

Curator's Choice

The Buckle Generic

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For this month's Curator's Choice, I present a ubiquitous, mass-produced, and very ordinary buckle from the second half of the 19th century or early 20th century (Figure 1). Why is this interesting? Because every other Curator's Choice I've ever done has focused on something unusual, special, or personal to the inhabitants of a site, and it's a change of pace to feature an artifact that is just plain and common. Unique artifacts often lend themselves to one relatively narrow interpretation, but that doesn't work for the buckle generic.

By the mid-19th century mass production and interchangeable parts had been adopted by the clothing industry, so interpretation of clothing-related artifacts from this period can be full of possibilities. While buckles of the 18th century regularly came in forms that were specific for use on items such as shoes, spurs, and knee breeches, buckles that were produced to be generic and useful on many things defy that kind of categorization.

The buckle type featured here was patented by 1855, and several variations of the form were introduced in subsequent years (Figure 2). These buckles could be made of ferrous alloys (e.g. iron and steel) or copper alloys (e.g. brass), and some are marked with patent dates or a bit of decoration. The buckles were used for straps and they were not meant to be seen when people were fully dressed, but their versatility is evident when you look at old catalogs and surviving clothing. They show up on ladies' foundation garments (Figure 3), men's vests (Figure 5), cinches for early blue jeans (Figure 4), and even "suspensories" for men (Figure 6). In other words, when this artifact is found it isn't possible to point at it and say, "that's for a [insert garment description here]!" No, the interchangeable buckles of the industrial era call for curators and archaeologists to abandon the idea of narrowing interpretation. Instead it's an opportunity to make a list of everything that might have used this buckle, and as the list grows, we are exposed to many different items of daily life that enrich our understanding of how industrialization changed the way people lived and dressed.

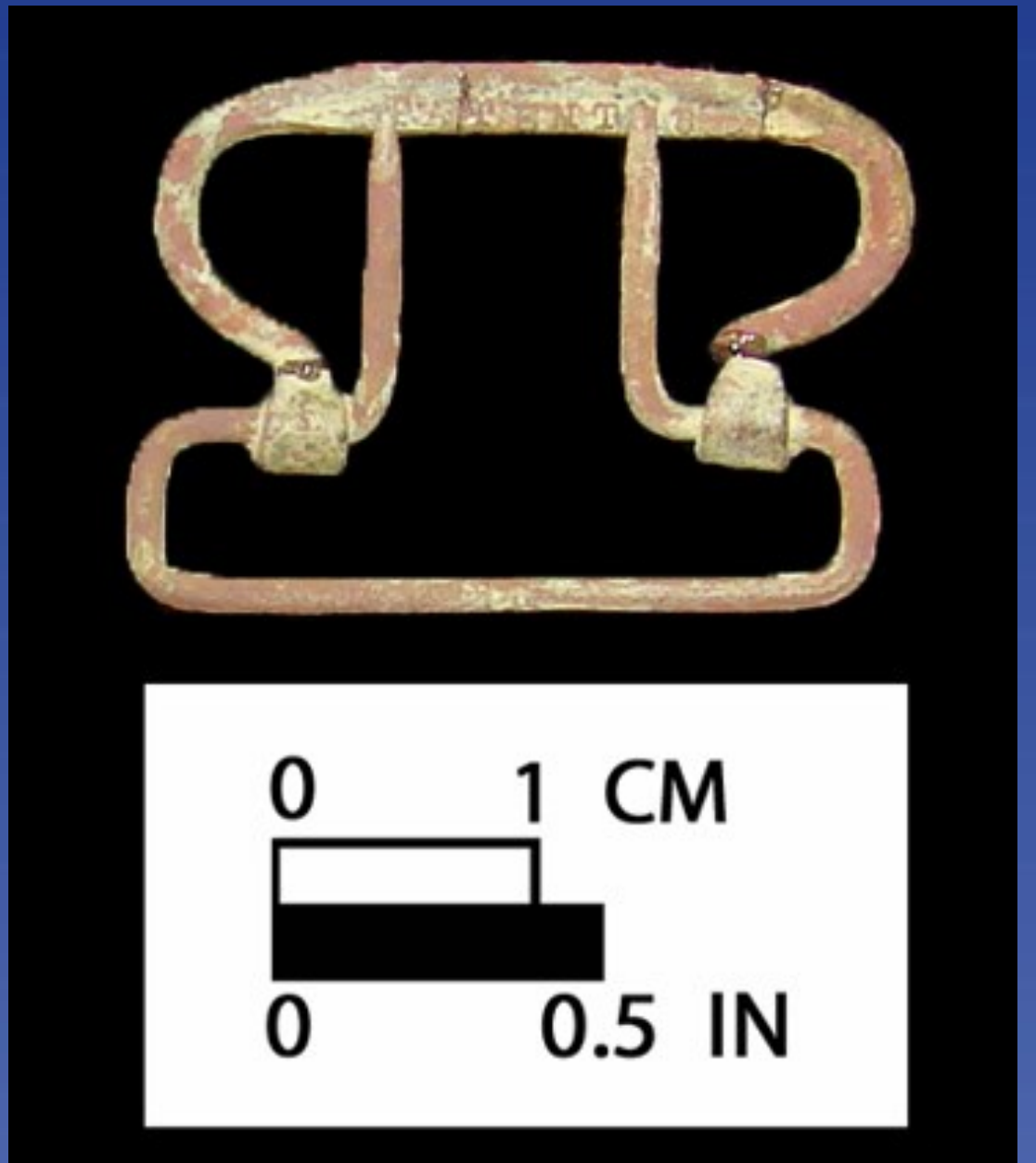


Figure 1: A copper alloy strap buckle from a 19th-20th century domestic site at Joint Base Andrews in Prince George's County. A partially legible stamp reads "PATENT 18 [?]" Courtesy U.S. Air Force, Joint Base Andrews.



Figure 2: Sketch from an 1855 patent for this type of strap buckle (U.S. Patent Office 1855).



Figure 5: This vest, ca. 1870s, has adjustable straps and a buckle at the back.



Figure 3: Ladies' foundation garments such as crinoline hoops (left, center, and center top) and bustles (right, with details at center bottom) attached at the waist with adjustable straps and buckles (Sears, Roebuck 1902:942).



Figure 4: Early jeans often had straps at the back with a buckle so they could be cinched for size, and they also had buttons for suspenders to hold them up instead of loops for a belt (Union-Made 2102).



Figure 6: Adjustable strap buckles were also used for men's "suspensories" as advertised in the 1927 Sears, Roebuck Co. catalog (Mirken 1970: 637).

References

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