

COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS ABOUT

THE J.H. SOUTH COLLECTION

by Karl Moulton

Having read an advance draft of David Perkins' article about the J.H. South United States Quarters, I'd like to add some background information about some of the people and events surrounding this particular sale.

Reading through the catalogue one would believe that the Stack brothers, Joseph and Morton, did an in-depth job at descriptions and attributions of the early U.S. material offered in the sale. In the Bust Quarter section Browning attributions are found, along with suffixes to denote various die states. This was quite advanced for the time with only The World's Greatest Collection by Abe Kosoff in 1945-6 being compiled in the same manner. There are even two pages of black & white plates for both the quarters and the early dollars. So much for the good part.

The first questionable sentence is, From the Tracy Turner Collection. This is part of the description found in the first quarter lot, #375, offering a 1796 B-2 described as a perfect proof. Years of looking for any clues about Turner has turned up absolutely nothing; even though he is pedigreed with buying coins from the Virgil Brand collection in descriptions for several lots later on. In the early dollar section the name has been spelled differently to read Tracey Turner, as seen in lot #755. This puts a big dent in the credibility of the listed Turner pedigree.

Along the same line is the total lack of confirmation of the existence of J. H. South. An earlier February 24, 1951, sale by Stack's lists impressive Large Cent and early half-dollar consignments from J.H. South. Much of the choice material is from the Dr. George French, Col. E. H.R. Green, and Waldo Newcomer collections, which were supposedly dispersed in the 1930s and early 1940s. Perhaps another researcher can help to validate the pedigrees of the J.H. South collection. As Perkins mentioned in his article, I, too, would be interested in knowing anything reliable about South or Turner.

Did J.H. South Really Exist?

Probably not. After untold hours of fruitless research, my opinion is that this was a fabricated name for consignments coming from Wayte Raymond. He had handled coins from all of the above named collections, lived in the Long Island, New York area (Mineola & Montauk), and was no longer conducting auctions of his own. Keep in mind Raymond had a rather large inventory of nice material from having been in the coin business for nearly 50 years.

It must be remembered that four years earlier Stack's had conducted a most impressive sale where the main consignor was listed as H.R. Lee. In the introduction they mention,

We begin by expressing our gratitude to that outstanding collector, H.R. Lee. Mr. Lee covered practically all the United States series. Mr. Lee spent decades gathering his collection.

From this glowing commentary everyone at the sale should have known the identity of Mr. Lee ; but, alas, there never was a Mr. H.R. Lee . Today, we know that it was none other than Louis Eliasberg, Sr., who used his mother s and his initials to form the pseudonym H.R. Lee .

The same thing had happened earlier in 1944 with the Stack s firm in cataloguing the J.F. Bell sale. J.F. Bell was a pseudonym for Jacob Shapero of Chicago. So, we see that just because a sale has a named consignor doesn t necessarily mean it is the name of a real person. If J.H. South was a collector, he did not leave any paper trail to verify his involvement with the Turner collection, the Stack s firm, or anything else involving numismatics.

Walter Breen's Involvement

Among the people attending this sale was Walter Breen. At the time, he was a rising numismatic researcher and was focusing on the early federal issues. He examined the Capped Bust Quarters offered in this sale only to find a fair number of them to be mis-attributed by the Stack brothers.

This is readily apparent by examining the coins that are plated. One of the more obvious mis-attributions is the scarce 1825/2 B-1 designated as a common B-2, Lot #466. It was catalogued as uncirculated. Two lots later there is an 1825 B-23. Is this a take your pick — we aren t sure of the variety attribution? Who knows? Actually, it was a B-2 variety according to the plate.

It gets worse. Breen described five different 1818 mis-attributions in the 1992 Browning revision. These were B-5, B-6 (see Perkins article), B-8, B-9, and B-10. Among other quarters noted by Breen as being mis-attributed in this sale were the 1806 B-4, 1821 B-2, 1821 B-5, 1828 B-2, 1831 B-1 and B-2, 1835 B-5, and 1836 B-2. This level of mis-attributed coins make me wonder how much time the cataloguers used in checking the Browning book. Obviously, not enough time was spent comparing the actual coins to plates and descriptions to come up with an acceptable percentage of proper attributions. A new variety, the 1820 B-5, was supposedly first reported by Breen at this sale. It, too, was mis-attributed as a B-4.

One thing that is puzzling is that if the coins came from Raymond, who published the Browning quarter dollar work in 1925, how or why were the quarters mis-attributed in so many cases? Of all people, he would have known. This leads us to assume the cataloguers did the attributions. One logical conclusion about the correct attributions is that since Raymond and Breen were on such good terms, he had supplied Breen with an accurate list to verify the mis-attributions after the catalogue had been printed and sent out. It should be noted that Raymond commissioned Breen to do numismatic research in the National Archives shortly after this sale took place.

While I hardly concur with Walter Breen on many issues, at this point in time he was doing credible research and still used his faculties properly, so I tend to agree with his listed attributions of the South quarters when compared to the Stack brothers cataloguing. Both of the cataloguers have passed away and no discredit is meant to the Stack s firm as the same thing can be found in all other catalogues of the era where attributions are listed.

Unfortunately, much of Breen's later writing, especially about early bust quarters, was not based on fact. This had led to repeated stories and myths that need to be discontinued by all authors and cataloguers. Just a few of these are:

1) The four 1827 over-dated quarters obtained for face value at the Mint in 1827 story. Joseph J. Mickley's first recorded visit to the Mint was on May 29, 1841, as confirmed by the U.S. Mint Visitor Registers. This story was contrived in part by W.E. Woodward in his January 1884 Heman Ely sale where he was offering an Original 1827 over-dated quarter. The actual foundation of this story came from A.M. Smith in his U.S. Mint publications beginning in early 1880, just after Mickley's death in 1878. Breen picked up on Woodward's story after 70 years and promoted it extensively in the 1950s and '60s when he was cataloguing for New Netherlands Coin Company.

It was constantly changed and manipulated to the point of ridiculousness until Breen's writings labeled the Norweb collection example, sold by Bowers and Merena in March, 1988, to be *J.J. Mickley's Favorite*. Of course this was Mickley's Favorite, it was his only one! Also, in this catalogue a passage that Breen wrote reads, *All stars show centers, which is probably why Mickley kept this one when he sold the others*. There is no verifiable record that Mickley ever owned more than one example (the Reakirt/Norweb coin) or of him selling any duplicate 1827 over-dated quarters. On a more recent note, Q. David Bowers has often reprinted Woodward's unconfirmed story in his many publications.

2) In Breen's 1988 Encyclopedia, p. 340, we see the E & L counter-stamped issues were first noticed in the 1870s. That's an extremely vague guess that spans 10 years, and even then it's not correct. Actually, the first appearance anywhere was in the December 12, 1881, John Haseltine sale, lot #915. His English and Latin conjecture has absolutely no validity. All awards of merit by schools during this time frame were in the form of paper certificates. Plus, there are no over-dated 1825 B-3s known with a counter-stamp.

3) Then there's the completely unfounded Breen belief that there was an R counter-stamped Capped Bust Quarter. THERE ARE NO Rs! It was merely a typographical error in an early Lyman Low sale that Breen apparently saw or heard about at some point, according to reliable second-hand information. The letters E and R are right next to each other on the keyboard. One final correction is that the counter-stamps are not always in the exact same spot. Since they were punched in after striking, there is a noticeable variation in relation to the denticles. The author has seen 3 different tilting positions on the 1815 E, with a few being double stamped.

4) As seen in the 1988 Breen Encyclopedia, p. 338, the 1796 quarter with a cracked obverse die was supposedly discovered in a Glendining & Co. sale in March 1935. This is incorrect information as there were several earlier listings in various American sales. One of the earliest traced by the author can be found in H.P. Smith's April 15, 1887, sale of the Charles White collection, Pt. 2, lot #317. Also, there is no verifiable contemporary U.S. Mint documentation referring to any presentation strikings of any 1796 quarters (or any other open collar coinage for that matter). Both of the known varieties can be found in proof-like, uncirculated condition and exhibiting a full head on the eagle. All of the third party grading services have not, and cannot, offer any official U.S. Mint criteria to substantiate their Presentation piece designations. They have labeled these as such, based solely on Breen's influence and commercial greed. For everyone's sake, let's stop having to read Breen's fables.

Proper Cataloguing Practices

We can see, the South Collection of Bust Quarters was impressive with regard to the quantity and quality. Of the 119 lots 36 were catalogued as uncirculated. At the time this was an important early U.S. material offering, even though there were just as many Ancients included as there were bust quarters and dollars combined.

This sale, because of hurried or improper cataloguing, descends to second rate for research purposes. The uncertainty of the names listed tends to discredit the actual owners and puts a large question mark in the important pedigree chain. Regrettably, we see this practice of using pseudonyms and fabrications continuing to this very day. This does not help promote a positive influence within the hobby. **Sensationalism and untrue statements have no place in numismatics; this includes the commercial arena.**

As a numismatic researcher and historian, my plea to all auction cataloguers is that if anonymity is not required, please list the actual names and provide accurate information about the main listed consignors. The American numismatic past has been screwed up long enough; let the present and future numismatists deal with truth. We will all benefit immeasurably if this practice is adopted and strictly adhered to.

I applaud David Perkins efforts to go outside his field of interest in order to further discussion, which in turn adds to the pool of knowledge. Every person interested in numismatics has a story to relate. So go ahead, compose something. We all learn from reading what others have to say, whether we agree or not. One thing to remember is: all numismatic knowledge is acquired.