

The Many Talents of Christopher Bechtler

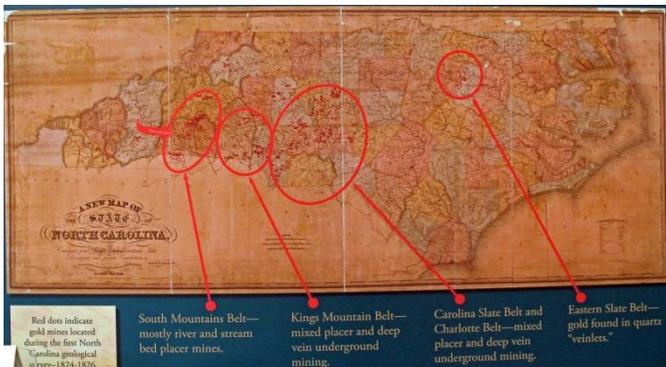
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Author's Note: This NIONSM article is the first in a planned series of articles that explores regional and local numismatic history. This series was inspired by a chance passing through of Rutherfordton, North Carolina, home of Christopher Bechtler. This encounter was reinforced a few months later when attending the South Carolina Numismatic Association's annual convention in October 2018. The Bechtler Mint Museum which is based in Rutherfordton had brought some of the displays from their facility to share with the patronage of the show. Additionally Ms. Betty Jenkins and Mr. Tim Callahan brought a collection of Bechtler coins to the Convention. Finally, the Author made a dedicated trip to Rutherfordton, where Ms. Dana Bradley, Docent of the Bechtler Museum, graciously gave him a detailed tour which was the genesis of this article and a related presentation. The Author is grateful to all those who

helped him learn about the Bechtlers and their coins, and he hopes you, the Reader, will also enjoy learning more about Numismatics In Our Neighborhood!SM

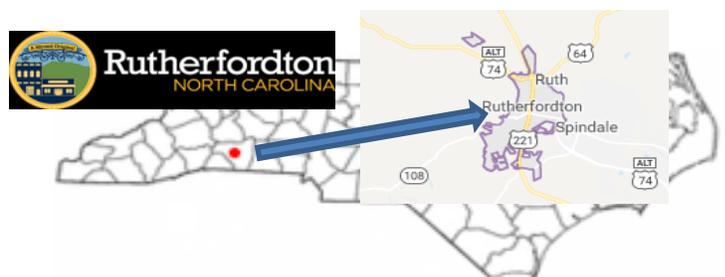
The year was 1830 and the small remote rural town of Rutherfordton, North Carolina was abuzz with the news of the arrival of a family of German immigrants, master craftsman recently immigrated to the US, who were going to try their luck as gold miners in the North Carolina mountains. So begins the amazing journey of the Bechtlers, Christopher and his sons Augustus and Charles, and his nephew Carl Christ (aka Christopher Jr.). But the journey really began in 1782 at Pforzheim Germany when Christopher Bechtler was born. Pforzheim was known as "Die Goldstadt" or the City of Gold, given its location in the gold bearing Black Forest region of southwest Germany.



Bechtler was from a fairly well-to-do local family and consequently he received training at the local vocational school and became a watchmaker and a jeweler. It is uncertain whether this training spawned his interest in gold, but it is known that he designed, built, patented, and put to use a "gold washing machine" - a sluice used to separate gold from Stubensand. Stubensand was sand used as an abrasive in household cleaners at the time, and it contained trace amounts of gold. By the late 1820s Bechtler gave up mining Stubensand

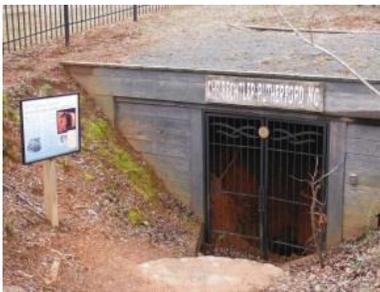
because the results were meager. He decided to immigrate to the United States, and in 1829 he, his sons, and nephew arrived in Philadelphia where they established a jewelry shop. This endeavor was short-lived, as the Bechtlers soon moved to the remote mountains of western North Carolina to enter the gold trade.

North Carolina at the time was experiencing a gold rush which began in 1799 and continued until 1849. This activity saw huge economic impact for the State, second only to Agriculture. At its peak there were over 600 gold mines in operation in western and central North Carolina. North Carolina gold also had a national impact in that from 1804 to 1828 all US gold coins were minted using North Carolina gold.



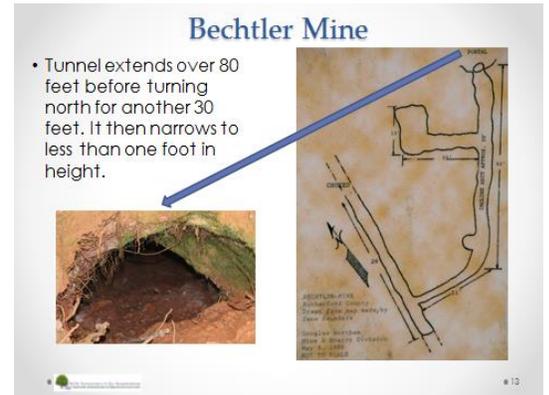
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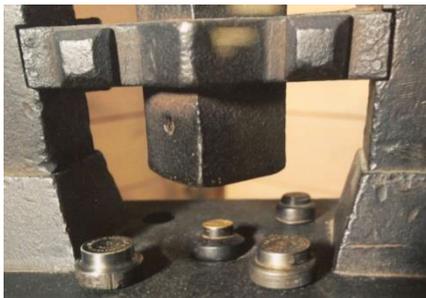


Upon arrival in Rutherfordton in 1830 Bechtler purchased several thousand acres of land and began mining and assaying gold. He established a home site, assay office, and mint approximately 3.5 miles north of Rutherfordton. Bechtler lived on this site until 1838 when he moved into his new home in town. The mint and mine site is now a Historic Park, and little trace remains in the terms of artifacts. In fact,

historians, researchers, and archeologists have been unable to locate the exact home site and mint building. Shown at left is what is believed to be the entrance to Bechtler's mine. Shown at right is a close-up of the actual entryway and a hand drawn map of the tunnels accessed through this entrance. Needless to say, the tunnel was very small – imagine miners working in this tight space, illuminated by oil lamp light, with the fire burning available oxygen – clearly a high risk activity!



While raw gold was abundant, gold coins – both Federal and State issue – were scarce and this made commerce and economic growth difficult. With Government approval, in July 1831 the Bechtlers began striking \$2.50 and \$5.00 coins using hand-crafted dies and a manual screw press (actual press shown at left). By 1832 the family had begun striking \$1.00 gold coins, 17 years before the US Government minted the first “official” gold dollar! Their fee for minting coins or refining gold? A mere 2.5%! The family was very industrious and in just 9 years they minted \$2,241,840.50 in coins. It is uncertain as to the exact number of each denomination produced, but it is known that they produced over a million coins in this period. By hand, one at a time!



Their peak production period was the 21 months from August

1836 to May 1838 when they minted \$770,240. At times they produced \$4,000 to \$5,000 per week! They also refined almost \$1.4 million in raw gold that was not minted into coinage. Between January 1831 and February 1840 the Bechtlers handled \$3,625,479 of gold (equivalent to \$105,337,250 in 2019 dollars) as compared to the US Government which handled only \$3M in gold in the same period. Shown here is a table of the Bechtler's output, as documented in an 1844 audit.

Bechtler Mint Output From 1831 to 1840							
"The following statement, as to Bechtler's coinage, is extracted from his books, and may therefore be relied on as correct:" ^[1]							
From	To	\$ Coined (Face Value)	penny weight (dwts) refined	\$ Refined (80 cents/dwt)	Total \$ (face value)	\$ Coined / Day	\$ Refined / Day
Jan 1831	Dec 1834	\$109,732.50	395,804	\$316,643.20	\$426,375.70	90	258
Dec 1834	Dec 1835	\$695,896.00	711,583	\$569,266.40	\$1,265,162.40	2223	1819
Dec 1835	Aug 1836	\$471,322.50	397,410	\$317,928.00	\$789,250.50	2277	1314
Aug 1836	May 1838	\$770,239.50	201,141	\$160,912.80	\$931,152.30	1408	294
May 1838	Feb 1840	\$194,560.00	24,060	\$19,248.00	\$213,808.00	354	35
		\$2,241,750.50	1,729,998	\$1,383,998.40	\$3,625,748.90		

[1] Source: Merchants' Magazine, Volume 11, July 1844: 62–65.

The fineness of the coins minted by the Bechtlers varied between 20 and 22 carat. Modern day assay of coins minted by Augustus Bechtler found the coins to be within 1.5% of stated gold content, which is excellent performance for the technology and production methods of the time.

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PCGS CoinFacts Catalog of Regular Strike Bechtler Coins	
Coin	Auction Record
1834 \$5 K-16 C Bechtler, RE RUTHERFORD	\$8,751 • N82 • 11-02-2014 • David Lawrence RC
1834 \$5 K-17a C. Bechtler RE RUTHERFORD	\$67,563 • AU58 • 03-09-2017 • Kagin's
1834 \$5 K-17 C Bechtler, PE RUTHERFORD	\$36,000 • MS62 • 03-21-2018 • Stack's Bowers
1834 \$5 K-17b No Star or C. RUTHERFORD	\$82,250 • XF45 • 03-09-2017 • Kagin's
1834 \$5 K-18 C. Bechtler RUTHERF	\$22,325 • AU53 • 03-09-2017 • Kagin's
1834 \$5 K-19 C. Bechtler20 Dist. RUTHERF.	\$48,175 • XF45 • 03-09-2017 • Kagin's
C Bechtler \$5 K-20 134 Grains, Star	\$29,900 • MS62 • 01-05-2006 • Heritage Auctions
C Bechtler \$5 K-21 GEORGIA 128 Grains Colon, RUTHERFORD	\$115,000 • AU58 • 01-15-2008 • Stack's
C Bechtler \$5 K-22 GEORGIA 128 Grains RUTHERFORD	\$52,875 • MS63 • 03-09-2017 • Kagin's
C Bechtler \$5 K-23 128 Grs., 22 Carat RUTHERF.	\$40,950 • MS62 • 06-03-2013 • Bonham's
C Bechtler \$5 K-26 134 Grains, No Star	\$73,438 • AU53 • 03-09-2017 • Kagin's
C Bechtler \$5 K-31 Chapman Restrike	\$40,825 • PR62 • 04-17-2008 • David Lawrence RC
C Bechtler \$5 K-31 Unofficial Restrike Gilt Brass	\$27,025 • MS63 • 03-09-2017 • Kagin's
A Bechtler G\$1 K-24 27 Grains, 21 Carat Plain Edge	\$14,100 • MS63 • 04-23-2014 • Heritage Auctions
A Bechtler \$1 K-25 27 Grains, 21 Carat Reeded Edge	\$21,150 • MS60 • 04-23-2014 • Heritage Auctions
A Bechtler \$5 K-27 134 Grs., 21 Carat	\$33,550 • VF35 • 06-10-1991 • Bowers & Merena
A Bechtler \$5 K-28 128 Grains 22 Carat	\$52,900 • MS61 • 03-14-2006 • American Numismatic Rarities
A Bechtler \$5 K-29 141 Grs., 20 Carat	\$31,625 • MS61 • 08-18-2011 • Stack's Bowers
A Bechtler \$5 K-30 Chapman Restrike	\$44,275 • PR66 • 01-01-2009 • Bowers & Merena

Three denominations and three fineness resulted in 35 Regular Strike coins as catalogued by PCGS CoinFacts. PCGS also lists 3 restrikes. Shown to the left are the varieties of coins minted, as well as the auction record for each type. Coins minted by Christopher are marked with "C. Bechtler" while those minted by Augustus are marked "A. Bechtler".

Bechtler coins are referred to as "era" coins because they were not dated. Three eras are typically referred to: 1831 – 1837; 1837 – 1842; and 1842 – 1850.

PCGS CoinFacts Catalog of Regular Strike Bechtler Coins	
Coin	Auction Record
C Bechtler \$1 K-1 30 Grains, RE	\$37,375 • MS63 • 08-09-2007 • Heritage Auctions
C Bechtler \$1 K-1a 30 Grains, PE	\$14,100 • XF45 • 03-09-2017 • Kagin's
C Bechtler \$1 K-2 28 Grains High RE	\$48,875 • MS64 • 08-09-2007 • Heritage Auctions
C Bechtler \$1 K-2a 28 Grains High PE	\$20,563 • AU55 • 03-09-2017 • Kagin's
C Bechtler \$1 K-3 28 Grain Center, RE	\$34,500 • MS61 • 08-09-2007 • Heritage Auctions
C Bechtler \$1 K-3a 28 Grain Center, PE	\$11,750 • XF45 • 03-09-2017 • Kagin's
C Bechtler \$1 K-4 N Reversed	\$29,900 • MS63 • 08-09-2007 • Heritage Auctions
C Bechtler \$2.50 K-10 67 Grains, 21 Carat	\$35,250 • MS62 • 04-23-2014 • Heritage Auctions
C Bechtler \$2.50 K-11 64 Grains, 22 Carat	\$43,125 • MS62 • 08-09-2007 • Heritage Auctions
C Bechtler \$2.50 K-12 Even 22	\$76,375 • MS63 • 03-09-2017 • Kagin's
C Bechtler \$2.50 K-13 70 Grains, 20 Carat	\$41,125 • MS62 • 03-09-2017 • Kagin's
C Bechtler \$2.50 K-5 No 75G, Fine Beads	\$44,944 • AU50 • 03-09-2017 • Kagin's
C Bechtler \$2.50 K-6 No 75G, Coarse Beads	\$54,625 • CH AU • 06-12-2002 • Stack's
C Bechtler \$2.50 K-7 CAROLINA at top	\$58,163 • Genuine • 03-09-2017 • Kagin's
C Bechtler \$2.50 K-8 Beaded, with 75G	\$123,375 • MS63 • 03-09-2017 • Kagin's
C Bechtler \$2.50 K-9 75 Grains w/Star	\$91,063 • XF45 • 03-09-2017 • Kagin's
C Bechtler \$5 K-14 Beaded no 150 G	\$3,190 • XF • 05-01-1990 • Stack's
C Bechtler \$5 K-15 Beaded w/150 G	\$118,675 • MS62 • 11-08-2013 • Stack's Bowers
1834 \$5 K-16a C. Bechtler, PE RUTHERFORD	\$85,188 • AU55 • 03-09-2017 • Kagin's



Some coins contain the date August 1, 1834. This is not the date of manufacture, rather this is the effective date of the Coinage Act of 1834. This Act changed the official US silver to gold ratio from 15:1 (set in 1792) to 16:1. This effectively reduced the fineness of US gold coins and the Bechtlers wanted to reflect this change by adding the date to identify the reduced weight coin.



It is believed the Bechtlers did this because they did not want to run afoul of the US Treasury. However, the US Mint apparently did not share this same concern because it did not make any indication of the reduced weight on the gold coins it minted following passage of this Act. (In subsequent issues of silver coins the Mint used arrows to signify changes in silver content.)

As mentioned earlier, there were three restrikes of Bechtler coins, two regarded as "official" and one as "unofficial". All three restrikes were done at the behest of Henry Chapman in the early 1900s. Chapman was a professional coin dealer and around 1908 he came across three of Bechtler's \$5 coin dies – one obverse and two reverse. He had a limited number of proof restrikes of the K-30 (Augustus) and K-31 (Christopher) Bechtler varieties produced.

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Since he had one Obverse die and two reverse dies the reverse design varied in these restrikes. The third and “unofficial” restrrike was made using the K-31 die on gilt brass. It appears Chapman wanted to experiment with alternative materials for coins. As can be seen in the previous image, the two gold restrrike examples have an obvious die crack between the six and seven o’clock position, whereas the gilt brass coin does not. This indicates the gilt brass coin was struck before the gold coins.



C Bechtler \$1 K-4-N Reversed, PCGS MS63, Courtesy PCGS CoinFacts

As can be expected when minting coins by hand, errors abound. Many (perhaps most) Bechtler coins have rotated dies – this “error” was very common. Other errors are less common and command a substantial premium; such as the unique specimen (above) minted using a cancelled die (the scratches made to deface the die are readily visible on the coin). Another example is the series of coins with a backwards “N” in the word “ONE” (left).



Attendees at the 2018 edition of the South Carolina Numismatic Association’s Annual Convention were treated to what is believed to be the largest collection of Bechtler coins in existence. This 53-coin NGC certified collection was assembled by Mr. Norman Jenkins (right) of Forest City, North



Betty Jenkins with collection of 53 Bechtler Coins

Carolina, and was brought to the Convention by his wife, Mrs. Betty Jenkins (left) and their “adopted son” Mr. Tim Callahan (below). These two wonderful individuals shared a wealth of knowledge and allowed the Author unfettered access to the collection. The Author is very thankful for their courteous accommodation to help make this article a reality!



Norman Jenkins with three Bechtler Coins

As an aside, Mr. Callahan also brought for display an entire collection of knives from the Bechtler Mint Knife Club. This club was started in 1983 and closed up shop in 2007. During this period 27 specialty knives (annual issues and some special editions) were commissioned from W. R. Case & Sons. Each knife has the Club’s logo and a replica of a Bechtler \$5 coin. Tim relayed that due to the rarity of some of the knives (as few



Tim Callahan with Bechtler Mint Knives Club Knives



as 43 were made in some years) it took him 10 years to assemble the complete collection, and it may be the only complete set in existence.

In addition to their mining and minting activities, the Bechtlers were also accomplished jewelers and gunsmiths, having learned these skills while still living in Germany.

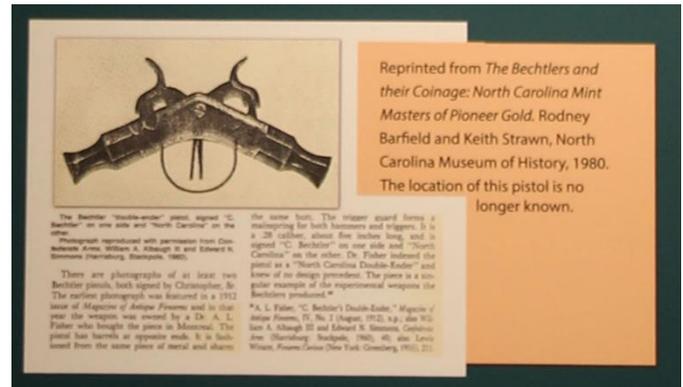
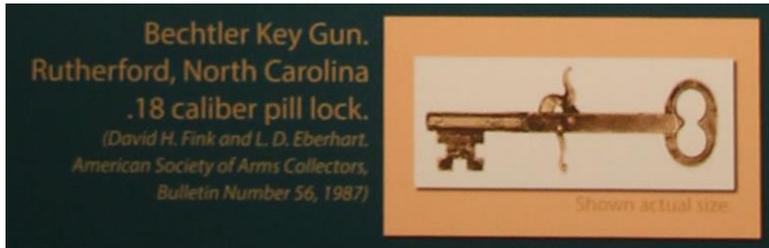
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The innovation they exhibited in designing and building tools for mining and minting was also applied to gun smithing. These skills served them well when in 1838 the US Government opened a branch mint in Charlotte NC and the demand for Bechtler's minting services began to decline. Bechtler guns were renowned for their quality and ingenuity. Shown here is the only known surviving Bechtler rifle.. While it looks like a double barrel shotgun, it is in fact a double barrel rifle that the Author estimates to be at least .50 caliber – see inset. This weapon was made by Augustus Bechtler and his name is engraved on the side plate. "North Carolina" is inlaid in gold on the top.



Additional novelty weapons manufactured included a .18 caliber "key" gun; a double ended pistol (not quite sure how this would be safely operated), boot pistols, and a walking stick pistol!



Bechtler's list of jewelry offerings included necklaces, earrings, brooches, rings, buttons, cufflinks, watches, lapel pins and many decorative art items such as candlesticks and hand mirrors.

Christopher Bechtler died at the age of 60, in December 1842 or January 1843. His son Augustus assumed control of the business but he passed away soon after his father, at the age of 34 (the records are not clear but his passing was in late 1843 or early 1844.) Christopher's second son Charles then took over the business, but he died in 1846 while in his 20's. It is widely suspected that all three died from heavy metal poisoning resulting from their mining, refining, and minting activities.



Christopher's nephew and adopted son – Carl Christ (given name) / Christopher Jr. (chosen name) – continued minting coins but exited the business between 1849 and 1852. He lived in Rutherfordton until at least 1857, and records indicate that by 1860 he was operating a jewelry store in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Readers interested in learning more about the life and times of the Bechtlers, as well as wanting an opportunity to see first-hand some of the coins and other items they made, have the opportunity to do so by visiting the Bechtler House Museum in Rutherfordton. Ms. Dana Bradley, (right), Director of Rutherfordton Outdoor Coalition and Docent of the Museum was instrumental in providing detailed information for this article as she graciously toured the Author through the facility and the life and times of the Bechtlers.



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The museum contains displays on the Bechtlers and many artifacts from their life - from the actual screw press they used in minting their coins to the 85-key family piano. The Author is extremely grateful to Ms. Bradley for sharing her time and knowledge to help the Author fully comprehend the achievements of the Bechtlers!



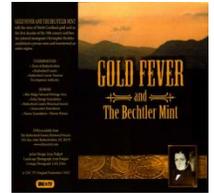
The museum is also the Headquarters of the North Carolina Gold Trail. It is located at 130 W. 6th Street in Rutherfordton. Its hours of operation are:

- Friday from 10:00a -1:00p
- Saturday from 10:00a - 3:00p.

It may be possible to arrange for a tour at another time - interested persons should call 828-351-9575 to check on availability of staff to conduct a tour outside of standard hours.

Sources and References:

Additional information on the Bechtlers is widely available on the internet. One excellent and comprehensive website is found at <http://goldfever.unctv.org/video>. This website contains the 28 minute video *Gold Fever and The Bechtler Mint* produced by the University of North Carolina. The website also has many video extras, a photo gallery, and links to additional resources.



Original "On Location" Research By Steve Kuhl:

- Interviews with Mrs. Betty Jenkins and Mr. Tim Callahan, 2018 SCNA Convention, Greenville SC, October 27, 2018
- Interview of Ms. Dana Bradley and Tour of the Bechtler Mint Museum, Rutherfordton, NC, January 18, 2019
- Photos taken of museum items and displays were courtesy of Ms. Dana Bradley and the Bechtler Mint Museum.

Original Photography by Clarissa Kuhl and Steve Kuhl.

History of North Carolina and Rutherfordton:

- Carolina Gold Rush: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carolina_Gold_Rush
- A History of Rutherfordton, NC, By Robin Spencer Lattimore
- North Carolina: The Golden State, written by Caron Myers, 2012 [<https://www.ourstate.com/north-carolina-gold-rush/>]
- Location of Rutherfordton, North Carolina. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rutherfordton,_North_Carolina
- North Carolina Geological Survey, J. A. Holmes State Geologist, Bulletin No. 9 Monazite and Monazite Deposits In North Carolina, By Henry B. C. Nitze Assistant Geologist, 1895

Articles on Christopher Bechtler:

- Gold Fever and the Bechtler Mint: <http://goldfever.unctv.org/bechtler>
- Christopher Bechtler https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_Bechtler
- Extensive Article on Bechtler available at: "Christopher Bechtler." (2019) In Immigrant Entrepreneurship, Retrieved March 19, 2019, from Immigrant Entrepreneurship: <http://www.immigrantentrepreneurship.org/entry.php>

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Coin & Coin Production Information

- Production of Bechtler Mint Jan 1831 to Feb 1840: Merchant Magazine - Volume 11, Number I, July 1844 - Bechtler production is on page 64
- PCGS CoinFacts Catalog of Bechtler Coins: <https://www.pcgs.com/coinfacts/category/bechtler-n-carolina-georgia-1831-1850/1682>
- Chapman Restrike information: Heritage Auctions : <https://coins.ha.com/itm/territorial-gold/c-bechtler-5-restrike-pr65-pcgs/a/444-2144.s>
- The Bechtlers and Their Coinage: North Carolina Mint Masters of Pioneer Gold. North Carolina Museum of History, 1980
- Dave Bowers article on contemporary visit in 1837: Trekking to private Bechtler Mint in North Carolina: Q. David Bowers (www.coinworld.com/news/us-coins/2016/02/trekking-to-private-bechtler-mint-in-north-carolina.html#)
- A Guide Book of United States Coins, 2019 (aka The Red Book); R. S. Yeoman