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The History of Lead Fishing Weights in Seneca Village

Abstract

Seneca Village was a predominantly Black community in Manhattan, where Central Park stands today. The people who lived in this village were forced out of their homes in order to create Central Park in the 1850s. Even though most of the buildings and other establishments were destroyed, some artifacts were later found from the Wilsons' residency. Within this essay I will unpack the importance of the lead weight discovered from the Wilsons' home and its impact on the villagers.



Figure 1. Lead weight from Seneca Village. Image from NYC Archeological Repository: The Nan A. Rothschild Research Center

Introduction

Seneca Village was a village in the early-to-mid 1800s that consisted of mostly African American people. The village was later destroyed in the late 1800s and turned into what is now Central Park. As a result of this happening many people had to leave things behind, which is how we have some of the artifacts from this village. When building Central Park many things were left under ground and were later dug up. The artifact I

will introduce and describe is a lead fishing weight. This artifact would not be common in people's homes today, however it makes sense for someone who lived in the village to have one. The people who lived in Seneca Village used many of their own resources. There was a garden where they could grow crops, and more importantly they were near bodies of water, namely the Hudson River, where they could fish, hence the use of fishing weights. They used these lead weights to weigh down the fishing nets while fishing in order to catch fish.¹ They could acquire the weights by either making them or buying them from someone. The weights were made with a mould; they would get a scrap of lead, melt it, then mould it to the size and shape they wanted.² The size, shape, and weight of the lead weights could vary based on the different kinds of fishing net and where they are fishing, they would use different nets and weights for different methods of fishing and different types of fish. Within this essay, I will talk about the use of the lead weight and its importance in the villagers' lives.

Technical Details

Lead fishing weights are made up of lead, iron, and other substances; as said before they would melt the lead and other metals down and mould it into the proper shape needed. They were also most likely easily accessible because of how close they lived to the water. Because of their location and lack of easy access to resources from actual markets they were dependent on the resources from the Hudson River. This item was also extremely easy to use, all you need to do is put the rope or line through the hook at the top of the weight and put it into the water.

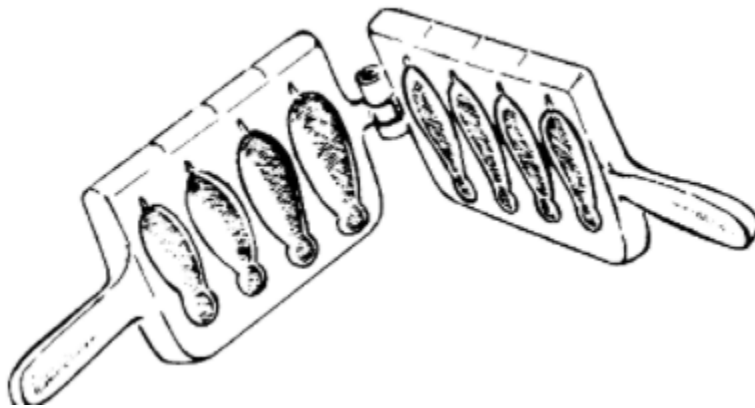


Figure 2. Mould for a lead weight. From “Handlining and Squid Jigging.”

¹Sharvit, Jacob. "Lead Fishing-Net Weights from the 'Fisherman's Grave,' Akhziv." *Atiqot / 74 עתיקות* 242-43 : (2013). Accessed July 26, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23467648>.

²“Part I Handlining.” Handlining and squid jigging. Accessed July 26, 2021. <http://www.fao.org/3/t0511e/T0511E01.htm#ch1.5>.

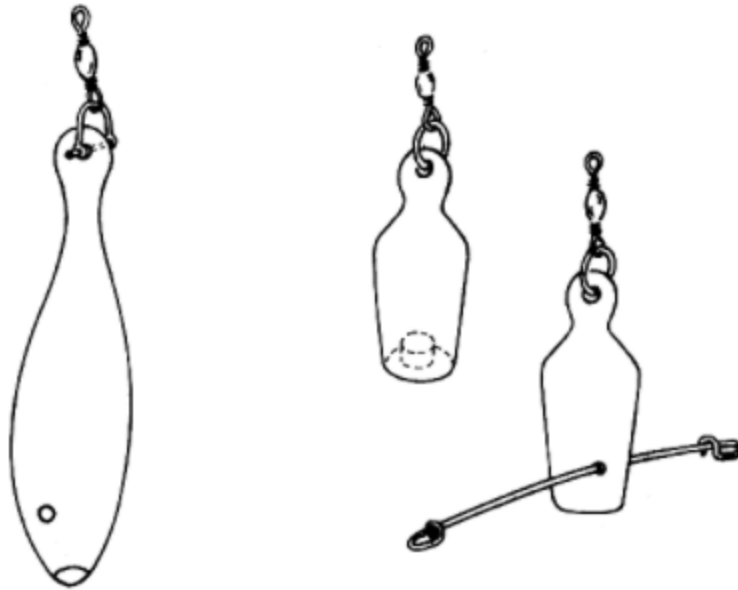


Figure 3. Lead weight being attached to the mainline in order to sink down the net.
From “Handlining and Squid Jigging.”

Social Meaning

Fishing weights are still used to this day, though they may not be as common or made of the same material, people continue to utilize them. The people who are most likely to use the weight are fishermen, as they are a crucial object to have. This item fits into the theme of labor and doing because fishing is a form of labor, and the weight likely played a huge role in the amount of work the villagers had to do to get food, as many of the markets were less convenient than the river. The Wilson family had most likely been one of many who would go to the Hudson River for their resources, thus their possession of the weight. However, there is also a chance the weight could have been passed on from past generations. Either way, having this item could cause it to be a lot easier to get food.



Figure 4. Lead weight from Hook Point from 1410-1630 AD. From Ward et al. 1999.³

Conclusion

To conclude, a lead fishing weight would be used a little less frequently today than in the past. During the 1800's it would be more common for people to fish, however fishing is not something all people would do. I am still curious about where this object originated and the cost of the item. I know it would be common in homes, however it interests me to know if the homes they were in were of people who had a higher income than most or not; it will also lead me to find out the Wilson's social class.

³ Ward, W. T., I. P. Little, G. M. Roberts, B. L. Gulson, B. M. O'Leary, and D. M. Price. "Ancient Lead Weight Found with Loisels Pumice near Hook Point, Fraser Island, Queensland." *Archaeology in Oceania* 34, no. 1 (1999): 25-30. Accessed July 26, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40387111>.