

Brass Confusion: True identity of a long misidentified artifact comes to light.

by Colin E. Murphy

The examination of an artifact that has been known to historians for many years has led to this article. The artifact is in the possession of the United States Marine Corps History and Museums Division (USMC HD) and was, until recently, on display at their museum at the Washington Navy Yard¹. It is believed that, in addition to the item possessed by the USMC HD, there are three or four other surviving examples in private collections. The artifact is, undoubtedly a United States Marine Corps equipment item from the early years of the United States.

The starting point for one wishing to examine early Marine Corps material history is *Uniforms of the American Marines 1775 to 1829* by Lt. Colonel Edwin North McClellan (USMC Ret.). Produced for the History and Museums Division of the United States Marine Corps, the book is a chronological compilation of excerpts from original, official Marine Corps correspondence. Originally published in 1932 it was reprinted in 1974 and 1982. In the later

reprints pictures were added to the text. Among these pictures there are



five that pertain to the era of War of 1812. IN this section there is a photograph of the subject of this article. The picture is of an oval 2 7/8" x 2 3/8"² ornamental, stamped, brass plate. The stamped brass plate features an eagle grasping a fouled anchor with "MARINES" above the eagle's head (**Figure 1, left**). The caption that accompanies the picture

reads; "Marine officers center brass portion of a copper breast plate of the War of 1812 era. It

can be seen in the painting of Lieutenant Bush following. Specimen from the collection of the Marine Corps Museum, Quantico, Virginia. (USMC Photo #530310).”³ According to Marine Corps Historical Division the plate was found near the sight of the Battle of White House⁴ which occurred in early September of 1814. The following page of Colonel McClellan’s work contains the referenced picture of the circa 1812 portrait of 1st Lt. William Sharpe Bush⁵ (**Figure 2, right**). The portrait does indeed show an oval



center portion of the larger breast plate on Lt. Bush’s sword belt



(**Figure 3, left**). For many years this conclusion concerning this plate was considered correct. Yet quick visual examination of Lt.

Bush’s breast plate shows that the center piece of the larger plate is centered in the direction of the larger oval itself while the eagle remains “upright.” However, the eagle in **Figure 1** is centered on the “Y” axis of the plate, or straight up and down in

correspondence to the oval itself. Another feature of the plate in **Figure 1** that would indicate it is not the center piece of officer’s larger belt plate is the presence of four pairs of holes, roughly positioned on the ends and sides of the plate. All examples seen by the author in person and in picture have, or look to have once had, the mentioned pairs of holes. Such holes would not be appropriate for attaching a metal object to another. Any piece meant to do this would have been laid inside the larger piece and, or soldered on. Likewise, a colleague, Mark Hilliard, has handled an original plate and noted its small size and referred to it as “wafer thin”. The “wafer thin” construction would seemingly negate its utility as working piece of a fastening system and the plate is likely to be of purely decorative use. Therefore, it can be determined, to a high

degree of certainty, that the plate in **Figure 1** is not a “Marine officer’s center brass portion of a copper breast plate of the War of 1812 era,” but rather a decorative piece designed to be sewn in place.

Besides the conclusion that the plate was a piece of an officer’s belt plate, other educated suggestions to its identity have been proposed over the years. One of these suggestions is that the brass plate in question is a Marine Corps enlisted man’s uniform cap plate of the 1804 pattern. The year 1804 was a transition year for the Marine Corps. In March of that year a new Commandant of the Marine Corps was named, and soon there-after the Secretary of the Navy ordered the Marine Corps to undergo a uniform change. This new uniform would make the Marines more modern looking. More in tune with the European Armies of the later named Napoleonic Era. A new feature of this uniform was the felt “yeoman” style shako referred to at the time simply as a “uniform cap.” The uniform change order of March 25, 1804 called for “high crown’d hats, without a brim, and a plume of red plush on the front of the hat with a Brass Eagle & Plate, & Hat Band of blue yellow, & red Cord with a Tassel of the same Colors.”⁶ The plate referred to is the model 1804 uniform cap plate. The first model cap plate was a stamped, brass plate, square in shape, with an eagle grasping a fouled anchor surrounded by stands of colors and instruments of naval and land warfare. Evidence to date fails to show any change in the design until January of 1807 and then only in shape.⁷ The letter from Lt. Col. Commandant Franklin Wharton read: “Call on Mr. Armitage⁸, and ask him if he will furnish that number at the limited price 25 Cents^{ea.} with the improvement in the shape, a difference only between a Square and an Octagon; no more



trouble can attend the work and I expect but little addition will be given, if any, to the materials in the plate...”⁹ For an example of the octagonal plate see **Figure 4 (above)**.¹⁰ This evidence plus the fact of artifacts its stated size demonstrates that the **Figure 1** plate was never a United States Marine Corps uniform cap plate from the 1804-1822 period when the Marine Corps used the “yeoman” style uniform cap. The reason the size of the plate must be put forth as evidence is the fact that the uniform cap of the Marines measured between 6 ½ and 7 ½ inches tall and it would be highly unlikely that anyone would have place a plate of such small measurements on the front. The look this would produce would be odd and probably laughable.

Another conclusion regarding the plate is based on early Marine Corps purchasing orders for plates. It is known that in August 1804 and perhaps earlier, though records are incomplete, orders called for plates of two sizes.¹¹ The belief is that the smaller, oval plate was a cockade devise or side ornament for the Marine Corps uniform cap. This is a solid conclusion based on the 1804 orders, and those that follow, for the cap, complete with all trimmings and ready for issuance to the Marines. The orders, like that previously referred to, called for a plume, a hat band a “brass plate and eagle.” The examination of the uniform cap order of March 25, 1804 and the letter sent by Commandant Wharton to Capt. Anthony Gale the following day which states; “you will observe an Eagle has been substituted for a cockade”¹² is likely what brought about this conclusion. Yet it is most probable that the eagle “substituted for a cockade” is more likely



an early cockade eagle, like those worn by other services. In the land services of the U.S. at the time the brass or pewter cockade eagles were usually placed upon a leather cockade and the entire piece, eagle and cockade, were attached to the uniform cap on the upper left side of the cap from which the band and tassel would be hung (**Figure 5, left**). However, it seems that the

Marine Corps just used an eagle only. This certainly would be a different look than what many may be used to, but in the thousands of original, official Marine Corps records and letters of the period examined, there are absolutely no cockades ordered for enlisted Marines. While, in those same records and letters, there are many orders that call for both eagles and cap plates. In period documents three distinct pieces of Marine Corps equipment; the cap plate, the cockade eagle and the oval plate were all called “eagles”. Evidence shows that in the 1804-1818 period, as today, the three were often confused when orders were written. This confusion resulted in Col. Wharton having to specify when he asked for eagles by stating; “I mean the Large Plate”¹³ and “Eagles, I mean the Square Plate.”¹⁴

With evidence demonstrating that the small oval plate is not the center plate of an officer’s shoulder belt breast plate, nor an early cap plate or a cap’s “cockade device” the question remains as to its use. Countless hours of pouring through Marine Corps documents has produced conclusive evidence what the small, brass ornamental plate is. However, the conclusion runs contradictory to the consensus of early 19th century U.S. military historians. The overriding consensus among today’s military, material culture historians is that the use of cartridge box plates by U.S. armed forces did not occur until the years following the War of 1812. Many in this community believe that either, no United States military force decorated the flaps of their cartridge boxes with an ornamental plate until at least 1816, or at the very least there is no evidence to the fact. A contemporary illustration by British Army Officer and spy, Charles Hamilton-Smith showing subjects of a U.S. Army regiment in New York City with small oval plates on their cartridge box flap. Yet it is believed that this picture depicts soldiers, at the earliest, in 1816, thus fitting the common perception. Yet, evidence shows the plate in **Figure 1** is just that; the earliest use of a cartridge box plate by an armed force of the United States.

Evidence shows that the United States Marine Corps was purchasing cartridge box plates possibly eight and definitely four and a half years before the War of 1812 began. This conclusion began to form with a single letter in the National Archives in Washington D.C. It was a letter read numerous times because of the information it contained about Marine Corps arms, but the pertinent evidence was not in the main body of the letter but in the post script, written in smaller font in the lower left hand corner of the letter. The November 6, 1813 letter reads: “have made one Thousand Small Cartridge Box Plates- send 100 to Boston & 100 to New York with 800 to this place.”¹⁵ Though quite forthright, one reference does not make a case and more evidence was sought. Again, a second reference was found in a letter studied numerous times but there was a failure to recognize what was being read. This letter came from the Quartermaster of the Marine Corps’ letter book. The letter was to a Marine Corps officer concerning the shipment of supplies he should be expecting.

The letter read:

*“Box N^o 4 50 Cart^s Boxes & Belts
 50 Brushes & Prickers
 40 Small Plates (all we had)”*

It further read:

“Recapitulation

50 Setts [sic] of Accouterments complete excepting 10 small cart^s Box plates.”¹⁶

The second reference now found it became necessary to document as many more references as possible. This would be done by again looking with a keener eye through all those USMC records and letters from the years of the War of 1812 and those directly before and after explicitly seeking any mention of cartridge box plates. Evidence of the plates within these thousands of documents is little and far between. This can be attributed to the fact of the earlier

cited letter calling for one thousand plates as well as other orders for seven hundred and five hundred along with other large orders. Such large orders for these plates during a time when the Marine Corps commonly had, under enlistment, just about five hundred men and never surpassing seven hundred men meant there were probably a few extra around to be issued for some time afterwards thus negating the need for a regular or frequent purchases. Yet, the broadening of the search to letters dating as far back as 1804 contained passages that called for small and large size plates. Evidently, these small plates, undoubtedly meaning these cartridge box plates, were being purchased and used earlier than previously considered. An order for 200 small plates was issued in September of 1804, but it was without any further description. The earliest reference located to date calling specifically for cartridge box plates is November of 1807. "Plates will in time be sent to you for Cartouche Boxes."¹⁷ Two days later Wharton would write to Captain Anthony Gale in Philadelphia seeking more plates as well as the two dies owned by the Marine Corps; perhaps one die for the octagonal cap plate and the other for the small, oval cartridge box plate or both for the cartridge box plate:

*"I have to request that you call on Mr. Armitage and require 500 plates for the Cartouche Boxes, to be immediately made and forwarded to this place, the two dies must be in your possession, after using one you will again receive it. should you want any of the plates you will retain the Number necessary."*¹⁸

Further evidence as follows:

- Lt. Col. Comm. Wharton to Lt. Edward Hall
August 24, 1804

*"Mr. Armitage is to receive 25 Cents for the Large Plates & six for the Small"*¹⁹

- Lt. Col. Comm. Wharton to Lt. Hall
September 8, 1804

"Mr. Armitage will furnish 284 more of the large Plates; also 200 of the Small: you will then

give to him a [illegible] on Mr. Harrison for 700 Large, & 200 Small, the amount of his demand; this done; he will deliver to you the dies, until a further Supply may be necessary.”²⁰

- Lt. Col. Comm. Wharton to Lt. E Hall
September 15, 1804

“Mr. Armitage must only furnish 284 large, & 200 Small plates for the Government, making in all 700 each; paying for them by [illegible] on Mr. Harrison agreeably to my Instructions of the 8th : the entire Quantity I must again receive; the large will be shortly wanted, as private, to be paid for by Stoppage from those not entitled to them, the small may be, as the Corps is increasing; 1000 we cannot at present issue, having not that number of men.”²¹

- Lt. Col. Comm. Wharton to Lt. Hall
September 23 , 1804

“Mr. Armitage I believe holds an order of mine for 1000 Small Plates.”²²

- Lt. Col. Comm. Wharton to Lt. Hall
February 16, 1805

“Can you inform me, by inquiry of Mr. Armitage, the number of large as well as small Plates furnished by him for the Corps, and paid for?”²³

- Lt. Col. Comm. Wharton to Capt. Gale
November 16, 1807

“Whenever the opportunity may present you will send on the Small Plates as we are now it want of them.”²⁴

- Lt. Col. Comm. Wharton to Philadelphia Naval Agent George Harrison
March 9, 1812

“The following Articles being a part of the Supplies for the current year I will thank you to make contracts for...500 Eagles of the small Size for Cartridge Boxes.”²⁵

- Lt. Col. Comm. Wharton to Capt. Gale
March 17, 1812

“Send to me as soon as possible 100 Sets of them [accouterments] - you will recollect I do not want from him [the Philadelphia contractors Jones & Kinsey] the Plate on the Box.”²⁶

Almost certainly there are more references to be found and they will be noted as they are found.

So, without much imagination it is easy to see the solid basis for the stated conclusion.

It all may fly in the face of what many have believed for years and even the most recent studies

but the small, brass oval plate belonging to the Marines is a cartridge box plate. The production and probable use of which extends back to at least 1804. Examination of earlier documents has yet to uncover any evidence of the plate but earlier production and/or use cannot be ruled out. However, it is most likely that, as previously stated, their use began with the uniform changes of 1804. Unfortunately, the letters sent by the Commandant of the Marine Corps for the year 1803 are at the present missing and the Letters Received folio has wide gaps.

The next question is why were the Marines the first to use something many believe the Army would not use until much later. One reason may have been a way to quickly discriminate between Marine equipment and those of others; U.S. Navy or Army. This is unlikely however. Another possibility is that Marines, though not considered an elite unit prior to the War of 1812 by the public or by others in the military establishment or government, seemed to have thought themselves elite or, at the least, different from the land service. One piece of evidence is that long after the U.S. Army, and most European armies gave up the powdered and queued hair the Marine Corps retained the look. It is speculated this was done because Napoleon's elite units maintained this look as well. So it is possible it was simply to be more ornamental and aspire to look like their contemporary, elites in Europe by placing shinier brass on themselves.

Another possible reason is that while much about the U.S. Army was based upon the French armies of the late 18th and very early 19th century the United States Navy and thus the Marine Corps used the Royal Navy and Royal Marines as a model. The Royal Marines of the same period had plates on their cartridge boxes. Again, tying in with the previous thought, in an effort to emulate combined with the possible belief that the shinier parts to the uniform the more impressive it looks. Of course this all ties in with the idea that looking sharp, well-funded and supplied presented an enemy with a visual that projected a sense of professionalism and

thus intimidation.

Also tied into this is the theory that the Marines were America's military ambassadors around the world. Very few people across the globe would ever come across a U.S. soldier and in much of the world sailors were often seen as well...sailors. With the work aboard sailing ships being damp and dirty there would be no need or desire to make them flashy and though many sailors the world over had uniform. The U.S. Navy for example had a dress uniform but it consisted of dark blue wool or linen jackets without any fancy trimmings. While in the case of the Marine Corps the 1804 uniform which was modified a few times through the early 1820s was one of the most elegant of all U.S. uniforms of the period. A single breasted blue coat with scarlet cuffs and collar, yellow herring bone lace extending out from the brass buttons combined with the tall cap complete with brass plate, eagle, red plume, band and tassel was likely to impress, or at least give a good showing to people around the world. It would be the Marines that people would notice. So with an elite spirit within the Corps and the desire to impress upon those around the world the sense of wealth and prowess of our young nation the Marine Corps probably used the plates to, in effect, look more respectable, more military and more striking.

While the reasons for the U.S. Marine Corps' early use of a cartridge box plate may be pure speculation and in some cases wishful thinking, hopefully future efforts will answer that question definitively. Yet, it can be said with certainty that the Marine Corps was using the cartridge box plates in 1807 and with a very high probability, as early as 1804. The mystery of those small oval plates, that have been the subject of many educated, sound conclusions, has been solved.

Note: All quotes of source, primary, secondary or other retain the spelling, punctuation

and grammar from the original source unless noted. Brackets were use (thus [...]) to enclose the authors own words inside quotes when necessary.

¹ The Museum at the Washington Navy Yard has been effectively closed due to the relocation of the USMC Historic Division museum and archives to a new facility under construction in Quantico, Virginia. This new, state of the art museum is scheduled to be opened November 10, 2006

² Measurements done at the museum were unreliable as the plate is permanently encased in plastic. The measurements include here are taken from J. Duncan Campbell and Michael J. O'Donnell, *American Military Headgear Insignia*, O'Donnell Publications, Alexandria VA, 2004, p. 35. The author believes that without a doubt this is a most reliable source.

³ Edwin North McClellan, Lt. Colonel, USMC, *Uniforms of the American Marines 1775 to 1829*, History and Museums Division Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, Washington D.C. 1932, p.12 of added picture section.

⁴ The Battle of White House took place September 2-6, 1814. It was an attempt to molest the retiring British fleet as it sailed away from now destroyed Washington D. C. White House was a short distance downstream from Mount Vernon. It was here Commodore David Porter with sailors, Marines and Virginia militia mounted guns to blast the passing ships. Many of the Marines were the remnants of the 114 Marines that had valiantly stood at Bladensburg. Two of them were killed in action. For more information on the Battle of White House see *Terror On the Chesapeake* by Christopher George and *The Burning of Washington* by Anthony Pitch

⁵ Lt. William Sharpe Bush was the commanding Marine officer of the *USS Constitution's* Marine Guard when she met and defeated *HMS Guerriere* in August of 1812. In the action Lt. Bush leapt to the taffrail of the *Constitution* when the ships became momentarily entangle and called to Capt. Isaac Hull, "Shall I board her?" them, almost instantaneously receiving a British musket ball in the head making Lt. Bush the United States Marine Corps' first officer killed in action.

⁶ McClellan, p. 26 of the text section

⁷ While there is evidence referring to the change from square to octagonal there has been no recorded evidence yet found concerning the engraved design or relative size of either the uniform cap plate or the small, oval plate.

⁸ Though my knowledge about George Armitage is limited to say the least I have gathered that he was a Philadelphia business man who produce metal plates and buttons for the US military. To find out more I refer the reader to J. Duncan Campbell's and Michael J. O'Donnell's wonderful book, *American Military Headgear Insignia*.

⁹ Lt. Colonel Commandant Franklin Wharton to Captain Anthony Gale, January 13, 1807, Letters Sent, Office of the Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMCLS), RG 127 National Archives and Record Administration (NARA), Washington D.C.

¹⁰ McClellan, p.11 of added picture section

¹¹ For more information on the production of ornamental metal plates used by the military, particularly those used as cap plates, the author refers the reader to the most complete and very well done book by J. Duncan Campbell and Michael J. O'Donnell; *American Military Headgear Insignia*.

¹² Wharton to Capt. Anthony Gale, March 26, 1804, RG127, CMCLS, NARA, Wash. D.C.

¹³ Wharton to Lt. Edward Hall, August 10, 1804, RG127, CMCLS, NARA, Wash. D.C.

¹⁴ Wharton to Lt. Hall, February 19, 1805, RG 127, CMCLS, NARA. Wash D.C.

¹⁵ Wharton to Capt. Gale, November 6, 1813, RG127, CMCLS, NARA, Wash. D.C.

¹⁶ Quartermaster Lt. Samuel Bacon to Lt. Thomas Swift, November 12, 1813, RG 127 Quartermaster's Office Letters Sent, NARA, Wash D.C.

¹⁷ Wharton to Capt. John Hall, November 4, 1807, RG127, CMCLS, NARA, Wash. D.C.

¹⁸ Wharton to Capt. Gale, November 6, 1807, RG127, CMCLS, NARA, Wash. D.C.

¹⁹ Wharton to Lt. Hall, August 24, 1804. RG127, CMCLS, NARA, Wash. D.C.

²⁰ *ibid.*, September 8, 1804

²¹ *ibid.*, September 15, 1804.

²² *ibid.*, September 23, 1804

²³ *ibid.*, February 16, 1805

²⁴ Wharton to Capt. Gale, November 16, 1807, RG127, CMCLS, NARA, Wash. D.C.

²⁵ Wharton to George Harrison, March 9, 1812, RG127, CMCLS, NARA, Wash. D.C.

²⁶ Wharton to Capt. Gale, March 17, 1812, RG127, CMCLS, NARA, Wash. D.C.

Picture Credits

Brass oval cartridge box plate encased in resin at Marine Corps Museum (Figure 1): Authors Collection

Reproduction of portrait of Lt. William S. Bush (Figures 2 and 3): Mark Hilliard Collection

USMC 1807 Cap Plate (Figure 4): Edwin North McClellan, Lt. Colonel, USMC, *Uniforms of the American Marines 1775 to 1829*, History and Museums Division Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, Washington D.C. 1932, p.11 of added picture section.

Reproduction Federal Period brass cockade eagle on leather cockade (Figure 5):

<https://regtqm.com/history/>

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