

## **The Dilemma of Low 54.... The Kneeling Slave Token**

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Following the researches of Lyman H. Low (1844-1924) on the Hard Times Tokens and the subsequent publication of his efforts in 1886, there has been a paucity of additional information on this early, attractive, readily available and historically important series. Perhaps none of these is more widely known than the 1838 anti-slavery token, although no cogent reason for its issue has been suggested in the numismatic literature, nor is there a description of its varieties, if such in fact exist. It is hoped that some earlier observations, coupled with a body of hard metrological data, may help to relieve some of this uncertainty.

The possibility that Low 54 was issued to influence the Congressional elections of 1838 was considered improbable by Lindesmith, who was led to believe that it may have appeared at the instigation of one of the American anti-slavery societies to commemorate the abolition of slavery in much of the British West Indies in that year. It was suggested by Leonard and Keeler that the anti-slavery movement may simply have decided to add their propaganda effort in token form at this time, the year being inconsequential, and/or that the token may have had some relationship to the underground railroad. Bushnell (1858) did not consider the token primarily political, in the sense of being campaign or election material.

In an extended article on presidential campaign medals which appeared in Scribner's Magazine in 1888, Gustav Kobbe, a knowledgeable early investigator, wrote colorfully of a "medium-sized bronze piece, dated 1838, which in the light of subsequent events has a deep significance. It evidently commemorates the organizing of the Liberty Party. On the obverse is a female slave kneeling and holding up her shackled arms, her hands clasped beseechingly. 'Am I not a woman and a sister?' is her pathetic appeal. This design and inscription seem to have been graven in bitter mockery of the reverse of the medal, upon which we read: 'United States of America' and 'Liberty'. A glance at this medal tells us that it differs as thoroughly from the other political medals so far examined as the purpose and methods of the anti-slavery agitators differed from those of the other political parties of those days. There is no clap-trap appeal to excited partisanship - nothing to bring an assemblage to its feet or to awaken a responsive cheer. The tears of the shackled woman fall rather upon the fruitful soil of humanity from which spring up pity and a deep sense of a wrong to be righted.

The pathos, the cruelty of slavery, and its mockery of the principles upon which our government is founded stand out in bold relief from this little circle of metal. The medallist seems to have worked with the grim earnestness of the leaders of the movement. The agitation

was not a mere political flash-in-the-pan. With the evidence this medal affords of the lofty spirit in which the antislavery movement was inaugurated, can we wonder that, although two great parties never dared face the question, it grew in importance until it overshadowed every other issue and had to be settled by an appeal from speech and parchment to blood and iron?"

To this it might be added that, considering the fine quality of the engravers art, it is unthinkable that the backward letter N in UNITED STATES on the reverse could have been an oversight. It was an inescapable cynicism on the national unity.

It has been shown in detail by the Fulds that the basic obverse design of the kneeling slave and the legend originated in the official seal of the British Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, which was organized in 1787, that Josiah Wedgwood, an ardent abolitionist, had his pottery firm manufacture large numbers of medallions in various sizes with this design, and that about 1797 a large number of British farthing and half-penny size copper tokens bearing a male slave of this design appeared in circulation in England. The design achieved great international appeal and was reproduced in an 1835 engraving by the black American artist, Patrick Reason. The dies for Low 54 undoubtedly were cut by Edward Hulseman, who was responsible for many of the other Hard Times Tokens of this period (Lindesmith). The Fulds felt that it was possible that the tokens were struck by the Scoville Manufacturing Co. of Waterbury, Conn., although many - if not all - of Hulseman's works were struck by Robinson, Jones & Co. of Attleborough, Mass.

In 1957 the Fulds described a variety of Low 54 ("Low 54a"), differing in that the obverse design bore a male slave in a similar posture, with the legend AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER? It was unknown prior to 1910, and although the reverse die letter stamps are identical (except that the N is correct), the work is slightly cruder and the denticles of the border are different. Only two specimens were known to them at that time, both in worn condition, and one would suspect that these were alternative die trial pieces that had inadvertently gotten into circulation, rather than a true variety.

Bushnell (1858) described the slave token as being Size 8 (which corresponds to 27mm.), saying that he had "gathered together all (of the U.S. tokens) that are known" to him. Low described them as being of 27 and 28mm. in diameter. Voorhis (1913) stated that there were two sizes of planchets, and that the smaller size shows a slight rise on the obverse rim below the letter R of SISTER, and below the left wreath ribbon of the reverse. Lindesmith believed the small variety was struck last, since three specimens available to him showed a die crack (sic) running from A of AMERICA through the wreath to a point above T of LIBERTY, and since the specimens were all EF and AU, there was a suggestion that they may have been struck for collectors. It also appeared to him that the larger variety in choice condition was quite rare. It is a conclusion of this present report that the defect observed by Lindesmith is common to both

sizes of tokens, and a statistical certainty that the larger planchet type is far the commoner in any condition.

A curious characteristic of Low 54 in all grades - observable at a glance, yet not apparent in the literature - is the fact that the reverse 1838 of this token is quite weak (fades) to the right side, so that the last 8 and sometimes the 3 are barely legible. The obverse and reverse axes are the same, although about half the specimens examined are off about 30' either to the right or left.

Although it is not normally observed, a comparative study of the large number of specimens in this study shows that, when the condition of the token is VG or less by the criteria devised for this investigation, the wear extends noticeably on the rim at the left side of the obverse and the underlying right side of the reverse. This fact, coupled with the fact that the reverse date is not in as high a relief as its surrounding design, makes it almost certain that the fading-date phenomenon is due to the dies not being evenly struck. It occasionally happens, however, that a specimen appears in which all four digits of the date are uniformly and evenly struck. The even-date and the fading-date varieties are absolutely distinct; there appear to be no transitional varieties and the difference is instantly discernable. This observation appears to provide valuable evidence regarding the slavery token.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

A sample of 73 specimens of Low 54 was obtained over a three year period (1975-1977) from American dealers and auctions, without regard to condition (except for two expensive reputedly BU specimens which were excluded). It is felt that this should represent a fairly unprejudiced sample of this token as it exists in the numismatic market today. The token is regarded as a common member (rarity 1) of the Hard Times series, and prices ranged from \$4 to \$30. Withdrawal from the market into this pool did not appreciably increase the price or slow the acquisition, and it might be estimated that somewhere around 1000 copies of the token still exist of the 25,000 to 50,000 mintage.

Of these, four were pierced (6, 6, 11, 11 o'clock), all with a slight projecting edge, as if done neatly with a hammer and awl, rather than drilled. Casual observation suggests that this figure of about 5 per cent is close to that seen in a number of other members of the Hard Times series. Twelve of the tokens showed some slight corrosion. Three were somewhat mutilated, but without any apparent political motivation, and one of these was counter-struck with a CS CR. Only two showed any obvious flan defect, and these were slight. One of the mutilated coins showed sufficient metal loss to be excluded from the metrological data reported.

When the specimens were laid out in order of increasing wear, it became possible to devise a grading system to which numerical values could be assigned for analytical purposes. Obverses proved to be more sensitive than reverses for this purpose, so that the system employed (*Table I*) utilizes obverse criteria almost entirely. *Table II* shows the distribution of specimens with both fading and even-dates, according to wear. The even-date variety is about ten times rarer than the fading-date' type, and the "wear distribution" is about the same for both, suggesting that both were in circulation for somewhat similar periods of time. One of the seven even-date specimens was pierced at the top.

The tokens were weighed on an analytical balance to the nearest milligram, and diameters and thicknesses were measured with a micrometer caliper to the nearest tenth millimeter.

***Table I***  
**GRADING SYSTEM FOR LOW-54 WEAR**

<b>Value</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Details</b>
10	Unc:	Complete hair detail. No sign of wear.
9	AU	Slight loss of hair detail. No wear at shoulder.
8	EF	Some hair detail. Small spot of shoulder wear.
7	aEF	Only trace of hair detail. Wear at shoulder extends along upper arm.
6	VF	Hair missing or vestigial. Forearm worn flat. Thigh flattened but some contour - no fine detail remains. Drape detail of left leg is still sharp.
5	aVF	Left leg drape detail largely lost.
4	F	Head & garment flat but belt line still visible. Folds on rt. thigh detectable.
3	aF	No folds apparent in rt. thigh.
2	VG	Belt line broken. Slight rim wear at left. Rev. leaf detail gone.
1	G	No belt or sash line. Rim wear at left.
0	Poor	Scarcely identifiable.

## RESULTS

Metrological data on Low 54 are summarized in Table 111. The most significant fact that emerges from this is that the even-date type was minted on a significantly smaller planchet than the fading-date type, the diameters of all seven specimens falling well below the smallest of the fading-date type. A scatter diagram of diameters fails to suggest anything other than this distribution.

Data fails to substantiate a significant difference between weights of the two types. When a scatter diagram of the weights is prepared, however, a bimodal distribution of the weights of the larger fading-date planchets may be observed, with 27 tokens weighing more than 10.3 gm. and 38 weighing less; modes for these peaks are at 10.5 gm. and 10.1 gm., respectively. The weights of all the even-date tokens fall well below the heavier of these two fading-date weight groups. Evaluating these two weight groups as to relative amounts of wear in the tokens they represent shows that they are identical. Further study reveals, however, that 89 per cent of the heavier group has thicknesses of 2.1 mm. or more, while 63 per cent of the lighter group has thicknesses of 2.0 or less. The bimodality of the planchet weights of the fading-date group is thus to a considerable extent a reflection of the token thickness, although a distribution curve of the thicknesses shows only a single peak.

*Table II*

### ANALYSIS OF SAMPLE BASED ON REVERSE DATE TYPE AND AMOUNT OF WEAR

Condition	Fading-Date	Even-Date	Total
Unc.	0	2	2
AU	2	1	3
EF	6	0	6
aEF	7	1	8
VF	6	2	8
aVF	13	0	13
F	8	2	10
aF	10	1	11
VG	10	0	10
G	2	0	2
Total	66	7	73

Wear, corrosion, sample size and the fact that the thickness is only measured to within 5 per cent all combine to make further comparisons doubtful. The two fading-date AU tokens do weigh more than the single AU even-date specimen, and 5 of 7 of the about EF weigh more than the single even-date token in this grade, but with increased wear the weight relationship disappears.

**Table III**  
**METROLOGY OF LOW 54**

	<b>Weight (gm)</b>	<b>Diameter (mm)</b>	<b>Thickness (mm)</b>
<i>EVEN-DATE TYPE (N = 7)</i>			
Mean	9.89	27.39	2.09
Range	(9.05-10.18)	(27.3-27.5)	(1.8-2.2)
Std. Dev.	0.4057	0.0690	0.1345
Std. Error	0.1533	0.0261	0.0508
<i>FADING DATE TYPE (N=65)</i>			
Mean	10.29	28.23	2.08
Range	(9.30-10.94)	(27.7-28.5)	(1.8-2.3)
Std. Dev.	0.4269	0.1677	0.1107
Std. Error	0.0529	0.0208	0.0137
<i>TOTAL SAMPLE (N=72)</i>			
Mean	10.26	28.14	2.08
Range	(9.05-10.94)	(27.3-28.5)	(1.8-2.3)
Std. Dev.	0.4386	0.2973	0.1121
Std. Error	0.0517	0.0350	0.0132

## **DISCUSSION**

The foregoing considerations show clearly that at least two distinct varieties exist of Low 54. This one, with a clear and even reverse date, was minted on a smaller (27 mm.) planchet and in a quantity of only a few thousand. The other, with an uneven reverse date, was minted on a larger (28 mm.) planchet and in about tenfold the quantity of the smaller. The fact that the larger group was minted on planchets of two thicknesses (albeit differing only slightly), which resulted in the tokens falling into two weight groups, does not seem of great significance. Both of the major varieties were minted from the same dies, both were in circulation for some time, and both were occasionally pierced for wearing.

Any solution to the dilemma of when each variety was minted and under what circumstances must, for the present, remain conjectural. Bushnell's large token collection in 1858 appeared to contain only the smaller variety. It does not seem probable that the competent and respectable minting establishments at Attleborough or Westbury would have produced an order of tens of thousands of manifestly defective tokens - or indeed that the thrifty and meticulous New England abolitionists would have accepted such. Or that their traditional frugality, coupled with the reasonable need for launching the newborn Liberty Party in 1838, would have called for more than a few thousand tokens. By 1840 their presidential candidate, James G. Birney, was only able to poll some 7,000 votes, and in 1848 they consolidated forces with other political factions to become the Free Soil Party. Six years later most of the abolitionists were Republicans, and by 1860 in power with Abraham Lincoln.

Could the dies have been restruck in quantity by cheap and negligent presswork to help the Liberty Party's Birney get his 62,000 votes in 1844? Or were they lost and fallen into the hands of commercial interests that sloppily struck them for easy sale as mementos of the political climate immediately preceding the Civil War?

The answers to these questions lie buried somewhere in the vast body of the abolition literature or the uncountable pages of the contemporary newspapers.

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This article was transcribed from the *TAMS Journal*; Official Organ of the Token and Medal Society; Volume 19, Number 6, December 1979. The following photo was not taken from that article.



Hard Times Token HT# 81, Scarce even strike '1838' variety. It's ~ 27.5 mm at 10.00 gm, AU.