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Politics of the Fur Trade: Clay Tobacco Pipes at Fort Union, North Dakota

Introduction

Large-scale excavations at Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site, on the Upper Missouri River, resulted in a large collection of cultural material spanning four decades from 1828 to 1867. The Fort Union Trading Post clay tobacco pipe collection and analysis of the collection will serve as a basis for developing a time line for clay tobacco pipes used during the early and middle 19th century fur trade.

Fort Union, in present day North Dakota, was located at the junction of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers, the perfect position to function as the major trade distribution and collection center in the Upper Missouri region (Figure 1). From 1828 through 1867, the post served as headquarters of the American Fur Company's Upper Missouri Outfit and as the primary trading post for the Assiniboine on the American side of the border but also served the Canadian Crow, Blackfoot, Cree and Métis.

In 1965, the site was acquired by the NPS and became Fort Union Trading Post NHS. With the decision to interpret the post with NPS on-site reconstruction, the NPS Midwest Archeological Center carried out

excavations, largely for the purpose of gathering information about the historic structures for the reconstruction. This work took place in 1968-1972 and again from 1985-1988. Through these investigations, over 500,000 artifacts, including an estimated 10,000 tobacco pipe fragments, were recovered. This large and diverse assemblage of clay tobacco pipes offers a unique opportunity to observe chronological changes in pipe styles. Politics were also reflected in a less obvious way through the growth of the American clay pipe industry as well as continued influx of pipes from other countries. This paper focuses on the Presidential Candidate pipes in the assemblage.

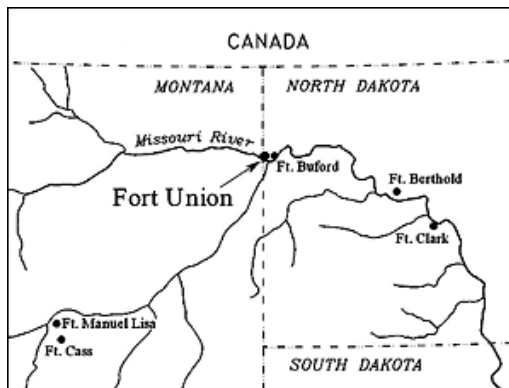


Figure 1: Fort Union trading post was located at the junction of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers.

Sources for Pipes in the Fur Trade Era

The American colonies exported products such as tobacco, and imported goods, including pipes. Following the political fallout from the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, English products—including pipes—appear to have been in disfavor or at least more difficult to obtain in the young American nation. A total of 19 American pipe makers who operated between 1776 and 1840 have been identified, although there are undoubtedly many other domestic pipe makers operating during this period. Some of the pipe makers in the interior were Moravian or Pennsylvania Dutch. Many pipe makers, who were often associated with the community potter of the era, made products for a locale clientele.

Since the fledgling American clay tobacco pipe industry could not replace the English source of pipes lost during and after the Revolutionary War, other European countries eagerly entered the American market. Although England continued to provide pipes to the United States, the evidence from Fort Union indicates that pipes came from a range of foreign as well as domestic sources.

After 1840, there was a virtual explosion in the number of known American pipe makers. Although in part, this may be due to better documentation, mechanization of pipe production certainly contributed to the growth of the industry. Production locations moved with the country's westward expansion, but—with the exception of several pipe makers in Texas—that pipe production stayed east of the Mississippi River.

In 1857, the Heye Brothers in New York were selling "Dutch and German Clay Pipes, Pipe Clay, etc." but in 1858 they had stopped advertising imported pipes and were only selling "pipe clay." Although imports to the United States certainly continued after 1858, one interpretation of the Heye firm's product line change is that an increase in domestic pipe production made good quality pipe clay more profitable than imported pipes. By the late 1850s, domestic output was beginning to supplant imports. Large numbers of European pipes continued to be transported to the United States, however. The pipes arrived in major ports and then were distributed nationwide. In one year, the German manufacturing town of Grosselmerode alone exported more than 13.5 million pipes to the United States.

Presidential Candidate Pipes

Presidential Candidate pipes, bearing the likeness of political figures, frequently occurred at American Fur Trade Era posts (Figure 2). These and similar pipes occur on many mid-19th century western sites. Presidential Candidate pipe fragments at Fort Union came from a variety of sources in Europe and America. Many of the anthropomorphic pipes dating to the mid 1800s were made in Germany. The German pipes were widely distributed and copied. Similar American-made pipes seem to be copies or imitations of German products. Pipes were also imported from France and Italy. Based on the sheer number of fragments, it appears that well over 80% of the pipes from Fort Union may have been imported from Europe.



Figure 2: Reference collection of Presidential Candidate and anthropomorphic pipe specimens. These pipes were made in Germany in the 1850s.

German Pipes

German-made pipes bearing the images of American politicians, including Franklin Pierce, Millard Fillmore, Henry Clay, Zachary Taylor, Ulysses S. Grant, and Lewis Cass were identified. Unlike the other anthropomorphic pipes, whose manufacture was prompted by political events, pipes of George Washington were commemorative products, as they were produced more than 50 years after Washington's presidency.

The Washington pipe is the only presidential style with a crown. Laurel wreaths were portrayed on the heads of Henry Clay, Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, and Lewis Cass, as well as an anthropomorphic female. Since Cass and Clay both lost their respective elections, wreaths presumably indicated leadership or stature rather than a victorious candidacy. Certainly—as occurs today—use of these pipes would tend to promote vigorous discussion regarding parties, candidates, and policies!

A few German clays are actually marked. The mark, although indistinct, appears to read Heinrich/Goebel, a pipe maker from Grossalmerode, Germany. The German-made Turk pipe is also represented in the Fort Union collection.

Other European Pipes

A small number of Fort Union specimens were produced in Italy around 1852. Their stratigraphic provenience in excavations at Fort Union indicates that these were used at the trading post during the 1860s. A few marked stems in the Fort Union collection are from the well-known French firm Gambier of Givet. The French Noel firm, in Lyon, is represented by a nearly complete specimen. Noel operated from about 1808 to 1920. One pipe, exhibiting a "Crown over 46" maker's mark is probably Dutch. Another Fort Union pipe displayed a botor mark on the rim. The botor was a distinctly Dutch manufacturing tool used to trim and smooth the bowl lip.

American Pipes

American pipe manufacturers often copied German anthropomorphic pipes. The American Taber family manufactured pipes bearing the image of Ulysses S. Grant at three different locations in New Hampshire from the 1860s-1880s. Although not as sharp and crisp as their German counterpart, the Taber pipes are the best executed high output presidential pipes produced by an American manufacturer.

A fragment of a Taylor pipe of unknown American manufacture was also found at Fort Union. The green glaze of the Taylor pipe is similar that seen on the American-made Grant pipe, suggesting that it may have also been manufactured by the Taber family.

American-made pipes in the Fort Union collection are from Point Pleasant (Ohio), Pamplin (Virginia), and the Taber pipe factory (New Hampshire). The Point Pleasant "Turk" pipe was also well represented in the Fort Union pipe assemblage. Given the propensity of American potters and pipe makers to copy popular goods (i.e. fashion or style-much as today), it is likely that this widely distributed Point Pleasant anthropomorphic pipe may well have been copied from the German "Turk" counterpart. The pipe makers were located in Ohio and Point Pleasant pipes moved up and down the Ohio River.

Fort Union pipe stems match similar Pamplin pipes from Virginia that were carried on board the steamboat Bertrand at the time of its 1865 sinking on the Missouri River.

Discussion

Three American pipe makers were identified in the Fort Union collection, and there are many more unidentified specimens. The Pamplin and Taber pipes were shipped by sea from the east coast to New Orleans and then up river to St. Louis. The Ohio pipes came down the Ohio River to St. Louis. From there, they went up the Missouri River by steamboat.

The major surprise in studying the Fort Union collection has been the preponderance of German-made Presidential Candidate pipes. Two locations in Germany, Uslar and

Grossalmerode, produced pipes, and firms in both towns used the same clay source and mold makers during part of their production. Other source countries included Holland, France, England, and Italy. Czechoslovakian pipes from this era are known on the Northern plains, but have not been identified in the Fort Union collection.

A number of white clay pipes, once assumed to be English or possibly even American-made products, are now known to be German in origin. Considering that a flexible reed stem pipe was much less likely to be broken in the rigorous frontier lifestyle than a long stem brittle white clay pipe, it seems remarkable that European white clays predominate in the Fort Union collection. There were fewer American manufacturers of reed stem pipes, however, and European makers had an aggressive and organized distribution system that supplied pipes to the American frontier.

A Peter Dorni marked pipe was also found at Fort Union. In the past, Dorni pipes have been considered to be of Dutch or French origin. A German Peter Dorni pipe manufacture firm, however, has recently been identified. Chemical analysis of the clays in pipes from these three countries is planned to determine if the pipes of different countries are chemically distinct and to identify the source of the Peter Dorni pipe at Fort Union.

Conclusion

The Fort Union pipe collection was dominated by European pipes, German pipes being foremost. The paucity of early American makers and the ongoing demand for pipes created an opportunity for European dominance of the pipe market in the 19th century American fur trade. The American pipe industry, however, gradually gained some of the market by mid-century as it became mechanized and improved product distribution. This shift can be demonstrated through careful chronological ordering of the pipes in the Fort Union assemblage.

The Fort Union clay tobacco pipe collection has offered a unique opportunity to observe chronological changes in styles and origins of pipes used on the American fur trade frontier. On-going analysis of the collection will serve as a basis for developing a more detailed time line and examination of transportation networks moving clay tobacco pipes used during the early and middle 19th century fur trade.

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Acknowledgements

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