

# THE BECHTLER COINS AND THE RUTHERFORD COUNTY, NC GOLD RUSH

Contributed by James L. Reid and Betty Jean Dill

## THE BECHTLER COIN WAS USED HERE

Source: The Spartanburg Daily Herald, Wed., Jan. 24, 1906, p. 5, col. 5

### FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS PAID FOR FIVE DOLLAR COIN

#### MADE BY MAN WHO ONCE LIVED HERE

The following is taken from a syndicated article going the round of the newspapers:

A private rarity among the gold coins issued by private concerns is a Bechtler five-dollar gold piece. This was made by C. Bechtler at his private mint at Rutherford, N.C., some time in the early 30's. The gold was taken from local mines.

He issued about twenty-five varieties of gold coins of the denominations of \$1, \$2.50, and \$5. The majority of these are fairly plentiful and bore no dates with the exception of two five-dollar gold pieces, which were dated 1834. They were all of high carat gold, with the degree of fineness stamped upon the face, ranging from 20 to 22 carats. The rare five-dollar piece is valued at over \$500.

Some fifty years ago, Mr. Bechtler lived here; though he coined his gold before he came to Spartanburg in the 30's and 40's. There was quite an amount of gold mined in Rutherfordton, N.C., especially at the Brackett mines. This gold was streams in minute particles like grains of sand though occasionally a good size nugget was found. There were no express companies then, and the miners had some difficulty in handling and shipping their gold. It was usually carried about in goose quills or glass vials. It was to meet this difficulty that Mr. Bechtler got permission to make his coins. His gold pieces usually passed at five per cent discount, although they were almost pure gold, with scarcely any alloy. His gold dollars were quite common in Spartanburg. A gentleman stated yesterday that he had seen many of them, but did not recall having seen any of his five dollar pieces, now valued at five hundred dollars.

Mr. Bechtler after he moved to Spartanburg conducted a watch and jewelry repair shop; his shop was at the southeast corner of Kennedy Place and North Church Street, in the building which a few years ago was condemned and torn down by the city to widen Kennedy Place. He was a large, dark complexioned man, with beetling eyebrows and spoke with a decided German accent; he was very industrious and much respected. Sometime after the war, he left Spartanburg.

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#### From 1870 Spartanburg Village Census

Chris'r Bechtler	65	Watchmaker	Bavaria
Sophia	60	Keeping House	Delaware

(He would be Christopher Bechtler, Junior.)

#### Item From the Internet

Christopher Bechtler, Sr., born in 1782 in Pfortzheim, Grand Duchy of Baden (Germany) along with his son and nephew, came to New York in October, 1829. In April 1830, the Bechtlers bought a tract of land and settled in Rutherford County, North Carolina. Public notice of the new Bechtler enterprise as a jeweler and watchmaker was made in the North Carolina Spectator and Western Advertiser on July 30, 1830.

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## **Spartanburg: Facts, Reminiscences, Folklore**

Collected and Edited by Vernon Foster with Walter S. Montgomery, Sr.

Chapter 15, The Old Iron District,

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### **North Carolina Gold Rush**

One of the richest deposits of gold ever located in the continental United States was discovered in the South Mountain section of Rutherford and Burke counties of North Carolina in 1828, setting off the first great gold rush in the nation's history. The discovery was made, according to tradition, when a traveler with some knowledge of minerals stayed overnight at a country inn at Brindletown, in Burke County near the Rutherford County line. As he freshened up the next morning in a little creek at the rear of the inn, he noticed a small nugget of gold in the stream. By panning water in the creek, he soon determined that more gold – lots of it – could be found in the surrounding hillsides.

The production figures are dramatic. In the year before the epic discovery, \$17 in North Carolina gold was received at the Philadelphia mint. In 1829, after the “find,” \$46,000 in North Carolina gold was received at the mint. In another year the total increased to \$128,000, and by 1832 the total had surged to \$450,000. Word of the discovery spread rapidly, of course, and was followed by a stampede of prospectors and would-be prospectors.

The sudden influx of miners, accompanied by swarms of speculators, gamblers, swindlers, and camp followers, had a devastating effect on the quiet, easy-going lifestyle of the natives. Particularly disturbing, it was said, was the increased difficulty in transporting gold in faraway Philadelphia. “The stagecoach route to Philadelphia was infested with highway men,” a local historian has noted. “They could smell gold a mile away, and thought nothing of killing to get it. For this reason, most miners were reluctant to become involved in shipping and preferred to sell their gold locally, but finding an honest buyer was the problem. The miners had to buy supplies in order to live, but some traders took advantage of the illiterate miners. Many of the poor fellows worked hard for years with nothing to show for it.”

### **“Appalled” at Cheating**

Community leaders were so appalled at the cheating and short-changing of the miners that they petitioned the U.S. Mint to establish a branch in western North Carolina where gold dust could be turned into ingots – or, better still, into coins of proven value. This petition, however, was denied when first presented.

Against this backdrop, two German immigrants, Christopher Bechtler, Sr., and his son Augustus Bechtler, arrived in Rutherfordton in the spring of 1830. They were said to be skilled metal workers and were soon joined by other members of their family. On July 30, 1830, the *North Carolina Spectator*, a Rutherford County newspaper, carried an announcement that “Mr. Chr. Bechtler” had “established himself as a clock and watchmaker, Jewelre, &c.” in a shop across the street from “Mr. Twitty’s Tavern” in Rutherfordton. The tavern, it was noted by local gossips, was convenient for the beer-loving Augustus Bechtler.

Local community leader, however, had other ideas for the talents of the Bechtlers, They soon persuaded the senior member of the family to open a private mint (which was entirely legal at the time). Accordingly, another advertisement appeared in the *Spectator* on July 2, 1831: Notice to Gold Miners and Others: C. Bechtler informs all interested in the Gold mines and in assaying and bringing gold into ingots or pieces of a standard value that he is now prepared to

assay and stamp gold in any amount to a standard of 20 cents, making it into pieces of \$2.50 and \$5.00 at his establishment 3-1/2 miles north of Rutherfordton, on the road to Jeanstown.

#### **“Land Office” Business**

A land-office business developed immediately, as the hard-working, illiterate miners hurried to have their hard-earned gold dust converted into more easily handled coins. Bechtler’s coins were admittedly crude in design, but the dollar value, amount, and fineness of the gold was never questioned. They were so highly valued, in fact, that some merchants offered discounts if payment for merchandise was made with Bechtler’s coins. In 1832, in response to popular demand, the Bechtlers began producing one-dollar coins, the first ever minted in the United States. The U.S. Mint did not begin minting one-dollar pieces until 1849.

In 1838 a branch of the government’s mint finally opened in Charlotte. After that development, the demand and the need for Bechtler’s coins steadily decreased. After the death of the senior Bechtler, Augustus moved the shop into downtown Rutherfordton. Following his own death in 1846, Christopher, Jr., continued the minting of coins for several years. When word of the discovery of gold in California reached Rutherfordton, however, most of the local miners joined the great Gold Rush of 1849. A few stragglers continued to bring in small quantities of gold dust to be minted, but Christopher, Jr., soon discontinued that business.

Some evidence exists that he moved to Spartanburg about 1857 and operated a jewelry shop on Church Street. He sold some property in Rutherfordton as late as 1869, and then moved to Charlotte, where he died at some later date.

From the remarkably precise records kept by Christopher, Jr., some idea can be gained of the value of gold that was processed in his shop and mint. From 1831 through 1840, he said, more than \$2.2 million was minted into coins, and another \$1.7 million was cast into ingots or worked into jewelry. In terms of today’s [1998] dollars, that nearly \$4 million in gold would equal almost \$280 million.

Quite a few Bechtler coins are said to remain in Rutherford County, most of them held as keepsakes by individual families. A sizeable collection is held by the Smithsonian Institution and another by the North Carolina Museum of Natural History. Some of the coins are also owned by the Rutherford County Historical Society. The current value of a Bechtler coin, when one can be found, ranges from fifteen hundred to twenty thousand dollars, depending on its condition.