

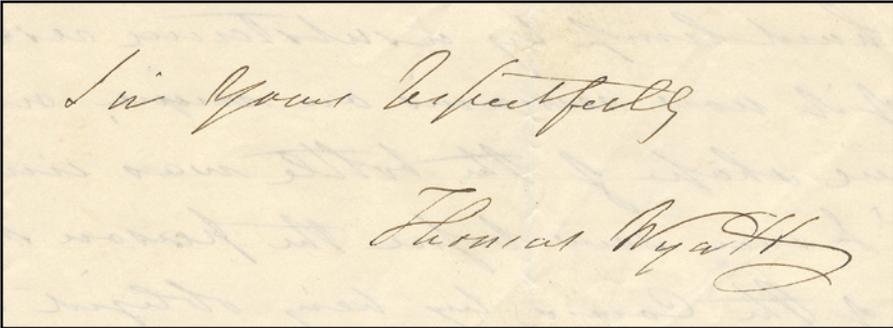
Off the Shelf: Thomas Wyatt and the Birth of Numismatic Fraud in the United States

by David F. Fanning

As a numismatic bookseller, I am lucky enough to handle some truly remarkable material, some of which never finds its way into a public auction where it might get the attention it deserves. This summer, an extraordinary archive of material pertaining to one of the more audacious and famous numismatic frauds of the nineteenth century was sold by our firm to a private collector. The archive consisted of six handwritten letters from Thomas Wyatt (c. 1797–1873). Wyatt was the author of three numismatic works: *History of the Kings of France* (1846),¹ the famous *Memoirs of the Generals, Commodores, and Other Commanders ... Who Were Presented with Medals by Congress...* (1848)² and a rare pamphlet titled *A Description of the National Medals of America, Presented to the Officers of the Wars of the Revolution and 1812* (1854).³

In the mid-1850s, Wyatt began striking medals, tokens and related items specifically for the nascent collector market. He also began producing high-quality struck reproductions of rare American colonial coins, which were privately marketed as original coins emanating from a hoard discovered in 1856. The “Chelsea Hoard,” as it became known, allegedly consisted of a group of Massachusetts silver coins that had been sealed in a bottle and forgotten about for two hundred years. In fact, the coins were all forgeries (and in some cases fantasy pieces based on coins that never actually existed, such as Pine Tree pennies). Perhaps most famous is Wyatt’s “copy” of the Good Samaritan Shilling, a coin that existed only in the form of a fantasy piece first depicted on the well-known plates prepared before 1730 (and published in 1746) depicting the collection belonging to Thomas Herbert, 8th Earl of Pembroke.⁴ Wyatt’s direct source for some of the dies he had created would seem to have been the engravings included in Joseph Felt’s 1839 *An Historical Account of Massachusetts Currency*.⁵ It has long been surmised that Wyatt faithfully copied the fine horizontal lines across the blank field of the NE shilling (added to the Felt illustrations to give depth to the images), thus providing collectors with the easiest method of distinguishing the Wyatt pieces from originals. A fascinating account of Wyatt and his work is given in Eric P. Newman’s masterful *The Secret of the Good Samaritan Shilling*.⁶

Wyatt’s copies did not remain undetected for long. Boston numismatist Jeremiah Colburn led the charge against Wyatt in August 1856, publishing excerpts from his correspondence with him and noting that soon after the “discovery” of the so-called hoard, “complete sets of this coinage poured into our city. ‘N.E.’ shillings and sixpence, before so rare, together with some other pieces never before seen, were to be found exposed for sale in this city ... all these pieces are counterfeit, and made by a man in New York city, who represents them to be originals.”⁷ Colburn corresponded



In Yours Respectfully
Thomas Wyatt

Letter dated 20 June 1856 by Thomas Wyatt.

with Wyatt beginning in June 1856, the same month as the “hoard” was announced.

The group of letters that recently came to market begins in the same month, tracing Wyatt’s fraudulent scheme from its beginnings in June 1856 to its unraveling just two months later. As a unique and unpublished record of one of the most famous numismatic forgeries in the United States, it is of considerable importance. Some excerpts follow.

Letter One: 20 June 1856. Wyatt writes, “I received your letter and I will send you the coins for your friend at the end of this week I have some difficulty in obtaining more except by exchanges, there are several here who have duplicate sets but will exchange only, and sometimes they want some of my medals so by that means I can obtain them it was so in this case, a gentleman from Philadelphia paid \$12 for a set last week.”⁸

Letter Two: 5 July 1856. Wyatt writes, “I received your letter this morning contain[ing] \$4.00 for coins sent to Mr. Ellis, and I acknowledge yours the other day containing \$6.00 for the set of coins I now send you. You say, you wish them as good as the last. I am obliged to send them to you as I got them, I have no way of choosing the good from the bad... I can procure the N.E. sixpence & shilling for 6\$ the two and this same gentleman tells me that a friend of his at Charl[e]ston S.C. has 2 of each which he can probably obtain for me by some exchange he says he has got the coin of the ‘Good Samaritan coined in Massachusetts’ what is it? If I can obtain another set I will let you know.”

Letter Three: 14 July 1856. Wyatt writes, “I send you the other set of N.E. money and I am trying to get the other (Pine Tree) as you wish, you shall [have] the 2 pennies as soon as I get them and as cheap as I can bargain for them I do not think they will want more than 1/50 each and perhaps not more than a dollar each. As soon as I receive the Good Samaritan piece I will enclose it to you with their price and you can do as you please about keeping it, a widow lady of Chambersburg has 6 of the pine tree money pennies in a collection belonging to her late husband a Gentleman assures me he can obtain them for me she wishes to sell the collection I have requested to know particulars in it are 2 splendid Lord Baltimore shillings I wish we could divide it amongst us I must see what I can do. I have received a letter from Mr Colburn also from a Mr Brown both wishing for Pine Tree Money...”

Letter Four: 28 July 1856. Wyatt writes, "I have received the \$8 for the N.E. Money, I send you the sixpence & twopence as you requested, you can have the pennies at \$1 each the same as I give for them. As to the Pine Tree Money being Counterfeit I believe no such thing if it is so, it was got up in Boston for I saw & examined the bottle &c myself with many others and they all pronounced them genuine ... The N.E. Money has been in Mr. Rob't Gilmore's Cabinet for many years at the sale his coins were scattered and I have frequently an opportunity of picking them up by exchanges, the 'Good Samaritan' belonged to him & was purchased by a gentleman in Washington who now is anxious to exchange coins for medals with me, when I receive it I will send it for inspection, he says there are two others in a Cabinet at Chambersburg which he has written to obtain..."

Letter Five: 7 August 1856. Wyatt writes, "I have not received the Good Samaritan till this morning's mail and I enclose it for your approval. Now its history is this. I cannot obtain it without giving 10 Revolutionary medals for it, these medals cost me 70 cents each I have permission to return it if I please, you have traded considerable with me and if you like it for seven dollars you shall have it and I do not make one cent by it beside the postages to Washington several times. Mr Colburn requested as soon as I received it I would send it to him. I told him he should see it meaning that if you kept it you would show it to him, if you do not, you can let him have it for 8 dollars and not less, he says in his last letter 'I defer remitting for the coins till I receive the Good Samaritan.' but I made no such promise I wish to be correctly understood as I wish to do what is right and give offense to no one. ... Let me hear about the Good Samaritan, some time I can give you its history and what it was coined for &c it is interesting"

Letter Six: 12 August 1856. Wyatt writes, "Whatever you may be disposed to think, I have acted justly to you in every point and that man does not live that can accuse me of the reverse without slander & falsehood but there is a clique here that what they cannot obtain by fair means they will by defamation and trickery. Mickley of whom you speak I never saw but once in my life more than 10 years ago and have never heard of him since. Bushnell is a young lawyer in Wall St that I see perhaps once in 3 or 4 years I have no acquaintance with him. I keep aloof from all. I thank you for your friendly hint you are quite mistaken about the coins being spurious metal, we tried them here in Nitric Acid and they were pronounced good silver."

It is fascinating to read these letters and recognize the lengths Wyatt went to in order to create false provenances for his creations. On many occasions, he simply alludes to sources ("a widow lady of Chambersburg," "a gentleman"); on others, he blatantly lies (citing the Robert Gilmore collection, for instance). He often preferred to exchange his creations for other (presumably authentic) coins, perhaps as a way to protect against charges of fraud if discovered. The turn of events made a strong impression on the young hobby and the notoriety of the pieces has never faded. Indeed, Wyatt's creations have become a popular collectible in themselves, appealing to those of us fascinated by the history of the coin collecting hobby in the United States.

Notes

1. Wyatt, Thomas. *History of the Kings of France; Containing the Principal Incidents in Their Lives, from the Foundation of the Monarchy to Louis Phillippe, with a Concise Biography of*

- Each. Illustrated by *Seventy-Two Portraits of the Sovereigns of France*. Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1846. Includes 18 plates engraved by W.L. Ormsby, illustrating 72 medals. Attinelli 119.
- Wyatt, Thomas. *Memoirs of the Generals, Commodores, and Other Commanders, Who Distinguished Themselves in the American Army and Navy during the Wars of the Revolution and 1812, and Who Were Presented with Medals by Congress, for Their Gallant Services*. Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1848. Includes 14 plates engraved by W.L. Ormsby depicting both sides of 41 medals. Attinelli 119.
 - Wyatt, Thomas. *A Description of the National Medals of America, Presented to the Officers of the Wars of the Revolution and 1812*. New York: Published for the Author by Charles Vint-en, 1854. Includes a finely engraved frontispiece plate depicting both sides of the Preble medal. Not listed in Attinelli.
 - Pembroke, Thomas (Earl of). *Numismata Antiqua in Tres Partes Divisa. Collegit Olim et Æri Incidi Vivens Curavit Thomas Pembrochiæ et Montis Gomerici Comes*. (Londini): Prelo demum mandabantur A.D. MDCCXLVI. Features 306 engraved plates of coins, including the earliest known engravings of a number of American colonial coins, including the Lord Baltimore sixpence and groat, Massachusetts Willow Tree threepence, sixpence and shilling, Oak Tree twopence and the Carolina Elephant token.
 - Felt, Joseph B. *An Historical Account of Massachusetts Currency*. Boston: Printed by Perkins & Marvin, 1839. Includes one lithographic plate of colonial coins and lithographic facsimiles of a 1690 Massachusetts Treasury note and a 1775 twenty-four shilling note. Attinelli 107.
 - Newman, Eric P. *The Secret of the Good Samaritan Shilling: Supplemented with Notes on Other Genuine and Counterfeit Massachusetts Silver Coins*. New York: ANS, 1959. *Numismatic Notes and Monographs*, No. 142.
 - Originally published under the pen-name “Nummus” in the *Boston Transcript* for August 19, 1856. Later published in the *American Journal of Numismatics*, Vol. VII, No. 1 (July 1872), pp. 4–5 under the heading “Counterfeit ‘N.E.’ and Pine Tree Money.”
 - Although Wyatt’s use of punctuation is unconventional, the meaning is nearly always clear. For that reason, the letters have not been edited. Any editorial clarifications are in [brackets]. Ellipses indicate material not quoted and are not in the original letters.



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