

# Curator's Choice

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## What The Shell Is Up With All These Buttons?

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Sometimes it is not just the object itself that is intriguing, but rather the context and history behind it. Buttons are not an uncommon occurrence on archaeological sites. What is unusual is to find many buttons from only limited testing at a site.



Figure 1. Buttons recovered from the Straiten site.

A total of 8 buttons (Figure 1) were found in shovel tests in November 2023 at the Straiten site (18CV307), a site that consisted of three dwellings that were part of the larger community known as Wallville, here at Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum (JPPM). Site testing sampled less than 2% of the entire site. Recovering this many buttons during just a small survey is very unusual!

Located near the Patterson House at JPPM, the Straiten site gets its name from the Straiten family, who were the last occupants of one of the three dwellings that stood at the site beginning in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Straiten home was the last of those structures that remained standing into the 1930s, just a stone's throw away from the old Peterson House – where the Patterson House is today.

The site's first occupants were initially enslaved families. After emancipation the dwellings were later lived in by some of the same families and their descendants. In the 1880 census, the household of John W. Peterson included a servant named Georgia Anne Ekins. By the 1930 census Georgia Anne was one of the last residents of the Straiten site, alongside her daughter Georgia and her daughter's husband James Straiten. As a servant of the Petersons, Georgia Anne may have worked as a laundress.

Of the buttons recovered, one stood out from the rest – a shell button with a hexagonal decoration (Figure 2). Shell buttons, also called pearl buttons, are made from the pearl-like iridescent lining of marine or freshwater mollusk shells. Shell buttons from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and into the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were typically dish-shaped with a wire pin shank on the back. They were often expensive because they were handmade from fine colorful and iridescent shells originating from warmer climates (Hughes and Lester 1991).



Figure 2. Shell button with lathed geometric design recovered from the Straiten site (Photo by Michael G. Block).

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During the Industrial Revolution in the second half 19<sup>th</sup> century, buttons were being mass-produced in the United States using less iridescent clam shells available along the northeastern seaboard and later from freshwater sources along the Mississippi River. Tubular saws were used to cut out several round blanks from the shell (Figure 3). Holes for fastening to clothing were drilled simultaneously on a drill press. Geometric designs like the one found on the button from the Straiten site were made with a machine engraver in a process called “eccentric lathe work” (Albert and Kent 1949).



Figure 3. Button blanks cut from shell, Keep Homestead Museum, Massachusetts. (Hatton 2001).

By the 1890s, freshwater mussels found along the Mississippi River became the dominant source for shell buttons, which led to a thriving industry in the Midwest. By 1900, Muscatine, Iowa was dubbed “the Pearl Button Capital of the World,” manufacturing millions of buttons per year. The overharvesting of these shells from the Mississippi created a problem, with sources being depleted around Muscatine and elsewhere – essentially killing the once thriving regional industry. Plastic buttons, which were easier to manufacture, would ultimately replace shell as a prominent button material (Sirmans 2023).

A shell button manufacturing industry grew on the Delmarva Peninsula in Maryland and Delaware beginning in the 1930s, using shells imported from the Mississippi Valley and around the world. Archaeologists from the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center documented three factories that remained in operation for several decades: the Schwanda factory in Denton (1936 – 1996), Martinek's button shop on Elliot Island (1949 – 1992), and Parizek's button shop (1940 – 1972) near Milford, Delaware (Biuk 2018).

The Straiten site was abandoned in the early 1930s, so it was unlikely that the button originated from these more local shops and factories. It was most likely produced sometime during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Evidence points to Georgia Anne being the last person to touch it. Putting a name to a specific object is pretty rare in archaeology! To learn more about the Straitens and other families, scan the QR code at right to visit the *Witnesses of Wallville* website.



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