

# Colonial Women Counterfeiters

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FORGING PAPER CURRENCY WAS RAMPANT IN THE COLONIES IN THE EARLY 18TH CENTURY, AND A NUMBER OF WOMEN FOUND IT AN EXCELLENT WAY TO INCREASE THEIR HOUSEHOLD BUDGETS.

COUNTERFEITING in colonial America was a crime tailor-made for women, and for nearly a half-century, they seem to have found more success at it than their male counterparts. No one knows how much false currency women put into circulation—or exactly how many women took up counterfeiting—but the fruits of their

efforts ranged from augmenting their household budgets to destabilizing the treasury of an entire colony.

These women often worked alone in their homes. Sometimes they operated as members of counterfeiting rings and even as heads of gangs who copied and passed bad bills into their communities. When the law caught up with women counterfeiters, it often resulted from careless behavior on the

part of their men folk. Some suffered excruciating punishment, but most got off lightly thanks to the mercy of the very neighbors they had been duping.

No single description fits a typical woman counterfeiter. Insignificant housewives such as Ann Lockwood in Connecticut used pen and ink to alter bills for relatively paltry gain, while Freelove Lippencott in Rhode Island printed bills on special plates she had commissioned in England. Most successful of all was a Massachusetts woman of some social standing named Mary Peck Butterworth, who created substantial phony wealth with her flatiron.

Overall, women accounted for 10 percent or less of colonial criminal activity. Most women, confined to farms or villages, worked dawn to dusk tending their households and raising their families. They had limited contact with the outside world beyond neighbors, church, and a few merchants. But sometimes temptation proved too great.

“Women often committed different types of crimes than men,” explained Dorothy A. Mays in her 2004 book, *Women in Early America: Struggle, Survival, and Freedom in a*

Enterprising colonial women found various ways to produce bogus currency. The most well known, Mary Peck Butterworth, would press a piece of damp muslin over a paper bill to pick up the pattern, re-trace it in black ink, and press the muslin onto clean paper. Then she burned the evidence by tossing the muslin into the fire. British painter Henry Robert Morland depicted a woman wielding her flatiron as Butterworth might have in his c. 1765–82 painting, *A Laundry Maid Ironing*.



*New World*. “Most men brought before a criminal court were there for crimes committed away from home. They mixed with gangs, got drunk and disorderly in public, or stole merchandise. In contrast, the criminal activity of women usually took place in their home environment.” And home was the ideal place for counterfeiting.

### A CONSTANT MENACE

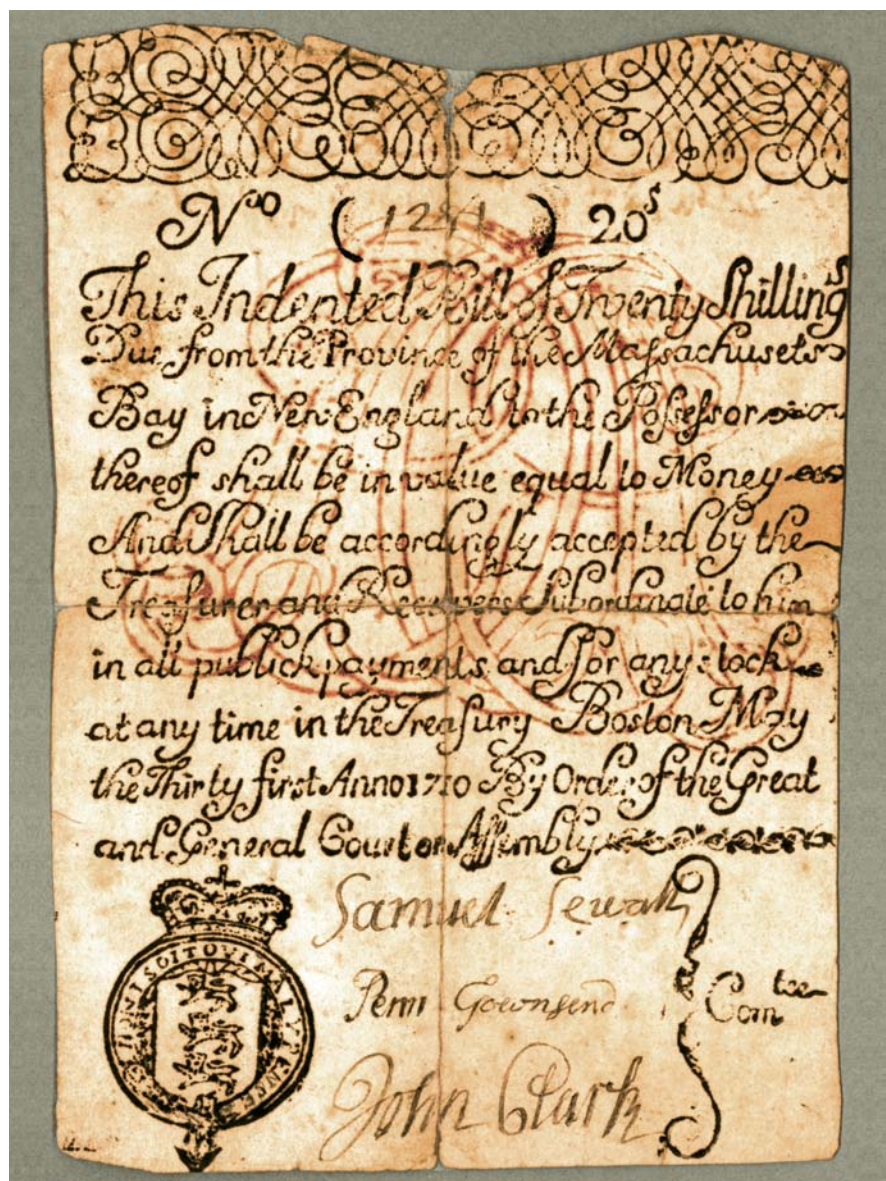
Because little specie, or “hard money” circulated in America in the 17th Century—due to an absence of silver or gold mines, restrictive trade with the French and Spanish West Indies, and debts owed to British merchants—the colonies began issuing paper money to manage daily expenses.

In 1690, Massachusetts Bay Colony issued publicly sponsored currency, the first government in the western world to do so. The other colonies soon followed until by 1755 all of colonial America was dealing with a hodgepodge of paper money as well as coin.

Currency conditions in pre-Revolutionary America were a counterfeiter’s dream. With individual colonies issuing their own paper money, people handled a collection of widely differing bills, often from neighboring colonies. Printing quality was crude, making illegally copying them relatively easy. The flimsy bills quickly became soiled, torn, and patched, making it even harder to spot fakes.

“Counterfeiting of early American paper money was a constant menace to the circulation of genuine bills,” wrote Eric P. Newman, a leading authority on historical American currency and coins, in his landmark 1967 book, *The Early Paper Money of America*. “Capture of counterfeiters and passers was particularly difficult.”

Women’s efforts to counterfeit paper money covered a gamut of sophistication, from amateurishly altering numerals to increase the value of a single bill to using engraved plates and similar means of reproduction that mimicked what colonial printers were doing lawfully. Any of these methods could suitably be performed at home, according to colonial court records pertaining to



This 20-shilling note, issued by Massachusetts on May 31, 1710, was split into four sections and has been repaired. Like most surviving early Massachusetts notes, it’s considered a contemporary counterfeit. Eric P. Newman illustrates another example of this denomination in *The Early Paper Money of America*, calling it counterfeit but without an explanation. (Two-shilling notes issued in 1691 were known to have been altered by adding a zero, when no 20-shilling bills had been printed.) The red monogram “AR” stands for “Anna Regina” (Latin for Queen Anne).

women indicted for counterfeiting.

The most prominent expert on counterfeiting in early America was the late Kenneth Scott, professor emeritus of history at Queens College in New York, who tirelessly researched the topic and wrote several books, including his 1957 classic, *Counterfeiting in Colonial America*. In his years of poring over colonial court records, Scott turned up an interesting fact: “There seem to have been no women counterfeiters in the southern provinces,” although he did not speculate why.

### YIELDING TO TEMPTATION

Freelove Lippencott is New England’s first known woman counterfeiter and the first to head a counterfeiting ring. The wife of a sailor in Newport, Rhode Island, she traveled to England in 1712 to hire engravers to make six plates for counterfeiting currency from Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. Back in Newport, she gathered cohorts—her husband, Robert, her brother, George Lawton, and friends Edward Greenman and Henry Cooke—to pass the bad bills.





This is another counterfeit bill, printed in Massachusetts in 1775. The clever forger altered the numerals and text to make a 4-shilling bill appear worth 40 shillings, revealed by the zeroes added in the upper corners of the bill and the changes in spacing where “FOUR” was altered to “FORTY.”

Lippencott and her ring printed and passed so many bogus bills that within a year authorities arrested her, her husband, and Greenman for counterfeiting. But despite repeated protests by prosecutors, two local grand juries refused to indict her or her husband, citing insufficient evidence. (Greenman was fined but had already fled to parts unknown.)

Undaunted, Lippencott continued her counterfeiting even while out on bail. She eventually sent her plates to Captain Edward Greenman, uncle of her gang member and a prominent Rhode Island politician, who also succumbed to temptation and began using them in his own counterfeiting operation. Historians believe Lippencott, who moved to Connecticut to escape notoriety, probably retained a financial interest in the plates and collected an illegal income through the captain’s activity for several more years.

While Lippencott was brazen and ingenious, most women counterfeiters possessed considerably less talent. Scott characterized them as “weak characters who yielded to the temptation of making some trifling gain.”

Such was the case of Ann Lockwood of Greenwich, Connecticut.

Lockwood was visited one July day in 1717 by friends Lieutenant Richard Higgenbotham and his wife, who wanted Lockwood to obtain some wool for the wife’s sock making. Among the money the Higgenbothams gave her for the transaction was a 2-shilling 6-pence bill. According to later testimony, Lockwood examined the bill and said it had enough room on it to change the numeral 2 to a 10. The lieutenant, aghast, told Lockwood to forget the idea immediately.

“Temptation, however, proved too strong,” Scott related from court records. “Ann was evidently unable to neglect such an attractive and easy way to make a profit, for she altered the bill and paid it out, together with three bills of two shilling sixpence each, to Benjamin Hobby for nine and a quarter pounds of wool.”

Hobby soon spent the bill and learned it was counterfeit. He returned it to Lockwood, who high-tailed it to the Higgenbotham home in Cos Cob and pleaded with the couple to take back the bill and, if ever asked, say a

stranger had foisted it off onto them. She reminded the couple of how “the apple had tempted Mother Eve” and promised to never alter another bill.

“Her husband, she added, knew of her crime, as did his brother Joseph, who had told her that he ‘had a good mind to knock her on the head’ because her husband was like to be ruined by her ‘confounded tricks,’” Scott wrote.

The Higgenbothams finally agreed to Lockwood’s plan, but meanwhile the wool dealer, Hobby, publicly accused Lockwood of passing the bad bill. She was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to stand in the pillory for a half-hour each of three days and to pay a fine of 6 pounds 13 shillings 6 pence. When she was due to serve her time on the pillory, Lockwood’s husband pleaded with authorities that she was needed at home to care for their sick children. The court granted his request to forego her sentence.

## FORGING WITH A FLATIRON

Unlike the conniving Freelove Lippencott and weak-willed Ann Lockwood, colonial America’s foremost

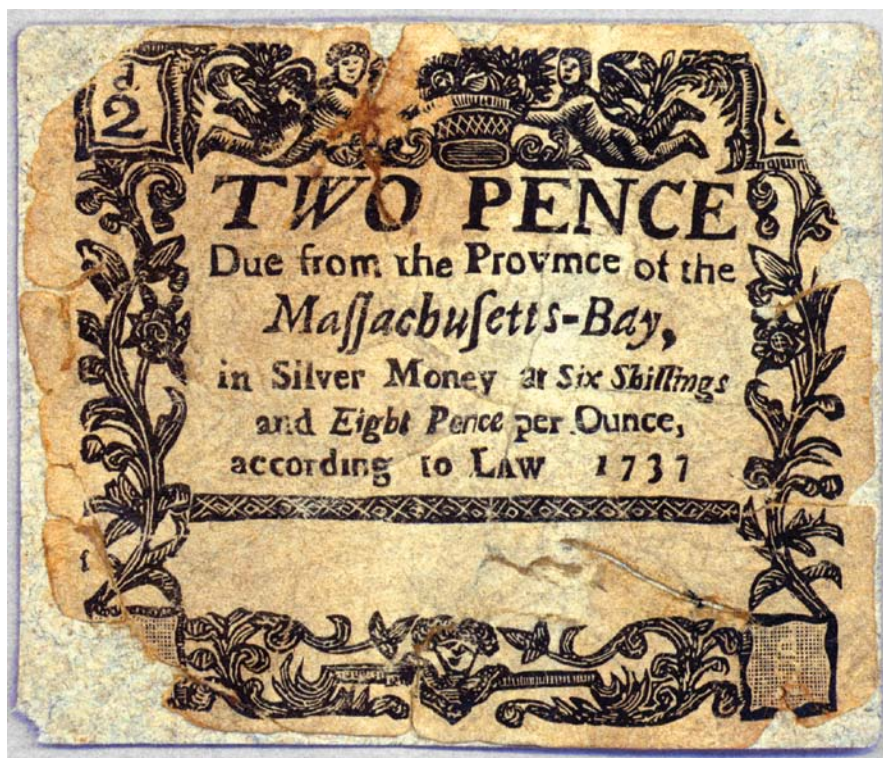


woman counterfeiter was a respected and industrious member of her community—not the type of woman usually drawn to criminal acts.

Born in 1684 into the founding family of Rehoboth, Massachusetts, Mary Peck Butterworth was related directly or by marriage to nearly everyone in the town. She married a prominent local house builder, John Butterworth Junior, who was mostly known locally as “Mary’s husband.” By the time she reached age thirty, she had five children, ran a well-organized home, and moved in prominent social circles throughout Rehoboth and its environs.

In about 1715, Butterworth discovered she could copy the printed image of a paper bill using a process much like today’s iron-on transfers. She placed damp, starched muslin over a bill and pressed it with her flatiron to pick up the image. She used the muslin to iron the image onto a blank piece of paper then refined the image with pen and ink. Lastly—and crucial to her eventual fate—Butterworth tossed her muslin cloth into the fireplace, burning the only evidence of her counterfeiting process.

Butterworth enlisted the help of three of her brothers, a sister-in-law, two of her husband’s young



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In 1737 Massachusetts authorized an emission of small change notes worth three times more than the first emission in 1690 because inflation had lowered the value of what were called the Old Tenor notes. Each denomination—1 through 6 pence—of the Middle Tenor notes had different woodcut designs for the border, sculpted by John Bushell.

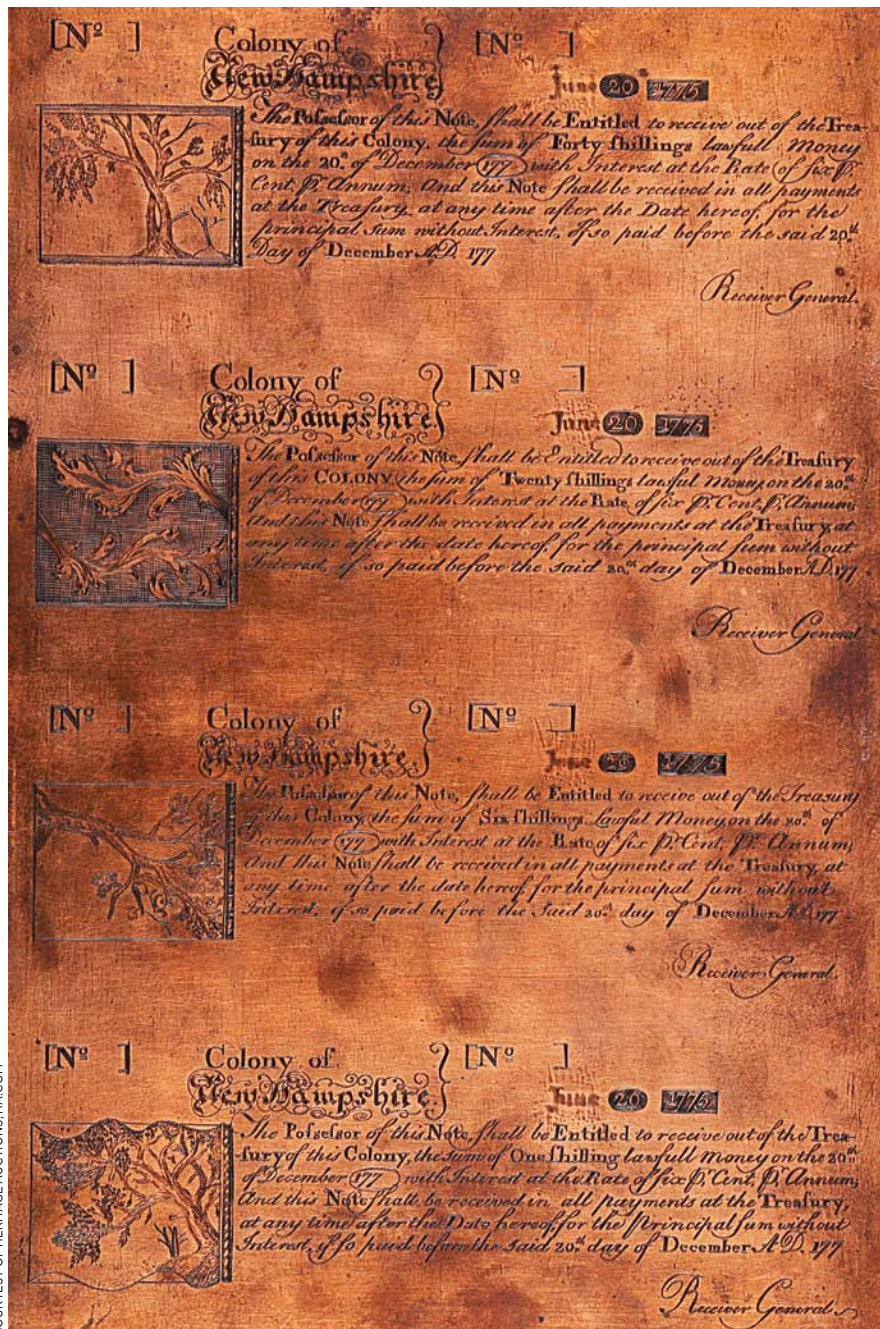
On October 10, 1771, Connecticut issued 12,000 pounds in treasury notes payable within two years without interest. (Previous emissions had offered interest at redemption.) The front of each note has the colony seal—three grape vines and a hand that points to the right or left—which appeared on every emission from 1755 to 1780. Each note was numbered and signed—here by William Pitkin, Benjamin Payne, and Elisha Williams—in red ink. Text on the back identifies Timothy Green as the printer, of New London. Each bill was usually slash- or hole-canceled upon redemption.



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This 2-shilling, 6-pence note was torn into quarters to make small change, with each quarter being worth 7½ pence. Much of the text and the signatures are missing. Based on earlier bills, the text likely reads: THIS INDENTED BILL OF TWO SHILLINGS & SIXPENCE / Due from the Colony of Connecticut in New England / to ye Possessor thereof shall be in value equal to / Money : And shall be accordingly accepted by the / Treasurer & Receivers subordinate to him; & for / any stock at any time in ye Treasury Hartford ...” Notes issued on December 1, 1724, were the first to have printing on the back, done by Timothy Green in New London, but no complete example is known.



carpenters, and even a local deputy sheriff. She and her accomplices counterfeited several different bills from Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts.

“Her methods were extremely simple and effective and as efficient as her management of her husband, children, and the band of helpers and passers which she organized,” Scott wrote. “The quality of the workmanship was high and Mary sold her bills at half their face value—she never passed them herself.”

For seven years, she operated from her home one of colonial New England’s most lucrative counterfeiting operations. She produced more than 1,000 pounds in forged bills, including so many Rhode Island 5-pound notes that she destabilized the colony’s treasury, a situation corrected only when Rhode Island authorities temporarily stopped producing legitimate 5-pound notes. With her profits, she and her husband purchased an expensive new home in 1722, which tipped off the authorities that something was up with the former Mary Peck.

The end came when one of the young carpenters in her ring,

A rare copper printing plate, engraved by John Ward Gilman in Exeter in 1775, was used to print currency that helped fund New Hampshire’s Revolutionary War effort. Gilman, who also designed the state seal in 1776, was paid 13 pounds to produce the plate, acquire and prepare the press, and do the printing. The plate had been missing for at least 150 years until the New Hampshire Historical Society purchased it for \$18,000 at auction in 2018.



Arthur Noble, traveled in 1723 from Rehoboth to Newport, Rhode Island, site of huge festivities planned for the public hanging of twenty-three captured pirates. Noble had stuffed his pockets with counterfeit bills and, upon arriving in Newport, ran into three young women and took them to a tavern, where he tried to pass one of the 5-pound notes.

The tavern keeper spotted the bad bill and had Noble immediately

arrested and thrown into the same jail the ill-fated pirates had just vacated for the gallows. Within days, Rhode Island deputy sheriffs arrived in Rehoboth, where three gang members—Butterworth's brother Nicholas, his wife, Hannah, and the other carpenter, Nicholas Campe—implicated her, even divulging her counterfeiting technique.

Butterworth was jailed but released the next day. A search of her

home turned up no evidence because she had burned it all. Likely because of her strong family ties in the area, a grand jury refused to indict her, and all charges were dropped. She returned to running her household, and two years later gave birth to her sixth and seventh children, twin boys. She went on to live a peaceful—and by all accounts, law-abiding—life until she died in 1775 at the age of eighty-nine.

## THWARTING COUNTERFEITERS

Despite the warning sometimes printed on colonial currency—"To Counterfeit is Death"—those who forged early bills operated with relative impunity. Counterfeiting likely started soon after Massachusetts Bay Colony issued its first notes in 1690. Britain left the colonies little choice, banning paper currency—also under penalty of death—in a specie-poor country that needed a medium with which to conduct business.

Anyone with a printing press could turn out fake notes, noted Jack Lynch, professor of English at Rutgers University, in "The Golden Age of Counterfeiting," published in 2007 in the *CW Journal*.

"Since counterfeiting can never be prevented altogether, the idea has always been to make the process so complicated and time-consuming that the effort required will not be equal to the face value of the phony money," Lynch explained. "Printers of 18th-Century currency resorted to special typefaces and type ornaments, sometimes cut by hand, in the hopes that counterfeiters would find it too expensive to reproduce the banknotes."

Not surprisingly, the ingenious Benjamin Franklin devised effective methods for thwarting counterfeiters. Numismatists are familiar with the leaf prints he used on bills for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The first, a 20-shilling note issued in 1739, incorporated three blackberry leaves and a willow leaf, along with Franklin's signature.

Franklin took his inspiration from amateur scientist Joseph Breintnall, who developed a technique for printing realistic leaf impressions. As numismatic historian Eric P. Newman explained, Franklin realized that "leaves not only had exceedingly complex detail but also that their internal lines were graduated in thickness. This would make virtually impossible a fine reproduction by engraving."

Other colonial officials apparently agreed, contracting with Franklin and his successors to print colonial and Revolutionary bills with leaf motifs for Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, and the Continental Congress as well as Pennsylvania.

In 2017, researchers at the University of Notre Dame began analyzing approximately 550 colonial bills in the Hesburgh Libraries' Rare Books and Special Collections—examples from all thirteen British colonies, including bills printed by Franklin—to determine how colonial and counterfeit currency was produced, distributed, and utilized.

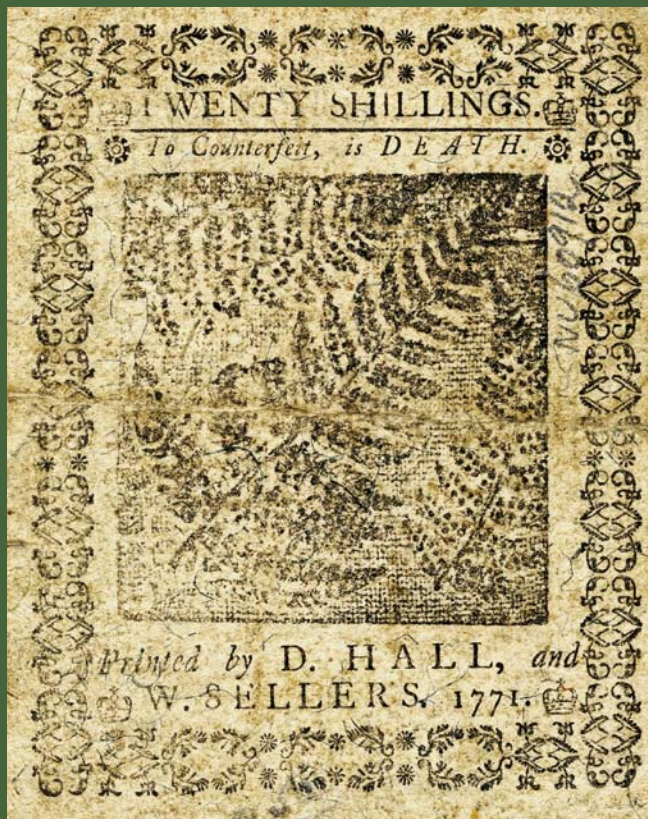
They studied historical data, the dates of production, and ink composition to map out approximate geographic origins of the money. "All these efforts will allow us to reveal the unknown history behind preparation of authentic and counterfeit currency," said physics professor and project leader Khachatur Manukyan.

Now nearly complete, the project revealed another of Franklin's techniques—using paper milled with flecks of mica, which the researchers traced to a single source, the Wilcox family paper mill in Chester County, Pennsylvania.

"They appear in all the papers Franklin used after 1740 through the Revolution. The quantities of crystals kept increasing but the composition was the same," Manukyan said. "We speculate that this material somehow ended up in the paper accidentally and then the mill started deliberately adding it. It was probably a measure to combat counterfeiting."

Identifying the composition of the original bills will also enable conservators to preserve and restore them, Manukyan noted. He plans to publish the study's findings by the end of the year.

The back of this 20-shilling note, issued by Pennsylvania in 1771, bears the warning "To Counterfeit, is DEATH" although the leaf design devised by Benjamin Franklin likely did more to deter counterfeiting than the warning.





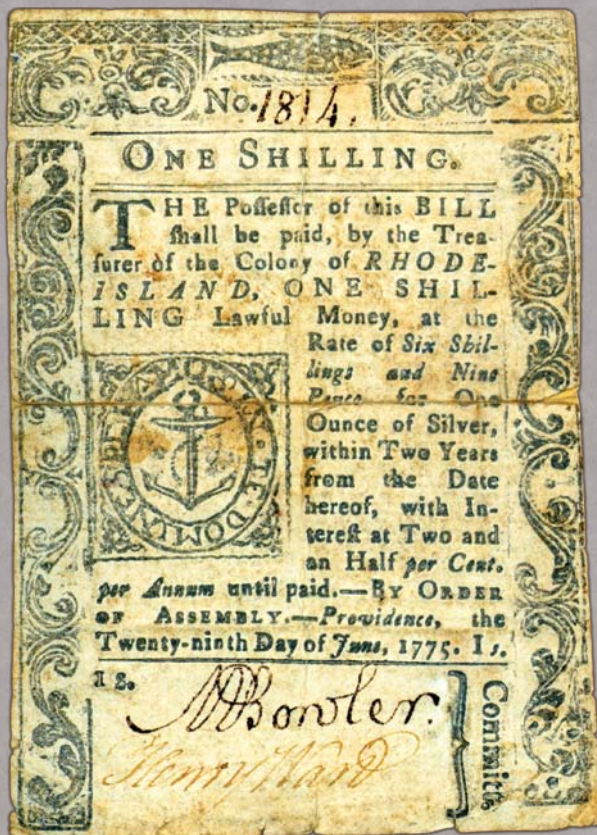


Standing in a pillory was among the forms of punishment meted out to female counterfeiters in the 1700s.

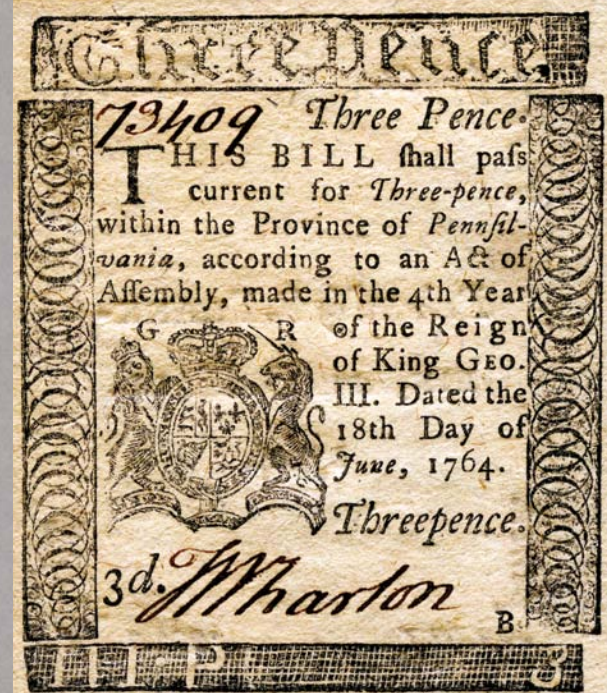
## PUNISHMENT HARSH AND MILD

Disposition of Mary Peck Butterworth's case is consistent with colonial trends regarding trials and sentencing of female criminals. While men convicted of counterfeiting usually faced the gallows, women were treated with much more leniency. In both Lip-pencott's and Lockwood's cases, their communities viewed the women as succumbing to temptation and being ripe for redemption.

As Mays noted regarding the period's jury trials, "The more serious the crime, the more likely the individual was to be found 'not guilty.' Serious crime was usually punished with the death penalty, and juries were reluctant to convict unless



A Pennsylvania 3-pence note issued in 1764 bears a British royal seal with initials above signifying "George Rex," or King George. (Perhaps small denominations didn't warrant use of the complex leaf motif.) After Benjamin Franklin retired from printing, his partner David Hall joined with William Sellers to print currency for the Commonwealth and the Continental Congress.



The June 29, 1775, emission from Rhode Island was the last to offer interest—for this even-numbered 1-shilling note, it was 2.5 percent within two years of redemption. (Odd numbered notes had a five-year due date.) The note was signed by Metcalfe Bowler and Henry Ward. Notes for denominations of 5 shillings and up had typeset reverses while the lower denominations had blank backs.



clear and indisputable proof from reliable witnesses was presented.”

Likewise, punishment meted out to women convicted of counterfeiting varied widely, often depending on the nature of the bills they falsified. Three Pennsylvania cases make this point quite clearly.

The most severe punishment any colonial woman counterfeiter in America suffered came in 1720 during the era when English laws and punishments—the so-called Bloody Code of England—were often still imposed on American colonists. An English silversmith named Edward Hunt had forged some Spanish coins and moved with his wife, Martha, to Philadelphia, where she passed them. Because England still sanctioned Spanish coin as legitimate currency at the time, the Hunts were arrested and sentenced for treason under English law. Edward was put to death, while Martha was fined the exorbitant sum of 500 pounds and spent the rest of her life in prison.

Four decades later in Lancaster, a spinster named Ann Tew was convicted of altering a 1-shilling Pennsylvania note into a 10-shilling note. She was sentenced to stand an hour in the pillory and have both ears cut off and nailed to it, receive thirty-one lashes, and pay 100 pounds plus court costs. A year later, in 1767, she was again convicted of changing a 1-shilling Pennsylvania note into a 10-shilling note.

“She received the same sentence as before, which makes one wonder how the executioner solved the problem of cutting off ears which he had already removed in 1766,” Scott wrote. Tew received a harsh sentence because she had counterfeited local notes, which were deemed more precious than currency from adjoining colonies.

By comparison, a woman named Alice Richards also was arrested in Pennsylvania in 1767 for counterfeiting and passing two Virginia bills. At her trial, however, she was convicted only of passing the bad bills—the allegation of forging the bills was dropped—and she served six months in a Philadelphia jail and paid court



Like other colonies, Connecticut often updated its printing plates to reuse them for subsequent emissions. This 5-pound note, first issued July 10, 1733, was re-dated May 1740. The face of the bill is bordered by elaborate scroll work, with the state seal bearing three grape vines in the bottom left. The typeset back identifies the printer as Timothy Green, New London.

costs. The milder outcome resulted because the fake bills copied those of another colony, making it a less serious offense in the eyes of the Pennsylvania court.

Throughout Scott’s extensive research into colonial court records, he frequently noted the number of counterfeiting charges against women in which grand juries refused to indict on grounds of “ignoramus,” choosing to ignore the evidence lawmen had presented. Moreover,

when convictions were obtained, women usually received fines—with friends and relatives often paying the amounts—and frequently were spared painful and humiliating physical punishments except the occasional pillory or ear cropping.

Regarding the relative leniency shown to women criminals, Scott concluded, “Counterfeiters were often popular with their neighbors.” \*

Greg LeFever writes about historical and domestic topics.