Curator's Choice

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Pocket Change

By: **Alex Glass**
JPPM Archaeologist

From the 17th to the early 19th centuries England had a small change problem. Chronic failure of the English government to produce small denomination coins made local commerce difficult. Merchants and their clients conducted most of their business using small coin denominations such as farthings, halfpennies, and pennies. In response to the shortage, merchants created tokens for circulation stamped with their own mark that were accepted in place of small coins (ANA 2026).



Figure 1. Image of the merchant token excavated from the Smith plantation on JPPM property. Merchant marks visible on the token identify the maker as John Swetnam of Melcombe Regis, England. (Photo credit Arianna Johnston)

One such token was found at the 18th-century Smith Plantation on Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum property in southern Maryland (Figure 1). The Smiths were English colonists with strong ties to merchants back in England. The token is very worn with a stamp depicting the initials "I", "A", and "S" enclosed by a circle and printed on both sides. On the border of the token is partially legible text that reads: "John Swetnam" on one side and "Draper of Melcom" on the reverse (this full text is based on other surviving matching examples). The "I" and "A" are the initials of John and his wife, Anne. The S is for their surname, Swetnam. Melcom, refers to the village of Melcombe Regis in Dorset, England and was likely the location of John Swetnam's textile business (Figure 2). While there is no date on the token, a John Swetman is listed as mayor of Melcombe Regis and neighboring Weymouth in 1652. Swetnam again appears in town documents dated 1666 suggesting a mid-17th-century production date for the token (Williamson 1889).

Although the Smith's St. Leonard site was occupied during the first half of the 18th century, the 17th-century draper's token is not completely out of place. That the token dates earlier than the Smith's St. Leonard site suggest it was circulated as currency well past its original manufacture and highlights the connection between the colonial and English economies.



Figure 2. Map of England with Dorset highlighted in red and the approximate location of Melcombe Regis.

References Cited

American Numismatic Association (ANA). 2026. English Tokens of the 17th and 18th-centuries. American Numismatic Associaton. https://www.money.org/money-museum/virtual-exhibits-moe-case14/, accessed 27 October 2026.

Williamson, George C. 1889. *Trade Tokens Issued in the 17th century in England, Wales, and Ireland, by corporations, merchants, tradesmen, etc.*

JPPM
Jefferson Patterson Park & Museum

10515 Mackall Road
St. Leonard, Maryland 20685

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