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### Abstract

This essay focuses on the duality of an earthenware dipped bowl excavated from the demolition of Wilson's House in Seneca Village. From the physical attributes to the deeper social meanings of the artifact, this bowl reflects the lives of the typical Seneca Village family as well as the role both women and African Americans played in kitchen and foodways. Although African American knowledge was traditionally shared through oral stories or personal experiences, food provided a means to maintain their personal and community identities while passing along their history to future generations.

### Dipped Whiteware Bowls of Seneca Village



Figure 1. *Slip Banded Dipped Whiteware Bowl*. Photo courtesy of NYC Archaeological Repository: The Nan A. Rothschild Research Center

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Seneca Village was a predominantly African American community that existed on the lands of what is now Central Park. Expanding from West 82nd to West 89th Street, Seneca Village was a place for free African Americans, Irish, and German immigrants to grow and raise their own vegetations and animals, own property, and escape the harsher discrimination they would face downtown. Despite the thriving history of this community, many historians have limited knowledge of Seneca Village due to cultural erasure, single-sided stories, and government use of eminent domain to acquire the lands for a public park. However, through recent excavations, historians have been able to recover many artifacts that existed within Seneca Village, one being a blue and white dipped bowl from the Wilson family's demolished house. The bowl played a large contribution to kitchen and foodways as its rounded design made it well suited for holding liquids and looser foods. This specific slipware, or earthenware decorated with slip, is noteworthy for its simple design and horizontal banding pattern. The excavated blue and white slipped bowl played a vital role in reflecting the gender values in Seneca Village as well as cultural values of African American foodways.



Figure 2. *Antique blue band mixing bowls, 1800s vintage blue & white, pottery.* Photo Courtesy of Laurel Leaf Farm shows an example of what an intact slipware bowl from Seneca Village may have looked like.

From the 17th to 19th centuries, slipware was a simple form of pottery that made its development universal. It did not require much labor and the clay could be sourced locally, resulting in its affordable cost and appeal to lower- and middle-class families.<sup>1</sup> Clay for slipware was dug from local pits; it required very little

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie B. Grigsby, "English Slip-Decorated Earthenware at Williamsburg," in *English Slip-Decorated Earthenware at Williamsburg* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1993), 8-70, 8.

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refinement and impurities could be removed by hand.<sup>2</sup> After sculpting the vessel from clay, a slip, or “syrupy mixture of clay and water,” could be applied to the unfired earthenware to produce various surface decorations.<sup>3</sup> Additives like mineral oxides were mixed into the slip to enhance the colors of the earthenware. To create patterns like banding, the vessel would be mounted horizontally onto a machine called a potter's lathe and as the vessel rotated, it was trailed with slip to produce the annular design.<sup>4</sup> To secure the vessel's designs and impermeability, it was coated with clear lead oxide glaze.<sup>5</sup> The earthenware would be hardened and sturdy enough for serving food with as little as one to two low-temperature firings done by a single potter.<sup>6</sup> This allowed for slipware production costs to be lower than its counterparts like porcelain and stoneware, which required much higher temperatures and several firings.<sup>7</sup>

This bowl may represent the “unifying force” that dinners had on African American families during the mid nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Cult of domesticity, a traditional practice that limited women to home and family life during the 19th century, encouraged African American women to play a significant role in preserving food traditions and holding African American culture together.<sup>9</sup> Despite knowledge typically being gathered from oral stories or their own life experiences, women continued to pass down their history and maintain personal and community values through their foods like stew.<sup>10</sup> Stews and soups were a traditional part of most dinners. Often served as a starter, a ladle was used to serve the liquid into smaller, individual bowls.<sup>11</sup> According to Captain Conneau, stews could consist of “mutton minced with roasted ground nuts

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 12

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> “Dipped Earthenware,” Diagnostic Artifacts in Maryland (Maryland Department of Planning), accessed July 25, 2021, <https://apps.jefpat.maryland.gov/diagnostic/Post-Colonial%20Ceramics/DiptWares/index-dippedwares.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Leslie B. Grigsby, “English Slip-Decorated Earthenware at Williamsburg,” in *English Slip-Decorated Earthenware at Williamsburg* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1993), 8-70, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 12

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 10

<sup>8</sup> Anne Bower and Robert L Hall, “Watching Soul Food; Food Crops, Medicinal Plants, and the Atlantic Slave Trade,” in *African American Foodways Explorations of History and Culture* (Urbana, Ill. u.a: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 1-5

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 3

<sup>11</sup> Anne-Marie E. Cantwell and Diana diZerega Wall, “Daily Life in the Nineteenth-Century City,” in *Unearthing Gotham: the Archaeology of New York City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 206-223, 212.

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and rolled up into the shape of forced-meat balls... stewed with milk, butter and a little malagueta pepper,” going on to further describe the dish as “rich.” It can be seen that African American dishes often valued both a healthy diet and peppery seasonings. The malagueta pepper was believed to have medicinal properties, preventing bodily infections and stomach disorders.<sup>12</sup> As men commuted to work and children went to school, dinner became a vital “family ritual” where all family members gathered together and dedicated time to “reinforce family ties and moral values.”<sup>13</sup>

African American kitchen and foodways continue to make their presence in contemporary times. Learning more about the depths of African American foodways can help reverse stereotypes and encourage those to appreciate different cultures. Today, African American cookbooks contribute to the formation and preservation of African American history and group identity, in a way that history hasn’t allowed before. African Americans can now “hold onto tradition but give that tradition new relevance and vitality” to pass onto future generations.<sup>14</sup> The excavation of the blue and white slipped bowl played a vital role in remembering the importance of African American women in preserving kitchen and foodways through unwritten knowledge, as well as the unifying nature of African American meals.

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<sup>12</sup> Anne Bower and Robert L Hall, “Watching Soul Food; Food Crops, Medicinal Plants, and the Atlantic Slave Trade,” in *African American Foodways Explorations of History and Culture* (Urbana, Ill. u.a: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2009), 34.

<sup>13</sup> Anne-Marie E. Cantwell and Diana diZerega Wall, “Daily Life in the Nineteenth-Century City,” in *Unearthing Gotham: the Archaeology of New York City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 206-223, 211.

<sup>14</sup> Anne Bower and Robert L Hall, “Watching Soul Food; Food Crops, Medicinal Plants, and the Atlantic Slave Trade,” in *African American Foodways Explorations of History and Culture* (Urbana, Ill. u.a: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2009), 10.

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