

## “Numismatic Impressions of the Abolitionist Movement”

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In the late eighteenth century, the spread of Enlightenment ideas and growing influence of the Industrial Revolution strengthened the movement against the horrific barbarism of slavery. Several tokens and medals struck between this time and the end of the United States Civil War served as circulating advertisements of the abolitionist cause and celebratory mementoes of its great, albeit overdue, achievements. Today, these numismatic tributes to the struggle against one of modern society’s most egregious injustices remain highly popular amongst collectors.



In the middle of the eighteenth century, tales describing the gruesome reality of slavery in the West Indies made their way back to Britain and stimulated public interest in the topic. The first formally organized abolitionist group, The Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, came together in 1787 at a printing shop in London. This society was responsible for commissioning the famous “Am I not a man and a brother?” design, which it adopted as its seal. The motif first appeared in print in the March 1788 issue of *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, but no attention was given to the name of the artist. Several prints of the design existed amongst the papers of ornithologist and engraver Thomas Bewick upon his death in 1828, and as of now he remains the most convincing candidate, but the evidence is far from conclusive. Well-known potter Josiah Wedgwood produced cameos of design in the late 1780s, some of which were shipped to Benjamin Franklin and worn by supporters of the antislavery movement in Philadelphia.

The design made its numismatic debut circa 1794 on private tokens associated with the “Conder” series. A penny-sized token features a reverse reminding us of the golden rule: “Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do you even so to them.” These are seen in copper, white metal and brass. Some display the initials “TW,” indicating the die-cutting is likely the work of Thomas Wyon senior, who in the 1790s was engraving medals in Birmingham with his brother Peter before eventually departing to London to assume the role of Chief Engraver of Seals at the Tower Mint. Halfpenny issues are the most commonly encountered and exhibit a reverse showing two clasped hands along with the hopeful legend “May slavery and oppression

cease throughout the world.” Farthing-sized pieces, seen somewhat less frequently, were commissioned by British coin dealer and political philosopher Thomas Spence and showcase the abolitionist emblem muled with various other designs. Although it is not known with certainty who engraved the dies for the small-denomination pieces, they are considered by some the likely products of William Lutwyche, a well-known die sinker who also dabbled in the popular business of striking counterfeits.

The agricultural economies of Britain’s Caribbean colonies in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were heavily reliant on forced labour. Barbados was one of the world’s largest sugar producers during this time and it is thought that a sugar plantation owner, Sir Phillip Gibbs, first commissioned the striking of the Barbados coppers featuring an African portrait above the words “I Serve.” These were struck in two groups: the first with small, thin heads was struck beginning 4 October 1788 by dies engraved by John Milton, totaling 5,376 pieces; the second, with broader heads, is far more common, with an estimated mintage of 200,000, but its origins are less well-documented. One example of a Barbados penny has been found struck on a planchet with edge-lettering intended for one of JG Hancock’s 1791 Richard Paley Leeds halfpennies, but this is as good a guess as may currently be made as to the identity of the engraver and producer of the second batch. Letters recently discovered in the Soho Mint Records indicate the Bridgetown, Barbados firm of John Arnot & Co. requested an additional production of 40,000 pieces from Matthew Boulton in the summer of 1791, but this order was withdrawn before it was filled, the reason being: “there is so Many of the penny pieces that I gave you an order to make, Sent from England to the Island of Barbados – That they are all Cryed Down, and down go for nothing.” The usual low grade in which these pieces are encountered testifies to their extensive use in Caribbean commerce. 1792 penny and halfpenny issues with George III riding a chariot on the reverse are private tokens struck by Milton for Gibbs in that year. Fantasy mulings with other tokens and silver issues are likely products of Matthew Young, who acquired Milton’s dies after they were no longer needed.

In 1807, the slave *trade* was criminalized in Great Britain, though this did not outlaw slavery itself. A medal commemorating this progressive step was designed by G.F. Pidgeon and struck at the Soho mint in 1814 for Zachary Macaulay’s trade with Sierra Leone. Macaulay had spent his younger years in Jamaica and made significant contributions to the abolitionist cause by collecting and organizing a great deal of horrifying information about slavery in the West Indies. Curiously, the reverse inscription “Abolishment of the slave trade in England in the 1807<sup>th</sup> year of salvation by the command of the Sultan George III, for we are all brothers” is in Arabic, and was the work of Soho mint engraver John Philip.

The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 officially did away with the practice in the British Empire, although the lives of most former slaves improved very little with its passage. Numerous medals were made in commemoration of this milestone. Struck in white metal, the illustrated ex-



ample was designed by the prolific Birmingham medalist Joseph Davis in 1834 for presentation to school children in Tewkesbury, a small town in Gloucestershire.

As is always the case with humanity's accomplishments, a great many women made significant contributions to the abolitionist movement. The Ladies Negro's Friend Society began in Birmingham, England in 1825, and distributed antislavery literature containing the "Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?" design that would later be adopted for use on tokens and medals. The illustrated British medal of the early 1830s was engraved by Thomas Halliday of Birmingham and pairs this design with a reverse listing the names of many prominent abolitionists. The obverse device and accompanying motto are said to have been introduced to the United States by well-known abolitionist writer Elizabeth Margaret Chandler and were used by William Lloyd Garrison as the header for the ladies department of his abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*.





In 1838, cent-sized copper tokens appeared in the U.S. bearing a design similar to that used on the aforementioned British pieces. Two years earlier, a law was passed requiring banks to accept only gold and silver in payment for public lands. This caused a currency shortage which, as it had done in England fifty years prior, motivated the issuance of privately-struck coppers. Although the “Am I Not a Man” token is rare with only three specimens currently known, its “sister” piece is readily available and one of the most popular issues of the “Hard Times” series, as these unofficial pieces later came to be known.

In 1860, the prevention of the expansion of slavery into new U.S. territories was one of the cornerstone policies of Abraham Lincoln’s presidential bid. This was advertised on some of the tokens circulated as part of his campaign. The illustrated example advertises “no more slave territory.” A final numismatically-expressed plea for freedom in this era came in the form of a Civil War Token, privately issued in the early 1860s again in response to a nation-wide need for circulating currency. The obverse of this piece shows the emblematic head of liberty surrounded by the motto “Liberty Not Slavery,” championing one of the Union’s reasons for engaging in the bloody conflict.



Spanning nearly a century, the battle to put an end to one of humanity’s darkest hours was a struggle requiring the effort of many great minds and the sacrifice of thousands of lives. As with nearly all such triumphs, it did not occur without leaving a lasting footprint on the realm of numismatics. The examples discussed within this article will forever serve as yet another way to learn about our past through the revealing lens of our coinage.

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