

Spread the Festive Board: Death on the Table in the Southern Backcountry

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In an essay entitled, “The Intersections of Life: Tables and their Social Role,” Gerald Ward explains that “a key to [tables’] significance in the social history of furniture, is that they involve people in social interaction in ways that case furniture and chairs do not. They provide intersections for human relationships, places where people come together and relate to one another.”¹ Tables are places where life happens. But what happens when the tables are turned? What happens when the table is put to a very different use – when the table becomes a place of death?

The relationship of death and the table is a long established one, particularly in the South. In a will dated April 30th, 1776, Alexander Campbell of Maryland instructed his executors “that five Gallons of Rum and five Gallons of Spirits and two Bushels of Wheat Flour made into good Biskets be decently Spent at my Burial.”² South Carolina resident William Taylor insisted in an 1822 will that there be “no serimony of words or songs about my remains, but have me decently burryed & furnish plenty to eat & drink of the best let none go away empty or dry.”³ Southern mourners often saw the table laden with all sorts of funeral foods.⁴ Often, however, the table finds a far more somber burden set upon it – the dead body itself.⁵ And it is this practice of laying death on the table, particularly in the southern backcountry, that deserves further exploration.

In an 1888 essay discussing the “Funeral Customs of Ireland,” James Mooney notes that “the neighbor women take charge of the body, which is washed and drest and stretched upon a board resting on a table or the backs of chairs.”⁶ Historian James Crissman records a similar response to death in Appalachian America: “the family placed the prepared body on display in the home . . . It was exhibited on either a table or two chairs.”⁷ Chairs typically accustomed to providing temporary rest to the weary body, now support a body at far more permanent rest. Objects accustomed to one sort of use find their tasks redefined when death enters the house.

Sometimes, however, death demands an object of its own. The “cooling board” is one such object. Looking at *Death in Early America*, Margaret Coffin writes that a “cooling board often became the resting place of the corpse until the coffin was completed, since the sick bed was probably needed for visiting relatives.”⁸ According to Crissman, “the board was usually whatever was available, including a piece of lumber that was handy, a board that was used for ironing, a door that was taken off the hinges, or

1 Ward, 16.

2 Wills, 1776-1777, VI. 41. Maryland Perogative Court. 12.

3 Wills of Richland County, Vol. 2, 1787-1853, Book H. 43.

4 This is even more interesting given that often this is according to the will of the deceased who takes the opportunity to host a final meal.

5 See figures 1-3.

6 Mooney, 267.

7 Crissman, 71.

8 Coffin, 79.

a table.”⁹ Anthropologist M. Bettis offers yet another description of the cooling board as found in the Tennessee mountains:

The board referred to was a ‘cooling board’ on which families used to place the body. Each family had its own board that was used by several generations and passed down through the family. . . . It was often put on saw horses or some other type of support to double as a trestle table at church picnics, barn raisings, etc. Occasionally it was used as an ironing board.¹⁰

Once again, an object transcends its expected use. An object associated with death, the cooling board, finds new life. The cooling board is set as a table. The table serves as a cooling board.

Most striking, however, are the moments when the body *becomes* the table. In an 1892 article exploring the relationship of death and the table, Sidney Hartland explores such moments. In Bavaria, “corpse-cakes” were prepared and then “placed . . . to rise *on the dead body*, which lay there enswathed in a linen shroud.” After rising, the cakes were baked and relatives of the deceased expected to eat them. The Welsh custom was similar. Food placed upon the body was thought to “absorb his qualities, which are transmitted to those of his kin who partake of the cakes.”¹¹ Thus, union between the living and the dead is achieved through the consumption of food with the dead body serving as the table.

Life and death – food and body. The story of the southern backcountry table is one laden with such tensions. And yet, no matter how it is set, that table gathers individuals together and transforms them into a community.

9 Crissman, 29.

10 qtd. in Crissman, 30.

11 Hartland, 149.

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Image Appendix

Figure 1 – *The First, Second, and Last Scene of Mortality*
Prudence Punderson, ca. 1774-84

(courtesy Mayhew & Meyers, *A Documentary History of American Interiors*)

While a surprising choice of table, particularly with its lowered leaves, the drop-leaf table emphasizes the domestic nature of the coffin's location.



Figure 2 – *The Death of William*
attributed to Michele Felice Corné, c. 1800
(courtesy Garret, *At Home: The American Family 1750-1870*)

The very delicateness of this table speaks to the fragility of life keenly felt by a grieving mother.



Figure 3 - *Scene in the NE Chamber of Belle Grove House*
—*Confederate Surgeon Embalming the Remains of General Stephen D. Ramseur,*
October 20th 1864
James E. Taylor, 1864
(courtesy Ohio Historical Society)