



The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

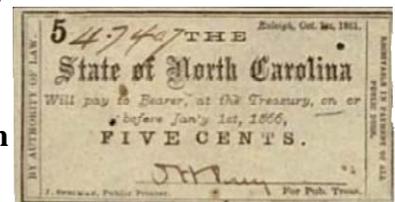
A Counterfeiting Scam in Civil War Wilmington

By **David Norris**

Counterfeiting was rampant in 19th century America, and never more widespread than during the Civil War. Paper money from national, state, and local governments flooded the South, along with other bills printed by banks and businesses. It was nearly impossible to keep up with that many kinds of money, making it easy for counterfeiters to pass off fakes of the unfamiliar bills. Many of the bills bore plain and simple designs, and were easy to copy. Newspapers warned readers constantly about new counterfeits, giving details to look for to detect the fakes. Sometimes, the papers had to admit the counterfeits were better than the originals!

Lots of money, quite a bit of it counterfeit, poured through Wilmington, North Carolina's largest city and the South's most important blockade-running port. The *Wilmington Journal* warned its readers about a very low-tech counterfeiting scam that was hitting businesses in town.

In fact, the editor of the *Journal* was downright disgusted at himself for falling for the "newest dodge" in counterfeiting. Flim-flammers in Wilmington were changing new five-cent North Carolina notes, dated October 1861, into fifty-cent notes by adding a zero. "In some cases," warned the paper, "the thing is done pretty neatly with a pencil. In other cases it is done pretty clumsily, by cutting out letters and figures from a newspaper, handbill, or book, and pasting them on the face of the bill." One of the latter, so crudely done that it was not "calculated to bear any examination at all," was accepted by the *Journal* and then paid out again. "The person to whom it was paid was luckier than we, for he remembered where he got it and brought it back." What made it even worse was that the story was spread to the western end of the state by being picked up by the *Asheville News* on June 12, 1862.



Shown here is a copy of one of the unaltered five cent notes of 1861. Measuring only 3 1/8" by 1 5/8", it was printed by the state printer, John Spelman (who was also the editor of the *Raleigh State Journal*). They were printed only on one side, but each note was hand-signed and numbered. Even in 1861, that was a lot of work for five cents!

