"Painful Leisure" and "Awful Business": Female Death Workers in Pennsylvania

Abstract: In late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Pennsylvania, women were the primary caretakers of the dying and dead. Watchers tended to the physical, spiritual, and social needs of the dying. Layers out of the dead washed, groomed, fixed, and dressed dead bodies. Watchers and layers included female relatives and neighbors and women who offered their services for pay. By the second half of the nineteenth century, most Pennsylvania women did not participate in these activities; the care of the dying and dead became the responsibility of formally trained and licensed professionals. The Civil War, industrial tragedies, the rise of undertaking and embalming as professions, and the increasing dependence on medical institutions such as hospitals and homes for the incurable contributed to the changes in the care of the dying and dead.

> We have lost our Neighbor Waln, she died this forenoon between nine and ten o'clock . . . . I went over and stay'd with the afflected children 'till their other friends and relations arrived—Molly Humphriss who lays her out, was also come, I then came away before that awful business commenced.
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> —*Elizabeth Drinker,* Diary, *April 19, 1798*

Before the rise of funeral directing and the funeral home, women such as Molly Humphriss practiced their "awful business," washing, grooming, dressing, and laying out the dead in the home of the deceased. In late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Pennsylvania, women were the primary caretakers of the dying and dead. Known as

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watchers and layers, they included the female relatives of the dead, neighbors, and women who offered their services for pay. One watcher was poet Annis Boudinot Stockton, who kept vigil as her husband Richard Stockton died of oral cancer. Writing to a friend, she described her watch as "painful leisure."[1] Once death occurred, the layers out of the dead took over and tended to what Quaker diarist Elizabeth Drinker referred to as "that awful business."[2] Eventually, this "painful leisure" and "that awful business" no longer occupied women's time. In the second half of the nineteenth century, death moved from the bedroom to the hospital room and from the front parlor to the funeral parlor due to changes in warfare, industry, and medicine.

Researchers who consider the history of death in America have focused on five main themes. First, historians offer surveys of how attitudes toward death changed over large periods of time and across geographic regions. For example, Philippe Ariès's *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* concentrates on Western attitudes toward death—primarily European, although it does address American values in a portion of the text. Second, scholars investigate the connections between American views of death and the Civil War; this literature largely seeks to understand how American men envisioned and experienced death. Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* shows how the tremendous loss of life fundamentally transformed how Americans thought about, dealt with, and felt about death. Researchers have also turned their attention to women and death in the United States in the nineteenth century. *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America,* by Ann Braude, traces the influence of spiritualism upon the development of women's authority in both the private and public spheres. Women empowered themselves through their association with death. Historians also investigate the social, cultural, and economic practices that characterize dying, death, and dead bodies. Christine Quigley's *The Corpse: A History* offers a wide-ranging analysis of how dead bodies were handled in a variety of historical and regional contexts. Finally, some scholars study artifacts of nineteenth-century American death culture, examining objects, such as mourning dress, artwork, and cemetery

[1] Annis Boudinot Stockton, letter to Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson, Nov. 24, 1780, in *Only for the Eye of a Friend: The Poems of Annis Boudinot Stockton*, ed. Carla Mulford (Charlottesville, VA, 1995), 50.

[2] Elaine Forman Crane, ed., *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, vol. 2, *1796–1802* (Boston, 1991), 1024.

monuments, that marked the American experience of death. Mary Brett's *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, and Customs*, for instance, is an elegantly illustrated analysis of aesthetic reactions to dying and death.[3]

Unlike historical surveys about death, this essay focuses on how Pennsylvania women offered a variety of services to the dying and the dead and how, due to military, industrial, and medical changes, their role in this work diminished and was performed increasingly by trained, male professionals. This article clearly recognizes the impact that the Civil War had on women's authority over dying and dead bodies. It employs written primary sources, including city directories, dictionary entries, diaries, and poetry to understand how women served as caretakers of the dying and dead and when this caretaking declined. City directories document layers out of the dead, indicate where they lived, and record whether they offered other services, like midwifery and nursing. Dictionary entries attest to the variety of titles applied to women who tended to the dying and dead, show how this work died out economically and socially, and suggest how the important labor that death workers undertook lived on linguistically as figurative language. Diaries record how friends, neighbors, and paid workers assisted family members with the dying and dead. Poetry expresses the immense emotional and physical energy that death care required. These

[3] Surveys about Western and American ideas and practices concerning death include Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore, 1974), 85–107; and David Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York, 1977). Books that focus on how the Civil War transformed death are Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York, 2008); Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799–1883* (New Haven, CT, 1996), 96–116; and Mark S. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death* (Ithaca, NY, 2008). The following sources address the topic of women's roles in relation to death: Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston, 1991), 10–81; Briony D. Zlomke, "Death Became Them: The Defeminization of the American Death Culture, 1609–1899" (MA thesis, University of Nebraska, 2013); Georganne Rundblad, "Exhuming Women's Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead," *Gender and Society* 9 (1995): 173–92; Wendy Simonds and Barbara Katz Rothman, *Centuries of Solace: Expressions of Maternal Grief in Popular Literature* (Philadelphia, 1992), 1–31; and Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York, 1977). Sources that focus on the history of dead bodies and funerary practices include Gary Laderman, *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 2003), 70–71; Christine Quigley, *The Corpse: A History* (Jefferson, NC, 1996); and Robert V. Wells, *Facing the "King of Terrors": Death and Society in an American Community, 1750–1990* (Cambridge, UK, 2000). Works that analyze memorial art and design include Mary Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, and Customs* (Atglen, PA, 2006); Blanche Linden-Ward, *Landscapes of Memory and Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery* (Columbus, OH, 1989); Ann Schofield, "The Fashion of Mourning," in *Representations of Death in Nineteenth-Century US Writing and Culture*, ed. Lucy E. Frank (Burlington, VT, 2007), 157–66; and Anita Schorsch, *Mourning Becomes America: Mourning Art in the New Nation* (Philadelphia, 1976).

sources describe the death services that women provided and how this work was transformed in the second half of the nineteenth century.

This study pays close attention to the language used to describe those who cared for—and the type of care provided to—the dying and dead. Women who tended to the dying usually were described as "watchers" and "watch-women," but the more common title of "nurse" was also employed. Persons who prepared bodies for burial were called "layers out," "layers out of the dead," "shrouders," and "streekers." As time passed, these occupations ended, and other skilled workers took over tasks for which women were once responsible. As a consequence, these dead jobs became dead words, buried in figures of speech that hid their original and full meanings. In addition to the significance of the titles used to identify the type of death work that was done, the phrases that described the tasks were deeply evocative. The expressions usually combined an adjective and noun that were meant to signify to the listener or reader the depth of the services that were provided and the intensity of physical, spiritual, and emotional energy that was expended and experienced. "Painful leisure" and "awful business" were two examples.

This history's geographic focus, Pennsylvania, is an appropriate location for a study of women's death services because death work in the state reflected national trends while still possessing unique characteristics. Like other states in the early nineteenth century, Pennsylvania began to industrialize. However, though Pennsylvania possessed one of the nation's largest cities, Philadelphia, it was also home to small towns and rural areas. Agriculture and commerce balanced the state's emerging industrial sector; its economy, thus, was similar to that of other northern states such as New York and Massachusetts. In addition, the ideology of domesticity shaped the experiences of Pennsylvania men and women; the effects of the domestic ideal were felt throughout the United States. Pennsylvanians, like other Americans, faced epidemics and other public health dangers. The state's youngest members died from childhood illnesses, and the commonwealth's mothers succumbed during labor and delivery. American children and women in different locales underwent similar tragedies.

Even though Pennsylvania participated in national economic, social, and cultural developments, it retained distinctive qualities that affected women's association with death. Pennsylvania law and custom influenced women's inheritance of spousal property and family property. Specifically, in Pennsylvania, all of a deceased husband's property could be sold to pay

for his debts. Only then might a wife receive her dower, or one-third of real property. Daughters usually did not receive real estate; instead, they inherited movable property.[4] As a result of these economic circumstances, women entered or stayed in the paid workforce, and one job in which they participated was death care. Philadelphian Rebecca Powell notably offered her services as a layer out after she was widowed. Furthermore, the ethnic diversity that characterized the state impacted the types of death rituals in which women participated. Pennsylvania German women, for example, heeded folk proverbs that instructed them about the proper presentation of the deceased. Philadelphia's Quaker heritage and the city's need for labor impacted women's experiences. In particular, a high percentage of the city's female residents remained unmarried. Some chose never to marry; others who had been widowed decided not to remarry. Instead, they lived in a variety of households—extended families, female-headed households, and partnerships made up of family and friends—and pursued a variety of economic opportunities.[5] The layers documented in Philadelphia directories frequently identified themselves as widows, and some were the most senior women in their female-led families. These factors—Pennsylvania inheritance law, ethnic beliefs and rituals, and urban women-focused households—shaped death services in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Women who cared for the dying were called "watchers," "watchwomen," and "nurses," and they tended to the physical, spiritual, and social needs of the dying. They fixed coverings, offered food, water, and medicine, and managed bodily evacuations. Spiritual tasks included praying and arranging visits by clergy and other religious persons. Women who kept the death watch welcomed visitors and loved ones to the side of the dying. Watchers made sure to observe the dying person's attitude toward death—was the death a Good Death and one that could comfort the living? The Good Death was a religious and cultural tradition that was important to Americans in the nineteenth century. A Good Death was one in which a person met the end with courage, confident resignation, and faith. Religious books, advice literature, and popular fiction instructed Americans on how to die well. Watchers hoped that the testimony of a loved one's passing consoled those left behind and demonstrated the

[4] Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1986), 160–68; Karin Wulf, *Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2005), 3.

[5] Wulf, *Not All Wives*, 2, 10, 12–15, 20, 22–23, 87, 90–91, 96–98, 110–11.

Christian devotion of the person who had passed. When individuals struggled against death, experienced tremendous pain and trauma, and repudiated the divine, observers noted that they had experienced a Bad Death. In these cases, a watcher might choose to withhold testimony from bereaved families, an example of another kindness performed. On the other hand, the watcher might decide to share the deathbed scene as a warning to others to fortify their faith and transform their behavior.[6] The watcher's most significant task was acknowledging her charge's passing by verifying that the person was indeed dead. Women who watched looked closely to see if the individual was breathing and shook the body to see if life remained.[7]

Family members and friends performed these important physical, spiritual, and social duties. Philadelphia diarist Deborah Logan documented the passing of her cousin Hannah Griffits in August 1817. Logan and several female friends tended to the physical needs of their beloved companion. Logan noted, "She has been most kindly and affectionately nursed . . . and nothing omitted that we thought would contribute to her comfort and the alleviations of her sufferings." Logan and the other women also performed spiritual duties; they observed Griffits's demeanor, her final words to family and friends, and her last breath.[8]

Poet Annis Boudinot Stockton's accounts of the dying and death of her husband, Richard, also provide evidence of the tasks that female family members rendered and the struggles women who watched withstood. She memorialized her watching experience in a poem entitled "*An* extemporal Ode *in a* Sleepless Night." Stockton recounted hearing the physical suffering of her husband and the emotional turmoil she endured:

> Thro' all the silence of this dreary night,
> Made awful by that taper's gloomy light;
> My aching heart re-echos ev'ry groan,
> And makes each sigh, each mortal pang, its own!

Stockton kept vigil at her husband's bedside, tending to his physical needs and comforting him as he cried out in pain. Stockton offered to take her husband's dying place, writing,

[6] Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 6–7, 26–28.
[7] Susan M. Stabile, *Memory's Daughters: The Material Culture of Remembrance in Eighteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY, 2004), 196–97.
[8] Ibid., 189–91, quote on 189.

> Ah! Could *I* take the fate to him assign'd
> And leave the helpless family their head;
> How pleas'd, how peaceful to my lot resign'd;
> I'd quit the nurse's station for the bed![9]

Stockton's words have multiple meanings: she was exhausted physically, emotionally, and mentally from hearing and seeing her husband suffer, but she could not sleep; she wished to trade her bedside station for the bed; and she desired to die instead of her dear, dying husband.

In another poem, titled, "A Short Elegy to the Memory of Her Husband," she asserted that the loss of him was a loss for many, that he was "*husband, father, brother, master, friend*." She again noted the suffering he endured and the pain it brought to her:

> Can we forget how patiently he bore
> The various conflicts of *the trying hour*;
> While *meekness, faith,* and *piety* refin'd,
> And steadfast *hope* rais'd his exalted mind
> Above the sufferings of this mortal state,
> And help'd his soul in smiles to meet her fate?
> O fatal hour! Severely felt by me![10]

Stockton stressed that Richard's virtues sustained both him and her during his dying. "His soul" not only referred to his immortal core, but also described her relationship to him. The "smiles" assisted both him and her to "meet . . . fate." Annis Stockton's poem not only documented the physical and social services she provided to her husband, but also indicated that she did a spiritual task demanded of watchers—she related that, despite his suffering, his dying and death were good. They testified to his virtue and instructed the living, especially her, how to be strong and face adversity.

Stockton's letter to Elizabeth Graeme Park on November 24, 1780, also described her care of her husband, hinted at the tasks she did, and expressed the pain it brought her. She asked her friend to excuse "my silence" as she was "totaly confin'd to the chamber of a dear and dying husband." The let-

[9] Stockton, "*An* extemporal Ode *in a* Sleepless Night," 1789, in *Only for the Eye of a Friend*, 156–57.

[10] Stockton, "A Short Elegy to the Memory of Her Husband," 1781, in *Only for the Eye of a Friend*, 99.

ter, like her poems, testified to the watch that she kept at Richard's bedside. As a writer, Stockton recognized that letter-writing—likely any writing—offered "one of the greatest reliefs I could have." However, her husband was not able to "bear the Scraping of a pen, on paper in his room, or Even the folding up of a letter." She lamented, "I have *Leisure*, painful *Leisure* enough." Stockton's leisure was painful—teeming with Richard's suffering and her own emotional and physical turmoil. Stockton held out false hope that Richard would improve. In the same letter, she revealed, "I have kept up my courage by flattering my self [*sic*], that the ulcer would heal, but it proves so obstinate that his constitution is sinking fast under it, and I have been very apprehensive for a week past, that he could not survive long, but he is now a little better." His cancer spread, and he died three months later on February 28, 1781.[11] These last months required Annis to tend to a man whose cancer had spread from his lip to his neck and throat. His health already undermined as a result of the cruel treatment he had received as a prisoner of war during the American Revolution, Richard likely endured immense pain in the neck, shoulder, and mouth and had difficulty chewing, swallowing, speaking, and breathing. The physical, social, and spiritual tasks that Annis rendered to her beloved were immense.[12]

Deborah Logan and Annis Boudinot Stockton nursed and watched over dying friends and family members. Hired help also acted as watchers; their assistance gave primary caregivers much-needed rest, especially at night. In some cases, their care extended to providing objects, such as candles, that were essential for evening work. The candles supplied by watchers served both practical and symbolic purposes. Nighttime caregivers needed to illuminate darkened chambers in order to tend to the dying person's needs. Candles in the death chamber also lent the space a sacred quality, and the illumination they provided was believed to light the deceased person's passage toward the other side. In addition, the shape that a candle took was thought to indicate the proximity of death. Witnesses watched for the shape of the winding sheet on a tallow candle, looking to see if wax had spilled down and hardened on its side. Lit candles comforted some

[11] Stockton to Fergusson, Nov. 24, 1780, in *Only for the Eye of a Friend*, 50. See also 21–22 for biographical information about the Stocktons.

[12] Even today, advanced oral cancer is one of the most difficult cancers to treat, and the physical issues that patients face are harrowing. Laura McLaughlin and Suzanne Mahon, "A Meta-Analysis of the Relationship Among Impaired Taste and Treatment, Treatment Type, and Tumor Site in Head and Neck Cancer Treatment Survivors," *Oncology Nursing Forum* 41, no. 3 (2014): E194–95; and Herbert B. Ershkowitz, "Richard Stockton," in *Encyclopedia of New Jersey*, ed. Maxine N. Lurie and Marc Mappen (New Brunswick, NJ, 2004), 782.

who kept vigil; for others, they only served as flickering reminders of life's shadows. Stockton eloquently characterized the foreboding quality of candles when she wrote, "Thro' all the silence of this dreary night / made awful by that taper's gloomy light."[13] The quiet of the chamber where Richard lay was worsened by the candle's glow.

While watchers kept watch over the dying, the care of the deceased body was left to women known as layers out of the dead. Like watchers, these women might be female relatives, neighbors, or paid workers. Some women, in fact, acted as both watchers and layers. As noted in the epigraph, the diary of Elizabeth Drinker mentioned the death of her neighbor R. Waln and the attentions that Waln received from a layer out of the dead identified as Molly Humphriss.[14]

Layers out of the dead had a variety of duties to perform. They washed, dressed, and groomed the body. The "awful business" to which Drinker referred meant the disturbing but necessary steps of closing the deceased person's mouth with a piece of cloth tied around the top of the head and the jaw or via a stick lodged between the chin and breastbone and of ensuring the eyes remained shut by means of coins or other weighted objects. Diarist Deborah Logan recorded that she performed this kindness for her cousin Hannah Griffitts: "I closed her dying eyes, and we sat for a time in solemn Silence, each, I believe, contemplating the joyful landing of her Soul upon the celestial Shore."[15]

The considerate work of the layers out of the dead became enshrined in Pennsylvania German folklore. One omen advised, "If the eye or eyes of a corpse remain unclosed, there will be another death, for it is looking for the next one to follow." A variation of this omen said, "If the eyes of a corpse are difficult to close it is said they are looking after a follower."[16] The open eyes of a corpse likely frightened onlookers; as a result of this fear, layers out of the dead took care to shut them. Layers out of the dead also removed internal organs, blocked orifices, and applied chemicals to the

[13] Emily K. Abel, *The Inevitable Hour: A History of Caring for Dying Patients in America* (Baltimore, 2013), 11–15, 24–25; and James K. Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia: Changing Attitudes and Practices* (Urbana, IL, 1994), 14–21. For articles on the significance of candles, see W. T. O'Dea, "Artificial Lighting Prior to 1800 and Its Social Effects," *Folklore* 62 (1951): 314; Isabella Barclay, "Scraps of Folklore," *Folklore* 5 (1894): 337; H. J. Rose, "Folklore Scraps," *Folklore* 45 (1934): 161. Stockton, "*An* extemporal Ode *in a* Sleepless Night."

[14] Crane, *Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 1024.

[15] Quoted in Stabile, *Memory's Daughters*, 191.

[16] For Pennsylvania German death omens and superstitions, see Edwin Miller Fogel, *Beliefs and Superstitions of the Pennsylvania Germans* (Philadelphia, 1915), 122.

body. They wrapped the corpse in alum-covered cloth or filled body cavities with charcoal to retard putrefaction. The title of "shrouder" referred to the skills the women had: they dressed, groomed, and preserved the body so loved ones could view it. They had to know how weather and climate affected decomposition; in hot weather, they placed bodies on ice and, in the freezing winter, they stored bodies in dead houses until the ground was soft enough to receive them.[17] Layers out had to work efficiently due to the onset of rigor mortis and the decay and discoloration of the body. Humphriss's work was, as Drinker described, "awful," in that it was both full of awe and truly dreadful. Women like Humphriss performed tasks that eased the suffering of family members and friends who hoped to look on their beloved's dead body and face without revulsion or horror. In order for this witnessing to take place, layers had to do chores that put them into contact with bodily fluids, dramatic skin changes, and potentially hazardous substances.[18] Humphriss was likely a professional layer out of the dead, or someone who performed these services in exchange for money or material goods, and not a neighbor, friend, or family member, like Deborah Logan, who completed these tasks out of a sense of community and compassion. The fact that Drinker described Humphriss's work as a "business" supports this conclusion. The systematic tasks—washing, dressing, and fixing the body—also kept the layer busy; she learned to read the dead body closely and completed her tasks with precision and care.

In addition to diaries, Philadelphia city directories are rich sources of information about professional layers out of the dead. The names of layers appear in both the general lists of business persons that the majority of the directories comprise and in the listings of medical workers that appear at either the beginning or end of the directories. Some layers out of the dead also advertised themselves as "nurses" or as "midwives."[19] All three medical specialties depended on women's entrance into the domestic sphere of

[17] Vertie Knapp, "The Natural Ice Industry of Philadelphia in the Nineteenth Century," *Pennsylvania History* 41(1974): 412–21.

[18] Quigley, *The Corpse*, 52–53; and Wells, *Facing the "King of Terrors,"* 48, 70. See Robert V. Wells, "A Tale of Two Cities: Epidemics and the Rituals of Death in Eighteenth-Century Boston and Philadelphia," in *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America*, ed. Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein (Philadelphia, 2003), 57. For the tasks assigned to persons who laid out the dead, see Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia*, 29–35; Zlomke, "Death Became Them," 16–23; and Rundblad, "Exhuming Women's Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead," 180.

[19] Philadelphia directories used the term "layer out of the dead"; directories from other parts of Pennsylvania did not use the term but instead documented "nurses": women who, most likely, also cared for the dead. See R. L. Polk and Co., *Pittsburgh in the Year Eighteen Hundred and Twenty-six,*

their customers. Sickrooms, lying-in chambers, and homes were the locales where people suffered through their illnesses, where women labored to give birth, and where bodies were laid out. The tie between domesticity and femininity allowed female nurses access to private homes. The fact that sickness and childbirth sometimes resulted in death also explains why nurses and midwives served as layers out of the dead. The intimate care that women provided to the living body extended to their concern for the dead body.[20]

In addition to being named as "midwives" or "nurses," some layers out of the dead listed themselves as "widows" in the city directories. Their widowhood affirmed their domestic status. It also signified their direct connection with death—they had buried husbands, and, if they were mothers, they likely had lost children too. Death was essential to their very identity as widows. The physical losses that these widows had experienced and the limitations placed on them by inheritance laws forced many to ply trades—such as nursing, midwifery, and laying out of the dead—that brought them into close contact with bodies.[21]

Rebecca Powell was one layer out of the dead who exemplified these multiple identities. According to the 1790 census, Powell was a young widow, in her twenties or thirties, who resided in Shepherd's Alley with three children, one boy and two girls, under the age of sixteen. The 1791 and 1793 city directories list her title as "widow." Three years later, in 1794, she advertised herself as a layer out of the dead. For the next three years, she identified as a widow and mantua maker. Historian Marla Miller describes the mantua as "a one-piece gown worn over a separate bodice" that appealed to both upper-class women and the middle-class

Containing Sketches Topographical, Historical and Statistical; Together with a Directory of the City, and a View of Its Various Manufacturers, Populations, Improvements, &c. (Pittsburgh, 1826), 107, 118, 121, 127, 129, 132, 142, 150, and 151.

[20] James Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1805* (Philadelphia, 1805), lxiii; Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1808* (Philadelphia, 1808), n.p.; Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1809* (Philadelphia, 1809), l; Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory, for 1810* (Philadelphia, 1810), n.p.; John A. Paxton, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1813* (Philadelphia, 1813), xiv; Paxton, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1819* (Philadelphia, 1819), n.p.; McCarty and Davis, *The Philadelphia Directory of Register for 1822* (Philadelphia, 1822), n.p.; Robert DeSilver, *DeSilver's Philadelphia Directory and Stranger's Guide, 1831* (Philadelphia, 1831), 105. Patricia D'Antonio, "The Legacy of Domesticity: Nursing in Early Nineteenth-Century America," in *Nurses' Work: Issues Across Time and Place*, ed. Patricia D'Antonio, Ellen D. Baer, Sylvia Rinker, and Joan Lynaugh (New York, 2007), 33–48; and Patricia D'Antonio, *American Nursing: A History of Knowledge, Authority, and the Meaning of Work* (Baltimore, 2010), 3–4, 9.

[21] Cornelius William Stafford, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1801* (Philadelphia, 1801), 137.

women who hoped to dress like them.[22] By 1801, Powell returned to advertising herself as a widow and layer out of the dead. However, from 1803 until 1807, she offered her services as a "tayloress [*sic*]," dropping the title "layer out of the dead." The occupation of tailoress meant that Powell constructed a wide variety of simple garments—including pants, skirts, shirts, and jackets for women, men, and children—and altered and repaired such garments.[23] In the 1808 directory and in eleven subsequent directories up until 1825, she advertised as both a "layer out of the dead" and as a "nurse."[24]

These shifting titles indicate that Powell was willing to do what it took to support herself and her children. They also highlight that Powell was a skilled worker. Layers and nurses like Powell had knowledge of chemistry, anatomy, and physiology. As a mantua maker and tailoress, Powell also had to be aware of the human body. Her occupations depended on similar abilities, including cutting and shaping. Layers cut skin, muscles, and tendons when they removed organs and packed the body; they sewed skin; and they shaped features such as the eyes, mouth, jaw, and limbs. Similarly, mantua makers and tailoresses cut fabric, molded it, and sewed it to fit the body. Since they possessed similar skills, a layer, man-

[22] Marla Miller, *The Needle's Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution* (Amherst, MA, 2006), 16, quote on 60.

[23] Ibid., 16, 64–65, 117–18.

[24] Philadelphia, PA 1790 US Federal Census, File 2 of 2 for Philadelphia City, Middle District, USGenWeb Census Project (2004), accessed Jan. 15, 2015, http://us-census.org/pub/usgenwebcensus /pa/philadelphia/1790/pg0226.txt; Clement Biddle, *The Philadelphia Directory* (Philadelphia, 1791), 103; James Hardie, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register* (Philadelphia, 1793), 114; Hardie, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1794), 123, 218–21; Edmund Hogan, *The Prospect of Philadelphia and Check on the Next Directory: Part I* (Philadelphia, 1795), 39; Thomas Stephens, *Stephens's Philadelphia Directory, for 1796* (Philadelphia, 1796), 148; Stephens, *The Philadelphia Directory of 1797* (Philadelphia, 1797), 146; Cornelius William Stafford, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1798* (Philadelphia, 1798), 76–77; Stafford, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1801* (Philadelphia, 1801), 137; James Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory, City and County Register, for 1803* (Philadelphia, 1803), 201; Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1804* (Philadelphia, 1804), 185; Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1806* (Philadelphia, 1806), 214; Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1807* (Philadelphia, 1807), 235; Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1808*, 2; Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory, for 1810*, 13, 225; Paxton, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1813*, xiv; B. and T. Kite, *Kite's Philadelphia Directory for 1814* (Philadelphia, 1814), 16–17, 366; Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory, for 1816* (Philadelphia, 1816), 9, 338; Robinson, *Robinson's Original Annual Directory for 1817* (Philadelphia, 1817), 353, 491; Paxton, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1818* (Philadelphia, 1818), 10, 269; Paxton, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1819*, 43, 323; Edward Whitely, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1820* (Philadelphia, 1820), 40, 354; *The Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1821* (Philadelphia, 1821), 364; McCarty and Davis, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1822*, 56, 398; *The Philadelphia Directory and Strangers Guide for 1825* (Philadelphia, 1825), 112, 160; D'Antonio, "Legacy of Domesticity," 39–40.

tua maker, and tailoress depended on many of the same tools, including scissors to cut fabrics and skin, irons to flatten fabrics or weigh down and close the eyes, extra pieces of cloth from which to fashion chin straps, and large tables on which to lay the dead or one's latest sartorial creation.[25] As a layer, a mantua maker, and a tailoress, Powell dressed bodies. Scholars of dress and fashion have pointed out that one's clothing acts as a second skin, helping persons to adopt new personas that may serve to empower them.[26] Nurses dressed wounds and applied plasters to return persons to good health and to shift the ailing individual's identity away from suffering and disease. Layers out fashioned bodies to their original state by working against rigor mortis and other changes brought on by death. At the same time, they dressed bodies for the eternal by wrapping them in shrouds and winding clothes.

Powell intimately understood her customers—she entered their homes, she knew their bodies, and she experienced their most private moments of nakedness, distress, and death. Powell's talents as nurse, layer, mantua maker, and tailoress were likely mutually beneficial; her dress clients might have requested her nursing and death services upon their demise, allowing her to reap profits from both her death services and from the fashion products in which she outfitted the corpses. Specifically, she may have offered burial garments such as shrouds and winding clothes and sold black fabric that was used as draping in and on people's homes.[27] She must have been a busy woman, given that she served the living, the dead, the young, and the old and offered a variety of semiskilled and highly skilled services. Her choice of work labels was also affected by health crises, namely the yellow fever epidemic of 1793 and subsequent flare-ups of the disease that struck the city. In fact, she dropped the title "layer out of the dead" in 1795. Perhaps her neighbors feared the work she did with dead bodies, especially during the time of an epidemic. The five deaths due to yellow fever that struck the residents of Shepherd's Alley might have been traced to her door; perhaps she thought it best to instead list herself as a widow, a mantua maker, and a tailoress. Or maybe

[25] Miller, *Needle's Eye*, 64–65, 70, 75–77, 79, 81, 83; Jacqueline Barbara Carr, "Marketing Gentility: Boston Businesswomen, 1780–1830," *New England Quarterly* 82 (2009): 44–45.

[26] Jessica Hemmings, "Altered Surfaces. The *Ambi Generation* of Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name* and *Butterfly Burning*," in *Body, Sexuality, and Gender: Versions and Subversions in African Literatures* 1, ed. Flora Veit-Wild and Dirk Naguschewski (Amsterdam, 1994), 175.

[27] Elizabeth C. Sanderson, *Women and Work in Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh* (New York, 1996), 64, 68–69, 71.

the epidemic brought her so much business that it was not necessary to advertise—her fine and caring work spoke for itself.[28]

Rebecca Powell was one of several layers in Philadelphia who offered services in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For the first three decades of the nineteenth century, she, Hannah January, and Selah Knowles worked as layers out of the dead. By 1819, the number of layers out of the dead had increased to fifteen women. Three years later, there were eighteen, including what appears to have been a mother-daughter business. The same directory notes the removal of the following businessperson: "William Adams, scrivener, teacher, and layer out of the dead." Adams may have been pushed from the market because the trade was one pursued by women. Whatever the case, the number of layers out of the dead had increased tremendously over a twenty-year period. This expansion resulted from the growth of Philadelphia's population. The city's industrialization afforded middle-class families the services of layers out of the dead. They no longer depended exclusively on neighbors or women of the household. Immigrants from overseas and migrants from rural Pennsylvania who died without the care of mothers, sisters, and aunts might have requested the services of the layers out of the dead before they died. Jane Hook, a layer out of the dead, catered to these single souls not only by arranging their final passages but also by lodging them (when living) in the boarding house she ran. Only fifteen years later, the number of women who provided death services had dropped dramatically. Only three women are listed in the 1837 Philadelphia directory. This drop marked a trend that continued for the remainder of the nineteenth century.[29]

Social factors accounted for why women such as Logan, Stockton, Humphriss, and Powell watched the dying and laid out the dead. First of all, dying and death, like other life events, took place in the home. Women gave birth at home, they married their husbands at home, they welcomed visitors at home, they tended the dying at home, and they died there themselves.[30] In addition, watchers and layers performed a key feminine social

[28] Hardie, *Philadelphia Directory and Register*, 123, 218–21; Hogan, *The Prospect of Philadelphia*, 39. My thanks to Robert Sieczkiewicz, research librarian and assistant professor at Blough-Weis Library, Susquehanna University, for suggesting that Powell may not have advertised after the 1793 yellow fever epidemic because her skills were known and appreciated.

[29] Paxton, *Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1813*, xiv; Paxton, *Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1819*, n.p.; Whitely, *Philadelphia Directory and Register, for 1820*, n.p.; McCarty and Davis, *The Philadelphia Directory of Register for 1822*, n.p.; A. McElroy, *A. McElroy's Philadelphia Directory, for 1837* (Philadelphia, 1837), n.p.; D'Antonio, "Legacy of Domesticity," 39–40.

[30] Thomas Lynch, *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade* (New York, 1997), 34–37.

function—they acted as good neighbors, entering the homes of family and friends and offering both physical and social comfort. Like good mothers and daughters, they dutifully cleaned and dressed others. Their work also gave them opportunities to make money or to accrue material or social compensation for their services. Watching and laying out made good business sense—people got sick, and people died. Their services, in other words, were needed. Cultural factors also shaped women's death services. Religious tradition provided women with feminine and female models who hurried to tend to Jesus's dying and dead body and who were rewarded with the honor of announcing his resurrection.

As the nineteenth century progressed, women's involvement in death care waned. The trend that appeared in the 1830s continued. Military, industrial, and medical developments transformed the ways Americans understood and dealt with dying, death, and the dead. The carnage wrought by the American Civil War played a large part in removing women from their caretaking responsibilities for the dead and dying. Men died suddenly and violently on battlefields or lingered in hospitals. Because mothers, sisters, and daughters often could not be with the dying, proxy kin—fellow soldiers, doctors, and nurses—took their places. For men who died alone, beloved objects and photographs substituted for their loved ones. Men held photographs and locks of hair, speaking their last words to images and mementos their dear ones had given them. The duty of family, especially female relatives, to witness directly the final actions and words of their departing member was not possible; as a result, letters written by the dying, by compassionate medical workers, and by officers and friends became prized evidence of a life well lived and a death welcomed and embraced.[31]

Not only did the Civil War transform women's duties in relation to tending the dying, it also changed how dead bodies were handled. The sheer number of dead and their distance from their homes and families meant that middlemen emerged who readied the body for burial immediately or for burial back home. In the case of immediate burial, those middlemen were laborers, including fellow soldiers and prisoners of war, who carted hundreds of soldiers or dragged individual soldiers by rope and with hooks to mass graves and covered them with dirt. Without kin to tend to them, the dead were buried naked, their clothes and belongings stripped by scavengers, or, at best, in their underwear, or perhaps with

[31] Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 9–13, 15–16, 18–22.

blankets, if available, wrapped around them. Sometimes, comrades erected crude markers to indicate to the living the presence of those buried underground. Due to the development of awesome and awful weaponry, some bodies simply ceased—pulverized by technology, men were obliterated, vaporized—leaving nothing to find. As the war dragged on and as families desired the return of their loved ones, embalming improved and increased in frequency. Undertakers, embalmers, and men who promised to find the location of dead kin appeared on battlefields.[32]

Although undertaking had developed prior to the Civil War, the national military crisis provided undertakers with a large clientele. The tasks once performed by individual specialists, including the sexton who readied the burial plot, the carpenter who crafted the coffin, and the layer out who prepped and preserved the body, became the responsibilities of the undertaker. Undertakers took control of the funeral from start to finish. With a coffin on hand; a hearse ready to transport it; a corpse preserver to ice the body until transfer to the coffin for burial; and fabrics to dress the corpse, line the coffin, and hang as crepe, the undertaker was the one-stop shop for the bereaved. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the undertaker took on the title of "funeral director," partnering with a local embalmer or learning how to embalm the dead. A new profession was thus established, and the public sought the services offered.[33]

The Civil War was also a boon to embalmers and embalming. Previously, embalmers, many of whom had medical degrees, practiced their craft by preserving bodies used in anatomical demonstrations in medical schools. The Civil War offered them multiple bodies on which to hone their skills and a public eager to purchase their services so that sons, brothers, and fathers might be returned for proper burials at home. Moreover, the military ordered embalmers to submit to licensing, a trend that continued for the profession once the war ended. The tragic assassination of Abraham Lincoln and the embalming of his body, which was viewed by thousands of Americans, popularized the technique. A process known for centuries, practiced in various parts of the globe, and improved as a result of the

[32] Ibid., 63–64, 66, 67–69, 71, 73, 74–75, 79–80, 89, 91–94, 96–98, 102; Laderman, *Sacred Remains*, 103–16.

[33] Brent W. Tharp, "Preserving Their Forms and Features: The Role of Coffins in the American Understanding of Death, 1607–1870" (PhD diss., College of William and Mary, 1996), 149–50, 157–65; Edward C. Johnson, Gail R. Johnson, and Melissa Johnson, "The Origin and History of Embalming," in *Embalming: History, Theory, and Practice*, 3rd ed., ed. Robert G. Myer (New York, 2000), 474.

Civil War eventually became the leading way the dead were handled and prepared.[34]

The 1867 *Philadelphia City Directory* provides substantial evidence that undertaking and embalming by men eclipsed women's work as layers out of the dead. The directory lists 125 male undertakers, one female undertaker, and only four female layers out of the dead. In addition, the source notes that as many as sixteen families may have practiced undertaking as family businesses; seven pairs of men with the same last names and identical addresses were involved in family-run undertaking firms. The fact that these men practiced family trades indicates that undertaking had a future; fathers were willing to train their sons. Moreover, the need for two undertakers at a single address shows that business was good enough to warrant two specialists at a particular location. Finally, the paired men might have devoted themselves to different aspects of the funeral business—one might have arranged the funeral services, for example, while the other prepped bodies for viewing.[35]

The Civil War definitely impacted death care services. Another reason for women's loss of control over the dead body stemmed from the terrible deaths experienced by those maimed and killed in industry. Characterized as the workshop of America, Pennsylvania was home to a wide variety of industries, including coal mining, steel production, railroad, and textile manufacturing. Machines malfunctioned, workers became fatigued or did not perform their tasks properly, tools slipped, and women, men, and children were injured, permanently disabled, and even killed. Farming, which became industrialized by the first half of the nineteenth century, also witnessed a greater number of accidents and deaths. This industrial trauma played a part in transforming who performed death services and where these services were rendered. In the nineteenth century, concern over accidents and injuries became a matter of public scrutiny—business owners wanted to decrease mortal dangers, politicians wanted to contain them, and scientists wanted to study them. Fatal incidents moved from private tragedies to public calamities.[36] In cases of industrial trauma, death often no longer occurred in the private space of the home; the woman who had offered care to the dying and dead was likely not present in this new space. Moreover, the dreadful mangling of bodies that frequently accompanied industrial accidents meant there might be

[34] Johnson et al., "Origin and History of Embalming," 463, 465–70.

[35] A. McElroy, *Philadelphia City Directory for 1867* (Philadelphia, 1867), 39–1124 passim.

[36] John C. Burnham, *Accident Prone: A History of Technology, Psychology, and Misfits of the Machine Age* (Chicago, 2009), 9.

little for layers to fix or compose. In 1846, a Reading newspaper reported that the young daughter of William Saltzer was crushed in a threshing machine, "her neck fractured and the whole body dreadfully lacerated and mangled."[37] By the second half of the nineteenth century, embalmers had developed a subspecialization known as restorative art, which historians Edward Johnson, Gail Johnson, and Melissa Johnson describe as the repair of "injuries to the dead caused by disease or trauma." The wounds inflicted by industrial accidents gave specialists such as Joel E. Crandall, a leading restorative artist, experimental subjects on which to perfect their techniques.[38] In some cases, the dead were lost permanently—unable to be identified or recovered, they remained where they fell. The gendered nature of some industries also explains why women no longer provided their traditional services: the masculine character of these occupations excluded them.

Coal mining and the railroad industry highlight how industrial trauma altered death care. The anthracite coal mines of northeastern and north central Pennsylvania were locales where men and boys worked. In fact, Pennsylvania law prohibited women from working in or around mines. The exclusion of women from the mines was such an ingrained part of mining life that superstitions concerning women and miners developed. If a miner happened to see a woman, especially a redheaded woman, on the way to work, he believed he would meet with danger. Many women remained indoors as the men went to work, and miners refused to allow women in or near the mines, fearing that they might cast a spell on it. Thus, the colliery was a man's world. Above and below ground, men and boys worked, talked, and socialized. The mines were also places where men and boys died. Mine explosions and flooding accounted for the loss of life. When possible, bodies were located, cleaned, dressed, and placed in coffins by fellow miners, who sought to ease the burdens of already grieving wives. In other cases, bodies were not retrieved and lay in the rubble where they had fallen.[39]

Railway fatalities also illustrate how death was affected by industrialization in the nineteenth century. Railroad accidents not only killed workers but also resulted in the deaths of passengers and people walking along or crossing

[37] Jamie Bronstein, "Caught in the Machinery: The Cultural Meanings of Workplace Accidents in Victorian Britain and the United States" *Maryland Historical Magazine* 96 (2001): 170.

[38] Johnson et al., "Origin and History of Embalming," 474.

[39] Harold W. Aurand, *Coalcracker Culture: Work and Values in Pennsylvania Anthracite, 1835–1935* (Selinsgrove, PA, 2003), 32; George Korson, *Minstrels of the Mine Patch: Songs and Stories of the Anthracite Industry* (Hatboro, PA, 1964), 145–46; Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia*, 191–96.

tracks. Trains crashed, brakes failed, boilers exploded, bridges collapsed, and people failed to outrun oncoming trains—workers, passengers, and everyday people fell victim to the violence wrought by the railroad industry. Work accidents, in fact, posed the highest risk of death for the men and women who worked in the industry.[40]

One of the most tragic train wrecks that took place in Pennsylvania was the collision between an excursion train originating in Philadelphia and filled with over 1,000 school children and their teachers and a passenger train originating in Gwynedd. On July 17, 1856, as a result of conductor error, the locomotives collided and the excursion coaches shattered and caught fire. Twenty-seven out of the thirty-nine dead were not definitively identified. As poet John McDevitt described,

> Many of these mortals,
> Were burned and mangled so,
> That neither friend or neighbor
> Their bodies they could know.
> About thirteen in number,
> Their friends could never find.[41]

As was the case in the Pennsylvania coal mines, women had no bodies to prepare because they could not be retrieved from the wreckage or were burned and disfigured beyond recognition. Although these dead bodies were memorialized in history and via song, the small comforts, such as tending to, dressing, grooming, and looking upon the deceased, were denied to family members, specifically to the women whose jobs these duties entailed.

A train wreck eight years later, in Shohola, Pennsylvania, not only shows the tremendous, destructive power of industrialization but also highlights how military struggle in the Civil War era shaped how the dead were cared for and treated. Confederate prisoners of war being transported from Jersey City, New Jersey, along with Union guards, fell victim to a crash near the New York border. A coal train collided with the prison transport train, resulting in sixty-five deaths, Union and Confederate combined. Emergency crews gathered the shattered bodies, placed the dead in pine boxes, buried them nearby, and marked the location in order

[40] Mark Aldrich, *Death Rode the Rails: American Railroad Accidents and Safety, 1828–1965* (Baltimore, 2006), 2–3.

[41] John McDevitt, *Disastrous Calamity on the North Pennsylvania Rail Road* (Philadelphia, 1856).

to assist grieving families who might come in search of loved ones. At least nine other major train wrecks in Pennsylvania between 1872 and 1947 furthered the industrial transformation of death in the state. Finally, the railroad industry prodded the development of professional organizations among undertakers and funeral directors, associations that played a factor in women no longer offering death services. The transportation of dead bodies on trains raised issues about the spread of disease and questions about the safety of embalming. Baggage handlers, who were primarily responsible for moving bodies being shipped across the nation, were especially anxious to have definitive answers. Since railroads crossed state borders, railroad bosses wanted a national answer to their concerns. They received that response from the National Funeral Directors Association in the late 1880s. The association recommended rules governing the transport of those who died from infectious diseases, the need for embalming, and the proper paperwork.[42]

This professionalization of funeral work matched the professionalization of other fields, especially in medicine. Just as doctors elbowed traditional female caretakers from the sickroom and the lying-in room, embalmers and undertakers nudged female death workers from the side of the deceased. Embalmers first honed their skills on or near battlefields and sites of industrial accidents, spaces that largely excluded women. Undertakers and embalmers then banded together to form associations. They deployed science and medicine in order to convince legislators and the general public that the state needed to take greater control of exactly who should tend to and dispose of dead bodies. Both sanitarian philosophy and germ theory stressed pathways of disease transmission and suggested the dangers posed by dead and rotting corpses. Embalming became a privileged technology that required formal training and an array of tools, supplies, and procedures. Book-length and serial publications communicated information about embalming. *The Sunnyside* (1871), *The Casket* (1876), and *The Undertakers' Manual* (1878) educated their readers about new methods, tools, and chemicals used to preserve the body and included advertisements for the specialized supplies used in the trade. Mortuary education evolved from home study to short, three- to five-day courses offered by itinerant embalmers to full-fledged, licensed, and accredited

[42] Edgar A. Haine, *Railroad Wrecks* (New York, 1993), 35–38, 43, 59–61; Zlomke, "Death Became Them," 16–18; Robert W. Haberstein and William M. Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 7th ed. (Brookfield, WI, 2010), 302–3, 318–20.

embalming and mortuary science schools. Embalmers developed specialized tools, such as the trocar, and preservation treatments, which they then patented. The use of formaldehyde and the need to ventilate the space where embalming took place led to the transfer of the procedure from the deceased person's home or hospital room to the funeral home.[43] Citing their specialized knowledge, attendance at special schools established for the education of undertakers and funeral directors, and mastery of modern technology, mortuary professionals argued that they were the best people to offer death services. The state of Pennsylvania responded with the nation's first licensing law, enacted in 1895. Upper- and middle-class families who desired to show their love and respect for the deceased did so by purchasing services from the professionals they deemed the most capable.[44]

The transfer of death from the home to the hospital also accounted for the transformation of death care. Over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, growing numbers of people died in hospitals or in public facilities such as homes for the incurable. This increase occurred despite the fact that hospital death was something that medical practitioners did their best to avoid. Hospitals shunned dying patients by discharging them and sending them home or to almshouses. Doctors hid dire prognoses from patients and their loved ones. When death in the hospital was inevitable, the dying person was moved out of the public ward and into a special room. In spite of medicine's aversion to death, hospital deaths multiplied due to the growth in the number and size of hospitals. Increasingly, family and friends no longer watched the dying or tended dead bodies; instead, medical personnel assumed these responsibilities.[45]

As women entered the paid workforce in greater numbers in the second half of the nineteenth century, their participation in death services diminished. Feminized professions, such as social work, librarianship, and nursing, emerged. Women, likewise, might choose to work in department stores, as secretaries, or in factories. Some women likely gave up death care

[43] Johnson et al., "Origin and History of Embalming," 470–71, 474, 477–81.

[44] Joseph W. Epler and James L. Schwartz, "Early Undertakers and Funeral Directors: Interesting Facts and Information," Pamphlet, Susquehanna University Medical Humanities Initiative Program, Selinsgrove, PA, Oct. 2, 2012; Haberstein and Lamers, *History of American Funeral Directing*, 291–325; Laderman, *Rest in Peace*, 70–71; Mark Harris, *Grave Matters: A Journey through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial* (New York, 2007), 43.

[45] Abel, *The Inevitable Hour*, 1–7, 22–56; Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death*, 86–88; Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Care of Strangers: The Rise of America's Hospital System* (New York, 1987), 292–93; Wells, *Facing The "King of Terrors,"* 195.

gratefully. Watching and laying out were hard work, requiring physical strength, putting women in contact with bodily fluids, and demanding that they deal with the raw emotions of bereaved family members and friends.[46]

The migration of rural American women and foreign-born women to the bustling cities of the late nineteenth century also explains why women no longer offered their services as watchers or layers. The limited spaces in which whole families or groups of single women lived did not allow for the laying out of the dead in family parlors; instead, the dead were visited at funeral parlors. Like birth and marriage, death moved from private rooms in family homes to public spaces rented or inhabited for fleeting activities.[47]

The diminishing role that women played in serving the dying and dead was reflected in the loss of these occupational categories and their replacement with titles like "undertaker," "embalmer," "mortician," and "funeral director." Female death services experienced language death—the words used to describe these women and their work passed away. In their place, figurative phrases remained that hinted at the type of services the women once offered and accomplished. Although most Americans might not be familiar with a streeker and the work she did, they would recognize a stretcher, or a bed upon which the wounded or ill lay before and during transport. The term "stretcher," in fact, refers to the flat board on which the dead were stretched before being placed in a coffin.[48] Similarly, many readers today would not be acquainted with a layer and the tasks she did, but they would recognize the idea of a corpse being "laid out" for its funeral or viewing. This concept implicitly refers to the actions once undertaken by a layer but erases the individual from the process. The figure of the layer out is even more elusive in the figurative phrase to "lay out," meaning "to knock (a person) unconscious; to kill."[49] New job titles, like "undertaker," "embalmer," and "funeral director," emerged; new specialties,

[46] Karen Rae Mehaffey, *Rachel Weeping: Mourning in Nineteenth-Century America*, revised 3rd ed. (Northville, MI, 2012), 49.

[47] Lynch, *The Undertaking*, 34–37. For analyses of how space limitations affected American society and culture, especially courtship and leisure, see Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore, MD, 1993); and Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986).

[48] *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (June 2015), s.v. "stretcher, n.," accessed July 7, 2015, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/191529.

[49] *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (June 2015), s.v. "to lay out" accessed July 7, 2015, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/106496.

like restorative art and dermasurgery, developed; and the skills that female caretakers of the dead once possessed were forgotten or absorbed by the new specializations.[50]

The removal of women from death care was not immediate or total. Women who continued to cater to the dying and dead included family members and neighbors; private duty and hospital nurses; members of ethnic communities; and undertakers, embalmers, and other workers associated with the funeral industry. In many rural areas and small towns, female relatives and friends washed, dressed, and prepared the body, readied the home for and welcomed visitors, and made the food that was distributed to guests.[51] Private duty and hospital nurses remained (and still do today) the first professionals to assist the dying and to prepare dead bodies. Persons of color and men and women of diverse ethnic backgrounds expected members of their community to tend to them as they lay dying and hoped that traditions, customs, and rituals honored their passing and comforted their family and friends. In the midst of the Civil War, Elwood Davis, the young nephew of Emilie Davis, a free woman of color who faithfully kept pocket diaries, died. A Philadelphia layer named Mrs. Williams prepared his body. Davis recorded, "This is the day we have to part with our little Elwood. I went down home in the morning. Mrs. Williams laid him out. Very nice but he did not look like himself." Although Williams's race is not identified in Davis's diary, due to the strong connection that Davis, her family, and her friends had to their community, it is likely she was a woman of color.[52] Folk rituals also kept some women in contact with the dying and with death; Irish families expected to see women wailers at the side of the deceased.[53] Finally, women entered the professional ranks of undertakers and embalmers or helped to run family funeral businesses. In the 1859–60 Lancaster city directory, Mary Hofman advertised herself as a "a grocer and furnishing undertaker."[54] Her second title meant that she supplied funeral undertakers with items and services that they then used to officiate at funerals.[55] In the late nineteenth century, women trained

[50] Harris, *Grave Matters*, 18.

[51] Haberstein and Lamers, *History of American Funeral Directing*, 260–61.

[52] Emilie Davis, entry for Feb. 2, 1864, in Karsonya Wise Whitehead, *Notes from A Colored Girl: The Civil War Pocket Diaries of Emilie Frances Davis* (Columbia, SC, 2014), 10, quote on 109, 169.

[53] Mehaffey, *Rachel Weeping*, 27–28, 45, 48; Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, and Customs*, 19, 25.

[54] William Henry Boyd, *Boyd's Lancaster County Business Directory* (Lancaster, PA, 1859–60), 101.

[55] Habenstein and Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 2nd ed. (Milwaukee, WI, 1962), 435–36.

and practiced as embalmers.[56] Wives and daughters assisted in family funeral businesses as receptionists, greeters, organists, and bookkeepers.[57] Neighborhood beauticians visited funeral parlors and styled the hair of the deceased.

Up until the second half of the nineteenth century, the care of dying and dead bodies had been primarily the sphere of women. Female death workers were watchers or caretakers that served the dying and their family members and friends. They kept watch over the dying by tending to their physical, spiritual, and social needs. Women also worked as layers out of the dead. Female relatives of the dead, neighbors, and women who offered their services for pay watched the dying and laid out the dead. Eventually, most Pennsylvania women did not participate in these activities; the care of the dying and dead became the responsibility of formally trained and licensed professionals. The Civil War, industrial tragedies, the rise of undertaking and embalming as professions, and the increasing dependence on medical institutions like hospitals and homes for the incurable contributed to the changes in the care of the dying and dead.

Yet, the life cycle of death care seems to be circling back. Motivated by reasons that convinced women to perform death services and turned off by the industrialization and commercialization of the funeral business, some women and men are turning to death midwives or educating themselves so that they can honor their loved ones when they pass. The high costs of viewings and funeral services; the environmental degradation wrought by the funeral industry, one of the nation's worst polluters; and the search for greater meaning have persuaded many Americans to bypass funeral homes and traditional rituals. Instead, they attend workshops—like those offered by Crossings, a national organization that promotes home funerals and green burials—that teach them how to wash, dress, and preserve their dead.[58] After these preparations, family and friends spend time with their deceased at home and craft ceremonies that they understand to be more meaningful to their loved one's memory and to their own grief. As in the first half of the nineteenth century, family members learn death care techniques to assist the dead on their final journeys; other women form them-

[56] Johnson et al., "Origin and History of Embalming," 476–77.

[57] See James L. Schwartz and Joseph W. Epler, "Undertakers and Funeral Directors of Union County, Pennsylvania, Researched and Compiled in 2009–2010" and "Undertakers and Funeral Directors of Snyder County, Pennsylvania, Researched and Compiled in 2008–2009." Privately published by authors.

[58] "Crossings: Caring for Our Own at Death," accessed Oct. 6, 2015, www.crossings.net.

selves into small neighborly groups, larger, regional networks, and even national associations.[59] Thus, as in the first half of the nineteenth century, female friends, relatives, and hired professionals are taking up death care and honoring loved ones by doing so.

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[59] Harris, *Grave Matters*, 31–34, 38–45, 104–11, 113, 119.