Eighteenth Century Conder Token History

In memory of Bill McKivor, 1940-2021.

THE FIRST THING TO COVER in this section is the actual name of this token series. In Britain, they are known as 18th Century Provincial tokens. Collectors in the United States have adopted the name of one of the first catalogers of the series, one James Conder of Ipswich. James Conder put out his catalog in the late 18th century. His arrangement became the standard reference. James Atkins followed with an updated reference in 1892. Between 1910-1917 Richard Dalton and S. H. Hamer published — in sections — what has proven to be a masterwork. It has been updated through the years, with the latest printing being one done in 2004. The relatively small number of revisions, corrections, and additions made to "D&H" in comparison to the size of the work has been small indeed. It is still the standard reference for the series.

In previous history sections the lack of small change, counterfeiting problems, and the reluctance of the British government to provide a good small coin for the masses to use has been discussed. A few other events made this lack of good small change far more important than it had ever been. Foremost among these events was the Industrial Revolution and its ramifications.

As society became industrialized — with the ability to manufacture machinery that made more manufacturing possible in other fields — the laborer saw an opportunity to leave the farm, and make a living wage for his family. There was thus a steady exodus from the provinces to mining or large manufacturing centers, where the need to pay wages was hampered by a lack of small coin. Some of the mines were located in out of the way areas, and there was literally no change available. In the cities, with more and more workers getting wages, more shops of all sorts were opened, bringing with them more jobs that needed wages to be paid. All of this began to accelerate by the mid 1780's.

KING GEORGE III had discontinued the making of copper coins in 1775. He found that they did not circulate. There were two main reasons. The huge number of counterfeit coins in circulation would be spent first — if the holder could get anyone to accept them. The nice, new, shiny penny would be saved — part of "Gresham's Law," an economic principal that states that *"Bad money drives the good money out."* The second reason they did not circulate was the counterfeiter — who would gather up the new issues, melt them down, and make 2 or 3 lightweight coppers out of one good one — thus doubling or tripling their money. Obviously, this only added to the counterfeits in circulation.

A third reason existed. The large cities often had enough — or even an abundance — of coin. That most of it was "bad" coin was a fact, but at least it existed. The small towns out in the "provinces" were often completely without coin. Money has a habit of flowing to the major trade centers, never to return.

IN 1787, the Parys Mining Company, that mined copper ore — made a decision. They had the copper, and they had access to coining presses. Located in Anglesey, Wales, they were out of the mainstream. Little coin of any kind found its way there. They decided to make their own. Beginning in 1787, they produced Penny and Halfpenny tokens, of the correct weight, nice design, and a edge legend that stated they were payable in Regal funds by them. They were avidly accepted by the workers, and loved by the merchants. The mines themselves were important — there was now a supply of copper in Britain that had not existed before. Planchets for copper coins could now be made locally, at reasonable cost.

Manufacturers and artists climbed on the bandwagon — producing designs that were not possible until improvements in coining manufacture due to the Industrial Revolution made it so. The need for correct weight coin existed — and there were lots of people willing to fill the need.

The idea caught on, and by 1795 thousands of issues of tokens could be found. Due to the improvement in the way tokens could be manufactured, the commercial tokens were not only of the correct weight, but could be made with wonderful designs. About 95% of the tokens produced were halfpennies. Penny tokens were generally produced in small number, with a couple of notable exceptions.

These tokens not only caught on with the buying public and merchants, but also created a groundswell of collectors determined to get one of each.

The collecting craze expanded to the point of many issues being made for collectors only — at a premium cost. It also led some manufacturers to the manufacture of "mules"— pieces made by using the obverse of one token, and the reverse of another — to make additional collector pieces. These were considered to be "spurious" issues — designed to cheat the public and fool collectors.

Furthermore, the tokens usually came with a lettered edge. On a correct piece, the edge gives information on the issuer, and where they could be found to convert the token into Regal coin. Varieties were made using incorrect edge markings, giving collectors one more thing to find — and the user often nowhere to go to redeem the pieces.

Others saw the advantage of making tokens, as well. Tokens were produced to advertise, espouse political views and social problems.

By 1795, the supply of these tokens — real ones, spurious pieces, and medalets — exceeded demand. The quality had deteriorated to the point where something had to be done. The British government finally stepped in, and called a halt to the tokens, issuing copper Two penny and One penny coins in 1797.

FOR a ten year period extending from 1787-1797 almost the only "coins" in circulation in Britain were the Provincial, or "Conder" tokens. As they were designed and manufactured by the public, they were not limited by any rules or regulations. Taken as a group, the tokens form a history of a people in a way never seen before — or since! Through them, we can look in on life in late 18th century Britain. We can see how they lived and thought through their commerce, politics, advertising, and even view their architecture. Avidly collected at the time of their issue, many of these tokens survive in wonderful condition, pieces of history that can be held in the hand. Collectors today find them perhaps even more fascinating than they did years ago. The study of these tokens has proven to be rewarding to many, and the stories behind the tokens and the era are exciting to discover.

A great deal has been written about the Provincial, or "Conder" tokens. The primary reference is Dalton & Hamer's *"The Provincial Token Coinage of the 18th Century,"* with descriptions and plates of thousands of tokens. In addition, R. C. Bell has written five books covering different types of the tokens — Commercial Tokens, Specious Tokens, Private Tokens, Tradesman's Tokens, Political Tokens, Social issues, Building Medalets, and the National, or Royalty issues of the period.

(This page contains information which was previously posted on Bill McKivor's "The Copper Corner" website. Credit: Jeff Rock, Conder Token Collectors Club.)

BRITISH HALF-PENNIES (OR HALF-PENCE) recovered from U.S. archaeological sites, such as **Fort Stanwix** (Rome, NY) and **Moores Creek National Battlefield** (Currie, NC) are colonial-era copper coins that frequently date to the reigns of King George II and King George III. Because circulating currency was scarce in the American colonies, these British coins remained in active circulation for decades.

DESIGN & DETAILS

Obverse: Features the profile bust of the reigning British monarch, such as George II (circulating with the GEORGIUS REX inscription) or George III.

Reverse: Depicts the seated figure of Lady Britannia holding a staff and the inscription BRITANNIA, along with the year of minting.

Physical Traits: These 18th-century copper halfpennies typically featured ribbed edges and were slightly larger than a modern U.S. quarter.

Archaeological Significance: Coins like the 1723 half-pence found at Fort Stanwix and the 1738 halfpenny found at Moores Creek National Battlefield offer vital insights into 18th-century commerce, military garrison life, and colonial trade networks. Archaeologists carefully study the varying degrees of wear and the distribution of these artifacts to track British troop movements and local exchange systems. [National Park Service] [Coincraft.com]

In colonial America what coins were used for day to day commerce?

COINS were chronically scarce in colonial America. Because Great Britain heavily restricted the minting of coins in the colonies and sent little actual currency overseas, colonists relied on a patchwork of foreign coins, locally minted money, and paper currency for daily commerce. The primary coins used for day-to-day transactions included:

Spanish Milled Dollars (Pieces of Eight): The most common and reliable currency circulating in the colonies was the silver Spanish 8-real coin. Struck in Mexico and South America, they contained consistent, trusted silver content. Because small change was rare, merchants literally chopped these coins into halves, quarters, eighths, and sixteenths to make change. This is the origin of the term "two bits" (a quarter of a dollar).

Foreign European Silver & Gold: Thanks to heavy trade with the West Indies, currencies like the Netherlands "Lion Dollar," French silver écus, and Portuguese gold moidores were widely accepted. Foreign coins were actually considered legal tender in America until 1857.

British Currency: Even though colonists used foreign coins, they largely kept their accounts in the English system: pounds (£), shillings (s), and pence (d). Actual British coins—such as the sixpence, shilling, and gold guinea—did circulate, but they were often hoarded or sent back to England to pay off debts.

Early Colonial Coins: A few colonies attempted to mint their own change to ease shortages. The most famous are the silver coins minted by Massachusetts Bay Colony between 1652 and 1682, which featured stamps of a Willow, an Oak, or a Pine Tree.

Before the U.S. adopted a unified decimal currency, colonists heavily relied on bartering with staple goods like tobacco, beaver pelts, and indigenous wampum (beads) when coins were unavailable.

Were Conder Tokens in circulation in colonial America?

YES, Conder Tokens did circulate in early America, but primarily after the Revolutionary War during the early Federal period, rather than the core colonial era.

Also known as 18th-Century Provincial Tokens, these private copper pieces were minted in Great Britain starting in 1787 to combat a massive shortage of small-denomination copper coins. Because the young United States faced an equally severe coin shortage before the Philadelphia Mint achieved high-volume production, millions of these British tokens crossed the Atlantic.

HOW CONDER TOKENS CIRCULATED IN AMERICA

Imported as bulk copper, American merchants and entrepreneurs ordered large quantities of plain-edge British tokens directly from English manufacturers to use as loose change along the eastern seaboard.

The Washington Pieces: Several varieties were deliberately struck in England featuring the bust of George Washington. For example, the 1791 Small Eagle cent was created by British die-makers hoping to secure a contract to mint official U.S. coinage. When the U.S. government declined, the manufacturers dumped the tokens into general circulation, where they became heavily worn from daily use.

The Kentucky Token: Minted in England around 1792–1794, this famous Conder token featured a hand holding a scroll reading *"Our Cause is Just"* surrounded by 15 stars (representing the 15 states of the Union at the time). Historians note that the plain-edge versions show extensive wear, proving they circulated widely as everyday cents in America.

The Franklin Press Token: Struck in England in 1794, this token featured a classic printing press. While initially produced as a local British merchant token, many were shipped to America to serve as much-needed copper change.

Because they were roughly the same size and weight as British halfpennies and pennies, the public accepted them seamlessly alongside whatever other miscellaneous copper coins were available at the time. Today, they are highly sought after by collectors of Early American Coppers.

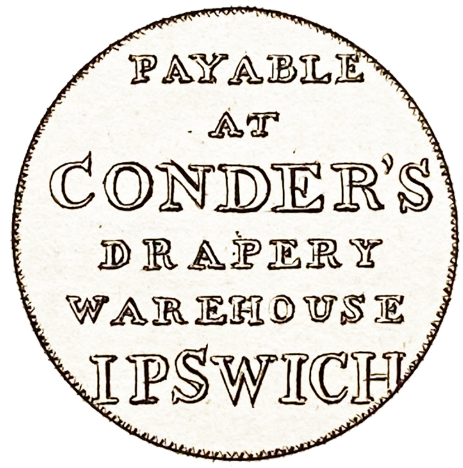

Illustration from *"The Virtuoso's Companion and Coin Collectors Guide."* London. 1795.

THE TYPOQUARIAN® » MITCH MONDELLO, FOUNDER «

TYPOQUARIAN® HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS

“FOR THE CONVENIENCE OF THE PUBLIC”

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CONDER TOKENS FROM THE COLLECTION OF MITCH MONDELLO, TYPOQUARIAN® HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS

PEACE AND PLENTY

GUIELMUS TERTIUS REX

EARL HOWE & THE FIRST OF JUNE

GEORGE PRINCE OF WALES

TRIED FOR HIGH TREASON T. HARDY

J. LACKINGTON

GUILFORD WOOLEN MANUFACTORY

LEEDS

ANGLESEA MINING DRUID

WILLIAM STINTON FINE TEAS & COCOA

PAYABLE AT I. FOWLER WHALE FISHERY

MACCLESFIELD

WAINFLEET

MACCLESFIELD

PRO BONO PUBLICO