Off the Shelf: The Sales of J. M. Henderson

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John M. Henderson (1870–1942) of Columbus, Ohio was a prominent American collector in the first few decades of the twentieth century (Figure 1). He is perhaps best known today for his term as president[1] of the American Numismatic Association (1909–11) and for the sale of his collection of half cents and large cents at auction by S. H. Chapman in 1921.[2] Less remembered today are the seven auctions held by Henderson himself, who was a dentist by trade and only a dabbler in the commercial end of numismatics. Dabbler though he may have been, his final catalogue was the 1938 ANA sale, suggesting that he may be deserving of a second glance.

Henderson's first auction sale was held on September 5, 1932, in conjunction with the Ohio State Numismatic Society's annual convention

1 The 1909 ANA presidential election was unusually contentious, pitting Henderson against Frank C. Higgins. With the convention taking place for the first time in Montreal, many of the votes placed were via proxies—most of them for Henderson. The Higgins camp, with Tom Elder's *Numismatic Philistine* serving as unofficial (loud)mouthpiece, alleged abuse of the proxy system, even as Higgins himself gracefully bowed out and allowed Henderson's election to be unanimous. Elder wrote that "The *Numismatist*'s feeble effort to cover up the Montreal discomfiture does not deceive any member of the A.N.A. nowadays. Somebody had to take the mud bath to go through the ditch dug around the official citadel and chase the occupants out into the light of day, where their methods stand apparent so that he who runs may read. Three hundred and seventy-five proxies in the hands of four persons, of whom three are officers in control of the official bulletin and playing into each other's hands, against seventy-one proxies divided up among the other fourteen voters at the convention. Doesn't that tell the tale?" In fact, Elder's wrath about the election had more to do with Farran Zerbe, a Henderson promoter, than with Henderson himself, whom Elder grudgingly admitted to be "a pretty good fellow anyhow."

2 S. H. Chapman, *A Collection of United States Gold and Silver Coins Consigned by W. A. Hilliard, Esq., Salem, N.J. and the Choice Collection of Cents and Half Cents of Dr. J. M. Henderson, ex-President, A.N.A., Columbus, Ohio. The Kingman Collection of Fractional Currency* (Philadelphia: S. T. Freeman & Co., Auctioneers, May 27, 1921). The plated version of the Henderson catalogue is among the rarest of U.S. numismatic auction catalogues.

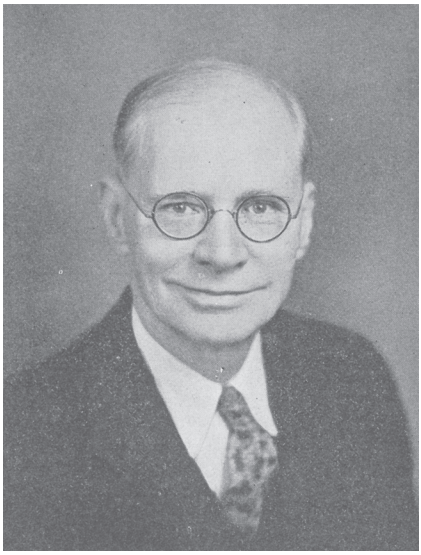
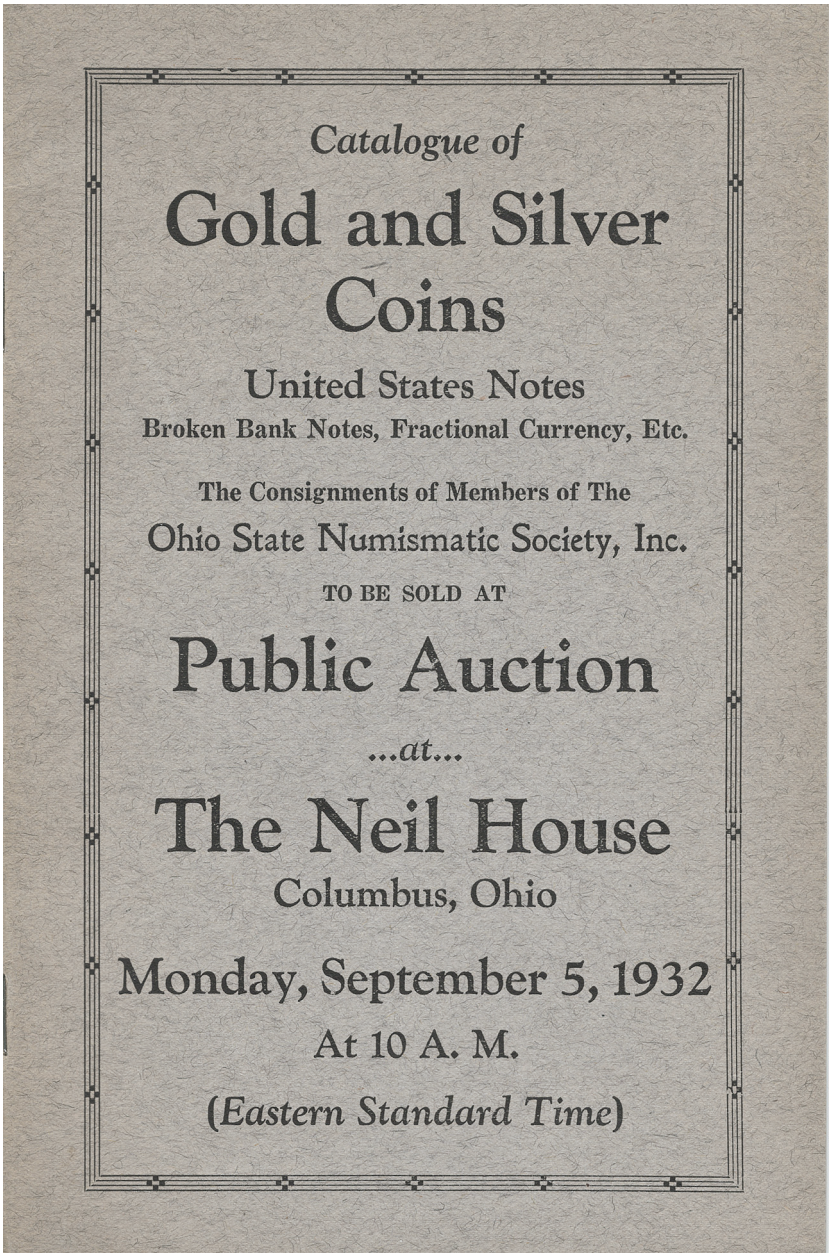


Figure 1. Dr. John M. Henderson, as depicted in his obituary (*The Numismatist* 55 no. 8 [August 1942]: 604).

(Figure 2). The site was the Neil House, a 400-room hotel and a Columbus institution situated across the street from the Ohio Statehouse until the hotel's demolition in 1981. The auction was organized by the Ohio State Numismatic Society, and Henderson likely found himself assuming the role of auctioneer due to his position as Treasurer of the Society. Henderson is identified as the cataloguer on the title page, and bids were to be addressed to him at his office in the Citizens Savings and Trust Building at 51 N. High Street (Figure 3). The sale is perhaps most notable for including a nice set of $3 gold pieces (including 1873), rare National Bank Notes (including Napier and Thompson signed notes), a good collection of Ohio broken bank notes, a 1907 wire-edge gold $10 with periods, and a 1915 Panama-Pacific set in the original frame.

On October 14 and 16, 1933, the Ohio State Numismatic Society held another sale, again calling upon Treasurer Henderson to catalogue and administer the sale. As before, the Neil House would be the site of the sale: in fact, Henderson held all seven of his sales in the well-known, centrally located hotel. The sale would be less notable than the previous year's, except that it included a very nice consignment of private and territorial gold coins, including an 1851 880 THOUS. Augustus Humbert



Catalogue of

Gold and Silver Coins

United States Notes

Broken Bank Notes, Fractional Currency, Etc.

The Consignments of Members of The

Ohio State Numismatic Society, Inc.

TO BE SOLD AT

Public Auction

...at...

The Neil House

Columbus, Ohio

Monday, September 5, 1932

At 10 A. M.

(*Eastern Standard Time*)

Figure 2. Henderson's first auction catalogue, dated September 5, 1932.

Figure 3. The Citizens Savings and Trust Building, where Dr. Henderson had his office during the period of his auction sales. The building, in downtown Columbus at the corner of High and Gay Streets, is currently being converted from office space to apartments.

$50 piece, an 1852 900 THOUS. $50, an 1855 Wass, Molitor & Co. small head $20, an 1852 Moffat & Co. 264 GRS $10 piece, 1849 and 1850 Holiness to the Lord $5 Mormon pieces, and more.

Henderson's sale of June 1, 1935, was originally intended to be another one held in conjunction with a convention of the Ohio State Numismatic Society, but according to the catalogue, "it was discovered the dates would likely conflict with other meetings, so the convention was postponed, but as the consignments were in, it was decided to hold the sale as planned." A collection of quarter eagles opens the sale, with Henderson writing that "All gold coins are now rare and getting

more so every day. The gold returned to the Treasury has nearly all been melted into gold bars." A consignment of early silver dollars (attributed by Haseltine number) follows. A substantial group of encased postage stamps and Lincoln-era ferrotypes adds some spice to the sale, with some rare Ohio banknotes (including a Kirtland $100) also featured prominently.

The collection of the late Henrie Edmund Buck was offered in Henderson's April 4, 1936, sale. In his introduction, Henderson notes that Buck, a former vice-president of the American Numismatic Association, had been his own sponsor for ANA membership many years before. The 1445-lot sale featured some scarce (at the time) CC dollars, decent large cents including a VF AMERI. chain cent and an EF 1794 Hays 27, 1861 Montgomery notes, Republic of Texas and Government of Texas notes, and some good half dimes including "1802—A fine example of someone's handicraft in producing an electro of an altered 1800 half dime." It should come as no surprise that Henderson is at his best when describing large cents, given the emphasis his own collecting had laid upon that series. A printed prices-realized list is offered for 50 cents, though I've never seen a copy.

The next catalogue, that of February 6, 1937, bears some indication that Henderson's ability to put together sales was beginning to be appreciated by a wider audience. The sale of the collection of the late Jesse E. Hische, the auction was held at the request of the estate and appears to have had no connection to the Ohio State Numismatic Society. Bert L. Foster is identified in the catalogue as the auctioneer, with previous sales making no mention of who played this role. The sale is most significant for paper money, with Henderson noting that "Mr. Hische specialized in U.S. Currency and Fractional Currency." The fractional currency was catalogued carefully by Henderson, with varieties, paper, surcharges, signatures, and repairs noted. Uncut sheets of fractional currency were offered, as was a shield.

But two months passed before Henderson's April 24, 1937, sale, this time as part of the Ohio State Numismatic Society convention. The sale's contents are small potatoes, with a glimmer of excitement caused by an 1850 Holiness to the Lord $5 Mormon piece being quickly dimmed by Henderson's note that it has been "holed and slugged" [*sic*].

If the previous sale is Henderson's least impressive offering, surely the capstone of his numismatic career is his following sale, the August

16, 1938, ANA sale. While ANA sales of the day were far from the grand spectacles of today, they were still important public events and being asked to catalogue it was quite a feather in Henderson's cap. Still, the contents of the sale are mediocre compared to plenty of sales of the day, with Adams rating it an unimpressive C+ overall.[3] The sale opened with paper money, with a partial sheet of four 1873 notes of the First National Bank of Lincoln, Illinois, bringing $40. A 1795 $10 gold piece in EF brought $55 and a 1932 ("None of this date were supposed to have left the Mint") brought $30. A small but nice consignment of private and territorial gold included an 1850 Baldwin & Co. $5 piece, an 1852 Wass, Molitor & Co. $5, and an 1849 Oregon Exchange Co. $5. Henderson seems to err on the side of extravagance in his commentary, noting that an 1878-CC $20 had a retail price of $150 and was well worth it, only to have the coin sell for $40.

While one would have to consider Henderson a minor cataloguer of the time, his seven sales are interesting for what they tell us about this notable collector[4] and as examples of numismatic commercial publications of the period in a locale fairly far removed from the hub of numismatic activity on the East Coast.

3 John W. Adams, *United States Numismatic Literature. Volume II: Twentieth Century Auction Catalogs* (Crestline: Kolbe, 1990).

4 For a good biography of Henderson, see Jack W. Ogilvie, "Dr. John M. Henderson: Eighth President, 1910 and 1911," *The Numismatist* 74 no. 10 (October 1961): 1361–1364.