

Curator's Choice

It's All in the Details - Pewter Regimental Buttons from Valley Forge

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Often overlooked today as an insignificant detail on a jacket, shirt or pair of pants, buttons can hold important information for archaeologists and historians, even raise questions about context and meaning on an archaeology site. The buttons of military uniforms can reveal information about the armies involved, as well as the dates and use of a site. In the early 18th century, the increase in the number of armies in Europe necessitated the assignment of numerical designations to regiments. The French first applied those numbers to their uniform buttons in 1762 followed by the British and the Americans (Troiani, 2001: xi). Excavations at the Washington Memorial Chapel at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania have recovered our pewter regimental buttons from the Revolutionary War (the winter of 1777-1778). Three of the buttons are from the 2nd Pennsylvania Regiment and one button is from the 14th Continental Regiment. These buttons have been conserved at the MAC Lab (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Pewter buttons before and after conservation treatment.

Most military buttons on the uniforms of enlisted personnel in the American Revolution were cast of a tin/lead alloy (pewter). Groups of up to twelve buttons could be cast in molds made of brass, bronze or wood (Tice, 1997: 2). The 2nd PA Regimental buttons from the Valley Forge excavation are one-piece cast pewter with a recessed center and raised numeral, integral looped shank and a scissors-type mold mark (Figures 4-6). While the backs of the recovered buttons are too corroded to determine if they are marked (Figure 1, bottom row), most buttons from this regiment were back-marked with "Clarke" in raised letters, believed to refer to a Philadelphia button manufacturer, Ephraim Clarke of Clarke & Company (Troiani, 2001: 136). The button from the 14th Continental Regiment (Figure 7) was also cast pewter with a raised numeral "14" and without a border (Troiani, 2001: 93).



Figure 4
Figures 4-6. 2nd PA Regimental buttons from the Valley Forge excavation.

Figure 7
14th Continental Regiment button from Valley Forge.

No fighting occurred at Valley Forge during the Revolutionary War. After the British captured Philadelphia, the patriot capital, and as winter approached, Washington withdrew the American troops to Valley Forge, close enough to maintain pressure on the British without the threat of a surprise attack. Supplies were not abundant but they were available as the soldiers patrolled, foraged and defended the camp. The soldiers became a well-trained professional army under the training of a former Prussian army officer, Baron Friedrich Wilhelm Augustus von Steuben. The soldiers at Valley Forge spent six months living active lives, waiting for the next move from the British (<http://www.nps.gov/vafo/historyculture/index.htm>).

The excavations at the Washington Memorial Chapel at Valley Forge have been conducted since 2007, seeking to understand the landscape and the story of the Americans encamped during the winter of 1777-1778. By studying the objects uncovered, the archaeologists reveal the daily lives of the Continental soldiers (Bloom, 2010: pers comm.). The buttons were discovered in the excavation of the units determined to be the camp kitchen (Shirley, 2009: <http://vafowmc.blogspot.com>).

One of the primary questions the archaeologists are seeking to answer is the identification of the regiments encamped at Valley Forge at the Chapel. While the three buttons from the 2nd PA Regiment would normally be an indication of encampment, the 2nd PA Regiment should have been camping on the opposite end from the Chapel site, in an area presently known as Wayne's Woods, under the command of General Anthony Wayne (Shirley, 2009: <http://vafowmc.blogspot.com>). Thus, the pewter buttons present many new questions as to where the 2nd PA Regiment was actually located. Perhaps the Chapel site was instead a work area used by a number of regiments. While there are many theories as to the movement of buttons and clothing, the exact story of these regimental buttons may never be known (Bloom, 2010: personal comm.).

References

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

