

Curator's Choice

An 18th-century French Caribbean Coin in Baltimore

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In the years before the American Revolution and the establishment of a federal mint, the North American colonies relied on foreign coins for their primary currency. With control over colonial trade and manufacturing in the hands of Britain, a country without access to major sources of precious metals and with no gold or silver to be mined in eastern North America, colonists turned to coinage from other countries (Lasser et al. 1997: 1).

Spanish silver and gold pieces were obtained through trade with the southern Spanish Latin American colonies and were predominantly used by wealthy colonists for large transactions and the import of goods (Smoak 2017: 472).

The poor and middling colonists, as well as the enslaved, relied more on coins of a smaller denomination to conduct commerce (Kelleher 2016: 49). As in North America, colonies in the Caribbean also struggled to provide sufficient currency for use in towns and on plantations. Goods such as tobacco, rum, and sugar were often used as a form of currency but the Caribbean islanders also found other innovative ways to deal with the lack of coinage, such as cutting Spanish silver coins into more usable pieces, or counterstamping coins for use in a specific colony (Salamanca-Heyman 2004: 57; Kelleher 2016: 50). The most common silver coin was the Spanish dollar, also called a "Piece of Eight" from the way it was cut into 8 pie-shaped wedges (Figure 1). Counterstamping was the act of applying a stamp to a coin to change its value and/or to indicate it would be accepted as legal tender in a place other than where it was originally issued (Doty 1982: 75). Various types of European coins of small denomination were counterstamped for use in several of the Caribbean colonies.

While the Spanish dollar was recognized as a global currency in the early colonial period, as Spanish power waned and Britain, France and the Netherlands competed to dominate in the Caribbean colonies, large volumes of diverse foreign coins found their way into circulation. Some of the most common coins in use along with the dollar were underweight Portuguese-Brazilian gold coins known as "Joes," Spanish two-reales, and stamped French copper coins known as "black dogs" or "stampees" (Kelleher 2016: 50; Smoak 2017: 472). This coinage, particularly the small counterstamped copper coins, was primarily used by enslaved individuals. Foreign coinage was critical to economic life in the Caribbean colonies for people across the social spectrum (Smoak 2017: 472).

Occasionally, coinage from the Caribbean would find its way to the North American colonies, perhaps in the pocket of a sailor or an enslaved individual who was being transferred for sale. One such coin, with a "TB/o" counter-



Figure 1. Examples of how a Spanish silver dollar or a piece of eight was cut to make smaller denominations.



Figure 2: 1749 French 2 Sols coin with barely visible crowned "C" stamp (reverse, right) and counterstamped with "TB/o" (reverse, left) for use in the colony of Tobago in the French Caribbean. From the

stamp for use in the colony of Tobago, was recovered from a small midden feature during excavations at Brown's Wharf in the Fells Point Historic District in Baltimore City (Figure 2). The Baltimore Center for Urban Archaeology monitored and tested the site during rede-

velopment along Thames Street in the late 1980s.

This coin began its life in 1749 as a French 2 sols and was likely used as a small change in France for many years before being selected for official use in the French Caribbean colonies (Smoak 2017: 474). The coin received a crowned "C" stamp on the reverse to mark it for official use and "TB/o" on the obverse for use specifically in Tobago (Krause et al. 1998: 236). The legend "SIT NOM DOM H BENEDICTUM," translated "Blessed be the name of the Lord," along with the date 1749, can still be partially seen surrounding the counterstamp on the reverse.

A faint shadow of a "C" is all that remains on the reverse side. The reverse legend "LUD XV D G FR ET NAV REX," translated "Louis XV, by the grace of God, King of France and of Navarre," is completely worn away. The coin in Figure 3 is an example in much better condition.



Figure 3: 1749 counterstamped French 2 sols similar to the coin found at Brown's Wharf, with clearer stamping (East Rock Coins n.d.).

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Brown's Wharf was the home of affluent residents and tradesmen such as sea captains, ship joiners (builders), and ship chandlers (dealer in supplies and equipment for ships). It was a center for importing, exporting, and storing goods from around the world, including sugar, coffee, indigo, tobacco, and cocoa from the Caribbean and Central and South America, as well as linen, shirts, hats, shoe insoles, and other clothing items from Europe (Figure 4) (Stevens 1989: 6). Enslaved persons were also listed among the cargo of many ships that docked at the Fells Point wharves (Arnett 1975).



Figure 4: 19th-century bird's eye view of Baltimore, including the inner harbor and Fells Point (E. Sachse and Co. 1870).

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