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# The Castorland Jeton or demi écus "Half Dollar" of 1796: Introduction

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In 1792 a group of French investors, with the financial backing of some Swiss creditors, purchased a 630,000 acre lot in upper New York State near the present day town of Carthage to create a colony for upper class French families fleeing from the tribulations of the French Revolution. The "Compagnie de New York" adopted a seal depicting a beaver chewing on a tree and the name Castorland (castor being the French word for beaver). The first settlers arrived in America on September 7, 1793 and built two towns on the land.

During the June 28, 1793 meeting of the company trustees, who had remained in Paris, it was decided to place an order with the Paris mint to strike "Jetons de presence" for the colony (with a few copies in gold and others in silver and copper). The items were minted in 1796 from dies created by Benjamin Duvivier. The obverse of depicts a female head representing Cybele, the classical goddess of fertility and the wilderness and protectress of the people. She wears her traditional walled or mural crown representing her role as a protector from harm. The legend reads "FRANCO-AMERICANA COLONIA" (The French American Colony) with the initials DUV below for Duvivier. The name CASTORLAND and the date 1796 are in exergue. On the reverse Ceres, the Roman goddess of grain and the harvest holds a cornucopia in her right hand and a drill for tapping the maples in her left; behind her a maple tree is being tapped for syrup and at her feet is a sickle and a sheaf of wheat. The legend is taken from Vergil's *Georgics*, book 2, line 173: "SALVE MAGNA PARENS FRUGUM" (Hail great mother of the crops); there is a beaver in exergue. This issue was minted as a medal for it bears no denomination and both the obverse and reverse are oriented to 12:00 o'clock, as is standard with medals. According to Victor Morin the Paris trustees were not entitled to any salary but received "two tokens of presence" as compensation for attending board meetings in Paris. These "jetons" are also referred to by numismatists as the Castorland Medal or the demi écus "Half Dollar". Thus, although this item was related to the colony it was struck in Paris for distribution in Paris.

Over the years the Paris mint has produced many restrikes of this coin in gold, silver and copper that can be dated by the symbols on the edge. Original die varieties can be identified by small problems with the hand punch lettering. On the obverse the initial A is low in AMERICANA and the numeral 1 in the date is low and touches the border denticle. On the reverse in SALVE the S is lower than the other letters, the M is somewhat below the A in MAGNA and the UG touch in FRUGUM. The example below is a very early restrike on a thin copper planchet exhibiting all of these peculiarities. Most restrikes have a more modern style lettering.

The Castorland colony suffered greatly during the severe winters in 1794-5 and 1795-6, along with the human toll most of their domestic animals died. Following these disasters, on the night of June 28, 1796 a hired hand stole the company's money (\$600) and escaped in a canoe. Soon thereafter the Swiss creditors in Berne appointed a new leader for the company. The colony continued to deteriorate until it was forced to dissolve in 1814 with Swiss creditors seizing all remaining assets.

## References

See: Breen, pp. 105-106; Victor Morin, "Castorland" *The Numismatist*, 1942, pp. 717-720 and John Kleeburg, "The Theatre at New York" in *The Token: America's Other Money* ed. by Richard G. Doty, Coinage of the Americas Conference, October 29, 1994, New York: American Numismatic Society, p. 31 and endnote 58. For an excellent discussion on the name of this item (jeton or half dollar) as well as a reprint of the Morin article see the essay "The 1796 castorland "Jetons" by Ron Guth and Mike Ringo at [www.coinfacts.com/colonial\\_coins/castorland/castorland\\_jetons.htm](http://www.coinfacts.com/colonial_coins/castorland/castorland_jetons.htm)

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