

6 Feet Under

By Cindy Peters

I apologize in advance for writing about 6 feet under. However, my husband and I recently planned and paid for our funeral arrangements, so naturally my mind went there. I did some research on the subject and I found it interesting.

The common phrase “six feet under” is traced back to England in 1665 during an outbreak of a plague. The Major of London enacted a law requiring all graves to be at least six feet deep to limit the spread of the disease. This thought ended up being erroneous, as in reality, very few diseases can be spread from dead bodies.

Another reason it was important to bury coffins deep was to protect them from grave robbers and body snatchers. In the 1800’s body snatching became a lucrative business when human cadavers could be sold for research. There were also expensive jewels that could often be obtained in the graves.

Another popular thought is that caskets are buried six feet deep in Northern States in order to be buried below the frost line. There was a concern that the frozen soil would push the casket back to the surface. The bad joke was that we all know how annoying it is to have relatives arrive unannounced.

Some places like New Orleans have coffins buried above ground due to the torrential rain and the water level. This practice would keep the coffins from floating to the surface of the soil.

Many graves today are only about four feet deep. Burial laws vary, but 18 inches of soil on top of a casket is a common requirement. If the body is not enclosed, two feet of soil is often mandated. In some places, such as low-lying wet land areas, graves must be much deeper than six feet, otherwise they would fill with water.

It is often standard practice to bury 12 feet if another person, usually a loved one is to be buried above in the same grave. Graves of babies and children are often buried much shallower than those of adults.

In Connecticut, landowners can bury bodies on their private land. The depth is up to the discretion of the landowner. However, the grave needs to be deep enough so animals won’t dig up the body.

Another concern by farmers is that with a shallow grave they could accidentally unearth a grave when plowing their fields.

In truth, despite “six feet under” being synonymous with the very idea of death, it has little to no relevance in burial customs. How deep a casket is buried is not universal and varies from place to place.

In some cultures, bodies were buried vertically. Six feet was the norm as at the time most people did not reach the height beyond six feet.

In the past my husband and I visited an historical plantation in Nashville, Tennessee. The tour guide showed us the crypt of the original plantation owners which was empty. There were so many problems with people breaking into the vault that the entire family had to be moved to an undisclosed location in order to avoid future vandalism.

In my home state of South Dakota, I found some of the historical Sioux Indian cemeteries unique and interesting. The deceased in the tribe would be buried with mounds of earth above them. The Indian Chief would have a small bush or tree planted above his mound.

Whether now while living during this pandemic or sometime once we have passed on, the reality is that we will probably be six feet apart.