

A History Of The Hearse

The funeral hearse was originally a wooden or metal framework, which stood over the bier or coffin and supported the pall. It was provided with numerous spikes to hold burning candles, and, owing to the resemblance of these spikes to the teeth of a harrow, was called a hearse. Later on, the word was applied, not only to the construction above the coffin, but to any receptacle in which the coffin was placed. Thus it came to denote the vehicle in which the dead are carried to the grave.

Originally considered public transportation, an elaborate framework would be erected over a coffin or tomb to which memorial verses or epitaphs were attached. It was then put on the top of horse-drawn carriages, looking much like a luggage rack. Today, the original hearse remains acknowledged by the bit of scroll work or stretched-out "S" on the side of a funeral coach, called Landau bars.

Hearses were originally horse-drawn, but silent electric motorized carts were introduced as horses began to be phased out as transportation. Examples that were used in Paris were reported in the pages of Scientific American in May 1907 and petrol-driven hearses began to be produced from 1909 in the United States.

Motorized hearses became more widely accepted in the 1920s. The vast majority of hearses since then have been based on larger, more powerful car chassis, generally retaining the front end up to and possibly including the front doors but with custom bodywork to the rear to contain the coffin. Some early hearses also served as ambulances, owing to the large cargo capacity in the rear of the vehicle.

A few cities experimented with funeral trolley cars and/or subway cars to carry both the casket and mourners to cemeteries, but these were not popular. The only exception was Chicago, Illinois which operated 3 different funeral trolley cars over the elevated tracks in downtown Chicago to outlying cemeteries in the western suburbs. A special funeral bureau handled the funeral trains which sometimes operated 3–4 funeral trains a week over the "L". [<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hearse>]



