

# COIN WORLD®

WORLD'S #1 RESOURCE FOR COIN & PAPER MONEY COLLECTORS & INVESTORS | COINWORLD.COM | MARCH 23, 2026 | \$2.50

## Questioning authenticity

Researcher offers reasons for doubting two badges available in the market

by **Dr. Harry Hutchins**, Special to Coin World

For more than 30 years, I have been collecting and re-searching Charleston, South Carolina, slave hire badges.

In 2004, I wrote, along with co-author Harlan Greene, a book entitled *Charleston Slave Hire Badges, 1783-1865*. A decade later, in *The North South Trader's Civil War Magazine*, we presented an article on additional research information ti-

ttled "Slave Hire Badges — The 2014 Update."

In 2020, the Smithsonian Institution's African-American Museum purchased my collection of 146 Charleston slave hire badges, currently the largest collection of Charleston slave hire badges in the world. It can be viewed virtually at [www.searchablemuseum.com/the-charleston-slave-badges](http://www.searchablemuseum.com/the-charleston-slave-badges), the museum's website.



This genuine freeman's badge associated with the 19th century slave trade in Charleston, South Carolina, is now in the collection of the American Numismatic Society. Notice the engraved "No 33" on the obverse.

Images courtesy of the American Numismatic Society.

Slaves living in the city of Charleston with their owners were often hired out to create revenue for the owner.

These slaves were required in Charleston to wear a metal badge bought by the owner. Slaves openly wearing these badges could travel within the city limits freely and without fear of being questioned or detained by the authorities.

A slave who was freed from bondage received paperwork proving this, which would allow free movement around the city.

However during the years 1783 to 1789, free people of color were also required to buy and display a badge,

*Questionable on page 7*

### IN THE NEWS

- **CCAC** reviews designs for 2027 Sport coins **p. 6**
- **COIN**-grading machine at ANA show **p. 16**
- **WINNER'S** medal from first Olympics sells **p. 18**
- **NEXT** 1776-2026 25¢ bags and rolls in March **p. 17**

### PLUS:

**COIN VALUES SPOTLIGHT**  
1917 QUARTER DOLLARS OF TWO TYPES AFFORDABLE **p. 10**

Questionable from page 1 the freeman's badge.

Charleston slave hire badges and Charleston freeman's badges were unique to only Charleston and Charleston Neck, South Carolina.

While many other southern cities had similar ordinances for both, only Charleston had these metal artifacts. All other slave-owning cities managed their controls by paper transactions or sometimes just a handshake.

The slave hire badge in Charleston was required to be renewed each year and a fee paid by the slave's owner, based on the slave's occupation.

The Charleston freeman's badge was purchased only once by the free person of color, and it did not have to be renewed annually.

When the city of Charleston was incorporated in August of

1783, badges were required for both the slaves that were hired out and the free people of color. The badge ordinances for both badges ended in Charleston in 1789.

No slave hire badges or freeman's badges were issued again until 1800. In 1800, the ordinance for slave hire badges was renewed, but the Charleston freeman's badges were not. The Charleston freeman's badge was only in use from 1783 to 1789.

According to the census of 1790, Free Persons of Color residing within the city boundaries of Charleston numbered 580.

The highest number on a freeman's badge found to date is number 341. That means at least 341 were issued. Assuming 100% compliance, as many as 580 freeman's badges could have been made.

The last issued slave hire badge was before Feb. 17, 1865. Northern forces, the Union army, occupied Charleston the next day.

This officially ended the Civil War in Charleston.

Fewer than 100 slave hire badges were issued between Jan. 1, 1865, and Feb. 17 of that year.

In most years between 1800 and 1862, about 20% of the slave population of Charleston possessed a badge.

Over the years, 11 free-

man's badges have been found. Two Charleston freeman's badges have surfaced that are unique in some ways that leave reason to pause. One first came to light around 2003 to 2004 and the other more recently, in 2024, in an auction.

Neither appeared to have been excavated nor showed signs of ground action, such as patina or pitting. All others that were found do show these signs.

In addition, it was troubling that block letters were engraved in the spot where a number was either engraved or stamped on all other documented and authenticated Charleston freeman's badges.

The latest of these, in the 2024 auction, was engraved with the letter "X" in the location where always before there was a number. The example introduced in 2003 to 2004 had an engraved "U" in place of a number.

The original owner of the "U" badge purchased the piece on eBay.

Thinking this might be a variation, the buyer then authored a website that included pictures and write-ups of the documented authentic Charleston freeman's badges that existed at that time.

At that time in 2003, only three authentic examples were documented. The owner believed his "U" badge made four.

In our book *Charleston Slave Hire Badges, 1783-1865* published in 2004, we documented the only silver Charleston freeman's badge, number 307, that this person



Close-up images of the hole in the genuine Charleston freeman's badge No 33 from the obverse and reverse side. Images courtesy of the American Numismatic Society.



This freeman's badge is of dubious manufacture. A Roman numeral X appears in the right field on the obverse. Genuine slave badges were marked numerically with Arabic numerals and not engraved or punched with lettering. Also examine the appearance of the holed areas as well as the coloration in comparison to the genuine badge from the ANS collection. Images by Dr. Harry Hutchins.

added to his website.

Since then, additional finds have been included, all of which are numbered.

Prior to auction of the "X" badge, photos of the badge were sent to my co-author, Harlan Greene, and me in November 2023 to ask our opinion on its authenticity.

The auctioneer was aware of the "U" badge and in correspondence stated about these (the U and X badges) that: "either both badges were genuine or both badges fake."

After we reviewed and examined the "X" badge, both Greene and I were of the opinion that the "X" badge was a copy, not an authentic period correct badge.

Let me present some reasons that I am of the opinion these badges are not genuine:

- No documentation is

Questionable on page 8



Alonzo James White, an American businessman and slave trader from Charleston, South Carolina, is shown conducting one of his many public auctions of his fellow humans. White was recognized as a “notorious” and prolific auctioneer who oversaw the sale of thousands, if not tens of thousands, of people in his 30-year career in the American slave trade. Image in public domain.



Charleston, South Carolina was the epicenter of the slave trade in the United States during the 19th century, and this is a former site of such activity, now a museum. Image by Old Slave Mart Museum.

*Questionable from page 7*

found in either the historical Charleston City Ordinances or in any archived or known newspapers that any other Charleston badge, license, or metal identification piece was ever designated with an alphabetical letter. All of the badges were numbered, including slave badges and freeman’s badges, cart and dray badges, chimney sweep badges, and even dog badges.

Again, all but these two letter badges, are stamped or engraved with a number.

➤ The fact that neither the “U” badge or the “X” badge has any ground action or patina on the surface, front or

back, is another factor that is very concerning.

When artifacts similar to these two have been lost and buried in the ground, changes to the surface occur.

The ground elements, over time, cause pitting and deterioration of surface metal; the patina is determined by the elements, which change the copper-bronze shiny orange color to a green or brown shade.

➤ The hand engraved letters No (meaning “Number”) with the football-shaped circle and two commas be-

low, which appear on both the “X” and “U” badges, appear almost identical, but when superimposed show very slight variations.

Even the auctioneer stated in correspondence “the engraving was probably done by the same hand.”

➤ Examination of the holes in the “X” and the “U” badges is very important.

On the “U” badge, the hole appears to be drilled. This would not be something done routinely in the 1783 to 1789 time period when freeman’s badges were produced. The common practice then to produce a hole was with a round punch or a square nail.

On all Charleston slave hire badges that have a hole at the top, the hole was made with a round punch or a square nail.

These punched holes typically have a slight indentation on the front and metal flashing to some degree on the back of the piece where the punch exited.

The badge owner often filed down this flashing on the back, to be less of an irritant when wearing. You can observe this above on the enlarged authentic number 33 badge. The filing is smooth and is a different color from the back of the badge.

The hole of the “X” badge is much larger than any other authentic Charleston freeman’s badges.

Also, very little evidence of indentation appears on the front, while a large amount of flashing is seen on the back and appears to have been tamped or hammered down, forming a large distinct ring. This feature is not observed on any other authenticated example.

This hole could have been made with a round nail; however round nails were not available until 1895. Before

*Questionable on page 24*

*Questionable from page 8*

that time, nails were hand-made and were either square or triangular.

The auctioneer, as it turned out, did not follow our advice. He sought a second opinion that was more to his liking.

When this “X” badge sold for an extremely high price, I was motivated to do more extensive research.

I traveled down many rabbit holes to find additional proof of what my gut and mind were telling me. Then the answer came that gave me 98% to 99% proof and was right in front of me. It won’t be 100% until an independent examiner does scientific examination of another future letter-engraved Charleston freeman’s badge when it surfaces.

Here is what I found. The owner of the “X” badge was J. Doyle DeWitt, one of the most knowledgeable and influential collectors of the 20th century, an active early American Political Items Collectors member.

DeWitt began working for Travelers Insurance Company in 1925, and in 1952 became president of all Travelers Insurance companies, and chairman of the board in 1964. DeWitt collected political items and that collection grew to over 60,000 items. Part of his collection was displayed at the University of Hartford in Connecticut.

After his death in 1972, the rest of his collection was given to the university; in 1989 it was displayed in a new Museum of American Political Life.

In 2004, the museum was closed, and DeWitt’s collection went into storage. Included in these storage boxes was the “X” badge, as not all of the items were strictly presidential artifacts.

In addition, the “X” badge was never displayed publicly



**A street-level view of the Old Slave Mart Museum complex gives an idea of the size of the operation.**

**Image by National Park Service.**

during his lifetime or after his death.

DeWitt also bought coins and other items. He became well known among coin dealers who would call him when they had items he might be interested in buying. He also belonged to the American Numismatic Society, and while attending his annual meetings, held in their New York City building, might have seen the authentic number 33 Charleston freeman’s badge on display.

This was one of only three ever found during his lifetime.

The other two genuine badges were the Garrett example, number 341, and the Charleston Museum badge, number 156.

DeWitt had five authentic Charleston slave hire badges in his collection that also were never displayed while he lived or after his death.

DeWitt might have put the Charleston freeman’s “X” badge in his collection to go with the authentic Charleston slave badges.

Maybe it was added be-

cause it was a Charleston badge and was unlike the other badges, or because of the shape stamped on it which looked like an umbrella, the symbol of his company, Travelers Insurance.

DeWitt was very knowledgeable about everything in his collection. His expertise was on display for the many variations in his accumulated collection of George Washington presidential buttons that he found and brought to light during his lifetime.

One would presume the “X” badge with its variations would have been noted if authentic and would have been presented by him to the American Numismatic Society as genuine.

A fellow collector, who knew DeWitt, shared that DeWitt researched items thoroughly for his collection and made few mistakes. So I believe that DeWitt knew this “X” badge was a reproduction.

In 1973, shortly after his death, The Hobby Protection Act made it illegal to own a copy of a valuable artifact that

didn’t have COPY stamped incuse on it.

Unfortunately, since such a stamp was not required during his lifetime, copies in his collection did not have to be marked as such. It certainly would have made it easier for all collectors of artifacts later to determine authenticity of such items.

Because of the information about where the badge came from and the belief that DeWitt may have known it was a reproduction, coupled with the physical evidence from the badge itself, I have strong doubts about its authenticity.

My objective in writing this article is the hope that it will not only help collectors of all artifacts to be vigilant in determining and documenting the authenticity of artifacts they find, but also inspire them to do the same with the artifacts that they come across to buy or collect.

Proper authentication of true artifacts and also proper notation of reproductions is of prime importance if we are to preserve history accurately. 