

475 - BUTTONS

475.1 IMACS Classification: Buttons should be encoded under the entry (BU) Buttons or (BW) Buttons with maker's marks.

475.2 Button Chronology and Dating: In general, "Europe furnished most of the buttons until almost the nineteenth century. Here and there, records show that a few were made in this country--in New England as early as 1706; in Philadelphia in 1750. Joseph Hopkins made silver buttons in Waterbury, Connecticut, in 1753. A 1770 advertisement announced that Benjamin Randolph was making buttons of apple, holly and laurel wood. By that same year, the three Grilley brothers had opened a shop in Waterbury, Connecticut, for the manufacture of pewter buttons, and invented a method including the wire shank. In 1774, the congress of Massachusetts recommended using papier-mache buttons to reduce imports from the mother country. During this entire period, both horn and pewter buttons were being made in homes, and peddlers were carrying them afar for sale. By the first quarter of the nineteenth century, buttons were being manufactured everywhere. England, France, Germany and the United States were in constant competition, especially in the manufacture of metal dress and uniform buttons. Because each country utilized its natural resources and its own craftsmen, materials and techniques varied" (Luscomb 1967:ix).

Buttons can be roughly dated according to initial dates of industrial innovations and material type. For chronology associated with material type see section 475.3. For chronology associated with shank styles see section 475.4. However, the best means of dating buttons corresponds to the presence of makers marks, quality marks and registry marks. These categories are defined below.

Back Mark (Maker's Mark): "A term used for any stamping found on the back of buttons: words denoting quality, such as Extra Rich or Superfine; manufacturers' names; uniform makers; stars, dots, eagles. The name of a known maker and recorded facts regarding his business career can be associated with contemporary activities and events to determine with reasonable accuracy just when a specific item was produced, and for what purpose. Even the lack of a back mark will often establish the period of use, since it was not until the early 1800s that button makers began to stamp firm names, trademarks, and other devices on backs. But there are exceptions to the helpfulness of back marks; sometimes the makers names have been spelled incorrectly, or a motto does not seem to be related to the face die" (Luscomb 1967:17-18).

Quality Mark's: "A term used for certain words found on the backs of buttons made after 1800. It is believed the purpose of the words was mainly to promote sales, as the differences in quality can seldom be noted. Most of the marks appeared between 1800 and 1850. Examples are "Rich Gold", "Gilt", and "Rich Orange" (Luscomb 1967:163).

Registry Mark's: "Marks found on the backs of British-made buttons. They have been found on ceramic, glass, horn, and metal buttons. A registry mark is diamond-shaped, with letters or numbers at the points of the diamond. At the top point is an extra circle with a letter. The letters and numbers indicated the material, month, day, and year the button design was registered, and bundle inspected (Luscomb 1967:166).

A compilation of button makers and outfitters of American origin that includes approximate dates of manufacture and also type of button produced can be found in The Complete Button Book (Albert and Kent 1949). It is an initial attempt to compile such a list and as such is only a partial one. Information of manufacturers not included in this listing can be obtained from local city directories of past years.

#### 475.3 Material types of Buttons:

- Abalone: See "shell"
- Agate: Moss agate or chalcedony, cut and polished in various shapes, has long been used to make buttons. Agate disks were available in the 1900 Sears catalog.
- Aluminum: In the later nineteenth century, aluminum buttons were more costly than silver or gold. They were produced in one or two pieces and stamped with delicate designs. Aluminum was also used in the 1940's and 1950's, particularly for stamped uniform buttons.
- Bakelite: This is a synthetic plastic invented in the United States between 1907 and 1909. Bakelite buttons were produced until about 1930 when other plastics were developed, the buttons were plain, drab colors and the word "Bakelite" was molded on the back.
- Bone: Disks cut from animal bones have been made in a variety of sizes from prehistoric times. They are usually sew-thru types with from two to five holes, although some with metal rims and shanks have also been made. Since 1850, carved and inlaid bone buttons have also been made. Bone buttons are made only rarely now but are more common on sites predating 1850.
- Brass: Probably the most common button material, brass has been used in the United States since the 1800's for men's clothing and uniforms. From 1800 to about 1860, one-piece buttons were made; after about 1860 two-piece buttons were made.
- Calico: One type of china button made in the United States between 1848 and 1865 and decorated with tiny calico transfer designs, (see Prosser).

- Celluloid:** This synthetic, ivory-like material was developed in 1869. Celluloid is distinguished from ivory by a carbolic or menthol odor produced by heating or rubbing the surface of the button. After 1900, a two-piece button was made by placing a thin piece of celluloid over another type of material.
- China:** See Prosser.
- Daguerreotype:** During the Civil War (1860 - 1865), daguerreotype photographs were used on two piece buttons with glass fronts and backs.
- Ferrotypes or Tintypes:** Developed during the Civil War, ferrotype photographs were also made into buttons. They do not have the "Coppery" finish found on daguerreotype photos.
- Glass:** Many different types of blown, molded, and fused glass have long been used for buttons. Glass has been used for all types of button construction, and a great range of colors are known. Luscomb (1967:80-89) discusses over twenty-five different kinds of glass buttons. Prosser buttons are often confused with glass. Be careful not to confuse glass with ceramic or so-called little chinas made by the Prosser process (Roderick Sprague, personal communication 1985).
- Horn:** Disks, metal shank and self-shank buttons cut from horns and antlers of animals were made in the United States and Europe. In the 19th century, horn was sometimes processed (or imitation horn was made) and stamped with intricate designs.
- Ivory:** Elephant tusks, the teeth of whales, and tusks of the walrus and hippopotamus were used for "ivory" buttons. Ivory can be distinguished from celluloid by fine-grained striations which are characteristic of the structure of teeth and tusks.
- Japanning:** This is a lacquering process developed in Europe about 1800. Tin, wood, brass or other materials were coated with successive layers of high grade varnish. Black was the most common color for japanned buttons. The term "lacquered" refers only to those varnished buttons produced in the Orient.
- Mother-of-Pearl:** See "Shell".
- Pewter:** Pewter buttons with wedge and wire shanks were cast in the late 18th and early 19th century for use on men's clothing. After 1800, a pewter button with an iron shank was made. Luscomb (1947:148) lists the names of 21 pewterers whose names appeared on pewter buttons in the early 1800's. After 1810, many pewterers switched to brass. Pewter buttons, painted and decorated with other materials, were manufactured in the late 19th century.

- Plastic:** The manufacture of synthetic plastic buttons expanded after 1930. In the 1940's, it was common to trim and inlay other materials into a plastic button body.
- Porcelain:** Porcelain buttons were manufactured in several styles between 1850 and 1920. Hand painted floral designs were popular between 1900 and 1920. Technically porcelain should include Prosser or china buttons but traditionally it has excluded this type.
- Prosser:** Patented in 1849, the process is one combining high fired clays to produce a glass or vitrified appearance. The most common varieties are black, white, or calico having an appearance of opaque pressed glass. The backs have a pebbled or orange-peel surface (Sprague 1983:167-172).
- Rubber:** Between 1849 and 1851, Nelson Goodyear patented and improved the manufacture of hard rubber. Often the name "Goodyear" and the dates "1849-1851" are molded on the backs of hard rubber buttons. These markings refer to the dates of the material patents, not the manufacture date of the buttons. Most buttons were black, or occasionally reddish brown, and ranged from 1/4 to 2 inches in diameter. Geometric designs or concentric rings were molded more often than any other designs. Rubber buttons were also made by the Indian Rubber Company before 1880-1890's. Novelty Rubber Co. (N.R.Co.) was a manufacturer from 1855 to 1870.
- Shell:** Because the inner layers of many types of shells are similar, it is difficult to classify buttons according to the types of shells from which they were cut. In the factory, shells are sorted by color, regardless of species. Fresh water shells are not as iridescent or brilliant as deepwater species. In the United States, fresh water shells are used for utilitarian buttons. It is difficult to date shell buttons with certainty because of the long history of shell as a button material. All types of holes, shanks, shapes, decorations and sizes are used for shell buttons (Luscomb 1967:177-180). Smooth backs generally postdate 1900. Intricate carved designs and cameos generally predate 1880. Commercially-made shell buttons were introduced into the United States from France in 1855 (Fontana and Greenleaf 1962:98).

<u>Materials</u>	<u>Dating Range</u>
"Bakelite" Plastic	Post - 1907 - Pre 1940
Brass - Uniform Buttons	Post - 1802
Calico - Porcelain	1848 - 1856
Celluloid 1869 - 1920	
Daguerreotypes	1860 - 1865
Ferrotypes	1860 - 1900
Plastic - Synthetic	Post - 1930
Porcelain	1850 - 1920

Rubber  
Shell

Post - 1849  
Post - 1855

The book *Antique Buttons* (Peacock 1972) was found to be very valuable for classifications. The book placed buttons into four groups based on size. They are diminutive (0-15 linges), small (15-30 linges), medium (30-40 linges) and large (over 40 linges)" (Buckles et al. 1978:430-431).

#### 475.4 Button Measurement:

Button size is expressed in lines (or "linges"). Forty lines equal one inch diameter. The following scale was used by Sears Roebuck and Co. in 1908 to correlate lines and inches:

Lines	12	14	16	18	20	22	24
Inches	1/4	5/16	3/8	7/16	1/2	9/16	5/8

Shirt and dress buttons are usually smaller than coat and jacket buttons. The 1908 Sears catalog refers to shirt and dress buttons as lines 10 to 20. Vest, coat and jacket buttons are sized 24 to 36.

475.4 - Button Shanks

See ILLUSTRATIONS section.