

Sacramental Tokens

By HARRIETTE KERSHAW LEIDING

THERE are many devout Presbyterians in the United States who have never even heard of a *communion token*, although in some places these little symbols were in use until the time of the Civil War.

They were variously made; of pewter, lead or tin, and were sometimes stamped with the name of an individual, the name of a parish, or the name of a church. They were given to duly qualified members of a church previous to the celebration of the communion service and returned by the communicant when he took his place at the table.

When the worshippers were being dismissed on Fast Day, the minister and elders stood in front of the pulpit. As the members filed past, those who were in good standing and "worthy" were handed, each, the small metal token. These tokens were surrendered at the coming sacrament of the Lord's Supper when the elders passed along the tables. By some, these small metal disks were looked upon as passports into the very Holy of Holies, so greatly were they honored by the men and women who had them in keeping for only a day or two at a time.

That interest in this country concerning sacramental tokens is an old story is shown by the fact of some inquiries in a magazine called *The Historical Magazine and Notes and Queries concerning the Antiquities, History and Biography of America*.* The January, 1872, issue of the periodical carries this query:

Sacramental Tokens—In some of the churches of the olden time, in the United States, communicants are said to have been admitted by metallic tokens. Can any of your readers inform me of the character of these coins, their inscriptions, by whom issued and to whom, and if they are now in use, and where? Brooklyn, N. Y., R.I.B.

The February issue conveys information as follows:

Sacramental Tokens—I have before me two small tokens, of lead; each about as large as an old-fashioned silver five-cent piece; very rude in their construction; and bearing no inscription on the reverse. One of them bears no other inscription than the letter H. The other is inscribed S:C, in relief; both of them are perfectly plain on the reverse. These tokens were sent to me, among other little curiosities, by my friend, Professor E. F. Rockwell, of Statesville, North Carolina, accompanied by the following memorandum: "Specimens of the TOKENS, formerly in use, and probably now, in many parts of the country, to admit communicants to the Lord's Table. By whom they were issued and on what terms, I am not informed." Morrisania, N. Y., H.B.D.

Antiquarians may know of other uses of tokens, such as the building tokens, issued in 1737-39 by John Higley of Granby, Connecticut, and called *Granby tokens* or *Higley tokens*; or they may recall other private or traders' coinage—*tavern tokens*; or, again they may remember those small copper pieces issued by Uncle Sam just prior to the Civil

*Established 1857 and at one time published by Henry B. Dawson at Morrisania, N. Y. The 1850's appear also to have been a period of considerable interest in tokens. In 1848 Charles I. Bushnell, "member of the historical societies of New York, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Wisconsin, Minnesota, etc.," published a work entitled *An Arrangement of Tradesmen's Cards, Political Tokens, also, Election Medals, Medalets, etc., current in the United States of America for the last Sixty Years, etc.* In this are listed five religious tokens, three of tin and two of copper. These apparently are contemporary with the book, and served not as communion tokens, but as Sunday School rewards of merit, or for some similar purpose.

War and generally known as *hard-time tokens*; but very little is definitely known concerning those small metal pieces used in the church's sacramental forms of worship. Undoubtedly, however, they have come down to us from the earliest days of Christians.



Fig. 1—SCOTCH COMMUNION TOKENS
(a). Obverse.
(b). Reverse.

In an article by Wentworth Allen, in *The Great Round World* for February 21, 1901, the Right Reverend F. S. Chatard, Bishop of Vincennes, and formerly Rector of the American College at Rome, is quoted as saying that the early Christians found it expedient to use the token or sign of their faith as a means of identification, even in the second century. Such emblems were of ivory, of metal and of stone. Metallic tablets were used perhaps as proofs of having received communion, or of the right of admission to the Lord's table. Right Reverend Mgr. Alexander Munro, D.D., Provost of Glasgow Cathedral, is, however, quoted in support of the belief that the token is a purely Protestant institution. He, however, admits the probability that, in the earliest ages of the Church, there must have been some such ready way of admitting the faithful to communion and of excluding enemies from Christian assemblies.

It is said that communion tokens were used at St. Martins in the Field at Easter services, early in the seventeenth century. In Scotland, as we know, the Scottish liturgy fell with the Scottish Church in 1638; but did not immediately arise again with it in 1662. In 1724 there appeared in Edinburgh the *Communion office for the use of the Church of Scotland*, which, with certain omissions, is said to be a verbal reprint of the office of 1637. It seems to have been the first of those many separate publications of the office afterwards familiarly known as the "weebookies."

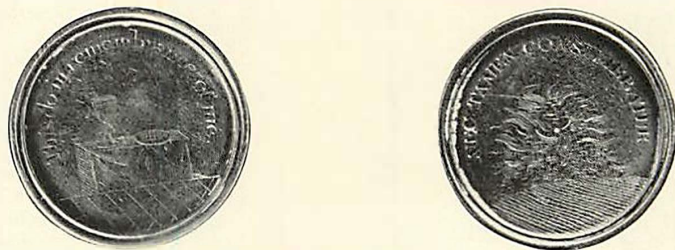


Fig. 2—SILVER TOKEN FROM CHARLESTON

Dating from the year 1800. Both silver and pewter tokens were used by the First Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina: silver for the gentry and pewter for the slaves. The two types of token were made in the same image; but of recognizably different materials. Actual size.

Thus we are brought to sympathize with that Earl of Pembroke, who flourished in Cromwell's time and was so

far disturbed by the changes of State religion which took place in his day that he expressed himself on the subject in his will.

Imprimis.—For my soul; I confess I have heard very much of souls, but what they are, or who they are, or what they are for, God knows I know not: they tell me now of another world, where I never was, nor do I know one foot of the way thither. While the king stood, I was of his religion, made my son wear a cassock, and thought to make him a bishop, but then came the Scots, and made me a Presbyterian; and since Cromwell entered, I have been an Independent. These, I believe, are the kingdom's three estates; and if any of these can save a soul, I may claim one; therefore if my executors do find I have a soul, I give it to him who gave it me.

It may be that his soul reached home after all because "This little Medal of God, The Soul of Man," may have gone to the Master Minter. It is certain, however, that the token was used from the earliest times, not only as a means of separating the fit from the unfit, but also as a convenient method of excluding imposters who sought to destroy the new faith, or renegade who had disgraced their profession; and it is equally certain that Presbyterian churches in Scotland and certain churches in America were accustomed to use these vouchers, of lead or tin.

Tokens which have been used in America are quite rare. Wentworth Allen's article in the *Great Round World* refers to a collection belonging to Robert Shiells, of Neenah, Wisconsin, which included eighty American specimens. That was in 1901. My own recent efforts to obtain information concerning this collection have proved fruitless. Mr. Allen, however, gave no illustrations of American tokens, but showed the obverse of an oblong Scotch communion token, carrying the inscription Mr. P. Murray, and the reverse of another Kilmadoc—1794; but these are Scotch Presbyterian tokens. (Fig. 1.)

In South Carolina, Presbyterians were amongst the first settlers. Presbyterian belief and order were established and maintained in Charles Town and in adjacent regions from the founding of the Province in 1670. Distinctive forms of Presbyterian worship obtained with this first group, and were maintained until 1731 when a division arose among the Presbyterians in Charles Town, which continued until 1814. Families and clans from Scotland, North Ireland, England and the English settlements in the West Indies, perpetuated the Presbyterian system previously established in this city by erecting and maintain-

ing a new Presbyterian church, popularly known as the Scotch Meeting House, or the Scots Kirk. Here we may naturally expect to find the perpetuation of Scotch customs. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that the Scotch Church in Charleston had silver tokens cast for the use of its members in 1800.

By way of showing how the Scotch Church clung to traditional usages, William G. Whilden, whose reminiscences of Old Charleston were published in the *Year Book* for 1896 says: "At a funeral at the Scotch Church once, wine and cake were handed to those in the procession as they stood in Meeting Street, on the sidewalk." In a letter to Hon. J. Adger Smythe, then, Mayor of Charleston, Mr. Whilden promised "to send from time to

time items relating to the City of Charleston . . . one on communion tokens used by only one church in Charleston, one in New Jersey and one in Marion, Alabama." Mr. Whilden's death prevented fulfillment of the promise, but it is certain that the "one church in Charleston" using tokens was the Scotch, or as we now call it, the First Presbyterian Church, which stands at the southwest corner of Meeting and Tradd Streets.

One of these tokens in silver is still in possession of the church. (Fig. 2.) This treasured relic is about the size of a silver half dollar with a double rim a quarter of an inch in thickness. The piece shows on its obverse the "Burning Bush," the emblem of the church, which is likewise engraved on the ten-piece silver communion service of the church.* The surrounding motto reads "Nec Tamen Consumebatur," in rather crude lettering. The reverse bears the design of a communion table, covered with a "fair white cloth" upon which stand a chalice and a paten. The inscription reads: "This do in remembrance of me." On the rim is inscribed "First Presbyterian Church, Charleston, S. C., 1800."

Through all the changes and chances of one hundred and twenty-five years, through five wars and through fire and flood this tiny silver piece has survived to be restored to the church as follows:

The son of the present minister, Reverend Alexander Sprunt, D.D., while visiting a college mate learned that one Vogel, a jeweler at Winston-Salem, had in his possession a coin connected with the First Presbyterian Church in Charleston. Vogel was willing to return this coin, which

*See E. Alfred Jones, *The Old Silver of American Churches*.



Fig. 3—PEWTER TOKENS FROM NEW ENGLAND (Enlarged.)

(a). Unidentified token.

(b). Apparently from the Londonderry, New Hampshire, Presbyterian Church, founded 1719. The token bears every appearance of eighteenth century design.

Both owned by the New Hampshire Historical Society. Size of each $\frac{3}{4}$ by $\frac{1}{2}$ inch.

he had received from a Union soldier after the war (who thought it was Confederate money) if proper claim could be established. This eventually was accomplished, but Doctor Sprunt, in telling of the restoration and identification of the token failed to remember the names of the antiquarians to whom appeal was made. "They," he said, "were from Ohio and one other western place." From the date of Doctor Sprunt's pastorate, 1900, and the Shiells collection, written of in 1901 as containing a Charleston specimen, it is possible that Mr. Shiells was the person that lived in the "other western place."

This belief is held also by Miss M. Muir, who has in her possession a pewter token used for the slave members of the congregation. A branch of the First Presbyterian Church is the present congregation of Olivette Presbyterian Church, colored, at Smith and Beaufain Streets, Charleston, and it may be that search by members of the congregation might reveal other tokens used by their folk of old.

Writing of this pewter token, Miss Muir says:

How my mother became the possessor of the pewter token, I do not know, for none of our servants were members of our church, but my father and grandfather, both being elders at the same time, it may have come accidentally in the gathering of them, into their hands. I always remember seeing it in my mother's possession—in a tiny box in which she kept her few precious possessions.

Miss Muir takes this occasion to set right some statements made by Alice Morse Earle in the *Atlantic Monthly*, August, 1894, by saying the tokens provided for the black members were of pewter, not tin and further to set the record straight, she writes:

Of course the white and black members did not sit together at the table, but after the white members communed, the black, four hundred in number, came forward to the table. The elders took up from the communicants the tokens which they received at the Preparatory service on the preceding Saturday afternoon.

Miss Earle is not accurate in saying that the Northern army looted the church property. All our valuables were sent to Columbia and Mr. Gordon, the grandfather of our present elder, J. Gardiner Gordon, had the care of them; he managed to save the Communion silver, but tokens, baptismal bowl, and church records all were lost. After the war, the church property here was looted and a valuable chandelier stolen, we suppose by the negro troops or radicals then in power in the city. The tokens were never used after the church was re-opened [1866], for what reason I cannot tell, unless there was such poverty in the church that the silver could not be replaced and hence the usage was given up by our particular church.

The New Hampshire Historical Society has recently acquired two small pewter tokens, each hardly larger than a thumbnail, on one of which appear the unmistakable letters, "L. D.," the other apparently bears the letters "N.E.L." This latter token it is thus far impossible to identify. There seems, however, no reason to question that the token marked "L. D." originated in Londonderry, New Hampshire.

Londonderry was founded in 1719 by a group of Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, seeking in America that freedom from religious persecution which their fathers had earlier hoped

to find in Ireland. *The History of Londonderry* describes as follows the founding of the first Presbyterian church in New England:

Being of Scotch descent, and having been educated in the Presbyterian faith and discipline, that mode of church government was adopted by this company of settlers. The church which they established was the first Presbyterian church in New England. Others were soon formed by the emigrants who accompanied them and followed this land, as they settled in different parts of the country.*

As to the origin, significance and uses of tokens, the author of the *History of Londonderry* has a good deal to say, but, although in several instances he surrounds his statements by quotation marks, he does not feel it necessary to disclose the source of the material. Some of his own deductions together with sections quoted from his unidentified source book are given here:

At a sacramental occasion in 1734, only fifteen years after the settlement of the town, there were present, as appears from the church records, seven hundred communicants. This number included, as we suppose, many from other towns, where settlements had commenced; and also who, retaining a relationship to this church, but residing elsewhere, returned, on such occasions to enjoy the privilege of communion with their brethren. These seasons, occurring but twice a year, were recognized by the people as important occasions, something like the assembling of the ancient tribes on their national festivals. This mode of conducting the sacramental services had originated in Scotland.†

The fact that the custom of holding the communion service at most but twice a year, and of making it the occasion for elaborate celebrations of all kinds, is corroborated by a quotation from the nameless authority, which continues:

These extra services gave rise to much preaching, which rendered the aid of several ministers highly desirable if not necessary. When the Sabbath came, which was the great day of the feast, the ministers, ruling elders, and communicants of the several churches were assembled, prepared to gather round the sacramental tables. In these circumstances question would arise, how should those who were really unworthy communicants in good standing be distinguished from unworthy individuals who belong to no church and were perhaps even profligate, but who from unworthy motives might thrust themselves into the seats of worthy communicants and thus produce disorder and scandal?

To meet this difficulty the plan was adopted to deposit in the hands of each pastor and his elders a parcel of cheap metallic pieces stamped with the initials of the church, called "tokens" which they were to dispense to all known members of their own church who were in attendance and wished to commune.

Thus although not a quarter part of the communicants were personally known to the pastor or elders of the church in which the sacramental service occurred, yet these cheap and convenient little certificates of church membership, for such they were intended to be, being received by each communicant from the minister and elders of his own church, prevented imposition and secured regularity and order.

Says the Reverend Mr. Parker in conclusion:

Such was the origin of "tokens," which for more than a century were used in our Presbyterian churches in this country, even many years after the occasion for them had passed away.‡

*Reverend Edward L. Parker, late Pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Derby. *History of Londonderry, New Hampshire*. Boston, 1851, p. 130, et seq.

†*Op. cit.*, page 142.

‡*Op. cit.*, pages 143, 144.