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Mourning Stationary

Mourning stationery formed part of the observance of the formal, lengthy and elaborate European social practice of mourning following the death of a person, particularly during the Victorian era (1800 – 1914).

Mourning was expected to be displayed both in public and in private. Families, servants and horses were expected to wear specific mourning clothing and livery; and even furniture, buildings and transport were also to be “dressed” in mourning-coloured drapes and accessories. Full observance of these special mourning practises was costly in terms of the clothing and accessories required (including undergarments, coats, trimmings, hats, jewellery and even stationery) that changed depending on the stage of the mourning period, which typically lasted two years.

The habit of sending mourning stationery has a long history, but became a widespread practise during the Victorian era. A person observing the mourning period used black-bordered stationery. All types of stationery were printed with the mourning border: letters, envelopes, calling cards, funeral programs. In the case of a ruling sovereign's death, public notices, newspapers, and other official government stationery could also have the mourning border applied. In the early stages of the mourning period's observance, a thick border was used, which would diminish in size as the mourning period progressed.



On the left is a notice of judicial execution carried out, which is edged with a black mourning border. It is likely that this notice was posted in a public area to inform the public of the execution of the sentence (CSC 1/1/1/242 parts 1-3)

Maria Helena Gertruida Christina Lee was sentenced to death on 10 May 1948 at the Cape Supreme Court, and hung on 17 September 1948 in Pretoria, after conviction for the murder of her lover Alwyn Smith.