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Introduction

This past summer, during Trent University's field school excavations at the Bark Site (BbGp-12), small heart-shaped artifacts of iron alloy with two triangular tines were recovered (Figure 1).

Initial research turned up only anecdotal evidence that these might be tobacco tags. A query to the Internet historical archeology and material culture mailing lists (HISTARCH and ARTIFACT) resulted in a considerable amount of information about these tags. The purpose of this article is to present this information. Note that there is some discrepancy between the introduction dates of tobacco tags in America and Canada.

Background

Tobacco tags have been found on archaeological sites from Florida (Kuehn et al. 1993) to Alaska (Mills, pers. comm.), in shapes ranging from circles to ovals, rectangular with an embossed horse, stars and hearts (both solid, and with a small heart "cut-out" in the centre – see Figure 1). Tags recovered archaeologically are usually no more than a rusty bit of iron alloy with two triangular tines. Originally, however, these tags were enamelled with bright colours, as well as product information. A preliminary, annotated list of sources and site reports containing references to tobacco tags is included in the Bibliography.

The use of tobacco tags began in the United States in the 1870s with an overabundance of cheap chewing tobacco. Manufacturers developed the tag as a means of identifying each plug of tobacco, to prevent the unscrupulous from selling the cheaper product as a higher grade (Storino 1995: 5).

The first tags, used in the 1870s by P. Lorillard & Co. of New York and Pioneer Tobacco Co. of

Brooklyn, New York, were wooden. In an 1877 circular, Pioneer explained their use: "to help enable the dealer to secure every possible advantage, we have placed the Wooden Tags or Trademark at intervals throughout the entire length of the plug, which permits the retailer to cut the lump into small pieces to suit his customer, each piece holding its identity as though a perfect plug in itself." These wooden tags disappeared with the advent of the tin tags, prior to 1880 (Storino 1995: 6).

The P. Lorillard company of New York was the first to use tin tags, applying one marked "Lorillard" to the inside of each plug's outer leaf wrapper. Unfortunately, the hidden tag was the cause of injuries, as consumers, unaware of its existence, bit into it. The Ben Finzer Tobacco Company of Louisville, Kentucky was the first to use the tin tag on the outside of the plug. Their attempt to patent the tin tobacco tag was unsuccessful, and the use of tags became widespread (Storino 1995: 6).

Not all tags represent the manufacturer of the tobacco – the tags were so inexpensive to make that custom brands for various wholesalers and retailers were economically feasible. Factories often manufactured only a few types of plug tobacco, and sold them under hundreds of brand names, each with their own tag. As a result there were more than 12,000 different tags in circulation (Storino 1995: 7-8).

Chewing tobacco sales, each plug marked with a tag, peaked between the years 1897 and 1917, averaging 200,000,000 pounds per year. In the early 1900s, the tobacco companies offered premiums, and the tags could be redeemed for items such as "The Four Famous Beauties" picture cards offered by W. Duke & Sons. The use of tobacco tags ended ca. 1930 (Storino 1995: 8-9).

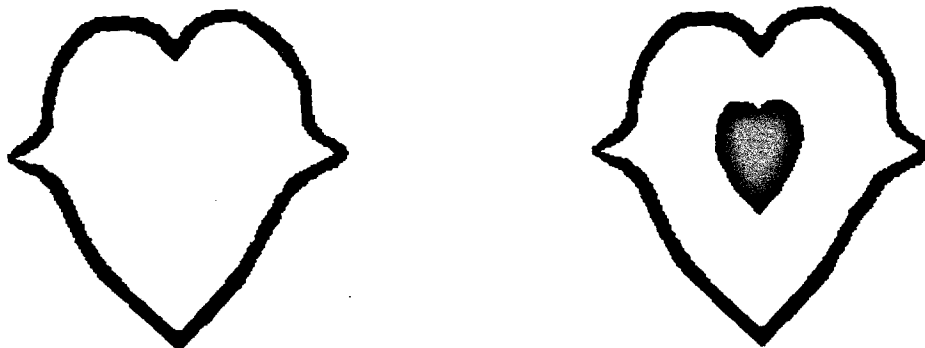


Figure 1. Macdonald tobacco tags. Left: from the Bark site (BbGp-12), Cavan; right: a metal "voided" heart.

Tobacco Tags in Canada

In response to my query, David Arthurs of Parks Canada forwarded the following extracts from correspondence between G. Leduc of RJR-Macdonald Inc. (Toronto) and D. Metropolit of Parks Canada (Winnipeg), dated 10 October, 1979: "The metal voided hearts you have found in Batoche, Saskatchewan [see Figure 1] is without doubt, the metal trade mark seal which was used by W.C. Macdonald Inc. of Montreal from 1870 to 1922. This was used as a Trade Mark seal for plug tobacco and each plug had one of these red hearts pressed into it, an invention of William C. Macdonald, the founder of the Company in 1858".

"The plugs of Macdonald Tobacco, both chewing and smoking, were distinguished by a little heart-shaped tin label with sharp lugs which were pressed into the tobacco. Labels from used plugs might be seen scattered about railway stations, lumber camps and farm stables, sometimes decorating hat bands and occasionally appearing in church collection plates. The "tobacco with a heart" became a prime favourite with fishermen, sailors, trappers, miners, lumbermen, farm labourers, railway hands – even with Indians and Esquimaux." (Quotation from *The History of Macdonald College of McGill*

University, founded by William Macdonald.)

Macdonald Tobacco Inc. was founded in 1858 as "McDonald Brothers and Co."; the name was changed after 1865 to "W.C. McDonald, Tobacco Merchants and Manufacturers". Cigarette production began in 1922. The company was sold to the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company in 1974, and the name was changed to RJR-Macdonald Inc. on October 27, 1978 (Arthurs, pers. comm).

While the Macdonald Tobacco heart tags are prevalent in Canada, other tags have also been found, such as circular ones, and a scroll-shaped tag embossed "O.B. PACE" (Springate 1997: 112). Because of the sheer number of manufacturers using round tags (see Storino 1995), their attribution to a particular manufacturer, in the absence of their enamelled finish, is almost impossible. I have, as yet, been unable to identify "O.B. Pace" as a manufacturer, wholesaler, or retailer.

It is unknown how many of the American tags, such as those represented in Storino (1995) made their way into Canada, and vice versa. Further research, including of those tags which still bear their enamelled decorations (such as those found in collections),

is necessary. Hopefully, this brief article will serve as a starting point.

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Megan Springate / 150 Thousand Oaks Drive / Atlantic Highlands, NJ 07716 / USA ■