

Mortsafes: Protection FROM the Dead or FOR the Dead?

Given the current popularity of vampires and zombies, it's no wonder that anyone stumbling across a mortsafe would automatically think of the undead. But these iron cages, found mostly in the U.K. and especially Scotland, were designed to protect the dead, not the living.

In the early 19th century, fresh bodies were in great demand in medical schools, where students practiced dissection to learn anatomy. The lack of any legal way to acquire such bodies led inevitably to grave-robbing, which for a time became a rampant problem near places with medical schools, like Edinburgh. "Resurrection men" were forced to widen their net, transporting bodies across great distances, as people caught on and took steps to prevent their loved ones' bodies.

Iron cages, ugly, practical, and effective, started appearing in Scotland around 1816. The general practice was to remove them after six weeks or so, although some survive in various cemeteries around the U.K., left in place and forgotten.

In the United States, to the best of my knowledge, there are only two mortsafes in existence – a pair of lovely, iron cages over two graves in Catawissa, Pennsylvania, a town nestled between the Susquehanna River and the Pocono Mountains. These mortsafes are quite different, and a bit of a mystery surrounds them.

First of all, they are decorative, which suggests they were meant to stand more than the usual six weeks – and in fact, they have done so. Secondly, they are the only mortsafes ever reported in this region, which is located nowhere near a medical school. Grave-robbing *did* occur in 19th century America. One particularly gruesome incident occurred less than five months before these mortsafes were built, but it happened 275 miles away in Cleveland, Ohio.

The graves belong to two young women, Sarah Ann Boone and Asenath Thomas. They were sisters-in-law, and they died within a couple days of each other in June, 1852. The cause of death is not recorded, and I find it strange that – although they were both married – there are no graves for their husbands nearby. In fact, the whole cemetery is odd, in that all the headstones seem to belong to women and children. I examined every headstone left standing and found only one for a grown man.

It has been suggested that these two mortsafes were merely decorative, meant to display the affluence of a grieving family burying two young women in such a short span of time. However, decorative or not, they are definitely *cages*, and they are *odd*. In order to trim the grass, it would have been necessary to unlock the cage doors and crawl inside, which violated a contemporary taboo about walking over graves. This seems like a very bizarre way to memorialize beloved members of one's family.

One has to wonder: Why cover the graves of these women – and only these two women? Who were they in life, and how did they die? I can only assume something very unusual happened in Catawissa, Pennsylvania during the summer of 1852. We may never know the truth, but I certainly did my best to create an entertaining story out of it.

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