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Nickels and Dimes: History and Current Status

The Secretary of the Treasury, through the U.S. Mint, is statutorily authorized to issue specific circulating coin denominations (31 U.S.C. §5112). Currently, the United States has six circulating coin denominations—dollar, half dollar, quarter dollar, dime, nickel, and penny. Unlike today’s circulating coins, initial coin designs did not feature images of U.S. Presidents; rather, they often featured allegorical images of Liberty and other symbols of the United States. Congress legislatively prescribes the design of circulating coins. Congress could provide future authority to redesign either the nickel or the dime, although no legislation to that effect has been recently introduced.

Nickel Designs

The Coinage Act of 1792 authorized the first 5-cent coin. They were called half-dimes and were made of silver. The first half-dime was issued in 1794, and until 1913 half-dimes featured an image of Liberty on the obverse. **Figure 1** shows several historical half-dimes, including obverses of Liberty with “flowing hair” (1794) and Liberty with a “draped bust” (1796). On the reverse, early half-dimes often featured a wreath around the coin’s denomination.

Figure 1. Selected Early American Half-Dimes



Source: U.S. Mint, “The History of U.S. Circulating Coins,” <https://www.usmint.gov/learn/history/us-circulating-coins>.

In 1866, Congress authorized the nickel, composed of copper and nickel. Between 1866 and 1873, the U.S. Mint issued both half-dimes and nickels. In 1913, the nickel’s obverse changed to the image of a Native American and the reverse featured the buffalo. Buffalo nickels were issued until 1938, when President Thomas Jefferson was placed on the nickel’s obverse and an image of Monticello, President

Jefferson’s home in Virginia, was put on the reverse. **Figure 2** shows examples of the Buffalo and Jefferson/Monticello nickels issued between 1913 and 2003.

Figure 2. Selected Images of Buffalo and Jefferson/Monticello Nickels



Source: U.S. Mint, “The History of U.S. Circulating Coins.”

For 2004 and 2005, Congress authorized the redesign of the nickel to commemorate the bicentennials of the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark expedition. The Westward Journey nickels featured President Jefferson on the obverse and four different images on the reverse. The four designs (shown in **Figure 3**) featured a depiction of the 1801 Jefferson Peace Medal, which is alternatively known as the Jefferson Indian Peace Medal; a keelboat; the American bison; and a view of the ocean from the Oregon coast.

Figure 3. Westward Journey Nickel Reverse



Source: U.S. Mint. “Westward Journey Nickel Series,” at <https://www.usmint.gov/learn/coin-and-medal-programs/westward-journey-nickel-series>.

Dime Designs

The Coinage Act of 1792 authorized the first dime (10-cent coin). Early dimes were made of silver and featured Liberty on the obverse and a wreath around the coin's denomination on the reverse. The U.S. Mint added reeded edges to the dime in the 1790s to discourage holders from filing off pieces of the dime to sell the silver. **Figure 4** shows early examples of the dime.

Figure 4. Early Examples of Dimes



Source: U.S. Mint, "The History of U.S. Circulating Coins."

Since the early 1900s, the U.S. Mint has used two designs for the dime's obverse. From 1916 to 1945, the obverse showed an image of Liberty with wings on her head, and the reverse had a fasces, a symbol of authority from antiquity, wrapped by an olive branch. These dimes were often called "Mercury Dimes." In 2016, the U.S. Mint issued a Mercury Dime centennial gold coin to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the coin. The Mercury Dime, however, was not reissued as a circulating coin. **Figure 5** shows the original Mercury Dime.

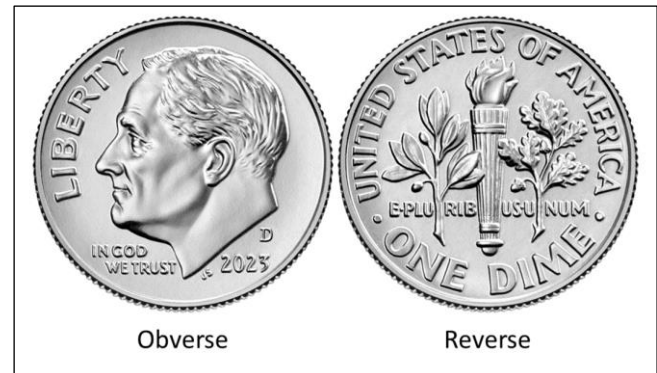
Figure 5. Mercury Dime, 1916-1945



Source: U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, "Mercury Dime," at <https://www.cfa.gov/about-cfa/design-topics/coins-medals/mercury-dime>.

In 1946, shortly after he died, the U.S. Mint placed President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on the dime's obverse. A torch with an olive branch to its left and an oak branch on the right are featured on the reverse. The choice of President Roosevelt for the dime's obverse reflected his support of the March of Dimes, a program that raised funds to find a cure for polio, a disease that President Roosevelt contracted in his late 30s. **Figure 6** shows the current Roosevelt dime.

Figure 6. Roosevelt Dime



Source: U.S. Mint, "Dime," at <https://www.usmint.gov/coins/coin-medal-programs/circulating-coins/dime>.

For more information on other circulating coins, see CRS In Focus IF12293, *Penny: History and Current Status*; CRS In Focus IF11394, *Quarter and Half Dollar Coins: History and Current Status*; CRS In Focus IF11190, *U.S. Dollar Coins: History and Current Status*; and CRS In Focus IF11773, *Redesigning Circulating Quarters, Half Dollars, and Dollar Coins: Current and Future Designs*. For more information on the role of Congress for circulation coin design, see CRS In Focus IF10533, *Congressional Involvement in the Design of Circulating Coins*.

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