



Updated March 20, 2023

Coins and Medals Celebrating the Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence

On July 4, the United States celebrates the anniversary of the 1776 signing of the Declaration of Independence with a federal holiday called Independence Day. For certain milestone anniversaries (every 50 years), Congress has authorized the temporary design of circulating coins, or the issuance of medals or commemorative coins. These milestone celebrations occurred in 1826, 1876, 1926, and 1976. The 250th anniversary occurs in 2026. This In Focus provides a historical overview of circulating coins, medals, and commemorative coins for past anniversary celebrations and the upcoming semiquincentennial (250th) anniversary.

Circulating Coinage

For two anniversary celebrations—1976 and 2026—Congress authorized the temporary redesign of circulating coins.

1976—200th Anniversary

For 1976, to celebrate the bicentennial, Congress authorized special designs of the quarter, half-dollar, and dollar (P.L. 93-127). Congress specified that the bicentennial coins maintain the same obverse as then-circulating coins, but include two dates—1776 and 1976—rather than the standard single date. Further, “the reverse side of all dollar, half-dollar, and quarter-dollar coins ... shall bear a design determined by the Secretary to be emblematic of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution.” **Figure 1** shows the bicentennial quarter, half-dollar, and dollar coins.

Figure 1. 1976 Bicentennial Coins



Source: U.S. Mint, “1976 Bicentennial Coins,” Image emailed to the author by the U.S. Mint, August 27, 2021.

The bicentennial quarter has a portrait of George Washington on the obverse and a colonial drummer on the reverse. The bicentennial half-dollar features a portrait of

John F. Kennedy on the obverse and Independence Hall on the reverse. The bicentennial dollar includes a portrait of Dwight D. Eisenhower on the obverse and the Liberty Bell and the moon on the reverse.

2026—250th Anniversary

In the 116th Congress, Congress enacted the Circulating Collectible Coin Redesign Act (P.L. 116-330) to authorize the temporary redesign of all circulating coins for the 2026 semiquincentennial. The law requires that the Secretary of the Treasury select coin designs in consultation with the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) and the Citizens Coinage Advisory Committee (CCAC). Additionally, the Secretary is required to devise a “design selection process developed ... in consultation with the United States Semiquincentennial Commission and with recommendations from the general public” (§3).

The Circulating Collectible Coin Redesign Act provides specific instructions for the reverse of 2026 quarters and dollar coins. For quarters, the U.S. Mint is authorized to redesign the quarter’s reverse “with up to five different designs emblematic of the United States semiquincentennial.” Further, at least “one of the ... designs must be emblematic of a woman’s or women’s contribution to the birth of the Nation or the Declaration of Independence or any other monumental moments” in American history (§3). For dollar coins, the U.S. Mint is authorized to issue coins “with designs emblematic of the United States semiquincentennial” (§3). Any semiquincentennial \$1 coins issued would be in addition to the regular issuance of Native American and American Innovation \$1 coins (§3).

Commemorative Medals

On two occasions (1876 and 1976), Congress authorized the issuance of commemorative anniversary medals.

1876—100th Anniversary

In 1876, the United States celebrated its 100th anniversary. To help celebrate the centennial, Congress authorized medals be struck to commemorate the “one hundredth anniversary of the first meeting of the Continental Congress and the Declaration of Independence.” The law (18 Stat. 76) stated:

That medals with appropriate devices, emblems and inscriptions, commemorative of the Centennial Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence be prepared at the Mint at Philadelphia for the Centennial Board of Finance....

These medals were issued as part of a larger Centennial International Exhibition of 1876 (i.e., Philadelphia World’s Fair). Official medals were struck in silver, bronze, and gilt. The medals featured liberty on the obverse and “In Commemoration of the Hundredth Anniversary of American Independence” on the reverse. **Figure 2** shows the Independence Centennial Medal.

Figure 2. 1876 Centennial Medal



Source: Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, “Independence Centennial Medal,” image emailed to the author by the Smithsonian, September 14, 2021.

1976—200th Anniversary

In February 1972, Congress authorized the U.S. Mint to strike medals for the American Bicentennial in 1976 (P.L. 92-228). The American Revolution Bicentennial Commission (ARBC) determined the medal’s design, subject to the approval of the Secretary of the Treasury. The medal depicts the Statue of Liberty on the obverse with the dates of 1776 and 1976, along with the words “Life Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness,” and five pointed stars on the surround edge [not pictured]. The reverse features the Great Seal of the United States, with the Bicentennial logos, and the words “American Revolution Bicentennial” at the top and “We the People” at the bottom. The ARBC sold the medal to help fund its bicentennial activities. **Figure 3** shows an image of the 1976 Bicentennial Medal.

Figure 3. 1976 National Bicentennial Medal



Source: U.S. Mint, “1976 National Bicentennial Medal.” Image emailed to the author by the U.S. Mint, August 27, 2021.

Commemorative Coins

For one anniversary celebration—the 150th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 1926—Congress authorized the issuance of commemorative coins. Legislation was introduced in the 117th Congress (2021-2022) to authorize commemorative coins for 2026, but was not enacted.

1926—150th Anniversary

In 1926, to celebrate the sesquicentennial (150th anniversary) of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Congress authorized commemorative quarter-eagles (\$2.50 cent coins) and half-dollars (43 Stat. 1254). The quarter-eagles featured Liberty on the obverse and Independence Hall on the reverse, while the half-dollar featured Presidents Washington and Coolidge on the obverse and the Liberty Bell on the reverse. **Figure 4** shows the 1926 sesquicentennial quarter-eagle and half-dollar.

Figure 4. 1926 Sesquicentennial Quarter-eagle and Half-dollar



Source: U.S. Mint, “Sesquicentennial of American Independence Quarter-eagle,” at <https://go.usa.gov/xFzcC>; and “Sesquicentennial of American Independence Half-dollar,” at <https://go.usa.gov/xFzcg>.

2026—250th Anniversary (Proposed)

In the 117th Congress (2021-2022), bills were introduced to authorize commemorative coins to mark the semiquincentennial. Those bills (H.R. 4429 and S. 2384) would have authorized four commemorative coins—a \$25 gold, a \$2.50 silver, a \$0.25 clad, and a \$2.50 proof five-ounce silver (§3(a)) to be issued in 2026 (§5(c)). Each proposed coin would have had the inscriptions of years 1776-2026, the denomination, and the words “Liberty,” “In God We Trust,” “United States of America,” and “E Pluribus Unum” (§4). Surcharges from the sale of the coins would have been paid to the America 250 Foundation (§7(b)). Neither measure was considered by the House or Senate. To date, legislation to authorize commemorative coins for the 250th anniversary has not been introduced in the 118th Congress (2023-2024).

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