

**COFFIN IT UP:
THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL STATUS AND ETHNICITY
IN AN HISTORIC-ERA LOS ANGELES CEMETERY**

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Analysis of the decorative hardware recovered from the historic-era Los Angeles County Cemetery provides a new look at the way coffins from an indigent and Chinese cemetery were decorated at the turn of the 20th Century. Previous usage dates for hardware have been expanded based on patent dates and the known interment dates of the cemetery. The dates ultimately speak to the fact that this was a lower-class cemetery. The Los Angeles County Cemetery has also revealed a formerly unknown piece of decorative hardware – a piece manufactured in the United States and used exclusively by the overseas? Chinese.

The Los Angeles County Cemetery (LACC), recorded as site CA-LAN-3553, was operated by the Los Angeles City Cemetery Association under contract by the County and began interring individuals in 1880. The County took over operations in 1896. It was commonly referred to as a “potters’ field” or as simply an indigent burial ground since its inception. The unknown, the medical cadavers, and amputations were buried alongside the many people whose families could not afford to have them buried anywhere else. The cemetery was also used as the Chinese burial ground. The burial records, headstones, and other artifacts attest to the fact that many of the decedents were not unknowns.

Decorative hardware also attests to this fact. Fifty-five percent of the burial receptacles encountered were decorated with hardware. This suggests that the decedents had family or friends to provide burial receptacle embellishments. The remaining 45 percent of receptacles, left undecorated, were likely either those of the unidentified dead or those of individuals with families of absolutely no means.

The research topics discussed here are as follows: If it is known that the cemetery was associated with socially and economically marginal people, why was hardware used on burial receptacles, sometimes in ostentatious amounts? Did the Chinese in Los Angeles also use decorative hardware?

AMERICAN DEATH CULTURE

In America, the “beautification of death” movement began in the late eighteenth century and lasted until the beginning of the twentieth century, although many elements persist in modern American culture. The movement was an approach and a way to cope with the reality of death. The major features of this movement include park-like, perpetual-care cemeteries (as opposed to church and family cemeteries), embalming (in order to preserve the body in a life-like state for viewing), the undertaking industry, elaborate mourning rituals, post-mortem photography, and the mass-production and wide availability of burial receptacles and associated decorative hardware.

The “Invisible Ink” Strategy

In the age-old attempt to emulate the upper classes, the lower classes adapted to the beautification of death. If achieved, the mortifying prospect of being buried in a pauper’s grave was at least partially avoided. Improvements in manufacturing technology and transportation offered inexpensive, white metal alloy hardware that reproduced hardware used by the wealthy.

Of course, the wealthy were not going to have any of this. By the end of the twentieth century, they started showing restraint by burying their dead in tasteful, understated caskets, with minimal hardware. Those of lesser means lagged behind, cycling through the old styles. This strategy of trend reversal was identified as the “invisible ink strategy” (Little et al. 1992:398). The upper class could still use ostentatious vaults, monuments, and more respectable private cemeteries, something the lower class was not able to duplicate.

DECORATIVE COFFIN AND CASKET HARDWARE TERMINOLOGY

Coffins are described as hexagonal burial receptacles with their widest points being at the shoulders. Colloquially, they have been referred to as “toe-pinchers” or “mummy coffins.” Historically, the word “casket” refers to a box for precious items, such as jewelry. Judging by the time at these rectangular burial receptacles appeared, the use of the word suggests a euphemism invented by the newly established funeral industry. Today, they are the most popular burial receptacle. Coffins and caskets were contemporaneous for up to fifty years, and undertakers advertised them for sale separately.

The following is a description of the common types of decorative hardware found on burial receptacles at the LACC and the pre-established usage dates. The hardware described are all from the cemetery and are also representative of the condition in which they were recovered. When new, they would have been silver- or nickel-plated or painted white.

Swing Bail Handles

A swing bail handle consists of a bail handle that connects two lugs. The handles swing out for carrying the coffin or casket, and rest against the side when not in use. Three handles per side were standard, but two per side were often encountered, presumably to save on the cost of the burial.

Short Bar Handles

A short bar handle consists of two arms that attach to the lugs. The handle attaches between the two arms and is capped with decorative finials. The handle was constructed from wood-reinforced ferrous metal instead of metal alloy, and often wrapped in plush fabric. The handles swing out for carrying the coffin or casket, but do not rest flush against the side when not in use. Three handles per side were standard, although two per side were noted in some instances.

Thumbscrews, Caplifters, and Escutcheons

Thumbscrews were used to attach the lid of the coffin or casket and consist of a ferrous screw with a decorative metal alloy head, usually flat. Escutcheons served purely decorative purposes, being screw plates to accept thumbscrews.

Caplifters are similar to thumbscrews in that they consist of metal-alloy decorative heads atop ferrous screws. They were attached to the lids of burial receptacles in order to lift them for viewing, and were often doorknob-shaped or figural. Caplifters were usually used in conjunction with escutcheons to finish off the look, and could be figural to match them. Some caplifters and thumbscrews were so similar that there is no reason to believe that they couldn't have been used interchangeably at the LACC.

Plaques and Other Decorations

A plaque is attached to the lid of a burial receptacle. While the wealthy could afford to have them cast in silver- or gold-plated brass and stamped with personal information, the inexpensive plaques were stamped with generic phrases such as “At Rest” or “Rest In Peace.”

To further embellish a burial receptacle, inexpensive studs stamped from tin could be purchased. They were often used to hide nail heads on the burial receptacle.

Table 1. Pre-Established Usage Dates for Decorative Coffin Hardware.

Coffins	pre-1900
Caskets	post-1850
Swing bail handles	1850s-1910s
Short bar handles	post-1878
Thumbscrews	post-1870s
Caplifters	post-1870s
Escutcheons	post-1870s
Plaques	post-1878
Other decorations	post-1870

USAGE DATES

Consistent with the height of the “beautification of death” movement, the usage dates for decorative coffin hardware fall within the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Table 1).

COMPARISON OF DATES WITH FINDINGS AT THE LACC

Coffins and Caskets

The interment dates for the LACC are 1880 to 1922, clearly well within the range of post-1850 casket use. At the LACC, the total number of burial receptacles recorded is 161. The total number of coffins recorded is 115. The total number of caskets recorded is 21. The shape of 25 burial receptacles is indeterminate due to decomposition and/or disturbance.

Research data show that coffins were rarely decorated and became obsolete somewhere between the late 1800s and 1930. In Kogon’s and Mayer’s (1995) studies, they could find no examples of coffins used in the twentieth century. The fact that there is such a severe stylistic lag at the LACC suggests that coffins were available cheaply. In fact, coffins were not only available cheaply, but the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors’ minutes from February 5, 1898 state that they were “to be supplied by this County.” This fact is further supported by the complete lack of shipping containers, which were often buried with the coffin or casket. This does not necessarily mean that they were always free. Non-indigents were charged for burial plots, and it is not unreasonable to believe that they were also often required to purchase the burial receptacle as well.

Decorative Hardware

Out of the 161 burial receptacles, 89 had decorative hardware. Sixty-six of the receptacles had swing bail handles, while only six had short bar handles. Both handle styles were used in conjunction with the other types of hardware described above. Because short bar handles became fashionable around the time the LACC began interring individuals, another stylistic lag has been identified. However, because swing bails and short bars were contemporaneous with each other for around 30 years, the lag is not as severe as the one between coffins and caskets.

The overwhelming number of swing bail handles used between 1880 and 1922 also attests to the presence of a lower-class cemetery. These handles had simply become much more affordable with the popularity of short bars. This was important because handles were both the most expensive and the most necessary pieces of hardware.



Figure 1. Short bar handles with early patent dates.

With short bar handles coming into fashionable use at the same time the LACC was established (post-1878), why should we see any at all in a lower-class cemetery? Contrary to the previously established dates, two sets of short bar handles were found with patent dates: one with a date of December 5, 1877 and the other with a date of May 11, 1875 (Figure 1). Thus short bar handles were in use at least three years earlier than previously believed. They were still relatively new upon the establishment of the LACC, but not so new that we would not expect to see several occurrences.

Making It Affordable

Research shows that normally hardware was sold in sets by the undertaker (i.e., one set of six handles or six sets of thumbscrews and escutcheons); however, the findings at the LACC suggest that sets, perhaps old stock, were broken up, and factory seconds and mismatched sets were used (Figure 2). It can be inferred that this was done in order to save on the cost of the burial.

THE CHINESE

Unfortunately, other elements of indigent death ways, such as body preparation, services, and mourning rites, are not well documented. This is not true for the Chinese. Although viewed as low-class people in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Los Angeles, their death rituals are much better documented, if only because people viewed them as different at best, and obnoxiously offensive at worst.



Figure 2. Mismatched lugs on two swing bail handles from the same burial.

The ways in which the Chinese decorated their burial receptacles were nearly identical to the Americans'. The same types of hardware were used: swing bail and short bar handles, thumbscrews, caplifters, escutcheons, plaques, and stamped tin studs. Even the overwhelming use of coffins over caskets was observed. However, there were subtle differences.

Both the Chinese and the Americans used stamped tin coffin studs on burial receptacles, but in different ways. While the Americans used them in moderation in order to cover utilitarian hardware, the Chinese used them to create patterns along the sides and tops of the receptacles. The burial receptacles themselves were also slightly different. Traces of red paint – a color believed by the Chinese to frighten away evil spirits – were often found on the wood.

The Chinese also saved on burial costs by using old stock and sets that had been broken up. In one instance, swing bail handles meant for use by the Independent Order of Odd Fellows had been



Figure 3. Upside-down swing bail handle, lug shown right-side up.

manufactured upside-down and attached to the coffin (Figure 3). These were likely inexpensive factory seconds.

The Lotus Blossom

One coffin ornament in particular determined a burial receptacle to be Chinese, more so than any other hardware (Figure 4). It was found exclusively at Chinese burials that were confirmed to be Chinese through artifacts, bone morphology, or both. The lug, pictured at top, was decorated with oak leaves and acorns. It attached to the side of the receptacle and a braided string attached the lug to an ornament, pictured at the bottom. The ornament represents an upside-down lotus blossom.

The reverse of the lugs state that a patent was pending in 1875. Not only do we know that it falls well within the range of the LACC interment dates, we also know that it was an American-made piece that appears to have been manufactured exclusively for the Chinese community. Coffin and casket trimmings catalogues searched did not offer this piece and it has yet to be identified in available, contemporary catalogues, most of which come from the east coast. It would not be unreasonable to speculate that the piece was manufactured in San Francisco, a larger city than Los Angeles at the time and having a much larger Chinese population.

CONCLUSION

American culture during the interment dates of the Los Angeles County Cemetery gives some insight into the initially contradictory use of decorative and non-utilitarian hardware in a cemetery reserved for the lowest classes. Simply put, they were influenced by the wealthy. In much the same way, the Chinese community was also influenced by prevailing trends during this time period, although slight modifications allowed them to maintain cultural identity.



Figure 4. Lotus blossom ornament.

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