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Hook & Eye Research

The Hook & Eye: Innovation and Labor in 19th Century Seneca Village

_____ *The design of this hook & eye set captures a period of innovation and affordability that the residents of Seneca Village likely experienced. My research aims to examine how practical this sew-in clothing closure may have actually been, and how its potentially flawed design may have limited its usage, allowing us to narrow down the kind of garments and occasions it would have been used in. I also consider the connection between the hook & eye and domestic labor, and how that relates to alternative African American family structures in the 19th century and forms of socializing in Seneca Village.*



Hook (right) and Eye (left). (Photo courtesy of the NYC Archaeological Repository).

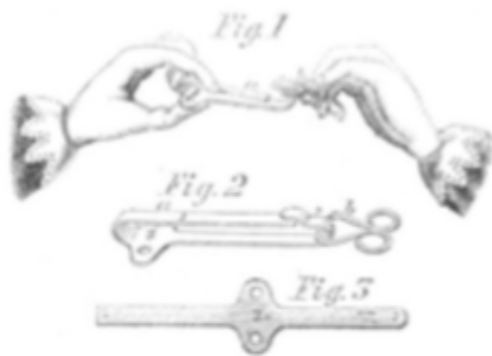
Recovered from the archaeological site that was once the Wilson home, the hook & eye artifacts are made of copper alloy and used in conjunction with each other.¹ Hooks & eyes could

¹ “Copper Alloy Clothing Hook,” NYC Archaeological Repository: The Nan A. Rothschild Research Center, accessed July 26, 2021, https://archaeology.cityofnewyork.us/collection/search/seneca-village-210709-copper-alloy-clothing-hook/keyword/hook/site/seneca-village/page/1/view_as/grid. “Copper Alloy Clothing Eye,” NYC Archaeological Repository: The Nan A. Rothschild Research Center, accessed July 26, 2021, https://archaeology.cityofnewyork.us/collection/search/seneca-village-210695-copper-alloy-clothing-eye/keyword/hook/site/seneca-village/page/1/view_as/grid.

be sewn into clothing and used for edge-to-edge closure, unlike the overlapping fabric closure that buttons provide. While small, the presence of the hook & eye provide significant insights into the social and communal aspect of domestic labor in Seneca Village. The design of the recovered artifacts, and the innovation to hooks & eyes throughout the 19th century, reveal how the timeline of Seneca Village interacts with the rise in inventions and machine-made products. This essay will explore what the limited usability of hooks & eyes may imply about the cultural norms of Seneca Village, and more specifically the potential activities of the women in the Wilson family.

Hooks & eyes are often referred to as “invisible closures,”² as they were frequently used on the inside or backs of garments. While pricier than straight pins, hooks & eyes were not the decorative closures of buckles or some buttons.³ Significantly, the hook & eye recovered from the site of the Wilson home have no visible ridges where the pieces would intertwine, and, as

evident from the shared scale in the above images, the curved portion of the hook is much thinner than the loop of the eye. In other words, this hook & eye appears to be easily undone, even against the wishes of the wearer. Of course, the artifacts could have been altered while underground, but the flawed usability of this closure actually matches up with negative sentiments over the hook & eye featured in magazine articles of the late 19th-century. An 1859 edition of *The*



Hook & Eye Improved with “Spring Lap” featured in *The Scientific American* (Photo Courtesy of *The London Engineer*).

Scientific American introduces an improved hook & eye, stating that the original design (which the recovered artifacts are) was “defective” and had a “liability to become unfastened.”⁴

It is likely that the hook & eye found on the site of the Wilson’s home would have been machine-made. Prior to 1830, hooks & eyes were made by hand and could cost \$1.50 per set.⁵ By the 1850s, thanks to machines that could produce 90 hooks and 120 eyes per minute, the price of one hook & eye together cost around 15 cents.⁶ Considering Seneca Village’s first

² White (2005), 76.

³ White (2005), 73-74.

⁴ “Hooks and Eyes for Ladies’ Dresses” (1859), 6.

⁵ “Hooks and Eyes” (1884), 49.

⁶ “Hooks and Eyes” (1884), 49.

residents purchased land there in 1825, and were evicted by 1857⁷, they were purchasing hooks & eyes just as the items were undergoing major manufacturing updates and becoming significantly more affordable, but before the closures were updated to be more practical (as mentioned in the previous paragraph). It is possible that the hook & eye were purchased prior to moving to Seneca Village, but even so this timeline still serves as a reminder of the technological excitement and innovation taking place during the existence of the community, and offers a chance at their participation in these advances

through their purchasing power. Further, it is significant that the copper alloy hook found on the Seneca Village site had a matching eye recovered as well, as it was common to use a loop of thread as a cheaper alternative to a metal eye.⁸

I think there are two possibilities for why this was. Perhaps I have correctly dated the purchasing of the hook & eye, and the metal eye was affordable enough (due to its

“mass”-produced nature) that the Wilsons would have opted for this more durable option. On the other hand, perhaps the Wilsons could afford the much more expensive hand-made hook & eye set and had purchased it earlier.

While doing research on the cultural significance of hooks & eyes in the 19th century, I noticed that texts focusing on domestic labor and sewing rarely mentioned those items. Rather, embroidery and other more artistic sewing was heavily featured. In New York City, particularly for middle class white women, there was an expectation of morality that could be fulfilled with domestic labor and leisurely household activities.⁹ While I cannot make any claims on the presence of embroidery or similar activities in Seneca Village, or lack thereof, I do argue that the sewing in of a hook & eye into a garment is not particularly artistic or time-taking and therefore not an activity of leisure. In fact, the hook & eye recovered on the site of the Wilson home may not have belonged to the Wilsons. It is possible that the Wilson women’s domestic labor extended beyond alterations of their own family’s clothing, and they served the clothing needs of



Drawing of hook-and-eye fastener from a nineteenth-century French catalog (Anonymous 1800–1830; Courtesy of the Winterthur Library Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera)

⁷ Wall, Rothschild, and Copeland (2008), 97-98.

⁸ White (2005), 75.

⁹ Welter (1996), 164-165.

their community, although no occupation is listed on the census. The women of families living in tenement homes in lower Manhattan often took sewing labor home to make extra money when the family needed it¹⁰. This sewing labor perhaps differs from the kind of sewing labor completed by women in Seneca Village, because these tenement home-residing women were doing this work in addition to the clothing-related labor they already did during the day. This perhaps suggests that some domestic labor in Seneca Village could be a source of income that was additional or flexible. Considering African American family structures often featured alternative gender norms, and African American women in the 1900s often had more authority at home than white women, it makes sense that the representations of domestic labor found at the Seneca Village site, and particularly the hook & eye, would offer the possibility of domestic labor without direct correlations to expectations of morality or submissiveness.¹¹

Returning to the somewhat impractical design of the recovered hook & eye mentioned earlier, the limited usability of a closure as loose as the original hook & eye could offer some insight into the kinds of garments it might have been sewn into.

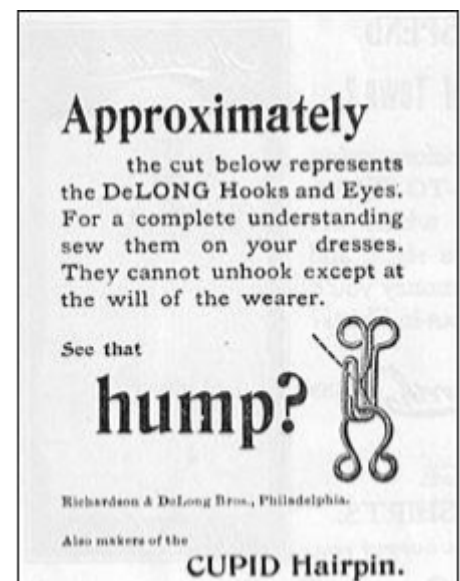
As mentioned in the 1859 edition of *The Scientific American*, original versions of the hook & eye could only remain secure if they were used to fasten tight-fitting garments.¹² This means that the hook & eye found on the site of the Wilson home was likely not used for looser-fitting outfits like summer dresses.

One occasion that could have required an outfit tight enough or worn temporarily enough to employ a hook & eye is church.

Comfort and the ability to complete demanding physical labor might have been a clothing requirement for weekday jobs, but it likely wasn't the priority for Sunday service. Connecting

with the previous paragraph, it's possible that the nicer, formal outfits worn in church may have been some of the garments the Wilson women mended or washed. This kind of situational

garment-wearing is present today, and although people tend to own more, cheaper clothing today there is still wealth attached to outfits for special occasions and celebrations. The fact that the



1898 ad for a hook & eye that stays clasped (courtesy of Richardson & DeLong Bros)

¹⁰ Yamin (2000), 89.

¹¹ Gallagher (2009), 427.

¹² "Hooks and Eyes for Ladies' Dresses" (1859), 6.

Wilson women were engaging with items like the hook & eye that may have only really been useful in occasional, formal settings provides insight into the variety within day-to-day life in Seneca Village. The Wilson women were likely engaging in domestic labor that was practical but also potentially socially-focused. Their domestic labor may have related to the labor done by the Wilson men through mending and washing their work clothes, but it wasn't necessarily centered around them or even just the Wilson family; the recovered hook & eye suggest that the labor of sewing in Seneca Village was connected to the routines, occasions, and celebrations of the community.

Walking through the streets of New York City today we are likely to see many more hooks & eyes than we would have in the 19th century. Hooks & eyes have lost their title as an “invisible closure,” as contemporary fashion has turned them into a decorative symbol of utility. One of the most common clothing items hooks & eyes are found on today are called “peasant



Peasant top for sale on Depop.com (courtesy of Google Images).

tops,” which feature puffed sleeves and a corset-like bodice linked with hooks & eyes all up the front. While it's strange to see these once-practical clasps used as a decorative gesture to the past, it isn't surprising to me that the original hook & eye, such as the one recovered from the site of the Wilson home, have an almost comical image. Hooks & eyes may have been mature and discreet, but they weren't very effective, and it's exciting that the design was updated and more controllable clasps were made. If anything, the presence of a likely machine-made hook & eye set lacking in any additional “security” really matches the

very brief and significant existence of Seneca Village. Both existences, and their removals, were crucial to the development of New York City and its various innovations, but there is also a true (more obvious) cultural loss accompanying the end of Seneca Village and a (less obvious) social and communal loss accompanying the disuse of original hooks & eyes.

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