

## HOW OLD IS "OLD"? Recognizing Historical Sites and Artifacts

Back to [Main Page](#)

### Miscellaneous Artifacts

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There are other easily recognized artifacts that may indicate historic-period use or occupation at an archaeological site. Usually these are items which are no longer commonly made or used in most parts of California:

**-Cut Nails**

**-Pocket Tobacco Tins**

**-Black-powder Cans**

While these items alone may not allow you to pin-point the age of a site, their presence can help you identify whether it's old enough to qualify as "historical."

#### **Nails: Hand-forged versus Cut versus Wire**

If a site includes, or once included, a wooden structure, odds are there will be nails – often thousands of them. Since nails are not especially attractive to treasure hunters, they will remain on the site long after the whole bottles and other diagnostic artifacts have been carted away.

The earliest nails were wrought or forged by hand. These taper to a point from all sides, are somewhat irregular in thickness, and have uneven heads. Hand-made nails indicate either a very early site, or the presence of a blacksmithing operation (or both). Hand-wrought nails are rare in California sites.

Machine-cut nails became dominant in western contexts in the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, though their manufacture began much earlier. Thin sheets of steel were cut into uniformly shaped nails with rectangular (rather than square) cross-sections, tapered sides, and blunt ends. These nails date from about 1830 to roughly 1920.

Modern nails are cut from wire, making them round in cross-section. They have pointed, rather than blunt, ends, and no taper. In California, wire nails had replaced cut nails for all but a few special purposes by the early 1900s.

If a site or structure contains more than one of these types of nails, it may indicate re-use of older nails or modifications to the structure over time. In such cases, it is important to note the relative proportions of one type to another. *And remember that, in "hinterland" areas with less access to stores and factories, older types may be used (and re-used) for several years after they have all but disappeared in urban settings.* This is true for many types of artifacts.



**These Machine-cut Nails are Rectangular with Tapering Sides and Blunt Ends**

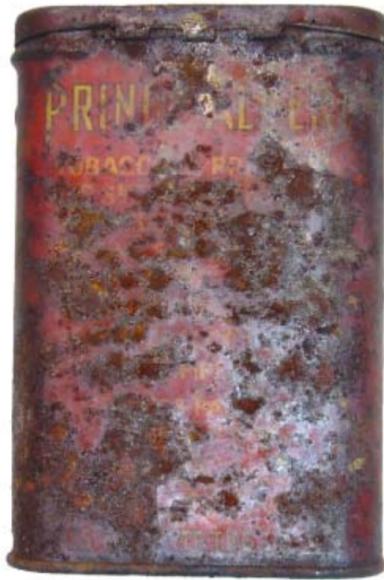
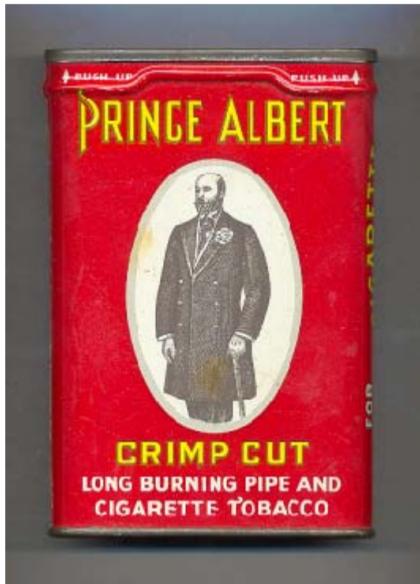


**Modern Wire Nails**

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#### **Pocket Tobacco Tins**

Ever heard the old joke "Do you have Prince Albert in a can? Well, let him out"? The "can" in question is the pocket tobacco tin, a flattened tin with hinged lid that was patented in 1907. While various brands of tobacco were sold in these tins, they became known as "Prince Albert" tins after one of the most popular brands. These tins continued to be made into the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century.



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#### **Cross-cut Saws**

These two-person, hand-held saws felled many a giant redwood, fir, and pine in 19<sup>th</sup>-century California, but they were slow and back-breaking. The first gasoline-powered chainsaw was invented in 1929, and within a decade or two, chainsaws had replaced cross-cut saws in California's logging industry. A cross-cut saw (usually represented as broken blades) probably dates your site to no later than the 1930s-40s.



**Saw Blade Fragment**

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#### **Black-powder Cans**

Blasting powder or "black powder" was used extensively in the American west in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries for mining, road and railroad construction, and even some forms of logging. The workers who built the Transcontinental Railroad, for example, used black powder to blast tunnels through the Sierran granite bedrock. Black-powder cans are large (about 5 gallons) and usually ribbed; and any trademarks found on them may help to date a site. These are some common examples (more can be found at <http://home.pacbell.net/rlmurra/timeline.html>)

- California Powder Works, Santa Cruz (1861-1906)
- Hercules Powder Company, Hercules, California (1882-1903 & 1912-1955)
- Western Powder Fuse & Explosives Company (1888-1902)