

I chanced upon the following piece and enjoyed reading in its entirety. There is more to add to a portion of the story. First, here's the original content, written by Russel Easterbrooks in NENA News in 2002.

Counterfeiting New England Bank Notes - Early Engravers Temptation



This is an example of a counterfeit note from the Claremont Bank in Claremont, New Hampshire.

The thousands of obsolete New England bank notes issued between 1830 - 60 offer one of the most interesting and unexplored fields for collectors, historians, and students of engraving. The multitude of different illustrations or vignettes represents some of the finest engraving during this period. Some of these engravers however succumbed to the temptation of applying their skill to the fabrication of forging notes.

One such engraver was Christian Meadows.; known as a fine craftsman who during his life was considered the most accomplished engraver in New England. Meadows early apprenticeship was as an engraver of bank notes and dies for W. W. Wilson located in Boston. His early life before this employment, around 1846, is unknown, yet his later work included prints, silversmith work, and decorative firearms engraving. Stauffer's standard book of American prints and their engravers describes Christian Meadows as an engraver of portraits and views in business at Windsor Vermont, between 1850-55.

My first discovery of his work, was a rare print displaying the Dartmouth College Campus signed; Engd. by C. Meadows. The origin of this print is described by a document in the Dartmouth college library as follows:

"We, the undersigned, members of Dartmouth College, do hereby associate ourselves together in joint copartnership for the purpose of publishing an engraving to be entitled, Dartmouth College to be executed on copper, and we hereby pledge ourselves to defray all expenses that may be incurred in obtaining, and to share all profits that may accrue from the sale of the same, jointly and equally. In witness whereof we have this fourteenth day of June in the year of our lord one thousand eight hundred and fifty-one, set our hands and seals:"

*E.T. Quinby
Geo. W. Gardner
Charles Caverno*

Initial inquiries made in Boston by this group revealed that the best known engraver for such a project was in a Windsor Vermont prison because of a small matter of counterfeiting. Vermont prison records indicate Christian Meadows was indeed a prisoner, number 1,348 and was confined from June 22, 1850 until July 4, 1853. His description at that time was: "Thirty-six years

old, five feet eleven inches tall, brown hair, light complexion, born in England.” Circumstances regarding Meadows imprisonment revealed the theft of, “bank notes and dies from the plant of W.W. Wilson” for whom Meadows was employed.

A few months later Meadows was suspected of passing counterfeit West River Bank notes by a cashier of a Wells River bank. Meadows was arrested some days later in Groton, Vermont by a Caledonia County Sheriff. Evidence seized at his and nearby residence included: two presses, a supply of blank copper plates and three boxes containing one hundred thirty-five dies of bank names and bank note vignettes, many of which had been stolen from the Wilson plant in Boston.

While serving his sentence the “accommodating” superintendent at the Windsor prison, Henry Harlow, allowed Meadows, in the charge of a guard, to travel to the Dartmouth College campus to make drawings, and upon returning to the prison was allowed to engrave the plate for the print. It seems Meadows finished print was viewed by a number of people including Dr. John Walker of the New Hampshire Agricultural Society, who it so happens was engaged in finding an engraver to do the work for the society's diploma.

Upon talking with Meadows, he agreed to perform the work. So a drawing was supplied by D.G. Lamont, an artist who resided near the birthplace of Daniel Webster. Lamont's drawing included the elm tree on the Webster birthplace, with the lettering “Webster Elm” on the trunk. Once the diplomas were printed, one was sent to Daniel Webster then Secretary of the State under President Fillmore.

Webster was impressed with the work of the engraving and wrote to the society: “This is a true resemblance of the tree at my birthplace. Who is the engraver that has done this? Where does he dwell? I have been searching for such a man. We want him at the State Department to engrave Maps”.

Webster received Meadows entire story, promoting him to write Vermont Governor Williams, asking him to pardon Meadows and stated “Why do you bury your best talents in your state prisons?” Governor Williams replied that “he did not feel justified in granting the requested pardon.” The next year new Vermont Governor Erastus Fairbanks reviewed Webster's letter and reopened the matter. After an investigation Governor Fairbanks set the date of July 4 on which to pardon Meadows.

Now a free man Christian Meadows settled down in Windsor and resumed his work as an engraver. Unfortunately Daniel Webster had died spoiling Meadows chance to work for the United States State Department. To date no list of Meadows engraving work has been undertaken. In addition to the Dartmouth College print, Meadows work includes prints of the Appleton Academy, the Female Seminary of Granville New York, the Thetford Vermont Academy, and the Barre Vermont Academy.

He is also known to have done portraits of Jeremy Belknap a prominent Massachusetts clergyman and Reverend David Merrill of Peacham, Vermont. Meadows also worked in silver at the shop of Roswell Bailey where he engraved coffin plates and other silver items. He also worked in the adjoining town of Woodstock, at the Firearms Company of N. Woodbury.

After 1859 all trace of Meadows is lost. An article in the Granite Monthly of 1880 by Dr. Nesmith states that "I have seen about Windsor and Hanover many trophies of the genius of Christian Meadows. He died some years ago."

Other than the West River Bank notes cited in the court records, it is doubtful other notes counterfeited by Meadows will ever be discovered. Many counterfeit notes were counterstamped COUNTERFEIT by banks who discovered them. Collectors today avidly collect counterfeit notes, which often sell for more than originals! Christian Meadows life is an obscure bit of history that can only add to the romance of collecting New England bank notes.

And now,

The Rest of the Story

Such a good read this story makes, it's not surprising another author wrote about Christian Meadows. Paul Heller penned an article in The Ephemera Journal, Volume 15, Number 2 in January 2013. The title is "Vermont's Finest Engraver: Prisoner Number 1348". This article adds more information and images, one which I include here.



Figure 1. Paul Heller's photograph (May 2012) of the house in Groton, Vermont where Christian and Elizabeth Meadows lived while planning their counterfeit scheme

About William W. Wilson

From an article I wrote for the IBNS Journal "Printers' Test Notes - A Primer" I quote:

What banknote printer with test notes was convicted of forging banknotes?

William W. Wilson Engraving and Printing was established in the 1830s as an engraver and printer. Wilson was arrested in 1853 in Boston for counterfeiting a Merchants Bank of Boston and Tradesmans' Bank banknote. Pelton, a banknote engraver and firm owner as well as Alderman Isaac Cary of the New England Bank Note Company testified against him. He was held for \$17,000 bail, was in default of bail and committed to jail. His only known test note, WW-101 has dimensions of 260 by 419mm and was last sold at auction for \$2,000.

The information of the arrest came from “The Bankers Magazine and Statistical Register, Volume 7 1853”. I have since found two varieties of Wilson’s test note, the only difference being the company address. The first address for the firm is 23 Court Street. The second assumed later address in 17 Doane Street, both in Boston. With the 1853 dollar worth \$35.50 today, the bail equaled \$603,500 in 2021 dollars, making bail difficult. It is not known how long Mr. Wilson was incarcerated, but a Boston directory for 1862 still shows Wilson at 17 Doane Street.

One wonders who started the life of crime first, Christian Meadows or William W. Wilson? Meadows was jailed in 1850 while Wilson was also jailed in 1853 – the year Meadows was released. Did Wilson become lured into the easy money of counterfeiting after enduring his loss of plates to Meadows?

Not so fast! Let’s look at one of Wilson’s test notes.

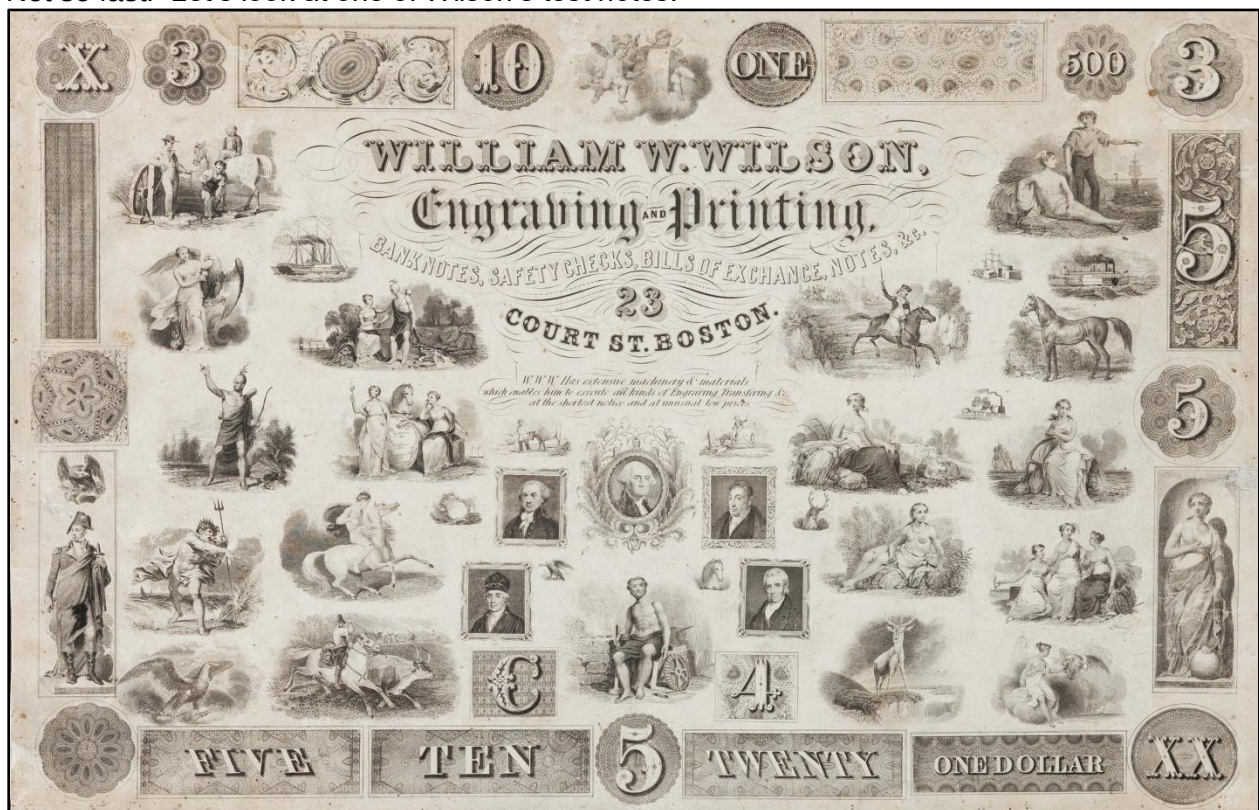


Figure 2. “North American Printers Promotional Sheets & Test Notes” catalog # WW-101a

Heritage Auctions, who sold the Court Street version noted, “The vignettes copy those created by engravers from the same period, including *Putnam’s Escape*, and several vignettes that are observed on spurious notes.” The Putnam’s Escape vignette Heritage is referring to is the mounted soldier to the right of Boston address. So! Wilson was “borrowing” vignettes from other engravers AND some of the vignettes were used on spurious notes. I love this period of banknote history as Russel Easterbrook seems to as well. So many printers producing wonderful notes with great vignettes for any bank that wanted to issue their own notes. For the spurious notes, why chance counterfeiting an existing note when you can make up your own bank!

It seems clear there was a den of thieves at the firm of William W. Wilson. No small wonder Christian Meadows succumbed to temptation for easy money.