

Curator's Choice

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Angling for a Catch: Fishhooks in Maryland

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From the earliest inhabitants to modern anglers, fishing has long been a way of life for Marylanders. One foundational piece of technology to harvest this aquatic bounty is the fishhook. This simple object has had a huge impact for such a small tool, evolving from hand-crafted bone hooks to the mass-produced variety of steel hooks today.



Figure 1. Bone fishhook from 18FR4 near Catoctin Creek

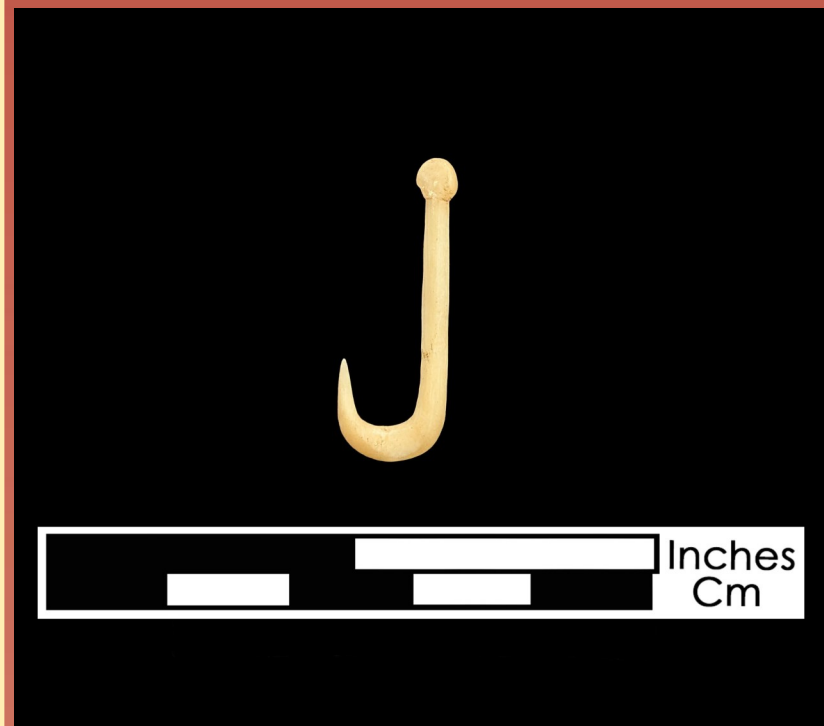


Figure 2. Bone fishhook from 18MO13, north of Great Falls along the Potomac.

Maryland Indians made their home along the banks of the water, relying on harvesting fish and shellfish as a part of their daily life. They used a variety of methods to catch fish, such as nets, hook and line, spears, and weirs (traps). William Strachey, a British colonist, described the hook and line method in 1612:

“Their angles are long small rods at the end whereof they have a cleft to which the line is fastened, and at the line they hang a hook, made either of a bone grated (as theynock their arrows) in the form of a crooked pin or fishhook, or of the splinter of a bone, and with a thread of the line they tie on the bait (Strachey 1612, 79).”

The MAC lab holds several examples of the different styles of fishhooks (see Figures 1 and 2). These examples were recovered from near Catoctin Creek in Frederick county, as well as along the Potomac River and were carefully crafted from bone. Fishhooks of various organic materials, including bone, shell, and horn have been discovered around the world, some dating back to 25,000 years ago (Corbyn 2011).

As European colonists arrived in the early 1600s, they applied their own methods to catching the variety of aquatic life they encountered in the Chesapeake. Their fishhooks were made of metal, typically iron or a copper alloy, and have been found at several sites along waterways. While they also used nets and traps, they primarily used hook and line from the shore, just as many anglers in Maryland enjoy today. We know this from inventories of their items. “A sample of 900 household probate inventories of colonists between 1640 and 1740 were examined, and 95% of those had only one type of fishing

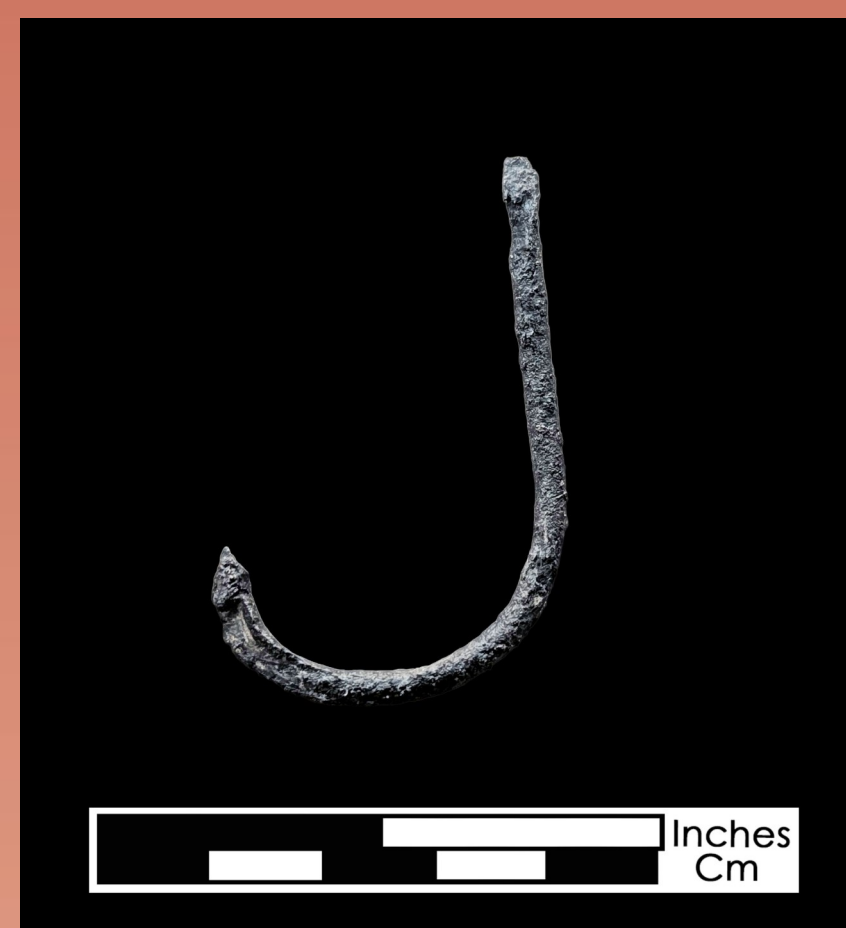


Figure 3. Colonial period metal fishhook from King's Reach site, at Jefferson Patterson Park.

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Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly. October 1678. Maryland State Archives. <https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc2900/sc2908/000001/000007/html/am7-52.html>

“The Fishing Museum Online - a Brief History of the Hook.” 2011. http://www.fishingmuseum.org.uk/hooks_overview.html.

gear – hooks and lines.....Curiously, few of the homes had boats or canoes (Miller 2022).”

Fishing provided necessary sustenance and could supplement the diet of colonists, but it was also a relaxing way to spend the day. Fishing as a hobby increased in popularity in the mid 1600s, evidenced by the publication of fishing guide books such as *The Compleat Angler* in 1653 by Izakk Walton. It was such a popular pastime in colonial Maryland that the Assembly saw fit to ban fishing on Sundays to keep holy the Sabbath day in 1678 (Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly 1678).

Fishhooks were produced commercially in England, although the metals used were fairly soft and of unknown temper and composition. Around 1640, Charles Kirby began producing fishing tackle using his own process to reliably temper steel, which resulted in a stronger and more reliable hook. Kirby hooks became known for their superior product and were dominant until crucible tempering of metal became widespread in 1750 (Herd 1997). At that point, the mass production of steel needles became possible, which were bent and shaped into fishhooks in a variety of shapes and sold.

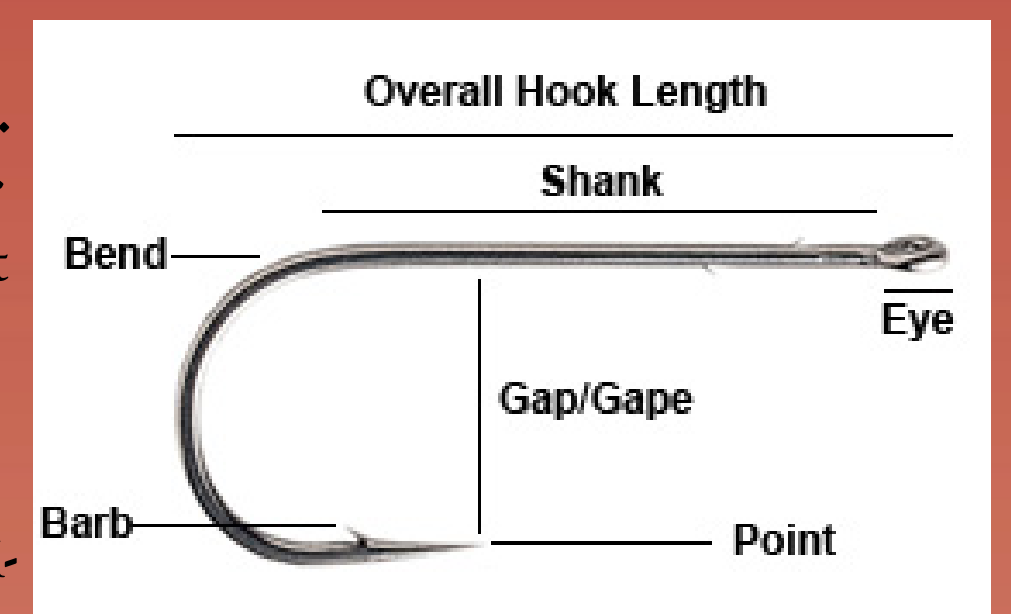


Figure 4: Diagram of the parts of a fishhook. “Understanding the Anatomy of a Fishing Hook” 2019.

The shape and size of a fishhook can be very different depending on the purpose of the hook. All of them catch fish of course, but anglers may choose different hooks to target different species of fish. Hooks all have some basic parts in common: the point, the bend, and the shank (Figure 4). While one of the first depictions of a fishhook with an eye, or a circular hole to tie the hook to the line, can be found in 1688’s *Les Ruses Innocentes*, a fishing and hunting guide book, (Figure 5) most fishhooks were “blind” (without an eye) until the late 1800s and were simply tied onto the shank of the hook (Herd 1997). Sizing of fishhooks was unregulated and varied across manufacturers, with different hook scale systems in place in the nineteenth century (Fishing Museum Online 2011). Today the sizing of fishhooks is more standardized, with a larger number representing a smaller hook, and vice versa.

Anglers still use metal fishing hooks today, but with access to a much greater variety of sizes and shapes for different uses. As new materials are developed, it’s likely they will be applied to one of humanity’s oldest tools, the fishhook. No matter what material it is made of, with a simple hook the anglers of Maryland will continue to enjoy the bounty of the waters.

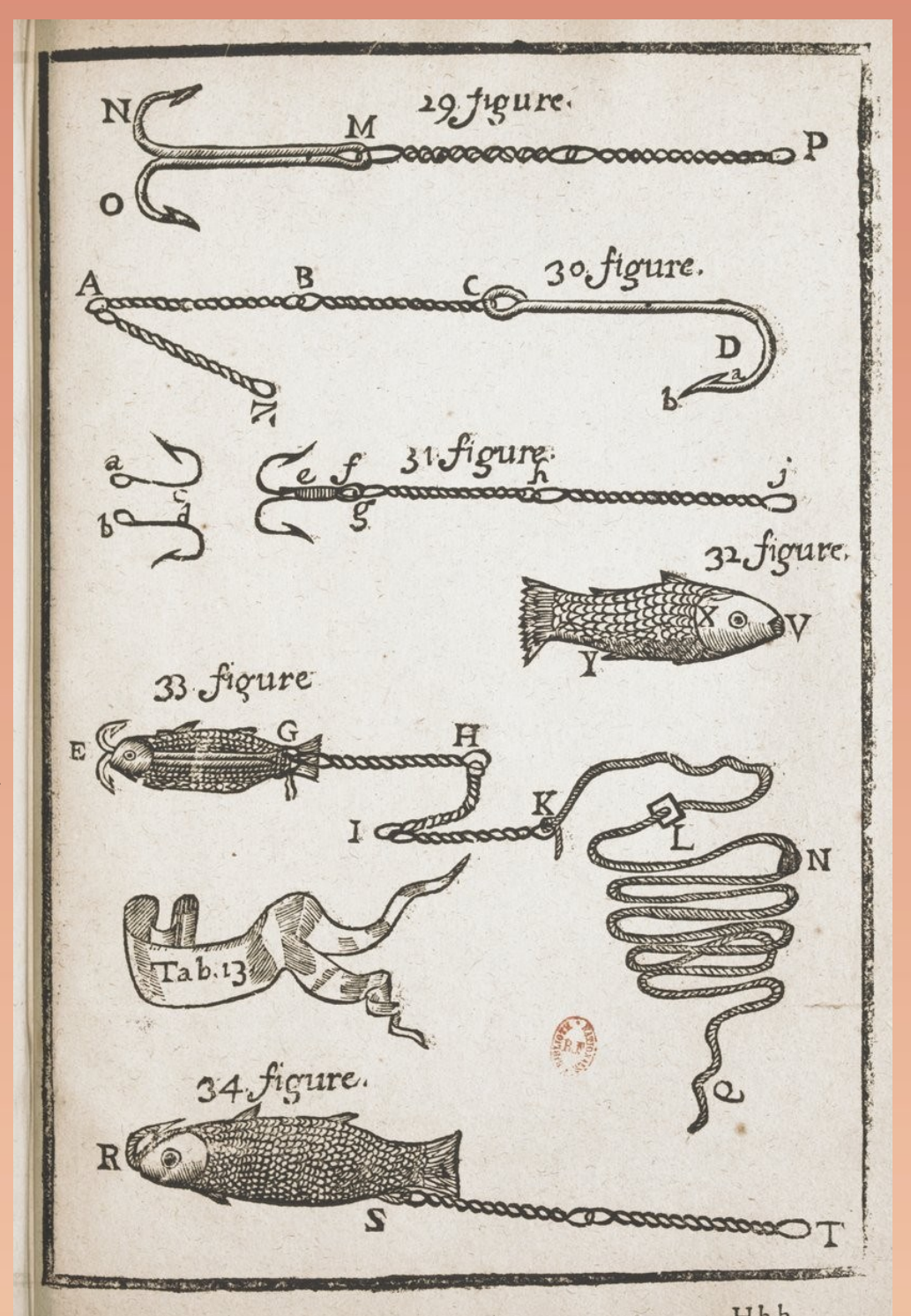


Figure 5: Depiction of fishhook with an eye from a fishing and hunting guide, *Les Ruses Innocentes*, 1688.



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