

THE MYSTERY OF HISTORY — FEBRUARY 7, 2022

WHAT'S IT?

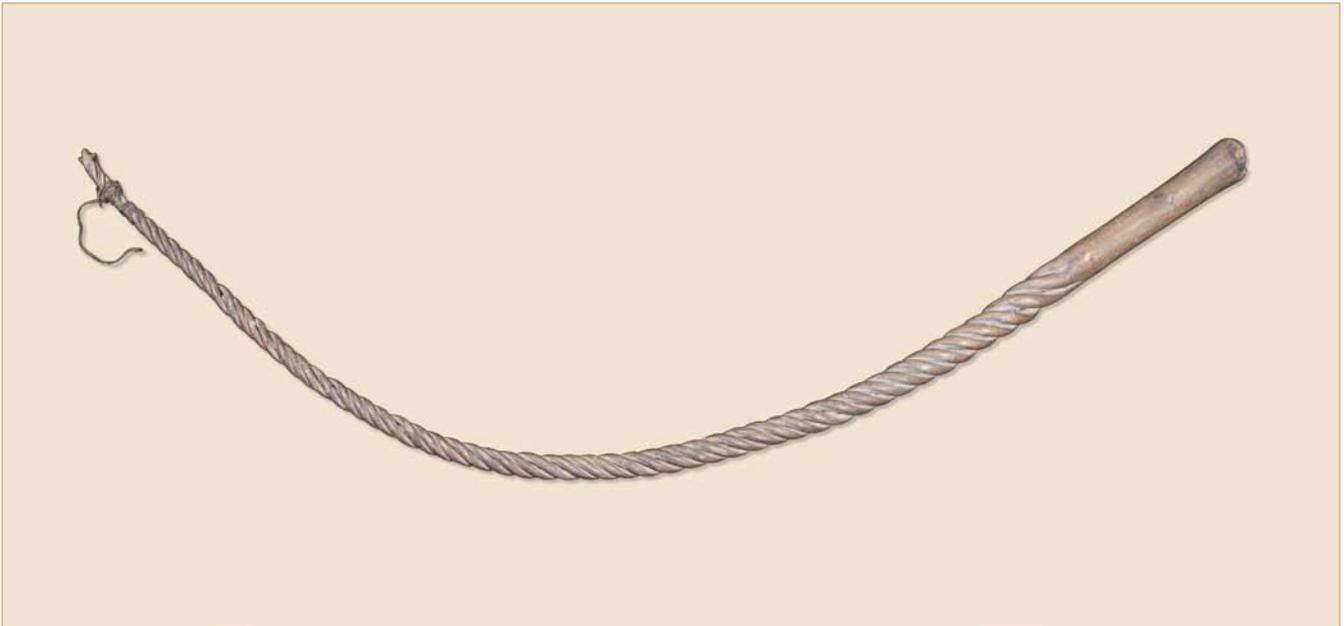


Fig. 1: Straight on view. PHOTO: © 2019 Norman J. Frisch



Fig. 2: Close up of distal end. PHOTO: © 2019 Norman J. Frisch



Fig. 3: Close up by handle. PHOTO: © 2019 Norman J. Frisch

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WHAT'S IT?**ARTIFACT 22-01****SPECIFICATIONS:**

From one piece of wood, four separated spirals are carved starting at the handle. Length (measured on the outside curve) = 100.33 cm (39 1/2 in); Handle: Maximum diameter at proximal end = 3.18 cm (1 1/4 in), at distal end = 0.79 cm (5/16 in) diameter. The distal end is wrapped with heavy string. Weight = 206 gm (0.45 lb)

CLUES & QUESTIONS:**The Insect Spanker**

The title for this artifact is actually a clue to determine what this artifact might be. See if you can figure it out! This cleverly designed tool helped to build America. You might be asking yourself how a twisted stick could build anything? This woody wonder was key to getting innumerable tons of materials and people to where they needed to be. In the hands of an expert, a person could use it to power transportation systems, plow fields for farming, grind grains into flour, and taxi people to and fro. Besides the functional aspect of this device, it is a remarkable piece of art and craftsmanship. While doing research for this artifact, I was not able to find a single one like it. How many pieces of wood were used to make it? What kind of wood do you think it is? How might it be related to the Erie Canal? What kind of training would you need to use this device? Please send and/or write out your answers on the “What’s It” response cards at the Seymour Library. Happy investigating!

ANSWER:

As you probably surmised, the artifact in the library for February and March wasn’t an insect spanker, but rather a play on words. In truth it was a buggy whip and was used as part of a disruptive technology involving transportation systems. How was it “disruptive”? For that answer, you simply have to look down at your feet. Before the advent of the horse and buggy (and other

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loads that were moved by draft animals) cargo was moved by humans. In some contexts a whip was used on humans to motivate them to pull extraordinarily heavy loads—think of the human slaves involved in creating the Egyptian pyramids. As human power was replaced by animal power, an example of a disruptive technology, bigger loads could be transported more efficiently. The evolution from the human whip to the buggy whip, combined the functions of the steering wheel, gas pedal, and braking systems found in today's automobiles. The whip was used to direct (steer) draft animals to wherever they needed to carry the loads, the speed at which the cargo arrived, and stopped at the at the endpoint with the use of verbal commands and purposeful touches of the whip to animal.

The particular buggywhip that was provided as an artifact is unique in terms of how it was created. Buggy whip manufacturers sprung up everywhere there were people and draft animals. A solid core was wrapped with leather and/or other materials to provide a stiff handle. Attached to the end of the handle and middle shaft were small strips

of leather to soften the blow the draft animals received from human drivers, i.e., a touch on the left pelvis “told” the animal to veer left. Contrary to popular belief and old western movies, whips were more often used as touching devices rather than an instrument being used harshly to motivate the draft animals. What's unique about the displayed buggy whip is that it was braided from a single piece of willow. The branch of willow was quartered at one end and four lengthwise splices were cut to a point approximately six inches above the other end of the branch. The spliced branch was then soaked in water for period of time to make the wood more pliable for braiding. Once the braiding was complete, a waxed string was wound around the end of the braid to hold the splices securely and also to secure the leather strips that would be used as the communication system from driver to animal. In doing research involving the buggy whip, this researcher did not encounter any other artfully braided buggy whip shafts. Most were simply a branch of some tree with leather strips attached to one end. The local whip makers of Brockport were true artisans!

GUESSES:***Seymour Library In-person Responses*****Dom Ahay**, “Whomping willow branch.”**Darlene Dukes**, “A whip used in slavery.”**Z. Herzog**, “Water finder.”**Ori Hodge**, “It is a long noodle.”**Eli Hoepfl**, “A whip for riding a horse and [carriage]. And they hit the horse with it.”**Missa** . . . [not decipherable].

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WHAT'S IT?**BACKGROUND**

“WHAT’S IT?” has been a feature of the BCM website since its inception in 2007. In 2017 Brockport Community Museum board member Archer “Buck” Noble, a Brockport Central School District teacher (now retired) developed “The Mystery of History” school project that encouraged fourth and fifth grade students to use observational and investigative techniques to help determine the type and use of different historic artifacts.

That project was introduced to the general public during a Brockport Community Museum outreach presence at the 2017 Brockport Sidewalk Sale. That success led to this collaboration between the Brockport Community Museum, Seymour Library and Brockport Central School District.

GET INVOLVED

- **Take your best guess** regarding the current artifact.
- **Do you have an artifact** you would like to know more about? Open your query to a larger audience.
- **Have a suggestion** about how we can improve this project?

If so...

Leave your contact information in “Ye old prediction box” near the exhibit display.

CREDITS

Museum project committee

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Seymour Library

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