

Reconstructing Native Mid-Atlantic Net-Making Technology: The Value of Collaboration and Outreach with the Lenape Tribe of Delaware

By:

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Introduction

Our field is increasingly recognizing the need to engage source communities with the preservation of their material culture. Over the past year, as part of an undergraduate senior thesis in Art Conservation at the University of Delaware, I have collaborated with the Lenape Tribe of Delaware to study Native American fishing nets from the Mid-Atlantic region. The project was inspired by the work of the last known Lenape fisherman and net-maker Clem Carney and has benefited tremendously from various forms of community outreach.

Carney was born in Cheswold, Delaware shortly after the American Civil War, and his descendants live in the same area today. Carney's nets and tools were collected in the early 1900s by the cultural anthropologist C.A. Weslager. Two of these objects can be found within the collections of the National Museum of the American Indian and offer a point of pride for the Lenape Tribe. Carney's nets, as well as those made and used by his Native contemporaries throughout the Mid-Atlantic, harken to a technology used for millennia prior to the arrival of European colonizers and centuries afterward. Unfortunately, the majority of Carney's materials cannot be located. This loss highlights years of misidentification and neglect of the Lenape Tribe of Delaware. It also points at a need to study, understand, and preserve this once crucial technology—a need which my research has attempted to fill.

Research Methodology

As part of my project, I investigated all extant examples of historic Mid-Atlantic Native American fishing nets and associated tools within museum collections in a technical study that incorporates not only descriptive analysis but also replication of the observed construction methods (Drooker and Webster 2000, 1). I studied 20 nets and net fragments, documenting details such as net type, material, construction method, and the presence of historic repairs and preservatives. I also created tools to enable continued research of this topic, including systematic examination forms and an inventory of all Native Mid-Atlantic nets and associated materials at institutions throughout North America. However, the most challenging and simultaneously rewarding aspect of this project has been the associated outreach and community engagement.

Associated Outreach

While the material analysis briefly mentioned above is unprecedented, I believe it would be meaningless without the input of Lenape community members. Conservators have the skills and insight to make material culture accessible to a wide audience, and we have the responsibility to make the objects we steward accessible to the communities that produced them. From its inception, decisions regarding my research goals and methods were made in conjunction with Chief Dennis Coker and other Lenape community members. In addition to my research, I spent most of my time on this project focusing on outreach events, including the organization of a tribal delegation to the National Museum of the American Indian Cultural Resources Center, public talks, and net-making workshops.

Tribal Delegation to the National Museum of the American Indian Cultural Resources Center

The majority of the nets and tools studied as part of this research are housed at the National Museum of the American Indian Cultural Resources Center (CRC) in Suitland, MD. In August 2018, after my examination, a Lenape Delegation came to the Center to see the materials. The delegation consisted of ten people, including Chief Coker and four of Carney's direct descendants.

During the visit, the delegation met with the conservation team, including Nora Frankel, who was completing her Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in Textile Conservation. In addition to understanding the net-making technology of their ancestors, the Lenape Tribe is interested in learning about the use of natural fibers more broadly in their material culture. Nora kindly shared

her research on the identification of bast fibers, which she presented at AIC 2018. Delegation members even tried their hand at spinning cordage. Delaware Public Media correspondent Sophia Schmidt captured the wonderful moment when Nora taught 7-year-old Carney-descendant Charlotte Cline how to make dogbane cordage (Fig. 1), similar to that she saw on two of the nets that day.



Figure 1: Nora Frankel, former Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in Textile Conservation, shows Melody and Charlotte Cline bast fibers commonly used for cordage (Sophia Schmidt)

The delegation visit had many positive outcomes. Chief Coker and tribal members made valuable connections to the collections staff and archivists, and the delegation members provided a unique insight on how the nets and associated materials were used within the greater context of

the region. Chief Coker shared personal stories of fishing as a young boy in the same waters as Clem Carney using nets similar to those I examined. Most importantly, however, the delegation members were able to observe and connect to materials similar to those made and used by their ancestors. Watching Melody Cline and her children admire the shuttle and float that were carved and used by their ancestor Clem Carney was incredibly powerful.

Public Talks

Following my research visits, I shared the preliminary findings with the Lenape community at large. I held two public lectures in Cheswold and Newark, DE. The lecture was scheduled twice so that Lenape from both Cheswold and northern Delaware, as well as scholars from throughout the state, could learn about the research. Tribal community members and elders, University of Delaware professors, and employees from the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary attended and engaged in valuable discussions. Chief Coker and community members provided me with useful feedback and suggestions on how to continue the research and the best ways to engage a larger audience, which has continued to be an obstacle.

Net-Making Workshops

The final component of the project's outreach has been hands-on net-making workshops. Chief Dennis Coker knows that few, if any, tribal members will begin tying nets as a result of this research. However, he believes that understanding these materials is most valuable as an "exercise in reminding [Lenape] people in how resourceful they were in order to survive" and has the ability to spark a greater interest in the tribe's material culture in general. Reconstructing an ancestral craft allows tribal members to gain a greater understanding and appreciation for the

object that was previously crucial to their sustenance. Additionally, the tribe agrees that including the non-Native public in the net-making workshops allows for a wider acceptance and respect for Lenape culture within the state of Delaware and on a national level.

The Biggs Museum of American Art in Dover, Delaware, located approximately seven miles from Cheswold, agreed to host a series of net-making workshops. The workshops have coincided with the museum's exhibition "Rooted, Revived and Reinvented: Basketry in America" and have provided an exciting opportunity to bring Native American art and technology into an American art museum.

The tying workshops have been held in conjunction with the museum's admission-free Saturdays, so that the events are not cost-prohibitive. The March 2, 2018 workshop was well-

attended by people of all ages and both Native and non-Native community members. It included an introduction to the research followed by a hands-on workshop focused on tying flat nets. I provided participants with cotton cordage and plastic shuttles, as well as handouts illustrating common knots used in the net-tying process. The most enthusiastic attendee was 10 years old. He adeptly cast on a net (Fig. 2) and took materials home to complete his first fishing net. His



Figure 2: I demonstrate tying to a young workshop participant at the Biggs Museum of American Art on March 2, 2019 (Ruth Ann Purchase)

excitement was contagious during the workshop. I also found it incredibly rewarding to see a young non-Native community member excited about Native arts. The tribal members who attended and I all agree that the event was a definite success.

The April 6, 2019 workshop had the same structure as the March 2 event. However, the focus was on tying nets in the round. The May 4 workshop will be held in conjunction with

Dover Days, a long running, free event, which brings hundreds of visitors through Downtown Dover and the Biggs Museum. I am in the process of developing a shorter hands-on activity for this event in collaboration with Ryan Grover, the museum's curator.

Outreach Findings and Recommendations

The scope of the project's outreach has been broadened by unexpected but very much appreciated media coverage. The research has been featured on six different websites, including both state-wide and national news sources. It has also been acknowledged by two professional organizations in archaeology and art conservation, as well as the Delaware State Parks Department. Information regarding the project has been shared in hard copy newsletters, exhibition brochures, web articles, blog posts, and a variety of social media outlets including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Additionally, the research has been presented in four public lectures in all three of Delaware's counties and two workshops, with one more lecture and workshop to occur in May.

Based on attendance at these public events and the recorded number of people reached by web-based content, it is estimated that over 5,500 people have learned about this research, the work of Clem Carney, and the importance of collaboration between art conservators and source communities.

The community engagement of the tribe has been at times difficult, due to the presence of larger community issues. In January 2019, one of two historic Lenape churches, Immanuel Union United Methodist Church, burned to the ground, and numerous tribal elders have passed during the course of the research. Additionally, many community members are rightfully leery of

non-Native scholars and anthropologists. The engagement of tribal members has grown slowly as the legitimacy and thoughtfulness of the research has been proven.

Despite these challenges, the project has succeeded in many ways. It has connected the Lenape Tribe with large institutions, including the National Museum of the American Indian and the Biggs Museum of American Art and has sparked further research. The Tribe is now undertaking research on dogbane in conjunction with the Delaware Department of Natural Resources after seeing dogbane cordage on nets at the CRC. Many conservators and museum professionals have also learned about the Lenape and the collaboration as a whole. Finally, non-Native Delawareans have learned about and gained a greater respect for the Lenape through the outreach events, while also learning about the field of art conservation and its many facets.

Conclusion

Chief Coker has stated that this research has “inspired community members to get more involved, study the arts and sciences and humanities, then see how each discipline informs the other.” I deem this a huge success. It is also my hope that this work will act as an impetus for increased collaborations between art conservators, material culturists, and source communities. Through this research and the associated outreach events, thousands of people of all ages have learned about the Lenape Tribe of Delaware. Additionally, many of the tangible and intangible aspects of a technology that has been so integral to the history Mid-Atlantic Native groups collectively have been preserved. Participation of community members, both Native and non-Native, in this project, proves there is a strong investment and interest in the material culture and history of indigenous communities. It has also shown that there is a larger public interest in

cultural heritage and its preservation— an interest I am proud to say has been cultivated through these various outreach efforts.

References

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To Register for the Final Net-Tying Workshop or Lecture:

<http://prod5.agileticketing.net/websales/pages/info.aspx?evtinfo=82530~03e13765-2c69-4555-9f98-2b887bde4199&epguid=8dad5a50-5b7f-490a-acea-53bc57307486&>

<https://www.cas.udel.edu/saturday-symposium/documenting-delawares-historic-architecture-and-heritage>

More Information about the Lenape Tribe of Delaware:

<http://www.lenapeindiantribeofdelaware.com/>