

THE BANK NOTES of ALGERIA and TUNISIA

by Steve Cox

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The *Banque de l'Algérie* (later named the *Banque de l'Algérie et de la Tunisie*) was the issuing authority for Algeria and Tunisia throughout the French period of control. These two nations sit at the northern edge of a vast territory once controlled by France, including Morocco, French West Africa, and French Equatorial Africa. Algeria and Tunisia are among the oldest French possessions in Africa, and have by far the longest history in terms of bank note issues.



Many think of the north African region as desert, and although the southern three quarters of Algeria and Tunisia are covered by the Sahara this isn't typical of the geography found in the more populated areas. The vast majority of Algerians and Tunisians live along the northern coast and just inland from the Mediterranean. The land here is tantalizingly fertile and has been a grain and fruit-growing region since antiquity. For North Americans the closest comparable is California.

The French began their involvement in North Africa during the 1830's. The struggle to bring Algeria under French control lasted over forty years, but by the beginning of the 1850's the French had gained enough of a foothold in Algeria to establish the *Banque de l'Algérie*. By the end of the century, France had added Tunisia to its African territories.

The French presence in North Africa was generally unwelcome, and agitation for independence never really abated throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By the early twentieth century, French North Africa had developed into a society strictly divided along racial lines. European colonists, comprising about ten percent of the population, held the vast majority of wealth and power. Moslems were denied the right to French citizenship unless they renounced their faith, making widespread assimilation impossible.

World War II put the French colonial system in North Africa to the test. The Axis-backed French Vichy government had control of Algeria and Tunisia from 1940. In 1942, Allied forces landed in Algeria and squeezed the Axis forces into a defensive posture in Tunisia. By May 1943, both Algeria and Tunisia were back under Allied control. Throughout the war, many native Algerians and Tunisians fought along side their Allied comrades. Those that survived the experience came home with a renewed sense of entitlement, having been exposed to other Allied combatants who enjoyed significantly more freedom than allowed the native North Africans.

After the end of World War II, the cries for independence became louder. Violent terrorist attacks, which had already been taking place in Algeria, became more frequent. By 1952, widespread violence had broken out in Tunisia as well. France was still drained from the effects of the Second World War and simply didn't have the strength to maintain control. Eventually after lengthy negotiations, France conceded Tunisian autonomy, and in 1956, Tunisia declared full independence from France. In Algeria, the road to freedom was bloodier, with a protracted war lasting from 1954 until 1962. On 5 July 1962, Algeria formally declared its independence from France, ending well over a century of French rule in North Africa.

GETTING STARTED

The paper money of Algeria and Tunisia can be somewhat overwhelming to the new collector. Issued over a period of over one hundred years, there are a myriad of types and varieties to sort out. The bank notes issued during the period of French control were for the most part printed by the *Banque de France*. A few exceptional notes were printed by other contracted printers, either in France or locally. One can collect the notes of the two nations separately (as listed in the [Standard Catalog](#)) but this can be rather awkward as the notes were placed in circulation by a single bank. This fact creates so much overlap between the issues of the two countries that it is almost impossible to separate them. A more logical approach (although not without difficulties) is to intermingle the notes of the two nations, ordering them chronologically. That's the approach I've always used, and will follow that scheme in this article.

The notes of French Algeria and Tunisia can be grouped broadly into six large series based on their dates of printing:

- *the early issues (1851 through the 1870's)*
- *the blue series (1873 through the 1920's)*
- *the multicolor series (1913 through the early 1940's)*
- *the Second World War issues (1938 through the mid 1940's)*
- *the post-war issues (1946 through 1959)*
- *the nouveaux francs issues (1959 through the 1960's)*

The *Banque de l'Algérie* was founded in 1851 and almost immediately began issuing bank notes. Unfortunately, these early issues are prohibitively rare. Muszynski and Kolsky list these types in detail in their reference *Les Billets du Maghreb et du Levant* (2002). All were printed by the *Banque de France*, some in black on white paper, some in black on greenish-blue paper, and some later issues in blue on white paper.



For most of us, a collection of the notes from the *Banque de l'Algérie* will start with the so-called “blue series” of 1873. A basic type set from 1873 to 1962 will include seventy-one notes. Even this abbreviated set is a challenge to collect, as several of the notes required are very rare even in low grade. If you wanted to ramp-up the level of challenge you could build a more complete type set, including all watermark varieties and overprint varieties. The next level might include the collecting of notes by signature variety. Just *try* putting together the over two hundred notes required – it has never been done to my knowledge. The precise number of notes in this set is unknown as some of the signature combinations haven't yet been reported for certain denominations.

Beyond this, there are innumerable variants in color, printing quality, and paper quality that can be studied and collected. What's more, for most of the notes there are many dates known to exist, and many others that probably haven't yet been discovered.

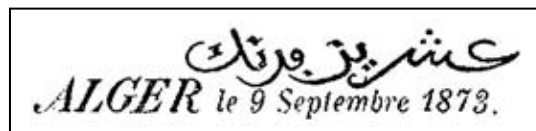
The BLUE SERIES



Two examples from the blue series: a 1000 francs note dated 1924 and a 20 francs note dated 1873

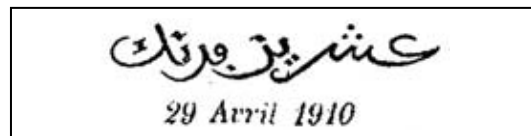
Les types bleus (or “blue series”) are the first really collectable issues, and date from 1873 up to as late as 1925. These notes were designed in the early 1870's by the French artist Guillaume Alphonse Cabasson. Cabasson's designs were typical of French notes from this period, based on Greco-Roman allegory and rather generic instead of being directly related with the place of issue. The pale blue ink used in this series was selected in the 1860's by the *Banque de France* to thwart photographic counterfeits (previously the bank had printed notes in black).

The earliest issues of the blue series (up through 1901) carried the city name *ALGER* immediately preceding the date of issue.



Later issues (after 1901) lack this feature but are otherwise identical in appearance. The issues with *ALGER* were printed in denominations of twenty, fifty, one hundred, five hundred, and one thousand francs. Five francs notes were also printed during the pre-1901 period, but lack the distinguishing characteristic of the name *ALGER* printed on the notes.

The later (after 1901) issues without "ALGER" are far more common. These notes also occur in denominations of five, twenty, fifty, one hundred, five hundred, and one thousand francs. By



denomination, the most common notes of this series are the five, five hundred, and one thousand francs issues. Undoubtedly, the five francs is common due to its relatively high printing (about 100 million notes). The higher denomination five hundred and one thousand francs notes, although printed in much lower quantities, were more likely to be preserved in decent condition due to the fact that they were generally stored away in bank vaults. In the early 1920's one thousand francs was worth over \$700 in modern currency. To give some perspective on how much money this was in the local economy, one thousand francs represented more than a skilled laborer's annual wage at the time. The real rarities of this series are the mid-value notes – in particular the twenty and fifty francs issues – which are very difficult to find in any grade. These notes were printed in modest quantities, circulated frequently, and then were redeemed and destroyed.

The MULTICOLOR SERIES

There finally came a time when the security provided by single-color printing became inadequate for the *Banque de l'Algérie*. The first multicolor issues were phased in gradually, beginning with the printing of a new 50 francs note in 1913, and almost immediately followed in 1914 by a new multicolor 20 francs note. In 1921 production of a new 100 francs note began; in 1924, a 5 francs note; and finally, in 1926, 500 and 1000 francs notes. In the introduction of the multicolor series we come up against the difficulty of examining notes in discrete "series". The earliest multicolor series notes to be released into circulation were the twenty and fifty francs notes, first paid out by the *Banque de l'Algérie* in 1918. The last multicolor series notes to make its debut was the five hundred francs issue, which wasn't released into circulation until 1938... twenty years after the twenty and fifty francs notes! Throughout this period the blue series and multicolor series notes would have circulated side-by-side. The multicolor series notes are remarkable for the fact that they display elements of local culture rather than just stylized allegorical images. The vignettes include people in local costume, native flora, a view of Algiers harbor and its Grand Mosque, and a camel loaded for a trans-Sahara caravan.

While more available than the "blue series" notes, but finding a complete set of these notes in high grade is still quite a challenge. These notes saw hard use, and due to inflation even the higher denomination issues were pressed into more widespread use by the 1930's and 1940's. The French franc was under great pressure during the period of issue of the multicolor series notes, its value eroding by about 80% from 1918 to the mid-1930's.



Two very rare notes from the multicolor series: an early 50 francs (blue and violet) dated 1913 and a 500 francs dated 1926 and overprinted TUNISIE

SECOND WORLD WAR ISSUES

Quite a number of changes were implemented by the *Banque de l'Algérie* between the years just prior to the Second World War up through the war's end. In the simplest terms, the dimensions of all denominations were reduced and a new high denomination five thousand francs note was added. Looking closer at signatures and paper varieties brings forth a significantly greater degree of complexity to these wartime issues.

The issues of this time period can be confusing as they don't make up a coherent series as did their multicolor series and blue series predecessors. They are really just a loose gathering of miscellaneous notes that happened to circulate concurrently during the late 1930's and early 1940's. Stylistically speaking the notes fall into one of three categories:

- The notes designed by Carré and Simon, which have a colorful, almost cartoon-like quality very distinctive from previous issues.
- Reduced format versions of the multicolor series including 5, 20, 500 & 5000 francs note issues.
- Emergency issues and local wartime printings.



Wartime issues: Algeria 50 francs, 1938; Tunisia 500 francs, 1943; locally printed Algeria 5 francs, 1942

Color variants, printing quality and watermark varieties play a particularly important role in working out the bank note issues of this period. The bulk of these notes were issued under France's Vichy government, which had control of Algeria and Tunisia from 1940. In 1942 Allied forces landed in Algeria and squeezed the Axis forces into a defensive posture in Tunisia, and by May 1943 both Algeria and Tunisia were under Allied control. During this turbulent period resources were limited and the ability to produce high quality bank notes was neither a high priority nor an achievable goal. One of the most dramatic changes during this period is a drop in the quality of the paper. During the early years the access to fine watermarked paper was uninterrupted. In 1942 new paper with a simplistic lettered watermark reading BANQUE DE L'ALGERIE was placed into use. The new paper was somewhat coarse and proved inadequate for high quality printing but was used anyway. The fact that wartime restrictions in trade made it hard for the printers to obtain the usual ink supply didn't help matters either. The result was a sharp decline in the printing quality of notes during the period from 1942-1945.

POST-WAR ISSUES

While the Second World War was coming to an end, the violence in Algeria and Tunisia was still heading towards a climax. By 1952 widespread violence had broken out in Tunisia. France was still drained from the effects of the Second World War and was more concerned with incipient violence in its prize colony of Algeria. Eventually, after lengthy negotiations, France conceded Tunisian autonomy. In 1956 Tunisia declared

full independence from France. In Algeria, October 1954 was a watershed month with the formation of the *Front de la liberation nationale (FLN)* which was determined to win independence from France by whatever means were necessary. On 1 November 1954 the FLN coordinated an attack against a number of government and military installations. This event is considered the start of the Algerian war for independence, which would continue unabated through 1962.

It is ironic that during this time of civil war the *Banque de l'Algérie* issued some of its most beautifully designed bank notes. The notes were designed by some of France's most talented bank note designers, including Henri Cheffer, William Fel, and Robert Pougheon. The vignettes used feature local archeological sights combined with images from the "glory days" of ancient Roman North Africa. Frequently the designs were based on mosaics created as floor decorations in wealthy homes and public buildings during the Roman occupation.



Algeria 5000 francs, 1947; Tunisia 5000 francs, 1952; Tunisia 500 francs 1952

There is some confusion in catalog listings for these notes but this can be rectified by organizing these notes by bank title. The *Banque de l'Algérie* issued notes during the early post-war period for circulation in Algeria. A special series of notes issued under the title *Banque de l'Algérie / Tunisie* were issued for use in Tunisia. In 1949 the bank changed its name to the *Banque de l'Algérie et de la Tunisie*, and issued notes for both Algeria and Tunisia under this title. After Tunisia declared its independence in 1956 the bank reverted back to its original name *Banque de l'Algérie*.

THE “NEW FRANCS” ISSUES

In May 1958 rising concern that the French government was softening on the issue of Algerian nationalism caused the European colonists to combine forces with the French army against the government in Paris. Charles de Gaulle was returned to power by the end of the month, and on 28 September 1958 the French people confirmed by vote his new Fifth Republic. Most of France hoped that the new government would finally be able to achieve peace in Algeria without losing control of the colony. Among the many changes brought about by the Fifth Republic was the introduction of the “new franc”. From 1 January 1960 one hundred francs would be equivalent to one “new franc”. This move was a politically motivated strategy intended to bolster confidence in the failing French currency. After the revaluation the franc would once again have the same purchasing power it did at the beginning of World War I.



Old 10000 franc note overprinted with “100 nouveaux francs” and 5 new francs note, both from 1959-60.

To help prepare the public for the change, existing stocks of five hundred, one thousand, five thousand, and ten thousand francs notes were surcharged with their new values: five, ten, fifty, and one hundred “*nouveaux francs*”. These surcharged notes were placed in circulation in July of 1959. They remain some of the rarest issues from the *Banque de l'Algérie* as they were released for only a six-month period. During this time new stocks of notes denominated in *nouveaux francs* were being printed in preparation for release in 1960.

Even the new issue of notes denominated in *nouveaux francs* was destined for a short, hard life. These notes circulated during the height of the war between Algeria and France. They were the currency in use at the time of the Evian Agreement, which allowed Algerians a referendum to decide the question of independence. On 1 July

1962, Algerians voted over 360 to one in favor of independence from France. On 5 July 1962, independence was formally declared. The notes of the *Banque de l'Algérie* continued to circulate until the introduction of the Algerian dinar in 1964, thus ending the era of the franc in Algeria.



The initial series of Algerian dinar notes (issued by the Banque Centrale d'Algérie in 1964) followed the old French design format

Any readers interested in assistance with developing a collection of the notes of Algeria and Tunisia are encouraged to contact the author at cox.numis@comcast.net. Whether you're serious about assembling a complete collection or just interested in picking up one or two examples of these beautiful bank notes, you can't go wrong giving this interesting specialty area a try.