A **familiar** phenomenon of the 18th and 19th centuries in the Caribbean was the cutting of silver coin, notably the Spanish colonial eight and two *reales*, to provide small change. Many varieties of these segments are known, distinguishable among themselves by size and shape, and by the characteristic counterstamps or edge devices stamped or cut upon them by the various colonial authorities for their identification and valuation. The cut and counterstamped coinage of the West Indies has already been the subject of considerable investigation.¹

One frequently hears it said that similar cut coinage circulated in Canada. The primary evidence is the ‘Ordinance for regulating and establishing the Currency of the Province’, of September 14, 1764, which includes this paragraph:

And whereas a Practice has been introduced of cutting Dollars, and of passing the Fragments as small Change at an arbitrary Value; and the same being liable to great Fraud and Abuse, *It is hereby further Ordained and Declared, That from the Date of the Publication hereof, No Parts of Dollars, or any other Coin, so cut, or otherwise clipped, shall be admitted to pass current by Way of Change in any part of this Province, and that all Persons, uttering or passing any such, upon Conviction thereof by the Oath of One credible Witness, before One or more Justices of Peace, shall, for the First Offense, forfeit the Sum of Ten Shillings, current Money of the Province, and Twenty for the Second, besides One Month’s Imprisonment; the said Fines, so levied, to be applied to His Majesty’s Use.*²

The terms of this paragraph make it certain that cut coinage was being circulated, and very likely produced, in Quebec at the time; although the lack of any historical comment and of any suggestion of amortization show that the cut coins had never been official. The comparatively small fine suggests as well that while the use of cut coins was a nuisance, they probably had not become a substantial part of the currency.³ It is worth noting that our distinction between cutting and clipping is not maintained in the ordinance. To the official mind both practices might seem equally destructive of the currency, and it is true that cutting gave the unworthy (or even a government) the chance to save a bit by shaving the edges of the fragments.⁴

This ordinance is regularly referred to by the historians.⁵ But however plain it is, when we come to look for the coins the situation is desperate. To be sure, in 1813 the so-called Holey

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² Published officially in the *Quebec Gazette* of October 4, 1764, p. 1.

³ Compare the fine of £100 later imposed by the ordinance of March 29, 1777, ‘If any person whatsoever shall, after the publication of this ordinance, for lucre or gain, by any art, ways, or means, clip, wash, round, file, impair, diminish, or falsify, or cause to be clipped, washed, rounded, filed, impaired, diminished, or falsified, any coin passing current in this province’. This of course included Spanish colonial coin.

⁴ Thus the ordinance of 1777, quoted above, makes no mention of cutting. Cf. F. Pridmore in *Num. Circ.* 67 (1959) 118 on deliberately under-weight cut half dollars of Tortola; and in *Num. Circ.* 71 (1963) 26–7 and 72 (1964) 4–5 on fraudulent cuts.

Dollar was produced on Prince Edward Island: the central area was punched out of a group of Spanish colonial eight reales. But the simple division of coin by cutting has not been proved for Canada from the artifacts themselves. Nor could it ever be without the discovery of new documentary evidence, for the reason that the pieces would not have been counterstamped.

Privately cut halves and quarters of the eight reales without counterstamp have been attributed to Barbados in the 18th century, and the quarter is attested in Dominica in 1788. Since anyone can cut a coin no given cut piece can be proved Barbadian if it is without counterstamp; conversely, an uncounterstamped piece found elsewhere might have been Barbadian in origin. At the very least, however, the discovery of cut pieces in a given locus can be evidence of their circulation there, if not of their origin.

The difficulty lies in discovering them. That cut coins are offered for sale in Canada today is obviously of no significance. What we need is a certain find of proved antiquity. Such a find has occurred in Canada, but its importance has apparently gone unnoticed. The site is the ruined village of Fairfield in southwestern Ontario, about 70 miles ENE of Detroit and 50 miles SW of London. Fairfield was a settlement of Delaware Indians, refugees from the United States, and the Moravian missionaries who had converted them to Christianity. They had wandered for some 50 years, founding a series of settlements which successively had to be abandoned. Finally coming to Canada they were given land by the government, and they founded Fairfield in 1792. The town lay on the north bank of the Thames, at an easy landing, and on the highway to Detroit. It soon developed into a settled and prosperous agricultural community.

During the War of 1812 an American force under William Henry Harrison penetrated southwestern Ontario, to win a considerable victory at the Battle of the Thames, October 5, 1813. The British and Indians were thrown back, and the Shawnee chief, Tecumseh, was killed. Fairfield lay just to the east of the battlefield. It was reached by the Americans on the next day, thoroughly plundered of whatever its inhabitants had had to leave behind in their flight, and on October 7 deliberately burned to the ground.

The inhabitants had fled further east. When they returned after the war they founded New Fairfield, on the south side of the Thames, where their descendants live still today. The first town was never rebuilt (nothing would have remained but foundations), the original site lying undisturbed and eventually forgotten. In 1941 local interest in the history of the area, incited by the recognition of a few random traces of human habitation, led to the rediscovery of Fairfield and its excavation by Wilfrid Jury of the Museum of Indian Archaeology of the University of Western Ontario, London. The artifacts recovered in the excavation are today on display in the small museum on the site.

Among the rather fragmentary remains of the objects of everyday life were found a very few coins—only four random pieces have been noted in the publications. Doubtless the inhabitants took most of their money with them. One coin found, and hitherto unpublished, is the quarter part of a Spanish colonial eight reales. A bit of the imperial portrait and coat of arms can be seen; the remaining legends read, on the obverse, [LUS-IIT], and on the reverse, [HISPA]. The original coin then was a bust type eight reales of Charles III, issued between

3 The excavation reports of Wilfrid Jury, including a précis of the history of the town upon which I have drawn, were published as Museum Bulletin 3 (1945), 4 (1946), and 5 (1948).
4 Viz., a Russian 2 kopeks of 1757, an English halfpenny of 1775, an English penny of 1794, and a U.S. half cent of 1807.
1772 and 1789. The mint of the coin as originally struck was probably Mexico, the main Spanish colonial mint in North America. The cut quarter was chisel cut, and lacks any counter-stamp or elaborated edge which might identify its origin as fraction. The condition is what the dealers would call Very Fine, i.e. showing some even wear, with all details clear.

This cut piece was discovered 'in a cellar of one of the houses at a 6 foot depth.' Typically the cellars have been the chief source of discovery of small artifacts at Fairfield; all the published coins from Fairfield were cellar finds. The superstructure of the log houses would have been plundered, then burned, the remains collapsing into the foundations. These were picked over by the returning community and thereafter left to natural or agricultural erosion. At the time of the invasion the cellars normally contained various kinds of objects not worth stealing—implements, food, seeds—and unrecoverable or not worth recovering after the destruction of the town. These were buried under the débris of the superstructures, as the excavations have plainly shown.

There is then no question about the date of use of the cut piece. We have the happy combination of an archaeologically sealed site and a sure knowledge of the precise moment of its sealing. Even the classical archaeologists are not usually so fortunate—one thinks at once of Pompeii, but there are not a great many sealed sites that are as certain. The evidence could not be better.

The most likely explanation for the appearance of this piece in Canada is that it was cut there. We know that the coinage in use in the province in the early 19th century was an inadequate, international assortment. Note the Russian 2 kopek bronze also found at Fairfield. The silver coinage especially was in very poor condition, and was unexportable. It is of course not impossible that the cut quarter was cut in the Caribbean: the date would be right for it. But that could rather indicate how widespread was the practice at the time, and the rather good condition of the coin argues against its having travelled so far in the course of normal circulation. In any case what is particularly surprising, and gratifying, is the evidence that cut silver was circulating in Canada at this time, exactly fifty years after the ordinance that was supposed to outlaw this kind of money forever.

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1 The circumstances of the unpublished find were communicated to me per litteras by Wilfrid Jury, June 2, 1967.

2 James Stevenson, 'The Currency of Canada after the Capitulation', in Transactions of the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec new series 12 (1876-7) 122, 125-6. Part of the problem was the lack of a provincial bank.