

# History of the Time Capsule

John M. Hoenig, Ph.D. looks at some of the attempts to preserve the present for the future.

IT WAS ALL SET. Theodore Roosevelt IV, great-grandson of US President Teddy Roosevelt, would come to Portland, Oregon, for the 28 May 2003 celebration. It was 100 years previously that President Roosevelt buried a time capsule — a copper box the size of a microwave oven — at the construction site of a 40-foot monument to explorers Lewis and Clark. There was only one problem — where exactly was the time capsule buried?

A search of newspapers from 1903 failed to disclose the precise location. In the end, the Oregon Historical Society decided it was too costly and disruptive to tear up the grounds around the monument looking for the box.

Aberdeen, Washington, fared only slightly better. In July 2003, a 94-year-old time capsule was opened. It had been laid in the cornerstone of the high school in 1909. The newspapers, photographs and booklets inside were a mass of moldy “wet crud”.

## Origins

The idea of creating a storage container to preserve documents and artifacts for a future generation dates back at least to medieval times when such boxes were commonly placed in building cornerstones. The practice was common among Freemasons who developed an elaborate ritual. Participants would wear special garb including an apron, go through a procession and make invocations, anoint the cornerstone with wine, oil and (in America) corn.

George Washington was a Freemason and he performed the Masonic ritual at the laying of the cornerstone of the U.S. Capitol building in 1793. The International Time Capsule Society, located at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, maintains that it is not known if there is anything inside this cor-



Part of an advertisement for Westinghouse showing the company's time capsule which was buried 50-feet underground in 1938 at the site of their exhibit at the New York World's Fair.

nerstone but an article in the *Washington Post* indicates the cornerstone was a solid block that was lowered onto an engraved silver plate. Because the Capitol building was extended and remodeled several times over the years, the exact location of the original cornerstone is not known.

The term “time capsule” is comparatively recent and was coined by the Westinghouse Company when it buried a seven-foot long, torpedo-shaped time capsule 50-feet under the grounds of the 1939 World's Fair in New York City. Instantly, a new term was added to the English language.

The International Time Capsule Society estimates that there are 10,000 time capsules in existence, the vast majority of which

have been forgotten or at least lost. Burying time capsules is especially popular during centennial and other celebrations, and many capsules were created when the US celebrated its centennial and bicentennial, and also when the new millennium arrived.

## Contents

There are no rules for what goes in a time capsule. Local histories, photographs, membership lists, and bylaws and constitutions are often included, as well as samples of locally made products or crafts and other items that reflect the times.

For example, according to the Minnesota Historical Society, the time capsule placed in the cornerstone of the State Capitol in 1898 contains: “the Holy Bible, the first two volumes of the Minnesota State Statutes, a history of Minnesota volunteers in the Civil War and many other books, speeches, newspapers, photographs, engravings and copper etchings.” Similarly, an 1873 time capsule buried in the cornerstone of the new city hall in Rochester, NY contained 350 items including books, catalogues, photographs, pamphlets, papers, pieces of parchment, currency, newspapers, maps and medals. Inside one of the books was a condom and on the wrapper was a notation that the condom should not be included in the capsule. Evidently, someone disagreed and slipped it into the box anyway.

For many years, the largest time capsule was the one on the grounds of Oglethorpe University (New Zealand now has a larger one). Termed the “Crypt of Civilization”, the Oglethorpe capsule measures 20 x 10 x 10 feet and was sealed in 1940. It contains thousands of items including Lincoln Logs, a Donald Duck doll, dental floss, recordings and newsreels,

including one of Adolf Hitler, a toaster, William Shakespeare's writings and over 640,000 pages of microfilm.

Contents of time capsules often reflect the events and organizations that created them. Thus, it is not surprising that the capsule under the US Holocaust Memorial Museum contains scrolls of remembrance signed by Holocaust survivors and the capsule in the cornerstone of the US Supreme Court building contains legal documents and memorabilia. However, the cornerstone of the Treasury Building in Washington, DC, contains a locket of hair from President Andrew Jackson's granddaughter. Jackson remarked at the time (1836) that "I am placing a part of my heart in this building."

Often the contents of a recovered capsule are in poor condition. And to make matters worse, on more than one occasion a recovered time capsule was stolen before the contents could be examined.

The saddest example of this is the time capsule buried in 1907 behind the foundation stone of the Gramophone Company factory in Hayes, Middlesex, England, by famed opera singer Nellie Melba.



Lowering the time capsule made by the Westinghouse Corporation for the 1939 New York World's Fair.

The capsule contained original disk recordings by Melba and other stars. The box was retrieved in the 1960s during renovations but was stolen before it could be reburied. Who knows what has happened to this fabulous treasure? There are even cases of time capsules being stolen just before they were scheduled to be buried.

Perhaps the most bizarre incident concerns the time capsule placed in the cornerstone of the courthouse in Eastland, Texas, in 1897. In 1928, 3,000 people watched as the time capsule was opened — 31 years after it had been sealed. Inside lay a flat, dusty and very much alive horned toad. How it got there is not clear. The toad was christened "Old Rip"

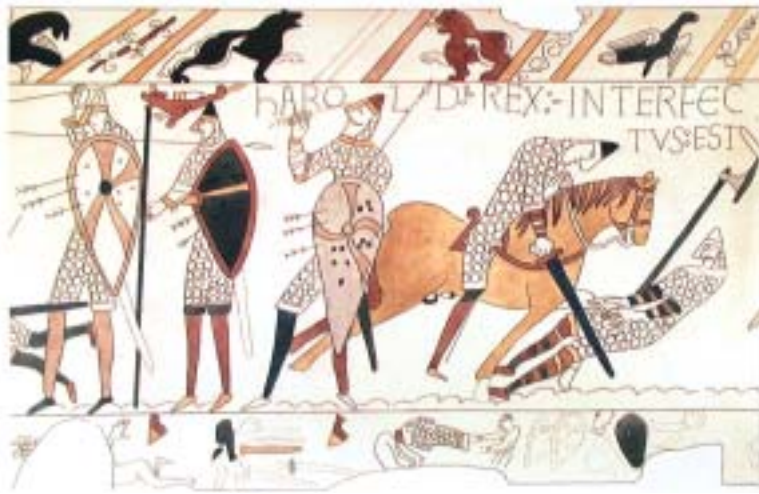
and became an overnight celebrity with a national tour that included meeting President Calvin Coolidge. The story becomes even more bizarre. In 1955, Warner Brothers released a cartoon entitled *One Froggy Evening* which was based loosely on the story of Old Rip. In the cartoon, a construction worker finds a frog in a time capsule and the frog sings and dances for him in a top hat. But, every time the construction worker tries to show off the frog to a producer in show business, the frog behaves like an ordinary frog. *One Froggy Evening* was a big sensation but it was essentially a one-hit phenomenon.

Some people treat time capsules as a serious matter and have expectations that the capsules will be recovered and opened at specific times (the Westinghouse time capsule is supposed to be opened in the year 6939 while the one buried on the campus of Oglethorpe University is scheduled for 8113). Others treat the subject in a romantic, whimsical way and leave it to fate to determine if and when a capsule will be recovered. Viewed in the latter way, we can see all the drama, comedy, serendipity and tragedy of a human endeavor. **HM**

## Enduring Myths: King Harold Was Killed by an Arrow in the Eye

The truth is that nobody knows how King Harold was killed at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 but contemporary accounts of the battle mention nothing about an arrow in the eye.

The origin for this popular belief is the well known image on the Bayeux Tapestry of a man with an arrow in the eye. But Harold could just as well have been the poor chap being cut down by the man on a horse.



There are three contemporary accounts of the battle. *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio* (written before 1068) gives no details of Harold's wounds. A second, written in 1070 says Harold was "pierced by mortal wounds" with no mention of an arrow. The third account, *Gesta Guillelmi* written between 1071 and 1077, describes Harold's wounds (which were horrific) in detail; these make no reference to an arrow wound.

The Bayeux Tapestry was probably embroidered in 1077, 11 years after the battle. Later accounts, starting in 1125 (59 years after the battle) do mention an arrow but by this time the Bayeux Tapestry image would have been known.