A UNIQUE BRASS BUTTON FROM THE “NEW YEAR FEATURE,”
PETALUMA ADOBE STATE HISTORIC PARK, SONOMA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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Functional object? Gift of honor? Personal amulet? These questions prompt examination of a singular artifact from Petaluma Adobe’s New Year Feature (NYF): a brass picture button, hand-etched with military imagery around the shank. NYF buttons, including a “Phoenix” button, reflect Mexican Republic Era style of male clothing embellishment. Buttons usually remained on garments awarded to California rancho personnel. The regional 1837-39 smallpox epidemic triggered disposal of contaminated items; this action resulted in the NYF. Information relating to the brass button, and the times, may reveal transference of a functional item into a talisman of private significance.

In the mid-1830s, Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo was charged with halting Russian migration from their coastal fortress into hinterland comprising the northern Mexican Republic frontier. To this end, Vallejo established fortress-like headquarters overlooking Petaluma Valley as well as the road linking the Pacific Coast to Sonoma Pueblo. The 2-story house and immediate grounds presently are within Petaluma Adobe State Historic Park in Sonoma County (Figure 1).

Until the American invasion of Sonoma Pueblo, the Vallejo family spent time and entertained in their Sonoma home, as well as at Rancho Petaluma headquarters. The compound was central to an economy dominated by an extensive cattle concern and industries ranging from saddle manufacture to textile weaving. Most of Vallejo’s large, skilled workforce trained until secularization at Mission San Francisco Solano. Many, or possibly all, people serving the Vallejos, as well as servants traveling with rancho guests, were housed on the Adobe Creek floodplain at the base of headquarters hill.

New Year’s Eve 2005-2006 floodwaters scoured the east bank of Adobe Creek, adjacent to the former workers’ residential area; and, simultaneously inundated the ancient floodplain. Thus, while the collapsing creek bank revealed the cross-section of a buried cultural feature, flood waters reverted to an ancient watercourse, sweeping artifacts onto the flat within a thick silt deposit (Figure 2). Emergency site management procedures recovered as much of the cultural deposit washing out of the embankment as possible resulting in the “New Year Feature” (NYF) assemblage, a unique “time capsule” of household and personal possessions reflecting life and events within a Mexican Republic Era laborers’ residential area (Parkman 2006, 2007; Alvarez and Parkman 2014, 2015, 2016).

Previous discussions describe a clamshell disk bead manufacturing kit, large sherds of Puebla Blue-on-White Majolica, and nearly 300 metal items from the NYF assemblage (Alvarez and Parkman 2014, 2015, 2016). Our hypothesis is that the NYF largely resulted when hasty measures were undertaken to control spread of smallpox during the 1837-1839 Miramontes epidemic that swept through North San Francisco Bay and Central Valley populations.

The exposed NYF cross-section appears to be the near edge of an 1830s trench aligned nearly perpendicular to the stream bank, most likely to drain the flat during periods of flooding. Suggested by the considerable amount of dietary beef bones, the open trench apparently was a convenient rubbish dump that became a cache of personal items when nearby household goods considered contaminated were destroyed. Valued items in the assemblage suggest that the household also had at least one individual of elevated status within the hierarchy of the residential workforce (Alvarez and Parkman 2015, 2016).
Figure 1. General Mariano G. Vallejo’s Petaluma Adobe, constructed in the mid-1830s as Rancho Petaluma headquarters; presently within Petaluma Adobe Historic State Park, Petaluma, Sonoma County, California.
Several items are unusual, hinting at presence of a person with complex duties beyond domestic service. One of these items, a hand-wrought standard base, suggests a member of Vallejo’s militia (Figure 3). Supporting this idea is a unique brass button (P1482-3-10), one of two in the NYF assemblage. In addition to a worn No. 2 Phoenix button similar to others documented at coastal and inland Sonoma and
Figure 3. New Year Feature (NYF) assemblage contained many unique items including this hand-wrought base that enabled mounted flag bearers to stabilize a flag standard and/or lance.
Marin county sites; an embossed shank button, to date, eludes identification or comparison to any similar button from regional Mexican Republic Era sites (Figure 4).

The large (1” diameter), possibly gilded brass shank button, is classified as a picture button in categories of “sporting” or “hunt” scenes. Remarkable for its face, or upper plate, this button is embossed with an animated, very detailed hunting scene enclosed in atmospheric swirls. An alert whippet hound, partially turned toward a wind-blown tree, suggests that the hunter just stepped out of view. The dog’s elongated neck has two collars and its long, curved tail is at rest on the ground. The tree is festooned with sport hunting items: A double trigger long gun is propped against the tree trunk; with a powder horn, game pouch, and French horn hanging from the tree branches.

Although most of the gilding appears worn and the center has a tiny scratch, this button is in good condition. Even with corrosion present, design elements are sharp and identifiable. Before 1800, American button manufactures used brass sparingly. “Many brass buttons were made in Europe and sent [to America] on garments or in sets” (Luscomb 1967:26). Between 1800 and 1865, but mostly prior to 1850, a coating of gold was applied to brass buttons (Luscomb 1967:78).

The button profile reveals a wire shank and two piece assembly that evolved from a soft shank button invented in the early 19th Century by Birmingham, England button manufacturers, Benjamin Saunders and son (Figure 5). Identified as a Saunder’s Shank, a patented method of driving the upper blank under heavy pressure into a die of hardened steel was applied to create both shape and pattern. The under blank was pressed into another die, which “riveted” the shank into the plate.

The reverse side, or under plate with shank, exhibits a back mark as well as complex hand-etched lettering and pictorial elements. The back mark relates to manufacturer, series, and/or design impressed at the time of manufacture. This back mark appears limited to stamped initials “J” and “C”, all that is visible since corrosion obscures spaces on either side that may contain additional information. To date, the identity of the manufacturer remains a mystery.

So far, only those elements that are evidence of manufacture and design are described. The upper plate may allude to European design and manufacture which prompts the inquiry into how this button got to Petaluma Rancho, eventually becoming part of the NYF assemblage? Trade between Europe and newly independent Mexico was uninterrupted; however, global trade alone does not rule out likelihood of foreign goods entering Mexican territories from America. The 1830s heralded an influx of Americans to the area. For instance, in April 1833, Padre Gutierrez, of Mission Solano, complained that John Work’s forty companions near Suisun, passing themselves off as hunters, were buying stolen cattle and “otherwise disposed to corrupt the neophytes (Bancroft 1885a III:392). Additional information from period documents suggests the third possibility of a “French connection” to Sonoma Pueblo and/or Vallejo’s homes. During the late 1820s and mid-1830s, French seamen, hunters, and traders visited Sonoma, no doubt coming into contact with Vallejo and his militia.

French trader, Auguste Duhaut-Cilly, rumored to have been an unpleasant guest, swanned around the region in 1827-28 (Bancroft 1885b II:598, 628, 650); and, in autumn 1835, Michel Laframboise, leader of Hudson Bay Co. hunters, was warned off Sonoma lands by Comandante Vallejo. Courteously, Vallejo allowed 24 hours for the French to leave or be treated as smugglers (Bancroft 1885a III:393; n. 17).

Beyond the button’s origins and possible routes and means for becoming part of NYF, its most intriguing aspect is the extremely personal and detailed etching encircling the shank on the button’s under plate (Figures 6 and 7). Describing, though not necessarily interpreting visible etched elements we attempt to enumerate them without obscuring the significance of the combined imagery and artistry. Proceeding clockwise from the top (Figure 8), there appears to be a military hat and possibly a swagger stick, note also the block numeral “2” just below the hat; in the next (right) quadrant (Figure 9) fringed military epaulets and a sword or knife are visible; in the lower quadrant (Figure 10) crossed guns and the back mark letters “J” and “C”; and, in the final (left) quadrant (Figure 11), a recurve bow and a long bent object, possibly a whip, are identifiable. It also appears that lettering is partially obscured by corrosion surrounding the shank. Finally, a soldered or repaired area is in the lower half.
Figure 4. Front of brass “picture” button recovered in silted area near the NYF.

Figure 5. Profile view of brass button showing two-piece assembly and wire shank.
Figure 6. Back, or under plate, illustrating hand-etched imagery.

Figure 7. Ink sketch of button under plate depicting hand-etched imagery.
Figure 8. Top position of under plate with military cap, swagger stick, and block numeral “2”.

Figure 9. Right quadrant position of under plate with fringed military epaulets and sword or knife.

Figure 10. Bottom, or lower, quadrant position of under plate with crossed guns and back mark letters “J” and “C”.
In summary, collectively the button’s under plate design elements present an amulet- or talisman-like object that may have been worn suspended around the neck; however, it is unlikely an explanation for this idiosyncratic artwork will be confirmed. One thought is that the careful artistry may honor events of the era involving military heroes; for instance, *hidalgos* of an earlier generation or frontier fighters such as General Antonio Lopez de Santa Ana. Not long before the estimated disposal of this item into NYF, Santa Ana’s troops overwhelmed *tejanos* at the abandoned mission Alamo near San Antonio, Texas. Equally possible, the creator or possessor may have desired a military-inspired talisman for courage as he accompanied Vallejo from the Presidio to the frontier North of San Francisco Bay in hope of securing a dynamic new future. Finally, it is possible he supported the military arm of the young Mexican government prevailing in California until the mid-1830s (Jones, Jr. 1979; Weber 1982).

REFERENCES CITED

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