

The Tokens of W.W. Wilbur of Charleston, S.C.

Notebook: First Notebook

Created: 11/11/2015 1:59 PM

Updated: 11/11/2015 2:00 PM

Tags: <no name>

URL: <http://www.andelfire.com/sc2/tokenofthemonth/token028/>

The Tokens of W.W. Wilbur of Charleston, S.C.

* * * Each month there is a special South Carolina token or medal that is highlighted as the Token or Medal of the Month. This month we will examine the tokens of one of the most prolific token issuers in 19th century South Carolina.

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The tokens of W.W. Wilbur of Charleston, South Carolina have long been known to the collecting community. Dated 1846 and the same size as a U.S. large cent, they were issued to be used in general commerce at the value of one cent and, in so doing, serve as a means of advertising Wilbur's varied business interests. Besides mentioning the auction and commission merchant aspect of his business, they also point out that Wilbur was a merchant's and manufacturer's agent, a collection broker, and a notary public. As evidenced by the number of surviving specimens and the differing varieties that were struck, Wilbur must have ordered these tokens by the thousands, probably over a period of several years. Hardly a day goes by that there is not at least one of these tokens for sale on eBay, where nice specimens normally bring between \$50 and \$100, sometimes even more. This is because that, in recent years, Wilbur has become popularly known as a slave auctioneer.

The city of Charleston was a mecca of slave trading activity in the antebellum South. It is estimated that upwards of 5 million enslaved Africans were brought to continental North America in the 17th and 18th centuries. Of these, a full 40% is thought to have passed through the port of Charleston, making the slave trade a large part of the city's economy. Slave auctions were an almost daily occurrence until 1808, when the federal government outlawed the importation of slaves. This

changed the complexion of the slave trade in Charleston, as large wholesale auctions of newly arrived Africans no longer took place. Auctioneers were forced to diversify their businesses, becoming brokers and sales agents for manufactured goods in order to supplement their income. Although establishing his business in the late 1840s, Wilbur was no exception, as evidenced by the number of professions/trades noted on his tokens.

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An illustration of a Charleston slave auction which appeared in the *Illustrated London News* on 29 November 1856.

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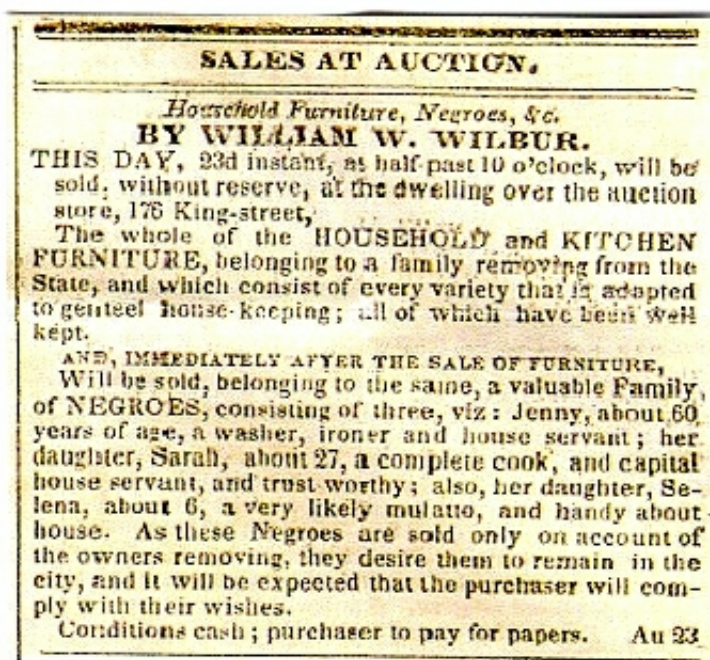
Originally cataloged in 1898 by Dr. Benjamin P. Wright in a series of articles entitled *American Business Tokens* and published in *The Numismatist*, Wilbur's tokens have been encountered on a regular basis for many years at coin shows and in dealer offerings. This alone should testify to the immense numbers that were placed into circulation by Wilbur at a time when it was common to encounter various tokens and foreign coins in one's pocket. One collector I know has been able to amass a group of close to 200 specimens, and this over 150 years after they were issued. To have this many surviving so long after being struck, Wilbur must have had tens of thousands made.

Dr. Wright, in his 1898 work mentioned above, listed (and pictured) just a single example of the W.W. Wilbur token. Wright's articles listed the entries in alphabetical order by name of issuer, an arrangement which was a little unwieldy for collectors. So in 1920, Edgar H. Adams published a work called *United States Silver Coins*, which reworked many of Wright's listings into a more easily digestible state-by-state format. In addition, he listed many previously unknown tokens, cataloging nine different varieties of the Wilbur token, counting those struck in differing metallic compositions. Later, in 1962, Donald M. Miller further refined and added to Adams listings in his *A Catalogue of*

U.S. Store Cards or Merchants Tokens. Miller added four more listings under Wilbur's catalog entry, making a total of thirteen different varieties. Russell Rulau, in the three editions of his *U.S. Merchant Tokens* published in the 1980s, mirrored Miller's listings almost verbatim, and these in turn have been incorporated in the four editions of his monumental *Standard Catalog of United States Tokens, 1700-1900*. In this article, I would like to examine in detail each of these listings, as I have identified four additional varieties of Wilbur's tokens and question the existence of some of the thirteen traditional listings.

But first, a few words about Wilbur himself. Other than the usual sources, there is not much that I could find in print about William W. Wilbur. He seems to have been born in 1796 in the state of Virginia. His name appears in the 1830 Charleston city directory as a manufacturer of combs, doing business at 166 King Street. The 1835 city directory locates him at the same address and shows his business as a "comb and fancy store." The 1837 and 1840 city directories shows him as operating a "comb manufactory" at two different addresses on King Street. It is not until the 1849 directory that Wilbur is shown as an auctioneer. In succeeding directories, Wilbur is again listed as an auctioneer, but sometimes also as a commission merchant or broker. In 1859, his son joined him in the business, as it then became known as Wilbur & Son. One directory names this son as Melvin B. Wilbur, but the 1860 U.S. Census names him as McLain B. Wilbur, 27 years old and living with his parents at the family home. In addition to William W. Wilbur, head of household, age 63, the census also lists a wife, Mary E. Wilbur, age 70, and a daughter, Mary A. Wilbur, age 30, all living at the residence at 60 Anson Street. Various advertisements in the Charleston newspapers of the day announce Wilbur's auctions, accompanied by partial inventories of the items up for sale. (One of these auction announcements is reproduced below and lists a "family of Negroes" that was to be sold by Wilbur. It is the existence of advertisements like this that has elevated the status of Wilbur's tokens from common advertising tokens to slavery-related items.) Wilbur died on November 29, 1861. The *Charleston Mercury* ran his obituary the following day, alerting their readers to the death of 65 year old William W. Wilbur, Sr.

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One of Wilbur's auction announcements which appeared in the *Charleston Daily Courier* on 23 February 1847.

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Wilbur's tokens were struck with 3 different obverse dies, which were paired with two different reverse dies. The identity of the engraver or maker of the tokens is not known at this time. For the purposes of this article, let's number the obverse dies as 1, 2, and 3, and the reverse dies as A and B. Strikes from each of these dies is shown below, followed by a discussion of the attributes of each die, and later, each individual die pairing.

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Obverse die 1 - "No period after CA"

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Obverse die 1 - Man holding gavel in center, W.W. WILBUR. AUCTION & COMMISSION MERCHANT around rim, CHARLESTON. SO. CA underneath, 1846 under man's feet. The main characteristics to note about this die are the absence of a period after CA and the presence of four buttons on the man's coat. These characteristics differentiate obverse die 1 from the remaining two obverse dies. For simplicity's sake let's name this die "No period after CA".

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Obverse die 2 - "Period after CA"

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Obverse die 2 - Same arrangement of man and inscription, except that there are three buttons on the man's coat and a period after CA. There are a couple of other subtleties that I would like to point out in preparation for the discussion of the third obverse die. Note that there is no crossbar in the H of CHARLESTON, and that the top of the O in AUCTION sits a little below a line drawn between the top serifs of the adjacent letters I and N. Let's name this die "Period after CA".

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Obverse die 3 - "Going at only a Penny"

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Obverse die 3 - Same arrangement of man and inscription, except that an additional line of inscription, GOING AT ONLY A PENNY., has been added around the man holding the gavel. If you will note the two die characteristics I pointed out in the description of die 2 above, you will note that they are exactly the same on this third die. This means that the third die was created by taking the second die as it was and adding the additional line of inscription. This new third die was not created in its entirety, but by simply taking the second die and reworking it. Let's name this die "Going at only a Penny".

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Reverse die A - "Thin Tree"

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Reverse die A - Palmetto tree in center, MERCHANTS & MANUFACTURERS AGENT around rim, COLLECTION BROKER NOTARY PUBLIC &c inside first line in circular fashion. The main characteristic of this die is the palmetto tree and its thinly configured palm fronds. Let's name this die "Thin Tree".

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Reverse die B - "Bushy Tree"

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Reverse die B - Same arrangement of tree and inscription, except the tree has a completely different appearance and a period has been added between BROKER and NOTARY. Let's name this die "Bushy Tree" after the bushier palm fronds.

I have examined over 300 of Wilbur's tokens and have found the following die pairings: obverse die 1 paired only with reverse die A, obverse die 2 paired with both reverse dies (A and B), and obverse die 3 paired only with reverse die B.

Now let's look at the thirteen varieties listed by Miller in 1962, along with some brief discussion about each. Keep in mind that Miller had taken Adams' nine listings and added four new ones. He did this by retaining Adams' original numbering system and simply adding an A to Adams' number for each new variety that he published. Note that Adams started Wilbur's tokens at number 5 due to four other tokens from Charleston from other issuers that had appeared ahead of Wilbur's listings. Also note that when Rulau transferred Miller's listings into his work, he rearranged the order in which some of the tokens appeared. This makes for a confusing scenario, and this is made more so by the fact that it appears that some of these listings were misdescribed or made in error. The original descriptions printed in Adams' and Miller's catalogs are reproduced below in italics.

Adams/Miller 5, Rulau SC5 - *WILBUR, W.W., ALCTICNEER, 1846. Alctoneer with hammer, Rx: Fairmeuc tree. Erass. No period after 'CA'* - This listing seems to be die pairing 1-A struck in brass. It is fairly straightforward, mentioning by name the "No period after CA" obverse, which is only seen paired with the "Thin Tree" reverse.

Miller 5A, Rulau SC5A - *Same. Copper.* - Die pairing 1-A. Note that this is not one of Adams' original listings. It also warrants some discussion about the differences between tokens made of brass and those made of copper. Sometimes it is very easy to tell the difference between these two metallic compositions, especially when the items in question were struck specifically for collectors and remain in uncirculated condition. The copper strikings will have a pronounced reddish color, while the brass planchets exhibit a more yellowish or greenish hue. There are many merchant tokens of the mid-19th century in collections today which were struck in a wide selection of metallic compositions for the collectors of the time, as token collecting was quite popular in the mid-1800s. However, the bulk of Wilbur's tokens were decidedly not struck for collectors, they were purely utilitarian in nature. The differences in the metallic composition of the planchets were not pronounced, and it is difficult, if not impossible today, to tell the difference between the copper strikings and the brass strikings after the tokens were placed into circulation. Indeed, the differences may be very slight and result purely from slight differences in the metallic planchet stock present at the token manufacturer's business when Wilbur's tokens were struck.

Adams/Miller 6 - *Same. Feuchtwanger metal. Very rare. Period after 'CA.'* - The mention of the period after "CA" definitely identifies this listing as obverse 2, but there is no mention of what type of tree is present on the reverse. Since the listing mentions "same" right under the previous listing for reverse die A, it has long been assumed that the reverse of this listing is also the "Thin Tree" variety. Assuming that this listing does refer to die pairing 2-A, I must state that I have not yet encountered a specimen of 2-A struck in Feuchtwanger metal, so I would designate this listing as unconfirmed. Feuchtwanger metal is a type of German silver alloy that was promoted by its inventor, Dr. Lewis Feuchtwanger of New York City, as a substitute for silver as a coinage metal in the 1830s and 1840s.

Adams/Miller 7, Rulau SC7 - *Same. Copper.* - If the listing above referred to die pairing 2-A, then this listing mirrors that "Period after CA"/"Thin Tree" striking, except in copper.

Adams/Miller 8, Rulau SC8 - *Same. Brass.* - Again, assumed die pairing 2-A, in brass.

Miller 7A, Rulau SC7A - (*Same*), *Small Tree. Copper.* - Not one of Adams original listings. Here we have a reference to a "small tree," which, since there are only two different reverse dies, must refer to reverse die B, the one I have designated as the "Bushy Tree." The die pairing would be 2-B, "Period after CA"/"Bushy Tree," struck in copper.

Miller 8A, Rulau SC8A - (*Same*), *Small Tree. Brass.* - Another listing not originally in Adams. Again, a reference to the "small tree" which I have designated as the "Bushy Tree." This would be die pairing 2-B, in brass.

Adams/Miller 9, Rulau SC9 - *Similar, GOING AT ONLY A PENNY below auctioneer. Brass.* - New obverse die description that corresponds to obverse die 3. This obverse die is only seen paired with reverse die B, therefore die pairing would be 3-B, in brass. Rulau adds correctly that this listing corresponds to the original Wright listing (Wright 1243), which is pictured in the 1898 series.

Adams/Miller 10, Rulau SC10 - *Same. Copper.* - Straightforward listing, die pairing 3-B, in copper.

Miller 10A, Rulau SC10A - *Same. Copper-nickel.* - Not originally listed by Adams, added by Miller in his 1962 listing. Die pairing 3-B, in copper-nickel. When compared to the variety Adams listed as number 11 below, I do not really understand why Miller added this listing. I have not encountered a specimen of this listing and would designate it as unconfirmed.

Adams/Miller 11, Rulau SC11 - *Same. German silver. Extremely rare.* - Assumed die pairing 3-B, in German silver. As mentioned above, I do not understand why Miller would have introduced the above listing in light of the German silver specimen Adams mentions here. Miller continued to list the Adams' German silver variety, in addition to his copper-nickel listing. I would venture to say that the differences in these two alloys are indistinguishable to the naked eye. On top of that I have not encountered a specimen of die pairing 3-B in either German silver or copper-nickel, so I would designate both as unconfirmed. The only die pairing that I have seen in any white metal type of alloy is 2-B, which is not listed in any previously published work except my 1990 book entitled *South Carolina Tokens*. It will be described later below.

Adams/Miller 12, Rulau SC12 - *Same. No period after 'CA' Copper.* - This listing adds much confusion to the situation. It has long been assumed that Adams and Miller meant this listing to refer to an obverse die with "Going at only a Penny" that was missing a period after "CA". I have not been able to confirm the existence of such an obverse die striking. I have, however, identified a few specimens struck with obverse die 3, which have been so worn or weakly struck as to have the period after "CA" so indistinct as to be invisible. Therefore I would seriously question the existence of this listing as a separate variety, and would classify it as a worn or weakly struck specimen of Adams/Miller 10.

Adams/Miller 13, Rulau SC13 - *Same. Brass.* - In like manner to the listing above, I would question the existence of this listing as a separate variety, and would classify it as a worn or weakly struck specimen of Adams/Miller 9.

As mentioned above, I have identified several varieties that have been heretofore unpublished in the major catalogs enumerated above. I will list them below and assign catalog numbers in accordance with the Adams/Miller and Rulau numbering systems.

Adams/Miller 6A, Rulau SC6A - Period after "CA." obverse, "Thin Tree" reverse. - I have encountered one specimen of die pairing 2-A struck on a silvered brass planchet. The silvering

certainly appears to have been added before striking, as has the specimen cataloged as number 9A below.

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Die pairing 2-B, "Period after CA" obverse, "Bushy Tree" reverse, struck in German silver.

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Adams/Miller 8B, Rulau SC8B - "Period after CA" obverse, "Bushy Tree" reverse. - Pictured is a specimen of die pairing 2-B struck in a white metal alloy that I will call German silver. I have encountered three specimens of this die pairing struck in such an alloy. The 2-B die pairing is the only pairing that I have seen struck in any type of white metal alloy and that is the reason that Adams/Miller 6, 10A, and 11 above are all unconfirmed. It is very possible that these three previous listings were made in error and were actually meant to describe the pictured 2-B die pairing.

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Die pairing 2-B, "Period after CA" obverse, "Bushy Tree" reverse, struck in gilt brass.

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Adams/Miller 8C, Rulau SC8C - "Period after CA" obverse, "Bushy Tree" reverse. - Also pictured is a specimen of a 2-B die pairing struck in gilt brass. No gilt brass specimens have been previously cataloged.

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Die pairing 2-B, "Period after CA" obverse, "Bushy Tree" reverse, struck in silvered brass. Photos courtesy of Aaron Packard.

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Die pairing 2-B, "Period after CA" obverse, "Bushy Tree" reverse, struck in silvered brass. Photos courtesy of Marty Bell.

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Adams/Miller 8D, Rulau SC8D - "Period after CA" obverse, "Bushy Tree" reverse. - A pair of new finds have been reported by numismatists Aaron Packard and Marty Bell. Pictured above are both specimens, struck with die pairing 2-B in silvered brass. No silvered brass specimens have been previously cataloged. After examining the photos of both specimens, I believe I can state that the silvering took place after circulation. On Packard's specimen, note that there are circulation "bagmarks" in the fields which have plating in them. The only way that could happen is if the token was placed into circulation before it was plated. On Bell's specimen, note that there is a relative absence of silvering among the lettering on both the obverse and reverse. This is probably due to silvering after circulation also, as slight dirt and grime in the lettering would accumulate from circulation and would keep the silvering from adhering strongly in those areas.

Adams/Miller 9A, Rulau SC9A - "Going at only a Penny" obverse, "Bushy Tree" reverse. - Die pairing 3-B struck on a silvered brass planchet.

As can be seen from the above discussion, the cataloging of Wilbur's tokens is in need of revision and renumbering. Perhaps in the next edition of Rulau's Standard Catalog of United States Tokens mention can be made of the new discoveries above and the catalog entries for Wilbur's tokens can be reworked.

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If you collect or have a casual interest in South Carolina tokens or tokens issued by cotton mills, lumber companies, or other types of businesses, you may want to purchase my book, *South Carolina Tokens* and its three supplements. To read a description of these standard references, please click on this link: [Books](#).

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