

Flying Eagle Cents

By the early 1850s, the large cent was becoming both unpopular and expensive to coin. The public disliked its rather large size (almost the size of a half dollar), and vendors refused to accept them. Moreover, copper prices had risen to the point where there was more than one cent's copper in each coin minted.

The Treasury sought alternatives. One suggestion called for the cent to be composed of billon, a mixture of copper and silver; these coins would also be holed as to keep cents at a decent size. However, trial pieces proved difficult to strike and the idea was dropped.

After examining Feuchtwanger cents that successfully circulated as hard times tokens, the Mint decided to change the new cents to a similar size. The Mint preferred a French bronze alloy (95% copper, remainder zinc and tin), but there was significant resistance to having the intrinsic value being only a fraction of its metallic value. After experimenting with other various metal compositions, the Mint decided on an alloy of 88% copper and 12% nickel. Ironically, the Mint changed the Indian cent composition to French bronze in 1864.

James Longacre was instructed to prepare designs for pattern coins. Initially, Longacre worked with Liberty head designs such as were common at the time and a number of pattern cents were struck in 1854 and 1855. By 1856 the Mint Director asked that a flying eagle design be prepared based on the dollar pattern prepared by Christian Gobrecht 1836-39. The model was likely Peter the eagle, a tame bird fed by Mint workers in the early 1830s until it was caught up in machinery and killed. The bird was stuffed, and is still displayed at the Philadelphia Mint.

The wreath on the reverse was previously used on Longacre's gold dollars and three-dollar pieces. It is composed of leaves of wheat, corn, cotton and tobacco, thus including produce associated with both the North and the South.

To lobby Congress to enact legislation, pattern dies were completed in late 1856, several hundred cents dated 1856 were produced, and distributed to legislators, government officials and special interests. This was the origin of the highly collectable 1856 Flying Eagle cent, although it was actually a pattern piece, not an official coin, as congressional approval had not yet been granted. Additional 1856 small cents were later struck by the Mint Director for illicit sale.

Congress formally authorized the new cent in February 1857. The legislation also eliminated the half cent, and declared foreign coins no longer legal tender (causing the Mint to melt most of the 1857 large cent stock not



released). When the new cent was released in May 1857, the public demand was so strong that the new design was hoard and few examples circulated.

From the start, the Mint had trouble striking the new design. This was due to the hard copper-nickel alloy and the fact that the eagle on one side of the piece was directly opposite parts of the reverse design; efforts to bring out the design more fully led to more die breakage. It was suggested that the eagle be replaced with a head of Christopher Columbus or George Washington but rejected due to Washington's distaste of individuals being displayed on coins.

In 1858, the Mint tried to alleviate the breakage problem using a shallower obverse relief. This led to the major variety of the series, as coins of the revised version have smaller letters in the inscriptions than those struck earlier. Efforts to conserve dies were the probable cause of another variety, the 1858/7, as 1857-dated dies were overstruck to allow them to be used in the new year.

The difficulty of getting good strikes caused the Mint to change to the Indian Head design in 1859. Collectors today will find a typical weakness on the eagle's tail feathers even on Mint State specimens and regardless of the date.

A complete date and variety set is possible and consists of only five issues: 1856, 1857, 1858 Small Letters, 1858 Large Letters and 1858/7. These are often collected in conjunction with the Indian Head series. 1857-58 Proofs are extremely rare, and probably number less than 100.

Special Meeting Activity Calendar

September – Show and Tell Night

November – Veteran's night,
Officer/Director elections

December – Christmas party

We need volunteers to give programs in 2017 and 2018. Contact Kevin Kell if you have an interest.

Upcoming Local Coin Shows

September 9 – Waco Fall Coin Show, Bellmead Civic Center, Bellmead. \$2.

September 22-24 – Texas Coin Show, Grapevine Convention Center. \$3 or free with NETCC membership.

October 7 – Colin County Coin Club Coin Show, Quality Inn, McKinney. Free.

October 20-21 – Cowtown Coin Show, Forest Hill Civic/Convention Center. \$3.

August New Members: Mary Ann Scott.

August First Time Visitors: Eric Luckie.