

Welcome to A House in Mourning...

The antebellum Lairdland Farm House is prepared for mourning it would have been in June of 1847 when the families associated with this tranquil farm were visited by death not once but twice.

On June 2, 1847, Robert Gordon, the father of Lairdland's first owner, Nancy Jane Gordon Lane, died at age 85. A Revolutionary soldier and early settler to the community, Robert Gordon had numerous children and grandchildren living nearby. On the day following his death, his 22-year-old granddaughter, Nancy Gordon Laird, the niece of Lairdland's owner, gave birth to her second daughter. Twelve days later, the baby died.

Robert Gordon and his great granddaughter were laid to rest in the cemetery at the Presbyterian Church just North of Lairdland. In time, many other members of the family would join them there.

By 1857, Mrs. Lane, her husband, Thomas J. Lane, and their children had moved to Texas, and her niece, Mrs. Nancy Gordon Laird, and her husband, Robert H. Laird, were owners of Lairdland. The Lairds greatly expanded the farm and home, living there until their own deaths some half a century later.

Though the home was never to see again the degree of grief experienced there in June 1847, visitors to A House in Mourning may come to understand the extent of the family's mourning over their losses when they explore 19th century death and mourning, burial practices and see authentic accouterments and artifacts, such as mourning jewelry and hair wreathes.

Lairdland Farm House is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and included on the Tennessee Civil War Trail.

Historic Lairdland Farm House

Victorian Mourning Customs

Death shadowed every day of life in the nineteenth century. Three of every twenty babies died before their first birthday, and those who survived infancy had a life expectancy of only forty-two years. Death was a daily possibility, lurking in every drop of untreated water, disguised in bottles of popular patent medicines, hovering over every scene of childbirth. When the War Between the States came, death visited families on both sides with increasing frequency.

Death shadowed nineteenth-century life in visible ways as well. Victorian society was bound and structured by elaborate rules of etiquette. These rules gave order to a society that changed rapidly as the Industrial Revolution created the middle class. Etiquette books instructed men and women in the details of socially acceptable behavior.

One of the areas of life that had a very strict social code was, ironically, death. Anyone who flouted the established rituals and rules of mourning risked scandal and ostracism.

Mourning had two stages: deep or full mourning and half-mourning. Each stage had its own rules and customs of decorum. When someone died, all members of the household (including the servants) would adopt deep mourning. Curtains were drawn and clocks were stopped at the time of death. Mirrors were covered because of a lingering superstition that the spirit of the deceased could become trapped in the reflective glass.

The body was watched over every moment until burial. This was frequently called "a Wake" and the body was "laid out" in the parlor.

ATTIRE

The rules of mourning were strictest in matters of fashion. Deep mourning demanded that women adopt a wardrobe made entirely of black crepe, a dull fabric without any sheen to reflect light. Even parasols and handkerchiefs were trimmed in black, without lace or other decoration.

Men wore plain black suits and black armbands. Children also wore black, and even babies were dressed in white garments trimmed with black ribbons.

Specific periods of time were considered appropriate for mourning. A widow was expected to mourn her husband for at least two years. Deep mourning lasted one year, and required not only an all-black wardrobe, but also an extremely circumscribed social life. Jewelry was generally not worn the first year.

After one year of deep mourning, a widow progressed to half-mourning, and could trade her black crepe dress for a silk one. Half-mourning allowed for jewelry made of pearls, amethysts, black cut glass and jet. A popular trend was to incorporate a lock of the deceased's hair into mourning jewelry. After a year of half-mourning, a widow could return to normal society.

Death infiltrated many objects in the nineteenth century, apart from clothing. Throughout the period, certain images were used again and again to represent the frailty and brevity of human life. Draped urns, broken columns, weeping willows, and extinguished torches were used as tombstone portraits and embroidered samples. Bereavement touched virtually every aspect of Victorian life, lending a somber hue to even the brightest day.

During the war years, many women lost so many members of their family to the conflict that it was not uncommon for a woman to remain in mourning for years.

LACHRYMATORY - TEAR BOTTLES

Referenced in Psalm 56:8 the use of tear bottles to collect tears of a grieving person over the death of a loved one dates back to antiquity.

During the Victorian period those mourning the loss of loved ones would collect their tears in bottles with special stoppers that allowed the tears to evaporate. When the tears were totally evaporated this was an indication that the mourning period was over.

During the Civil War, some women were said to have cried into tear bottles and saved them until their husbands returned from battle. Their collected tears would show the men how much they were adored and missed.

HAIRWORK

Hairwork, particularly hair jewelry, was extremely popular with the Victorians. A very old method of weaving and twisting human (and horse) hair into flowers, braids, and various woven and "spun" designs, hair jewelry was popular in the U.S. and Great Britain from the 1840s to 1880s.

Whether made in the home, or professionally manufactured by a jeweler/jewelry company, hair pieces were made in remembrance of loved ones.

In remembrance of others, often in relation to mourning, ladies would weave flowers of hair, wire and glass beads from a deceased relative (or several family members) weaving them into a wreath or heart shape and place them under glass.

It was also the custom for the family of a deceased person to cut locks of hair from the deceased and hand out as "souvenirs" or remembrances to those attending the funeral. Special cardboard boxes were designed to hold such hair locks and a mourner, over time, could collect locks from several people.