

Vail-Holt Funeral Homes

Founded: 1839

Location: 109–111 West Main Street, Madison (1839–1920); Third and West Streets (1920–24); 402 West Main Street (1924–)

Cornelius Vail and J. H. White formed the Vail & White Furniture and Undertaking Company. The partners made their own caskets from wood felled in the nearby hardwood forests or they could order metal “burial cases.” They also crafted cabinets, chairs, mattresses, and looking glasses. The seven-member firm purportedly aided in the burial of President Zachary Taylor and former Vice President John C. Calhoun in 1850. After several years Vail bought out White, continuing to both make furniture and provide funeral arrangements, bringing in his son, George, to help with the business.

Cornelius Vail was the son of a master shipbuilder, Thomas, who built military craft for the War of 1812, piloting them down the Ohio and the Mississippi Rivers to New Orleans for service on the American side. Before the Civil War some believed that buying premade caskets was sacrilegious and one report noted that Vail was “almost mobbed for buying a small stock of ‘factory’ coffins.” People must have grown used to the idea of having premade coffins around because Vail remained in charge of the business until his death. By 1861 Cornelius changed the name of the business to C. Vail & Son.

George Vail was born in Madison the same year his father and White began their partnership. He worked in Richmond for four years before moving back to Madison to help his father. George became the sole proprietor of the firm after his father’s death and like his father included his sons in the business, changing the name of the company to

George C. Vail & Sons in 1895. Throughout this period the partners continued to make furniture from a store on the west side of West Street between Main and Second Streets. By the turn of the century the furniture store could boast of having a wide selection of Victor Victrolas in stock as well as a complete catalog of records, numbering more than 5,000 recordings.

Frank and Harry Vail continued the traditions began by their grandfather and father after George's death in late 1920. By 1937 the brothers owned a twenty-foot hearse with a 120 horsepower engine, advertised as "luxurious enough for kings and queens." Frank's son, Dana Vail, took over the business after his father's death. Dana closed the furniture store before 1949. A longtime employee of Vail's Furniture Store, John Gans, continued to sell furniture at 209–211 East Main, the last building that housed the furniture department, after Vail closed the store. By 1959 the company could boast of having recorded more than 25,000 burials.

Dana Vail continued the business alone until 1973 when he took in Jim Holt as a partner. Eleven months later Vail died, making Holt the only operator. Holt was born in Indiana and matriculated at the Kentucky School of Mortuary Science. Beginning in 1965 he went to work for the Lytle Funeral Home, remaining there for three years before taking a job with Vail. The 1973 partnership changed the name to the Vail Memorial Funeral Home, a designation retained until 1985 when Holt became the sole proprietor. Holt incorporated the business, combining the name of Vail and Holt.

Growth has accompanied the tenure of Jim and Sherrill Holt. They purchased the Grayson-Barnes Funeral Home in Hanover in 1978, renaming it the Vail-Holt Funeral Home, located on 278 Main Street. In 1997 the Holts, in cooperation with the Lytle-

Gans-Andrew Funeral Home and Carriage Services, a national chain, acquired property on Michigan Road in Madison to build another home.

In 1998 Vail-Holt Funeral Homes were a subsidiary of Carriage Services. James and Sherrill Holt continued to work at the company along with their sons, James II, and Brent J. Carriage Services, Incorporated is the fifth largest publicly held provider of funeral services in the United States. By the end of 1997 the company based in Houston, Texas, operated 120 funeral homes and twenty cemeteries in twenty states.