

17th Century Lead Cloth Seals from Anne Arundel County, Maryland

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Abstract

Lead cloth seals or bale seals are recovered from colonial sites throughout the Chesapeake Region. This paper reports on the 39 seals that have been recovered from early colonial sites throughout Anne Arundel County. Many of these seals are marked and reveal information about the origins of a cloth bale and the type of cloth it may have sealed, lending insight into the international trade of textiles in colonial Maryland. The marks also lend the archaeologist a useful chronological tool, as these artifacts are often dated or contain the visage of the ruling monarch. Alnage marking of lead seals by the English government was abandoned in 1724, offering the archaeologist a further dating tool. Additional study could elucidate personal preferences of colonists regarding their selection of cloth for clothing and interior decorations.

Introduction

Lead cloth inspection seals are a relatively common artifact recovered from 17th century sites throughout the Chesapeake Region and elsewhere. Often labeled with the misnomer “bale seals”, these objects were, in fact, attached to the outside corner section of bolts of cloth to indicate that various inspections of the merchandise had occurred. They could indicate marks for governmental purposes such as quality control or that the material had been taxed, but also might represent local inspections by dyers, clothiers, weavers, or searchers (Egan 1994:1).

This paper reports on a number of seals which have been recovered from the town of Providence, a 17th century settlement on the banks of the Severn River in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, as well as some from the surrounding region. In the course of excavations conducted over the last twelve years, Anne Arundel County’s *Lost Towns Project* has recovered a total of 39 of these objects. At Providence, 19 seals came from the Burle’s Town Land (18AN826) home site, 8 came from Homewood’s Lot (18AN871), and single examples were recovered from both the Town Neck site (18AN944) and Leavy Neck (18AN828.) Other lead seals from the surrounding region have been recovered from Chaney’s Hills (18AN1084), the Willson Site (18AN1084), and London Town (18AN48).

The discussion and interpretations presented below are heavily based upon the 1994 work of Geoff Egan titled *Lead Cloth Seals and Related Items in the British Museum* (1994). This work discusses the uses of lead seals in general, and carefully describes the more than 350 examples held by that institution. Since most seem to have been recovered from the Thames River in London, contextual information is usually not available. The study presented here adds contextual information to this artifact and considers lead seals that had served their intended purpose and were discarded by the end consumer of the cloth these seals once marked.

When their symbolism is decipherable, these durable artifacts provide invaluable information on the types of cloth being utilized, and potentially its geographical origins. Since some of these lead seals are also dated, they can also provide useful chronological information to the archaeologist.

Lead Cloth Seals in the 17th Century

The most usual form of a seal is two connected discs of lead that were bent over the corner of a bolt of cloth (where they could be easily seen), and clamped tight with a device that impressed the lead with various symbols, numerals and letters. A riveted form of the seal seems to have been developed for marketing of commercial textiles (Figure One: adapted from Egan 1994:viii). The 16th and 17th century found more elaborate four and six part seals, presumably to allow for more details to be placed on the stamp (Egan 1994:5).

The blank seals would usually be cast in a stone mold and varied in size. Smaller ones (< 20mm) might be more suited for application to lighter, more delicate fabrics, whereas larger seals might be used for courser heavier fabrics, such as sailcloth or decorative hangings (Egan 1994:4). Closer consideration of variations in size and weight might lead to a better understanding of what cloths were being imported and what their ultimate use might have been.

The use of lead seals as a mark of inspection for cloth products has great antiquity. Egan states that lead seals were in regular use by the early 1300s. The first reference to marking of cloth by the alnager (an officer of the Crown) is found in 1328 (Egan 1994:2). An alnage seal denotes governmental involvement in the inspection, not only for quality, but also for taxation. Alnager seals often bearing information about the current monarch, thus they are useful chronological markers for archaeologists. Frequently, alnage seals were produced with four parts, the first pair bearing previously impressed governmental symbols, while the second were impressed at the time of inspection on a more local level. The four part seal seems to have been in common use by the 17th century (Egan 1994:5).

Alnage seals are also referred to as searchers seals. The seal was proof that an alnager (an officer of the crown) had established by examination ('searching') that cloth met standards of quality prior to sale. This system also allowed for taxation (Egan 1994:1-3). Markings that suggest alnage applications include the crown, royal coats of arms, shields, portcullis decorations, fleur-de-lis, griffins or lions rampant, the heads of royalty, and those that specify a town name.

Marks indicative of clothier or weaver marks are more personal in nature and would be more akin to a makers mark. A wide range of personal initials and marks are found on these seals, along with a location for noting the length, weight, and width of the textile. These marks may include "aftermarket" additions, in the form of hand scratched markings. Clothiers and weavers may have also acted on behalf of the government and functioned as searchers (Egan 1994:2).

The alnage system had become highly ineffective and corrupted by the 18th century, and was abolished in 1724. This demise may offer a significant dating tool for sites in colonial Maryland. Lead seals with markings suggesting alnage application would likely not be found on a site

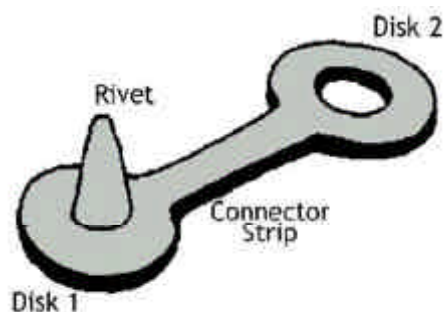


Figure One: Typical Lead Cloth Seal. Most decorations are found on the non-riveted side of Disk 1.

that was occupied after the first quarter of the 18th century. Lead seals with personal markings continue to be used throughout the 19th century for labeling purposes, intended primarily to impart information to local textile producers and traders (Egan 1994:4).

The Sites

Seven sites in Anne Arundel County have yielded lead cloth seals as discussed in this study (Figure 2). The majority of the collection of seals originated at sites that were once part of Providence, the first European settlement in Anne Arundel County, founded in 1649 (Luckenbach 1995). Over the last twelve years, a total of eight sites have been discovered which were once parts of this hamlet-like settlement centered just north of present day Annapolis, MD on the Broadneck peninsula. Eight of these sites have been surface collected; six have been subject to formal excavations. Two of the excavated sites of Providence produced no lead seals - the Broadneck Site and Swan Cove. The remaining four, Town Neck, Leavy Neck, Homewood's Lot, and Burle's Town Land, produced the assemblage of lead seals discussed below.

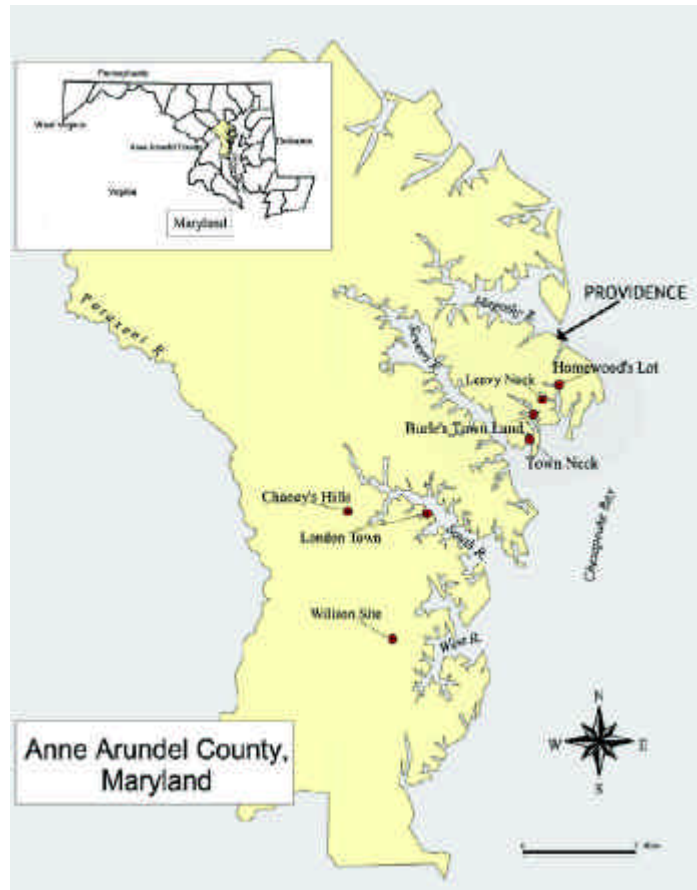


Figure Two: Location of Sites with Lead Cloth

We have also included in this study seals recovered from three sites discovered to the south of Providence, including Chaney's Hills, the Willson Site, and London Town. Chaney's Hills and London Town are contemporaneous with the Providence sites while the Willson site represents the early years of the 18th century, when the seal system is losing credibility.

The Town Neck Site, (18AN944, ca. 1661-1690), was the subject of testing that was virtually of a salvage nature (Beauregard, et al. 1994, Luckenbach 1995, Goodwin 2000, and Mintz and Moser 2002). Few units were dug, but a considerable amount of bulldozer-damaged feature contents were screened. These produced no seals, but a single example was recovered during a surface collection of the impacted area.

Recent excavations at Leavy Neck (18AN828, ca. 1660-1730) uncovered a substantial cellar hole. One lead seal was recovered from this feature, which appears to date to the third quarter of the seventeenth century.

The vast majority of seals discussed here originated from two sites – Burle’s Town Land (ca. 1649-1676) where the excavation of 229 five by five foot squares produced 19 examples, and Homewood’s Lot (ca. 1649- mid 18th century) where 87 excavation units and 65 excavated or tested features produced eight seals.

Burle’s Town Land (18AN826) was the home of Robert Burle, surveyor for the town of Providence. Excavations produced a rich assemblage of material from the third quarter of the seventeenth century. Characteristic of the Burle’s Town Land assemblage was a noticeable influence of Dutch and Continental materials, along with the expected assemblage of artifacts representative of English importation. Detailed tobacco pipe studies of the site indicate that Robert Burle had an extensive international trade network with a focus on Bristol, England, and the Netherlands (Luckenbach 1994, 1995, Sharpe, Luckenbach and Kille 2002).

Occupation at Homewood’s Lot (18AN871) began in 1649, with the first wave of Puritans moving from Virginia to Providence. The site was intensely and continuously occupied through out the colonial period and into the nineteenth century (Gadsby and Callage 2002.) Fortunately, numerous sealed and well-dated features offer snapshots into representative time periods at Homewood’s Lot.

The three sites located outside of the Providence settlement are found south of the South River. London Town was a prominent colonial seaport founded in 1684. The town was an active base for shipping throughout the 17th and 18th century. By the Revolutionary War, the town had fallen into relative obscurity and was eclipsed by the government center of Annapolis (see Kerns 1999, Cox, West and Moser 1997, Gibb and Persinger 1996) Six lead seals from the town site have been included in this study.

Richard Chaney and his descendants occupied Chaney’s Hills from 1658 until 1707 (Callage, Kille and Luckenbach 1999, 2002). The site is located on a unique promontory along the western reaches of the South River. Eighty-five plowzone units were excavated which produced two lead seals.

Finally, the Willson Site (1700-1725), located in the West River region of the County, produced three seals during the limited excavations of plowzone and the testing of three sealed domestic trash-filled features (Cox and Sharpe, In Press).

The Lead Seals

A total of 39 lead seals have been recovered from the sites described above (Table 1.) The seals range from 10mm in diameter to 24mm. Nearly all are circular in form, though two rectangular or square seals were recovered from Homewood’s Lot and London Town. Two unique variations on the typical circular form have been recovered. A single star-shaped seal was recovered from Homewood’s Lot and a unique double diamond-shaped seal was excavated Burle’s Town Land. Of these 39 seals, 18 have discernible designs or marks, 5 have cloth impressions, and 16 have no recognizable marking. Of those with markings, 9 exhibit markings that clearly

Sample Number	Provenience	Size (mm)	Shape	Markings	Disc 1,2, ID (inner discs), R (rivet), C (connector)	comments/origin
1	826-13	14	circular	CAR / SAY / 1672	1,C	Ainage
2	871-1	13	circular	DOZ / 1677 // 4-part banner w/ poss. fleur de lis	1,2, ID, R	Ainage (Lancashire, Yorkshire, Devon or Hampshire)
3	871-5	15	circular	PW / D / I // Griffin with rouletted edge	1,2,ID,R,C	Ainage (Yorkshire or Somerset)
4	826-1	18	circular	Somerset PW	1	Ainage (Somerset)
6	826-4	10	diamond	Suffolk 1674 // Poricullis w/ crown	1,2,ID, R, C	Ainage (Suffolk)
8	871-4	13	star shaped	OF ENGLAND over a crown with C R underneath // M	1,2,R,C	Ainage
7	1084-1	16	circular	Crown over Thistle / 3	1,2,R,C,	Ainage / Charles II
8	TN-1			T B		Ainage (TB initials of a London town warden?)
9	1188-1	15	circular	head of Anne , rouletted edge with scratch marks	1	Ainage ca. 1702
10	826-10	19	circular	TC / XX (opposite side has intense scratches but no discernible marks)	1,2,ID, R, C	XX part of a date?
11	871-3	21	circular	W / XX // rings w/ a dot	1	Worsted?
12	826-3	20	circular	W	1, R, C	
13	826-12	13	circular	H III or H T T T or H M	1,R,C	
14	826-5	20	circular	I / Y / ?	1,R	
15	826-9	11	circular	Indet. Dot sequence and poss. Y	1	
16	871-8	14	rectangular	B / 2	1	thin (14mm * 21mm)
17	48-5	na	rectangular	5/ H O N ? / D F ?	1	
18	48-1	23	circular	cross/ heart design or 'T' and 'A'	1	very heavy- Bent / poss. mark on bent portion, Continental Europe analogy
19	48-3	19	circular	possible star-like pattern		
20	871-6	21	circular	poss. cloth impressions, poss star or fleur de lis on rivet side	1,R, C	
21	826-19	19	circular	cloth impression	2	
22	826-17	19	circular	cloth impression	2, C	
23	826-8	24	circular	cloth impression	1,R,C	
24	826-6	20	circular	frag. cloth impression	1	
26	871-7	23	circular	cloth impression, poss. 'L'	1, R, C	
28	826-15	12	circular	none	1,R	
27	48-2	14	circular	none	2	
28	826-7	16	circular	none	1	
29	826-2	16	circular	none	1, R	
30	871-2	17	circular	none	1	
31	48-4	18	circular	none		
32	826-14	20	circular	none	2	
33	826-16	21	circular	none		
34	826-11	22	circular	none	2	
35	1188-2	na	frag. circular	none		
36	1188-3	na	fragment	none		
37	826-18	na	fragment	none	C	
38	48-6	na	fragment	none	C	
39	828-1	na	fragment	none		

Table One: Lead Cloth Seals recovered in Anne Arundel County, Maryland.

associate the lead seal with the alnage system; three of these are dated. Four of the 39 are intact enough to determine that they are four-part seals, with two additional inner disks (Seals # 2, 3, 5, and 10).

Lead Seals with Alnage Marks

The following discussion details the markings found on nine seals that are clearly royal in nature (Figure 3A and 3B). Seal #1 was recovered from Burle's Town Land and has one side that is indecipherable, while the other has the impression **CAR/ SAY/ 1672**. Located in the plowzone near the main structure, the date provided little other than a confirmation of the generally assumed site chronology. Since some seals had already been recovered at the site that bore geographical inscriptions like "Suffolk" or "Somerset" initial research on this object centered on locating a place named "Carsay" – to no avail. This artifact remained enigmatic for quite some time until it was finally determined that this seal bore a reference to the cloth usually known as "kersey," thus providing an interesting and unexpected insight into 17th century linguistic dialects.

Kersey was a cheap, coarse woolen cloth of twill weaves, which as often used for overcoats because it kept water out. The material was woven at Lancashire and in Yorkshire "where they were sometimes called Northern Dozens." Kerseys were also produced in Devon and Hampshire. (Montgomery 1984:271-3, Egan 1994:75).

The discovery of this reference to "northern dozens" provided the breakthrough for deciphering another dated seal. Recovered from Homewood's Lot, seal #2 contained the inscription **DOZ/ 1677**. On the reverse a possible 4 part arms (England?) with three fleur-de-lis's partially visible. After first assuming that this was a reference to quantity, it was now clear that the seal was describing an alternate name for kersey fabric.

The further conclusion that the seal's origin was from a northern county was compromised by seal #3 –also recovered from Homewood's. This seal had a lion rampant or griffin on one side and the inscription **PW** in large letters and **DZ** in small ones. Egan states that such heraldic seals usually date after the reformation in 1660 (1994:60). This PW seal bore an obvious relationship to one from Burle's Town Land (seal #4) that read **PW** in the center and **SOMERSET** around the edge. Apparently "dozen" was a cloth term familiar in this county as well.

Placing the source of PW in Somerset, led to an extremely rare occurrence, the ability to associate a lead cloth seal with a specific individual. During the mid-17th century, and absence of officially minted small change led to the production of large numbers of private token issues, usually in farthing and half penny denominations. Reference to Williamson's *Trade Tokens Issued in the Seventeenth Century in England, Wales, and Ireland, by Corporations, Merchants, Tradesmen, etc.* indicates a prolific number of tokens being issued during this period by a clothier named Peter Wells in Somerset which also bear the initials PW (Williamson 1970). Peter Wells, therefore, becomes the candidate most likely to have produced the Providence PW cloth seals as well.



Figure Three A: Lead Seals with Alnage Markings. (Seal #1= 14mm, Seal #2= 13mm, Seal #3= 15mm, Seal #4= 18mm, Seal #5= 10mm)



Figure Three B: Lead Seals with Alnage Markings. (Seal #6= 13mm, Seal #7= 16mm, Seal #8= n/a, Seal #9= 15mm)

Burle's Town Land produced the third dated example in seal #5, that bore the inscription **Suffolk/ 1674** on one side and a portcullis (castle gate) with a crown on the opposite side. This seal was the smallest recovered thus far in Anne Arundel County (10mm) and was a double disc diamond shaped seal. This was clearly an alnage seal as it had the obvious royal markings of the portcullis and crown. The portcullis is often associated with Queen Elizabeth.

Another strangely configured alnage seal (#6) was found in conjunction with the crown motif at Homewoods Lot. A small (13mm) star shaped seal, with one side showing a crowned **CR** for Charles II and the inscription **OF ENGLAND**. The reverse has an enigmatic script capital letter **M**. Egan shows an apparently identical M on a seal with scratched x and c on the obverse (1994:183.) Another seal with the crown motif was recovered from Chaney's Hills (seal #7). This 16mm seal has the crown over thistle motif with the number 3 next to it. A similar motif is sometimes seen in conjunction with the head of George I, but is also commonly associated with the reign of Charles II, an attribution that more closely fits the Chaney site's 17th century chronology.

Two letter initials were prominent on the readable section of the only cloth seal recovered from the Town Neck Site. This seal (#8) bore the initials **TB** and an indecipherable inscription around. Egan references an alnager with the initials TB who appears on numerous seals from both Essex and Suffolk counties during the reign of Charles I and the Commonwealth (Egan 1994:47) thus the inscription on the TB seal may likely be Suffolk. Suffolk and Essex were mainly known for the production of colored cloths, broadcloths and "says" (a grade of worsted cloth made from wool) that were widely exported. Egan states that these two counties were perhaps administered together for the alnage due to the similarities of their products (1994). Alternatively, the Norwich worsted textiles occasionally had the town wardens initials included on the seal. TB is found on two such seals in Egan and are the initials of town warden Thomas Browne (ca 1670).

The one clearly 18th century seal recovered in Anne Arundel County is alnage seal #9. A lead seal with the head of Anne and a rouletted edging was recovered at the Willson Site. Notable scratched inscription overlies the head and appears to be a T and a Z. This "aftermarket" hand inscription is seen in conjunction with seals that are not specifically alnage seals and strongly suggests the uses for the alnage system extended well beyond the governmental applications of quality control and taxation. Such hand inscriptions imply that the weavers, transporters, and perhaps even the brokers for various textiles may have marked the seal after its initial inspection, thereby using the alnage seals for their own purposes. The alnage system is known to be abolished by 1724, thus this 18th century example, recovered from an excavation unit immediately over a circa 1720s cellar hole suggests that the seals with royal affiliations were still in circulation till the very end of the system.

Clothiers, Weavers, Dyers and Merchant Marks

The nine marks discussed below appear to have marks that are not directly indicative of the alnage system (Figures 4A and 4B). These marks are personal in nature and resemble makers marks found on other items traded during the colonial period.

A Burle's Town Land seal (#10) has the initials **TC** with an **XX** beneath it. A similar **XX** is found on a seal recovered from Homewood's Lot This seal has a **W** over top of the **XX** (see seal

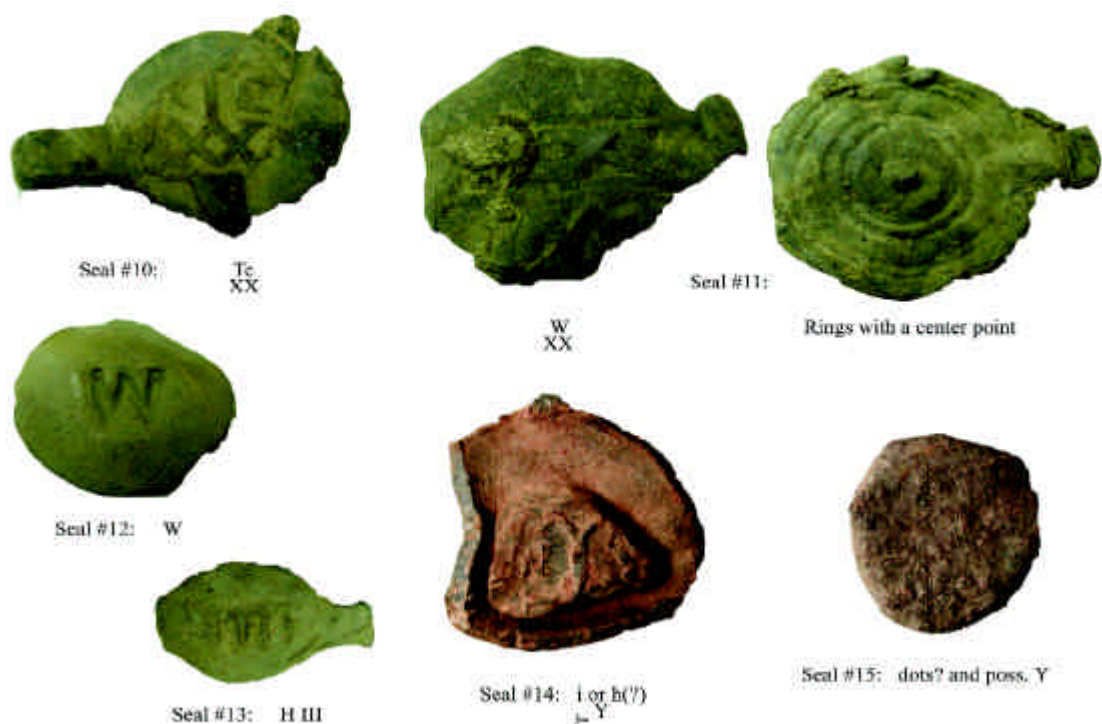


Figure Four A: Lead Seals with Clothier, Weavers, Dyers, and Merchant Markings (Seal #10= 19mm, Seal #11=21mm, Seal #12=20mm, Seal #13=13mm, Seal #14=20mm, Seal #15=11mm.)

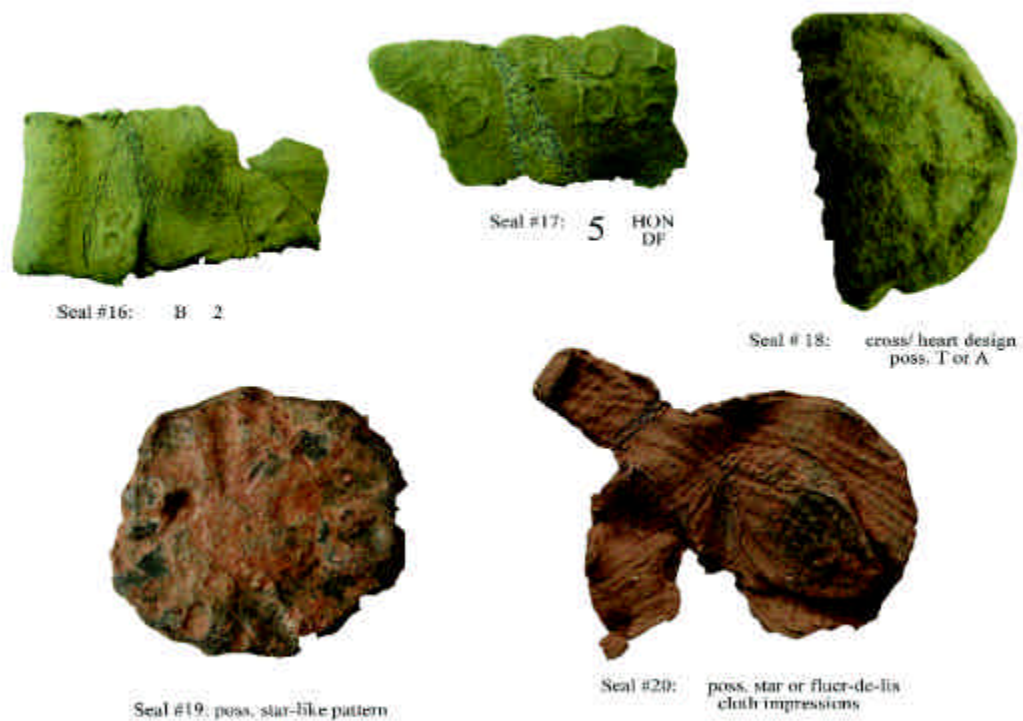


Figure Four B: Lead Seals with Clothier, Weavers, Dyers, and Merchant Markings (Seal #16=rectangular/ 14mm, Seal #17=n/a, Seal #18=23mm, Seal #19=19mm, Seal #20=21mm.)

#11). The opposite side has several rings in relief on the reverse with a point in the center. These XX marks may be a part of a date. Alternatively, these are perfectly comparable in design to initialed merchant's seals that occasionally appear on wine bottles of the period and the mark is seen on numerous examples of privy marks. The **TC** and the **W** that accompany the XX on these two examples may be the initials of the textile weavers.

Four additional marks from Burle's Town Land have possible initials imprinted. Seal #12 exhibits a single incused **W**. No comparable examples of the text style were noted in Egan's work. Perhaps this single mark of W may indicate that the fabric was worsted, a type of woolen yarn or textile. Another seal that was difficult to decipher has a series of upright letters that probably read **HHH** (#13), though depending upon the observer, the characters might instead read **HTTT**, or **HM**. The final marked seals from Burle's Town Land are difficult to attribute but may have the letter Y in common. One has a small roman **I** followed by a faint scratched **Y** that is twice the height of the I (#14.) The other has a faint series of dots with a possible **Y** (#15.) These two seals both seem to have been marked by hand and are likely not alnage seals but merchant seals.

Two square seals have a series of letters inscribed on them. On the Providence seal from Homewood's Lot (#16), only **B / 2** can be seen, while the London Town example (#17) shows a similarly enigmatic series of letters deciphered as **5...HO (N?)...O...D(E or F)...**

Although barely decipherable, a relatively large example from London Town (18AN48) appears to bear a cross and heart design that may be continental European in origin (#18). Egan shows vaguely similar examples from the British Museum that were made by the Hanseatic League (1994:116).

This London Town example is the only seal discovered thus far in Anne Arundel County that could be categorized as a non-English seal. The absence of non-English seals from Providence and the surrounding region is notable given the amount of Dutch artifacts, particularly building materials like brick, floor tiles and roof tiles, that have been recovered from these sites (Luckenbach 1995). While residents are acquiring domestic goods from a broad range of countries, it appears that cloth is coming primarily from England.

Seals #19 and #20 show very degraded surfaces and may have markings as noted on Figure 4B, though their condition prevents positive attribution. Seal #20 does however, have the clear impressions of the fabric it once sealed

Unmarked Lead Seals

Five otherwise unmarked seals showed the clear imprint of cloth on their surface (Figure 5.) Interestingly, seals #21 through 25 and #20 as noted above are, on the larger end of the size scale for seals recovered in Anne Arundel County, ranging from 19 mm to 23 mm. Logic suggests that large rolls of fabric, which would likely be a courser weave would have larger seals associated with them, providing more surface area and a deeper impression of weave upon the lead.



Figure Five: Lead Cloth Seals with Cloth Impressions, (Seals # 20- 25)

The remaining examples (#26 through 39) have no marks or are incomplete fragments. Measurements may be the only useful information to be gleaned from these samples.

Conclusions

With one exception, all of the cloth seals described to this point are clearly English in origin. Although Egan's work on the seals at the British Museum (1994) demonstrates that foreign seals are fairly common in England, only the single example from the London Town seems not to be from the mother country. This strongly suggests that the English were the primary supplier of cloth for the colony. The abundance of other Dutch trade materials in the Providence settlement suggests that fabrics from England were of a notable quality and may have been preferred by the colonists.

The presence and absence of lead cloth seals on colonial sites might also suggest levels of wealth. Abundant lead seals would indicate the occupant of the property had the means to acquire large bolts of cloth that would still have these inspection seals on them upon arrival in the colonies. We have found ample lead seals at Burle's Town Land and Homewood's Lot, both sites that were occupied by wealthy Providence residents with strong trade connections to England and the Netherlands (Luckenbach 1995, Gadsby, personal communication). Perhaps other less well-off

Providence residents such as planter William Neale at Leavy Neck, and artisan and planter Emmanuel Drew at Swan Cove bought their textiles in smaller quantities, and therefore were not the ones to remove and discard the lead cloth seals from large bolts of cloth.

The distinction between alnage seals with overt royal imagery and merchant-type seals with personal markings provides a useful diagnostic for colonial sites. Alnage-specific markings should not be seen after 1724, when the system was abolished. Those that are dated or contain a monarch's bust, provide an even more sensitive chronological indicator than coinage. While a dated coin might be in circulation for an indeterminate period of time, a bale of organic cloth and its associated seal had a limited life span.

Merchant-type markings lend insight into the trade practices for textiles in the colonies. Specialized and closer review of the fabric impressions should further our understanding of the type of textiles commonly traded. This will naturally lead to a better understanding of colonial clothing and interior decoration practices and preferences, adding a perspective one can almost touch to colonial life in Anne Arundel County.

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