

*Michael S. Nassaney, Uzi Baram, James C. Garman, and
Michael F. Milewski*

Guns and Roses:

Ritualism, Time Capsules, and the Massachusetts
Agricultural College

When agriculture students buried a time capsule in 1877, they proclaimed its contents "of great importance to future ages." But the capsule's recovery in 1991 suggests the students' real concern was the future of farming and agricultural education in their own rapidly changing time.

On a spring morning in 1991, our archaeological crew and several heavy equipment operators dug carefully around an old pine tree stump on the Amherst campus of the University of Massachusetts. Five hours later we came upon what we were looking for. After more than a century underground, the time capsule buried by the Class of 1878 during a tree planting ceremony saw the light of day.¹

Time capsules—often mysterious collections of objects that people select to represent themselves and their cultural milieu—have great potential to inform us about the past, yet they and the circumstances surrounding their interment have

received little, if any, attention in the historical or anthropological literature. Scholarly discussion of time capsules is extremely rare, and the only serious overview of the formal variation and meaning of time capsules has been offered by an anthropologist from a popular culture perspective.² This lapse is unfortunate, because material remains of encapsulated time, objects deliberately set aside in the past, provide an entry point into discussions concerning relationships between past, present, and future.³ The actual contents of a time capsule, however, constitute only one dimension of a broader discourse, because the burial process is often a ceremonial activity charged with meaning for the participants.

Our collective effort in the recovery of a time capsule at the University of

Massachusetts galvanized our fascination with time capsule creators and their intentions. Our discovery raises a series of interesting questions about the act of encapsulating time. By “encapsulating time,” we mean the intentional act of selecting representations of one’s particular world for the edification of future generations, the deliberate curation of the present for the future. Some of the questions posed by our find are site-specific, pertaining to the institutional identity of what was once known as the Massachusetts Agricultural College. For example, what is the historical context of the time capsule, and how is it related to the role of a land-grant college in the post-Civil War era?

Other questions relate to anthropological and historical ideas about ritual activity and time: might time capsules be buried for audiences in the present, as well as the unknowable future? Similarly, the relationship of ritual to artifact becomes especially pertinent in treating time capsules as archaeological assemblages. The contents are constrained in two directions—first, by the physical limits of the actual time capsule, and second, by the aspects of material culture the creators actively choose to commemorate for the benefit of future generations. Yet despite the efforts made in their selection—the Class of 1878 referred to their capsule as “a box containing documents of great importance to future ages”—time capsule inventories are arguably of less significance than the motivations for their creation and the rituals surrounding their burial. This article addresses these issues by considering two University of Massachusetts time

capsules—one we recovered and one we helped to design and bury. We begin with a description of the events surrounding the interment of the first capsule in 1877 and its recovery from a hillside overlooking the center of the campus 114 years later.

BURYING THE PRESENT

On August 27, 1874, a group of twenty-six young men assembled for freshman registration at the Massachusetts Agricultural College in Amherst, Massachusetts (fig. 1). Many in this Class of 1878 were the sons of small-scale farmers from rural places or such Massachusetts villages as Amherst, Bridgewater, Hadley, Franklin, Leverett, and Marlborough. Earlier classes at the college, established in 1863, also were made up for the most part of local students and young men from other places in the state. Admission to the college required the ability to pay tuition and board promptly and to show “a certificate of good moral character” from a teacher or pastor.⁴ On average, the students were a little older than seventeen. The majority in these early classes worked for wages at the college, suggesting that the students were not on the whole comfortably middle class.

Nearly three years later, on April 4, 1877, the seventeen remaining students in the Class of 1878 agreed to plant a class tree during that year’s commencement week and noted their decision in the class secretary’s record book. They chose to place a white pine near the flagpole that stood in what was then the center of the campus (figs. 2 and 3) and also to bury “a box containing documents of great importance to future ages.”⁵ The selection of the

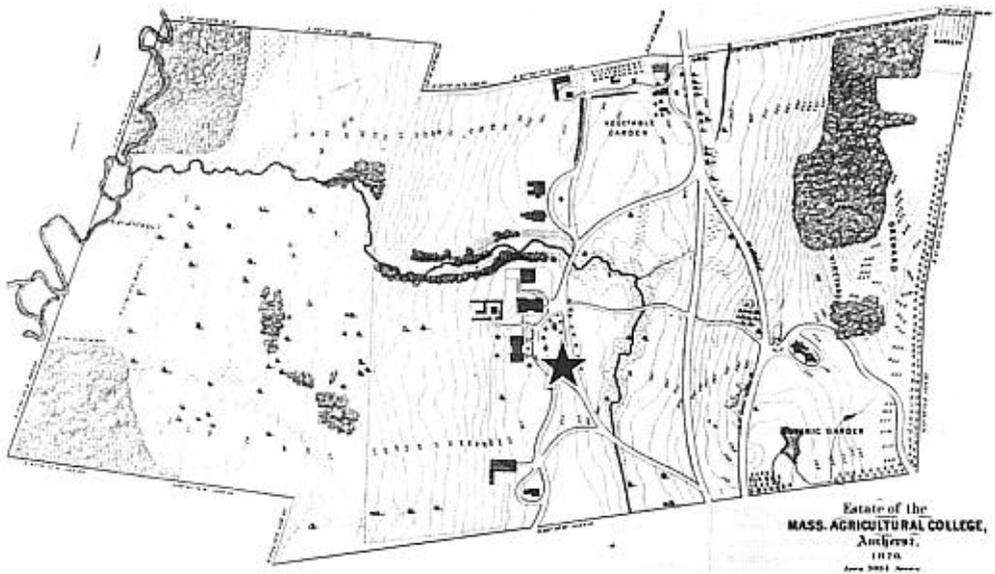


Fig. 2. Map of the "Estate of the Massachusetts Agricultural College, Amherst," 1870, published in Eighth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Agricultural College, January 1871. The star shows the approximate location of the pine tree and the time capsule.

documents to be set beneath the tree was left to the discretion of a committee. At a meeting on June 12, they made final arrangements for the upcoming event. The dimensions of the box, which was to cost no more than seventy cents, were specified at ten by seven by three inches.

When commencement week finally arrived in 1877, the students were prepared for their special event. The program for the day featured a number of activities, but it does not even mention the time capsule. On June 19, "the exercises were held under the old chestnut tree. . . . A suitable platform was built under it for the accommodation of the speakers and singers. A vast concourse of spectators gathered to witness the ceremony."⁶ An oration and poem were read, interspersed with music by the glee club and followed by a seven-gun salute. In the poem he wrote for the occasion,

Charles Francis Coburn pointed out to his classmates the way to "True Nobility" and drew analogies from the upright pine that would soon be planted. Members of the class then carefully laid the box of papers in the ground and placed the white pine immediately above it. They then gathered around to sing the *Ode to the White Pine*, a song valedictorian Arthur Amber Brigham had composed for the event; after they had covered the tree's roots with earth, they cast rose petals around its base.⁷ After an eight-gun salute and the closing hymns, the crowd dispersed from the hillside.⁸ One year later, on the eve of their own graduation, the Class of 1878 had two of their own examine the condition of the pine tree. These inspectors reported to the class that the tree they had planted the previous year was alive and had set new buds.

The 1878 commencement was held



Fig. 3. The white pine tree of the Class of 1878 stands between the flagpole and the walkway right of center in this photograph, taken between 1886 and 1892. The planting of the tree predates the campus chapel, built in 1885. The building in the background at right is South College. Courtesy University of Massachusetts Special Collections and Archives.

on Wednesday, June 19, at Amherst College Hall, one year after the time capsule ceremony. Twenty eager students were finally awarded their bachelor of science degrees. Of the graduates, eight planned to follow agricultural pursuits, six were undecided, three chose business, and one each selected medicine, veterinary science, and chemistry. The class met periodically until their fifty-year reunion in 1928, when the eight surviving members sat on the commencement platform as honored guests. When the exercises were completed the men, marking their final group activity as members of the class, gathered around

the white pine tree. The last alumnus of the Class of 1878, John Franklin Hunt, died in 1943, and knowledge of the ceremony surrounding the tree's planting was lost to living memory.

MEMORY AWAKENED

In the fall of 1990, more than a century after the planting of the white pine, a severe wind storm seriously damaged the majestic tree, and the university's landscape architect decided that it should be cut down. Within weeks of the storm, university archives assistant Michael Milewski located and reexamined the long-ignored class records

during his research to identify the historical significance of the pine tree. When members of the Office of Alumni Relations were notified of the tree's legacy, they contacted Michael Nassaney, then an anthropology graduate student at the University of Massachusetts, to develop a recovery strategy to find what became known as the "time capsule." To an anthropological archaeologist, it was a most unusual survey and excavation project. By far, the majority of objects archaeologists typically recover are haphazardly discarded, somehow lost and not meant to be found. In this case our predecessors had intentionally created an archaeological assemblage for some unknown future. By embarking on the quest for the capsule, we, in the present, became that future.

We initially examined the base of the tree using a proton magnetometer, which measures magnetic intensity below the surface of the ground. Magnetometers differ from metal detectors in their ability to measure fields of magnetic change rather than merely specific metal objects. The survey results were equivocal at best, suggesting that the box might be nonmetallic, buried deeper than the instrument could detect, or situated immediately beneath the decaying tree stump, which was nearly six feet in diameter. We would need to conduct exploratory excavations.

The university supplied a backhoe and operator to cut four short trenches along the margins of the trunk and thus to sever the tree's root system and expose the underlying soils. We carefully monitored the excavations, occasionally noting and collecting historic artifacts such as con-



Fig. 4. Selected objects found during the time capsule excavations—large mammal bones, ceramic fragments, and two shell casings possibly used for the seven- and eight-gun salutes fired during the June 1877 time capsule ceremony.

struction debris (for example, brick and roof tile fragments); pieces of metal, glass, and ceramics; and a few large mammal bones (fig. 4). These objects were probably associated with later filling and landscaping modifications and not with the Class of 1878's activities. Two shell casings that were found in the excavations, however, deserve special notice because they might derive from the salutes fired during the tree planting ceremony of 1877. The casings are .45-70 caliber, standard military issues for the period, and conform to those dating from 1876 found at the Little Big Horn Battlefield in Montana.⁹ Furthermore, these casings were designed for blank cartridges, not for shooting with bullets—precisely what one might expect in ceremonial salutes.¹⁰

The tree stump presented a formidable obstacle to further excavation, so it was removed with a larger backhoe. Once it was severed from the earth, we examined the massive root system of the stump to see if the time capsule was entangled in

its grip. Meanwhile, excavations continued. Remarkably, our efforts were rewarded when a slightly dented and discolored metal box was exposed about six feet below the present ground surface, just northeast of where the pine once stood (fig. 5).

Over the course of the day, many spectators paused to watch the excavations at the center of campus. By the time we found the box, an anxious crowd of about 150 onlookers had assembled to witness this historic event. Some began to chant "Open it! Open it!" when they saw our excitement at having located the elusive treasure. The news radiated far beyond the campus: local and even national media began to report the discovery.¹¹

The find was a copper box of the dimensions described in the class notes; its top was soldered shut, but a corner was bent

open (figs. 5 and 6). There were no fresh scratches on the box to indicate recent damage; it had been forced open prior to excavation either by natural processes or disturbances associated with landscaping activities.¹² In any case, moisture had entered the box, partially damaging its contents and rendering them unstable. Once in the laboratory, the delicate contents of the box were removed and placed in a heavy, airtight plastic bag in preparation for freezing. This process would temporarily stabilize the documents until appropriate conservation measures could be undertaken.

When the contents were finally examined in detail (fig. 7), they appeared to be generally mundane (table 1). There were no rare coins, personal mementos, or popular culture icons of the 1870s in the



Fig. 5. *The 1877 time capsule in situ, immediately after its discovery.*



Fig. 6. *The copper box had somehow been forced open in its century and more underground; moisture entering from the corner damaged the time capsule's contents.*

box. Indeed, many of the contents were duplicated by holdings in the special collections and archives of the university library.¹³ Only one of the documents—an original, handwritten manuscript that contains a prophecy or “future words”—has no duplicate in the university collections.

Though only a portion of the ten-to-twelve-page text is legible, that portion is worth quoting:

If we apply ourselves to this development of our agriculture, manufacture, and commerce and elevate the moral and intellectual tone of the people then we may indulge the hope that our country will ever be the abode of peace and prosperity, the seat of learning and the arts. Our nation has yet begun to work out her possibilities richly endowed by nature. The wealth of her resources remains to be harvested.

The passage almost seems to answer a final examination question given that year to the graduating Class of 1877, who were asked to describe “the importance of agriculture as a producing industry and its relations to other arts and industries.”¹⁴ The

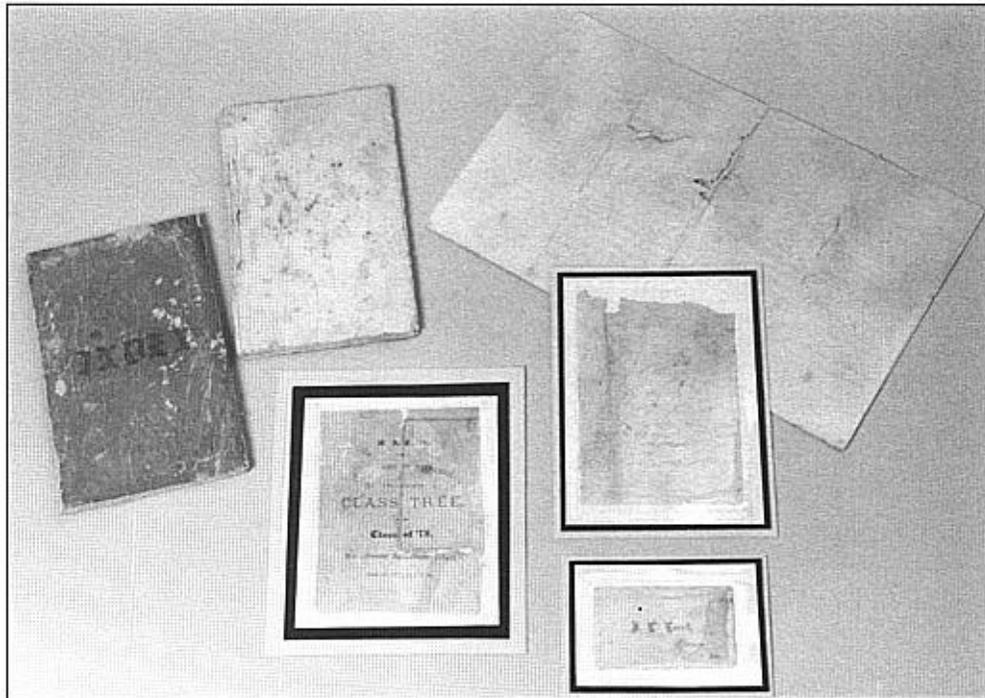


Fig. 7. *The 1877 time capsule contents after conservation (see table 1).*

TABLE I. CONTENTS OF THE CLASS OF 1878 TIME CAPSULE

<i>Contents</i>	<i>Description</i>
Manuscript	Poem delivered at the planting of the class tree on June 19, 1877, by Charles Francis Coburn, '78
Manuscript	Signatures of the junior class as listed in <i>The Index</i> , November 1876
Manuscript	"Future Words," ten to twelve handwritten manuscript pages, mostly illegible
Program	"M. A. C. '78, Programme of Exercises at the Planting of the Class Tree, by the Class of '78, Massachusetts Agricultural College"
Business Card	J. L. Lovell (father of Charles Otto Lovell, '78), Amherst photographer, 2.5 by 4.0 inches
Report	Twelfth annual report of the Massachusetts Agricultural College, January 1875
Yearbook	<i>The Index</i> of the Massachusetts Agricultural College, vol. 8, no. 1, published by the Class of 1878, November 1876

Note: The contents are listed as they were found stratigraphically from top to bottom in the copper box.

question and the prophecy may well reflect concern over an issue that preoccupied many agriculturalists, students and nonstudents alike, during this period. In the early and mid-nineteenth century, most Americans thought the United States would remain an agrarian society and the population would remain primarily rural.¹⁵ However, in the post-Civil War years the burgeoning of industry in the Connecticut Valley may have impelled the reflection (and perhaps doubt) of the Massachusetts Agricultural College and its students about their role in a rapidly changing political economy.¹⁶ Furthermore, the college was established amid controversy, and its future was in jeopardy from the start.

INSTITUTIONALIZING AGRICULTURE

The Massachusetts Agricultural College was established in 1863 by the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 as an agricultural institution.¹⁷ The commonwealth placed the institution for scientific agriculture in Amherst, in the western part of the state, amid fierce competition from other towns (see fig. 2). The purpose of the college, as an act to incorporate its trustees stated, was "to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes, in the several pursuits and professions of life."¹⁸ A nationwide trend in the establishment of similar institutions signaled a shared concern "to combine the knowledge which the common farmer ought to possess in prac-

tical life, with the theory as studied in a four years' course at college."¹⁹

By the mid-nineteenth century, the landscape of western Massachusetts had begun to change as urban populations grew and as industry and transportation networks developed; so, too, did the agricultural economy orient itself more concerted to the market.²⁰ State agricultural institutions throughout the country were meant to increase farm efficiency and productivity in order to supply the growing urban areas. For western Massachusetts, the more diversified agricultural practices of the past gave way to increased specialization, particularly the large-scale production of tobacco and onions.²¹ The expansion of commercial agriculture had both positive and negative consequences. Agricultural output rose, population increased, and the value of tobacco production more than tripled between 1860 and 1870. Land prices also rose to new heights in this expanding market. Yet economic growth was abruptly curtailed in the 1870s when demand for Connecticut Valley tobacco fell and markets became depressed. Population and land values declined over the next two decades until tobacco markets rebounded in the 1890s. Farmers in the valley must have worried that, as historian Christopher Clark has suggested, "they might share the economic decline faced by their cousins in the [Berkshire] hills."²²

Although the positive economic trends of the 1860s were fueled by the progressive ideology of the day, the state legislature was reluctant to support the agricultural college in the early years, and administrators initially had problems

attracting students. In the first decade of the college the number of matriculants and graduates varied widely. The benefits of a scientific and liberal education were not always apparent to the sons of traditional farmers, especially during the depressed economic times of the 1870s. By the end of the decade, the college was thirty-two thousand dollars in debt.²³

The first class consisted of forty-seven individuals, eight of whom were from Amherst. The next year, fifty-six students entered the college, thirteen of whom were from Amherst; all but two were from other Massachusetts towns. From 1870 to 1877 the total number of matriculating students steadily declined from 123 to 67. The entering Class of 1878 included twenty-six, less than half the number of students who had entered only a decade before, and by the junior year just seventeen students remained in the class. In 1877, when only ten degrees were granted, the college graduated its fewest number of students.

In its early years, the Amherst community regarded the role of the institution with considerable ambivalence. One local history notes that Amherst farmers voiced initial opposition to the college, while "lawyers, physicians, settled ministers and teachers, including the entire faculty of Amherst College, all merchants, mechanics, and business men" supported it.²⁴ Farmers, some of whom did not welcome the Morrill Land Grant Act, believed that the new colleges for scientific agriculture had been designed primarily "to change farming rather than to preserve it."²⁵ The professional, scholarly, and business com-

munity, on the other hand, believed that the application of scientific principles and insights to agriculture could only strengthen the local economy and the position of the state in the national economy.

These were difficult times for the students as well. As William H. Bowker, a member of the first entering class in 1867, recalled forty years later:

it certainly took courage on the part of the young student to come and remain here when the tendency of the times, and in many cases the home influence, was against it and in favor of classical education. . . . Even the agricultural press, at times, has been lukewarm; and as for the farmers, for whom the college was supposed to be established, they have contributed, until recently, less than half the students.²⁶

Similarly, support for the agricultural college was never strong in the state legislature, whose appropriations were barely adequate for the school's survival. From its inception in 1863, the college was established as an independent corporation and was expected to generate its own revenues from the land-grant fund, student tuition fees, and produce from the college farm. The first two state appropriations of ten thousand dollars each were made as loans with the idea that they would be repaid out of future revenues.

William S. Clark, the college's first president (1867–79), spent much of his time struggling to retain state support for the college even at its minimal levels. He probably encouraged other advocates of the school, such as the faculty, to do likewise. In an attempt to bolster the image of the

institution among many of the commonwealth's farmers, Professor George Loring compellingly presented the mission of the college to the Massachusetts Board of Agriculture in an 1869 address:

It is not because the farming of this State has not been successful that we are establishing an agricultural college here; it is not because the farmers of the State are ignorant of certain principles upon which, heretofore, they have been successful, that this college has been established; but it is because, under the trials of modern agriculture, the best education is necessary in order to enable the farmers of the State to carry on their business profitably and successfully. It is the application of definite rules to the business of agriculture that we are striving for.²⁷

Loring's emphasis on the "definite rules" of agriculture was meant to convey to members of the audience the obvious economic benefits of scientific agriculture and to persuade them to view the college as indispensable. He professed wonder about the state's priorities in funding institutions of higher education within its borders:

It was somewhat astonishing, that notwithstanding Massachusetts had spent upon Harvard College, from its inception and infancy, almost down to this very hour, hundreds of thousands of dollars from her own treasury, and from the private pockets of her citizens as much more; notwithstanding she had endowed every scientific institution within her limits; had bestowed upon Williams College her bounty; upon Amherst College her bounty; upon Tufts College her bounty; and upon

almost every female academy, upon the School of Technology, and upon the Museum of Natural History, a liberal share of her wealth; the instant an institution was put into her own hands for her own government and her own development, she not only began to pause herself, but her most enterprising and liberal citizens began to pause also. It is difficult, my friends, to account for this. An institution which is the only one . . . that Massachusetts can claim as her own . . . is met by the most formidable opposition.²⁸

Despite Loring's plea, the state legislature in its 1870 session considered a resolution to cut off funding for the college altogether. In the spring of 1871, while the pioneer class was preparing for its graduation, the state legislature again debated the policy of supporting agricultural education. Legislators ultimately agreed to meet their legal obligation to maintain the level of funding the Morrill Act required, but they underscored the idea that the college was to become financially self-supporting, or what they considered "independent." Yet by the mid-1870s, internal revenues were dwindling due to decreasing enrollments. The financial position of the college continued to disintegrate with the economic decline of the 1870s. The legislature stood adamant in its refusal to grant annual monetary support, and the Panic of 1873 moved the state to attempt to relinquish its responsibilities. Despite these serious threats to the well-being of the institution, however, it managed to weather these hard times.

Its survival may have been due in part to its dedicated leadership. Clark in par-

ticular was an important and influential figure in the early history of the Massachusetts Agricultural College.²⁹ Like other late nineteenth-century college presidents, he was a model member of the emerging professional class.³⁰ According to historian Burton Bledstein, institutions for higher learning during this period sought to project "before society the image of the modern professional person, who committed himself to an ethic of service, was trained in scientific knowledge, and moved his career relentlessly upward."³¹ Clark was an administrator who managed both the campus and many aspects of town life.³² He was away on leave in Japan for the purpose of establishing an agricultural college for the Imperial Government when the Class of 1878 buried its time capsule.

In all of the controversy surrounding the college in the 1870s, the students had little, if any, voice. We suspect that the students' notion to create a future memorial was a consequence of both Clark's absence and the economic uncertainty of the times.³³ Although Clark was unavailable to address the Student Literary Society, as had been customary, another speaker could have been invited; others had given the address previously. In lieu of this presentation, the class decided instead to "occupy the time usually devoted to some dry exercises in the drill hall, with exercises of a livelier nature in the open air."³⁴ The tree-planting ceremony that they consequently proposed and staged was, in their words, "the most interesting event of the year."³⁵ Addressing the future, the Class of 1878 students straddled change as they became professionals, learned to apply sci-

entific principles to agriculture, and equipped themselves intellectually to deal with increased specialization, the one aspect of the agricultural college's endeavor that farmers probably most opposed.³⁶

The ceremony may also have expressed the tight bonds of fraternalism that members of the class had forged by their junior year.³⁸ The time capsule ceremony was a public affirmation of their shared experience amid recognition of how jeopardized it was by declining college enrollment, the degree to which their own class had shrunk, and the ambivalence toward their enterprise at both local and state levels. Through their ritual act the Class of 1878 addressed an unknowable future and a tenuous present.

ENCAPSULATING TIME

Thousands of time capsules have been buried in the United States, and reports of their preparation and interment in modern times are numerous. Yet relatively few have been found and documented.³⁹ The extreme rarity of recovered time capsules probably explains why they have been ignored in scholarly discourse. Destruction of buildings, transformations of landscapes, and oblivion have all erased the memories of most capsules from the collective consciousness. Anthropologist Robert Ascher believes that people persuade themselves that their capsule will be recovered: "All time capsules—ancient, futuristic, and contemporary—are, by definition, deliberately designed and placed to be found at a later time."⁴⁰ Analogies of writing and reading are appropriate here: the time capsule is a text written by human agents for an

unknown audience, perhaps labeled simply "The Future." Yet if we were to conclude our analogy there with a linear equation (former culture buries time capsule for unknown later culture), we would be shortsighted. The pomp and circumstance surrounding the tree-planting ceremony and time capsule interment seem entirely incommensurate with the box's contents. The Class of 1878, it would seem, buried the time capsule as much for itself as an audience as it did for future audiences.

The description of the events that surrounded the burial of the time capsule suggested to us that it was a ritual act, a social performance that conveys information about the participants and their cultural traditions.⁴¹ In this light, the contents became much less interesting to us than why the box was buried in the first place. For the Class of 1878, we think that issues of identity and self-affirmation were very much at stake. These students were young children when the Civil War was fought in the previous decade. The decade after the war was plagued by economic depression that led to a decline in agricultural prices. And industry had begun to challenge agriculture for predominance in the Connecticut Valley. These factors, along with an influx of foreign-born migrants into the valley, led to changes in the patterns of farm labor. "Whereas at the end of the eighteenth century the great majority of people worked on the land, by 1860 this was not true in many places," rural historian Christopher Clark has noted; "in Northampton, less than one-third of the workforce owned farms or labored in agriculture. Farming remained the predominant activity in the

poorer hill towns and on the rich lands along the Connecticut River, but in both places, and in differing ways, the development of markets and commercial agriculture had transformed it.⁷⁴² Enmeshed in an American culture that had recently, and self-consciously, celebrated itself at its 1876 centennial, the members of the Class of 1878 may have felt compelled to affirm their own place in history and society through a ritual act.

The centennial raised historical consciousness throughout the nation, particularly in New England, and encouraged the preparation of numerous town histories, atlases, and biographies. This event also engendered a variety of expositions dedicated to “modern” ideals, including, as several archaeologists have put it, “industriousness, technological progress and international commerce, and co-operation.”⁷⁴³ These ideals were not without contradiction, however. Although scientific agriculture was espoused as a worthy goal among progressive thinkers, state funding was slow in coming. As agricultural students facing a world in which agriculture seemed destined to play a comparatively lesser role in the New England economy, the Class of 1878 may have perceived the future as threatening, particularly as people abandoned the hill towns of western Massachusetts and such industrial cities as Holyoke, Springfield, and Turners Falls took shape.⁷⁴⁴ Would agriculture meet a similar fate in the Connecticut Valley? The world beyond the academy that the Class of 1878 would have to face was in a dramatic state of change, and the burial of the time capsule was a stay against these altered

conditions. As the farm threatened to become only a memory and the future of the academy lay in doubt, they did not want to be forgotten.

Thus the students asserted their modernity to themselves and to others beyond the college in time and space. In keeping with nineteenth-century ideas about time, the past and the future had become recognized as clearly disconnected from the present. Geographer David Lowenthal notes, “During most of history men scarcely differentiated past from present. . . . Up to the nineteenth century those who gave any thought to the historical past supposed it much like the present.”⁷⁴⁵ By the 1870s members of society had begun to appreciate the idea that their present would be of interest to the future when it became past. It is this realization and the acts that arose from it that set the Class of 1878 apart from other late nineteenth-century cohorts at the college.

The time capsule interment ritual also served as an affirmation of identity and fraternal solidarity for these young men who would soon become professionals. The contents of the box do not reflect the totality of American culture in 1877, nor do they compel scholars to draw sweeping conclusions about the state of that culture. Furthermore, it appears that more time was spent planning the ceremony than determining what should be put in the capsule. The copy of *The Index*, the handwritten manuscript, and the other printed materials reflect the internal world of the Massachusetts Agricultural College at a critical moment in its development. Despite its recovery in 1991, and despite its creators’

assertion that it was “of great importance to future ages,” the time capsule relates primarily to the Class of 1878, not to the future. It may have had its greatest impact on the students of the nineteenth century. That it has spoken to the future is a testimony not so much to the contents of the capsule as to their interment, an action that speaks louder than any of the words that can be deciphered in the entombed documents. As Albert Bergesen has stated, “Somehow, the most compelling aspect of time capsules seems to be the burying of them, the marking of our spot”; when recovered, he has noted, they “almost never contain items of much interest or value, or tell us anything about the past that we might actually care to know.”⁴⁶

Not only are time capsules usually buried and seldom found containing little of interest, but the idea of saving a representative sample of a society or culture in a small box, as some have noted, is both senseless and impossible.⁴⁷ Time capsule planners and builders, Bergesen has argued, “lack the necessary perspective to judge what is most important” about society or what the future may want to know about the past.⁴⁸ Thus, the act of creating a time capsule seems to reveal more about the makers than does the capsule’s inventory. Furthermore, there are some similarities in outlook among time capsule makers through the ages, as a comparison between two time capsules buried on the campus of the University of Massachusetts—in 1877 and 1991—makes clear.

After the homecoming football game in October 1991, the Class of 1991 emulated the Class of 1878 by dedicating a

young pine tree where the earlier tree once stood. They also lowered a time capsule, albeit a somewhat larger one, into the ground next to their sapling (fig. 8). The ceremony surrounding the burial was intentionally designed to replicate the events of 1877—speeches were read, songs sung, an ode recited, rose petals strewn, and salutes fired. Rather than invent a new tradition, they sought to associate themselves with the past by recreating the ritual acts of some 114 years earlier. The Office of Alumni Relations and the Class of 1991 invited a large public audience to help them “make history,” as the invitation put it. A child’s coffin held the contents of the modern time capsule (table 2), which is supposed to be opened in the year 2113 to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the institution.

Several interesting parallels can be drawn between the classes of 1878 and 1991. In the late 1980s the University of Massachusetts began to suffer drastic reductions in state funding as appropriations dropped from \$167 million in 1988 to \$128 million in 1991. These budget cuts had a severe impact on salaries and payroll, hiring practices, and the quality of many academic programs. The library budget was particularly hard hit: 1,650 periodicals were canceled, and the university library became one of the nation’s most poorly funded. In a November 1989 letter to more than sixty thousand alumni, Gordon Oakes, chair of the university’s board of trustees, urged support for the institution in words reminiscent of those Professor Loring had uttered more than a century earlier. “Now is the time for all of us . . . to raise our voices



Fig. 8. Members of the University of Massachusetts Class of 1991 and the Alumni Office lower a time capsule, actually a child's coffin, into the ground during the 1991 fall homecoming weekend. Courtesy University of Massachusetts Special Collections and Archives.

in protest. . . . We *must* raise our voices against further cuts lest we become an unwilling partner in the Commonwealth's mindless march toward mediocrity." Throughout this economically turbulent period, which lasted into the early 1990s, faculty and students staged public rallies and planned strikes; state employees were threatened with furloughs. In the fall of 1990 the campus newspaper, *The Massachusetts Daily Collegian*, reported that "the rift between the student body and the administration grows with each campus cut."⁴⁹

The Class of 1991 seemed to respond to a perceived threat to the well-being of the university, much as their predecessors reacted to the late nineteenth-century challenges to the survival of the college and of

agriculture. There are notable similarities in the motivations that triggered the activities associated with the creation and interment of each time capsule. A feeling of pride and optimism permeated both of the ceremonies, as did a sense of fear and apprehension. One might suggest, therefore, that time capsules represent a response to economically, politically, and socially stressful conditions and are most likely conceived and interred when the future seems most uncertain or identity is in doubt.⁵⁰ What would become of agriculturalists and the agricultural college during the expansion of industry in the late nineteenth century? What will become of a late twentieth-century public institution of higher education as politicians seeking to privatize society force severe

TABLE 2. SELECTED CONTENTS OF THE CLASS OF 1991 TIME CAPSULE

<i>Contents</i>	<i>Description</i>
Clothing	Class of 1991 T-shirt
Manuscript	Signatures of a subset of the class of '91 (count unknown)
Videotape	Footage showing campus life and highlights of band and basketball team activity
Programs	"M. A. C. '78, Programme of Exercises at the Planting of the Class Tree, by the Class of '78, Massachusetts Agricultural College"; 1991 time capsule ceremony; 1991 commencement; football program (autographed by the team); New World Theater program
Printed Card	Invitation prepared for the 1991 time capsule ceremony
Newspaper	Homecoming issue of <i>The Massachusetts Daily Collegian</i> and a copy of the <i>The Massachusetts Daily Collegian</i> dated May 15, 1991
Newspaper clippings	Re: Class of 1878 time capsule discovery
Audio cassette tape	Popular hits of 1991, sounds of the U Mass Marching Band
Documents	Senior committee article in <i>Massachusetts Magazine</i> , personal documents by the 1991 time capsule committee
Books	<i>Farmer's Almanac</i> (1991)
Tickets	Senior Semi-formal Dance, Senior Picnic, Senior Weekend, Homecoming Football Game
Banner	University of Massachusetts pennant
Card	Student identification card
Letter	Admissions acceptance letter
Manuscripts	Unpublished text of addresses delivered at the ceremony
Miscellaneous	Lamba Chi coffee mug; a copy of the U. S. Constitution; local pub menus; various U Mass publications; <i>The Wall</i> (compact disc and videotape set by Pink Floyd); map of the campus in 1991

financial cutbacks upon it?

The act of burying the time capsule is a ceremony of self-affirmation intended to reinforce group identity and solidarity. Thus it is not surprising that the items

enclosed in them often deflect attention from political and economic uncertainties that are particularly difficult to face, let alone resolve. The unknown can be left to the future which, through its realization,

presupposes resolution. Time capsule creators usually present themselves as optimists whose choice of items to bury ignores political tensions, social conflicts, and economic stress; they strive to construct a more idyllic picture of the present to themselves and the future while simultaneously hoping for a better world. In a fictional interchange between father and his sons, the novelist E. L. Doctorow noted as much of the time capsule the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company created for the 1939 World's Fair:

He asked my brother and me why we thought there was nothing in the capsule about the great immigrations that had brought Jewish and Italian and Irish people to America or nothing to represent the point of view of the workingman. "There is no hint from the stuff they included that America has a serious intellectual life, or Indians on reservations or Negroes who suffer from race prejudice. Why is that?" he said as we finally edged him away from the Immortal Well and into the Hall of Science.⁵¹

Like the celebration of the American centennial, the burial of a time capsule is a self-conscious ritual that purposely avoids representing injustices of the day.

When, as the literature suggests, time capsules are unlikely to contain anything of historical interest or intellectual value, why would anyone want to dig them up? For our part, we might have been much less enthusiastic had we known initially what the box contained. In our ignorance, the time capsule undoubtedly represented an intentional voice from the past, one that presumably would speak to us much more

clearly than the muffled sounds we are able to pick up from lost or haphazardly discarded objects. The search for a time capsule and its discovery are means of establishing a direct connection through the ages. When the Office of Alumni Relations authorized us to find the capsule, and when we worked to recover it, we were collectively seeking to connect ourselves with the past and reaffirm our role as members of a long-standing institution that we hoped would persist into the future despite the embattled circumstances of public higher education in the commonwealth in both the present and the past. ❀

Michael S. Nassaney is an assistant professor of anthropology at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. His research interests include eastern North American archaeology, political economy, and material analysis. Currently working in the Middle East, Uzi Baram is an archaeologist whose master's thesis analyzed the regional impact of the Massachusetts Agricultural College. James C. Garman is an archaeologist employed by the Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc., in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, who specializes in urban archaeology and historic cemeteries in the Northeast. Michael F. Milewski is an archives assistant at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

NOTES

1. Although we use the term “time capsule” throughout our discussion, the Class of 1878 did not use the term. See Massachusetts Agricultural College, Class of Seventy-Eight, *Its Oration, Poem, Prophecies, History, Etc., as Delivered at Class Supper, Parker House, Boston, June 21, 1878* (Amherst, Mass.: Transcript Job Office, 1878), 31. The phrase “time capsule” did not come into popular usage until more than sixty years later when the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company used it for the box it buried at the 1939 World’s Fair. See Albert Bergesen, “Oh, Well,” *The Atlantic*, July 1987, 16–18. Michael Nassaney coordinated the efforts to recover the time capsule. He was assisted by Uzi Baram, James Garman, Al Greene, and Michael Volmar. Michael Milewski rediscovered records that indicated that the Class of 1878 had buried a box of documents beneath its class tree. He also worked to conserve the capsule’s contents. The authors would like to thank the University of Massachusetts Office of Alumni Relations and Special Collections and Archives for involving us in the time capsule project and supporting the preparation of the figures that accompany this text. Richard Gumaer conducted the proton magnetometer survey to locate the capsule. Mitch Mulholland, director of UMass Archaeological Services, made the field equipment available to us. The crew of the UMass Grounds-Physical Plant Department cooperated by providing and operating the mechanical equipment used to find the copper box. James Clifton, James Ferreira, Edward Hood, Alan Jacobs, Cheryl Lyon-Jenness, and anonymous reviewers offered useful suggestions on earlier versions of this paper. We especially thank Kathryn Grover for her critical reading and editorial assistance. Stephen Mrozowski provided bibliographic assistance. This work was prepared with computer equipment provided by a grant from the New Faculty Research Support Program, Western Michigan University. The documents and artifacts recovered through the time capsule project are in Special Collections and Archives, W. E. B. DuBois Library, University of Massachusetts, Amherst (hereafter cited as U Mass Archives).
2. Robert Ascher, “How to Build a Time Capsule,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 8 (1974): 241–53.
3. Mark Leone, “Archaeology’s Relationship to the Present and the Past,” in *Modern Material Culture: The Archaeology of Us*, eds. Richard A. Gould and Michael B. Schiffer (New York: Academic Press, 1981), 5–14; David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
4. Edward Carpenter and Charles F. Morehouse, *A History of the Town of Amherst* (Amherst, Mass.: Carpenter and Morehouse Press, 1896), 548.
5. Class of Seventy-Eight, *Oration*, 31.
6. *Ibid.*
7. “Programme of Exercises at the Planting of the Class Tree by the Class of ’78, Massachusetts Agricultural College, June 19, 1877, at 4 P. M.,” U Mass Archives.

8. We suspect that the seven- and eight-gun salutes, rather unconventional from a military protocol perspective, symbolized their year of graduation—1878.
9. Douglas D. Scott, Richard A. Fox, Jr., Melissa A. Connor, and Dick Harmon, *Archaeological Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989).
10. Richard Colton to Michael Nassaney, 1991.
11. For example, a *New York Times* correspondent contacted Nassaney and Milewski for their reactions to the discovery, and a related article was printed in the *Times* Campus Life section. See “A Time Capsule Helps Archivists To Look Back,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1991.
12. Construction of the Campus Chapel, less than one hundred feet from the capsule, was completed in 1885. In the 1930s, excavations to install steam lines may have also disturbed the copper box.
13. The members of the Class of 1878 were apparently quite adamant in their desire to ensure that a record of their four years at the college be preserved. For their ninth reunion on June 21, 1887, they voted that the secretary’s book, together with a copy of the *Index ‘78*, the printed exercises of the class supper, and the *Class Record* be deposited in the college library for safekeeping. In 1921, these and other memorabilia relating to the class were assembled and placed in a tin box that is kept in the library. “Secretary’s Record, Class of 1878,” Record Group 50/6-1878, U Mass Archives. These acts appear to be atypical for alumni; there are no records of any other class taking them.
14. “Agricultural College Commencement,” *The Amherst Record*, June 20, 1877, 4.
15. Gary Kulik, Roger Parks, and Theodore Z. Penn, “Introduction,” in *The New England Mill Village, 1790–1860*, eds. Gary Kulik, Roger Parks, and Theodore Z. Penn (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1982), xxxi.
16. For a look at the changing political economy of the region, see Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990); Michael S. Nassaney, Alan H. McArdle, and Peter Stott, “An Archaeological Locational Survey, Site Evaluation, and Data Recovery at the Russell-Harrington Cutlery Site, Turners Falls, Massachusetts” (University of Massachusetts Archaeological Services Report no. 68, 1989), 11–15, Massachusetts Historical Commission, Office of the Secretary of State, Boston; Robert Paynter, *Models of Spatial Inequality* (New York: Academic Press, 1982), 59–86; Martha Van Hoesen Taber, *A History of the Cutlery Industry in the Connecticut Valley*, Smith College Studies in History 41 (Northampton, Mass.: Department of History, Smith College, 1955); Peter Thorbahn and Stephen Mrozowski, “Ecological Dynamics and Rural New England Historical Sites,” in *Ecological Anthropology of the Connecticut Valley*, ed. Robert Paynter, University of Massachusetts, Department of Anthropology Research Reports no. 18 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1979), 129–40.
17. Harold W. Cary, *The University of Massachusetts: A History of One Hundred Years*

- (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1962).
18. Commonwealth of Massachusetts Statutes, Chapter 220, Act of 1863, "An Act to Incorporate the Trustees of the Massachusetts Agricultural College, April 29, 1863," 1–2, Record Group 1/2–Legislation, U Mass Archives.
 19. "Agricultural College Commencement."
 20. Clark, *Roots of Rural Capitalism*, 284–88; L. E. Klimm, "The Relation between Certain Population Changes and the Physical Environment in Hampden, Hampshire, and Franklin Counties, Massachusetts, 1790–1925" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1933); Jack Larkin, "Massachusetts Enters the Marketplace, 1790–1860," in *A Guide to the History of Massachusetts*, eds. Martin Kaufman, John W. Ifkovic, and Joseph Carvalho III (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 69–82; Margaret R. Pabst, *Agricultural Trends in the Connecticut Valley Region of Massachusetts, 1800–1900*, *Smith College Studies in History* 26, 1–4 (Northampton, Mass.: Department of History, Smith College, 1940–41); Paynter, *Spatial Inequality*, 81–83.
 21. Christopher Clark, "Household Economy, Market Exchange and the Rise of Capitalism in the Connecticut Valley, 1800–1860," *Journal of Social History* 13 (1979): 169–89; Pabst, *Agricultural Trends*.
 22. Clark, *Roots of Rural Capitalism*, 327.
 23. Frank Prentice Rand, *Yesterdays at Massachusetts State College, 1863–1933* (Amherst: The Associate Alumni of the Massachusetts State College, 1933), 46–51.
 24. Carpenter and Morehouse, *History of the Town of Amherst*, 542.
 25. Richard S. Kirkendall, "The Agricultural Colleges: Between Tradition and Modernization," *Agricultural History* 60 (1986): 21.
 26. William H. Bowker, "The Old Guard and the Faculty of Four," *MAC: College and Alumni News* (Amherst, Mass.: Carpenter and Morehouse Press, 1907), 11–12.
 27. George B. Loring, "The Farmer and the College," in *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Agriculture, with an Appendix Containing Reports of Delegates Appointed to Visit the County Exhibitions, and Also Returns of the Finances of the Agricultural Societies for 1869* (Boston: Wright and Potter, state printers, 1870), 177–78.
 28. Loring, "The Farmer and the College," 176.
 29. For biographical information on William S. Clark and a report of archaeological investigations at his campus home, see Uzi Baram, "'Boys, Be Ambitious': Landscape Manipulation in Nineteenth Century Western Massachusetts" (M. A. thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1989).
 30. Burton J. Bledstein, *Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1976).
 31. Bledstein, *Culture of Professionalism*, 333.
 32. Clark was a member of the Amherst Town Common Beautification Committee and on the board of the Amherst Gas Light Company and the Amherst Water Company.
 33. For an extended discussion and examples

of invented traditions, see the contributions to Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

34. Class of Seventy-Eight, *Oration*, 31.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Most of the graduates became successful professionals in agriculture, industry, and medicine. Obituaries published in various issues of *The Alumni Bulletin* provide some biographical information on several prominent class members. For instance, John Hosea Washburn of Bridgewater did postgraduate work at Brown University prior to receiving his Ph.D. from the University of Gottingen, Germany, in 1889. A professor of agricultural chemistry, he became president of the Rhode Island Agricultural College (1889–1902). His father's small Bridgewater farm was valued at \$2,500 in 1870. In 1884, Horace Edward Stockbridge of Hadley was also awarded his Ph.D. at Gottingen. He spent the next four years as professor of chemistry and geology at the Imperial College of Agriculture and Engineering in Japan, and, upon returning to the United States, he served as president of the North Dakota Agricultural College (1890–94) and professor of agriculture at Florida Atlantic College (1894–1906). One of the founders of the *Southern Ruralist*, Stockbridge was its editor for sixteen years.

Other graduates chose to enter other fields. John Franklin Hunt became a civil engineer after graduating from the college, worked as a railroad construction superintendent in Texas, and later in his

career supervised the construction of the first steel building in Boston. Josiah Newhall Hall, the son of a Chelsea farmer in eastern Massachusetts, was one of two graduates to receive a medical degree from Harvard. A year after his 1882 graduation, he went to Denver and began practicing medicine in the small, neighboring town of Sterling. Hall was mayor of Sterling in 1888–89 and later became professor of therapeutics at the University of Colorado. In addition to writing a book and more than 140 articles for national medical publications, Hall was a member of the American Medical Association and president of numerous other professional organizations including the Colorado state board of medical examiners (1891), the Colorado state board of health (1903–1904), and the American Therapeutic Society (1916).

37. U. S. Bureau of Census, *Population, 1870* (Washington, D. C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1870).

38. Fraternal organizations of all sorts were common among males in nineteenth-century America. See Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen, eds., *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

39. Bergesen, "Oh, Well," 16. A typical time capsule search was reported recently in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Workers drilled numerous holes into the cornerstone of the University of Montana's Main Hall to find a time capsule that was placed there in 1897. "The university hoped to open the capsule at its centennial celebration in October but has been

- forced to abandon the search for fear of damaging the building's structure." See "Time Capsule Eludes U. of Montana," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Aug. 4, 1993, A5; see also Lee May, "Lost Time Capsules: When History Gets Mislaid," *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 1991, section A.
40. Ascher, "How to Build a Time Capsule," 242.
 41. Conrad P. Kottak, *Cultural Anthropology*, 4th ed. (New York: Random House, 1987), 267.
 42. Clark, *Roots of Rural Capitalism*, 8.
 43. Mary Praetzellis, Adrian Praetzellis, and Marley R. Brown III, "What Happened to the Silent Majority? Research Strategies for Studying Dominant Group Material Culture in Late Nineteenth-Century California," in *Documentary Archaeology in the New World*, ed. Mary C. Beaudry (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 195.
 44. Michael S. Nassaney and Marjorie Abel, "The Political and Social Contexts of Cutlery Production in the Connecticut Valley," *Dialectical Anthropology* 18 (1993): 247-289.
 45. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, xvi.
 46. Bergesen, "Oh, Well," 16.
 47. See Ascher, "How to Build a Time Capsule," and Bergesen, "Oh, Well," 17.
 48. Bergesen, "Oh, Well," 17.
 49. *The Massachusetts Daily Collegian* and the *Daily Hampshire Gazette* regularly reported on the budget cuts and their impacts on university services. See, for example, Marc Elliot, "Profs to Plan Furlough Protests," *The Massachusetts Daily Collegian*, Apr. 10, 1991, 1; Robert Grabar, "Jobs Axes: UMass Cuts 56," *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, Aug. 7, 1991, 1; and Kendra Pratt, "Fall Cuts Severely Damage UMass," *The Massachusetts Daily Collegian*, Sept. 28, 1990, 1, 3.
 50. We recently learned of another time capsule that was motivated by somewhat similar circumstances. In 1895, the Women's Centennial Commission was organized in Cleveland, Ohio, to discuss why the city fathers had ignored women in the planning of their centennial party. To remedy the situation the commission created a time capsule for the "Unborn Women of 1996" which was designed to document women's history and celebrate their accomplishments in the greater Cleveland area. It is interesting to note that even though the women of Cleveland were motivated by their conspicuous avoidance by members of the opposite sex, the text of their sealed letter favorably compares the state of their world with what it had been one hundred years earlier. See Dianne King, "From the Casket: Words of Wisdom and Hope from a Century Ago Offer Inspiration and Examples for Today," *Chicago Tribune*, Mar. 10, 1996, section 13.
 51. E. L. Doctorow, *World's Fair* (New York: Random House, 1985), 284.