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Tyler Rudd Putman

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## “Every Man Turned Out in the Best He Had”: Clothing and Buttons in the Historical and Archaeological Records of Johnson's Island Prisoner-of-War Depot, 1862–1865

Tyler Rudd Putman

*During the American Civil War, federal authorities sent captured Confederate officers to the military prison on Johnson's Island in Lake Erie, Ohio. These prisoners came from a narrow demographic; most were Southern, white, upper-class males. They left many documentary accounts of their experiences in the camp, some of which detailed how they used clothing to display both individuality and group identity in their civilian, military, and incarcerated experiences. Twenty years of excavations on Johnson's Island have resulted in the discovery of at least 1,393 prisoner buttons and numerous other clothing-related artifacts. This study compares the buttons from a single latrine feature and the site as a whole with a unique primary source—a laundry notebook kept by an unknown prisoner—to test the interpretive potential of the historical and archaeological records, and consider what they reveal about prisoners' clothing. Using data gathered through the end of the 2008 field season, this article examines the biases of both the archaeological evidence and the documentary sources related to changes in prisoner clothing. The results demonstrate how archaeologists can relate isolated privy or latrine features to site-wide patterns over extended periods of time.*

*Pendant la guerre de Sécession, les autorités fédérales ont envoyé des officiers confédérés capturés à la prison militaire de l'île Johnson dans le lac Érié, en Ohio. Ces prisonniers venaient d'un groupe démographique assez restreint; la plupart étaient des hommes blancs, du Sud, et de la classe supérieure. Ils ont laissé de nombreux témoignages écrits de leurs expériences dans le camp, et certains décrivent comment ils ont utilisé des vêtements pour afficher à la fois leur individualité et leur identité de groupe, à travers leurs expériences civiles, militaires et en tant qu'incarcérés. Vingt ans de fouilles archéologiques sur l'île Johnson ont abouti à la découverte d'au moins 1393 boutons de prisonniers et de nombreux artefacts liés aux vêtements. Cet article compare les boutons provenant d'une fosse de latrines et du reste du site avec une source primaire unique - un cahier de blanchisserie gardé par un prisonnier inconnu - afin de tester le potentiel interprétatif des sources historiques et archéologiques et explorer ce qu'ils révèlent sur les vêtements de prisonniers. En utilisant les données recueillies jusqu'à la fin de la saison de fouilles de 2008, cet article examine les biais inhérents aux données archéologiques et aux sources documentaires relatives aux changements dans les vêtements des prisonniers. Les résultats démontrent comment les archéologues peuvent relier des latrines isolées avec des schémas visibles à travers le site, sur une période de temps étendue.*

### The Johnson's Island Prisoner-of-War Depot

Between 1862 and 1865, thousands of Confederate officers lived on Johnson's Island, Ohio. As prisoners of war (POWs), these men struggled to maintain and modify their senses of individual and group identity. This struggle touched many aspects of their lives, including the material culture surrounding them. Some continued to refer to themselves as Confederate officers, while others set their military lives aside amid the more pressing demands of surviving incarceration. These men wore fine linen shirts, coarse wool shirts, uniform frock coats with gold braid, and unadorned civilian sack

coats. Examining the artifactual remains of these men's imprisoned lives, especially archaeologically recovered buttons and clothing artifacts, in conversation with their writings, including a unique laundry inventory maintained by one prisoner (FDJI 1865), sheds new light on their experiences.

Johnson's Island is in Sandusky Bay on the Ohio side of Lake Erie and remains most notable historically for its use as a Union POW depot during the American Civil War. On this small island, federal authorities constructed a stockade and prison camp with 12 barracks and a hospital (“Blocks” 1–13), as well as, after the summer of 1864, two large mess halls. Inside the prison walls, prisoners

used block-specific latrines. Other structures outside the walls served as guard housing and administrative spaces (Bush 2000: 66). At the end of hostilities, the national government demolished most of the camp and sold the materials at auction. Johnson's Island reverted to its pre-war usage as farmland and later was the site of a failed "pleasure resort" venture (Frohman 1965: 122). In the early 20th century, quarrying destroyed much of the area associated with the guard quarters and one of two earthen forts on the island. The first systematic archaeological survey began in 1988 in response to encroaching housing development (Bush 1990). The island gained National Historic Landmark status in 1990. In 2002, a grass-roots preservation organization, the Friends and Descendants of Johnson's Island Civil War Prison (FDJI), purchased the majority of the prison-compound acreage and the second earthen fort, preserving these areas for future study and interpretation. Since 1988, David Bush has led excavations on Johnson's Island, currently working with Heidelberg University's Center for Historic and Military Archaeology.

Excavations on Johnson's Island have resulted in the recovery of thousands of artifacts representing many aspects of mid-19th-century military and social life. The federal government used the prison compound for only three years during the Civil War, and prison authorities dug new latrines for each barracks block approximately every four to six months as older ones were filled and covered (Bush 2000: 67). Artifacts recovered in the excavation of each latrine were thus deposited during brief periods of time, and comparing these assemblages demonstrates changing conditions in the prison. Feature 3, the latrine discussed in more detail below, contained a homogenous primary deposit sealed with a clay cap when federal guards filled it (Bush 2000: 70). Among the most common artifacts recovered from these latrines are buttons. Such "small finds" reveal details about facets of the historical human experience of special interest in recent archaeological work, including that concerning gender (Beaudry 2006), incarceration (Casella 2007; Beisaw and Gibb 2009), and conflict (Geier and

Winter 1994; Geier and Potter 2000; Geier, Orr, and Reeves 2006; Geier et al. 2010). Placing clothing artifacts from Johnson's Island in conversation with written accounts from prisoners there demonstrates the multidimensional nature of prisoner-of-war experiences and the necessity of combining historical and archaeological techniques in accessing past cultures.

### Clothing on Johnson's Island

Clothing entered the Johnson's Island prison environment in four ways, each discussed in detail below. Prisoners wore and carried some garments into the institution when they arrived. Later, some prisoners received packages containing clothing from contacts outside the prison. Other men relied on the prison authorities, who issued garments to those in need. Prisoners with money avoided the indignity of wearing prison clothing by purchasing garments from the sutler, a civilian shopkeeper who operated in the prison. These four routes for clothing acquisition resulted in wardrobes much more diverse and personally significant than might be expected in an institutional environment. Although most of these routes do not leave distinct archaeological signatures, all contributed to the material world of the prison and its artifactual traces.

Because they did not always arrive on Johnson's Island immediately after capture, POWs brought a variety of garments into the prison. Horace Carpenter, for instance, a first lieutenant in the 9th Louisiana Infantry, was captured when Port Hudson fell in 1863 and was imprisoned near the front for several months before being transferred to the North. Carpenter noted that, by the time his group reached Johnson's Island, "there was nothing in our apparel to mark the Rebel soldier" (Carpenter 1891: 708). Even when soldiers entered the prison wearing their uniforms, the clothes might not meet Confederate regulations. Especially later in the war, many officers in the field adopted civilian garments or wore enlisted men's uniforms (Arliskas 2006: 17).

Uniforms remained significant after prisoners arrived, as many captured officers tried to maintain physical representations of their respectable military identities as a means

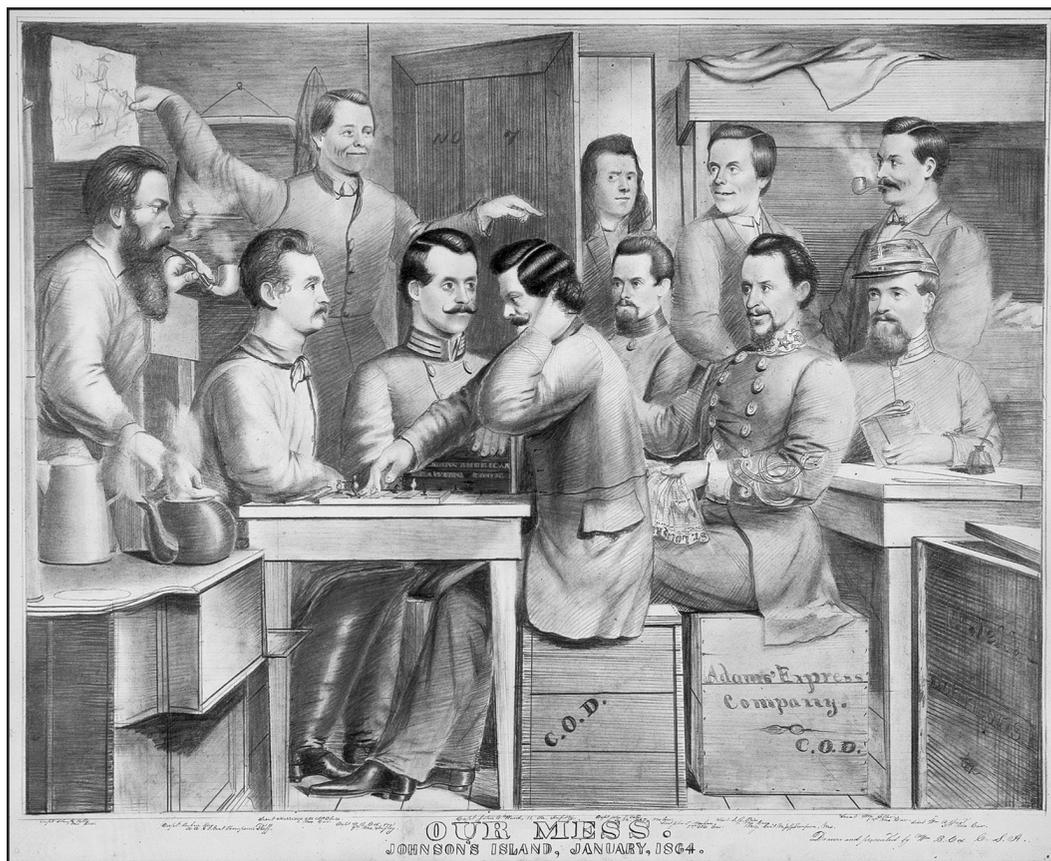


Figure 1. *Our Mess*, an 1864 drawing by W. B. Cox of prisoners on Johnson's Island. (Courtesy of the Friends and Descendants of Johnson's Island Civil War Prison, Tiffin, Ohio.)

of resisting institutional authority. A January 1864 drawing by Johnson's Island prisoner W. B. Cox, entitled *Our Mess*, depicts several figures wearing Confederate uniforms, as well as men in fashionable sack and frock coats (FIG. 1). *Our Mess* is not a candid snapshot but an idealized depiction of prisoner clothing. Here, Southern gentlemen, despite crowded and dirty conditions, maintain gentlemanly appearances. In reality, many were not so dapper. Nevertheless, the importance of well-kept clothing is also apparent in the only known photographs of Johnson's Island prisoners, produced through the clandestine work of Lt. Robert Smith of Tennessee (FIG. 2). Smith constructed a simple camera and ran a photography studio in the eaves of his barracks block. His images, at least ten of which survive, depict men in both uniforms and civilian clothes. Many of the subjects of

these photographs wear detachable collars, a mark of a gentlemanly status. Their other garments, such as fine coats and vests, give no hint of their prisoner status.

After arriving at the prison, some men relied on the generosity of their friends and family on the outside for clothing. Prisoner Lt. Col. John Washington Inzer of the 58th Alabama Infantry, for instance, recorded in his diary on 31 March 1864 the receipt of a box containing a "coat, vest, pants, 2 woolen shirts, 2 calico shirts, two pair woolen drawers, 2 silk handkerchiefs, 2 towels, soap, 4 collars, 2 cravats, 1 pair suspenders," and a hat (Crow 1977: 69). However, Inzer was probably exceptional because, in 1864, mail contraband subject to confiscation included "any excess of clothing over what is required for immediate use" (United States War Department 1899c: 75).

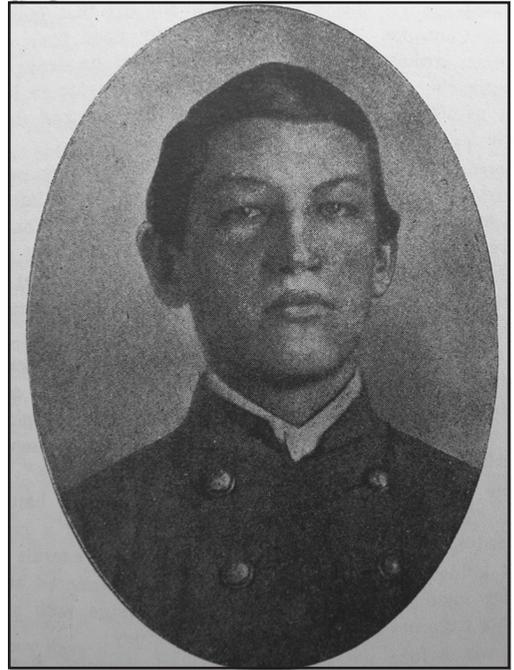
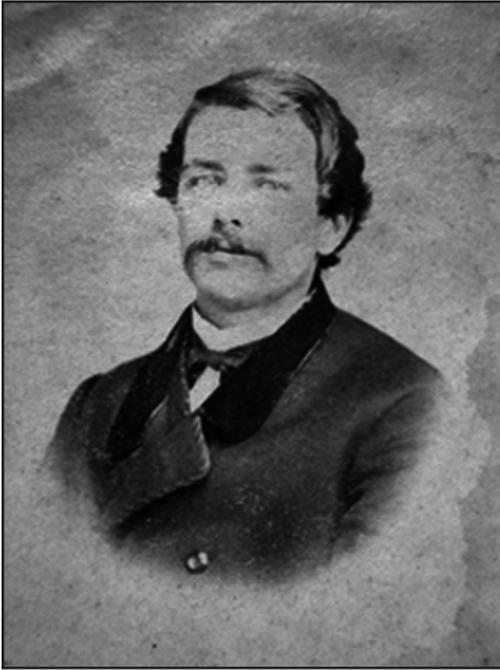


Figure 2. Two of the surviving photographs attributed to Robert Smith: at *left* is an unknown prisoner in a fine civilian coat, at *right* is prisoner Robert C. Crouch wearing his uniform, as published in a 1909 issue of the *Confederate Veteran* magazine. (Courtesy of the Friends and Descendants of Johnson's Island Civil War Prison, Tiffin, Ohio.)

These restrictions mattered little, however, to the many men who lacked the outside contacts necessary for care packages. A third clothing source for such prisoners was the federal government, which supplied essential garments to prisoners in need. Lt. William Peel recorded one such scene on Johnson's Island in his diary on 10 February 1864: "When our Lt came into call the roll, he ordered a list of the necessary articles of clothing, which being furnished him, he brought in, during the day, pants, drawers, shirts, shoes + socks" (Wilds 2005: 106). These regular distributions included not only those garments produced or procured by the federal government but also those purchased under the program managed by Confederate General William Beall late in the war. Beall, captured in 1863 and briefly imprisoned on Johnson's Island, received his parole by agreeing to act as an agent for prisoners, receiving the only sanctioned cotton shipments from the South and using the sale proceeds to purchase clothing and blankets for distribution to

POWs in various camps (Gray 2001: 67). Several "Beall shirts" are listed in the laundry inventory discussed below, confirming their presence on Johnson's Island (FDJI 1865). Many officers overcame an initial distaste for institutional clothing, which one prisoner in 1862 deemed "badges of servitude" (Barbiere 1868: 193), as circumstances forced them to adopt garments such as Beall's shirts and federally issued clothing.

Throughout the war, some prisoners managed to avoid reliance on familial or government charity. Early in the war, these prisoners ordered clothing from outside the walls, as in 1862, when a group of prisoners

obtained 500 new suits (coats and pants) made of gray drilling goods, cut in military style and trimmed with military trimmings. These new suits were obtained in Sandusky, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Columbus, and patterns of these rebel military suits were sent from the island to the manufacturers and letters passed through the post-office between the prisoners and manufacturers in relation to the clothing (United States War Department 1899a: 591).

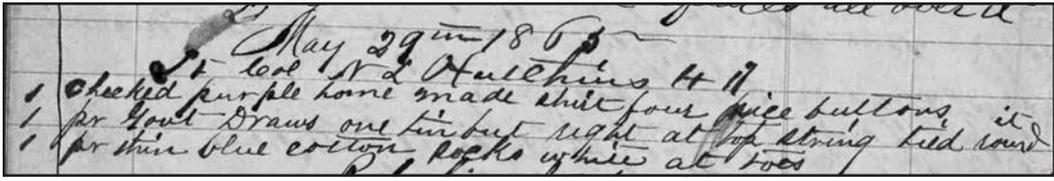


Figure 3. A typical entry in the laundry notebook. (Courtesy of the Friends and Descendants of Johnson's Island Civil War Prison, Tiffin, Ohio.)

Later in the war, with such correspondence restricted, Johnson Island's inmates relied on their fourth source of clothing, the prison sutler. The sutler, like those who followed the various armies of the Civil War, was a civilian retailer who operated a small store, this one inside the prison compound. Prison authorities also restricted sutler purchases later in the war. In the summer of 1863, commissary-general of prisoners William Hoffman instructed the commandant at Johnson's Island that the prisoners there could purchase only clothes

such as are absolutely necessary. One suit of outer garments and a change of underclothes is all they require, and if they have this they will not be permitted to purchase anything more. If they buy either coats or pants, they must be of gray cloth, such as they wear, with plain buttons, without trimmings (United States War Department 1899b: 161).

To enforce these regulations, the federal government not only controlled prisoner purchases but also monitored their possessions, and the threat of inspection loomed over the men incarcerated on Johnson's Island. On 14 June 1864, William Peel's messmates heard a rumor of an impending inspection and prepared for confiscations. "Our Block made, perhaps, the most genteel appearance at roll-call, this morning than they have for a long time. Every man turned out in the best he had, + in a full suit too, if he had it" (Wilds 2005: 211-212). What began with frantic prisoners attempting to wear and conceal their best clothing ended in a comic scene as they realized the news represented yet another fictitious "grapevine telegraph" (Wash 1870: 202) from the prison rumor mill.

Such limitations and restrictions on the clothing of prisoners on Johnson's Island constrained their choices and impacted how they dressed. However, these men also had a variety of means at their

disposal through which they might acquire clothing of both utilitarian and personal value. The documentary record of the site, while rich, is only one type of relevant evidence about these choices, and it often presents contradictory stories. Some men complained bitterly about inadequate garments; others seemed to enjoy substantially better wardrobes in prison than they had during their pre-imprisonment field service. Combining documentary evidence of their experiences with archaeological materials results in a more nuanced picture of prisoner clothing and also reveals the biases inherent in both of these record types.

### The Laundry Inventory

The officers on Johnson's Island wrote occasionally about receiving clothes from home or about the prison administration issuing garments. Others bemoaned the lack of adequate outerwear during freezing winter months. One of the most valuable documents related to the clothing on Johnson's Island, and the one that most informs an interpretation of related archaeological materials is a notebook kept by an unknown prisoner (FDIJ 1865), now owned by the FDJI. This book includes a ledger, documenting a small laundry business the prisoner conducted in May and June of 1865, in which he meticulously recorded the details of the garments other men paid him to wash so that he could return clothing to correct owners. Thirteen of the surviving pages of this record are devoted to this inventory, encompassing a period of one month. To take only one example of the sort of entries it contains, on 29 May 1865, Lt. Col. N. L. Hutchins, 16th Georgia Infantry, needed three garments washed: a "checked purple home made shirt four rice buttons," a pair of "Govt Draws [government drawers] one tin but[ton] right at top string

tied round," and a pair of "thin blue cotton socks white at toes" (FDJI 1865) (FIG. 3).

Laundry work represented a ready source of revenue for enterprising prisoners on Johnson's Island. Capt. William Wash of the 60th Tennessee Mounted Infantry described the process in September of 1864:

I bathed at the wash-house and had my clothes washed on a machine. Washing was carried on as a business. A fellow would get permission to buy a machine from Sandusky, and engage to do the washing of certain ones every week; then he would hire sufficient help to collect, wash, iron, and deliver the clothing. Prices were moderate, and the work generally faithfully performed. I did my own washing at first, but after hiring a few times, lost all taste for the business (Wash 1870: 264).

Although prisoners laundered clothing outdoors in the prison yard, excavations have not uncovered any archaeological trace of this activity beyond building areas, such as concentrations of buttons lost during washing. Nevertheless, prisoner accounts suggest the commonality of laundering and how the appearance of Confederate officers washing clothing seemed a novel sight to some prisoners. In 1862, Lt. Col. Joe Barbieri of Tennessee recorded that the "elegant, and accomplished" Capt. George Jones doing laundry "with arms akimbo, surveying the results of his labors in the soapy fluid, was a picture to be remembered." Barbieri "was forcibly reminded of the fact, what creatures of circumstances we are" (Barbieri, 1868: 103), but other prisoners, such as the officer who kept the notebook in 1865, overcame their initial disdain and went into the laundry business.

The laundry inventory expands an archaeological view of prisoners' material life necessarily limited to more durable artifacts. Besides those garments that might be archaeologically detectable through their buttons, the notebook also lists those made entirely of textiles that would leave no material trace. These included common items such as socks, as well as accessories like silk handkerchiefs and detachable collars, along with linens such as bedticks, towels, and even a spotted calico pillowcase. Twenty different knit undershirts, nine without any buttons, and some possible Confederate-issue garments appear in the inventory (FDJI

1865). Samuel Weaver managed the unenviable task of organizing the burial of the dead at Gettysburg in 1863 and explained that when all other means of identifying a body failed, "the underclothing was the next part examined. The rebel cotton undershirt gave proof of the army to which he belonged" (Weaver 1864). Some such undershirts were almost certainly in use on Johnson's Island, alongside others of common civilian origin.

The presence of both Confederate (drawers and socks) and "Government" (meaning U.S. federal issue, chiefly shirts) garments in the inventory proves that prisoners wore items they procured from both sides of the conflict. "Beall" shirts noted in the inventory suggest that prisoners recognized the garments purchased and delivered under General Beall's program compared to clothing of Confederate or Union governmental origin (FDJI 1865). It is unknown whether these shirts had any specific button type that might appear archaeologically. Even without this evidence, the inventory indicates that prisoners were careful observers of not only the appearance but also the source of their own and others' clothing.

The laundry inventory represents four weeks' worth of commissions, including 154 garments with buttons and 330 buttons described by material type (FDJI 1865). Analyzing the document based on these factors sheds light on prisoner clothing. In several instances, clothing reappeared with alterations. These notations include both garments missing buttons since the last washing and garments that prisoners repaired with new buttons. In this way, the laundry inventory reveals that button loss was a common occurrence for prisoner garments (helping explain the frequency of buttons recovered at the site) as was garment maintenance (FDJI 1865). Acting Master's Mate (Confederate States Navy) M. G. Porter, for instance, added a shell button to the collar of his "dark purple checked flimsy shirt" between its first laundering and the second record on 29 May.

Comparing data from this inventory with buttons recovered archaeologically from Johnson's Island is the best way to test how this unique source and the archaeological record diverge and whether either is representative of the clothing in use in the prison during this period. The inventory probably includes

errors, such as miscounted or misidentified buttons, and it does not contain a random sample of all the clothing prisoners wore. It is, rather, the product of personal relationships of residents of Block 4 and one particular launderer. Federal authorities designed Block 4 to house officers separate from and more comfortably than enlisted men before designating Johnson's Island as an officers-only prison soon after it opened in 1862. Smaller rooms and more windows made it a more desirable location for prisoners. By the end of the war, however, the demography of this block was comparable to that of most of the other barracks. Moreover, the laundry inventory includes only those garments that individuals chose to have regularly washed—chiefly shirts and drawers. Only two outer garments, a “checked linen summer coat” and a “blue p[ai]r pants” appear in the list (FDJI 1865). Certain button types used on these sorts of garments, such as brass military buttons, are less common in this documentary source than they were in the complete wardrobes of prisoners. The archaeological record contains its own biases. Combining these two sources allows insights into the context of objects in the prison and the formation and interpretive potential of these two record types.

### A Case Study

The entire prison artifact assemblage and the excavations within Block 4 contain artifacts deposited over a four-year occupation period, during which time prison conditions and the material culture in use there changed dramatically. Comparing the laundry inventory with the contents of a single latrine in use for a shorter period is instructive. The closest match among those excavated on Johnson's Island is one associated with Block 8 from the fall of 1864 (Feature 3). Both Blocks 4 and 8 served as general housing and contained a mix of prisoners. Prison conditions changed less between late 1864 and the late spring of 1865, when the launderer was at work, than at other points in the war. Prisoner demography and patterns of clothing remained relatively consistent in these final months of the prison's occupation, and the two periods may be compared while exercising due caution.

Considering a specific latrine eliminates the problem of varying clothing standards and regulations during the course of the prison's existence and capitalizes on the unique potential of these tightly dated features. Comparing the inventory to latrines from other periods would indicate other changes that occurred in prison clothing. A latrine from roughly the same period, however, allows testing of whether the archaeological data recovered from a privy or latrine is reflective of materials in everyday use within a given site. The artifacts recovered from military latrines and civilian privies must be carefully interpreted to infer site-wide material use, and this interpretive technique is uniquely testable in this instance; see Wheeler (2000) for research on privy potential, and, for another institutional privy interpretation besides those mentioned elsewhere here, see Starr (2001). The deposition processes occurring in a latrine are notably different from those in the general areas of the prison, and, just as the laundry inventory contains only certain garments, the buttons recovered in a latrine may not reflect the actual proportions of buttons in use on all prisoner garments. The buttons recovered in general living areas of the prison presumably represent a sample of buttons from all garments worn there. Those buttons deposited in a latrine come from garments that see the most stress in that location—namely, the trousers and drawers that prisoners unbuttoned with each visit. Buttons were rarely deposited as secondary refuse in the Johnson's Island latrines because prison authorities provided wagons for regular trash removal from the compound (United States War Department 1899b: 901). Burned bone buttons and ash layers in Features 19 and 41, latrines associated with the prison hospital and dating to mid-1862 and mid-1863, respectively, suggest that prison authorities burned clothing, possibly belonging to smallpox victims, in some latrine pits shortly before sealing them.

Button size and shape indicates much about clothing type, and the study of extant historical garments clarifies the use of archaeologically recovered fasteners. Two useful archaeological button studies besides those cited elsewhere in this article are South (1964) and Lindbergh

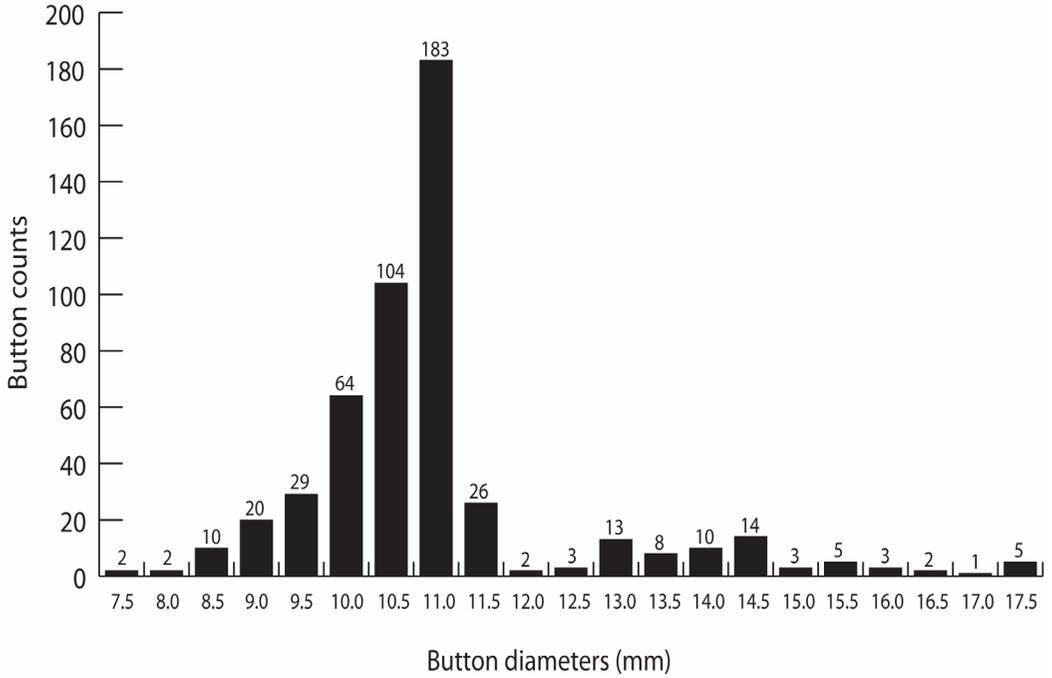


Figure 4. Diameters of sew-through Prosser buttons from Johnson's Island.

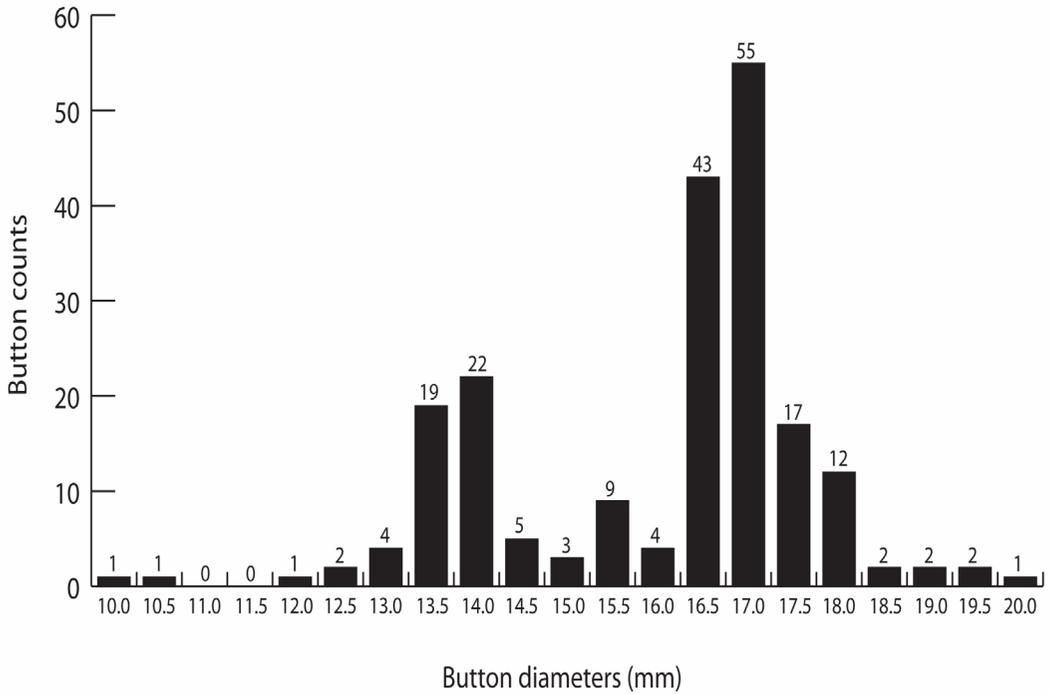


Figure 5. Diameters of sew-through bone buttons from Johnson's Island.

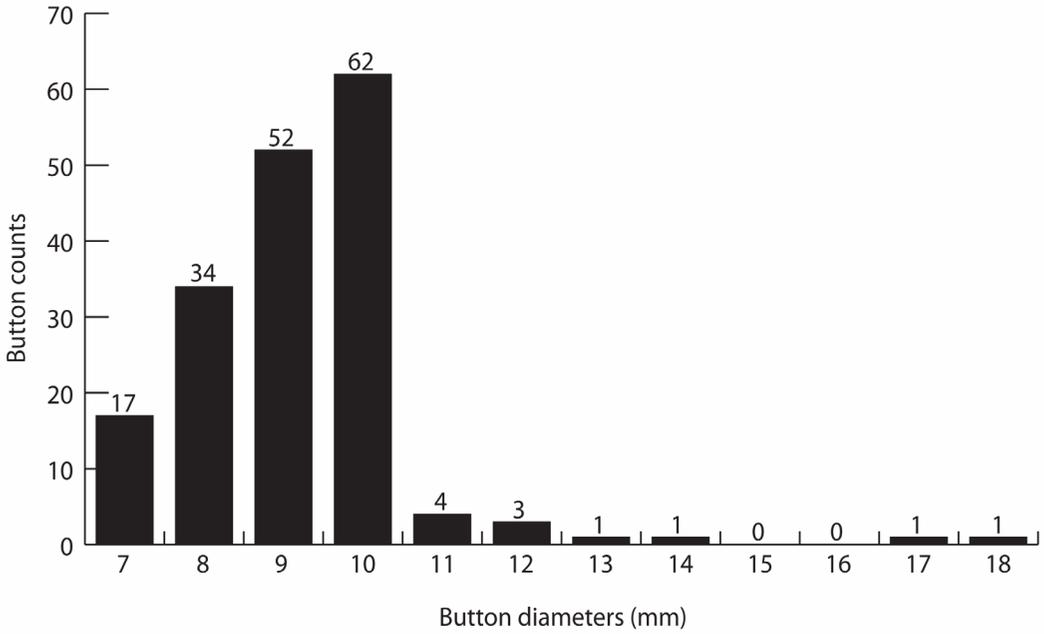


Figure 6. Diameters of sew-through shell buttons from Johnson's Island.

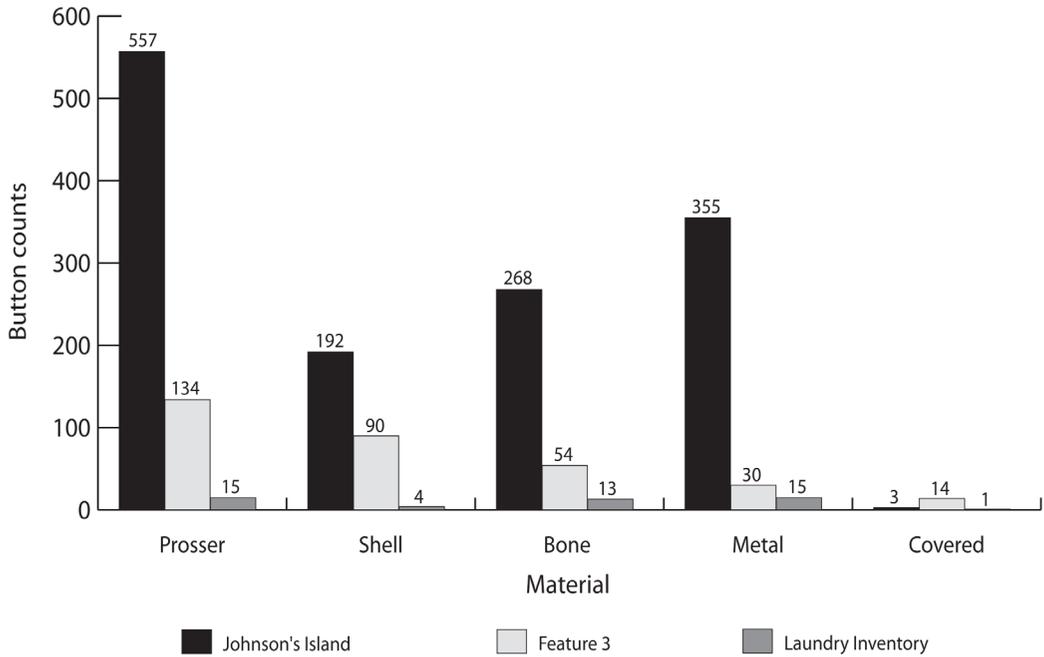


Figure 7. Numbers of buttons in group by material type.

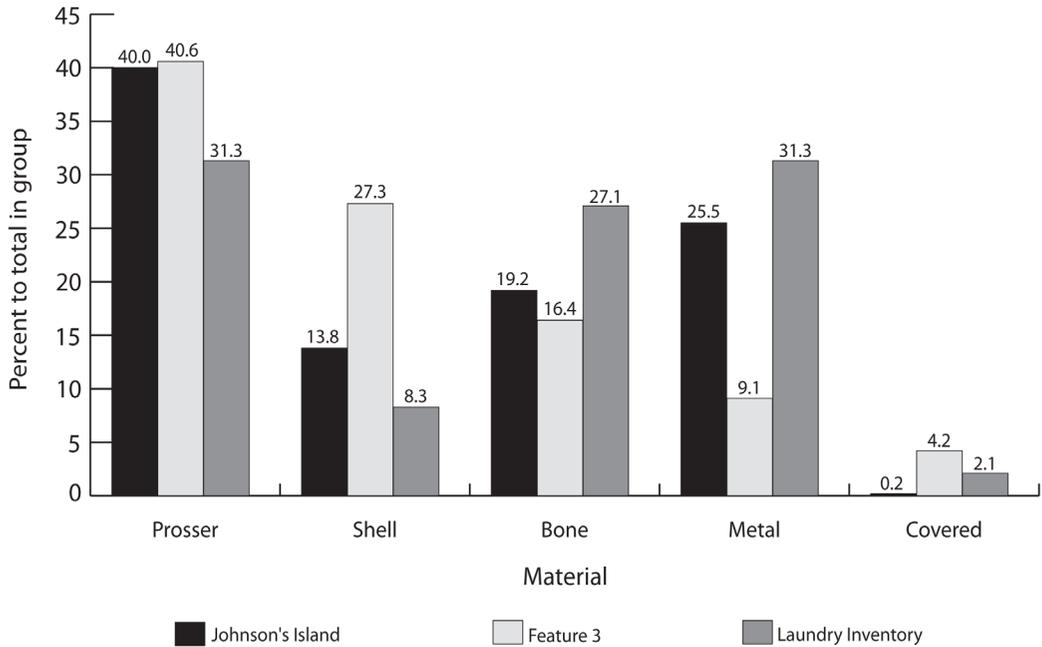


Figure 8. Percent to total in group by material type.

(1999). Figures 4–6 show the diameters of all intact Prosser, bone, and shell buttons recovered from the Johnson's Island site through 2008 (FIG. 4–6). In the case of Prosser (FIG. 4) and bone (FIG. 5) buttons, these figures reveal a high frequency of buttons of a similar size. These peaks reflect the two different types of garments that commonly employed such buttons. Smaller buttons appeared most often on men's shirts and larger ones on men's trousers, underdrawers, and sometimes vests. The prisoner launderer noted button size subjectively, prohibiting size comparisons with archaeological examples. His attention to material, on the other hand, was assiduous, and the seven distinct types he noted are comparable to those recovered from Feature 3 and the prison compound.

### Archaeological Data and Comparisons

Comparing the data from the prisoner laundry inventory with a latrine from Johnson's Island reveals interesting patterns. Figures 7 and 8 display the frequency in number and percentage of each material type as it appears in the notebook (330 buttons)

(FDJI 1865); in Feature 3, the late 1864 latrine associated with Block 8 (48 buttons); and in the entire Johnson's Island assemblage (1,393 buttons) (FIGS. 7 and 8). Each of these material types and the significance of variations in their presence in each source are discussed below.

The prisoner launderer labeled many fasteners on various garments "rice buttons." This term does not appear in any other examined contemporary source, but the archaeological record clarifies the material to which it refers. Prosser buttons (most often called "china" in the mid-19th century and by later collectors) are composed of a high-fired ceramic created through a process Richard and Thomas Prosser invented around 1840 (Sprague 2002: 113). Their process, like that used to create encaustic floor tiles, involved the compaction of ceramic powder between metal dies (Grimmer and Konrad 2004: 502). During firing, the ceramic vitrified to create a button similar in appearance to porcelain. By the end of the 2008 season, excavations had uncovered 556 Prosser buttons on Johnson's Island, indicating the popularity of these cheap and versatile fasteners. Because the inventory makes no mention of such buttons,

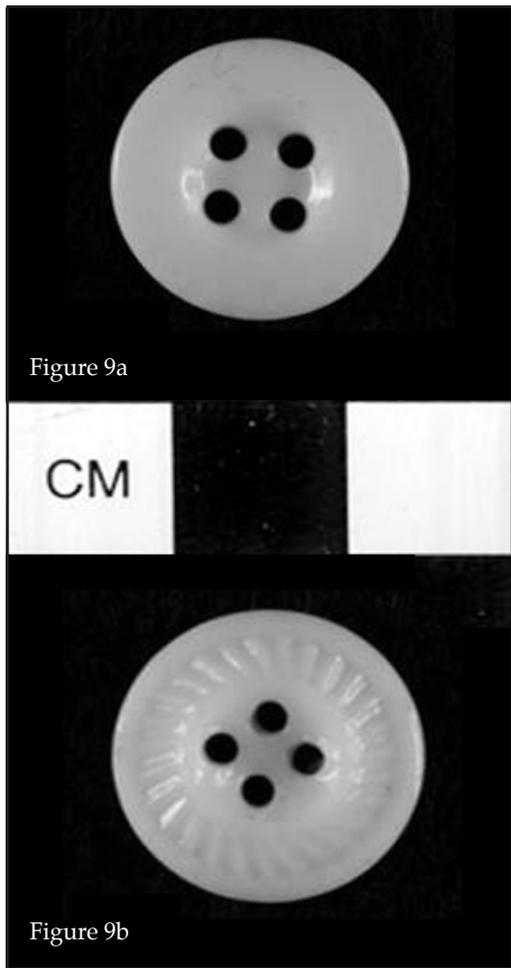


Figure 9. Examples of white Prosser buttons from Feature 3: top, a plain example and bottom, one of the pair of “pie-crust” buttons recovered. (Photograph by David Bush, 2009.)

it is safe to assume that “rice” represents another (possibly regional) colloquialism for this type (FDJI 1865). Of the 15 Prosser buttons recovered from Feature 3, 9 are plain white examples and 2 are a matching pair of “pie-crust” buttons (a collectors’ term) that may be the type the launderer described as “notched” rice buttons on a white knit undershirt (FIG. 9). Four Prosser buttons from this feature are decorated, providing a sample of the three coloring methods used during the Civil War: dyeing, painting, and transfer printing. Two are a solid color, dyed in the clay (black and brown), one features a painted green

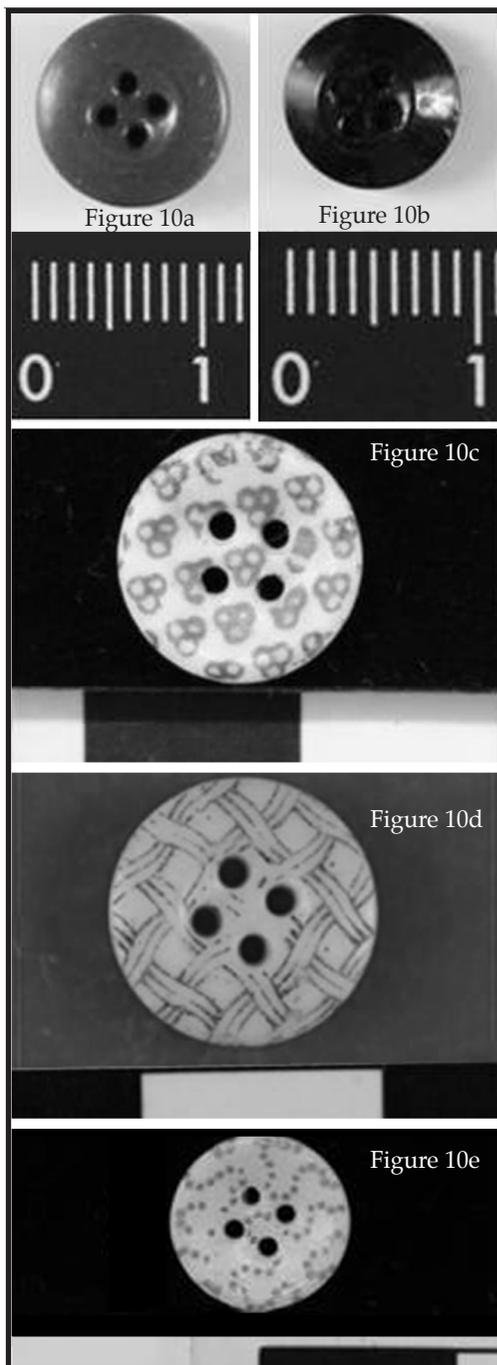


Figure 10. Examples of two solid-colored Prosser buttons from Feature 3 (upper, 10a and 10b) and three “calico” buttons from elsewhere on Johnson’s Island (lower, 10c, d, and e). (Photograph by David Bush, 2009.)



Figure 11. A fragmentary shell button from Feature 3 (Figure 11a) and two intact examples from other locations on Johnson's Island (Figures 11b and c). (Photograph by David Bush, 2009.)

band, and one has a very faded transfer-printed "calico" design on the face (FIG. 10). Many of the buttons described in the laundry inventory as colored or speckled without a material type (FDJI 1865) were probably decorated Prosser buttons. These entries were combined with the "rice" category for comparative purposes in the above charts. White and colored Prosser buttons were employed on a wide variety of garments during the Civil War

years, especially shirts and underdrawers, and less frequently vests and trousers.

The buttons the unknown launderer noted as "prl" (pearl) were almost certainly shell or "mother-of-pearl" buttons. During the Civil War, shell button makers used salt-water shells harvested in the South Pacific and cut in large manufacturing centers, especially Birmingham, England (Jones 1946). While the laundry inventory recorded



Figure 12. Examples of bone buttons removed from Feature 3. (Photograph by David Bush, 2009.)



Figure 13. Men's underdrawers with bone buttons and red thread decoration, ca. 1860. (Private collection, photograph by Michael Stiles, 2009.)

many garments with shell buttons, such buttons occur infrequently in Feature 3 (only 4, or 8.3% of the total). In the mid-19th century, shell buttons were used most commonly on men's shirts; the prisoner launderer washed these garments frequently, and shirt buttons were rarely deposited in latrines. The few shell buttons deposited in the latrine most likely came from underdrawers. Feature 3 also contained fewer fine shell buttons compared to other excavated latrines. Forty-seven distinct

cut designs appear among the shell buttons of Johnson's Island, almost all represented by only a single example, but the shell buttons recovered from Feature 3 were all plain. The absence of these finer buttons from Feature 3 suggests that the quality of some prisoner clothing had declined by the end of 1864 (FIG. 11).

Despite the high frequency of "horn" buttons in the laundry inventory (51 buttons, or 15.5% of those noted), none survived in Feature 3, and only one has been recovered within the prison



Figure 14. Metal buttons from Johnson's Island, including a tinned sheet-iron example (left) and a japanned button with decorations (right). (Photograph by David Bush, 2009.)



Figure 15. A federal "general service" brass button with an impressed eagle design from Feature 3. (Photograph by David Bush, 2009.)



Figure 16. A cloth-covered metal button from Feature 3. (Photograph by David Bush, 2009.)

site. Rather than indicating the disappearance of horn after deposition, this discrepancy is comparable to that of the “rice” buttons described above. Staining, a process used to darken bone buttons, may have resulted in the “black horn” buttons the prisoner noted. In other cases, the prisoner seems to have used “horn” and “bone” interchangeably to refer to the common bone buttons found on a variety of garments in use during the Civil War. For this reason, horn and bone buttons from the laundry inventory were combined for comparative purposes. Both the historical record and the buttons recovered archaeologically indicate a great variability of style (FIG. 12). By the Civil War, mechanization made the button-making process more efficient and productive. Manufacturing these objects involved cutting cattle bones (chiefly limb bones) into flat disks and drilling the sewing holes (Ford 1943: 182–183). The laundry inventory indicates that bone buttons were especially common on underdrawers, which explains their regular appearance in latrines on Johnson’s Island. Figure 13 shows an extant pair of underdrawers dating to the 1860s, but with no other provenance, featuring three simple bone buttons (FIG. 13). They are likely similar to the pair listed in the laundry inventory as “thin

white Draws stitched with red thread” with “horn” buttons. Men’s trousers, both civilian and military, also employed bone buttons to close the fly and attach suspenders and were another source of buttons lost during latrine use.

The metal buttons in the laundry inventory (brass and tin) represent a smaller proportion of the whole compared to the relatively high frequency of excavated examples. Such buttons rarely were used on undergarments made from finer materials because they abraded the fabric, but they were found more frequently on outerwear like coats and trousers, garments found less frequently on the laundry inventory. The metal buttons found in Feature 3 include 12 plain and tinned sheet-iron examples, as well as 1 japanned example (FIG. 14). Japanning involved a varnishing process consisting of coating a tinned sheet-iron button with a thin layer of enamel, resulting in a glossy black finish. Some such buttons also featured stamped decorations. The laundry inventory notes a few such “black tin” buttons on both drawers and shirts (FDJI 1865). Besides ferrous buttons, two federal “general service” brass coat buttons recovered from Feature 3 suggest that some prisoners wore Union garments or reused Union buttons in the prison (FIG 15). In

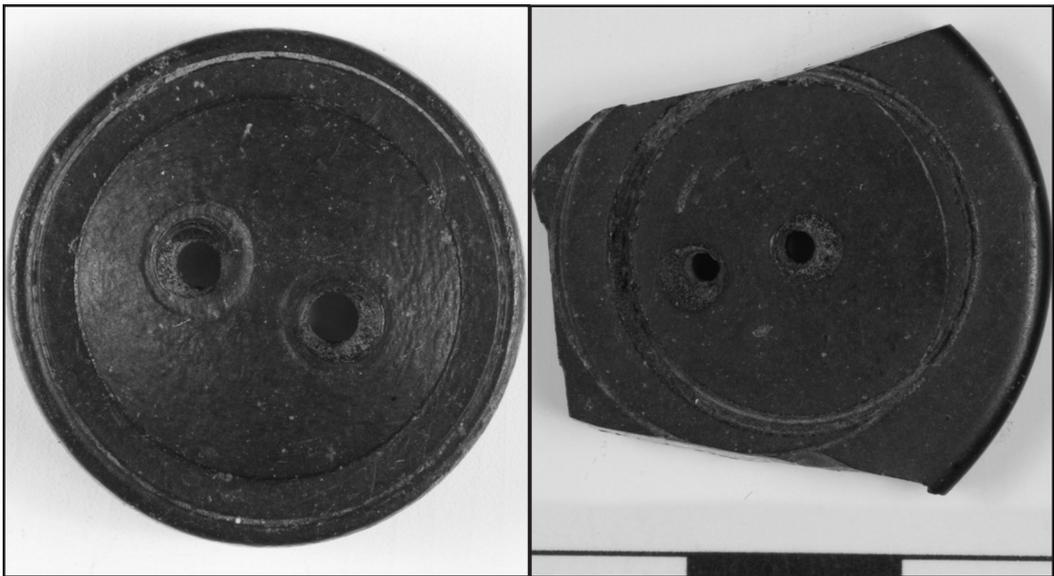


Figure 17. Two hard rubber buttons from Johnson’s Island, one intact and the other showing distinct carving indicative of the first stages in the creation of a ring. (Photograph by David Bush, 2009.)

another case, W. M. Gammon recycled his Confederate staff-officer buttons, attaching them to a pair of Confederate-issue drawers. The coats of the prisoners featured more brass military buttons than indicated in either the laundry inventory or Feature 3 because men rarely washed their coats, and prisoners unbuttoned and thus lost coat buttons less frequently during latrine use. Such loss was not impossible, however, as indicated by a single cloth-covered button from Feature 3 of the sort used on men's civilian coats during the Civil War (FIG. 16).

Some materials appear only rarely in these documentary and archaeological sources. The laundry inventory mentions no hard rubber buttons (FDJI 1865), fasteners made from the material Charles Goodyear developed and his brother Nelson patented in 1851 (Woshner 1999: 24). While no hard rubber buttons were recovered in Feature 3, they do appear occasionally on Johnson's Island, where prisoners used them for both clothing fasteners and as raw material in the production of carved rings and other crafts (FIG. 17) (Bush 2011: 126–129). As of the end of 2008, 18 complete hard rubber buttons were in the Johnson's Island assemblage, along with at least 9 identifiable but partially carved examples, most manufactured by the Novelty Rubber Company and bearing the Goodyear patent date. Two other material types noted in the laundry inventory—wood and paper—represent a relatively small proportion of recorded buttons (FDJI 1865), and if any were deposited in Feature 3 or elsewhere on Johnson's Island, they deteriorated soon thereafter. In the inventory, wood examples occur on only three garments, all labeled as "C.S. drawers" (FDJI 1865). Wood buttons were a cheap option for Confederate military contractors, who apparently employed them in the production of these government-issued underdrawers. These buttons do not survive in archaeological contexts and represent another class of button that would remain invisible if not for the laundry inventory. Data for hard rubber, wood, and paper buttons are not included in Figures 7 and 8.

## Conclusion

The laundry inventory kept by an unknown prisoner combined with other

historical sources help clarify various aspects of dress among the Confederate officers on Johnson's Island. The inventory demonstrates, for instance, that shirts among officer prisoners included fashionable examples with pleated breasts, stripes, and checks, and that prisoner clothing included both Confederate- and Union-issue garments (FDJI 1865). Some of the garments recorded, such as knit undershirts, cannot be detected archaeologically and went unnoticed by prisoners less concerned with such objects. This source, however, presents an incomplete view of clothing on Johnson's Island because of its narrow temporal focus and its limitation to certain pieces of clothing rather than complete wardrobes. Comparing it with archaeological materials is beneficial in testing conclusions drawn about the prison as a whole based on temporally and spatially distinct latrine features. Certain variables, including the comparative durability of button materials and the likelihood of their deposition in a latrine, affect the representative nature of the artifacts recovered from these features. These qualifications inform interpretations of isolated features in relation to broader site patterns. In other instances, ground truthing reveals flaws in the documentary record. The laundry inventory's notations are not scientific; "rice" and "horn" buttons were actually Prosser and bone (FDJI 1865), for example. Artifactual evidence complements historical material to create a dialogue about the culture of clothing on Johnson's Island that would be impossible within the limitations of either source used independently. The baseline material discussed in this article should be useful to those examining a variety of other archaeological and historical situations. More details about changes within the Johnson's Island prison await comparisons between the laundry inventory and latrine assemblages from different periods, as well as a more extensive comparison of clothing from multiple latrine artifact assemblages. Beyond Johnson's Island's walls, these data are useful to archaeologists attempting to extrapolate site-wide patterns from privies and latrines, as well as historians interested in prisoners of war, institutionalization, clothing, gender, and other related topics.

Prisoners on Johnson's Island struggled to cope with the restrictions of their incarceration.

They found that clothes did not make the man, as William Wash explained while watching the federal guards in 1863: "Fine dress and haughty demeanor don't constitute the soldier, and though in parti-colored and seedy attire, we felt fully able to cope with the same number of those fine soldiers, who had never heard a cannon except at a jubilee or celebration" (Wash 1870: 86). In both the documentary and archaeological records, evidence is found of pre-imprisonment clothing and the adoption of new garments within the prison. Biased authors left accounts of prison life. These men believed themselves to be or wanted to represent themselves as gentlemen enduring imprisonment gallantly. Deposition and formation processes distorted the archaeological record of their experience over time. Neither source paints a complete picture of clothing on Johnson's Island, but, in conversation, they demonstrate some of the many ways prisoners used clothing. Whether worried about warmth, politics, or style, the men confined on Johnson's Island knew that there was more to a man, be he a soldier or a gentleman, than his clothes.

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### Author Information

Tyler Rudd Putman is a Ph.D. student in the History of American Civilization Program in the Department of History at the University of Delaware.

Tyler Rudd Putman  
 236 John Munroe Hall  
 Newark, DE 19716