Caroline’s Clothes: The Life and Loss of an Antebellum Woman

In Chatham Center, New York, it is said that the ghost of Caroline Sutherland Layton, a beautiful young woman who died in the 1850s, can sometimes be seen in her wedding dress walking the fields and picking flowers near her childhood home.

Caroline’s wedding gown happens to be in the historic textile collections of the Illinois State Museum, and her ghost tale was the first thing I learned while researching its provenance for an upcoming exhibition. It wouldn’t be the last. Caroline’s story, teased out of her artifacts and a few fleeting written references, represents a powerful, if brief, window into the life of a woman whose trajectory was all too common in her time: someone who married, moved west, and died young. In Caroline’s case, all of this happened within twelve months.

Analyzing these garments and the scant historical record against the backdrop of her social and historical context produces a poignant view of a westward migrant. It shows how she invested emotional, social, and physical work in building a life and family in a new state. Like many young brides who went west with their husbands, Caroline gambled the comfort of the familiar on the promise of the new. And like many young brides, Caroline lost that gamble,

dying young despite her advantages of class and wealth.

Like countless other women, Caroline is remembered only as a brief footnote in the historical record. No family letters by, to, or about her survive. She appears only in the 1850 federal census, an 1851 school catalog, and three newspaper tidbits between 1856 and 1857. Beyond that, she is remembered only as a ghost story, and because of a macabre postscript to her life: in the 1930s, her family vault crumbled, and curious trespassers found Caroline's iron coffin within. Visible through a glass faceplate, Caroline's body was in a remarkable state of preservation, appearing unchanged by time. Word quickly spread through town, and scores of locals hiked out to the burial vault to gaze at her features. A newspaper article called her the "vision in the vault," and the story of her extraordinary postmortem appearance passed into local legend.

Fortunately, something more tangible than a legend remains of Caroline. A small collection of her personal garments was preserved by her family for more than a century and a half. Initially sent back to New York with her remains after her death, they were brought to McLean County, Illinois, with her mother and brother when they relocated there in the late 1850s. They passed down through generations of her brother's descendants until 2019, when they were donated to the Illinois State Museum.

Figure 1: A stenciled laundry mark enabled Caroline Sutherland to keep track of her "whites" in the wash. Illinois State Museum. Photo by Dannyl Dolder.

There is always a bit of hesitation when ascribing ownership to objects whose original owner is long gone from this world. Luckily, however, Caroline stamped her garments with her laundry mark, C. A. Sutherland. A nineteenth-century laundry mark, as I like to tell museum visitors, serves the same function as writing a kid's name in their underpants with a Sharpie when sending them to summer camp: it helps to ensure that the right garments come back to the right person after being washed. In this case, the laundry mark, coupled with the garments' 1850s construction and style, affords a high degree of certainty that these garments, untouched for decades, did indeed belong to Caroline. Considered together, these garments provide rich insight into the tumultuous last year of Caroline's life, fleshing out her experience of having become a bride, new resident of Illinois, young matron, expectant mother, and mother in rapid succession before her untimely death at age 23 in 1857.

Figure 2: Maria Wilbour Sutherland (1806–1886), Caroline's mother. Courtesy of Martha Ehler.

Caroline Sutherland was born about 1834 in Columbia County, New York to what seems to have been a prosperous middle-class family. Her mother, Maria Wilbour Sutherland, had studied under Emma Willard at the Troy Female Seminary in 1822. Her father, John Sutherland, was a physician until his death in 1842. The 1850

census found 15-year-old Caroline and her widowed mother living in a household headed by her 24-year-old brother Samuel and his wife Mary. Samuel is listed as a farmer with $12,000 worth of real estate, on the high end for his near neighbors.

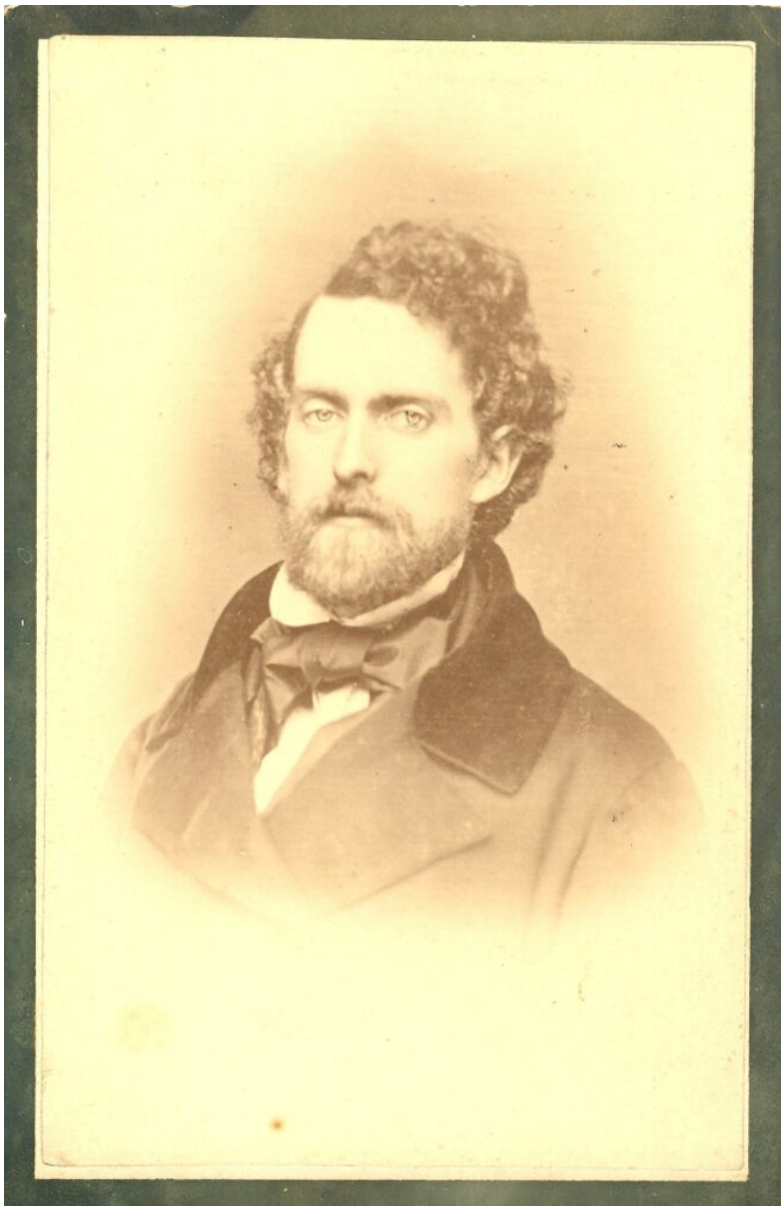


Figure 3: Samuel Wilbour Sutherland (1826–1879), Caroline’s brother. Courtesy of Martha Ehler.

Nothing is known definitively about Caroline’s life in New York other than the fact that, like her mother before her, Caroline attended the Troy Female Seminary. She appears in its *Catalog of Officers and Pupils* for the 1851 to 1852 school year. The single known photo of Caroline, taken in the early 1850s, shows an attractive young woman whom family and local lore say was regarded as the “reigning beauty” of her town.

Figure 4: Caroline Sutherland Layton (c. 1834–1857?). Photo courtesy of Martha Ehlers.

The survival of her small clothing collection (comprised of two chemises, three nightgowns, one apron, one pair of drawers, one apron, one pair of stockings, four caps, a petticoat, and a wedding gown) helps to fill in the gaps of Caroline's story.

Caroline likely created some if not all of the undergarments and nightwear before her marriage. Single, middle-class girls were expected to help with housework in preparation for becoming housekeepers themselves one day. For example, Caroline almost certainly helped with the family's sewing and mending and probably sewed her chemises and drawers herself. Although middle-class women often hired a dressmaker to make gowns, they typically still undertook the creation of household textiles, men's shirts, children's clothing, and their own undergarments. Even if a family hired live-in domestic servants (which the Sutherland family did not, per the 1850 census), these servants were

usually given more laborious tasks like laundry and cleaning and at best helped, rather than entirely took over, the sewing. The small, even stitches and solid construction of Caroline’s personal garments reflect her mastery of the needlework skills that she would soon be called on to employ as the mistress of her own home.

Figures 5 and 6: Caroline likely sewed her own chemises and drawers, perhaps as part of her bridal trousseau. Illinois State Museum. Photos by Dannyl Dolder.

Despite her sewing duties, however, the years before Caroline's marriage were likely a relatively carefree period of her life, as it was for many middle-class women. The burden of household management would ultimately have fallen to Caroline's mother or sister-in-law, leaving Caroline ample time for socializing. Her chemises, drawers, and petticoats were foundational garments that supported the dresses she wore while calling on friends, attending civic activities, and being courted by her admirers. The up-to-date hairstyle she sported in her photograph suggests that she followed fashion trends closely. This supposition is supported by the volume of her petticoat, with its cartridge pleated waist, which tells us her gowns had the stylish bell-shaped silhouette popular in the 1850s. These gowns were likely made by a skilled dressmaker who could create the precise fit and up-to-date styles that a well-to-do, fashionable woman like Caroline would have preferred. Caroline's garments, photograph, and oral tradition combine to paint a picture of a

beautiful young belle enjoying an active social life before she married.

Figure 7: Caroline’s cartridge-pleated petticoat supported fashionably bell-shaped gowns. Photo by Dannyl Dolder.

No evidence survives to suggest when or how she met her future husband. Though also a native of New York, Reuben Layton was from Wayne County (outside Rochester) more than two hundred miles from Caroline’s home in the Hudson River Valley. He appears in the 1850 census as an 18-year-old clerk living in his parents’ household. His father, a farmer, owned $8,000 worth of real estate, making him the fourth most prosperous of his 20 nearest neighbors. By 1856, Reuben was living in Rockford, Illinois, and working as a clerk in the banking house of Spafford, Clark, & Ellis.

Likely a combination of New York roots and business interests brought Reuben into Caroline’s geographical vicinity in New York. At some point, the man

described in a Rockford newspaper as “every inch the gentleman” won the heart of Chatham Center’s “reigning beauty.”

Caroline Sutherland married Reuben Layton on November 18, 1856, wearing a gown of figured, cream-colored silk with a lace “bertha” collar. Its construction was complicated, involving puffed and ruffled sleeves, support boning, and box and cartridge pleats at the waist to create the wide-shouldered bodice, fitted waist, and bell skirt. The rigor of construction, cost of the silk material, and importance of the occasion suggest that this garment was made for Caroline by a professional dressmaker.

Figure 8: Caroline Sutherland married Reuben Layton in this gown on November 18, 1856. Photo by Dannyl Dolder. Dress photographed at Historic Edwards Place in Springfield, Illinois.

Caroline’s choice of a white dress is telling. It confirms her status as a

well-off middle-class woman. As textile historian Leimomi Oakes has pointed out, textiles in shades of white were difficult to achieve and hard to maintain, meaning that white wedding dresses were often signifiers of wealth rather than purity. The richness of the gown further suggests that her family likely approved of her choice of suitor, as they underwrote the cost (in both material and labor) of this expensive gown. Caroline's dress was meant to be seen and admired.

Caroline's white wedding dress also hints that she was forward-looking in her approach to both fashion and in contemporary ideals of marriage. Although women were married in white for centuries, Queen Victoria popularized the trend when she married Prince Albert in 1840. Moreover, Albert and Victoria were also held up as models of a companionate marriage wherein partners shared romantic love and mutual respect. Caroline did not make traditional or practical choices with her wedding dress or choice of husband. She did not marry a prosperous local farmer in her best dress and stay in New York to live near her family. She married an upwardly mobile clerk from Rockford, Illinois, in a stylish white dress. Something within her led her to imagine a new kind of life for herself, in a new state with a husband with whom she likely shared a new ideal of partnership based on mutual respect and romantic love.

Like many antebellum young people, the newly-married Laytons probably saw the west (as Illinois was then considered) as a land of opportunities for financial and social advancement beyond what their rural New York roots could offer. Indeed, within 15 years Reuben would amass $125,000 in assets. Yet the move would not come without hard work and the sacrifice of leaving behind familiar people and places. Caroline, in particular, would be tasked with managing a household in a new city far removed from her social and familial support network.

Before she married Abraham Lincoln, a young Mary Todd once contemplated the change in demeanor of a recently wed girlfriend and wondered, "why are married folks so serious?" Caroline Layton's linen apron, stained with use, reminds us of the unglamorous side of newly married life. As a young bride, Caroline went from helping her mother and sister-in-law with domestic tasks in her childhood home to being fully responsible for the management of her own, smaller, household. Food preparation, cleaning, and managing lights and fires were labor intensive tasks in the nineteenth century, and the availability of domestic help was not guaranteed. Caroline may well have had a similar experience to her fellow New York transplants to Illinois, Eliza Farnham and Helen Edwards. Farnham, as a new bride in Tremont, scrubbed the floors of her new home because "if I had not, no one would." Edwards cried the first time she churned butter in Springfield, Illinois, overwhelmed by the extent of her new domestic duties. Caroline's starched apron represents the mantle of responsibility she assumed as a married woman. The garment is plain, serviceable, and without frills, symbolizing the reality of housekeeping that lay behind the romantic ideal of marriage.

Figure 9: Caroline’s plain, starched linen apron speaks to the unglamorous realities of married life in the antebellum west. Illinois State Museum. Photo by Dannyl Dolder.

Among Caroline’s first tasks in Rockford was to begin building a social and domestic support system to replace the one she had left behind in New York. She had extra reason to need this support, because she had become pregnant sometime around her wedding night. Caroline’s petticoat reflects the accommodations she made to her changing figure during her pregnancy. The waist has been expanded with a length of cotton string, increasing the circumference from 25” to 29”. One imagines her wearing these garments, perhaps in a pretty day dress with the waist let out, as she took the first steps towards building a network of supportive women around her. The wives of her husband’s business associates likely called to introduce themselves, as did her near neighbors. She might also have been able to hire household help, such as a full-time servant or a weekly washwoman. All of these relationships would have been vital to easing her physical burdens as well as her anxieties as she adjusted to the realities of being a pregnant new wife in a new state.

Figure 10: A length of string expanded the waist of Caroline’s petticoat during her pregnancy. Illinois State Museum. Photo by Dannyl Dolder.

Among Caroline’s cache of clothing is a linen nightgown with full, gathered sleeves and buttons extending the length of the front of the garment. Falling loosely from the shoulders, this garment would have been comfortable even in the very last stages of pregnancy. Indeed, Caroline may well have been wearing this gown (or one just like it) when she gave birth. In *The Young Wife’s and Mother’s Book* (1842), Pye Henry Chavesse recommends laboring mothers to “put on her clean night-gown, but to have it pinned up to her waist; to have a flannel petticoat to meet it; and then to put on a flannel dressing-gown.” As a middle-class woman, she likely would have had a physician there to attend to her labor (or “confinement,” in nineteenth-century parlance). Had Caroline been at home in New York, her mother or sister-in-law would have been by her side for emotional support. As it is, we don’t know who, if anyone, held Caroline’s hand in her new state as she labored. According to Caroline’s descendant (donor of her clothing collection), family tradition holds that her mother traveled to Illinois to be with her, but we will never know for sure.

Figure 11: Caroline’s nightgown. She likely wore this gown, or another just like it, while giving birth to her daughter. Illinois State Museum. Photo by Dannyl Dolder.

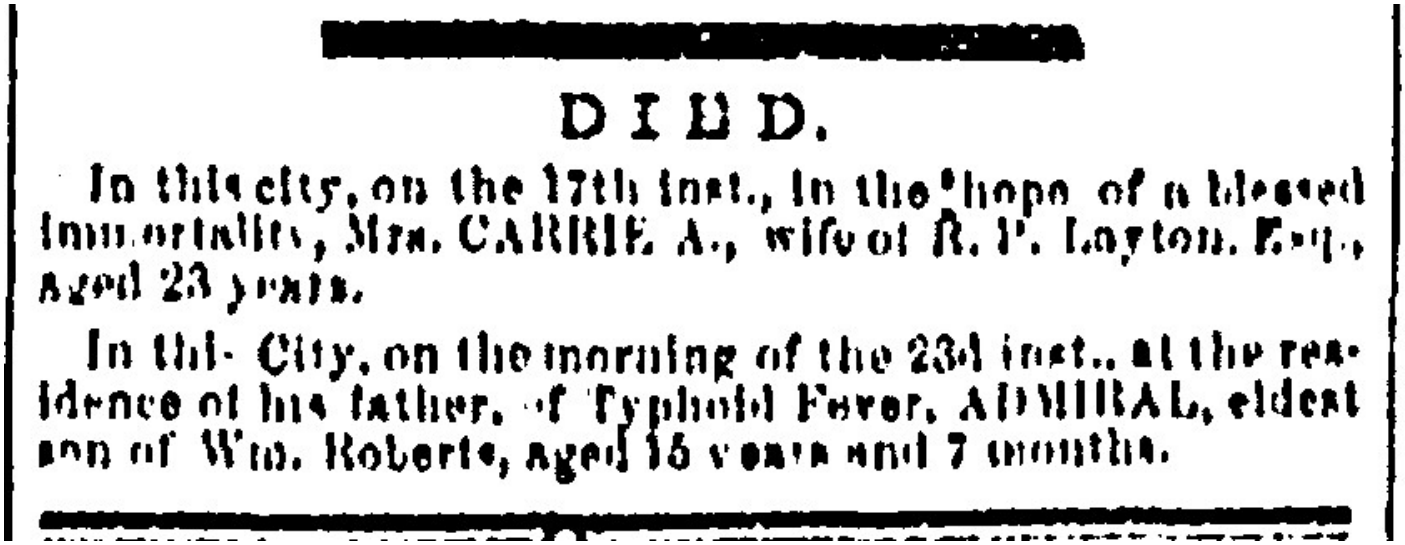
After giving birth to her daughter, Florence, Caroline likely followed the nineteenth-century custom of observing a “lying-in” period of recovery. Like many women of her class, she may have had a hired nurse with her during this time. During the first several days postpartum she was expected to lie flat in bed, regardless of her level of energy. Within a week of giving birth to her first child in 1844, fellow young wife Julia Trumbull of Alton felt “perfectly well” and complained “it seems hard to be forced to lie in bed when one feels so.”

After a week or so had passed, new mothers were permitted sit up and eventually to leave their beds (though not their rooms). At this point in her recovery, Caroline likely exchanged her nightgown for her wrapper. Made of cross-barred muslin, this garment has a straight full front and a cartridge-pleated skirt

attached to a fitted back. This wrapper would have been ideal for Caroline to wear as a mother to a newborn. The loose waist would not have constricted her midsection, and the button-front bodice would have accommodated nursing. At the same time, the garment was considered socially acceptable for a new mother to wear when receiving calls in the home when she was well enough to show off the baby to friends.

Figures 12 and 13: Caroline’s wrapper was an appropriate garment for her to wear while “lying-in” after delivery once she was permitted to leave her bed. Illinois State Museum. Photo by Dannyl Dolder.

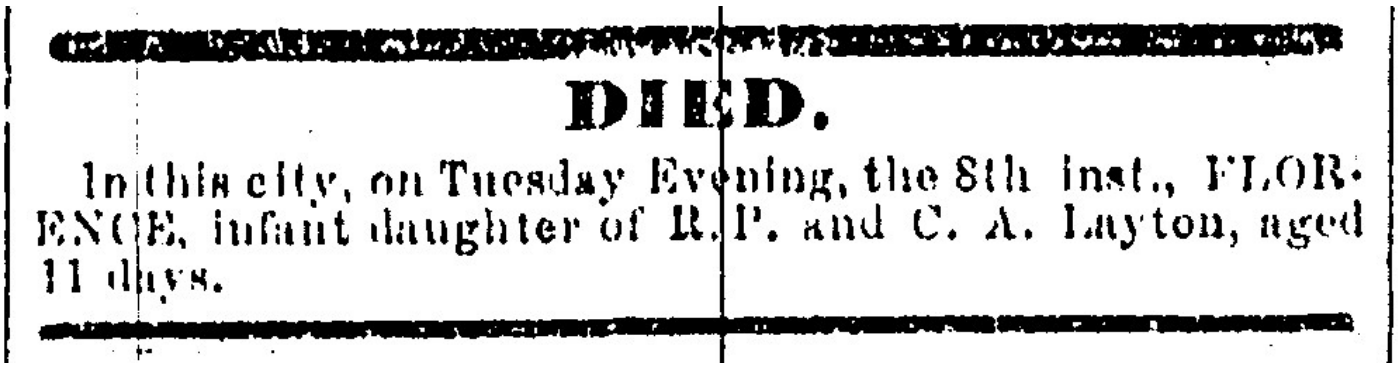
Caroline Layton may have felt, as fellow Illinois wife and mother Mary Lincoln did, that having a “loving husband and precious child” was the “happiest stage” of her life. Sadly, her happiness was not to last. The September 15, 1857, issue of the *Rock River Democrat* noted the death of “Florence, daughter of R. P. and C. A. Layton, aged 11 days.” The cause of death was not indicated, but such deaths were tragically commonplace in the antebellum Midwest, where infant mortality rates have been estimated at upwards of 40 forty percent. Caroline’s grief and the physical toll of childbirth may have left her weakened. On November 17, 1857, one year less one day after her wedding, she died at age 23.



DIED.

In this city, on the 17th inst., in the hope of a blessed immortality, Mrs. CARRIE A., wife of R. P. Layton, Esq., aged 23 years.

In this City, on the morning of the 23d inst., at the residence of his father, of Typhoid Fever, ADMIRAL, eldest son of Wm. Roberts, aged 15 years and 7 months.



DIED.

In this city, on Tuesday Evening, the 8th inst., FLORENCE, infant daughter of R. P. and C. A. Layton, aged 11 days.

Figures 14 and 15: Baby Florence Layton died just eleven days after birth. Rock River Democrat, September 15, 1857. Caroline Sutherland Layton died at age 23 on November 17, 1857. Rockford Register, November 28, 1857.

Caroline’s family undertook significant expense to bring her remains to New York for a funeral and entombment in the family vault. This decision reflected their financial means and suggested that they considered New York Caroline’s home, if no longer in life, then for her eternal rest. Her body was placed in an iron coffin with a glass face plate. Likely a hermetically sealed Fisk metallic burial case, these coffins were popular in the 1850s for transporting remains over long distances because of the excellent preservation they afforded. Indeed, when the family vault crumbled in the 1930s, trespassers described Caroline as almost unchanged by time.

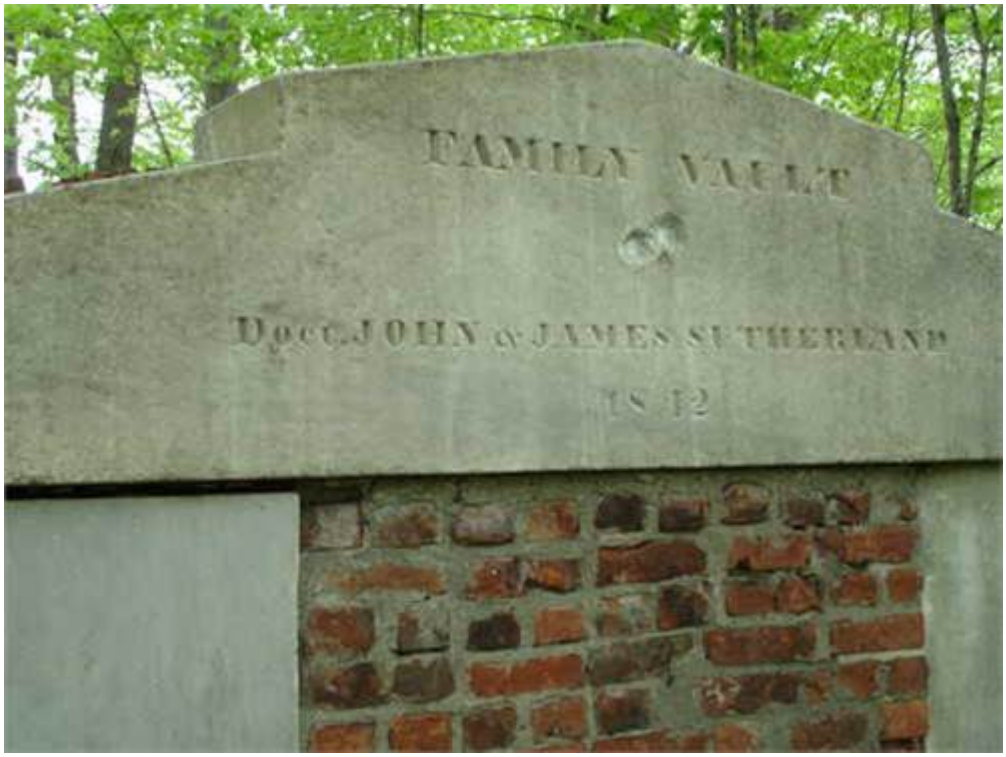


Figure 16: The Sutherland family vault in Chatham Center, New York, was breached in the 1930s. Inside, trespassers saw Caroline Sutherland Layton's perfectly preserved features through the window of her iron coffin.

The faceplate built into Caroline's coffin also gave rise to a myth that created some confusion about her wedding gown. Once it became known that a beautiful young woman's body was remarkably preserved in her coffin, locals flocked to the tomb to see her for themselves. These onlookers saw a white garment through the coffin's faceplate and assumed that she was buried in her wedding dress. This rumor was doubtless fueled by the fact that Caroline was still a newlywed when she died. It is more likely, however, that they saw burial clothes or a burial shroud.

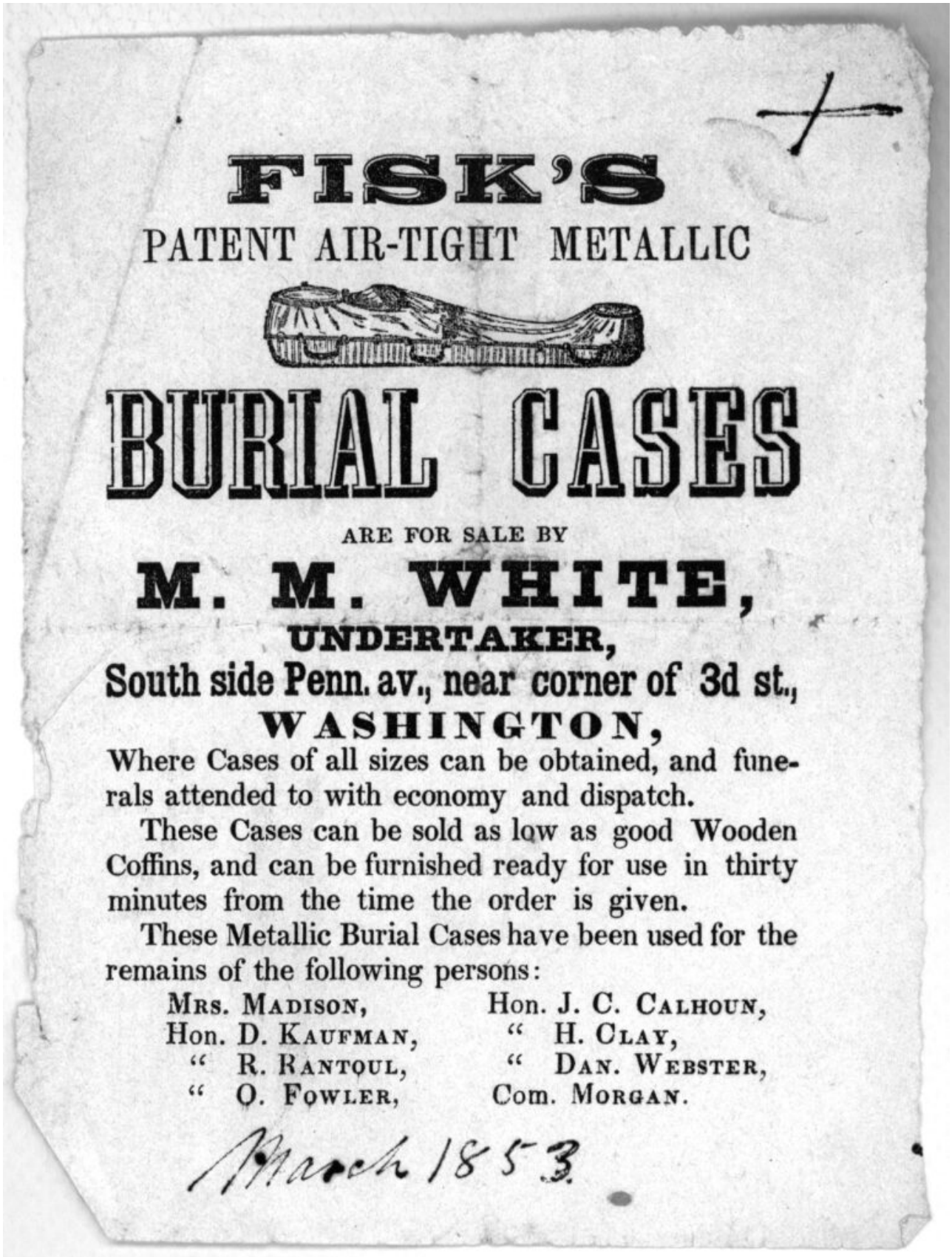


Figure 17: Caroline's remains were sent home to New York in an iron coffin, likely a Fisk metallic burial case. Retrieved from the Library of Congress.

Antebellum burial clothes were garments for the dead that mimicked clothes for

the living, albeit with faster and poorer construction. Burial shrouds were smock-like garments that opened at the back for ease of dressing the body. Both burial clothes and shrouds could have elaborate details, particularly from the waist up, where the deceased would be visible in a coffin. Describing the funeral of a 20-year-old woman in 1868, Helen Edwards of Springfield, Illinois, described her as a “young bride of death” and reported, “She looked lovely I am told, in her shroud of finest white merino, a rouche about her neck, and a veil of tulle fastened at the side with a pure white Paponica flowers in her hand.” To those unacquainted with the sometimes-elaborate nature of nineteenth-century burial shrouds, such a garment could easily be confused with a wedding dress.

Family tradition holds that after Caroline’s death, her clothing was packed into her trunk and returned to New York with her body. It remained with the family, passed down through multiple generations, until its donation to the Illinois State Museum in 2019. Yet one garment hints that not all of Caroline’s clothes remained untouched after her death. Her split drawers, made of linen and edged in the same drawn thread embroidery as one of the chemises, displays something I have never seen in any other historical garment.

Caroline’s laundry mark, stamped in the inner part of the waistband, was altered by a subsequent user. Her first and middle initials, CA, were crossed out, and “M H” written by hand in their place with indelible ink. Apparently, after Caroline’s death, her sister-in-law Mary Hoag Sutherland appropriated her drawers and replaced Caroline’s initials with her own. To modern readers, this may seem like it crosses a line of privacy or propriety. To a nineteenth-century housewife and mother of four children like Mary, perhaps it was an expedient way to save a few stitches on the construction of a new garment for herself. If Mary Sutherland made use of Caroline’s drawers after her death, she may well have helped herself to the chemises and nightclothes as well, although we’ll never know for sure.

Figures 18: After Caroline’s death, her sister-in-law Mary Hoag Sutherland claimed her drawers and wrote her initials in the waistband in place of Caroline’s. Illinois State Museum. Photo by Dannyl Dolder.

Taken together, Caroline’s surviving garments paint a poignant picture of the last year of this young woman’s life. In November 1856 she was a Hudson River Valley bride in an ivory silk wedding gown. A year later she wore her burial shroud. In between, she moved west to Illinois and surely began expanding her social circle in her new home, even as she expanded the waist of her petticoat to accommodate her pregnancy. Her apron speaks to the physical labor she put into the effort of building her new life, while her nightgown and wrapper speak to not just the physical but the emotional journey of birthing and then burying a child shortly before her own untimely death.

Caroline Sutherland Layton was one of countless women throughout history who died young. Most of these women are forgotten, or at best, remembered as a line on a census or a name on a tombstone. Thanks to her family’s careful preservation of her clothing, a window into Caroline’s life has been preserved. In connecting with the things Caroline made, altered, and left behind, we connect with her humanity. We remember her not just as a statistic or ghost story, but as a person who experienced the joys and fears of becoming a young bride, wife, expectant mother, and mother during the eventful final year of her life.

Centering material culture when researching those with scant documentary evidence of their lives can help fill in the gaps of their experience. In

Caroline's case, analysis of her clothing illustrates both the aspirations and perils of those who moved west in search of a better life. Despite the advantages of status and prosperity, Caroline died a bereaved mother, far from her extended family.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Martha Ehlers for entrusting this remarkable collection of Caroline Sutherland's garments to the Illinois State Museum. Thank you to Dean Farmer for his meticulous research on Caroline Sutherland. Thank you to Dannyl Dolder for her top-notch photography.

Further Reading

Lyman Trumbull Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library
Condell Family Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library
David Davis Family Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library

Laura B. Bozeman, "The Genteel Frontier: Westward Expansion of Womanly Refinement," (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota Ph.D. dissertation, 2014).

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Eliza Farrar, *The Young Lady's Friend: A Manual of Practical Advice and Instruction to Young Females on Their Entering Upon the Duties of Life After Quitting School* (New York: John W. Parker, 1853).
Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience: 1800–1915* (Santa Fe: University of New Mexico Press, 1982).

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This article originally appeared in April 2024.

Erika Holst is the curator of history at the Illinois State Museum. Her publications include *Historic Houses of Lincoln's Illinois, Edwards Place: A Springfield Treasure,* and *Wicked Springfield: Crime, Corruption, and Scandal During the Lincoln Era,* as well as several scholarly and popular articles. Her current exhibition, *Growing Up X,* explores the toys, technologies, and cultural touchstones that surrounded and shaped Generation X in their youth.