

The President's Letter

By Chris Pilliod

This is my 49th letter as president.

Summer always brings a visit to downtown Philadelphia and as I wander the area of the original Mint site one notices that, for blocks and blocks of the city, little has changed over the decades, even centuries. And my thoughts dissolve into numismatic dreams of working in the first U.S. Mint.

Little Francis was just 16 when he was hired at the Mint in 1796. A year earlier he had asked his teacher for what use he would ever have for conjugated verbs and participles since he already spoke, by his standards, fluent English. His punishment was writing "a bemused busy boy bides with books" 100 times. Having always struggled in schoolwork, Francis decided he'd seen enough and, well, that was the last he saw of the school. As a child, whenever Francis scampered with his friends out of the row houses off South Street into the city he would often pass three small buildings on 7th Street at the corner of Arch and wondered just what the men were doing in there. A guard kept watch over the steps leading inside, so he knew it was of importance, he only observed this at the banks. No signs designating the type of industry were within view. The windows were often open and inside he could clearly hear the clanging of machinery and men's voices. Smoke belched out the flues of the chimneys, but without the smell of the textile mill where his father was employed. This was a coughing pungent smell.

A week after he left school, Francis asked the guard the nature of the business going on inside.

"This is the United States Mint," the guard curtly replied. Francis was bemused they were making coins for the United States no more than 10 blocks from his home. He asked about employment. A month later he was delivered a letter stating he would be accepted for employment as a day laborer if he was able to meet their standard of fitness. He would begin with a wage of \$4.00 per week, "irrespective of requisite hours for services rendered."

Philadelphia was the most strategic city of the country in 1796. It had until this very year been the largest city in the nation. New York City passed it by in population that year. Even at that, the total number of those living in the City of Brotherly Love numbered just 36,000, no bigger than modern day Stanton, California, or Quincy, Illinois, or Lima, Ohio.

When Francis and his friends would gather on the banks of the Delaware to swim on the hot summer days, it was on a meandering dusty path off Spruce Street through a woods of several hundred yards in length to find the banks. Today, this ground is cut by I-95, one of the busiest interstates in the world. It is also home to Penn's landing, a bristling hub for revelers of food, drink and strolling.

To insure his timely arrival at 6 a.m. for work, Francis's path to the Mint was facilitated by a cut through St. Peter's Cemetery, final resting place for many of the city's most famous citizens. Past this were cobblestone streets with rowhouses until he neared Center City on Walnut Street. Two centuries later, he would be bewildered that these tiny rowhomes in an area now known as Society Hill would fetch \$1.2 million each.



At Walnut and 7th as he neared the Mint was a park where he and his friends would play on-end for hours. But as the long days at the Mint would wear on him and he plodded home grimy after toiling 12 hours, he soon grew envious of the little boys and girls frolicking on the grass he once played just a few years earlier. The City's founding fathers had designated portions of the Center City be set aside for the citizens for enjoyment, and named them after prominent patriarchs of the nation. The one at Walnut and 7th, like the others, still stands, never having seen a construction crew these centuries later. This one was named Washington Square, which was joined by Franklin Square in the northwest corner of the city, Rittenhouse Square to the southwest, and Logan Square to the northwest. These parks originally defined the outer areas of the tiny fledgling city, each about half a mile from Center City; but after decades of growth, the city has expanded miles and miles beyond these boundaries. Of the four, Logan Park would be selected as the site for decades of public



executions, with hundreds of locals gathering to observe the grisly last gasps, including Francis' father who was fascinated by the morbid.

Often when he wanted to treat himself, Francis would stop off at Cecilia's, a small bakery off Lombard and 6th Street and buy a fresh piece of oven-bread and strawberry jam for 1 cent. And then it would be off to work, where as a laborer he would simply follow the orders of the day such as toting bins of copper blanks to the Pressroom for striking—only the senior laborers would be allowed to handle the silver and gold blanks. One day, a co-worker whiling away some time informed Francis that "Philadelphia" was misspelled on the Liberty Bell. He ruminated over the comment for some time, before quietly asking, "Well, how do you spell it???"

Other days would be spent cleaning and oiling the screwpresses for maintenance. Steam power would be late in Francis' career—not until 1836 would it be introduced. So for his first 40 years of service all efforts would be performed entirely by man aided by simple mechanics. The length and weights of the flywheels the men would throw magnified the striking forces required to strike the coins, especially the large diameter issues like the big Silver Dollars Francis loved. Small screw presses with short flywheels were sufficient for the tiny coins, the Half Dimes and such. The design of the screw pitches in the yoke were critical—steep pitches were necessary for high speed strikes and pressures; low-pitched threads with elevated moments facilitated by long flywheel arms were a must for the extreme pressures needed for impressing the hobs into the annealed dies. He often felt bad for the tireless workers who spent 12 hours working the heavy equipment and the men in the Melt Shop enduring the high heat of the summers.

So concerned was the Mint with insuring the public confidence of the newly established monetary system that every blank above quarter size was individually weighed on a balance beam scale to insure compliance with legislated standards. They couldn't dare let an underweight silver or gold coin be issued to the public when the denomination accorded its value to the equivalent precious metal value. Heavy blanks or planchets would be "adjusted" by filing weight off the face or edge. Light planchets would be returned to the Melt Shop for recycling or plugged and augmented to bring the weight into standard.

On occasion, Fran (as he would come to be called) would be asked to hand carry parts or drawings to a local machine shop for repair or fabrication. Other days were spent cleaning up in the Melt Shop, Rolling Mill or pickle house. On hot days he often longed for the Delaware River but long hours and exhaustion prevented him from joining his friends. Fran would slowly plod home for a late dinner and the longing of his bed. He performed all of this with diligence and prompt.

One hot September day, Fran was asked to pick up 40 pounds of die steel from a supplier in the industrial section of the city, the near north side of the city, located at the corner of Broad and Spring Garden Streets. Diemaking at the Mint was a critical barrier to the production of coinage. Often inferior broken dies could not be retired due to the heavy demand of coinage at the banks and for commerce. As such, dies with entire pieces broken off, or "cuds," were maintained in service. By today's standards, just a whisper of a faint die crack is cause for stopping the press

and retiring dies; in Francis' day, this was not an option, making die pairings without cuds sometimes rarer than those with cuds. He had heard of issues with something called heat treatment, and they were experimenting with a new method and were anxious to secure the material that they had dispatched him to retrieve. Because of the distance Fran needed the department's wagon to pull behind him as he set off on a muggy day for the die shop. In the heat, he pulled his wagon past Congress Hall, the site of the United States Congress as well as the President George Washington. He knew it was a common occurrence for residents to see the president freely walking in and around Center City, although Francis had never observed him personally. He gazed around the building gawking at respectfully dressed men bustling about but, to be sure, he wouldn't have recognized the First Father if he shook his hand. In two years' time, the Congress as well as the President would relocate to Washington, D.C., and Francis would not venture on the long three-day wagon ride to the new nation's capitol 140 miles to the southwest. That was fine with him though, as he felt it was quite an honor the day the Director of the Mint, Elias Boudinot, walked by and gave a hearty "Hello, young man!" For four more years, Philadelphia would also serve as the state capital until it moved to Harrisburg in 1800. It was indeed the hub of the nation.

After dutifully insuring the receipt of goods matched the invoice, Francis safely secured the materials in his wagon and headed south on Broad Street, working up quite a thirst from the toiling. As he neared Callowhill Street, a sign outside a shop advertising food and drinks caught his eye. He parked his wagon in plain view of the window not to lose sight of the precious cargo while he satisfied his thirst inside. There inside was a young attractive lady serving a few distinguished gentlemen at the bar who immediately caught his attention. Young with wispy blonde hair and a fresh smile, she took note of Francis as he headed towards her for a glass of cold water. She had heard her telling the gentlemen of her Fine Arts studies at the University of Pennsylvania, the first university in the nation and recognized as one of the finest of the 30 or so colleges in existence. The school was located on the western side of the Schuylkill River, a remote location Francis had never visited. Although he was no match for her intelligence, Francis very much enjoyed the small chat they had, and as he left, he mentally etched the address of the establishment in his mind.

And off he went to the Mint...



...and dropped out of school.