



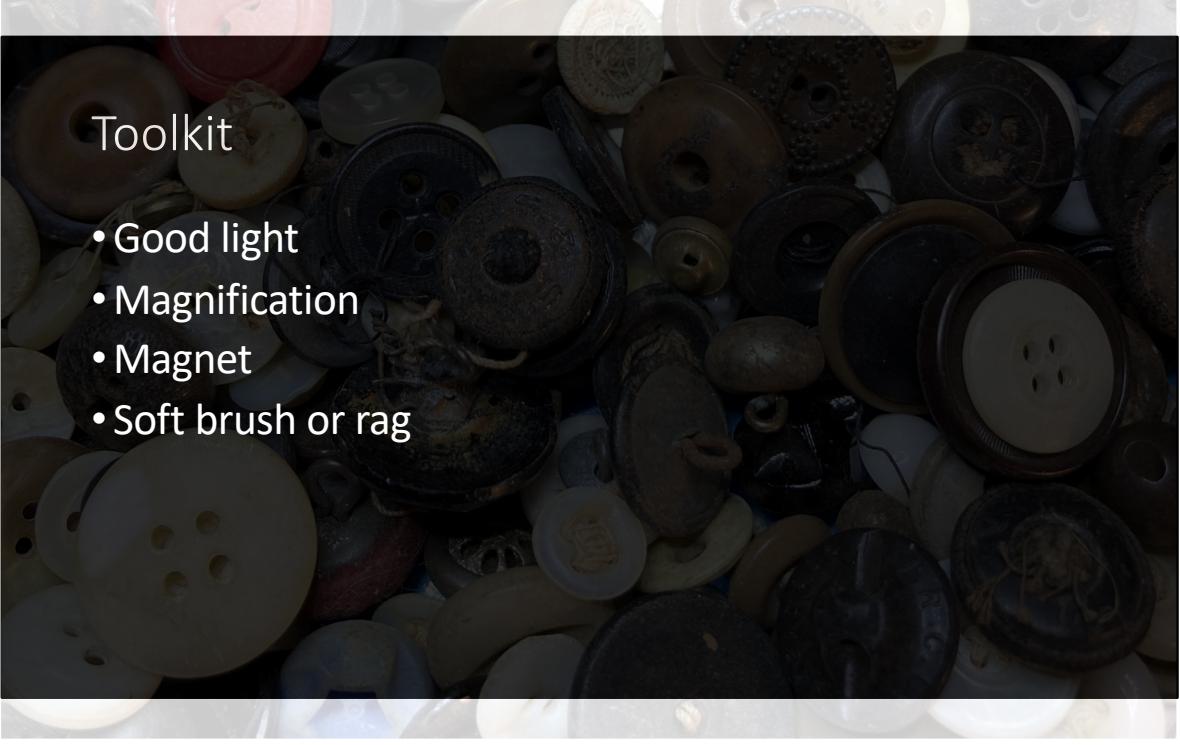
# Historic Button Identification

Lindsay Bloch, Ph.D.  
Society for Historical Archaeology  
New Orleans, LA, January 8, 2025

## Notes:

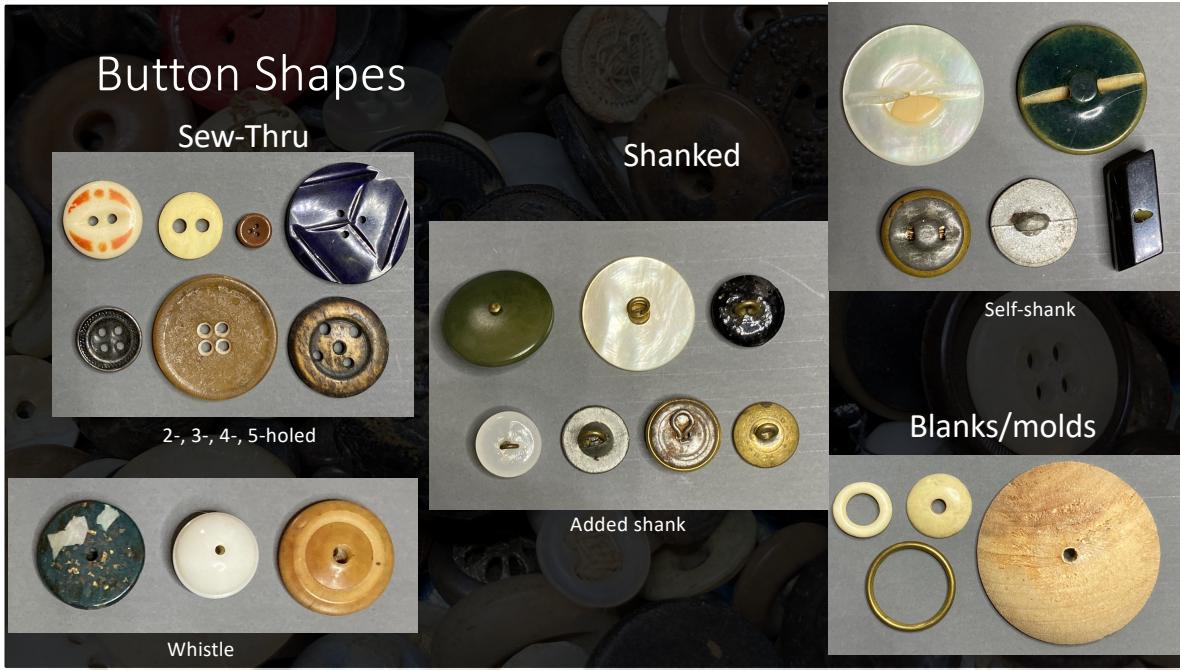
Emphasis today on recognizing materials and technological diagnostics of buttons.  
Technology is a way to identify change over time.

Use some terms from button collectors, but don't always find them especially helpful.  
Will try to signpost when I'm using a collector's term.



## Toolkit

- Good light
- Magnification
- Magnet
- Soft brush or rag



Tremendous variety in buttons, often the same material can be used to produce buttons with all sorts of attachments. Here are some of the most common attachments.

Sew-thru is simplest and most common today. Historically, they tended to be more common for utilitarian purposes, such as pants flies, suspenders, work shirts, and undergarments. However, decorative sew-thru buttons are also quite abundant.

Number of holes can speak to function:

2 hole and 4 hole the most common. Some two hole specifically for underwear, I'll point those out.

3 hole are typically for decoration or novelty. Mostly very small, or unusual buttons  
5 hole, most commonly seen on bone but also other carved materials. More on why 5 holes in a minute

Whistle, fascinating button from specific period in time before machine sewn buttons. Hey-day mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> c. to early 20<sup>th</sup> c.

So many different kinds of shanks. Simplest is self, where the primary material also

composes the shank, typically in a solid piece.

Shanks can be made of wire, soldered on, embedded in molten material, screwed into solid material, or stapled.

Wire all the way through, visible on the face is a pin shank

You will also see examples today of other shanks embedded in the main button body, swaged in, or otherwise.

Finally, there are buttons that we typically expect to find without a shank, because that shank was an organic: fabric, thread, or catgut. The button material that remains is the mold, which was covered in cloth, thread, or other material. More on these in a minute.

# Materials-Organics

General characteristics:

Parts of plants and animals

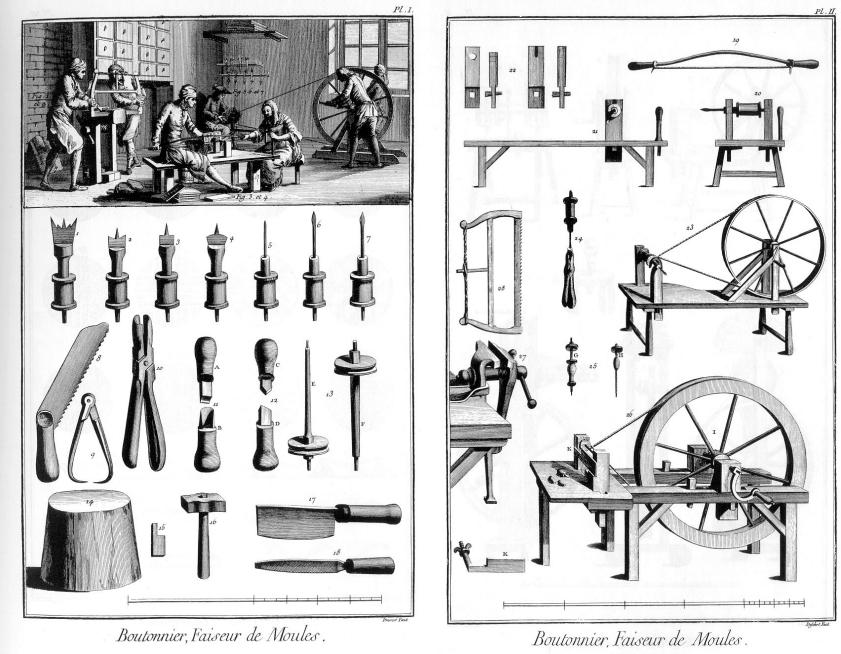
Some of the earliest buttons. Can be carved using hand tools

May not preserve archaeologically

Functional perspective: durability is variable.

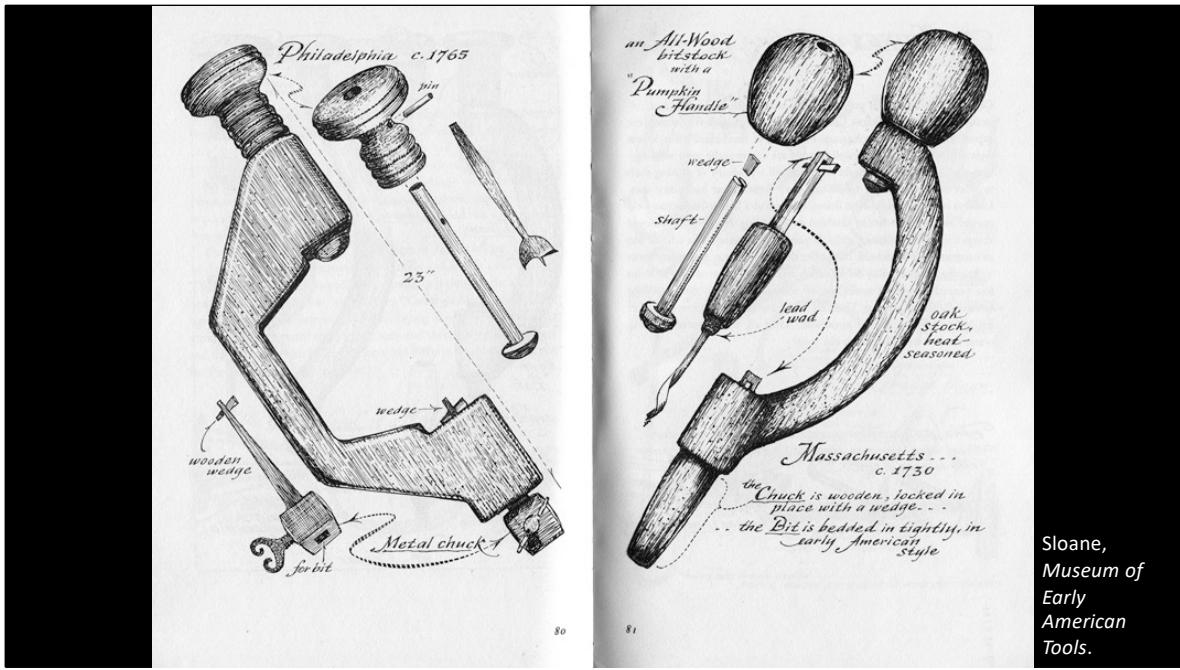
# Cutting Blanks

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/did2222.0001.397--button-maker?rgn=main;view=fulltext>



General method the same for most organic buttons. Using a brace and bit to remove round blanks from flat sections of bone, wood, shell, etc.

Workshop setup for making buttons, Diderot's Encyclopedia



Hand brace and bit, smaller scale production.

## Organics-Wood



<https://archaeology.cityofnewyork.us/collection/search/7-hanover-square-207667-oval-wooden-button-blank>

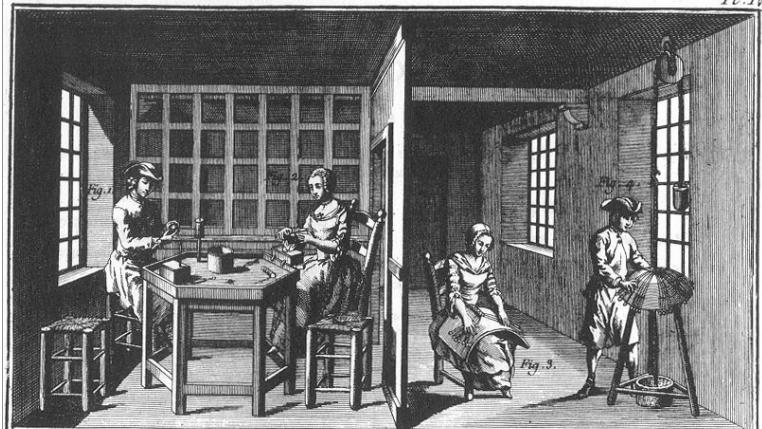


<https://archaeology.cityofnewyork.us/collection/search/south-ferry-terminal-106617-wood-button>

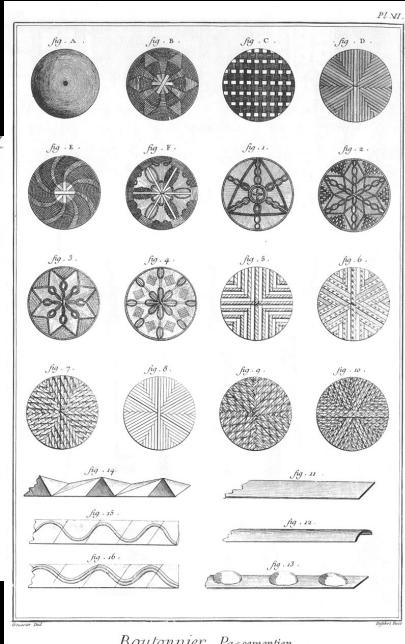
Archaeological examples of wood buttons (one-holed blanks)

Pre-20<sup>th</sup> century, wooden button molds/blanks were the most common form for wood in button manufacture. In 20<sup>th</sup> C. they became used for buttons emphasizing the material itself.

## Passementerie

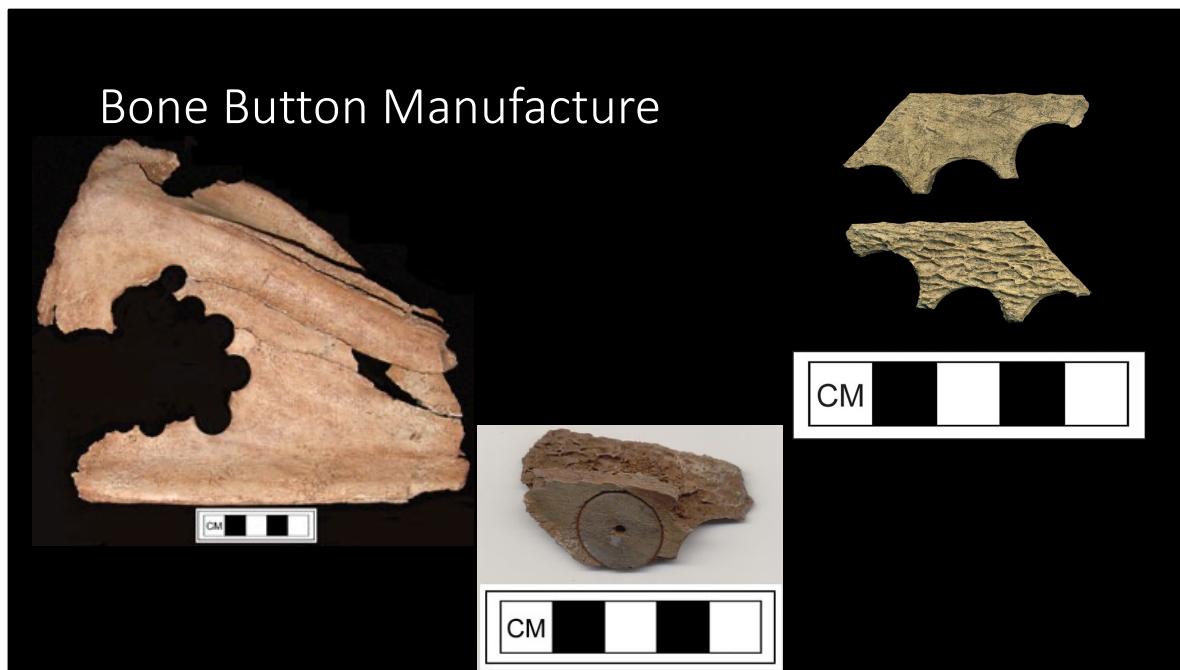


<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/did2222.0001.397/--button-maker?rgn=main;view=fulltext>



Boutonnier, Passementier.

Fancy version of covered buttons with cloth, lacework, or similar textile covering a wooden or bone blank. The shank was often the fabric itself or thread.



Examples of bone button blanks from archaeological contexts in DAACS

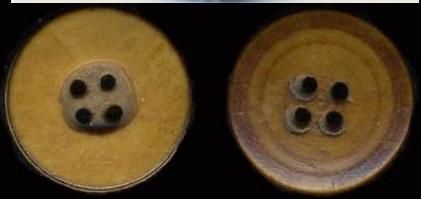
Artifact IDs:

16-2203H-DRS—00117  
109-118TPS-NOS—00129

## Organics- Bone



CM



Archaeological examples of bone buttons from the Hermitage Plantation.

Artifact IDs:

- 1405-91-01-023-DRS—00547
- 1405-91-01-012-DRS—00336
- 1405-91-01-070-DRS—00262
- 1410-97-02-03-DRS—00372
- 1404-96-02-31-DRS--00014

## Bone vs. Ivory



Bone texture has small linear voids and dark veiny marks.  
Ivory (much more rare archaeologically) is dense with no pores/voids and subtle grain pattern.

## Shell Button Manufacture



[www.fedheights.org/index.asp  
?SEC=%7BF6154F4D-86A4-  
4AE6-B311-  
1C16A9ED3A87%7D](http://www.fedheights.org/index.asp?SEC=%7BF6154F4D-86A4-4AE6-B311-1C16A9ED3A87%7D)



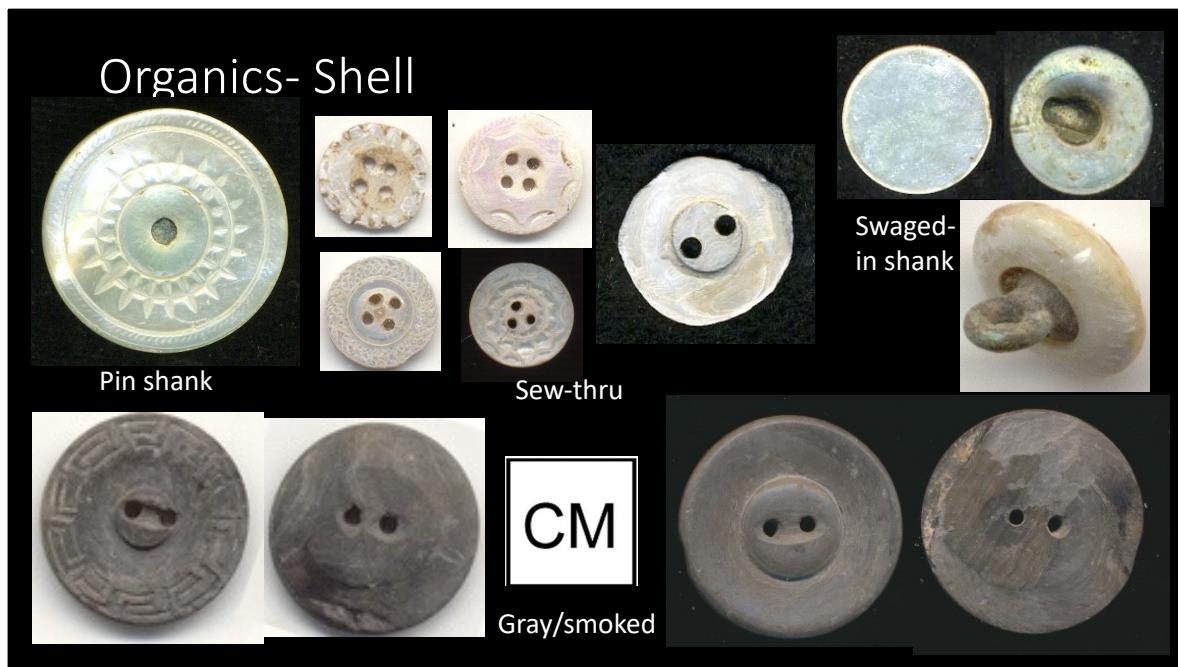
<https://muscatainehistory.org/>

American freshwater mussels, post 1889.



<https://www.lchshistory.org/things-that-matter-2019/2019/4/18/la-crosses-fastest-button-cutter>

Tools of shell button carving



May be carved from any number of shells, both marine and freshwater  
DAACS Artifact IDs

1405-90-01-212-DRS—00031  
1405-90-01-173-DRS—00017  
1405-91-01-032-DRS—00414  
1410-97-01-29-DRS—00644  
1410-97-01-09-DRS—00327  
1410-97-01-31-DRS—00282  
1410-97-01-40-WTS—00081  
1404-96-02-19-DRS—01979  
1405-95-01-043-DRS—00012



Texture of horn buttons, like mashed together hair. Delaminates with moisture.

## Material-Organics-Horn



Backs of horn buttons with linear and platy texture. Right button has pick mark used to remove it from a mold.



Very common for Victorian and early 20<sup>th</sup> c. dress, but have not seen any archaeological examples.

Small black dots = pores.

## Sorting Organics: select a criterion

### Material

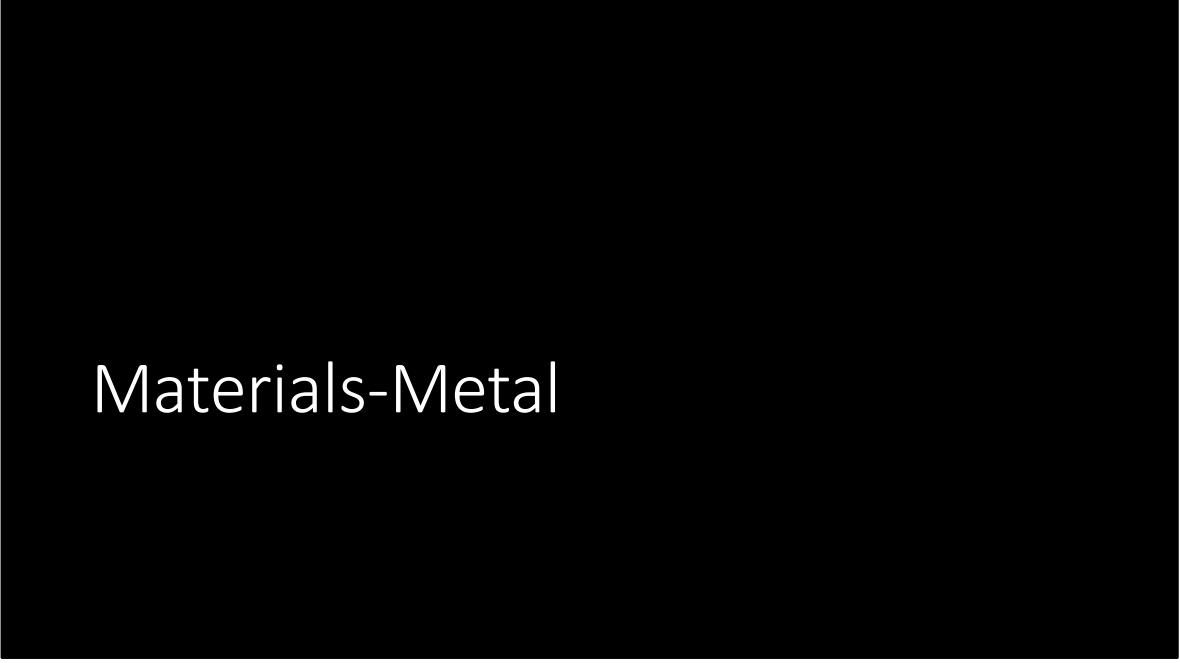
- Wood
- Bone
- Horn
- Shell
- Vegetable Ivory

### Decoration/Surface Treatment

- Carved
- Painted
- Dyed
- Molded

### Shank Type

- Sew-thru
- Self-shank
- Pin shank
- Swaged-in shank
- Blanks/molds



Materials-Metal

## Methods- Casting



Oldest method of manufacturing metal buttons.

White metals (lead, pewter, tin) can be melted in household fire.

Iron and copper alloys require higher temperatures of forge/furnace.

## Metal— Cast Flat Disc self-shank



Cast in single piece in a 3-piece mold. Mold seam on back is diagnostic.

DAACS Artifact IDs:

1403-90-01-167-DRS—00050

1410-97-03-010-DRS—00179

1410-99-02-040-DRS—00026

103-571AA-NOS--00197

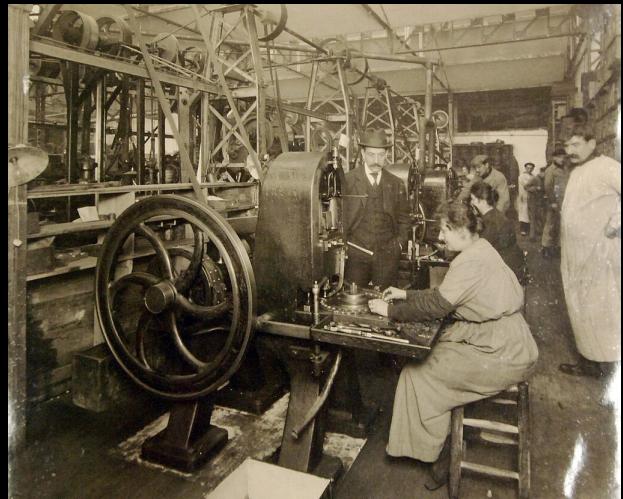
Metal-Cast Flat Disc,  
embedded shank



1405-90-01-256-DRS—00006

1206-E15.2-DRS--00095

## Methods- Stamping



Woman stamping sheet metal buttons into shape on a machine.

## Metal- Stamped Flat Disc



Method of piercing circles out of sheet metal, technique developed at scale during Industrial revolution. This type will always have shanks that were added separately via soldering/brazing.

DAACS Artifact IDs:  
1403-90-01-177-DRS—00097  
1405-95-01-015-DRS--00012

## Metal- Two-piece (or more)



CM

Further development of stamped metal buttons using thinner sheet metal/foil. Metal face crimped over back plate. Post 1802

DAACS Artifact IDs:

- 1403-90-01-177-DRS—00097
- 1403-90-01-020-DRS—00310
- 1405-91-01-023-DRS—00556
- 1412-99-01-016-DRS—00022
- 1403-90-01-208-WTS—00015
- 1405-91-01-023-DRS—00550
- 1405-90-01-195-DRS—00014

## Metal- Two-piece (or more)

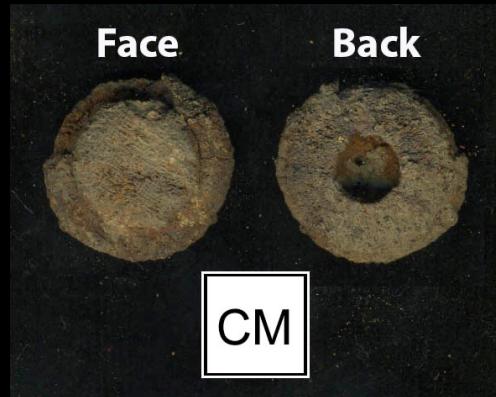
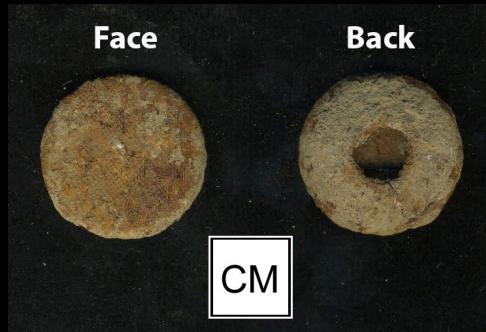


More examples of two-piece metal buttons with crimped faces.

DAACS Artifact IDs:

- 1404-96-02-32-DRS—00020
- 1404-96-02-43-DRS—00001
- 1405-95-02-032-DRS—00004
- 1404-96-02-67-DRS—00003
- 1404-96-02-31-DRS—00068
- 1413-99-03-016-DRS--00094

## Metal- Two-piece pad back



Post 1825- flexible canvas shank inside the back plate. Face still crimped over the back. Fabric may be sandwiched in this way, forming a fabric-covered button.

DAACS Artifact IDs:

1410-97-01-29-DRS—00638

1410-97-01-29-DRS--00648

## Decorative Techniques



Plating and Gilding

CM



Engraving

CM

Decorative techniques for metal buttons include plating/gilding, and engraving

DAACS Artifact IDs:

1401-90.01.151-DRS--00810

1410-98-01-054-DRS--00016

## Decorative Techniques



CM



Inlay

CM



CM

Stamping

Additional decorative techniques for metal buttons: added materials such as inlaid shell or glass; stamped decoration.

DAACS Artifact IDs:

- 1404-96-02-09-DRS—00219
- 1405-91-01-023-DRS—00549
- 1410-97-01-31-DRS--00283

## Metal- Two-piece - Workwear



Later development of two-piece metal into sew-thru varieties which were more utilitarian.

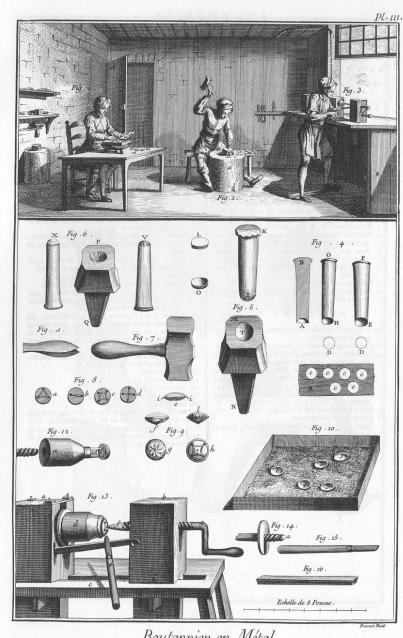
DAACS Artifact IDs:

- 1405-90-01-195-DRS—00014
- 1410-97-01-06-DRS—00142
- 1410-97-01-08-DRS—00399
- 1410-97-01-09-DRS—00333
- 1410-97-02-11-DRS—00336
- 1405-91-01-023-DRS—00549
- 1404-96-02-05-DRS—00099
- 1405-90-01-046-DRS--00061

## Metal and Organic Composites



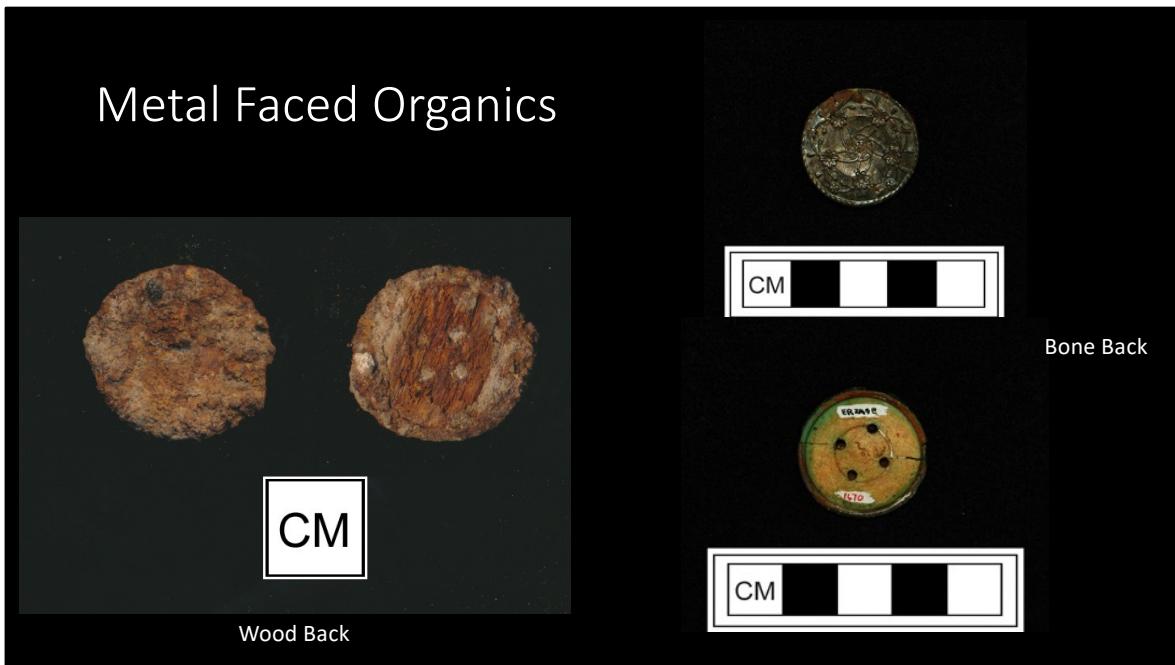
<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/did2222.0001.397/--button-maker?rgn=main;view=fulltext>



Returning to the wood blanks of Diderot. Sheet metal could be formed over those as well.

The shanks would be made of catgut or similar material.

## Metal Faced Organics



Examples of two-piece buttons with metal faces and organic backs. Left: iron or steel over wood. Right, copper alloy over bone.

DAACS Artifact IDs:

410-97-01-08-DRS—00399

1410-97-01-09-DRS—00333

Cloth covered



Example of a metal two-piece button with a cloth face, cloth still present.

1405-90-01-159-DRS—00180

## Thread Button Blank



Example of a thread or Dorset button (aka Singleton) made of lacework thread around a metal ring. Could also be made on bone rings. This one still has threads present.

1412-97-03-123-DRS—00220

## Sorting Metal: select a criterion

<b>Material</b>	<b>Decoration/Surface Treatment</b>	<b>Manutech</b>
• Pewter	• Molded/Cast	• Cast (one piece)
• Cu Alloy	• Stamped	• Cast (wire shank)
• Iron	• Painted	• Cast (spun back)
• Steel	• Gilded/Plated	• Cast (drilled eye)
• Aluminum	• Inlay, appliqu��	• Stamped (wire shank)
	• Etc.	• Stamped, 2 piece
		• Stamped, sew-thru
		• Stamped, pad back
		• Etc.

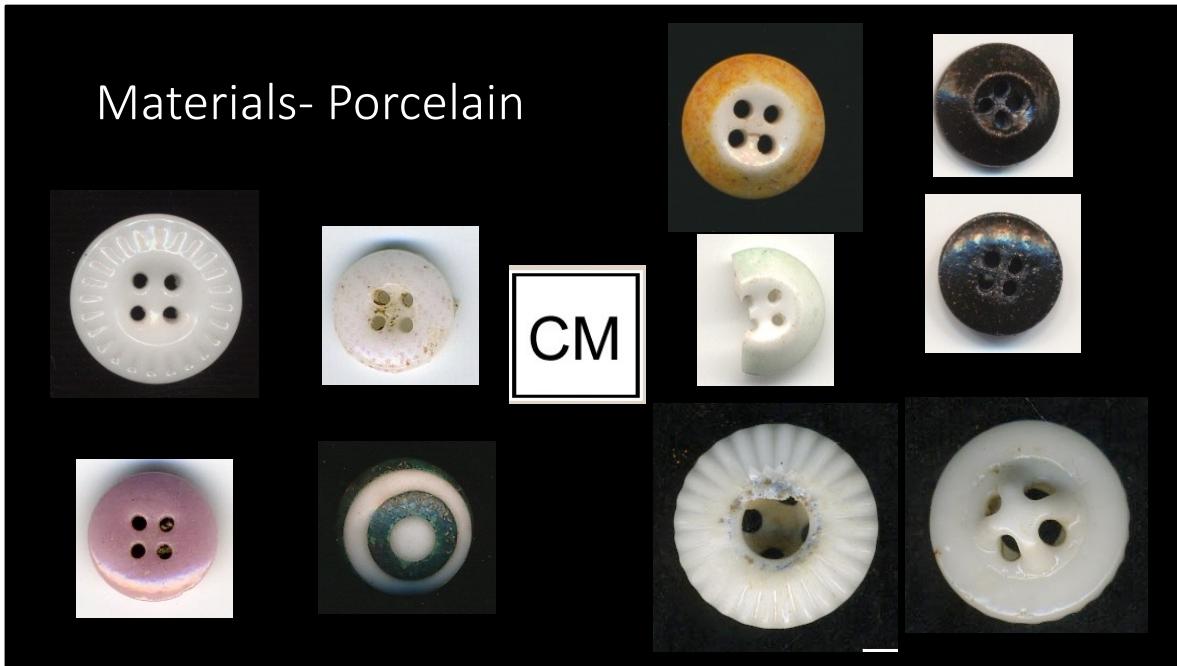
## Materials-Glass and Ceramic



Developed out of glass bead manufacturing. Early types were wound with simple wire shanks embedded. These often fall out. Later varieties had back plates and other forms of embedded metal shanks that provide more surface area and are less likely to come apart. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sew-thru glass buttons were produced.

DAACS Artifact IDs:

- 1405-91-01-023-DRS—00548
- 1410-97-01-08-DRS—00405
- 1412-97-03-118-DRS—00009
- 1412-99-01-026-DRS—00201
- 1410-99-02-060-DRS--00101
- 1410-99-02-074-DRS--00128



Prosser-molded buttons. More grainy texture than glass. Wide variety of decoration and styles but lack of information on chronological differences.

DAACS Artifact IDs:

- 1405-91-01-070-DRS—00261
- 1405-91-01-030-DRS—00359
- 1410-97-02-17-DRS—00216
- 1410-97-01-08-DRS—00367
- 1410-97-02-09-DRS—00357
- 1412-99-01-006-DRS--00113
- 1410-97-01-30-DRS--00519

## Materials- Ceramic



CM

Norwalk Buttons

CM

In general, pottery is too fragile for buttons, but this variety was the other main type produced. Marbled earthenware. American. Called "Norwalk" buttons. Similar to Bennington pottery, made with marbled earthenware clays, in Norwalk CT early-mid 19<sup>th</sup> c.

1410-97-02-26-DRS--00123

## Sorting Glass and Ceramic: select a criterion

<u>Material</u>	<u>Decoration/Surface Treatment</u>	<u>Shank Type</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Glass</li><li>• Porcelain (Prosser-molded)</li><li>• Earthenware</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Molding</li><li>• Cut</li><li>• Paint</li><li>• Luster</li><li>• Etc.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sew-thru</li><li>• Embedded wire</li><li>• Back plate</li><li>• Self-shank</li><li>• Pin-shank</li><li>• Whistle</li></ul>

## Materials-Composite/Synthetic

There are many different kinds of modern synthetics and they can be difficult to identify even when they are non-archaeological.

## Materials- Hard Rubber



Common archaeologically and preserve well. Post 1851. Almost always have patent info on the back.

DAACS Artifact IDs:

- 1405-90-01-090-DRS—00134
- 1410-97-01-31-DRS—00264
- 1410-97-01-33-DRS—00158
- 1410-97-01-29-DRS—00603
- 1412-99-01-026-DRS—00055
- 1410-97-02-15-DRS--00204

## Materials-Composition



CM



Could be made of many different materials. Very dense but become eroded archaeologically.

DAACS Artifact IDs:

1410-97-01-30-DRS—00566  
1410-97-01-31-DRS—00265  
1410-97-02-11-DRS--00455

## Materials- Paper/Fiber

	<p><b>Fiber</b> Pre-1940, 1840 - 1900 (greatest popularity)</p> <p><i>a.k.a.: Paper, Cardboard</i></p> <p><b>Description:</b> Opaque and lightweight utilitarian buttons. Black are the most common, but many colors are possible. Two- or four-hole sew-thrus and shoe buttons with embedded wire shanks were made.</p> <p><b>Manufacturing Technique:</b> Stamped from compressed cardboard sheets. Entire surface was coated with a waterproof enamel or lacquer.</p> <p><b>Decoration:</b> Typically undecorated, but simple molding may be seen. Rarely, enameled surfaces were painted to highlight molded decoration.</p> <p><b>Diagnostics:</b> The softness of the cardboard leads to deformation of the eyes and edges. While originally thick, the surface wears off exposing the sheet-like interior structure. Preservation is poor, with water damage expanding and softening the body. Note that fiber may also form the backs of metal-faced buttons, or act as filling inside two-piece sheet metal buttons.</p>	
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# Materials- Celluloid, Casein, Phenolic Resin

## Early Plastics

The image displays a collection of 18 historical buttons arranged in a grid, each labeled with its material and condition:

- Celluloid one-piece
- Celluloid shanked
- Celluloid metal back
- Celluloid cardboard back
- Celluloid back
- Celluloid decay
- Casein face
- Casein back, cracks
- Casein insect damage
- Phenolic face
- Phenolic back, saw marks
- Phenolic two-color resin
- Phenolic carved

**Cellulose nitrate (1869-1940), a.k.a. Celluloid:** Extremely lightweight buttons. All colors are possible. Translucent to opaque. Sew-thru, self-, or added shanks common, as are two-piece buttons with celluloid "bubble" over sheet metal back. Typically stamped or molded. Decoration includes dye, painting, stamping, carving, and applied materials. Celluloid is unstable, developing blocky cracks and discoloration, eventually crumbling. Highly flammable with a camphor scent.

**Casein (1899-1940), a.k.a. Galalith, Erinoid:** Lightweight plastic made from milk proteins and formaldehyde. Usually opaque. Utilitarian sew-thru buttons are most common, either body dyed or surface dyed over white ground. Decoration includes carving and molding. Smells like wet dog when damp. Develops surface cracks and highly subject to pest damage. Unlikely to be recovered archaeologically.

**Phenolic resin (1911-1950), a.k.a. Bakelite, Catalin:** Dense plastic made from carbolic acid and formaldehyde. Can be translucent or opaque; ivory (now yellow) and black are the most common colors. Sew-thru and shanked styles were produced. Buttons were carved and trimmed with a lathe, usually from round or cylindrical blanks, or could be molded. Backs are typically flat; may have saw marks. Warming will produce a formaldehyde scent. Preservation good.

Celluloid, faux ivory

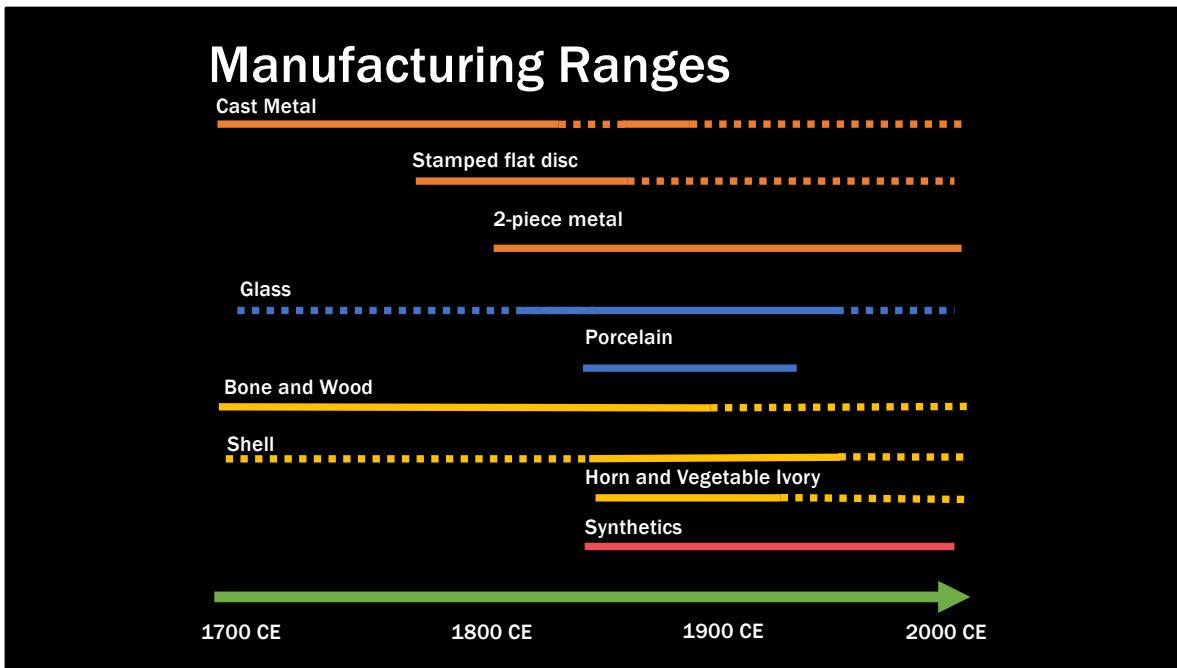
celluloid

casein

phenolic resin

## Sorting Synthetics

- Hard Rubber
- Composition
- Fiber
- Celluloid
- Casein
- Phenolic Resin (Bakelite)



These are approximate, reflecting both when they were made and when they could be expected to be found in assemblages in North American contexts

## Buttons in Context

A few examples of buttons on clothing

## Covered Buttons



1780s

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/174804>



1830s

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/81107>

## Covered Buttons



1760s

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/157868>



Early 19th

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/90792>

## Trousers

Levi jeans from 1800s found in abandoned mine shaft sell for \$87,000

Pair described as 'holy grail of vintage denim collecting'

Aisha Rimi • Thursday 13 October 2022 09:22 EDT • [Comments](#)



1840

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/79497>

<https://www.the-independent.com/news/world/americas/oldest-pair-of-levi-jeans-auction-b2201880.html>





Underwear buttons, attached with tape, not thread.  
Children's garter system, "pantywaists"

## Victorian Waistcoat



<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/91074>



## Victorian Waistcoat



<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/91082>

## womens' buttons



Late 18th

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/108023>



1860s

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/173578>

## Shoe buttons



Prosser-molded 1875



Fiber early 20<sup>th</sup> c.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/115817>

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/90432>



Shoe and gaiter buttons, typically made of fiber.