

Slate Pencils from Frame Building

Archaeologists are continuing excavations of the frame building at the Newman Street site. The variety of artifacts recovered from the frame building have archaeologists pondering what function the building served. Included among the artifact assemblage are domestic wares, architectural materials, metal tools and hardware, keys, personal items, and even a cache of slate pencils!



Pack of slate pencils. Image courtesy of the National Museum of American History.

Slate pencils, usually made from slate or soapstone, were first exhibited at the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association in Boston, MA in 1844 (Early Office Museum 2016). After their exhibition, students commonly used slate pencils to write letters and numbers onto personal sized blackboards known as slates. Since slates could be wiped clean after each use, they were a much less expensive alternative to large quantities of paper (NMAH 2021). Slate pencils were usually purchased in packs, like modern lead pencils, and came either unwrapped, wrapped in paper, or encased in wood. Paper wrapped slate pencils often had designs or prints on them, such as the American Flag. They were advertised as late as 1914 but were likely used until the 1930s (Early Office Museum 2016).

The slate pencils uncovered within the frame structure at the Newman Street Site were likely from multiple packs. These pencils could have originally been wrapped, but since paper and wood tend to degrade over time we cannot know for certain. They were, however, clustered together in a relatively neat row. It's possible the pencils had been in their original paper or cardboard pack that has since degraded. The question is, why so many? It is almost as if someone had purchased several packs and simply forgot about them.



Cache of slate pencils, outlined in red, were clustered together in a row.

References

National Museum of American History

2021 *Slate Pencils, Box of 5*. Electronic document, https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1122579#:~:text=In%20the%2019th%20century%2C%20schoolchildren,slates%2C%20personal%2D-sized%20blackboards.&text=In%20the%20United%20States%2C%20slate,as%20late%20as%20the%201910s, accessed April 13, 2021.

Early Office Museum

2016 *History of the Lead Pencil*. Electronic document, http://www.officemuseum.com/pencil_history.htm, accessed April 13, 2021.