

In God We Trust

by Bill Groom

The first appearance of our motto “In God We Trust” was displayed on the two cent pieces of 1864. Following the outset of the Civil War, a pastor petitioned Salmon P. Chase, then Secretary of the Treasury, to acknowledge God on our coins. Two years later, in 1863, Chase authorized the motto as we now know it. It has since appeared on many but not all issues of U.S. coins and paper money.



Those who seriously collect and study U.S. coins and alternative forms of currency are fully aware that the adoption of the motto “In God We Trust” was not without precedent. There were many coins and tokens that acknowledged God, prior to 1864. This article will discuss some of the better known examples.

During the Civil War, folks tended to hoard coins, and merchants took to using tokens to facilitate trade and realize a profit. These predominantly cent-sized, copper and brass tokens could be purchased for a fraction of their face value and given out in change as a cent. The great majority of these tokens were produced and circulated in the more industrialized Union states. They typically displayed patriotic themes and/or advertised a business. The below Civil War token asks that “God Protect the Union.”



The above Civil War token, dated 1863, appeared in circulation just prior to the two cent pieces that expressed the official motto. Liberty appears on the obverse, wearing the historic Phrygian cap of freedom. In ancient Rome, the Phrygian cap was worn by emancipated slaves, being symbolic of their freedom.

The below two Civil War tokens, circa 1863, illustrate the Eye of God. The piece on the left also shows symbols (the three links are not a chain) that were related to the Order of Odd Fellows. While not a religious institution, the Order was built with the teachings of the Holy Bible in mind. It was and today remains a benevolent organization that helps folks who are in need. The token pictured on the right invokes the sentiment once spoken by Andrew Jackson, "The Union must and shall be preserved."



The Eye of God was previously portrayed on a number of eighteenth century colonial coins, including the first official cent of the United States. Dated 1787, the so-called "Fugio Cent" was designed by Benjamin Franklin. The Latin word *fugio* (I fly), used in conjunction with the sun dial represented time flying. Note God's face in the sun, emitting rays of light. Doubtless, the phrase "Mind Your Business" was intended for the British. Each of the thirteen, conjoined rings on the reverse represented a state.



Many of the first thirteen states authorized the issue of coins to facilitate trade. The independent state of Vermont issued its own coins from 1785-88. Below is pictured a copper cent, dated 1786. The “Eye of God” appears on the reverse. The phrase “*Stella Quarta Decima*” is Latin, meaning the fourteenth star. The so-called Vermont Republic or *Vermontensium Republica*, a then independent state, became the fourteenth state to join the Union in 1791. Peeking above the obverse landscape on this Vermont cent are the eyes of God, as He emits rays of light.



Another state to utilize the “Eye of God” motif was New York. This Nova Constellatio (Latin, meaning new constellation) issue was privately struck in England between 1783-85. These were placed into circulation in New York. The obverse of the below cent, dated 1785, reads *Libertas et Justitia* which is Latin for Liberty & Justice, and the fancy, central script is US.



Among the earliest coins issued for use in the colonies were those used in Massachusetts. The silver coins were issued in denominations of two pence, three pence, six pence and one shilling. Pictured below is a copy of a Pine Tree Shilling. Other varieties utilized a Willow and an Oak tree. These coins were struck in the 1600's but thought to have been back-dated to 1652 so as to avoid running afoul of British law.



Like the aforementioned coins and tokens in this article, the Massachusetts coins acknowledge God. The Latin words "*An Dom*" literally translate to 1652 ... "year of our Lord."

There are citizens today who seek to remove "In God We Trust" from our currency. Typically, these naysayers argue the separation of church and state. They view the motto as an intrusion upon their non-belief or alternative beliefs. Yet, as the above coins and token issues attest, the history of this country is demonstrably rooted in Christianity. Religious beliefs aside, our coinage illustrates historic precedence for the motto, "In God We Trust." For over three hundred years now, our founders have approved of coins that acknowledge God. To suddenly deny this motto would be akin to denying historical truth as believed and lived by our founders. What would then be next, the Declaration of Independence which begins with the acknowledgment of God, our Creator?