

MOURNING BUTTONS

by Dorothy Krugner of Vancouver, Washington

MOURNING - (mourning n.) Actions or expressions of one who has suffered a bereavement. Conventional outward signs of grief for the dead. The period during which a death is mourned.

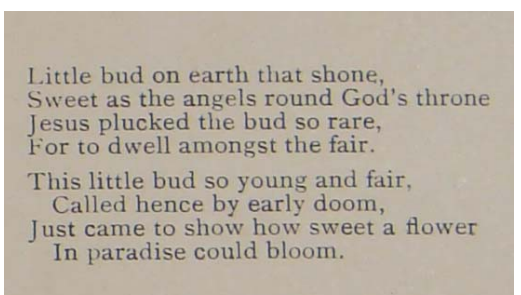
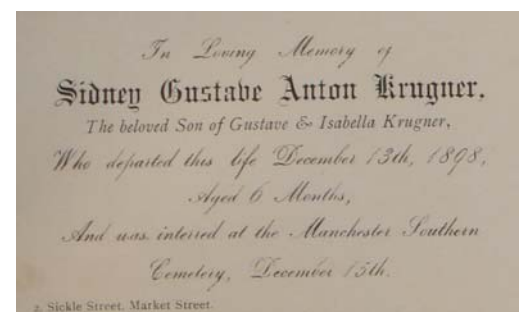
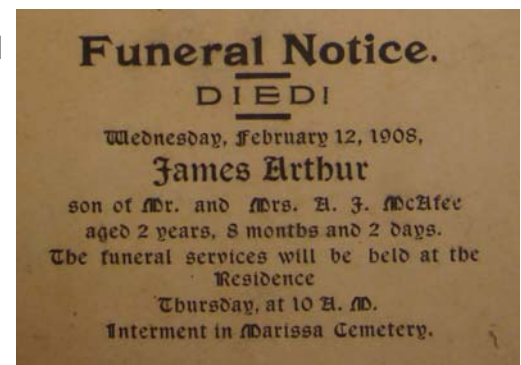
IN MOURNING—Wearing the garments indicative of grief.

One of the first questions archaeologists seek answers for when unearthing an old culture is, “How did the people bury their dead? Was there any indication of ritual involved?” So far, all cultures, including prehistoric, buried their dead with some type of ritual. Researchers have found burial grounds of Neanderthal man dating to 60,000 BC with animal antlers on the body and flower fragments next to the corpse, indicating some type of ritual and gifts of remembrance. In Europe there are Mourning Iris and Mourning Widow Geranium flowers, both dark shades with black stripes or highlights. We are also finding some of the animal species also feel grief and separation.

The mourning rites help us cope with death in a number of ways. Disposal of the body, for sanitation and disease prevention, preparation of the soul of the deceased to the “other side” regardless of the religion, help satisfy the fact of separation, bring together the community for security and support, and provides a framework for the mourners to cope emotionally until intensity of grief has passed.



My husband remembers hearing about a baby that died in his father's family. After the death of his aunt, the items shown were found in the family picture album. We are not sure if the child's picture was taken just before death or after. An early use of the camera was for death photographs and pictures taken just prior to death were quite common.



European and American mourning rituals have been part of social and religious life for centuries. Today, we tend to keep funerals and memorial services to a speedy minimum, and our grief private. Memorial art from the Middle Ages through the Victorian era shows that death rites and grief expression were much longer, more ritualized, very public and highly artistic.

Throughout the Middle Ages, mourning art and custom was directed primarily under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church, which was concerned with keeping its rites and doctrines ever present in the minds of the faithful as well as the non-religious. Memorials were intended to promote the concepts of heaven for the faithful and hell for the sinners.

These concepts remained unchanged until the influences of the 18th century enlightenment and romantic movements. It has now become the “Age of Reason.” What do we see? Classical designs of urns, shrouds, obelisks and weeping Grecian mourners all appear in the 18th and early 19th century memorial art, jewelry, tombstone architecture, needlework and buttons of Britain, Europe and America.

A newly prosperous middle class was emerging during the development of the Industrial Revolution in both 18th century European and American society. The education of females increased with the establishment of “dame” schools which included the teaching of needlework samplers and mourning art.



18th Century hand painted button. This button has all the mourning motifs: the weeping tree, pedestal and a rowboat with one person moving away. The painted strip surround is very unusual. The boat is often found as it was to represent the passage of a soul to the “after life.”



Classic motifs of mourning hand painted on ivory. This button came from a set of six, each painted on ivory with a different mourning scene. This button is so typical of the motifs found on needlework made throughout the 1700 through the early 1800s. The column or pedestal with the urn represents memory.

Many cultures and religions call for specific time limits for burial. Notably the Jewish and Muslim religions require the body be buried within 24 hours of death. There were important reasons for this, primarily health related.

Color is also viewed differently: in China white is the color of mourning. White was also used in this country in the 1700s and was even used later for children's clothing when a family member died.

The preparation of the deceased eventually developed into the industry of undertaking. Merchants began dealing in mourning clothes, fabrics, jewelry and other specific items for mourning in the mid 1800s.

Hair jewelry became very popular. The jeweler would have selections of items like rings, brooches and pendants ready to have the hair of the deceased brought in and placed into the item selected by the family.

HUMAN HAIR WORKS

Some of the most popular mourning jewelry today is the type of hair-work piece seen here. This fine quality "rose" brooch, c.1850-70, is done in two varieties of woven "table-worked" hair and has a small gold center finding. 1.5" in diameter. Courtesy of *Things Gone By*. \$225.



ABOVE RIGHT: Here is an Edwardian hair ring in its original box from England. Mourning rings have been found dating back to 1487 and throughout the 16th, 17th, and 18th Centuries.



RIGHT: Brooch with a background of finely woven hair.

BELOW RIGHT: Woven hair set in black japanned metal.

BELOW: Hair under glass with real pearls in the outside border of button's pearls represent tears.





These lovely c.1850-70 hair-work earrings in the acorn motif, symbolic of power or victory (sometimes in relationship to military funerals), are beautifully executed in the table-worked method over wooden molds (which would be removed after weaving was completed). These were made to have the smaller acorn hang in front of the larger acorn, an unusual arrangement and quite dramatic when worn. 2.5" long. *Courtesy of Things Gone By*. \$695. Swedish women became very skilled in weaving human hair. The watch fob at right was another popular hair item.



Buttons with real human hair are hard to identify. Deb Chrowl of Oregon is my expert. She says to look for uneven color, fineness of each strand, and with a strong power magnifier, fine little breaks in a single strand.

Memorial rituals steadily rose in popularity, reaching their height in Civil War America and in Victorian England. Within the families of the very wealthy, providing mourning outfits for the servants of the household was a status symbol. New outfits were ordered for the servants that would be "seen" by others. This could be for the coachman, footman, and primary household staff.

New black clothes were expensive. Buttons were much cheaper and would work for the majority of a family's staff. It was easy and affordable to change buttons.



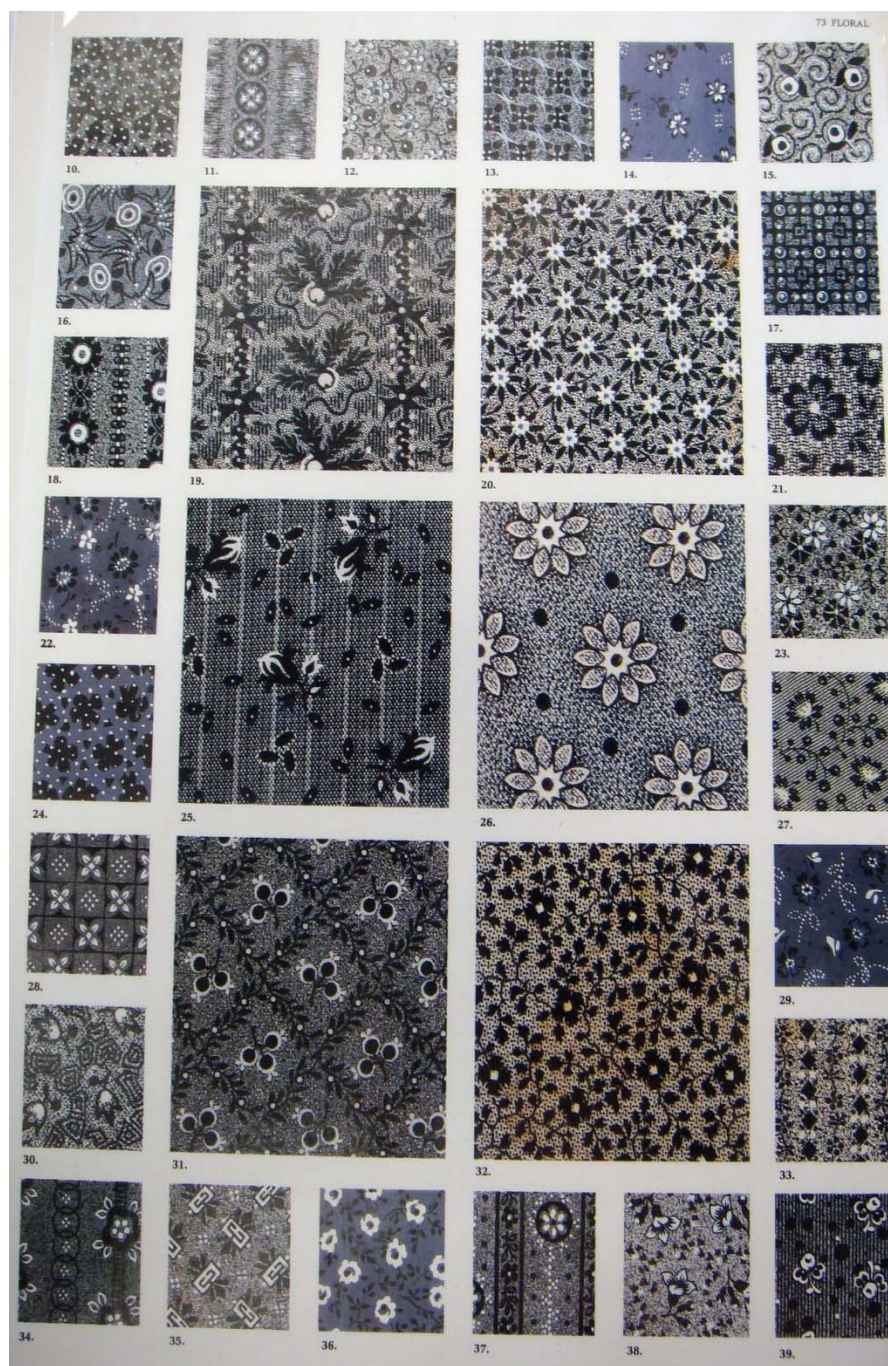
LEFT: This button features three different colors of hair set in brass with a border of fleur de lis and scallops. This button was a real find. Thank you to Gil Biggie—and the price was right!

RIGHT: Black metal sporting button. Back marked "TW&W Paris."

BOTTOM RIGHT: 19th Century silver-plated ladies coat of arms. Blackened for mourning. The blacking would last about as long as the mourning period. Back marked "Tipson & Newbury, Birmingham." Purchased in London at the "Button Queen" store.

BOTTOM CENTER: Earl's mourning button. Double Livery with coronet made of horn. No back mark.





Here we have some of the types of half-mourning prints available. The majority date from the mid to late 1800s.

Do you remember what events were taking place in the 1800s to the early 1900s? War, war and more war! These, of course, created much death, both here and on the Continent. One internet site showed thirty-seven different wars occurring during the 1800s.

During this time the average life span was low; adult age was in the 40s. Very common were high rates of childhood death, both through accident and disease. All of these numbers remained high for centuries. Yet, we don't see the ritualized mourning during the "Black" death plague years. Why? Probably too much death! Also, the people who could afford the expense and time to mourn, the middle class, did not yet exist.

Memorial art and mourning artifacts reflect not just an outdated cultural practice, but they represent an emotional bridge from men, women and children who did not keep

silent about their grief. It was shared publically for all to see. And, SHARE they did.

Depending on the region's customs, widows wore mourning for one to two years. At the extreme, this was to be full black, with crepe covering the bonnet from head to toe. Mirrors were covered or draped in black. Even the straight pins used to fasten the veiling in place were special. These were made of iron or steel with a black varnish. A store in Richmond, Virginia, advertised in 1856, "Mourning pins available to hold your mourning hoods or face-covering veils." The rest of the family—brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, first & second cousins, grandparents—were all people to be mourned, from four weeks to six months or more.

For men, going to work was permitted and the wearing of normal clothing, but with the

addition of a black hat and arm bands—and only for six weeks. Men were permitted to marry after the six weeks if they were widowed with small children.

Until the advent of improvements in medicine and sanitation standards, reducing the frequency of death in a family, it was not uncommon to spend years in mourning clothes—going from full to half mourning and back to full mourning. For the half mourning stage the widow was permitted to wear lavender, brown and gray. Some areas permitted touches of white.

What other items were used to “honor” the departed? Stationery must have a black border, which should be wide enough to honor the loved one, but not so wide as to be “vulgar.” A 1907 Sears catalog offered mourning handkerchiefs with a black border. Specific fabrics were considered appropriate for “widows weeds”—bombazine, wool crepe, silk organdy—all were required to have a dull surface.

When we hear the term “mourning” we think black glass with a dull finish and the jet, but we need to expand on that perception. All classes, in both America and England, wanted to participate in the ritual, but mourning was expensive. During the Civil War, the South was not able to obtain most manufactured goods—including glass and metal buttons.

I found a reference to the use of rubber buttons for mourning in the South. The book *India Rubber & Gutta Percha in the Civil War Era* noted that Union prisoners of war used rubber buttons to make rings to take home when the war was over. Horn was also used as it was normally black, naturally dull, and not expensive. The 1897 Sears catalog has a dozen horn buttons for five cents and a “fancy” black glass button by the dozen for ten cents.

Illustrated on the next page are postcards from England. The colored one is dated May 18, 1908, and is addressed to a “Miss Hart” at the “Home for Incurables” in Harrogate. Somehow, I don’t think I would appreciate receiving a card like this! The middle card is a sympathy card.



MOURNING FABRICS

HALF-MORNING: CHOCOLATES, PURPLES, & SHAKER GRAYS

“Chocolates” (1,4,7), “Purples” (2,3,5,6,8,9), and “Shaker grays” (silver grays) (10-39) were terms used in the 19th Century textile industry for dark-hued calicos like these, which were worn by widows who had passed out of the stage of mourning proper, when they were expected to wear black. The sad sisters of cheerier cloths such as the cinnamon pinks, these prints were also favored by practical rural working women, not necessarily bereaved, because their speckled textures and dark colors required less frequent laundering.

With the death of Prince Albert in 1861, Queen Victoria wore mourning and jet

jewelry for the remainder of her life. Here are true jet jewelry and two jet buttons. The area around the Whitby Abbey, England (right top & bottom—founded in 657 AD), had supplied jet since Roman times. True jet is a semi-soft gemstone of a type of brown/black coal—the fossilized wood of a tree

similar to the monkey tree. The necklace is very light weight compared to a similar one of glass beads. The brooch with small flowers is a very poor condition, but is shown as a similar one can be seen in the reprinted Sears Roebuck catalog of 1897 and sold for \$1.50.

RIGHT: Bar pin.

FAR RIGHT: Crudely carved jet ball button.

RIGHT: Jet button with a cross motif.

BELOW RIGHT: Jet necklace, brooch, and stud described above.

CENTER: The Masonic symbol on a horn button.

BOTTOM ROW, RIGHT TO LEFT:

Two putti holding an oval mirror.

Birds—a common motif.

Flowers were also very common. A fascinating glossary of symbols of mourning lists 78 flowers and trees in the book *Mourning Art & Jewelry*.



: JET



NECKLACE

BROOCH

STUD



Here are postcards from England. The colored one is dated May 18, 1908, and is addressed to a "Miss Hart" at the "Home for Incurables" in Harrogate. Somehow, I don't think I would appreciate receiving a card like this! Directly below is a sympathy card.



Card addressed to Miss Hart, Home for Incurables, Harrogate. Written on back: "I hope you will like this but don't take it too seriously. It looks alright with the whiskey bottle on the table doesn't it. Don't be too eager to ????? at it. I hope you are getting alright."



We Extend Our Sympathy

Thoughts that are earnest and tender
Thoughts that are kind and true
Came from our heart overflowing
With sympathy for you.



Western Regional Button Association is pleased to share our educational articles with the button collecting community. This article appeared in the December 2013 WRBA *Territorial News*. Enjoy! Please join WRBA! Go to www.WRBA.us WRBA gladly offers our articles for reprint, give credit to the author and WRBA as the source.

Horn buttons on a half-mourning fabric. Not all of these buttons may have been used for mourning, but it is difficult to determine which motifs would qualify.



Handmade cloth or needlework buttons were probably the most common.
We can't tell how many of these were worn on mourning clothes.



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A Civil War era half-mourning print behind rubber buttons. Of the 24 buttons on the card, five have cross variations. A wonderful article on crosses with illustrations was in a WRBA bulletin. An interesting fact learned in this study—one of the reasons for the color variations in rubber was the use of homemade lye soap for washing clothes. It was very hard on colors and materials.



RIGHT: Seven dull black glass buttons.

BUTTONS *Top to bottom:* Horn—wreath with acorns. Acorns are also found in dull black glass. Dull black glass—acorns. Horn—large horn button with a cross and sword. Dull black glass—cup shape that a dressmaker would purchase at the dry goods store then use buttonhole stitches and bullion knots to fill the center.

BELOW: Half-mourning print from the 1860-70s with glass buttons we call Victorians. Note how the button colors of these three pages look like they “belong” on the fabric.



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Half-mourning print from the 1860-70s with glass buttons we call Victorians.



Half-mourning print from the 1860-70s with glass buttons we call Victorians. We can thank the quilters for the current availability of reproduction prints that have been found on quilts of the era in museums.

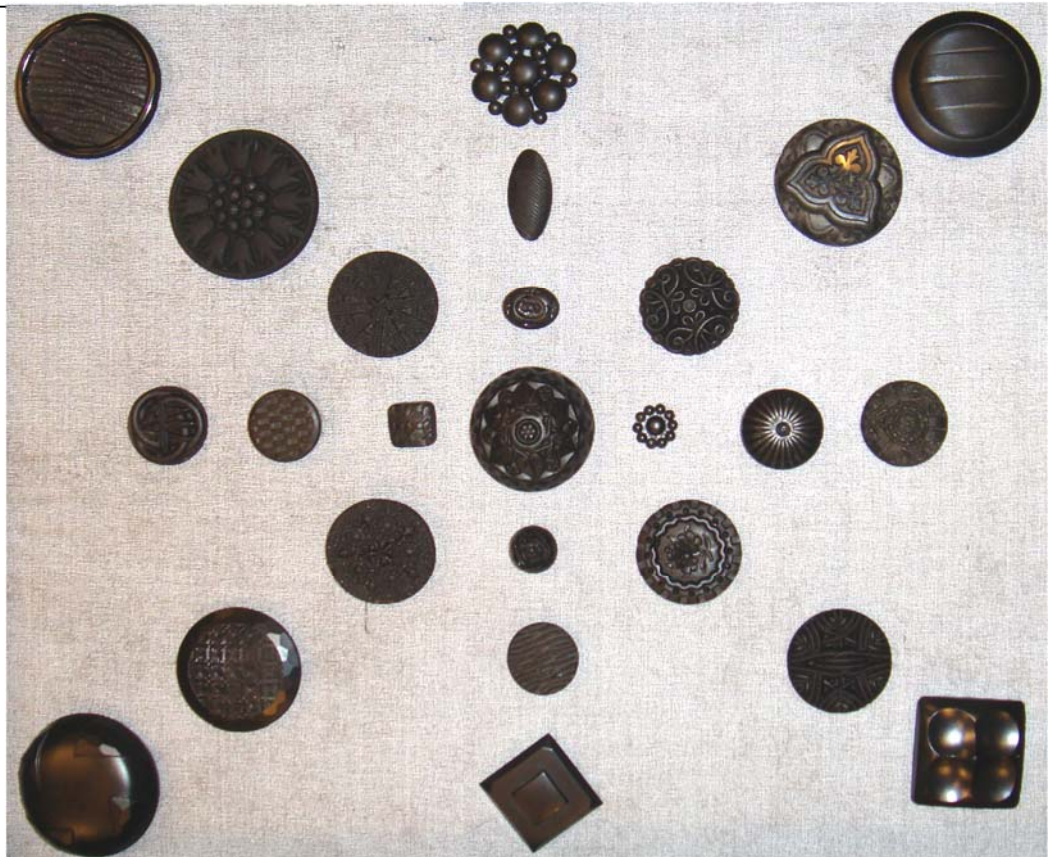
At the time of a family death in rural America during the first half of the 1800s, friends or neighbors would come in and, using natural dyes—notably indigo, logwood or sumac—change the widow's current dresses and create her mourning wardrobe. The bonnet and veiling would be borrowed or purchased from the nearest dry goods store.

Mourning buttons are not the most “exciting” of our buttons—there is not the eye-appeal of an enamel, or the beauty of a shell—but they are representative of a long history of how we have coped with grief and how and why we have moved away from expressing our feelings during a time of personal pain.



Special thanks to Deb Chrowl for help in identifying hair buttons; my daughter, Kaaren Bedi, for the loan of hair and jet jewelry; and Mika Jarmusz for photography and computer expertise.

Buttons we normally call “mourning” buttons: black glass with a dull surface. They are on a fabric gauze typically used for veiling.



FORMAL AFTERNOON DRESS IN COLORS OF HALF MOURNING BOUGHT IN 1889. BODICE AND SKIRT ARE OF BLACK FIGURED SILK PATTERN WITH SILVER AND CREAM/GRAY WILLOW LEAF DESIGNS. From *The Art of Dress* by Jane Ashelford. Page 238.



Gown, possibly Virginia, 1817-1825, cotton with inked decoration, sleeves shortened, 1996-105.

Women sometimes wore white dresses with black trimmings for mourning. The black-inked design on this dress appears to be later than the original construction, possibly added during remodeling for mourning wear. A fragmentary note with this gown identifies it as a “Dress made and worn by Mrs. (torn) White when James Monroe was inaugurated 1817.” The gown was found in Accomac, Virginia, and may have been made in that area.



Figure 260. Mourning accessories (clockwise from top), Fan, Britain, ca. 1760, painted and pierced paper, bone, 1992-36; Rectangular knee buckles, Brittain, 1756-170, jet, steel, copper alloy, 1953-1013, 1-2; Oval knee buckles, Britain, 1775-1800, jet, gold, 1954-621, 1-2; Brooch and case, Britain, worn in Caroline County, Virginia, 1780, watercolor on ivory, glass, pearls, gold, silk, leather, G1962-138, gift of Mr. George Baylor.

Milliners and other shopkeepers sold a wide variety of mourning accessories. The brooch commemorates the short life of Frances Courtney Baylor, who was born in October 1779 and died five-and-a-half months later.