

Tokens Of The Ferracute Machine Company

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This article contains revised excerpts and elements of my original full length feature entitled **Oberlin Smith: The Man, His Machines and the Mint**. It initially appeared in the June 2010 issue of *The Numismatist*, the official publication of the American Numismatic Association (www.money.org).

Bridgeton, a small city on the Eastern Coast of The United States is located in the Southern portion of the state of New Jersey. Like many cities in the U.S., over the years Bridgeton made the transition from an agricultural to a more manufacturing based economy. At its peak, the primary industries were glass manufacture due to abundant silica sand deposits in the region and canning to support its still sizeable farming community. As engineering capabilities increased, it also became home to one of North America's most productive yet least known corporations. Today, on a little travelled side street sits the dilapidated shell of The Ferracute Machine Company.





The main reason that Ferracute, remains a somewhat obscure footnote in history is that it didn't make "things"- it made the machines that allowed other companies to make and sell their "things". As such, the average early 20th century American consumer was most likely unaware of the impact Ferracute had on their daily lives, in their homes and even in their pockets. Ferracute's venerable founder, Mr. Oberlin Smith (1840-1926) was a talented innovator and his ingenuity helped catapult America into the industrial age while also revolutionizing the modern coining process. Outside of numismatic and specialized academic circles, Smith has limited name recognition however, his

technical prowess earned him a customer list that included iconic names such as Ford, Eastman Kodak, Baldwin Locomotive and The United States Mint.



Oberlin Smith (1840 – 1926)

In 1863 Smith set up shop in Bridgeton and it was during this time that he would often look over a customer's piece of machinery that was brought in for repairs and utter what became his signature phrase of "I can make a better one!". By 1873, Oberlin's brother Frederick joined the firm and they decided to concentrate on the press and die business- it was this decision that would eventually become their niche and gain them customers the world over. In January 1877 they incorporated and the name of the firm was formally changed to The Ferracute Machine Co., with Oberlin serving as President and Mechanical Engineer.

Initially they designed equipment for use in the canning industry however, they branched out into making presses for various industries expanding to the point that if an item was mass produced and made of metal, there was a good chance it was manufactured on a Ferracute model press. As was typical of businesses at the time, Ferracute displayed their various presses at Expositions and World Fairs including the Pennsylvania State Fair in 1879, the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 and the Paris Exposition in 1900. As a part of their exhibits, they would coin the tokens pictured here and

pass them out to attendees. The tokens had no stated monetary face value and primarily served as promotional pieces for their presses.

1900 Paris Exposition 19mm Rulau # Brg4



Reverse



Obverse

1879 Pennsylvania State Fair. 19mm Rulau # Brg2



Obverse



Reverse

Undated. It is believed that the “puppy tokens” were produced at the 1893
Columbian Exposition 38mm Rulau # Brg6



Reverse

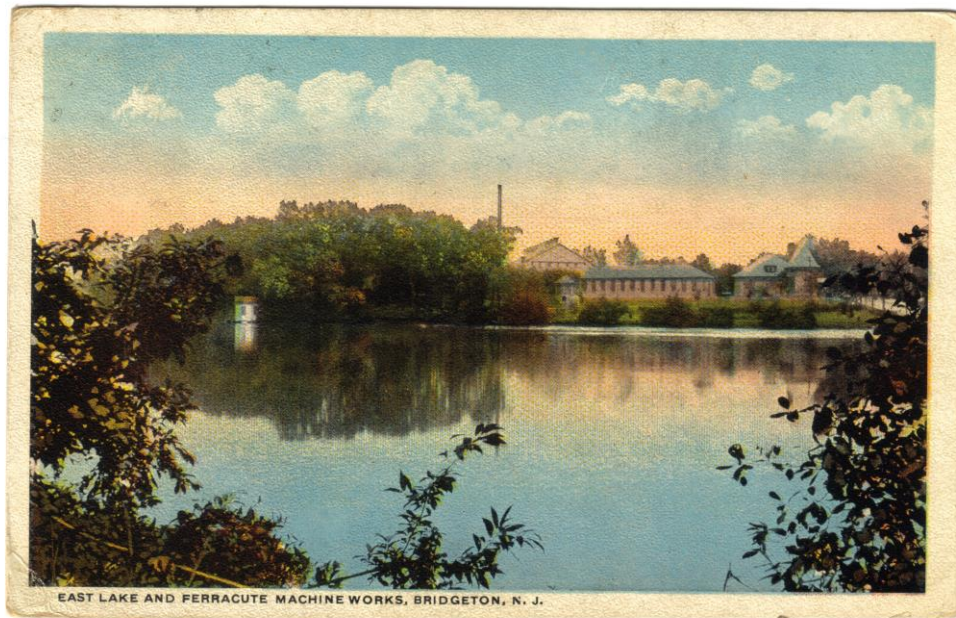


Obverse

In August of 1892, Ferracute shipped their first order, a 38 ton punch press to the U.S. Mint in Philadelphia thus beginning a longstanding relationship that would remain until the 1960's. Smith was a devout student of the minting process and continued to improve upon his initial designs subsequently patenting various enhancements to his presses in 1896, 1905 and again in 1909. Ironically, Smith himself was not a coin collector but for a mechanical mind such as his, it's somewhat easy to understand that he would have been more interested in the process than the product.

It was due to the initial success in Philadelphia and the continuous improvement of their presses that orders started to come in from other countries making coining equipment a sustainable product line for the company and they now aimed to provide all of the equipment needed to successfully operate an entire mint facility. What has become known as Ferracute's crowning achievement came in 1897 when the Imperial Chinese Government ordered the design and installation of three mints. This order helped elevate Ferracute's status as a premiere mint equipment manufacturer and also provided a young Ferracute engineer named Henry Janvier with the adventure

of a lifetime ! -As the trip to China tale has been told many times, I will omit it here but invite any interested reader to contact me for a copy of my original article which contains the entertaining story. Upon completion of the Chinese project, Ferracute received both local and national acclaim and were rewarded with additional orders to construct mints in Potosi (Bolivia), Lima (Peru) and Honan (China). The Ferracute Machine Co., continued in business for several more decades and eventually closed its doors in 1968 with its line of presses being sold to Fulton Iron Works of St. Louis. Despite its demise and the sad state of its former facility, the fond memory of Ferracute and its contributions to the modern minting process are now preserved through the various tokens like those displayed here.



For a copy of the complete feature as it originally appeared in print or if you have questions about the tokens featured here, please contact me directly at Rubneck@aol.com.