

A WORD ABOUT MAKING BONE FISHHOOKS

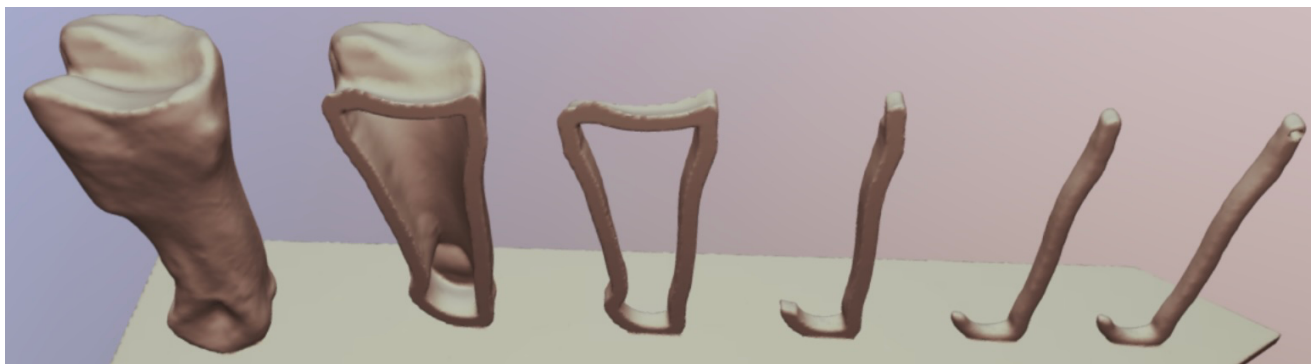


For millennia, freshwater fish were important food sources for Kentucky's Native peoples. Freshwater drum, catfish, suckers, gar, and other species provided nutrients – proteins, fatty acids, vitamin B12, phosphorus, selenium – with multiple health benefits. Fish bones and scales, such as those pictured here, from archaeological sites provide evidence of past fish consumption patterns. At some sites like Rosenberger in Jefferson County, large percentages of fish remains indicate they were an important dietary component.

Native peoples used several different fishing technologies. To catch multiple fish, they built rock and wood weirs across rivers, funneling fish into baskets or nets. Native fisherfolk also cast woven nets, held down with rock sinkers or attached to dried gourds for buoyancy (pictured at right), into waterways. To catch individual fish, they sometimes used spear throwers but more commonly used bone fishhooks and plant-fiber line.



Craftspeople typically made bone fishhooks from deer bones, especially the *ulna* (the thinner bone of the front leg) and the *phalanx* or toe bone. Using the latter, a toolmaker sheared the bone from top to bottom on two faces thus removing the outside bone layers and exposing the bone's hollow center. This produced one or two “blanks,” from which J-shaped fishhooks were cut. The toolmaker then ground down each fishhook to refine the shape and drilled a small hole in the straight end for the line in each hook.



Indigenous toolmakers living in different parts of Kentucky used variations of this basic process to make fishhooks of different shapes. As toolmakers passed down that knowledge across generations, regional traditions of fishhook styles developed. Archaeologists study these variations to track Native social groups over time and space.