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The Virginia Halfpenny of 1773: Introduction

Although the April 10, 1609 charter for the Virginia Plantation included the authority to mint coins the colony did not choose to exercise this privilege until May 20, 1773, when the Virginia Assembly authorized the coining of a halfpenny at the Tower mint in London. The coin, engraved by Richard Yeo, was made of copper at a weight of sixty halfpence to the pound. Five tons of halfpence (about 670,000 pieces) arrived in New York aboard the ship "Virginia" on February 14, 1774 but were not distributed until written royal permission was obtained about a year later. The Virginia treasurer, Robert Nicholas, published a notice bearing the date February 27, 1775 in all issues of the *Virginia Gazette* printed between March 2-16, explaining that "copper money is now ready to be issued in Exchange either for Gold, Silver or any Treasury Notes." Soon after the initial disbursement of the coins commenced, the Revolutionary war broke out in Massachusetts at Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775. Consequently Virginians hoarded the new halfpenny, along with all other copper coins, until the end of the war. Although the halfpenny contained the portrait of the king of England, it is clear these coins were used in Revolutionary and post war Virginia, for out of fifty-nine coins found during the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, forty were Virginia halfpence.

At some point during the Nineteenth century, Colonel Medes Cohen (1796-1879) of Baltimore acquired a large quantity of uncirculated specimens which he slowly sold off over a period of years. In 1952 Breen suggested Cohen found the halfpence in a government office in Annapolis then, later, in his *Encyclopedia* Breen stated Cohen had found a keg of the coins in Richmond sometime after the Civil War. In fact, nothing is known as to the quantity, location or date of the acquisition of these coins. We do know that in 1929 his descendants auctioned off all that remained of the find, some 2,200 coins. Several were in red mint condition but were either spotted or stained. Many of the halfpence were acquired by the dealer Waite Raymond and later resold. For additional information see the discussion by Q. David Bowers (who suspects the hoard was found in the 1870's) in his work cited below on coin hoards.

The halfpenny displays the bust of George III on the obverse with the shield of Virginia on the reverse. There are several variants listed by Newman. He lists 13 obverse varieties with no stop after GEORGIVS (1-13) and 9 obverses with a stop (15 and 20-27). Two reverses have a harp with six strings (A-B), 15 varieties have seven harp strings (D-T, with no variety assigned to the letters I or L) and 5 varieties with eight harp strings (V Z). These 22 obverses and 22 reverses are found in 28 different combinations. There is also a nine harp strings reverse die that survives in the royal mint collection but does not appear to have been used for production as no examples have been found with that reverse. There is also a very rare larger size proof prototype, sometimes referred to as a "penny," and an extremely rare silver proof pattern dated 1774 that was engraved by Thomas Pingo, often referred to as a "shilling". Breen knew of six examples of this latter variety. The matrixes and device punches for the halfpenny still exist in the Royal Mint collection in London.

References

See: Eric Newman, *Coinage for Colonial Virginia*, Numismatic Notes and Monographs, no. 135, American Numismatic Society: New York, 1956 and his "Additions to Coinage for Colonial Virginia" in the American Numismatic Society's *Museum Notes*, 10 (1962) pp. 137-143 and plates 28-29; on the Cohen hoard see: Q. David Bowers, *American Coin Treasures and Hoards and Caches of Other American Numismatic Items* Wolfboro, N.H.: Bowers and Merena, 1997, pp. 30-31.

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