



An Investigation of Wood Usage in the 18th and 19th Century Funerary Industry

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Introduction

Much can be learned from funerary goods, and the value of materials can reflect the wealth and status of the individual. The excavation of the First Baptist Church of Colonial Philadelphia in 2017 may give insight on a financial correspondence between specific wood types used for coffins and its significance both culturally and economically during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Methods

50 coffins were recovered and analyzed. The coffins were then separated by wood type into 8 different categories. The three most popular wood types were researched extensively.

Wood Types at FBCP

- American Black Walnut; 18 coffins (36%)
- Mahogany; 13 coffins (26%)
- Sweet Gum; 8 coffins (16%)
- Yellow Pine; 5 coffins (10%)
- White Pine; 2 coffins (4%)
- Red Cedar; 1 coffin (2%)
- White Cedar; 1 coffin (2%)
- Unidentifiable; 2 coffins (4%)

Wood Types and Distribution

- The Sweet Gum tree is one of the most common hardwood trees in the USA, abundant both in the coast and far inland. It is easy to cultivate and harvest, rendering it cheap for consumption. Its satin-like finish made it one of the most desirable cheap woods¹
- The Black Walnut is one of the most sought-after trees in American History. Deep brown, strong, weighty, and shock resistant wood made it expensive and popular in Colonial America.² While it has a vast distribution, it's difficult to harvest, farm, and transport, leaving it one of the most expensive woods in the market³
- Mahogany is indigenous to tropical-America; beloved for its rich red color, fine texture, variability and wide trunk. With its simple care, growing conditions, accessible farming and easy harvesting, Mahogany quickly became the most valued and sought-after wood in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries⁴. Despite the demand, Mahogany was a relatively cheap wood to buy due to the slave labor used to farm, harvest, and transport it⁵

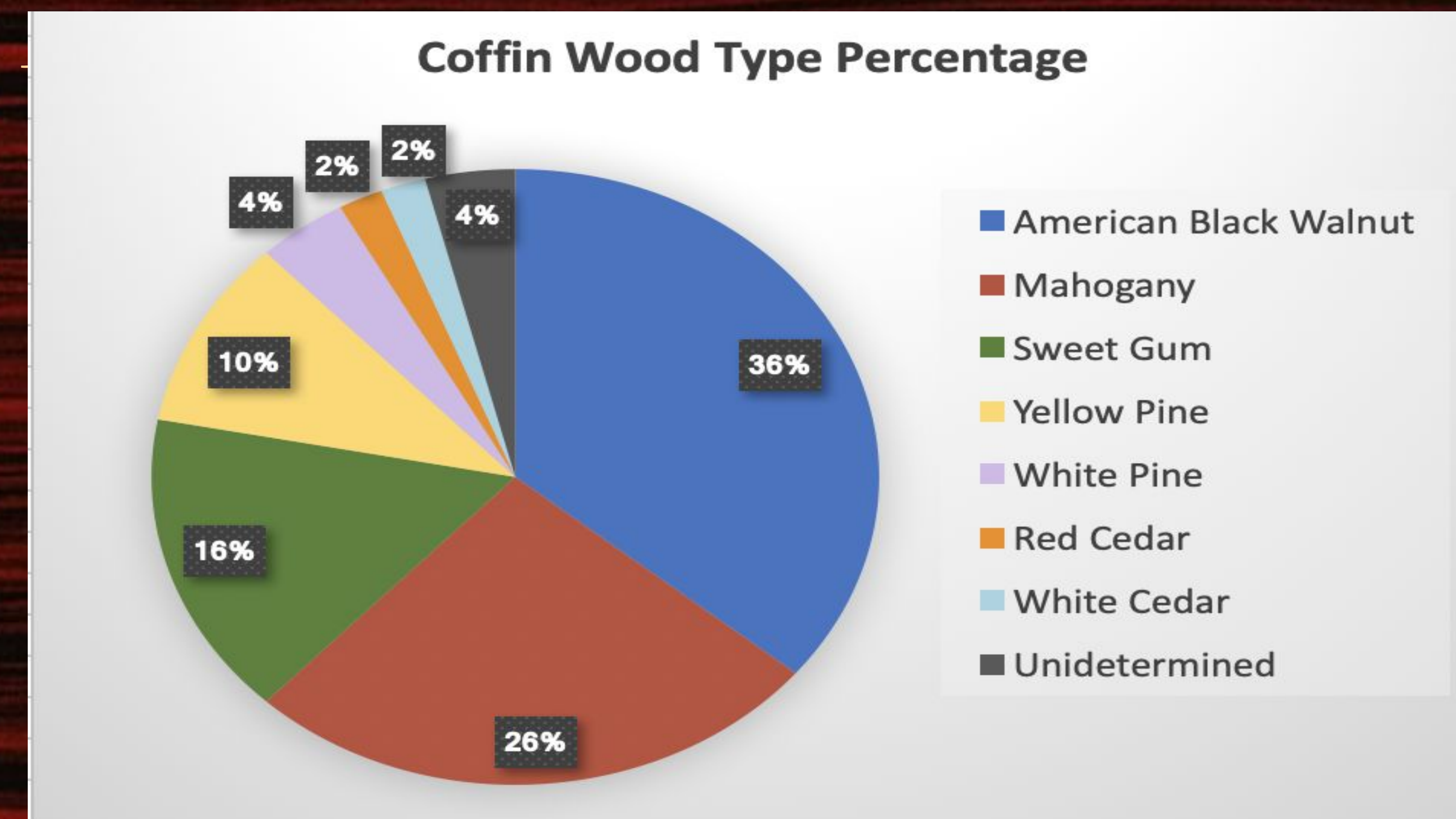


Figure 1: Pie chart separating the wood types by percentage.

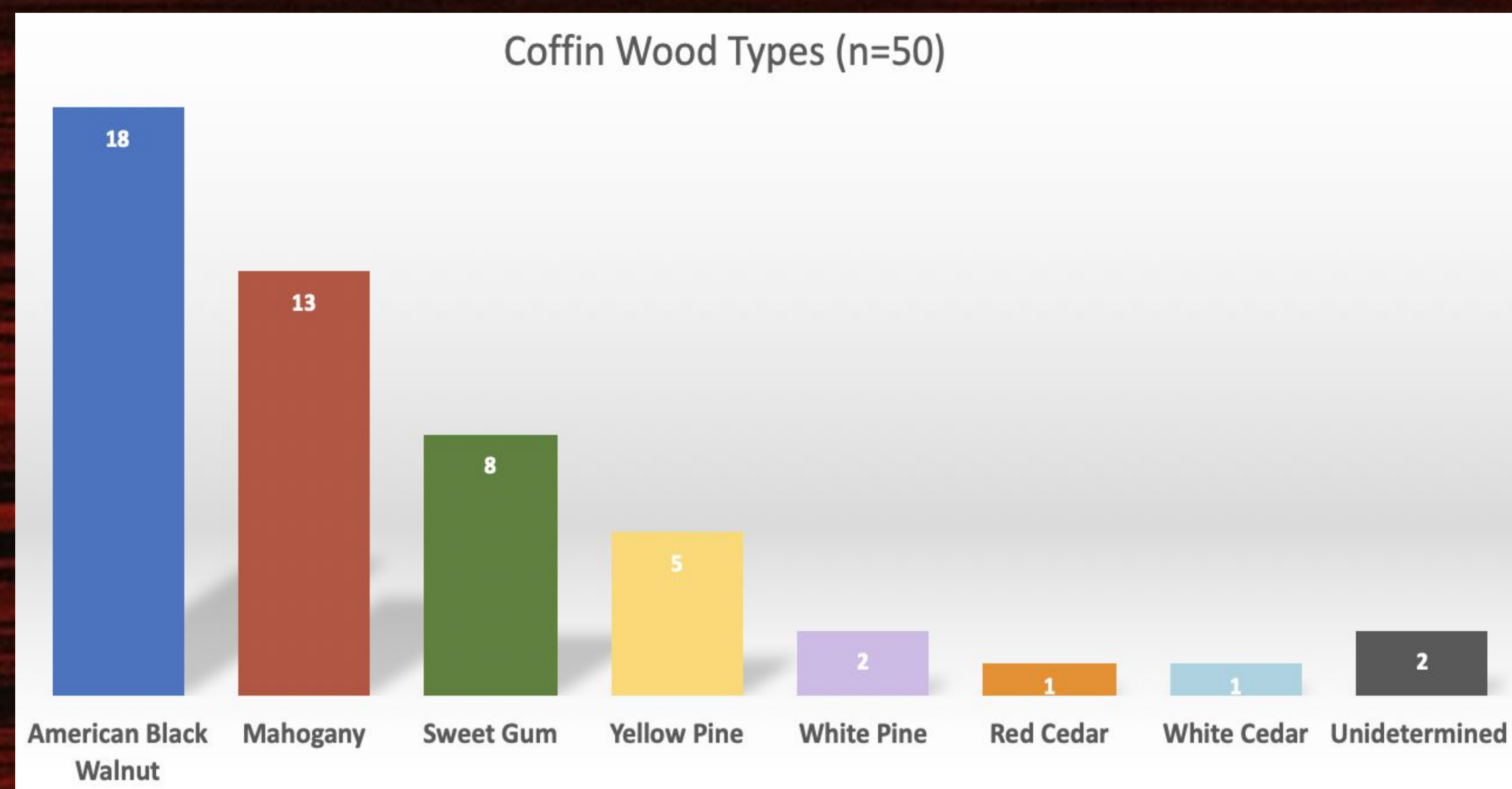


Table 1: Bar graph depicting the distribution of wood types in coffins recovered by amount



Figure 2: First Baptist Church Coffin Exhumed



Figure 3: Students in the TCNJ Field School examining a coffin

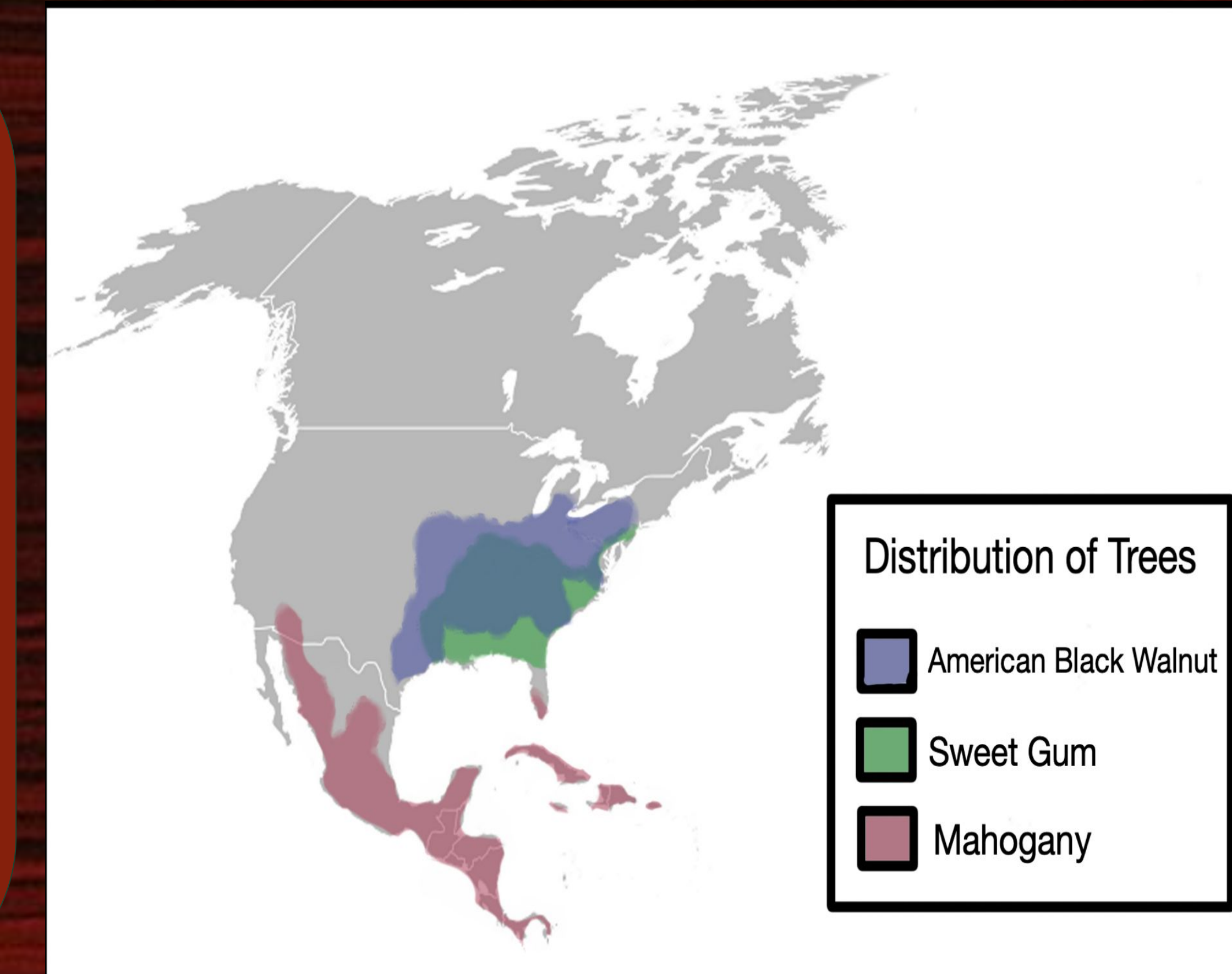


Figure 4: Map depicting distribution of trees by type in the USA and Central America

Conclusion

- There doesn't seem to be a direct correlation between social status and coffin wood types.
- While Mahogany has been historically expensive, the vast geographical range, easy farming, and cheap slave labor facilitated the sale of the wood.

References

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