White Pipes

A very common artifact type found in abundance is the clay smoking pipe. Though smoking is fast becoming taboo in our society, it was extremely popular in the late nineteenth century.

Several kinds of clays were used to make the pipes in this artifact group. The most common is the pure white "china clay." Other types include the buff-colored "domestic ball clay" and light gray "English ball clay." Something called "common clay" exists in red or brown shades. Occasionally, a stem was coated to prevent it from sticking to the lips.

Many pipe fragments are small stem portions, perhaps an inch or two in length. One of the most popular explanations is that as a pipe was passed from man to man, a bit of the stem was snapped off for sanitary reasons. Another more obscure theory claims that pipe stems were broken off to get the smoker nearer to the warmth of the burning tobacco in freezing weather. If you have ever smoked a pipe, you might be skeptical of this idea.

The diameter of a pipe's stem hole is considered one of the best indicators for establishing an approximate age. Generally, the smaller the hole, the newer the pipe. However, by 1860 stem holes were as small as they could get and still be usable. Most of the Fort Hays pipes come from wall past that date, so this method does not help much.

Another theory proposes that the thinner the pipe bowl, the older the pipe, but this is unproven. Yet another way of ascertaining age is through various markings or initials on the stems or bowls. Again, a problem exists: an initial on a bowl probably was incorporated in the original design, and thus stuck to the stem even if that model was produced for fifty years. Consequently, markings or initials are not very useful in accurate dating.

European pipes were so popular that they were copied in America, and the Fort Hays collection has several examples. For instance, a stem inscribed "Peter Dormi," represents a Dutch manufacturer Dormi. Another stem says, "L. Fiolet." Omar... deposit." This indicates an item handmade by a French manufacturer that operated from 1768 to 1921. Not very useful! One bowl has the name "Cattis" on it. Several fragments bear the initials "T.D." My research turned up several possibilities, including a Thomas Deaver (1746-1779) and a Thomas Duggan (1804-1852), both English pipe makers. Then there is...