

The Washington Quarter

*In spite of changes, or perhaps because of them,
this venerable coin is here to stay.*

STATE QUARTERS have created diversity in U.S. coinage for some time now, but the original Washington quarter still is plentiful in circulation. Its perseverance is a testament to decades of production, while its enduring design is a reminder of a time when continuity, not change, was the norm in American numismatic imagery. If you've been collecting state quarters and you're looking to expand your hobby interests, it's worth considering the various incarnations of the venerable Washington quarter.

When the Washington quarter was introduced in 1932, most circulating U.S. coins still carried images of Liberty. But just as the centennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth prompted a new cent design in 1909, George Washington's bicentennial was considered an appropriate occasion for a numismatic tribute to our first President.

A design competition mandated that the coin's obverse feature a rendering of a Washington bust by 18th-century French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon. The artist had traveled from Paris to Virginia to model his subject, and his resulting work has been called "unquestionably the finest portrayal of Washington in existence." The sculptor's iconic image had been a staple on commemorative medals and was a logical choice for a Washington coin.

Far more controversy surrounded the choice of a specific design. The

Commission of Fine Arts strongly recommended models by Laura Gardin Fraser, but those created by John Flanagan ultimately were selected. Fraser's designs remained

A previous design change commemorated the bicentennial of America's independence. Jack Ahr's reverse design depicting a colonial drummer boy was combined with Flanagan's obverse on coins dual-dated 1776-1976. Bicentennial coins were struck in 1975 and 1976 in large mintages and were widely saved by collectors and non-collectors alike.

If you own a Bicentennial quarter, you're well on your way to a type set, since the series comprises only four varieties. Flanagan's original design was struck in 90-percent silver (1932-64) and copper-nickel clad (1965-74, 1977-98). Bicentennial coins have just two compositions: clad circulation strikes and 40-percent silver pieces made for collectors.

A date/mintmark collection with approximately 150 pieces (excluding collector-only issues) is far more extensive. Fortunately, most specimens are acquired easily. Clad coins

are inexpensive, and silver issues from the mid 1940s to the 1960s are available in nice, uncirculated condition for around \$10 or less. Only a few early dates are scarce, particularly the low-mintage 1932-D and 1932-S. Because of these factors, completing a date/mintmark set of Washington quarters is a very reasonable goal.

As always, use caution when purchasing expensive coins. Counterfeit and altered pieces—most notably imitations of the 1932-D or 1932-S made by adding a mintmark to a 1932 Philadelphia piece—are found in the numismatic marketplace. ☐



▲ A 1932 Washington quarter (top center) flanked by the series' various obverse and reverse incarnations.

unused until 1999, when they appeared on a gold \$5 coin marking the 200th anniversary of Washington's death. Meanwhile, Flanagan's obverse portrait and reverse eagle were used on quarters beginning in 1932, with a modified version of his obverse appearing on state quarters since 1999.

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▲ These references offer solid advice about grading and the coin market.

Another issue to keep in mind is accurate grading, which can be vital even for common coins. For uncirculated pieces in the uppermost reaches of the grading scale, small differences in condition can have big effects on cost.

Fortunately, potential pitfalls can be avoided. Several references can help you spot questionable pieces and evaluate condition: *The Complete Guide to Washington Quarters* by John Feigenbaum offers background information on the series and a detailed analysis of its coins; *The Official Guide to Coin Grading and Counterfeit Detection* edited by Scott Travers, with text by John Dannreuther, provides help regarding evaluating American coins, including Washington quarters; and Scott Travers' *Coin Collector's Survival Manual* dispenses valuable guidance on the coin market and grading.

It can be reassuring to purchase coins that have been authenticated and graded by third-party services. These are sealed in hard-plastic holders known as "slabs." Remember, in numismatics—as in most pursuits—knowledge helps you get good value for your money.

Overall, the Washington quarter series is very accessible, but there are enough challenges to make it exciting. As the predecessor to the popular state quarters, and as a classic American issue in its own right, there's a lot to like about it.

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