

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-08420-9 - Death and the American South  
Edited by Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

## Introduction: Death and the American South

Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover

As her family carried her in a coffin for burial in Jefferson, Mississippi, Addie Bundren remembered how “My father said that the reason for living is getting ready to stay dead. I knew at last what he meant and that he could not have known what he meant himself, because a man cannot know anything about cleaning up the house afterward.” William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* ranks consistently among the twentieth century’s finest novels, and much of that esteem derives from Faulkner’s brilliant engagement of one of the most difficult of human topics: death. The novel relates the story of Addie Bundren and her family’s odyssey to respect her wishes and bury her some distance from their home, on the other end of Yoknapatawpha County. But each of her kin has his or her own reason to undertake the quest, beyond and despite Addie’s burial. The story introduced thousands of readers to the peculiarities of southern life – and southern death.<sup>1</sup>

How has death framed southern history? That is the essential question behind this book, which began as a conference in April 2011 titled “Death! ‘Tis a Melancholy Day’: Death, Mourning, and Memory in the American South,” underwritten by the Department of History at North Carolina State University. Scholars presented papers on a rich variety of subjects relating to individual and community experiences with death between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. The strength of those

<sup>1</sup> William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying: The Corrected Text* (New York: Vintage International, 1985), 175–76.

works and others solicited in this emergent field convinced us that a volume on death would enrich southern history.<sup>2</sup>

*Death and the American South* explores the intimate relationship between death and southern history, but we are not making a generalizing case for the uniqueness of southern death and deathways. In some of the authors' stories, deathways appear patently southern: demographics, physical environments, religion, race and gender values, and politics often shaped many regional rituals of and attitudes toward death. But the history of death in the South took shape within larger contexts – European empires, plantation colonies, the United States, the Western world – that make futile any argument for consistently unique southern ways of death.

Instead, these scholars explore what we consider a more interesting and significant question: what were the causes and implications of the South's defining experiences with death? Taking a wide range of perspectives while concentrating on discrete episodes in the region's past, the authors of these essays tease out shifting, complex relationships between death and the American South. While many of the essays connect to the violent biracial history of the region, others remind readers of the continued influence of Native Americans. Several essays reveal the power of religion in shaping attitudes toward death and mourning. Demographics drive some scholars' interpretations, while others emphasize cultural changes apart from – even at odds with – mortality rates. Several authors illuminate the fact that death is at once deeply intimate and a powerful public site. The history of death takes many forms, and the authors consider killing and suicide, disease and decay, corpse preparations and mourning traditions, filiofetism and memorialization, the mourners and the dead.

Death's grim and constant presence in the American South began with the region's earliest manifestation. Roanoke colonists in the 1580s witnessed around them the ghastly consequences of the epidemic disease they unwittingly transmitted to local Indians. And, like later voyagers to southern outposts, they paid for their American folly with their lives. When war prevented the English from resupplying the Roanoke colony until 1590, the colonists disappeared. Many Englishmen preferred to believe they had starved or been killed: the possibility that they had been assimilated into

<sup>2</sup> We thank Jonathan Ocko and the Department of History at North Carolina State University for funding the conference that initiated this project.

the Indian populations was a “social death,” a degeneration into savagery that few Europeans wanted to acknowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Roanoke was just the start. From their earliest colonial foundations, all the southern colonies struggled with forbidding environments. During Jamestown’s “starving times” of 1609–10, only 60 of the 240 colonists at the fort survived the winter. Some survivors resorted to cannibalism, and several of the dying dug their own graves, hoping to keep their bodies from being ravaged by wild animals – and fellow colonists. Within a few years of the colony’s founding, one seventeenth-century Englishman observed that “in steed of a Plantacion,” colonial Virginia deserved “the name of a Slaughterhouse.” And mortality rates in the Chesapeake only mildly improved over the next century. South Carolina’s Lowcountry was even more dangerous than the Chesapeake, and deadlier still for African slaves than English colonists. In the autumn of 1711, several simultaneous epidemics killed 250 whites and nearly 400 blacks. Wealthier whites abandoned the Lowcountry seasonally to avoid disease, leaving behind susceptible slaves. Death was so pervasive among the colony’s slave populations that those communities did not reproduce through natural increase until the turn of the nineteenth century. Farther south, the Spanish colony of Florida witnessed its own share of epidemics, deprivation, and bloodshed. Unlike the English colonies to the north, the Spanish widely used Native Americans as laborers. In the mid-seventeenth century, however, when three waves of smallpox and measles killed more than ten thousand Guales, Timucuas, and Apalachees living and laboring in the Spanish missions, the Spanish began to import African slaves.<sup>4</sup>

Those Native Americans who died in the Florida missions were symptomatic of a larger carnage underway within Southeastern Indian nations. While European colonists faced inhospitable environments, they also brought diseases and intercultural violence that made environments equally

<sup>3</sup> Erik R. Seeman, *Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492–1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 67–77; James Horn, *A Kingdom Strange: The Brief and Tragic History of the Lost Colony of Roanoke* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Nathaniel Butler, “The Unmasked Face of Our Colony in Virginia” (1623), excerpted in “The Virginia Planters’ Answer to Captain Butler, 1632” in *Narratives of Early Virginia, 1606–1625*, ed. Lyon Gardiner Tyler (New York: Charles Scribner Sons, 1907), 417; Martha McCartney, “The Starving Time,” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, [www.encyclopediavirginia.org](http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org), January 1, 2014; John H. Hann, “Demographic Patterns and Changes in Mid-Seventeenth Century Timucua and Appalachee,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 64 (April 1986): 380–81; Peter McCandless, *Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

unfriendly to Native Americans, who suffered far greater population losses in the early South. Traveling among the Sewees and Congarees of the Carolina backcountry in 1701, John Lawson related how, “The Small-Pox has been fatal to them; they do not often escape, when they are seiz’d with that Distemper, which is a contrary Fever to what they ever knew.” Lawson did not understand how the disease was transmitted, but its consequences were devastatingly clear: “it destroy’d whole Towns, without leaving one *Indian* alive in the Village. . . . The Small-Pox and Rum have made such a Destruction amongst them, that, on good grounds, I do believe, there is not the sixth Savage living within two hundred Miles of all our Settlements, as there were fifty Years ago.”<sup>5</sup>

War, too, devastated Indians and their cultures, particularly because Europeans had more advanced weaponry. More than one thousand Tuscaroras died during the Tuscarora War, almost half of them in one incident in 1713 when colonial forces burned Tuscarora men, women, and children alive in Fort Neoheroke. Two years later, the Yamasees led a confederation of several Indian nations against South Carolina. Hundreds of European colonists were killed, but when the Cherokee decided to support the Carolinians over the Yamasees, the tide turned, hundreds of Yamasees died, and the survivors fled to Spanish Florida for refuge. Fourteen years later, the Natchez rebelled against French colonists at Fort Rosalie, killing more than two hundred and holding the fort for months before French-allied Choctaws besieged and captured the fort, murdering at least one hundred of the Natchez. Natchez peoples tried to take refuge among the Chickasaws, and when the French demanded the refugees be handed over, the Chickasaw War erupted, costing hundreds of Chickasaw lives and destroying their villages and culture.<sup>6</sup>

Death defined the character of southern provinces even before there was a self-conscious South, distinguishing the southern colonies from other North American ventures. Jamestown, the Carolina Lowcountry, St. Augustine and the Spanish missions of Appalachee and Timucua, the French settlements of the lower Mississippi valley – all starkly contrasted to New England, the mid-Atlantic, and New France’s northern colonies

<sup>5</sup> John Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina*, ed. Hugh Talmage Lefler (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 231–32.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Kelton, “The Great Southeastern Smallpox Epidemic, 1696–1700: The Region’s First Major Epidemic?” in *The Transformation of the Southeastern Indians, 1540–1760*, ed. Robbie Ethridge and Charles Hudson (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 21–38; John H. Hann, “St. Augustine’s Fallout from the Yamasee War,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 68 (October 1989): 180–200.

where death rates fell dramatically and consistently after the first years of settlement. The deaths of tens of thousands of Native Americans through disease and war facilitated European expansion, opening up acreage for staple crop production. But death played an even greater role in determining the rhythms of southern life during the region's formative decades: white Southerners' obsession with land and slaves was born out of death. Losses of both African and Native American laborers pushed Europeans to import greater numbers of Africans, binding southern agriculture more tightly to the international slave trade. By driving eighteenth-century importation patterns, demographic patterns, and family life, death also shaped the emergence of divergent African-American cultures in the southern colonies.<sup>7</sup>

So, too, was the white South's suspicion of the dark "Other" established during the death throes of the colonial era. More than 150 Carolina settlers died in the opening days of the Tuscarora War of 1711–13. During the Yamasee War of 1715, nearly 7 percent of South Carolina's white population died, a higher percentage and number of deaths than that suffered by New Englanders during King Philip's War. The Stono Rebellion of 1739 witnessed the death of thirty white colonists and forty-four insurgent African slaves, provoking strict slave codes that framed white-black relationships through the decades of slavery and Jim Crow and convincing white colonists that African slaves, no less than Indians, posed a constant threat to their very existence. As Craig Thompson Friend explores in "Mutilated Bodies, Living Specters: Scalpings and Beheadings in the Early South," Indians, whites, and blacks used mutilation of the dead to create scenes of terror and send political messages to those who came upon such scenes. Violence against corpses became as ubiquitous in the early South as violence against the living. As two forms of bodily mutilations, scalpings and beheadings earned a particularly visible role in the development of the early South.<sup>8</sup>

The colonial South's oppressive mortality also framed family life. Children died young and in large numbers; those who survived often found themselves orphaned by widespread parental death. War, epidemic and endemic disease, and famine meant that most people did not live to be

<sup>7</sup> Philip Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> William L. Ramsey, *The Yamasee War: A Study of Culture, Economy, and Conflict in the Colonial South* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008); Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974).

grandparents, leaving the care of children to aunts, uncles, and extended kin networks. In the near absence of an elderly, established population, patriarchy was weak, forcing young men to compete for wealth and power early in life, consequently marrying and beginning families at early ages. Throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, these patterns crossed racial and ethnic lines.<sup>9</sup> The colonial South's peculiar intersection of racial interactions, persistently high mortality rates, and familial instability contributed to evolving ideas about death and the afterlife.

A larger cultural shift was under way in Western cultures that sought to soften the intensity of death's role in daily life, the final result of which was rejection of the medieval idea of the deathbed scene as a battlefield where good and evil fought over the soul of the dying. In its place emerged a more humanist vision of the "good death" and the anticipation of familial reconciliation in Heaven. The South had its own regional manifestation of this cultural transformation. West African cosmology emphasized life after death as one of ancestral guides and eternal life with forefathers. As African slaves became Christianized, they blended their traditions with European beliefs in a Great God and single Heaven for all believers. The intimacy of white and black lives and deaths in the colonial South accelerated the sharing of these ideas. Christian ministers, particularly during the First Great Awakening, tapped into the South's blended theology and the more emotive demonstrations that accompanied it, employing the vision of afterlife to draw in converts.<sup>10</sup> In "The Usable Death: Evangelicals, Anglicans, and the Politics of Dying in the Late-Colonial Lowcountry," Peter N. Moore examines how evangelical leaders reacted to these shifts in deathways by encouraging followers to die according to Reformed evangelical ideas of the "good death," curbing excessive grief even over the tragic loss of children and spouses. Moore also uncovers the interplay between

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Blake Smith, "Mortality and the Family in the Colonial Chesapeake," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8 (winter 1978): 403–27; Carville V. Earle, "Environment, Disease, and Mortality in Early Virginia," in *The Chesapeake in the Seventeenth Century: Essays on Anglo-American Society and Politics*, ed. Thad W. Tate and David L. Ammerman (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 96–125; Lorena S. Walsh and Russell R. Menard, "Death in the Chesapeake: Two Life Tables for Men in Early Colonial Maryland," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 69 (summer 1974): 211–27; Darrett B. and Anita H. Rutman, "'Now-Wives and Sons-in-Law': Parental Death in a Seventeenth-Century Virginia County," in Tate and Ammerman, eds., *The Chesapeake in the Seventeenth Century*, 153–82.

<sup>10</sup> Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), esp. 297–321; Michel Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), esp. 214–25.

proper death accounts and political power – a theme that other authors show continued to mark the South into the modern era.

By the 1770s, as second- and third-generation Southerners acclimated to endemic and epidemic diseases, death rates began to fall, families and communities became more stable, and the notion of the South as a self-consciously distinct region began to emerge. In some ways, the American Revolution not only served to create a new nation but contributed to the South's regional formation. In the new republic, men who had participated in the creation of the United States became mythologized as "founders," specifically in the public commemorations of their deaths over the following decades. As Founding Fathers, they became the divinities in an American civic religion intended to legitimize the nation. Simultaneously, they lived as southern aristocrats on vast estates, surrounded by slaves and all of the amenities that patriarchy afforded gentlemen. As Lorri Glover relates in "When 'History Becomes Fable Instead of Fact': The Deaths and Resurrections of Virginia's Leading Revolutionaries," the apotheoses of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison were more than public affairs: nationwide veneration went hand-in-hand with relatives' efforts to frame deathbed narratives and the public's memory. By creating laudable death narratives, descendants resurrected their famous ancestors as paragons of republican virtue, the American founding, and southern patriarchy.<sup>11</sup>

Before arguments over the morality of slavery began to rend apart the nation, then, the South played an important role in defining what was "American." The democratic impulses set in motion by the American Revolution, however, extended public mourning beyond the deaths of Founding Fathers. In "American Mourning: Catastrophe, Public Grief, and the Making of Civic Identity in the Early National South," Jewel Spangler demonstrates how memorialization of the deceased following 1807's *Chesapeake* affair and a devastating fire in 1811 Richmond, Virginia, inspired a "national" form of mourning that we still employ today. In contrast to commemoration of great men, the episodes in Virginia made possible more egalitarian remembrances, reflecting in public rituals of grief the democratization of the early American republic.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Burstein, "Immortalizing the Founding Fathers: The Excesses of Public Eulogy," in *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America*, ed. Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 91–107; Gerald Kahler, *The Long Farewell: Americans Mourn the Death of George Washington* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008).

By the 1840s, however, self-defined southern men, in thrall of a culture of honor and determined to perform their manhood, turned the South into a killing field with sadistically romanticized duels, vicious exploitation of slaves, and, ultimately, the overwhelming carnage of the Civil War. Death remained a powerful shaper of southern values, and as attitudes toward the afterlife and deathbed evolved, so, too, did attitudes toward the corpse. The ways in which people treat dead bodies have always signaled their cultural values, and in the Old South, not all corpses were treated equally. Jamie Warren's "To Claim One's Own: Death and the Body in the Daily Politics of Antebellum Slavery" explores issues of power and ownership under slavery. By following the corpse from deathbed to the grave (or lack thereof), Warren reveals how, in taking care of corpses and preparing them for burial, slaves found ways to reclaim autonomy as they asserted authority over the anatomies of their kin. Race, then, became a significant factor in the treatment of corpses, which in turn reinforced racial distinctions and racial contests over power in the plantation South.<sup>12</sup>

So, too, did death contribute to identity formations in antebellum southern cities. As immigrants filled places like New Orleans, Savannah, and Charleston, most did not have the means to escape the seasonal epidemics as plantation families had since the colonial era. In "Nativists and Strangers: Yellow Fever and Immigrant Mortality in Charleston, South Carolina," Jeff Strickland exposes how nativism manifested among native-born white Charlestonians who often blamed yellow fever epidemics on German and Irish immigrants, even as they argued that epidemics were useful for thinning out immigrant populations. Death, then, became an accomplice in making "southern" a synonym for whiteness and contributing to emerging racial ideals about the innate inferiority of blacks, unassimilated immigrants, and other "Others."

The terror and destruction of yellow fever epidemics were soon surpassed by the horrors of war. The carnage of the Civil War left a self-inflicted scar on the South that would not mend for generations. By 1865, southern white family life, the plantation economy, and the foundations of the region's long-standing social order crumbled under the weight of 260,000 Confederate corpses – lives squandered in a failed bid

<sup>12</sup> Mark S. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), chap. 5; Seeman, *Death in the New World*, 1–10; Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from African to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), esp. chap. 7.



to deny freedom to 4,000,000 African Americans.<sup>13</sup> Confederates faced a social death as well: their soldiers had physically died, but when the war ended, the larger American nation did not bereave their deaths or recognize their sacrifices. Between Fort Sumter and Appomattox, the meaning of war had shifted so that President Lincoln could proclaim at Gettysburg “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom.” There was no rebirth for the Confederacy, however: it died, and with it everything for which it had stood. In the aftermath of the war, former Confederate soldiers dealt with a disenfranchised grief, mourning friends and family who had died while they had survived. Their losses, although publicly mourned in the South, were celebrated in the North.<sup>14</sup>

The depth of white Southerners’ loss and despair during and after the war resulted in many considering suicide and many more reconsidering its morality. In “‘Cumberer of the Earth’: Suffering and Suicide among the Faithful in the Civil War South,” Diane Miller Sommerville analyzes how changing religious considerations reshaped ideas about suicide among southern white men and women of faith who either contemplated suicide or responded to loved ones who took their own lives. As witnesses to unprecedented suffering, many Southerners gradually tempered their long-standing and intractable theological condemnation of suicide as an affront to God as they developed a more compassionate response, one that considered self-murder tragic but understandable given the dire conditions of war’s aftermath.

As Reconstruction ended and the South was “redeemed,” white Southerners undertook a variety of new ways to escape the world they had inherited – and to resurrect the world they had lost. The struggle to restore southern men’s sense of value and manliness resulted in white women’s massive memorial efforts, which recast Civil War deaths into

<sup>13</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2008); Franny Nudelman, *John Brown’s Body: Slavery, Violence, & the Culture of War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), chaps. 3 and 4; Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799–1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pt. II.

<sup>14</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “The Gettysburg Address,” November 19, 1863, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Therese A. Rando, *How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 57–60; Kenneth J. Doka, ed., *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow* (New York: Lexington Books, 1989), 4.

narratives of honor and sacrifice.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the fight to ensure white prerogative manifested in Jim Crow segregation and macabre lynch mobs policing the color line through racially motivated murder.<sup>16</sup>

One of the main subjects in Donald G. Mathews's essay, Corra White Harris embodied these two impulses, recasting her husband's suicide as martyrdom while defending racial violence as essential. In both instances, sex intersected with race. In 1899, Harris penned an editorial defending the lynching of Sam Hose, an African American accused of murdering a white farmer and raping his wife. Not coincidentally, Harris's husband, the Reverend Lundy Harris, had confessed to sexual interludes with African-American women. As was typical in the New South, white male predations on black women got perversely twisted into the inverse: stereotypes of black male sexual aggression against white women.<sup>17</sup> Corra Harris condemned black men's rape of white women – a ubiquitous rumor but exceedingly rare crime – as an affliction on “respectable” society. But when Lundy Harris later committed suicide, Corra insisted that he was ultimately not to blame for his sexual transgressions or even his self-murder. In “The ‘Translation’ of Lundy Harris: Interpreting Death out of the Confusion of Sexuality, Violence, and Religion in the New South,” Mathews examines this family saga to reveal the hypocrisies of interracial sex and racialized violence.

Just as the demographics of death had framed the development of the early South – from settlement patterns to the importation of greater numbers of African slaves – so, too, did it have a hand in shaping the New South. Widespread poverty, a paucity of medical professionals, and persistent ruralism conspired to make the New little changed from the Old South in the most universal of ways: Southerners white and black still had shorter life expectancies and higher mortality rates than the rest of the

<sup>15</sup> Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865–1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Caroline E. Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Claude A. Clegg, *Troubled Ground: A Tale of Murder, Lynching, and Reckoning in the New South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Knopf, 2010).