

The Philadelphia Mint: A Coinage Legacy

By Kristen Pearson

CONGRESS PASSED THE COINAGE ACT on April 2, 1792, establishing the United States Mint and setting the U.S. dollar as the standard unit of currency. Before that point, American commerce had relied on state-minted coins, foreign currencies like the Spanish dollar, and most of all, the barter system. Though the need for a federally regulated currency was recognized as early as 1777, debate had raged for years over what form that currency should take. Numerous prototypes were minted and circulated before a consensus was reached, including one coin—designed by Benjamin Franklin—inscribed “Mind your Business.” The first official coins—silver *dismes* (dimes)—were minted in Philadelphia one year after the Coinage Act was passed. They were struck from Martha Washington’s own silverware.

The first silver dismes were emblazoned with the eagle on one side and the bust of Liberty on the other. These motifs can be tied to the Neoclassicism of the Founding Fathers, who deliberately identified the new nation with Athens and Republican Rome. The eagle, sacred to Jupiter, was a symbol of Roman might and the emblem of the Roman legions. The goddess Libertas—associated with the overthrow of the Tarquin kings, the establishment of the Republic, and the manumission of slaves—was also adopted as the symbol of Revolutionary France in the form of Marianne.

Widely considered to be the most beautiful American coin ever minted, the Saint-Gaudens Double Eagle, produced from 1907–1933, also features the goddess Liberty. On this coin, Liberty is depicted striding forward with torch and olive branch in hand, her dress and hair billowing out behind her. On the reverse is a soaring



ABOVE RIGHT: The Mint's first female employees were hired in 1795, two years after the Mint was established. Some worked as adjusters, weighing each coin blank and shaving off any excess metal. This 1903 photo shows a woman operating a coin press.

ABOVE: The Saint-Gaudens Double Eagle, considered the most beautiful American coin, was produced from 1907–1933. Photos from Wikimedia.



ABOVE: *Inspecting the First Coinage* by John Ward Dunsmore, 1792. Silver used to make the first U.S. coins came from silverware donated by George and Martha Washington. Courtesy of The Philadelphia Mint. LEFT: The Philadelphia Mint in its second location, ca. 1900, at Chestnut and Juniper Streets. Photo from Wikimedia.

eagle backed by the rays of the sun. President Roosevelt, unhappy with the aesthetic quality of American coinage, personally requested that Augustus Saint-Gaudens, one of America's greatest sculptors, design the 20-dollar gold coin and corresponded with the artist throughout the process. Inspired by the coins of Ancient Greece, Roosevelt suggested that the Double Eagle be designed in high relief—a decision that would lead to significant difficulties in the coining process. Saint-Gaudens later lamented, "I am grieved that the striking of the die did not bring better results. Evidently it is no trifling matter to make Greek art conform with modern numismatics." The production of the coins was seriously delayed, and Saint-Gaudens, who had been in poor health, died three months before any Double Eagles were minted. Today, coins are still designed by master sculptors. Many use the same techniques as Saint-Gaudens, sculpting the initial design in clay, while others use digital tools to create three-dimensional models.

The largest U.S. Mint in the country still operates in Philadelphia, though it is no longer located in the original building; in fact, the Mint has been relocated three times since it was established. Philadelphia polymath David Rittenhouse, appointed Director of the Mint

by George Washington, purchased two plots of land on 7th and Arch Streets for the construction of the first Mint building in 1792. At three stories, it was the tallest building in Philadelphia at the time. The second building, known as the "Grecian Temple" for its white marble columns, was located at Chestnut and Juniper Streets and was in operation until 1901. Neither the first nor the second Mint buildings have survived to the present, but the third building still stands, housing the Community College of Philadelphia.

Now in its fourth iteration, the Philadelphia Mint has been located on Independence Mall since 1969—just 100 yards away from where the original building once stood. The first coin press, salvaged from the original building before it was demolished, is displayed in the Mint's public galleries and offers a contrast to the automated coining process employed today. At its highest capacity, the first Mint could produce 1 million coins in three years; the fourth Mint can produce the same number in 30 minutes.

THE PHILADELPHIA MINT is open to the public from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday year-round, and through Saturday during the summer months. The free, self-guided tour takes approximately 45 minutes. The Mint is located at 151 N. Independence Mall East, Philadelphia, PA 19106 (on 5th Street between Arch Street and Race Street).