

Historic Coin Finds at the Nickerson Homestead

Alan M. Stahl and Gerry Stahl

Four seventeenth-century coins were found in excavation at the William Nickerson Homesite in Chatham during the summers of 2018 and 2019. The excavation was carried out from 2016 to 2019 by Craig Chartier of the Plymouth Archaeological Rediscovery Project under the auspices of the Nickerson Family Association (NFA) on land owned by the Chatham Conservation Foundation (CCF).



The archaeological study of the William Nickerson homestead is arguably the most significant Colonial excavation on Cape Cod. It unearthed the first Chatham homestead and produced hundreds of historic artifacts, which shed significant light on the life of Chatham's founding family. The property where the dig was conducted is now being restored to a public park by CCF, adjacent to the NFA's museum site. Both the dig and the restoration have been publicly supported by grants from Chatham's Community Preservation Fund.

The archaeological 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. The land corresponds roughly to what is now the Town of Chatham.

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. Anne died in 1686 and William a few years later. There is no evidence that the house was occupied after that date, although their children settled in the area. Finds from the dig such as ceramics, clay tobacco pipes and bricks are consistent with occupation in that period.

Among the artifacts uncovered are four coins. The coins are rare finds:

- The oak-tree sixpence coin is the only silver Massachusetts coin that has been reported found on Cape Cod. As described below, it is one of several overstruck six-pence over one-shilling oak-tree coins. However, none of the five others was found in situ—i.e., the others are known only as pieces in modern collections, not associated with their historic contexts. Coins minted in Boston, like this one, were the only silver coins produced in the American colonies.

- The English half-groat coin is the only type of seventeenth-century English silver coin found in the American colonies—discovered at very few locations.
- The Irish copper half-penny coin is one of only three of its kind found in the American colonies.
- The English bronze farthing is further evidence of economic activity at the homestead.

The discovery of four coins on the Nickerson homestead suggest that there was probably considerable commerce taking place at the property, where the family engaged in many productive activities, including running a forge. Artifacts of European and Native American origin also reflect lively commerce. As indicated by the size and style of the homestead, the Nickersons were relatively well-to-do.

It appears from the Nickerson finds that in the seventeenth century, English settlers in Cape Cod had some limited access to silver and bronze coinage minted in the British Isles, as well as the silver denominations minted in Boston. 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.



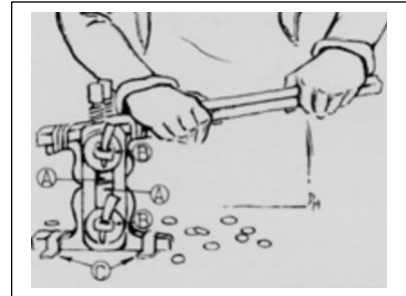
The dig site. Alan Stahl (left) and Craig Chartier standing where the Massachusetts coin was found.

Massachusetts Oak-Tree Silver Sixpence-over-shilling

The coin revealing the most local history is a Massachusetts silver sixpence of the “oak tree” series, bearing the date 1652, but probably minted between 1660 and 1667. Excavation finds of Massachusetts silver coins are rare. This is the only find of a silver Massachusetts coin that has been reported for Cape Cod.

The coin reflects the history of the Massachusetts colony. In 1652 Massachusetts passed an act providing for the establishment of a mint in Boston. The Massachusetts series is the only silver coinage struck in the American colonies before Independence; its inception is due to the lack of royal power in England during the period of the Commonwealth years from 1649 to 1660; the 1652 date of the inception of minting was immobilized on subsequent issues. Before that, commerce in Massachusetts was conducted primarily through the barter system, causing various serious difficulties for the colonists involving trade locally and tax payments to England.

Oak-tree coinage was produced using a rocker press, rather than simply using the traditional hammer striking method. When the lever is pulled, the upper and lower rockers press against each other with a rolling motion so that a blank metal planchet placed between them is impressed with the design of the two dies. Evidence that this new technology was used in Boston is found in the curvature of the coins.



The coin 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 possibly struck earlier. The visible letters on the sixpence obverse read **IN·MASATHV**_____. The visible letters on the sixpence reverse read **NE**___**NGLAND·ANO**. The centers on both sides—the tree and the date—are still clearly visible. The under-type is an oak-tree shilling of the “Spiny Tree” variety, with the obverse of the under-type beneath the reverse of the oertype. The letters **AND** of the under-type show through on the obverse from 2 to 4 o’clock. The letters **AT** of the under-type obverse show through at 10 o’clock of the reverse. (See photos below.)

The coin is bent in multiple directions, in a way that reflects curves produced by the rocker press on both the original striking and the overstriking. The coin is 21 mm. in diameter (about the size of a modern U.S. nickel). It was found 34 cm. below the surface on September 17, 2018, by a descendent of the Nickersons in the southwest yard of the Nickerson site, in a trench containing the wooden palisade fence surrounding the house.

The use of a tree as the obverse type for the Massachusetts silver issues was done to avoid either a royal effigy or some symbol of parliament—using an object representing a major aspect of the physical environment of the Bay Colony. Moreover, it had a special significance in the justification for the issue of coinage in 1652, as preserved in an anecdote from the period. When challenged on the usurpation of the regal right to coinage, the colony’s agent at court, Sir William Temple, used the tree on the coins as a defense. He tugged a pine-tree shilling from his pocket and showed it to the king, who asked what sort of tree it was. Temple explained it was “the Royal Oak which preserved your Majesty’s life,” a reference to the hollow tree in which the king had hidden after the battle of Worcester in 1651. That answer was said to have so pleased the king that he laughed heartily and called the New Englanders “a parcel of honest dogs,” in effect allowing the minting of the coin in Massachusetts that year.

The choice of a tree as the main symbol on the Massachusetts silver coinage may also be seen as a conscious evocation of Native American symbolism and the earliest manifestation of an indigenous American numismatic iconography. The Massachusetts settlers were, from the start, in close contact with the native groups that would come to be identified as the Haudenosaunee, or Five Nations. By the time their traditions came to be written down, the Nations had as the primary symbol of their confederacy the Great White Pine, identified in a vision by their legendary prophet Deganawidah as a symbol of humanity living within the principles governing relations among individuals. This native symbol of the pine tree would be taken up explicitly in the eighteenth century by the Sons of Liberty in their creation of the Liberty Tree, under which they conducted their daily exercises.

Following the pictures of the obverse and reverse of the excavated Nickerson sixpence coin are images of better-preserved sixpence and shilling coins struck from the same dies, as well as a model of the overstruck coin with the visible features enhanced.



English Charles Silver Half Groat

The second coin is a silver half groat (two-penny) 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 a mint mark (**R**) which allows the coin's striking to be dated to 1644-45. The coin is 15 mm. in diameter (smaller than a modern dime). Comparable finds of early English silver coins have been found in Plymouth, MA, as well as in Ferryland, Newfoundland, and in Jamestown, Virginia.

Following are images of the excavated coin and of a better-preserved instance from the same dies:



Irish Copper Halfpenny

The third coin is an Irish copper halfpenny dated 1682. It was found within the brick work at the eastern end of the homestead's hearth; it is 26 mm. in diameter (slightly larger than a modern quarter). Though the coin is extremely worn, it is possible to make out the last digits of the date; in any case the issue lasted only from 1680 to 1684. Virtually none of the legend is visible other than the **O** of CAROLVA at 9 o'clock and the **D** of DEI at 1 o'clock on the obverse, and the numbers **82** of the date above the right of the harp on the reverse.

A coin of this type was found in an archaeological excavation carried out in Pemaquid, ME, and one carried out in Philadelphia, PA; it is otherwise unattested in American coin finds.

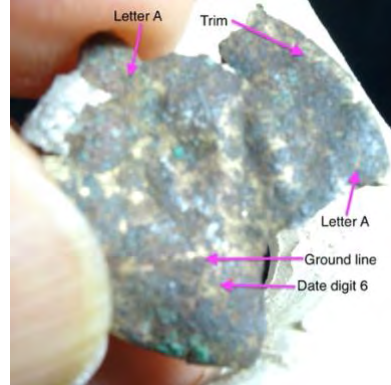
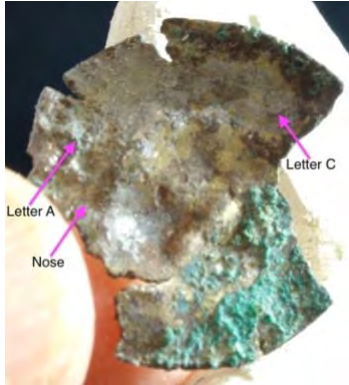
Following are images of the excavated coin and of a better-preserved instance from the same dies:



English Charles II Bronze Farthing

The fourth coin found is a highly oxidated notched disk 20 mm. in diameter (about the size of a modern nickel). It has been identified as an English Charles II bronze farthing. One side has a portrait bust with a prominent nose facing left. The letter **A** in front of the brow and the **C** above the back of the head are visible under magnification. On the reverse, the ground (exergue) line and the number **6** of the date below it as well as two letter **A**s are visible, as is some of the trim around the circumference.

Following are images of the excavated coin, of the same coin cleaned up and annotated, as well as of a better-preserved instance from the same dies:



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Alan M. Stahl is Curator of Numismatics, Princeton University. He published a report on the coins:
Stahl, A. (2020). Coin Finds from the Nickerson Site, Chatham MA. *Journal of Early American Numismatics*. Vol. 3, 2 (December 2020).

Gerry Stahl is Treasurer, Chatham Conservation Foundation. He sculpted the bronze medallions of the Massachusetts silver sixpence coin.

Craig Chartier is archaeologist at the Plymouth Archaeological Rediscovery Project. See his “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> and “2018 Field Season at the William Nickerson Site,” <https://www.plymoutharch.com/2018-field-season-at-the-william-nickerson-site/>.

Michael Karchmer of Harwich provided the photographs of the four excavated coins.

Coins and other artifacts from the Nickerson site are the property of the Chatham Conservation Foundation, Inc. The Nickerson Family Association plans to place them on public display.