

LONE STARS RISING

*a missing
numismatic link*



PHOTOS: ISTOCKPHOTO/BILL SWEENEY & ALVIN STERN/JIM BEVILL (COIN)



Well-documented 1817 ½-real coins of New Spain long eluded collectors, but new finds provide valuable information about their issuance.

NUMISMATISTS WHO STUDY the U.S. colonial coin series credit the small, copper ½-real pieces known as the *jolas* of New Spain (Texas) as the first appearance of the Lone Star symbol for Texas. These *jolas* were struck in 1817 and 1818.

The 1818 *jolas* are exceedingly rare in their own right, but the recent discovery of six examples of 1817 *jolas* bearing the Lone Star symbol sheds new light on this short-lived, but historically significant series. The first widely published images of the 1817 coins appeared in James Bevill's 2009 book, *Paper Republic: The Struggle for Money, Credit and Independence in the Republic of Texas*.

Minted in San Antonio de Béxar in 1817-18, *jolas* are the only Spanish coins known to have been struck in what now is the United States. The Republic of Texas existed as an independent nation for 10 years, and its boundaries included parts of present-day Oklahoma, Kansas, New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming. Texas ceased to be an independent nation in early 1846. Unlike the original 13 colonies, it had never been under British rule, having been settled under the flags of Spain and Mexico prior to winning independence during the violent Texas Revolution of 1835-36.

When *jolas* were struck for use in regional commerce, Texas was a northern province of *Nueva España* (New Spain). A war was raging in other parts of Mexico, in an attempt to overthrow almost 300 years of rule by the mother country. In September 1810, the central government in Mexico City became alarmed that rebels were hijacking and plundering shipments of raw silver being transported from the mining areas to minting facilities in Mexico City. To mitigate this risk, several branch (or emergency) mints were established in close proximity to the silver mines to strike coins for regional use.

The branch mints produced a steady stream of large 8-, 4- and 2-real pieces. The 2 reales (25 cents) was the denomination

most frequently found in circulation, and ½- and 1-real coins became almost nonexistent. The smaller ½-real pieces (6¼ cents) were needed for making change and were called *jolas*.

In the Texas interior, commerce and daily activity bustled around the Spanish missions of the early 1800s. The areas of San Antonio de Béxar, Goliad and Nacogdoches flourished and became the most successful of the Spanish settlements. By 1815, there emerged a chronic shortage of low-denomination coins, partly because fewer were made by the regional mints during the Mexican War of Independence.

It was during this period that an obscure, but very significant, event in the history of Spanish Texas occurred. Because of the shortage of small change, businesses and citizens of San Antonio de Béxar resorted to issuing paper scrip and IOUs. The public's refusal to accept these items in commerce soon became a city-wide problem.

In 1817 acting Spanish Governor Manuel Pardo received authorization from Mexico City to strike small copper coinage to facilitate commerce. He selected Manuel Barrera, a local merchant and administrator, to produce 8,000 *jolas*. There is evidence in the original Béxar archives that the Barrera coins were released into circulation in San Fernando de Béxar on or about March 29, 1817. To facilitate their acceptance in the community, the governor ordered the posting of the following notice, which translates:

Public Notice

Our neighbor Don Manuel Barrera having petitioned to this government the milling of five hundred pesos in total containing his name and surname; This government has accepted this individual's solicitation to mill five hundred pesos in total, with a value of half a real for each for use in purchases and sales and should circulate in the commerce of this city and no one should decline to accept them. I sign this in San Fernando de Béxar on the 29th day of the month of March in 1817 to advise the public.

◀ **THIS 1818 NEW SPAIN** copper ½-real coin features a Lone Star motif that came to represent the State of Texas.

Actual Size: 18mm

Although the existence of 1817 jolas was well documented, they remained somewhat of an enigma for generations, as no specimens were thought to have survived.



FIGURE 1

Actual Size: 15.7mm



FIGURE 2

Actual Size: 15.5mm

▲ A collector discovered these two 1817 New Spain (Texas) $\frac{1}{2}$ -real coins at San Juan Bautista, Mission San Bernardo. The obverses feature the denomination, $\frac{1}{2}$; a cluster of raised dots at either side of the date; the initial "R" above the date; and the monogram, A.D.; to the left of the date.



▲ The notice regarding the issuance of jolas likely originated inside the Spanish Governor's Palace in San Antonio.

This order is thought to have originated in the Presidio, known today as the Spanish Governor's Palace, in San Antonio. The jolas were made of copper, measured 15 to 20mm in diameter, and bore the initials of the "minter" and the value, crudely struck as $\frac{1}{2}$ [real], on the obverse. On the reverse was a five-pointed star with a raised "dot" at its center. Although the existence of 1817 jolas was well documented, they remained somewhat of an enigma for generations, as no specimens were thought to have survived. Several recent discoveries have shed light on how these coins may have come into being.

PHOTOS: BOB SHELTON

The Mission San Bernardo Coins

In the mid-1960s, a Texas collector found three small, copper coins dated 1817 with a metal detector at the site of Mission San Bernardo, adjacent to San Juan Bautista at the modern-day town of Guerrero, Mexico, near Eagle Pass. Spanish explorers used such early missions as staging areas for expeditions into Texas. This numismatic discovery is significant, as this "gateway to Texas" is located where *El Camino Real de los Tejas* (the Old San Antonio Road) crosses the Rio Grande River. This places the discovery coins squarely on the trade route from San Antonio de Béxar to the Mexican interior.

Struck from crudely cast dies, these coins range from 15.28mm to 15.7mm in diameter, and weigh from 1.444g to 2.066g, respectively. On the obverse of one such piece (Figure 1) is the denomination, $\frac{1}{2}$; the date, 1817; and a symbol to the left that appears to be a monogram A.D., for Anno Domini. Clusters of eight, raised dots flank the monogram and date, with the letters "R" and "A" (possibly for "Royal Authority") above. On the reverse is a multi-pointed motif that resembles a flower. Undoubtedly, this $\frac{1}{2}$ -real copper token is an 1817 jola.

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The obverse of another piece from Mission San Bernardo (Figure 2) bears the denomination, $\frac{1}{2}$; three numerals of the date, 817; and the monogram, A.D. Clusters of eight, raised dots are found at the left and right, with the initial "R." above, as on the previous specimen. The remainder of the obverse is illegible. There are no distinctive design elements on the reverse. The striking similarities to Figure 1 and their mutual discovery indicate they were struck under the same authority and circulated side by side. But were either of these coins part of the Barrera coinage?

The discovery of these 1817-dated copper coins suggests a series of small, almost random mintages intended to supply change for the local economy.

The La Bahía Specimen

In 2008 Jim Bevill was asked to examine a unique example of a small copper coin denominated " $\frac{1}{2}$ " found during an archaeological excavation on the grounds of the Presidio La Bahía near Goliad, Texas, on December 17, 1963. The piece was discovered in a trench inside the north wall of an old Spanish fort.

The obverse (Figure 3) has the letters BARR, followed by an "I" and an "A," possibly an abbreviation of Barrera. Oddly, the letters and the fraction ($\frac{1}{2}$) are inverted, as if they were mistakenly punched into the die. Also on the obverse is 17, presumably part of the date. Although the reverse at first appears to be blank, two, distinct bits of metal could be interpreted as remnants of the design on the San Bernardo pieces.

Bevill concluded that the La Bahía piece was a trial strike or a die-cutter's error of the 1817 jolas by Barrera at San Fernando de Béxar. It may have been discarded during the minting process after the lettering error was discovered, and then mixed in with the subsequently produced coins. It too can be considered an 1817 jola.

The Andrew Lustig specimen (Figure 4) begins to bring the pieces of the puzzle into focus. On the obverse is the denomination, $\frac{1}{2}$; and the date, 817. Although there are no clusters of raised dots, the monogrammed symbol A.D. once again appears to the left of the date. Encircling the date are M.BA and rA, undoubtedly for M.BARRERA. The letters are weakly struck, but the spacing is proper for a seven-letter name. Even though the mixture of upper- and lower-case letters is unusual on a Spanish colonial issue, there appears to be the same use of the lower-case "r" (although inverted) in the abbreviation of Barrera on the La Bahía specimen (Figure 3). It bears a similar multi-pointed motif on the reverse, which indicates it was produced by the same authority that struck the coins found at Mission San Bernardo.

The discovery of these 1817-dated copper coins—one with a two-digit date, one with a three-digit date and another with a four-digit date—suggests a series of small, almost random mintages intended to supply change for the local economy. Because two of these coins appear to spell BARRERA on the obverse, the evidence suggests they were predecessors of the issues with the Lone Star reverse. It seems logical that using the issuer's initials was a solution to the design problem, rather than a random style change.



▲ **FIGURE 3:** This 1817 New Spain $\frac{1}{2}$ real, found at La Bahía, is a trial strike. The lettering on the obverse is inverted.

Actual Size: 15.5mm



▲ **FIGURE 4:** The Lustig specimen of 1817 New Spain $\frac{1}{2}$ real also appears to be a trial strike. It bears a multi-pointed motif on the reverse, similar to those found at Mission San Bernardo.

Actual Size: 15.5mm

Origin of the Lone Star Symbol

Only six specimens of the 1817 jolas struck for circulation and bearing the Lone Star reverse are known today. Although mintage of 8,000 coins was authorized, it is not known how many were struck. All six measure 18mm in diameter, have the fraction rotated to the right, and weigh between 1.3g and 1.6g. There is only one die variety, in which each coin exhibits a series of ridges on the periphery of the obverse. Curiously, no bar separates the numbers in the fractional denomination.

Five of the six coins were discovered in 2004 in a small, manila envelope marked "Italian," among seemingly worthless pieces in a "junk box" containing coins from a larger collection. These jolas had a heavy black encrustation. The sixth example, originally thought to be a fantasy piece, was obtained on the bourse floor at the 1978 American Numismatic Association convention in Houston.

For reasons unknown, Barrera's authority to mint these coins was withdrawn and given to another administrator after some 20 months. Thus, there was ample time for multiple varieties of these 1817 copper coins to have been struck under Barrera's authority.

PHOTO: PRESIDIO LA BAHÍA/JIM BEVILL

PHOTO: ANDREW LUSTIG/ANA STAFF

The fact that de la Garza was required to post collateral for the outstanding Barrera coins... implies a sense of urgency on his part in redeeming them.

Traces of Barrera's initials, the denomination and the date can be seen on the coin obverse in Figure 5 through almost two centuries of dirt and corrosion. On the reverse is the outline of a five-pointed star with the diagnostic dot in the middle.

Figure 6 also bears Barrera's initials, the denomination and the date. The reverse features the five-pointed Lone Star symbol for Texas. This coin, once heavily encrusted, has been professionally conserved, restoring its original appearance.

Figure 7 is consistent with the above examples. This uncirculated piece has the same obverse die

characteristics, as well as a "fat star" on the reverse with the diagnostic raised dot in the center.

The 1818 de la Garza Coinage

Barrera's coinage monopoly was retracted by the governor, who granted the minting operation to local merchant and postmaster José Antonio de la Garza in December 1818. De la Garza was authorized to reclaim Barrera's coins and to re-issue 8,000 specimens bearing the date 1818 and his initials J.A.G. on the obverse. As a condition of this authorization, de la Garza was required to "post a security for the jolas that appear minted in addition to the five hundred pesos" and to deposit "with the ayuntamiento [municipal council] the coin mold with which the aforementioned minting of jolas has been practiced with the value of half a real and no other."

The fact that de la Garza was required to post collateral for the outstanding Barrera coins in addition to his own implies a sense of urgency on his part in redeeming them from circulation. The order to withdraw the die (also called a mold or *troquel*) suggests a similarity between the two designs. The March 29, 1817, proclamation in the B  xar archives clearly states that Barrera had petitioned for "the milling of five hundred pesos in total containing his name and surname." Yet, the 1817 coins with the Lone Star reverses included only the initials of his first name and surname.

This discrepancy can be explained by a December 5, 1818, document, in which de la Garza wrote, "I permit the one who represents Don Jos   Antonio de la Garza that he seeks to mint in jolas, with the name and surname of the one who is writing, Don Jos   la Garza." But elsewhere in the document, he stated that "they will carry engraved the first letters of my given and surname and the year of this date." This indicates both Barrera and de la Garza found their initials sufficient to satisfy their name and surname requirements on the new coinage.

While the jolas circulated widely around San Antonio de B  xar, these coins and their Lone Star reverses were largely unknown in the numismatic world until 1959, when a small hoard of 60 1818-dated jolas were unearthed on the banks of the San Antonio River during an excavation. The low survival rate of the 1817 jolas can be explained by their withdrawal from circulation by order of local authorities on December 6, 1818. A posted order recalling the Barrera coins translates, in part:



▲ **FIGURE 5:** Found in a coin dealer's "junk box" in 2004, this 1817 jola has large letters and exhibits a "fat" star on the reverse.

Actual Size: 18mm



▲ **FIGURE 6:** This 1817 jola, found in the same "junk box" in 2004, has been professionally conserved to remove surface encrustation. It has large letters and a fat star on the reverse.

Actual Size: 18mm



▲ **FIGURE 7:** Obtained at the 1978 ANA convention in Houston, this 1817 jola was produced on a large planchet. It has large letters and features a fat star on the reverse.

Actual Size: 18mm

PHOTOS: ALVIN STERN/JIM BEVILL

PHOTOS: RICHARD MEDINA/JIM BEVILL

Several 1818 ½-real pieces may have made their way along the trade routes that ran east, though there was little to spend them on.

The Presidio La Bahía, located near Goliad, Texas, was built in the mid-18th century to defend Spanish interests against Native American and French attackers.

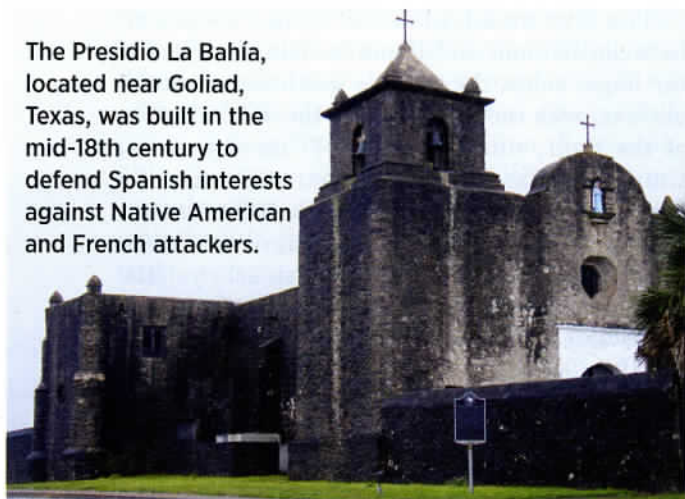


PHOTO: JIM BEVILL

The circulation of the previously minted coins by D[on] Manuel Barrera should cease today. And with the effect that whoever has the jolas minted by Barrera should not lose them and present them to D. Jose Antonio Lagarza [sic] within 12 days. He will receive them and give them the same quantity of the newly minted coins.

De la Garza was appointed to the minting task after Antonio Maria Martinez assumed the governor's office in Spanish Texas in the spring of 1817. The December 6, 1818, recall of the Barrera coinage refers to "a detriment caused to consumers due to the lack of change cash, for which reason they either fail to purchase what they need, or they must pawn a peso or spend it entirely without need for such." This language implies Barrera never got close to producing the 8,000 coins he was authorized to mint and place into circulation; therefore, it would be de la Garza's responsibility to fill the production gap.



PHOTOS: PRESIDIO LA BAHIA/JIM BEVILL

▲ **FIGURE 8:** This 1818 jola, minted on a small planchet, bears an inscription in large letters and has a fat star on the reverse. It resided among a collection of military buttons at La Bahía for a number of years before it was correctly identified as a jola.

Not Actual Size

Several 1818 ½-real pieces may have made their way along the trade routes that ran east into Nacogdoches and then to Natchitoches, Louisiana, though there was little to spend them on outside of the populated areas. On a trip through Texas in 1821, Stephen F. Austin remarked that money was "tolerably plenty" at La Bahía because of the trade "from Nachitoches [sic] to the coast," but he found that, on the whole, the environment was rural and the people lived very poorly.

The widespread use of jolas in colonial Texas is confirmed by an 1818 specimen (Figure 8) of the de la Garza issue found during an archaeological dig in the southeast corner of the Presidio La Bahía near Goliad on December 14, 1963. This coin, with an undisputable provenance, was mistakenly identified and resided among a collection of military buttons at La Bahía for a number of years before being correctly designated as a ½-real coin of New Spain.



PHOTOS: MIKE DUNIGAN

▲ **FIGURE 9:** Struck on a small planchet, this 1818-dated jola displays large letters and a fat star. It was found among a hoard of coins excavated near the San Antonio River.

The San Antonio River Hoard

The piece pictured in Figure 9 was struck in San Fernando de Béxar by José Antonio de la Garza. Discovered among a hoard of coins in a 1959 excavation near the bank of the San Antonio River, it shows considerable signs of corrosion.

Through the generosity of Frost Bank in San Antonio, we were able to examine, weigh and identify eight additional 1818 New Spain jolas from the San Antonio River hoard. These pieces were discovered by a workman digging along a route that later became San Antonio's River Walk. The workman brought the coins to the city's Witte Museum, which passed along the information to Frank W. Brown, a Frost Bank employee. Brown purchased some of the coins, researched them and acquired some for the bank's permanent money collection. We examined two additional examples that were housed in a sealed glass case, but we were unable to remove them for closer study.

Upon first glance, one might be surprised by the crudeness of the coins and the haphazard methods by which they were created.



FIGURE 10



FIGURE 11

▲ Two 1818 jolas from the Frost Bank collection were struck on large planchets, exhibit large letters and have a “skinny” star on the reverse.

Actual Size: 19mm

Upon first glance, one might be surprised by the crudeness of the coins and the haphazard methods by which they were created. The Frost Bank specimens were somewhat deteriorated as a result of their long period underground. To preserve them, it appears someone applied a coating of shellac, a common practice among collectors and museums several decades ago. Among the bank’s coins, some displayed star tips that were pointed, while others were rounded. All the design elements were plainly visible. The 1818 examples fell into two, distinct planchet sizes.

There were three large-planchet coins, measuring 19mm in diameter. These pieces were visibly larger than the other coins, with the fraction rotated to the left. The star on the reverse was punched with a different tool, giving it a “skinny” appearance, but still with the diagnostic dot in the center.



▲ FIGURE 12: This small-planchet variety of 1818 jola has the numerator of the fraction at the right. The coin has large letters and a skinny star. Not Actual Size

The five small-planchet coins measured between 16.5mm and 18mm in diameter. Unlike the larger coins, the fraction was inverted on the obverse, with the numerator of the denomination at the right, similar to the 1817 Barrera coins. Unlike the Barrera coins, a bar separates the numbers in the fraction on the de la Garza issues.

The harshly cleaned river hoard specimen shown in Figure 10 was crudely struck, yet the lone star is boldly punched and well centered on the reverse. The piece pictured in Figure 11 also is from the original river hoard. Although primitively struck, it displays full lettering detail and a Lone Star that is boldly punched and nearly centered on the reverse.

The specimen shown in Figure 12 is a small-planchet variety. The fraction is rotated to the right, with the top of its numerator to the right of the J.A.G. It has a “skinny” star on the reverse.

Another small-planchet variety (Figure 13) also has the fraction rotated to the right, with its top at the middle of “G” of J.A.G. The tips of the reverse star are somewhat rounded.

On the small-planchet piece illustrated in Figure 14, the fraction is rotated to the right, with the top of its numerator at the edge of the “A” of J.A.G. The star on the reverse has somewhat rounded tips. This coin is a product of the same obverse die that struck the 1818 La Bahía coin.

The coin shown in Figure 15 was found near Goliad, Texas. Minted in San Fernando de Béxar by José Antonio de la Garza using a different set of dies, it has a more refined appearance than the earlier, crudely struck jolas. However, the raised “dot” in the middle of the star on the reverse is less pronounced. This particular specimen was certified by ANACS. It is one of several distinct varieties of 1818 coins made by de la Garza, some of which have weakly defined reverse stars.

Authenticating the New Spain Jolas

Three of the four 1817-dated coins discussed at the beginning of this study were dug out of the ground by individuals who were searching an old Spanish mission site. Although the coins’ authenticity is beyond dispute, the bigger questions are who struck them, and under what authority? It is interesting to note that the March 29, 1817, public notice stated that the issues contain “his name and surname,” yet production of only two of the four coins made any attempt to fulfill this requirement, despite that they are clearly and con-

PHOTOS: FROST BANK/JIM BEVILL

vincingly patterned after each other.

Although the manufacture and distribution of both the 1817 and 1818 coins in Spanish Texas is firmly documented, the process of authenticating the 1817 coins with the Lone Star reverse presents its own set of challenges. None of the coins with the initials MB are known to have been unearthed from Texas soil (at least not by their present owners). Yet five of the six documented examples had a heavy black encrustation that initially rendered their design features unrecognizable. It was only after this almost opaque crust was carefully removed from four of the coins that the remarkable discovery was revealed. Although we expected to find some consistency of the 1817 coins with the 1818 specimens at Frost Bank in San Antonio, we were somewhat surprised at the crudeness of the 1818 specimens. These pieces exhibited two, distinct planchet sizes, a fractional denomination rotated in two different directions, multiple obverse dies and at least four different star punches.



FIGURE 13



FIGURE 14

▲ Two 1818 ½-real pieces struck on small planchets have large letters, and the star on the reverse has rounded tips.

Not Actual Size

Yet there are a noticeable number of similar elements between the 1817- and 1818-dated coins. All the ½-real jolas issued for circulation were struck in copper and separate the minter's initials, M.B. or J.A.G., with a period. They display a fractional denomination, ½, on the obverse; a full date; and a series of ridges around the perimeter of the obverse. No coins of either date exhibit such ridges on the reverse, and all examples carry a five-pointed star on the reverse with a raised dot in the approximate center.

When we realized that the 1817 coins with the Lone Star reverse came from only one set of dies, we were reminded that the 1794 Flowing Hair dollars produced by the U.S. Mint were also struck from a single die pair. Subsequent 1795 Flowing



▲ FIGURE 15: Found near Goliad, Texas, this 1818 jola was struck in San Fernando de Béxar by José Antonio de la Garza. The raised dot in the center of the star on the reverse is less pronounced than those on other varieties.

Not Actual Size

Hair dollars were made in multiple die combinations, as were the 1818 jolas. However, unlike the Flowing Hair dollars, there are three distinct planchet sizes across the two dates of the jolas. If the 1817 coins were modern counterfeits or fantasy pieces, one would expect them to be made on the same-size planchet as at least one 1818 variety. However, they have a distinctly different diameter.

The owner of the 1817 coin obtained at the 1978 ANA convention submitted it to the American Numismatic Society for authentication many years ago, but was told that the staff was unable to do so, in part because of a lack of comparable specimens. Similarly, when the family of the late George O. Walton submitted his 1913 Liberty Head nickel for a 1963 auction, it was rejected by Stack's as a counterfeit. Forty years later, this piece was authenticated at an ANA convention in 2003, when a team of numismatists was able to compare it with the other four known examples.

In the case of the 1817 jolas, other specimens did not surface until 2004. These pieces were heavily encrusted. It was not until the summer of 2005, when the owner carefully removed the contaminants obscuring the detail on these small, copper coins through a chemical rinsing process, that the design elements were revealed.

So, have the long-lost New Spain jolas minted by Manuel Barrera in 1817 been found? Physical and historical evidence seems to indicate more research is needed.

The 1817 jolas are so rare that they constitute a one-year type in a two-year series. If authenticated, they represent the first circulating coins struck in Texas, or in any of the former Spanish Territories (1810-21) or Mexican areas (1821-48) presently located in the United States. The little jolas, coined while Texas was still known as New Spain, left a lasting imprint of the Lone Star that became, and will forever be, a unique symbol of Texas. ■