



**THE NEW  
ORLEANS  
MINT  
TREASURE**

*A True Story by Tom Hoke*

*During the month of January, 1861, more than 5,000 freshly minted \$20 gold double-eagle coins along with 300,000 silver half-dollars were legally exchanged at the United States mint in New Orleans, Louisiana. Evidence indicates these coins may have been buried close to Harbor Drive to the West of Waveland, Mississippi. On today's market these coins would have a value of more than \$50,000,000. This is a treasure story based on extensive research, an eyewitness account, and a 55 year search for the truth, a truth often stranger than fiction.*

*New Orleans, January, 1861*

From January 1 to January 31, 1861, the New Orleans mint was operated by the United States Treasury Department. Only two coins were stamped out by the huge steam presses: (1) \$20 gold double-eagles, and (2) silver half-dollars. Treasury records show 5,000 double-eagles and 330,000 silver half-dollars were produced during this period.

*National Archives Center, Ft.  
Worth, Texas*

In Ft. Worth, Texas at the National Archives Center in Building 1, an oversized leather-bound musty smelling record book called the *Gold Book* details precisely every gold exchange made at the New Orleans mint during the period January 1, 1861 through January 16, 1861.

## Major Gold Exchanges at the New Orleans Mint, January, 1861

### *January 5, 1861*

Source	Type	Weight (Oz)
Citizens Bank	British Sovereigns	931.05
Citizens Bank	South American Doubloons	913.35
Citizens Bank	Mexican Doubloons	560.41
Citizens Bank	South American Doubloons	410.43
Bank of Louisiana	British Sovereigns	1281.70
Bank of Louisiana	British Sovereigns	1281.72
Bank of Louisiana	British Sovereigns	1024.50

### *January 16, 1861*

Source	Type	Weight (Oz)
Citizens Bank	British Sovereigns (5000)	1281.94
Citizens Bank	British Sovereigns (5000)	1281.94
Citizens Bank	British Sovereigns (5000)	1282.13

South American gold doubloons, Mexican gold doubloons, California gold coins, Spanish gold doubloons, and British gold sovereigns were exchanged for United States gold coins. Each entry in the “Gold Book” is numbered, the date of entry is provided, the source is identified (unless the trade is small), and the weight of the gold traded is given in decimal ounces. The last entry in the *Gold Book* is dated January 16, 1861.

Careful analysis of the *Gold Book* shows during January, 1861 a total of more than 10,249.17 ounces of foreign gold coins were exchanged at the New Orleans mint. Previous exchanges indicate gold was worth \$18.83/ounce, so more than \$192,991.87 worth of gold was exchanged by January 16, 1861. Smaller exchanges were also made, but they are not shown. During January, 1861 there were 24 exchanges completed. Each exchange took approximately 1 week before payment was made, thus the final payments for gold exchanged on January 16, 1861 were made around January 23, 1861.

In the *Gold Book* the final date of entry, January 16, 1861, showed a flood of 15,000 British gold sovereigns were brought into the mint three times in one day by a representative of the Citizens bank. The value of the gold legally exchanged at the bank during January, 1861 was greater than the value of the 5,000 double-eagle coins produced by the United States Treasury Department, which means all the recently minted gold and a large quantity of silver flowed out of the bank in exchange for foreign gold.

## *Treasury Department Attempts to Take Action*

In late January, 1861 the United States Treasury Department realized if war were to break out the New Orleans mint would be taken over and the gold and silver in the mint would be lost.

Secretary of the United States Treasury, John A. Dix, who had assumed his position January 15, 1861, reported on January 22, 1861 a total of \$880,087.40 was in the hands of the New Orleans Mint's Treasurer.

Dix broke it down like this:

**“Treasurer of the mint, \$389,267.46; Assistant Treasurer to the Credit of the Treasurer of the United States, \$265,445.14; and to Assistant Treasurer to the credit of disbursing officers, \$225,374.80.”**

Dix sent a draft for \$350,000 payable to Adams' Express Company to the Assistant Treasurer of the New Orleans mint. The draft was not paid on presentation because apparently the mint did not have sufficient funds on hand to cover it, and the Assistant Treasurer declined to pay any part until he could pay the whole.

The truth was the New Orleans mint did not have \$350,000 to send because the fund valued at \$389,267.46 was in gold bullion. He couldn't send gold bullion in payment. The other two funds which were supposedly composed of freshly minted gold double-eagles and silver half-dollars could not be sent because they had been exchanged for British gold sovereigns, Spanish gold doubloons, South American gold doubloons, California gold coins, and Mexican gold doubloons. Sometime in the future the demand note might have been met, but the State of Louisiana took charge of the mint on February 1, 1861 and the United States Treasury Department lost control.

### *Transfer of Assets to the State of Louisiana*

When the State of Louisiana took over the New Orleans mint, a complete and detailed inventory was made of every item in the mint. On February 13, 1861 A. J. Guirot, Assistant Treasurer of the State of Louisiana, sent a statement of balance of gold and silver coins transferred from the U.S. Depository at New Orleans to the State of Louisiana on January 30, 1861. The letters from Guirot to William Price,

Treasurer of the United States, are located in the National Archives center in Rockville, Maryland.

On copperplate press, impressions are difficult to read, but a transcript follows:

**“Statement of Balance in Gold and Silver coins in the U.S. Depository at New Orleans was transferred to the State of Louisiana on January 30, 1861 and on that date took credit of the following amount:**

**To credit of: Public Revenue: \$146,226.72**

**Disbursement Offers: \$306,592.82**

**Post Offers: \$ 31,164.44**

**\$483,983.98**

**In Gold coins: \$308,771.00**

**In Silver coins: \$175,212.98”**

The \$483,983.98 total for the gold and silver was very close to the \$490,819.94 in two of the funds mentioned by John A. Dix several weeks earlier, and the gold bullion fund was later transferred intact to the Confederate States of America.

Even though a detailed inventory was made February 1, 1861 for every piece of machinery and every asset previously owned by the U. S. Government and turned over to the state of Louisiana, why it took A. J.

Guirot thirteen days to indicate in a letter the amount of gold and silver left a question mark. Guirot also failed to mention one of the most important facts: the gold coins turned over to the State of Louisiana were primarily foreign gold coins rather than U.S. gold coins.

A total of 9,750 \$20 gold double-eagles were later made by the State of Louisiana, and another 2,991 \$20 gold double-eagles were coined by the Confederate States of America.



**Figure 1 - Flawed date displayed on most coins (photo courtesy of Ira & Larry Goldberg Coins & Collectibles, Beverly Hills, California).**

A characteristic of most of the 1861-O \$20 gold coin in numismatic collections has been a flawed date (Figure 1) which clearly shows a weakness in the bottom of the 8 and the 6 in 1861.

Since three sets of dies were sent from Philadelphia in December, 1860 to the New Orleans Mint, it can be intelligently assumed the first 5,000 coins minted by the United States Treasury Department were flawless, especially with so many set of dies available, but keep in mind most of the first 5,000 coins were exchanged for foreign gold just after they were made. When the State of Louisiana took over the New Orleans mint in February, 1861 they were in a big hurry to make U. S. \$20 gold coins out of all the foreign gold which had been dumped into the mint the previous month. The coins minted by the State of Louisiana, as well as the coins minted by the Confederate States of America appear to have flawed dates. This seems to indicate possibly two sets of dies were used, and it also confirms a majority of the first 5,000 coins, assumed to be perfect, are no where to be found. They simply *disappeared*. According to the records, only one set of dies was ever used. The difference in the 5,000 gold double eagles produced by the United States Treasury Department and the Confederate States could possibly have been due to the fact the Confederate gold was created from foreign gold, and the foreign gold had a

different copper content, which could have caused the dropout in the 8 and the 6.

### *An Interesting 1862 Memorandum*

In 1862, William M. Evarts, a State Representative, sent a letter containing a memorandum supposedly written by a prominent New Orleans businessman to United States Secretary of State William H. Seward. The memorandum read:

**“It should not be forgotten that the Citizens bank or the president, or some other person connected with the bank, has been reported as acting in some way, directly or indirectly, as fiscal agent of the Confederate Government, and that that Government may have funds in the hands of such agent, which were on deposit with the Citizens bank. It is even probable that a portion of the gold stolen from the mint in New Orleans at the commencement of the rebellion was deposited in the Citizens bank by some agent or officer of the Confederate Government.”**

Clearly, in 1862, there was a tremendous suspicion that the gold in the mint had been stolen and deposited in Citizens bank by an

agent or officer of the Confederate Government.

*Superintendent of Public Works at  
the New Orleans Mint*

In January, 1861 the Superintendent in charge of Public Works for the City of New Orleans was an ex-Union Army Captain named Johnson Kelly Duncan. Duncan was also in charge of public works at the United States mint. Duncan, who graduated from West Point Military Academy in 1849, was married to the daughter of a prominent British businessman.

Duncan's signature appears on document after document in the mint records, and because of his access and status he could have been the representative of the Citizens bank who legally exchanged foreign gold for the gold and silver in the mint and then deposited it in the Citizens bank.

*Citizens Bank Records for  
January, 1861*

The University of Texas in Austin, Texas

has a library containing a microfilm file of the Citizens bank records for 1861. A review of the films indicates most of the records are worthless because the quality of the film is poor and difficult to read. Even though the Citizens bank record data is useless, there is a small pamphlet near the end of the microfilm record which is entitled: *The Story of "Dixie" and The Citizens Bank of Louisiana.*

This pamphlet reveals another key to the secret of what happened to the gold and silver coins legally removed from the New Orleans mint. The text reads:

**"Besides these forced contributions, the Citizens Bank gave \$250,000.00 to the Confederacy on April 15th, 1861; loaned the Confederacy \$325,000 in coin on January 7th, 1862; and paid the payrolls of various divisions of the Confederate Army to a total of \$50,000.00."**

Since when does a bank 'give' \$250,000 to the Confederacy? Do banks give money away? In the same sentence it clearly states "\$325,000 in coin was also 'loaned' the Confederacy".

The first truth is the \$250,000 was from the gold exchanges with the mint.

The second truth is the \$250,000 consisted of 5,000 freshly minted \$20 gold pieces and 300,000 silver half-dollars.

The third truth is about the middle of April, 1861 a young Choctaw Indian boy 50 miles away witnessed an incident which he kept in his mind all of his life.

### *Highway 90 - The Old Spanish Trail*

The Old Spanish Trail runs from New Orleans along the coast, and it is now known as Highway 90. From New Orleans, Louisiana to Waveland, Mississippi is about 50 miles. A wagon carrying gold and silver would make it in about 10 hours.

### *The Incident: An Eyewitness Account*

In 1954 a Choctaw Indian who had spent his 99 years in the same spot just outside Waveland, Mississippi told your author an interesting story about something which happened to him around the time the Civil War started, back when he was 7 years old.

With the clarity of age which can help a mind vividly recall what happened almost 92 years before right before the Civil War started, the old man spoke about how he had been playing in the woods just before dark. He heard a wagon coming from the Old Spanish Trail. Hiding in the trees, he watched as the wagon, guided by a uniformed officer, with two slaves in the back, pulled off the road into the thick grass. The young Indian boy silently witnessed the entire event as two black men dug a deep hole, and then lifted things out of the wagon into the hole. They were about to fill-in the hole when something happened and the officer shot and killed both men. He dragged their bodies into the hole, filled-in the dirt, got back into his wagon and never returned. For a Choctaw the area where the incident took place was an *evil spot*, so no one ever went near it again.

When the story was told, the old man, even though he was almost blind, had waved his left hand from the porch of his home. He indicated the incident occurred somewhere down the only road from the Old Spanish Trail to the home he had occupied from 1855 to 1954.

## *Where The Woodbine Twineth and The Whangdoodle Mourneth*

In 1954 when I heard this story I was 14 years old, and my Father, a geologist, owned 16 acres just to the Southwest of where the old man lived. The road in those years was straight as an arrow, and there was only one road: Harbor Drive, located several miles outside the city of Waveland, Mississippi. My Father had setup “headquarters” along Philip Bayou, and we had a two story home with a small cement swimming pool on 16 acres.

I soon forgot the story the old man had told, and 12 years later I was working in Quito, Ecuador, South America when I received a newspaper article from my Mother. The article read: “New Orleans Mint Possibly Robbed of \$1,300,000 in Gold and Silver”. I read about how the mint might have been robbed in 1861 just before the Civil War, and it suddenly dawned on me that story tied-in to what the old man had said many years before. Maybe there was a link between what happened on Harbor Drive

and the supposed robbery of the New Orleans mint?

My Father sold our 16 acre property just West of Harbor Drive, and he and my Mother moved to Pass Christian, Mississippi. When I was visiting one day, he told me about a funny thing which happened when he lived along Philips bayou.

He was watching a bulldozer operator cut in a driveway for a new subdivision featuring “Waterfront Lots”. The street was along one of the canals close to the Southern part of our 16 acres, along the West side of Harbor Drive. The bulldozer operator suddenly got stuck and could not budge something in his path. It seemed like a big rock. Frustrated, he attempted several times to move it, but he could not. Finally my Father suggested to him: “Why not just move over a foot or two and cut in the driveway?” The dozer operator agreed, and finished his work. Later my Father suggested since the soil in the region is very sandy and there are no big rocks, what the dozer operator hit might have been a meteorite. Or it could possibly have been *something else*.

In 1993 I began to research the New Orleans Mint. I wanted to know: “Was it robbed? Who could have robbed the mint if it was robbed? What coins were produced by the mint? How many of those coins are in circulation? What do the microfilm records show?”

Originally I had a researcher from New Orleans, visiting the mint for me. She provided details about the history of the mint, who ran the show, and who did what. She was my original source for the name Johnson Kelly Duncan because she said he apparently was in charge of everything and many of the documents were signed by him. I also had a researcher in Maryland working to discover how much of the gold and silver inventory was transferred when the mint was turned over to the state of Louisiana. I was trying to determine if anything was *missing*.

My original story published in the September, 1994 issue of *The Numismatist Journal* indicated Johnson Kelly Duncan was the man who ended up with the gold and silver. Since that article other research has proven all the gold and silver taken from the mint was removed legally and nothing was stolen. Whether or not anyone was killed in 1861 when the gold and silver was

possibly buried is something we may or may not ever discover. But one thing is certain: when my telephone rang about a few years ago, I was in shock. A New Orleans attorney named Duncan wanted to talk to me.

### *A Link Between New Orleans and Harbor Drive: Coincidence?*

The New Orleans attorney indicated he was a great-great relative of Johnson Kelly Duncan, the man I thought was the illusive Confederate officer who might have taken the \$250,000 from the Citizens Bank and buried it along Harbor Drive near Waveland, Mississippi. The attorney was extremely polite and very interested in the story he had seen on the internet entitled: *How The New Orleans Mint Was Robbed*.

What he really wanted to know was where my family and I had lived in 1954 along Harbor Drive. I told him about our property on 16 acres and how we had spent summers there fishing, alligator hunting, and enjoying the bayou. Then he blew me away with a single comment: “My family bought your property years ago, and we kept a summer home there until a few years ago.”

After a pleasant discussion, I sent him an old photo of the house. He replied he thought it was the same house. Still skeptical, I asked my brother, a Realtor in the area, to check the deed records in Hancock County to see if this was true. It was.

So, putting things in perspective: I had created a story based on facts which only lacked putting two locations together: New Orleans and Harbor Drive, and somehow before I ever even wrote my original story those two locations were linked to each other by the purchase of a property we had owned long before the story evolved. Talk about truth being stranger than fiction, this was almost too much.

Johnson Kelly Duncan in 1862 became a Brigadier General for the Confederacy and fought courageously at Ft. Jackson outside New Orleans. He was captured and sent to Tennessee where he later died from a fever. He never returned to New Orleans to his family. And he never returned to Harbor Drive to claim the New Orleans mint treasure....if he was ever there in the first place.

*In Conclusion:*

One thing is certain: near Waveland, Mississippi just off the Old Spanish Trail along Harbor drive, *something* is buried. It just might be worth \$50,000,000 if anyone is interested. Now that Hurricane Katrina has leveled many of the homes, there is a possibility someone will be cutting in a driveway or digging a hole near Harbor Drive and the telltale clang of metal on metal may fill the Mississippi air.

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