

A Lead Seal from Fort Ross, Sonoma County, California

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In 1984, a unique artifact was found at Fort Ross, the former Russian outpost located on the northern California coast. The artifact is a lead disc with raised markings on both sides (Fig. 1). Herein is found a description of the artifact and an interpretation of its former use.

Fort Ross was founded in 1812 by the Russian American Company. The settlement was occupied until 1841, at which time it was sold to Captain John Sutter. In addition to the Russians, there were also Native Alaskans at Fort Ross, brought there to hunt sea otters. Also present at Fort Ross were the local Kashaya Pomo, who sometimes assisted the Russians in their agricultural endeavors.

Fort Ross became a part of the California State Park System in 1906, and since that time, many of the original buildings inside the Russian Compound have been reconstructed. The lead disc was found in the southwestern corner of the Compound, adjacent to the Officials' Quarters, one of the reconstructed buildings. This building was originally constructed by the Russians in order to house Russian American Company officials, as well as the occasional visitor to Fort Ross. The building contained a kitchen, storerooms, an office, a jail, and two workshops. A metal-working shop was located at the west end of the Officials' Quarters. Archaeological excavation in this area has recorded the presence of crucibles, indicating that metals (probably copper and lead) were being cast (Glenn Farris, personal communication 1987).

The artifact was found on the surface, very near to the Officials' Quarters, in an area where a minor amount of soil disturbance had occurred due to weeding earlier in the day.² It is probable that the artifact was brought to the surface and to view by this disturbance.

The artifact is a cast lead disc measuring 30 mm in diameter and 3 mm in thickness. It weighs 14.96 g. There are raised markings on both sides of the artifact. On one side of the disc, there is a small cross, beneath which is a cupola-like design (Fig. 1a). When viewed from a different angle, this design looks like a "D+," and is somewhat reminiscent of a brand mark. The markings on the opposite side of the disc are more difficult to decipher, but there appears to be a somewhat similar cupola-like design, above which may be the almost worn-away image of a cross (Fig. 1b). There is ticking around the outer edge of both sides of the artifact. One side of the disc shows some evidence of crimping about the edge. Aesthetically-speaking, the artifact is of seemingly-crude manufacture.

The lead disc is unique in that only one other artifact similar to it has ever been recovered from Fort Ross, despite the numerous archaeological excavations that have been conducted there. Another lead disc, somewhat similar to the artifact under discussion, was found at Fort Ross many years ago, but, unfortunately, is no longer available for study. According to John McKenzie, Curator of Fort Ross from 1948-1963, an artifact described as a lead disc, about the size of a quarter-dollar, but thicker, with raised markings on both sides, was found by a visitor to Fort Ross during the 1950s (McKenzie 1982). The markings on this earlier lead disc were very different from those on the more recent find. On the earlier disc, there was on one side the slightly raised letters, "PAK," while on the other side there was the raised figure of the Imperial Eagle. The letters represent the name, "Russian American Company." In written instructions from the Company Manager Hagemeister to the New Archangel (Sitka) office, dated February 18, 1818, it was ordered that furs be distinguished by placing seals on them.

According to Hagemeister's instructions, the inscription "PAK" was to appear on all Company furs. In order to indicate the colonial origin of the furs, the symbol "+" was to be placed below the "PAK" inscription on New Archangel furs, and the symbol "~" was to be placed on furs from Fort Ross (Gibson 1976). These insignia were stamped on bales of furs and all other products intended for export.

The artifact reported by McKenzie resembles in part the seal ordered for Fort Ross. McKenzie's disc and the seal for Fort Ross that was called for by Hagemeister were both made of lead, and the letters "PAK" appeared on both of them. The disc from the Officials' Quarters at Fort Ross does not resemble the Fort Ross seal that was called for by Hagemeister. However, it does show some similarity to the seal described for New Archangel as each bears a small cross. Whether either of both of the two lead discs found at Fort Ross was used as seals have not yet been determined. It seems unlikely that a seal placed on products would be marked on both sides, as are both of the Fort Ross artifacts. It has also been observed that the Fort Ross artifacts are unlike those lead "bale" seals recorded elsewhere in North America (Adams 1986a, 1986b; Noel Hume 1982:270, Fig. 88).

The lead disc from the Officials' Quarters does resemble the lead tokens used throughout North America during the historic period (cf. Noel Hume 1982:172, Fig. 62). It is conceivable that the Fort Ross artifact was used by the Russians as such a token in trade. If this was the case, then the insignia of the cross may indicate that it originated at New Archangel, and perhaps fortuitously found its way to Fort Ross. The artifact's pattern of the cupola-like design and cross might also represent a local invention, used only at Fort Ross. However, if tokens were being used at Fort Ross, it seems unlikely that other examples would not have been recovered in the many archaeological excavations carried out at Fort Ross and within a number of historic Kashaya Pomo occupation sites near the Russian settlement. Perhaps the nearest recorded instance of a lead token being found in a Native American archaeological site is CA-MRN-138, located about 80 km from Fort Ross in ethnographic Coast Miwok territory (Slaymaker 1977:164, 267, Fig. 62). The artifact described from MRN-138 is considerably smaller than the Fort Ross disc, and it is marked in a very different fashion. Lead tokens have also been found in early

American-era sites, but these artifacts tend to be marked differently from the Fort Ross specimen and they are less-crudely manufactured (cf. Benté 1978:66), Fig. 20). During the late 19th century, the Officials' Quarters saw use as a saloon and the nearby Commandant's House was used as a hotel. It is conceivable that lead tokens were used at Fort Ross during this time, but it would seem likely that any such token would look similar to tokens used elsewhere during this same period. The Fort Ross disc looks cruder and older.

It is also possible that the Fort Ross disc was produced by someone other than a Russian. There were Spanish and Mexican missions and ranchos within easy travel of Fort Ross. The disc's cupola-shaped design with cross could suggest a Hispanic origin, perhaps as a trade token or seal used by the missions at San Rafael or Sonoma. To date, however, similar artifacts have not been recovered from such sites.

Regardless of whether the lead disc from Fort Ross represents a bale seal, a trade token, or some other type of artifact, it does seem possible that it was used for trading purposes. The Russians at Fort Ross carried on an extensive trading practice with Spanish, Mexican, American, and even Christian Indian parties (cf. Carlson and Parkman 1986; Gibson 1976; Khlebnikov 1976). Trade tokens could have been locally produced at Fort Ross in order to give to Kashaya Pomo workers, or, perhaps, produced at New Archangel for a similar purpose. Of course, the disc might also represent a crude ornament and/or a safe-passage token, somewhat like the Russian "Peace Medals" which were given out to the chiefs of the Kashaya Pomo to assure them safe entry into the settlement at Fort Ross.

Further archaeological investigation at Fort Ross might someday prove helpful in better understanding the nature and use of the lead disc. Until that time, the Fort Ross specimen will remain a unique and enigmatic artifact of the past.

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¹ This is a slightly revised version of a manuscript entitled, "A Unique Artifact from Fort Ross, California," which I wrote in February, 1987.

² The night before the disc was discovered, Willie, the park's guard dog, had pawed around in the recently weeded area, thus bringing the artifact to light.



Figure 1. Lead Disc from Fort Ross. A, This side of the artifact is clearly marked. Note the small cross beneath the cupola-like design; b, This side of the artifact is less clearly marked. Note the cupola-like design above which is the faint evidence of what may have been a small cross. Scale in mm.