

SOMETHING PRECIOUS: THE CASKET IN AMERICA, 1870 to 1890

Abstract: “Something Precious: The Casket in America, 1870 to 1890,” examines the connection between the mass-production and mass-consumption of coffin and casket hardware. Mourners from the mid nineteenth century interacted with the coffin and casket differently than mourners from the late nineteenth century. Archaeological methodologies and historical analyses prove that the casket is simultaneously a mortuary and sentimental object. Knowledge about coffin and casket hardware contributes to the understanding of post-mortem photographs in the Newberry Library’s unprocessed Helen Sclair Collection. Researchers participate in above ground archaeology when they “read” the casket in death portraiture, and as a product, successfully date the photograph. The casket’s material histories contribute to the larger understandings of American mourning culture, as seen in above-ground archaeology practices.