

Curator's Choice

A Tisket, a Tasket, a Beaded Wire Basket

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Last year JPPM's Public Archaeology crew brought me two little pieces of iron with glass seed beads embedded in the corrosion (Figure 1). They wanted to know if the beads were just accidentally stuck in the corrosion because they were deposited next to the metal, or was something else going on? My answer was that something else was going on.

Back in 2011 I wrote a Curator's Choice about metallic threads recovered at the JPPM Public Archaeology site, Smith's St. Leonard, and a 17th-century site known as Charles' Gift (Rivers Cofield 2011). Metallic thread embroidery was incredibly popular in the 17th and 18th centuries on gloves, gowns, coats, waistcoats, shoes, etc. It was also popular for a kind of three-dimensional embroidery known as stump work, which decorated caskets, boxes, mirror frames, and pieces of art meant to hang like paintings. Sometimes tiny beads were incorporated into the embroidery. Having studied this needlework while researching metallic thread, I had seen images of a related art form worked in beads: that of the 17th-century beaded wire basket (Figures 2-3). So when the crew brought me iron with white and blue beads surrounding it in a seeming spiral pattern, I pulled the embroidery book where I remembered seeing the beaded basket, and showed them what I thought this represented (Brooke 1992:92). Sometimes when I identify something like this, especially so quickly, it surprises people. But I ask you, if you

had seen images of these beaded baskets, wouldn't you have remembered them? They seem pretty unforgettable to me!

These baskets, which became popular in the second half of the 17th century, have sometimes been interpreted as gift baskets because of their similarity in form to silver baskets used for offering Christening clothes to newborns. They seem too impractical to have held much though. Since these baskets often depict commemorative scenes, such as royal couples, it has also been suggested that they were used as betrothal or wedding gifts.

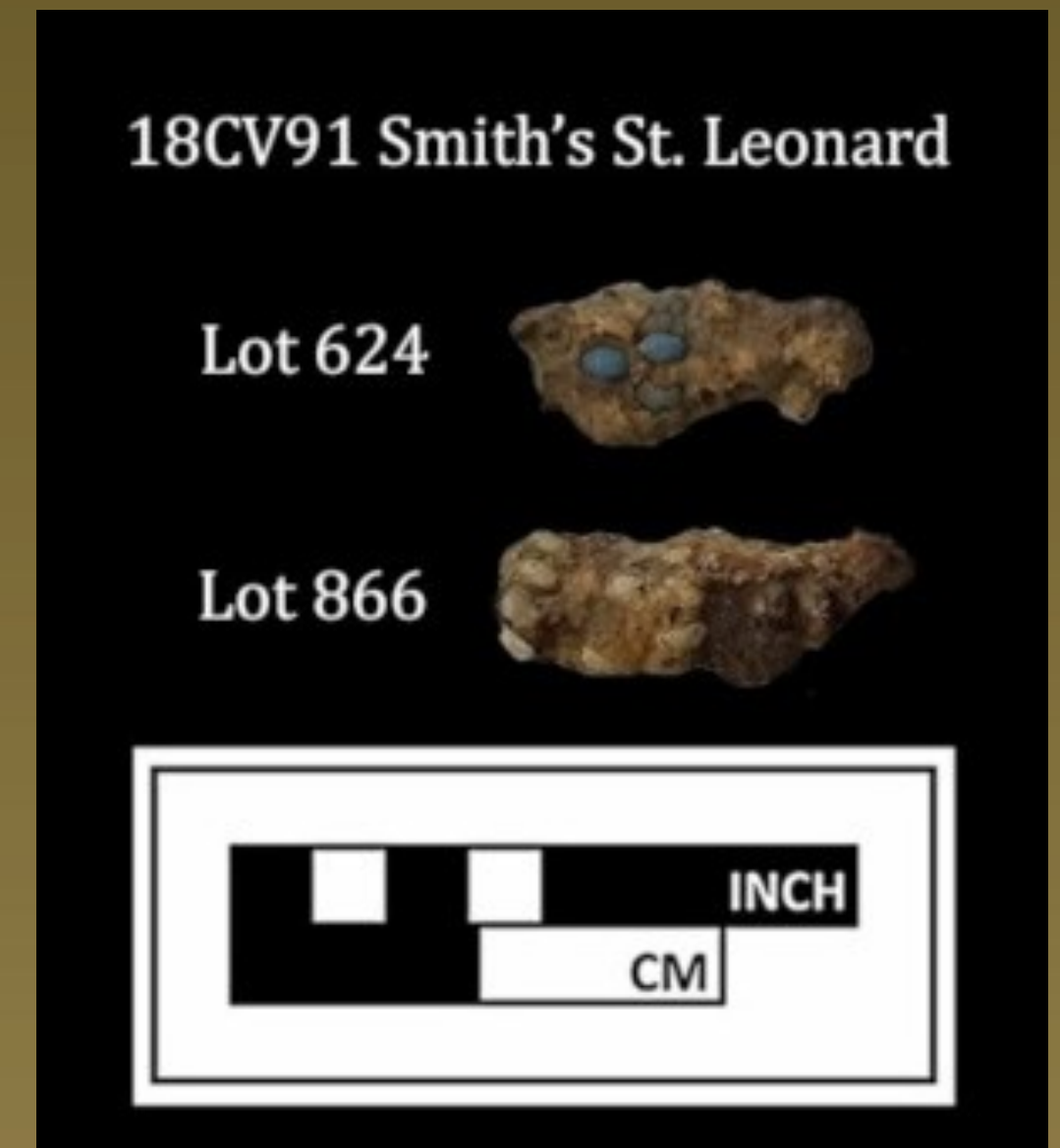


Figure 1: Iron fragments wrapped in tiny blue beads (top) and white beads (bottom). Each bead is about 1.2 mm wide.



Figure 2: Beadwork, ca. 1680 (21"x18"x5.5") recently sold by Sotheby's (Lot 1402).



Figure 3: Beadwork basket, dated 1662 (18.5"x13.5"x7") sold by Sotheby's on January 20, 2019 (Lot 1404).



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