

Merrymeeting Bay Pioneers Project Progress Report for 2020

Project Status as of May 27, 2021

*A report summarizing the project's activities and achievements
from January 1, 2020 to the date of this report.*

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I. 2020 SEASON REPORT

INTRODUCTION

With the continued support of the Merrymeeting Bay Trust, in 2020 the Merrymeeting Bay Pioneers Project (MBPP) completed additional, extensive archival research, primarily among the Pejepscot and Kennebec papers held by the Maine Historical Society (MHS). The MBPP also assisted the MHS in several ways with their efforts in digitizing and transcribing maps and other documents in their collection.

During 2020, and despite the COVID-19 pandemic, we were able to follow up on information that we derived from archival sources by conducting archaeological fieldwork in multiple locations, including both testing and excavation work, which is summarized in this report.

FIELD ACTIVITY SUMMARY

Building upon the results of our previous season, we determined at least the general locations of most of the documented pioneer-period homesteads, as well as several later, colonial-period sites. Therefore, we decided upon a multi-step fieldwork program to further identify and explore those sites.

- An intensive metal-detector sweep of potential sites was conducted to locate concentrations of metallic artifacts that could indicate centers of human activity that would merit further testing. We were using a newly-purchased state-of-the-art detector with enhanced capabilities to distinguish between various metal types.
- Numerous test pits were dug, both by hand and with the aid of a post-hole auger to locate traces of former structures. This allowed us to narrow down the physical area(s) that would be targeted for further testing and excavation.
- Where warranted by test pit results, excavations were undertaken to explore both the structures and the areas around them. These strategies worked well and led to the discovery of the pioneer-period sites discussed below. In addition, we now have two sufficiently promising eighteenth-century sites that may warrant this level of excavation, and we expect to encounter many more during the course of our investigations.

PURCHASE / STEVENS – FIELD TESTING

Our first priority for the season was to complete an assessment of the Purchase/Stevens site at the northwestern terminus of Stevens's Carrying Place (aka, Stevens' Carrying Place), which connects Merrymeeting Bay with the New Meadows River.

Archival evidence clearly indicates that both Thomas Purchase and Thomas Stevens had dwelling houses in this general location, though it is not clear if these were the same structure. Unfortunately, our metal detecting produced no definitive evidence of pioneer-period (pre-King Philip's War) occupation. We suspected that extensive previous metal detecting by unknown persons may have resulted in the removal of much of the evidence we that were seeking, so we arranged for a series of power auger test borings to be conducted over the site area. These also yielded no evidence of pioneer-period occupation.

However, metal detection and test pits did yield a number of artifacts that indicated a good deal of later human activity in the area. These artifacts are shown and described in Section II of this report.

We had previously noted the small Harrison and Curch family cemetery at this location, and upon further inspection, discovered what appeared to be another grave nearby, marked only by head and footstones spaced about six feet apart, possibly the grave of one of Thomas Stevens's wives.

We had identified a large house foundation and cellar atop a knoll at the site, which we believe to be the remains of the 19th-century Harrison homestead. This well-drained elevation was an ideal house site, and may have been where the Purchase/Stevens house(s) were located, in which case the construction of the large deep-cellaried Harrison house would have obliterated evidence of earlier structure(s). With these activities we believe that we have concluded our research at this site, unless future research provides new evidence associated with this location.

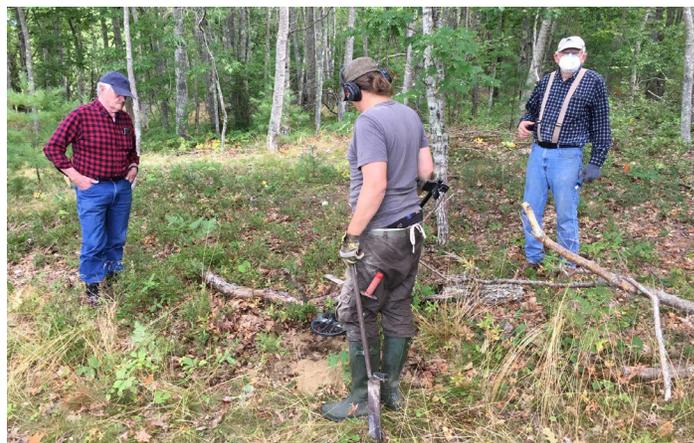


Figure 1. A metal-detection sweep in search of areas of concentrated human activity, near the northern terminus of Stevens's Carrying Place.

YORK, THOMAS, AND WILLIAMS – FIELDWORK

After concluding our investigations at the northern terminus of Stevens's Carrying Place, we shifted our focus to exploring the shoreline of the southwestern portion of Merrymeeting Bay in Topsham. This area was of interest because it is the general location described in the Pejepscot papers and other archival sources of three homesteads: those of Samuel York, James Thomas, and a husband and wife named Williams.

Metal detecting sweeps of the target area indicated three probable house sites. We decided to undertake extensive excavations at one of these sites, probably built by one of the above-mentioned settlers. Our excavations revealed a dense cluster of mostly small rocks, which we interpret as underlayment for house sill beams and/or flooring.

We also recovered thousands of small fragments of somewhat vitrified sandy clay that we interpreted as daub hardened by a fire that most likely consumed the building during King Philip's War (1675-6). Subsequent to the burning of the dwelling, centuries of agricultural plowing scattered the rock underlayment to the extent that we cannot be sure of its exact dimensions. We did, however, identify a shallow depression within the rock cluster that may have been a root cellar similar to those found in other Maine colonial house sites.

Artifacts at this site were quite sparse, for two probable reasons: First, historical documentation suggests that the families in this area had sufficient forewarning of impending Indian raids to provide ample time to withdraw to safety and carry their valuables and their most important household items along with them when they evacuated their homestead.



Figure 2. After excavating and recording these excavation units, the excavators arranged the stones from each unit in flat circles to provide a means of clearly visualizing the relative number of stones from each unit, as well as their overall distribution pattern. While the exact dimensions of the original structure have been blurred by generations of farming that scattered the stones, the general pattern still clearly suggests the approximate location of the structure.

Second, the three settlers in this area probably only arrived around the time when local Indians granted them title to the land in 1670. Since King Philip's War broke out just a few years later, their material circumstances were probably still close to the level of bare subsistence, in which case we would not expect to find large volumes of domestic objects, such as broken pottery, pipe stems, and other artifact types one would expect at a longer-occupied site.

Despite the relative paucity of domestic artifacts at this homestead site, we nevertheless recovered a number of important diagnostic artifacts that were very useful in the interpretation of this site. Some of the identifiable artifacts we did recover include table knives and a spoon handle, all of styles that date to the period of King Philip's War. In addition, we found fragments of at least one glass bottle which showed unmistakable evidence of having been subjected to a very hot fire, almost certainly the one that destroyed the building.

We recovered thousands of burned daub fragments, some of which are imprinted with a pattern that shows them to have been in contact with house timbers. In addition, one long patch of charred wood may have been the remains of a timber. We recovered a large number of wrought-iron nails. Most were common nails of the sort that would have been used to attach clapboards to the house exterior. Such sheathing would have been a typical upgrade to a wattle-and-daub structure to prevent the daub from being eroded during rainstorms, as well as providing a bit of needed insulation.

We also recovered clinched nails, which may have been used to make doors, among other applications. We recovered only a few small fragments of more recent window glass, suggesting that window openings were probably unglazed. Glass windows would have been a rather rare luxury item during the initial stages of 17th-century settlement in the area.



Figure 3. Some of the artifacts found include A) a small iron knife blade; B) iron clinch nails; C) a seal top spoon shaft; D) a large iron knife blade. Clinch nails were often used in the fabrication of doors for houses, cabinets, chests, and other items subject to movement and stress, as the ends of the nails were bent over to prevent them from coming loose with use. A typical door made with clinch nails is shown by item E in this figure.

The burned daub, abundant charcoal fragments, and hand-wrought iron clapboard nails would indicate that this house was most likely constructed in a manner typical of the period, with a timber frame made weather tight by wattle-and-daub filling between the timbers. The roof was probably thatched with reeds from the marshes along the shores of Merrymeeting Bay. The absence of brick fragments suggests that the hearth fire was probably vented by a simple smoke hood or daub chimney flue.



Figure 4. This demonstration house at Pemaquid, Maine, typifies small timber-frame structure found in 17th-century settlements in the area. The areas between the timbers are filled with wattle and daub, clapboard siding is added to protect the wattle-and-daub walls from erosion, and the roof is thatched with reeds. Stones placed under the sill beams help prevent moisture transfer from the soil that would rot the beams. Various materials were used for flooring in these early structures, including stones, reeds, wooden planks, etc. These simple structures were usually upgraded or replaced with better homes over time.

Multiple prehistoric archaeological sites have been excavated on this property, so we were not overly surprised that our excavation uncovered Indian artifacts, mostly stone tool fragments and flaking debris. Starting with the most recent, we found a single sherd of pottery that must have been made no earlier than 3,000 years ago. The next earlier artifact is a stemmed spear tip of a style known to date to around 4,500 years ago; this is the period when two nearby sites were occupied, so the discovery of this outlier was not surprising.

More interesting was a rather tight cluster of flaked stone artifacts and flaking debris. These were made mostly of Munsungan chert, a high-quality tool-making rock type found approximately 165 miles to the north. This material saw two well-established prehistoric periods of popularity as a tool-making raw material. The first of these periods was approximately 13,000 years ago when Paleo-Indians occupied the region, being the first humans to do so. The second period was around 1,000 years ago. However, the few Munsungan chert artifacts we found do not fall stylistically into either period. We therefore decided to radiocarbon date two small burned bone fragments found along with the chert fragments, on the presumption that they were most probably the result of a brief encampment by the tool makers.

The resulting radiocarbon dates were 9070 + 50 and 8490 + 50 years BP. These dates are from a period when human populations in the Maine region were very small. While they apply directly only to the bone fragments themselves, burned bone of this kind is considered a reliable indication of human presence. The samples we dated are only two of a great many similar fragments, but our budget did not permit us to carry out more radiocarbon dating. The two dates are far enough apart in time to perhaps indicate different periods of human occupation. Nevertheless, two factors lead us to conclude that this cluster

of (mostly) Munsungan chert artifacts are of roughly this age: First, similar artifacts dating to this period have been found elsewhere in the Northeast and, second, similar dates have been obtained from nearby archaeological sites just across Merrymeeting Bay in Brunswick. These materials extended down into the sandy soil that underlies the house debris, suggesting that they may all be quite ancient.

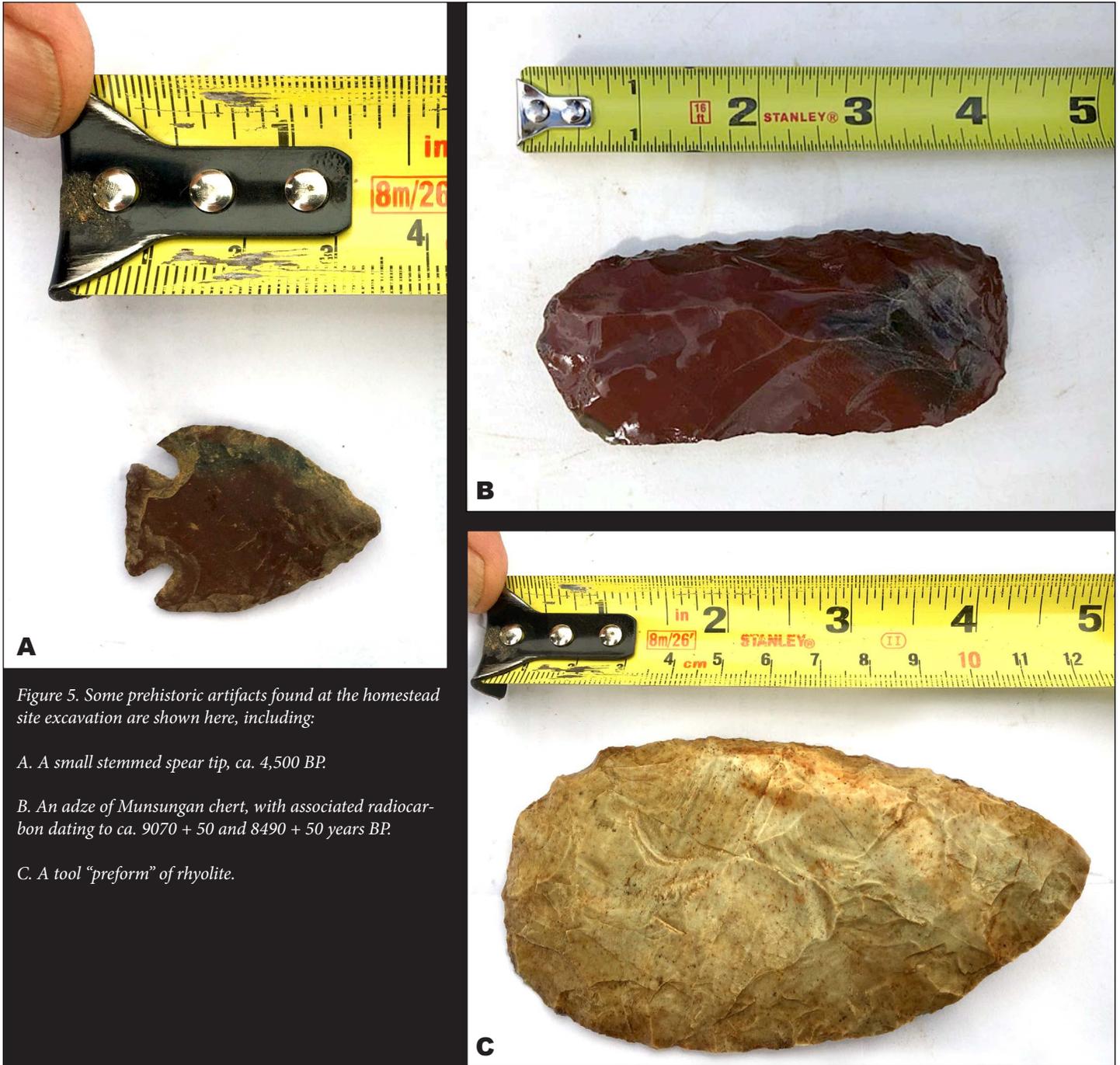


Figure 5. Some prehistoric artifacts found at the homestead site excavation are shown here, including:

A. A small stemmed spear tip, ca. 4,500 BP.

B. An adze of Munsungan chert, with associated radiocarbon dating to ca. 9070 + 50 and 8490 + 50 years BP.

C. A tool "preform" of rhyolite.

In addition to the main excavation on this property, we dug auger test pits at regular intervals over a large area surrounding the house site. These test pits produced a small number of artifacts dating from the pioneer period, but no evidence suggesting additional structures.

Other Nearby Sites (Possible York, Thomas, Williams)

Using metal detection, we located three other possible early house sites nearby, two on the same property and the third on an adjoining property. The first of these is located roughly one hundred yards to the southwest of our excavation and produced hand wrought nails. The second is on higher ground, near the Foreside Road. It also produced wrought nails, but more recent

materials as well. Interestingly, we recovered fragments of what appear to be daub, suggesting a pioneer-period building, as wattle and daub were apparently not used by later settlers. Two pewter spoon bowls of a style appropriate to the pioneer period were found, one of which was found at a site that yielded very few artifacts from metal detecting. We plan to conduct archaeological testing of all three sites in 2021.



Figure 6. An assortment of metal objects found at three potential pioneer-period sites. Most of these objects are later, but the presence of daub and a couple of possible pioneer-period artifacts, such as the spoon bowl at the upper left in this image, offer incentive for archaeological testing of these sites.



Figure 7. The pewter spoon bowl is a typical 17th-century style. The pewter spoon handle is probably 18th century.

OTHER TOPSHAM SITES

Beyond the above-mentioned sites, we plan to pursue permission to explore at least one additional probable site location: the home site of Thomas Gyles. Time permitting, we may also return to the probable location of the homestead of Gyles's brother James. Brief visits to this location have not yet produced any clear pioneer-period evidence, but James is important to the Merrymeeting Bay story because he was author of our only first-hand account of the Indian raids that depopulated the bay during King Philip's War.

BRUNSWICK SITES

Archival research indicated the presence of important sites in Brunswick near the shores of the New Meadows River. The earliest is the homestead of pioneer-period settler Alistair Coombs, located north of the causeway leading to Bath. We have multiple references to Coombs indicating that his house stood above and adjacent to a marshy part of the New Meadows, formerly known in archival literature as "Coombs' marshes." In addition, brief archaeological testing there in the 1980s produced reports of burned daub, indicating the former presence of a structure. We plan metal detecting and test excavations at this site in 2021.

Nearby lies a very different, but equally interesting site, the garrison (fortified) dwelling of Tobias Hamm, which dates to the 1730s. Although we are not (yet) focused upon sites dating from later waves of settlement in the area, Hamm is of interest because he was an African American who appears to have been the founder of an African American community that included the above-mentioned Harrisons, and whose descendants continue to live in the area today. We also plan metal detecting and test excavations at this site in 2021.

BATH SITES

We continue to seek the location of Christopher Lawson's home, the cellar of which is shown on an eighteenth-century map. Details of the map are not clear, due to inaccuracies in the map itself, but we have a general idea of the approximate location, and we will need to make an effort to obtain the necessary permissions from the multiple land owners in the area. Lawson was an early pioneer in the Merrymeeting Bay area, and played an important role in the community.

In sum, we are confident that most of the pioneer-period homesteads around Merrymeeting Bay will be identified by the end of the 2021 season. Our excavations this season should provide abundant new evidence of what these homesteads looked like and how their inhabitants lived by and interacted with the bay.

RESEARCH BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES CITED

NOTE: This list is a work in progress. The references listed below are only a partial list of some of the references used in our research. A more complete bibliography is still under development.

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II. ARTIFACTS (Northern Terminus of Stevens's Carrying Place)

ARTIFACTS FROM TESTING - Northern Terminus Area of Stevens's Carrying Place

This section contains photos and descriptions of artifacts found during a metal-detection sweep and from test pits made in the area associated with the northern terminus of Stevens's Carrying Place in 2020. These artifacts indicate a high level of human activity in this area, but unfortunately, no artifacts were found that could be definitively dated to the period prior to King Philip's War (1675-6). We have concluded our fieldwork in this area, at least for the foreseeable future. Of course this area may be revisited at some later date if warranted by new evidence from our research, or by possible expansion of the scope of the project.

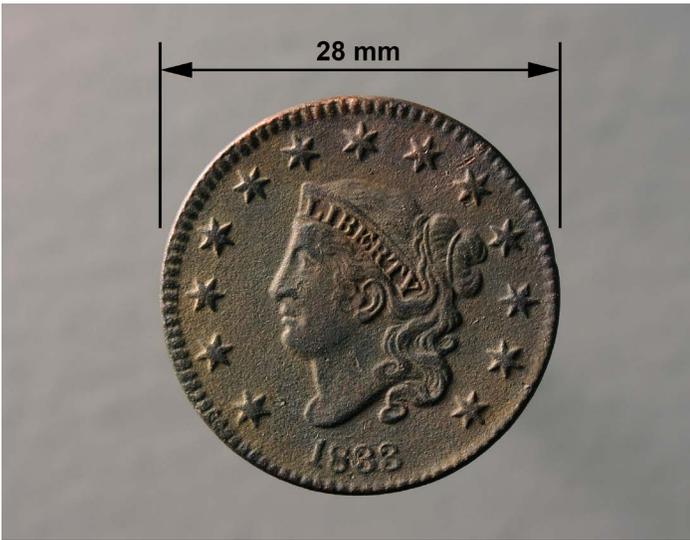


Figure 8. 1833 United States "Matron Head" large cent, in very good condition for a field find. Found in inter-tidal zone near the two "cuts" or "ramps."



Figure 13. Reverse side of the coin shown in Figure 2.



Figure 9. 1694 William & Mary halfpenny (British). See note 1.

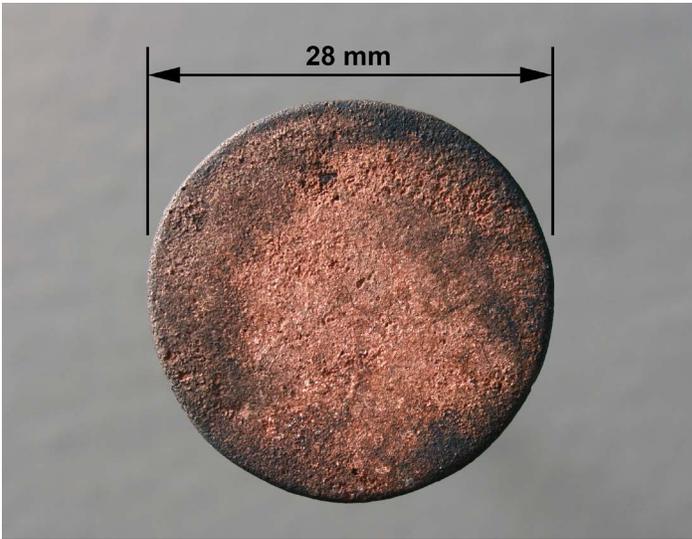


Figure 12. Reverse side of the coin shown in Figure 4.

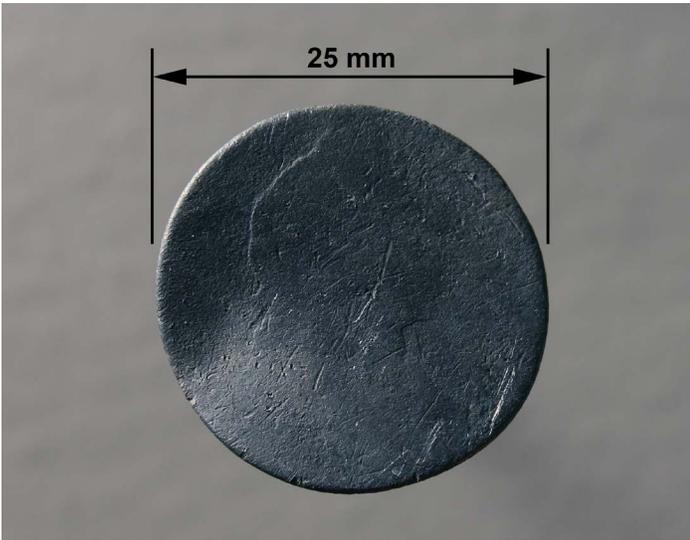


Figure 10. Carolus III (Spanish) 2-Real Silver coin 1759-1788. Obverse side. Found in inter-tidal zone near "cuts" or "ramps" to shore.

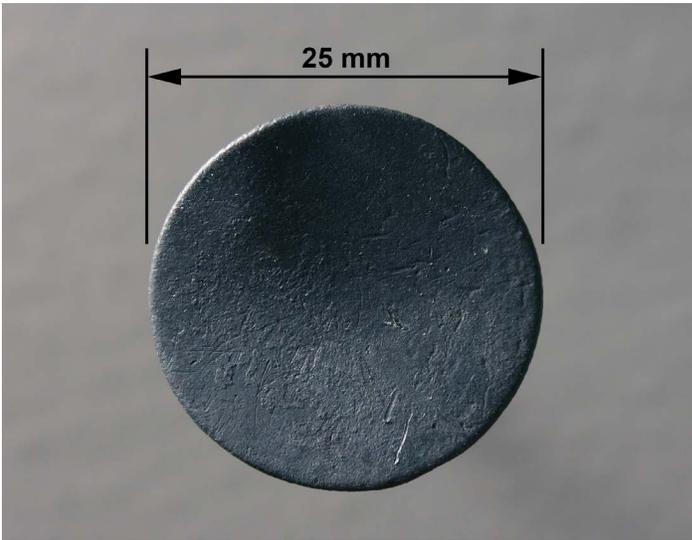


Figure 11. Reverse side of coin shown in Figure 6.

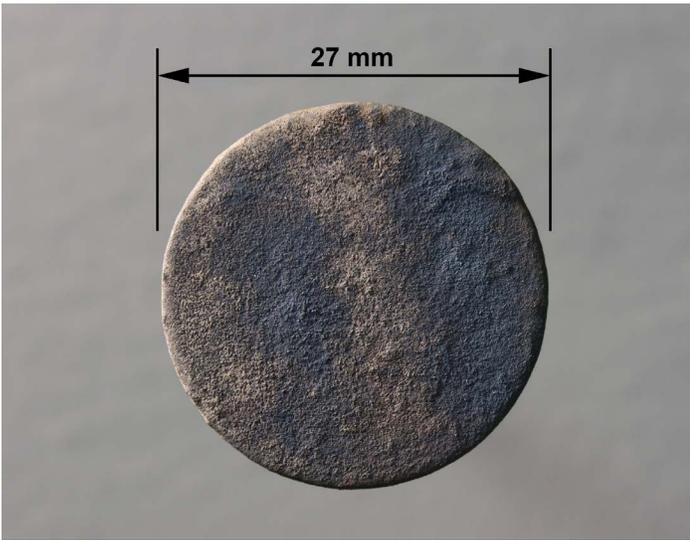


Figure 14. United States draped bust large cent. 1796 to 1807. Coin orientation may not be correct in photo.

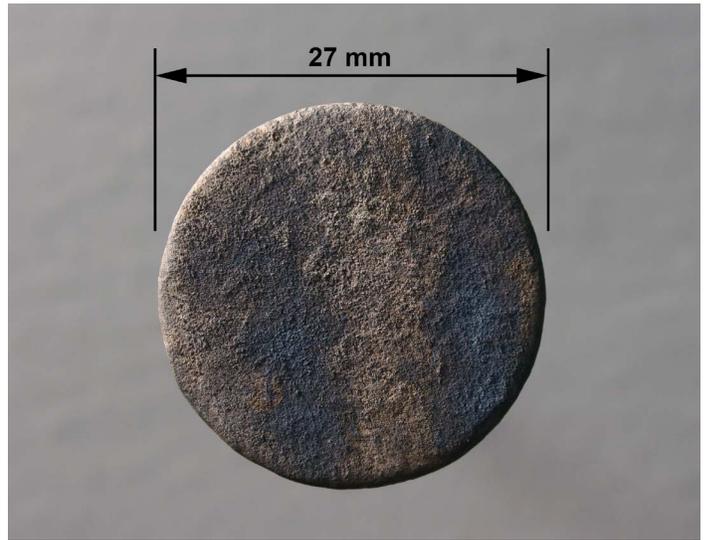


Figure 15. Other side of coin shown in Figure 8.

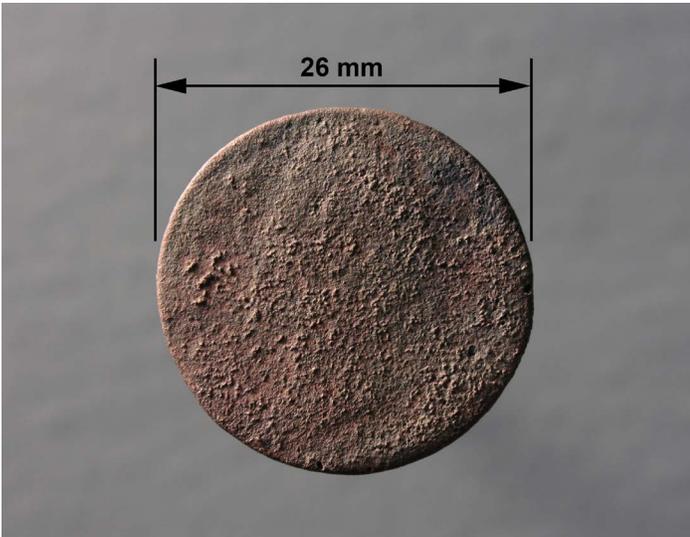


Figure 16. Unidentified copper coin, halfpenny size, possibly a French Louis XVI Liard/ Deniers. 1754-1793.



Figure 17. Reverse side of coin shown in Figure 10.



Figure 18. King George II copper halfpenny, 1749. Many of these produced from 1729-54 were colonial counterfeits.



Figure 19. Reverse side of coin shown in Figure 12.

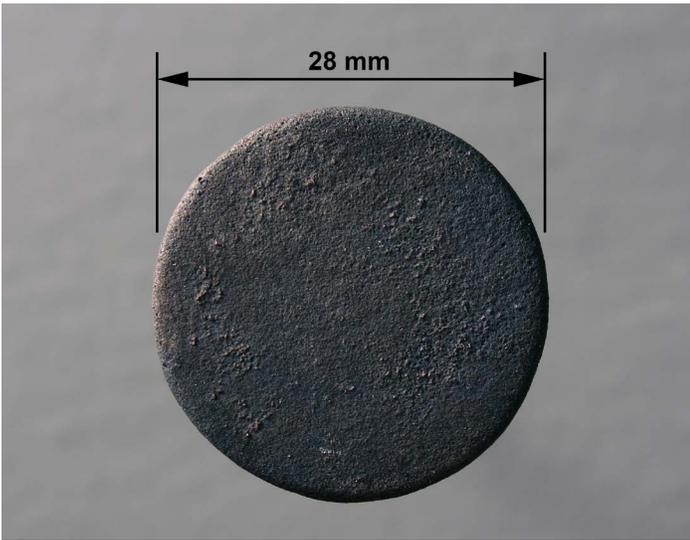


Figure 20. Unidentified copper coin, halfpenny size, possibly French/British mid-18th century or American early 19th century.

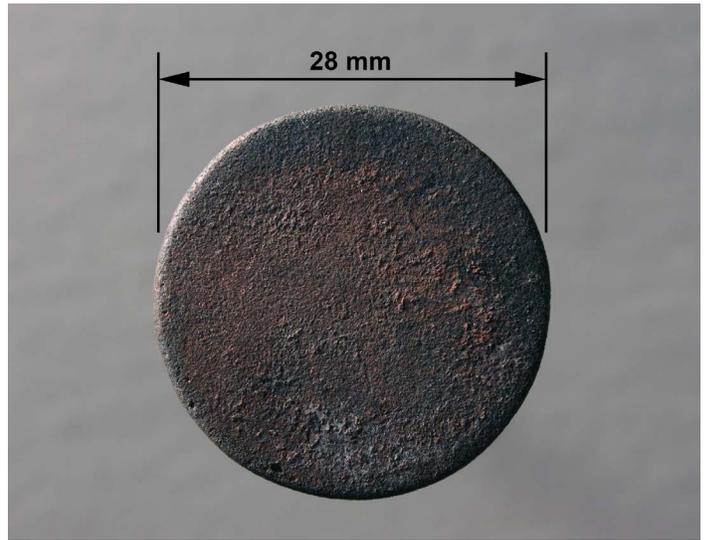


Figure 25. Other side of coin shown in Figure 14.

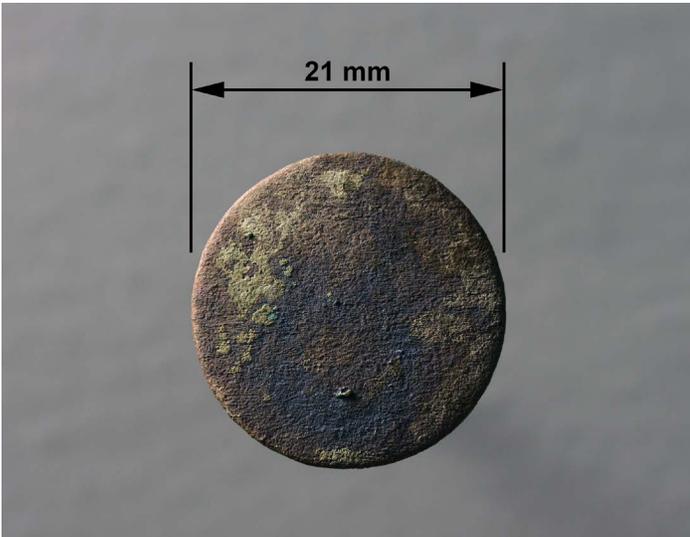


Figure 21. Civilian gilt button, possibly circa 1820. Gilt was applied to copper buttons as an amalgam of gold and mercury. See note 5 for details.



Figure 23. Back of button shown in Figure 16.



Figure 22. Civilian gilt button, possibly circa 1820. It appears that this button may have a world globe with banner depicted on its front.

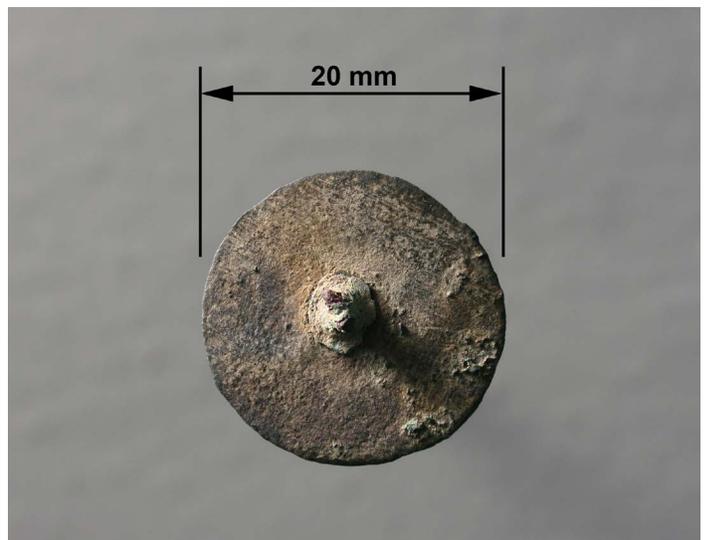


Figure 24. Back of button shown in Figure 18.



Figure 26. United States Army coat button, ca. 1808-1830. Cast pewter.

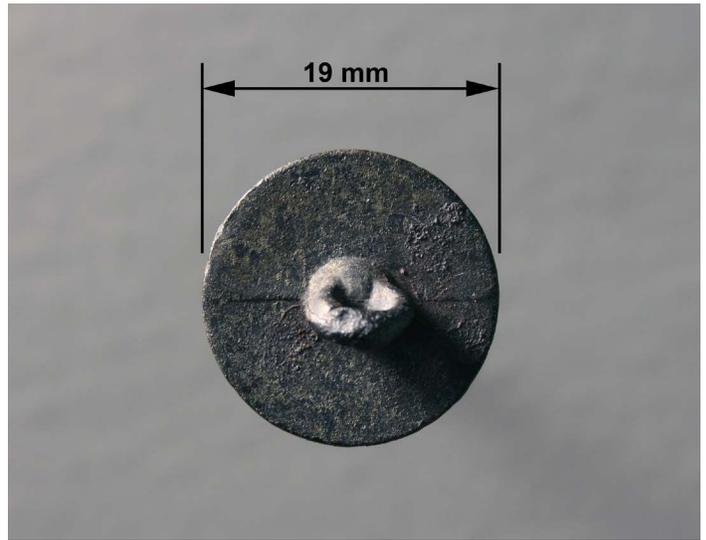


Figure 29. Back of button shown in Figure 20.

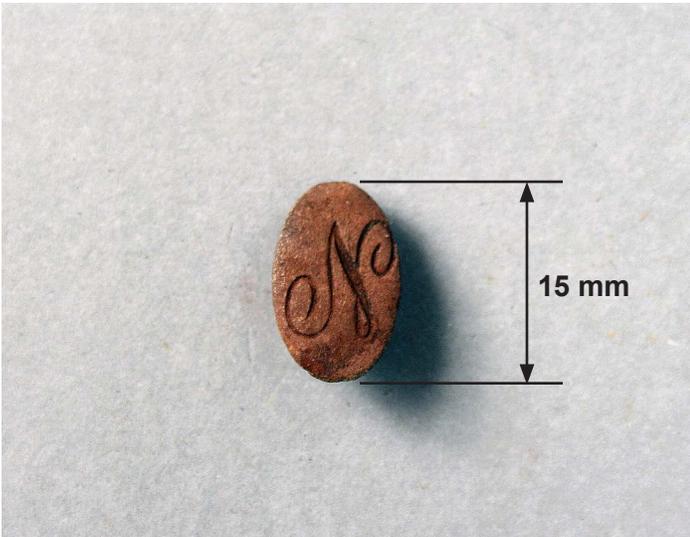


Figure 27. "N" cuff link, probably mid to late 18th century.



Figure 30. Various buckles, copper and brass. Most are horse tack. Probably mid-19th century through early 20th century.



Figure 28. Spoons. Upper two are silver plated. Bottom spoon is pewter. See note 2.



Figure 31. Reverse sides of spoons shown in Figure 24.

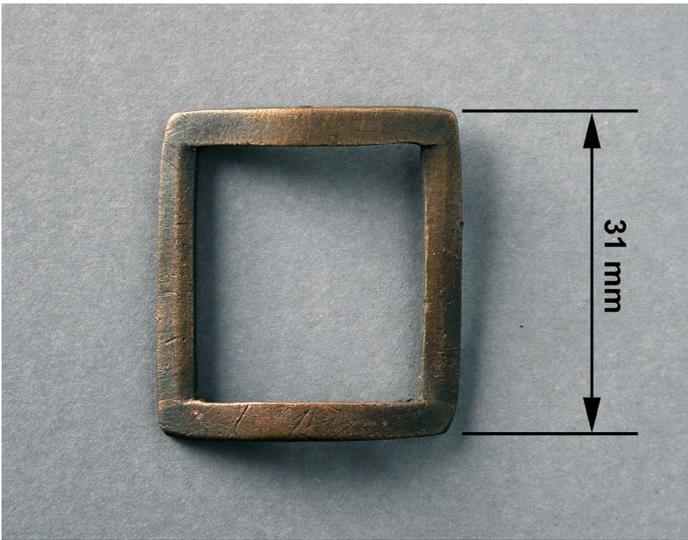


Figure 32. Knee buckle. Simple non-ornamented design. Brass or bronze. Difficult to date, especially since the chape is missing. See note 3.

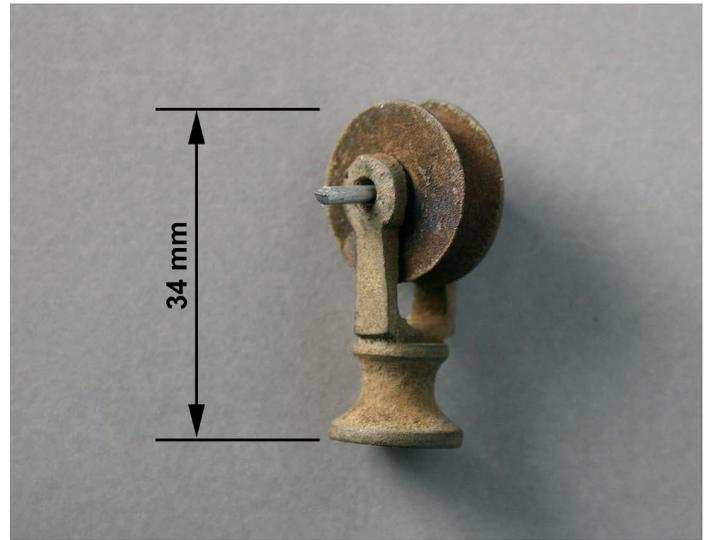


Figure 33. Small brass pulley and bracket. Unknown use. Bottom of bracket has threaded hole. Shaft missing. Bracket shaped at least partially by hand.



Figure 34. Small pewter object. Unknown use. Large end (at bottom) has threaded interior, as if it may have been screwed onto the end of a stick.

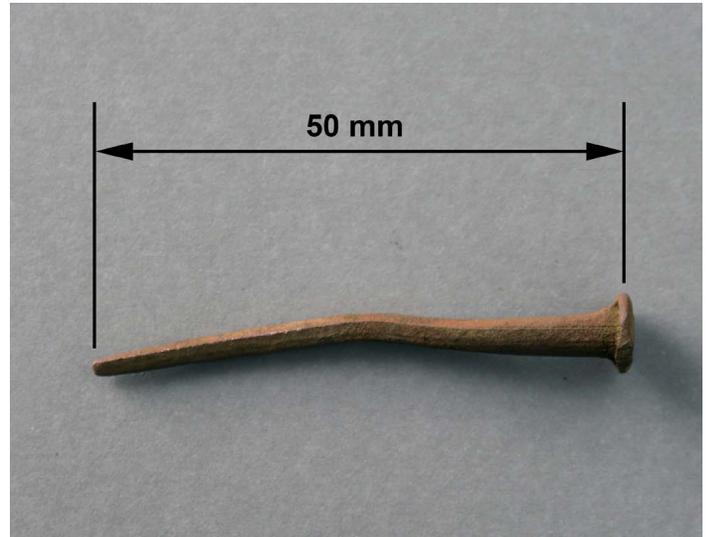


Figure 36. Copper nail in good condition. May have been used in boat-building. Appears to have been cut from copper sheet and then headed.



Figure 35. Lead weights. Upper-right weight is probably 19th or early 20th century. The other two are probably older. See note 4.

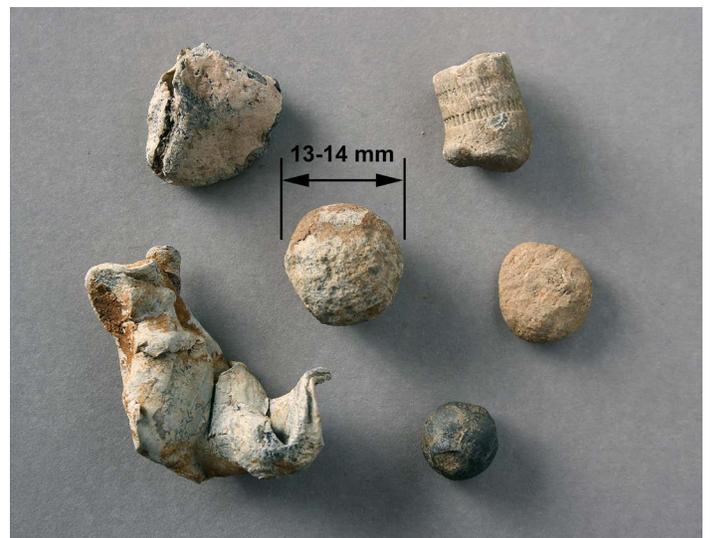


Figure 37. Lead bullets. Three balls of unknown date, one 19th or 20th century bullet with some impact damage, and two with heavy impact damage.



Figure 38. Iron handle, possibly from a trunk or tool box. Unknown date.



Figure 39. Broken cast-iron fragment of spherical object, very possibly a finial from a bed frame or other furniture item.



Figure 40. Brass heel plate for small heel, probably woman's or child's shoe.



Figure 43. Fragments of the wick mechanism from an oil or kerosene lamp. Central-draft tubular wick design, probably mid-1800s or later.



Figure 41. Brass harmonica plate. Date unknown, but probably mid-19th century or later.



Figure 42. Salt-glazed stoneware fragments, multiple vessels. One base from 9-inch-diameter vessel. Fragments w/brown interior glaze, cream exterior, ca. 1860-1880. Fragments in Figures 37-41 are the same basic typology.



Figure 44. Stoneware fragment. See Figure 37.



Figure 47. Other side of pottery fragment shown in Figure 38.



Figure 45. Stoneware fragment. See Figure 37.



Figure 48. Stoneware fragment. See Figure 37.

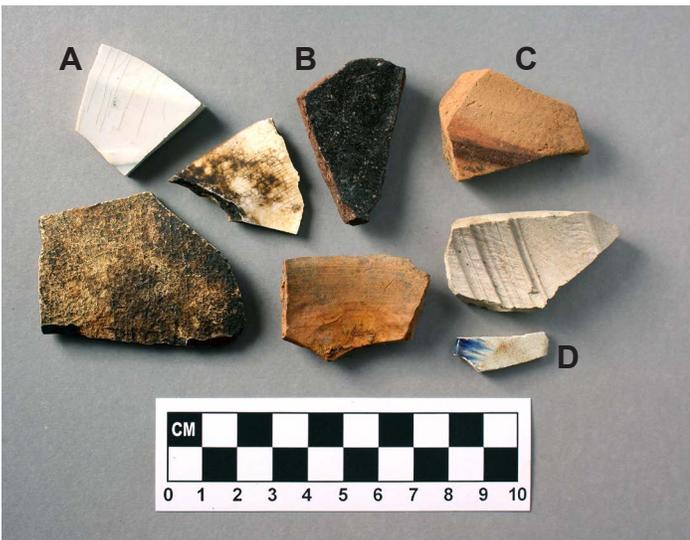


Figure 46. A: White "granite" stoneware w/molded motif, ca. 1850-1920. B: Buckley-type sherd, typically utilitarian ware, ca. 1690-1775. C: Crude earthenware, w/line or possible "spill-over" of slip to interior. D: White-field pearlware w/blue impressed shell-edge pattern, ca. 1770-1810.



Figure 49. Creamware. Popular pottery, ca. 1750 through the 19th century.



Figure 50. Glass fragments. More information is pending.



Figure 55. Small medicine bottle, base missing. Blown into mold. More information is pending.



Figure 51. Brass clock mechanism frame, unknown date.



Figure 52. Various iron spikes and nails. Square cut. Removal of encrusted rust could help narrow possible dates by revealing manufacture method.



Figure 53. Horseshoe and fragment, stakes, and possible chisel. Stakes and chisel have characteristic grain pattern of wrought iron.



Figure 54. Claw hammer and ball peen hammer (mid-19th c. and onward), and adjustable wrench or "spanner" (mid-19th c. to mid 20th c.).

Notes:

1. This coin was found within a “spill” group of 4 coins, along with a 1749 King George II copper halfpenny, which means it was likely an 18th-century drop and not a late 17th-century drop.
2. There is a portion of a trademark or style mark on the silver-plated spoons, which might help trace their origin, manufacturer, and date, although catalogs don't always contain all of the local silversmiths' work.
3. The knee buckle is an interesting piece. This one may be difficult to date, as it not only lacks the chape, but also is devoid of any ornamentation that sometimes provides date and origin information. However, some further research might shed some light on it.
4. The weight at the upper left with the groove around one end is of unknown date, but in terms of its shape and possible function, it is reminiscent of stone plummets used by Indians to weight fishing nets, and might have had a similar function, or it could have been tied to a fishing line as a sinker or used for some other purpose. The weight with a hole in it, also of unknown date, was probably designed to be tied to a line of some kind.
5. Making gilt buttons was a hazardous affair. Below is an excerpt an 1844 issue of The Penny Magazine, which describes the process of producing gilt buttons.



[Soldering Button-Shanks.]

The gilding is a more elaborate process. The gilt buttons are, in the odd but concise language of the workmen, called “all-overs” or “tops,” according as they are gilt all over, or only on the outer, exposed surface. There is also a distinction between the “yellow” and the “orange” gilding, the former being affected in colour by the previous use of a mixture called “similar” (“gold-resembling,” as it seems to signify), made of zinc and mercury. We will therefore select an “orange all-over” and an “orange top” as examples of the processes adopted.

For the first of these the buttons, when properly cleaned, are put into an earthen pan, together with some “quick-water” and gold-amalgam, the chemical action of which on each other, and on the button, is very curious. The gold is neither a liquid nor a leaf, but is mixed up into a kind of paste with mercury: this paste, however, will not act upon the button unless a thin film of mercury be previously deposited on the surface; and to produce this deposition is the object of the “quick-water,” or “gilders’ aquafortis,” which is a solution of nitrate of mercury. The buttons, the quick-water, and the amalgam are worked up together in the pan by means of a brush; a chemical (or perhaps galvanic) action takes place between the copper of the button and the mercury of the quick-water, whereby a thin film of mercury becomes precipitated on the button; and in this state the button is prepared to receive a second thin film of the amalgam.

For gilding the “tops,” as the object is (for cheapness) to use gold only on the outer surfaces, the buttons are arranged side by side on boards having little holes to receive the shanks. Quick-water is brushed over the surfaces; and after this the amalgam paste is worked on them, to which it adheres only on the parts which have received the thin film of mercury from the quick-water.

In both these cases, then, we have the buttons coated with mercury and gold at their surfaces; and to get rid of this mercury is the object of the next process, one

Continued on following page.

which has always been deemed very deleterious, but which is now conducted on a better plan than formerly. The buttons are put into the "gilding-cage," an iron wire-gauze cylinder, nine or ten inches in diameter, provided with an iron door and a long handle. This is inserted in a cylindrical oven, so nearly closed



[Cage and Oven, for Button-Gilding.]

as only to allow the handle to protrude through the front. The heat within soon causes the mercury to evaporate from the surface, and a very careful arrangement of flues is adopted, to carry off these fumes to separate condensing-chambers, where the mercury resumes its metallic form. A woman sits in front of the oven, and keeps the cage of buttons constantly rotating, by means of a winch-handle, to allow all the buttons to be equally acted on by the heat.

There are about this time other subsidiary arrangements for cleansing the surface of the button, heightening the colour of the gold, &c.; but these we may pass over, and proceed to notice the "burnishing." This process is effected at small lathes, provided with simple apparatus for retaining each button temporarily while it revolves; and a workman, with a burnisher of hæmatite, or blood-stone, burnishes the surface of each button brilliantly in the course of a very few seconds.



[Burnishing Buttons.]

III. OUTREACH

PRESENTATIONS

While the COVID-19 pandemic essentially eliminated our ability to make in-person large-group presentations to the public, we did make a remote Zoom presentation about the history of pioneer-period settlements in the Merrymeeting Bay area and how we are using LiDAR and GIS technology in our project. This presentation was made to the Portland-based “Spirits Alive” group, and was very well received, judging from feedback from attendees.

SITE VISITS FROM COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Since our excavations took place in the open air, in a hayfield, we were comfortable allowing small masked groups to observe our activities and to discuss them with us. Visitors numbered around 50 people, including reporter Darcie Moore of the *Brunswick Times Record/Portland Press Herald*, who wrote an extensive piece about our project (November 23, 2020).

WEBSITE

A copy of this report is available to the public on our project website, updating the public as to our activities for the 2020 season. We plan to update the website each year with our findings and accomplishments. We also received several useful comments and inquiries from interested community members via the feedback form on our website.



Courtesy of Point of View Helicopter Services

Figure 56. An aerial view, taken from above Swan Island in the Kennebec River and overlooking Merrymeeting Bay and out to the coastline.