Coffins, Shrouds, and Booze:
Burial Practices, Trends, and Tradesmen
in Loudoun County Estate Accounts
1757-1900

Loudoun County Historic Records & Deed Research Division
October 2018
First Friday Exhibit
Estate Accounts often include the names of individuals who received payment from the decedents estate for funerary services, gravestones, coffins, and digging the grave. These records provide evidence of burial practices and customs, and when compared over a long span of time can show how those customs changed. This exhibit showcases some of the trends found in estate accounts, and brings light to some of the names of individuals who provided burial services.
Coffins

Coffins appear with the most frequency, though very few specify the type of wood used. In 1797, Josias P. Adams’ estate paid for a coffin from John Harris made of black walnut, while John Wilkinson’s estate paid for a mahogany coffin in 1818. Coffin makers in early estate accounts worked primarily as cabinetmakers, carpenters, or chair makers. John M. Thompson appeared in estate accounts as a coffin maker from 1832 to 1869, and worked primarily as a cabinetmaker but also made coffins. Towards the mid to late nineteenth century, the duality between working as a cabinetmaker and serving as an undertaker became a normal occurrence. J.W. Goodhart worked as a cabinetmaker and constructed coffins, dug graves, and provided gravestones according to estate accounts from 1844 to 1889. His son Elijah Goodhart, also worked as a cabinetmaker, but became primarily known as an undertaker, providing coffins, embalming, and conducting funeral services as early as 1898.
John M. Thompson worked as a cabinetmaker in Middleburg and made several coffins for various people throughout his career. He died in 1865, but his wife Orel continued to sell coffins until her death in 1873. The two sale bills for the Thompson estate included overstock coffins, and materials to make coffins all purchased by John Doyle. Doyle learned the cabinetmaking trade from John M. Thompson, lived with the Thompson’s until Orel’s death, and created his own business with his nephew known as Doyle & Roche.
Receipts for Cabinetmakers, Undertakers, and Embalmers 1918-1932
Found in various chancery records

Early coffin makers primarily worked as cabinetmakers and carpenters. Throughout the nineteenth century, funerary services and products became commercialized and mass produced. Many coffin providers became undertakers while simultaneously selling furniture and providing upholstery services.
Alcohol

A very common listing found in early estate accounts is some form of alcohol either for the wake or the funeral. Eleanor Lyles’ funeral in 1772 included a gallon of rum, while Joshua Daniel provided “whisky for the burial,” of William Griffith in 1783. George Chilton’s estate paid for “liquor at sitting up with the corpse,” in 1773.
Many early estate accounts did not include a gravestone, either because the grave never received a stone, or the payment for the marker came from another source. Others used simpler markers of wood such as Francis Hughes whose estate paid an unnamed person for “painting head and foot boards,” in 1807. Most gravestones appear in estate accounts beginning in the 1820s and increase significantly into the nineteenth century.

Estate Account of Francis Hughes 1813
Will Book K p. 317

Funeral items listed include a coffin built by Garrett Hough, and payment to an unnamed person or persons for digging the grave, carrying the corpse to the grave, and painting head and foot boards.
Estate accounts in the mid to late nineteenth century occasionally listed different gravestone shapes. In addition to the commonly used monolith, other shapes included obelisks, and grave slabs (long flat stones that lay flat on top of the grave). Thomas E. Bard received payment for the “gravestone and inscription,” of Mahlon Russell’s stone in 1831. More specialized tradesmen appeared in estate accounts of the later half of the nineteenth century such as William G. Biser, “Proprietor of Lovettsville Marble Works, Cemetery work of all kinds,” and P.P. Perry “manufacturer of monuments, headstones, coping, furniture, slabs, etc. in marble or granite.” This trend of specialized funeral trades and commercialization of funeral work carried over into other funeral items found in the later nineteenth century.

Receipts for the Purchase of Gravestones 1890-1929
Found in various chancery records

Specialized gravestone makers appear in Estate Accounts and other court records more frequently in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. W.G. Biser of Lovettsville, Poulson & Everhart of Round Hill, P.P. Perry of Leesburg, and C.S. Gaver & Company of Lovettsville are only a few examples of the many gravestone producers who served Loudoun and the surrounding area.
Estate Accounts often list the names of individuals who received money from the estate for a gravestone. These individuals include gravestone cutters, engravers, and agents who helped procure gravestones manufactured elsewhere for the deceased. Many of the names provided are tradesmen who lived and worked in Loudoun County. Some names included are of tradesmen who lived in surrounding areas such as Maryland and other parts of Virginia. The photographs below showcase some of the works attributed to specific gravestone providers according to estate accounts, and according to signatures found on the stones.
**Graveyards & Grave Diggers**

Most early estate accounts do not specify the location of the grave. A few however, mention work done to family graveyards. The estate of Peter Boss paid George K. Fox, Richard Henderson, and Joseph Kid for planks and posts for the fence around the family graveyard. References such as these can provide evidence of family graveyards, and with further research could help establish the location of certain graves. Most men dug graves as a side job, and worked in a variety of graveyards and family plots, but a few did work for specific locations. Rodney Davis appeared in estate accounts between 1853 and 1883 digging graves and setting gravestones for the Goose Creek Burying Ground in Lincoln, VA.

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>1853-1883</td>
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**Example of an estate account:**

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More caretakers of specific graveyards increased in the late nineteenth century, especially with the establishment of new cemeteries and cemetery companies. Beginning in 1860 the term “sexton” appeared in several accounts identifying a grave digger or cemetery caretaker. Blanco W. Bramhall served as sexton for the New Jerusalem Lutheran Church cemetery in Lovettsville, appearing in accounts from 1863 through 1871. George Newton as cemetery superintendent sold a lot in Union Cemetery for the burial of Thomas W. Edwards in 1892.

Receipts for the Purchase of Cemetery Lots 1911-1929
Found in various chancery records

Early graveyards included family lots and churchyards, yet new cemeteries came into existence through the establishment of a variety of Cemetery Companies. These cemeteries included Sharon Cemetery in Middleburg, Union Cemetery in Leesburg, and Lake View Cemetery in Hamilton.
Burial Goods

Early estate accounts reference simpler funeral items or the “necessities;” a container for the body, some kind of burial cloth, and provisions for the survivors. A shift in funeral trends occurred in the mid nineteenth century as estate accounts began to include additional items for mourning, fancier gravestones, and more commercialized funeral materials and specialized services. A greater focus on the process of mourning and the funeral service took precedence. Mourning crepe (a fabric usually in black used for draping or clothing), memorial cards, and a sliver coffin plate, provide examples of this shift.

Estate Account of William G. Orr 1828
Will Book R p. 67

Anthony Colbert assisted in digging a grave, and Moses Wilson provided a shroud, cap, and sheet for the burial.

Estate Account of L.F. Palmer 1896
Will Book 3M p. 422

Expenses for funeral items include service provided by the sexton named G.R. Poland, a monument purchased from P.P. Perry, a silver plate for the coffin, and memorial cards.
While other probate materials such as wills and inventories can provide interesting information about the deceased person when they lived, estate accounts can provide information about burial practices, and the names of tradesmen who provided funeral services and goods in Loudoun County over time.