

DBQ Assignment: Hoodoo and Rootwork in the Antebellum South

Background

In the antebellum U.S. South, slaves preserved and adapted African spiritual traditions often called hoodoo, conjure, or rootwork. These practices involved charms, roots, powders, and rituals that could heal, protect, or resist oppression. At the same time, hoodoo was controversial — some enslaved people relied on it, others doubted it, and white enslavers feared it as a form of rebellion.

You will explore hoodoo through a background essay and five primary sources in which enslaved people describe their encounters with conjure.

Part I: Preparation

1. Read the secondary essay: Hoodoo and Rootwork in the Antebellum South (c. 1800–1865).
2. Take the quiz to assess your reading and understanding of the essay.

Part II: Primary Sources

Read the packet Hoodoo in the Words of Enslaved People. It includes:

1. Frederick Douglass — Sandy Jenkins’s protective root.
2. Henry Bibb — Powders and failed love-conjure.
3. Celestia Avery (WPA, Georgia) — Anti-conjure protections.
4. Willis Easter (WPA, Texas) — Harms of conjure and protective “jack.”
5. Sallie Keenan (WPA, South Carolina) — Grapevine cure for rheumatism.

Part III: Using AI as Your Reading Companion

You may use AI tools (like ChatGPT) strictly as a coach, not as a writer. Use these and only these prompts below. You may not use ChatGPT to generate any original writing for this assignment — only to check your understanding, clarify vocabulary, or improve your thesis after you have written it yourself. You may be required to copy and paste your entire AI conversation for review to verify appropriate use.

1. Vocabulary Coach

Act as my Vocabulary Coach. I’m reading historical documents about hoodoo and rootwork, and I need help understanding key terms. For each word I give you, please:

1. Define it in plain, modern English.
2. Give me one historical example of how it was used.
3. Create a simple modern sentence that shows the meaning.

My first word is: [insert term].

Suggested terms: hoodoo, conjure, mojo, gris-gris, tricking, counter-work, goopher dust, John the Conqueror root, two-headed doctor, fixed.

2. Translation Coach

Translate this dialect-heavy historical passage into clear modern English. Keep the meaning the same, but make it easier to understand. Do not shorten or summarize — just render it in plain English.

3. Thesis Evaluator

I am writing a DBQ essay about hoodoo and rootwork in the antebellum South. Please evaluate my thesis statement.

1. Does it answer the prompt?
 2. Is it too broad, narrow, or vague?
 3. Suggest one way to make it more specific or arguable.
 4. Give me an example of how I could phrase it more strongly while keeping my idea.
- Here is my thesis: [insert thesis].

Part IV: Guiding Questions

Description: Available as separate document. These guiding questions are designed to help you read each primary source closely. They direct your attention to how hoodoo was practiced, how people felt about it, the roles it played in communities, its relationship to Christianity, and its larger themes of resistance and survival.

Instructions: For each source below, complete the table by writing short but thoughtful notes in the right-hand column. Your answers do not need to be full sentences, but they should be specific enough to remind you of details you can use in your essay.

Part V: DBQ Essay (One-Page Thesis Drafting Worksheet)

Prompt:

How did hoodoo and rootwork shape enslaved people's experiences in the antebellum South? In what ways did these practices offer healing, protection, or resistance, and why did they generate debate both inside and outside enslaved communities?

Directions:

- Write a clear thesis statement that directly answers the prompt.
- Support your argument with evidence from at least 3 of the 5 primary sources.
- Incorporate insights from the secondary essay, your textbook, or other research material for historical context.
- Address multiple perspectives (believers, skeptics, conjure doctors, enslavers).
- Conclude with a reflection on why studying hoodoo matters for understanding enslaved people's agency and cultural survival.

Write your first draft thesis in the box below. Then use the Thesis Evaluator AI prompt to get feedback and revise. Record your improved version in the second box. Remember: you must write the original draft yourself before consulting AI.

My First Draft Thesis

AI-Assisted Thesis (after feedback from the Thesis Evaluator prompt)

Part VI: Evaluation Criteria

- Thesis & Argument: Clear, specific claim answering the question.
- Use of Evidence: Integrates at least 3 primary sources accurately.
- Contextualization: Brings in relevant background from the essay/textbook.
- Analysis: Considers perspectives, limitations, and significance of sources.
- Clarity: Organized and polished writing (2–3 pages).