

# Flying Eagles and Indian Heads

*Once familiar images on the common, American “penny,” these popular motifs eventually gave way to a presidential portrait.*



ONE HUNDRED and fifty years ago this month, something entirely new appeared in American commerce: the small cent. Until 1857, cents were bulky copper coins, inconvenient to use and increasingly expensive to make. But the new, smaller, copper-nickel cents were instantly popular, because they were compact and could be exchanged for worn, Spanish silver coins that had lingered in America's money supply.

The new coin's obverse portrayed a flying eagle, with a wreath of agricultural products (corn, cotton, tobacco, wheat) on the reverse. Both sides were designed by U.S. Mint Chief Engraver James Longacre, though the eagle was based on an earlier image by his predecessor Christian Gobrecht. The bird in flight certainly was aesthetically pleasing; art historian Cornelius Vermeule praised the design's “naturalistic power and precision.” But the motif soon was abandoned: it was too difficult to impress into the hard, nickel alloy.

Its replacement, the Indian Head cent, debuted in 1859. (Actually, Longacre's creation might more appropriately be called the “Indian Headgear” cent, because only the headdress is authentically Native American.) The laurel wreath on the reverse was replaced by an oak wreath in 1860, with a small shield incorporated into the design. Ironically, this symbol of national unity appeared on the eve of a sectional conflict that would tear the country apart.

The Civil War wreaked havoc with

America's economy, as paper currency displaced metallic money. Copper-nickel cents had once been plentiful—sometimes to the point of nuisance. But as the conflict continued, cents were hoarded, prized for their convenience in everyday commerce. With nickel comprising 12 percent of each cent, a limited supply of the metal kept the Mint from keeping up with demand. Made in vast quantities with a wide variety of patriotic slogans or advertising messages, privately issued bronze tokens filled the gap.

Official cents—made of bronze—returned to circulation in 1864. Mintages grew by the decade, and the coin achieved what Vermeule called “the blessing of popular appeal” until it was replaced by the Lincoln cent in 1909.

The Flying Eagle cent and the Indian Head cent often are collected together. The four major types include: Flying Eagle (1857-58); copper-nickel Indian Head (1859); copper-nickel Indian Head with modified reverse (1860-64); and bronze Indian Head (1864-1909). Collecting one of each gives a nice overview of the two series.

A complete collection of Flying Eagle cents contains only two pieces, though the scarce 1856—prepared as a pattern, not for circulation—

▼ Only the headdress on the 1859 Indian Head cent is authentically Native American. The laurel wreath on the reverse was replaced with an oak wreath in 1860.



COIN PHOTOS: ANA ARCHIVES



▲ Longacre's Flying Eagle design had "naturalistic power and precision."

sometimes is included. The Indian Head cent series is less extensive than its 50-year lifespan suggests, because, until 1908, all were made at the Philadelphia Mint without a mintmark. The 1877 and the 1909-S are the keys to the series, while copper-nickel pieces and Philadelphia issues after 1878 generally are inexpensive.

As usual, a coin's value is heavily determined by its state of preservation. The amount of detail on the eagle's feathers, and the legibility and prominence of LIBERTY on the Indian's headband are good indications of overall wear. There are distinctions to be made even among uncirculated coins: those with fewer marks or brighter luster bring a premium. Coloration also affects valuation: bronze Indian Head cents with original, orange-red color are more highly prized than red-brown or brown specimens.

In today's coin market, \$25 will get

you a well-worn Flying Eagle, a modestly worn copper-nickel Indian or a nearly uncirculated bronze Indian. For \$100, you can purchase a modestly worn Flying Eagle, a nearly uncirculated copper-nickel Indian, or a choice, red-brown, uncirculated bronze Indian. Of course, rare dates or coins in higher condition will command higher prices.

More details on the two series, including numerous color photos, can be found in Richard Snow's comprehensive *Guide Book of Flying Eagle and Indian Head Cents*. The website [www.indianheads.org/index.html](http://www.indianheads.org/index.html) has lots of great information and many images that collectors of these coins will enjoy.

Flying Eagle and Indian Head cents once were considered innovative and popular, but that time has long since passed. Still, for numismatists, history comes alive when collecting these appealing coins.

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