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The matter of paper conservation has been much on my mind lately. The National Numismatic Collection of the Smithsonian Institution has contained more currency than coins since at least the early 1970s, when the first of what ultimately became more than three hundred thousand 'certified proofs' were transferred to our collection from the Treasury Department. Certified proofs are trial printings of notes on sheets ranging from four elements to thirty-two, and they represent every type of currency ever produced at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, in every stage of production. The transfer posed problems in organization and housing, but its members shared a common, benign characteristic from our point of view: they were in an excellent state of preservation, and it was therefore unnecessary to think about paper conservation in connection with them. We indeed had many other, normal currency notes, both American and foreign, which could have benefitted from the attentions of a paper conservator - but it always seemed that there were more pressing matters for consideration; and at least our paper collection was properly housed and unlikely to deteriorate further. So matters stood until the beginning of 1998. Then everything changed, and the matter of paper conservation moved from a theoretical benefit to a major concern.

Everything changed because we got a new accession. It was made up of paper currency, much of which was in poor condition. And it was enormous.

The accession was a hoard of paper money issued by the Confederate States of America. The Southern insurgents had had to fight their ultimately unsuccessful war for independence by means of currency rather than coinage - but their leaders were eminently conservative gentlemen, for whom an essentially fiat currency, even issued with the best of intentions and for the best of causes, was deeply troubling. Bureaucratic misgivings led to a vague genuflection in the direction of fiscal responsibility: one of the provisions accompanying the final issue of Confederate paper money (which bore the date of 17 February 1864) decreed that this new paper would be exchanged for the old, three new notes of a given denomination in compensation for two old ones. The paper turned in was to be canceled by Confederate officials. In that way, consciences could be assuaged - and the Southern Confederacy could still have the sinews of war.

The new arrangement worked after a fashion: old notes (not all of them by any means, but a goodly number) were patriotically turned in and taken to Richmond, where they were canceled and lodged in a warehouse in the Confederate capital. Then matters got interesting: for the retired currency was captured with the fall of Richmond and sent to Washington as war booty by an exultant Union Army in the spring of 1865.

It spent the next several decades in the War Department, where choice specimens were assembled into sets and given out to visiting dignitaries. The hoard was transferred to the Treasury Department around 1910, then passed to the care of this country's National Archives a quarter of a century later. From there, title to the Confederate currency passed to the Smithsonian Institution by the provisions in two agreements, drawn up in 1957 and 1958. But the hoard remained at the National Archives for the next four decades, regardless of the agreements. We had no space to house it - and to be frank, there was very little interest in such material on the part of our curatorial staff at the time. In fact, it might *still* be at the National Archives, were it not for the actions of an employee of that institution. It seems that this individual was stealing choice pieces from the hoard and peddling them at local coin shows! He was unmasked, sacked - and my museum decided it was time to claim what was legally ours.

It did so at the beginning of 1998. Told that the transfer was imminent, I rounded up several volunteers gave them an intensive course in Confederate currency, and as soon as the 125 boxes of notes arrived, we got down to work, examining, sorting, and cataloguing what came to be known as the Richmond Hoard.

We immediately discovered something interesting: the National Archives, repository of the papers of the United States of America, had either deliberately or accidentally underestimated the amount of material being transferred. We had been led to believe that each archival box contained approximately one thousand notes. The fact that the currency was so closely packed that one could take off the cover, invert the box, and have nothing fall out suggested that we were dealing with rather more than a thousand notes per box. We were: a quick count revealed that each box contained five thousand notes, if not more. Our labors had quintupled as soon as we began; and the question of paper conservation had become five times as important as we had thought it would be. It had been challenging enough to begin with.

This was because of the way in which the hoard had originally been created and subsequently housed. The point of assembling it in the first place was to pull notes from circulation, so that they could be replaced by other notes. In order to permanently retire the older notes from commerce, they must be marked in an obvious way, so that if any of them happened to escape detention they could not possibly reenter trade. The Confederate Treasury settled on the expedient of cutting each note, in any of several different ways. Bills could be retired by means of two cross-bladed knife cuts. They could have circular holes punched in them to accomplish the same objective. They could have parts of their lower margins cut away, again by a circular punch. Or (to make doubly sure that everybody got the point) they could be cut-canceled *and* punch-canceled.

Confederate fiscal integrity was thereby safeguarded. Unfortunately, the work of a later generation of numismatists was also thereby rendered more difficult: the various forms of cancellation weakened the notes. So did the fact that they had been crammed into archival boxes. And so did the fact that many of them were in poor condition even *before* they were called in and canceled. Confederate money might not be worth much (and it was likely to become worth less the longer you kept it); but it represented patriotism and hope - and it was better than no money at all. So if your currency fell apart, you glued, or in some cases, sewed it back together. And you thereby kept it usable for a few more transactions - until the Richmond authorities called it in, and it became someone else's problem. As it happened, it eventually became *our* problem, and a legitimate topic of discussion with paper conservators.

There was originally one all-embracing conservation unit within the Smithsonian Institution. It was generally known by its acronym - CAL, for Conservation Analytical Laboratory. A few years ago, the organization changed its name to Smithsonian Center for Material Research and Education. No one is quite certain what the new name means. Nor is anyone quite certain what the organization bearing the new name does. What it does *not* do, apparently, is the hands-on sort of work one thinks of when one hears the word 'conservation'. This task has devolved upon the local level: most of the museums comprising the Smithsonian Institution now have their own conservation departments.

This may be just as well: the preservation problems of each museum may and probably will vary widely from those of all others in the system. The conservation staff of my museum, the National Museum of American History, is called Preservation Services. It currently has seven employees (two administrators and five conservators), specialists in metal, textiles - and paper. In the latter specialization, we have two employees, Lynne Gilliland and Carolyn Long. Neither is full-time: one works three days a week, and the other works half-days at Preservation Services, spending the remainder of her time with the museum's Loan Office.

Our conservation laboratory dates back to the late 1970s. It only dealt with objects for the first few years, but it added paper conservation to its concerns in the early 1980s and textiles a decade later. As with every other department in the Smithsonian system, Preservation Services has suffered from a decline in staff (cuts managed through attrition: whenever anyone retires or moves on, he or she is not replaced). At the same time, its budget has remained static at best. The result has been that, in common with all other components of the Smithsonian, including my own the conservation department has had to make choices. It has been forced to admit that it cannot do everything that it wishes, and it has had to choose that portion of the work which realistically can be done, and which can bring the most benefit to the museum as a whole.

The selection it made was logical, but it created difficulties for us. For Preservation Services decided to work *only* on objects which are about to go on exhibit, or which have just come off exhibit. The conservators concluded that, while one might wish to have every object in the museum examined and professionally treated, those items which will actually be viewed by the public (and our 'public' numbers between five and six million visitors a year) must take precedence over objects which will only be seen by curators and volunteers - regardless of how interesting or how much in need of conservation those objects might be. In other words, what Conservation Services calls 'Standing Collections' are essentially on their own - including six hundred thousand or so Confederate notes, no matter how interesting (or how fragile) they may be. The only way the Richmond Hoard will receive the conservation attention it deserves is if the rules of the game are changed.

And the way to change the rules is to expand the conservation staff. As Ms. Gilliland told me, 'We can do any type of treatment necessary - provided we have the staff'. But the onus of responsibility for getting the extra staff rests on us, not on Preservation Services. In other words, if anything is to be done, we must initiate it. What can we do?

There are several possibilities. We could make increased use of volunteers, diverting at least a portion of our unpaid workforce from the cataloguing and arranging of Confederate material to performing the first steps in a sort of conservation triage - determining which notes need attention first, then setting them aside for restoration or at least rehousing. But *then* what? We lack such basic commodities as mylar sleeves for housing individual notes, adequate lockable metal cabinets for housing them, etc., etc. In other words, our shortages include not only personnel and expertise, but the homely commodities which are necessary before any progress, by anybody, can be effected. So the idea of using volunteers is an incomplete solution, at best. *We* need the experienced specialists to do the job. And *they* need the tools of the trade.

It all comes down to money. In America, there is an old proverb: you have to spend money to make money. Our experiences with Richmond Hoard have suggested a new one: you have to spend money to save money. How do we get the funds we need?

There are a number of possibilities, some more likely (or less controversial) than others. In theory, we could sell off part of the Richmond Hoard in order to save the remainder of it. The volunteers have gone through approximately forty percent of the material during the past twenty-one months. They, and I, know which notes constitute rarities, which notes constitute precious witnesses to wartime monetary practices - and which notes fall into neither category. If we assume that our people have examined around three hundred thousand pieces of Confederate currency thus far, then it should be possible to safely dispose of the majority of those notes (say eighty percent, or two hundred forty thousand of them) without damage to the historical record, without prejudice to the overall strength of the National Numismatic Collection.

Except that it is *not* possible or practical, for at least two reasons. First, if the National Museum of American History were to undertake such a sale, critics would dwell, not on the beneficial uses to which the proceeds would be put, but on the fact that the Museum of the American People was selling part of the People's National Patrimony. Anyone connected with the project would risk seeing his or her employment terminated, and the museum, would very likely see its funding threatened by Congressional conservatives, who tend to distrust the Smithsonian Institution as a liberal threat to traditional values under the best of circumstances. And there is a second challenge for anyone wishing to sell a portion of the Confederate material in order to preserve the rest. Most of the members of the hoard are five- and ten-dollar bills from 1862 and 1863. That was what got turned in: higher-value notes were still useful, in commerce, and lower-value notes weren't worth remitting. The types of notes we have in greatest quantity just happen to duplicate the most common notes found in dealers' shops; what would happen if we suddenly released a quarter million more of them into the market?

The possibility of raising funds by selling other parts of the numismatic collection is equally if not more impractical. Under current guidelines, any disposal of any museum object, whether by means of sale, exchange, donation, or destruction, must be approved by *every* curator in the museum. I am certain that a number of them would veto the idea of a sale of numismatic objects, even duplicates, even for a good cause, because of the precedents it might set, the impressions it might give, to the public, to the museum community - and to Congress.

The most logical way of raising the money we need for hiring personnel and purchasing supplies is by means of a grant. There are several possibilities with our museum community - including the Smithsonian Women's Committee, which awards monies for worthy projects within the institution, and a new program calling itself 'Saving America's Treasures', which specializes in saving parts of the national patrimony which are especially important and especially vulnerable if left unattended. This latter program offers distinct possibilities and advantages, and I have requested detailed information about it. I foresee a possible problem, however: the Confederacy after all lost the Civil War, and there might be concern in some quarters about allocating funds for the preservation of the monetary byproducts of a discredited racial, social, and economic system. But at the moment, I propose to pursue this possibility all the same.

There are also opportunities for help from other federal agencies, although I have previously found that an application to an outside but federal entity for help is likely to meet with frustration and eventual refusal, the reasoning apparently being that the Smithsonian should finance its own projects - regardless of whether it has the funds to do so.

In my opinion, we would have greater success by applying to the private sector, targeting either or both of two groups for help. We could seek funding from private, grant-giving organizations, such as the Getty Foundation. We could also seek what we need from firms whose business it is to buy and sell rare coins and paper money. The businesses would receive a valuable cachet from their help, particularly if they specialized in the purchase and sale of early paper money. We would receive something even more valuable, the ability to do justice to a priceless component of the American heritage.

All this said, any application to the private sector would have to be accompanied by extreme caution. As with Caesar's wife, the National Numismatic Collection must not only be blameless, but be above the very concept of culpability. This nation's numismatic cabinet only has one reputation, and we dare not compromise it, regardless of the stakes.

But there might be another way of raising the funds, securing the skilled assistance, and purchasing the supplies that we need. The museum's administration recently announced the formation of an exhibit program called 'Views into the Collections'. I was asked to create exhibit concepts which would result in new displays, link the objects being shown to the larger story of American history - and do all this on a fairly modest budget. The concepts in question can employ up to three transverse vitrines measuring three meters by one, along with freestanding, explanatory panels. I have developed three ideas, all involving America's numismatic story and its connection with larger events. My first idea carries forward several themes from a book I published last year called *America's Money - America's Story,* examining what our coinage and currency can tell us about local history in stressful times. The second idea involves *Pictures from a Distant Country,* a book I am now compiling on American imagery on nineteenth-century private banks notes. And the third idea proposes to employ Confederate currency to explain the work of numismatists and numismatic volunteers, and to show our audience the value of such currency (which constitutes one of the few contemporary records available concerning monetary practices in the Confederacy). I favor adoption of this third concept, because it will give the visitor important insights into an obscure and misunderstood portion of our past. It will also pay homage to the contributions of Smithsonian volunteers, a group of individuals with which the public will identify. And it will coincidentally address the problem of paper conservation. As I said earlier, changing exhibits do receive the attention of Preservation Services. So if the administration agrees to adopt my third idea for a numismatic display, we shall be able to ask for and stand a decent chance of receiving conservation *help from our own museum,* help upon which we may be able to build on some future occasion. In times of scarcity of money and manpower, a modest success is far preferable to no success. And large accomplishments can grow from small beginnings.