



Dress for Life and Death

The Archaeology of Common Nineteenth-Century Buttons

Anatolijs Venovcevs

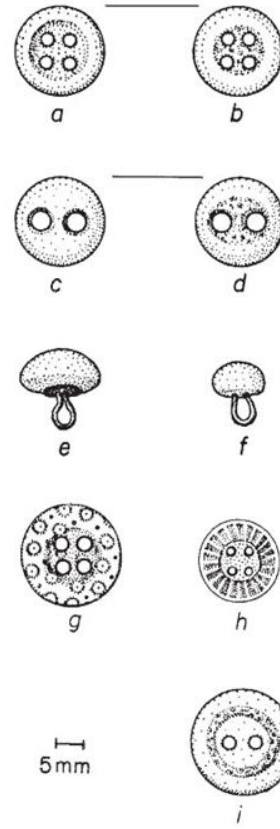


FIGURE 1. Common Prosser button styles: *a*, four-hole dish type button, front; *b*, four-hole dish type button, back; *c*, two-hole panty-waist button, front; *d*, two-hole panty-waist button, back; *e*, domed gaiter button, note the shank plate; *f*, domed shoe button; *g*, calico button; *h*, pie crust button; *i*, back of fisheye button showing typical back rough surface only on the raised ring. (Line drawings by Sarah Moore from samples in the author's collection.)

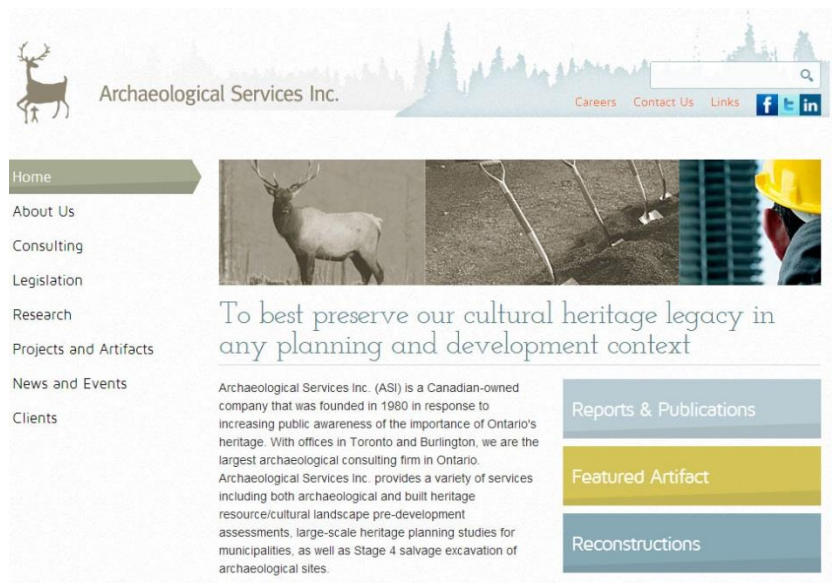




About Me

LAURIER

- Graduated Laurier in 2010 with a BA (Hons) in archaeology (pre-contact specialization)
- Attended FITP starting in 2009
- Started working at ASI in 2008 as a co-op student
- In 2011 got hired to write Stage 3 and Stage 4 historic (Euro-Canadian) reports





A Confession



- I'm an Archaeologist
 - Expertise focus on what is preserved
 - Which, in Ontario, does not include many organic items like textiles



- Thus the archaeology study of clothes in Ontario must generally be limited to the study buttons



Current Button Typologies

- Archaeology Articles

- Ferris, Neil (1986)
- Lindberg, Jennie (1999)
- Sprague, Roderick (2002)

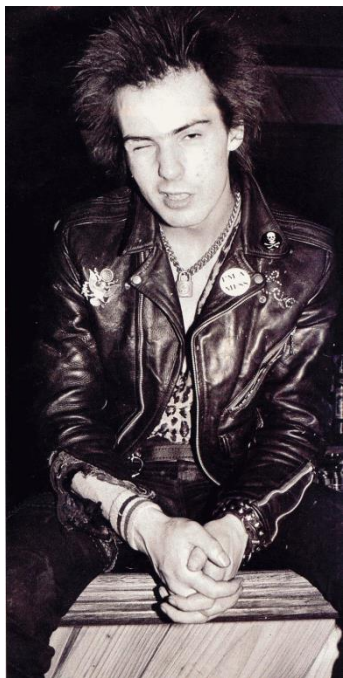
- Collector's Books

- Epstein, Diana and Millicent Safro (2001)
- Fink, Nancy and Maryalice Ditzler (1993)
- Luscomb, Sally C. (1967)
- Meredith, Alan and Gillian Meredith (2004)

- Focused on material type and style

- Bone
- Metal
- Shell
- Ceramic
- Glass
- Rubber
- Miscellaneous

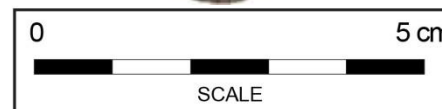
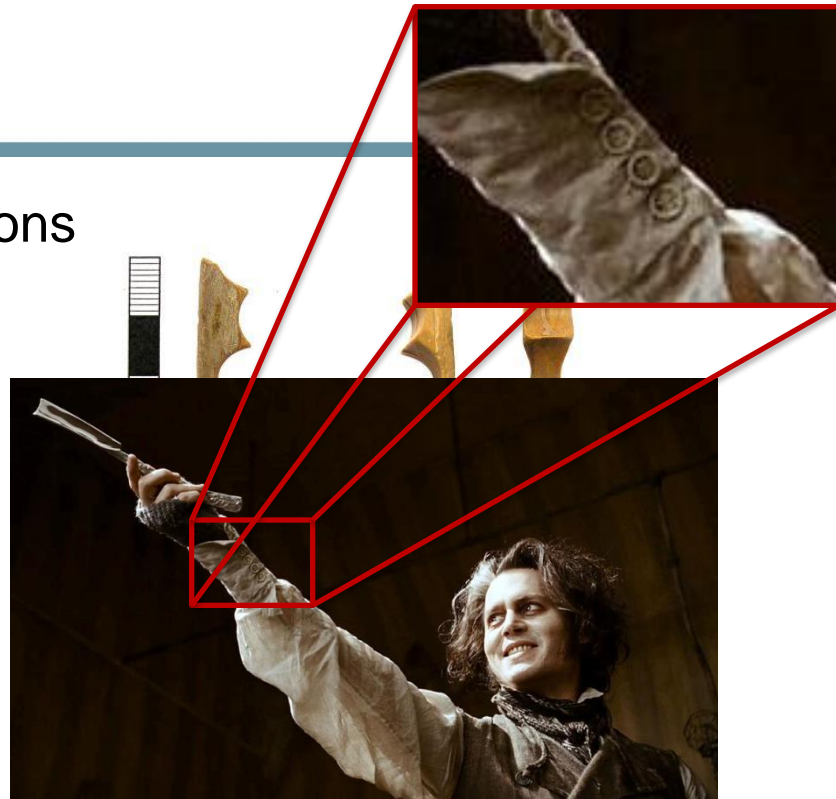
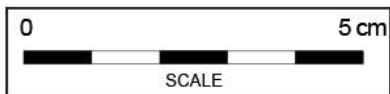
- Presents an excellent summary of their production styles, links to changes in fashion
- Provides a good chronological sequence and can help date archaeological sites
- Provides suggested uses for individual buttons but fails to be carried over into a functional typology
- A functional typology would help:
 - Identify the garments people wore
 - Track changes in styles
 - Link buttons to socio-economic status
 - Provide an opportunity to study resistance and conformity to society through the conspicuous methods of non-verbal communication





Bone Buttons

- Arguably among the oldest types of fasteners
- Entered mass-production in the eighteenth century
 - Cheapest resource costs – a dead animal
 - Cheapest tools – a bone lathe
 - Relatively durable
 - Versatile
- Could be shanked but the most common bone buttons had ringlets between one and five
 - Single holed buttons used as backs for metal buttons or covered with cloth (known as Dorsets or Cartwheels) and used on shirts
 - Disappeared by 1830s
 - Two or more were sew through buttons (four and five holed ones being the most common)
 - Small ones were used on shirts, trousers, underwear, women's shawls
 - Larger ones used on outerwear
 - Fell out of popularity by the 1850s due to vegetable ivory/horn buttons

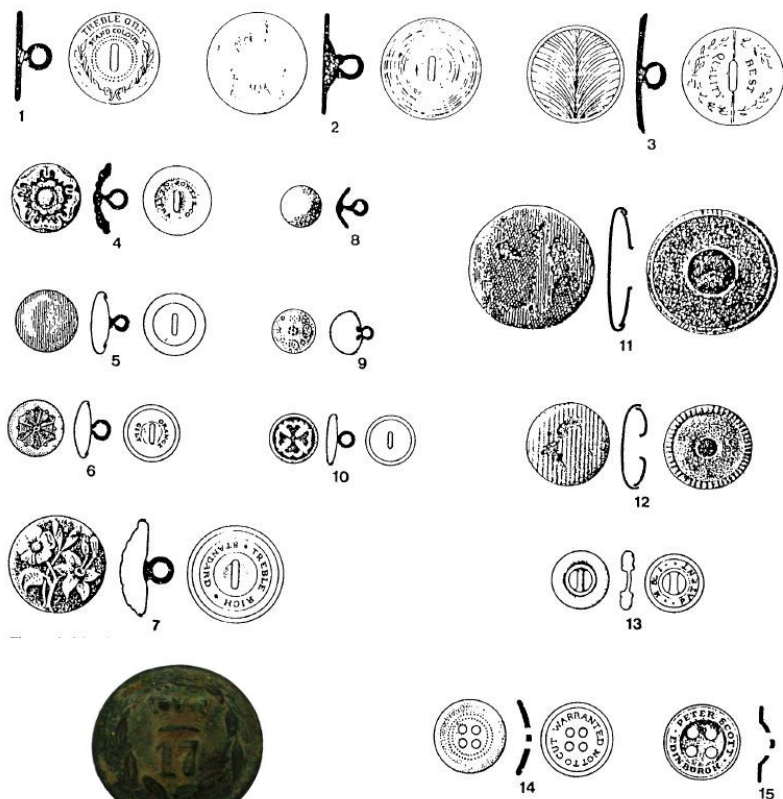




Metal Buttons



Mountvernonmidden.com



Metal Buttons from Ferris 1986:99

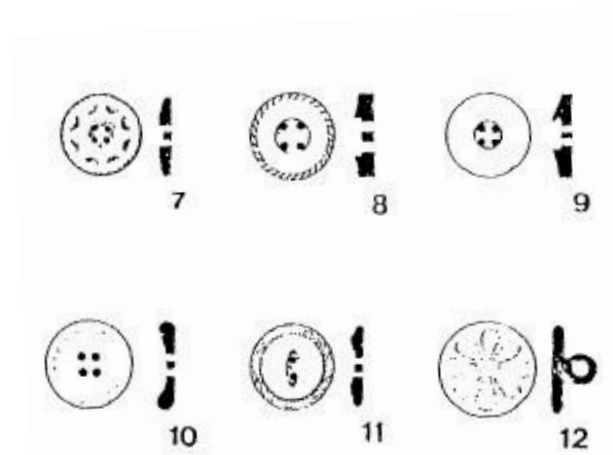


- Popular since the 1760s
- Styles changed through time
 - Pewter popular until 1830s
 - “Gilded Age” of metal buttons between 1830s and 1850s
 - One piece vs. two piece buttons
 - Words like “Double Gilt,” “Triple Gilt,” inscribed on the back.
 - 1796 Act of Parliament
 - Metal buttons used on everything
 - Cloth covered buttons starting in the mid-nineteenth century
 - Florentine and other cloth-covered buttons
- Can be easy to identify
 - Large buttons, upward of 30 mm in size, were for coats
 - Small and medium ones (8 to 15 mm) were popular on cuffs, vests, (shirts, boots, and etc. before the 1830s)
 - Two-hole underwear buttons, four-hole suspender buttons
 - Military buttons



Shell Buttons

- Also known as “pearl” or “mother-of-pearl” even when they weren’t necessarily that
- First preserved example on a garment is from an undershirt of King George IV from 1827
 - Recent archaeology shows that these were made in the eighteenth century as well
- Manufacture
 - Similar to bone buttons, you need a mollusc and a lathe
 - Started in Birmingham but was cheap enough to establish anywhere a supply of shells was available
 - Mississippi River in the late nineteenth century
 - Kitchener in 1891
- Styles similar to bone – sew-through buttons are the most ubiquitous though shanked shell buttons and mother of pearl inlays for metal buttons and cufflinks are not uncommon
 - Could be decorated
 - Small sew-through buttons were very popular on shirts, larger ones used on trousers and coats

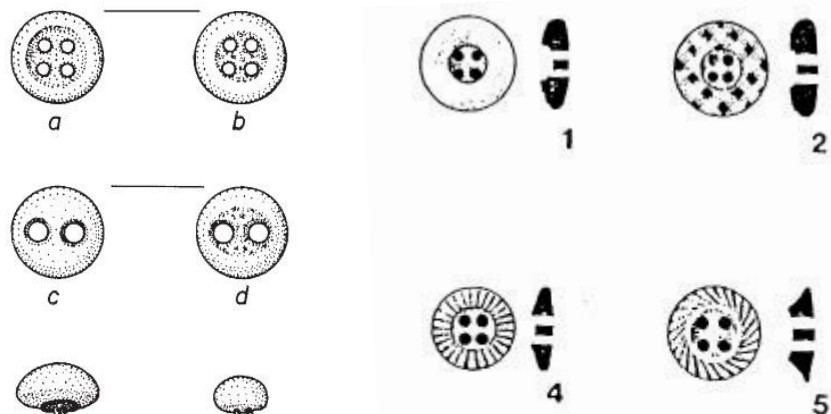


Shell Buttons from Ferris 1986:101





Prosser (Ceramic) Buttons



From Ferris 1986:101

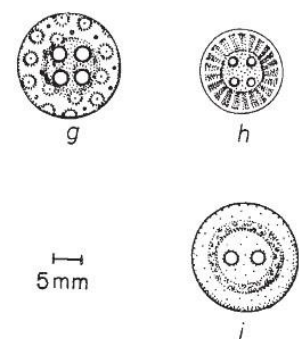


FIGURE 1. Common Prosser button styles: *a*, four-hole dish type button, front; *b*, four-hole dish type button, back; *c*, two-hole panty-waist button, front; *d*, two-hole panty-waist button, back; *e*, domed gaiter button, note the shank plate; *f*, domed shoe button; *g*, calico button; *h*, pie crust button; *i*, back of fishtail button showing typical back rough surface only on the raised ring. (Line drawings by Sarah Moore from samples in the author's collection.)

From Sprague 2002:112



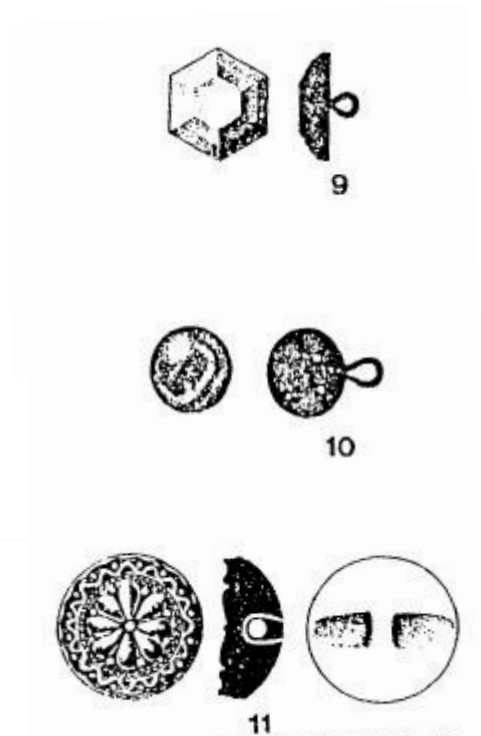
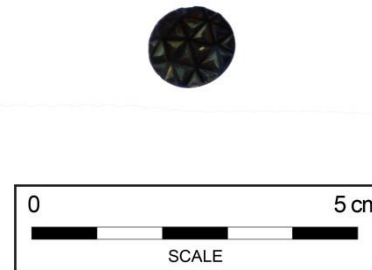
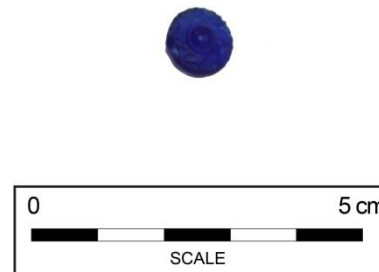
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- First clay buttons were manufactured in the eighteenth century
 - Expensive, elaborately decorated, and made of porcelain
- Trend changed in 1840
 - Richard Prosser's dry porcelain mould method
 - Patented on June 17, 1840
 - Thomas Prosser, made a similar patent with the US Patent office on June 30, 1841
 - The story on Jean-Felix Bapterosses (1843-44)
 - After 1850, the most common button on most archaeological sites
- Styles
 - Four-hole sew-through buttons most common
 - Most are plain white and mistaken for milk glass
 - Moulded into a variety of styles – beaded, ink well, etc.
 - Calicos and other painted decorations
 - Two-holed and three-holed specimens, large sew-through buttons, domed buttons with shanks
- Popular until the 1920s and produced until the 1950s/1960s



Glass Buttons

- Rare finds on archaeological sites – never a large part of the market
- First produced in the 1830s and mounted on metal frames
- After the 1870s were press moulded with an insertion of a metal shank
- Came in a variety of colours
 - Clear, blue, and black
 - Often ornate designs
 - Associated with women's attire or children's clothes
 - Also popular for men on vests
- Black glass buttons were the height of fashion after 1861, the trend continued as far as the 1890s



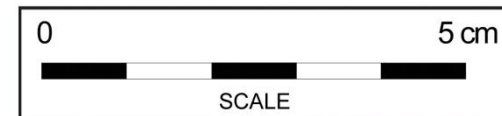
From Ferris 1986:101



Rubber and Other Buttons



From Ferris 1986:102



Rubber:

- Very rare
- Patented in 1851 by Goodyear (not of tire fame)
 - One of the first items made out of rubber
- American monopoly, never caught on in Europe because of a “peculiar smell”
 - In Ontario only appears in ones or twos, mostly as four-hole sew through coat button types
 - Suggests that it was a novelty item
 - The smell does not survive within the archaeological record

Wood:

- Very common and one of the earliest, all but unheard of in the archaeological record

Vegetable Ivory (Horn):

- Boiled down cow hoofs which replaced bone buttons in the 1870s
- Hardly gets identified within the archaeological record



Wooden button from Boise, Idaho. Retrieved from - <http://www.basquemuseum.com/category/sterms/idaho-excavation-level-2-parlor-unit-20-wood>



Towards a Functional Typology

Summary

- Current typology provides good dateable attributes, useful for dating archaeological sites
- However, does little to create a unified picture of the site and who the people were

Challenges

- Buttons are extremely multi-purpose
 - Bought separately
 - Saved, used, and recycled
 - Could have been used on different types of clothing
 - Issues with shanked buttons
- Buttons did not have to be uniform on a garment
- Issues with survivability of certain button types and changes in fashion
- Understanding the supply, demand, and distribution of buttons in Ontario is still in its infancy
- Male-centric



Courtesy of Wikipedia Commons



Towards a Functional Typology



Stone carvers at U of T, Courtesy of Vintage Toronto

- A few generalizations can be made
- Most bone buttons are, unfortunately, unidentifiable
- Small (8 to 15 mm diameter) sew-through shell and ceramic buttons were probably used on shirts, along with the one-hole bone fabric buttons; decorated variations were generally more expensive than plain ones
- Large specimens of these can be linked to coats and jackets
- Large metal buttons were used on coats while small and medium ones were common on vests and cuffs; varieties of gilding and moulded helps to establish a hierarchy
- A few buttons could be identified to the garment
 - Two-hole metal underwear button
 - Four-hole metal suspender button
 - Black glass vest buttons
 - Ornate glass women's buttons
 - Small three-hole children/doll buttons
 - "Gaiter" buttons

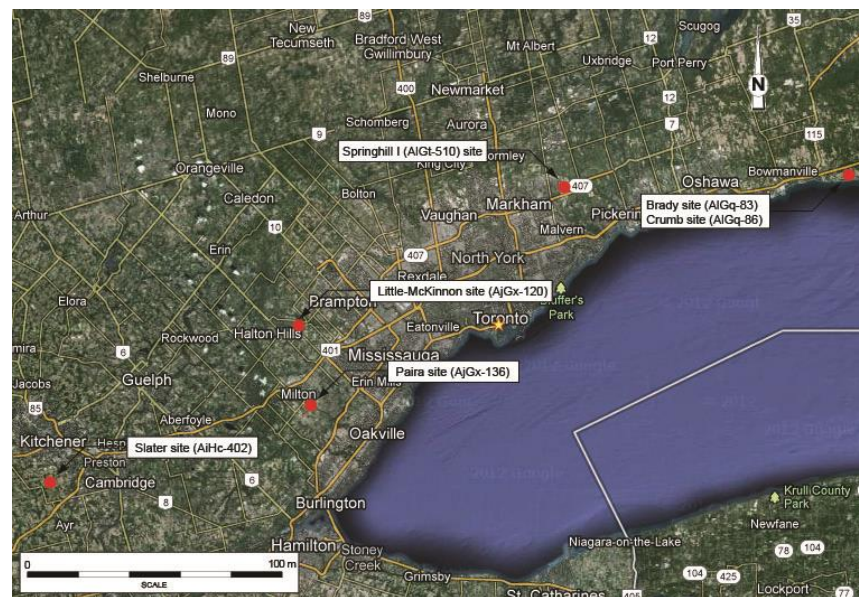


Putting It Into Practice

Six rural domestic sites chosen:

- Brady
 - Township of Darlington
 - 1820s-1840s
 - Affluent homeowner
 - 76 buttons recovered
- Slater
 - Township of North Dumfries
 - 1820s-1840s
 - Isolated tenant farmers (later land owners)
 - 12 buttons recovered
- Paira
 - Township of Trafalgar
 - 1820s-1840s
 - Sporadically occupied by tenant farmers and small lawn owners
 - Five buttons
- Little-McKinnon
 - Township of Esquesing
 - 1830s-1850s
 - Lightly occupied by two landowners
 - Seven buttons

- Springhill I
 - Township of Markham
 - 1830s/1840s – 1870s
 - Occupied by tenants
 - 27 buttons
- Crumb
 - Township of Darlington
 - 1848-1854
 - Occupied by well-off tenants
 - 34 buttons





Results and Observations

	Shirt		Cuff/vest		Coat									
	Plain	Fancy	Plain	Fancy	Plain	Fancy	Ind. Out.	Underwear	Suspender	Military	Ladies	Child	Gaiter	Total
Brady	11	2	8	15	14	10	4		7	1	2	2		76
Slater	3			3	2	1	2		1					12
Paira	2				1		1			1				5
Little-McK.	1			1	2		1					2		7
Springhill I	12	1				1	13							27
Crumb	12	1	2	4	1	2	2	4	3		1	1	1	34
Total	41	4	10	23	20	14	23	4	11	2	3	5	1	161

	Shirt		Cuff/vest		Coat									
	Plain	Fancy	Plain	Fancy	Plain	Fancy	Ind. Out.	Underwear	Suspender	Military	Ladies	Child	Gaiter	Total
Brady	14.5%	2.6%	10.5%	19.7%	18.4%	13.2%	5.3%		9.2%	1.3%	2.6%	2.6%		100.0%
Slater	25.0%			25.0%	16.7%	8.3%	16.7%		8.3%					100.0%
Paira	40.0%				20.0%		20.0%			20.0%				100.0%
Little-McK.	14.3%			14.3%	28.6%		14.3%					28.6%		100.0%
Springhill I	44.4%	3.7%				3.7%	48.1%							100.0%
Crumb	35.3%	2.9%	5.9%	11.8%	2.9%	5.9%	5.9%	11.8%	8.8%		2.9%	2.9%	2.9%	100.0%
Average	28.9%	3.1%	8.2%	17.7%	17.3%	7.8%	18.4%	11.8%	8.8%	10.7%	2.8%	11.4%	2.9%	

- Shirt buttons dominate, especially later sites
 - Springhill I and Crumb vs. Brady and Slater
 - Associated with the shift in fashions
- Almost a fifth of all buttons consist of button ones
 - Almost 50% from Springhill – evidence of utilitarian work attire?
- Cuff and vest buttons are roughly equivalent to coat
 - Fancy cuff/vest buttons more common than plain, opposite to that of coats
 - Relation to work clothing and “refined” attire
 - Coat buttons common on more sites than vest/cuffs
 - Vests not necessarily for purely working class attire



Death – The Undiscovered Country (of Button Research)

Point Abino:

- Early Euro-Canadian cemetery in Niagara
- Impacted by utility lines in the twentieth century and identified during right of way work
- No dates and little idea on which individuals were buried
 - Associated with members of Page family, late Loyalists
 - Judging by buttons and history, most burials occurred around 1830
- Ten burials (seven males and three small children)
 - Three were babies (three years and under)
 - Three in late teens (under 20)
 - Two young adults (20 to 35)
 - One middle adult (30 to 50)
 - One old man (50 and over)
- Five had buttons in various qualities
 - Two teens
 - Both young adults
 - The old man
- Buttons still located in the same general areas before the fabric decayed
- Useful for drawing parallels between buttons to garments but larger samples with tighter dates and identities are needed





Burials from Point Abino

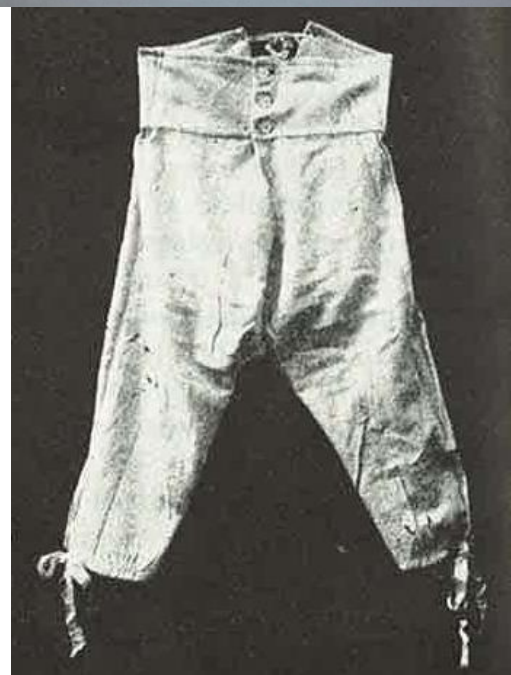
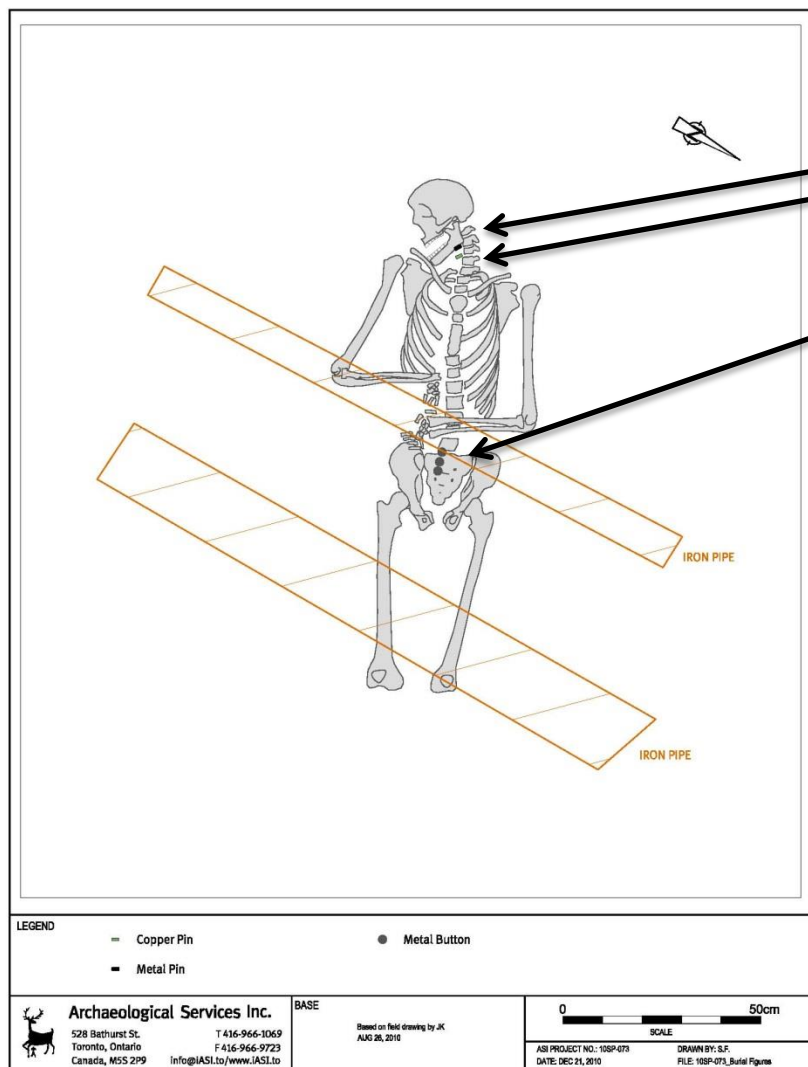
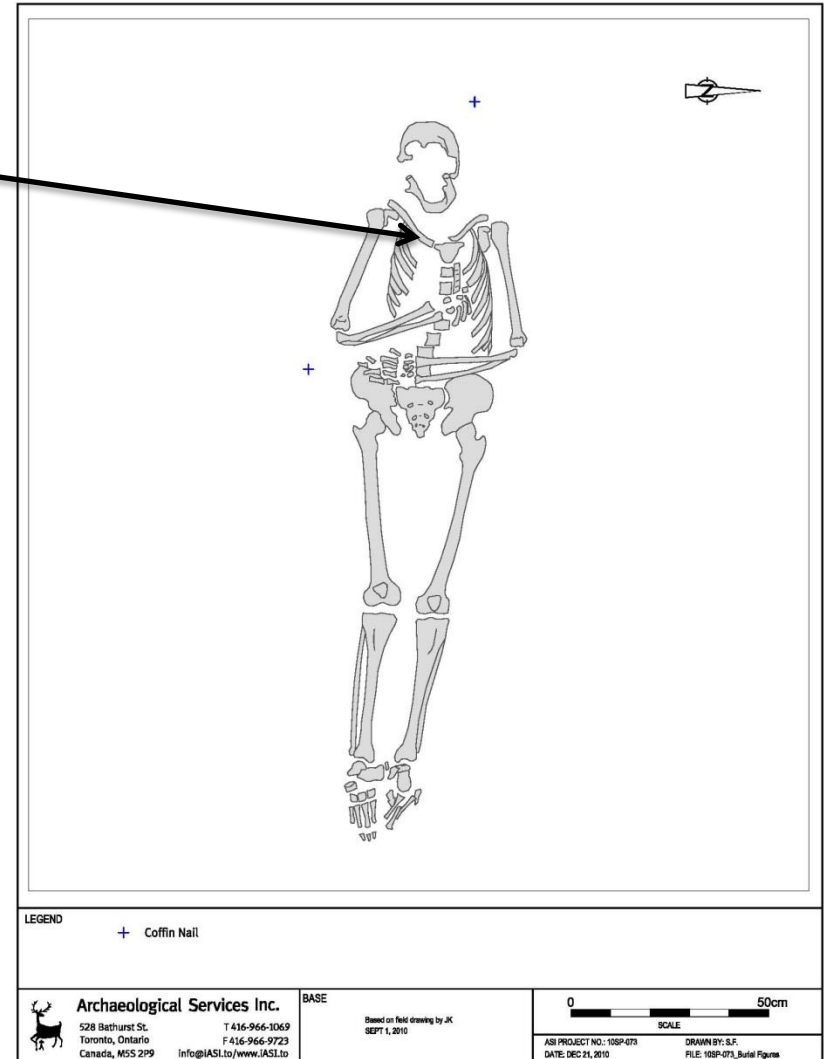


Figure 7: Burial 7

From Willett and Cunnington 1992:104



Burials from Point Abino



From Willett and Cunningham 1992:100

Figure 8: Burial 8



Burials from Point Abino

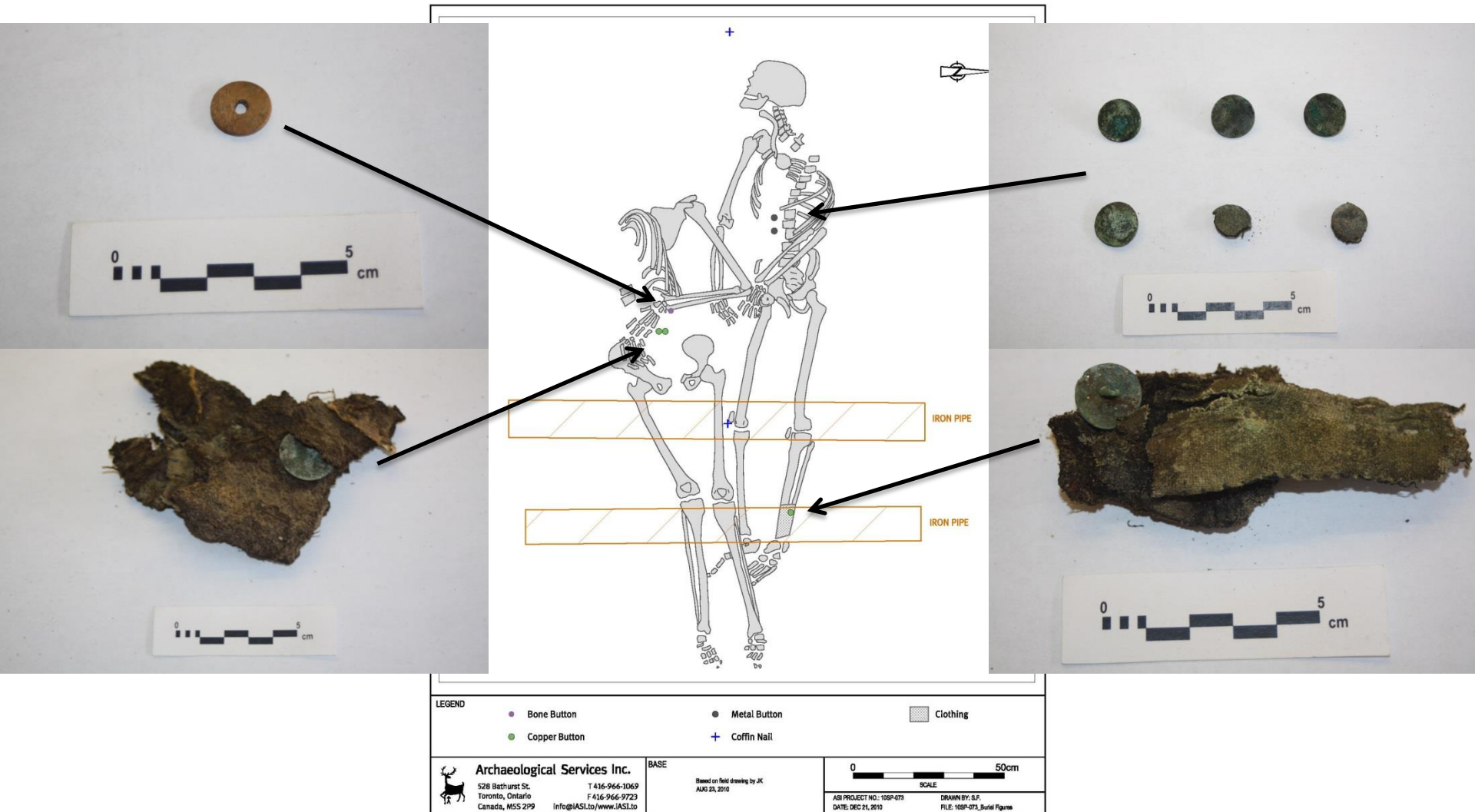


Figure 5: Burial 1 and 2



Burials from Point Abino

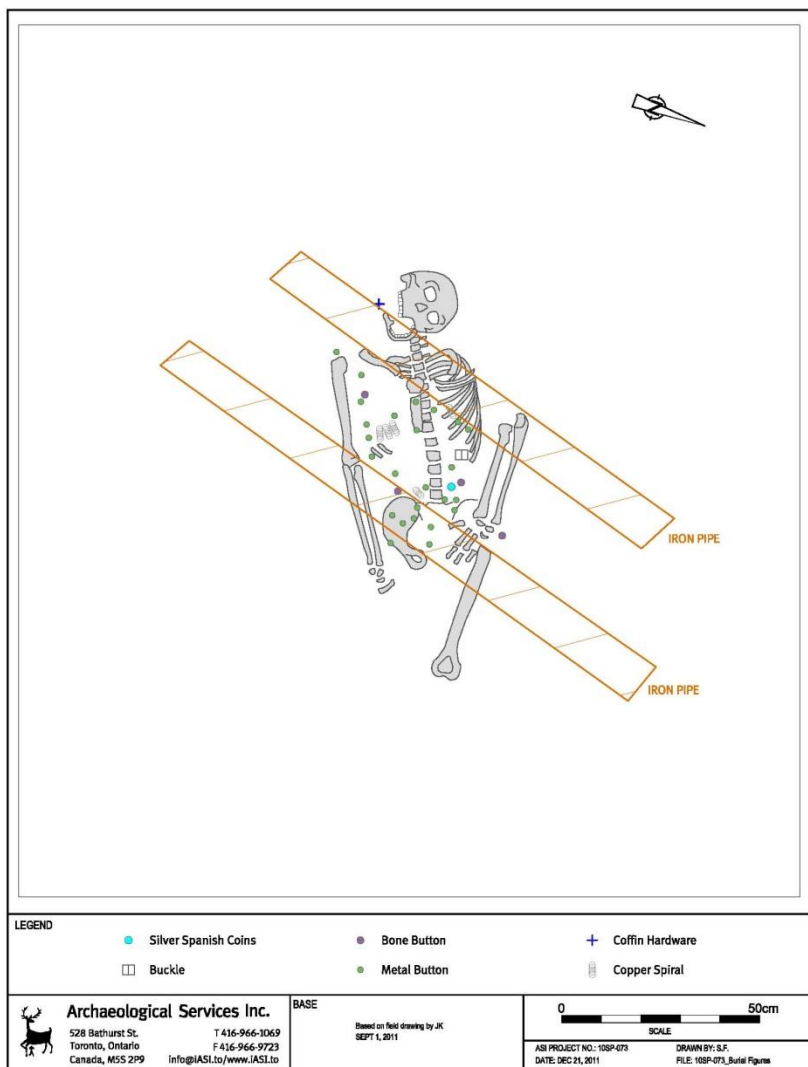


Figure 10: Burial 10





Conclusions

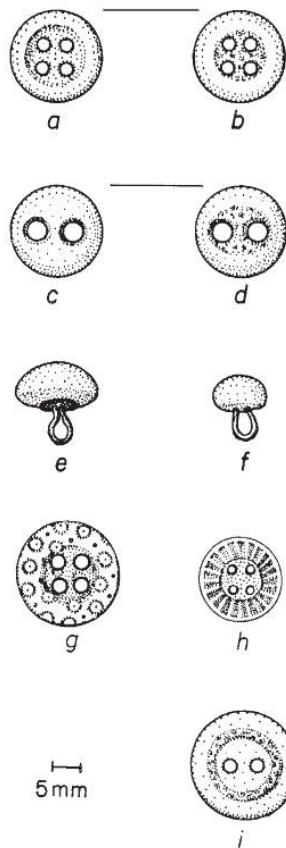
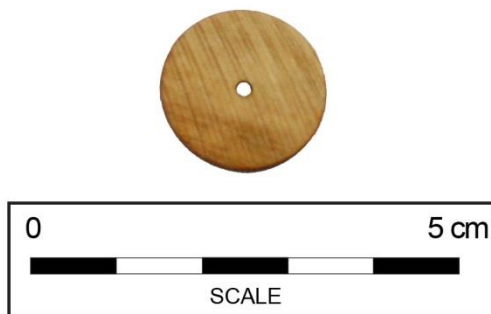


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- Buttons have been proven to be effective artifacts for refining the dates for archaeological assemblages but have yet to live up to their potential for examining the inhabitants of sites on a social and cultural level
- Reclassifying and examining buttons with a functional typology hold great potential to bridge this gap but several things are needed
 - Understanding garments and changes in fashions from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century
 - Understanding the life history of buttons from their manufacture, to shipping, to purchase, to use and re-use, to their eventual deposition within the archaeological record
 - Creating a large comparative literature of archaeological sites from different types of sites, in different areas
 - Cemetery excavations have great potential to contribute to this goal
- A functional typology has great potential at informing us about the social and economic conditions of individuals in during the time period in question





Any Questions?

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Citations:

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