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PRESS RELEASE
17 February 2012

For Immediate
Release
Contact: Missy
Groppel
202-337-2288
Dumbarton House

Dumbarton House Discovers Ha' Penny Coin in Mortar

February 17, 2012 - Georgetown, Washington, D.C. -- An English half-penny or "ha' penny" [HAY penn-knee] dated 1775 was found last week in the mortar of historic Dumbarton House *minutes* following the first attempts to collect mortar samples for research. This unexpected discovery is a fast "pay day" following the receipt of a grant from The National Trust for Historic Preservation's Dorothea de Schweinitz Fund for the District of Columbia for the study of the mortars used in the building of the house.



"If you haven't got a penny, a ha' penny will do; if you haven't got a ha' penny, then God bless you!" So says a well-known nursery rhyme or holiday carol. The coin, found within the mortar of the exterior western wall of the house, is believed to be an English half-penny dated 1775. A classical profile of King George with the words "GEORGIUS III REX" appears on one side, and a classical female "BRITANNIA" and date of 1775 on the reverse.

Because the coin was found in the mortar, it suggests that the wall was built after 1775, no surprise since the house's original construction is dated to 1798 or so. Until further study, there is no evidence to the coin's English authenticity, or if it may be an American "counterfeit." In the 1770s, coin counterfeiting was rampant in England and its subject colonies, and a felony, though counterfeits were commonly accepted as legal tender in the colonies.

The builder's reasoning for placing an English coin in the house's mortar will likely remain an unsolved mystery but oral tradition supports the theory that this was a common practice among builders to place a coin in the hearth for good luck; other items related to witchcraft and superstition have been found behind hearths or lodged on a stone in a chimney perhaps placed as talismans (adapted from Farmers, Fishermen and Flax Spinners, authored by Elizabeth Gale, 1983).

"I saw a shiny glimmer in the mortar which just drew my eye to the spot for our first investigative mortar sample, and we were amazed to quickly 'unveil' a coin, a truly exciting moment!" said facilities manager Adam Chase.

The mortar sample was collected for the study of the house's historic mortar to help identify the mortar recipes used to build the house. Dumbarton House has undergone multiple phases of construction since it was built 1798-1800, including: the house's extraordinary move and construction of the wings in 1915, the restoration of the 1930's, and the addition built in 1991. Identifying the mortar recipes for each phase will be essential to the preservation of the house's historic brick facades. The mortar study was made possible by a National Trust Preservation Fund grant from the Dorothea de Schweinitz Fund for the District of Columbia.

For additional information, please contact Dumbarton House.

The Dumbarton House is a Federal period historic house museum, circa 1800, preserved to educate the public about life in Washington, D.C., during the early years of the Republic. Since 1928, Dumbarton House has been owned and maintained as headquarters for *The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America*, a women's organization that actively promotes our national heritage through historic preservation, patriotic service and educational projects. The museum, open to the public in 1932, is today open for tours Tuesday through Sunday, eleven in the morning until three in the afternoon (last entry, two-forty-five). The museum hosts a year-round calendar of public events, lectures, concerts, balls, exhibitions, family activities, summer camps, and rental events. www.DumbartonHouse.org



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