

CLOTH SEAL MEDALS

The transformation of a Cloth Seal into a Medal

By Steve Cox



Fig. 1 An Indian of the Great Lakes Region as he might have appeared in the late 1700's, or early 1800's. This Native American is wearing a British Army jacket, the cloth seal medals from this article, and various other pieces of trade silver from the same area. Drawing by the author.

On a cool September afternoon, in a majestic forest nurtured by Lake Michigan, a good friend of mine gave new life to a relic of our past that had lain hidden in the ground of a long lost and forgotten Ottawa Indian camp site for almost 200 years. This is the story of a British Cloth Seal that was created in England and dates from 1806 to 1816. Within a relatively short period of time it made the arduous trip across the Atlantic Ocean, and traveled deep into Michigan Territory, where it seems to have been lost or left behind by someone we will never know. Just imagine, the last person to hold this in their hand may have been a Native American, an Indian Trader, or perhaps even a battle worn Colonial or British soldier. **Fig. 1**

In this paper, “to coin a term”, I will, refer to these artifacts, as “Cloth Seal Medals”. Before I get into the details, I will state that without a doubt the artifacts in question started out as nothing other than British Cloth



Fig. 2. Specimen #1, British Cloth Seal picturing the Royal arms on the Obverse, and the words "STORE KEEPER GENERAL LONDON" on the reverse.

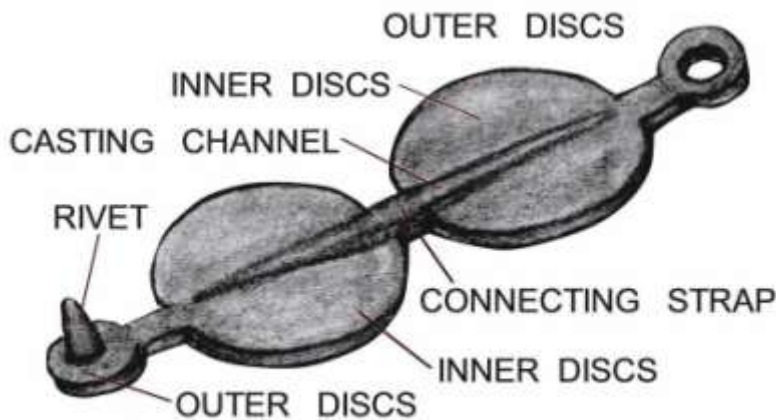


Fig. 3 Design of the Four Disc Cloth Seal, Type "Series A"

Seals. By the time they were left behind on an Ottawa Indian camp site in Michigan Territory they had been transformed into “by definition” medals.

Specimen #1. Fig.2. As you can see by separating the 2 inner discs, removing the connecting strap and 2 outer discs, and adding

holes for suspension, the metamorphosis into a medal became complete. **Fig.3.** the

(four disc cloth seals) are fairly rare in America, and medals fashioned from them are extremely rare. The reason for this is simple; after being removed from shipping bales upon delivery; they were generally melted down and cast into bullets. In Colonial Spanish settlements this was even mandated by the Crown. I have not yet encountered a Spanish Cloth Seal Medal.



Fig. 4 Rendering by the author of the Obverse and Reverse of Specimen #1.

To make details on specimen #1 easier to study, I have drawn scale enlargements of each disc. Fig. 4. Earlier the same person recovered a cloth seal medal of the same type on the same Ottawa village site. Specimen 2, Fig. 5. This specimen also had an attachment hole added, and under close examination it appeared to be from the same mold. This would make it highly improbable that the cloth seal medals were traded in from Canada.

In the years from 1603 to the present, the *Union of the Crowns* places England, Ireland and Scotland under one monarch. For comparison I have pictured another of my British cloth seals that dates from 1603 to 1649. Fig. 6. These Arms were reused during two later periods however the site



Fig. 5 The obverse of Specimen #2

this was found on is in Portobello, Panama, and dates to the mid 1640's. Also I have pictured a casting made from a British cloth Seal dating from 1714 to 1801. This was given to me by Lloyd Draper, a friend and historian in New York; He found 3 of these in the Niagara Frontier on the site of a Mill built by the British for the local Tuscarora tribe around 1804, Fig. 7.

Cloth seals have been used widely in Europe since the 13th century. Soft lead was the common material used in the seals. By the early 1800's, the weaving and finishing of cloth had become one of England's major industries. At this time the manufacture of cloth was quite expensive, and for that reason it



Fig. 7 Casting of a British Cloth Seal displaying the Royal Arms for the years 1714 to 1801. From the authors collection.



Fig. 6 British Cloth Seal displaying the Royal Arms for the years 1603-1649. From the authors collection.

became a highly regulated industry. As a result, by law, these seals were affixed to bales of garments or cloth as a means of recording and regulating the shipments. They were not to be removed until delivery to the proper authority, and then removed only by authorized persons, generally officers of the *Store Keeper General*, or *Store Keeper General of the Indian department*. It was for this reason that the seals were designed to be as tamperproof as possible. The cloth seals in this article can be classified as (4 disc seals), and given a type designation of "Series A" based on typology for the seals found at

Fort Michilimac. Stone (1974:281) **Fig. 3**. On the obverse disc of the cloth seal that inspired this article, Specimen #1, **Fig. 2 & Fig. 4**, appears the British royal coat of arms of King George III, consisting of the royal arms upon an oval shield surrounded by the garter, and surmounted by the royal crown and supported by a Lion on the left and a unicorn on the right. Upon the garter is the motto “HONI . SOIT . QUI . MAL . Y . PENSE” (Evil to him that evil thinks), and below on a ribbon is the motto “DIEU . ET . MON . DROIT” (God at my right). Behind the ribbon a Rose and thistle, the quartering of the arms shows that of England 1st and 4th, Scotland 2nd, and Ireland in the 3rd. Centered is bonnet measuring only 3.8 mm dates the royal arms to the years 1801 to 1816. This is the same royal arms used on the reverse of the George III Indian Peace medal dated 1814, **Fig. 8**. The seal discs are 40mm in diameter, and weigh 21.3gm



Fig. 8 George III, Indian Peace Medal dated 1814

Obverse, and 13.7gm reverse. The difference in weight is due largely to the thickness. On the reverse disc in raised letters appears the title “*Store Keeper General London*”. The casting is in lead. The seal was originally gold gilded. The gold gilt is thought to emphasize the status of the company or shipper. I have also seen this gold gilt on cloth seals of the *East India Company*. **Fig. 9**. By dating the Royal arms on the bale seal medals one can be almost certain the cloth seals were shipped to America between 1801 and 1816. Based on the fact that the 2 bale seal medals were found on the same Ottawa camp site in Michigan,



Fig. 9 East India Company Cloth Seal, Gold gilded. Drawing by the author.

By dating the Royal arms on the bale seal medals one can be almost certain the cloth seals were shipped to America between 1801 and 1816. Based on the fact that the 2 bale seal medals were found on the same Ottawa camp site in Michigan,

and it was controlled by Americans until the War of 1812, you might logically narrow the timeline to 3 years, mid 1812 to mid 1815, the years the British were active in this area. The cloth seals were most likely affixed to bundles of cloth, or garments, and shipped by the *Store Keeper General* in England to the *Store Keeper General of the Army*, or the *Store Keeper General of the Indian Department* in the Americas. Other factors might explain how and why these cloth seal medals might have ended up in the Ottawa camp. During the War of 1812, the British authorities launched a campaign through their licensed traders operating in Upper Louisiana under the office of the *Store Keeper General of the Indian Department* to take away the medals the Americans had given the Indians, and replace them with British medals, and tokens displaying loyalty to the Crown. This campaign was carried out so successfully that it took the Americans well over 20 years after the War of 1812 ended to restore American Peace medals back to the Indians. From the evidence presented here I believe these cloth seal medals might well have been given to the Ottawa by the British during these chaotic times in hopes of strengthening the British and Indian alliance, and gaining their loyalty. The British laws dictated that all gifts, awards, and stores were to be delivered only through the office of *Store Keeper General of the Indian Department*.

In conclusion I would like to state that historic medals, whatever the type, are far more than adornments, or jewelry. As a rule they are designed, given, and worn with a great deal of pride and meaning. Each medal can tell a story if one takes the time to listen. To quote Frederic Betts, brother of the famous authority on Colonial American medals, Charles Wyllys Betts, who died in 1887, "It is safer" it has been said, "To quote a Medal, than a historian".