

A Slave-Related Counterstamp

by Bill Groom



As a lifelong student of history, I'm hard-pressed to think of a more poignant topic than Slavery for Americans to ponder. This Hard Times token, Low #54, speaks loudly on the subject. Large numbers of these cent-sized tokens were issued by the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1838. These tokens ironically stood in stark contrast to the comfortably seated *Lady Liberty* coinage that the U.S. Mint had then commenced producing.



Also during this era, the practice of counterstamping coins was well underway in America. These “little billboards”, as author Greg Brunk deemed them, often served as a means of advertising products and/or services. This practice peaked during the 1850's and came to a virtual standstill as coinage was being hoarded during the Civil War. Circulating coins and tokens were thus literally speaking to Americans.

One of the great many entrepreneurs who utilized counterstamped coins to garner business was a man named Isaac B. Burbbayge of St. Louis, Missouri. He operated an intelligence office there between 1837-59, working at various addresses. He had opened a branch office in Cincinnati by the late 1850's. Isaac ran frequent ads in eastern papers, offering a variety of services to folks wanting to head west. For a mere dollar, Isaac would reply to correspondence by sending a map. He principally offered his services as a broker, dealing in real estate and helping pioneers make needed connections. In a more unseemly manner, Issac also offered his services as a broker in the slave market. He likely represented the interests of slave owners, hoping to capture runaways; thus, the intelligence aspect of his business.

Burbbayge's stamped coins, shown on next page, are identified by virtue of his I.B.B. initials. St. Louis directories from the era show that he is the only current resident to possess same. It's estimated that perhaps twenty of Burbbayge's counterstamped coins may exist. All known pieces are silver, including half dimes, dimes, quarters, halves and Spanish two-bit coins. These two dimes are dated 1839-O and 1853.

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1839-O and 1853 Liberty Seated dimes with Burbbayge's counterstamp on the obverse.

Looking at his logo stamp on this 1853 quarter, it's clear that Isaac took care in centering his mark and placing it obtrusively in opposition to Lady Liberty. Might he have done this simply to make his mark more noticeable as the coin circulated and generated word-of-mouth advertising on his behalf? Or, was it his intent as a slave tracer to controvert Lady Liberty? Perhaps, both?



Brunk assigned # B-45 to this issue, whereas Rulau listed them as MO-102.

Illustrated below is one of Isaac Burbbayge's many NY ads. It makes no mention of any slave-related services; this, likely to avoid antagonizing abolitionists in the 1850's

**I. B. BURBBAYGE'S
GENERAL AGENCY
AND INTELLIGENCE OFFICE.**

Established between Ten and Twenty Years.

AGENCIES and WANTS, brought about, and all kinds of information given.
River and California Guide Books to be had at this Agency from ten cents to \$1.
Post paid letters, with one dollar, on any business, will receive a return answer.
Office No. 102 Second, corner of Locust St., ST. LOUIS, MO.

The below ad copy appeared in the NY SUN in September of 1845. It goes into more detail about his services, including his engaging in slave-related activity; this, likely tracing and procuring

IMPORTANT NOTICE, 50,000 PERSONS - Men, women, boys and girls, every year, obtains Intelligence and information for my agency, to wit: go-ahead-men, clerks, book-keepers, salesmen, capitalists, mechanics, farmers, laborers, traveling agents, also tip-top women and girls, cooks, washers, ironers, nurses, &c. buys and sells negroes, real estate, houses, lots, farms &c. Persons contemplating going out west, or in want of information and intelligence therefrom can, without doubt save time, money and shoe leather, by making known their wants, in all communications to my address postpaid and enclosing a fee of one dollar, will receive special attention with dispatch - Address, I.B. BURBBAYGE, General agent and proprietor of the old established intelligence office, money, negro slave, and, real estate agency, Saint Louis, Missouri.

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In other ads, Isaac touted that, "Any citizen can tell you in what part of the city my office is located." In 1851, a dime paid at his office would purchase "Guide Books of Distances, on all Western Rivers, Lakes, &c." An ad posted in THE SPIRIT OF THE TIMES, NY, NY, on September 18, 1847, invited readers to "Save time, trouble, shoe-leather, Bentonian Mint Drops, &c. &c. When you visit Saint Louis, Mo., drop in at this old ten years established INTELLIGENCE OFFICE AND GENERAL AGENCY DEPOT."

Isaac B. Burbbayge died in or about April of 1859. The following notice appeared in Cincinnati's THE DAILY PRESS, dated April 27, 1859

THIS is to certify that Mr. Wm. P. Jones has been for several years in the employment my late husband, I. B. Burbbayge: that he has, (for) periods, had entire charge of my said husband's (business) when he was called away from the city, and on all occasions we have ever found him honest, trustworthy to the greatest degree. In all cases have ever found him strictly devoted and attentive (to) the interest of his employer. He is a kind gentle man, and entitled to the respect of all who we have business with.

N.B. This is to certify that William P. Jones, agent of my husband, I.B. Burbbayge, is authorised by me to collect all debts due said agency.

MRS. MARY Q. BURBBAYGE.
CINCINNATI, April, 20(?), 1859

Prior to his removal to Cincinnati, William P. Jones had been listed in the St. Louis directory, working as a clerk for Isaac B. Burbbayge. The 1859 and 1860 St. Louis directories list one Juste Fontaine occupying an intelligence office at 14 Vine, residence at 42 Myrtle. Mr. Fontaine was either working for Mrs. Burbbayge or had purchased the business.

Very few counterstamped coins can be connected to slavery. It's no wonder that Burbbayge simply utilized initials on his coins. His professed occupation as an intelligence officer is another interesting facet which surely adds to the desirability of this merchant. Burbbayge's counterstamps are clearly rooted in the antebellum era, historic reminders of those pre-Civil War days when sides were being chosen and the lines were being drawn. Had Isaac B. Burbbayge lived beyond 1859, chances are that he'd have joined the lost Confederate cause.

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