

Notes on Joseph J. Mickley

Pioneer American Numismatist

by
Karl Moulton

Introduction

We are pleased to present this study by Karl Moulton. The subject, Joseph J. Mickley, was born in Pennsylvania in 1799. As a teenager he endeavored to acquire a cent of his birth date, but was unsuccessful. The challenge loomed, and within a few years he was firmly established as a collector.

By the 1850s he was one of the most familiar figures on the American numismatic scene. By the time of his passing two decades later, he was considered the grand master of the coin collecting community.

Much has been printed about Mickley in various numismatic texts from the American Journal of Numismatics, in the 1860s and 1870s, down to historical accounts in modern magazines and books.

Karl Moulton has made a special study of Mickley, in many instances finding errors in conventional wisdom. This article presents some of his findings to date, in a project expected to be published as a part of a book on early quarter dollars. Near the conclusion of the article a special revelation is presented regarding the die characteristics of the 1827 quarter.

Mickley Chronology

A brief time-line of Mickley's life sets the scene. To most entries much else could be said, but this chronology serves to place the later commentaries in context:

- 1799, March 24:** Born in Catasaqua, Pennsylvania.
- 1816:** Desires to find a cent from the year he was born.
- 1818:** Moved to Philadelphia and became an apprentice in making, repairing, and tuning stringed instruments including Piano Forte s.
- 1822, August:** Opens his own business (music repair and sales) at No. 67 North Third St.
- 1826:** Moves to 359 Market St.
- 1827:** Sustains first of several burglaries (U.S. dollars and foreign coins) 1 Gets married this year? 2 The Philadelphia Mint strikes 1827-dated quarter dollars from freshly polished dies, although this had no connection with Mickley at the time.
- 1828, July:** Becomes the father of first of six children.
- 1830:** Second child born.
- 1834 ?:** Gets remarried.
- 1835-1842:** Has four more children.
- 1840s:** Collects autographs, including the signers of the Declaration of Independence.
- 1841, May:** Visits the U.S. Mint *for the first time* with his elder brother Jacob from Lehigh County.
- 1841-1851:** Visits Mint on an average of once or twice per year as confirmed by U.S. Mint Visitor Registers.
- 1842:** Moves to 927 Market St. across from the new post office.

1845?: Rescues Herr Plich (wealthy old German music teacher) from a fire next to a rented back room of his residence. This would alter the financial course of Mickley's life.

1848: Sustains burglary of about twenty Half Dollars.

1850: Receives first installment (lasting 27 years) of Plich trust money, to be distributed for such charitable objects as he should consider most worthy

1851, February: Attends Lewis Roper sale (the first notable U.S. coin auction). Roper had gone to California in 1849, but died of fever on the return trip in 1850 aboard the *S.S. Panama* (cf. Joel Orosz research).

1851-1857: Finishes raising family and builds his coin collection while developing a close friendship with William E. DuBois, assistant assayer at the Mint and curator of the Mint Cabinet. DuBois wrote extensively on numismatics, but had difficulty separating fact from fiction. In a later era he stood ready as Mint spokesman to authenticate as original various recently-made restrikes and numismatic delicacies.

1857: Attends meeting to consider forming a numismatic society in Philadelphia, which would become the first organized coin collecting group in America (followed quickly by the American Numismatic Society).

1858: Publishes the very first date & rarity guide for U.S. coins, aptly titled *Dates of United States Coins and Their Rarity*. Elected president of Numismatic & Antiquarian Society of Philadelphia.

1859: Contributor to Montroville W. Dickeson's book, *An American Numismatological Manual* published this year, the first large-format book devoted to United States and related coins.

1860s, early: Reminiscence (published in 1867) by E.L. Mason, Jr. describing Mickley's home in the early 1860s: Few are aware that Mr. Mickley is a great musical celebrity, but those who have been fortunate enough to claim acquaintanceship with the great coin hero need not be told how the rooms of that old-fashioned residence on Market Street groan with ponderous pianos, and the walls are hung profusely with old violins, guitars, and paintings; and even a second story rear room has all the implements of a musical instrument maker's trade scattered about; while an odd-looking nursery far in the rear is piled ceiling-high with old books, newspapers, and pamphlets, relieved by eccentric looking chests and boxes. Mr. Mickley has not been an idle student of science. Besides coins, documents, books, medals, &c., which he has collected and mastered, there are instruments which when touched by his masterly hand produce sweet, soul-inspiring sounds and cause us to look up in his good natured, smiling, open countenance, and wonder at the ability and genius of the man.

1863, October: Family reunion, manuscript read at 100th anniversary of Mickley children's murders.

1867, April 13: Sustains burglary of foreign coins. By this time he had lived alone for a number of years.

1867, April 30: Sells most of his collection to W.E. Woodward, the highly respected dealer from Roxbury, Massachusetts, who immediately sells all of Mickley's U.S. gold to William S. Appleton.

1867, May: Buys \$10,000 worth of U.P. 5-20 bonds.

1867, August: Starts collecting coins and medals again after a bronze medal was struck by Charles K. Warner to honor him, according to *Mason's Coin & Stamp Collectors Magazine*, Vol. 1 No. 5, p. 46.

1867: W.H. Key, of Philadelphia, cut the dies for a 51mm medal depicting Mickley, then president of the Numismatic and Antiquarian Society of Philadelphia.

1869, February: One of 48 numismatists illustrated on a sheet titled *Mason's Photographic Gallery of Coin Collectors of the United States*, No. 1, published in *Mason's Coin and Stamp Collectors Magazine*.

1869, June: Closes business and leaves for extended trip overseas. Commissioned as envoy for U.S. Mint obtaining examples of coinage from 24 different mints in various countries.

1872, June: Returns home and buys a new residence on Wood St., where he lived alone.

1875: Publishes 37-page pamphlet about early Mickley family history in America.

1878, February 15: Sustains heart attack and dies at his doctor's residence.

Mickley and the 1827 Quarters

One of the most repeated stories about Joseph J. Mickley relates to the rare quarter dollars of 1827. He is said to have visited the Mint and while there obtained four 1827 over-dated quarters at face value. This story is riddled with improbabilities. As we know, this story was first printed after Mickley's death by A.M. Smith and greatly expanded shortly afterwards by W.E. Woodward. Here is the known background relating to this story:

The first United States Mint was never a banking or exchange facility. The institution employed no clerks to work as tellers. While it is true that bullion was coined into money, it was done on large deposits; and, at this point in time, it often took many weeks before the depositors were actually reimbursed.

The Mint had no coins available for purchase or exchange by collectors, which were few in number. In fact, the Rules and Regulations of the Mint, which were revised in 1825 by the new Mint Director Dr. Samuel Moore, specifically stated that, New coins not be given in exchange for others to visitors without the consent of the Chief Coiner. This regulation presumably refers to exchanging damaged or worn out pieces. It may also apply to the visitors who took a short tour through the Mint and wanted a souvenir. In any case, only Adam Eckfeldt had the authority to provide new coinage to anyone, including the Mint Treasurer. As of this writing, there is only one direct pedigree traced to Eckfeldt from that early period; that being the 1791 Washington Cent (lot #250) in the 1919 ANA sale conducted by Henry Chapman. Dr. Joel Orosz has published correspondence revealing that a decade or so later, the Mint furnished coins to Robert Gilmore, Jr., a Baltimore collector, for his cabinet. However, no evidence of such activity is known for the 1827 (or before) era.

In 1884 W.E. Woodward published that three Proof 1827 quarters could be pedigreed to Mickley, but the time line and information were not complete. Since there was no way for Mickley to refute this story, it stood as accepted fact since Woodward had spent three days with Mickley in April 1867 when he purchased most of Mickley's collection. Woodward implies a quotation or two from Mickley in his story, but was very careful to not use the appropriate quotation marks in his commentary.

It should be noted that two examples listed by Woodward are not pedigreed directly to Mickley -- only implied by Woodward and assumed by the reader. The listed pedigrees and prices realized are correct to 1862 when George Seavey offered the first one as part of his collection, which was catalogued by W.H. Strobridge. Also, it should be noted the prices listed by Woodward in his Ely catalogue were over 20 years old and, believe it or not, the 1827 over-dated quarter prices had dropped substantially in subsequent offerings since 1862.

Over a decade of exhaustive research by the writer to uncover contemporary documentation to corroborate this story has revealed absolutely nothing of a factual nature. Rumors and theories abound, but incontrovertible facts are nowhere to be seen.

William Elliot Woodward was the 19th century leader when it came to promotion (Mickley story in the 1884 Ely catalogue), over-grading (anything with a reflective surface was labeled as a Proof), and creative writing (Ichabod Crane satire in his 39th sale) in his catalogues. He was not alone in these attributes — certain of his competitors outdid him at several turns. Moreover, Woodward seems to have had good intentions and to have been a scholar, unlike all but a few of the coin sellers of this era.

Regrettably, this story, which was contrived after Mickley's death, has been accepted as fact by present numismatists based upon Walter Breen's writings starting in the 1950s. I find it strange that Woodward's story was never repeated in any numismatic publication prior to this time. The lack of any other substantiating evidence tends to confirm this as nothing but what it really is -- a story.

Tracking Mickley s Involvement with 1827 Quarters

The earliest mention in print of any United States quarter dollars dated 1827 is from September 13, 1857. It is an anonymous letter penned by Outsider (believed to be John K. Curtis of New York) after the newspaper exchanges between Gus (Augustus B. Sage) and Numismatist (Charles I. Bushnell), recounted in detail by Q. David Bowers in his book, *American Numismatics Before the Civil War*.

The letter reads, In 1827 only four quarters were struck from the die. Mickley, of Philadelphia, has one. Long [William Long, museum and restaurant operator] of the same city another; Graves & Weston, proprietors of the American Union of Boston the third; and the fourth I have not got the run of.

Unfortunately, no printed record of the existence of any 1827 dated United States quarters in numismatic hands has been found for the 30 years from 1827 to 1857.

The 1857 account is most likely the basis of assigning four quarters to Mickley, a statement included in A.M. Smith s 1880 — 1885 publication *Coins and Coinage, The United States Mint*. Smith has the first part basically correct according to Outsider s story of 1857 in that he states, In 1827 only four pieces, as alleged by the late Joseph J. Mickley, were made. The last part of Smith s comment reads, all of which he obtained at face value in that year. Notice that Smith does not mention how Mickley obtained them, nor does he offer any substantiating background information to support his claim.

Among the problems with Smith s story is that it was completely inaccurate as to the actual number known at the time. In 1867 coin dealer Edward Cogan had created a list of known owners and it contained 10 names of owners of 1827-dated quarters (which, however, were not labeled as current owners). Also, remember that Outsider s 1857 story only listed three owners with specific mention that Mickley had only one! Being the earliest reference regarding these issues, it must be accepted as correct since Mickley did not dispute this while he was alive. It is likely that if Mickley had obtained four 1827 quarters from the Mint in the year they were coined, he would have shared this with his friend, W.E. DuBois, who was interested in coinage history and published several books and many articles on numismatics.

A.M. Smith s comments, published after Mickley s death, may have been meant as a tribute to the late great numismatist, but as far as actual background knowledge of such events, Smith was not on the scene in 1827, does not seem to have personally interviewed Mickley on the subject, and his story is unconfirmed by any other source. It did, however, add a little spice to help sell his publication about the U.S. Mint until he left town for unknown reasons.

After Smith s comments, the very next time an 1827 quarter (they were not yet listed as over-dates) was offered at auction was in the January 8, 1884, Heman Ely catalogue presented by W. Elliot Woodward. As noted earlier in the present article, Woodward greatly expanded on Smith s story (this is the first and only time Woodward relates this tale) and still describes only three pieces, yet still alludes to Mickley s ownership of four based on Smith s 1880 story, which was incorrectly based on Outsider s 1857 story. The fourth was not accounted for except that it must have been stolen .

The Ely listing is given herewith:

Lot 244: 1827 *Magnificent proof*. *Of this coin not more than five or six original impressions are known; all that have been sold for a long time are comparatively recent issues, and are easily distinguished by the rough spots in the field, caused by rust in the die [these are the restrikes from the original obverse die, now rusted, and an irrelevant reverse].* It is related that in 1827 Mr. Mickley called at the Mint and asked for a quarter of a dollar of that date, tendering a silver dollar in payment; four quarters were handed to him; he remarked, I want only one, but reminded that he must take his change in something, he consented to receive the quarters. One of these pieces was in the Finotti Collection, sold by me to Mr. Seavey, by him sold at auction Sept. 22, 1863, for \$225. The next that appeared was this one, bought I think by Mr. McCoy from Mr. Colburn and purchased by Mr. Ely at my sale of the McCoy Coll. for \$227.50. The third remained in Mr. Mickley's hands until I purchased his collection and sold the piece in a proof set of 1827, probably the only known proof set of that date. The fourth Mr. Mickley was unable to account for, and always declared it must have been stolen. I have never seen or positively known of any other original. For this piece I paid Mr. Ely \$227.50. [At the Ely sale in 1884 it brought \$212 net to Massachusetts, according to a surviving annotated catalogue. This particular coin eventually ended up in the T. Harrison Garrett collection.]

Interestingly, Woodward even goes so far as to indirectly quote (and this is a key point) what Mickley supposedly said in a conversation at the Mint. To clarify the record, it is not a direct quote in the catalogue, merely implied. If Mickley only wanted one, as stated in Woodward's account, why did he simply not offer one quarter for another? This would have been the most logical thing to do.

Going back to Woodward's offering of Mickley's 1827 quarter in the sale of the Mickley Collection, 1867, it is noted that no mint visit story is published with it. Instead, we see a promotional blurb by Woodward who was the actual creator of the so-called 3-piece 1827 proof set. The following appeared in the 1867 catalogue under the heading, Proof Sets.

Lot 1706: 1827 Three pieces, Half, Quarter, and Dime. As is well known the Quarter of this year is of a high degree of rarity, and it may be that a *proof set* exists in no other collection. [The set was sold to Mr. Reichardt for \$180, this per a contemporary annotated catalogue; the surname was spelled as Reakirt by some others.]

As the 1867 listing was prepared soon after Woodward visited Mickley and as Woodward takes some effort to describe the rarity of the 1827 quarter, it seems strange that its story was not attached at that time — if Mickley had ever related such an account.

In my opinion, the conversation printed years later in the 1884 Heman Ely Collection listing, was merely a figment of Woodward's imagination to serve as a tribute to Mickley, and has no basis on fact. There is nothing anywhere in print to support Woodward's story. Besides, he knew this was not true in light of Cogan's 1867 list of owners. He himself had sold more than four 1827 dated quarters and could not present any additional accurate pedigrees directly to Mickley. The only correct Mickley pedigree is the single example, which was sold in the October 1867 Mickley sale to Joseph Reakirt (Reichardt).

Walter Breen read Woodward's 1884 story at some point in his early research and took it to heart. Significantly, Breen's 1953 monograph published by Wayte Raymond, *Proof Coins Struck by the U.S. Mint 1817-1821*, seems to dismiss the idea of Mickley buying an 1827 quarter or any other early Proofs directly from the Mint:

Though J.J. Mickley had Proofs arranged in sets incompletely for almost every year 1827-1867, it is improbable that he got them thus from the Mint — he lacked examples in some years where Proof sets were certainly made. More likely Mickley obtained the coins from other collectors, and the sets offered of the years 1817-1833 are made-up ones, not so issued from the Mint.

In his cataloging of 1827/3 over-dated quarters for New Netherlands Coin Company, he even *adds* to Woodward's story. His catalogue descriptions make for interesting reading as he first just copies Woodward's information that Mickley exchanged a U.S. silver dollar for four quarters. Shortly afterwards, he realized this could not have happened as the Mint did not do this.

He then relates that Mickley exchanged a foreign dollar (Mexican or Spanish) as a single bullion piece and immediately received four 1827 quarters as change, without even having the single bullion piece refined, assayed, or any other necessary procedure done that the Mint required on all bullion deposits. Breen also implies there just happened to be four 1827 quarters sitting around the Mint which were used for exchange purposes. In doing my research it was entertaining to see his pedigrees change through the years as to which four originally belonged to Mickley. He had even figured out which one of the four Mickley had probably kept after he sold the others. In reality, this was nothing but an exercise in creative writing with absolutely no basis in fact. Moreover, Breen often could not remember his own notes or what he had seen. For example, in his writings he mentioned 1827 quarter dollars he had seen, but neglected to mention the one in the Garrett Collection, which he had examined — this despite his mentioning many other coins from the Garrett Collection.

The casual reader of Breen's 1977 account in *Walter Breen's Encyclopedia of United States and Colonial Proof Coins* would certainly get the impression that Breen had access to factual data as to Mickley's purported transaction. By this time, many details had been added, including the particular type of dollar tendered (not a U.S. dollar), that Mickley did not particularly care if he received a Proof or a business strike, that possibly a clerk had on hand specimens of Proof quarters to be given out as ordinary change, that regular business strikes were not available at the time, etc.

It is common knowledge, evidently originating with Mr. Mickley himself, that Joseph J. Mickley went to the Philadelphia Mint sometime in late 1827 — probably by New Year's Eve — and tendered a Spanish or Mexican silver dollar, asking for a quarter dollar of the year 1827 as part of his change. He would have been satisfied with a regular business strike for his date set, but what he got was four proofs! It seems that no business strikes were as yet available, and he had to take his change in something — and so the coiner, or some clerk, gave him the four proof quarters.

My research of Joseph J. Mickley has shown that much of what we know of him has come from other people and not directly from Mickley himself. Many of these stories were offered as tributes while he was overseas for three years from 1869 to 1872, or after he died in 1878. Although Breen was a master at adding factual-sounding fanciful details to his printed texts, the Mickley story was simply embellished by Breen, not created, as noted.

Joseph Mickley was a true gentleman with a high level of integrity. In his own writings he was very aware of being factual and well researched. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in his 1863 manuscript about his grandfather, which was read at the Mickley family reunion in North Whitehall, Lehigh County, Pennsylvania. This was intended to be a book, but was later published as a 37-page pamphlet in 1875. It serves as the first history of the Mickley family in America in Minnie F. Mickley's seldom seen 1893 work about the Mickley geneology. My favorite passage from Joseph J. Mickley's writings can be found in this publication: Memory is an easy dupe, tradition a careless story teller .

In Minnie F. Mickley's book, there is a most revealing 26-page biographical sketch about Joseph J. Mickley written in 1885 by J. Bunting, a very close friend. Bunting fills in many pieces of the puzzle concerning Mickley's early years that cannot be found in reading the accounts in numismatic publications. This may have been written as a response to W.E. Woodward's 1884 story.

Mickley's Early Awareness

As to when Joseph J. Mickley actually started collecting, there are at least a half dozen starting dates to be found depending on who wrote what and when they did it. I believe it was Mickley himself who stated that it was 1816 when he first searched for a cent of his birth year. Most 17 year-old males become keenly aware of money, or the lack thereof, and value each and every penny. A later passage written by Mickley, which appeared in the *American Journal of Numismatics*, reflects on the beginning of his recognition of money other than simply for spending purposes. However, it doesn't necessarily mean he began a collection of coins in 1816. He may have accumulated a short date run of cents while searching for one from 1799, but nothing more according to what is known in print. This was most likely the extent of his small cabinet in 1817.

Realistically, he would have had a difficult time as a young coin collector because he was moving to the biggest city in the United States and would have needed all his funds to get by while learning his trade as an apprentice musical instrument repairman for the next four years. Apparently, he did not have the necessary finances to further his education at college.

Sometime after he opened his own business in the summer of 1822, he put aside a few silver dollars, probably as savings, but these were stolen in 1827. From what can be confirmed, this was the only numismatic related event in Mickley's life for this year. He was probably much too busy courting his first wife, Cordelia Hopfeldt, to do much else. It is believed they were married this year, as their first child, Henry, was born in July of 1828. A second child, Josephine, was born in 1830.

My research has not uncovered any clues as to what happened to his first wife, but Mickley soon re-married. With his second wife, Diana Blumer, he fathered four children from 1835 to 1842. It is extremely doubtful that Mickley would have had much to spend on collecting coins during this pre-1840 timeframe. His life and finances were dictated by business and family matters.

Mickley's first known visit to the Mint in May 1841 predates Matthew Stickney's May 1843 visit. It should be noted that Col. Mendes I. Cohen, from Baltimore, also visited the Mint in 1841 a few weeks before Mickley. Both Mickley and Cohen eventually owned an 1804 silver dollar. However, according to Stickney's July 2, 1867, letter to dealer Ed Cogan, they were not remembered as collectors in an 1843 list made by William E. DuBois (curator of the Mint collection and assistant Assayer) even though they had both visited the Mint two years before Stickney. Unfortunately, DuBois was never prone to telling the truth. This omission creates an open ended question regarding the early collecting endeavors of Cohen and Mickley. Bet you didn't know P.T. Barnum beat them all when he visited the Mint in 1840!

The 1827 Mint Report

As to the mintage figure of 4,000 quarters which is found in the 1827 Mint Director's *Annual Report*, it merely shows that a delivery of quarters was made in the last quarter of the year; December 29 to be exact. It is only a bookkeeping entry pertaining to a warrant (#1133) being filled by Adam Eckfeldt, Chief Coiner, to the Mint Treasurer. Based on my research, I believe this was the first batch of 1828 Browning-1 variety quarters delivered, rather than leftover 1825 dated coins as Breen suggests. The most compelling fact to support this theory is that the over-dated 1827 quarters share the same reverse die as the 1828 B-1, and they both display the new style crossover 8 in the date. The new style 8 found on the 1827 over-dated quarters is actually over-dated over an old style double loop 8.

A Numismatic Revelation: The 1827/3/2 Quarter

In fact (and this has not been published anywhere before), the obverse die, which was used to create the 1827 over-dated quarters is the exact same die which had been used earlier to create the 1823/2 over-dated quarters! It is correct right down to the same number of denticles around the rim. This obverse die did not crack as Breen relates in his 1988 *Encyclopedia*, pg. 340. The lower right tip of the 2 was not removed during the re-lapping process and is clearly visible on all known examples. In reality the quarters bearing the date 1827 are properly listed as being **1827/3/2 - A TRIPLE OVER-DATE!** This is the only United States issue to ever be clearly triple over-dated (the 1824 half dollar over various dates is not unequivocal).

Another unpublished fact is that **all four digits were over-stamped** in the creation of this obverse die; they are not merely re-cut. This, again, is a unique occurrence in American numismatics. The best plated reference to see all of this is found in the March 24, 1988, Norweb II catalogue, conducted by Bowers and Merena, pg. 40. From research conducted in the National Archives, I believe this work was performed by Christian Gobrecht in 1827, when there were four different deliveries of letters and figure punches that year. At the time Gobrecht was employed in the private sector in Philadelphia, but did certain commission work for the Mint. Additional information relating to this story will be presented in a forthcoming book.

Walter Breen and Early So-Called Proofs

The time has come for new thinking about much of Walter Breen's research as he often did not validate his sources or present the facts properly. Many modern researchers are finding substantial credibility gaps in his writings, which cover all areas of American numismatics. One significant area that requires greater scrutiny and discussion is the so-called early Proof issues before the introduction of the close collar. This includes the 1827/3/2 Capped Bust Quarter. As of this writing, there has not been a single shred of verifiable, contemporary documentation — official or otherwise -- to suggest they are anything more than proof-like business strikes. No evidence has been found that such pieces were presented or sold to Mickley or any other numismatist at the time.

However, Breen has taken this issue one step further with *his* creation of Presentation Pieces, as seen in his book *Encyclopedia of United States and Colonial Proof Coins*. Here, again, there is absolutely no valid evidence to support any such claim. The proper contemporary term for first strike open collar pieces was **Master Coin**. Breen's early Proof book, which is filled with large amounts of conjecture, not identified as such, intermingled with fact, is the source of much confusion within the hobby; as are his various hand-written, coin show certificates of authenticity.

Perhaps an open forum to review, examine the characteristics, and re-classify coinage from this controversial timeframe would be beneficial to the entire numismatic community. We can then credit Breen for giving the impetus for later research, but it will be up to others to present facts and, when appropriate, add theories and conjectures, identifying them as such.