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Ironstone Ewer

Abstract

Seneca Village, a nineteenth-century community of mainly African American residents, was recently excavated in 2011 where present-day Central Park is. Many artifacts were recovered and archaeologists have studied them to piece together the puzzle that was life in Seneca Village. This study focuses on an ironstone ewer found in the home of the Wilson family, an African American family who lived in Seneca Village. This study covers the rise in popularity of ironstone as a material, to the uses of ewers to promote personal hygiene and societal values. It further highlights how the perspective on cleanliness is always changing depending on the societal norms in place at that specific time, and how artifacts such as the handle of an ewer can shed light on those societal norms.

Introduction

The object at the center of this study, the handle of an ironstone ewer, is slightly chipped and also has a curve at the top of the handle for aesthetic purposes most likely. Discovered in the Wilson family home in Seneca Village, the artifact sheds light on the common practices in their family. The nineteenth century was a turning point for hygiene across the world as the upper class began to see cleanliness as something of value, something that would distinguish them from the lower classes. Soon after, bathing spread as common practice across all social classes. Considering this, the handle of the ewers was most likely used by the Wilson family to grab the ewer and clean themselves by scooping up water and pouring it onto themselves. This study will focus on the technical details of the ewer such as the implication of the ironstone material, the social meaning

of the artifact as it relates to values of cleanliness, and the artifact's relevance in contemporary society.



Figure 1. White Granite Ewer/Pitcher Handle. Photo courtesy of NYC Archaeological Repository: The Nan A. Rothschild Research Center

Technical Details

A distinguishing feature of this particular ewer is its material: ironstone. In 1813, Charles James Mason patented ironstone in Staffordshire, England, the county that would go on to become one of the major distributors of the earthenware. As a result, ironstone artifacts found on pre-1870 sites most likely have English origins. Ironstone, which also went by the name “white granite,” was most popular in the mid-nineteenth century due to its affordability in comparison to porcelain. Despite what the name may suggest, ironstone does not actually contain any trace of

iron. Instead, “it’s porous earthenware, made of clay mixed with feldspar.”¹ Porcelain-making, on the other hand, is an ancient and complex art form dating back to Shang Dynasty China. Without an insider’s knowledge, Europeans struggled to emulate Chinese porcelain until the late eighteenth century. The production of ironstone attempted to amend this by using transfer patterns and hand painting on ironstone blanks to imitate porcelain.

The use of ewers most likely coincided with the nineteenth-century “water cure” movement, also known as hydropathy: a dedicated movement of self-discipline whose followers believed water was the answer to a variety of modern ills, including pain relief. According to Kathryn Kish Sklar, “Hydropathy was based on the belief that water was the natural sustainer of life. It prescribed bathing, wet compresses, steam, massage, exercise, the drinking of cold water, and a spare diet.”² As the water cure craze took hold of middle-class Americans, such as those in Seneca Village, two hundred and thirteen water cure centers opened around the country. A musical testimonial composed by Mrs. A. J. Judson approvingly declared “All hail to pure cold water That bright rich gem from heaven; And praise to the creator, For such a, blessing given!” in its first stanza.² Ewers were used for both medicinal and sanitary purposes as in the former, they could be used to pour water over a burn or an infected wound, and in the latter, they most likely replaced showers and were used when people took baths. The first half of the nineteenth century also coincided with an ecological crisis in New York City where, due to a mass increase in population size and land modification, the city struggled with a water supply crisis.³ As a

¹ Lidy Baars, “Collecting and Caring for Ironstone Dishware,” Romantic Homes, April 12, 2018, <https://www.romantichomes.com/collect/keepsakes/ironstone/#:~:text=Ironstone%20is%20not%20porcelain%3B%20it's,painting%20to%20imitate>

² Kathryn Kish Sklar, “All Hail to Pure Cold Water!,” AMERICAN HERITAGE, July 1, 2021, <https://www.americanheritage.com/all-hail-pure-cold-water>.

³ Jean E. Howson, “The Archaeology of 19th-Century Health and Hygiene at the Sullivan Street Site, New York City,” Northeast Historical Archaeology, <https://teenthinkers.bgcdml.net/senecavillage/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/HOWSON-19th-c-Health-and-Hygiene.pdf>

result, privies were in use until the end of the nineteenth century, meaning people needed to be able to either go to a water source or bring one to them, the latter of which was done through the use of ewers.

Social Meaning

Cleanliness appears to be a relatively new practice when American history is examined. I would wager that this is because of a recent connection between cleanliness and the body and self. In the eighteenth century, people rarely ever washed because cleanliness was believed to be tied to clothes, rather than the body and self. History professor Peter Ward states “The idea about cleanliness focused on their clothing, especially the clothes worn next to the skin....The common view was that the white linen garments they wore below their outer clothes absorbed the body’s impurities, cleaning the skin in the process.”⁴ The maintenance of one’s body became common practice with the advancement of plumbing, architecture, and science. Bathrooms replaced privies and outhouses, and suddenly people had a space dedicated to simply their body and self, forcing them to take better care of themselves. To be clean was to be wealthy, to be affluent, to be desirable. The fact that the Wilson family owned an ewer speaks to their personal values on cleanliness and hygiene. This fragment of an ewer, therefore, disputes the media-formulated image of the 'dirty' residents of Seneca Village by serving as evidence for their engagement in practices of maintaining personal hygiene.

Conclusion

At first glance, the focus of this study appears to be exactly what it is: a broken handle of a chipped ironstone ewer. However, under an archaeological lens, this artifact offers up much

⁴ Peter Ward, “Historian Explores the Evolution of Personal Hygiene,” Voice of America, accessed July 27, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/historian-explores-evolution-personal-hygiene>.

more. It speaks volumes about the societal pressure to be clean and how it went beyond the body and self; being clean was a message to others that one was reputable and upstanding. It is now evidence against the hateful narrative that was spun about Seneca Village residents. In a contemporary context, the artifact stands to show how values of hygiene are always changing. I am reminded of how our own values surrounding cleanliness changed this past year as the world was ravaged by a pandemic. To hug another, to kiss them, to hold them, was suddenly looked down upon. To be within less than six feet of someone felt like an offense. Touching subway poles, ketchup bottles at restaurants, or public restrooms couldn't be done without grimacing. Hand sanitizer sales jumped six hundred percent. Our view of what was considered clean and what was not has changed, and while slowly life continues to resume to what it was before the pandemic, it can never truly go back to the way it was. In a similar fashion, the introduction of ewers was a sign of a changing society, one that had new ideas about hygiene. In a few centuries, when historians and archaeologists look back upon the artifacts of our time, a disposable mask or hand sanitizer or a pair of gloves, perhaps they too will see them as relics of a changing society.

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