

The Surprisingly Dark History of Time Capsules

Not all time capsules contained innocent items like newspapers and knickknacks.

By [Lorna Wallace](#) | Oct 24, 2024





Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, photograph by Harris & Ewing,

When genealogists think of buried treasure, most don't picture a creaky wooden chest full of shiny gold coins. Instead, caches of photos, newspapers and records often come to mind—the kinds of things that might be hidden inside a time capsule. These blasts from the past hold treasures someone carefully selected to represent themselves and their times, and then stowed away for an unknown future person to find.

There's actually a society that keeps track of these genealogical collections: the International Time Capsule Society, hosted at Oglethorpe University in Georgia. The group oversees "the father of the modern time capsule," the strangely curious [Crypt of Civilization](#). The 20-by-10-foot underground room, designed to hold records for 6,000 years, is filled with documents, photos and artifacts of modern civilization.

The chamber's stainless steel door was welded shut in May 1940, to be reopened in the year 8113. Visitors can gaze upon the door. Nobody alive now will be around for that unveiling (I'm imagining copies of the 1890 census in there), but on these pages, you can bear witness to the opening of other famous time capsules and their curious contents. Here's a look at seven of these blasts from the past.



THE CENTURY SAFE, C. 1876.

The world's first planned time capsule debuted in 1876 when New York magazine publisher Anna Deihm assembled a "Century Safe" at the U.S. Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. The iron box was stuffed with 19th-century relics including a gold pen and inkstand, a book on temperance, a collection of Americans' signatures, and snapshots of President [Ulysses S. Grant](#) and other politicians taken by photographer [Mathew Brady](#). After being sealed in 1879, the purple velvet-lined safe was taken to the U.S. Capitol and eventually left to languish under the East Portico. Though nearly forgotten, it was later rediscovered, restored and unlocked on schedule in July 1976 during the nation's bicentennial festivities. At a

2. The Massachusetts State House Time Capsule

The United States' oldest known time capsule was the work of none other than [Samuel Adams](#) and [Paul Revere](#). In late 2014, repairmen fixing a water leak at the Massachusetts State House [uncovered](#) a brass box that the two former [Sons of Liberty](#) had placed in a cornerstone to mark the building's construction back in 1795. It had already been opened once in 1855 for cleaning and the addition of new artifacts, and historians were initially unsure if its contents had survived intact. When it was finally [unsealed](#) in 2015, however, it was found to contain a trove of preserved artifacts including newspapers, coins dating back to the 1600s, a page from the Massachusetts Colony Records and a copper medal with an image of "General of the American Army" [George Washington](#). Most exciting of all was a silver plaque—most likely the work of Revere—that read, "This cornerstone of a building intended for the use of the legislative and executive branches of the government of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was laid by his Excellency Samuel Adams, Esquire, governor of the said Commonwealth."

India [\[edit \]](#)

- Indian Prime Minister [Indira Gandhi](#) had buried a time capsule outside one of the gate of [Red Fort](#) complex, The Indira Gandhi government named this time capsule "Kalpaatra", Delhi containing post-independence history of India on 15 August 1972 amid political opposition. It was scheduled to be opened after 1000 years. The next [Janata government](#) unearthed it in 1977 but its contents were never made public and were lost.^{[4][5][6][7]}
- A time capsule was buried in the presence of the [President of India](#) near the auditorium of [IIT Kanpur](#) on 6 March 2010.^{[8][9]}
- [Mahatma Mandir, Gandhinagar](#) containing the history of Indian state of [Gujarat](#) marking the 50 years of its foundation. Installed in 2010.^{[10][11]}
- Alexandra Girls' English Institution, a school in [Fort, South Mumbai](#) buried a time capsule in 2014, scheduling it to be opened on 1 September 2062, on the bi-centennial anniversary of the school.^[12]
- Under the flag holding of Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#), a time-capsule was buried in the premises of Lovely Professional University, a University located in Jalandhar, Punjab on the second day of Indian National Congress dated 4 January 2019. The occasion was attended by Nobel laureates, including biochemist [Avram Hershko](#) and physicist [Duncan Haldane](#). They lowered a 8x8 time capsule-box made of aluminium and wood with a glass door. 10 feet into the ground. A smart phone, landline telephone, VCR, stereo player, stop watch, computer parts like hard disk, mouse, laptop, central processing unit, a motherboard, hard disk with the latest documentaries and movies, a camera, science-text books and scientific equipment like rheostat, refractorscope and double microscope are some of the things that will remain buried for 100 years. The area where the capsule has been buried would be cemented and earmarked.
- On 26 January 2021, a 1.5 tonne time capsule encapsulating the history of Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) history spanning over a century was buried 30 feet deep in the park opposite Victoria Gate during Republic Day celebrations to mark the university's eventful centenary year on Tuesday.

Japan [\[edit \]](#)

- The [Expo '70](#) time capsule is located near [Osaka Castle](#), donated by [Panasonic](#) and the [Mainichi Newspapers](#). It was opened for the first time in 2000,^[13] and then the second time expected to be opened in 2100.^[14] The time capsule remains sealed until 6970.

Kazakhstan [\[edit \]](#)

- In [Aktau](#), people of 1967 sent a message showing the chronology of the development of [Mangyshlak Peninsula](#) with the names of the people who helped to build the town in the desert. The letter was put in a metallic cylinder in a triangular marble urn. It opened in November 2017.^[15]

3. The Crypt of Civilization

Most time capsules contain only a few trinkets or letters, but Oglethorpe University's "Crypt of Civilization" represents an audacious attempt to preserve all of human knowledge for posterity. The project was the brainchild of the university's president, Thornwell Jacobs, who believed it might serve as a valuable record for archaeologists in the distant future. Beginning in 1937, he converted an underground 20-by-10 chamber in the administration building into a museum of civilization filled with everything from 640,000 pages of microfilmed books and religious texts to an early television, a container of beer and a set of toy [Lincoln Logs](#). The vault even features a special "language integrator" to help teach English to whoever might find it. The entire haul was welded off behind an airtight stainless steel door during a ceremony in May 1940. Jacobs decreed that it should remain closed for 6,177 years—the same amount of time that was then thought to have passed since the beginning of recorded history. The Crypt remains at Oglethorpe University to this day, and is now more than 75 years into its long journey to the year 8113 A.D.

Titanic Time Capsule (2000)

The Titanic Time Capsule sealed in the year 2000, stands as a poignant tribute to the tragic sinking of the RMS Titanic & serves as a link between the modern era & the historical events of the early 20th century. This time capsule was buried in Belfast, Northern Ireland the city where the Titanic was built to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the ship's ill-fated maiden voyage.

The creation of the Titanic Time Capsule was a collaborative effort involving local Authorities, Historical Organizations & Individuals who were deeply moved by the legacy of the Titanic. The capsule aimed to capture the collective memory of the disaster & offer a connection to the lives & stories of those who were affected by the tragedy.



Contained within the time capsule were various artifacts & items that paid homage to the Titanic & its passengers. Letters from survivors & relatives of those onboard, Photographs, & personal mementos were carefully curated to provide a glimpse into the human experiences associated with the Titanic's voyage & subsequent sinking.

The Titanic Time Capsule also served as a symbol of resilience & remembrance. It highlighted the importance of preserving historical memory & honoring the lives lost on that fateful night in April 1912. By creating this capsule, the organizers sought to ensure that the lessons & stories of the Titanic would continue to resonate with future generations.



While the capsule is scheduled to be opened in the year 2112, its significance reaches far beyond that distant future date. It stands as a testament to the enduring impact of historical events. The power of human connection across time & the imperative to remember & learn from the past. The Titanic Time Capsule serves as a solemn reminder of the lives lost & a testament to the timeless human endeavor to keep history alive for generations to come.