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Examining Slate Pencils and Educational Equity in Seneca Village

**ABSTRACT**

Seneca Village was an autonomous and predominantly Black community within Manhattan during the 19th century. Prior to its destruction in 1857, residents of Seneca Village developed various community institutions, including churches, schools, and cemeteries. The community further constructed cultural and social standards, such as an emphasis on secondary education and schooling. This study examines a slate pencil from Seneca Village, identifying the artifact's (1) material composition and technical details; (2) social meaning and former implications; and (3) contemporary connections. Through utilizing evidence provided by public documents and a prior archeological excavation in 2011, this study explores a 21st century angle of the artifact's meaning, centering on racial inequities and educational disparities. Furthermore, the outcome of the study suggests that the usage of the slate pencil connects to efforts to include more Black students within institutions of education.



**Fig. 1.**

Slate Pencil from: NYC Archeological Repository: The Nan A. Rothschild Research Center.

## INTRODUCTION

The 2011 archeological excavation of Seneca Village unearthed artifacts of the primarily Black community that existed in present-day Central Park. Within the community resided the Wilson family, whose house contained a number of artifacts discovered during the excavation. In context SC 6D, a slate pencil was left by the Wilson family below the house's floorboards (see fig. 1). This artifact is fitting for the time, as slate pencils were commonly used by 19th century students for practicing arithmetic or handwriting. Similar to a piece of chalk and a chalkboard, students would use the slate pencil on a corresponding slate board, saving the need to consistently buy paper. Moreover, based on data from an 1850 census record, Seneca Village had a culture that emphasized education compared to other Black communities in New York City. This aspect of the community reaffirms the idea that slate pencils were likely used in educational spaces. By examining such elements of Seneca Village, this study aims to provide a closer look into the slate pencil, and to highlight its representation as a vehicle to higher opportunities.

## TECHNICAL DETAILS

The slate pencil is made from slate, a “fine-grained, clayey metamorphic rock that cleaves, or splits, readily into thin slabs having great tensile strength and durability.”<sup>1</sup> Slate's propensity to split into slabs also made it a common writing surface to work in conjunction with the pencil. Although the origination of the slate pencil is largely unknown, the “principal production [of slate itself] in the United States is from Pennsylvania and Vermont.”<sup>2</sup> Due to the ability of slate boards to be reused, using both slate pencils and slate boards was a cost-friendly

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<sup>1</sup> “Slate.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., [www.britannica.com/science/slate-geology](http://www.britannica.com/science/slate-geology).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

alternative to writing directly on paper.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, in school settings with the involvement of children, it was more practical to use slate pencils as an economic benefit for the institution. Other aspects of Seneca Village such as an emphasis on education explains the discovery of slate pencils from the Wilson house.

## **SOCIAL MEANING**

The broader theme of “labor and doing” relates to the slate pencil as students would use them in writing or practicing arithmetic. In short, using a slate pencil is typically related to an access to education. During the 19th century, secondary education was not as emphasized for young Black Americans in other areas of New York City, such as Little Africa. According to an 1850 census record, attendance in secondary schools for Black students in Seneca Village was 75.0%, compared to the 41.7% attendance of Black students in Little Africa.<sup>4</sup>

The slate pencil further bears social relevance because it was likely used by Black students in educational spaces, subverting commonly held ideas supporting the exclusion of Black people in academia. For instance, due to the exclusion of Black students in secondary education, the New York African Free School was created in 1787 by the New York Manumission Society, which was a group dedicated to advocating for African Americans. The school's mission was to educate Black children to take their place as equals to white American citizens. As the New York Historical Society explains:

It began as a single-room schoolhouse with about forty students, the majority of whom were the children of slaves, and by the time it was absorbed into the New York City

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<sup>3</sup> “Slate Pencils, Box of 5.” *National Museum of American History*, [americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah\\_1122579](http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1122579).

<sup>4</sup> Wall, Diana diZerega, et al. “Seneca Village and Little Africa: Two African American Communities in Antebellum New York City.” *Historical Archaeology*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2008, pp. 97–107. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/25617485](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25617485). Accessed 25 July 2021.

public school system in 1835, it had educated thousands of children, a number of whom went on to become well known in the United States and Europe.<sup>5</sup>

The success of these Black students can be attributed to the education they received in the New York African Free School. Similarly to the success of Black Americans who received an education, the slate pencil could be considered as a vehicle for socioeconomic mobility, increased inclusion in white dominated spaces, and higher career opportunities. Within Seneca Village, the African Union Church had a school, where the slate pencil may have been used.

### CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS

Writing devices in school settings have evolved since the usage of the slate pencil. In the late 19th and early 20th century, students opted for chalk and chalkboards as opposed to slate pencils and slate boards. Following this, in 1975, the dry erase marker was invented, which was used in conjunction with whiteboards.<sup>6</sup> These dry erase markers took a chemical approach to its formation, combining a series of chemical agents such as SD Alcohol-40, isopropanol, and resin.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, in order to adapt to digital technologies, David Martin and Nancy Knowlton founded the SMART board in 1991, used as an interactive visual and writing tool.

Other historical connections, such as the effort to include more Black students within institutions of education, still remain points of contention in the 21st century. From a contemporary lens, the slate pencil is relevant because it was used during a time of heavy exclusion of Black students in academic spheres. Likewise, such exclusion connects to conflicts regarding New York City's highly segregated schooling system. With standardized testing for

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<sup>5</sup> *Examination Days: The New York African Free School Collection*, [www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool](http://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool).

<sup>6</sup> Richer, Derek. "Whiteboards' History, Materials and Buying Tips." *The History of Whiteboards*, The Workplace Depot, 1 Nov. 2020, [www.theworkplacedepot.co.uk/news/whiteboards-history](http://www.theworkplacedepot.co.uk/news/whiteboards-history).

<sup>7</sup> Enne, Vee. "Chemicals in Dry-Erase Markers" *sciencing.com*, [sciencing.com/list-6040398-chemicals-dry-erase-markers.html](http://sciencing.com/list-6040398-chemicals-dry-erase-markers.html). 25 July 2021.

high schools such as the Specialized High Schools Admissions Test (SHSAT), low-income Black students are often at a disadvantage in admissions. For instance, in 2021, only 8 Black students were accepted to Stuyvesant High School, one of the nine specialized high schools in New York City.<sup>8</sup> There are still many efforts today to combat racism that pervades such institutions, and the slate pencil was one part of those first steps that represented an increased inclusion of Black students in educational spaces.

## CONCLUSION

The slate pencil found from under the Wilson family's floorboards has a connection to schooling and education. Similar to other contemporary writing tools used in school settings, its ability to be used various times made it a resourceful and cost-efficient device. Furthermore, the slate pencil plays a prominent role in telling the history of New York City, particularly for young Black Americans. During a time where Black Americans are discriminated against in academia, the slate pencil represents a mechanism to support socioeconomic mobility and increased inclusion. Nonetheless, contemporary efforts still persist in the 21st century to advocate for the dismantling of racist practices within institutions of education.

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<sup>8</sup> Shapiro, Eliza. "Only 8 Black Students Are Admitted to Stuyvesant High School." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 29 Apr. 2021, [www.nytimes.com/2021/04/29/nyregion/stuyvestant-black-students.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/29/nyregion/stuyvestant-black-students.html).

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