ABSTRACT

The antebellum era was a time of paper—there were newspapers and magazines to read, advertising bills to recognize, and money in the pocket to evaluate. Both the bank note companies and art unions emphasized the quality of the artists they hired, and publicized these works for their taste and nationalizing sentiments. These groups set out to produce a product that encouraged consumer confidence in paper in exchange for something more lasting, such as a painting in oil or a gold coin. The link between these two ideas and the creators of that ineffable quality that lent confidence to both the bank note and the fine art engraving was the engraver himself. Navigating this modern, paper economy in both realms were engravers such as Alfred Jones (1819-1900), a man who made his way in the financial and art worlds, and whose ambitions and career serve as a case study to explore the rapid changes in the demand for images during the Nineteenth Century.

Chapter one situates Jones and his colleagues in their historical era and illuminate how cultural, political, and technological advances created a market where engraving could flourish. Chapter two examines Jones’s role within the art unions of the day, and
how those groups advertised the skill of engravers, such as Jones, to bolster notions of value in the prints they issued. Chapter three looks more closely at the images created by engravers, and investigates their role in establishing and reinforcing a national visual lexicon that could unify the idea of the nation even as it was unraveling. Chapter four discusses the confusion surrounding counterfeit engravings during the antebellum period and the efforts bank notes companies undertook to highlight the skill of their engravers to reassure the general public of their worth.

The burins of Jones and his cohort, through their work in fine arts organizations and bank note companies created images accessible to the average citizen, images these consumers could recognize and assign a value. They applied their talents to works on paper that illustrated the making of the American self in the years before the Civil War.