

In Retrospect

May 25, 2025

#6 Machin's Mills

In 1845, historian Jephtha Root Simms documented letters and biographical data related to the life of “Captain Thomas Machin, engineer,” in the *History of Schoharie County*. Machin had moved to this rural central New York county in the 1790s from his previous home on the shore of Orange Lake, outside of Newburgh. During the late 1780s at his lakeside mill, Machin minted “coppers” of various types. Some were imitations of British halfpennies, while others were officially or unofficially designed to pass as state coppers. Simms’s work was referenced by John H. Hickcox in his *Historical Account of American Coinage* of 1858, and from there, nineteenth-century numismatic scholars such as Sylvester Crosby and C.W. Betts further developed the story of the coinages of Machin’s Mills.

However, it was not until the 1950s that Eric Newman, perhaps motivated by the coins discovered in the “Stepney Hoard,” pursued an effective die study. Robert Vlack further perfected the die study in the 1960s with the issuance of schematic plates. In the August-September 1959 issue of *Empire Topics*, Newman encapsulated his research and asked the numismatic community for assistance, “Can you help with your ideas, your data and information as to your coins? Needles in a haystack can be found, particularly with the magnetism of numismatics.”

Accompanying Newman’s request was an example of a 1788 halfpenny that later sold at Heritage Auctions as part of the collection of the Eric P. Newman Numismatic Education Society. Another coin from Newman’s collection sold by Heritage Auctions was the 1776 CEORCIVS III REX, which Newman wrote about in his 1958 article “A Recently Discovered Coin Solves a Vermont Numismatic Enigma,” originally published in the *American Numismatic Society Centennial Publication*. In the Winter 2022 *C4 Newsletter*, authors James Rosen and William Eckberg proved in their article, “Was Eric Newman Correct About the Punch-Interlocked Vermonts?” that Newman was mistaken in his belief that this coin shared the same central device as Vermont issues. Rosen and co-authors Jack Howes and Gary Trudgen published the definitive reference on Machin’s Mills with their 2024 book, *The History and Coinage of Machin’s Mills, 2nd Edition*.



1788 Machin's Mills Halfpenny, Vlack 23-88A. This is the plate coin for Eric P. Newman's article "The Machin's Mill Mint Near Newburgh, N.Y.," which appeared in the August-September 1959 issue of *Empire Topics*.

The cataloger noted: "According to Eric P. Newman's original envelope, this piece may be from the Stepney Hoard." Heritage Auctions, November 2017, lot 15295.



1776 Machin's Mills Halfpence, The Vlack 9-76B Discovery Coin, 'Vermont Enigma' Coin. Ex: Stepney Hoard; Eric P. Newman; Eric P. Newman Numismatic Education Society. Heritage Auctions, November 2014, lot 3030.

A search for facts adding to the knowledge of . . .

THE MACHIN'S MILLS MINT NEAR NEWBURGH, N. Y.

by Eric P. Newman

What occurred in the mysterious operation of the mint for the coinage of coppers erected at Orange Lake, New York, about 1786? When Thomas Machin, a hero of the American Revolution, used land of Governor George Clinton of New York for a "money-making" venture it was hoped that the state of New York would approve a coining franchise for his association as had been granted to others in the neighboring states of Connecticut, Vermont, New Jersey and Massachusetts. Since that did not materialize the group turned to the unauthorized coinage of coppers. If we only knew more about what coins they made we might answer many questions about American coinage during the period before the Constitution.



Genuine and counterfeit British halfpence were circulated freely in the United States before and after the Revolution, and the profit in manufacturing a few more seemed attractive—particularly at Machin's Mills because there was no law against counterfeiting copper in New York at that time. The coins struck at Machin's Mills are as much a part of American numismatics as any other series—even though most of them were imitation British halfpence. Some are dated 1776, 1778, 1787 and 1788, dates when no genuine British halfpence were minted. There are hundreds of varieties of British halfpence dated from 1770 to 1775, and a few dated 1781, 1784 and 1785. While virtually all of these are of British or Irish origin, a few may be Machin's Mills or other American pieces. Many a collector's junk box has American pieces of this type in it, but there they remain unidentified. The Vermont, Connecticut and New Jersey pieces which are candidates for a Machin's Mills source at least are known as well as those with New York and Federal insignia. Yet which were made in Machin's Mills is unknown. It is not even known what coins are referred to in the Connecticut mint report where it is said that Maj. Eli Leavenworth had coppers made in New York (Machin's Mills) which were similar to Connecticut coinages.

For over ten years the writer has been gathering data on Machin's Mills to write up the subject and sincerely needs the cooperation of many numismatists. If the joint efforts of anyone who has any relative data were pooled substantial further progress can result. We are on the threshold of adding a new series of American coins. No fact is too obvious to restudy, no prior statement exempt from challenge, no eighteenth century George III British halfpenny too unimportant to examine. What can you add to this subject?

The records of Thomas Machin are still to be located. They were used by Jephtha R. Sims in *The History of Schoharie County* in 1845 and their whereabouts are unknown. In *The History of Newburgh* by Ruttenber, and the *History of Orange County* by Eager there are comments about the mint. Hickcox was the first numismatist to comment, then Crosby (pp. 172, 190-202, 290, 319 of *Early Coins of America*) adds more data. C. Wyllys Betts first tried to identify Machin's imitation British halfpence in his pamphlet "Counterfeit Halfpence". Kurth in the February 1942 Numismatist pushes the frontier forward, then Breen in the January 1952 Numismatist described the amazing Fairfield County hoard. In the *Centennial Publication of the American Numismatic Society* the article of the undersigned entitled "A Newly Discovered Coin Solves a Vermont Numismatic Enigma", attempts to explain the relationship between the Vermont coinage and Machin's Mills imitation British halfpence.

Even the term "Bungtown coppers" needs clarification. Many writers have stated that this expression refers to coppers with unofficial legends such as GREGORY III PON, GANGES III RATE, BRITAIN'S HAPPY ISLE or BONNY GIRLS. There is a great probability that Bungtown really means imitation British halfpence with standard legends rather than evasive legends, and that the coppers with evasive legends were never used in America. Has any reader ever found any evidence in letters, newspapers, diaries, hoards, or otherwise that coppers with unofficial legends ever circulated in America? Are not Machin's Mills halfpence some of the true Bungtowns?

Can you help with your ideas, your data and information as to your coins? Needles in a haystack can be found, particularly with the magnetism of numismatics.

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