

"Small Chinas" from the Steamboat Bertrand

By Ronald R. Switzer
National Park Service

One hundred and eight years ago, on March 18, 1865, the sternwheel steamboat Bertrand left her berth at St. Louis on the Missouri River for Fort Benton in Montana Territory. Loaded with a capacity cargo the mountain class steamer struck a snag and sank in the river on April 1, at Portage La Force near De Soto Landing in Nebraska Territory. Contemporary salvage attempts were mostly unsuccessful, and the cargo consisting of agricultural and mining supplies, household goods (Switzer, 1971: 6-10; 1972: 5-7), textiles (Schwieger, 1971), canned and bottled foodstuffs (Switzer, 1974), and munitions (Switzer, 1972: 250-255; 1972: 85-87) remained in situ to be covered with silt and sand as the river shifted in its channel.

The Bertrand lay forgotten until 1968 when two Omaha men rediscovered the deeply buried hull on De Soto National Wildlife Refuge, and began to salvage the valuable cargo. The excavations were completed in 1969, having brought to light one of America's largest and most complete historical treasures.

In the diverse cargo were several hundred cubic feet of water and mud saturated textiles including bolt and ready-made goods, hats, neckties, slickers, and a large quantity of sewing notions and supplies. The quantity

and variety of these notions is overwhelming. Sewing supplies include hundreds of thimbles, needles, straight pins, hooks and eyes, suspender guides with leather attachments, and 13,000 buttons. More than 100 different styles and types of buttons are represented. In the collection are buttons composed of hard rubber, mother-of-pearl, glass, china, bone, wood, fabric, pressed fiber, tin and brass. Brass buttons exhibited the most variation, and sporting buttons called "Tally Ho's" are assuredly the most attractive of the entire collection (Switzer, 1972: 417-426). The small china buttons described in this article represent about 34 percent of the total number of buttons recovered

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from the cargo of the steamboat Bertrand.

It is unfortunate that so little is known concerning the history, details of manufacture, and the quantities and varieties of buttons in use on the American frontier during the nineteenth century. Perhaps description of small chinas from a Civil War era steamboat will contribute to the knowledge of button history, and better define the time frame during which some varieties of buttons were produced and distributed.

History of Porcelain Buttons

Historians credit the Chinese with the discovery and development of hard translucent white sonorous ceramic known as porcelain. However, the exact date of the discovery remains unknown. Centuries later, as Far East trade markets began to flourish during the sixteenth century, Portuguese, Dutch and English trading companies began importing Chinese porcelain dishware to Europe where it became commonly known as "Chinaware" or "China." The ear-

liest European attempts to duplicate fine Chinese porcelains date from the late fifteenth century, but most met with little success. Composed of kaolin, quartz and feldspar fired at high temperatures, the secrets of porcelain manufacture were fairly well kept by the Chinese until the middle of the eighteenth century when, a few inferior hard and soft paste duplicates were produced in Europe.

The popularity of porcelain eventually spread to America where, by the mid-nineteenth century some porcelain was produced in the form of buttons. Most popular were "small chinas", a class of porcelain buttons composed of several distinct types. The majority of collectable small china buttons are plain white or have white bodies over which decoration has been applied. In the Bertrand collection there are 2,670 plain white buttons, 78 white piecrust buttons, and 1,264 calico printed buttons of the four hole sew-through type, and lesser numbers of gaiter and ringer buttons.

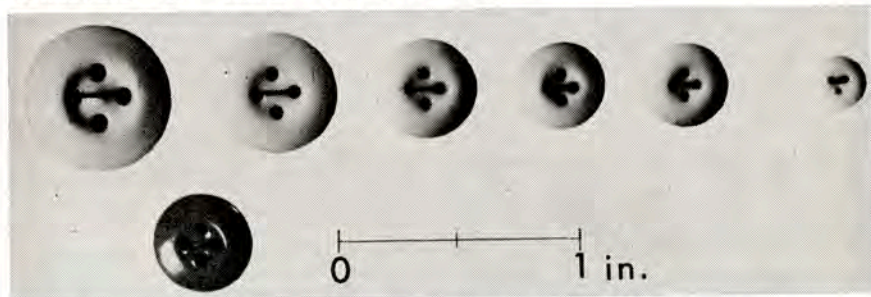


Figure 1. (a-e) Plain small chinas; (f) plain small three hole china; (g) plain turquoise-colored china.

Plain Small Chinas

More than 1,000 plain white four hole buttons ranging in size from $5/8''$ to $5/16''$ in diameter are represented in the collection (Figure 1 a-e). In addition, several hundred inkwell-shaped chinas were found, most of which exhibited an iridescent luster,

and eighteen brilliant turquoise-colored buttons measuring $3/8''$ in diameter (Figure 1 g). The former were made in two sizes, $3/8''$ and $7/16''$ in diameter. Only seven three-hole plain white chinas measuring $1/4''$ in diameter were recovered with the cargo (Figure 1 f).

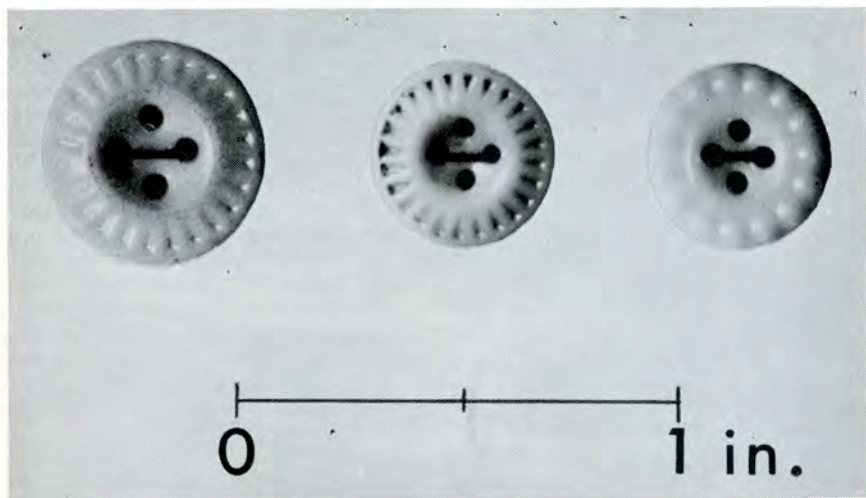


Figure 2. (a-c) Piecrust chinas.

Piecrust Chinas

Piecrust chinas presumably received their name from their dimpled or fluted edges. Most of the 78 piecrust chinas in the Bertrand collection are plain white, but a few ex-

amples exhibit the smokey iridescent luster found on a number of plain white chinas buttons. These four hole sew-through buttons measure $7/16''$ and $1/2''$ in diameter (Figure 2 a-c).

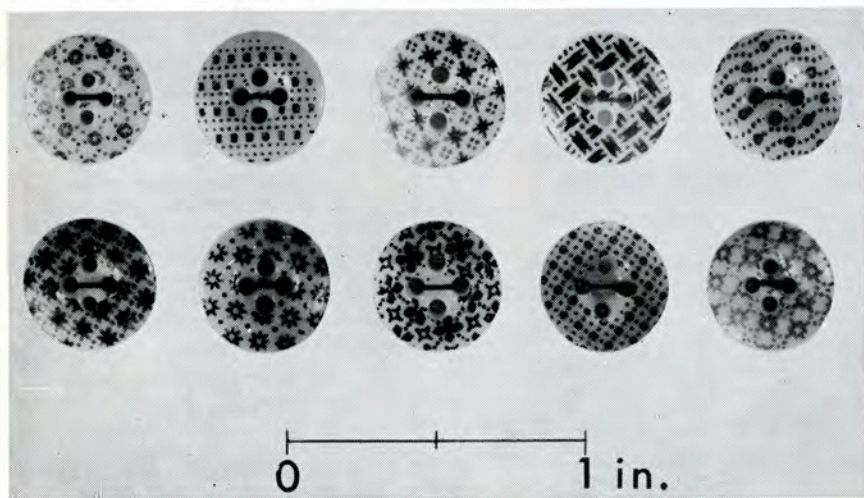


Figure 3. Calico chinas.

Calico Chinas

Calico buttons are the most numerous individual type. Luscomb (1967: 31) defines calico buttons as "china buttons with decorative patterns that are similar to, sometimes identical with, those on the cotton fabric called calico." She explains that calico cloth bearing small printed designs was brought to Europe from India in the seventeenth century. Although the popularity of calico spread rapidly and the cloth was much in evidence on the western frontier of America in the 1800's, the only calico recovered from the Bertrand was in the form of two bolts of printed handkerchief stock.

Decoration on calico china buttons was applied by transfer printing, a method developed in England in the mid-eighteenth century. The design was engraved or etched on a copper plate, to which mineral ink was applied. The design was then printed on tissue paper with a small printing press. Sizings were used in combination with the inks to make the designs adhere to the greenware or bisk-fired buttons where the tissue was pressed against them. Most china buttons were hard paste porcelain, that is, covered with clear glaze, and the glaze and base material were brought

to maturity in the same firing.

Luscomb (1967: 31) states that some calicos were made in France and England, and the first American examples were produced by Charles Cartledge and Company of Greenpoint, Long Island, New York, in July, 1848. Inasmuch as this firm stopped producing buttons in 1857, and so little is known of other producers, the manufacturers of the Bertrand examples remain unknown.

Interestingly enough, some of the Bertrand calicos were found sewn to men's red flannel underwear. Most, however, were found in bulk form

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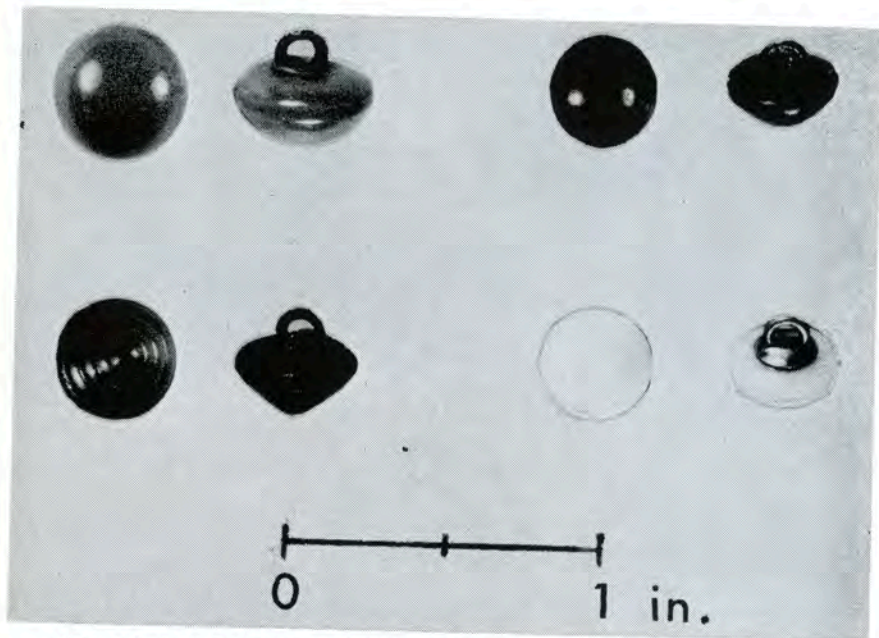


Figure 4. (a-c) Brown and black dome-shaped and cone-shaped gaiter chinas; (d) small white "aspirin" china.

among sewing supplies. Basic identifiable colors on the calico buttons are red, green, blue, and brown. Black and yellow appear on a very small number of the buttons. All of the Bertrand examples are 7/16" in diameter (Figure 3).

Gaiter Chinas

Luscomb (1967: 76) reports that gaiter buttons were worn on shoes and on women's and children's clothing. All of the 345 gaiter buttons from the Bertrand were found with or attached to textile materials. These gaiters are typical white porcelain with brass or white metal shank plates with loop shanks. In some examples the shank plates are slightly embedded in the button backs. Button backs are somewhat rounded in appearance. There are a small number in fairly equal quantities of black and

brown dome-shaped and black cone-shaped examples (Figure 4 a-c). Additionally, there are a small number of famous small white "aspirins" or flat pill-shaped gaiter buttons (Figure 4 d).

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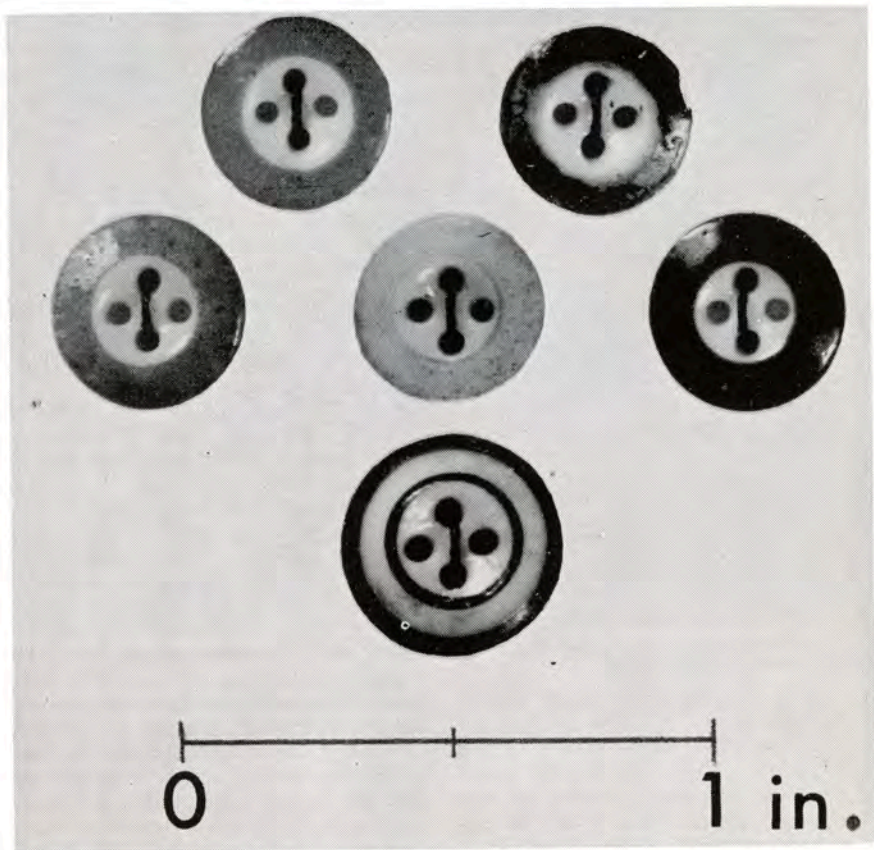


Figure 5. (a-e) Single band ringers; (f) two band brown ringer china.

Ringer Chinas

Typical ringer buttons are white porcelain with one or more colored bands encircling the button faces. Two types of ringer buttons were discovered in the Bertrand cargo, of

which there are several color variations. The most common type is a white-bodied saucer-shaped button with a wide band of color around the border. Colors represented are blue, green, pink and peach. Single band

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ringers measure 7/16" in diameter (Figure 5 a-e). The second type, of which there is only one specimen, is a white-bodied inkwell-shaped button with a concave face and two bands of color. One band encircles the concave center, while the second band encircles the border. The bands are deep reddish-brown and the button measures 7/16" in diameter (Figure 5 f). All of the ringer buttons are of the four hole sew-through type.

Hopefully, this article will provide a descriptive and encyclopedic look at a few small Civil War era buttons. Historical information and methods of construction have been included wherever possible, to provide better perspective on these little known artifacts.

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