

# Placing Deathcare: Mortuary Goods and Services in the Landscape of Nineteenth-Century New York State

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## Introduction:

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S., death was an important part of daily life both socially and economically. A network of mortuary producers ("deathworkers") helped the living to perform necessary rituals with the correct material culture. These goods and services had to be sourced through deathworking professionals, such as undertakers and stone carvers, whose labor nestled within existing social and economic networks. Often, archaeologists focus on mortuary goods within the context of burial, without attending to the interactions leading up to the final placement of these goods with the deceased. Using a combination of archival and geospatial methods, I visualize these deathwork networks in the upstate New York Towns of Cazenovia Fenner, and Nelson from 1800 to 1915 and demonstrate the utility of historic newspapers for broadening perspectives on mortuary archaeology. This project builds upon a pilot study exploring the Towns' cemeteries and residents' adoption of popular trans-Atlantic trends in Victorian mourning and contributes to my dissertation focused on the relationship between class, gender, and conspicuous consumption of mortuary goods in 19<sup>th</sup> century rural spaces.

## Results:

Archival analysis revealed 17 undertakers who were documented by advertisements or news stories in Madison County papers between 1800 and 1915. For 4 of these men, it was possible to chart decades-long careers and the passing of undertaking business from father to son. 9 of the 17 known undertakers worked within the Village of Cazenovia, but others were more geographically dispersed—creating a broad regional network of deathworking. For monument makers, I found similar trends. Of the 6 known monument production sites, 4 out of 6 had businesses centered in Cazenovia, S. Stanton and Case & Clarke worked in Syracuse and Hamilton, respectively. It was more difficult to find personal details for monument makers than for undertakers, perhaps indicating differences in status for these two deathworking careers. Some undertakers moved regularly from one shop front to another, but in the Village of Cazenovia there is a distinct clustering of both undertaking and stone making businesses, creating a mortuary district centered around the village's main street and within easy reach of the large, well-regarded Evergreen Cemetery.

Town/Village	Distance to Cazenovia
Canastota	14.8 miles
Chittenango	8.6 miles
Delphi	6.2 miles
Erieville	8.8 miles
Georgetown	15 miles
Hamilton	19.2 miles
Pompey	9.6 miles
Syracuse	20 miles

Figure 7: Distance between hubs

Undertaker	City	Dates of Operation
S. Alden	Cazenovia	1845
J. Naughton	New York City	1860-1910
C.B. Miller	Cazenovia	1869-1903
Lester G. Wells	Cazenovia	1870-1889
E.G. Wells	Cazenovia	1889-1901
Steve Merritt	New York City	1890
Reynolds	Delphi	1891
J.H. McMahon	Canastota	1890
Floyd Currier	Georgetown	1896
Payne	Erieville	1897
E.G. Jones	Chittenango	1897
E.L. Wheeler	Pompey	1898
George E. Shepherd	Cazenovia	1908
Edward J. Walsh	Cazenovia	1909
C.A. Miller	Cazenovia	1910
Daley	Cazenovia	1915
Evans	Cazenovia	1915

Figure 8: Known undertakers, 1800-1915

Monument Maker	City	Dates of Operation
S. Stanton	Syracuse	1844
Case and Clarke	Hamilton	1850
E.W. Childs and U.C. van Vleck	Cazenovia	1850
Niver Marble Works, prop. Thomas McGuire	Cazenovia	1885
Cazenovia Marble Works, prop. W.H. Woodruff	Cazenovia	1894
M.S. Strong's Monumental Works	Cazenovia	1903

Figure 9: Known monument makers, 1800-1915

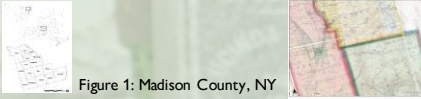


Figure 1: Madison County, NY



Figure 2: Cazenovia, Nelson, and Fenner

## Methods:

I created a system for moving through archival data on the mortuary industry of nineteenth-century New York state. I identified a series of search terms related to deathwork, such as "undertaker," "gravestone," "mourning goods", and "funerary". With these search terms established, I developed a workflow for reading and recording the contents of the 13,000+ entries connected to these search terms that appeared in the Cazenovia Public Library's Community History Archive between 1800 and 1915. Priorities included: summarizing entry contents, identifying if any vital information such as addresses were included, identifying if the entries were illustrated, and identifying if the entries were repeated. Then, I mapped the geographic data I found through this archival deep dive, creating a single map spanning the entire study period through which I could visualize the spatial dynamics of the region's death industry.

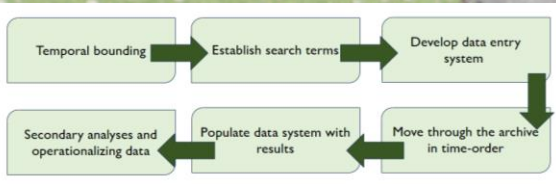


Figure 3: Methodology workflow

Search Term	Source	Date	Summary	Address Given?	Illustrated?	Repeated?	Other Notes
"Undertaker"	Cazenovia Republican	02/04/1875	Ad for Miller & Crawford, a new undertaking firm	59 Albany St., Cazenovia	Yes	Yes, repeated weekly through 03/11/1875	Home address also given: 27 Albany St.
"Undertaker"	Cazenovia Republican	10/22/1885	Ad for L.G. Wells' Sons undertaking, specifically for the Boyd Burial Vault	No detailed address	Yes	Yes, repeated regularly from 09/03/1885 through 02/18/1886	

Figure 4: Archival data entry sheet



Figure 13: Regional view of known deathworkers

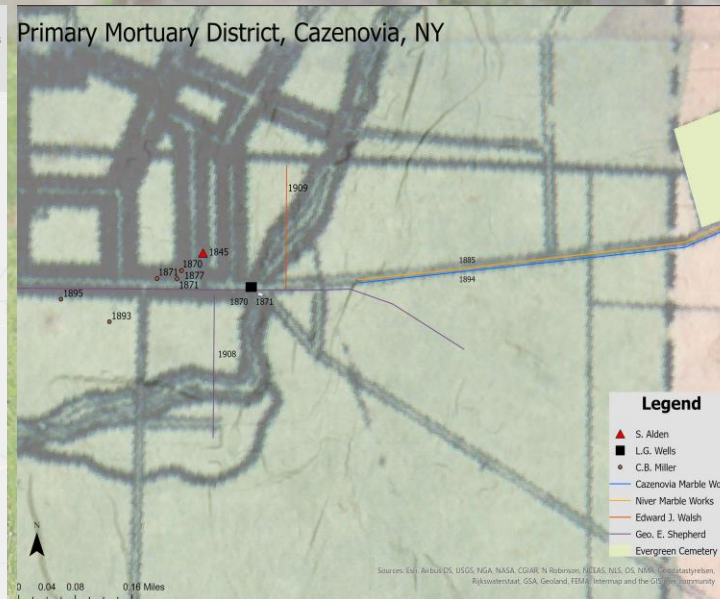


Figure 14: Local deathwork center, Cazenovia NY



Figure 5: 1879 Marble works ad



Figure 6: 1877 Undertaker ad



Figure 10: 1874 ad

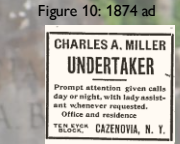


Figure 11: 1910 ad

## Discussion:

Residents of Fenner, Cazenovia, and Nelson were able to actively choose which deathworking professionals they sought out for services, and these professionals actively courted business through personal branding and advertisements in local newspapers. This was not a hyper-local economy, but one that covered more than 20 miles from end-to-end. The region was able to support multiple deathworking professionals at the same time, such as the undertaking businesses of Miller and Wells which operated simultaneously to each other for decades. These services were clearly important and necessary for past residents of the area, and choices about deathwork were likely informed by multiple factors, including familial values or beliefs, cost, and willingness to travel to secure services. It is possible that village centers such as Cazenovia (pop. 1718 in 1870), Hamilton (pop. 1529), and Canastota (pop. 1492) acted as hubs of social and economic interaction for the smaller towns throughout the region, illustrated by the concentration of mortuary resources in these population centers.

The existence of a mortuary district in the village of Cazenovia (population of 1718 in 1870) speaks to the economic and social importance of the death industry. In newspaper advertisements, some deathworkers published full addresses, while others listed only the street on which they could be found; similarly, some illustrated the advertisements they purchased with eye-catching images, while others did not. For those who bought advertisements over multiple years and seasons of business, a choice to illustrate or include longer (more expensive) text from season to season could vary. This shows a dynamic approach to business strategy on the part of deathworkers, as they made choices weighing the cost of advertisements compared to potential for profit.

While deathworkers as far away as New York City did not advertise their services in Madison County newspapers, their work was discussed and critiqued in local writing. Residents of this agriculturally focused region, often painted as a backwater, were clearly aware of, interested in, and connected to urban mortuary trends through the print media they consumed.

## Conclusion:

This work demonstrates the utility of historic newspaper sources for exploring past spatioeconomic relationships in novel ways. Future work will continue to add depth and meaning to understandings of 19<sup>th</sup> century upstate New York's deathworking economy and the choices made by both those who provided and those who procured mortuary services.



Figure 12: 1894 ad

## Acknowledgements:

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