

SOLID - CAST LOUISIANA BUTTON

The dirt of the Old Dominion gives up a rare find from the Pelican State

by John E. Harris,
R. Ph.



The signal that day in May 2004 was no different from countless ones I had heard before. A steady two-toned melody, one that had always brought with it a nervous sense of anticipation, knowing something good could be below. A second later and my entrenching shovel had neatly cut a plug of dirt from the history ridden soil. Another sweep of my Nautilus and the signal was



even louder, heightening my desire to know what I had found. After deepening the hole even more, a quick sweep of my detector indicated that the object was no longer in its resting place. Seconds later a glimpse of gold caught my eye, and I was holding a button I had never held before.

My love of Civil War relics began when I was just a child—and I

Above, the Louisiana button recovered by the author, shown at left. Below is proof that once you start collecting on a theme, who knows where it will all end.



owe it all to my father. Every few weeks, on Sunday afternoons, he would take my younger brother and me on walks along the Yorktown Battlefield. Our mission was to see who could find the most minié balls. As a child, he had found a ravine where Federal troops must have had target practice. After heavy rains, bullets eroded out of the banks of the ravine, and my father had found bucketsful. He had even found cannonballs this way as a schoolboy and, as was customary back then, sold them to the Park Service for a dollar. These were then used in their historical displays.

No matter how hard I tried I could never find as many as he did. I can remember thinking that there had to be an easier way to locate them. Santa finally brought me my first detector, a Metrotech (which I still have) at the age of 13. That present from Santa was the best present I ever got. It also began a lifelong hobby of metal detecting.

Yorktown, Virginia, is mostly remembered in history for the Siege of 1781, which effectively ended the American Revolution. However, Yorktown was once again the site of major siege operations in the Peninsula Campaign of 1862. Growing up near the battlefield, I played every day on soil where soldiers from both wars had fought and died. History was everywhere, so it was no wonder the relics were also.

Over the years I had been fortunate to unearth countless artifacts in the fields and woods around my home. But buttons, especially those of the Civil War era, soon became my favorite finds. My rarest Southern state seal, up to that point, was a very rare Texas “D” button that I unearthed near Yorktown in the early ’90s. But I had also found Southern buttons from the states of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Mississippi, Georgia, Louisiana, and Alabama. My rarest Northern button was a New Jersey National Guard button I found near Yorktown at an 1862 hospital site. This button had the very rare backmark of Farrant, Lester, and Co. Albert had stated this button was post-Civil War, but I did an in-depth study of the backmark and proved that the button was in fact made at the outbreak of hostilities. (*NSTCW* made note of this in a 1992 issue.)

Other Northern state seals I had found included Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York, Maine, Connecticut, and Rhode Island.

A view of a Confederate fort southeast of New Yorktown with a ruined 32-pdr. navy gun.

This button, however, was different from all of them. Right away I knew it was a solid-cast button because of its weight. I had never found a solid-cast button before.

I gently placed the button in my button container and continued to hunt. Earlier that day, I had found a cuff button not far from this one. I had also found a Zoave button, a few Gardners, some musket balls, and a couple of cannonball fragments.

Steady rains had saturated the soil. Finally, unable to bear the suspense anymore, I found a stump hole where water had pooled. I gently washed the button face, and little by little the dirt washed away. A beautiful spread-winged pelican stared up at me. I had found a solid-cast Louisiana!

Once home I carefully took pictures of my newfound treasures. After careful cleaning, the cuff button turned out to be an early Virginia and the coat button turned out to be the most spectacular Louisiana button I had ever seen.

Then I began to make phone calls to my relic hunting friends, two of whom showed up in minutes. Neither Jimmy Neise and Jimmy Laster, both experienced relic hunters, had seen a Louisiana button quite like this before, and they were just as bewildered as I was.

My next move was to get on the Internet. I posted my find on an online relic hunting forum and netted numerous responses, many of them from well-known authorities in the Civil War collecting field. However, it was another digger who finally began to answer my questions concerning the button. Danny Brown of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, had also found one and he responded. He noted that it does not appear in Albert’s *Record of American Uniform and Historical Buttons*, but it is listed in Warren Tice’s book *Uniform Buttons of the United States*. He added:



Courtesy Library of Congress

My button was found near downtown New Orleans last August [2003] when they were tearing down some very old housing. William Leigh of Virginia, a nationally known button collector and dealer, contacted me when he heard I had found one. He has actually seen and held my button. He told me that to his knowledge only a few have been found—all in Virginia [up to that point]. The button is as right as rain and very, very rare.

Danny's helpful information continued:

The button is too finely made to have been a local or one made during the war. It most likely dates from 1860 and may have been militia. Mine too has gilt, although less than yours. It is heavier than a solid cast T. Miller Texas button. I don't think many were made because so few have turned up. Based on the fact I found mine in New Orleans, I think it is reasonable to assume that they were specially made there for one small unit and that is all that ever had them. I also assume this unit fought in Virginia since this is the only other state where they have been found. They are so heavy it is easy to see why they were lost so easily. I have not been able to find anymore about the button, but yours is definitely from the Civil War.

Later that week in online correspondence with William Leigh, he stated, "This is a great button and its unique manufacture is unlike any other Confederate button known. What a wonderful find! I have seen fewer than 10 of these

over the years."

In the Tice reference work, it is listed as LA245A1. He states it is a crude copy of LA304, with the pelican's head facing toward the right. It measures 21mm in diameter and is patterned after LA2 in Albert's book and similar to LA10. It is noted as the rarest of all the pelican buttons.

I believe it was more than likely made by a jeweler in New Orleans before its fall in mid-1862. The die work exhibited is just exquisite, and the lined field is almost flawless, with only a few small air bubbles where the casting did not flow perfectly. The pelican, standing guard over her young, stands out boldly, with no weak areas whatsoever. A side view of the button features intricate cross etchings that encircle the circumference of the button. The gold plating is spectacular—almost three times as thick as that of more standard military buttons of the period. The shank is constructed of wire. The back is blank, with a machined channel showing turning marks.

The cost of producing these buttons must have been very high. Whoever wore them must have been very proud of their Louisiana heritage. But who were they?

The following is taken directly from the National Park Service's Yorktown Historic Briefs.

In 1861, Major General John Bankhead Magruder, commander of the Army of the Peninsula, began constructing defensive lines across the peninsula. He anchored his left flank at Yorktown, strengthening and improving existing Revolutionary War fortifications. From Yorktown, 12 miles of new earthworks spanned southward to the Warwick River for several miles before

turning westward and ending at the James River. Initially Magruder only had 11,000 men to hold his entire line. His adversary, George B. McClellan, commander of the Army of the Potomac, had a force of about 146,000 men. Magruder was vastly outnumbered. However he marched his infantry and moved his artillery in such effective theatrics that he convinced McClellan that the Confederates were too strong for a Federal attack.

A Confederate water battery during the Siege of Yorktown.



Courtesy Library of Congress

According to Houghton Mifflin's *Civil War Battlefield Guide*:

CS Lieutenant Robert Miller stated that his 14th Louisiana marched from Yorktown to the James and back six times during Magruder's show of strength. By May the Confederate force had grown to 53,000 men. And on the night of May 3-4th the Confederate Army slipped away toward Williamsburg. McClellan had allowed his enemy to get away. A major battle at Yorktown never materialized due to his indecisiveness.

The state of Louisiana played a major role in these operations. In Steven Sears's *To the Gates of Richmond*, 10 Confederate units from Louisiana are mentioned occupying Yorktown. These were the 1st Louisiana Battalion, the 1st Zouave Battalion (Copper's Battalion), the 2nd Louisiana, the 5th Louisiana, the 10th Louisiana, the 14th Louisiana, St. Paul's Foot Rifles, Donaldson's Battery, Moody's Madison Battery, and the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Washington Artillery.

But how was I going to determine who could have worn the button I had found? At that point I decided the only way this could be done was to find a common denominator, if one existed, between the known locations of the Louisiana units and the locations of the buttons. There was my button, which was found near Yorktown, and Danny Brown's button,

which had been found in downtown New Orleans. Another well-known Virginia relic hunter, Gary Williams, had unearthed a solid-cast Louisiana button near the James River close to Williamsburg. He and his digging partner, Steve Hicks, found a virgin camp in the late 1980s and unearthed numerous Louisiana and eagle "R" buttons.

Of even more interest was what Steve Hicks found close to where Gary unearthed his solid-cast Louisiana: a beautiful pelican-with-rays Louisiana plate. In Steve Mullinax's *Confederate Belt Buckles & Plates*, he attributed this plate, designated Plate 295, to a New Orleans craftsman. He noted that "New Orleans boasted a number of small shops with craftsmen capable of such fine die work and construction"—an observation that can apply to this button as well.

Interestingly enough, another pelican-with-rays Louisiana plate was found near Yorktown in 1974 by Ralph Meredith. This plate was published in Vol. 2 No. 2 of *NSTCW*. Was there a possible relationship between these buckles and the solid-cast buttons?

Going back through my complete set of *NSTCW*, I was startled to see another solid-cast Louisiana button

pictured in Vol. 7 No. 3. Thomas Dimitri had uncovered this one in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1980. A study of Louisiana troops that had occupied Charleston showed only one Confederate unit: the 4th Louisiana. But the 4th was not at Yorktown.

It seemed as though I was getting nowhere.

Once again I began to wonder if there could be a connection between my button and the pelican-with-rays Louisiana plates. Both could be attributable to master craftsmen of New Orleans. Could these craftsmen be one and the same?

Once again going through back issues of *NSTCW*, I found that Chris Christman of Poquoson had unearthed another "pelican with rays" Louisiana plate in Newport News, Virginia, near Young's Mill. This made a total of three plates, all found behind the same siege line where two solid-cast Louisiana buttons had been found.

How could the 4th Louisiana, which hadn't fought in the Peninsula Campaign, be linked to those Louisiana units that did? Where did these men come from?

Later that day I had my answer. The 4th Louisiana was composed of men from the parishes of Madison, Ouachita, Franklin, Tensas, and Concordia. Madison—I had a possible connection. Moody's Company, also known as Madison's Light Artillery, had been in Yorktown and Williamsburg and was composed

solely of men from the parish of Madison. Researching where the men in the other nine Louisiana units that had occupied Yorktown originated from, I came upon only one other common denominator with the 4th Louisiana. Both the 4th and 5th had men from the parish of Ouachita.

Andrew Booth's *Record of Louisiana Soldiers and Louisiana Confederate Commands* notes:

The Madison Light Artillery was organized at Tullalah, Louisiana, during the winter of 1861-1862 with the men from Madison Parish. The company soon moved to Virginia and served in S. D. Lee's, E. P. Alexander's, and F. Huger's Battalion of Artillery. It fought with the Army of Northern Virginia from the Seven Day's Battles to Cold Harbor, and then was involved in the Petersburg siege and the Appomattox campaign. The unit lost 24 percent of the 135 at Gettysburg and surrendered with 3 officers and 41 men. Also known as the Madison "Tips" [for Tipperary], this was a unit made up of mostly Irishmen. They were armed with two (2) 3-inch ordinance rifles and two (2) 24 pound howitzers.

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My button had been found near Yorktown in the vicinity of existing trenches where artillery mounds were present. Months before I had also unearthed a 24-pdr. howitzer shell close by. The Madison Light Artillery had two 24-pdr. howitzers. Another connection could be drawn.

Of great interest to me at this point in my research was the fact that the men of Madison Parish who served in Company A, 4th Battalion, Louisiana Infantry, had created a special button designating their unit. This was the Madison Infantry "Meet Us" button listed as 284A1 in Tice's work.

Obviously the men of Madison Parish were proud of their Louisiana heritage and wanted to stand out among others. They seemed to spare no expense in doing so. If they created a special button for a company in their infantry unit, why not create a special button for a company in their artillery unit?

My theory is that the men, or possibly officers, of Moody's Battery were equipped with these buttons and buckles. They could have been purchased from a master jeweler in New Orleans and distributed among high-ranking men from Madison Parish.

The button found in Charleston could have also been worn by an officer who elected to enter the 4th after being equipped with the same uniform as those in Moody's Battery. Of course, this is all speculation at this point because there is currently no direct photographic documentation.

My theory is just that—a theory. But the beginning of the Civil War, the various units' uniforms and accoutrements exhibited a great deal of individuality. It could be that some wealthy men from New Orleans and its surrounding parishes purchased items from the same jeweler for the simple reason that he was the best.

I would be glad to hear from any readers with information that may shed additional light on the subject.

A last note: As luck would have it, my interest in this led to me being offered the pelican-with-rays plate found by Ralph Meredith near my hometown of Yorktown. It now resides in my collection next to its centerpiece—the solid-cast Louisiana button I found one unforgettable spring day. NSTCW

The author dedicates this article to his father, Dr. Julius E. Harris, with love, respect, and affection.

Native Virginian John Harris, a 1998 graduate of Old Dominion University and a 1992 graduate of the Medical College of Virginia, is currently a pharmacist for a chain pharmacy in Hampton, Virginia.

He welcomes comments about this article.

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