

FUNERALS IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY VIRGINIA

A Research Report by

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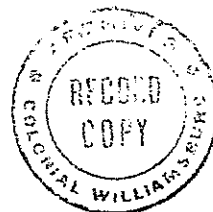
FUNERALS IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY VIRGINIA



Funerals in colonial Virginia were to some extent social as well as solemn occasions. The friends and relatives of a dead person had often gathered at his plantation from considerable distances. Once they had made the tedious journey, they might expect to stay several days. The necessity of feeding them during this time meant that a certain amount of feasting became an expected part of the funeral. Even in cases where people did not come from so far off, at least one meal was in all probability provided for those who were present.

Drinking was also quite common at seventeenth century funerals and may have continued with some frequency into the eighteenth. However, there was an obvious reaction just prior to 1700 against the huge amounts of liquor being consumed at funerals. Some people even began to specify in their wills that nothing to drink should be provided, and so the practice may have moderated somewhat. There are, however, other evidences, such as the three gallons of wine and nineteen gallons of other spirits provided at the burial of one John McClanahan in 1774, that drinking was still prevalent at Virginia funerals.

The funeral service for a member of the planter class or for some other person of wealth and position customarily was quite elaborate. The attendance was usually large. Near relatives and a good many more distant ones; friends and fellow planters; humbler neighbors from near-by small farms; and the servants and slaves of the plantation were all likely to be present. Those closest to the deceased usually wore some indication of mourning, either



full mourning clothes or a black ribbon or armband. They might also have been left mourning rings and mourning gloves by the will of the dead person.

Funerals usually took place at home, and there was considerable resistance to the idea of holding them in church. Likewise the church graveyards were largely for the burial of transients or persons who lived very close to the church. A family burying ground in the garden or at some other convenient location on the plantation was much more popular. Hugh Jones' Present State of Virginia (1724) describes these preferences very succinctly:

The Parishes being of great Extent (some sixty Miles long and upwards) many dead Corpses cannot be conveyed to the Church to be buried: So that it is customary to bury in Gardens or Orchards, where whole Families lye interred together, in a Spot generally handsomely enclosed, planted with Evergreens, and the Graves kept decently: Hence likewise arises the Occasion of preaching Funeral Sermons In Houses, where at Funerals are assembled a great Congregation of Neighbours and Friends; and if you insist upon having the Sermon and Ceremony at Church, they'll say they will be without it, unless performed after their usual Custom.

As Jones' description indicates there was usually a funeral sermon delivered by the rector of the parish, not too different from modern funeral sermons except for its greater length. The clergyman would also read the Anglican Order for the Burial of the Dead as it appears in the English Prayer Book of 1662, this being the prayer book in use in the colonies from that date until the end of the Revolution. The vestments worn by the clergyman would depend upon whether he wore his ordinary habit or dressed as he would have for a service in the church. If in street attire he would have worn a long cassock, cincture (sash), gown or black or gray coat, tippet (long black scarf), a soft black square cap or a black cocked hat, a large wig, and bands (a soft white linen neckcloth with two pendant tabs). Vest-



ed for church he would have exchanged the gown or coat for a linen surplice, probably at this time one which buttoned up the front and was full and long. He would have removed the tippet and then probably have put it back on over the surplice together with a hood. His hat, of course, would be removed.

The one or two contemporary illustrations which are available here strongly suggest that in the case of a funeral a clergyman would have appeared in ordinary habit rather than wearing a surplice. The cassock would, however, certainly stamp him distinctly as a cleric. As illustrations of eighteenth century clerical dress we have in our files color slides of a former member of the staff correctly vested and standing in the pulpit of Bruton Parish. There are also several contemporary illustrations, mostly English but certainly applicable, in our Graphic Arts File. A list of these has been compiled and will be held for use, if needed.

It is probable that the parish clerk might have been present at any funeral to assist the clergyman with responses, etc., since he is specifically mentioned as one of the persons to be included in the funeral procession in several wills. Like the clergyman he wore a cassock, bands, and wig.

It is clear from the contemporary records that Virginians made a sharp distinction between the funeral and the burial, much more so than today when the two words are often interchangeable in popular usage. The funeral referred to the gathering of mourners for the sermon and other suitable memorials. The burial involved only the actual interment of the body. It was moreover possible to separate these two parts of the service by intervals of as much as several weeks, especially if the deceased had requested a more or less private burial.

There is some indication of the firing of guns at Virginia funerals.



However, this seems largely to have been a seventeenth-century custom. There was, for instance, a 1655 law in the colony against the wasting of powder at entertainments, but weddings and funerals were both exempted from its restrictions. There is much less evidence of this custom in the eighteenth century; so it probably should not be included in any representation of a funeral of the later colonial period.

Where the funeral and the burial were observed at the same time or where the burial was not private, some sort of procession from the house or church to the burying ground took place with a greater or lesser degree of ceremony. The following, which describes the funeral of Col. John Hutchings of Norfolk in 1768, is undoubtedly a rather elaborate procession:

He was yesterday carried to the place of interment by six reputable tradesmen, his pall supported by six Aldermen, preceded by a party of the militia with their muskets clubbed, muffled drums, and mourning banners, and was followed by a numerous offspring, a great number of relations, and a very great concourse of people of all ranks and degrees.

A much simpler procession would have been that of Mrs. Elizabeth Stith, a wealthy widow of Isle of Wight County, whose will specified that she should have "a decent burial, with only my relations and near neighbors at it; and that the parson and clark with the four men that bear me to the grave shall have hat bands and gloves;..."

The following account by a traveler in Virginia in the 1780's, Robert Hunter, gives a rather full description of a funeral—and a fairly elaborate one—which took place some weeks after the actual burial:

This morning I dressed myself in mourning to go to poor Mr. Hopper's funeral with Mr. George McCall. It's the custom in this part of the country to have the funeral

service performed two or three weeks after the person is buried—a very foolish one in my opinion, as it only serves to renew the grief of the relations. People were invited all the way from James River to it [this apparently occurred near Tappahannock]. Mr. Mathews, the parson who married them about six weeks ago, read the service. As soon as it was over, the ladies walked into one room and the gentlemen into another, where a table was spread with funeral cake and wine sealed with black. After this followed a cold dinner. Neither Mrs. Ritchie nor Mrs. Hopper appeared. . . .



Many of the descriptions of funerals and burials which do survive are those of extremely elaborate rites. Two of the best accounts, for instance, are those of the funerals for Lord Botetourt, the next to last royal governor, and for Peyton Randolph, the Speaker of the House of Burgesses, who died attending the Continental Congress at Philadelphia but was returned to Williamsburg for burial. These were exceptional; they might well have been the two most ceremonious funerals in the entire history of colonial Virginia. But, as the evidence above might suggest, even the death of the average planter often called for a funeral attended by a large gathering and marked by a high degree of formal ceremony.

At the same time there was a counter-movement in the direction of simpler funerals setting in during the twenty-five years or so before the American Revolution. Many planters who possessed both the means and the social position to warrant the fullest funeral observances were stipulating by will that they should be interred quietly and without great formality. These were men such as Thomas Lee of Westmoreland County who complained of the "indecent mirth" at funerals and asked that his burial service consist of only the church ceremony attended by those relatives and friends who were near and that a funeral sermon be preached in his parish church on some day other than that of the burial.



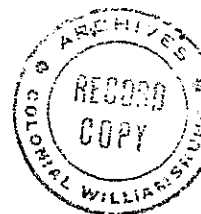
The specific instructions of such men, who as Charles Carter of Cleve said of himself, "never delighted in funeral poms," are a valuable source of evidence for the type of simple funeral which they desired but also for the more prevalent funeral customs which they abhorred. Quite commonly they sought to introduce one or more of the following modifications in the traditional ceremonies:

1. Keeping the burial portion of the ceremony private or nearly private. Thomas Lee's request on this score is mentioned above, and Charles Carter asked that his burial take place at night and be kept as private as possible. The usual request was, like that of Thomas Lee's, that attendance at the actual burial be held to relatives and near neighbors.

2. Elimination of the funeral sermon. Not only was the sermon moved to another day from the interment; it was sometimes omitted altogether, much in keeping with modern Anglican practice. There are numerous examples of this (e.g., Philip Grymes of Middlesex County who requested "no funeral sermon--prayers only").

3. Restrictions in the use of mourning clothes. This was so commonly asked that it seems safe to conclude that, even where the funeral remained rather elaborate, there was a general trend in the direction of simpler mourning observances. To some extent the non-importation agreements of the pre-Revolutionary era promoted this, since black ribbon and clothes probably had to be imported; but it was a movement that was well under way before 1765.

Charles Carter's will was very detailed in his instructions on mourning. He asked that only his children appear in mourning and that any other relatives should wear "Common Clothes, the men with a black Crape on



their left arm and the women with a black knot on their left side. . ."

He added, "I do positively forbid the putting of any of my servants in mourning, having always determined within myself as much as my power lay, by setting a proper example, to put a stop to the ridiculous custom of involving familys by pompous funerals and mournings. . ."

There are other examples, too. Philip Grymes wanted only his wife in mourning and only if she so chose. Mrs. Stith in her instructions for a very simple procession also mentioned that the pallbearers should have only black hatbands and gloves. And Philip Rootes of King and Queen County wanted none of his family to go into mourning.

4. The use of common men as pallbearers. This sometimes occurred even at important funerals and may have been in reality a long-standing practice; for Sir John Randolph who was entombed in the Chapel of the Wren Building in 1737 had specified that his body should be carried by six poor house-keepers of Bruton Parish. One of the most interesting requests is that of Philip Rootes who wanted four of his Negro slaves as pallbearers.

Any attempt to describe a funeral of a Virginia plantation owner of the 1760's or 1770's must then really take into account two diverse characteristics, first of all, the traditionally elaborate ceremony attended by a large number of mourners, but, secondly, the increasing note of simplicity in the burial customs of the age. Depending upon which of these features received the greater emphasis a funeral scene laid in this time and place could show considerable variation in the size of the gathering and in the degree of formality observed and still retain its claim to authenticity.

The following outline, which follows a middle course between the divergent trends in colonial funerals, suggests one possible example of a representative funeral of the period:

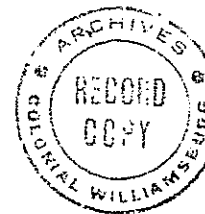


Attendance. Even if the funeral were represented as a fairly simple one, there should probably be a large number of people present—and a very varied cross-section of the rural population of Virginia. Besides the members of the family, there might be a number of men, obviously wealthy planters and of the same social class as the deceased, with their wives. As many, or perhaps even more, plainer people, representing the neighboring small farmers, and the slaves of the plantation should also be present. Then the clergyman and his clerk would complete the mourners.

Pallbearers. Even some of the really large funerals, such as that of Peyton Randolph mention only six pallbearers. Apparently four or six were the usual number in most cases. As some of the above examples have shown, these men could have ranged all the way from fellow planters to Negro slaves of the deceased.

Mourning dress. This is one of the details on which the greatest amount of variation is possible. The best description which we found is that of the very simple mourning requested by Charles Carter with all but the closest relatives in ordinary clothes, the men wearing black crape on their left arm and the women with a black knot on their left side. Mourning gloves for the pallbearers might also be depicted. Fuller discussion of mourning dress will require consultation with Mrs. Walsh, who is in charge of our Costuming Department.

Place of Burial. There is no problem here at all, as any attractive and well-landscaped plot either in the garden or elsewhere on the plantation served as a final resting place for the family.



Details of the funeral and burial. There could or could not be a sermon by the clergyman, but almost certainly he would read all, or portions of, the burial service from the English Prayer Book of 1662. His dress and that of the parish clerk, who also would probably be present, would have been as indicated above. If both the funeral and burial were being held, then there would have been a procession to the grave, joined by all the people present.

The funeral as a social gathering. If any sizeable number of people were present, then the fact that the sadness of the occasion was partly alleviated by its being in part a social gathering should not be overlooked. There would perhaps be a spread of food after the burial and a good deal of conversation among the people present.