

The following is a selection from the introduction to the research section of the funeral tour produced for the Seward House, done to fulfill my Masters thesis requirements.

*Death, Memory, and Mourning in a Victorian House:
A Funeral Tour for the Seward House*

It is inherently difficult for historic house museums to draw wide and varied audiences due to their singular and static nature. Such museums usually only celebrate the home's owner and his or her life through interpretation of the unchanging house and its historic furnishings. Historic house museums can diversify and broaden their audiences by providing programs that address universal topics, such as marriage, schooling, or even death. Death is an event that all people share. No matter our age, gender, ethnic background, religious affiliation, or economic status, death is a reality we must all face. In an effort to educate visitors about this sensitive topic, as well as to stimulate a broader audience, the Seward House, the historic home of statesman William H. Seward and his family, will offer visitors the opportunity to attend an historic funeral.

The following discussion of mourning encompasses the entire nineteenth century, but provides focus on customs being followed at the 1872 funeral of William Seward. This research is the basis for a special tour that will be offered for a brief period each year at the Seward House in Auburn, New York. The tour will invite visitors to attend Seward's "funeral" with the purpose of educating them about Victorian-era mourning rituals in a very real and visual way. A first-person interpreter will lead visitors through the house, following the same path used in 1872, to view Seward's "body." Throughout the tour, the interpreter will provide visitors with narrative information describing the various mourning decorations, the reactions of original funeral attendees, and a description of Seward's last hours. The narrative will be done in such a way as to make the visitor feel as though the guide is just pointing out the obvious, such as, "Miss Weed did a fine job draping the house in mourning" or "Mr. Pomeroy always follows funeral etiquette by wearing a crepe band upon his hat." After the funeral portion of the tour is complete, the interpreter will step out of character to allow for a description of Seward's funeral procession and burial. Images will supplement this description.