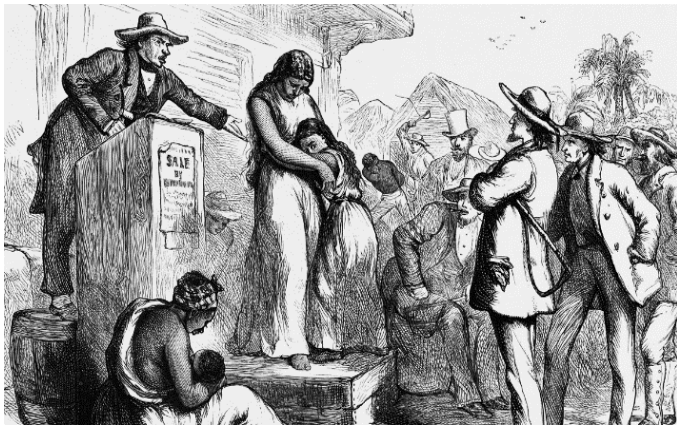


# TRAVEL TRUNK: Death and Mourning in Black Communities of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century



## American Slavery Overview

American slavery was a racially motivated institution that considered African Americans as personal property. They were deprived of personal freedoms and rights granted to their non-Black counterparts. Enslavers would often deprive those enslaved of their personal liberties, such as being able to read and write. These actions were often backed by state and federal laws. Slavery was prevalent in American culture and economics throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The 19th century saw a rise in movements to see the end of American slavery. Abolitionists, or those who were against slavery, sought to actively end it in the United States. These movements were led by free Black people such as Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. DuBois, white abolitionists such as author William Lloyd Garrison, and other outspoken individuals who saw slavery as unorthodox.

The Civil War was the breaking point of state versus federal rights to continue slavery in the country in the 1860s. It led to the signing of the emancipation proclamation, freeing enslaved peoples in rebelling states. Slavery in America officially came to an end with the indoctrination of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment. However, Black Americans were still openly racially discriminated against after the war.

It is important to understand these events when looking at Black history in America. It shows the personal affliction Black Americans faced, both free and enslaved. These acts of oppression directly lead to the sense of community highlighted in this Travel Trunk.

## About This Travel Trunk

This collection of artifacts shows just some of the ways Black communities mourned their dead in the 19th century. They express how differently they were treated, even in death. Enslaved individuals were not afforded the same funeral and burial luxuries as their counterparts. African traditions were then incorporated into mourning practices, creating a distinct, multi-cultural community.

W.E.B. DuBois, a Black historian, writer, and activist of the era said, "I have called my tiny community a world, and so its isolation made it; and yet there among us but a half-awakened common consciousness, sprung from common joy and grief, at burial, birth, or wedding." These artifacts show that despite the inequality black individuals faced, they were able to preserve parts of African culture into a strengthened and shared sense of community.



## Artifacts



### Music Box

For African Americans, a music box would be considered a luxury item. In Louisiana, those freed could afford such a luxury, and have it played at their funerals. For others, this was not the case. Instead, they had to rely on more traditional ways to incorporate music into the grieving process. Music at Black funerals would usually consist of a short song of worship and prayer sung with piano in the background. One reads "Master I am dying now, meet! Oh! Meet me there."



### Coffin

Funerals for Black people of the time ranged; some received proper burial services with a coffin, grave plot, and an allowance of guests while others received none. Enslavers often ensured that the bodies of enslaved peoples were not allowed in churches for funeral services. Octavia George, an enslaved person, was noted as saying, "Funerals were very simple for slaves, they could not carry the body to the church so they would carry it to the graveyard and bury it."



### Still

Sometimes for funerals, enslavers would allow those enslaved to celebrate the lives of the ones lost by supplying rum from their own stills. Rum was often made on plantations by those enslaved. Some rum and whiskey companies have been noted to use pictures of African Americans with their products to sell merchandise.

## Questions

**How did Black communities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century shape mourning and funerals of today?**

*Consider this question and the others below after looking at this Travel Trunk:*

1. What are some major differences between funerals of people of color and free people of Southern Louisiana?
2. How did Black communities gather to mourn the deceased?
3. What were common aspects of funerals of the 19th century?

## Poster Project: Compare and Contrast

*Using the knowledge from the Travel Trunk and your own knowledge, use the diagram on the next page to compare and contrast the mourning practices discussed in this Travel Trunk and those of modern day.*

Your poster should include:

- Information from your personal experiences
- Similarities to funerals today
- Differences to funerals today
- Three (3) visual references
- Two (2) pieces of factual information from the text

