

LES GRANDS NUMISMATES

Sylvester Sage Crosby (1831-1914)

Sylvester Sage Crosby published only two major numismatic works during his lifetime, but both were of extraordinary importance. The first, a die study of the cents of 1793, published in April 1869, was the first die study ever performed; he expanded this study into a fuller treatment of the cents and half cents of 1793 in a monograph published in 1897. Crosby's second major numismatic work was a study of the pre-federal coin issues in what is now the United States, published from 1873 through 1875, which remains an essential source today.

Crosby was born on September 2, 1831 as the penultimate child of the ten children of the Unitarian minister Jaazaniah Crosby, D.D., and Huldah Robinson Sage of Charlestown, New Hampshire. His father's unusual first name is one of those Old Testament names that used to be so popular among New England families. His father attended Phillips Exeter Academy and Harvard College, graduating with a B.A. in the class of 1804. On his mother's side Crosby was descended from John Pierpont, one of the founders of Yale College. Crosby himself did not attend college, but became a watchmaker in Charlestown at the age of seventeen. He moved from Charlestown to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where many of his other relatives resided. His watch business was in Boston: first at 240 Washington Street, and later at 43 West Street. Crosby was married twice. He first married, in 1855, Mary Elizabeth Capelle (1834-74); in 1875 he married Mehitable "Hittie" Ackers (1832-1907). In addition to his interest in numismatics, Crosby's other avocations were archaeology, astronomy, and the culture of mushrooms. From 1872 until his death he resided in the same house at 21 Sacramento Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He died at home of stomach cancer on August 18, 1914.

Why did this new numismatic methodology of the die study develop in the United States, where numismatics did not have the long tradition that it did in Europe, and why was it developed by Crosby, who had no formal education after age seventeen? In 1857, the replacement of the old large cent by the smaller flying eagle cent ignited a craze for collecting cents. It seemed as though it would be easy to put together a date set of large cents back to the first year of issue, 1793, for less than a dollar.



Yet some years, notably 1799 and 1804, proved to be rare; for one year, 1815, no genuine cents existed (although forgers promptly altered dates to create cents of 1815); and for 1793, there were three major types (chains, wreaths, caps). The interest in cents spread to all early American coins, and four best-selling books were published in rapid succession: John H. Hickcox, *An Historical Account of American Coinage* (1858); Montroville Wilson Dickeson, *The American Numismatic Manual* (1859; second edition, 1860, third edition 1865); James Ross Snowden, *A Description of the Ancient and Modern Coins in the Cabinet Collection of the Mint of the United States* (1860); and William Cowper Prime, *Coins, Medals, and Seals, Ancient and Modern* (1861). Numismatic societies were established in the cities of the northeastern United States, plus eastern Canada. The first was the Numismatic and Antiquarian Society of Philadelphia, established in January 1858, followed by The American Numismatic and Archaeological Society of New York, established in April 1858. When the New England Numismatic and Archaeological Society of Boston was formed in April 1866, Crosby became its curator.

The three types of cents of 1793 present a problem of chronology. An analogous problem existed among the silver coins issued by Massachusetts, where there were four major types (New England shillings, Willow tree shillings, Oak tree shillings, and Pine tree shillings, plus smaller denominations), yet all bore the year 1652 (except for a minor denomination dated 1662). With four types of silver coins dated 1652, and three types of cents dated 1793, traditional methodology, such as the issue theory of the Viennese school, was inapplicable. Rapid changes in type and the idiosyncratic development of American numismatic art made another method, dating by style, also inapplicable. At the same time new technologies, widely adopted in the United States in the 1850s, facilitated the study of coins: photography and electrotypes.

Crosby grew up in a well-educated household that had wide intellectual interests. He came of age in a region that was experiencing what the literary critic Van Wyck Brooks would later call “The Flowering of New England” and the “New England Indian Summer.” Furthermore, as a watchmaker when interchangeable parts were beginning to be applied to fine mechanics (such as guns), he would be acquainted with tool and die technology, and understood how each die would convey a unique appearance to its products. The United States led the rest of the world in the application of interchangeable parts to fine mechanics. Finally, Crosby had access to the fine libraries of Boston, and, as a resident of Cambridge, he may possibly have had access to some of the resources of Harvard.

In 1868 the New York City collector Joseph N. T. Levick compiled a table of the most notable cents that had appeared at auction since 1855. He then began to seek the finest cents to put together a photographic plate showing the varieties of 1793. He collaborated on this with Crosby. Crosby wrote the descriptions of the dies and

assigned to each obverse die a number, and to each reverse die a letter. The coin dealer Ebenezer Locke Mason anticipated Levick and Crosby by publishing a list of the varieties of 1793 in his *Coin and Stamp Magazine*, starting in December 1868. Mason bungled the job, so that only eleven of his varieties can be recognized today. In April 1869 Crosby and Levick published their plate and descriptions in the *American Journal of Numismatics*. This is the first die study ever published. Not only did Crosby distinguish the dies, he also constructed die links and die chains.

As is often the case, the idea was in the air at the time, and at least one other contemporary numismatist also discovered the idea of the die study. In 1878, the Swiss numismatist Friedrich Imhoof-Blumer would arrive at the same idea independently of Crosby, when he published his die study of the coins of Acarnania. Crosby, however, did anticipate Imhoof-Blumer's discovery by nine years, so there is no question of his priority.

In 1896, Crosby published in a series in the *American Journal of Numismatics* a further study of the coinage of 1793, including documents. This was published as a separate monograph in 1897. It included six die marriages that had been discovered since 1869. Crosby's 1897 work has stood the test of time. Only one new die marriage has been reported in the intervening century, and that new die marriage remains controversial.

In 1869 the New England Numismatic and Archaeological Society appointed Crosby to a committee of six to prepare an authoritative account of the pre-federal coins of America. The other five members, however, became distracted by other matters and all the work devolved upon Crosby. The Stock Market Crash of 1873 dried up the market for coin books, and Crosby ended up financing much of the publication himself. The book was published in parts from 1873 through 1875. It has been reprinted four times since 1945. Upon its appearance, it got a favorable review in the *Nation*, which further commented in its issue of February 10, 1876:

“The general absence of artistic beauty in American productions is exhibited in the common ugliness of the coins. No one of them will be prized two thousand years hence for beauty such as makes the coins of Greece and her colonies still precious to the lovers of art. No woman will ever wear one set like a gem for her adornment. The plates in Mr. Crosby's book are suggestive, not so much of the superiority of modern culture, as of its inferiority to that of the ancient world.”

Crosby completed the research in a mere three years. The work comprised many die studies by Crosby, including Massachusetts silver coinage and Connecticut coppers. Many of Crosby's die identification systems, such as that for Nova Constellatio coppers, are still used today. Crosby's publication of the documents on the Massachusetts silver coinage was so thorough that when Sydney P. Noe did his own

die study of Massachusetts silver he referred readers to Crosby. Crosby's text remains essential reading for anyone interested in this area.

Crosby must have been an extremely amiable man, for he was able to persuade prickly collectors to lend him their coins so he could describe them and publish them. He did have the disadvantage of being gullible. Fakes are common in the United States series, and a healthy skepticism is required. Although Levick recognized in 1868 that a 1793 cent of "chain Ameri." variety was a fake, Crosby published it as genuine in his 1897 monograph, and assigned it the variety number "3-B." Crosby published an article in the *American Journal of Numismatics* about strikings from hubs of the so-called New Haven restrikes as if they were genuine work of 1787, and not the fakes of the late nineteenth century that they actually are. Crosby also published an 1804 over 3 dollar overdate as if it were genuine, although even contemporaries who were fooled by the mint-produced fantasy 1804 dollars did not consider the 1804 over 3 overdate to be genuine.

Crosby admitted in his introduction to the *Early Coins of America* that several pieces in his work had never circulated in the United States, but he included them because they had been regularly collected as part of the United States series. An example would be the British eighteenth century "Conder tokens," such as the one issued for the Franklin Press in London. From the very beginning the numismatic history of the United States was distinct from its monetary history. Crosby did not describe what circulated and what did not in the thirteen colonies and the early United States, but rather recorded the narrative that coin collectors constructed to articulate the story of the American project. This narrative privileged copper coins that resembled British halfpence, and omitted other widely circulated coins from the canon, such as Spanish American dollars, Brazilian joes, or Spanish pistareens. In including the coins that resembled most closely those of Britain, Crosby's account was in more ways than one the story of "New England." Since coin collecting in the South was nipped in the bud by the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the narrative was constructed from the northern point of view. Some coinage that circulated widely in the southern United States in the colonial and early federal period, such as cut Spanish pistareens, has only begun to be adopted into the canon in recent years.

Crosby's example of the die study was widely followed, so that now a die study exists for nearly every one of these coinages from 1616 to 1857. Crosby also stands at the beginning of a dialectic between the study of modern coinage and the study of ancient coinage, for in 1911 Edward Theodore Newell would apply the die study technique, so well known by then to collectors of United States large cents, to the Alexander coinage.

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