

# The Doorknob Collector

Number 223

September-October 2020

A Publication of The Antique Doorknob Collectors of America

*A Non-profit Organization Devoted to the Study and Preservation of Ornamental Hardware*

## THE 2020 CONVENTION

### IT WORKED!

BY ALLEN S. JOSLYN

As the very old joke goes about the dog playing a violin, what was initially amazing was that we had an electronic convention. That it went off so well was certainly the whipped cream and maraschino cherry on top – thanks to the “tech team”, Paul Woodfin, Mike Smith and Steve Hannum, who masterminded and executed the effort. In fact, totally contrary to Murphy’s Law, nothing at all seemed to go wrong.

After preliminary formalities, Paul explained how to work Zoom, which everyone soon got the hang of. Displays of knobs for sale had been previously posted, and sellers reported good sales, raising the question whether such displays could be posted on an ongoing basis.

The auction had some very tasty items (see TDC #222), but not all of which sold then for the minimum bids. Most have now been sold in post-convention transactions discussed between the seller and other club members.

Several members had submitted photos (and one video) of some outstanding displays of hardware and hardware-inspired collections, and they were all great. Steve Hannum won for the Most Creative Display for a video presentation of three complete sets of door hardware, shown from all sides. Len Blumin’s display of carvings of doorknobs by founding member Arnie Fredrick was notable. My (Allen Joslyn’s) display of R&E Japonesque hardware won Best Theme Display (“The Gilded Age”) and Best in Show. The displays are available for viewing at <https://www.antiquedoorknobs.org/displays>.

Next year’s Convention is tentatively scheduled for Albany in July at the Hampton Inn. I say “tentatively” because – obviously – no one knows what next summer will look like. But we can all hope (and pray), and of course plan, that we will be able to meet face-to-face in Albany in 2021.

Steve Hannum gave a report on the VDA website, showing a new page which will feature enamel hardware. However, we need more photographs of enamel doorknobs, plates, rosettes, hinges, and other hardware items. If anyone has some enamel hardware, please contact Steve so that we can get them added to the website. He also discussed the idea of adding plates and other hardware pieces to the VDA website, and is seeking (1) ideas about how to categorize plates as the first new hardware element, and (2) is seeking volunteers to help with this effort. Please contact Steve if you are interested in helping with this effort.

Steve Hannum was presented an Award for Distinguished Service for his tireless efforts of leading the development of the *Victorian Decorative Art* website, and spending thousands of hours photographing,

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building, and enhancing the site to provide information for ADCA members and the American public concerning antique hardware. The website now features more than 2,850 different doorknob designs, and Steve has gone through most of the club's catalogs to identify the manufacturers for most of the doorknobs on the site. Please congratulate and thank Steve for his hard work.

A new ADCA Educational Scholarship fund has been established by several members to support students getting their education in architecture, historic preservation and the building trades, with a focus on antique hardware. Liz Gordon is heading this committee, and we met the first recipient and heard her presentation which is discussed in the next article.

The Convention elected Directors and Officers for the coming year. There was no change in the directors, but after a number of years, I have stepped down as President, and Paul Woodfin has taken over the post. Jeff Orman is replacing Paul as Treasurer, while Steve Rowe remains Vice President. The office of Secretary was divided: Mike Smith will continue all his functions, except that Steve Hannum will become Recording Secretary (and a member of the Executive Committee) charged with keeping the club and Board minutes.

I have no doubt that Paul will make an excellent President and that the Club is lucky to have him.

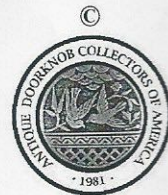
## ADCA Educational Scholarship Fund Established

At the Board meeting during the 2019 ADCA convention Liz Gordon proposed the establishment of an ADCA Educational Scholarship to assist students financially who are studying Historic Preservation, Architecture & Design and/or Historic Restoration Trades for a college degree or certificate, and to help build interest in antique hardware among younger people. The winner(s) receive a cash scholarship, a one-year ADCA membership, and money to help cover travel costs to attend the ADCA convention that year. Funds are provided through tax-deductible donations to the ADCA for this purpose, and in 2019 the club received generous gifts from club members Liz Gordon, Rhett Butler, and Marshall & Vicky Berol. If you wish to help support this Scholarship fund, send your donation to the North Little Rock address, and contact Liz Gordon if you have any questions. Read more about the scholarship program at the Educational Scholarships link on the club's [www.antiquedoorknobs.org](http://www.antiquedoorknobs.org) website.

The club contacted 70 schools and were able to award one scholarship in 2020, to Houston Adkins from Belmont College in Ohio. Houston is studying Building Preservation/Restoration, and "wants to work in the preservation trades for a couple different reasons. The first is because I love making things with my hands and seeing a project come together. This combined with my love for history and architecture makes working on old houses and buildings my dream job. I also like to be outdoors and do not want to sit at a desk all day. A job in this field will allow me to be outside and moving all the time. Someday, when I go to work, I want it to be more than just a paycheck. I want it to be something that I love, and two of the things that I enjoy the most are old buildings and working with my hands."

Congratulations to Houston, and her essay starts on the following page.

### *The Doorknob Collector*



Published six times a year by  
**Antique Doorknob Collectors of  
America, Inc.**

1608 Osage Drive  
North Little Rock, AR 72116  
Annual Membership in USD \$25.00  
age 18 or younger USD \$10.00  
Foreign rates on request.

Founded Sept. 1981, the **Antique Doorknob Collectors of America** is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization devoted to the study and preservation of ornamental hardware.

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## My Dream House

*By Houston Adkins*

On a small, one lane road stood a small grey house. A story and a half tall, with light grey clapboards, white gingerbread trim, and a silver metal roof. My family and I would pass it often on our way to church, and I have loved it ever since I was a small child. It is a quaint little house, with enough Victorian charm to be cute and whimsical but not so much that it is overbearing.

My dad used to be a home health care nurse, and he had a patient who lived in the house, an old bachelor whose name was Euston Freeman - his name was pronounced the same as mine. He was born October third, 1919, and orphaned at the age of fourteen. Although I do not know it for a fact, it appears that he moved in with his aunt and uncle at that time and then lived in their house for the rest of his life.



Stories my dad told me of the man and his little house always interested me. It is hard to believe how some people live. While the house had electric, there was no running water, and in the winter, he would pee in old milk jugs to save from going out in the cold. He lived in one room, the living room, and the floor was badly sunk and sloped to one side. He used a kerosene heater and had a hotplate to heat his food on. He moved into a nursing home and soon after passed away in 2008.

Time went on, and while I always had a fondness for the little house, it laid buried in the back of my mind. It remained that way until a "for sale" sign popped up in front of the house. It was September of 2018. Coincidentally, a couple days later, my mom saw the realtor handling the property and found out that it had already sold, but that the buyer was interested in the property and not the house. She gave the realtor her number and asked if she would pass it on to the buyer. The lady who bought the house and property called several days later, to tell us that she and her husband were interested in selling. They saw the small house as a hazard and something they did not want to deal with. My dad and I went through the little house and decided that it was in too bad of shape to move, but I was still interested. Eventually, we decided that \$500 would be a fair price, the lady accepted, and I wrote out my second check ever. I was absolutely thrilled.



Two very important things happened that allowed me to purchase my little house. I stated earlier that my dad was a nurse, and he was, but he quit his nursing job ten years ago to be a full-time timber-framer and antique log home restorer. He had the skill, equipment, manpower, and barns that would be needed to deconstruct the house. I also had spent the previous summer working for him and had enough money saved so that I could write that check. Without my dad, I would never have been able to purchase my little dream house.

The house was in bad shape. It sat on cut stone that was buried only about six inch-

es in the ground. The back had sunk and the floor joists were sitting rotten in the dirt. The living room floor was completely gone, the chimney was falling in and signs of deterioration were all around. If one was to look past that though, they would see lovely wood trim, rosettes at the comers of all the doors and windows, built in cabinets and wooden curtain rods. Although the house was small, its builder had taken pride in its construction, and although deteriorated, everything was still there. No one had remodeled it in order to add a bathroom or bigger kitchen; it was the same as when it was built in 1904.

Over the next month, I spent afternoons taking pictures and measurements, documenting everything that I could. I would go after school and work for about an hour or so each evening until I had all the information that I needed.

Although I bought the house on the sixteenth of October, it did not get taken down until late April. While there was some work that I was able to do inside on my own, much of it could not be done without some help. That winter, my dad was busy with work, and since he was going to help me on his dime, I patiently waited.

When we finally did get to take it down, it was very exciting, but at the same time a little sad. I loved my little house and was glad that it was mine, but it was somewhat sad to take it from its yard, to disassemble its many pieces, and then load it on a trailer to haul away. In this case and instance though, that was all that could be done, and so we did it. We found all sorts of interesting things in the process, old scissors, a button hook, a copy of "Ten Nights In A BarRoom and what I saw there," interesting newspaper articles, and the date 1904 scrawled on several boards throughout the structure. All of this not only gave us some insight on the ideas and belongings of the original occupants but also when the house was likely built. When it came to the structure itself, there were some parts of it that were impractical to save. The three main pieces were the downstairs flooring, the clapboards, and the metal roof. The flooring was in bad shape and not much of it was left. The clapboards wanted to bust when they were removed, and the time required to get them off in one piece would have exceeded their worth. The metal roof was in rough shape and not practical to reuse. Although it was sad to see some of it go, the reality is, it is impossible to save everything.

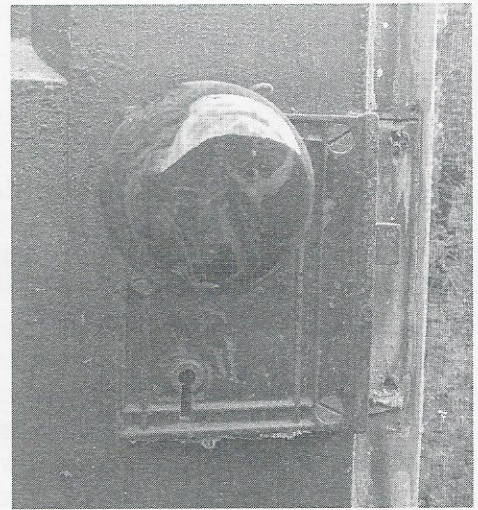
Although there were some things that were lost in deconstruction, even more was saved. I have all of the interior and exterior doors, the windows, interior and exterior trim, the fireplace mantel, built in cabinets, wall studs, floor joist, upstairs flooring, and lightning rods, as well as all the rock from the foundation. Everything is stacked in storage sheds on my mom and dad's property, waiting for it's time to come again.

Although, right now, it is just in stacks strewn through different barns, someday, I am going to live in that house. People might think that I am crazy, but I do not care. I want to rebuild it as a moderm house while keeping it as close to its original as possible. There are two ways that I could do this. The first would be to leave the footprint of the building the same and make the upstairs a master suite, with a bedroom, bathroom, and closet. The other option would be to add an addition onto the back, making the house almost 'S' shaped. This would allow the house to have more than one bedroom. Regardless of how I decide to do the bedrooms, the main floor will remain the same. The living room will be the living room, the original downstairs bedroom will be the kitchen, and the parlor will be the dining room. The original kitchen, which is right off of the living room, will be a laundry/



bathroom. The stairway will also remain in its original location, although it may need to be widened a few inches because it was originally only 28 inches wide. (Reference last page)

While the layout of the rooms is very important, what really makes a house is the toppings, the hardware included. Although I believe the house to be lovely, the hardware does not appear to be anything extraordinary. Simple brown and white porcelain knobs and rim locks are on all the downstairs doors. The upstairs doors have decorative thumb latches, and all the interior hinges are purely functional. The exterior doors have more decorative hinges, but they are still common. The built in cabinet has two round knobs, which have a floral pattern on them. All the hardware is cast iron. Other than standard door hardware, the downstairs windows all had wooden curtain rods. While the dowel rods themselves are warped and unusable, the rod holders and decorative ends are all in good shape. The house also had three aluminum lightning rods, along with the woven cable. One of the lightning rods is missing its glass globe. All the hardware in the house is simple, but I have all of it, and that is what makes it unique. Someday, when I rebuild my little house, I will need to replace very little of the hardware. That said, cast iron rusts, and I will need to further research how to clean and take care of it. I hope that I can attend your convention so that I am able to learn more in depth how to clean and restore my hardware. I also hope to find either antique or period correct plumbing and lighting fixtures.



Although the house had electric, it was added years after the house was built and consisted of a few outlets and a bare bulb centered in every room. This is not quite the aesthetic I am going for, so I will have to find fixtures that match the charm and time period of the house. I have always been a sucker for a good project, and this one is for sure the largest I have ever undertaken. Before I can start anything, I will need to buy a piece of property. Obviously, as a college student, I am not currently in a position to do this. It is something that I hope to be able to do in five to seven years. By that time, I hope to have a good job and be in a position where I can get a loan to make the purchase.

Although I cannot start the actual building of the house, there is much I can do in early preparation. I can work on floor plans and elevations, deciding exactly how to lay out the house. I can go to auctions and antique stores to collect furniture. My room at home is already getting clogged with said furniture. I have a desk, couch, loveseat, and chair to name a few of the pieces, along with miscellaneous dishes, linens and other things that make a house a home. While I know this is just a start, by giving myself lots of time, I am able to buy what I truly love when the prices are good. The more I collect now, the less I will have to purchase in a rush later. I am also learning many of the skills I will need to build the house. In windows and doors class, I will learn how to restore all my windows and doors. In masonry, I will learn how to build the foundation and fireplaces. In wood class, I have learned how to do interior trim work. I have also learned how to wire a house, and am currently learning about plumbing. While working with my dad, I have learned how walls go up, how to hang a door, and many other aspects of the job. After I graduate, I hope to have a job in the field where I will gain even more skills that will aid me in the construction of the house.



Regardless of what happens, I will rebuild my little house to its former glory. Its legacy will remain and its previous life will not be forgotten, all while a new life and legacy will be given to it. It will live in a new yard and harbor a different family, but its original charm will always be maintained.

# COFFIN HARDWARE

By Allen S. Joslyn

*[Please, if you are sensitive to discussions of death, burial, or related subjects, please go read something else.]*

We are all avid collectors of decorative door hardware from the post-Civil War period, or “builders’ hardware”. But there was another type of decorative hardware which also became popular in that period, coffin hardware. For obvious reasons, examples of it are difficult to collect, but there are trade catalogues and some design patents, which illustrate the designs. (Of course, a catalogue illustration or patent does not show the extent to which the item was actually produced).

Humankind has been decorating graves, at least of the important, from time immemorial, certainly before there were doors to decorate. But in the Victorian age, funerals and their accessories became common and regarded as important displays of the worldly success of the deceased. Death and dying (which could be a romantic finale, as in operas such as *Aida*) became an important cultural subject. This shift in public attitudes has been called “The Beautification of Death”. Megan Springate notes that before the mid-18th century, death held “the terror of judgment” but that there was no cult of mourning then.

“...Into the nineteenth century, the popular perception of death shifted and a cult of mourning literature developed ....Death become more of a romantic idea and increasingly celebrated as an escape from our imperfect world – a literal domestic haven populated with departed family and friends that promised respite from the instability and uncertainty of a increasingly capitalist world.”

“The ideology of the beautification of death included the idea that the dead would experience a physical resurrection in the afterlife. ...”

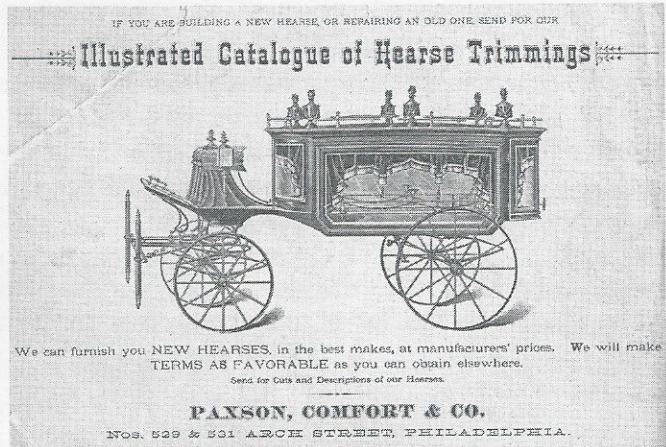
“Also accompanying the beautification of death was a shift away from private sentiment and an increase in the public display of mourning . . . This prescribed public mourning, accompanied by an increasingly long list of behaviors and objects necessary for funeral and memorialization to be considered ‘proper’. Appropriate public expressions of grief and mourning were increasingly seen as matters of good taste and style, eventually becoming a necessary ‘civic virtue’.” (Springate, p. 60).

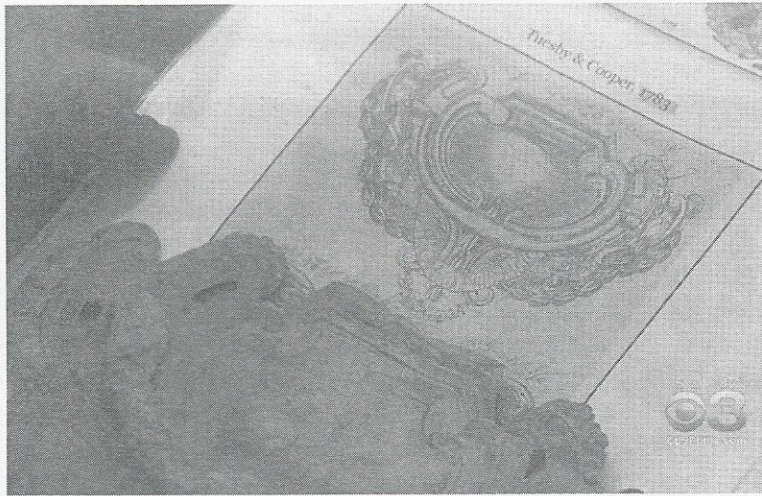
During this period, mass produced inexpensive burial decorations became available, as compared with earlier periods when the cost of such hand-made accessories limited their availability to the rich. The mid-nineteenth century saw the creation of a middle-class which could afford to engage in public displays of culture and virtue, of which funerary practices became a part.

At the same time as these new attitudes to death were developing, the Civil War erupted. It created a new industry, arranging for burials, and new modes of employment, which fit into contemporary attitudes. The funerary industry and mass demand for coffin hardware - as well as for builders’ hardware - really exploded following the Civil War. For builders’ hardware, the impetus came from the post-War building boom and the spread of the country westward, as well as the development of methods of mass production. For coffin hardware and the new trade of funeral director, the impetus was the Civil War.

Prior to the Civil War there was, to be sure, a trade in coffin hardware (generally imported from England and illustrated in a few catalogues), as shown by a recent find in downtown Philadelphia. A building was planned for a parking lot across from the Betsy Ross house. The area had been a cemetery at the First Baptist Church, but it was supposed to have been relocated in 1860. When workers broke ground, however, a few bones were found and delivered to two archeologists. Later, when the back-hoe started to dig, it crunched into a mass of skeletons and coffins. Eventually they unearthed over 400 intact burials. (An unanswered question is how many more bodies had been in the earth removed from the area before digging had been halted.)

This find was a gold mine for researchers, as well as a challenge to provide for respectful re-





burial. The skeletons can provide a lot of information about the lives of the deceased, including the level of psychological stress they were under (which manifests itself in grooves in tooth enamel). Tooth tartar and plaque can disclose pathogens that infected an individual, and skeletons can evidence diseases as well as trauma to which an individual had been subjected.

The *New York Times* reports that: "The cemetery has yielded one of the largest collections of coffin hardware discovered in a colonial American cemetery (see photo above). These decorative plaques and handles have helped to date many burials to

the 1720s to 1790s. One key resource has been a 1783 volume of the "Tuesby and Cooper Coffin Hardware Manufacturer's Catalogue". Dr. Leader [an archeologist from the College of New Jersey] tracked down the only known copy at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and [another archeologist] made digital copies when she visited last fall. Dr. Leader matched First Baptist hardware to the catalogue."

The researchers are trying to compare the health of individuals with their wealth as indicated by their expense of their coffins. Such comparisons become more questionable once mass-produced coffin hardware became available.

The earliest American coffin and accessory catalogues appear in the mid-1850s (R&E offered "fancy, electro plated" coffin handles in an 1859 price list) but it was the Civil War which revolutionized burial practices. To say it was bloody is an extreme understatement. Some 620,000 (or as high as 750,000) people were killed in it, equal or well more than as the total American fatalities in the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, WWI, WWII, and the Korean War. That was a lot of bodies – many unrecognizable, or in bits, many simply dumped in pits without identification, but also identifiable intact corpses as well. The militaries, at least, tried to keep good records. Before that war, people were generally buried near to their homes, be it in a city cemetery and in a coffin, or in a rural area, in a shroud or a plain wooden coffin in the nearby church graveyard. In the Civil War, soldiers from both sides died far from home, and their families urgently wished to "bring them home".

Survivors of battles often made a point of trying to direct the families to where the body of their relative had been temporarily buried, and or perhaps just left. (It was common for soldiers to bury the dead of their uniform color – blue or grey – and leave those of the opposite color lying in the open – but, after all, it is the victor who is left in possession of the battlefield). After a battle, relatives would descend on the battlefield in an effort to retrieve the bodies of loved ones, as would persons whose trade was arranging for their return home. (Gawking was also a popular activity). There were obvious problems with transporting the bodies of the dead.

One solution was metal coffins, sealed tightly and (hopefully) emitting no odors. Perhaps the first such patent in the United States was the Fisk patent (Patent 5984), in 1848, which resembled an Egyptian sarcophagus with a glass window for viewing the face of the deceased. The Patent explained that all air could be exhausted from the coffin to prevent decay, or it could be filled with a gas to prevent it. Despite (or perhaps because of) its high cost, the Fisk coffin was favored by the affluent, and some prominent personages were buried in it, such as John C. Calhoun, former Vice-President and Secretary of State. There were further refinements in metallic coffins over the years; see, for example, the patent obtained by Crane, Breed & Co. in 1865 (Patent D2,228).

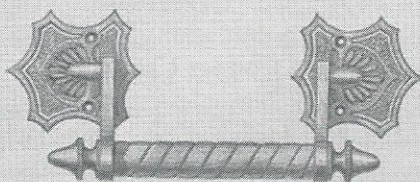
Another solution was embalming, which had been used in Europe only to preserve specimens but which became popular on the battlefields of the Civil War, a large and very profitable business. Its potential was grasped by Dr. Thomas Holmes, who became known as the "father" of embalming, who developed a promoted a more effective embalming fluid. At the very outset of the war, he moved his practice to Washington, obtained exclusive rights from the Federal Government to embalm Union Soldiers at

### Coffin and Casket Handles.

All Wire Strengthened Through the Whole Length  
SILVER PLATED ON WHITE METAL.



Full Size Cut of No. 226.



Half Size Cut of No. 225. Finished.

Silver Plated on White Metal.

the outset of the War, and handed out flyers to soldiers mustering for battle. In fact, Holmes embalmed the first Union casualty of the war, Col. Elmer Ellsworth, a friend of Lincoln, who was shot while trying to take down a Confederate flag in Alexandria, just across the river from Washington, and arguably the last (Abraham Lincoln himself). Embalmers would often appear just before the battles to contract with soldiers for their services, and on the battlefields and in hospitals afterwards, to a degree that led General Grant to prohibit their presence towards the front because of its effect on morale. Embalmers would often charge more for an officer than an enlisted man, or restrict their practice to the corpses of officers. Dr. Holmes himself profited from the war by performing some 4,000 embalmings at \$100 per case.

Actually, the number of dead who were embalmed was limited. Dead enlisted men tended to be buried in mass graves; officers received more individualized attention. Indeed, it was common for opposing forces to declare truces to permit corpses of officers to be returned to their side. Many of the corpses which could be individually identified were too far decomposed for embalming to be feasible. Most were buried in place, which eventually led to the creation of national battlefield cemeteries where the battles had been fought. But the practice of embalming had secured a foothold.

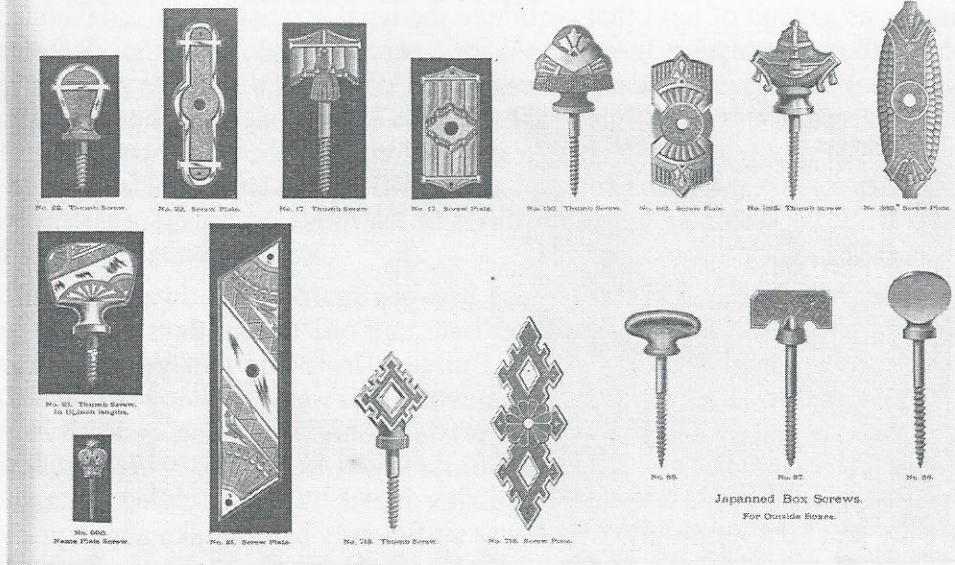
Thus a profitable industry or trade, whatever you wish to call it, dealing in funerary services for Civil War dead sprung up. The country also was enraptured with the beautification of death. Embalming has been introduced to the general public, and its popularity spread, in large part because it permitted transportation of the dead and public displays of the departed. What happened was what you would expect – the creation of a mortuary industry to serve the post-Civil War period. In prior periods, preparation of the corpse, funerals and burials were handled by members of the family or the local pastor. In the years following the Civil War, undertakers or funeral directors emerged as a separate profession, relieving the family of having to deal with processing the deceased from pick-up, embalming, display, funeral and burial.

But to the hardware. It is likely simple hardware was used for Civil War deceased, when it was used at all, but in the post-bellum period, ornate designs became popular. This hardware would include:

- **Handles:** Coffins for adults generally had six to eight handles for lifting and carrying; some had bar handles running the length of the coffin or casket. Two catalogues illustrating these are (or will shortly be) available from the ADCA Archives: Sargent & Co.'s 1877 catalogue (above left) and Paxson, Comfort & Company's 1886 Supplementary Catalogue of Undertakers' Hardware.
- **Coffin Screws:** These were used to secure structural elements of the coffin, and for that purpose were similar to ordinary screws. But they were longer than conventional screws and instead of simple slots, had raised heads made of white metal, sometimes silver plated. They were thus intended to be displayed, not hidden like ordinary screws. Gradually they were replaced with thumbscrews.
- **Decorative Hardware:** These might include Screw Caps (hinged covers to conceal regular screws, see Patent 36,635); Coffin tacks (ornamental white metal heads fastened to a short nail), and other ornamental metal (crosses, plaques identifying the deceased as a member of the GAR, garlands, etc).
- **Thumbscrews:** The lid of the coffin was attached with fancy hand screws, also in brilliant metal. Caplifters were screwed into the lid and used to position it (next page, from Paxson, Comfort & Co's 1886 catalog).
- It was common for coffins to have a window through which the deceased could be last viewed.

Hardware for children's coffins often depicted lambs (a symbol of innocence and purity) or of children. This reflected a shift in the views of children, from the Puritans belief that they were corrupted with original sin, or the view that they were simply immature little adults who could labor for their keep, to the Romantic ideal of childhood innocence, where their proper place was in the domestic haven of a household (shown below, left).



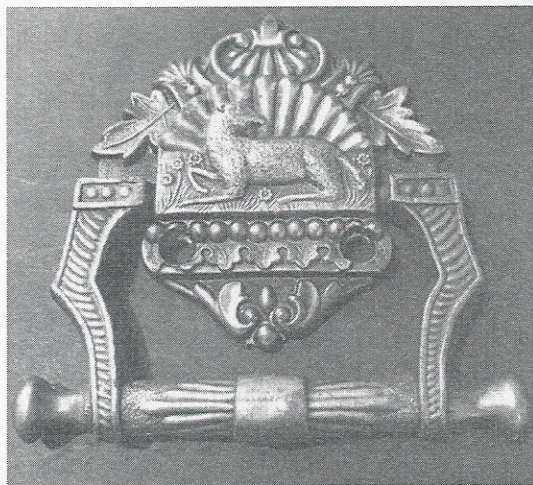


As the hardware industry developed after the Civil War, there was an effort by established hardware firms to get into new industry. R&E's 1865 catalogue carried a page illustrating coffin handles, but these disappeared by the time of its 1870 catalogue. Corbin included coffin accessories in its 1856, 1860 and 1867 catalogues. Sargent & Co. obtained three design patents for coffin handles in 1867 (Patents D2586, D2647 and D2648), and its 1871 catalogue (pp. 271 et Seq.) and its 1877 catalogue (pp. 441

et seq.) have sections on coffin hardware. So also, reportedly, does its 1874 Catalogue. The problem faced by regular builders' hardware manufacturers in entering the mortuary industry was that undertakers needed more than just hardware, and would be attracted to firms which could supply all of their funeral requirements. (Analogously, R&E distributed its railway car locks through a company which specialized in railroads' needs, see TDC# 194). Crane, Breed & Co. obtained a patent for coffin handles in 1875 (Patent 8395) and was a full line supplier of undertaking needs, including metallic "burial cases and caskets." Coffin hardware thus came to be offered only by companies which concentrated on funerary customers (who today might be known as "full-line wholesalers") using specialized catalogues, with the result that the family's choice in hardware was limited to what the undertaker chose to offer. And, except in the early years, there was no apparent cross-over between production of builders' hardware and of coffin hardware.

The following paragraphs have nothing to do with coffin hardware, but with two fears concerning burial in Victorian times. The first was a widespread fear of being buried alive, illustrated (and fed) by Edgar Allen Poe's short stories such as *A Premature Burial* (1850). How often this actually occurred is uncertain, but it certainly was wildly exaggerated. The Victorians were, however, an inventive bunch and a number of proposals were put forward by which one could (hopefully) avoid this fate. These generally involved signaling systems by which the newly awoken occupant of a coffin could signal the event to the outside world. Patent 81437 (1868), had an air inlet, a ladder so the occupant could climb out, and a bell with an attached rope so if the occupant was too weak to climb, he or she could ring for help. See also

Patent 3385 (1843, the earliest issued such patent in the United States), which had a spring-loaded lid which would be activated by the slightest movement); Patent 268693 (1882); Patent 329495 (1885); and Patent 371626 (1887). A Patent was issued as late as 1983 for an electric alarm system. For all the horror the prospect could create, there was a practical solution (which originally led to the institution of the morgue in Europe) – wait a few days before burial. George Washington, on his deathbed, in fact had directed that his body wait three days above ground. This fear did help popularize the practice of embalming, which would definitively end any doubts. Despite all the ruckus, however, there no evidence of that any of these imaginative coffins were actually ever used.

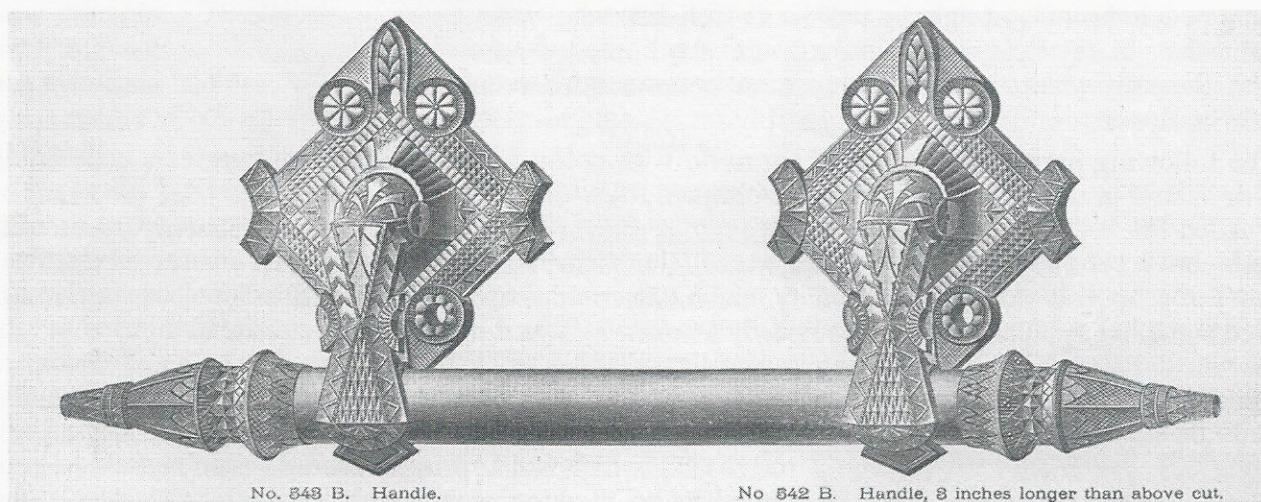


The second, more realistic Victorian fear were grave robbers (known as "Resurrection Men"). They were a natural

consequence of the demand for dissection specimens with the establishment of real medical schools in the United States. Grave robbing did occur through the 19th century but virtually disappeared in the 20th century, as a result of laws that permitted the legal acquisition of cadavers and the practice of embalming (which allowed cadavers to be stored for future use and meant that decomposition did not force hurried dissection). But while the danger persisted, a variety of defensive patents were obtained, such as for iron reinforcing for the coffin (Patent 376408, 1887) and one for a burial vault with a door so arranged that any concussion on it in an effort to gain entrance to the vault would cause it to explode and terminate those making the attempt. Shrapnel and/or rifle cartridges were also piled about to increase the effect (Patent 226743, 1880). The Fisk coffin, and the following metallic coffins, were highly favored for their ability to discourage grave robbers.

There was a significant difference between builders' hardware and coffin hardware: the former was expected to last for decades, the latter had only one or two days of glory, and afterwards no one would know how it looked or had stood up. Builders' hardware thus generally used thick bronze, which could withstand years of use, while coffin hardware was made of metal with a brilliant plating for show. White metal was the most common in mass produced hardware, and generally made of tin, antimony, arsenic (for brilliance) and other metals; sometimes it was lead based. The Sargent coffin hardware was generally "silver plated on white metal". Another metal used was called Britannia metal, composed of about 90% tin, and 10% antimony, which was sufficiently hard to take a high polish. Brass was seldom used.

There is a controversy-probably impossible to resolve- whether the various styles of decoration of coffin hardware over the Victorian period reflect changing attitudes to death, or simply different styles. And what was the relation, if any, between design changes in builders' hardware and coffin hardware? It is unlikely that the symbolism found in funerary hardware as indicating the character of the deceased would have much relevancy to the design (perhaps years before) of his or her front door hardware. On the other hand, did changes in fashions in builders' hardware-such as the influence of Japoneseque design-influence coffin hardware? There is more to be done.



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