

Does a Special 1874-CC Dime Create an Intriguing Connection between Virginia City and France?

By Dan A. McCarty

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As I read the article about the 1874-CC *With Arrows* dime by Belay Off in the summer 2015 issue of *Curry's Chronicle*, I too became intrigued as to the coin's provenance. Fortunately, for Belay Off, I was not previous owner of that dime, because I never would have consigned it to the auction in the first place!

At any rate, as I thought about connections between Virginia City, Carson City, San Francisco, New York, and France, an intriguing tidbit of history struck me. And I would like to share it with you. So, if you're ready, here's the cool historical narrative that came to my mind.

I believe the main connection in this case might be the wife of Comstock King John W. Mackay, Louise.

But first, here's some background information, most of which comes from *John Mackay – Silver King in the Gilded Age* by Michael J. Makley. In 1852, the twenty-year-old Mackay had come to Sierra County in Northern California from New York City. Gold had drawn him, along with thousands of other fortune hunters, to the area. He placer mined along the Yuba River and along smaller streams and tributaries around Downieville, California.

During Mackay's time in this region, Major Daniel E. Hungerford, a veteran of the Mexican War, was the proprietor of the drugstore in Downieville. His daughter Marie Louise had studied French and Spanish at St. Catherine's Female Academy in Benicia, California. At the age of fifteen and a half, in 1859, she was engaged to a physician. After she turned sixteen, she married Dr. Edmund Bryant. It is doubtful that Marie Louise met John W. Mackay during this period. Their introduction to one another would have to wait until

about seven years later.

In 1859, Mackay, the Hungerford's, and thousands of others migrated to the northwestern portion of Utah Territory, as news spread of a strike in Washoe, east of the Sierra. Hungerford, a major in the Sierra Guards militia, fought in the Pyramid Lake War of 1860. After serving in the Union Army during the Civil War, at Fair Oaks and Malvern Hill, he returned to Nevada in late 1862 with the intent of raising a regiment to fight the Confederates in Texas, but orders never materialized. In 1863, Marie Louise, her husband Dr. Bryant, and their young daughter, Eva, joined Hungerford in Virginia City. The doctor, unable to resist the temptation of alcohol and a ready supply of opiates in his medical bag, soon left for "greener pastures." In early 1866, Marie Louise became a widow, as her husband died at a place called, of all things, Poverty Hill, near La Porte, California. Her life in Virginia City following the death of her husband was frugal. She earned a meager income, sewing for ladies in town and teaching French and piano at St. Mary's Catholic School. She had been cultured and refined by the Dominican nuns at St. Catherine's Female Academy, a status she presumably enjoyed and longed to attain. Mrs. Robert Howland, a longtime friend, once remarked that Marie Louise's intentions were "social," and went on to say that Marie Louise was "reluctant to marry an uneducated though successful miner, who stuttered; mindful as she was of the cultured though tragically unfortunate gentleman who had been her husband. Her intense ambition to shine had not been dulled by years of deprivation."

On Christmas Day in 1866, Theresa Fair, wife of Mackay partner James G. Fair, invited Marie Louise and her daughter Eva to dinner. Another dinner guest was John Mackay. So began the relationship between John W. Mackay and Marie Louise Antoinette Hungerford



Marie Louise Mackay around the time she was in France.

Bryant (Marie Louise would also be known as Louise for much of her life). The thirty-five-year-old Mackay married the twenty-four-year-old Louise in November 1867. With profits from his mining ventures, Mackay bought a vacant lot above Virginia City and had a house built for them. Louise's mother and her sister moved in with the Mackays.

From that point on, Louise began to use Mackay's status (and money) to gain her desired social standing. And, her mother, not to be left behind, followed. The journey they began in Virginia City would take them to San Francisco, New York, and eventually to France. The marital relationship was, indeed, peculiar. As Louise, her mother, and her sister climbed the social ladder across the United States and eventually to Europe, John Mackay continued toiling every day in his mines on the Comstock Lode.

With that background, I return to Belay Off's 1874-CC dime. It might take much imagination, but I can see the possibilities for the provenance of that dime connected to the life of Louise Mackay. Her

husband made numerous trips to Europe. Starting in 1876 Louise lived in a mansion in Paris. Could that dime have traveled from Virginia City to France in Mackay's pocket, and found its way into Louise's purse? Could one of her sons, Willie or Clarence, have spent that dime in a French bakery? (Coincidentally, Clarence was born in 1874, in San Francisco, CA.) We will never know.

But we do know that Louise Mackay and her children lived in France in the 1870s (and beyond that decade), that John Mackay often traveled from Virginia City (where Carson City dimes circulated) to France, and that it is entirely possible that he carried change from the Nevada coin factory in his pocket during those trips. The question is, could a piece of that change have been an 1874-CC dime, which did not return to the United States until the 21st century, and which eventually wound up in Belay Off's collection?

Oh well, it was worth a try. Don't you think?

(Image courtesy of Southgate Coins)

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