Analysis of a Child’s Casket Recovered from the Bell Tower of the Immanuel Lutheran Church, Hoxie, Kansas

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August 19, 2012
Abstract:

On August 15, 2012, Mrs. Viktorija Briggs contacted the author asking for information about a cloth covered child’s casket that her husband recovered from the bell tower of the old Immanuel Lutheran Church, Hoxie, Kansas, which the couple recently purchased. A shipping receipt found inside the casket revealed that it was manufactured by Abernathy Casket Company, a division of Abernathy Furniture Company, of Kansas City, Missouri. The casket was purchased in 1933 by a Hoxie furniture dealer, C.E. Montgomery. It is as of yet unknown why the casket was not used and why it remained for so many years in the bell tower of the church. The following report uses United States patent records and period manufacturers’ trade catalogues to describe and analyze the casket and provide some historical background to the manufacturing company.
INTRODUCTION

The analysis and historical study of mortuary artifacts is crucial in establishing a useful discourse between multiple lines of evidence recorded and recovered in the archaeological investigations of historical cemetery investigations. Decorative burial container hardware and grave adornments imbibe multiple social and aesthetic meanings. For some affluent members of society, ornate and expensive burial container hardware or monuments were used as a marker of social status (Burgess et al. 2007). Others used these objects as a means of masking social realities and presenting the illusion of wealth (Little et al. 1992). Hardware and grave markers in and of themselves held religious and ideological symbolic value in the development of the outward expression of the Victorian Beautification of Death movement in the late 19th century (Bell 1987, 1990). The 19th and early 20th century perspective viewed the ornamentation of the funeral and the burial container as an extremely important part in the expression of sentiment and community re-structuring.

Mortuary artifacts hold great value for the archaeologist just as they did for the mourners. Exact identification of types and styles of burial container hardware and other mortuary artifacts is vital in defining the chronology of burial, particularly when dated grave markers are absent or when markers have been displaced. Variations in hardware styles and forms, as well as materials of manufacture, indirectly reflect aspects of socio-economic class, status, and/or community involvement in the funeral process (Bell 1987, 1990; Davidson 1999, 2004; Little et al. 1992; Pye 2007). Additionally, the specialized burial container hardware introduced in the early 20th century contexts reveals the deepening control of the professional funeral industry in the production and distribution of funeral merchandise.
The current analysis is of a cloth-covered child’s casket (Figure 1) recovered from the bell tower of the old Immanuel Lutheran Church (Figure 2), in Hoxie, Kansas (Figure 3), which was recently purchased by Mrs. Viktorija Briggs and her husband. Inside the casket was located a shipping receipt dated October 2, 1933 (Figures 4 and 5). The receipt records that the casket was purchased by a Hoxie furniture dealer, C.E. Montgomery, from the Abernathy Casket Company, a division of the Abernathy Furniture Company, Kansas City, Missouri. First, a brief history of the manufacturing company will be presented, followed by the analysis and description of the casket recovered in Hoxie and hardware contained therein.

**Figure 1 (above)** – Cloth-covered casket recovered from Immanuel Lutheran Church, Hoxie, Kansas. (Photo supplied by Mrs. Briggs.)

**Figure 2 (right)** – Immanuel Lutheran ChurchU.S. Utility Patent No. 275,503 assigned to W. C. Langenau for a burial casket catch in 1883. (Photo supplied by Mrs. Briggs.)
ABERNATHY CASKET COMPANY

Abernathy Casket Company was a division of Abernathy Furniture Company, which was one of the earliest and most successful Kansas businesses. The company was founded as Abernathy Brothers Furniture Company in 1856 in Leavenworth, Kansas, by brothers William and John Abernathy. Later Abernathy built a factory with ten acres of floor space in the West Bottoms of Kansas City (Figure 6). Abernathy operated its plants in Leavenworth until sometime in the 1940s and in Kansas City until the 1950s. Both buildings remain to this day (KSHS 2011).

Little is known about Abernathy Casket Company. Wardnkathy (2006) reported that Abernathy began producing coffins and coffin trimmings in 1876, but it is unknown from where this information has been acquired. Only two merchandise catalogs from Abernathy Casket Company are known to exist, a 1924 price list of hardware, linings, burial garments, embalmer supplies and undertakers’ sundries applying to Catalog “E”
owned by Karissa Basse, Atkins Global, Houston, TX), and the circa 1930 casket Catalog “H” (owned by the Commonwealth Institute of Funeral Service, Houston, TX). From Abernathy Catalog “H” it is known that in the 1930s, the display parlor (Figure 7) at the Kansas City plant had a team of sales associates on hand ready to show customers their stock of 135 different types of caskets and a complete line of burial garments for men, women, and children (Abernathy Casket Company ca. 1930:7).

CASKET AND HARDWARE DESCRIPTION

The terms “coffin” and “casket” have often mistakenly been used interchangeably. The Columbia Guide to Standard American English states that the term “coffin” is generic with “casket” being used a euphemism for “coffin” for longer than a century in the United States (Oster et al. 2005:161). Nonetheless, these terms actually refer to different styles of burial containers that also reflect different cultural and historical meanings. Popular literature and even
period mortuary catalogs sometimes propagate this confusion about the terms through their ambiguous use (Pye 2010).

While a variety of forms did exist between the 16th and 19th centuries, coffins were generally hexagonal in silhouette with the widest point at the shoulders, tapering to both the head and the foot ends. Within the archaeological literature, hexagonal coffins have been referred to as logical literature such as “toe-pincher” (Burnston and Thomas 1981:II-5; Trinkley and Hacker-Norton 1984:4; and Parrington et al. 1989:144), “pigeon-toed coffin” (Blakely and Beck 1982:188), “truncated diamond coffin” (McReynolds 1981:15), as well as the “shouldered coffin” (LeeDecker et al. 1995:50). Mainfort and Davidson (2006:104) observe that the hexagonal shape imitates the idealized human form. A close relationship between the coffin and the shape of the body is not surprising because the explicit purpose of the coffin was to act as a protective encasement for the deceased (Lang 1984:30).

The casket is a rectangular, or parallel sided container, which developed in the late 19th century and represents an important change in terminology and construction. Rectangular burial containers were already in use prior to the 19th century (Koch 1983) for all demographics, and primarily for the interment of infants and young children in the early 19th century (Bybee 2002; Davidson 1999). The shift to the term casket, however, reflects a change in ideology as it pertains to death and burial in the United States. The term “casket”, which is of French derivation, refers to a box used to hold and showcase valuables (Farrell 1980:10; Habenstein and Lamers 1985:168; Lang 1984:31). Tharp (1996:199) interpreted its use as a term for burial receptacle to mean that the container “held not an ugly corpse, but the valuable remains of a loved one and the mourners experienced a ‘beautiful’ death.” Thus, the burial container evolved from a coffin meant to enclose the body to a casket, a piece for presentation (Lang 1984:31).
An attempt has been made by some scholars to use burial container shape as a temporal diagnostic. This is a problematic approach due to the fact the rectangular casket was introduced at different points in time in different regions throughout the country (Mainfort and Davidson 2006). This was not just because of production and distribution concerns, but also due to cultural aversion changes in the burial container. The presence of hexagonal coffins in trade catalogs indicates that a persistent niche market existed for these containers even into the 1920s (Mainfort and Davidson 2006:109-110).

Hoxie Casket

The child’s casket recovered from the Immanuel Lutheran Church in Hoxie, Kansas, was manufactured by Abernathy Casket Company as previously mentioned. The shipping receipt that was found along with the casket provided valuable information about the casket itself. It is listed as Style #14, a four foot long casket covered in white lambskin with a white interior listed as “Reg..747” with handle #230. A search through the circa 1930 Abernathy Catalog “H” contained an image of Casket #14 (Figure 8). It is constructed of thoroughly seasoned and kiln dried lumber, most likely white pine. It is covered with a white embossed lambskin, yet the cloth covering of the Hoxie example is in poor condition, with large pieces missing altogether (Figure 9). The interior is lined with shirred plain white silk (No. 747), with a similarly covered round pillow. The interior of the Hoxie casket is in excellent condition considering its storage location and age (Figure 10). The bed of the casket under the lining is padded with muslin, cotton, and wood wool (thin wood shavings also known as excelsior). Aside from excelsior, sawdust or newspapers have also been used for padding of the casket bed, and functioned in part to absorb decompositional fluids from the corpse (Coffin 1976). A white braided cord support runs from
the lid down to the brim of the casket. Although not evident in the catalog image, the lid is attached using two separable stop hinges and secured when closed via two catch assemblies. The casket is adorned with nickel-plated short bar handles, which are not the same handles present on the Hoxie casket. It is shipped in an

Figure 8 – Casket Style #14. (Photo from Abernathy Catalog “H”.)

Figure 9 – Hoxie casket showing deterioration of the cloth covering. (Photo supplied by Mrs. Briggs.)
outer box which is included in price. Unfortunately, the extant 1924 price list does not include prices for caskets, so it is not possible to provide a cost estimate for this casket.

*Catch Assemblies*

Catches are small complex ferrous fastening devices that were used to secure the lid of a burial container or a viewing window cover. Figure 11 is the drawing page from a 1953 patent (U.S. Utility Patent No. 2634997) for a catch. While this is an admittedly recent piece of hardware, it does show fine exploded view of the components of a standard catch. *Figure 1* in the patent shows a vertical section through the casket and lid so that the catch can be seen. *Figure 2* is a front view of the catch. *Figure 3* is

![Figure 10 – Hoxie casket showing interior lining. (Photo supplied by Mrs. Briggs)](image10.jpg)

![Figure 11 - U.S. Utility Patent No. 2,634,997 assigned to William R. Gallowitz for a spring latch mechanism.](image11.jpg)
a bottom plan view of the catch. *Figure 4* is a top plan view. *Figure 5* is a side view of the “latch guard and mounting ears.” *Figure 6* is a front view of the same. *Figures 7, 8, and 9* are top, side and end views of the wire spring. *Figure 10* is a side view of the lever plate. *Figure 11* is a front view of the base plate with latch guard and mounting ears. *Figure 12* is a bottom plan view of the base plate. *Figure 13* is the completed catch. The only major difference between this more modern spring and older examples is that most of the earlier devices used thin arched metal plates for the spring rather than wire. Finally, catches must be paired with a matching escutcheon through the latch guard would pass and the latch would hold when the lid is closed. Catch escutcheons were interchangeable to a certain degree in terms of size and shape depending on the construction of the burial container and the function and type of catch being used.

The first patent (U.S. Utility Patent No. 275503) for a catch was issued to W. C. Langenau of Cleveland, Ohio, on April 10, 1883 (Figure 12). It was a simple design consisting of a rectangular base plate with latch guard, and a lever connected to the latch plate.
Langenau followed with a second similar patent (U.S. Utility Patent No. 281277) in July of the same year. From these early patents numerous varieties were patented throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As evidence by the 1953 patent discussed above, catches were still important pieces of hardware in the casket manufacturing industry into the 1950s. It is not currently known whether these same types of catches are used in present day caskets, or if their popularity waned at some point since the 1950s.

**Hoxie Casket Catch**

The two catches present on the Hoxie casket (Figures 13 and 14) are associated with a rectangular catch escutcheon, which will be discussed below. This catch is made of iron, but has very little oxidation present. The base plate is circular with one side clipped. It has two screw holes on either side and an odd small third hole at the apex of the circular side. The latch guard is narrow and gently rounded at the top. The lever plate is thin and curved like a snake’s head raised upwards in the same direction as the latch guard. The lever is kept in play by an arched metal spring plate on the bottom of the catch.

The base plate of the Hoxie Catch does not have any engraving present to indicate the manufacturing company, but it is similar to Catch No. 114 used on burial containers with plush work in the circa 1920s-1930s Langenau Mfg. Company catalog.

**Figures 13 and 14** – Catch on Hoxie Casket showing profile and plan view. (Photos supplied by Mrs. Briggs)

**Figure 15** - Catch No. 114, which is similar to the Hoxie Catch, as illustrated on page 8 of the 1920s-1930s Langenau Mfg. Co. catalog.
The illustration for Catch No. 114 reveals that this catch was produced by Langenau Mfg. Company of Cleveland, Ohio, which also held the patent for the hardware dated November 26, 1889. A search of patent records revealed that on this date W. C. Langenau was issued a patent (U.S. Utility Patent No. 416002) for a “coffin fastener” (Figure 16). The catch illustrated in the patent is clearly not the same as the Hoxie Catch. It more resembles the earlier 1883 Langenau catches. The fact that Catch No. 114 in the later catalog bears this date suggests that it is the catch assembly itself that was the point of interest in the patent and that variation in form was unimportant. Though it is dated to the 1889 patent in the catalog, the Hoxie Catch is very similar to that depicted on the illustration page of the U.S. Utility Patent No. 793199, which was issued to Samuel Kelly on June 27, 1905. Though perhaps not an exact match, it is likely an early antecedent of the Hoxie Catch.

Hoxie Catch Escutcheon

The two Hoxie Catch Escutcheons (Figure 17) are of the rectangular types used to match with various sorts of catches for plush or cloth work. These escutcheons are

![Figure 16 - U.S. Utility Patent No. 416,002 assigned to W. C. Langenau for a coffin fastener in 1889.](image1)

![Figure 17 - Catch escutcheon on Hoxie Casket. (Photo supplied by Mrs. Briggs.)](image2)
made of iron and have two screw holes one either side of a rectangular hole which is cut to accept the spring assembly of the catch. There are no specific patents known to exist for this escutcheon type, but it appears most similar to Escutcheon Style #31 in the circa 1920s-1930s Langenau catalog (Figure 18).

**Separable Stop Hinge Assemblies**

Separable stop hinges are those devices whereby the arm of the hinge plate is inserted into a recess below a matching escutcheon that can hold the tip of the arm when in the open position (Figure 19). The principal advantage of the separable stop hinge was that when closed the hinge would work as a fastener preventing movement of the lid, and when open, the lid could be secure but also quickly removed from the casket body simply by offering sufficient lifting force so as to release the hinge arm from the escutcheon.

The earliest patent that could be located which illustrates a version of a stop hinge was U.S. Patent 382160, which was granted to Edward and Britain Holmes of Buffalo, New York, on May 1, 1888 (Figure 20). The inventors admit knowledge of other “hook-catches in combination with slotted plates adapted to receive them” being used previously for hinging casket lids, so the history of stop hinges most assuredly predates this patent.
The rectangular base plate of the Hoxie Stop Hinge (Figure 21 and 22) has three screw holes which are positioned one on each side and the final under the hinge arm. The hinge arm extends from the center of the plate and with an undulating curve on one edge and a sharp step midway up the other side. It eventually ends at a finger-like terminus over the edge of the base plate.

No patent specific to this type of stop hinge was located. It appears to be a match to No. 195 in the circa 1920s-1930s Langenau Mfg. Company catalog (Figure 23). The Langenau catalog reveals that this type of hinge was used for hinging heavy tops to shells.

Figure 20 - U.S. Utility Patent No. 382,160 assigned to Edward and Britain Holmes for a burial casket fastener in 1888.

Figure 21 and 22 (Middle and Right)- Separable Stop Hinge affixed to the shell of the Hoxie Casket. (Photos supplied by Mrs. Briggs.) Figure 23 (Left) – Separable Stop Hinge No. 195, which is similar to Hoxie Stop Hinge, as illustrated on page 59 of the 1920s-1930s Langenau Manufacturing Company catalog.
Hoxie Stop Hinge Escutcheon

The two escutcheons associated with the Hoxie Stop Hinges (Figure 24) are ferrous rectangular long arm angled brackets with the base segment containing two screw holes at either end and the arm containing one screw hole. It also contains a central rectangular hole in the base plate and an arched segment at the end of the central hole opposite the arm of the bracket.

No patent specific to this type of escutcheon was located. It does, however, appear as No. 27 in the circa 1920s-1930s Langenau Mfg. Company catalog (Figure 25). The Langenau catalog reveals that this type of escutcheon was interchangeable with hinge used for hinging heavy tops to shells 13/16” thick.

Handles

Mainfort and Davidson (2006:122-123) state that the earliest burial container handles were either made specifically for mortuary contexts (citing Rauschenberg 1990:43-44) or were utilitarian furniture hardware employed in a mortuary setting. The use of handles specifically designed for mortuary purposes date back to at least the 18th century. Tharp (1996:81-88) notes that British coffin handles were being imported and advertised for sale in the American colonies as early as 1738.

Handles on burial containers serve multiple functions. A primary function of handles is to provide a means by which the burial container may be carried to the gravesite from the home or
from whatever transportation device was employed to convey the deceased to the burial locale (Davidson 1999:535). The 19th and early 20th centuries saw great innovation in material, form, and style (the extent of which cannot yet be quantified) that cannot be explained by the transportation function. It should not be taken for granted that burial container handles serve broader social and ideological functions.

**Double-Lug, Short-Bar Handles**

The double-lug, short-bar handle, which is the type of handle present on the Hoxie Casket, is a variant of the short bar concept, the history of which has been outlined by Mainfort and Davidson (2006:122-128). This variety is more complex than earlier swing bail forms, and can consist of up to nine parts: two lugs, two arms, two pins, a bar/tube, and two tips. The earliest patent dates for elements of the short-bar handle appears in 1866, with numerous stylistic variants (e.g., C. Strong’s 1869 Coffin Handle, U.S. Utility Patent No. 97,827, Figure 26) being patented continuing through the 1870s and 1880s (Mainfort and Davidson 2006:125-126). Based on period trade catalogs available for current study, it is evident that early form, short-bar handles were for sale in 1871, as advertised in the 1871 H.E. Taylor & Co. illustrated catalog. These handles grew in popularity in the 1880s and made up a fair majority of the

![Figure 26 - U.S. Utility Patent No. 97,827 assigned to C. Strong for a coffin handle with early components of a short-bar handle in 1869.](image)
handles available in catalogs through the early 20th century.

**Hoxie Handle**

There are four double-lug short-bar handles present on the Hoxie Casket (Figure 27). The lugs of this handle are generally rectangular with rounded corners and a shell-edge design around the margin of the lug. The central portion of the lug is smooth as are the arms. The end segments of the bar are circular and the caps are domed with a raised ring at the apex of the head. Below the head the end cap tapers to a long cylindrical portion with four narrow rings running around the center. The bar has a swelled, embossed plush grip.

![Figure 27 – Handle affixed to the shell of the Hoxie Casket (Photo supplied by Mrs. Briggs.)](image)

On the reverse side of the lugs (Figure 28) is written “W.C.H. Co.” and “280.” There is a discrepancy, therefore, between the artifacts labeled style “280” and the Abernathy shipping receipt that notes the handles used were style “230.” Perhaps there was a typographic error on the shipping receipt. The “W.C.H. Co.” suggests that the handles came from the Western Casket Hardware Company of Elgin, Illinois, which was founded in 1903. After merging with the Elgin Silver

![Figure 28 – Reverse face of Hoxie handle (Photo supplied by Mrs. Briggs.)](image)
Plate Company in 1926, they became Elgin Metal Casket Company. Why then does this handle retain the “W.C.H. Co.” mark? It is possible that the handle was produced by the Western Casket Hardware Company prior to the merger and name change. Alternatively, it could be that the mold was sold to Abernathy, who did not bother to retool the mark.

No catalogs from “W.C.H. Co.” are known to exist, so it is not possible to verify that this handle was sold by that company. “W.C.H. Co.” is the assignee of numerous patents for coffin and casket hardware, but a patent for this handle could not be immediately located in their patents or any other. Matches to lugs and tips of this handle have been located in the circa 1904 Gate City Coffin Company catalog (Figure 29). Because “W.C.H. Co.” was just founded in 1903, it seems unlikely that Gate City would have been able to acquire the mold prior to the 1904 printing of the catalog. The handle likely was invented prior to this date by an older unknown company. Style #280 is not listed in the 1924 Abernathy price list, but there is a handle Style #230 present. Because no illustrated catalog of Abernathy casket hardware is known to exist, it is difficult to say for sure that Abernathy actually produced and sold this style of handle.

Figure 29 – Handle with similar lugs, arms, and tips to Hoxie Handle as illustrated on page 15 of the circa 1904 Gate City Coffin Company catalog.
CONCLUSION

This report has described several general classes of mortuary artifacts and specific descriptions of hardware represented on the child’s casket located in the bell tower of the old Immanuel Lutheran Church, outside of Hoxie, Kansas. The casket was known to have been purchased in 1933 from Abernathy Casket Company of Kansas City, Missouri. As mentioned in the introduction to this work, mortuary artifacts held significant meaning and value for the people who purchased these items for deceased loved ones. Social status and economic expenditure are always relative, and it is vitally important to understand this context. While no archival information has been immediately located to determine the cost of this casket, or the circumstances of its purchase, lack of use, and eventual repose in the church, further historical research is warranted.
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