

The Legendary Beck Sale

The son of a banker, John Beck amassed an impressive collection of nearly 4,000 U.S. and world coins.



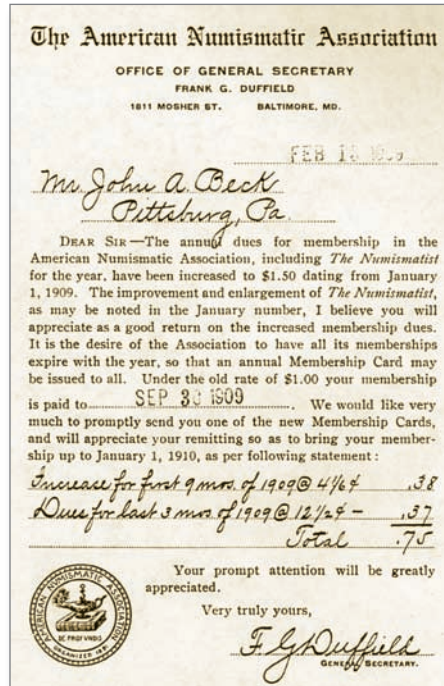
PENNSYLVANIA numismatist John Andrew Beck was born on January 5, 1859, in the mountain community of Chestnut Ridge in Western Pennsylvania, east of Morgantown, West Virginia. A collector of United States and world coins, Beck is remembered primarily for his outstanding collection of U.S. territorial coins and bars, and his excellent selection of early U.S. gold.

His father was in the salt business, a major industry at the time, and Beck was privileged to receive a private education at Saint Vincent College in Wheeling. The family reportedly lived some years in Texas, but was forced to leave because of Indian raids, eventually settling in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, just north of Pittsburgh.

The senior Beck directed several local banks, a few of which merged to form the Pittsburgh National Bank and Trust Company. It was the first to apply for a charter under the new National Bank Act, signed into law on February 25, 1863, but it was the 668th to receive one, on December 30, 1864.

It is not known exactly when John Beck developed an interest in numismatics. He is thought to have purchased coins from Henry Chapman, Farran Zerbe and Norman Schultz; some suspect he collaborated with other dealers, but this is unconfirmed. His collection went on the auction block 51 years after his death in 1924.

Handling the three-part sale, conducted between January 1975 and February 1977 on behalf of the Pittsburgh National Bank, were Abner Kreisberg and Jerry Cohen, doing

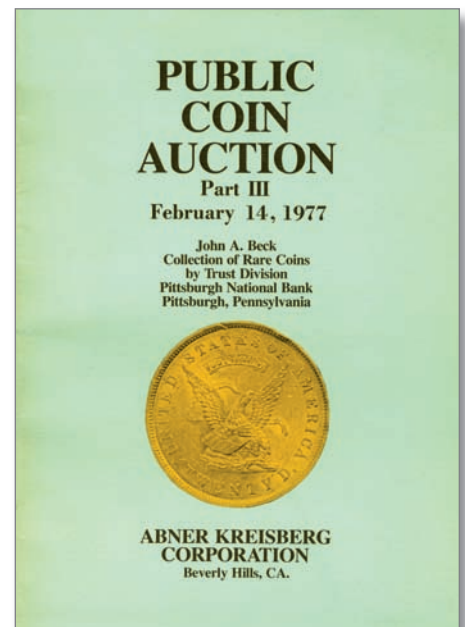


▲ John A. Beck (1859-1924) assembled an impressive cabinet of U.S. and world coins, which was auctioned in 1975-77. At the left is Beck's ANA dues receipt from 1909.

business as Quality Sales Corporation in Beverly Hills. Beck's 3,954 coins sold for \$3.2 million. His holdings included an 1819 half eagle, which brought \$50,000; an 1855 Kellogg & Company proof \$50, which realized \$120,000; and another 109 \$50 slugs of various varieties. A Choice Uncirculated 1792 half dime garnered \$12,500, while a Japanese 1725 gold oban of Kyoho sold for \$7,200.

In their catalog for the third and final sale, Kreisberg and Cohen noted:

The attendance at [the first and second sales] was evidence of the esteem in which the famous JOHN A. BECK COLLECTION is held. The letters from the successful bidders expressing their delight and pride of ownership were most rewarding. The pedigree "from the "JOHN A. BECK ◉



PHOTOS: ANA ARCHIVES & LIBRARY

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COLLECTION” will always command the respect of collectors . . . With the offering of Part III we would like to thank all who have made the selling of [this collection] one of the most memorable experiences in our long Professional Numismatic careers. We enjoyed cataloguing this great collection—removing the coins from their original Chapman envelopes and noting Mr. Beck had paid an astounding \$35.00 for 1795 Small Eagle \$5 (Lot 331 which realized \$3,500 in our January 1975 sale).

Nearly 20 years later, Heritage Auction Galleries of Dallas, Texas, offered three coins from Beck’s collection in its 1996 Long Beach, California, sale: an 1848 Seated Liberty dollar in Very Fine-30 and an 1877-CC Trade dollar in Very Good-10, which together brought \$495; and an 1874-S Trade dollar in Mint State-63, which realized \$1,210. *berman@money.org*

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