

LONG SHOTS,

BRIDES-
MAIDS



THE 1936-37
COMMEMORATIVES

*that Could
Have Been*





COVER STORY

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SOMETIMES, what didn't happen is almost as interesting as what did. At the height of the U.S. commemorative craze in 1936 and 1937, a whopping 36 coinage proposals were introduced to Congress. Almost any

representative or senator with time on their hands could be goaded into presenting a commemorative coinage bill before Congress. A good number of the failed proposals that follow were either conceived or introduced by individuals, (sometimes) questionable organizations, local chambers of commerce or members of Congress who had little to no knowledge of what embodied a good commemorative. Pride and/or profit, usually in the form of a local celebration or something tangible, such as a museum, monument or memorial building, often played a role.

Cities, towns and even small villages made the most appearances. Typically, the proposal sought to celebrate a discovery, founding, charter, land grant, borough, admission or colonization and incorporation. Apparently, there are many ways to claim an "anniversary."

Battles, minor skirmishes, American and European expeditions into uncharted wilderness, and tragic massacres appear as well. A handful of proposals honoring science, feats of engineering, religious services and acts of compassion round out the submissions. Some were molehills disguised as mountains with a shameless lack of history, while others contained history perhaps best left forgotten.

Each pitch meant something to someone at sometime. Many, however, either drowned in the congressional swamp of pending legislation, were dismissed in committees, wiped off the books, or they received the personal attention of an eleventh-hour presidential veto.



The proposals in this unsuccessful parade have contributed their own histories—if not colorful footnotes—to what might have been.

1936 Commemorative Craze

The year 1936 will long be remembered as the height of the commemorative craze, with 16 issues being struck. One of the unsuccessful proposals was the Centennial of Michigan half dollar. It is notable due to the fact that the Detroit Coin Club Committee, which sponsored the bill, requested a mintage of just 5,000. If approved, the issue would have had the lowest mintage of the series and surely would have been the key. It should be noted that the Cincinnati issue had already been authorized, and perhaps Congress was reluctant to approve yet another bill heavily sponsored by a local coin club.

The 300th anniversary of the founding of Hartford, Connecticut, would have made for an interesting half dollar. This coin could have become a reality, if not for the fact that a half dollar had been issued the previous year for Connecticut's tercentenary.

A proposal for the 160th anniversary of the encampment of Washington's army at Morristown, New Jersey, during the winter of 1779 also floundered, most likely because of the peculiar anniversary being honored. Successful sponsors knew that anniversaries divisible by 25 (50th, 75th, 100th, 150th, etc.) stood a better chance

COIN ILLUSTRATIONS: BEN SCOTT

of getting approved. Attempting to celebrate the 160th anniversary was probably seen as an act of desperation or just impatience.

The year 1936 also saw a proposal for the 100th anniversary of the founding of a mission at Walla Walla, Washington, by Marcus and Narcissa Whitman. A physician and missionary, Marcus Whitman traveled along the Oregon Trail to establish a mission to convert American Indians to Christianity. In 1847 an outbreak of measles brought on by settlers caused an indigenous uprising, which resulted in the murder of 13 people, including Whitman. Had the proposal been approved, it would have provided an interesting

tie-in with the 1926-39 Oregon Trail Memorial. It also would have been the second commemorative with a religious backstory, following the 1924 Huguenot-Walloon Tercentenary half dollar. The coin proposal was replaced with one for a medal.

A December 1936 proposal was intended to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of Shreveport, Louisiana, and the opening of the Red River to navigation and development of the tristate territory, which comprised northern Louisiana, eastern Texas and southwestern Arkansas. This motion eventually passed, but, as with the Whitman proposal, only after the coin was replaced by a medal. The fact that Arkansas was two years into



▼ **THE CONSTRUCTION** of the Fort Peck Dam in 1937 was a suggested topic for a commemorative half dollar. The proposal was nearly adopted, and sponsors prematurely rushed ads into print offering the nonexistent coins for sale.

▼ **THIS RACIST PRINT** from the 19th century depicts the murder of Christian missionary Marcus Whitman in 1847. The Waiilatpu Mission, which Whitman had founded near Walla Walla, Washington, was the basis of a commemorative half dollar proposal in 1936.



PHOTOS: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

the five-year run of its very own commemorative half dollar, not to mention the introduction of a new obverse, probably incensed the sponsors of other proposals who also were attempting to gain momentum. The bill was hastily tossed into the trash can.

The town of Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania, suggested a half dollar to celebrate its 50th anniversary as a borough. Unfortunately, nothing of any great historical importance originated from the town, which had been annexed from the city of Pittsburgh. Because of this, and the town's relatively short life at the time, nothing more came of the idea. The Wilkinsburg proposal is a prime example of what *Numismatist* editor Frank G. Duffield railed against in his August 1937 editorial titled "The Decline and Fall of Commemorative Coinage." Duffield made note of "the desire of groups of men in some localities to get in the



Commemoratives celebrating two engineering structures also were proposed in 1937."

commemorative coin game with some celebration that has no interest beyond the limits of their own locality." He also stated that the then-current session of Congress had over 50 commemorative-half-dollar proposals before them, and not one had "reached first base."

The International Peace Garden, which straddles the United States-Canada border (located between North Dakota and Manitoba), was also proposed as a feature for a coin. The three-and-a-half-acre garden was dedicated in 1932 as a symbol of peace between the two nations. The Peace Garden bill was sadly put out to pasture, and numismatists with an interest in horticulture were made to wait until 1997, when the Botanic Garden silver dollar was issued.



THE FLOODGATES OPENED by the commemorative-driven activity of 1936 only helped add to the number of proposals in 1937. Plans appearing before Congress included a centennial issue for the University of Louisville. The prestigious Kentucky university originally founded in 1798 was forced to close in 1829. It reopened as a medical institute in 1837, which was the centennial anniversary being promoted.

The city of Toledo, Ohio, also sought recognition for a centennial half dollar under somewhat interesting circumstances. Originally founded

in 1833, Toledo was "refounded" in 1837 after a conflict known as the Toledo War, a boundary dispute fought between Ohio and Michigan from 1835 to 1837.

A plan honoring the 162nd anniversary of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence also was suggested. The North Carolina county had long laid claims to being the first county to declare independence from England on May 20, 1775. The controversial assertion eventually was proven false. This information, coupled with the peculiar 162nd anniversary, probably did not help the half-dollar proposal.

In light of additional coinages for the Arkansas, Texas and Oregon Trail issues, sponsors of the 1936 Cincinnati half dollar also sought legislation that would provide 1937-dated coinage. Controversial to begin with, no further Cincinnati issue was authorized.

Commemoratives celebrating two engineering structures also were proposed in 1937. One was for the Booneville Dam, which was constructed along the Columbia River in Portland, Oregon. The 1937 date commemorated the opening of the dam's first powerhouse, which enabled it to produce hydroelectricity. The other was the Fort Peck Dam in Montana. Construction began in 1934 under the Public Works Administration (PWA). Upon completion in 1940, it became the world's largest hydraulically filled dam. The structure's art-deco architecture was so impressive it was featured in the first issue of *Life Magazine*. The sponsors of the Fort Peck coin bill (the Fort Peck Memorial Association) famously jumped the gun in March 1937 when they ran an advertisement in *The Numismatist* offering reserved orders for the not-yet-authorized commemorative half dollar priced at \$2 each.

Easton, Pennsylvania, also suggested a half dollar in 1937 to celebrate the city's 50th anniversary. As with numerous other proposals from various towns or cities, Easton felt it had something worth recognizing. The area had been settled in 1739, founded in 1752, established as a borough in 1789, and became a city in 1887. Therefore, Easton was seeking a coin commemorating its 50th anniversary as a city, which was denied. A more rational idea would have been to seek the bicentennial of its 1739 settling with a 1939 commemorative. Montgomery, Alabama, sought a half dollar to celebrate its centennial as a city in 1937. In a rare move, the sponsors, perhaps owing to the cavalcade of pending legislation, eventually withdrew this proposal.

Clinton, New York, proposed a half dollar to observe its sesquicentennial in 1937. Had it been successful, the issue would have been, without a doubt, the smallest celebration ever observed on U.S. coinage. Clinton was a village and a small one at that. Its total land area was just 0.6 square

miles, and its population in 1937 was estimated to be fewer than 1,500. The recently released Hudson and Albany commemorative issues probably dampened any enthusiasm for yet another New York State coin, and the proposal died.

Mercer County, West Virginia, also sought a half dollar to celebrate its centennial. Originally part of Virginia, the county became part of West Virginia when it gained statehood in 1863. Mercer County was named for General Hugh Mercer, who was killed in the Battle of Princeton in 1777.

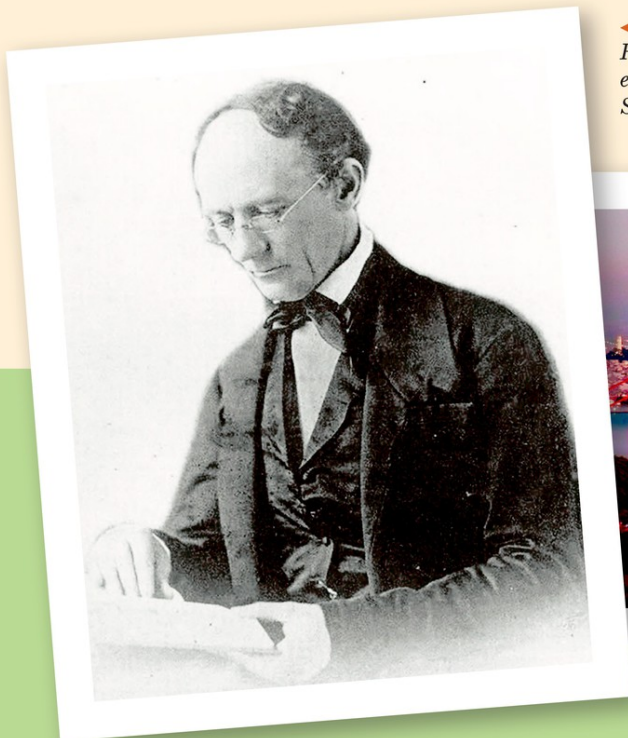
The city of Chicago, Illinois, requested a half dollar in observance of the 150th anniversary of its Charter Jubilee. The wording of the proposal specified that the mintage not exceed 100,000 and asked that no pieces be struck after 1937. Perhaps the bill's sponsor was sensitive to the recent abuses of commemorative coinage and crafted the language of the proposal to help gain the faith of the authorizing congressional committees, but to no avail.

Plans for a half dollar honoring the heroes of the Alamo also materialized in 1937. Given that the 1934-38 Texas Centennial half dollars (which depict the Alamo on the reverse) already were being struck, the proposal appeared to be an exercise in overindulgence. Its origins may have sprung from the Texas Centennial Commission's 1936 request for five new reverse designs for the current commemorative. When the request was denied, the Arkansas Centennial Commission

sought three design changes for its half dollar. The latter's attempt was trimmed to permit one new reverse motif, known as the 1936 Arkansas-Robinson Centennial. Forced to abandon its quest for design changes to a current issue, the Alamo Mission Chapter of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas (which sponsored the proposal) decided to pursue an entirely new coin instead; hence the Heroes of the Alamo. Displays of numismatic-induced politics such as this eventually led to the suspension of commemorative coinage after 1954.

A half dollar honoring the 1540-42 sea expedition by Spanish explorer Francisco Vázquez de Coronado also was proposed in 1937. Coronado's trek, which originated in Mexico, covered a large part of what would become the southwestern United States, including New Mexico, Texas, Kansas and Oklahoma. Coronado also was credited with discovering the Grand Canyon. After failing to attract momentum, the proposal was later reintroduced by the Coronado Cuarto Centennial Corporation. Plans specified that the coins be dated 1940. Although the sponsor had sufficient time to bring the bill to fruition, the proposal lacked the necessary support. It probably did not help that the design was similar to the 1935 Old Spanish Trail issue that celebrated explorer Cabeza de Vaca's expedition of 1535.

Yet another proposal honoring expeditions was the 250th anniversary of Marquis de Devouille's



◀ **WILLIAM HOLMES MCGUFFEY** began publishing his *McGuffey Readers* in 1836 and improved the education of schoolchildren everywhere. A commemorative half dollar in honor of "America's Schoolteacher" was proposed in 1937.



▲ **SPONSORS** of the newly dedicated Golden Gate Bridge requested a half dollar be struck using silver melted down from previously unsold 1936 Oakland Bay Bridge coins, thus reflecting the mutual "rivalry" between supporters of the two engineering marvels.

PHOTOS: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

exploration of territory in present-day New York State, as well as the 266th anniversary of a similar voyage by Robert Cavalier (also known as Sieur de La Salle). The Devonville-La Salle committee, an offshoot of the New York State Archaeological Association, sponsored the half-dollar proposal. Proceeds from the sales of the coins were intended to help establish a permanent “memorial collection” in Rochester, New York, honoring the two Frenchmen.

The quiet borough of Berwick, Pennsylvania, (best known as the home of Wise Potato Chips) requested a 1937 half dollar to commemorate the 153rd anniversary of its land grant, the 150th anniversary of its founding, and the 118th anniversary of it becoming a borough. The tiny 3.25-square-mile borough requested no more than 20,000 coins for its multi-anniversary.

Beckley, West Virginia, sought 25,000 half dollars to commemorate the 100th anniversary of its founding, as well as the 180th anniversary of the birth of its founder, John Beckley. Beckley was the first librarian of the Library of Congress, as well as the first clerk of the House of Representatives.

William Holmes McGuffey, who first authored the widely used McGuffey Readers in 1836, was also considered as the subject of a half dollar in 1937. Known as “America’s Schoolmaster,” McGuffey completely revised elementary school

admission but was held on federal land leased from a private organization. Most likely any profits from coin sales would have gone toward pageant expenses. Had this proposal come to fruition, the issue would have, without a doubt, become the most religious in nature ever struck by the United States.

Tobacco cultivation and exportation in Virginia was the subject of a proposal from the National Tobacco Festival’s finance committee in 1937. The South Boston, Virginia, celebration requested a half dollar commemorating the 350th anniversary of the introduction of American-grown tobacco to England by Sir Walter Raleigh, as well as the 325th anniversary of John Rolfe’s successful cultivation of the product. Both Raleigh and Rolfe were notable figures in pre-colonial Virginia history (Raleigh for his role in establishing the “lost colony” of Roanoke and Rolfe for marrying the noted Powhatan Pocahontas). It appears this proposal was drawn up after the 1937 Roanoke Island 350th Anniversary half dollar (which features Raleigh on the obverse) had already been struck. Apparently, the issuance of two commemoratives featuring Raleigh in the same year was too much for anyone to justify.

The city of Poughkeepsie, New York, proposed a half dollar to observe the 250th anniversary of its settlement in 1687. The request for 25,000 coins also included the vague phrase “and for other purposes.” Poughkeepsie’s request most likely failed because of geographic matters. The city is located along the Hudson River, as are the cities of Hudson and Albany, both of which were issued commemorative coins in the previous two years. It is possible that Poughkeepsie introduced its coinage plans after witnessing the success of the Hudson and Albany issues. Despite the proposal’s failure, President Franklin D. Roosevelt attended the 1937 celebration and personally dedicated a new post office.

Plans for a 1937 half dollar celebrating the opening of the Golden Gate Bridge had curious origins. The proposal’s language noted that only half of the 200,000 coins allowed for the 1936 San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge issue were actually struck and cleverly suggested 100,000 be allotted for a coin honoring the Golden Gate Bridge. The original bill authorizing the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge half dollar called for a coin commemorating the completion of both bridges. This interesting rivalry reflects the jealousy shared by supporters of the two structures as well as local pride, not to mention the attempt to make lemonade from lemons when the Golden Gate did not make it onto the coin.

The city of Meadville, Pennsylvania, sought a half dollar for the celebration of its 1938 sesqui-centennial. Meadville was notable for playing a part in the Underground Railroad, which aided



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textbooks and dramatically improved children’s education for generations to come. McGuffey Readers became a standard issue for schoolchildren in many states from the mid-19th through the mid-20th centuries. Although more than 100 million copies of his readers were sold, McGuffey considered his work a humanitarian effort and only received \$1,000 for his books. The coinage proposal asked that 10,000 coins be struck at the request of the Federation of McGuffey Societies. At its height, the organization numbered more than 100,000 members.

One of the most unusual requests for a commemorative half dollar came from the Wichita Mountain Easter Sunrise Service. Located near Lawton, Oklahoma, the religious pageant sought 40,000 coins bearing the date 1937. The annual Easter show celebrates the life of Jesus and takes several hours to perform, ending with the resurrection at sunrise. The event never charged

► **A 1937 PROPOSAL** requested a half dollar honoring German-born mathematician and engineer Charles P. Steinmetz, whose theories advanced the electric power industry. Despite his popularity at the time, Steinmetz has largely been forgotten today.



PHOTOS: BEN SCOTT (COIN) & WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



◄ **A HALF-DOLLAR PROPOSAL** commemorating General Benjamin Logan's 1786 Ohio raid, which destroyed Indian villages in retaliation for attacks on white settlers, was as controversial then as it would be today.

escaped slaves in reaching the North. While the proposal for a Meadville coin ultimately failed, it is interesting to note how individual sponsors often networked with others. In Q. David Bowers' book, *An Inside View Of The Coin Hobby in the 1930s*, Bowers highlights the correspondence of numismatist Walter P. Nichols. Nichols was an ANA life member and briefly served on the organization's Board of Governors. A lifelong Maine resident, Nichols was instrumental in getting the 1936 York County, Maine, Tercentenary half dollar passed through Congress. Nichols' correspondence with L.W. Hofferker, a numismatist who designed and distributed nearly the entire 1935 Old Spanish Trail issue, is revealing. Numerous other sponsors, including the Meadville Chamber of Commerce, wrote to Nichols requesting his advice on how to get a commemorative proposal passed.

The 20th anniversary of the 42nd Infantry (Rainbow) Division of the U.S. Army National Guard was proposed for a commemorative half dollar in 1937. The 42nd Infantry was established in 1917, shortly after the United States declared war on Germany. It was comprised of Army National Guard units from numerous states and federalized National Guard divisions. General Douglas MacArthur played a part in its origins. Though the pro-

the controversy and suspicion that was so rampant in commemorative coin circles at the time. It recalled the origins of the Cincinnati half dollar from the previous year and unquestionably thwarted any additional attempts toward legislation. It should be noted that when *The Numismatist* reported the story in April 1937 under the headline "Additional Bills For Commemorative Coins," the article included the sentiment, "Rumors None of Them Will Pass." Of all the proposals mentioned in the four-page write-up, only the Antietam and New Rochelle requests were authorized.

The city of Atlanta, Georgia, was a worthy contender for a half dollar celebrating its centennial in 1937. Originally settled in 1837 to provide a railroad link between Savannah and the American Midwest, the city underwent several name changes. Terminus, Thrasherville and Marthasville were previous monikers before Atlanta finally stuck in 1847. Despite the city's size, the proposal failed in Congress. Atlanta had to wait an additional 59 years until it was finally honored on multiple coins to celebrate its hosting of the 1996 Summer Olympics.

A particularly controversial proposal was the 1937 sesquicentennial of General Benjamin Logan's 1786 expedition, known as Logan's Raid, into Ohio. Logan led Kentucky militia into 13 Shawnee villages in retaliation for tribal attacks on white settlers. In the Shawnee village of Mackachack, Logan's forces destroyed crops and burned tepees. One of Logan's men, against direct orders, killed the Shawnee chief. Logan's invasion failed to stop Shawnee-led attacks and incited resentment against the settlers. If the Logan proposal were authorized, it no doubt would have been considered inflammatory to American Indians.

Another 1937 proposal was for a half dollar honoring Dr. Charles P. Steinmetz (1865-1923). A German-born mathematician and electrical engineer, Steinmetz formulated mathematical theories that enabled alternating current to be introduced into the electric power industry and electric motors. Steinmetz was born with a deformed spine but never let his debilitating health issues hamper his work. He held over 200 patents at the time of his death and was considered a contemporary of Nikola Tesla, Thomas Edison and Albert Einstein. Unfortunately, Steinmetz's legacy remains unknown to most Americans. In 2004 Edison became the first engineer honored on a commemorative coin, 67 years after the long-forgotten Steinmetz proposal.

Perhaps the most significant proposal introduced in 1937 was a half dollar to commemorate the sesquicentennial of the United States Constitution. The plan contained unique language that would allow the director of the U.S. Mint to suspend the coinage of regular-issue half dollars



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posal was unsuccessful, it remains notable as the smallest anniversary ever requested for a commemorative.

When a group calling themselves the Caldwell (New Jersey) Coin Club sponsored a bid for a half dollar recognizing the centennial of Grover Cleveland's birth, *The Numismatist* reported that "considerable surprise was expressed in collecting circles." Apparently the group was "not a body of coin collectors, but one which has organized and incorporated under that title" for better publicity. The organization admitted that it "was formed for the purpose of being the sales agent of the Grover Cleveland coin, if and when the bill is put through." The Grover Cleveland Birthplace Association in Caldwell apparently was to be the benefactor of any profits. This was only after "necessary costs, disbursements and fees" were collected by trustees of the Birthplace Association as well as "the officers and directors of the Caldwell West Essex Kiwanis Club."

The Caldwell Coin Club episode only fueled



We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, insure domestic Tranquillity, provide for the common defence, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Article

Section 1. All legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives.

Section 2. The House of Representatives shall be composed of Members chosen every second Year by the People of the several States, and the Electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

No Person shall be a Representative who shall not have attained to the Age of twenty five Years, seven Years, and a Day, who shall not, when elected, be an Inhabitant of that State in which he shall be chosen.

Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including all bound Persons, except Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons. The actual Enumeration shall be made within three Years after the first Meeting of the Congress, and within every subsequent Term of ten Years, in such Manner as they may by Law direct.

▲ **DESPITE ITS NATIONAL APPEAL**, the United States Constitution's sesquicentennial was not chosen for a commemorative coin in 1937.

PHOTOS: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS (GREAT FLOOD), BEN SCOTT (COIN) & WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



▲ **THE GREAT FLOOD OF 1937** was the subject of a proposal for a humanitarian commemorative half dollar intended to provide financial aid to victims of the multi-state natural disaster.

for the year and instead strike Constitution half dollars. Whether this half dollar was intended to circulate (like the 1932 Washington quarter) was not specified. The 150th anniversary of the Constitution had much going for it. Unlike the aforementioned local or regional proposals, it was a national observance that all Americans would immediately recognize. However, only two commemoratives issued ever exclusively bore the date 1937—the Roanoke Island and the Battle of Antietam halves.

The most humanitarian proposal ever to appear was the 1937 Flood Relief half dollar. The coin was intended to benefit sufferers of the 1937 “Great Flood” of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. According to the motion, the Flood Relief Commemorative Coin Association asked that 30,000 half dollars be struck to secure funds to aid those affected by the disaster. Had it passed, this piece would have been the first and only truly humanitarian commemorative ever issued by the United States. The flood affected four states (Ohio, Illinois, Indiana and Kentucky), killed 385 people and left 1 million homeless. Property losses totaled \$500 million at the time. Little else is known about the logistics of the proposal, but even if it had passed, it surely would have fallen short of its merits. The projected \$30,000 it might have raised would have



The name originated from the digging of multiple sawpits in the area that were used for shipbuilding.”

been insufficient considering the magnitude of the disaster.

The plan that almost nailed the door shut on any further commemorative activity was, without a doubt, the infamous 1937 proposal to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the changing of the name of Sawpit, New York—a small village that dates back to 1732—to Port Chester. The name originated from the digging of multiple sawpits in the area that were used for shipbuilding. In 1837 Sawpit became Port Chester, and later was incorporated in 1868. At the time, the 2.5-square-mile village was considered a seaport, and given the nickname “Gateway to New England.” While most towns, cities or villages celebrated either the year of their settling, founding, charter or incorporation, none had ever bothered with an attempt to commemorate a name change. For many collectors and members of Congress who were already awash in a sea of commemorative issues, the Sawpit proposal was considered superfluous.



AFTER THE DELUGE of 1936-37 proposals, commemorative legislation briefly dried up. The 1938 New Rochelle half dollar became the only new issue introduced into the commemorative series until 1946. The

gluttonous regurgitation of the Arkansas, Boone, Oregon Trail and Texas issues also might have hindered many new proposals. By 1941 commemorative prices had hit rock bottom. A dealer’s ad in the April issue of *The Numismatist* offered “Bargain Box Commemoratives,” featuring a 1936 Cleveland at only 90 cents, while a three-coin set of 1937 Texas halves could be picked up for only \$3.95. Columbian Exposition halves dated 1892 and 1893, 1918 Illinois Centennial halves and 1925 Stone Mountain Memorial issues could all be purchased for less than \$1 each.

By 1941 Congress wasn’t even able to implement a Commemorative Coin Commission, a group that would have been granted the authority to accept or reject commemorative coinage bills placed before it. Only after the United States entered World War II did commemorative coinage proposals fall silent, as the mint rolled up its sleeves and fought the war through the production of steel cents and magnesium nickels.

Conclusion

It seems everyone had something worth commemorating in 1936 and 1937. Some of the aforementioned proposals were noteworthy, others were hardly missed, and a few could be regarded as politically incorrect today. Despite the flurry of already authorized commemorative legislation, Congress was simply overwhelmed. By 1938 the number of proposals had all but ceased. ■

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