

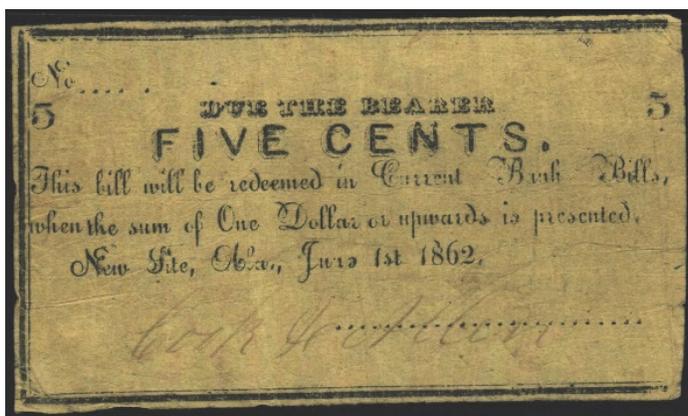
"NEW SITE" WAS A DAMN SIGHT BETTER THAN THE OLD SITE: THE STORY OF NEW SITE, ALABAMA

by: Bill Gunther

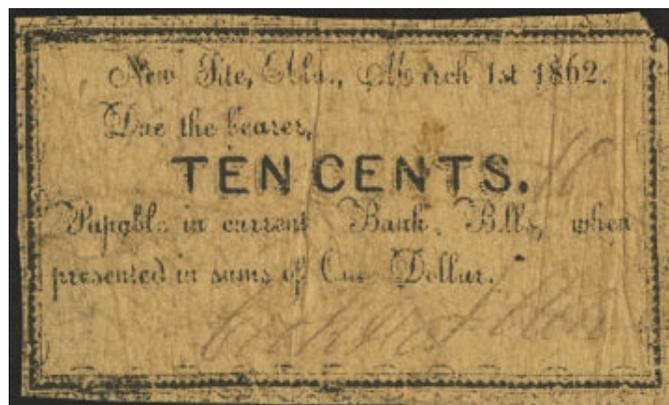
It continues to surprise me that so much interesting history can be learned from a tiny surviving piece of Alabama scrip from the 1800s. Although scarce, the notes from the town of New Site, Alabama hardly attract much attention from collectors since they do not contain elaborate vignettes or other visual elements. They are the essence of simplicity in banknote design. But when closely examined, they reveal the story of Alabama's relatively unknown gold rush days twenty years before the discovery of gold in California! This is the story of how the town of New Site came to be and who issued the notes.

The Notes

Let's begin by examining the rather unremarkable four notes known to exist from the town of New Site, Alabama. The first three notes shown below are signed by Cooke and Allen. The 5-cent note is dated June 1, 1862 while the 10 and 50-cent notes are dated March 1, 1862. It would appear that these individuals needed the 10 and 50-cent notes before they needed the 5-cent note. The only real difference appearing on the June notes is the listing of the numerical values. There are no vignettes or printer imprints on any of the notes suggesting that these notes were likely produced locally and inexpensively. (All the images are courtesy of Heritage Auctions)



Gunther-Derby 376-S.05a. New Site, Alabama. Cook and Allen, 5 cents, June 1, 1862.

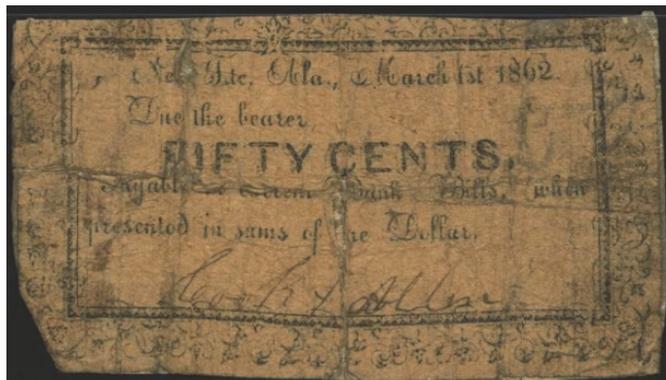


Gunther-Derby 376-S.10a. New Site, Alabama. Cook and Allen, 10 cents, March 1, 1862.



Gunther-Derby 376-S.50a. New Site, Alabama. Cook and Allen, 50 cents, March 1, 1862.

The fourth note from New Site, a 50-cent note shown below, is somewhat similar in design to the 5-cent note, but notice that it is signed only by a “J.C. Allen”. Rosene assigned a different catalog number to this 50-cent note as if it was a different merchant.¹ However, as we shall see, it appears that all the notes are from same merchant, “Cook and Allen”, but with “Cook” absent from the June 1862 50-cent note signature line.



**Gunther-Derby 376-\$.50b. New Site, Alabama.
J. C. Allen, 50 cents, June 1, 1862.**

Cook and Allen, Grocery Merchants

James D. Cook, the oldest of the two gentlemen, was born in 1821 in Laurens County, South Carolina. He attended school in South Carolina but by 1850 had relocated to Chambers County, Alabama.² Cook was living in a boarding house operated by William W. Carlisle, a farmer, and his wife. There were five boarders in the Carlisle household, including Cook who listed his occupation as “grocer”. Others in the household included a tailor, a shoemaker, a cabinet maker and a carpenter.

Cook married Mary Elizabeth Leverett in Chambers County on April 26, 1853. “Lizzy” as she was known, was 13 years younger than James and they only had one child, a son named George G., born in 1855.³ In 1860, Cook was living in Milltown, Chambers County, and listed his occupation as a “farmer”. Milltown was a short distance (15 miles) from New Site in Tallapoosa County. It was not uncommon for individuals to move in and out of farming as an occupation while at the same time holding a different occupation, like “grocer”.

On May 15, 1862, Cook enlisted in the 37th Alabama Infantry as a Private.⁴ At that time, the Confederate conscription rule only extended to men up to the age of 35, although by September of 1862 it was raised to age 45.⁵ Cook was not required to enlist, but did so voluntarily. His service was cut short when he died on July 3rd, 1862 in Milltown.⁶ It is not clear if his death was in anyway service related. But here we find the answer to our question: there were not two different companies (grocers), Cook and Allan, and Allen, as Rosene had assumed, but one company that dropped one signature (Cook) when one of the partners died.

Joshua C. Allen was born in 1831 in Georgia but his family appears to have relocated to Tallapoosa County, Alabama, by 1849 when he was 18.⁷ No 1860 Census record for Joshua C. Allen could be located, but he married Mary E. Cook on December 25th, 1862 in Chambers County.⁸ Since Cook was his business partner, it is possible that Mary E. Cook was related to James D. Cook, although no relationship could be found.

Joshua C. Allen, at age 32, enlisted in the Home Guard (nearby Russell County) on August 13, 1864 as a Private.⁹ By enlisting in the Home Guard, Allen would be able to devote some time to his farming activities and provide for his family. Following the end of the Civil War, Allen maintained his occupation as a farmer in 1870 and 1880. An interesting side note is that George Cook, the son of James D. Cook, was living with the Allen family. It is not clear if Elizabeth Cook was alive at that time. No information on Allen for 1900 was found, and by February 28, 1909 he had died, an “old soldier” living in the Soldiers Home in Chilton County Alabama.¹⁰ In the death record, he was listed as widowed.

To summarize, Cook and Allen was a grocery merchant located in New Site, Alabama and when Cook died in 1862, it appears that Allen carried on the business at least for a short time.

In the Beginning

Strange as it may seem, gold was discovered in Alabama almost twenty years *before* it was discovered in California. An article in the *Mobile Commercial Register* reported on May 9, 1831 that gold was discovered in Chilton County, about 50 miles due south of what is now Birmingham (Birmingham was not founded until forty years later on January 26, 1871).¹¹

In 1842, more gold was discovered in Tallapoosa County, about 50 miles to the east of Chilton County.¹² The result of these discoveries was the arrival of thousands of “get-rich quick” miners pouring into the area and the creation of several mining towns including, of course, one named “Goldville” in Tallapoosa County. Goldville received its official charter from the Alabama legislature in 1843.

By 1845, the population of Goldville was estimated to be 3,000 which would have made it one of the largest towns in Alabama.¹⁴ The miners most likely lived in tents and shacks near their steam-side “claims.” When they came into town, they were looking for supplies and relaxation which was provided by as many as fourteen merchants, seven saloons, brothels and two hotels, but no church.

Miners and other residents of Goldville were apparently quick to write home with stories of their adventures with the result that the temporary post office reportedly handled more mail in a day than New York City!¹⁵ At its peak, the population of Goldville reportedly grew to almost 5,000.

In early 1849, a growing number of the more “moderate” residents of Goldville became disenchanted with conditions in the town. They sought to find a quieter, more moral, place to live and began to search for a “new site” for their town. Not more than 3 miles to the south of Goldville they came across a “quiet, wooded and peaceful area” which they immediately declared would be the “New Site” of their town. That name stuck and to this day the town is known as New Site (officially the name is New Site Town).¹⁶

What Goes Around, Comes Around

In a bit of irony, it was gold that created Goldville and gold which quickly led to its demise. Gold was discovered in California in early 1848 but it was not until late that year that news reached the east coast and even later before the news reached such remote places as Goldville, Alabama.¹⁷ But when the news finally arrived, the exodus to California began and quickly decimated the town. One observer noted that miners left so quickly that they did not put out their campfires.¹⁸ The town that many had grown to hate was emptied and “went dormant” as the combination of exiting miners to California and other residents moving to “New Site” sealed the fate of Goldville. New Site grew modestly over the years and in 2010 recorded a total population of 773. Goldville, by comparison, never recovered and recorded a total population of only 55 in 2010.¹⁹

Footnotes

¹Walter Rosene, Alabama Obsolete Notes and Scrip (Society of Paper Money Collectors, 1984), p. 103.

²James D. Cook, Census of 1850, Ancestry.com.

³Marriage Records, Ancestry.com

⁴James D. Cook, U.S. Civil War Soldiers, 1860-1865, Ancestry.com.

⁵“Confederate Conscription Acts of 1862-1864,” Wikipedia.org.

⁶James D. Cook, Find-a-grave, Ancestry.com.

⁷Joshua C. Allen, Public Family Trees, Ancestry.com.

⁸Alabama, U.S. County Marriage Records, Ancestry.com.

⁹Joshua C. Allen, U.S. Civil War Soldiers, 1860-1865, Ancestry.com.

¹⁰J. C. Allen, Alabama Deaths and Burials, 1881-1952, Ancestry.com.

¹¹“Town of Goldville Lures Would-Be-Gold Prospectors”, www.tuscaloosa news.com,

July 18, 2005. www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20050718/NEWS/507180324?p=2&tc=pg

¹²Joe Waters, “Gold Mining History of Tallapoosa County, Alabama”,

www.jovikri.tripod.com/public-index.html

¹³“Goldville, Alabama,” Wikipedia.com.

¹⁴Joe Waters, “Gold Mining History.”

¹⁵“Goldville, Alabama,” Wikipedia.com.

¹⁶See www.townofnewsite.com.

¹⁷“California Gold Rush,” Wikipedia.

¹⁸Joe Waters, “Gold Mining History.”

¹⁹See www.censusviewer.com/city/Al/newsite and www.censusviewer.com/city/Al/goldville.