

Small Gilt Waistcoat Buttons

C. 1825 - 1840



STEAM LOCOMOTIVE
BLANK



UNITED WE STAND
FINE COLOUR



SYMBOLS OF
AGRICULTURE
FANCY ORANGE COLOUR

JACKSONIAN BUTTONS

Patriotism, Progress and Prosperity



Fashionable gilt waistcoat buttons dominated men's fashion during Andrew Jackson's presidency. They were a perfect fit, too! Men proudly wore these rich brilliant orange-colored buttons as a true reflection of the feeling of our country's pride. Not only do these buttons depict the various aspects of our country's commerce and industry, but they also show the great sense of patriotism felt by the American people. America was experiencing a period of expansion and prosperity and the brilliance of these sparkling gilt buttons were just right.

Today Jacksonian buttons are relatively scarce. According to *The Big Book of Buttons* (2010) by Hughes and Lester, current values range from \$30 - \$200. Over one hundred patterns, including the die

variations, have been documented with a few patterns being extremely scarce, such as the pattern of the FAT CAT.

Construction

Jacksonians are a one piece button typically with an Omega-type shank. They all have an applied separate rim turned over the edge. Sizes range from 13 - 17 mm. Their images are intricate yet well defined with rims either plain in style or fancy. The faces are either of a pictorial or conventional design but some are even plain-faced. The little gems sport an array of images representing commerce and industry, patriotism, animals, plants, objects, and many others. Many of the conventional Jacksonians have Alpha shanks.

The buttons are consistent with the way in which gilt buttons of the era were constructed. They are made from copper or a copper/zinc alloy. Blanks were cut and a design was stamped using dies.

Drawn brass wire was bent into an omega shape for the shank, hence the Omega-type name. Heat was used to securely fasten them to the metal blank. The blanks were cleaned in acid bath to burnish and close the pores in the metal. The gilding process involved putting the buttons into a liquid, an amalgam, of gold and liquid nitrate mercury. Nitric acid acted as the catalyst to cause the gold to adhere to the copper as it was being heated. Once removed, the luster-less buttons get a polishing in a stone burnishing spindle until the buttons are a brilliant gold color.

The backmarks on Jacksonian buttons always seem to be of raised lettering but a few have recessed marks. Most conventional designs have recessed backmarks. Some of the factory marks include L. & Kendrick, R. J. & CO. , Scovills, and several others. Quality marks include Extra Colour, Rich Colour, Fancy Orange Colour, and more. Many are quite plain on the back, are blank or bear nonverbal backmarks.

Though these buttons emerged during the John Quincy Adams presidency in 1825, David Johnson, early NBS collector and author, coined the term “Jacksonian Buttons” as these small

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buttons were most popular when Andrew Jackson was the most dominant figure in the US and president, March 4, 1829 - March 1837.

References:

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*Characteristic
features: Omega
shank and Rim*



The top button shows the Omega shank and a nonverbal backmark with radiating lines. The next two buttons show a plain and a fancy rim.

Presentation Notes:

What made Andrew Jackson popular in 1814? The Battle of New Orleans in 1814 was Jackson's biggest victory and marked the end of the War of 1812. Success in defeating the British made him the hero of the people..

What might some of the symbolism behind the buttons represent?

There are buttons depicting machinery and steam travel which was just getting started. A main mode of transportation at this period of time was the use of HORSES. There are several variations with or without riders. Seaward travel and coastal travels were depicted by east and west bound vessels, all of which are CLIPPER SHIPS. A STEAM ENGINE is represented as well as a STEAMSHIP and a PUMPER. In 1828, construction on the Baltimore & Ohio railroad began.

Other buttons depict items for farming showing AGRICULTURAL TOOLS. Cyrus McCormick invented the reaper in 1831. Buttons with sheaves of WHEAT depict a show of prosperity. Farm animal such as a COW, ROOSTER, LAMB and a TURKEY can be found on these buttons. Other sources of food from hunting are depicted such as the, SQUIRREL, RABBIT, DEER, and FOX. Necessary hunting supplies such as the POWDER HORN, and a QUIVER reflect the hunting aspect as well.

It is common to see EAGLES with or without shields on Jacksonian buttons. With pride, the national symbol is represented in many variations which include plain and fancy rims. Other symbols include heads of founding fathers of our country, busts of JEFFERSON and WASHINGTON, plus a CLOWN face to round off the politicians - a contemporary interpretation. Patriotism is just screaming from several verbal buttons, UNION-STRENGTH, LIBERTY-UNION, and UNITED WE STAND. And, there are more. The LIBERTY CAP buttons represents freedom and liberty, one is shown with a cornucopia on either side and another with the liberty cap flanked by flags and cannons.

Other images, such as the ANCHOR symbolizing hope, a CORNUCOPIA for abundance, and musical instruments such as the LYRE, HARP, HORN, and FLUTE for social entertainment. DOGS are depicted hunting, carrying a basket in its mouth, and perhaps a pet. Per Johnson Fraser, to which I concur, "Speaking of Pets, who can't visualize sitting in front of a fireplace on a cold winter's night with the FAT CAT near by." Two different BEE HIVES certainly symbolize that hard work gives sweet pleasures.

With America's new beginning a true sense of patriotism, progress, and prosperity was felt by society. These precious little gilt one piece rimmed Jacksonian buttons are a tangible link with those times that we can hold in our hand.