Masonic PAPER MONEY – Expensive Ephemera

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Paper Money is a very popular collector's subjects and maybe surprisingly, there are several issues that have a Masonic connection.

USA

When considering Masonic Paper Money, the one banknote that immediately springs to mind is the US One Dollar note. It has been analysed to the nth degree, portraying the painting by Andrew Sealey of George Washington, the quintessential American Freemason. The Masonic emblems: the all seeing eye, pyramid and other devices, have been given innumerable interpretations, even before Dan Brown descended on the scene. Among collectors the US $ 1.00 bill has long been nicknamed the ‘Masonic dollar'. This is because of the design on the 1917 large size one dollar note. Not only was it the portrait of George Washington that had a Masonic significance but the left hand side vignette portrays what would appear to be unmistakable Masonic activity. It is an engraving by Joseph Ourdan (not a freemason) depicting a group of sailors of which the figure in the foreground is giving the sign of fidelity, while another sign is discharged by the sailor just behind him, head crouched. The sailor on his knees appears to be doing the same with his left hand. The group depicted are in fact Christopher Columbus and his entourage aboard the Santa Maria giving thanks to the Lord on the first sighting of land in the Americas, the Watling Island . . . . thus no Masonic significance!

The current dollar bill first appeared in 1935 and incorporates what are seen as Masonic emblems within the dual Great Seal of the United States. That on the left side depicts the all seeing eye of the Deity within a triangle above a pyramid. On the right, above the American eagle, are the 13 six pointed stars arranged to form the shape of the Shield of David. The symbols are a tribute to George Washington: first President of America. The formal and official view of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, who had the notes designed and printed, is that there was no intention whatever to give the notes any Masonic connotations.

GREECE

Coming closer home to Europe, in Greece, demands were made in parliament for the withdrawal of the new 500 Drachmae ‘Masonic' banknote when it was first issued in 1983. The banknote depicts Ioannis Capodistrias, the first Greek Governor after the liberation from Ottoman rule in 1828. Capodistrias was a Freemason, though not supportive, having effectively banned all secret societies, including Freemasonry for the best part of a quarter century. Nonetheless, the banknote design incorporates a supposedly ‘Masonic' handshake at the base of the note with the square and compass design as a background to the numeral ‘500’, at the centre of the note. Intentional references to Capodistrias’ Masonic affiliation.

JERSEY

These two examples need just a little imagination and are quaint masonic stories. There are, however, some genuinely masonic banknotes. In allowing some leeway to the definition of a banknote, it may be described as a printed monetary instrument that is redeemable

on sight and is made out to ‘bearer’. Using this as a correct definition of ‘paper money’, a wonderful example of an exceptional banknote exists in the Museum collection in St Helier, Jersey.

In 1866, in an endeavour to raise funds for the building of the first Masonic Temple in the Channel Islands, the few masons at the time came up with an ingenious scheme: a circulating banknote that was effectively an interest free guaranteed ten year loan. The £1 notes, issued over a period of several months in August of 1866 by authority of the board of the Masonic Temple Company, had all the ingredients of a legal tender banknote. The design was executed by William Adams, a very well known and active Jersey mason who became Provincial Grand Secretary for three years in 1857. The note, with other similar issues by various institutions on the Island at the time, resembles in detail the Bank of England £1 note of the period. The Provincial masonic coat of arms appears on the top right of the note and a beautifully engraved view of the temple on the opposite side. Normal security measures are incorporated. The notes, hand numbered and dated and signed by the trustees of the Board, have the printed statement *'We Promise to pay the Bearer'* and *'redeemable on Demand'* followed by a blank space to allow an entry of the name of the person or authority who would redeem the note.

The catch lies in the printed statement declaring the date of the payment of the value of the note to Bearer as being ten years after the date of issue. Ingenious indeed. They were known as *'redeemable certificates*' and were perfectly legal issues at the time. The serial numbers on surviving examples would indicate a considerable quantity of the notes being released for circulation. There is no reason to suppose that the notes did not circulate as currency. In the knowledge of final redemption, they would have changed hands at face value of £1 during the ten year period prior to redemption. These *Jersey Masonic Temple Bank Notes* are exceedingly rare collectors' items. A signed example is in the collection of the Masonic Museum in Jersey.

PORTUGAL

Portugal also issued a genuine Masonic banknote, the 1918 five centavos issue that circulated as legal tender for almost a decade. After the proclamation of the new Republic of Portugal in 1910, a major monetary reform introduced the new currency system establishing, for the first time, the centavo and escudo currency units. The 1918 5 Centavo note incorporates to the left of centre, the blatant Masonic square and compasses, placed there as a symbol of the Republican ideals that had only recently replaced those of the Monarchy, following on the assassination of King Carlos and the Crown prince a few years earlier. Such Masonic ideals as truth, relief and brotherly love have often – and still are, in some nations – been admired and adapted by political groups to symbolise their national aspirations. The square and compasses are the most obvious of these symbols. The small size notes were issued by the Government Treasury and were backed by bronze coinage. They continued in circulation until 1925 when all fractional currency was done away with.

GERMANY

A final series of 'true' banknotes with a Masonic association were the German emergency notes of 1922, popularly known as 'Notgeld'. These local currency issues from hundreds of different towns and cities were the result of force of circumstance. The ever increasing and spiralling inflation in Germany, following the First World War, led to a drastic shortage of money. Inflation was increasing at a rate with which the paper money printing machines could not cope. The resulting shortage of money at local banks throughout the nation reached a critical stage. From about 1918 several municipalities began to issue their own local emergency banknotes. It soon became clear to the local Treasurer that these issues could prove to be very profitable if the public could be persuaded not to redeem them. To achieve such a result a variety of designs of local interest were colourfully printed on the issues. The scheme succeeded. By 1923 a recorded total of more than 400,000 different issues were circulated by some 350 local municipalities.

It is not surprising, therefore, for one series of banknotes to be devoted to craft trades, including masonry. The notes show the coat of arms used by the various trades and the familiar square and compasses appears on one of the 1 Mark notes. The issue was released in Boden in 1922 and consists of a series of notes for 25, 50 and 75 Pfennig and 1 Mark. The builder or mason appears on the 1 Mark note, flanked on both sides by the square and compasses. It is interesting to note that in this series the carpenters and bakers also use the square and compasses as their emblem.

No doubt the observant collector will discover some more instances of Masonic Banknotes – an unusual and curious field of ephemera.