



Mourning Keepsakes

By Karen Livsey and the Fenton History Center Staff

Victorian mourning customs included funeral cards, invitations and memorial cards. Funeral cards were used to notify friends and family of a funeral. The cards were usually bordered in black and included information about the deceased and the time and place of the funeral. These cards could also be used as "tickets" to the funeral. The Allen family collection holds a few of Horace Greeley's funeral cards. Mr. Greeley (1811-1872) was one of the most famous men of the late 19th century. He was a journalist and author, anti-slavery leader, founder of the New York Tribune, Congressman from New York State during 1848-1849, and a Presidential candidate in 1872. Augustus Franklin Allen, was a contemporary of Horace Greeley. The Allen family collection has a number of letters between Mr. Greeley and the Allen family. Augustus F. and his wife, Margaret Cook Allen and their daughter Charlotte Olivia Allen Black corresponded with Mr. Greeley about a variety of business and personal matters. Greeley and the Allen family must have been on friendly terms because the family received funeral cards to attend the funeral. Given Mr. Greeley's wide circle of influence, business acquaintances, and friends and that the church could hold only so many people, those people invited specifically by the Greeley family were given cards with the phrase "Admit bearer-body of church" which allowed the person to be seated in the main part of the church for the funeral. The cards could then be kept as keepsakes. Included in the collection at the Fenton History Center is the funeral invitation card, as pictured here, and a "non-ticket" card funeral card for

Horace Greeley. The “non-ticket” card has a less elaborate type font and lighter colored lettering.

Memorial cards from the late 1880s into the 1900s were often the same size as cabinet cards. Cabinet cards are the cardboard-backed studio photographs about 4 by 6 inches popular in that time period. Memorial cards, of that time, were often black with gold lettering. They are made with thick cardboard just like the cabinet cards. Today we can sometimes find them in photograph albums of that time period. The photograph albums were made to hold cabinet cards. The memorial cards are often in the album with a photograph of the deceased. That photograph could be of the person during their lifetime or it could be a photograph of the deceased in their coffin. This was particularly done with children when no photograph had been taken during their lifetime.

A different type of memorial card is also shown. This is the memorial card for Prince Louis Napoleon. He died at the age of 23 while serving in the British army in Africa. His family was in exile in England. Prince Louis Napoleon was the nephew of Napoleon I. This type of card seems to be more typical of European memorial cards with the fancier cutout design. It includes his portrait and the details of his death saying that he was "Killed by the Zulus in Zululand, Africa". This card is also part of the Fenton History Center's collection but we are not sure why it is included in the collection with Horace Greeley's card and his letters to the Allen family. Someone in the Allen family may have known the Prince or it was collected as an interesting piece of history.

Most Victorian-era cards have the typical black border or are black with colored lettering. The black border was used on stationary during the mourning period. Even Victorian-era newspapers used a black border around the story of a prominent person's death.

The funeral or memorial cards are a custom that continues today in the form of remembrance cards, Mass cards or prayer cards. The birth and death dates of the deceased are given and some other biographical information along with a prayer, poem or saying. Today the Internet includes websites where one can order different types of memorial cards. There are websites that display many memorial cards collected from around the world and from different time periods. The family historian may find an ancestor's card in these collections and find information for which they have been searching. All of these memorial cards-old and new-are made and used as keepsakes.