

The Earliest Tennessee Token

by Bill Groom

One of the greatest joys of collecting old tokens rests in the benefit of attaching history to a piece, the sharing of knowledge. Questions abound, and many an answer can be found; this, with the aid of the internet, in particular. One can build an online library of digital books through Google, scan early newspapers and directories in digital form, visit dedicated websites, and do much more to gather information about the early days in America; and, elsewhere around the globe. The world is now literally at our fingertips.

This article tells something of the story behind what's believed to be the earliest token issued by any merchant in the state of Tennessee. Below is pictured the store token of **H & I KIRKMAN / NASHVILLE, TENN.** The obverse shows an anvil, upon which lean metal implements. The reverse legend reads as follows: **H & I KIRKMAN / NASHVILLE - TENN / IMPORTERS OF HARDWARE AND CUTLERY**



In his *Standard Catalog of United States Tokens, 1700-1900* (4th ed. - 2004), Rulau lists this merchant token in copper, brass and silver-plated brass. Rulau estimated that perhaps twenty specimens, total, then existed. A very fine specimen sold for \$1,700 at auction in 1990. Based upon the token's "fabric" or style, Rulau deduced that it was struck between 1828-32. He noted that no directory evidence was possible to confirm the years of this business, as the first city directory for Nashville was produced in 1853. Rulau learned that one Thomas Kirkman owned a hardware business in Nashville as early as 1809. Having found some genealogical info pertaining to Thomas, Rulau then surmised that the issuers of this token were Hugh K. and John (a.k.a. Ian) Kirkman, sons of Thomas.

Having made a personal visit to the Mormon archives in Salt Lake City, Utah, Rulau learned that the H. & I. Kirkman firm was succeeded by Kirkman & Ellis (John Kirkman & James Ellis), cutlery and hardware at 34 Public Square; this, by 1853. The K&E firm dissolved by 1858. Ellis opened a dry goods store, and J. Kirkman later became a banker.

There's more to the story

In 1826, Tennessee celebrated its thirtieth year as the sixteenth state admitted to the Union. Only two years prior, Tennessee's favorite son, Hero of New Orleans in the War of 1812 and candidate for President, Andy Jackson, lost a close race with John Quincy Adams. Jackson would win the next race though.

Twenty years prior, in 1806, Nashville had incorporated as a city. Valued as a port city along the Cumberland River and strategically located, Nashville was to eventually become the state capital. In these early days, it drew many Scots-Irish who were seeking religious freedom; then too, many of whom benefited from land grants, given their service in the Revolutionary War. Entrepreneurs likewise saw opportunity knocking.

Tennessee settlers and those heading for points west naturally needed tools and all manner of hardware to build a new life. One of the earliest merchants in Nashville was an Irish emigrant by the name of Thomas Kirkman. Sources differ on the initial year, of Kirkman's arrival; being sometime between 1804-07. By 1809, Thomas owned a storehouse and ran a hardware store, located near the corner of College and Cedar Streets. His father had been a major in the British army. Thomas evidently had some relatives in Ireland and/or England who supplied him with wares for his business.

Thomas Kirkman married Eleanora "Ellen" Jackson in County Cork, Ireland in 1799. Their first three children were born in Ireland. Hugh, their sixth child, was born on May 25, 1810, and John, their seventh, was born on April 8, 1813.

Thomas Kirkman died in April of 1826, at age 46. According to legal records, the liquid assets of his estate then exceeded \$100,000! He obviously had a thriving business. It's likely that older sons, Thomas, Jr., then age 26, and James, then age 24, initially assumed responsibility for the family hardware business. Hugh was then age 16 and John but 13 years old. Within a few years following their father's death, the estate apparently settled, Thomas, Jr. and James relocated to Florence, Alabama and established a prosperous hardware business there. Thomas, Jr. later pursued interests in planting and steamboats. Interestingly, the City of Florence had incorporated in 1826, and Andrew Jackson, soon-to-be-President, played a part in its development. Like Nashville, Florence, another river city, was obviously a wise place to establish a hardware business.

In December of 1829, H. & J. (I) Kirkman & Co., who had built stores on Church Street, advertised that a large assortment of hardware, cutlery and saddlery had been received from England. Among the new goods received were Rogers' pen-knives, table, dessert and carving knives, and forks, razors and scissors. They also received plated ware and building material. This stock may well have arrived on the steamboat "Nashville" which, on December 19, unloaded a cargo of 420 tons and soon departed with a shipment of 1,400 bales of cotton.

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The *History of Nashville* (1890) reveals that the younger Kirkman brothers were in business at the close of 1829 and probably earlier. It may even be the case that these tokens arrived from England with that cutlery and hardware shipment in December of 1829! Rulau noted that the tokens had been struck by one Thomas Halliday, a die sinker in Birmingham, England (working years of 1810-42). Akin to painters, early engravers had a recognizable style; often reusing/reworking prepared dies that, in effect, brand their work. Thus, these Kirkman merchant tokens were produced prior to 1843.

Glimpses of Hugh and John

In the early 1830's, Hugh, in his early twenties, wealthy and having the reputation of then being Nashville's most eligible bachelor, owned a farm called "Oak Hill" upon which he bred racehorses. His most famous horse was named Wacousta which was sent to Hugh by an English uncle. After establishing a winning career, Wacousta was offered for sale at the then princely sum of \$4,000. Hugh's interest in horse racing was shared by his younger brother, James.

Hugh married Eleanora Van Leer, the daughter of Anthony Van Leer, in 1839. She was not only beautiful, but her father, Anthony Van Leer, owned thousands of acres of rich farmland, the Cumberland Iron Works and a retail store in Nashville. Hugh later managed the iron works for his father-in-law. Anthony built a palatial home for the couple in 1848; this, on the southwest corner of Charlotte and Fifth Avenue in Nashville. Sadly, in June of 1849, following the birth of her sixth child, Eleanora died. She was but 27 years old. Hugh died in 1861. Their stately home later became the Tennessee Institute for the Blind.

In 1844, John Kirkman, formerly H & J Kirkman & Co., was reportedly a hardware dealer. By 1852, the business was known as Kirkman & Ellis; later, Gray & Kirkman's hardware store (see invoice at end of this article). John apparently did some gunsmith work. A 50 caliber pistol that was once carried by one of Brigham Young's Mormon bodyguards bears the mark, ***John Kirkman / Nashville***, on the gun's lock plate.

John owned the Odd Fellows Hall which he gratuitously loaned for Episcopal Church services in 1857. In 1864, John sold a plot of land for \$10,000, upon which was built the St. Mary's Orphan Asylum.

Following the Civil War years, John Kirkman became President of the Third National Bank in Nashville. When that bank later merged with the American National Bank in Nashville, John remained President in that bank from 1884 until his death in 1888.

The Kirkman Brothers were wealthy, entrepreneurial, southern aristocrats yet were active in civic affairs. They provided much needed hardware and European industrial goods to southern farmers, miners and pioneers who were westward bound. Still, snippets of historical information, strongly suggest that the success of this family dynasty was also built upon religious principles and generosity to those less fortunate.

Final Thoughts on the token

It's not until the early 1850's that other, die-struck advertising tokens were issued by various merchants in Nashville and Memphis. Small cent-sized, merchant tokens from those cities and a few other Tennessee towns were issued during the Civil War years. Like those of the Kirkman Brothers, the 1850's era Tennessee tokens listed by Rulau are about the size of then circulating large cents. While none of these tokens were intended to be substitute cents, they were often accepted in trade as such; this, with each having, in effect, a cent's worth of copper or metal therein. Today, we know this to be true by virtue of the heavy, circulation-induced wear that many of these early tokens now exhibit.

While it's possible to answer many questions about early tokens like that of the Kirkmans', there typically remain many unanswered questions. Did the young Kirkman Brothers order these tokens from England? Unless an invoice someday appears, we may never have an answer to that question. Given the small number of these tokens now known, perhaps twenty specimens, the brothers may have received but a sample batch. Might an overseas relative or another brother have ordered some samples as a gift?

Since there are three known varieties of the Kirkman token, being maybe 5-10 examples, each, in copper and brass, plus one token that was silver-plated, this was likely a sales' sample group. A merchant would then choose which variety at a particular cost would best suit his needs. Surely, if no more were ever ordered by the brothers, this would explain their present rarity. As the bulk cost of advertising tokens was well under a cent, apiece, a merchant could profit from passing the tokens in change as a cent. Then too, there was the added benefit that this word-of-mouth advertising token carried with it.

No matter how interesting to read, historical writings are not always accurate. Earlier writers often took liberties, confusing and obscuring facts in the process. This often makes it difficult for us present-day students who seek to sort matters out. There may be some errors in this article that need correction or updating. I'll leave that up to future collectors who share my interest in the study of early tokens and Americana. Enjoy!

One more thing

Oftentimes, upon acquiring a token, I'll search for memorabilia that's related to the merchant or business at hand. I refer to these items as "go-alongs." Regarding Kirkman Hardware, I've managed to acquire an invoice, dated 1878. It bears the name of John Kirkman as a junior partner and salesman. John, then age 65, had yet another ten years to live. Thus, this invoice is a token remembrance of the final Kirkman Brothers' enterprise.

Unlike the Kirkman Brothers' token, this invoice provides a good many facts about the latter day business. The date and address is given. The partners and employees are named. There's a more detailed listing of the company's products and more. Go-alongs like this virtually make a token come to life.

Here's an illustration:

FULL STOCK OF A VERY FINE PLOWS AT FACTORY PRICES.

WHOLESALE HARDWARE.

Huddart's Platform Scales. AGENTS FOR New York Belting Company.
Shoenberger's Nail Works. Fire and Burglar Proof Safes.

Nails and Plows Invariably Cash. Nashville, Tenn., Dec 24 1878

Mr. S. Brown

J. M. GRAY,
JOHN KIRKMAN,
J. H. FALL,
E. H. FALL,
Salesman,

Bought of GRAY, KIRKMAN & CO.,

Importers of Hardware and Cutlery, 78, Cor. Bridge St. & Public Square.

Interest will be charged after 60 days, unless otherwise specified.	✓	1	auly Front door Lock		2.25
	✓	3	" W K	35	1.05
	✓	3	" Dead	50	1.50
	✓	1	" Mud Wheel		.50
	✓	14	" St Louis Gate Latches	12 ²	50
	✓	1	Pr ssys		50
			Box		50
			Cr By Cash		6.80
					3.40 Bal. 3.40

Enclosed you will find Bill for Shade Fixtures Receipted I paid Gray Kirkman & Co Bal 3⁴⁰. You can't wait until I come up for ~~wait~~ Write you before you remit. If the goods don't suit you, please don't ship them back as I can sell them to some one when I come up. I done the best I could for you and hope you will be pleased

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Sources & Recommended Reading:

American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine - February, 1840.

History of Nashville - H.W. Crew, 1890.

Old Days in Nashville, Tenn. - Reminiscences - Miss Jane H. Thomas, 1895.

Standard Catalog of United States Tokens, 1700-1900, 4th ed. - Russell Rulau, 2004.

Tennessee Records: Tombstone Inscriptions and Manuscripts - Jeanette Tillotson Acklen, 2009.