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Seneca Village and the 19th Century Toothbrush

Abstract

Seneca Village was an African-American and immigrant settlement that existed in the place of what is modern day Central Park, New York. From the long lost site, many artifacts have been recovered which allow archaeologists and scholars to infer about their use in the daily lives of the villagers. In this research essay, I examine a toothbrush artifact from Seneca Village. This essay uses the history of the standard toothbrush along with information about life in Seneca Village and the Wilson family to understand the reasoning behind them owning a toothbrush in a time where it was rare to.



Bone toothbrush handle, with centimeter ruler for size perspective. (Photo courtesy of the NYC Archaeological Repository)

As described on the NYC Archeological Repository Site, this artifact is a “bone toothbrush handle with a missing brush head. The bottom of the toothbrush is chipped. The edges of the handle are slightly beveled.”¹ The toothbrush was found at the site of the Wilson family home, which they were forced to vacate in order for the city to begin constructing Central Park. The toothbrush is

plain in nature, but its presence opens up lots of room for interpretation. Questions about this

¹ NYC Archaeological Repository: The Nan A. Rothschild Research Center. 2020. "Seneca Village." NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, New York, NY. <http://archaeology.cityofnewyork.us/collection/map/seneca-village>.

object include its rarity for the time, its use, and its meaning about hygiene and lifestyle in Seneca Village. Because of the uncommonness of toothbrush use in the 19th century, especially among the working class, it is unusual that the Wilsons owned a toothbrush and it suggests that they cared about their appearance and cleanliness.



Another perspective of the bone toothbrush handle.
(Photo courtesy of the Institute for the Exploration of Seneca Village History)

handle is not quite missing, but parts of it have chipped off. The toothbrush is made of bone, which was a common material used for toothbrushes in the 19th century. The bone is likely cattle femur or ilium (pelvis), both of which were used because of their ability to withstand moisture.² Expensive alternatives for bone toothbrushes were ivory and gold toothbrushes, which were used by the elite and wealthy, such as Napoleon.

Working class people and a large majority of middle

² Mattick, Barbara. "A Guide to Bone Toothbrushes of the 19th and Early 20th Centuries ." Bard Graduate Center. Accessed July 2021.

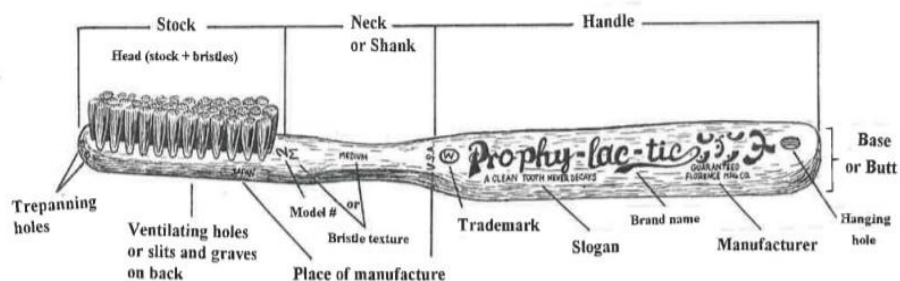
<https://teenthinkers.bgcdml.net/senecavillage/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/MATTICK-Guide-to-Bone-Toothbrushes-Chs.-1-3.pdf>

The toothbrush looks rough, with nicks and cuts and it seems to have been worn out or perhaps decomposed over time. Although it is well preserved for the most part, it appears to have many scratches and cuts to it, which are likely due to its age. It is also important to note that the head of the toothbrush, which would contain the brushing bristles, is missing. The bottom part of the



Napoleon's Gold Toothbrush. (Photo courtesy of Science Museum Group on JSTOR <https://jstor.org/stable/10.2307/community.26322127>)

class people used cloth or sponge and charcoal to clean their teeth, an accepted and affordable oral hygiene practice.³ The Wilsons' toothbrush, therefore, appears to be a middle ground between the costs of different tooth cleaning products and between what different socioeconomic classes typically used. The place of origin of this toothbrush is largely unknown, as it does not have a manufacturer's mark on it, a common practice of the time.⁴ Dating the toothbrush then



Sketch and description of parts of a toothbrush. (Photo courtesy of Mattick, Barbara. "A Guide to Bone Toothbrushes of the 19th and Early 20th Centuries")

becomes difficult, as the branding or marking of toothbrushes started between the 1840s and '50s, which might suggest

that this toothbrush was made before then. However, it could have been made after the '40s by hand in someone's home or shop who did not use markings, but again this is not known. Another theory is that the toothbrush could have been made overseas in England, Germany, or France, which were leading toothbrush producers, and imported to New York.⁵ Being able to determine the date and location of manufacture is crucial to understanding the financial relation to the Wilsons, because if they owned a toothbrush before the 1840s it likely would have cost a lot more than if they purchased it in the 1850s, when toothbrush cost was significantly reduced. Not much is known about when they purchased the toothbrush, just that it was left at their house when they departed Seneca Village in 1857.

³ Mattick, Barbara. "A Guide to Bone Toothbrushes of the 19th and Early 20th Centuries." Bard Graduate Center. Accessed July 2021.

<https://teenthinkers.bgcdml.net/senecavillage/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/MATTICK-Guide-to-Bone-Toothbrushes-Chs.-1-3.pdf>

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid* p.15

The Seneca Village toothbrush is noticeably not cranked, or curved, and is similar to the long and straight toothbrushes used today. In that sense, it was practical and simple to use. The straight design of the toothbrush makes sense, as non-cranked toothbrushes started to be made in the 1840s and later became more popular in the 1870s.⁶ That being said, most toothbrushes that resemble modern day toothbrushes did not start to be manufactured until the 1870s, with cranked versions being more popular before then. There was no American patent for the toothbrush until 1857 when H. N. Wadsworth filed one. Even with that early patent, larger scale production and the toothbrush industry as a whole did not see a boom until post Civil War, specifically the 1870s.⁷ Because there is no data available on toothbrush use in Seneca Village, it is difficult to determine the rarity of the Wilsons owning a toothbrush. However, in comparison to the larger general population, toothbrushes were definitely not common in everyday use for most Americans in the mid to late 1800s. Apparently, due to cost and availability, “toothbrushes remained exotic luxuries until after 1850.”⁸ Even with more affordable options being offered in the late 19th and early 20th century, statistics show that even as late as 1932, only 20% of Americans used toothbrushes, which is shockingly low.⁹ This can likely be credited to controversy and disagreement over the necessity of toothbrush use among doctors and dentists.

Taking into account the rarity of toothbrush use and cost of a bone toothbrush, it is surprising that the Wilsons owned a toothbrush. Mr. William G. Wilson was a sexton at the All Angels Church, a position that did not pay particularly well. Considering he had a wife, Charlot,

⁶ Samford, Patricia. “Bone Handled Toothbrushes.” Diagnostic Artifacts in Maryland. Accessed July 2021. <https://apps.jefpat.maryland.gov/diagnostic/SmallFinds/Toothbrushes/index-BoneHandledToothbrushes.html>.

⁷ Mattick, Barbara. “A Guide to Bone Toothbrushes of the 19th and Early 20th Centuries .” Bard Graduate Center. Accessed July 2021. <https://teenthinkers.bgcdml.net/senecavillage/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/MATTICK-Guide-to-Bone-Toothbrushes-Chs.-1-3.pdf>

⁸ *ibid* p.15

⁹ *ibid* p. 5

and eight children to support and raise, it is surprising that he had the money to afford a bone toothbrush instead of opting for the more common and cheaper method of cloth and charcoal.¹⁰ It is unknown who in the Wilson family bought and used the toothbrush, but it is likely William or



Archeological excavation of the Wilson's home. (Photo courtesy of Rothschild, Nan A, and Diana diZerega Wall. Seneca Village - The Excavations)

Charlot, as it would be too expensive to buy toothbrushes for the children, and the only other employed person in the family was the eldest son William H. Wilson, who probably earned meager pay as a waiter.¹¹ The question, then, is: why did the

Wilsons choose to own a toothbrush? It definitely reflects on the family's desire to be clean and hygienic, and especially to be viewed as such by others. In pre-Civil War times with rampant racism, it makes sense that the Wilsons, an African American family, would want to present the best version of themselves in order to assert themselves among the largely white middle class. In this case, presenting the best version of themselves definitely includes their appearance and hygiene, and also the things they own. Not only does the toothbrush signal that they take care of themselves, but it shows they could afford items that most of the working class could not.

Additionally, Mr. Wilson's job as a sexton involved a lot of manual labor, such as cleaning

¹⁰ Rothschild, Nan A, and Diana diZerega Wall. Seneca Village - The Excavations. Accessed July 2021. http://projects.mcah.columbia.edu/seneca_village/excavation.html

¹¹ Population Census of the 22nd Ward, New York (New York State Manuscript Census for 1855). Collection of the New York City Municipal Archives, Bureau of Old Records.

graves and tending to the appearance and maintenance of the church. This job may have inspired a desire in Mr. Wilson to be able to clean himself from the dirtiness of his work at the end of the day. In the present day, it is both medically and socially expected for one to use a toothbrush, so it can be difficult to understand that using a toothbrush was an intentional choice for the Wilsons.

In conclusion, the presence of a toothbrush in Seneca Village is striking considering the rarity of toothbrush use during the mid 1800s. It can be explained by the likely desire of the Wilsons to maintain good hygiene, especially considering Mr. Wilson's job as a church sexton. By looking at the structure of the toothbrush, one can see that the withstanding bone made for easy use of the toothbrush, making it a practical and helpful possession despite it likely being expensive for the Wilsons to purchase.

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