

A Journalistic Approach to Small Cents

Though they may be little, these coins

have newsworthy scope and history.

THE AMERICAN cent needs no introduction. Billions are produced each year, and the coin is part and parcel of virtually every cash transaction. But the 1-cent piece is far more than a common, utilitarian object; its changing designs and varying specifications convey a fascinating numismatic tale. To elaborate on the coin and its story, here are the answers to the famous “5 W’s” of journalism—“who, what, when, where and why,” as well as “how.”

WHO designed the coins? James Longacre designed the Flying Eagle and Indian Head cents, and his initial “L” appeared on the latter’s obverse ribbon beginning in 1864. The Lincoln cent’s designer, Victor David Brenner, received credit for his work with his initials “V.D.B.” at the bottom of the reverse on the first issues of 1909, but the letters were removed soon after the coin’s release because of opposition from the U.S. Treasury. The initials returned in 1918, though in a less prominent position below Lincoln’s bust. There was no controversy for Frank Gasparro, whose initials “FG” sit to the right of the Lincoln Memorial.

WHAT images have appeared on small cents? The small cent’s obverse has featured some quintessentially American images. The Flying Eagle motif lasted only until 1858, and the classical image of Liberty wearing an Indian headdress was issued for a half century beginning in 1859. In 1909 the cent became the first American circulating coin to portray a historical person, with a bust of Lincoln introduced upon the 100th anniversary of his birth. Reverse images include agricultural

themes, with wreaths on Flying Eagle and Indian Head cents, and wheat ears on the Lincoln cent. The current reverse, featuring the Lincoln Memorial, was introduced in 1959.

WHEN was the small cent introduced? In 1857 the large cent, an inconvenient copper coin about the size of a quarter, was replaced by a much smaller copper-nickel piece. The new coin had the same diameter as today’s cent (19mm) but was significantly thicker and heavier. Initially, the Treasury exchanged small cents for silver coins of the Spanish Empire and its former colonies, but ended the circulation of foreign coins in the United States in the 1850s.

WHERE have small cents been coined? For half a century, the Philadelphia Mint was the only source of small cents, with production expanding to San Francisco in 1908 and to Denver in 1911. A Mint facility at West Point also made cents from 1974 to 1985. Denver and San Fran-

cisco issues usually (but not always) carry the mintmarks “D” and “S,” respectively, while cents from Philadelphia and West Point have no mintmark. (Mintmarks are located below the wreath on Indian Head cents and below the date on Lincoln cents.) Today, Philadelphia and Denver make cents for circulation, while San Francisco makes proofs for collectors.

WHY has the metallic composition of the small cent changed? The original 88-percent-copper and 12-percent-nickel alloy was undone by the Civil War’s economic tribulations. In 1864, with small coins in great demand and nickel in short supply, a thinner bronze piece of 95-percent copper debuted. The next major change also was a wartime measure. To conserve copper for military use during World War II, 1943 cents were made of zinc-plated steel. Subsequent alterations primarily have been driven by rising copper prices. The Mint struck experimental aluminum ©



▲ The 1859 small cent (left) featured a classical image of Liberty wearing an Indian headdress. Fifty years later, the cent became the first U.S. circulating coin to depict a historical person, Abraham Lincoln.

pieces dated 1974, but the bronze cent persisted until the current copper-coated-zinc composition was introduced in 1982.

HOW can one collect small cents?

A type set is a great way to learn about the small cent. With several long-lived designs and few metal changes, such a set is pretty compact. Many numismatists enjoy the challenge of collecting the series by date and mintmark. Key dates like the 1877 and the 1909-S V.D.B., or major varieties like the 1955 doubled die, can be expensive. But most date/mintmark combinations are widely available, and many recent issues can be found in circulation.

To learn more, read *A Buyer's and Enthusiast's Guide to Flying Eagle and Indian Cents* by Q. David Bowers (ANA Library Catalog No. GB30.B6f) and *The Complete Guide to Lincoln Cents* by David W. Lange (ANA Library Catalog No. GB30.L2).

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1861-S Paquet \$20 Lib
NGC AU58

Anthony Paquet, originally from Hamburg, Germany became Assistant Engraver to James Longacre in 1857. Paquet was put in charge of redesigning the double eagle reverse in 1859. With less than 20,000 total mintage, David Akers calls this coin "the scarcest double eagle from the San Francisco Mint". The narrow rim, abrasions and wear of the Paquet reverse make this coin very rare in AU55 and extremely rare in AU58 with only 5 others and none graded higher. Considering the scarcity and history, the 1861-S Paquet could still be considered greatly undervalued.

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