



Made From Off The Land

Somerset Place State Historic Site

Throughout recorded history, families have depended upon naturally grown and cultivated organic materials to craft objects they needed. *Made From Off The Land*, presents some objects that might have been made by enslaved and employed white families living at Somerset Place plantation in 1843. The focus is on objects that were primarily made by women and children using materials that could easily be collected near the home.

Made From Off The Land

SEDGE is a grass-like plant found growing wild in swamps, marshes, or on the banks of lakes, rivers and streams. Sedge has narrow leaves, a solid stem, and one or more bushy heads on the stem.

SEDGE BROOMS

The history of brooms is perhaps as old as mankind. The earliest brooms were probably the small limb of a leafy or needled tree or made from a handful of wild grasses. Throughout the world brooms have, and continue to be used, to sweep floors, whether they be dirt or wood. Brooms were also used to sweep yards before cutting grass became popular. They ranged in size based on the preferences of a particular culture. In Africa, early brooms were made from a variety of short sedges requiring the user to stoop over to sweep the home and yard. Most early European brooms were longer.

In 19th century North Carolina, at locations like Somerset Place, brooms were generally made from sedge that still grows naturally and bountifully across the state.

Sedge brooms wore out pretty quickly. Children traditionally

gathered a year's supply of the broom sedge when it dried out in January and stored in sheds and barns. When new brooms were needed the sedge was already on hand.

SEDGE BASKETS

The craft of basket making predates recorded history. Some of the earliest existing baskets were discovered in the tomb of Tutankhamen, an Egyptian king who died more than 3,325 years ago. According to the Old Testament, some 3,294 years ago, Moses' mother set him afloat in a basket made of "rush"—a natural grass from which baskets could be made.

The oldest form of baskets are coiled baskets. They are made of a variety of sedges, grasses, vines and pine needles. These baskets require no tools to produce as did woven baskets made of split hard woods.

GOURDS

The history of gourd crafts is believed to date back to the fourth Millennium B.C. Specimens were found in the Egyptian tombs of the Fifth Dynasty. As one of Africa's earliest cultivated plants, the gourd has been adapted by both nomadic and sedentary people throughout the continent. Gourds were introduced to the new world in the 1600s by European travelers. Enslaved Africans brought their knowledge of gourds with them to the Americas where they cultivated, dried and shaped them into bowls, dippers, dishes, ladles, and jugs. Gourds were also used by enslaved people to fashion string instruments.

During the 1840s, an organized group of free blacks, slaves and white sympathizers formed a secret network of people who hid runaway slaves—a network known as the Underground Railroad. The gourd became a symbolic compass for travelers on the Underground Railroad. In the song "Follow The Drinking Gourd" the Drinking Gourd refers to the Big Dipper which points to the North Star. The Big Dipper guided runaway slaves north to safe states or Canada.

CHEWINGSTICKS/ TOOTHBRUSHES

Chewingsticks were recorded being in use in early Babylonia in 3500 B.C. About the size of a pencil, one end was chewed and used to brush the teeth. The other end pointed like a pick to get debris from between teeth. The earliest written information about Chewingsticks is found in Chinese literature in 1600 B.C. The first bristled toothbrush originated in China around 1600 A.D. Almost 200 years later, around 1780, the first toothbrush was made in England. The handles were carved out of cattle bone. Heads made of natural bristles, from the necks and shoulders of pigs, were placed in bored holes made in the bone and kept in place by thin wire.

When the first patent for an American made toothbrush was given in 1857, many families could not afford to purchase toothbrushes. Instead, family members simply went into the woods and cut pencil size sticks from the Black Gum tree and chewed one end until it feathered out and could be used to brush teeth.

CORN SHUCK/ CORNHUSK DOLLS

Cornshuck and corncob dolls have been made by Northeastern Indians probably since the beginning of corn agriculture more than a thousand years ago. A type of Iroquois doll was made in response to bad dreams. The doll was later discarded and put back into the earth to carry away the evil of the dream.

During the 1840s, on plantations such as Somerset Place, generally, only the plantation owner could afford to purchase dolls and other toys for their children. During harvest time, the children of the overseers and enslaved families gathered corn husks and corncobs and lovingly crafted dolls. .

REED & CANE

The love of music is a defining human characteristic. In 1840, the cost of store bought musical instrument was prohibitive for most families. Fathers and grandfathers lovingly carved whistles and flutes from reed and cane growing nearby. Yard brooms were also made with reed.

CORNCOB PIPES

The history of smoking pipes comes from the ancient world where they were invented and reinvented around the world. Depending on place and time, pipes have been made of a variety of materials including clay, glass, metal, cherry wood, and bamboo.

Smoking pipes made of corncob bowls with reed stems were popular in the 1840s among people working in agricultural settings. During corn shelling season, when feed corn for farm animals was stored in barns for the winter, corncobs were plentiful. Pipes made from the corncobs were combustible and frequently had to be replaced. Both men and women indulged in the habit of corncob pipe smoking.

*Made From Off
The Land:
An Outreach Program
of Somerset Place
State Historic Site*