



A Free Woman of Color from New York and a Rural Southern Woman from Louisiana:  
A Comparison of Mid-Nineteenth Century Burial Dress

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Textile remains rarely preserve in mid-nineteenth century burials in America. One important exception to this is when a burial takes place in sealed cast iron coffins. Fisk metallic burial cases were first manufactured in Queens, New York, in the mid 1840s and were first patented in 1848. When properly sealed, iron coffins have been reported to keep their occupants in a state of excellent preservation. These coffins were manufactured specifically to address new problems arising from the technological advances of the day, such as the sanitary transportation of the dead back from the newly opened frontiers and the protection of those at home from epidemic diseases. Fisk coffins were visually impressive, relatively expensive and extremely practical. Studies of iron coffin burials have demonstrated that the physical remains along with the associated clothing and coffin can contribute a wealth of knowledge to the study of social customs, dress, mortuary practices, and intimate details of a particular person that could not be gained in any other fashion. Catalogs and advertisements from the 1850s indicate that customers had a choice of styles and decorations. Prices for Fisk-patented iron coffins advertised in New York ranged from \$6.00 to \$25.00 with eleven sizes ranging from 2'4" to 6'6" (Warnasch, Conlogue, Gonzalez, Paddock, Kareem, 2013). Due to the cost involved in the transport and handling of these heavy coffins from New York to Louisiana, the prices could be expected to have been higher in the South. The archaeological literature suggests that predominantly middle or upper class whites used these coffins. Both women examined in this study were buried in Fisk cast iron coffins.

The burial remains of an adult African American woman were recovered in 2011 in Queens. She is now believed to be Martha Peterson, who is listed in the 1850 federal census of Newtown, Queens, as living as a domestic servant with a Fisk relative on the foundry property. Lesions on her body indicate that she died of small pox (Warnasch, et al., 2013). Another woman, Clemence Elizabeth Gaudet Tucker Evans, was buried in Thibodaux, a small rural town in South Louisiana. She died in 1857 at the age of 35, but the cause of her death is unknown. Not only Clemence but also her son and her sister were buried in Fisk iron coffins. Her family would have been considered "well to do" at the time and owned property in this rural area (Hintlian, 2001). Although similar in age and when and how they were buried, Martha and Clemence lived and died in very different circumstances.

The burial dress of these two women were analyzed and compared. Many similarities were found between a northern free woman of color living in Queens, and a rural southern

woman living in Thibodaux. One might expect very different burial practices between women from such different cultural and geographic circumstances, but this was not seen in the archaeological remains. Both women were buried with a carved comb in their hair and dressed in night clothes that had been worn and repaired during life. All garments were made of undyed cotton and were hand sewn. Both were wearing knit stockings and a chemise under their gowns. Several differences were also present in their dress including the fact that Martha was wearing a shear, ruffled cap and Clemence was not, and Clemence wore a petticoat over her chemise and Martha did not.

High mortality rates made death a part of everyday life and the life of the individual was reflected in death with the transition from life to death often taking place in the home. Because death pervaded nineteenth century American culture, metaphors were a way of coping and expressing ideas and beliefs related to death (Aldridge 2009). Research has indicated that nineteenth century American burial dress often fell into two categories that are associated with the two types of death metaphors most prevalent in the period. They are those that refer to death as sleep and those that refer to death as a journey (Kuttruff 2012). The women in this study were both dressed in nightclothes, relating to death as sleep, rather than in their best dress, which would be more appropriate for a journey. Thus the burial dress of two women from very different backgrounds appears to reflect similar cultural influences of the period. This is another example of how studies of iron coffin burials can contribute to the study of dress, social customs, mortuary practices, and details of the individual.

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