

The Merry Burial Compendium

Glenn Alan Cheney

New London Librarium

The Merry Burial Compendium

by Glenn Alan Cheney

Copyright © 2017 Glenn Alan Cheney

Cover painting: *Dark Meadow*, by Glenn Alan Cheney

All rights reserved.

The last section of this book previously appeared in The Merry Burial Blog at ctgreenburialgrounds.org and is republished here with permission of Connecticut Green Burial Grounds.

Published by
New London Librarium
P.O. Box 284
Hanover, CT 06350
NLLibrarium.com

ISBN: 978-1-947074-04-0

Printed in the United States

The Other St. Joseph

St. Joseph of Arimathea is the patron saint of undertakers. All four Gospels mention him. He was a wealthy businessman who dealt in metals. (It is mere coincidence that metals as a source of wealth are associated with Pluto, Roman god of the Underworld, where metals come from.) It was Joseph who, on the first Good Friday, went to Pontius Pilate to ask permission to recover the body of Jesus from the Cross. Joseph prepared the body for burial, anointed it with oils, shrouded it in linen, and carried it to the cave where he was so briefly interred. Joseph is remembered for his courage and kindness.

The Bible says no more about Joseph, but according to legend, Joseph had taken the youngster Jesus to the Isle of Britain on a business trip, which accounts for the gap on Jesus' résumé between his childhood and his ministry. Years later, Joseph is said to have returned to Glastonbury with the Holy Grail, the cup he had used to catch the blood from the crucified Christ. William Blake immortalized the legend in his poem *Jerusalem*, which includes the quatrain

And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?

Is it coincidence that the Saint's Day of St. Joseph of Arimathea's is March 17, the same as that of St. Patrick, patron saint of the Irish who populate so much of the American funeral industry? Just maybe.

Saints Preserved

The remains of several saints and beati of the Roman Catholic Church have been exhumed and reported to have not decomposed. In some cases, the bodies were accompanied by an aroma of holiness described as sweet or floral. The inexplicable preservation is attributed to the “incorruptibility” of truly holy individuals. This is not to say that none of the bodies of saints have decomposed, but when they don’t, it is confirmation of holiness.

In some cases, decomposition was somehow avoided despite conditions which would normally hasten it. A classic example was St. Francis Xavier. He was first buried on the beach of tropical Shangchuan Island. It was dug up six months later and found uncorrupted by decomposition. He was then moved to Malacca, where he was buried for about a month. Then he was dug up and shipped to tropical Goa. His right forearm was removed and sent to Rome. Another arm was sent to Macao. The rest of the body remains in a glass case in a silver casket in Goa, as fresh as a mutilated daisy that’s been dead for half a millennium.

Preservation due to embalming, mummification, lack of oxygen, or other explanations is not considered incorruptibility.

Cemeterial Behavior

What kind of behavior is appropriate for a cemetery? Should people be allowed to jog or do other kinds of exercise? Should families be allowed to picnic? If so, should their picnic space be allowed to infringe on the grace space of unrelated people? How about a barbecue grill? Should a lawn tractor be allowed to drive over a grave? How long may a maintenance person operate a weed-whacker, leaf-blower, or other loud machinery? Should children be allowed to play hide-and-seek behind gravestones? Should people be allowed to plant flowers on their loved-one's grave? How about a bush? How about a tree? How about leaving plastic flowers on a grave? How about flags other than American flags? Should it be permissible to leave things on the graves of strangers? Should the consumption of alcohol be allowed? Why not allow smoking? Are firearms OK? Can they be shot into the sky? How about fireworks? Should cemeteries be open after dark? Why shouldn't someone be able to camp out on the grave of a loved one? Should commercial solicitation be allowed? How about religious proselytizing? How about begging?

Should freedom of speech be in any way limited? Is it constitutional to prohibit anti-war protestors from shouting during the funeral of a combat veteran? Was it OK for a union to inflate a giant rat just outside a funeral that was using a non-union-made coffin?

Who should make these decisions? A private cemetery association? A municipality? The federal government? The families of the deceased? Those present at a funeral in process? Or no one?

Just in Case

Taphophobia is the fear of being buried alive. And it's not an unfounded fear. "Premature burial" has been known to happen.

Given the horror of slowly expiring in the dark of a tight space, coffins have been designed for the possibility of escape. One had a pipe that allowed air into the buried coffin and which could be moved to indicate life below. A vault in Williamsport, PA, had a hatch through which the resurrected could escape. Duke Ferdinand of Brunswick had a window on his coffin that would fog over if he exhaled. A German priest invented a coffin with a trumpet-like tube where he could sniff for putrefaction (or rather, the lack of it) or hear anyone calling for help. There were coffins with strings attached to bells or flags aboveground, coffins with bellows allowing the interred to pump in air, a coffin with an emergency alarm, an intercom system, and a heart monitor.

Despite the popularity of these "safe coffins," there has never been a case of the prematurely interred signaling life.

Arboreal Burial

Connecticut Green Burial Grounds is unique in that it allows a chosen tree to be planted over a grave. In a short time, the sapling's roots tap into the body below. Nutrients from that body become the tree.

If you could be a tree, what tree would you like to be? What characteristics would you like to become?

Would you like to be an oak—black, white, red, scarlet, pin, live, scrub, swamp, overcup, chestnut, chinkapin, which?—tall and strong, symbol of endurance, the stuff of the hull of the Mayflower, the species where the Charter of Connecticut once hid?

Or are you more the maple type, lush in summer, glorious in fall, flush with sweet sap, the tree kids most prefer to climb?

Perhaps you'd like to be reborn into magnificence, a beech with overarching foliage as big as a house, a stout trunk of silver where lovers carve their hearts.

You could be a linden, ever-so aromatic, beloved by bees, seeds favored by chipmunks, known by friends as basswood, quick to grow, going up a hundred feet to blossom in the sun.

Why not for once be slender and beautiful, a stem or pair of stems of birch—white with bark that burns hot, black that tastes a minty sweet, paper all covered with curls—your leaves serrate, petiolate, stipulate, and feather-veined? In winter you would be beautiful in snow.

Or would you sum your life as a weeping willow, your hair hung low around your grave, the space around you cavernous and cool? With every breeze you'd sway a slow and lovely dance.

Or are you evergreen—cedar, hemlock, spruce or pine? Or ash or elm, chestnut, cherry, hawthorn, hickory, sassafras, mulberry, sycamore, or gum?

So many trees to choose from, but you only get one.

Frequently Asked Questions on Posthumous Matters

Must I embalm my loved-one?

No. No state laws in the United States require embalming. Some states require embalming or refrigeration if the body is not buried or cremated within a reasonable period of time. Some require embalming if the body is to be on public display. Immediate burial with no such treatment is always an option.

Is there such a thing as “Bring Your Own” coffin?

Yes. Under rules established by the Federal Trade Commission, you are allowed to buy or even make a coffin, casket, shroud or urn. They are available on the Internet from many sources. You can have the container shipped straight to the funeral home. You don’t have to be there when it arrives, although the funeral home may ask you to inspect the casket. You will not have to pay anything to the funeral home for using a unit bought elsewhere.

What’s the difference between a casket and a coffin?

A casket is essentially a rectangular box, though some are oval. The traditional coffin has sloped shoulders.

What is a green casket?

A green casket or coffin is made entirely of biodegradable materials, with no nails, synthetic glues, paint, varnish, or synthetic cloth. Common materials include bamboo, hemp, wool, cotton, cork, teak, willow, rattan,

seagrass, banana leaves, and organic cardboard.

Is a coffin necessary for cremation?

No, though many states require a rigid container for cremation.

Do I need to buy a cemetery plot before I die?

No, but if you have a preferred place, you'd best buy it beforehand. You can contact a cemetery directly, or you can ask a funeral home to help. In some cases the cemetery is operated by a church or cemetery association (such as Connecticut Green Burial Grounds), in some cases a municipality.

Is there such a thing as a used/rental casket?

Yes. A funeral home can rent you a nice but previously occupied casket from which the interior has been removed and replaced for each previous occupant. These caskets are usually used for viewing or a funeral service. Afterward the deceased can be removed to a more affordable or appropriate unit.

Can I get a casket emblazoned with the icons and trademarks of the band known as Kiss?

Yes. See memorials.com. Click on "Unique Caskets." Other options are the names and logos of sports teams, even the ones that suck. Your funeral home of choice can help you with your unique wishes.

How much does a coffin cost?

The sky's the limit! And so is the ground. A tricked out upper-end casket of mahogany with all the bells and whistles can cost \$20,000 or more. An average range of funeral home offerings start around \$700

THE MERRY BURIAL COMPENDIUM

and goes up from there. A cardboard casket made of 25-35% recycled material produced in a bleach-free process and held together by a starch-based glue can be had for \$300. Caskets of organic woven fibers such as banana leaf, willow, seagrass, or rattan, cost between \$1,500 and \$3,000. A simple pine box can be had for around \$1,000. Plus, of course, if there's anything as inevitable as death and taxes, it's shipping and handling, but that's between the buyer and seller, not the funeral home.

What's cool about a cardboard casket?

People can write messages on it. Children can draw pictures on it. It blots up tears and it cycles into the ecosystem more quickly than other materials.

Can I be buried in my back yard?

Maybe, but it's extremely complicated. The rules vary from state to state. Generally, if a Zoning and Health Department approves, you can do it. But wherever you are, you're going to need a very large yard, a very good lawyer, and a very cooperative Zoning Department and Health Department.

Is burial at sea an option?

Sure! Anchors aweigh! But you have to be at least 3.5 miles from shore and the water has to be at least 600 feet deep. The body and any container must be prepared to sink directly. A funeral director will know the rules, which are determined by whichever state has jurisdiction. Of course if you're in international waters, you can do whatever you want. U.S. Navy veterans and their dependent families are entitled to burial at sea at no cost.