

DAACS Cataloging Manual: Buttons

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INTRODUCTION

Button terminology is generally not as standardized or as well known as terminology for other artifact classes, such as ceramics. Therefore, a great deal of what follows is simple definition of terms found in the button table.

The button table for DAACS was produced in conjunction with Barbara Heath and Heather Olsen of Poplar Forest. Their input is greatly appreciated.

1. MAIN BUTTON TABLE

1.1 Artifact Count

Do not batch buttons.

1.2 Completeness

Choose “Complete,” “Incomplete,” or “Shank Only.”

1.3 Manufacturing Technique

Manufacturing Technique refers to the main manufacturing technique of the button. For one-piece buttons, for example, this is usually “Cast” or “Stamped.” For two-piece buttons, we are using *Manufacturing Technique* in reference to the main button part, not the button face.

Manufacturing Technique, Face refers to the manufacturing technique of the button face.

Manufacturing Technique	Description
Cut/Carved	Used for bone, ivory, shell, wood, and other organic materials that are cut or carved by hand or machine.
Cast	Molten metal was poured into a button mold and allowed to harden. The button would have characteristic mold seams most likely on the back of the button and possibly the eye. Some buttons had cast eyes (with mold marks) and others were cast with an iron or brass wire shank placed into the mold. Hinks (1988:60) notes that most cast buttons from the early 18 th century are pewter, but by the mid-18 th century large numbers of cast brass and copper (i.e. copper alloy) buttons were produced.
Drawn	Most commonly applies to drawn glass buttons and wire metal buttons. For instance, metal rings that are used as button forms for covered buttons, such as crocheted buttons, are usually drawn wire. Drawn glass buttons are made in much the same way as drawn glass beads, where a long tube of glass is blown out, stretched (drawn), and then cut.

Hollow cast	The face and back are cast as one piece around a separate, often iron, shank. Two holes are present in the back to allow internal gases to escape during casting. Used for brass or pewter buttons. Most common in the first half of the 18 th century (Hinks 1988:56).
Molded	Used primarily for glass buttons that are poured in liquid form into a mold and allowed to harden.
Prosser Molded	Highly compressed, heated ceramic buttons. Generally date after 1840 (Sprague 2002: 111). In DAACS, the material type for Prosser molded buttons is “Porcelain.”
Spun Back Cast	Button was cast in a mold, usually with the eye cast in place. After casting, the button was placed in a chuck and spun by the lathe. A tool was used to cut the back of the button to remove the mold seams and smooth the surface. This type is characterized by the concentric circles that can often be seen on the button back. The eye was often a wire cast in place with a blob of metal, later lathe-finished which created a cone-like shape to the shank (described below).
Stamped	Metal discs stamped out of large sheets of metal, creating a very thin and uniform button. Stamped buttons are almost always copper alloy, such as brass, as tin alloys are too soft and brittle to be rolled out into thin sheets and stamped. Solder was used to attach wire shanks to stamped buttons.
Wound	Used for glass buttons that are wound from long threads of glass.

1.4 Button Type

- **“1 Piece”**: These buttons are made from a single material, such as wood, bone, horn, glass, etc. These are often flat discs, although there are exceptions (ex., molded glass buttons). The distinguishing factor of one-piece buttons is that they are constructed from one material, as only one part.
***Note:** In DAACS, flat metal buttons should **not** be cataloged as one-piece. There is a separate Button Type, “Flat Disc,” to describe flat, metal one-piece buttons. Also see “1 Piece, domed.”
- **“1 Piece, domed”**: These buttons resemble one-piece buttons, but are domed instead of flat. For example, cast one-piece metal buttons are often “1 piece, domed.”
- **“2 Piece”**: These buttons consist of separate faces and backs that were brazed or soldered together. The face and back were often made of different materials. Most common in brass buttons, although found in pewter as well. Also see “2 Piece, domed.”
- **“2 Piece, domed”**: Made just like two-piece flat buttons, but with a domed face.

- **“3 Piece”**: These buttons have separate faces and backs as well as separately applied rims. See also “3 Piece, domed.”
- **“3 Piece, domed”**: These buttons are made just like three-piece flat buttons, but with a domed face.
- **“Blank/Mold”**: A “Blank/Mold” is a bone or wood button with either zero holes or one hole. The single hole was a product of manufacturing, when these buttons were cut with a lathe or a carpenter’s brace and bit (Hinks 1988:67). They could be used as the backs to stamped metal buttons, the supporting disc for cloth buttons, or more holes could be drilled in them to make simple, 1-piece bone or wooden buttons (ibid).

- **“Collar Button”**



- **“FD concave back”**: These are flat disc buttons with concave backs. Note that these buttons do not have to be as domed as “1 piece, domed” buttons, but can be only slightly concave.
- **“Flat Disc”**: In DAACS, we are calling flat, metal one-piece buttons “Flat Disc” buttons. These buttons are flat discs with shanks either cast as part of the button or soldered onto the back. See also “FD concave back.”
- **“Ring”**: These buttons have a cloth or crocheted covering structured around a thin metal ring. The metal ring is often the only part recovered archaeologically.

1.5 Button Shape

This field records the shape of the button as seen from the top, not as seen in profile.

- Barrel: tapers to either end; ends somewhat flattened.
- Octagonal
- Oval
- Rectangular
- Round
- Square
- Unidentifiable

1.6 Button Material

Refers to the main material of which the button is composed. For buttons with insets, the main material is that which comprises the back and sides of the button, and the inset material is listed under “Button Material, Face.” For example, a copper alloy button with a bone inset on the face has button material as “Copper Alloy” and “Button Material, Face” as “Bone.”

- Bone
- Ceramic
- Copper Alloy
- Glass

- Iron
- Ivory
- Missing
- Paste
- Pewter
- Porcelain
- Shell
- Silver
- Synthetic/Modern
- Tombac
- Unidentifiable
- Wood

1.7 Button Material, Face

“Button Material, Face” is used for two-piece buttons. These buttons often have insets – the main material is that which comprises the back and sides of the button, and the inset material is the “Button Material, Face.” For example, a copper alloy button with a bone inset on the face has “Button Material” as “Copper Alloy” and “Button Material, Face” as “Bone.” For one-piece buttons, this field should be “Not Applicable.” The list of materials for this field is the same as for the Button Material field described above.

1.8 Manufacturing Technique, Face

This field records the manufacturing technique of the button face. For buttons without a separate face material (e.g. 1-piece buttons), this field should read “Not Applicable.” Choices for this field are the same as those for *Manufacturing Technique*

1.9 Button Color

Button color is used only for ceramic and glass buttons. A Munsell color reading should be taken on these buttons. For all other materials, “Not Applicable” should be selected. Also, be sure to see “Button Metal Color,” below, which applies to metal buttons.

1.10 Button Eye








Enter in the number of eye holes on the button. Even though a button may be broken and some holes may be missing, enter in the number of eye holes the button would have originally had. For buttons with shanks, enter Not Applicable. For collar buttons, enter Not Applicable.


1.11 Button Shank Style

This field records the button’s shank style. If the shank is missing and you can’t determine the style of the shank, enter Missing into this field. Even if the shank is missing, look for evidence that tells you what the shank was. Two flanges of cast metal on the back of the button indicate that the shank was Cast in Boss. If there are two tiny dots or marks on the back of a copper alloy button, this usually means that the shank was an Alpha, as these are the points where the shank was attached. For collar buttons and other buttons without shanks, enter “Not Applicable.”

Table 1.1 Button Shank Information

Note: The images are examples of what each shank type might look like. Not all shanks will appear exactly like those pictured – be sure to read the Button Type and Descriptions column.

Shank Type	Button Material	Shank Material	Date Range	References	Button Type and Descriptions	Image
Alpha	Copper Alloy; occasionally Iron.	Copper Alloy; occasionally Iron.	1770s-~1800	Hinks 1988:60; Hughes and Lester 1981:221	1-piece, flat disc buttons. Shank is shaped like the Greek letter Alpha. Similar to Omega shanks, but without the typical Omega feet.	
Cast Eye	Pewter	Pewter	17th-mid 18 th century	Hinks 1988:52-54; Hughes and Lester 1981:221	1-piece, flat disc buttons. Note the mold seams visible on the shank and back of the button.	
Cone w/ Wire Eye	Tombac or Copper Alloy.	Iron or Copper Alloy.	18 th to early 19 th century	Hughes and Lester 1981:221	1-piece, flat disc buttons. Cone shank with embedded wire eye. The cone shank is cast and often lathe-finished.	
Drilled Eye	Pewter, Copper Alloy, or Tombac.	Pewter, Copper Alloy, or Tin Alloy.	18 th to mid-19 th century	Hughes and Lester 1981:221	1-piece, flat disc buttons. The drilled, peg-shaped shank is cast with the rest of the button.	
Embedded wire	Pewter; occasionally Copper Alloy.	Iron or Copper Alloy	1800-1830s	Hughes and Lester 1981:221	1-piece, flat disc buttons. A wire eye shank is embedded in a metal hump. Typical of "hard white" pewter buttons.	
Omega	Copper Alloy	Copper Alloy; occasionally Iron.	after ~1800	Hinks 1988: 60; Hughes and Lester 1981:221	1-piece buttons. Shank is shaped like the Greek letter Omega and soldered onto the back of flat disc buttons. Similar to Alpha shanks, but Omega shanks have feet.	
Sanders type/Loose Eye type	Copper Alloy	Copper Alloy, occasionally Iron	after ~1830	Hughes and Lester 1981:221	2-piece buttons. Sander's Type: Solder was applied between the back plate and the wire shank. Loose Eye: Describes wire shanks loose or free-floating within two-piece buttons.	

Shank cast in boss	Pewter, Copper Alloy, or Tombac.	Iron or Copper Alloy	1760-~1800	Hinks 1988:53	1-piece, flat disc buttons. These buttons are usually cast with a spun back. The shank is set into a blob or cylinder of metal. Note the “wings” of metal around the shank.	
Wire Eye	Glass, Ceramic, or Bone	Iron or Copper Alloy			“Wire Eye” is a term used to describe wire shanks on glass, ceramic, or bone buttons. Note that this term should NOT be used for unidentifiable shanks on metal buttons. Also NOT to be used for 2-piece, hollow cast buttons (see Sander’s Type/Loose Eye).	

Images are from: Hughes and Lester 1981:221.

1.12 Button Shank Material

Choices are “Copper Alloy,” “Iron,” “Pewter,” and “Unidentifiable.” If the shank is missing, enter “Missing.” If the button did not originally have a shank, enter “Not Applicable.” The default is “Not Applicable.”

1.13 Button Shank Condition

Choices are “Bent,” “Broken,” “Corroded,” and “Straight.” Also in the list are “Missing” and “Not Applicable.” The default is “Not Applicable.” Sometimes a shank will be, for example, both bent and corroded. For *Shank Condition*, the cataloguer should pick one of these options to enter into the table, and then write the other in *Notes*.

1.14 Button Metal Color

This field describes the color of the button as it would have looked to the consumer. It is a subjective assessment of the button’s appearance rather than its actual composition. This field should only be used for metal buttons, for all other button types use the default “Not Applicable.” There are only three other options: “Yellow,” “White,” and “Unidentifiable.” See Heath 1999:58-62 for discussion of button metal color.

“Yellow”: Copper Alloy buttons should be “Yellow,” unless there is evidence of plating. Tin plating and silver plating are commonly seen on Copper Alloy buttons; these should be listed as “White.” Buttons with Gilding should be listed as “Yellow.”

“White”: Tombac buttons should be “White,” unless there is evidence of Gilding. Gilt buttons should be “Yellow.” Pewter Buttons should be “White.”

“Unidentifiable”: Iron buttons should be “Unidentifiable,” unless there is evidence of plating or gilding.

****NOTE: Plating and gilding should also be listed in the Decoration table.**

1.15 Button Back Stamp

Back Stamp is a text field. If the button has lettering or a stamped design on the back, indicate this in the Back Stamp field. Common back stamps are, for example, “BEST QUALITY” or “Olive branches.” If the stamp is too long or intricate to describe in the Back Stamp field, enter “See notes” and then describe the stamp in the notes. The default for this field when there is no stamp should read “None.”

2. BUTTON DECORATION

Any buttons with a decorative element should be entered into the Button Decoration tab. This includes engraving, stamped decoration, molded decoration, and plating.

2.1 Decorative Technique

Use this field to describe the type of decoration seen on a button. Choices are:

- “Carved”
- “Cast”
- “Engraved”
- “Facetted”
- “Jewel Setting”
- “Molded”
- “Painted”
- “Plated”
- “Stamped”
- “Transfer Printed”
- “Wheel Engraved”

Plating and Gilding

Plating and gilding should be catalogued as follows:

<i>Decorative Technique:</i>	“Plated”
<i>Jewel/Inlay Material:</i>	“Not Applicable”
<i>Decorative Technique Color:</i>	“Tin,” “Silver,” or “Gilt”
<i>Decorative Motif:</i>	Leave this field blank.

2.2 Jewel/Inlay Material

This field should be used to describe any jewels or inlays set into the face of a button. Note that this field does not refer to two-piece buttons with glass or other non-metal faces. Instead, this field describes the inlays sometimes seen on metal-faced buttons (both one-piece and two-piece). Inlay materials will often be identified using a microscope. For example, semi-precious stones will look quite different from glass or “paste” jewels under a microscope. Paste jewels scratch easily, and look very dull over time (especially after having been in the ground).

If you have a button with a jewel or inlaid material, the Button Decoration tab might look like this:

Decorative	Jewel/Inlay	Decorative	Decorative Motif
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Technique	Material	Technique Color	
Jewel Setting	Glass	Red, Muted Medium	This glass inlay is round in shape and set in the middle of the copper alloy button face.

2.3 Decorative Technique Color

Use this field to describe any applied color associated with a decorative technique. This field is most commonly used to describe plating as “Tin,” “Silver,” or “Gilt.” This field should also be used to describe the color of jewel settings and any painting or transfer-printing. If a button has more than one decorative color, enter in separate records for each color. This field should be “Not Applicable” for any decorative technique such as engraving or molding that does not have an applied color.

2.4 Decorative Motif

Use this field when further description of a button decoration or design is necessary. One should, for example, describe the pattern seen on an engraved button face or the design seen on a molded button face. If no description is necessary (as with plating, for example), leave this field blank.

3. BUTTON CONDITION

3.1 Burned

Choose “Yes” or “No.” The default is “No.” Ignore the “N/A” option.

3.2 Conservation

The default is “No Conservation.”

If the button has been conserved, enter “Yes” into this field and describe the conservation in the *Notes*.

3.3 Post-Manufacturing Modification

Choose “Yes” or “No.” The default is “No.” Ignore the “N/A” option.

Post Manufacturing Modification is a field seen in all of the different artifact categories. Use this field when an artifact appears to have been physically modified in order to change its original function.

Catalog the object as it would be cataloged in its original form. Enter “Yes” under *Post Manufacturing Modification*, and describe in *Notes* how the object has been modified.

4. BUTTON MEASUREMENTS

For buttons, measure length, width, and height regardless of whether you have a complete button or not. Measure what you have. When you only have a shank, for example, measure the length, width, and height of the shank.

Button weight should be measured in grams, to the nearest tenth.

5. EXAMPLES FOR CATALOGING VARIOUS BUTTON TYPES

5.1 Bone Buttons

<i>Manufacturing Technique:</i>	“Cut/Carved”
<i>Button Type:</i>	Usually “1 Piece.” These are the buttons that typically have four or five holes – do not call them “Flat Disc.” A bone button with a single hole in the center is a Blank. Use “2 Piece” if the bone is the back to a metal button.
<i>Button Shape:</i>	Note the shape of the button as seen from a plan/overhead view. Usually “Round.”
<i>Material:</i>	“Bone”
<i>Material, Face:</i>	“Not Applicable” unless the bone is the back to a metal button.
<i>Button Color:</i>	“Not Applicable”
<i>Eye:</i>	Note how many holes the button has.
<i>Shank Information:</i>	All fields should be listed as “Not Applicable.”

These protocols also apply for most **Wood**, **Shell**, and **Ivory** buttons.

5.2 Ceramic Buttons

<i>Manufacturing Technique:</i>	Usually “Prosser Molded.”
<i>Button Type:</i>	Usually “1 Piece” but may be part of a “2 Piece” button.
<i>Button Shape:</i>	Note the shape of the button as seen from a plan/overhead view.
<i>Material:</i>	“Ceramic” or “Porcelain”
<i>Material, Face:</i>	“Not Applicable” unless the ceramic is an inset to a metal button.
<i>Button Color:</i>	Munsell the color range of the button.
<i>Eye:</i>	Note how many holes in button. If the button has a shank, put “Not Applicable” in this field.
<i>Shank Information:</i>	If a ceramic button has a metal shank, indicate that the <i>Shank Style</i> is “Wire Eye.” If there is no shank for the button, put “Not Applicable” for all shank fields.

5.3 Glass Buttons

<i>Manufacturing Technique:</i>	Usually Molded. If the glass is faceted (and therefore cut), the <i>Manufacturing Technique</i> is still “Molded” but note the cut facets in the Decoration table.
<i>Button Type:</i>	Usually “1 Piece,” but may be part of a “2 Piece” button.
<i>Button Shape:</i>	Note the shape of the button as seen from a plan/overhead view.
<i>Material:</i>	“Glass”
<i>Material, Face:</i>	“Not Applicable” unless the glass is an inset to a metal button.
<i>Button Color:</i>	Munsell the color range of the button.
<i>Eye:</i>	Note how many holes in button. If the button had a shank, put “Not Applicable” into this field.

Shank Information: If a glass button has a metal shank, indicate that the *Shank Style* is “Wire Eye.” If there is no shank for the button, put “Not Applicable” for all shank fields.

5.4 Metal Buttons

Manufacturing Technique: Usually “Cast,” “Spun Back cast,” or “Stamped.” Cu Alloy buttons tend to be stamped and Tombac buttons tend to be cast, although this is not always the case.

Button Type: Could be all types.

Button Shape: Note the shape of the button as seen from a plan/overhead view.

Material: “Cu Alloy” (yellow/green metal), “Tombac,” “Iron,” or “Pewter”

Material, Face: “Not Applicable” unless this button is a 2 or 3 piece button.

Button Color: “Not Applicable” for metal buttons.

Eye: Note how many holes in button. If the button had a shank, put “Not Applicable” into this field.

Shank Style: Identify the shank style. If the shank is missing and you can’t determine the style of the shank, enter “Missing” into this field. Even if the shank is missing, look for evidence that tells you what the shank was. Two flanges of cast metal on the back of the button indicate that the shank was “Cast in Boss.” If there are two tiny dots or marks on the back of a copper alloy button, this usually means that the shank was an “Alpha,” as these are the points where the shank was attached. See the section on *Shank Styles* for detailed descriptions of shanks.

Button Metal Color: Yellow, White, or Unidentifiable. See the section on *Button Metal Color* for a detailed description of this field.

5.5 Button Shanks

How to catalogue a single button shank, when the rest of the button is missing:

Completeness: “Shank Only”

Manufacturing Technique: “Unidentifiable”

Button Type: “Missing”

Button Shape: “Missing”

Material: “Missing”

Material, Face: “Not Applicable”

Button Color: “Not Applicable”

Eye: “Not Applicable”

Button Metal Color: “Not Applicable”

Back Stamp: “None”

Catalogue Shank Style, Shank Material, and Shank Condition as usual. For *Shank Condition*, only use “Broken” if the shank itself is broken (NOT to indicate that the shank has been broken off from the rest of the button).

Take all measurements.

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