

## Minting Gold into Coins <sup>[1]</sup>

### The Bechtler mint

Despite the gold rush, North Carolinians in the 1820s were short on cash, especially gold and silver coin. Banks issued their own paper money, promising to redeem them (allow them to be traded) for gold or silver, but not everyone trusted these "bank notes" or would accept them as payment -- and if the bank that had issued them closed, the notes would be worthless. As a result, few miners would sell their gold dust and nuggets for paper money.

The U.S. Constitution prohibited the states from minting coins, but it didn't prohibit private individuals from doing so. In 1830, a German metal smith, Christopher Bechtler, Sr., settled in Rutherford County with his family and opened a private mint and jewelry shop. For a fee, a miner could have his raw gold made into coins. To make coins, Bechtler placed blank gold discs called *planchets* into a hand-operated press, which stamped a design on them.

Although the designs on Bechtler's coins are simpler than those on official U.S. coins, their actual gold content -- and therefore their "real" value -- was very consistent. The U.S. Government tried to cast doubt on the value of Bechtler's coinage, but was unsuccessful.

Some people, though, made counterfeit versions of Bechtler's coins, like the one shown at left. Counterfeit coins were made of brass with only a thin layer of gold coating.

### The Charlotte Mint

Since miners in North Carolina supplied almost all of the gold sent to the United States Mint in Philadelphia up until 1828, residents of Charlotte were determined to attract the first branch office of the United States Mint. Gold mines in the area included the Barringer mine and others in the Gold Hill Mining District. After a lengthy period of [courting](#) <sup>[2]</sup> federal officials, construction of a branch United States mint began in 1835 and was completed in 1837 on West Trade Street in Charlotte. Like a similar branch facility in Georgia, the Charlotte mint only produced gold currency.

Architect William Strickland designed the mint in the Federal style, popular from the beginning of the national period to the first quarter of the nineteenth century, especially so for public and government buildings. The style combines the [austere](#) <sup>[3]</sup> Roman architectural style with the subdued detail of the neoclassical style. A large rectangular structure adorned with rows of plain windows with the main entrance underneath a columned patio in the center of building, the Charlotte Mint showcased a robust elegance of power and [perseverance](#) <sup>[4]</sup>.

In 1837, the United States Mint in Charlotte was destroyed by a fire. The fire destroyed the building on Saturday, July 27, 1844. The Mint building was rebuilt following a renewal of its charter by Congress in 1846. It reopened October 1846 and began minting coins again that month.

From the first building's completion in 1837 until the fire in 1844, then after the rebuild in 1846 and extending up until North Carolina's secession from the Union in 1861, the Charlotte mint processed over five million dollars of gold currency in \$1.00, \$2.50, and \$5.00 denominations. After joining the Confederacy, the state converted the structure into a Confederate hospital and command center. Three years after the war's conclusion, the mint reopened as an U.S. Assay Office until 1913, where precious metals and minerals were tested for public quality assurance. When the expansion of a post office threatened the mint, Charlotte patron Mary Myers Dwelle led a group of citizens in financing the meticulous relocation of the mint to the exclusive Eastover area, between Eastover and Randolph Roads. In 1936 the mint underwent extensive renovations. It opened on June 1, 1936, a century after its original dedication, as part of the Mint Museum of Art.

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<sup>[17]</sup>

The former U.S. Mint building in Charlotte is now part of the Mint Museum of Art.

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## DESTRUCTION OF THE BRANCH MINT BY FIRE.

It is our melancholy duty to have to announce to the public the destruction of the U. S. Branch Mint in this place by fire, on Saturday morning last. The fire when first discovered was seen to proceed from the upper story of the western wing in the room where the coining presses were kept, and in which, as we learn from some of the workmen, no fire had been for at least ten days before the accident; and we learn from some of those first at the fire that nothing but about 8 feet of the floor had been burnt and had water been handy it might have been easily extinguished, but the air being admitted the flames rapidly spread so that all chance for its being saved was soon gone. What seemed strange to us was that as there were reservoirs no effort was used as far as we could see to use the water that they contained; and the upper part of the building seemed entirely resigned to the mercy of the flames; and it does seem to us that if the attention of the people had been directed by some of the workmen early to the reservoir nearly above the fire a different result might have been the consequence. How the fire originated is involved in mystery. Some allege that as a number of students were about the building smoking on the evening before, that it may have occurred from a lighted segar being thrown in an exposed situation—others again say that a segar would not set any thing on fire.— There is one thing certain, the building on the night before the fire was left entirely alone, and if there was any one in the community so lost to every feeling of honor as to desire its destruction, that they had every opportunity, if they could gain admittance, of carrying their meanness into execution. Mr. Caldwell, the Superintendent, was sick in Lincoln County, and he had left it in charge with another person who was to sleep in the building while he was away, but who on the night in question did not stay there. Whether a different result would have been the case had any one slept in the building we are unable to say; but one thing is clear, in saving the expense of a watchman the Government has lost the building. We rejoice at one thing and that is, that not a single Whig holds office in the establishment. Were they Whigs instead of Loco Focos we should not hear the last of the destruction of the Mint, especially at this time, by the carelessness of those filling the offices because they were Whigs. We do not wish to cast censure on any one for fear of doing injustice, knowing that the reflection attendant upon its loss is sufficiently pungent. We are sorry to learn that the Superintendent lost all his private papers and a considerable sum in money.— *Charlotte Journal*.

[18]

August 9, 1844 publication from *The Raleigh Register* covering the U.S. Mint building fire. Image courtesy of DigitalINC.

### Artifacts:



[19]



[20]

A Bechtler gold dollar and a counterfeit of a Bechtler gold coin. Only a little of the gold coating remains.

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