

The First Private Mint in the United States

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Gold was first discovered in western North Carolina in 1828 in the Brindletown area of Burke County. Prospectors soon worked their way over the ridge into Rutherford County and into the watershed of the Second Broad River. At this point (1830), a great rush was on. Gold was found almost continuously down the river and in many feeder streams. Approximately \$750,000 worth of gold was produced in Rutherford County in 1830. A similar amount was found in Burke.

The sudden influx of miners, speculators, gamblers, swindlers and camp followers which accompany a gold rush had a disastrous effect on the local citizens. For decades, the people had existed independently on their small farms, raising their own food, making their own clothes, building their own homes and furniture, and somehow surviving. The few items they could not produce themselves, they obtained through a friendly barter system with local merchants. This system collapsed when the miners came.

Coins of any kind were scarce and the area had no uniform medium of exchange. The Federal government was pressured to establish a branch mint in the gold region as the nearest was in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. But no such branch would be established for almost eight years. Their trip to the mint was long, arduous and filled with danger. Highwaymen were not uncommon and miners were reluctant to make the trip or even to ship their product. Most sold their gold locally, but honest buyers were rare. Trade in raw gold, of unproven quality was not good business.

About this time, it became necessary to begin underground mining. Very few lode miners were available, so agents were sent to Europe to recruit experienced gold miners to come to North Carolina.

Christopher Bechtler, a gunsmith, metallurgist, and jeweler from Pforzeheim, Germany heeded the call to America. With him came two sons, Augustus and Charles, and a nephew, Christopher Jr. They arrived in Rutherford County, North Carolina, in the spring of 1830 and immediately bought land and built a house three and one-half miles north of Rutherfordton, NC.

The senior Bechtler was known as a mystical person. It was said that he would look at a nearby hill and "see" veins of gold that could be reached by tunnels. He truly believed in his visions, as is evident today by the remaining network of tunnels on the property.

By July 1830, Bechtler had established a business as a clock and watchmaker, jeweler, etc. When a petition in Congress for a branch US Mint was denied for the area, local businessmen and community leaders urged Bechtler to set up a private mint. On July 2, 1831, Bechtler announced in the local newspaper, The North Carolina Spectator and Western Advertiser, that he was "prepared to assay and stamp gold to any amount to a standard of 20 carats, making it into pieces of \$2.50 and \$5.00 value." The first private mint in the United States was established.

Not only did Bechtler set out to mint coins, but he also had to build all the machinery required to do so. He made the dies, the planchet punch, the roller and the press. The coins were minted one at a time in a hand-turned screw press. This was a very slow process, but the family proved to be productive. It is

amazing that so small a facility could process such an enormous amount of gold. It is estimated that from 1800 to 1840, North Carolina mines produced over ten million dollars worth of gold. The Bechtlers handled 40% of this output in one form or another. According to Bechtler's own records, "From January 1831 to February 1840 - \$2,241,840.50" worth of gold was coined and 1,729,998 penny weights fluxed, the total value being \$3,625,840. The value today would be slightly less than 80 million dollars.

Today I visited with a local coin dealer. He stated that he could not buy Bechtler coins locally. He had to go out of the area to find them. He had in his display case a bent 27 grain 1834 Bechtler \$1 coin. Since it was damaged the price was \$975. He had recently sold a nice \$1 coin for \$1300. He quoted prices to me of \$1000 for an average \$1 piece, \$2500 for a \$2.50 coin, and \$4000 for a \$5 piece. He said he was recently offered a very nice \$5 piece for \$4700. Using these figures, Bechtler's total output of coins today would be worth something in the neighborhood of 2.2 billion dollars. Unreal!!!

On July 6, 1840, Christopher Bechtler, Sr. turned over the entire coining operation to his son, Augustus. Their business had been steadily dropping as the federal government had finally opened a mint in nearby Charlotte in 1838. Augustus moved the mint operation to downtown Rutherfordton around 1844. In the summer of 1846 Augustus died, leaving everything to Christopher Bechtler, Jr. Christopher, Jr. operated the mint until July 1857, then gave up and moved to Spartanburg, South Carolina, where he opened a jewelry shop. No production figures are available for Augustus's or Christopher, Jr.'s minting operation.

It should also be noted that the Bechtlers were accomplished gunsmiths. They built a rifle that could be fired "eight times in a minute." This is supposed a turret or harmonia-type repeater, but no such gun survives today. The Bechtlers' priming mechanism was described in 1837 as having "a chain for sixty caps, revolving by a catch of the trigger." This was indeed unique. They built snuff box pistols, walking stick rifles, and many beautiful rifles. An extremely fine, all metal pocket pistol (steel carrel, brass stock) of Bechtler manufacture is owned by Rutherford County Historical Society I have personally seen this piece and it is truly beautiful. The barrel is inscribed "C. Bechtler."

The Bechtler family's contribution to Rutherford County was tremendous. Their coins live on as a monument to this industrious family who migrated to a new world and left a great mark upon it.