

Coin Finds from the Nickerson Site, Chatham MA

Alan M. Stahl

Princeton University

Four seventeenth-century coins have been found in excavation at the William Nickerson Homesite in Chatham MA on Cape Cod in the 2018 and 2019 seasons. The excavation has been carried out since 2016 by Craig Chartier of the Plymouth Archaeological Rediscovery Project under the auspices of the Nickerson Family Foundation on land owned by the Chatham Conservation Foundation [Figures 1, 2].¹ The site was the home of William Nickerson and Anne Busby Nickerson, who immigrated to Massachusetts from England in 1637. They moved to Cape Cod in 1661 onto land they had acquired from the Mannamoiett Natives in 1656. Anne Busby Nickerson died in 1686 and William a few years later. There is no evidence that the house was occupied after that date. Finds such as ceramics, clay tobacco pipes, and bricks are consistent to occupation in that time period. The excavated house appears to have had two rooms in an L-shaped configuration, measuring about 8 meters by 10 meters, with a surrounding wood palisade.

The English Charles I silver half groat [Figure 3]

The coin is a silver half groat (twopenny) piece of Charles I of England (1625-49) from the Tower (London) mint. The obverse is worn and poorly preserved; of the obverse legend only the king's name and the beginning of his titlature are legible: **CAROLVS·D.G. M**; on the reverse the shield is clear and most of the legend is present: **IVSTITIA THRONVM·FIRMAT** ('Justice consolidates the throne'). The reverse legend begins with mint mark (**R**) which allows the coin's striking to be dated to 1644-45.² The coin was found on August 22, 2019 in sector U 306 of the Nickerson site, at a depth of 20-30 cm. There are no comparable finds of seventeenth-century English silver coins in the American colonies; the dominant silver coinage in that period comprised mainly pieces on the Spanish real denominational series minted in Mexico and Peru.³

The Massachusetts silver sixpence-over-shilling [Figure 4]

The coin is a Massachusetts silver sixpence of the 'oak tree' series, bearing the date 1652, but probably minted between 1660 and 1667, struck over a Massachusetts shilling.⁴ The Massachusetts series is the only silver coinage struck in the American colonies before Independence; its inception is due to the lack of royal

¹ "Report on the 2017 Excavations at the William Nickerson Homesite, Chatham Massachusetts," <https://www.plymoutharch.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Nickerson-Final-report-part-1.pdf>, accessed 3/13/20; "2018 Field Season at the William Nickerson site," <https://www.plymoutharch.com/2018-field-season-at-the-william-nickerson-site/>, accessed 3/13/20. The site is off the Orleans Road in Chatham MA, near the reconstructed house of later centuries operated by the Nickerson Family of America.

² J. J. North, *English Hammered Coinage*, 3rd ed. (London: Spink & Son, 1991), 2, 153 and 162, #2258.

³ Philip L. Mossman, *Money of the American Colonies and Confederation*, Numismatic Studies 20 (New York: American Numismatic Society, 1993), pp. 54-63.

⁴ Sylvester S. Crosby, *The Early Coins of America* (Boston: Estes & Lauriat, 1878), pp. 25-122; Sydney P. Noe, *The Oak Tree Coinage of Massachusetts*, Numismatic Notes and Monographs 110 (New York: American Numismatic Society, 1947); Walter Breen, *Walter Breen's Complete Encyclopedia of U. S. and Colonial Coins* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), pp. 12-15; Q. David Bowers, *Whitman Encyclopedia of Colonial and Early American Coins* (Atlanta: Whitman, 2009), pp. 39-43; Christopher Salmon, *The Silver Coins of Massachusetts* (New York: American Numismatic Society, 2010); die identities refer to those of Salmon, who lists the corresponding older identifications.

power in England during the period of the Commonwealth years from 1649 to 1660, a circumstance that also explains the continued use of the immobilized date on coins minted after the Restoration.

The specimen found on the Nickerson site is an overstrike, made from sixpence dies struck on top of a cut-down silver shilling (12 pence) bearing the same date but no doubt struck earlier.⁵ The obverse corresponds to Die 2 in its early state, before the first S was recut to make die states 2a and 2b. The visible letters read **IN·MASATHV** _____. The reverse is Die B; the visible letters read **NE** ____ **NGLAND·ANO** . The central types on both sides are complete. The undertype is an oak tree shilling of the ‘Spiny Tree’ variety, dies 11a-Gi, with the obverse of the undertype beneath the reverse of the overtype. The letters **AND** of the undertype show through on the obverse from 2 to 4 o’clock, and there is a trace of the 2 of the central date visible to the right of the obverse tree. The letters **NE** of the undertype obverse show through from 7 to 9 o’clock of the reverse, along with some of the beading of the interior circle.

The flan is uneven in a way that reflects the curves produced by the rocker press on both the original striking and the overstriking [Figure 5]. The coin is 21 mm. in diameter, with an 11 o’clock die axis on the overtype, and weighs 2.29 grams. It was found 34 cm. below the surface in sector U 190 SE on September 17, 2018, in the Southwest Yard of the Nickerson site, in a trench containing the wooden palisade fence surrounding the house [Figure 6].

No other find of a silver Massachusetts coin has been reported for Cape Cod. Excavation finds of Massachusetts silver coins are rare: a pine tree shilling and halfpence were found in excavation at Pemaquid ME [68] and a pine tree shilling in Rennselaer NY [188].⁶ A hoard found in Salem MA in 1859 contained 4 or 5 pine tree shillings along with a rose farthing of Charles I (1635 to 1644) [133]. Single finds of silver Massachusetts coins (usually by accident or through the use of a metal detector) include an oak tree twopence in Brookline MA [111], a pine tree threepence in Plymouth MA [117], a Pine Tree threepence in Saugus MA [118], a pine tree sixpence in Essex MA [121], a pine tree sixpence in Wellingsley (Plymouth) MA [122], a pine tree shilling in West Springfield MA [126], a pine tree shilling in Williamstown MA [129], and a pine tree shilling Longmeadow MA [179].

The Irish copper halfpenny [Figure 7]

An Irish copper halfpenny dated 1682 was found on October 1, 2018, within the brick work at the eastern end of the hearth, at WNH V02 SW F01 at a depth of 30 cm. Though the coin is extremely worn and corroded (much more so than the two silver coins from the site), it is possible to make out the last digit of the date; in any case the issue lasted only from 1680 to 1684, under letters patent granted to Sir Thomas Armstrong and Colonel George Legge.⁷ Virtually none of the legend is visible other than the **D** of **DEI** on

⁵ Notice of this phenomenon was first published by William J. Wild, “Six over Twelve,” *The Colonial Newsletter*, 8, 2 (July, 1969), 257-60, where the discovery of the first example is credited to Walter Breen in 1957, and the second example to John J. Ford in 1968; follow-ups appeared as *idem*, “A third SIX over TWELVE specimen,” *The Colonial Newsletter*, (March 1970), 300; *idem*, “The Fourth Six over Twelve Specimen,” *The Colonial Newsletter*, (January, 1971), 310-11; *idem*, “A New overtype for the six over twelve specimens,” *The Colonial Newsletter*, 10, 3 (September 1971), p. 328; all accessed via the Newman Numismatic Portal. In all, five specimens of this overstrike had been known prior to the discovery of the Nickerson example.

⁶ John M. Kleeberg, *Numismatic Finds of the Americas: An Inventory of American Coin Hoards, Shipwrecks, Single Finds and Finds in Excavations*, Numismatic Notes and Monographs 169 (New York: American Numismatic Society, 2009); numbers in brackets refer to entries in Kleeberg’s inventory.

⁷ “John S. Powell, “The Irish Coinage of Armstrong and Legge,” *Seaby Coin and Medal Bulletin*, no. 718 (June 1978), 174-176; Michael Dolley, “The ‘Armstrong and Legge,’ (Recte ‘Knox’?) Halfpence Irish with Dates 1680/1/2/3/4,” *Seaby Coin and Medal Bulletin*, No. 728 (April, 1979), 118-120; O’Brien Coin Guide: Armstrong & Legge’s ‘Patent Irish Halfpennies for Charles II,’ *The Old Currency Exchange* (August 6, 2015), <https://oldcurrencyexchange.com/2015/08/09/obrien-coin-guide-armstrong-legges-irish-regal-halfpennies-for-charles-ii/>, accessed 3/13/20.

the obverse at 1 o'clock and the very faint numbers **82** above the right of the harp on the reverse; the coin is 26 mm in diameter. A coin of this type was found in the excavation in Pemaquid ME [68] and one carried out in Philadelphia PA [68]; it is otherwise unattested in American coin finds.

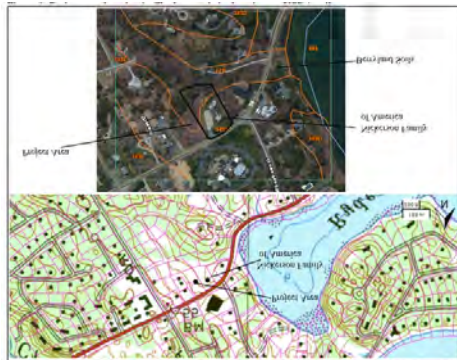
The English Charles II bronze farthing [Figure 8]

A notched disk, 20 mm in diameter, was found in sector U223 of the Nickerson site on August 6, 2019, at a depth of 55-60 cm. It has been provisionally identified as a cut-down bronze farthing of Charles II, minted between 1660 and 1685. On the obverse one can make out a bust facing left and the letters **S** and **A** in the legend from 10 to 11 o'clock and **C** at 2 o'clock; the exergue line is visible on the reverse with the numeral **6** of the date beneath, as is Britannia's staff.⁸ Three bronze farthings of Charles II were found in excavation in Ferryland, Newfoundland [76], one at the Camden Site, Caroline County VA [147], and two in Williamsburg VA [421]; nineteen specimens have been found as a result of metal-detector finds in Burlington NJ [281] and one in Gloucester and Salem Counties NJ [517].

It appears from the Nickerson finds that in the seventeenth century, English settlers in Cape Cod had access to silver and bronze coinage minted in the British Isles as well as the silver Massachusetts denominations. The importation and circulation of coins from Spanish mints of the New World, which would come to dominate the circulation in Colonial North America, is not yet apparent in this context.

Figures

1. Project area location in Chatham MA and site location on USDA soil map.



2. The Nickerson House excavation site, Oct. 12 2018.



⁸ I am grateful to my brother Gerry Stahl, Treasurer of the Chatham Conservation Foundation, who alerted me to the coin finds and who has tentatively identified this coin, which I have not seen.

3. The English Charles I silver half groat



4. The Massachusetts silver sixpence over shilling



5. The Massachusetts sixpence over shilling, bent in the restriking process



6. The author (left) examines the context of the discovery of the Massachusetts sixpence, Oct. 12 2018.



7. The Irish copper halfpenny



8. The English Charles II bronze farthing

