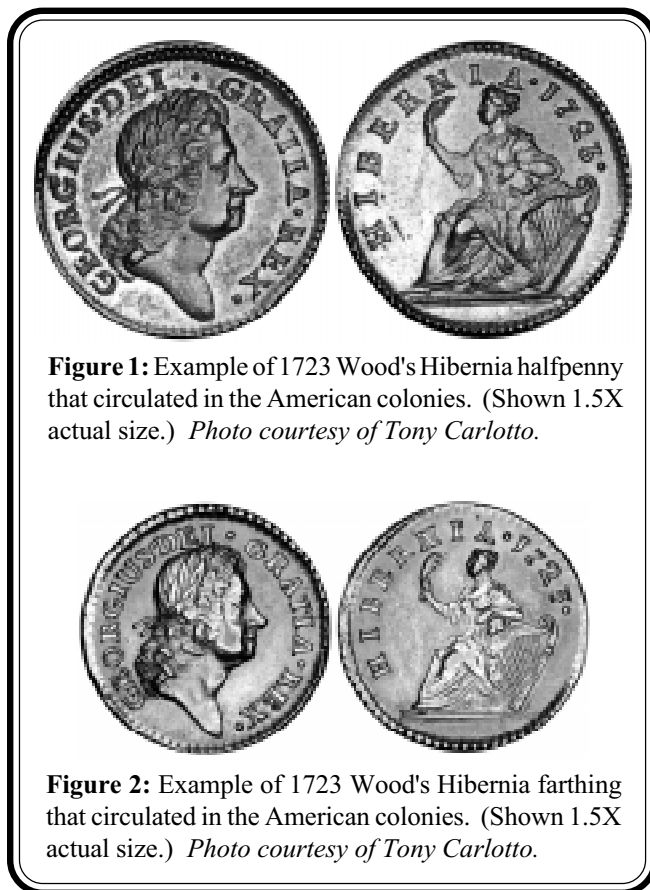


## WOOD'S HIBERNIA COINS COME TO AMERICA

by

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**Figure 1:** Example of 1723 Wood's Hibernia halfpenny that circulated in the American colonies. (Shown 1.5X actual size.) *Photo courtesy of Tony Carlotto.*

**Figure 2:** Example of 1723 Wood's Hibernia farthing that circulated in the American colonies. (Shown 1.5X actual size.) *Photo courtesy of Tony Carlotto.*

Among colonial coinage, one of the more controversial topics is William Wood's Hibernia coins. Under a 1722 patent, Wood minted at least £40,000 of copper Farthings and Halfpence for what was deemed a coin starved Ireland. Numismatic literature is rife with questions as to the acceptance of these coins in Ireland and their arrival and circulation in the American colonies. This article presents a revised view of what is commonly referenced on the subject.

Most tales pertaining to Wood's Money are not based on research but rather upon the self-serving written record of the opponents to these coppers. After a careful review of historical documents, it becomes clear that Wood's coppers enjoyed extensive use in Ireland. In fact, they became the dominant medium of exchange for everyday transactions, especially in rural areas. Further, it can be reasonably assumed that Wood's coins would have found their way to the American colonies during the course of commerce and immigration.

Finally, when these coins became semi-demonetized in Ireland in 1737, they were not only readily available for export but also arrived in extensive numbers primarily in the Mid-Atlantic colonies.

The story of Wood's coinage should not be gleaned solely from the records of the upper class whose documents have survived the centuries and often form the main source of our understanding of the era. Their concerns generally centered on issues that pertained to silver and gold, which represented the medium of exchange for commerce. The lower class, or the "Common Man," that was the primary user of copper coins, was often illiterate and seldom left a record of its monetary concerns. It is because of these circumstances that many numismatists have been misled in their understanding of the important role that base metal coins, especially Irish coppers, played in the American colonial economy.

It is evident from eighteenth century records that the American colonies lacked sufficient coinage to meet their needs. Further, it is evident that the colonists had a preference for English copper coins. However, it must be noted that England during the early 1700s failed to mint a sufficient supply of coppers to satisfy the daily needs of its own inhabitants let alone the necessities of its far flung colonies. This unmet need had to be satisfied. And it is here that Wood's Hibernia coins

came into service in small transactions, be it at the local market or tavern. With a small loaf of bread at a penny, one could not expect to use bullion or paper money that consisted generally of large denominational notes.

The saga of Wood's Money in America begins with its initial introduction into Ireland. Jonathan Swift, and other opponents of Wood's coinage, laid the groundwork for the perspective that Wood's coins were rejected and failed to circulate in Ireland. Philip Nelson in his pamphlet entitled *The Coinage of William Wood, 1722-1733*, outlined the standard reasons for this opposition:

- (1) the Irish Parliament was not consulted nor did it approve of this venture,
- (2) the coins were to be minted under a private patent rather than at the London mint,
- (3) the weight of Wood's coins was less than that of English regal issue, and
- (4) Wood's proposal to mint £108,000 in coins was deemed to be not only excessive but also detrimental to Ireland's economy.

Intertwined with these arguments was the political fight between the opposing English Whig and Tory parties. Members of the party out of favor, such as Swift, were more than willing to attack their opponents in biting satirical prose as was the norm of the period. And it is here that Wood's coppers became a rallying point for those dissatisfied with London.

Assuming the role of advocates of Irish nationalism, Wood's detractors wrote numerous tracts, leaving behind them a well documented tale of their opposition. Their success was based on their ability to restrict the number of coppers that Wood could import into Ireland, as well as prevent the coins from gaining equal status with regal English coppers. Unfortunately Wood did not understand Irish politics, which led him to be cast negatively in the press.

While Swift and others were able to have an impact on the introduction of Wood's coins into Ireland, it is clear from recent research that Wood's coins did enjoy a high level of acceptance and circulation. For a detailed discussion on this point, see the recent article by the author in the Fall 2000 issue of the *Colonial Coin Collector Club's Newsletter* entitled "Wood's Money: Acceptance or Rejection in Ireland."

Initially, Wood's coins were accepted by the Irish who were in a great need of coppers for daily transactions. As a commentator on the Wood's controversy related:

as soon as the Copper-Money appear'd, it met with a general Approbation; the People took it with so free a Consent, that it became universally current: There was no Objections rais'd, either against its Figure, which was very beautiful, or the Workmanship, which was complete, or the Value and Fineness of the Metal...the Shop-keepers (in particular) felt the Advantage in their Retail Business...These Farthings and Halfpence...are nothing but a certain Quantity of Copper Metal sold in small pieces...they are carried to Market as coin'd Copper Metal...and... 'tis a current Merchandize (*sic*)...<sup>1</sup>

The use of Wood's coppers in all probability could not have been prevented. It was generally agreed that Ireland was in great need of an infusion of copper coins. The extent of the monetary shortage, however, was a matter of debate. The general view was that Ireland needed up to £20,000 of additional coppers to meet everyday transactions. Even Swift admitted that there was a deficiency although he placed it at the low figure of £5,000. A moderate voice in this debate was Hugh Boulter who, as Primate to Ireland, advised authorities in London that about £15,000 was a more accurate number. By all standards, Wood's proposal to mint £108,000 was excessive.<sup>2</sup>

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The opposition to Wood's Money was centered in coastal cities such as Dublin. However, even there, Wood's Money was in daily use in coffee-houses where according to one of several contemporary reports they were "chiefly current."<sup>3</sup>

The high point of opposition was reached during the summer of 1724 when the English Privy Council stated that Wood had within reason complied with the terms of his patent. In response, opponents orchestrated numerous petitions that appeared in Dublin newspapers. In one such instance, the city's bankers proclaimed:

we will neither receive or utter in any Receipt or Payment of Money, or any Account whatever, any of the Halfpence or Farthings coined by William Woods (*sic*)...as we conceive the uttering of said Half-Pence and Farthings will be highly Prejudicial to...the Trade of this Kingdom...<sup>4</sup>

In spite of such proclamations, Wood continued to ship his coins to Ireland. In order to avoid confrontation, imports were often carried out "clandestinely."<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Wood was forced to increase the discount rate offered to distributing agents as an inducement to acquire his coins. From an initial discount of 15 percent, Wood doubled the rate and may have even raised it further according to some accounts.<sup>6</sup> Overall, Wood's actions produced some positive results. As a Dublin newspaper reported, we are:

well informed of the Attempts of several Persons in and about this City, who have purchased vast amounts of William Wood's Halfpence and Farthings at cheap Rates, in order to pass the same in this Kingdom...<sup>7</sup>

In the end, the English government realized that opposition to Wood's Money had to cease. As a compromise, Wood surrendered his patent. He also agreed to limit to £40,000 the number of coins that he would import into Ireland. Thus, by 1725, the controversy subsided and opposition to Wood's coppers disappeared from the press.

At this juncture, the fate of Wood's Money is subject to debate. It is often stated in numismatic literature that at this point in the mid-1720s Wood's coins, having been rejected by the Irish, were shipped *en masse* to the American colonies. However, this assessment as to timing is premature. Recent research outlines how these coins were extensively used in Ireland for the next decade and a half before their general export to the colonies. Further, it is clear from the records of the period that Wood's coppers enjoyed widespread circulation in the interim since:

- (1) the Collectors of the King's Revenue were instructed to accept Wood's Money in payment to the Crown,
- (2) the Army was forced to receive Wood's coppers as partial payment of salaries, and
- (3) the lower classes, especially those residing in rural areas, out of need for a medium of exchange, accepted and utilized the coins.<sup>8</sup>

This last point was most problematic to the opponents of Wood's Money, for if the coins became accepted by a significant segment of the population, then it would be difficult to prevent the elevation of Wood's Money to the status of coin of the realm. And it is apparent that Wood's coins were gaining acceptance.

Swift, in his pamphlet of advice to Roman Catholics, expressed his concern that poor and rural Catholics, who dominated the countryside, were accepting Wood's Money. Outraged, Swift wrote:

'tis astonishing to see you...tamely and blindly submit to be impos'd on...Wood was doubtless encouraged by this apparent Indolence of yours to attempt his Experiment. He consider'd you as a very considerable trading Part of the Nation...He therefore expected to meet with no Difficulty on your Side in receiving his Proposal.<sup>9</sup>

As for the Revenue Collectors, they were ordered by London to accept Wood's Money and were probably encouraged by the fact that they could "purchase them at a large discount, and return them at full value to the King." Further, soldiers in spending their wages would "Palm their Brass upon the Country for the Necessities of Life" and, according to Swift, local merchants would be hard pressed to refuse payment in Wood's coppers from the armed representatives of the Crown.<sup>10</sup>

In the end, it is apparent that Wood's Money came to represent the dominant copper coin in Ireland. By 1728, the amount of copper coins in Ireland had increased by 150 percent.<sup>11</sup> This increase can only be explained by the circulation of Wood's Money. As one contemporary noted, coppers as the lowest species of coin were in general use among the people of the Kingdom.<sup>12</sup> Even Swift had to concede in later years that the people of Ireland, regardless of their sentiments on the issue, accepted Wood's "brass, rather than return empty" after purchasing everyday goods at market.<sup>13</sup>

Having outlined how Wood's Money achieved an important place in the Irish monetary system, it is now time to outline the means by which these coins were transported to the American colonies. As with Ireland, the historical record of the period is primarily revealed through the surviving documents of colonial leaders and businessmen. Unfortunately, their focus as to coinage lay with silver and gold. For the "Common Man" who left behind only limited written documents, his use of coppers is harder to discern.

Irish events were poorly reported in the American colonies. The usual newspaper listing retold mostly incidental events such as when two men were executed:

the hangman was intoxicated...was going to put one of the Ropes about the Parson's Neck as he stood in the Cart, and was with much Difficulty prevented by the Goaler from so doing.<sup>14</sup>

and:

A very odd Circumstance happen'd lately...Two Servants liv'd with a Gentleman, the one as a Man Cook, the other, House-keeper...and were married at 16: Some Differences happening between them, the House-keeper declar'd the Cook was no Man, but a Woman...which we here' (*sic*) upon Examination prov'd so.<sup>15</sup>

As for Wood's Hibernia coinage, it was initially reported in positive terms such as that related on October 3, 1723:

William Wood, Esq;...began his Coinage for Ireland on Monday last...the said Coin being made of the best English Copper, having on one Side his Majesty's Head with his Inscription GEORGIUS REX; and on the Reverse the Effigies of a Woman playing upon a Harp and around it HIBERNIA...<sup>16</sup>

As for the controversy that engulfed Wood's coppers, aside from the brief retelling of the Irish Parliament's Resolution in opposition to Wood's Money, the colonial press basically continued its format of relating minor aspects of life in Ireland.<sup>17</sup> A notable exception pertains to Boston newspapers that during the height of the controversy went so far as to reiterate accusations that Wood was "guilty of a notorious Fraud" as a result of his activities.<sup>18</sup> Outside of the Bay Colony,

however, the otherwise indifference to events in Ireland would have prevented colonists from being caught up in the biases that some felt so strongly in Ireland.

During the colonial era, there existed a need for coins as a medium of exchange for small transactions. This need prior to the American Revolution pertained primarily to the northern colonies where the demands of urban centers, artisans and commerce dictated that the local economy have an adequate supply of copper coins. That this need was never fully satisfied can be attested from colonial records from the earliest days of settlement.

New York illustrates this point on several occasions. First in 1675 when Governor Andros proposed to the Duke of York to import farthings into the colony.<sup>19</sup> Later, in 1715, Governor Hunter recommended that copper from local New York mines be utilized to mint farthings for “ordinary uses.” In a letter to the English Lords of Trade, the Governor stated the need for such a venture:

There is one hardship which I have observed ever since I came into this country, which fall chiefly upon the poorer sorts; that is there being no currency but of silver and bills of credit, the smallest is of two shillings...<sup>20</sup>

As for the other colonies, attempts to solve the shortage of small change were partially addressed at various times during the colonial era. A notable example was the shipment of £300 of halfpence and farthings to Philadelphia in 1682. Another was the infusion of over £2,000 of coppers into Massachusetts in 1749 as part of England’s compensation for expenses that the Bay Colony incurred in a prior military expedition. For a detailed history of such events see Philip L. Mossman, *Money of the American Colonies and Confederation: A Numismatic, Economic and Historical Correlation*.

In addition to English coppers, Irish coinage played a notable role in the colonial monetary system. Most significant was the importation of the St. Patrick coppers. Given that these coins had been demonetized on the Isle of Man, Mark Newby acquired a large quantity of them which he transported to New Jersey where, by a 1682 act of the colonial legislature, they were recognized as official coins of the colony. Further, it appears that coins from the reign of William III were exported in “great Quantities” to the northern colonies.<sup>21</sup>

As for Wood’s coppers, they came to the American colonies as a result of three different events:

- (1) as a by-product of trade between the colonies and Ireland,
- (2) as a part of the possessions of immigrants leaving Ireland, especially during times necessitated by dire events, and
- (3) as a result of a change in monetary policies in the host country that lessened the value of Wood’s coins.

Trade between the colonies and Ireland prior to the American Revolution pertained mainly to the Middle Colonies. For a detailed discussion on commerce during this era, see John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789*. The summary of their findings was that for the Northern Colonies (c. 1750) Boston’s trade with Ireland accounted for less than 2 percent of the registered tons leaving that port. For Philadelphia and New York, it was about 10 percent and 12 percent respectively. The figure for the Upper South is comparable to that of Boston while the number for the Lower South was negligible.

Wood’s Money was not normally a part of transatlantic trade although it would have crossed the ocean in the possession of seamen. Such coins were more likely the remains of a stay on shore,

stemming from trips to the local market and tavern. As Swift noted, Wood's coppers were used in Irish seaports for everyday purchases. Others noted:

as Farthings and Halfpence were the lowest Species of Coin, so they were dispos'd of, generally Speaking, among the meanest sort of the trading People; and in Consequence of this...they were ordinarily exchange'd...<sup>22</sup>

As such, American seamen would have encountered Wood's Money. And the favorable exchange rate whereby coppers were worth twice as much in the colonies as they were in their country of origin provided an inducement to profit by carrying Wood's coins upon returning home. However, the limited resources of average seamen would have constrained any excess in this matter.

Another avenue for the arrival of Wood's coins in the colonies would have been during periods of immigration. Of particular note was the Irish famine of the late 1720s. The severity of the corn crop failure was centered in southern Ireland. As starvation mounted, the rural populace started to migrate to the coastal cities. As one observer of the destitution noted:

Saw the Swarm of Poor which crowded along the Roads scarce able to walk and infinite Numbers starving in every Ditch in the midst of Rags...on every Side with hungry Crises (*sic*)...<sup>23</sup>

During the height of the famine in 1729, riots erupted in Dublin as people broke into warehouses in search of corn in order to "prevent their famishing for want of food..."<sup>24</sup>

The situation was made worse by a severe depression in the linen industry in Northern Ireland. Again, the plight of the poor was dramatic:

great Numbers of them...have been forced to turn to common Beggars, and others...to the Necessity of feeding on Grains, and Blood from the Slaughterhouses, &c. and the Numbers of those distressed Workman is so great...<sup>25</sup>

Lacking employment opportunities in Ireland, people by the tens of thousands started to immigrate to the American colonies. Having set sail with meager possessions, they were often forced into servitude upon arrival at their destination. A common announcement in Mid-Atlantic newspapers related the situation as follows:

arriv'd here the Ship George & John...from Ireland, who has on Board several Irish Men, Women & Boys, Servants, among whom there is several Trades-Men as Carpenters, Weavers, Taylors, Black-smiths, &c. Whoever Inclines to purchase the Terms of any of them, may apply to the Captain...<sup>26</sup>

A few years later, in the mid-1730s, the outflow of Irish immigrants to the American colonies was again a notable event. This time the issue was land tenure in rural Ireland. This outflow was considered significant and occurred during the phase-out period for Wood's coppers in Ireland, which would have aided in the export of said coins to the American colonies. As one newspaper reported, the migration:

is now at such a height, that by a moderate Computation, no less than Ten Thousand...will transport themselves this Season.<sup>27</sup>

Another report referencing the great number of immigrants coming to the Mid-Atlantic colonies stated:

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Last week arrived here...from Ireland...about 100 Passengers...About the 13th Instant arrived here 345 Passengers from Ireland, and we have an Account from New Castle (about 40 miles below Philadelphia) that in the space of 24 Hours there arrived about 1000 Souls from the same Place; And that 20 more Ships with Passengers are coming from Ireland.<sup>28</sup>

It appears from discussions of events at that time that the desire among those leaving Ireland was to take with them as many coins as they could obtain. It can be readily surmised that the preference would have been for those coins that had as high a value as possible with the least amount of bulk. Although gold coins would have represented the highest value, they were not in common circulation. Silver coins were available but only to a modest degree. As a result, bullion coins became scarce and carried an additional premium. The practice of carrying coins out of the country was so disturbing to Irish businessmen that a law was proposed that would have made it illegal to leave the country with bullion coins. Such was not the concern for coppers and they were the only real alternative for poor immigrants. Thus, in 1729, it was noted that the supply of copper coins had lessened in Ireland.<sup>29</sup>

Given the scarcity of silver and gold coins during the 1720s and 1730s, as well as the limited resources of immigrants, copper coins in spite of their bulk would have been carried out of Ireland. By the mid-1730s, the outflow of coppers can be surmised to have been significant due to the fact that during this time, there appeared in Ireland an array of merchant tokens. Their introduction would only have resulted from a growing shortage of small change.

The first introduction of tokens was not really an attempt to address any shortage of copper coins. Rather the coinage of James Maculla of Dublin, who in 1728 and 1729 minted halfpenny and penny coppers, was inspired by a desire to produce base metal coins of Irish origin as an alternative to Wood's Money. Swift opposed this enterprise and given that it lacked any official support it is doubtful that it had a meaningful impact.<sup>30</sup>

The next instance was the production of Irish tokens between 1734 and 1736, which was a result of a general copper coin shortage. Here, the coins were primarily issued in two and three pence denominations. The exception was the limited mintage of a halfpenny known as a Belfast Ticket by William Ring who also made a penny. All of these coins were intended to meet local needs near Belfast and Londonderry. Their production coincided with a mass exodus from that region. As for southern Ireland, written notes rather than coins were utilized by the mid-1730s.<sup>31</sup>

The primary destination for immigrants coming to America was the Middle Colonies. Here, the combination of urban centers in need of workers, an expanding economy and the availability of land, posed an ideal attraction. Also, the presence of a heterogeneous population would have been deemed more welcoming. But this region also had its concerns in regard to the influx of so many immigrants. Reacting to this event, Philadelphia imposed a tax of 20 shillings for each Irish servant imported.<sup>32</sup> In response, immigrants altered their destination to surrounding areas as follows:

About ten days ago a Ship arrived here from Ireland with 200 Servants, and to avoid paying said Duty they are put on shore at Burlington and Trent Town in New-Jersey. There are now four Vessals (*sic*) more...<sup>33</sup>

Southern cities were in their formative stage and utilized a non-free black population to perform many of the necessary artisan tasks. Further, the South, because of slavery, was not viewed as a desirable destination. In fact, a ship captain, who in order to avoid the Philadelphia tax tried to land his Irish passengers in Virginia, disturbed the immigrants to such an extent that they mutinied, forcing the ship to land in New Jersey. The captain took the passengers to court but lost the case.<sup>34</sup>

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In remote areas of the South such as the Shenandoah Valley, Irish immigrants were arriving, having passed through Pennsylvania in search of cheap land. However, these newcomers lived basically on a subsistence level.

In New England, the atmosphere was generally hostile to Irish immigrants who were commonly viewed as “Vagabonds” and “Wenches” and, according to a New England newspaper, only “the very Scum of the Nation, both Freeman and Servants, visit the Plantations.”<sup>35</sup> As a disincentive to poorer immigrants coming to the Bay Colony, Massachusetts required that immigrants had to provide a security to ensure that they would not become a financial burden on the Town to which they were relocating. In 1724, the law provided as an alternative to cash that the immigrant would have satisfied this requirement if their effects were valued at £50 or more. This would have represented a considerable asset at that time and was well out of the reach of the poor and displaced Irish immigrant. Also, it is not surprising to witness the Massachusetts General Court dictating that recent arrivals from Ireland must locate themselves in the more remote areas of the colony or be prosecuted by writs of trespass and ejected. Such hostility resulted in the Irish being a minority in the colony, representing less than one percent of the general population in the 1790 census.<sup>36</sup> In spite of these problems, there existed pockets of settlements in which the Irish concentrated. A prime example would be the colony of Frederick Fort at Pemaquid Maine where Wood’s coins have been found.<sup>37</sup>

In response to the regional issues listed above, poor Irish immigrants, being primarily from rural areas, traveled to the Middle Colonies, carrying with them their possessions. The money they took would have been those coins that were readily available as they prepared for departure, including Wood’s coppers which played a dominant role in rural Ireland at that time.

Although trade and especially immigration would have resulted in the introduction of Wood’s Money into the American colonies, it is doubtful that it represented a significant factor. But it did lay the basis for the beginning of a new series of coins for the colonial economy. This would have been conducive to the later arrival of a greater number of Wood’s coppers with the semi-demonetization of Wood’s Money in Ireland in 1737.

Irish leaders had long advocated for official copper coins from the London mint. Finally in 1736, the Crown announced that a new issue of royal copper farthings and halfpence would be made for Ireland. This represented the first Irish regal mintage in decades. The Crown during the next two years produced almost 50 tons of these new coppers.<sup>38</sup> Further, the Crown authorized the Treasury to ship to Ireland additional regal English coppers. The new coins were “greedily received” by the populace according to the Lord Primate to Ireland.<sup>39</sup> It was generally assumed that given the preference for regal coins, the desirability of Wood’s Money would have greatly lessened.

The demise of Wood’s coppers came in 1737 upon the release into circulation of the new regal coins. Then the Crown proclaimed that the Collectors of the King’s Revenue would thereafter restrict the number of Wood’s coppers that would be accepted in any given payment. This pronouncement coincided with the order that the army would limit its use of Wood’s coins in making payments to the troops. The scene was now set for the export *en masse* of Wood’s Money. As one keen observer of the Irish copper coin market noted earlier, any coin surplus would be shipped off to other countries especially to the American colonies. And the arrival of the new regal coins from England would certainly have created an added supply of coppers in Ireland. In fact, this development was significant enough that for the balance of the decade, no new tokens were produced in Ireland.<sup>40</sup>



Irish newspapers are quiet as to the fate of Wood's Money at this juncture. However, any change from the use of Wood's Money to the new regal coppers must have caused some monetary disruptions. And indeed this is what occurred as reported in Dublin:

all Trade and Business is cramp'd and ruin'd for want of Change, which is so scarce...and were it not for the Circulation of Two-penny written Notes that several of the Merchants, and substantial Inhabitants give out, all Trade would certainly stagnate and stop for want of Change.<sup>41</sup>

It can only be assumed that non-regal coins such as Wood's were being taken out of circulation. If this were occurring then the dislocation to the Irish monetary system would have been dramatic given that Wood's Money represented a sizable component of the copper coin market. This was confirmed in the Dublin press when it reported that the disruption was severe enough that it had:

occasion'd a general Dissatisfaction in the People, and several Mobs in the City... rioted.<sup>42</sup>

It can be surmised that given the lessened desirability of Wood's coins at this juncture, they, like the St. Patrick coppers before them, were bought up and shipped to the coin starved American colonies. The logical place to observe reactions to an infusion of base coppers into the local economy would be in those colonies that had an extensive trade connection with Ireland as well as a significant Irish population that would have been accustomed to Wood's coppers. Further, a receptive region would have to have urban centers with a strong local economy that would have been in need of base metal coins for daily transactions.

Given the above criteria, the Mid-Atlantic Colonies represent an ideal setting for the importation of Wood's coppers. And it certainly helped that this region was undergoing rapid economic expansion during the 1730s which would have increased their receptiveness to any infusion of new coins. Further, the region had a history of utilizing Irish coins be they Newby's St. Patrick pieces or those from the reign of William III.<sup>43</sup>

The South, in addition to lacking the key components listed above, appears to have generally not needed copper coins. Thomas Jefferson in discussing the issue as it pertained to Virginia stated that copper coins were not used in that colony.<sup>44</sup> Supporting this fact are advertisements in the *Virginia Gazette* wherein merchandise was listed for sale in terms of English Sterling and occasionally in Spanish money such as book subscriptions for "Half a Pistole."<sup>45</sup> In the Carolinas, merchandise was listed almost entirely in Spanish funds. The colony of Georgia was basically non-existent in the 1730s. In spite of the above commentary, one should not suppose that coppers were totally absent from the South. Rather, it can be inferred that base metal coins played at most a minor role.

New England, on the other hand, met the urban, strong local economy criteria for adopting Wood's Money. Yet, it is doubtful that said coins played much of a noticeable role in that region's economy given its strong anti-Irish sentiment and limited Irish population coupled with only minor trade relations with Ireland. Also, the region was economically dominated by Boston with its strong preference for English coppers. Further, the Bay Colony issued its own supply of small pence paper money in 1722 and again in 1737. The first issue of £500 was small, limiting its impact. The latter issue of £2,625 was more significant. Although the intent of such paper notes was to abate the practice of tearing larger notes into segments in order to make change, the availability of small denomination notes would have lessened the need and use of Wood's Money in that region.<sup>46</sup>

In spite of the above efforts, New England still had a shortage of copper coins although it was not as severe as in the Mid-Atlantic Colonies. This might have been one of the reasons for the production in 1737 of the Higley coins in Connecticut. However, the ensuing controversy

surrounding these lightweight coins dampened their acceptance as can be noted in their inscription which changed from "value of three pence" to "value me as you please." Overall, the concern for an additional supply of money was enough that a number of Boston Freeholders petitioned the Massachusetts General Court in 1737 for:

Relief under our present difficult and distressing Circumstances for want of a sufficient Medium, whereby the Trade and Business of the Town is very much decayed...and Cash to purchase the Necessaries (*sic*) of Life hard to obtained... .<sup>47</sup>

In the Middle Colonies, there were two dominant commercial centers: Philadelphia and New York City. Between them they controlled the economic affairs of New Jersey. In addition, Philadelphia extended its influence over Delaware and into Maryland through commercial ties to the Chesapeake Bay region and New York's trade connections through Albany extended into southern Vermont whose remoteness isolated it from Boston.

From the newspapers of the 1730s, New York clearly had a problem in 1737 with an infusion of copper farthings and halfpence. And, Pennsylvania had similar concerns. New York tried to address the issue through a regulatory measure to restrict the importation of copper coins. Pennsylvania's solution was to consider printing paper money:

the General Court has under their Consideration the making of small Money from a Penny to six Pence, of the new Tenour, to accommodate the Trading Part.<sup>48</sup>

It is arguable that of these two commercial centers, New York had the greater concern with the infusion of copper coins. The problem may have been exasperated in the colony by the fact that due to the region's rapidly developing economy, it had a greater need for money. Further, it must be noted that New York had a more advantageous exchange rate for coppers during this period. Finally, New York was the premiere colonial trading partner for Ireland. The combination of these factors would have resulted in a heightened flow of coppers into New York.

Unfolding events in New York can be gleaned from two events:

- (1) an advertisement in a local newspaper, and
- (2) legislative action to control the importation of copper coins into the colony.

Advertisements of the era commonly stated that merchants would accept payment in current money. This referenced their open willingness to accept as payment coins that were in general circulation, which would have meant copper and bullion. Notably, the following announcement appeared in the *New York Gazette* of March 28, 1737, and was repeated several times thereafter:

Copper Money will not be received as the discharge of Bonds.<sup>49</sup>

By itself, said announcement could be interpreted to mean several things. However, at the time of this announcement, there was a growing concern among New York merchants that the recent arrival of increasingly large quantities of copper coins from abroad would be unsettling to the local economy. The general view of the New York Assembly was that this development would have the effect of:

Reduceing (*sic*) of the present rate at which Copper money doth pass as aforesaid might prove a vast loss especially to Tradesmen Labouring People and Farmers who are possessed of a large Share thereof... .<sup>50</sup>

At worse, the infusion had the potential to disrupt the current acceptance of coppers as a medium of exchange. This would have included those coins only recently introduced into the colony, which by inference would have been Wood's coppers.<sup>51</sup>

The infusion was large enough for the New York Lieutenant-Governor to remark to England's Lords of Trade that ship captains upon their return from abroad were importing significant quantities of coppers since the exchange rate at that time placed a premium of twice the stated face value on imported coppers.<sup>52</sup> And, if the coppers were Irish there was an added premium since such coins were worth less than English coins as per terms of the exchange rate between those two countries. This distinction, however, was not recognized in the colonies.

The concern was deemed important enough for Adolph Philipse as a member of the colonial Assembly from New York City to propose the enactment of a law to regulate the importation of copper coins. The Abstract of this legislation outlines the problem in New York wherein it stated:

Copper Half-Pence & Farthings have been from Time to Time imported into this Colony, which have been and are paid and received in the Markets and other Payments, by the common Consent of the People, at a higher Rate than their intrinsick (*sic*) Value. And whereas by the Conveniency of such Copper Money passing in small Payments, the Importation of the same is still continued; but at the Rate at which the said Copper Money has been and still is admitted to Pass, as aforesaid, hath occasioned so large an Importation thereof, that what was a Conveniency at first may in Time prove otherwise, if no Remedy be applied...<sup>53</sup>

The language of the bill, entitled: "An Act to prevent the further importation of Copper Money into this Colony," starts off by mentioning its concern with the importation of English coppers. It should be noted that between 1734 and 1736 the London Mint produced as many coppers in those few years as it had made for the entire reign of George I (1714-1727). This large injection of regal farthings and halfpence within such a brief period would have created a temporary excess in the number of coins that the English economy could readily accommodate. As already noted, a number of said coppers were shipped to Ireland. Others in all probability constituted part of the 1737 infusion of coppers into the Mid-Atlantic colonies. But, it is obvious from the text of the new Act that English coppers were not the only coins under discussion. As the text of the Act continued, its broader intent becomes clear and it encompassed Wood's Hibernia coins by stating that the new regulation applied to:

all Copper Halfpence, Farthings, and all other Copper Money whatsoever...<sup>54</sup>

This new regulatory Act highlighted the great concern that was present in New York in 1737 as a result of the importation of a large number of copper coins. The new law contained the following provisions:

- (1) no person entering New York on any vessel shall import copper coins in excess of ten Shillings current money of the colony,
- (2) in order to encourage informers, they would receive upon condemnation of such copper money one-third part thereof, and
- (3) if the vessel's Master failed or refused to notify the Port Collector of the importation of copper coins, he would forfeit all copper money seized and pay a fine of £50 current money of the colony.<sup>55</sup>

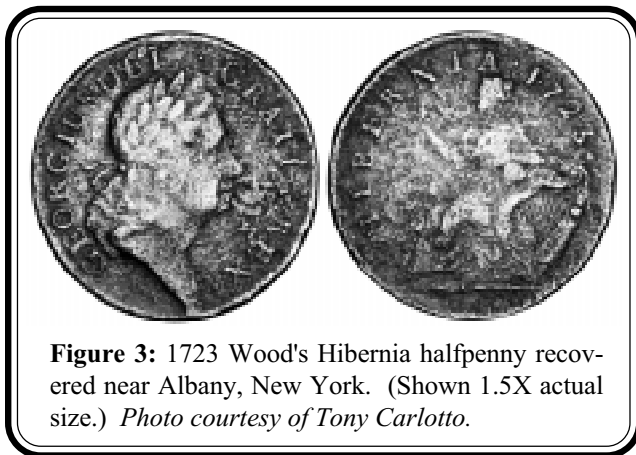
It is doubtful that the attempt to regulate the importation of copper coins was effective. Although vague in its wording, enforcement would have rested with the Vice Admiralty Court. Unfortunately,

the administration of the court at that time was in disarray due to the death of its chief justice. In fact, the court was mainly in recess and the few cases that it reviewed were adjourned.<sup>56</sup> To date, I have been unable to locate any case wherein coppers were confiscated as a result of the law referenced herein.

It is as problematic to ascertain the quantity of Wood's coppers that were imported into the colonies as it is to discern the nature of their distribution and circulation. This problem is made difficult because the written record is most limited in its reporting of events surrounding base metal coins. Also, found coin hoards, although insightful, are not definitive because hoarders generally do not use copper coins given that they are bulky, do not wear well in the ground and deteriorate in damp places. Yet, there are many instances of found copper coins.

Philip L. Mossman in his article entitled "The Circulation of Irish Coinage in Pre-Federal America," outlined a compilation of recovered Wood's coppers. Of particular note was the find at Pemaquid Maine where of the 83 coins recovered 18 were Wood's coppers. This site is especially noteworthy because it was a frontier region of Massachusetts where 50 Irish families had immigrated to in the early 1730s.<sup>57</sup> This hoard of coins supports the thesis herein that Irish immigrants, in coming to the American colonies, brought with them coins then current in Ireland, including Wood's Money.

Another notable instance is the recovery of 43 copper coins in southern New Jersey. Todd Gredesky in his article entitled "More on the Circulation of English and Irish Coppers: Small Change Coppers found in Southern New Jersey" related the find of a Wood's farthing and the viewing of an additional three Wood's halfpence.<sup>58</sup> This information references an area of the Mid-Atlantic Colonies that witnessed an inflow of Irish immigrants during the late 1720s and 1730s. Also located in the Philadelphia region were three Wood's coppers identified as part of the Pennsylvania Highway Find.<sup>59</sup> Although one can debate the interpretation of this discovery, its occurrence is worthy of note.



**Figure 3:** 1723 Wood's Hibernia halfpenny recovered near Albany, New York. (Shown 1.5X actual size.) *Photo courtesy of Tony Carlotto.*

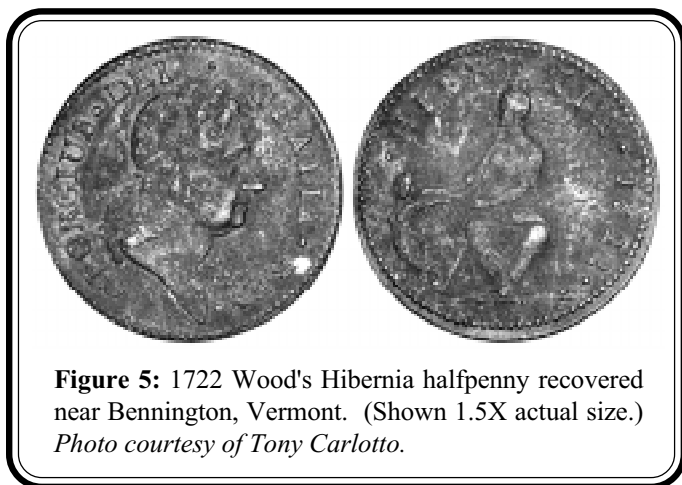
Finally, recent discoveries come from two archeological sites in Albany, New York, that are still in the first stage of examination and hold promise for more coin recovery information. The sites are by themselves interesting given that one was at the eastern gate to the Albany stockade where a colonial ferry operated for transporting passengers across the Hudson River. Here, the recovery of a Wood's halfpenny lay within the context of four identifiable English coppers from the period of 1735 to 1745. The other discovery came from a residential area estab-

lished on the northern side of the Albany stockade. Here, a Wood's halfpenny was recovered within the context of nine other identifiable copper coins, being a Dutch half-duit bearing the date of 16--, a Spanish copper without a visible date, five English halfpence from the period of George II, and an English farthing dated 1749. Combined, these recoveries create a comparative context and relationship between Wood's and English coppers during the American colonial period. Although the sample is indeed small, it supports the thesis presented herein.<sup>60</sup>

To date, Mossman has compiled a documented inventory of 103 recovered Wood's Hibernia coins, being 96 halfpence and seven farthings.<sup>61</sup> The distribution of recovered Wood's Hibernias



is outlined on the above map. While this list is small in comparison to coin recoveries for Connecticut and New Jersey coppers, it is more meaningful in relation to general discoveries of copper coins that predate the American Revolution. Further, it needs to be noted that one can see recovered Wood's coppers at most large coin shows. They are basically identifiable by their



**Figure 5:** 1722 Wood's Hibernia halfpenny recovered near Bennington, Vermont. (Shown 1.5X actual size.)  
*Photo courtesy of Tony Carlotto.*

condition. Unfortunately, said coins almost always lack references as to place of recovery and context. This deficit results from the absence of interest in recovered coins prior to current data collecting. The best hope for improving this situation is for interested parties to associate themselves with people who are in the field of coin recovery, which would result in documenting additional coin finds. The author has recently established such a relationship, resulting in the location of two Wood's Hibernia halfpence. One represents a newly

discovered location, being the first reported recovery of Wood's Money in Vermont, recently added to Mossman's documented inventory shown above.<sup>62</sup>

The findings related herein outline the contention of this paper that Wood's Hibernia coinage played a significant role in the American colonial monetary system. As coppers, they were needed and used to facilitate daily transactions, serving the needs of the "Common Man."

## CONCLUSION

Overall, after evaluating the historical record, it is clear that several key assumptions outlined in current numismatic literature are in need of revision:


- (1) Wood's Money was not rejected in Ireland in the 1720s, rather it was accepted and circulated to 1737 in large quantities, especially in rural areas that experienced an acute shortage of coins for daily needs,
- (2) Swift and other opponents in decrying the use of Wood's coins in Ireland left behind them a most self-serving historical record that erroneously conveys the impression that Wood's coins were rejected by the Irish,
- (3) the prevailing assumption given in numismatic literature that Wood's Money was exported to the American colonies during the 1722-1724 era of controversy is premature and needs to be restated as the mid-1730s,
- (4) Wood's coppers arrived in America, primarily in the Mid-Atlantic colonies, as a result of three factors:
  - (a) as a minor byproduct of transactions in Ireland that stemmed either from seamen visiting local taverns and markets or from acquiring coppers for profit, taking advantage of the favorable exchange rates that placed a premium on coppers in the colonies,
  - (b) as a more significant result of immigration from Ireland during dire times such as the famine of the late 1720s or the economic dislocations of the mid-1730s that impacted most heavily on the rural lower class that was the main user of Wood's coppers, and
  - (c) as a primary result of the 1737 release into circulation of the new Irish regal copper coins combined with the change in the Crown's policy toward the use of Wood's Money, thereby lessening the value and usefulness of his coins in Ireland,
- (5) Wood's Money along with English coppers arrived in vast quantities in the Mid-Atlantic colonies in the mid-1730s, and this event was significant enough to necessitate the

passage of a regulatory law in New York and the consideration of printing small denominational paper notes in Pennsylvania as a means to control the matter, and (6) current research on Wood's Money is unearthing a number of coin finds, including a limited sample of coins within an archeological context, that supports the thesis that Wood's Hibernia coins circulated during the colonial era.

This paper does not purport to be the definitive answer to questions concerning the role of Wood's coppers in the colonial economy. Additional research is necessary, especially as it pertains to the recovery of copper coins. Here, the context of such finds can play a defining role in the relationship between Wood's coins and other coppers of the period, as well as outline the circulation patterns for said coins.

This paper does postulate that there is enough current evidence to revise statements often mentioned in numismatic writings that question the important role that Wood's Hibernia coppers played in the American colonial monetary system. In fact, we can now readily assume that Wood's coins served a notable role in the colonies as to daily transactions.

Given the demise of Wood's Money in Ireland in the mid-1730s, these Irish coins are comparable to St. Patrick coppers. Having outlived their usefulness in their host country, they were exported to the coin starved American colonies where they found a renewed value. The questions to be formulated henceforth should focus on extrapolating the quantities imported and distribution patterns.

Now is the time to elevate the significance of Wood's Hibernia coinage to the status it deserves as an important American colonial copper coin for the era's "Common Man." 

## References

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2. David Bindon, *Some Reasons Shewing The Necessity the People of Ireland are under for continuing to refuse Mr. Wood's Coinage* (Dublin, 1724), p. 12; J.G. Simms, "Dean Swift and the Currency Problem" *Numismatic Society of Ireland (Occasional Papers, No. 20, 1978)*, pp. 8-11. In the debate on the extent of the copper shortage, the lack of farthings was of particular concern; and, since Wood's Money included farthings, it was deemed as one of the reasons for the willingness of the Irish to accept his coins.
3. George Ewing, *A Defence of the Conduct of the People of Ireland In their unanimous Refusal of Mr. Wood's Copper-Money* (Dublin, 1724), p. 12.
4. *Dublin Courant*, August 17, 1724.
5. *Presentation of the Grand-Jury of the County of the City of Dublin* (Dublin, November 28, 1724), p. 1.
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7. *Dublin Courant*, August 22, 1724.

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8. Brian J. Danforth, "Wood's Money: Acceptance or Rejection in Ireland" *The C4 Newsletter* (Fall, 2000), pp. 25-29.
  9. Jonathan Swift, *Advice to the Roman Catholics of Ireland concerning Wood's Halfpence* (Dublin, 1724), pp. 4-5.
  10. Ewing, op. cit., pp. 38-39; Jonathan Swift, *The Soldier's Plea: against Receiving Mr. Wood's Brass-Money* (Dublin, 1724), p. 3.
  11. James Maculla, *A Letter to the People of Ireland, Relating to the Copper Half-Pence, Coining in Dublin* (Dublin, 1729), p. 6.
  12. Defoe, op. cit., pp. 32, 35.
  13. Jonathan Swift, *A Short View of the State of Ireland* (Dublin, 1727), p. 7.
  14. *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg), July 28, 1737.
  15. *Boston Gazette*, December 1, 1735.
  16. *Boston News-Letter*, October 3, 1723.
  17. *Boston Gazette*, December 16, 1723.
  18. Ibid. Of Boston newspapers, the *New-England Courant* appears as the more strident in reporting the Wood's controversy. However, its reasoning is open to interpretation. Was it based upon an anti-Wood's Money bias, or was it more in keeping with the colony's anti-Irish sentiments. The latter may have been the case given its statement on June 19, 1725 that such reporting "may not be disagreeable to the Taste of our English Readers." As compared to whom – the Irish?
  19. E.B. O'Callaghan (ed.), *Documents relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York* (Albany, 1853), pp. iii, 232-34.
  20. Ibid. pp. v, 461.
  21. Thomas Prior, *Observations on Coin in General with some Proposals for Regulating the Value of Coin in Ireland* (Dublin, 1729), p. 42.
  22. Defoe, op. cit., pp. 32, 35.
  23. *New York Gazette* (New York), November 3, 1729.
  24. *New York Gazette*, July 7, 1729.
  25. *New York Gazette*, September 1, 1729.
  26. *New York Gazette*, June 24, 1728.
  27. *South Carolina Gazette* (Charleston), August 14, 1736.
  28. *South Carolina Gazette*, October 23, 1736.



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29. *New York Gazette*, March 17, 1729 and April 7, 1729; Isaac Broadloom, *The Hue and Cry of the Poor of Ireland for Small Change* (Dublin, 1731), pp. 2-3; Prior, op. cit., pp. 1-2. In Thomas Prior, *A List of the Absentees of Ireland and the Yearly Value of their Estates and Incomes spent abroad* (Dublin, 1730), p. 20, it is claimed "that there is less Species now in the Kingdom, than was at any one Time since the Revolution" some 40 years earlier. Boulter, op. cit., pp. ii, 201-202. Boulter listed the premium as four-pence for every twenty shillings in silver.
30. W.J. Davis, *The Nineteenth Century Token Coinage of Great Britain Ireland The Channel Islands and the Isle of Man* (London, 1969), pp. 229-37.
31. Ibid.
32. *New York Gazette*, July 28, 1729.
33. Ibid.
34. *New York Gazette*, October 20, 1729. In this article, I do not make a distinction between southern and northern Irish immigrants although the latter is often referenced as being Scotch-Irish.
35. *New England Courant* (Boston), January 4, 1725.
36. Albert B. Hart (ed.), *Commonwealth History of Massachusetts* (New York, 1928), pp. ii, 258-59 and iv, 143.
37. Philip L. Mossman, "The Circulation of Irish Coinage in Pre-Federal America" *The Colonial Newsletter* (April, 1999), p. 1910.
38. C. E. Challis, *A New History of the Royal Mint* (Cambridge: England, 1992), p. 438; Rogers Ruding, *Annals of the Coinage of Britain and its Dependencies* (London, 1819), pp. iv, 10.
39. Boulter, op. cit., pp. 171-72; Ruding, op. cit., iv, 16. The consideration to ship English coins to Ireland in order to address the mounting scarcity of coppers was under review by London authorities by at least 1733 as reported in the *South-Carolina Gazette* on June 9, 1733.
40. James Maculla, *King George and his Ancestors Parliamentary Grants to the People of Ireland* (Dublin, 1725), p. 12; *Dublin News-Letter*, May 7, 1737.
41. *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia), March 24, 1737.
42. *New York Gazette*, January 9, 1738.
43. Evarts B. Greene and Virginia D. Harrington, *American Population Before the Federal Census of 1790* (Gloucester: Massachusetts, 1966), pp. 4-5. It can be assumed that said coins of William III were English since both regal and counterfeit halfpence of that monarch have been recovered in America and also because Irish coppers of William III are quite rare and none have been reported here yet.
44. Sylvester S. Crosby, *The Early Coins of America: and the Laws Governing Their Issue* (Reprint: New York, 1983), p. 339.
45. *Virginia Gazette*, September 17, 1736.

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46. *Boston Gazette*, January 31, 1737 and May 9, 1737; Eric P. Newman, *The Early Paper Money of America* (Iola: Wisconsin, 1990), pp. 169, 172. It should be noted that Walter Breen in his encyclopedia on American coins stated that the 1722 paper issue by Massachusetts of small denominational notes was a response to the unwanted introduction of Wood's Rosa Americana coins.

47. *Boston News-Letter*, December 7, 1738; Crosby, op. cit., pp. 324-28.

48. *New York Gazette*, July 4, 1737.

49. *New York Gazette*, March 28, 1737.

50. New York State, *The Colonial Laws of New York from the Year 1664 to the Revolution* (New York, 1894), pp. ii, 962-963.

51. Ibid., *New York Gazette or Weekly Post-Boy* (Boston), December 3, 1753.

52. John R. Brodhead (ed.), *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York* (Albany, 1855), pp. vi, 117.

53. *Journal of the Votes and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Colony of New York* (New York: General Assembly, 1764), November 7, 1737.

54. *New York Gazette*, July 3, 1738; Challis, op. cit., pp. 379, 435; Broadloom, op. cit., p. 6.

55. *New York Gazette*, January 9, 1738.

56. Charles M. Rough, *Reports of the Cases in the Vice Admiralty of the Province of New York* (New Haven, 1925), xxiii. It would have been difficult to regulate the importation of copper coins. As noted in May 24, 1753 in the *Independent Reflector* (Boston) during a period of concern with the inflow of counterfeit coppers, the Bay Colony considered passing a regulatory law. However, it was felt that it would be to "little avail: For, while it is attended with so great a Profit, there always will be Persons who, more influenced by lucrative Motives than Affection for their Country, will venture to import them in Defiance of Law."

57. Mossman, op. cit., pp. 1909-12.

58. Todd Gredesky, "More on the Circulation of English and Irish Coppers: Small Change Coppers found in Southern New Jersey *The Colonial Newsletter* (April, 2000), p. 2063.

59. Mossman, op. cit., p. 1911.

60. Hartgen Archeological Associates, Inc. This firm conducted the archeological dig and analysis of historical artifacts at the two referenced Albany sites. They graciously allowed me to review at their lab all coins that have been recovered to date.

61. Personal communication, Philip L. Mossman, June 20, 2000.

62. See for reference *The Colonial Newsletter* (April, 2000), p. 2064; Personal communication, Philip L. Mossman, November 15, 2000.