

MAKING A MINT IN VERMONT

In a Time When Money Was as Scarce as Hen's Teeth

Nowadays you might think it was strange if a neighbor of yours were to start making quarters, dimes and nickles in a workshop in his backyard. You also might let the police know that there was a counterfeiter in town. Two hundred years ago, in 1785, residents of Rupert, Vermont, had just such a neighbor. However, Reuben Harmon, Jr. was no counterfeiter. He was minting pennies for Vermont, the first state to issue copper coinage.



Courtesy of National Life Insurance Company

On June 15, 1785, at a meeting of the state legislature in Norwich, Vermont, Reuben Harmon was granted the **exclusive** right to coin copper in the state. Up until this time, people traded farm goods for items they needed. However, many would have agreed that carrying a pocketful of coins to town was easier than hauling half a pig to the store to trade for some seed corn, buttons, and hardware.



Reuben Harmon's mint was an unpainted sixteen by eighteen foot building located on a branch of the Mettawee River. (The building is now gone but an Historic Sites marker indicates its location.) Inside was a furnace used to melt the copper. Two other machines rolled and cut the copper and yet another stamped the coins. The mint could make between thirty and sixty coins per minute using copper that Harmon probably got from Connecticut as copper mining in Vermont did not begin until 1793.

The 1785 and 1786 issues of copper pennies pictured a sun rising over a wooded mountain with a plow resting in the field below, the words VERMONTIS RES PUBLICA (Latin for "Republic of Vermont") and the date. On the reverse, an eye within a circle from which twenty-six lines **radiate** (thirteen long and thirteen short) was pictured. The long rays **intersect** a circle of thirteen stars. The words read STELLA QUARTA DECIMA (Latin for "fourteenth star").

The pictures and words on these first Vermont coppers tell us a great deal. The mountains **represent** the Green Mountains for which the state is named. The plow symbolized Vermont's number one industry — farming. The reverse side tells us that, although Vermont was an independent republic, it wished to join

the original thirteen colonies (represented by the thirteen stars) as the fourteenth star on the Federal flag. In 1791, six years later, Vermont's wish came true.

Later the design of pennies issued changed. Instead of the mountain and plow there appeared a head in **profile** with the words VERMON AUCTORI (Latin for "by authority of Vermont"). On the back was a seated woman with INDE ETLIBE (Latin for "independence and liberty") and the date. The change was probably to make Vermont coins look more like Connecticut's so people could use them in both states.

No one knows how many coins were minted in Vermont. We do know that Reuben Harmon did not operate his mint for the ten years authorized by the legislature. Harmon coined his last issue in 1788, just three years after opening his mint. Perhaps minting coins was not as **profitable** as he had hoped. Four years later, in 1792, the United States Mint was established and began minting the country's coins.

Some thirty-five varieties of pennies were coined in Vermont. You can see some of them at the Bennington Museum which has the biggest collection of Vermont coins on display in the state.



VOCABULARY

exclusive - not shared by others

radiate - to project outward from a center

intersect - to join or to cross

represent - symbolize

profile - side view

profitable - to gain money