

## Fun Facts About...Coffins

The word comes ultimately from Greek *kophinos*, a basket. In English, the word was not used in a funeral sense until the 1500s.

The history of coffins is a fairly long one, as humans began burying the dead at least 100,000 years ago. The use of coffins, or coffin-like structures, can be traced to the Celts and ancient Egyptians. In Egypt, bodies were mummified, placed in a sarcophagus, and buried in pyramids. As early as the year 700, the Celts were crafting burial boxes with wood and stones. Prior to the use of caskets, bodies were often wrapped in a shroud before burial.

In 1784, the desire to save wood was so great, Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II decided reusable coffins needed to be the new hot item. Trap doors were placed in the bottom of each coffin; this way, those performing the burial ceremony could flip a switch and, presto, the body falls into a hole under the coffin. After the corpse vanished, the coffin could be used again. This disturbing trend lasted about six months before the public called shenanigans and demanded it be stopped.

It may sound ridiculous, but exploding casket syndrome is a common term in the death industry (which also somewhat sounds ridiculous). During the decomposition process, the body releases gas, and things start to liquefy. If there isn't a way for gas to escape, pressure continues to build until the gas explodes. Such an explosion causes caskets to burst and can even crack mausoleum walls. Not to mention the post-mortem goop that needs to be cleaned up. To avoid such explosions, casket makers added burper valves, such as those found in Tupperware, to release gas build-up and keep the deceased intact.

Premature burial was a very real and terrifying issue in the 19th century. Creating an alert system seemed like the best way to deal with the problem. Enter so-called safety coffins, which were rigged with a bell to alert cemetery guards of any living people trying to get out of their premature graves. These coffins also had a small hatch to allow fresh air in while waiting to be dug out.

As knowledge has increased and personal preferences have developed, the materials used to build coffins have changed over the years. Caskets have been made out of bamboo, wicker, glass, wood, cast iron, steel, and even gold. Metal coffins became very popular among the wealthy members of society in the 1800s, as a method of protection against grave robbers.

Now, one can acquire a coffin in the shape of pretty much anything, from musical instruments to high-heel shoes. In 2015, coffin pods were introduced to the world, allowing the body to decompose and serve as fertilizer for the tree seedling buried with it. This way, a form of life grows out of death and lets the departed give back to the earth.

