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RESEARCHES INTO THE AMERICAN ARMY BUTTON OF THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

BY WILLIAM L. CALVER

The study of the earliest types of inscribed buttons of the American army—those of the Revolutionary War—was begun by a small group of enthusiasts about forty years ago. Somewhat later came the discovery of abundant specimens of distinctive buttons of the British regiments which had encamped during the Revolution in and about the present city limits of New York. These finds were made at old camp sites. With the partial exhaustion of yields from these British sites, a systematic search was instituted for old American military stations with the assurance that these also would yield their due quota of the adjuncts to the Continental and state uniforms. At this time our real researches commenced; and it is with this work, rather than with the study of the buttons themselves, that this article is concerned.

The heraldic interest in these American buttons is slight; as a rule the numerical or regimental designation is all that is shown. Yet their medalic and historical value is considerable. They are in many cases the only tangible reminders we have today of the corps which they represent. They attest either the regular or the makeshift character of the uniforms worn by the soldiery of the patriot armies; they speak of the itineraries of the several corps, or of contingents of these corps; and, where maps or geographical data are lacking, their discovery identifies the military sites whose locations have been lost to history.

Of course, care must be taken in the evaluation of this class of evidence. Occasionally American buttons are found on British camp sites, while quite often British regimentals appear in American camps. The former we attribute to prisoners and the latter doubtless came off uniforms captured from the enemy and worn, in dire need, by the Continentals. In certain camps where state troops are known to have been quartered, no distinctive buttons of the regiments present have been discovered, even after diligent search. It is quite probable, in such cases, that the occupants wore buttons of a perishable nature.

It would be well at this time to say a few words about the military button of this period. Since 1768 the British army button had been marked with the regimental number or, in the case of certain corps, with a distinctive device. This practice was followed in the American service where possible, but, due to the absence of regulations, changes in organization, and difficulties of supply, a considerable variety of forms resulted. Military buttons were made in two general sizes, a large size for the coat and a smaller size for the waistcoat. For the enlisted man these buttons were made of "white metal," or, in other words, pewter, cast from a mould in one single piece. Such hand work accounts for their usual crudity. An officer's button, on the other hand, was usually much more elegant and was often of foreign manufacture. They were

composed, quite universally, of a wooden back and a cement filling, covered over by a thin metal face bearing a *repoussé* design of the distinctive insignia; the metal used was either copper—silver-plated—or (block) tin. Of course many American officers and enlisted men wore flat buttons of brass, either plain or figured, but of definite civilian origin.

As stated above, other buttons of a perishable nature were employed. A regiment from Massachusetts had leather buttons, and camp-made buttons of bone and wood, covered with cloth, were certainly worn.¹ We find on old camp sites and barrack dumps many bone button discs, together with the stock from which they were cut and the steel cutters used in the manufacture of these "moulds." Proof also that pewter and lead buttons were made in the camps is not wanting. A definite instance of such manufacture is found in the case of the 6th Massachusetts Regiment, whose lead buttons, finished and unfinished, were found in a refuse pit at Camp Robinson's Farm, Garrison, N. Y. This camp was situated on the property of Beverly Robinson, about one and one-half miles east of the Hudson River, quite near to the present Cat Rock Road. The identical mould from which these buttons had been cast was discovered at New Windsor Camp, Orange County, N. Y.

Revolutionary buttons recovered from certain soils are, when found, much corroded and often in the last stages of decay. Other specimens, owing perhaps to a high percentage of lead in their composition and to favorable conditions of soil, are still almost "factory-new." To account for such serviceable buttons in refuse pits it is surmised that a fastidious soldier found it easier to replace lackluster buttons with ones newly cast than to attempt to refurbish the old. Indeed, evidence of repolishing is unknown among the thousands of British and American specimens found. Doubtless, also, many a button-laden uniform was discarded because it was verminous or too tattered to wear. Many buttons found are without shanks which, of course, rendered them useless to the wearer.

The scenes of our labors in retrieving these bits of equipment lay mostly in the Hudson Highlands—particularly at West Point and the several redoubts which comprised that citadel. We conducted researches on Constitution Island at the bend of the river, the site of a number of redoubts and camps, and also in the mountain fastnesses on the easterly side of the stream. Here we met with some success in our search for what had become known as the "lost camps of the Hudson Highlands." These lost camps were the cantonments established after the fall of the original defensive works of the river in 1777. The latter defenses had consisted of batteries erected in 1775 on Constitution Island and the works known as Fort Montgomery and Fort Clinton, built in 1776 on the westerly side of the river, about six miles to the southward. Following the destruction of these works, new cantonments were laid out, in 1778, to defend the passes through the hills and, being placed near enough to the river, to permit a force to rally and resist an ascent of the Hudson by the enemy. These camps were occupied until the end of the war. The



PLATE I

Pewter buttons believed to be of the regiments of the Continental Line of 1776. Specimen 11 reproduced through the courtesy of Captain L. F. Hagglund; the balance found near West Point.

camps found and explored were: Hampshire Huts, Robinson's Farm, and Connecticut Village. Such camps as Soldier's Fortune, New Boston, and York Huts are still to be discovered.

On the easterly side of the river the finds, with the exception of those made at Robinson's Farm, were not prolific; nor were there many discoveries at Redoubts Nos. 1 and 2, to the south of West Point. Yet at Redoubts Nos. 3 and 4 the excavation work was well rewarded and at Fort Wyllys many well preserved and important button specimens were unearthed.

The best of all sites, perhaps, was the slope on the northerly side of "Faculty Row" at West Point. This street, now the residence of certain of the faculty of the Military Academy, is the survival of the old military road to Newburgh. About where Quarters No. 37 stands, there was, in 1779, a large barracks and it seemed reasonable—all regulations to the contrary—that the soldiery, especially at night and in winter, would resort to the steep hillside just across the way as a ready-to-hand dumping place for all manner of discarded material, military and otherwise. The guess was good, for in the fullness of time (with our permit by us) we removed a patch of sod and came immediately upon a rich lead of "pay-dirt." Mingled with the nondescript articles which our sieves gave up were the military objects which identified the site. All the mementoes recovered were of interest but the most welcome were the uniform buttons, found in considerable quantity. On this hillside alone were unearthed samples of most of the Continental types together with a fine assortment of the kind worn by the state troops of Massachusetts and Connecticut.

In considering the various classes of buttons which have been found, let us look first at the Continental type which bears only a number. It will be remembered that the regiments of the Continental Line authorized for 1776 were distinguished by number alone, with no reference in their title to the state from which they came. Certain provisions were made for clothing these troops and for differentiating between the regiments by means of the color of the facings of the uniforms. That it was intended also to issue numbered buttons to these units is made clear by the General Orders of November 13, 1775, in which the new colonels were instructed to make the necessary arrangements with the Quartermaster General so "that the buttons may be properly numbered."² Doubtless this issue was only partially effected for only twelve examples of such numbered buttons, out of twenty-seven which should have existed, have been discovered and even these can not always be positively identified. Furthermore, descriptions of deserters in 1776 and thereafter would appear to indicate that numbered buttons were worn by units other than the Continental Line.³ Nevertheless, the examples shown (Plate I) are almost certainly of the type authorized for Washington's army of 1776.

It is significant that, although specimens 1 to 5 are more ornate in character than specimens 6 to 12, the two groups alternate in their numerals. To account in part for some of the numbers not having been discovered, it might

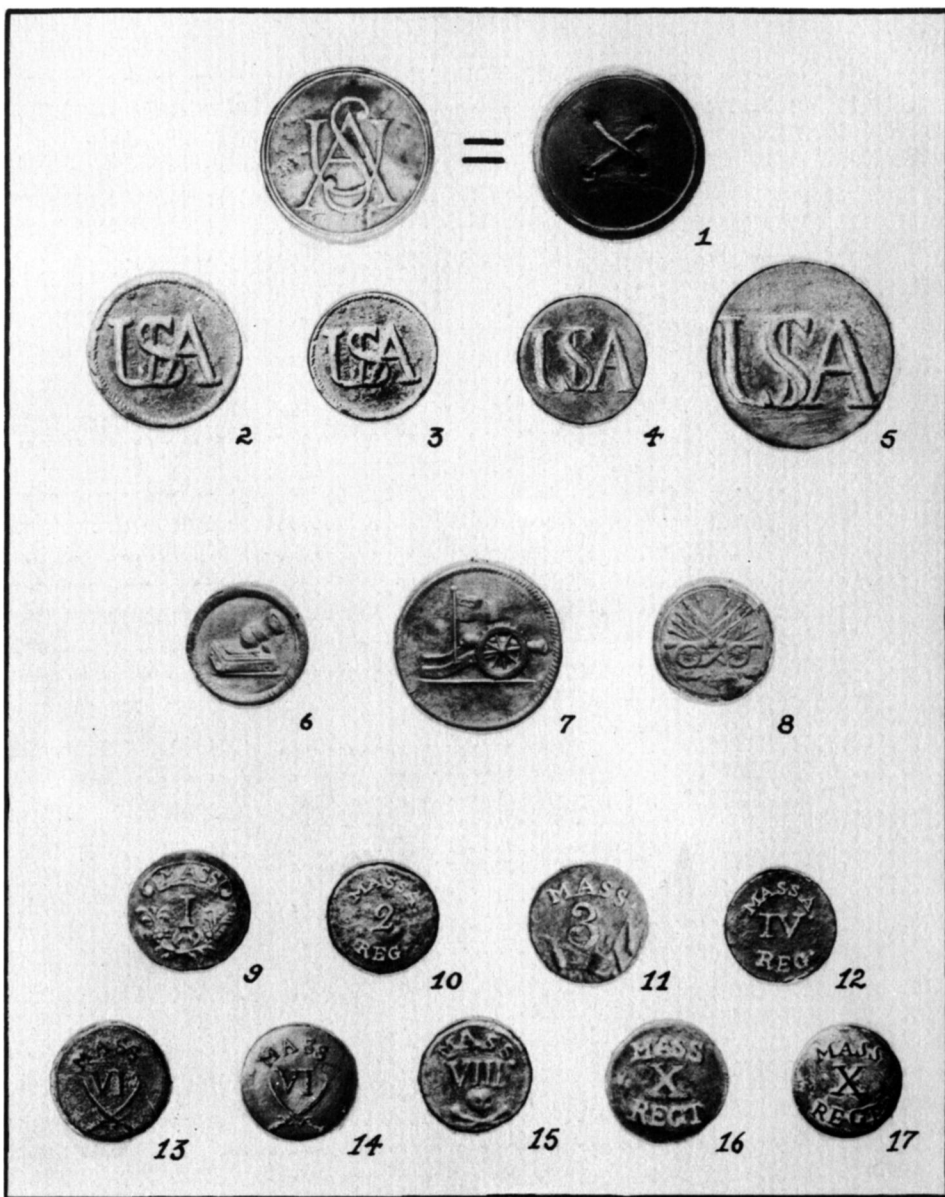


PLATE II

1. Officer's button, Continental Army, tin face with wood back, found on Constitution Island. 2-5. Pewter enlisted men's buttons, Continental Army. 6-8. Bronze buttons, Continental Artillery. 9-17. Small buttons, waistcoat type, of the Massachusetts Line; specimens 14 and 17 are of the officer type with copper faces, silver-plated, and wood backs; the balance are of pewter.

be added, as mentioned above, that some may not have been manufactured. Of the buttons shown, all, save specimen 11, were found in the vicinity of West Point. Specimen 11 was recovered from the *Royal Savage*, one of General Arnold's ships sunk October 11, 1776, in the Battle of Valcour Island and recently raised by Captain L. F. Hagglund. This find clearly establishes the early use of this class of button.

The next, and by far most common type of Continental button is the one which bears the letters "U.S.A." (Plate II, 1-5). Although we do not know exactly when this type was introduced, we can say with some safety—considering the locations at which it has been found and the probable date of the first use of the initials "U.S.A."—that it did not make its appearance before 1777.⁴ The frequency with which this button is found, however, would indicate that its issue was very general after this date.

In 1777 the designations of the Continental Line were altered so that the regiments would bear a state name and number. This resulted in the issue of state buttons, which are dealt with below. There were, of course, a number of organizations which could not be classified under a particular state and it was for them, perhaps, that the general "U.S.A." class was introduced. For example, early in 1779, a deserter from Colonel Flowers' Artillery Artificer Regiment is mentioned as wearing "white buttons having the letters U S A on them."⁵

Of this class two general types of privates' buttons have been recovered. The first and most common type has the monogram upon an otherwise plain face with a raised border, crudely milled; in a rarer type this border is missing. Both types are of pewter. The officers' buttons of this class (Plate II, 1) are much more neatly made and were probably fabricated in France. Although five specimens were found in an old house in New England, only one has been found in a camp—in a refuse pit at Redoubt No. 7, on Constitution Island. These officers' buttons have thin faces of tin with wood backs, after the manner of the French army officers' buttons of their day. For attachment to the garment they have, upon their backs, loops of stout cord, or gut, like those of the British officers of the Revolutionary period. In no case, however, did the British buttons have wood backs—they were universally of bone or ivory.

Another class of Continental button, fairly common in the Hudson Highlands, is that worn by artillerymen. Since early in the war, the four regiments comprising the Corps of Artillery had worn "large yellow regimental buttons" instead of the more common white buttons of other troops. This custom, distinctive for the Artillery and borrowed perhaps from the British, was confirmed by Washington in his orders of October 2, 1779, wherein it is specified that the buttons of the Artillery and Artillery Artificers were to be of yellow. Three distinctive types of this class of button have been discovered, all of which are believed to have been worn by the Artillery. Usually they are made

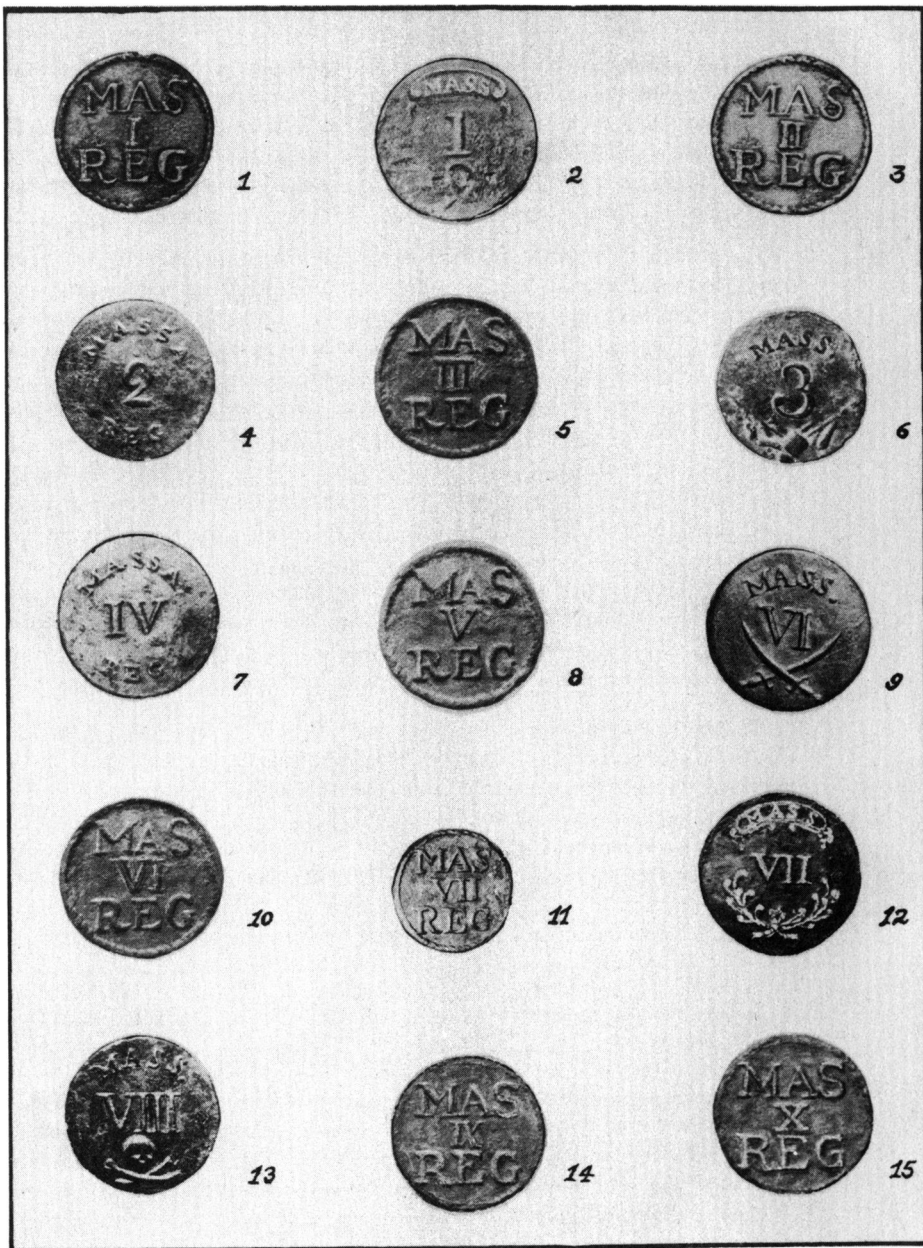


PLATE III

Pewter buttons of the Massachusetts Line found near West Point.

of bronze, although a few specimens made of pewter—probably in emergency—have been recovered. Of these types (Plate II, 6-8) the most interesting shows a mounted field piece, to the trail of which is attached a flag having the British union where now the stars of our union appear. This would indicate that the button was made early in the war, probably as early as 1776. A second type displays a coehorn mortar in its bed and a third type carries two cannon, back to back, over which is a trophy of flags.

Turning now to buttons bearing state designations, we find that the Massachusetts regiments of the Continental Line of 1777-1783, from the 1st to the 10th, are represented in our West Point or Hudson Highlands finds (Plate II, 9-17; Plate III). There is a wide variation in design in these Massachusetts buttons. Most often the designation is expressed in Roman numerals, although the 2nd and 3rd used Arabic at times. By way of decorative effects, half wreaths are shown on some of the 1st and 7th Regiment buttons, while upon some of those of the 3rd Regiment there is a trophy of drums and flags. Among the smaller buttons shown, there are two of the officer type (Plate II, 14 and 17) having silver faces and wood backs. It will be noticed in these two cases that the design is the same for both officers and men. The most significant of all these designs, however, is that on the officers' and privates' buttons of the 8th Massachusetts — a skull and crossbones, the gruesome emblem of the "Bloody Eighth."

Of the Connecticut Line we have buttons representing the 1st to 5th Regiments (Plate IV). Universally upon these Connecticut buttons the regimental numbers are shown in Arabic numerals with the state and regiment indicated in initial letters. One type of the 3rd Connecticut button, however, is unique in having the initial letter of the state made up in dolphin-like figures. Another unusual design is found for the 4th Regiment. On a single specimen discovered at Redoubt No. 4 at West Point there appears an ordinal "4th" and a foliated script monogram "CR."

Specimen 9 on this plate presents a remarkable instance in the discovery and identification of ancient military buttons. This button, when found on the hillside in front of the 1780 barracks at West Point, was in very poor condition, showing upon its face no legible inscription. Careful cleaning, however, brought out in good relief the clearly defined letters "LIy 3 C.R.," indicating the "Light Infantry Company of the 3rd Connecticut Regiment"—undoubtedly the original company organized in 1781. In February of that year this company numbered fifty-four men.⁶ The officers were: Roger Welles, Captain; William Lynn, Lieutenant; and Jacob Kingsbury, Ensign. It was one of the ten companies detached from the Connecticut Line in 1781. These in turn were part of the division of thirty-six companies drafted from regiments of the several states and designed for service in the South. The division, commanded by Lafayette, assisted at the siege of Yorktown. Five

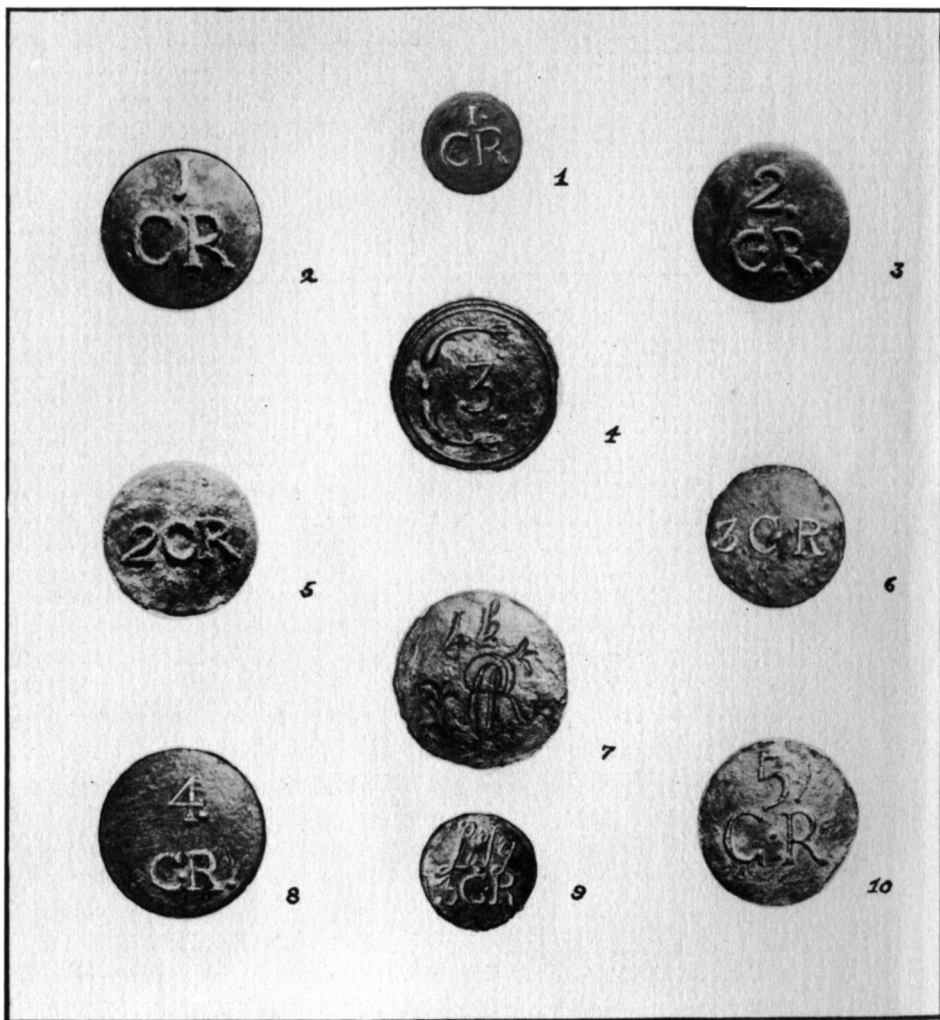


PLATE IV

Pewter buttons of the Connecticut Line. Specimen 1, of the 1st Connecticut Regiment, was cast in an original mold found at New Haven, Conn. The balance were discovered near West Point.

companies of light infantry from as many Connecticut Regiments, of which the 3rd was one, with two Massachusetts and one Rhode Island company, formed a battalion which, under Colonel Gimat and Major Wyllys of the 3rd Connecticut, led the column that stormed one of the enemy's redoubts at Yorktown on the night of October 14, 1781. The adoption of distinctive buttons for a single company is unique. No other such instance has come to light in the American or, for that matter, the British armies of the Revolution.

From the three mountain camps discovered in Putnam County, on the east side of the Hudson River, as well as from West Point, were retrieved numbered buttons of a peculiar type (Plate V, 1-7). They have at their centers, on a flat face, the numerals "2," "5," etc., surrounded by a broken circle and dot, characteristic of both the British and French buttons of the period. Upon their backs, however, they have cylindrical shanks perforated at right angles, a feature of the French button of 1762, the year in which military buttons were first numbered. Since these universally were found in close proximity with regular Connecticut buttons and on the camp sites of Connecticut troops, we attribute these to the regiments of that state which the numerals represent. There can be little doubt that the buttons were of French fabrication and that they were originally intended for the army of that country.⁷

On Plate V are also shown some Pennsylvania state buttons. Specimens 8, 9, 10, and 13 were discovered at Fort Ticonderoga and specimen 11 was recovered from the ruins of Fort Washington, New York City. Special interest attaches to specimen 12, inscribed "PSR" for the Pennsylvania State Regiment.⁸ This corps was so designated when first raised, becoming the 13th Regiment of the Pennsylvania Line in 1777.

On Plate VI are shown specimens of uniform buttons which are extremely rare and, in some cases, are quite unique. Specimen 1 is the type of button worn by New York state troops, probably throughout most of the Revolution. Only a few samples have been found and the exact dates of its use cannot be ascertained. Specimen 2 is of the 1st Maryland Battalion.⁹ It was found among refuse from the old Century House — the Nagle residence at 212th Street, New York City, on the westerly bank of the Harlem River.

Specimen 3, marked in monogram "DR," was found at the British fort at Richmond, Staten Island. It is an officer's button and, quite certainly, of the Delaware Regiment.¹⁰ The following specimen, which shows a bounding stag, was discovered at Redoubt No. 4 at West Point. It is also an officer's button, probably of The Bucks of America, a colored corps raised in Massachusetts. Their flag, showing a similar design, is preserved in the collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society.¹¹

Specimen 5 is of an unusual type in that it has a state designation shown in script. Just a few — three or four — of these buttons of the New Jersey

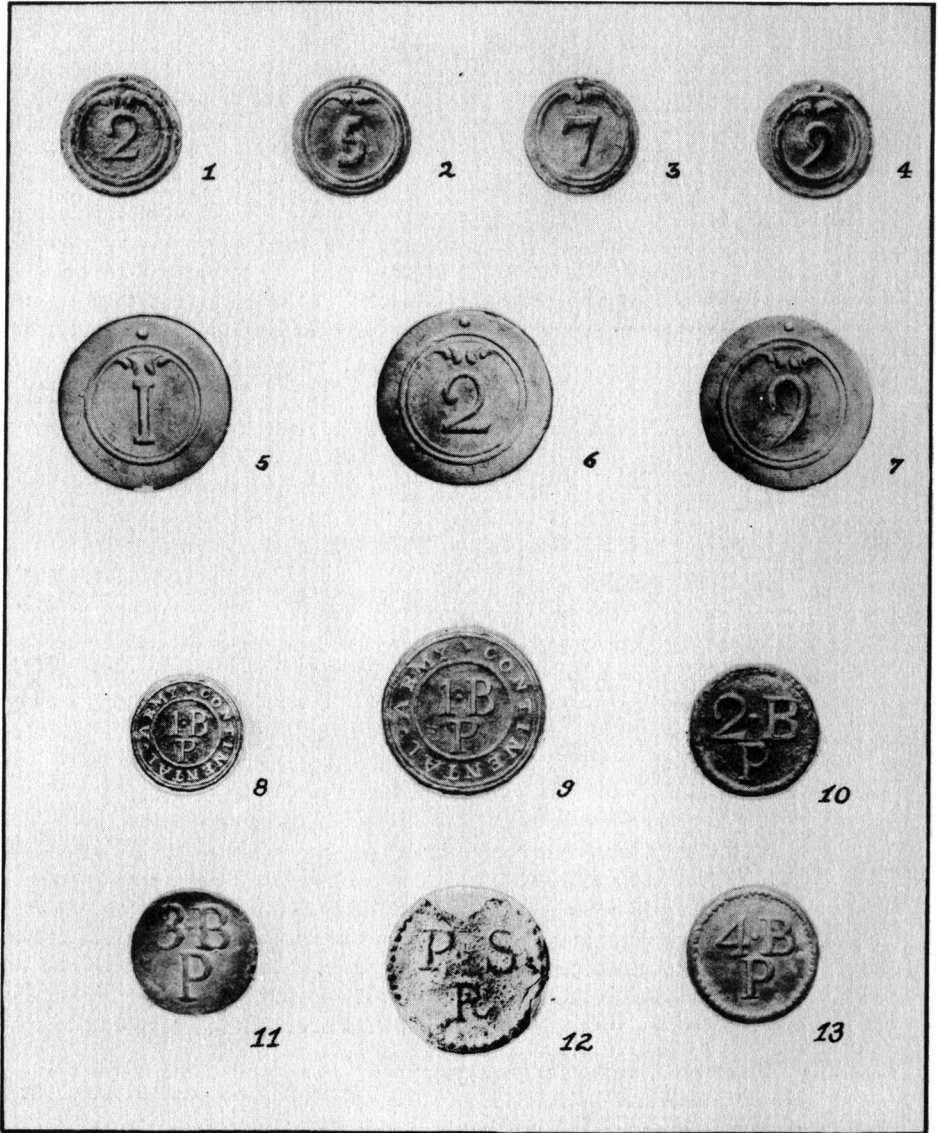


PLATE V

1-7. Pewter buttons of the French model of 1762 found near West Point and believed to have been used by regiments of the Connecticut Line. 8-13. Pewter buttons of Pennsylvania troops. Specimens 8, 9, 10, and 13 were found at Fort Ticonderoga; specimen 11 at Fort Washington; and specimen 12, of the Pennsylvania State Regiment, was unearthed near Philadelphia. The initial "B" is for "battalion," a term used synonymously with "regiment."

state troops have been found and all are from Ticonderoga. They bring to mind the perfidious conduct of the 1st Battalion, whose officers and men left Ticonderoga at a critical moment on the expiration of their terms of service in November, 1776. For this shameful behavior, the battalion was drummed out of camp by their more patriotic companions.¹² Specimen 6 is of a Massachusetts regiment raised in Boston early in the war. According to Mr. Samuel Adams Drake, this unit wore black uniforms faced with red and a button bearing the motto INIMICA TYRANNIS (hostile to tyrants) circling the design of a hand bearing a naked sword.¹³ The single example obtained of this button was recovered from a pit at Camp Robinson's Farm.

The "RIR" button (specimen 7) is of the Rhode Island Regiment. It was found at Cold Spring, in Putnam County, New York, on a camp site shown on Villafranche's map of 1780. There was, originally, a 1st and 2nd Regiment of Rhode Island, but they were consolidated and renamed in 1781. This combined regiment was at Yorktown and spent the following winter in barracks at Philadelphia. They removed to the Hudson Highlands in the summer of 1782. Another specimen of the "RIR" button was discovered among the ruins of the American blockhouse at Sneden's Landing, Palisades, New York, and still others have been exhumed from burials at Williamsburg, Virginia.

In strong contrast with the foregoing crude attempts at military button-making are some extremely well-made but mystifying specimens found on various American sites (Plate VI, 7-13). They all display a regal crown, but certainly not the crown of England or of any other great European country. Beneath these crowns, in which one finds slight variation in the attributes of royalty, are such initial letters as "CN," "RN," "FDM," etc. One example of this type of button, a perfect specimen marked "FDM," is now in the collection of Revolutionary material at Fraunces Tavern, New York City. Privates buttons with these same initials have been found at West Point and in the American camp at Morristown, N. J. Buttons marked "RRN" have been discovered at West Point and one such was unearthed with the remains of American soldiers killed by the British in the raid on Young's House, Westchester County, on the night of February 2, 1780. The other examples of this class of button were discovered on the hillside in front of the Revolutionary barracks at West Point.

Our sieves give up, of course, a great variety of material other than buttons. Many coins of small denomination have been found and these, we suspect, like the bone discs, did duty as buttons when covered with cloth. From the refuse pits and dumps has come a host of objects instructive in their own way — musket fittings, bullets, and gunflints, buckles of all kinds, military tools, and the like. Non-military material found includes iron nails, wrought in many sizes and shapes; *lead* pencils in their original form—devoid of wood sheathing; improvised table knives and forks; sleeve-link buttons with artistic or medalic designs; and innumerable fragments of glass

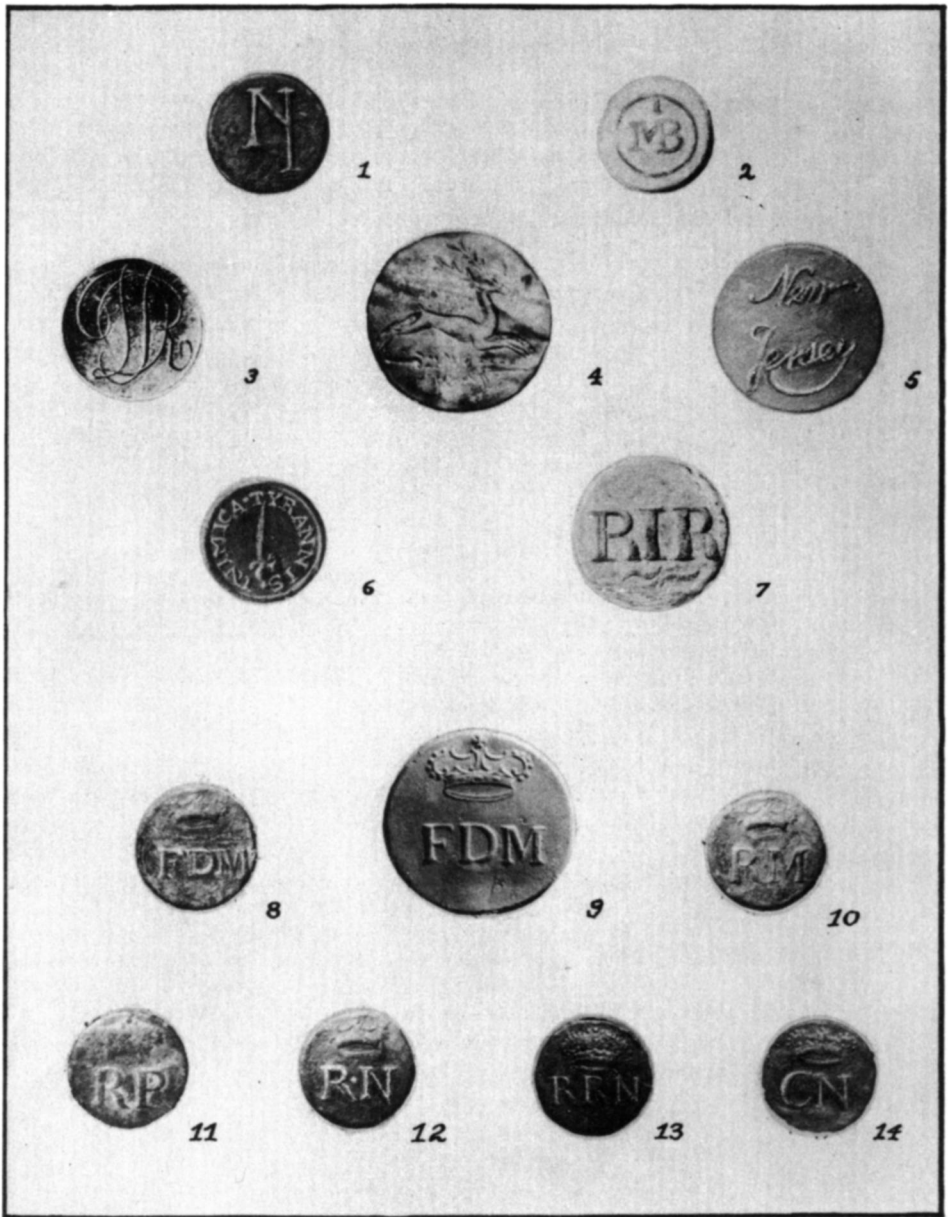


PLATE VI

1. New York state, pewter. 2. 1st Maryland Battalion, pewter. 3. Officer's button, The Delaware Regiment, bronze. 4. Officer's button, believed to be of the Bucks of America, copper, silver-plated. 5. New Jersey state, pewter. 6. Unidentified Massachusetts regiment, copper face with wood back. 7. The Rhode Island Regiment, pewter. 8-14. Buttons not as yet identified, but apparently worn by some American troops. Specimen 9 now in the collection at Fraunces Tavern, New York City; the balance found at West Point. A button similar to specimen 8 was found at Morristown, N. J., and one similar to 13 in Westchester County, N. Y.

and pottery vessels. Some of the objects are of most ingenious fabrication and many, considered indispensable in their day, are now of almost forgotten utility. All are valuable reminders of eighteenth century military and domestic life and, in view of their historical, military, or sentimental interest, the physical labor expended in their recovery has been well rewarded.

It might be well to explain the several references to refuse pits and dumps. These are revealed, or at least suggested, by a greener growth of grass or rankness of the weeds at old camp sites and fortifications. Too often, however, lush growths of poison ivy point to the garbage enriched soil whence come the objects of our quest. "Flare," a quality which all earnest explorers must possess, has much to do with locating good "leads." It can guide the real collector to his heart's desire more surely than any other factor. It is inexplicable but certainly indispensable.

Notes

1. Charles M. Lefferts, *Uniforms . . . in the War of the Amer. Rev.*, (deserter descriptions) pp. 75, 128.
2. Force, *American Archives*, 4th, III, 1613.
3. Lefferts, pp. 74, 78, 81, 100, 124. Of course, some of the numbered buttons mentioned probably came from captured British uniforms.
4. We know of its being worn in December, 1777. Lefferts, p. 101.
5. Lefferts, p. 85.
6. AGO, Conn., *Record of Service of Connecticut Men in the . . . Revolution*, p. 352.
7. See Louis Fallou, *Le Bouton uniforme français*, pp. 74-75.
8. See also Lefferts, p. 125.
9. Lefferts, pp. 101-106. The terms "battalion" and "regiment," and hence the initials "B" and "R," were used indifferently for these Maryland units.
10. It is quite probable that this was Colonel John Haslet's Delaware Battalion, the best uniformed unit in the army of 1776, although Lefferts (pp. 26 and 98) states they wore buttons with "DB" on them.
11. Gherardi Davis, *Regimental Colors in the War of the Revolution*, pp. 19-20.
12. MS orderly book of Colonel John Trumbull, Fort Ticonderoga Museum.
13. *Historic Fields and Mansions of Middlesex*, p. 254.