

Curator's Choice

Sugar Nippers

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Until the late 19th century, refined sugar was sold in loaf form ~ cylindrical cones that were molded into different sizes (some as tall as three feet!), wrapped in paper and sold to the individual consumer (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Refined white and brown sugar molded into cones. Photo from www.CocktailLudes.com.

Breaking the hard sugar into smaller chunks to be processed for cooking or sweetening beverages required a tool that would have been instantly recognizable to our colonial ancestors. Sugar nippers (also called nips, cutters or tongs) had curiously-shaped blades and were designed to be used like scissors to separate smaller chunks of sugar from the cone. *Miss Leslie's Lady's House-Book*, published in 1850, advised readers that "a pair of sugar-nippers are indispensable, for breaking small the loaf-sugar after it has been cracked with a stout knife and a mallet or hammer." (Leslie 1850:235).

A pair of iron sugar nippers were discovered during archaeological excavations at Oxon Hill/Addison Plantation (18PR175) in Prince George's County, Maryland (Figure 2). They were found on the ground surface near the former Addison manor house, built in 1710 and destroyed by fire in 1895 (McCarthy et al. 1990).

The Addison family's sugar nippers were of the handheld variety. A small leg or spike that projected from one of the handles at a right angle was held against the tabletop to steady the nippers and provide more control (Figure 3). The Addison sugar nippers were missing this spike, and one of the blades was broken as well.



Figure 2. Sugar nippers from Oxon Hill Plantation.

Tabletop nippers were mounted horizontally on boards, allowing the user greater force with the blades (Old and Interesting 2009).

Sugar nippers for use in the kitchen were generally made of iron-like the Addison example~or of silver for use with tea services. Some iron examples were decorated at the joint between the two handles (Jamestown Yorktown Foundation 2015), but the Addison example was undecorated.

Granulated and cubed sugar, introduced in the late 19th century, were the death knell for sugar nippers. Since that time they have been relegated to the odd kitchen curiosity that shows up in antique shops.



Figure 3. Sugar nippers and sugar dish depicted in a print of unknown date. The shape and decoration on the sugar dish date its manufacture to the early 19th century. Illustration from <http://www.victorianpassage.com>.

References Cited

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Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum is part of the Maryland Historical Trust, an agency of the Maryland Department of Planning, Baltimore.

