

The SBA Dollar: A Retrospective

U.S. COINAGE

On the 20th anniversary of legislation authorizing the Susan B. Anthony dollar, the author takes a look at the circumstances surrounding its creation.

by Jillian Leifer

TWENTY YEARS AGO, on October 10, 1978, President Jimmy Carter signed into law the Susan B. Anthony Dollar Act. Under the provisions of this legislation, the United States Mint manufactured small-sized dollars dated 1979 to 1981. As the supply of Anthony dollars is nearly exhausted and the Mint prepares to introduce its replacement in 1999, this is an appropriate time to reflect on the circumstances that surrounded its approval.

The minting of the Susan B. Anthony dollar represented a unique combination of economic, political, historical and social influences. Understanding these influences provides an awareness of the richness of our nation's numismatic heritage. Studying the economic repercussions of the dollar's production affords an opportunity to observe the dynamics of American capitalism in action. Analyzing the politics behind the mintage of the coin provides an opportunity to understand the democratic process at work. Tracing the history of the Anthony dollar teaches valuable lessons about the growth of women's rights in America. Grappling with the social issues involved in the coin's creation exemplifies the interplay of majority and minority groups in our country.

Economic Considerations

CREATION OF A smaller dollar coin was primarily an economic decision. In 1975 the United States Mint commissioned the Research Triangle Institute to study coin denominations and alloys, as well as coinage system alternatives. The Institute recommended a reduction in the size of the dollar coin, suggesting that it fall somewhere between the quarter and half dollar. It insisted that a smaller coin would save the government millions of dollars and made it clear that the Eisenhower dollar was

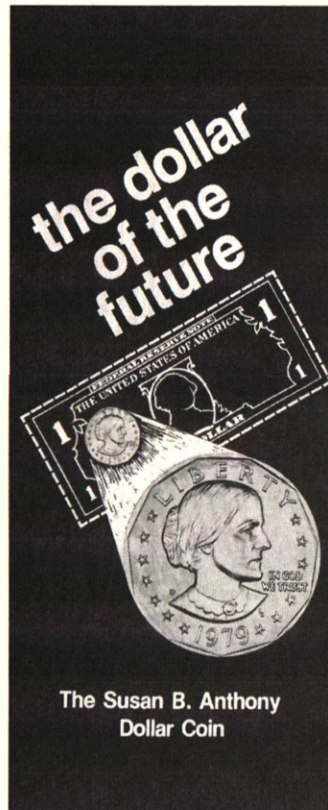


The Anthony dollar (top) quickly earned the nickname "mini dollar." The 8.1 g, 26.5mm coin is 30-percent smaller than its predecessor, the Eisenhower dollar (bottom), and represents the first U.S. coinage denomination to be reduced in size in more than 120 years. Its 11-sided inner border was designed to provide tactile recognition for the visually challenged.

ANA ARCHIVES

“COINS ARE FASTER and easier to handle. The automatic merchandising industry will be able to offer a far wider range of products to the American consumer.”

.....



A brochure circulated by the Treasury Department in 1979 promoted the new coin as the “dollar of the future” and listed some of its benefits to consumers, as well as retail and financial communities.

cumbersome and unpopular with the American people.

In 1976 a study commissioned by the Treasury Department, “A New Smaller Dollar Coin: Technical Considerations,” brought the idea of a smaller dollar one step closer to reality. At this point, the Treasury tested several designs. The following year, Treasury Chief William E. Simon issued a “State of Coinage Report,” in which the Treasury Department advocated the minting of a new “mini dollar” coin, once again citing economics as its primary motivation. Federal Reserve Board Governor Philip E. Coldwell championed this claim in testimony before a House subcommittee:

The Federal Reserve spent 48 million dollars for printing new currency in fiscal year 1976. Of that 48 million dollars, 28 million dollars was spent to print nearly two billion dollar notes. If all these dollar notes were replaced by coins, the Federal Reserve would realize savings of 28 million dollars in printing costs.

The Treasury Department estimated that replacing the Eisenhower dollar with mini dollars would result in savings of \$4.5 million. Even greater savings would be achieved by replacing circulating dollar notes with the mini-dollar coin. The Treasury Department compared the 15-year estimated service life of a dollar coin to the 18-month life span of a \$1 note. Replacing only 20 percent of the \$2.4 billion worth of outstanding \$1 notes with dollar coins would save yet another \$4.8 million. Mint Director Stella Hackel summed up other advantages:

Coins are faster and easier to handle. The automatic merchandising industry will be able to offer a far wider range of products to the American consumer. It will broaden the scope of the vending machine industry and increase efficiency of automated coin returns for cashiers. The creation of a smaller sized dollar also represents the modernization of currency and coins in this country.

Opposition to the mini coin came from the American Bankers’ Association (ABA). An ABA spokesman hit hard at the lack of definition in Administration policy, accusing the government of a “piece-meal approach to the nation’s circulating coin and currency system.” The bankers believed “there [was] a lack of fundamental market research and a master plan for the future of the dollar.” The group also feared that the Treasury had no plans to promote the circulation of the new mini dollar and felt it was doomed to failure without an adequate public

“ACCORDING TO OUR studies[,] the lack of public interest in the current dollar coin is directly attributable to its cumbersome size and weight.”

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information campaign. In support of this claim, they cited the failure of the \$2 bill.

There are certain long term business interests which must be considered in any coinage change. Consumer substitution of dollar coins for dollar bills may work well on paper but not necessarily in practice. Fiscal responsibility demands that the Mint carry out studies before it changes its coinage.

Speakers for the National Automatic Merchandising Association (NAMA) endorsed the new mini coin. NAMA gave strong testimony, stressing its importance for the convenience of millions of consumers

who inserted close to ten million coins every hour around the clock in vending machines in 1976. The proposed coin blanks have been tested by industry experts at the request of the Bureau of the Mint and were found to be satisfactory. According to our studies[,] the lack of public interest in the current dollar coin is directly attributable to its cumbersome size and weight.

Hindsight proved the bankers correct. Despite Treasury Department hopes to reap large fiscal savings, the coin failed to catch on with the public. Most Americans rejected the Anthony dollar because they confused it with the quarter. In addition, NAMA never followed through on its commitment to a wide-scale conversion of vending machines to accommodate the new coin.

Production of Susan B. Anthony dollars ceased in 1981 even though the law authorizing its mintage remained on the books. In 1985 the United States Mint offered Susan B. Anthony dollar sets to collectors through the mail. Ironically, the Anthony dollar became one of the most popular items in the Mint's catalog.

Political Influences

THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS through which the Susan B. Anthony Dollar Act became law illustrates the strong role politics played in its mintage. The design of United States coins can be traced to the Mint Act of April 2, 1792, which required all to bear a portrait symbolic of liberty. For more than 115 years, allegorical female figures known simply as “Miss Liberty” represented this ideal.

The United States Mint and the Treasury Department originally intended the new mini dollar to carry a Flowing Hair Liberty. When Representative Mary Rose Oakar (D-Ohio) introduced a bill providing for the portrait of Susan B. Anthony, a political controversy erupted.



Representatives of the vending-machine industry endorsed the concept of a smaller dollar coin. However, they failed to follow through by converting equipment to accommodate the new coin.



Actual Size: 26.5mm

ANA ARCHIVES

In 1868 Women's Rights pioneers Susan B. Anthony (left) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (right), pictured together around 1900, published a newspaper that championed their cause.

CORBIS



“... ‘MISS LIBERTY’ is not an appropriate figure to symbolize American womankind just as I don’t think Uncle Sam and Father Time . . . represent mankind.”

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Oakar’s legislation created a political stir by advocating a change in precedent. Oakar argued:

We have never had the face of a woman who actually lived, memorialized on a United States coin. [T]he choice of the mythical figure of “Miss Liberty” is not an appropriate figure to symbolize American womankind just as I don’t think Uncle Sam and Father Time belong on United States coins to represent mankind.

In her introduction of the Susan B. Anthony Bill, Oakar praised Anthony’s lifelong dedication to the Women’s Rights movement, attributing the passage of the 19th Amendment to her leadership.

Several individuals and national groups with widely separate political viewpoints supported Oakar’s position. The bill garnered the support of the League of Women Voters, National Women’s Political Caucus, Daughters of the American Revolution, Women’s Lobby Incorporated, American Association for University Women, National Federation of Business, Professional Women’s Clubs, and National Organization for Women (NOW). Eleanor Smeal, president of NOW, argued that the “Miss Liberty” design would be a grievous error and could be interpreted only as a statement by the government that no American woman is worthy of such recognition.

Representatives Patricia Schroeder, Gladys Moon Spellman and Millicent Fenwick also pushed for the legislation. As Schroeder said, “We have had live eagles and live buffaloes on our coins, but never have we had a live woman.”

Lending support to Anthony’s portrait was Frank Gasparro, chief engraver of the Mint, and creator of both the Anthony and Flowing Hair Liberty motifs. Gasparro argued, “The Anthony design for the dollar coin will serve as a teaching tool. It will cause people to consider and question who Susan B. Anthony was and her role in history.”

The Treasury Department supported Gasparro’s Flowing Hair Liberty. Secretary of the Treasury W. Michael Blumenthal attacked Oakar’s proposal: “Although many women have made substantial contributions to the nation, they’ve all fallen short of the presidency. To depart from the past precedent of using ‘Miss Liberty’ would surely invite unnecessary controversy.”

“MEMBERS OF THE Commission wanted less glamour, more toughness, less refinement and more of Anthony’s real strong face.”

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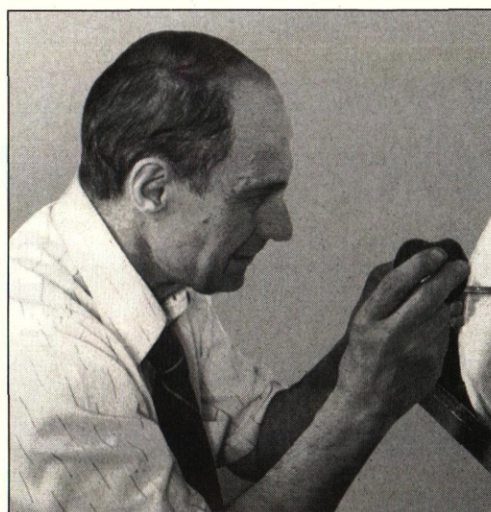
Additional protests poured into government offices from numismatists around the country who supported the Flowing Hair Liberty. Collectors argued that the magnificence of Gasparro’s design deserved recognition. One collector summed up the arguments when he wrote:

Mr. Gasparro’s design is beautiful. I firmly believe that such a symbol as Liberty does, in fact[,] represent U.S. women and U.S. men. “She” does not represent a single issue or cause, as some of the actual people suggested do; but rather, everything America stands for—freedom, justice, peace . . . I would think that the modern American woman would be proud that such ideals would be represented by a female figure.

Despite the opposition, Oakar introduced the bill to the House Committee on Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs. At the same time, Senator William Proxmire (D-Wisconsin), chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, sponsored a similar bill in the Senate. Both houses of Congress successfully advocated the inclusion of Susan B. Anthony’s portrait, and the Treasury Department and Mint bowed to the legislative mandate. On August 22, 1978, the Senate passed the bill providing for the striking of a new, reduced size dollar coin carrying the image of the 19th-century suffragist Susan B. Anthony on the obverse. The reverse would bear the Eisenhower dollar’s *Apollo 11* motif. Not a single Senator dissented. On September 26, 1978, the House of Representatives approved by a vote of 368 to 38.

The last hurdle was approval by the United States Commission of Fine Arts. Initially, the Commission returned the Anthony portrait to Chief Engraver Frank Gasparro, requesting that he “strengthen the design. Members of the Commission wanted less glamour, more toughness, less refinement and more of Anthony’s real strong face.” Gasparro willingly complied.

Anticipating high demand for the new dollar, the government decided to get a jump on production. Therefore, the Mint struck the first Susan B. Anthony dollar coins in Philadelphia on December 13, 1978, with 1979 dates and the first “P” mintmark since the silver nickels of World War II. Denver production began on January 9, 1979, and San Francisco minting began on February 2, 1979.



Chief Engraver of the United States Mint Frank Gasparro (shown) created the Susan B. Anthony portrait as well as the proposed Flowing Hair Liberty design.

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The Susan B. Anthony Dollar

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Historical Context

THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE of Susan B. Anthony's portrait on the silver dollar lies in her contributions to the women's movement. The coin symbolizes the long and difficult struggle of American women to obtain equal rights, a struggle to which Susan B. Anthony dedicated her life. According to Lynn Sherr, television news correspondent, in her Anthony biography *Failure Is Impossible*:

Anthony . . . carefully, wittily, and sometimes painfully laid the groundwork for virtually every right we [have as women today. She] not only helped create the first women's movement in this country, she led it, brilliantly, for more than fifty years. Indeed, it was her tireless dedication to The Cause—the drive for the most crucial political right of all, the vote—and her astounding skill at organization that not only changed laws and attitudes, but also helped introduce the entire realm of equal rights to a very reluctant nation.

Anthony branded herself a “radical egalitarian,” insisting that “no human being was superior to or inferior to any other.” This belief in the equality of all human beings underscored both her public and private life and served as the guiding force in all of her relationships and her work. She used this principle in deciding campaign strategies and dealing with confrontations. Anthony also used this “radical egalitarianism” to justify her status as a single woman:

When I am crowned with all the rights, privileges, and immunities of a citizen, I may give some consideration to this social institution; but

until then I must concentrate all of my energies on the enfranchisement of my own sex.

Anthony began her career as a schoolteacher, and her democratic and progressive views on education again reflected her radical egalitarianism. She also showed a strong commitment to public education. In an 1862 letter to longtime friend and fellow women's rights pioneer Elizabeth Cady Stanton, she wrote:

Any and every private education is a blunder, it seems to me. I believe those persons stronger and nobler who have from childhood breasted the commonalty. If children have not the innate strength to resist evil, keeping them apart from what they must inevitably one day meet, only increases their incompetency.

Keenly aware of the lack of educational opportunities available to women, Anthony dedicated many years to the fight for coeducation. Says Sherr, “At a time when separate schools for female students were catching on, she remained a relentless advocate of coeducation.” She delivered several speeches arguing for the sexes to be educated together. In 1856 Anthony explained her belief that

[b]oth sexes eat, sleep, hate, love and desire alike. Everything which relates to the operations of the mind is common to both sexes. . . . If they are allowed to attend picnics together, and balls, and dancing schools, and the opera, it certainly will not injure them to use chalk at the same blackboard.

She soon realized, however, that teaching did not leave her enough time to work for social reform. By 1848 she had abandoned her career and plunged herself into a life dedi-

cated to social reform. Although her chief concern centered on women's rights, she also fought for temperance and the abolition of slavery. A few years before the Civil War, she offered her views on the institution:

[Slavery] is the Legalized, Systematic robbery of the bodies and souls of nearly four millions of men, women, and children. It is the Legalized traffic in God's Image. . . . We demand the abolition of slavery because the slave is a human being, and because man should not hold property in his fellowman.

What bothered Anthony most about drinking was the abusive effect alcoholic husbands had on the lives of their wives and children. She believed that her work in the temperance movement turned her into a feminist.

She joined the Daughters of Temperance Society, and while traveling around the country to raise money for the temperance movement, she discovered that married women had no money to contribute to the cause. Even if they did hold a job, their husbands controlled the family finances. From this, Anthony realized that women's rights went way beyond economic freedom. In an 1895 interview for the *New York Mail and Express*, she told of her experiences:

There were [hundreds of cases] in which designing men would marry innocent girls for their money, and almost as soon as the marriage vow was uttered, would waste their wives' dowry in riotous living. If a man failed[,] his creditors attached his wife's property, and frequently took away from her everything she had. . . . There were cases where women with lazy or dissipated husbands would try to work and support

themselves and their little ones and when it came around to the . . . pay day . . . the wretched husband would appear . . . and collect the proceeds of her toil and let her go home penniless. . . . And stranger still, the father had the right of custody over the children at the expense of the mother. These facts will illustrate a condition in which women had no rights and no privileges; where, in fact, they hardly had a soul to call their own. The thing struck me so forcibly that I determined to enter public life and battle for my sex.

Anthony also embarked on a campaign to change the laws concerning ownership of property by women. First she arranged a series of regional conventions in New York. From there, she organized petition

campaigns designed to change the property laws for married women in that state. She and her co-workers started a door-to-door campaign. Braving the vicious winter weather of upstate New York, they collected more than 6,000 signatures in a 10-week period. In 1860, after five years of petition drives, state canvasses and legislative hearings, New York passed a law allowing married women to own separate property, to carry on business in their own names, to enter into contracts, to sue and be sued, and to be the joint guardian of their children.

In May 1860, Susan B. Anthony opened the Tenth National Woman's Rights Convention in New York City with an invigorating speech that infused the movement with new energy and spirit:

Inasmuch as man, in the progress of his development, found that at each advancing step new wants demanded new rights . . . it is his duty to stand aside and leave to woman the same rights. It is in the struggle to win their rights that women learn the depth of male resistance to woman's emancipation. That resistance and the struggle itself often make it difficult to see and expose other levels of domination . . . winning a new right exposes other issues and clarifies the direction for the movement's next struggle.

Always witty and spunky in speaking out for the rights of married women, Anthony was challenged by renowned abolitionist Reverend A.D. Mayo of Rochester, New York. When Mayo accused her of being single and thus having no business

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discussing married women's rights, Anthony quipped, "Well, Mr. Mayo, you are not a slave, suppose you quit lecturing on slavery."

In January 1868, Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton published a newspaper, *The Revolution*, championing the cause of women's rights. The newspaper became an instant success. Sherr describes how Anthony's personality was well-suited for the task:

[Anthony] possessed a reporter's curiosity and a columnist's convictions; a publisher's vision and a publicist's savvy; a sales manager's drive and so much charisma as a celebrity that the mere mention of her name in the headlines sold papers. . . . Acutely aware of the power of the printed word, she was a one-woman press phenomenon.

In the 1872 presidential election, Anthony doggedly lobbied both parties to include "a plank in your platform that shall assert the duty of the National Government to protect women citizens in the exercise of their right to vote; & thereby make it possible for women possessed of true self-respect to advocate the claims of [your] party to the suffrages of the people."

When both parties refused to address the suffrage issue, an infuriated Anthony took matters into her own hands. She, along with her three sisters, walked into a Rochester polling place and voted in the presidential election. Two weeks later, she was arrested at her home. Justice Ward Hunt presided over her trial in a New York court. The judge made a mockery of the entire trial, forbid-

ding Anthony to testify in her own defense, denying the jury the opportunity to retire and weigh the evidence, and instructing the all-male jury to return a guilty verdict. At the completion of the trial, Hunt imposed a \$100 fine and asked if she had anything to say to the court. In her lengthy response, she stated:

Yes, your honor, I have many things to say; for in your ordered verdict of guilty you have trampled under foot every vital principle of our government. My natural rights, my civil rights, my political rights, my judicial rights, are all alike ignored. Robbed of the fundamental privilege of citizenship, I am degraded from the status of a citizen to that of a subject; and not only myself individually but all of my sex are, by your honor's verdict, doomed to

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political subjection under this so-called republican form of government. . . . and I shall earnestly and persistently continue to urge all to the practical recognition of the old Revolutionary maxim, "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God."

By 1882 Anthony's movement had its own committee working in the Senate and in 1890 its own committee room. As she happily remarked, "Oh, we are getting along, but it takes a long time to educate public opinion in a matter like this." This was no exaggeration on her part. Her tireless devotion to the cause can be seen in a diary entry made at the age of 78:

I have delivered 75 to 100 speeches a year for forty-five years, not counting thirty years of addresses to Congress and the New York State

Legislature. I spoke in churches, parlors, town halls, opera houses, and vaulted state capitols; in Colorado I climbed atop a billiard table for one lecture and a dry goods box on the courthouse steps for another. I addressed farmers in Kansas, students in New York, townfolk in Iowa, others in Missouri. I spoke against a background of crying babies, raging thunderstorms and welcoming applause.

As the years passed, Anthony became a charismatic leader, earning for herself the nickname "Napoleon of woman's rights." Her total commitment to the women's movement, her strong principle of "radical egalitarianism," and her personal strength and boundless energy motivated those with whom she came into contact.

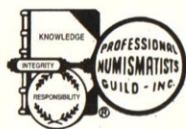
She helped women see themselves as individuals as well as understand their collective tie to the larger group of women. Susan B. Anthony served as the catalyst of this new identity. A reporter for the *Cincinnati Gazette* summed up her importance to the women's movement shortly after the Civil War:

The paramount reason why Susan B. Anthony should be the Apostle of the Woman's Rights cause is that she has never surrendered to man her independence, nor annihilated her personality by marriage, nor promised to honor and obey a male master.

Although Anthony did not live to see the 19th Amendment, she never questioned that it would become a reality. At the 1906 meeting of the

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Susan B. Anthony Dollar

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National American Woman Suffrage Association—her last speech before the public—she put forth this inspiring prophecy:

There have been others also just as true and devoted to the cause—I wish I could name every one—but with such women consecrating their lives, failure is impossible!

Social Impact

SOCIALLY, ANTHONY'S PORTRAIT on the silver dollar serves as more than a mere reminder of the American woman's struggle for liberty and equality. It inspires future generations to continue the fight to secure liberty and human rights for all Americans. It teaches Americans that they must stand up against those individuals who, as part of the majority, feel they have the right to control those in the minority.

Through her courage, persistence and dedication, Susan B. Anthony provided an example of each American citizen's obligation to join in the struggle for human rights and freedom. Anthony fought for social issues that bear as much relevance today as they did 100 years ago. Sherr reminds us that

[Susan B. Anthony] dealt not only with the vote, but with most of the same issues confronting modern women—domestic violence, . . . the value of female friendship, the victimization of prostitutes, the battle for equal pay.

Although the Susan B. Anthony coin never achieved the popularity its creators hoped for, it remains a symbol of bold aspirations and high ideals. Not everything in our society can be measured in terms of eco-

nomie gain. The Anthony dollar demonstrated that a country can respond not only to economic influences, but also to political, historical and social influences. The Susan B. Anthony coin celebrates the commitment to "liberty and justice for all" that has become the hallmark of our country. •

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Jillian Leifer is a college student from Wayland, Massachusetts. This article is based on "The Susan B. Anthony Dollar," her 1997 submission to the Professional Coin Grading Service (PCGS) essay contest.

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