

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"Countians feared being buried alive"

Carroll County Times article for 21 November 1993

By Joe Getty and Jay Graybeal

Buried alive!

Modern medical science has greatly alleviated our phobias about being buried alive. For most of history, however, being mistaken for dead and buried alive was a real fear of the living.

Today's knowledge about the human body and the functions of the brain have given us a greater understanding about disease and death, especially the nature of a coma. Such medical phenomena were a mystery to earlier generations in Carroll County.

The following is an example in local historical literature of this fear being expressed. It is an excerpt from an article about the Gist farm on Gist Road in Westminster written by Ruth Gist Pickens:

"It was in the drawing room that all the family parties, weddings and funerals took place. During the last two years of Colonel Joshua Gist's life, he became too feeble to climb the stairs (he lived to be 91) and one end of the drawing room was partitioned off for his bedroom. Here he kept his coffin, into which he would have his personal servant lay him out and then call the family to comment on his appearance. Each time he would ask them to promise not to bury him until the third day after his death. He feared being buried alive, because his brother, General Mordecai Gist, was thought to be dead in the 1780s and would have been buried, but the family awaited the arrival of General Mordecai's dearest friend, General Nathanael Greene. On the third day, when he did arrive, General Greene asked to be allowed to sit for a little while beside his dead friend. He noticed that General Gist moved one eyelid. General Gist was revived and lived years longer, married the third time, and had another son. Since then the Gists have kept their dead three days before burial." "Friendship Valley Farm" *Maryland Historical Magazine*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (1952).

That this fear was widespread is confirmed by an article in the Westminster Democratic Advocate newspaper that included an illustration about an invention by a Russian count:

"To Prevent Premature Burial - According to the Cincinnati Enquirer a practical demonstration was given recently in New York of a method of saving the lives of those prematurely buried. The system is the invention of Count Michael de Karnice Karnickio of Russia. Count Karnickio's apparatus consists of a tube four inches in diameter, a box and a few appliances for signaling. The tube is placed over an aperture in the coffin and the other end of it appears above the surface of the ground where it is surmounted by the box. Through the tube passes a rod on the end of which inside the coffin is a ball. The slightest movement of the body in the coffin is communicated to the rod which in turn releases springs. The door of the hermetically sealed box flies open, the bell rings and the signal ball rises above the grave to a height of six feet. At night a lamp is placed overhead and in the event of the supposed dead recovering consciousness there is a ray of reassuring light. The attention of the watchman of the cemetery may also be attracted by a rocket which is automatically discharged." *Democratic Advocate*, December 21, 1901.

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Similar concerns are demonstrated in an article from the Democratic Advocate of May 16, 1891:

A Funeral Postponed Owing to Doubts Whether It Was a Case of Death or Suspended Animation

The people of Sykesville and the surrounding country were thrown into a state of excitement on Sunday afternoon by the report that Mrs. Lavinia Brown, whose remains had been taken to the Presbyterian Church near that place for interment, was not dead. It was said her death was a case of suspended animation. The report proved unfounded, as after examination by two physicians life was pronounced extinct. Mrs. Brown was not buried on Sunday, as first intended, however, owing to the conviction of her husband that she was not dead. Her body was taken from the church and kept until Monday afternoon when all doubt of her death was removed and the body buried.

Mrs. Brown was the wife of Benjamin F. Brown, living near Hood's Mills. She had been in feeble health for more than a year, suffering from a complication of diseases. On Friday she arose in the morning as usual, but after performing a portion of her household duties complained of sickness and went to her room. Later her husband came in from his farm work, and, going to his wife's room, saw her lying on the bed, as he supposed asleep. He left the room without disturbing her. Another member of the household went in to see if she wanted anything, and going to the bed found it impossible to arouse Mrs. Brown. Other members of the family were called and it was ascertained that she was dead. It is supposed she had been dead several hours before the discovery was made. The remains were prepared for burial and the funeral was set for Sunday afternoon.

During Saturday and Sunday neighbors called at the Brown homestead to offer assistance, and all remarked how natural and life-like she looked. Many doubted that life was extinct, and so expressed themselves. When the undertaker, James R. Weer, came to put the remains in the coffin, he was requested by Mrs. Hannah Brown, sister-in-law of the deceased, to make an examination and give an opinion as to whether or not Mrs. Brown was dead. This Mr. Weer did, and said that undoubtedly there was no life in the body. Uncertainty still preyed upon the mind of Mr. Brown, but the body was put in the coffin and the top screwed on.

The funeral train reached the church about 8 o'clock Sunday afternoon, but so certain by this time was Mr. Brown that his wife was not dead that he refused to allow the coffin to be carried further than the vestibule. Here he insisted that it be opened. When the lid was removed the corpse still had the same lifelike appearance. The hands, which had been folded across the breast, had unclasped and fallen to her sides. There was no rigidity in the body, and every attempt to place the hands in the original position failed, as they would fall back as often as folded. The flesh, too, was elastic and would give to touch, assuming its natural position as soon as relieved of pressure. These circumstances still further strengthened the belief of Mr. Brown that his wife was not dead, and also created a doubt in the minds of all who saw the corpse. Finally Mr. Brown requested Rev. J. D. Thomas, the minister, Prof. Trusten Polk and Mr. Weer to make an examination and give their opinion. After viewing the body these gentlemen refused to give a decided opinion, and suggested that the body be kept over until the following day, and that physicians be called upon to investigate. This was acquiesced in by the relatives of the deceased and the funeral postponed.

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The remains were carried to Springfield Institute, near the church, by courtesy of Prof. Polk, and Drs. D. B. Sprecher and H. C. Shipley were summoned. They examined the body and gave the opinion that life was gone. This removed all doubt, and the funeral took place at 8 p.m. on Monday."

Photo Caption: Carroll County residents were notified about a device to prevent premature burials when this illustration was published in the Democratic Advocate of December 21, 1901.