

Plain Talk about *The Numismatist*

Introduced in 1888, *The Numismatist* originally reflected the views and needs of its creator and first editor, George F. Heath

by Q. David Bowers



The first issue of Heath's new publication was called *The American Numismatist*, a title that was shortened to *The Numismatist* for subsequent issues.

Making its debut on the coin collecting scene in the autumn of 1888 was *The American Numismatist*, a modest, four-page leaflet dated September-October, the brainchild of Dr. George F. Heath of Monroe, Michigan. The good doctor had his eye on the future, for the masthead proclaimed that the initial issue was Volume 1, Number 1, with more issues planned. Apparently, the "American" part of the title was not deemed necessary, for on the next issue, November-December, it was dropped.

In his spare time, Dr. Heath dabbled in selling coins by mail. More than anything else, *The American Numismatist* was a house organ, a price list. For just 60 cents, readers could order "Packet No. 13," which contained "10 var. of silver coins size of half dime," or for \$1.25, Packet No. 14, with "10 var. of same dime size."

"Interesting items, original and selected, will occupy over half its columns," Dr. Heath said of his publication, further noting that "bargains in coins will be continually offered the collector, in fact, it is the publisher's determination that *The Numismatist* [sic] shall prove a welcome visitor to his coin patrons, and any others who prepay the postage, he proposes that they shall get the full value of their money.

"Of one thing all may rest assured,

this paper has come to see its year out and though small and unpretentious, will, like the Irishman's flea, 'get there just the same,' and when least expected. And so without further ado we launch our frail bark on the journalistic seas, and with clear skies and a flowing sail go out on our mission."

Little did Heath realize that this germ of an idea would be published for the next century and would go on to become the most important non-profit coin journal ever created. The first issue of *The American Numismatist* pointed out the virtues of collecting to the youth of his time, a sentiment that was no less relevant 100 years ago than it is today:

A sign of the time most favorable is the spirit of our youth in these matters; weak and feeble as the efforts may be, fruit will be borne in the future. It is a hopeful sign when the youth of any land turn their attention to the making of collections; whether it be of coins, minerals, Indian relics, paper money, birds' eggs, autographs, postage stamps, fossils or curios, it matters not. From any of these lines much may be learned, and the taste cultivated will invariably lead to something higher and better.

"There are about 20,000 coin collectors in this country," Dr. Heath went on to say, "and the making of coin collections has never been so popular, the world over, as today. Coins could never be bought so cheap

as they can today. The wonderful impetus given to their collecting during the past few years, and the competition among dealers has done the work.”

Interestingly, among the dozens of different coins Heath offered for sale, none was given a grade. A coin’s beauty and desirability was apparently in the eye of the beholder, who was protected by a strong guarantee: “The coin packets as per list on this page contain no duplicates. The coins are in above average condition, and so confident am I that they will give satisfaction, that I agree to refund the money in any unsatisfactory sales on the return of the coins,”

His holdings must have been fairly generous, for he advertised that he had “over 3,500 varieties always in stock.” Heath’s motto, “Cheaper than the Cheapest,” seems a bit out of character with the rest of his statements and philosophies, but, on the other hand, he wanted to promote his business, and one way to do it was to give the appearance of offering bargains.

The second issue of his publication featured a lead editorial on the subject of Chinese cash coins. Even more than the inaugural issue, the second emphasized coins for sale, with stress placed on world and ancient pieces, although in the American series a group of 25 varieties of “War Period tokens” could be ordered for 50 cents.

New services were announced, including the free answering of numismatic questions and the identification of unknown coins, “providing a careful description, a rubbing, or the coin itself is sent.” Further, “to any who may desire, exchange advertisements of 25 words or less will be inserted free of charge to such as are entitled to receive this paper,” There was no indication of a subscription or

other charge for *The Numismatist*, and it is presumed that the periodical was sent free to those who responded with an occasional order.

The Numismatist continued publication, with the third issue bearing a January-February 1889 date. Again, emphasis was on advertising packets and individual coins for sale. “*The Numismatist* is here to stay,” it stated. Ideas were forming concerning a subscription arrangement. Until April 1, 1889, a year’s worth of issues, plus “a good foreign coin” would be sent on receipt of 11 cents in unused stamps. At the same time, the editor gave his own numismatic preferences:

We have frequent calls for the U.S. series of dates. We have our own good reason for not collecting a series of dates. We believe in collecting only distinct varieties. The field is large enough and replete with a vast variety of beautiful and interesting designs, and we see no necessity of a collector spending his time and money over an interminable series of dates.

Stop the foolishness. If you want varieties, we have them; don’t ask us for dates, for we are not in the fruit business.

The fourth issue of *The Numismatist* skipped a few months and bore a date of July-August 1889. The four-page format remained; however, three of the pages were devoted to editorial comments, with just one page of coins for sale—a near reversal of earlier priorities. The subscription rate was stated as 10 cents per year to cover postage, but to active customers *The Numismatist* was sent free.

Apparently, even if you did not subscribe or order anything, you could still obtain Heath’s little publication. “Is it not worth 10 cents a year to you?” he beseeched. “If not, kindly inform us and we will try to make arrangements to give it to you.”



Dr. George F. Heath, creator and first editor of *The Numismatist*, was born in Warsaw, New York, on September 20, 1850. After graduating with a degree in medicine from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in 1881, he entered general practice in Monroe in 1884. When not engaged in “relieving afflicted humanity, amputations, and other kindred amusements,” he devoted his time to the more serious business of his collections and *The Numismatist*.

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A token dated 1902 advertises the American Numismatic Association as well as The Numismatis (donated by Harry J. Foreman).

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To pique his readers’ interest, Dr. Heath offered a coin quiz, stating that anyone correctly answering two-thirds of the questions (there were 10 in all) would receive a free subscription, and the person furnishing the best answers to all of them, if he was a subscriber, “may select coins from our lists or approval lots to the amount of one dollar.” Heath also added “The Numismatist’s Philatelic Supplement” to the periodical and provided two pages of stamp lore, for a total of six pages of information.

The sixth issue of *The Numismatist*, dated November-December 1889, concluded Volume 1. An essay titled “Numismatics” occupied most of the front page and half of the second, noting in part that “The science of coins and medals is as old as antiquity itself. There is probably no other branch of collecting so ancient and honorable, or that has received the attention of students of all ages, as that of coin collecting.”

However, interest in *The Numismatist* was not what Dr. Heath had expected, and the sixth issue marked the termination of a noble experiment:

THE END. It is the universal testimony of all that have attempted numismatic periodical literature in this country that the coin collector will not support a journal in their interest, be it good, bad or indifferent. That this is true, we know; but why it is so is beyond our ken. And so *The Numismatist*, having filled out the measure of its days, draws the draperies of its couch about it and lays down to pleasant dreams. FAREWELL!

Heath bore no ill will for the lack of support and concluded his message on a cheery note: “A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you all. May you live long and prosper.”

But the post-mortem was prema-

ture, and after a lapse of two months, lo and behold, *The Numismatist*, Volume 2, Number 1, appeared, dated March 1890. Obviously, Heath’s generous nature, his desire to promote coin collecting, and the wish to include his offerings in a publication with a more elegant title than the “Monthly Bargain Circular” combined to rescue *The Numismatist* from its seeming demise. In this issue his prices were even cheaper than the cheapest, for his coins were priced “at rock bottom.”

Things were looking up for the fledgling periodical, and it was bravely announced that “this little paper, while only advertised as a bi-monthly, will in all probability issue 12 numbers in 1890. It is published solely in the interest of the publisher and its coin patrons and to these latter it will be sent free.”

To make up for lost time, with the target of 12 issues for 1890 in mind, the next month, April, saw two issues, one dated simply April 1890 and the other April 15, 1890. Then came the May 1890 issue. The June issue, Volume 2, Number 5, featured on the front page the beginning of an essay titled “American Colonial Coins of the United States.” The essay was continued and expanded in the July, August and September issues, after which it was resumed in November, a month in which two issues appeared. The topic was concluded in the December 1890 issue, which marked the twelfth number in the second volume, thus attaining the hoped-for publishing goal.

Dr. Heath continued to refer to his coin offerings as bargains and his prices as rock bottom, but as if the rock-bottom prices were not low enough, the July 1890 issue offered a half-price sale! Emphasis seemed to be on price and price alone, with scarcely a mention of quality.

From the August 1890 issue, readers could order for \$ 50 “a magnificent German collection” consisting of 500 coins, “many over 100 years old,” or for \$ 100 a collection of 750 varieties “from over 100 cities and states.” Ten different varieties of Chinese coins, “some over 500 years old,” classified, were available for 30 cents, while 50 varieties of English penny and halfpenny tokens, circa 1789-1813, could be bought for \$ 6, and a group of 100 Civil War tokens was available for \$2.50.

In the same issue, the editor could not resist a touch of whimsy:

There is occasionally a letter sent to the mayor of our city by some doubting Thomases, inquiring as to our reliability. Now we don’t object to this, but we fear our friends will not be doing themselves justice in this way, for they are apt to get a prejudiced reply; for, fortunately or unfortunately, we happen to be the mayor of the City of Monroe.

Ambitious plans were announced for 1891, with the frequency of publication accelerated to semimonthly, or 24 issues. The subscription rate was quintupled to 50 cents a year, but this was offset by the gift of a coin “at the least worth from 30 to 50 cents.” Promised features included the following: “Even- number will be illustrated. Every number will contain interesting articles and notes on coins. Every number will contain the names and addresses of from 10 to 15 or more live coin collectors, with their specialties, if any.”

“Numismatists are universally honest,” Dr. George Heath stated, “so we don’t ask for your money until we fulfill our promises; simply give us your honest intention, as we give you ours. We may both fail, still we take the greater risk.”

Thoughts of closing down the periodical were left behind, and the

publisher noted, “*The Numismatist* without any promises or flourish of trumpets has kept on in the even tenor of its way and completed its second year. It promises to go right along on the same old track, a feeble representative of that most fascinating branch of collecting; the most valuable in history; the Science of Numismatics. With us, it has ever been, a rest and recreation from business and professional cares; a labor of love . . . We have kept the faith. We have finished the year.”

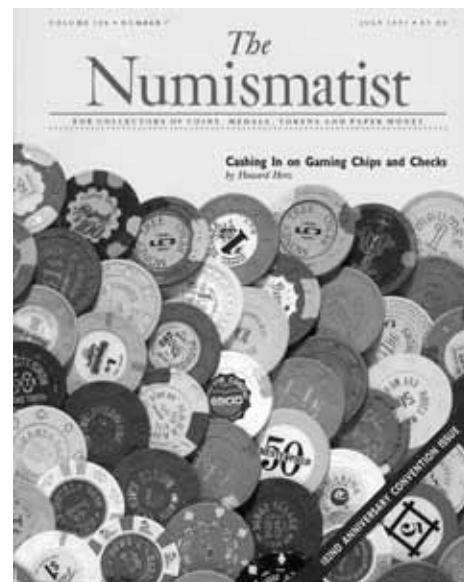
The first issue of the new year was dated January 1, 1891, and bore the greeting “A Happy New Year to all our readers. May the new year be neither ‘poor’ nor ‘fair,’ but from ‘Good’ to ‘Proof to you all.’”

Apparently, subscriptions were coming in at a satisfactory rate, for Heath noted, “The publisher is trying to do something to popularize the science of numismatics. His sincere desire is to make the journal more and more worthy of your support. He is, so far, pleased with reception met with, and grateful for kind words and favors shown. The futures of this journal; Subscriber! Advertiser! Contributor! depend mainly upon *you*.”

The coin collecting hobby was expanding, and the editor went on to say, “The numismatic revival that we have been working for is coming.” He noted the advent of several other numismatic publications with approval.

In February 1891, Heath made a proposal that would have far-reaching implications: “What’s the matter of having an *American Numismatist Association*? Would it be possible? Would it be practicable? All in favor of such a scheme, send in your names.” The seed was planted, and the germination was reported in a double-sized March issue carrying an

“The post-mortem was premature, and after a lapse of two months, lo and behold, *The Numismatist*, Volume 2 Number 1, appeared.”



“Cashing in on gaming chips and checks” by Howard Herz was featured in the July 1891 issue of *The Numismatist*.

article titled “A Plea for an American Numismatic Association.”

Thus, George F. Heath became the founder of the American Numismatic Association. The ANA was intended to be noncontroversial and to be “primarily in the interest of the great class of less advanced and beginning collectors.” At the time, most advanced numismatists belonged to the American Numismatic and Archaeological Society, publisher of the *American Journal of Numismatics*, which contained many learned dissertations on esoteric numismatic subjects.

Heath further elaborated:

Our expenses should be light; put the annual dues low. One dollar should be sufficient at present, and arrangements can probably be made whereby each member will receive this value in numismatic literature thrown in as a partial inducement . . . You can depend upon *Plain Talk* [a publication for which Charles T. Tatman furnished coin news] and *The Numismatist* to keep you posted until then.

Unselfish perhaps to a fault. Heath stated that he had nominated Tatman as secretary “to obtain an efficient officer and the hopes of having *Plain Talk* for an official organ.” He did not advance *The Numismatist* as a candidate. *Plain Talk* became the official ANA organ, but as Tatman was lax in his duties and publication lapsed, the “official organ” mantle fell upon *The Numismatist*, although in the November 1891 issue it was intimated that *Plain Talk* still was in the running for this honor.

It may come as a surprise to present readers that for a brief time in the late 1890s, *The Numismatist* removed itself from the ANA and decided that it was no longer its official journal, for Heath, a man of action, could not tolerate what he considered to be las-

situde on the part of ANA officials, who would not even answer his correspondence! However, this separation soon ended.

On June 16, 1908, Dr. Heath suddenly died. Farran Zerbe, then president of the ANA, assumed the task of editing and publishing *The Numismatist* and soon purchased the publication from Heath’s heirs. In 1911, through the generosity of W.C.C. Wilson of Montreal, Canada, *The Numismatist* was purchased from Zerbe and presented to the ANA. Ever since that long-ago time, *The Numismatist* has been a vital part of the American Numismatic Association.

Editors of The Numismatist

George F. Heath	1888-1908
Farran Zerbe	1909-1910
Albert Frey	1911-1912
Edgar H. Adams	1912-1915
Frank G. Duffield	1915-1942
Lee F. Hewitt	1942-1943
Burton H. Saxton	1943-1944
Stuart Mosher	1945-1954
Elton G. Bradfield	1954-1966
Glenn B. Smedley	1966-1967
Edward C. Rochette	1967-1972
Thomas Marshall	1972-1973
Edward C. Rochette	1973-1974
N. Neil Harris	1974-1988
Barbara J. Gregory	1988-

Former ANA President Q. David Bowers has -written well over two dozen books, many of which have become classic references in the field of numismatics. A rare coin dealer since 1953, he co-owns Bowers and Merena Galleries, Inc., located in Wolfboro, New Hampshire. This article is excerpted from an early draft of THE AMERICAN NUMISMATIC ASSOCIATION CENTENNIAL HISTORY, a comprehensive volume compiled by Bowers for the ANA’s 100th anniversary in 1991.



For a time, *Plain Talk* was in the running to become the official organ of the American Numismatic Association.

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