

Historical Research and Victorian Mortuary Photography

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Locating a photograph of a long-lost ancestor is always a wonderful thrill! A discovery of this sort is especially exciting for descendants and historians, like myself, who are devoted to the preservation of our cultural imprint. In all too many cases, photos are the only visible record of an individual's existence. So many of these priceless mementos of days gone by have unfortunately been misplaced, or maliciously destroyed. Therefore, we are indeed fortunate if we have early photos at our disposal to add tangible visual evidence that will support our research into the past. An old photograph may hold many important and surprising clues to aid in furthering our research beyond the identification of family members. In these historic photos, the subject matter may not always be what it appears to be. This is especially true in the case of photographs and daguerreotypes taken during the Victorian Era. For example, a few years ago, I was given a plastic storage bin containing a large number of old family photographs that had been lost for almost 50 years.¹ Included in this treasure trove of memories were a few specific photos and daguerreotypes that were the only existing likenesses of my paternal slave ancestors. Needless to say, I was moved to tears by this amazing discovery. One particular photograph was that of my Great-Great Grandmother, Elizabeth Morgan.



*Elizabeth Morgan
1773-1889*

Grandma Lish, as she was affectionately known to the family, was a Colonial slave who was born somewhere in the State of Maryland during the Colonial era. She died in Old Sunnidale Township, Simcoe County in 1889.² My first impression of her photograph was that it showed a sweet, elderly, brown-skinned woman, who was seated in the parlour of her home and obviously dressed in her Sunday “go – to – meetin’” finest. Looking closely at the details of her face, it struck me how flawless her skin was and that she appeared to be blind. It also occurred to me that something about her image seemed unusual, or somewhat unnatural. In time, I realized that I was really looking at the vestige of death in portrait form. The woman in the photograph was dead! I found myself simply unable to comprehend why my family, or anyone for that matter, would permit a distasteful photograph of this

¹ Following the death of Martha Elizabeth Morgan in 1961, the box containing these family photos was removed from the homestead and taken to the home of a great-granddaughter, who lived in Detroit, Michigan. The photos were found in the attic by a great-great-grandson, who turned them over to me for safe-keeping in 2007.

² Recent research indicates that Elizabeth Morgan was born a slave of the Moore family, in Frederick County, Maryland, and died, on August 9, 1889. Ontario Provincial Archives, Schedule C, Ontario Death Registry 1869 – 1938, Sunnidale Twp., Simcoe County, Ontario, #022061.

sort to be taken. To my knowledge, this was unheard of in my family. In point of fact, I clearly recall my father and my aunts becoming extremely upset when they happened to witness someone taking a photo of a deceased person at a local funeral home. Being a natural-born sleuth, I began searching for a plausible reason for the morbid photograph of Grandma Lish.

The first thing that I learned was that the daguerreotype, invented in 1837, was far more accessible to the affluent in society than it was to the middle and lower classes.³ Victorian photography was a very expensive and involved luxury, in an era when money for many was scarce and the Grim Reaper was a frequent and unwelcome visitor with no respect for position in society. Death was stoically accepted as a part of life, especially in the case of children.

Back then, a pregnancy was not an occasion to be celebrated, as it is today. The onset of the “lying in period” in Victorian times was often the harbinger of a double funeral for the mother and newborn baby. In those days, the infant mortality rate was so astronomically high that in many cases parents refused to name their newborn children until they were reasonably certain of their survival. Historical records clearly show that many children within the same immediate family unit carried the same given name as other children who were deceased.

An American poll taken in 1840 indicates that 57 children out of 100 died before the age of five and that life expectancy for adults generally ranged from 22 to 44 years of age.⁴ Thousands of people died of common infectious diseases that are now preventable, or can be controlled through the development of antibiotic drugs and vaccines. Ague, Scarlet Fever, Cholera, Consumption, Typhoid, Diphtheria, Smallpox, Influenza and Measles were common causes of death in the Victorian era. It is no small wonder that people lived with the spectre of death always on their minds and anticipated having to plan for the funerals of their children and other family members.

During this time period, communities and families seemed to be in a perpetual state of mourning. Household parlours were reserved for funerals, and bodies were buried with great haste. Flowers and candles were used out of necessity, in the fruitless attempt to mask the unpleasant odour that accompanied the natural decomposition of the body and permeated the house for weeks. Great quantities of ice were used to slow decomposition until burial, but this was often ineffective. Under the circumstances, many family members were unable to attend the funerals of their loved ones due to the narrow window of opportunity and travel distance.

In addition, very strict rules of mourning etiquette governed all of society, regardless of community standing. Curtains were drawn, mirrors were covered with crape and clocks were stopped at the moment of death. The remains were constantly watched by close friends to ensure that any potential embarrassment or indignity could be expediently attended to, until the burial of the deceased had been completed. The “Death Watch” usually continued for some days following the interment. Grave bells were oftentimes installed, attached to the coffin, to ensure a speedy rescue, in the event that the dearly had not actually departed, but had been stricken by sleep paralysis, or had been in a coma. There was also the ever-present danger of grave robbers, who were frequently in the employ of medical schools who relied

³ *Embalming Methods of the Early Nineteenth Century* – [http://www.oocities.org/funeral history/embalming.html](http://www.oocities.org/funeral%20history/embalming.html)

⁴ *Ibid.*

on a steady supply of cadavers for the study of anatomy.⁵

One such incident of grave robbing occurred following John Brown's famous raid on the arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in 1859. The bodies of the dead raiders were hastily exhumed within hours of burial and removed to the Winchester Medical School for dissection.⁶ It is worth noting that Robert Lincoln, son of assassinated President Abraham Lincoln, so feared grave robbers, that he had his father's coffin encased in several tons of cement.⁷

In 1846, Dr. Ellerslie Wallace, of Philadelphia's Jefferson College, developed a zinc chloride-based compound to preserve cadavers for observation. The downside was that this compound contained arsenic and other deadly carcinogenic materials, making it dangerous to use. Advancement in embalming techniques came with the advent of the Civil War when Dr. Thomas H. Holmes received a commission, from the Union Army Medical Corps, to embalm the bodies of Union Soldiers that had been identified and were to be shipped home for burial. Dr. Holmes personally embalmed 4,028 of these brave young men, and in the process he developed a safer method of performing the task. The discovery of formaldehyde in 1867 advanced the process further, thanks to the German chemist August Wilhelm von Hoffman. By 1882, Dr. C. M. Lukins had established a school in Cincinnati to train specialists in the art. Before long, embalming became the accepted means to sanitize and disinfect bodies. This, of course, permitted more relatives and friends to attend funeral services, for those who could afford the additional expense of this highly-specialized service.⁸

Throughout North America it became commonplace to have memorial photographs taken of the dead and dying. For families of limited means, this might be the only photograph ever taken of an individual. In urban areas, photographers advertised their ability to service the needs of a bereaved family, within an hour of being notified of an expected passing. In more rural areas, arrangements with a photographer would be made in advance.

The photographer would be summoned as soon as it became apparent that death was imminent. While the family awaited the arrival of the photographer, the body would be washed and dressed either in a clean nightshirt, or wrapped in a shroud. The deceased would be carried into the parlour and placed on a chaise lounge or in a chair, preferably near a window. When the photographer arrived, the body would be posed in a life-like position, under the watchful eye of a close friend of the family. Depending on the wishes of the family, sometimes the body was posed in a reclining position, as though the individual were only sleeping. In other cases, a post-mortem family portrait would be requested, with the deceased posed in a seated or standing position, surrounded by family members. This involved the use of metal supports to hold the body erect. If a very large number of family members were to be included in the portrait (and weather conditions permitted) the body would be moved outdoors. Considerable manipulation of the joints was often required to achieve the desired visual effect. The eyes were often pried open and the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jane Cooper-Wilson, *Echoes In The Hills: My Eighteen-Month Search for John Brown's Legacy*, Collingwood (2011).

⁷ Philip B. Kunhardt Jr., Philip B. Kunhardt III and Peter W. Kunhardt, *Lincoln: An Illustrated Biography*, Alfred A Knopf Inc., New York, Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto (1992), p. 399.

⁸ *Embalming Methods of the Early Nineteenth Century* – http://www.oocities.org/funeral_history/embalming.html – Following the Battle of Gettysburg (July 1863) the bodies of fallen soldiers were exhumed and shipped home for burial, at the cost of \$1.59 per body. Also See: Philip B. Kunhardt Jr., Philip B. Kunhardt III and Peter W. Kunhardt, *Lincoln: An Illustrated Biography*, Alfred A Knopf Inc., New York, Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto (1992), p. 217.

eyeballs turned (usually with the handle of a spoon) so light would be reflected on the surface of the pupils, giving the appearance of life. If this was not possible, painted artificial eyes were placed over the closed eyelids, or were painted directly on the eyelids.⁹ In Grandma Lish's photograph, her eyes are only partially open and have not been turned. This suggests to me that it may have taken more time than desired for the photographer to arrive from Barrie, by horse and carriage. In instances when it was impossible to photograph the body, for whatever the reason, an empty chair with strategically placed floral arrangements, to represent the person, was substituted.¹⁰

In after-thought, I understood that Great-Great Grandmother Elizabeth was not only a Colonial slave who escaped to freedom; she was the first Black woman to settle in Sunnidale Township. No doubt, the family understood the significance of her life and wanted to immortalize her image for posterity. It is conceivable too that she requested the photograph be taken, just as she had insisted that the stories of her escape be repeated to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, so they would remember their heritage and what she, as the Morgan family matriarch, represented. This is evident in how Great-Great Grandmother was dressed.

The tortoiseshell comb in her pure white hair and the brooch at the neck of the white collar on her black dress, clearly indicate that she was a widow at the time of her death. Her husband had predeceased her in 1873. Her brooch appears to be made of hair, no doubt belonging to her husband, John Morgan Senior. This mourning brooch was probably made at the same time as a hair wreath, made from hair taken from family members that adorned a wall in the parlour of the Morgan Homestead.

Surviving examples of mortuary photography are disturbing, at best. Yet, when one understands the mindset of the time, one realizes that a mortuary photograph was probably the only way the family had to preserve the image of their loved one. Close examination of these photographs often reveals clues about the cultural origin and lifestyle of the family involved. Hints about the cause of death, illness, infirmity, or religious and fraternal affiliations of other individuals included in the photo may also be evident.

Often, the type of clothing worn by others portrayed in photographs provides clues into the practices of mourning. For example, a man wearing a dark suit with a black arm band, gloves, studs and cuff buttons and black-edged linen would indicate the individual was in deep, or full-mourning¹¹, whereas a lighter coloured suit with a black arm band would indicate half-mourning – the period following full-mourning -- when the widower's life was beginning to return to normal. White gloves might indicate that a child had passed away, or that the gentleman was part of a fraternal order, such as

1956.001.004
Greyish-white "Late Mourning" cap worn by Mrs. George Snider in the 1890s (several years after Mr. Snider passed away).



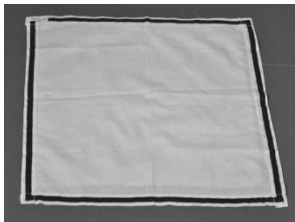
⁹ *Embalming Methods of the Early Nineteenth Century* – http://www.oocities.org/funeral_history/embalming.html

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Widowers remained in full-mourning for two years. Widows in full-mourning were expected to remain in their “widow’s weeds” for a period of two to four years. *Mourning and Funeral Usages, April 1886 (electronic edition), Harper's Bazaar, Nineteenth Century Fashion Magazine* – <http://harpersbazaar.victorian-ebooks.com> (2005) http://www.morbidoutlook.com/fashion/historical/2001_03_victorianmourn.html

the Masonic Lodge.

A photograph of a woman dressed entirely in black clothing and shielding her face with a white handkerchief edged in black, may have indicated that she had lost one or more male family member during wartime. Likewise, if the woman was wearing mourning clothes, the colour of her gloves would indicate whether the person being mourned was an adult or a child. If her face was exposed and she was wearing a mourning veil on the back of her bonnet, this may have indicated that bereavement took place more than one year previously.¹² If the veil covered the face and extended to the hem of the skirt, the bereavement would have been very recent. Or, if she appeared to be wearing another subdued colour (grey, purple, mauve, brown, burgundy, or green) with a white collar, this indicated that she was in half-mourning,¹³ meaning that the lady was gradually returning to normal life after a mourning period of a minimum of two years. Young children in a bereaved household were only required to wear mourning clothes for a period of one year. The type of jewellery, fan and other accessories being worn (if any) also provide clues.¹⁴



1975.010.007
Black-edged white handkerchiefs signaled to viewers that a person was still in mourning



1959.018.001
1880 large Victorian British-made brooch was suitable for mourning, as it is all-black in colour



1963.018.002
Victorian mourning brooch with an insert area under a window to display a woven keepsake of human hair¹⁵



Queen Victoria and her grandchildren, 1861

Some widows, like Queen Victoria and Mary Lincoln, remained in mourning dress for the remainder of their lives.¹⁶ However, both of these women were famous figures and the details of their lives are well-documented. In the case of ordinary people, the search for details is not always easy, and in the case of slave ancestry, it becomes much more difficult.

The practice of holding funerals in the family home continued well into the 1950s, but as views toward death began to change, the parlour gradually evolved into a room to be enjoyed by the living. Mortuary photography is no longer a part of funereal practice, but the photographs that remain from this tradition provide historians and genealogists with important evidence about the feelings and lifestyles of our ancestors as well as the cruel realities of their lives. History is, after all, the legacy of people and events of days gone by. History

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. Jewellery made of jet stones, hair, or a miniature portrait of the deceased was acceptable in society.

¹⁵ Items 1956.001.004, 1975.010.007, 1959.018.001, 1963.018.002, Grey Roots Museum Collection. Captions by Joan Hyslop.

¹⁶ Philip B. Kunhardt Jr., Philip B. Kunhardt III and Peter W. Kunhardt, *Lincoln: An Illustrated Biography*, Alfred A Knopf Inc., New York, Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto (1992), p. 394 – 395.

has, once again, proven that our Ancestors will always find a way to make their legacy known, just as the long-lost mortuary photo of Grandma Lish will always be a reminder for her descendants of her tenacious will to survive and be remembered.