

## CLEANING AND RESTORING BUTTONS

by Lisa Schulz  
Button Images  
[www.buttonimages.com](http://www.buttonimages.com)

Before cleaning your buttons you will need to know what materials the buttons are made of and have a knowledge of their construction and makeup, because the various materials are treated differently.

Many of the following cleaning techniques have been suggested by other collectors. They have not all been tested by this writer.

There are several things that this writer has used very successfully, and would recommend keeping in your cleaning supply kit. They are:

- Polishing Cloth (see my catalog or web site for ordering Polishing Cloths.) With use the cloth will get black, but it still continue to clean your buttons. I keep one for metal buttons and another (cleaner one) for other materials. Do not wash the Polishing Cloth.
- Brass Brush (see my catalog or web site for ordering Brass Cleaning Brushes.) Can be used on brass buttons without scratching. Can be used on other types of metal with a little more caution (brush gently). Use caution on fine silver and pewter.
- Gray ink eraser (found with school supplies or an office supply store.)
- Lead Pencil.
- Baby oil, mineral oil or gentle furniture polish used with a soft cloth.
- Clean dry tooth brush. Most buttons can be brushed with a tooth brush to remove dirt or dust that is on the surface or in cracks.
- Dremel with eraser wheels and brass brushes. (Can be purchased at some WalMart stores, some hobby stores or hardware stores) – The eraser wheels come in black, blue, and pink, with black being the harshest and the pink being the most gentle. I recommend beginning with the gentle eraser wheel (pink) and work your way up to the black if you need to. Put a mounting wire through the shank and use this wire to hold the button securely while cleaning it. Turn on the Dremel and touch the button very gently with the wheel. CAUTION: It is very easy to over polish your button using this method.
- Vibratory Tumbler - more details on this method at end of article.

Always be EXTREMELY cautious when cleaning buttons that have paint on them. Paint is easy to remove or chip using many of these methods.

I do not use any type of polishing creams or pastes. The creams and pastes tend to get down into the cracks and are extremely difficult get out of the tiny spots. If you already have brass buttons with polish deposits in the cracks of the button, the Brass Brush listed in my catalog works great for cleaning it out.

I suggest that you try cleaning your less expensive buttons first, to gain experience, before attempting to clean your more deluxe buttons. The wrong cleaning method can destroy a button, so be careful!!!

Many materials listed here have more than one cleaning method listed. That does not mean you have to use all of them. It means there are a number of methods available for cleaning those materials. If one method does not work on your button, try another.

In all cases a little more caution will need to be used if there is any type of embellishment on the button.

### Bone

- Wipe with a clean polishing cloth.
- Cut a lemon in half, dip it in salt and rub over surface, wipe with damp cloth and dry.

### Celluloid

- CAUTION: Most paints and stains are not permanent, so clean very gently.
- NEVER submerge in water.
- Wipe gently with a polishing cloth.

- If crackled and/or chalky the button is probably deteriorating and very little can be done to restore it. Keep separate from ALL other buttons.

#### Ceramic

- If the ceramic has been baked the button can be wiped with a dry or slightly damp cloth, or wiped with mild soapy water.
- If the ceramic is not baked, just painted, it will be difficult to clean without removing the paint.

#### Composition

- Wipe with a polishing cloth.
- Use baby oil, mineral oil, or furniture polish on a soft cloth, wipe gently. Wipe the button again with a clean, dry cloth, to remove excess oil or polish.
- Natural self-shining shoe polish can be used to give the buttons a shine.

#### Copper

- Wipe/rub with a polishing cloth.

**Enamel** - (Be careful not to confuse painted metal buttons with enameled ones. Painted buttons have not been baked. The paint may be brittle and flake off easily. DO NOT use these methods if the button is painted, they WILL remove paint.)

- Wipe gently with a polishing cloth.
- Silver polish can sometimes be used with care.
- Use a cloth just slightly, moistened with household ammonia, wipe the button very gently. Will remove the dust and dirt, but not the enamel.
- In some cases dirt can be removed by using a small amount of toothpaste on a clean, dry cloth. Wipe the button gently. Wipe again with a clean, dry cloth to remove all toothpaste.
- Motawala enamels are a camera technique and are not fired. Take great caution in cleaning them. DO NOT use water, a silver polish, ammonia or any type of moisture.

#### Fabric

- NEVER rub or brush the fabric, even if material seems strong. The threads are often brittle and break easily.
- Put a small amount of fabric dry cleaning fluid into a glass jar. Put the buttons into the fluid and gently shake the jar for a minute or two. Remove buttons, lay on absorbent cloth (or towel), outdoors (or in front of an open window), to dry. The air will help to evaporate the fluid. DO NOT use this method if there is trim or embellishment on the button that has been glued on rather than sewed on.

#### Glass

- Be very cautious when cleaning buttons with luster and paint. It may rub off easily if it has not been fired on. Clean with caution.
- With CARE, wipe painted glass very gently with a dry cloth, a clean polishing cloth, or slightly damp cloth.
- If decoration has been fired on the button, it can be cleaned with a damp cloth of mild soapy water.
- Very dirty buttons with no paint, luster or embellishment, can be wiped gently with a damp cloth, or Windex.
- Glass with foil under glass should be wiped with a dry cloth.
- One-piece glass with a self-shank and no paint, no luster, and no embellishment can be put in a mild sudsy water, then rinsed, and dried thoroughly.

#### Horn

- DO NOT use water.
- Wipe with a polishing cloth.
- Use a soft cloth with either furniture polish or mineral oil, then wipe with clean dry cloth.
- Can rub a bit of lanolin into the surface of the button, after a few minutes wipe with a clean dry cloth.
- Color can be restored by rubbing with a good quality paste shoe polish, apply with a cloth, remove the excess.
- Soft brush can be used to clean dust and dirt out of cracks.
- Holes in horn buttons caused by insects--Place buttons in a plastic bag and put in the freezer for a week. This should kill any remaining insects and their eggs.

#### Ivory

- Wipe with a clean polishing cloth.
- Cut lemon in half, dip in salt and rub over surface, wipe with damp cloth and dry.
- Wipe with soft cloth and baby oil. Wipe dry.

#### Leather

- Wipe with a polishing cloth.
- Use saddle soap, Neetsfoot Oil, or neutral shoe cream.
- Baby oil and mineral oil also work well.
- Take caution if there is embellishment on the button.

#### Metal/Brass

- NEVER submerge two-piece buttons into any liquid. Many of them have a cardboard disk in the center, which will absorb water, and eventually destroy the button.
- Brush well with a high quality brass brush. This will remove the green powder, but not scratch the button. Also works well for cleaning grooves in buttons, and shining them a bit.
- Wipe or rub with a polishing cloth.
- Rub with wool carpet.
- Rub gently with an ink eraser.
- Rub gently with Q-tip covered with acetic acid as in vinegar, catsup, and Worcestershire Sauce. Then wipe clean with a dry cloth. Take caution using this method if the button is made of more than one piece, liquid could get in between the layers and would be difficult, if not impossible, to remove.
- CAUTION: All types of Brass or Metal polish tend to leave a residue in the cracks and small areas, which is difficult to wipe out. Over time, the polish residue can eat into the surface of the metal if left there.
- A brass brush can be used to remove residue that is already on your button.
- A brass brush on a Dremel can also be used, but eye protection is a MUST, as splintering of the brass may occur.
- A silicone rubber wheel (eraser type wheel) on a Dremel can also be used. Eye protection is a MUST. CAUTION: Be careful not to over polish.
- BE CAUTIOUS cleaning buttons with original tint. Many methods will remove the tint.

#### Pewter

- Wipe with a polishing cloth.
- Brush very gently with a high quality brass brush. CAUTION: Some pewter is very soft and may scratch easily.
- Use the outer leaf from a head of cabbage, as a polishing cloth, then buff with a soft cloth.
- Use Turtle Wax or chrome polish.

#### Silver

- Wipe with Polishing Cloth.
- Use a good silver polish.
- CAUTION: All polishes tend to leave a residue in cracks and small areas that are difficult to wipe out. Use a brass brush to remove the residue, it can eat into the surface of the metal if left there.
- Never store in or around rubber (including rubber bands). The rubber actually "melts" into the silver and can destroy the silver.

#### Steel

- BE CAUTIOUS with tinted steels. Many polishes can remove the tint.
- Wipe with a polishing cloth
- Brush well with a high quality brass brush.
- If rusty, rub the rusty area with the lead of a pencil or an ink eraser to remove rust. Wipe with a clean cloth. With time the rust may return.
- Rust can be removed with a commercial rust remover such as Rust Eater, WD-40 or Naval Jelly, and may prevent further rust. Apply carefully with a cotton swab, let set for a little while (or over night), remove with more cotton swabs or a soft dry cloth. Then polish with Polishing Cloth.
- Use 000 steel wool to remove rust on backs and shanks of steel buttons.
- Always make sure your hands are dry when working with steel.
- A brass brush on a Dremel can also be used, but eye protection is a MUST, as splintering of the brass brush may occur.
- A silicone rubber wheel on a Dremel can also be used. Eye protection is a MUST. Be careful not to over polish. If buffing is then needed it can be done with a polishing cloth or a felt wheel on the Dremel.
- All cream polishes tend to leave a residue in the cracks and small areas. It is difficult to wipe out. Use a brass brush to remove the residue. The polish residue can eat into the surface of the metal if left there.

### **Tin or Zinc**

- Wipe with a polishing cloth.
- Rub with a soft eraser.

### **Uniform buttons**

- NEVER submerge two-piece buttons into any type of liquid.
- Wipe with a polishing cloth.
- Brush with a high quality brass brush.
- Rub with wool carpet.
- A brass brush, on a Dremel, can also be used, but eye protection is a MUST, as splintering of the brass brush may occur.
- A silicone rubber wheel on a Dremel can also be used.
- Polish with a high quality metal polish. All polishes tend to leave a residue in cracks and small areas that are difficult to wipe out. Use a brass brush to remove the residue. The polish residue can eat into the surface of the metal if left there.
- CAUTION: Be careful not to over polish.

### **White metal**

- NEVER submerge two-piece buttons into any type of liquid.
- Wipe with a polishing cloth.
- Brush with a high quality brass brush.
- Rub the dingy areas with a crumpled piece of aluminum foil.
- Rub with wool carpet.
- Polish with a high quality metal polish. All polishes tend to leave a residue in cracks and small areas that are difficult to wipe out. Use a brass brush to remove the residue. The polish residue can eat into the surface of the metal if left there.
- Can make your own polish by making a paste of three parts baking soda and one part water.
- DO NOT over polish.

### **Yellow metal**

- NEVER submerge two-piece buttons into any type of liquid.
- Wipe with a polishing cloth.
- Brush with a high quality brass brush.
- Rub with wool carpet.
- Some have suggested rubbing your button on newspaper
- A brass brush on a Dremel can also be used, but eye protection is a MUST, as splintering of the brass brush may occur.
- A silicone rubber wheel can also be used on a Dremel. Eye protection is a MUST.
- Polish with a high quality metal polish. All polishes tend to leave a residue in cracks and small areas that are difficult to wipe out. Use a brass brush to remove the residue. The polish residue can eat into the surface of the metal if left there.
- Make your own polish with a paste of 1 tablespoon each of salt, flour and vinegar. Use a soft cloth to apply the polish.
- DO NOT over polish.

### **Pearl or Shell**

- Wipe with a polishing cloth.
- If there is no paint or embellishment on the button it can be cleaned with a soft brush and mild soapy water.
- Luster can often be restored by rubbing with a soft cloth moistened with baby oil or mineral oil. If there is no trim or painting on the button you may soak it in mineral oil or baby oil for a while. Then wipe dry with a clean cloth.
- If there is other material embellishment, try wiping with a dry cloth, or a polishing cloth.

### **Plastic**

- Wipe with clean polishing cloth.
- Wipe with a damp cloth.
- If one-piece and no paint on button can be washed in mild soapy water.
- Dry thoroughly.

### **Rubber**

- Wipe with a clean polishing cloth.

- Wipe with a small dab of furniture polish or baby oil, on a soft cloth. Dry thoroughly.
- A soft brush can be used to remove dust and dirt from the deeper designs.
- On black rubber one can use a high quality black shoe polish to restore color.
- Avoid soap and water.

#### **Turquoise**

- Use a soft dry cloth. DO NOT use water.

#### **Vegetable Ivory**

- Wipe gently with a clean polishing cloth.
- Do not use water.
- Polish with Kiwi Leather Balm. Dry thoroughly.
- Use a soft cloth with furniture polish, baby oil or mineral oil. Dry thoroughly.

#### **Wood**

- Do not use water.
- Wipe with a clean polishing cloth.
- Clean like furniture, if no paint, trim, or other material embellishment one can use a soft cloth with furniture polish, baby oil or mineral oil.
- Be cautious with those that have other material embellishment. Many other embellishments will not take well to furniture polish.

#### **THINGS TO REMEMBER:**

- DO NOT over-clean or over-polish your buttons.
- NEVER dump a box of buttons into a pan of water no matter how dirty they are.
- Take special caution when cleaning buttons of several materials.
- Be gentle, a tender touch is best.
- DO NOT use water on most buttons.
- Some types of polish can destroy golden age buttons, as well as other buttons with a gold finish.
- DO NOT use olive oil or vegetable oils, with time they can become rancid.
- Exposure to sun and air will not harm most buttons.
- Radiation of the sun's rays will kill fungi and mildew. Allow them to heat gradually.
- DO NOT take buttons from a cool place and put in the direct sunlight, some materials may crack.
- DO NOT use any type of liquid when cleaning glass mounted in metal. The moisture will get under the glass.
- Japanese metalwork is often difficult to polished.
- NEVER submerge two-piece buttons into any type of liquid. Many of them have a cardboard disk in the center, which will absorb the liquid and eventually destroy the button.
- DO NOT mount buttons with pipe cleaners, safety pins, paper clips, or steel wires. Over time, these materials will rust, causing damage to the shanks of your buttons.
- It is best to use copper wire, or coated copper wires for mounting buttons. They will not rust or cause damage to your buttons.

#### **STORAGE OF BUTTONS**

- Celluloid should be stored alone. Celluloid buttons are highly corrosive of brass and steel if stored together. There is Camphor in the celluloid which reacts with metal, causing deterioration to both materials.
- Plastic buttons should be stored alone. Some plastics contain carbolic acid. With time those buttons will be destroyed themselves, as well as buttons that come in contact with them, particularly metal buttons. They will also destroy the metal shanks.
- Metalized plastic should also be stored alone. It too is highly corrosive of brass if stored with brass. It is also corrosive to some other materials if stored together.
- In general it is best to store like materials together.
- DO NOT store buttons in air tight containers. It is best to store them where air can circulate around your buttons, and where they can breathe.

#### **ODORS/MUSTY SMELLS**

- Place buttons (not celluloid or plastic) in direct sunlight for a day. Some times the sun will remove the odors.

- Place buttons in a bag with a dryer sheet of fabric softener. Leave for several days.

### **CLEANING QUANTITIES OF BUTTONS with a Vibrator Tumbler**

There is a vibrator tumbler that is used by non button collectors to clean small parts (such as gun parts) or rocks. It works wonders on many types of buttons as well. The machine has a motorized base and annular tumbling bowl with a lid.

This is what my machine looks like.



The buttons are vibrated in the machine, along with ground walnut hull media. (Ground corn cobs can also be used, but I have been told that they need to be replaced more frequently than the walnut shells.)

I have put a wide variety of materials in my machine, all at the same time. I have put in most types of metal, glass, Bakelite, vegetable ivory, pearl, and Lucite.

The Vibrator Tumblers come in a wide variety of models and sizes. Regardless of size, they are all used in the same way. Make sure the machine is setting on a hard, smooth (not carpeted), level surface with ample clearance around it, to allow proper air flow to the motor. Fill the bowl about 1/3 to 1/2 full will the walnut hull media. (I do not use the media with rouge in it. Some types of rouge media can give some buttons a reddish tint.) Add the buttons you want to clean. (I have had a couple hundred buttons at a time in my large size tumbler.) Screw the lid on tightly and turn it on. Buttons can be cleaned in this method of vibrating for 24 hours or more. I have had some very dirty or stained buttons in the machine for a week. Time is not crucial with this machine. Shut the machine off and check your buttons periodically, until the desired finish is attained.

To remove buttons, empty entire contents of the bowl into a plastic sieve or strainer, which has been placed in, or on another container. The media will go through the sieve into the container and the buttons will stay in the sieve. If there are buttons that are not as clean as you would like, they can be put back into the bowl for more polishing. This same media can be used over and over again. When it appears to be dirty, discard it and replace it with clean media.

A few CAUTIONS and suggestions:

- I would suggest you start by experimenting with your least expensive buttons first.
- Buttons with openwork, such as cricket cages can become filled with the media.
- Be cautious with buttons with paint, tints, or luster. (I have had some turn out great, and others not so great.)
- The media does get caught in deep grooves and under layers or loose edges.
- Media will get inside buttons with cone type shanks that are open. To partially prevent the media from getting inside these buttons you can insert a small piece of pipe cleaner into the shank, and leave it there during the tumbling process.
- Media that gets into grooves and cracks can sometimes be removed by shaking the button. If that does not work try a toothbrush, brass brush, or the brass brush on a Dremel.

Where does one get a Vibrator Tumbler and the walnut media?? There is a wide variety of places on the internet that sell them, as well as many gun shops, and a few rock shops. If you want to look on the internet, do a search for Vibrator Tumbler.

Have fun, and good luck at restoring your buttons to their original beauty!!!!

(revised 4/2007)

© 2004-2008 Button Images  
May be copied for personal use only

