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Villainous Eggnog, Disgraceful Naps, and Wartime Virginia: The Winter and Spring of 1862-1863.

Though the American Civil War (1861-1865) took place squarely in the middle of the age of the railroad, water was still an important part of life in Victorian-Era Virginia. A U. S. Navy button uncovered by the University of Mary Washington's field school at the Sherwood Forest Plantation Site (44ST615) serves as a reminder of the fact that the American Navy was very much present in the Stafford County area from December 1862 to June 1863.

Scovilles and Company of Waterbury, CT, which only operated under that name from 1840-1850, manufactured the button at the center of this paper. This means that it was likely a decade or two old by the time it was deposited at Sherwood Forest (McGuinn and Bazelon 2001 110). The round button is 22mm in diameter and made of brass which has tarnished from being in the ground. The button fits the description of Albert's Type II buttons (1977: 7). According to Albert, this two-piece style of button went into mass-production in the early 19th century England (1977: 7). The front plate, or shell, of the button is crimped over the back plate, which used to contain the shank. The shank itself, which was most likely a soldered-on metal wire ring, is missing.

The button was likely used to fasten a coat, as comparatively small buttons were used for vests (United States Navy 1852: 31). Most larger buttons contained in Albert are 23mm, so roughly the same size as the object from Sherwood (1977: 101-102.) A vest button was about 16mm (Albert 1977: 103). A portion of the back plate has been bent into the hollow interior of the button's front plate. The back of the button is marked with the name and place of

manufacture, “ - Scovilles & Co. - Waterbury.” The circular seal formed by the crimped edge of the front plate surrounds this mark. The dome-shaped front plate shows an embossed eagle that faces the wearer's left while clutching an anchor and rope by its talons, demonstrating that it was for use by the United States Navy (Albert 1977, 201). This zoomorphic symbol is surrounded by a background of embossed horizontal (relative to the eagle) stripes. Encircling the eagle, but within the striped field, are 13 five-pointed symmetrical stars, evenly spaced apart. Surrounding the entire front of the button is a plain rim, which itself is surrounded by a rope rim.

The button was found in unit 49 in stratum B, which dates to the Union occupation of Sherwood Forest from December 1862 to June 1863 when Federal armies set up hospitals, a balloon observation, and some fortifications (McMillan 2009). There are no United States Navy units known to have been stationed at Sherwood Forest (McMillan 2009). However, since the site acted as a hospital, it is entirely possible that a Navy service member may have been rushed there if injured nearby.

Throughout the occupation of Sherwood Forest, U.S. Navy ships were engaged in intermittent combat and raids in the Stafford County area (Rush and Woods 1897: 97). Also, Sherwood Forest was a central hub of reconnaissance and communication. Contemporary observers noted the presence of several prominent officers there (Anonymous 1863: 1). Since the bluff upon which the plantation lay commanded an excellent view of the surrounding topography, including the river, it is possible, if not probable, that at least some Navy officers visited the site (Figs. 3 and 5.).

The vicinity of Belle Plains, which served as an unloading point for supplies headed to Sherwood Forest, seemed to be a continual source of headaches for American naval officers, as revealed by *the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies* (Rush and Woods 1897).

The Potomac Flotilla, the squadron patrolling both its namesake river and the Rappahannock during this time struggled throughout the winter to capture deserters and hamper the constant efforts of settlers to smuggle contraband into federal camps (Conner and Mackowski 2016: 71-73). According to historians Albert Conner and Chris Macowski, who describe the winter of 1862-1863 as “the Army of the Potomac’s ‘Valley Forage,’” the above-mentioned tasks formed the majority of the flotilla’s duties, along with the usual missions providing combat support and blockading waterways that could supply rebel positions (Conner and Mackowski 2016: 71).

Letters of soldiers published in newspapers and the reports of officers from Sherwood Forest in the spring of 1863 often bloomed with whimsical excitement and reports that the men stationed there were in particularly good spirits. “It was the most beautiful spot, well supplied with wood and water, and by far the pleasantest campaigning ground I have ever seen,” commented one soldier (Curtis 1891: 137). However, the records of the Navy tell a very different story, as the Federal armies leaked a steady supply of deserters who attempted to slip away on the Potomac and Rappahannock disguised as civilians.

In an effort to coordinate with the Navy, General Hooker of the U.S. Army requested that his comrades at sea exert extended efforts to apprehend those fleeing from the service (Conner and Mackowski 2016: 71). Col. Charles Candy felt “personal pride in putting a stop to desertions.” (Conner and Mackowski 2016: 71). Apparently, this could only be achieved with the aid of the Navy, as the many waterways in and around Stafford County provided swift and ample avenues of transportation (Conner and Mackowski 2016: 71).

The smuggling of contraband, especially strong liquor, proved to be another major challenge confronting the Potomac Flotilla during the occupation of Sherwood Forest (Rush and Woods 1897: 224). “Do not at anytime or for any cause relax your vigilance,” Commodore Andrew A.

Harwood, Commander of the Flotilla, warned his men (Rush and Woods 1897: 212). For he doubted by February of 1863 “weather there are any volunteer sutlers’ vessels at this time in which liquor is not smuggled. We have seized two already at Alexandria, which I cleared the custom-house.” (Rush and Woods 1897: 237). Harwood was referencing an incident that occupied a large portion of naval correspondence from February 23-25 1863. On the 21st, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Wells complained that a sutler schooner known as the *Mail* had managed to slip by Federal customs with a cargo of contraband. A later inspection by the Navy, however, revealed that she had on board approximately 1,530 containers of an “intoxicating drink” labeled as “milk drink.” (Rush and Woods 1897: 232).

Apparently, the smugglers had craftily colored their beverage a milky white to fit the part, prompting one officer to label the substance “a villainous eggnog.” (Rush and Woods 1897: 234). To make matters worse, the smugglers were U.S. soldiers. The men who operated the *Mail*, “by a singular coincidence,” hailed from three different volunteer regiments from Maine, “the state celebrated for its liquor law.” (Rush and Woods 1897: 233). This cutting remark was a nod to one of the great controversies of the second half of the 19th century: prohibition legislation. Since the early 1850s, the state of Maine passed a series of highly controversial laws restricting the sale and use of alcohol (Anonymous: 1851).

The Potomac Flotilla continued to apprehend numerous vessels similarly containing illegal goods, which their operators had purportedly intended to sell to Federal soldiers. (Rush and Woods 1897: 234). Commodore Harwood even went so far as to recommend a novel method of spotting cans that had been filled with contraband. Apparently, smugglers would apply a unique soldering technique. “The top and bottom are probably heated with some resinous substance and the edges bent over in order that the cover at either end can be easily removed to

convert the can into a drinking up.” (Rush and Woods 1897: 234). He also mentioned shipping liquor in oyster cans (Rush and Woods 1897: 234).

The frequent desertion, smuggling, and other trials that revolved around the Stafford region during the period of Sherwood Forest’s occupation required constant vigilance and battle-readiness, despite the fact that periods of tedium must have lured officers and enlisted men alike to slip into idleness in rest on occasion, especially over the long, dreary winter. Perhaps the most powerful manifestation of the perceived dangers of becoming too comfortable is the order of Commodore Harwood commanded one of his subordinates to instill the mindset of continual presence of mind into his sailors, that it was “a disgrace of the worst kind to be caught napping.”

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Figures

Fig. 1. Button front.



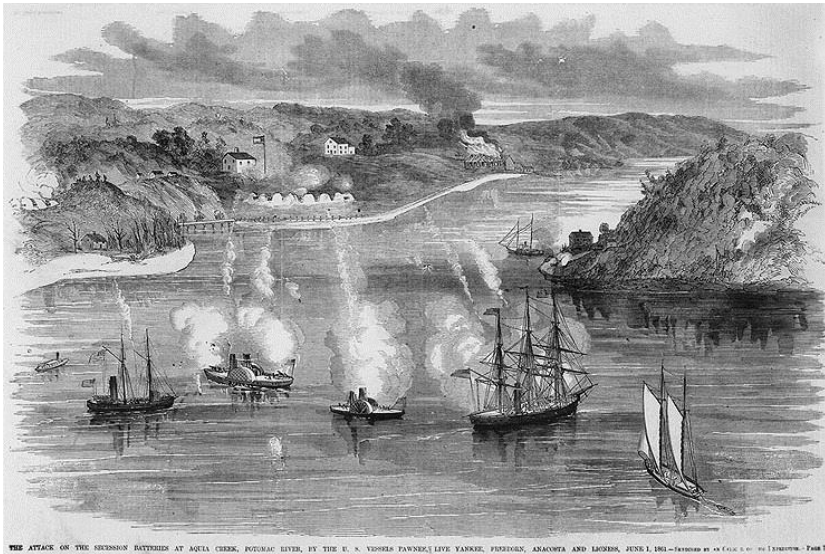
Fig. 2. Button back. Scale in cm.



Fig. 3. Library of Congress. Sherwood Forest is on the bluff.



Fig. 4. U.S. Navy Vessels in Stafford County. Wikimedia Commons.



THE ATTACK ON THE SEVEN BATTERIES AT AQUA CREEK, POTOMAC RIVER, BY THE U. S. VESSELS PANAMA, LIVE YANKEE, FURZELOH, ARACOTA AND LINDEN, JUNE 1, 1862—DRAWING BY AN OFFICER OF THE LINDEN.—FROM THE

Fig. 5



(Google Earth. Labels by E. Knick.)