

# Mourning and Mementos: An Archaeologist's Collection

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Antiquing has long been a personal hobby of mine. I'm also interested in the historic practices of mourning and the associated material culture, especially from the period of Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901) when death was a much larger part of life compared to today. As a result, I have accumulated a group of items related to loss and remembrance in earlier times, which allows for a look into period standards, beliefs, symbolism, and customs. Although mourning artifacts are sometimes found in archaeological [contexts](#), my collection is made up of non-archaeological pieces. These types of items can be found in antique stores, flea markets, postcard shows, etc., and can evoke a sense of sadness knowing that their original purpose was to mark the passing of a loved one and provide a lasting memento by which to remember them.



Although not as common today, taking photographs of coffins and floral arrangements and of the individual laid in their coffin (an example of [post-mortem photography](#)) at funerals and wakes was a more prevalent and culturally acceptable practice from the mid-1800s to around the 1930s. During the Victorian period the practice of sending flowers and laying them around the coffin, or displaying them nearby, became more common. Sometimes a post-mortem image may have been the only one that the bereaved family had of the person. Many photos in my collection have no identifying information written on or accompanying them, so the identities of the individuals have sadly been lost to time.

**Left:** This parlor card depicts a floral display which also included a photograph of the deceased in the center.

Memorial or funeral cards would normally include a bible verse or poem along with pertinent details such as birth and death dates and the age at which the person passed away. These could be shared with individuals to eventually be placed in an album or frame, kept in the parlor on a table or mantel, or in a display cabinet ("cabinet cards"). Typical examples were of black or white card stock and featured design elements and symbolism Victorians understood-- e.g., a cross, bible, weeping willow tree, laurel wreath, or dove. Examples including a photo of the individual can also be found. These cards were so common that there were specialized memorial card businesses in many



**Above:** Memorial Card for Margaret Hinkley

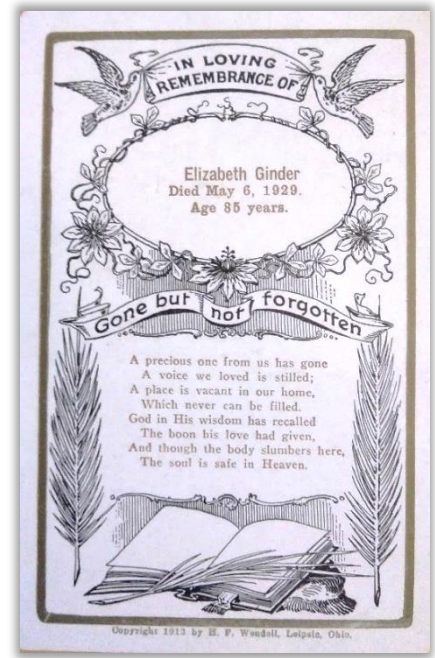
cities. The Margaret Hinkley example was produced by the Memorial Card Co. out of Philadelphia and marked the 1888 passing of a one-year-old little girl. The Elizabeth Ginder card is from the H.F. Wendell & Co., out of Leipsic, Ohio, and represents a later example from 1929. This [firm](#) produced a variety of memorial goods, and its catalogues claimed it was the largest memorial house on earth.

Period mourning products took many forms. Expressions of sympathy could be sent via postcards or cards, and special mourning stationery was available. Mourning jewelry provided a way for the wearer to remember an individual dear to them. These items of personal adornment reflected the times in terms of style, symbolism, and materials. Some of the more unusual pieces of jewelry by today's standards are perhaps those made from, or featuring, actual human hair. Hair jewelry was not always produced or meant for mourning but rather for friendship or other sentimental reasons. However, for many, wearing such a ring, necklace, bracelet, brooch, or earrings became a way for the bereaved to keep the loved one's memory alive and physically close. Other common materials used for period mourning jewelry included jet, gutta-percha, horn, pearls, onyx, and more. The black brooch features a hand, a common symbol used in Victorian jewelry. Especially for Victorians, there were also formalized, specific mourning dress requirements and lengths of time one was expected to adhere to them.

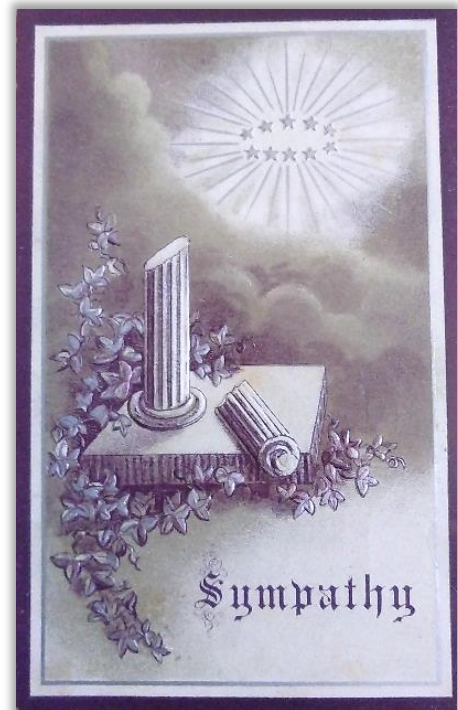


**Above and Right:** Examples of Mourning Jewelry

Having a collection of such poignant mementos and conducting research on the pieces provide a unique opportunity to understand in greater detail how different in many ways today's American cultural practices are surrounding death. A major commonality, however, between past centuries and today is that we all experience loss and have our own ways of remembering friends and family members who are no longer with us.



**Above:** Memorial card for Elizabeth Grinder.



**Above:** This sympathy postcard sent in 1910, falls within the decade considered by many to be the "Golden Age of Postcards." It features a broken column which could be seen to represent a life cut short.

## Further Reading:

Brett, Mary

2006 *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing & Customs*. Shiffer Publishing, Ltd., Atglen, Pennsylvania.

DeLorme, Maureen

2004 *Mourning Art & Jewelry*. Schiffer Publishing, Ltd., Atglen, Pennsylvania.

Luthi, Ann Louise

1998 *Sentimental Jewellery*. Shire Publications Ltd., Oxford, UK.

Ruby, Jay

1995 *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

