

The Story of Time Capsules

The idea of time capsules has been around for thousands of years, although the name “time capsule” is relatively new. The ancient Egyptians created a kind of time capsule in the tombs of their pharaohs, the pyramids. Egyptians buried the pharaoh’s prized possessions along with them in the sealed rooms of the pyramids, including things they thought the pharaoh would need in the after-life.

Thousands of years ago, kings and wealthy merchants would bury mementos, documents, and objects in the cornerstones of buildings. A cornerstone is the stone laid at the corner of a building during its construction. Often, a small space has been left hollow within the stone to hold documents and small objects that will remain sealed within the building. Like a time capsule, a cornerstone contains a deliberate (on purpose) message to the future. However, unlike time capsules, the pharaoh’s tombs and cornerstones are not meant to be opened at a specific time in the future.

The idea of leaving behind a collection of objects and documents to be opened at a specific time in the future did not come about until 1876. This was the year that America turned 100 years old and held a “Centennial Exposition” in Philadelphia to celebrate. Mrs. Charles Diehm, a New York publisher, created what seems to have been the first time capsule, the “Century Safe.” She encouraged visitors to the Exposition to sign red leather-bound guest books and then she put them in the safe, along with the autographs and photographs of famous military officials and politicians. She also included some objects in her “Century Safe.” She then decided that the safe should remain sealed until 1976.

No one seems to have created another time capsule with a specific opening date until the late 1930s, when Dr. Thornwell Jacobs, President of Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, GA, decided that he would try to preserve all human knowledge in a vault the size of an average living room. Dr. Jacobs came up with this idea when he was trying to research ancient civilizations for a book he was writing and had trouble finding enough information. He decided to make sure that future historians would have plenty of information on the 20th Century.

In May, 1940, when the “Crypt of Civilization” (as Jacobs called it) was finally sealed, it contained 800 objects, including papier mâché models of fruits and vegetables, motion pictures of historical events since 1898, a Donald Duck doll, artificial arms, and a machine for teaching English in case it is no longer spoken. The Crypt is not to be opened until the year 8113 A.D.

The term “time capsule” was coined by G. Edward Pendray to describe a publicity stunt he created for the Westinghouse Electric Corporation. Facing competition from General Electric, Westinghouse wanted to convince customers that it had the ideas that would shape the future. Pendray had just the answer.

For the 1939 World's Fair in New York City, he built on Thornwell Jacob's "Crypt of Civilization" idea. Westinghouse, too, would preserve all of human knowledge, but instead of sealing it in a room, it would be buried in a 7 foot long, shiny torpedo-shaped object made of cupaloy, a new copper-based material invented by Westinghouse. Pendray called his idea the "time capsule." The capsule looked sort of like a spaceship, and the idea was that it was being launched to the future.

Since 1938 time capsules have become a worldwide phenomenon. Now they are sealed for all kinds of occasions, including city centennials, sales campaigns, world's fairs, company anniversaries, space missions, and even birthday parties.