

U.S. COINAGE

The Mint at New Orleans

Louisiana's branch mint had a short, but colorful career, marked by architectural ailments and Confederate complications.

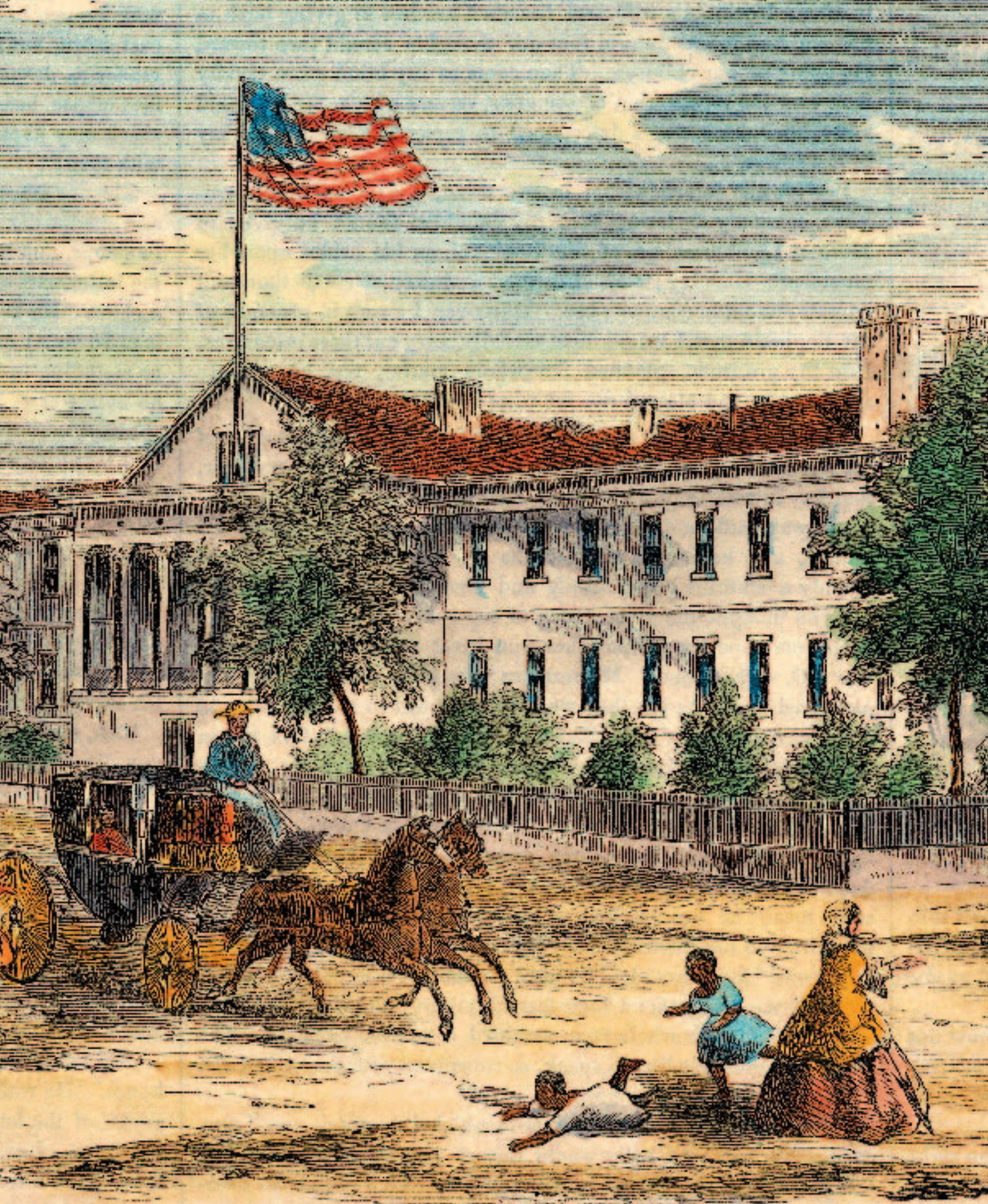
by Greg Lambousy [ANA202844](#)

ON MARCH 3, 1835, President Andrew Jackson, hero of the Battle of New Orleans, signed a bill authorizing the U.S. Treasury to establish a branch mint in Louisiana. The same act also provided for minting facilities in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Dahlonega, Georgia. (The Southern mints were the result of Jackson's long war with the Bank of America and paper money.) New Orleans was selected as a location for the manufacture of hard currency because it was the "emporium of the Great Valley," with gold specie from Mexico flowing through its active markets. ◀

▶ The New Orleans Mint, as pictured in *Ballou's Pictorial Magazine* in 1858.

PHOTO: LOUISIANA STATE MUSEUM





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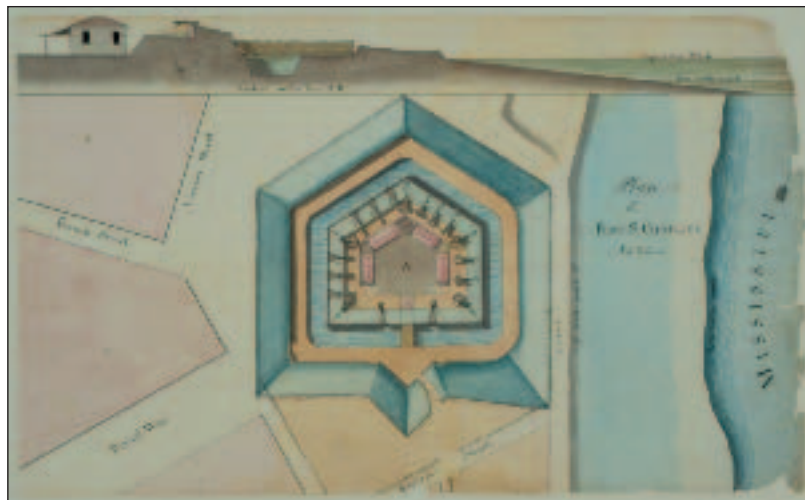
► New Orleans, depicted here in an 1803 painting by J.L. Bouqueta de Woiseri. Fort St. Charles is visible at the right, with a flag raised above the central structure.

▼ Fort St. Charles was the largest of five fortifications surrounding the city. This plan is dated 1814.



PHOTO: CHICAGO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

PHOTO: HISTORIC NEW ORLEANS COLLECTION



Coining operations began in the New Orleans facility in 1838, though the building was not actually completed until 1839. When the Confederate States of America occupied it in April 1861, it would become the only U.S. mint to produce Confederate coinage.

Minting ceased for a time, but resumed in 1879. By 1909, the operation had become obsolete, superseded by new mints in San Francisco and Denver. The assay office, however, continued to function until 1931, when it was moved to

the New Orleans Customhouse on Canal Street.

Purportedly, the cornerstone of the mint building was laid on the foundation of Fort St. Charles, one of five fortifications surrounding the city. Spanish Governor Baron Hector de Carondelet noted that Fort St. Charles, constructed in the form of a pentagon, was built larger than the other four to accommodate troops in the event of an insurrection.

In 1821 the fort was demolished, and the land was given to the City of New Orleans the following year. The area was made into a park, aptly named Jackson Square. The park remained until 1835, when the city returned it to the federal government for construction of the New Orleans branch mint.

Construction Begins

By April 10, 1835, Mint Director Samuel Moore was advertising in a Philadelphia newspaper for proposals to build the New Orleans facility. Martin Gordon was hired to superintend construction, while William Strickland was commissioned to design the building. A student of Benjamin Latrobe, the architect of the United States Capitol, Strickland was popular in Philadelphia, where he was known as the “city

architect.” (Some of his more significant buildings include the Second Bank of the United States, the United States Naval Home, the Merchants Exchange, the Tennessee State Capitol, and the Philadelphia and Charlotte Mints.)

The design of the New Orleans Mint reflected Strickland’s preoccupation with simplified, classical forms typical of the Greek Revival era. He was paid \$300, for which he provided the government with four watercolor and ink drawings and sixteen pages of specifications. Strickland did not oversee the construction, nor did he visit the site. Unfortunately, he did not take into account the soft soil in and around New Orleans; the building’s supports and foundations were better suited to the firm ground of Philadelphia. Accordingly, the structure endured an endless number of repairs and reconstructions throughout its history.

Gibson’s *Guide and Directory of the State of Louisiana and the Cities of New Orleans and Lafayette* (1838) noted the mint was

an edifice of the ionic order, of brick, plastered to imitate granite; having a center building projecting, as also two wings, is strongly built, with very thick walls and well finished. . . . The total length of the edifice is 282 feet, and the depth about 180—the wings being 29 by 81, and the whole three stories in height. It was begun September 1835, and is now on the point of being completed

Working at the Mint

Operations at the New Orleans Mint were divided into four separate departments: treasury, melting and refining, assaying and coining. The **treasurer** received all bullion brought to the Mint for coining. He also was charged with safeguarding the bullion and coin in the mint as it moved from one department to another.

The **melter and refiner** was responsible for creating gold and silver ingots of the proper fineness from raw bullion. Samples of the melter and refiner’s work were tested by the **assayer** to insure that the correct combinations of precious metals and alloys were employed.

The **coiner** received the ingots from the melter and refiner. The metal bars were passed through rollers and then drawn through an apparatus that reduced them to the proper thickness. Blanks were punched from the resulting strip.

The blanks (or planchets) then were weighed and cleaned. Any underweight planchets were returned to the melter and refiner. After milling, which created a ridge along the edge, the blanks were sent to the pressing room, where they were struck and ultimately transferred to the treasurer.



—at a cost of 182,000 The Square is being surrounded by a neat iron railing on a granite basement.

By 1837, the building was in such an advanced state of construction that minting equipment—including three coin presses—was shipped to New Orleans from Philadelphia. (The more delicate assaying instruments were ordered from a firm in Paris.) With the advice of the mint director, Presidents Jackson and Van Buren appointed the first officers, including the superintendent and treasurer (both of which were strictly political appointments), and the assayer, melter and refiner, and coiner.

Coins and Characters

Congress authorized the New Orleans branch mint to produce coinage of gold and silver. Circulating gold coinage was initiated the following year with a limited mintage of quarter eagles (\$2½). By the middle of the 1850s, the New Orleans branch mint was producing silver dollars, half dollars, quarters, dimes, half dimes and 3-cent pieces, as well as gold double eagles (\$20), eagles (\$10), half eagles (\$5), \$3 pieces, quarter eagles and dollars.

Operations began on March 8, 1838, with the first deposit of Mexican dollars by Lizareli & Company, amounting to \$32,408.01. A day later, melting and assaying began, and by May 7 the first coins were struck: 30 dimes. On June 29, the coiner and treasurer delivered 30,000 ☉



▲ New Orleans 3 cents, dime, \$3 and 50 cents.

◀ Andrew Berrett pours molten silver into a rotary ingot mold, c. 1890.

COIN PHOTOS: HARRY W. BASS JR., FOUNDATION/DOUGLAS PLASENCIA (GOLD) & ANA MUSEUM (SILVER)

[Riddell] was accused at one time of being unable to properly conduct a gold melt and at another of killing his wife . . .

10-cent pieces; total dime production for the year amounted to \$40,243.40.

Operations ceased between August 1 and November 30 “on account of the sickly season” (an outbreak of yellow fever). Two mint officers died, and the others left office. All, including the superintendent, were replaced by the following year.

Joseph Kennedy, the second superintendent of the New Orleans branch mint, served from 1839 to 1850. He and his family, like other officers, were provided apartments in the mint building. Late in his tenure, Kennedy held a debutante ball in the mint for his daughters Rose and Josephine.

Eliza Ripley, a New Orleans socialite who attended the soiree, said the mint was “made ample for the gay festivities by utilizing committee rooms, offices and every apartment that could be diverted for the crowd’s comfort—so, we wandered about corridors and spacious rooms, but never beyond the touch of a gendarme—officers, sol-

diers, policemen at every step. These preparations gave a rather regal air to the whole affair.”

John Leonard Riddell served as the second melter and refiner from 1839 to 1848. A multifaceted man, he pursued careers in both science and politics. He invented the binocular microscope and wrote books on such subjects as *Orrin Lindsay’s Plan of Aerial Navigation, with a Narrative of His Explorations in the Higher Regions of the Atmosphere, and His Wonderful Voyage around the Moon*.

Controversy often followed him. While he worked for the mint, Riddell had several confrontations with fellow officers and workers. He was accused at one time of being unable to properly conduct a gold melt and at another of killing his wife, who died in their mint apartment.

Around 1844, in an effort to streamline ingot production, Riddell invented the rotary ingot machine, which was put into use by the late 1840s. Cool water passed through the machine and rapidly hardened the bullion. Depressing a foot lever allowed the molds to rotate after each

pour and the previous ingot to be removed, greatly speeding the process. The machine almost tripled the average silver melt (from 3,000 to 8,500 ounces) and reduced the number of workers needed to do the job.

Riddell released a numismatic work in 1845 entitled *Monograph of the Silver Dollar, Good and Bad, Illustrated with Facsimile Figures*, and in 1847 he wrote an article for *De Bows Review* entitled “The Mint at New Orleans—Processes Pursued of Working the Precious Metals—Statistics of Coinage, etc.”

Another mint officer with an extremely inventive turn of mind was Philo B. Tyler, head

► Second Mint Superintendent Joseph Kennedy.
▼ Rolling strip and cutting coin blanks (bottom).

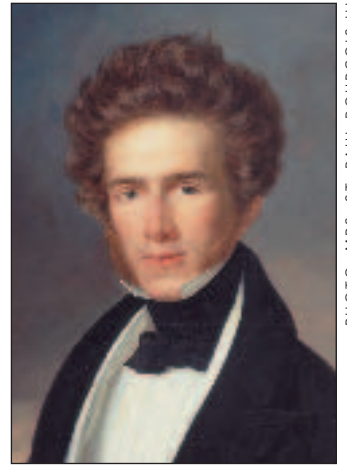
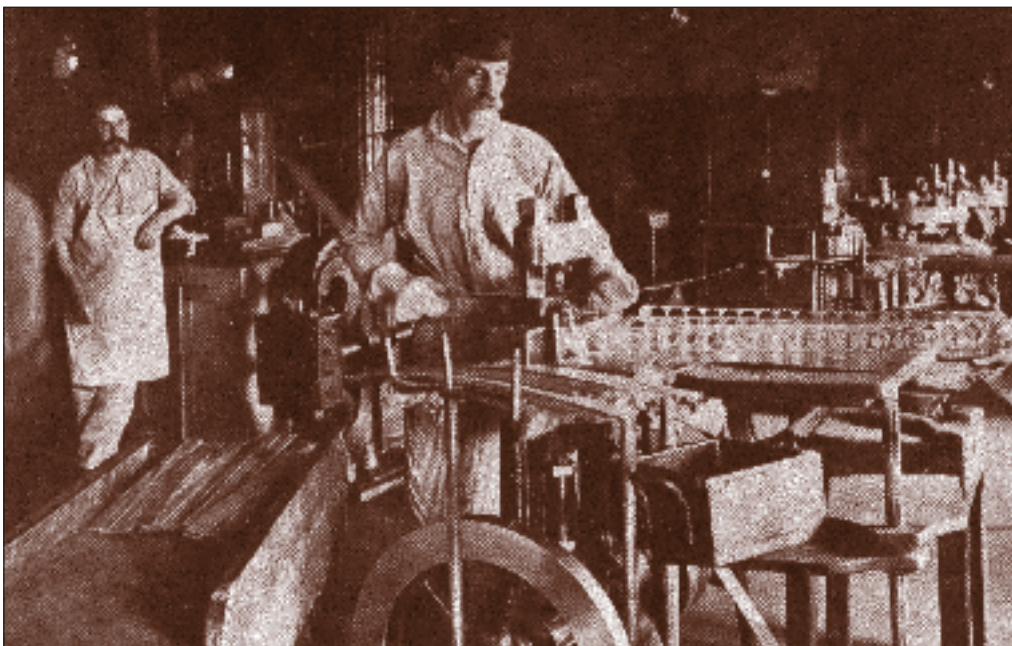


PHOTO: MRS. ST. PAUL BOURGOIS III (NEE ROSE BEVERLY CHEW BUTLER)

of the coining department for much of the 1840s. Before his untimely death, his brother Rufus invented a table for counting silver dollars, which Philo Tyler patented. Tyler also contributed to the manufacture of the first American, steam-operated coin press.

In 1844, when operations were suspended during a dispute over ownership of the square of ground the mint occupied, Tyler returned to Philadelphia to oversee casting of a new steam press at the shop of Merrick and Agnew. Tyler left the New Orleans Mint three years later to become superintendent of American Machine Works in Springfield, Massachusetts. His company later manufactured a large steam engine for the New Orleans Mint at a cost of \$17,262. Dr. M.F. Bonzano, melter and refiner, contracted with American Machine Works for a 10-horsepower steam engine in May 1853. The engine was installed on the main floor of the mint in March 1855.

Structural Strategies

In the 1840s, the building began to show signs of structural problems. James Gallier Sr., a well-known New Orleans architect, was hired to remedy the situation. In his autobiography, he noted:

The floors were sustained upon groined brick arches, supported by square brick pillars; but the thrust of the arches having caused the abutments to give way, the arches began to sink at the crown, and the whole structure threatened to become a mass of ruin. I was called on in a great hurry to devise some method of averting the danger. I caused to be inserted strong rods from outside to outside of the building in each direction; by shoring up the rods, they having screw knuts and outside plates, the building was rendered perfectly secure . . .

The tie rods still are in place, and the plates can be seen on the outside walls of the second and third floors.

Shortly after Gallier's repairs, James H. Dakin, architect of New Orleans' St. Patrick's Church and the Louisiana Arsenal, was asked to examine the first-floor arches under the melting room. He found them "liable to fall at any moment" and recommended that they "should be segments of circles and the mortar should be made of the best cement." It appears the arches were rebuilt on May 13, 1845, according to his suggestions.

Problems with the building persisted. In May 1854, Major G.T. Beauregard, superintendent ◉

▼ Superintendent Hugh S. Suthon with stenographer Emily Perkins in his office at the New Orleans Mint, c. 1903.



PHOTO: LOUISIANA STATE MUSEUM

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of construction for the New Orleans Customhouse, was directed to “examine and make an estimate of repairs” at the New Orleans Mint. Trained at West Point as a civil engineer, Beau regard superintended various federal building projects before he began his career in the Confederate Army. In a report dated May 9, 1854, he recommended that the entire mint building be rendered fireproof by removing wooden floor sections, adding iron beams and installing a galvanized roof.



The Confederates Take Control

Months before the first shots were fired on Fort Sumter in April 1861, Louisiana seceded from the United States, declaring itself an independent republic. The Louisiana Secession Convention was held in the state capitol in Baton Rouge on January 26, 1861. With a vote of 113 to 17 in favor of secession, Convention President Alexander Mouton declared “the connection between the State of Louisiana and the Federal Union dissolved, and that she is a free, sovereign, and independent power.”

the mint vaults contained a half million dollars in gold and silver.

By March 21, the Secession Convention had accepted the Confederate Constitution. An ordinance was enacted stating that “Louisiana doth hereby cede unto the Confederate States of America the right to use, possess [sic], and occupy all the forts, arsenals, lighthouses, the mint, customhouse, and other public buildings acquired by the State from the late United States.” On April 1, the Confederate States of America took possession of the mint, again retaining its officers. Because of a lack of bullion, the mint ceased operations in late April, but the staff remained on duty until May 31.

The New Orleans Mint was the only facility to strike coins with a uniquely Confederate design. Years later, Benjamin F. Taylor, chief coiner of the New Orleans Mint during the Civil War, described the circumstances under which the coins were struck. In a letter to the War Department in Washington, he wrote:

. . . In the month of April, orders were issued by Mr. Memminger, Secretary of the [Confederate] Treasury, to the effect that designs for half-dollars should be submitted to him for approval. Among several sent, the one approved bore on the obverse of the coin a representation of the Goddess of Liberty, surrounded by thirteen stars, denoting the thirteen States from whence the Confederacy sprung, and on the lower rim the figures, 1861. On the reverse there is a shield with seven stars, representing the seceding States; above the shield is a liberty cap, and entwined around it stalks of sugar cane and cotton, “Confederate States of America.” The dies were engraved by A.H.M. Peterson, Engraver and Die Sinker, who is now living in Commercial Place. They were prepared for the coining press by Conrad Schmidt, foreman of the coining room (who is still living), from which four pieces only were struck. About this period an order came from the secretary suspending operations on account of the difficulty of obtaining bullion, and the Mint was closed April 30, 1861.



▲ A female mint employee feeds blanks into a coin press (top), while a corps of women uses delicate scales to weigh planchets.

When the Secession Convention reconvened in New Orleans on January 29, an ordinance was adopted that allowed federal workers to continue in their posts as employees of the State of Louisiana. The State took possession of the New Orleans Mint on January 31, keeping the same officers. On February 1, a committee of five was formed to inventory the property of the “late Federal Union within the Parish of Orleans.” It was reported to the Convention that

Taylor kept the two dies and one of the four coins, which now resides in the American Numismatic Society collection in New York City. The other three coins have quite a pedigree. One owned by Dr. Edward Y. Ames presently belongs to numismatist/author Eric P. Newman.

Another owned by John Leonard Riddell was acquired by numismatist Lester Merkin. The fourth coin, once held by Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy, was sold by Stack's of New York in 1995 to a private collector.

In 1862 United States Marines, under Commodore David Farragut, seized control of New Orleans and raised the U.S. flag atop the mint. New Orleanian William Mumford, along with three other men, removed the flag and tore it to pieces. Mumford, a well-educated but reckless man with a love of drink, defiantly wore shreds of the flag in his buttonhole. He eventually was arrested and sentenced by U.S. Army General Benjamin Butler to be hanged in front of the mint on June 7, 1862.

Mumford's execution was reported in newspapers throughout the North and South. In response, Confederate President Jefferson Davis proclaimed General Butler a "felon, deserving of capital punishment." Davis also ordered that if Butler was captured, he was to be executed immediately.

New Life for the Old Mint

Following the capture of New Orleans, Dr. M.F. Bonzano was ordered to take possession of all mint property for the federal government. The mint reopened as an assay office in October 1876, with Bonzano functioning as assayer in charge and as superintendent. In 1877 Bonzano was asked by special mint agent James R. Snowden to report on the repairs and machinery needed to bring the New Orleans branch mint back into full, operational order. Bonzano noted that the melting department and refinery needed work and additional machinery. The coining department required a new press to strike Trade dollars. Boilers installed in 1855 had begun to deteriorate.

The New Orleans Mint resumed coining operations in 1879. It was the only mint in the South to reopen after the Civil War.

A series of political struggles ensued for the next 30 years. Many thought the New Orleans Mint was superfluous and existed merely as a form of political patronage for Louisiana legislators. Given the facility's aging machinery and competition from the Denver and San Francisco Mints, it became increasingly more difficult to justify the cost of operations in New Orleans. By June 1911, after production had been halted for two years, machinery began to be dismantled and shipped to the Philadelphia Mint.

In 1922 a supervising architect for the Treasury Department issued a report describing the general decay into which the building and its remaining machinery had fallen:



PHOTOS: LOUISIANA STATE MUSEUM

... The attic and building generally contains old decayed tanks, masonry furnaces, old iron, piles of paper, mud and dead pipe and gas lines and flues, etc., and many holes in masonry floor arches exist without any apparent reason. Surface dirt and cobwebs exist practically throughout the building, the accumulation of years, and there is no janitor force employed. The rear lot and courtyard is filthy with trash, cans, old abandoned machinery, decayed and falling wooden and sheet metal sheds and shacks and an old brick chimney.



▲ The Old New Orleans Mint on Esplanade Avenue is one of five national landmarks in the historic French Quarter maintained by the Louisiana State Museum. Learn more by visiting lsm.crt.state.la.us/lsm.htm.

At this time, the assay department still operated on the third floor. A Naval Recruiting Station and a Veterans Bureau dispensary and dental clinic operated in other parts of the building. The architect recommended in his report that the assay department relocate to the New Orleans Customhouse, where it could share the use of a newly built bullion vault.

His advice finally was taken in 1931, when the mint building was converted into a federal prison. In 1943 the prison closed. The building functioned as a Coast Guard Receiving Station until the middle 1960s, when it was transferred from the federal government to the State of Louisiana and placed under the stewardship of the Louisiana State Museum Board. In 1979 the mint opened to the public as a part of the Louisiana State Museum complex.

Today, the New Orleans Mint building exhibits few of the problems that plagued it during its tumultuous decades of service. It stands as a testament to man's ingenuity—and frailty. ©