

“The Start of Cremation in America”

For the first few hundred years of America’s time, cremation was a practice considered taboo and deemed unreligious by a primarily Christian nation. However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, there was a change in popular opinion regarding the practice of cremation. This radical shift in viewpoints can be mainly attributed to the increasing availability of information concerning cremation. In 1869 in Florence, Italy, “an international congress of medical experts denounced burial as unhygienic and championed cremation ‘in the name of public health and of civilization (Prothero 9)’”. This incident, combined with the publication of Sir Henry Thompson’s “Cremation: The Treatment of the Body after Death” in the *Contemporary Review* in January of 1874, began an explosion in the interest of cremation all over Europe and America. Several periodicals and newspapers across the United States, such as the *New York Times*, began to publish articles and essays discussing the issues of morality, sanitation, and various other topics regarding cremation.

Although there was a boom in interest in cremation during this time, the increase in publicity did not seem to affect the number of cremations, as some had predicted. This was mainly due to the fact that cremation was considered a financial risk for funeral homes at that time. Another factor was the economical depression, which resulted in many who were unable or unwilling to take the gamble and invest in a crematory. Perhaps one of the most influential reasons for the low number of cremations was that, despite new medical information to the contrary, most still considered the practice to be a vague and unholy abomination.

While the majority of the American population found cremation still unthinkable, supporters of the practice saw cremation as a way to “purify” America and to increase American refinement. The first cremation in America, executed within a crematory, took place on December 6, 1876. Many cremationists hoped, and believed, that this event would serve as an example of the benefits of the process. However, instead of increasing support for the business, the first cremation seemed to create a negative image for the practice. The cremation was conducted with little to no emotional ritual or respect for the dead or those family members and friends left behind. On the contrary, the first ceremony was to demonstrate sanitary superiority over burials, according to the cremators. To the family of the deceased, the reporters, and various others in attendance, it was a disgrace to tradition and was somewhat of a “comic affair” (Prothero 36). In contrast to the respectfulness of the ceremony, the results of the scientific aspect of the cremation seemed positive but not impressive enough to overshadow the negative aspects of the non-ritualistic and unspiritual service.

Although the cremation industry in America had a difficult beginning, the practice has become a large percentage of the market today. Since the time of the first cremation in an American crematory, there have been improvements, with many supporters rising up to educate and increase awareness of this viable method of final disposal. Since the end of the nineteenth century, cremationists and crematories have held their services with greater respect and with greater emotional connection for loved ones. Through these changes, cremation rates continued to grow steadily and by 1999, cremation had lost its ghastly image, resulting in cremation rates that increased by 25% (CANA). The rate for

the year 2010 is projected by the Cremation Association of North America to be around 40 percent.

Because of the unfortunate beginning cremation had in America, it seems that the cremation society has made sure that each cremation ceremony is held with great respect for the deceased. Acting in accordance with this goal, the McDonald Containers Company has established itself as a business that provides cremation supplies to crematories and funeral homes. The main products produced by the business are cremation containers and various other cremation accessories, designed to cater to the needs of their customers. These cremation containers, also known as cremation trays, are used during the process to hold the deceased. Instead of wrapping the deceased in linens and laying the bodies in the crematoriums, these boxes give an alternative option and a somewhat less morbid ceremony. Another benefit of cremation containers is that they make the transportation of the dead more efficient, less expensive, and not as morose. In conclusion, companies such as McDonald Containers are leading the process of cremation into a bright new future, hand in hand with the American people.

Prothero, Stephen. Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America. Berkeley: U of California Press, 2002. Print.