

Dexter Gardner & Son Funeral Home

Founded: 1816

Location: Third and Busseron Streets, Vincennes (1816–); 427 Main Street (–1915);
505 Main Street (1915–)

Dexter Gardner & Son Funeral Home, the oldest continuously operating business in Indiana, originated in Vincennes in August 1816 when Andrew Gardner opened a cabinetmaking shop and general store on the corner of Third and Busseron Streets. Gardner learned the cabinetmaking trade in Springfield, Massachusetts, where he was born in 1792. About 1812 he moved to Cincinnati; four years later he moved to Vincennes. Gardner maintained scrupulous accounts of his business transactions, and his ledgers reveal the variety of services he provided for the pioneer community of Vincennes—turning knobs for a chest of drawers, repairing a broken parasol, and fixing a sausage stuffer in addition to manufacturing furniture and selling goods.

On 24 August shortly after opening for business, Gardner sold his first coffin to A. Wood for \$2.00. He gradually became the town's undertaker. Gardner would go to the home of the dead, measure the body, and manufacture a poplar or cherry coffin to size, for which he usually charged from \$2.00 to \$10.00. In 1819 he built a hearse for use in funeral processions. Over the years Gardner and his descendants supervised the funerals of many notable Knox County residents, including Francis Vigo, the soldier and fur trader who provided vital support to George Rogers Clark during the American Revolution. Gardner provided a \$20.00 coffin for the debt-ridden Vigo in 1836; Gardner's descendants were reimbursed for the cost of the funeral forty years later by the

federal government. In 1880 the Gardners oversaw the elaborate funeral of Gov. James Douglas “Blue Jeans” Williams of Knox County.

In 1840 Andrew’s son, Elbridge Gerry Gardner, became a partner in the firm, now Andrew Gardner & Son. Elbridge had begun working for his father at the age of fourteen. At his father’s death in 1860, he inherited the business, which subsequently became the E. G. Gardner Undertaking & Furniture Company. In 1884 Elbridge’s sons Dexter and Edward became partners in the firm, which became E. G. Gardner & Sons. The family divided the business in 1892, with Edward assuming control of the furniture manufacturing side of the firm and Dexter continuing the undertaking establishment. Elbridge maintained an interest in the undertaking firm, which continued to be known as E. G. Gardner & Sons, but he eventually deferred to his son. In 1899 Dexter’s son, George Elbridge Gardner, became a member of the firm, which then became Dexter Gardner & Son. After Dexter’s death in 1902, George operated the firm with his sister Frances D. Gardner, who was a licensed funeral director and embalmer. After the death of his grandfather Elbridge at the age of ninety-one, George Gardner became head of the company.

On 14 August 1916 the Gardners sponsored a gala celebration for their centennial. Undertakers were invited from across the state, and a floral parade featuring the company’s hearses, including the surviving original hearse, was held in the afternoon. The firm’s new quarters in the historic Bonner-Allen Mansion at 505 Main Street were open for inspection all day, and in the evening the visitors and guests were invited to a dinner in Harmonie Park, which featured cabaret performers and a comedian from Indianapolis. George Gardner’s fifteen-year-old son, Dexter Carl, was formally admitted

to partnership in the firm during the celebrations. Ownership of the firm remained in the family during the following years. Dexter succeeded to the presidency of the firm at his father's death in 1929 and was succeeded in turn by his son, George Dexter Gardner. George's son, David Dexter Gardner, joined the firm in 1978, becoming the seventh generation involved in operating the funeral home. Dexter Gardner & Son claims to be the oldest funeral home operated continuously by a single family in the country.

In 1998 George Gardner sold the 182-year-old business to Keystone Properties, Incorporated, a funeral home chain based in Florida. With a weakening financial position and without an eighth generation to take over the business, the Gardners believed that they had no other option but to sell. The larger chains wanted to terminate the present employees, but Keystone Properties promised the family that they could continue to manage the property, that no employees would be fired, and that the name would not be changed.