

A MID TO LATE 19TH CENTURY MILITARY BUTTON

The Warner Site of Brighton, MI has been continuously occupied by the Warner family since at least October 1841, perhaps as early as July 1837. Descendents of Timothy Warner, a pioneer from Livonia Township, Livingston County, New York, continue to live in the mid 1850's Greek revival house. The property functioned as a farm for crops, cattle, and fruit for over 150 years. The site also contained a number of outbuildings, including barns, a blacksmith shop, and a log cabin. A preliminary dig of 293.75 ft², between the house and the existing clothesline, has produced a number of historic era artifacts including buttons, bones, nails, glass, dish fragments, etc. Maker's marks on the dish fragments date from 1847 to 1910 and various buttons found date from the 1850's to early 20th century.

Unit 555 495 N excavated by Tim and Kerry Bennett in October 2007 produced a gilt, convex, brass button with a spread eagle and shield containing the letter I. It is constructed in two pieces, 15 mm (5/8 in) in diameter and 50 mm in circumference. It is in excellent condition, with no signs of wear or damage. Most of the gold gilt remains, although a green patina has encompassed the brazed loop shank. The back is labeled "Superior Quality", separated by two * encircling an inner ring of dots.

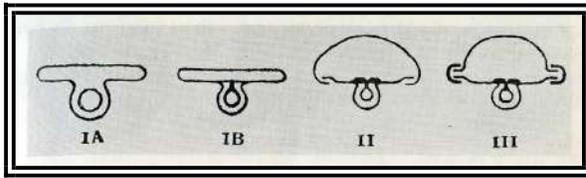


Brass, gilt 19th century infantry officer's button found at the Warner Site in Brighton, MI, October 2007 by Tim and Kerry Bennett. (Photo by Tim Bennett)

The button appears to be similar to button 85A pictured on page 38 and described by Albert Alphaeus in his "Record of American Uniform and Historical Buttons". Alphaeus lists the specifications as:

"In 1851, G. O. No. 31 A. G. O., specified:

'For officers of ...Infantry...-gilt, convex, device a spread eagle with letter...I, for Infantry...on shield, large size, seven-eighths of an inch in exterior diameter, small size, one half inch.'"



Albert's four styles of military buttons. Type II is a two piece button invented by Benj. Sanders of Birmingham, England about 1813.

Alphaeus also mentions that a similar pattern was used for enlisted men but without the I on the shield, beginning in 1854. This pattern that omitted the letter designation allowed it to be used for all areas of enlisted corp., instead of having separate buttons for infantry, calvary, artillery, etc., as was previously the case.



Albert's Federal Officer Infantry buttons from 1851 to 1902.

Alphaeus notes that this general pattern was used for officers until 1902 when the Great Seal pattern was implemented. The inverted/indented shield style, however, was only used until 1883. The button found at the Warner Site was probably from 1865 or earlier as the back marks changed significantly after the Civil War. Also after 1865, buttons are manufactured with the eagle displaying an elongated neck and the tips of the wings point horizontally instead of vertically. Therefore, the probable manufacturing date range for the button is 1851 – 1865.



"Indian Wars" style button displays raised shield, elongated neck and horizontally oriented wing design. (Photo by Tim Bennett)

Alphaeus lists the following possible back marks for button 85A:

1. "Scovill Mf'g Co/Waterbury" rmdc; 20 mm.
2. "*Goddard & Bro/Extra"; 21 mm.
3. "*Horstmann. Sons & Drucker. NY" rmdc; 21 mm.
4. ".Lambert & Mast./Phila" rmdc; 21 mm
5. "W. G. Mintzer/Phila" rmdc; 21 mm
6. "W. H. Smith & Co/New York" rmdc; 21 mm
7. "& Steele & Johnson"; 21 mm

(rmdc = raised mark depressed channel, the button found is not of this type)

Other manufacturers such as Drucker, D. Evans, Goodyear, T. G. Hood, W. G. Mintzer, Hartley & Graham Schuyler, W. H. Smith & Co. and Wanamaker & Brown were also known as principal button manufacturers for the United States.

The US Army guidelines were fairly specific in regards to the size, shape and materials included, however were much more ambiguous regarding the insignia design.

Regardless, manufacturers varied on the exact diameters for the two sizes as well as the amount of gilding included. More conspicuously, variations on the spread eagle design

also varied greatly, although following a basic format. Most designs included the eagle clasping arrows in the left claw, however some designs show just the opposite. The size and shape of the letter “I” was another obvious difference.



Tice's Superior Quality button by Steele & Johnson circa 1860's most closely matches the one found at the Warner site.

The Waterbury Button Company was known to use the “Superior Quality” phrase, although they were not the only one. Warren Tice, author of “Uniform Buttons of the United States” lists a closely matched button, G1215A104, with the Superior Quality back mark. He indicates Steele & Johnson as a probable manufacturer beginning in the 1860's.

Unfortunately, due to the generic nature of the back mark, the manufacturer cannot be absolutely established.

“Superior Quality” is actually just one example for a set of common back marks that were used as quality/marketing phrases by a number of suppliers. Other marketing phrases such as “Extra Quality”, “Extra Rich”, “Fine”, “Extra

Gold”, “Rich”, and “Best...” were also used during the mid to late 19th century by a variety of companies. With no industry standard to go by, these relative marks of quality were created by the companies themselves to roughly denote physical aspects such as the thickness of the brass, the amount of gold gilt and/or the attachment of the shank to the button. Tice provides a second reason, “Buttons with backmarks denoting the quality of gilt or plating were also kept in the maker's inventory to satisfy merchants wishing to preserve the maker's invisibility.” The Waterbury Button Company, under the name OGS Technologies, submitted an application to trademark the phrase “Superior Quality” in 2001. This application was denied since it was found that this back mark referred to a supposed level of quality rather than the manufacturer itself.

The button was excavated near the bottom of the unit at around 14 inches in depth, however not in situ. This unit also produced other buttons, though none of military style nor any that can be definitely attributed to the 19th century. As seen in the photo to the right, the unit is located directly below the current clothesline. Other adjacent units also contained other buttons from the mid to late 1800's, though none of military origin. Photographs from the early 1950's show the clothesline in the same area as the current one. A concentration of shell, stamped metal, and bone buttons from a similar time period found in the vicinity suggests the clothesline likely existed there from much earlier times.



Excavation of unit that produced the military button, nearly at the point at which it was found. Tim Bennett with shovel is assisted by his twin daughters Anna (left) and Megan (Right). (Photo by Kerry Bennett, October 7, 2007)

The button's smaller diameter size of 15 mm suggests that it may have been used on the arm cuff of a frock coat or shell jacket, the cape of a great coat, the front of a vest, or on a kepi style hat. The larger styles (20-21 mm) were typically used on the inside layer of the great coats and on the front of a uniform frock coat and jacket. Like the styles, the sizes also varied slightly, with diameters for the smaller buttons ranging from ½ in to 5/8 in.

While it is impossible to exactly ascertain why this button was found where it was, several possibilities come to mind. If it indeed originated from clothing, the most likely scenario includes detachment while it was hanging out to dry or airing out on a clothesline. The existence of other 19th century buttons found nearby and the close proximity of the existing clothesline gives credence to this hypothesis. Several uniform components such as a shell jacket, vest, frock coat, and great coat all are known to use the smaller size button like the one found. Great coats were typically worn by enlisted men, however would sometimes be worn by officers to disguise their rank from Confederate sharpshooters. The jacket and frock coat used this size on the cuff, while the great coat used it on cape. The vest used the buttons down the center.



Warner family members Laura Fuller Warner, foreground and Rose Van Troostenberghe Warner in back hanging clothes to dry. This image, probably from the late 1940's, early 1950's shows the position of the clothesline in the same location at it is today. (Photo from Rose Warner collection)

Another alternative includes buttons dumped with used wash water. The activity of washing clothes was probably conducted in the same general area and the discarded water would be dumped in a similar locus over time, creating a concentration in a relatively small area. Other sites in the region such as the Mason's Tavern site in Grand Blanc produced several hundred buttons, likely for this reason. Nineteenth century uniforms typically made of wool, were washed in lukewarm water like any other garment. Although it is widely believed that washing wool clothing will cause it to shrink, it is the washing in more extreme temperatures, either hot or cold, that tend to cause the shrinking effect known by many. The button of course could simply be a lost



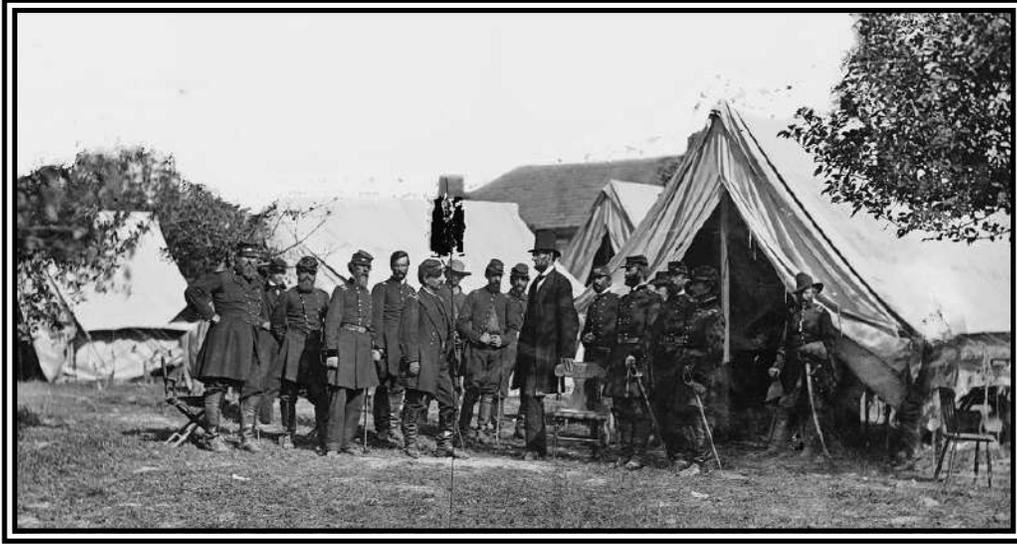
Various Union officers' uniform attire that would have used the smaller size button found. Top row, from left to right: frock coat with three cuff buttons, shell jacket with three cuff buttons, great coat & cape with six smaller buttons, and kepi hat with two buttons. Bottom row, from left to right, close up of cuff and vest. (Photos courtesy of Quartermaster shop, a firm supplying reproduction regalia at www.quartermastershop.com)

memento or tossed out as refuse and coincidentally found in the area of other buttons and the existing clothesline.

The button could have also originated from a kepi style hat that could have been given to someone in the family, such as one of the children and the button simply detached and was lost. Buttons of this size were used on each side of the hat to attach the chin strap. Buttons attached by copper/brass wires were originally used, however, those with loop shanks were also used. Broken dish fragments dating from 1842 to 1910 found in the immediate area may suggest the button or hat could have been simply part of the assemblage of artifacts tossed in a refuse pile early in the 20th century. It should be noted that no other remains of the hat have been discovered.

The button could also be intentionally removed and discarded. It was common practice after the Civil War to replace standard issue buttons with those displaying the GAR insignia. Other experts have also indicated that veterans could wear components of the uniform, but the buttons and rank insignia were to be removed before being worn as a civilian. Additional buttons of this type found in future excavations would make these possibilities more probable.

It is interesting to note that than no members of the immediate Warner families over several generations that lived at the site were known to have any military involvement until WWII. Other more distant connections did have involvement in the Civil War. Andrew Bishop was enlisted as a 2nd Lieutenant on December 5, 1861 in the 15th Michigan Infantry, Company D and was discharged with the rank of Captain on January



President Abraham Lincoln and Gen. George B McClellan with group of officers, October 3, 1862, Antietam MD. Notice the smaller cuff buttons on the various jackets and coats of the officer's uniforms. The larger size buttons appear on the front of the uniform. (Photos courtesy of Library of Congress online catalog.)

28, 1865. He may have been a great uncle of Daisy Bishop (1880-1967), wife of Judson Warner (1880-1947). William B. Conely (1830-1911), a famous portrait painter was brother in law to Elvira Lawson Warner (1849-1907) through her first husband, Henry Conely (1846-1873). Elvira later married George Washington Warner (1848-1933). William was enlisted and discharged as a Private and a member of the 1st Regiment, Engineers and Mechanics, Company A. Wounds he sustained handicapped him for the rest of his life. Last, Adelbert Foote (1841-1863) was enlisted as a Private on August 28, 1861 and was a brother to Laura Fuller Warner's (1886-1966) uncle, Charles Foote (1836-?). He was a member of the 5th Michigan Infantry, Company I and died from wounds incurred at Alexandria, VA on January 31, 1863. The fact that the button was issued to an officer/NCO reduces the possibilities regarding the owner. Of the possible owners mentioned previously, only the most remote (and tentative) relation, Andrew Bishop, was an officer.

Surplus winter military clothing has commonly been sought after for its durability, warmth, and affordability. Working class occupations like farming which involve a great deal of time outdoors in all kinds of weather would find the wool garments desirable for their heat retention, especially even when wet. Literally tons of Civil War era surplus was sold by the US government, especially to New Yorker Frank Bannerman. Reselling these items, Bannerman became known as the father of the "Army-Navy" store. Not only was military clothing worn outside to protect from the elements, but also worn inside as well. Elroy Warner, a former resident, recalled how as a child in the 1960's, he had worn an old WWII coat to bed to ward off the chilly winters in his 2nd story bedroom. Even today, military surplus is sought after by hunters, campers, outdoorsman, and those with various outdoor occupations such as farming, construction, etc.

Agricultural work during the mid to late 19th century required many hired hands and boarders to plant, maintain, and harvest crops over the years. Timothy was known to have as many as ten teams working nearly 600 acres. During the fall, harvesters and threshers would also be employed on a short-term basis. Worker turnover from season to season would be high due to the temporary nature of the work. Discharged veterans in search of work may have continued to wear portions of their uniform until resources were available to purchase civilian clothes. Due to the large number of workers and high turnover rates, it is likely that some of them could have been Civil War veterans or owned that type of clothing.

The hat, uniform, or coat could have been simply purchased or acquired in trade. Timothy Warner was well known in the community through multiple positions including township treasurer in 1863 & 1865, Justice of the Peace, road commissioner, school board member, and as part owner of the old Woodruff gristmill from 1868 to 1872. He would have had a number of contacts with other residents during and closely after the Civil War through these and other capacities.

Although it is somewhat unusual to find a single military style button on a pioneer site, it is certainly not unique. Interestingly enough, during the same year long time avocational archaeologist Don Simons found a single 7/8 in officer's calvary button at the Waterous site in Grand Blanc township. This site, dating from the early 1830's, is similar to the Warner site yielding a number of artifacts including pottery, bone, buttons, iron implements, etc. The Cater site in Midland county produced a US infantry button dating from 1815 to 1821. The Cater site is also a pioneer site from the early 19th century. These buttons may represent temporary visits from relatives and/or a seasonal workforce boarded at the sites.



Officer's calvary button found at the Waterous Site in Grand Blanc, MI. (Photo by Kerry Bennett, courtesy of Don Simons)

The eagle design on the front and the style of the back mark suggest a date range of 1851 to the mid to late 1860's. The only family connections, albeit somewhat extended, are also from that war. The back mark of "Superior Quality" is too general to attribute to a particular manufacturer, although Waterbury and Steele & Johnson were known to use the phrase. Despite the fact that the button was issued to an officer or possibly an NCO limits the number of possible owners, it cannot be attributed to a specific person. The button could have fallen off of a jacket, coat, or vest that had hung on a clothesline to dry, attached to a hat that was discarded, or may have been simply a lost keepsake from a distant relative or friend. In the absence of more specific information, the discovery of this button has certainly made for an intriguing find.

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