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Coffin Handles from the African Burial Ground, New York City: Notes on Their Source and Context

By Megan E. Springate*

Introduction

Coffin hardware refers to both functional and decorative elements, generally metallic, used on coffins and caskets in historic mortuary contexts. Examples of coffin hardware include handles, hinges, caplifters, thumbscrews, name plates, and decorative elements. Although the British industry was well-established in the eighteenth century, the mass-produced coffin hardware industry did not take hold in North America until the middle of the nineteenth century.¹ Coffin hardware use in North America pre-dating the establishment of a domestic industry is not unknown; it is, however, uncommon, and generally has been associated with the burials of high social status or wealthy individuals. That said, exceptions to this include iron handles recovered from two burials at the African Burial Ground in New York City, which date to the middle decades of the eighteenth century. Research into the British antecedents of the nineteenth-century American coffin hardware industry led to the identification of a likely British source for the African Burial Ground handles. Imported British coffin hardware also has been found in African-American burials pre-dating the domestic industry in Philadelphia. Both the Lower Manhattan and Philadelphia examples suggest a series of questions requiring further research and data to address.

1. In Britain, coffin hardware is referred to as coffin furniture, and this is reflected in the British literature (Church and Smith 1966). To minimize confusion, the term coffin hardware will be used to refer to both North American and British examples.

Coffin Handles from the African Burial Ground, New York City

The African Burial Ground, located in what is now Lower Manhattan, was in use between the mid-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries; the last interment was in 1795. The 6.6-acre site located outside the boundaries of what was then New Amsterdam was used as a burying ground for free and enslaved blacks. In 1991, human remains were identified during the construction of a new federal office building at the corner of Duane Street and Elk Street (now African Burial Ground Way). A total of 435 burials were excavated from the portion of the burial ground slated for redevelopment; it is estimated that these excavations represent less than 4% of the entire burial ground (Perry et al. 2006a: 444). Several volumes of reports documenting the excavations and providing historic context and analysis are available online at www.africanburialground.gov.²

In general, burials excavated at the African Burial Ground had very little coffin hardware. Where present, hardware generally was limited to the decorative use of tacks, either arranged around the perimeter of the lid, or forming a design, such as the heart shape on the lid of one of the other burials (Perry et al. 2006b: Burial 101). The lack of other hardware types and larger quantities of hardware was not unexpected, given that the last interments at the African Burial Ground pre-dated the wholesale spread of mass-produced coffin hardware in North America by at least a half century. A total of seven wrought iron bail handles were, however, recovered from two burials dating from the middle temporal group, circa 1730 through circa 1765 or 1776 (Perry et al. 2006a: 129). A single wrought iron handle was recovered from Burial 90, a woman between 35 and 40 years of age. Because it was found alone, the single handle was determined unlikely to have functioned as a coffin handle, and may not originally have been associated with the burial. No other coffin hardware (other than nails) was recovered from this burial (Perry et al. 2006b: Burial 90). The individual in Burial 176 was a man between the ages of 20 and 24 years. In addition to the presence of six wrought iron coffin handles, his coffin also was decorated with tacks spaced approximately every two inches around the perimeter (Perry et al. 2006b: Burial 176).

The wrought iron handles recovered from both Burials 90 and 176 were of the same design; although they were incomplete when recovered, researchers were able to reconstruct

2. The African Burial Ground National Monument is now part of the National Park Service, National Parks of New York Harbor. More information can be found online at www.nps.gov/afbg.

what they looked like (see Fig. 1). The central lugs of these handles were diamond-shaped and were attached to the coffins via a pair of screw holes in each oval-shaped ear. In the center of each lug were pierced cutouts in the shape of hearts laid horizontally with their points outwards, mirroring each other.

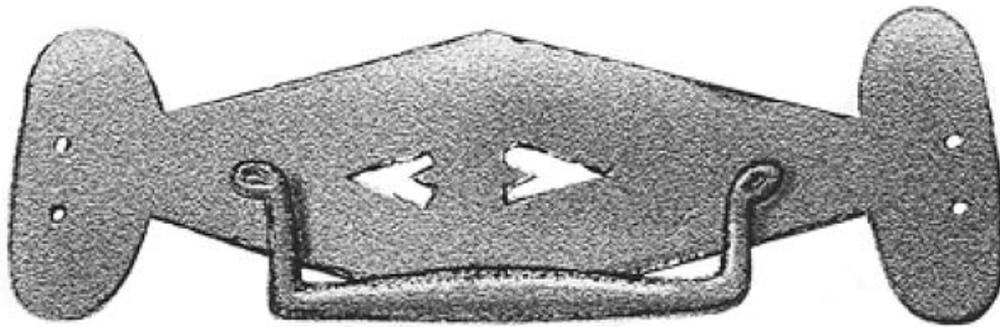


Figure 1. Composite sketch of handles from Burials 90 and 176, African Burial Ground, New York City (Perry et al. 2006b). Image courtesy of the National Park Service.

Heart shapes at the African Burial Ground, such as those found in the iron handles from Burials 90 and 176 and outlined by tacks in Burial 101, were interpreted as possible representations of the Sankofa symbol from West Africa. Originating with the Twi-speaking people of present-day Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire, the Sankofa symbol incorporates a heart-like shape and has been interpreted as the symbolic representation of a proverb ("*Se wo were fi na wo sankofa a yenki*") that translates as, "It is not a taboo to return and fetch it when you forget" (Perry et al. 2006b: Burial 101). In a recent article, Seeman (2010) argued that the use of heart shapes in burial contexts does not reflect a direct African cultural expression. Instead, he suggests that the use of heart symbols on the African Burial Ground coffins -- and the use of coffins at all -- had roots in Anglo-American mortuary culture. He notes specifically that heart designs made in tacks on coffin lids (as seen in Burial 101 in the African Burial Ground) were common in Anglo-American burials, with the heart representing the soul and its ascension to Heaven (Seeman 2010: 118). Aspects of Anglo mortuary culture were, he argues, adopted and modified by people of African descent and incorporated into a new African-American mortuary system that incorporated aspects of remembered African practices (Seeman 2010: 103, 116). His

argument may further be supported by the source of the handles recovered at the African Burial Ground. Other facets of African-American cultures that have developed incorporating both African and Anglo-American aspects include ritual practice (Wilke 1997) and foodways (Carney and Rosomoff 2009). A recent overview of African Diaspora archaeology provides several other examples (Fennell 2011).

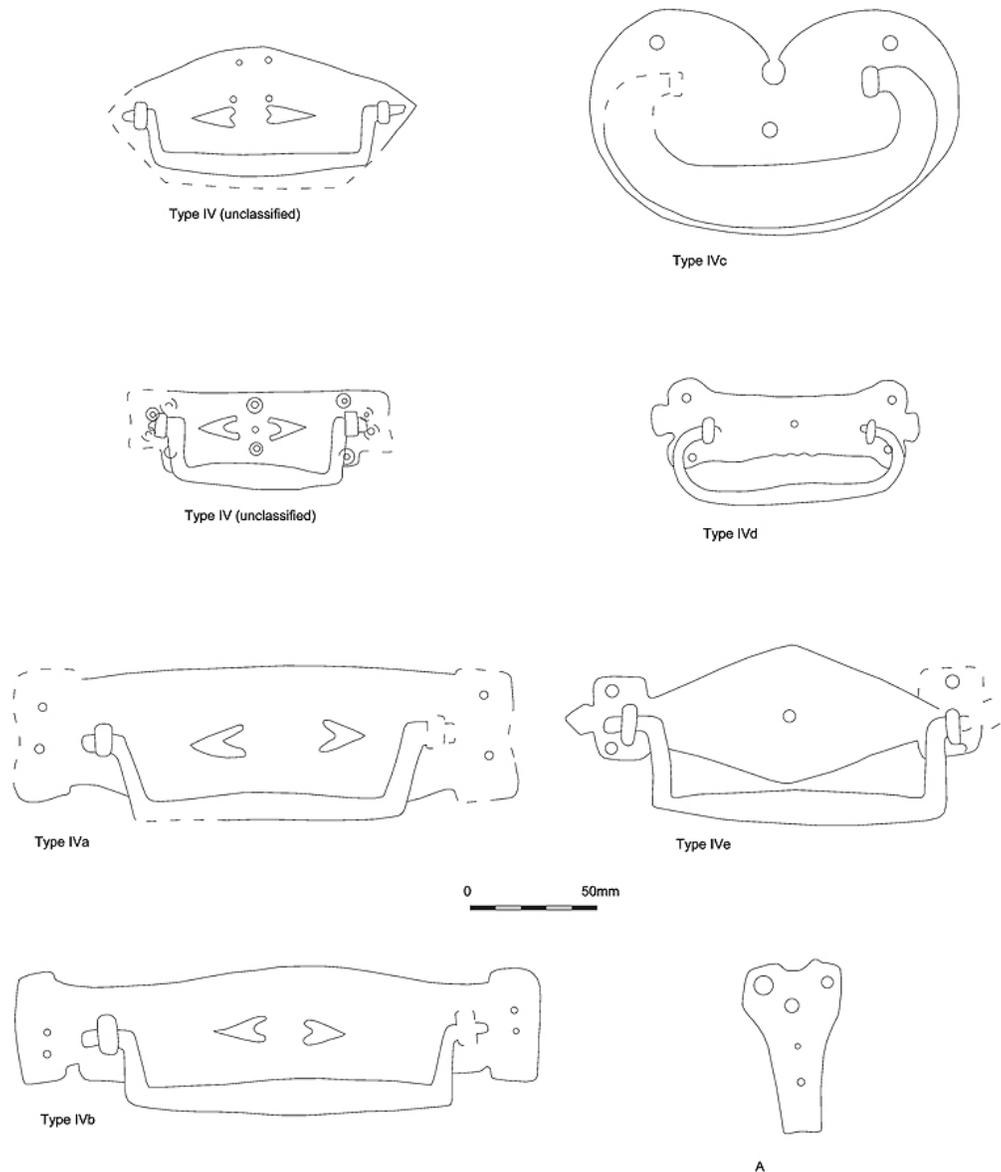


Figure 2. Iron grips recovered from the Kingston-upon-Thames Quaker burial ground (Bashford and Sibun 2007: Fig. 14). Image copyright and courtesy of Archaeology South-East.

The handles recovered from the African Burial Ground are almost identical to iron handles recovered from the Quaker Burial Ground, located at Kingston-Upon-Thames, London (see Fig. 2). Although there is not an example of an exact match, handles from the Quaker Burial Ground share the mirrored heart image, the shape of the grip, the central lug arrangement, and the lug design of a diamond shape with ears. The Quaker Burial Ground was in use from 1664 through 1814, with iron handles identified in burials ranging from 1664 through 1796. These handles were identified as furniture handles for pieces such as sideboards and dressers, and not as handles specifically manufactured for use in mortuary contexts (Bashford and Sibun 2007: 126-127). The Quaker Burial Ground also contained burials with hearts and other decorations made using tacks set into the coffin wood (Bashford and Sibun 2007: 120). The use of the iron furniture handles at the Quaker Burial Ground in London is contemporaneous with the estimated interment date of the burials at the African Burial Ground. The use of furniture hardware on coffins is not uncommon; other examples in London include those from Christ Church, Spitalfields, between 1729 and 1852 (Reeve and Adams 1993: 86). There also are examples of hardware such as hinges and handles that were not made specifically for coffins used in burials in North America in various contexts. These include handles found in furniture hardware catalogs for case pieces such as dressers or desks and plain brass carpenters' hinges.

The English Coffin Hardware Industry and Early American Examples

The development of the mass-produced coffin hardware industry in England has been linked to the mid-eighteenth century consumer revolution and the shift in English society from feudal to mercantile (Fritz 1994-95: 246; Tharp 2003: 124). As the demand for coffin hardware increased, manufacturers strove to increase production. Prior to the late-eighteenth century, much of the coffin hardware was made by punching, chasing, and engraving sheet metal to form the desired design. In 1769, John Pickering of London patented a stamping process for raising patterns in sheet metal. His patent specifically identified it as a method of manufacturing coffin hardware, as well as other stamped metal applications, such as coach hardware (Church and Smith 1966: 621; Hamilton 1967: 347). This new process led to an 80% decline in the cost of manufacturing, making coffin hardware increasingly available to the general public and increasingly profitable for the manufacturers. The perfection of the die-sinking process increased both the quality and the variety of designs available; common motifs included winged

cherubs, angels with trumpets, upturned torches, urns, and sarcophagi (Church and Smith 1966: 622-623; Reeve and Adams 1993: 86). Throughout this shift in British coffin hardware manufacturing, cast iron hardware remained the least expensive (Church and Smith 1966: 623-624).

Coffin hardware produced in Britain went predominantly to the local market, and only a very few manufacturers exported their wares to the colonies (Church and Smith 1966: 622). It was not until a domestic mass-produced industry took hold in North America in the middle of the nineteenth century that coffin hardware appears with any regularity in North American burials. Coffined burials pre-dating this period usually contain only the nails used in coffin construction. There are, however, a small handful of exceptions indicating that the use of coffin hardware was not completely unfamiliar in North America as early as the eighteenth century. These include newspaper advertisements for hardware (including handles) imported from England that appear in Philadelphia as early as 1738 (Tharp 1996: 226; 2003: 118) and custom handles that were made by a silversmith in 1770 for the coffin of Lord Botetour, the royal governor of Virginia (Tharp 1996: 70-72). These early examples are generally associated with the wealthy ruling and merchant classes. The presence of early coffin hardware in burials at the African Burial Ground, therefore, seems anomalous.

Handles from the Tenth Street Cemetery, Philadelphia

There is, however, another example of imported British coffin hardware from an African-American context pre-dating the domestic industry. The Tenth Street Cemetery in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania was associated with the First African Baptist Church, and was in use from 1810 through 1822. A total of 89 individuals were recovered during excavations; three of them, all adult women, were buried with imported British coffin handles. Burial 64, a woman aged 25 to 29 years, and Burial 33, a woman aged 50 to 54 years, both contained handles with the head of a cherub above a draped, central oval (see Fig. 3). Burial 88, a woman aged 45 to 49 years, contained handles with a draped urn above the head of a single cherub identified as the “glory and urn” design advertised in English pattern books of the 1790s (Crist et al. 1995: 242). Unlike the handles recovered from the African Burial Ground, handles recovered from the Tenth Street Cemetery were made specifically for mortuary use. Several instances of decorative, stamped tin coffin lace also were also identified at the Tenth Street Cemetery (Crist et al. 1995: 243).

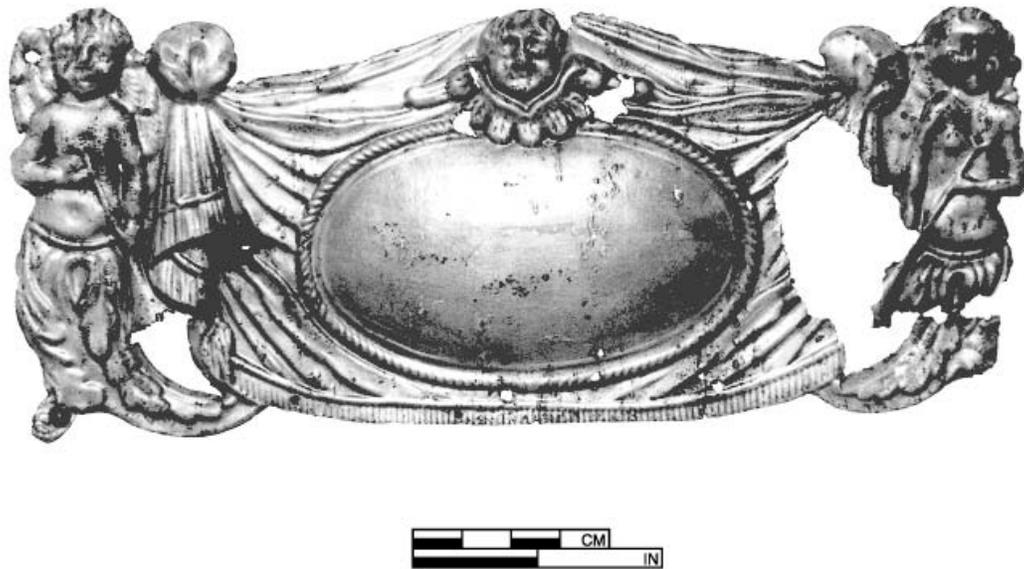


Figure 3. One of six identical coffin plates from Burial 64, Tenth Street First African Baptist Church Cemetery (Crist et al. 1995: Plate 14). Image courtesy of John Milner Associates and PennDOT.

Avenues of Inquiry

The occurrence of imported hardware in African/African-American burials prior to the establishment of a domestic mass-produced coffin hardware industry raises several questions. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the use of hardware in burials was not unknown in America, but generally was not practiced among people lacking economic and cultural capital. Some of these questions cannot be answered based on the information that is known about the interred individuals; others cannot be answered based solely on a sample of five burials from two locations; and others will require documentary evidence to address.

- Furniture hardware used as coffin hardware has been identified in both the African Burial Ground in New York City and in a Quaker burying ground in England, as well as other contexts. What are the circumstances under which this substitution is made? Is the distinction between the use of furniture hardware in the burials at the African Burial Ground and the use of specialized coffin hardware at the Tenth Street Cemetery a meaningful one? Are people improvising what they feel is necessary for a proper burial

in cases where coffin hardware is not available? Is it a decision based on cost? The use of regular furniture hardware in a Quaker context suggests an ideological component. Documentary research into the religious beliefs and/or financial abilities of the deceased and those who buried them (where these can be identified) may aid in explanations regarding the choice of furniture versus specialized coffin hardware in particular burials.

- What were the circumstances surrounding the choices to use handles on the coffins of the deceased at the African Burial Ground and the Tenth Street Cemetery? Who made those decisions? Presumably at the Tenth Street Cemetery, the decision was made by the families of the deceased, but what is their connection to the coffin hardware trade? Were the individuals buried with handles at the African Burial Ground enslaved or free? Were they buried by their families, other enslaved people, or their owners? How did any of these people come to acquire the hardware, when only very few British manufacturers were exporting their wares? Since the identity of the deceased are unknown, it is unlikely that specific connections can be made; however, documentary and ethnohistoric research regarding who was importing hardware and into funeral practices specific to particular communities may provide clues.
- It is unlikely a coincidence that both examples are from port cities, but what is the connection from manufactory to ship to grave?
- Is there a Quaker connection? Hardware similar to that recovered from the burials at the African Burial Ground was recovered from a Quaker cemetery in London, and Philadelphia has deep Quaker roots. These connections are tenuous, and may be coincidental, but perhaps bear further investigation.
- Is the selection of the heart-bearing handles at the African Burial Ground an example of a developing system of African-American mortuary practices in the Americas (as suggested by Seeman 2010)? Does the use of mass-produced (albeit imported) hardware at the Tenth Street Cemetery also speak to an African-American system of mortuary practice? Further examples of early coffin hardware use in black burials should help address these questions; ethnohistoric research may also prove useful.
- How does the early use of coffin hardware in African/African-American burials compare to that in white burials from the same period?

Although more questions have been asked than answered, what is clear is that there appears to be much more complexity in the use of coffin hardware in America prior to the establishment of the domestic industry than first realized.

Acknowledgments

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Note

* Megan E. Springate, University of Maryland, College Park. I would be very interested in knowing about other examples, from any context, of coffin hardware use in North America pre-dating the development of a domestic industry. I can be reached at arch@digitalpresence.com

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