The experience of slavery has been referred to as “a living death.” One need only scan a few lines of an entry such as “Whips” to realize the aptness of that epithet. Objects malign and benign crowd the pages of this novel reference work, as this is primarily a catalog of artifacts, the tangible evidence left behind in the wake of the so-called “peculiar institution.” In addition to articles on manmade things, such as “Auction Blocks,” “Buttons,” and “Coins and Currency,” there are headwords for items from the natural world as well: “Fish and Shellfish,” “Sugar,” and “Tobacco,” being but a few examples. Rounding out the coverage of subject matter are essays on institutions within the institution of slavery, as in “Benevolent Associations” and “Underground Railroad.” All of the approximately 175 entries are alphabetically arranged, are signed by the individual author that wrote it, and conclude with a short bibliography for further research. The set is illustrated with crisp black and white photographs.

The editors are well versed in their respective areas of expertise. According to the biographical sketches listed on the contributor's pages, Katz-Hyman is “an independent curator and consultant to museums on historic house furnishing and interpreting pre-Civil War African American material culture” (577). Rice is “the director of the Museum Studies Program at George Washington University and a long-time curator and consultant to museums on African American interpretation” (577). Close to 90 historians, curators, college professors and others likewise engaged in scholarly pursuits wrote the majority of the articles.

What makes this such an interesting and engaging volume is the way in which the lives of enslaved African Americans are reflected in what they ate, the tools they used, the clothes they wore and all the other physical stuff they either made, found or otherwise put to use. As pointed out in the Introduction, the totality of these possessions “... suggest the ways that material goods added richness and color to an individual's life and contributed in no small measure to creating and maintaining personal and collective identity” (xi-xii). In short, material culture is one more window through which we can observe and understand the past. The reference literature on slavery is, as one would expect, extensive, but typically consists of broad overviews of the subject. A case in point is Slavery in the United States: A Social, Political, and Historical Encyclopedia (Junius P. Rodriguez, ed. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-Clio, 2007). While these are generally well researched and informative works in their own right, the uniqueness of World of a Slave is that, aside from breaking new ground, the narrow focus permits in-depth discussion of an overlooked aspect of this dark chapter in American History. However, it should be noted that a highly specialized work of this nature would be most at home in equally specialized libraries, such as those that support museums, historical societies and academic institutions with curricula in archeology, American history and the like. For these niche markets, this two-volume set is highly recommended for purchase.—Michael F. Bemis, Assistant Librarian, Washington City Library, Woodbury, Minnesota