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Fisk Patent Coffins Recovered at the Buzzard Family Cemetery, Newberry, South Carolina

By Jonathan Leader, Valerie Marcil, and Gene Norris

The decision to move or disturb a cemetery is never an easy one. Most people would agree that the dead are buried where they are for a reason and that leaving them in place is preferable to moving them. Their mortal remains are a part of the cultural and natural landscape and provide an indelible and often personal link to a community’s past. Nonetheless, events and present day community needs often bring the dead in conflict with the living.

In the case of the Buzzard/Buzhardt family cemetery located near Newberry, South Carolina, the community need was for the expansion of a successful industrial park. The proposed expansion would impinge upon a well marked historic family cemetery. The Buzzard cemetery was surrounded with a granite post fence and contained a series of magnificent granite vaults, head stones and footers. Fortunately, a descendant of the family, Gene Norris, was still in control of the land.

Mr. Norris entered into negotiations with Newberry County to ensure that the economic and historical significance of the area would be nurtured. Volunteers from County Public Works formed a team that mapped, numbered, and dismantled the granite work, and

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placed it in safe storage. The volunteer team continued the work of exhumation, reboxing, and transporting the deceased’s remains to their new resting place under the oversight of Mr. James O. Smith, Newberry County Coroner, and by DHEC permit. Ms. Valerie Marcil, SHPO archaeologist, and Dr. Jonathan Leader, State Archaeologist, formed a consultation team to assist Mr. Norris, Mr. Smith, and the volunteers in their work.

This proved to be a very fortuitous partnership. The excavation and recovery team soon discovered that the work at the cemetery would not be routine. The majority of the individuals buried at the cemetery had been interred in wooden coffins. Hinges, nails, and other small items survived in readily identifiable forms. The skeletal remains were fragmentary, difficult to distinguish from the clay sub soil and difficult to collect. Nonetheless, the volunteers persevered and carefully checked the entire column of earth by hand in each grave to ensure as complete a recovery as possible. This stands in stark contrast to the more common use of heavy equipment to uncover graves for relocation. The use of heavy equipment often results in incomplete recovery and the scattering of human remains.

The volunteers willingness to invest the additional time in the recovery effort, to “do it right” as they said on numerous occasions, paid off in an amazing and unsuspected way. Six of the 21 graves were found to contain Fisk 1848 patent cast iron coffins. Had the work been done using heavy equipment the coffins would have been severely damaged, and the information, not to mention the individuals in the coffins, would have been irretrievably lost.

Fisk patent coffins have been found from time to time in South Carolina. However, this project is the first where so many of these coffins have been found at a single location. Even more importantly, the coffins included adult and child sizes and represented three distinctly different ornamental styles. This has never been duplicated anywhere else in South Carolina.

The Fisk patent coffin is somewhat unique in that it came with a guarantee that the deceased would be preserved in “as is” condition when used properly. We were to find that this was not an idle boast 153 years later. The Fisk coffins were made from cast iron. They were hermetically sealed by an ingenious compressible lip rim and carefully spaced tensioners. A mineral glass viewport over the face made it possible to see the deceased without opening the coffin. This was a decided plus at the time. Ice and embalming were both uncommon commodities until after the Civil War.

Fisk designed his coffins to take advantage of the prevailing mortuary practices of the time. At the simplest level, the casket could be sealed and the interior environment allowed to reach an anoxic state. This was quite effective on its own, as the loss of oxygen dramatically slowed decomposition. It was even more effective when coupled with the arsenic cream embalming materials that were popular. The coffins could also be used with an older preservation technique that relied on alcohol, brine, or other preservation fluid. And, quite astonishing for the time, the coffins could also be equipped with a gas cock to allow for the introduction of inert gas. Clearly Fisk was a man ahead of his times.

The cost for a Fisk coffin was not cheap. At a time when a locally-made wooden coffin might cost $5 and a store bought one $10 - $20, an iron coffin would most likely start at $100 or more, which was equivalent to between 1/3 and the entirety of an average person’s annual wage. The six found at the Buzzard cemetery represent a significant expenditure. The Crane, Breed, and Company foundry of Cincinnati, Ohio made the majority of the Fisk patent coffins, although other foundries produced small quantities as well under license.

The Buzzard family had been prominent in the days prior to the Civil War and had seen its fortunes expand with the introduction of cotton through the area. It was this crop that provided the wealth that permitted the purchase of the Fisk coffins. The majority of the family
members buried in the Fisk coffins departed life between the very short period of April 1855 and May of 1856.

The Buzzard family iron caskets are a very fine representation of the tastes and sentiments of their day. The symbolic adornment used was familiar to the Victorian period and mainstream Christianity. An excellent example of this is the finely detailed chrysalis and butterfly on the child’s coffin that symbolized the waiting sleep of death that would end with the resurrection. The cast iron coffins were designed to duplicate the preservation ascribed to the ancient Egyptians by modern means.

The simpler form of the coffin was widely advertised at the time of the Civil War as a means for the bereaved to return their war dead from the distant battlefield in the best possible condition. In 1939, a Confederate Lieutenant was exhumed in the upstate during construction of a road. He was buried in a simple Fisk patent coffin. Other such burials have been recorded for Louisiana, Virginia, Ohio, and Michigan. The Fisk coffin was eventually replaced by more modern forms and was no longer available to the public by the early 1920s.

Mr. Norris, in consultation with Ms. Marcil and Dr. Leader, decided not to open the coffins for study. The change in environment would have adversely affected the remains and could have posed a health risk. It was decided instead that the exteriors of representative coffins would be carefully cleaned and fiberglass molds made. This would preserve the shape, form, and ornamentation. These molds have been used to make duplicates that will become part of educational and historic exhibits throughout the state. In the course of the mold making, a child’s iron glass viewing port cover was loosened. The glass itself remained sealed and intact. The perfectly preserved child’s face framed in white lace was clearly visible. It was very clear that Mr. Fisk’s patent had stood the test of time.

Mr. Norris and the immediate descendants permitted a public visitation prior to the reinternment service. This occasion was a celebration and reunion of a family with deep roots in South Carolina, a statement of civic cohesion and a family tribute to the deceased. Mr. Norris and the extended family held the reinternment service at another historic family cemetery near Newberry shortly thereafter.

“There’s one thing in this world which a person won’t take in pine if he can go walnut; and won’t take in walnut if he can go mahogany; and won’t take in mahogany if he can go an iron casket with silver doorplate and bronze handles. That’s a coffin. And there’s one thing in this world which you don’t have to worry around after a person to get him to pay for. And that’s a coffin.” - Life on the Mississippi, Mark Twain

DANIEL BILDERBACK, SCIAA’S ASSOCIATE CONSERVATOR

By Jonathan M. Leader

If you haven’t met him yet, be assured that you will. Daniel Bilderback is the SCIAA’s Associate Conservator in the Office of the State Archaeologist. Dan has a solid background in archaeology, history, and objects conservation. His Bachelors of Arts was awarded by the College of William and Mary, his Masters of Arts in Applied History from the University of South Carolina, and his core studies in objects conservation from the Campbell Center for Historic Preservation.

The Institute was fortunate in being able to coax Dan away from the Department of History, where he had been instrumental in the work done during the State House’s renovation. Since his arrival at SCIAA, he has been heavily involved with the Florence Stockade, Gronauer Lock project, and the Indigo Society cannon project for which he received an award.

Dan’s office is in the Conservation laboratory. If you need to contact him, he maintains a mailbox at the main office and checks it regularly. The number at the lab is (803) 777-5096.

Daniel Bilderback at work on the Indigo Society cannon. (Photo courtesy of Joe Bull, Indigo Society)