

# Victorian funeral practices essay

[Design](#)



The Victorians are known for their fascination with death. During the Victorian era (1837-1901) they took death very seriously, no expense was spared when arranging a proper funeral. During this time most Americans lives became restricted to the family. As the emotional focus of people narrowed to the immediate family, the significance of the final act expanded. We will take a closer look at Victorian funeral practices by focusing on one home and the death of Andrew Lowe in 1886. The Andrew Lowe house was designed by architect John Norris in 1847. It is a three story building in the Italianate style with brick over stucco, cast iron balconies and a fairly rigid floor plan.

It has a classical entrance with massive doors. The first story is set below street level. The family dining room, kitchen, pantry and servants room were placed on this floor. The second floor was the principal floor of the home. There were parlors, dining room, library and butlers pantry. The top floor had five bedrooms and a bathing room. Wide halls extended the length of each floor and a stairway joined the parlor and bedroom floors.

Andrew Lowe bought the land and started building in 1847. While the house was under construction Andrew Lowes wife, Sarah Hunter Lowe and four year old son died. He moved into the house with his two young daughters. He remarried Mary Couper Stiles five years later and had three more daughters and a son and heir, William Mackay Low who would marry Juliette Gordon six months after Andrew Lowes death in 1886.

Though we do not have many facts about his death or funeral we can conjecture what may have taken place by looking at the common rituals and

practices at the time. I could find no record of cause of death, if he was ill the setting for death was at home, in bed. Each family member would be called to the bedside to be given advice, farewell and blessing. When his death occurred telegrams would be sent and notices published in the newspaper. If a notice was by letter, the stationary would be bordered in black.

Formal funeral invitations may have been sent out and attendance was expected. The house would be decorated throughout in black crepe. The front door crepe would be tied with a black ribbon. All doorways and mantles on the primary floor of the home would be in black crepe and the mirrors would be covered. It was believed that if a mourner saw their reflection, they would be the next to die. The clocks were stopped at the time of death and usually the piano was closed. By the 1880s mourners were sending flowers to the home.

The undertaker would prepare the body and it would be laid out in the front parlor. The deceased would be dressed in his finest clothes. It was necessary for some family members or close friends to sit up overnight with the body. This was the wake.

It made certain no animals disturbed the body and helped to confirm that the corpse was really dead and not just in a comatose state. Some Victorians were fearful of being buried alive, special caskets were made with built-in alarms. If they did wake up to find themselves buried alive they would be able to trip a mechanism to send a signal. A feast would be held at the home either before or after the funeral. Distant relatives and friends would attend.

Every aspect of the burial process would be embellished. The funeral service would take place in the parlor.

There may have been a postmortem photograph of Low or a wreath of his hair on display. There was a popularity at the time for Memento Mori (remember death). Post mortem photographs, death masks and jewelry made from the deceased hair all fall into this category. It is most often associated with the death of children. The body would be taken from the parlor through the hall and front doors feet first.

Victorians believed that if the deceased looked back into the house he would take those inside with him. The body would be conveyed to Laurel Grove North Cemetery by an ornate horse drawn hearse, accompanied by appropriately dressed attendants and given a ceremonial burial. Andrew Lowes burial plot has a large cross and is surrounded by a patio of brick flooring. He is buried beside his first wife, Sarah Hunter and their only son. Men attending the funeral would be wearing black hat bands as a sign of respect for the deceased.

Women did not usually attend the burial and some would stay at the house to prepare food, take down decorations inside, start the clocks and uncover mirrors. Victorian mourning fashion was mainly aimed at women, widows in particular. If Andrew Lows wife survived him she would have had guidelines for proper mourning etiquette. A widow was in full mourning for one year and was not allowed to exit her home with out full black attire and a weeping veil. Second mourning lasted nine months and allowed minor ornamentation. Mourning jewelry of jet or hair from the deceased could be worn. Taking a

lock of hair and weaving it into knot designs for use in a broach was popular and a way of keeping a loved one close and remembering them.

Half mourning lasted three to six months with a very gradual easing into color. During the civil war so many men died that women were often in perpetual mourning. Some of the mourning customs of the Victorians are still in practice. Some seem bizarre to us now. It was the 19th century's way of dealing with a part of life.

Today we seem to want to play down the role of death in society. . The Victorians may have gone too far but we may have gone too far the other way, rituals and processes help us to grieve and to come to terms with death