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BRINGING GEORGIA'S HERITAGE HOME: SMALL TRAVELLING EXHIBITS FROM A LARGE MUSEUM

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The Smithsonian Institution has traditionally focused its attentions on blockbuster shows - major exhibits which do not travel, which are permanent (that is, remaining up for a period of at least five years: in America, that's as permanent as permanent gets). But smaller, travelling shows are not out of the question (although they commonly consist of representations of objects rather than the objects themselves). And a large travelling display was mounted in conjunction with the Smithsonian's 150th anniversary. Called America's Smithsonian, it will be seen in around twenty cities across the country, and it will travel until the middle of next year. It consists of real objects, American icons ranging from Abraham Lincoln's hat to Judy Garland's ruby slippers. Naturally, such a travelling blockbuster show takes an immense amount of planning and in fact represents a logistical nightmare, lasting for several years before, during, and after the actual show. But there are other ways of presenting real objects, objects of a major importance to particular groups - and presenting them on a low budget. And this is what I wish to address today: here is one way of "bringing a heritage home".

In America, the predominant interest in numismatics has been that of the hobbyist rather than that of the scholar. And within the hobby, state and regional associations of collectors play a particular role. This stems from the natural American proclivity to join local clubs and interest groups; it also stems from the federalist and regionalist nature of American life, which, while diminishing in the face of the late twentieth century, still holds great appeal and force. So there are state numismatic associations in all fifty of those entities (as well as hundreds if not thousands of local coin clubs); and there are larger organizations which embrace an entire region, pulling membership from several adjacent states.

The Blue Ridge Numismatic Association is one such organization. The core of its membership comes from the Southern Piedmont, a band of territory reaching from northern Alabama through north-western Virginia; but it also has members from Mississippi, Florida, Arkansas, and from other states in the South and even Midwest. Current membership stands at around one thousand. Each year, the Blue Ridge group hosts a numismatic convention, whose purpose is to bring people together, to buy and sell coins - and to present an educational program, consisting of exhibits and lectures. And this is where I entered the picture.

In May of this year, I was approached by the head of the Blue Ridge Numismatic Association, Judith Murphy, who wondered whether I would be willing to bring a Smithsonian presence to the Association's next convention, to be held in Dalton, Georgia near the end of August. I was about to make my excuses, pleading lack of lead-time, when she added

that her group had approached the museum on several previous occasions and had received no reply. This concerned me: the Smithsonian Institution and its collections are the property of the American people, who have the right to expect a reply to a request - and the right to see some of what are, after all, their own objects. So I agreed to become involved.

I decided to mount a small exhibit called Georgia's Currency: Colony through Confederacy, reckoning that a local approach would be of interest to the majority of Blue Ridge members. I was able to do so because of two conditions: first, the numismatic history of pre-twentieth-century America was deeply local in nature, featuring money from thousands of issuers across the country; and second, our Numismatic Collection was especially rich in such materials. A third condition, which made things a good deal easier, was the fact that I had recently finished a book on the connections between American history, geography, and numismatics and was preparing a series of lectures based on the book, which I would be giving a few weeks before the Blue Ridge convention. So Georgia's Currency virtually wrote itself; and I was easily able to secure objects to illuminate the text.

I had three criteria in mind as I wrote the text and selected the display materials.

First, I must work small and work cheap: we had no money to spend on the show, and the Blue Ridge Numismatic Association and the Georgia Numismatic Association would be paying to get it, and me, to Dalton.

Second, the artifacts I chose must be interesting but relatively inexpensive: the Blue Ridge request had come in well past the deadline normally in force for a loan of materials, and the less value attached to the objects I was taking, the better.

And third, there must be sufficient objects to tell the story I wished to tell, but no more: I would be personally bringing them with me to Georgia.

Fortunately, the nature of the materials came to my rescue. Like most other places in early America, Georgia relied on paper money for most of its cash transactions, and those notes still existed in the thousands - for the banks and other issuing authorities had frequently been unable to redeem them. So I was blessed with a fairly wide choice of relatively inexpensive, light-weight, interesting, attractive, and small objects for my display.

The display in question would be divided into three parts, each of which would fit into a separate case. In America, coin shows are a common enough occurrence so that aluminum, lockable exhibit cases are widely available. They are standardized, measure about one meter by seventy centimetres - and the Blue Ridge group would have several of them set aside for my use. That was crucial: all I had to bring to Dalton were the display objects, their captions, and any other explanatory materials, all of which could be placed in a single padded cardboard box, which could be carried as personal luggage on the flights.

The exhibit would examine the story of Georgia's money during the days of the English colony and the American Revolution (1733 to 1789); during the period of private, note-issuing banks (1790 to 1860); and during the trying times of the American Civil War (1861 to 1865). I ended my exhibit at that point, for the Southern defeat of 1865 brought an end to a distinctly Georgian numismatic tradition - except in very limited areas, such as tokens.

Some thirty-nine objects were selected for display, all but three of them paper notes. The exceptions were a bill of exchange, signed by James Oglethorpe, founder of the colony, and two Spanish-American Pieces of Eight, upon which, in theory, much of Georgia's early currency was based. These three objects were all in the first case. Everything else in all three cases was paper currency - issues of the colony, issues of the state, and issues of private Georgia banks, several of them from the town of Dalton. Each case contained between nine and fifteen objects. All of these materials were examined and found suitable to travel by our museum's Conservation group; and their conveyance and display in Georgia received the blessings of the museum's Collections Committee - on which, fortunately, I sit! The aggregate value of the numismatic materials to be shown was slightly over fifteen thousand dollars.

I wrote the exhibit labels and captions, which were then laser-printed onto colored stock, which was in turn heat-bonded to cardboard, then cut to size. All of this was done in our Numismatics department, involving no outside outlay of time, personnel, or money.

After making the selection of materials and writing the explanatory text, I created mock-ups - hand-drawn preliminary arrangements which took into account both text and objects. I wanted to display my materials in a logical, sweeping fashion, carrying forward the story I was telling in the main labels. Once I was satisfied with my arrangement, I made copies of these, the text panels, and the exhibit labels for home retention; they could be faxed to me in Georgia, in the event of an emergency. I would take the originals with me to the show.

The convention lasted from the twenty-second through the twenty-fifth of August. I flew to Chattanooga, Tennessee (the closest large city with regular air service). I was met in Chattanooga by a member of the Georgia State Police, who escorted me across the Georgia line and on to Dalton, some fifty kilometres away. We arrived at the North-West Georgia Convention Center (the venue of the convention) around two in the afternoon. My cases and colored background materials were waiting for me, and within an hour, I had the display mounted, the cases locked and ready for viewing.

The illustrations document the general sequence of events.

The Blue Ridge Numismatic Association gave our display generous advance notice - and it had cleverly arranged all of the exhibits in the exact center of the convention floor, so that every visitor had to go by them on his or her way to or from the dealers' area, or bourse. The Blue Ridge group had also prepared flyers advertising the Smithsonian exhibit and my role in it.

Some two thousand people attended the convention, and virtually all of them saw the exhibit at one time or another.

As I mentioned earlier, most numismatic conventions in America sponsor educational fora in addition to exhibits. This one was no exception, and I was given an hour to speak, answer questions, etc. About forty people attended my remarks, which consisted of half an hour of a general description of the Smithsonian, its history, and the evolution, holdings, and role of the Numismatic Collection. During the remaining time, I answered questions from the audience and spoke of the United States' latest commemorative coins (a silver dollar and a gold five-dollar piece, celebrating the hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Smithsonian Institution). In conjunction with the commemoratives, I mounted a fourth display case, which featured a set of the new coins and brochures to be taken away by the public. The public appeared enthusiastic; indeed, I could not have been happier with the attendance at my educational session and with the welcome reception of the Georgia exhibit itself.

In these times of shrinking budgets, when one is tempted to avoid new exhibits altogether, I believe I have discovered a viable way to bring numismatics to the people. If you added up the cost of my flight (\$220), the cost of my room in Dalton (\$160), and the cost of meals and incidentals, including the non-numismatic components of the exhibit, you would still be speaking of a sum less than five hundred dollars, for a display seen by several thousand people, over a period of several days. And virtually none of the costs were borne by the Smithsonian itself: the bulk of them were met by the Blue Ridge and Georgia Numismatic Associations - who were delighted to see a portion of their numismatic heritage come home, if only for a few days.

We have decided that Georgia's Currency: Colony through Confederacy will appear before a wider audience: it will be mounted at my home museum as a temporary show, and we shall also be putting it on the World Wide Web, so that its dissemination will be national, even global. As with the original show, all work in this new dissemination will be performed in-house and will require no additional outlay of time, or money.

I see future shows on the Dalton model, featuring close, harmonious work with local and regional organizations, producing displays of local and regional interest, as a valuable way of keeping our collections before the public, of meeting the Smithsonian Institution's self-described mission of "the increase and diffusion of knowledge among mankind". I have been invited back to Dalton next year - and have had invitations from two other groups as well. Numismatic centralism may very well be the order of the day in contemporary America - as it is in other places around the world, where a single authority is responsible for all coinage and currency. But interest in an earlier numismatic localism remains alive and well; and I suspect that this is as true in your countries as it is in mine.