

= Buffalo nickel =

The Buffalo nickel or Indian Head nickel was a copper @-@ nickel five @-@ cent piece struck by the United States Mint from 1913 to 1938 . It was designed by sculptor James Earle Fraser .

As part of a drive to beautify the coinage , five denominations of US coins had received new designs between 1907 and 1909 . In 1911 , Taft administration officials decided to replace Charles E. Barber 's Liberty Head design for the nickel , and commissioned Fraser to do the work . They were impressed by Fraser 's designs showing a Native American and an American bison . The designs were approved in 1912 , but were delayed several months because of objections from the Hobbs Manufacturing Company , which made mechanisms to detect slugs in nickel @-@ operated machines . The company was not satisfied by changes made in the coin by Fraser , and in February 1913 , Treasury Secretary Franklin MacVeagh decided to issue the coins despite the objections .

Despite attempts by the Mint to adjust the design , the coins proved to strike indistinctly , and to be subject to wear ? the dates were easily worn away in circulation . In 1938 , after the expiration of the minimum 25 @-@ year period during which the design could not be replaced without congressional authorization , it was replaced by the Jefferson nickel , designed by Felix Schlag . Fraser 's design is admired today , and has been used on commemorative coins and gold bullion pieces .

= = Background = =

In 1883 , the Liberty Head nickel was issued , featuring designs by Mint Engraver Charles E. Barber . After the coin was released , it was modified to add the word " CENTS " to the reverse because the similarity in size with the half eagle allowed criminals to gild the new nickels and pass them as five dollar coins . An Act of Congress , passed into law on September 26 , 1890 required that coinage designs not be changed until they had been in use 25 years , unless Congress authorized the change . The act made the current five @-@ cent piece and silver dollar exceptions to the twenty @-@ five year rule ; they were made eligible for immediate redesign . However , the Mint continued to strike the Liberty Head nickel in large numbers through the first decade of the 20th century .

President Theodore Roosevelt in 1904 expressed his dissatisfaction with the artistic state of the American coinage , and hoped to hire sculptor Augustus Saint @-@ Gaudens to redesign all the coins . Constrained by the 1890 act , the Mint only hired Saint @-@ Gaudens to redesign the cent and the four gold pieces . Saint @-@ Gaudens , before his 1907 death , designed the eagle and double eagle , which entered circulation that year ; the cent , quarter eagle , and half eagle were designed by other artists and released into circulation by 1909 . By that time , the Liberty Head nickel had been in circulation for more than 25 years , and was eligible for redesign regardless of the special provision . In 1909 , Mint Director Frank Leach instructed Barber to make pattern coins for new nickels . Most of these coins featured the first president , George Washington . The press found out about the pieces , and speculated they would be released into circulation by the end of the year . The Mint received orders from banks in anticipation of the " Washington nickel " . However , the project was discontinued when Leach left office on November 1 , 1909 , to be replaced by Abram Andrew .

Andrew was dissatisfied with the just @-@ issued Lincoln cent , and considered seeking congressional authorization to replace the cent with a design by sculptor James Earle Fraser . While the change in the cent did not occur , according to numismatic historian Roger Burdette , " Fraser 's enthusiasm eventually led to adoption of the Buffalo nickel in December 1912 " .

= = Inception = =

= = = New design = = =

On May 4 , 1911 , Eames MacVeagh , son of Treasury Secretary Franklin MacVeagh wrote to his father :

A little matter that seems to have been overlooked by all of you is the opportunity to beautify the design of the nickel or five cent piece during your administration , and it seems to me that it would be a permanent souvenir of a most attractive sort . As possibly you are aware , it is the only coin the design of which you can change during your administration , as I believe there is a law to the effect that the designs must not be changed oftener than every twenty @-@ five years . I should think also it might be the coin of which the greatest numbers are in circulation .

Soon after the MacVeagh letter , Andrew announced that the Mint would be soliciting new designs for the nickel . Fraser , who had been an assistant to Saint @-@ Gaudens , approached the Mint , and rapidly produced concepts and designs . The new Mint director , George Roberts , who had replaced Andrew , initially favored a design featuring assassinated President Abraham Lincoln , but Fraser soon developed a design featuring a Native American on one side and a bison on the other . Andrew and Roberts recommended Fraser to MacVeagh , and in July 1911 , the Secretary approved hiring Fraser to design a new nickel . Official approval was slow in coming ; it was not until January 1912 that MacVeagh asked Roberts to inform Fraser that he had been commissioned . MacVeagh wrote , " Tell him that of the three sketches which he submitted we would like to use the sketch of the head of the Indian and the sketch of the buffalo . " Roberts transmitted the news , then followed up with a long list of instructions to the sculptor , in which he noted , " The motto , ' In God We Trust ' , is not required upon this coin and I presume we are agreed that nothing should be upon it that is not required . " Fraser completed the models by June 1912 , and prepared coin @-@ size electrotypes . He brought the models and electrotypes to Washington on July 10 , where they met with the enthusiastic agreement of Secretary MacVeagh .

= = = Hobbs affair = = =

In July 1912 , word of the new design became publicly known , and coin @-@ operated machine manufacturers sought information . Replying to the inquiries , MacVeagh wrote that there would be no change in the diameter , thickness , or weight of the nickel . This satisfied most firms . However , Clarence Hobbs of the Hobbs Manufacturing Company , of Worcester , Massachusetts requested further information . According to Hobbs , his firm was the manufacturer of a device which would detect counterfeit nickels inserted into vending machines with complete accuracy . Discussions continued for most of the rest of 1912 , with Hobbs demanding various changes to the design , to which the artist was reluctant to agree . When in December 1912 , the Hobbs Company submitted a modified design for the nickel , MacVeagh strongly opposed it . On December 18 , Roberts officially approved Fraser 's design , and the sculptor was authorized to complete and perfect the design , after which he would be paid \$ 2 @,@ 500 (US \$ 61 @,@ 300 with inflation) for his work .

On January 7 , 1913 , Fraser 's approved design was used to strike experimental pieces ; the sculptor later wrote that he remembered several of the workmen commenting that the new piece struck more easily than the old . Afterwards , Roberts asked Fraser if the Hobbs Company was content with the design . The sculptor told the Mint director that the firm wanted changes made , and Fraser agreed to meet with them further . Over the following two weeks , Fraser worked with George Reith , the Hobbs Company 's mechanic who had invented the anti @-@ slug device , in an attempt to satisfy the firm 's concerns . On January 20 , Fraser wired the Mint from his studio in New York , announcing that he was submitting a modified design , and explained that the delay was " caused by working with inventor until he was satisfied " . The next day , Philadelphia Mint Superintendent John Landis sent Roberts a sample striking of the revised design , stating , " the only change is in the border , which has been made round and true " .

Despite the apparent agreement , the Hobbs Company continued to interpose objections . Engraver Barber was asked for his view ; he stated that Reith , who had attended the trial striking , had been given all the time and facilities he had asked for in testing the new pieces , and the mechanic had pronounced himself satisfied . Hobbs Company agent C. U. Carpenter suggested that Reith had been intimidated by the preparations that had already gone into the issue of the modified nickel , " and , instead of pointing out clearly just what the situation demanded , agreed to adapt our device to the coin more readily than [sic] he was warranted in doing " . On February 3 , Hobbs sent Roberts a

lengthy list of changes that he wanted in the coin , and the sculptor was required to attend a conference with Hobbs and Reith . On the fifth , following the conference , which ended with no agreement , Fraser sent MacVeagh a ten @-@ page letter , complaining that his time was being wasted by the Hobbs Company , and appealing to the Secretary to bring the situation to a close . MacVeagh agreed to hold a meeting at his office in Washington on February 14 . When the Hobbs Company requested permission to bring a lawyer , Fraser announced he would be doing the same . The Hobbs Company sought letters of support from the business community , with little success ; Fraser 's efforts to secure support from artists for his position were more fruitful . Barber prepared patterns showing what the nickel would look like if the changes demanded by Hobbs were made . MacVeagh conducted the meeting much like a legal hearing , and issued a letter the following day .

The Secretary noted that no other firm had complained , that the Hobbs mechanism had not been widely sold , and that the changes demanded ? a clear space around the rim and the flattening of the Indian 's cheekbone ? would affect the artistic merit of the piece .

It is of course true that only the most serious business considerations should stand in the way of the improvement of the coinage , and this particular coin has great claims of its own , because of its special quality . If we should stop new coinage ? which is always allowed every twenty @-@ five years ? for any commercial obstacles less than imperative , we should have to abandon a worthy coinage altogether . This would be a most serious handicap to the art of the Nation , for scarcely any form of art is more influential than an artistic coin , where the coin is widely circulated .

You will please , therefore , proceed with the coinage of the new nickel .

After he issued his decision , MacVeagh learned that the Hudson & Manhattan Railroad Company , which Hobbs claimed had enthusiastically received his device , was actually removing it from service as unsatisfactory . The Secretary 's decision did not end the Hobbs Company efforts , as the firm appealed to President Taft . With only two weeks remaining in his term , the President was not minded to stop the new nickel (production of which had started on February 18) and MacVeagh wrote to Taft 's secretary , Charles D. Hilles , " Certainly Hobbs got all the time and attention out of this administration that any administration could afford to give to one manufacturing corporation . " Numismatic historian and coin dealer Q. David Bowers describes the Hobbs matter as " much ado about nothing from a company whose devices did not work well even with the Liberty Head nickels " .

= = Release and production = =

The first coins to be distributed were given out on February 22 , 1913 , when Taft presided at groundbreaking ceremonies for the National American Indian Memorial at Fort Wadsworth , Staten Island , New York . The memorial , a project of department store magnate Rodman Wanamaker , was never built , and today the site is occupied by an abutment for the Verrazano @-@ Narrows Bridge . Forty nickels were sent by the Mint for the ceremony ; most were distributed to the Native American chiefs who participated . Payment for Fraser 's work was approved on March 3 , 1913 , the final full day of the Taft administration . In addition to the \$ 2 @,@ 500 agreed upon , Fraser received \$ 666 @.@ 15 (US \$ 15 @,@ 900 with inflation) for extra work and expenses through February 14 .

The coins were officially released to circulation on March 4 , 1913 , and quickly gained positive comments as depicting truly American themes . However , The New York Times stated in an editorial that " The new ' nickel ' is a striking example of what a coin intended for wide circulation should not be ... [it] is not pleasing to look at when new and shiny , and will be an abomination when old and dull . " The Numismatist , in March and May 1913 editorials , gave the new coin a lukewarm review , suggesting that the Indian 's head be reduced in size and the bison be eliminated from the reverse .

With the coin now in production , Barber monitored the rate at which dies were expended , as it was the responsibility of his Engraver 's Department to supply all three mints with working dies . On March 11 , 1913 , he wrote to Landis that the dies were being used up three times faster than with the Liberty Head nickel . His department was straining to produce enough new dies to meet

production . In addition , the date and denomination were the points on the coin most subject to wear , and Landis feared the value on the coin would be worn away . Barber made proposed revisions , which Fraser approved after being sent samples . These changes enlarged the legend " FIVE CENTS " and changed the ground on which the bison stands from a hill to flat ground . According to data compiled by numismatic historian David Lange from the National Archives , the changes to what are known as Type II nickels (with the originals Type I) actually decreased the die life . The new Treasury Secretary , William G. McAdoo , wanted further changes in the coin , but Fraser had moved on to other projects and was uninterested in revisiting the nickel . The thickness of the numerals in the date was gradually increased , making them more durable ; however the problem was never addressed with complete success , and even many later @-@ date Buffalo nickels have the date worn away .

The Buffalo nickel saw minor changes to the design in 1916 . The word " LIBERTY " was given more emphasis and moved slightly ; however many Denver and San Francisco issues of the 1920s exhibit weak striking of the word , the Denver issue of 1926 especially ; Bowers questions whether any change was made to the portrait of the Indian , though Walter Breen in his reference work on United States coins states that Barber made the Indian 's nose slightly longer . According to Breen , however , none of these modifications helped , with the coin rarely found well @-@ struck and with the design subject to considerable wear throughout the remainder of its run . The bison 's horn and tail also posed striking problems , again with the Denver and San Francisco issues of the 1920s in general , and 1926 @-@ D in particular , showing the greatest propensity for these deficiencies .

The piece was struck by the tens of millions , at all three mints (Philadelphia , Denver and San Francisco) , through the remainder of the 1910s . In 1921 , a recession began , and no nickels at all were struck the following year . The low mintage for the series was the 1926 @-@ S , at 970 @,@ 000 ? the only date @-@ mint combination with a mintage of less than 1 million . The second lowest mintage for the series came with the 1931 nickel struck at the San Francisco Mint . The 1931 @-@ S was minted in a quantity of 194 @,@ 000 early in the year . There was no need for more to be struck , but Acting Mint Director Mary Margaret O 'Reilly asked the San Francisco Mint to strike more so that the pieces would not be hoarded . Using materials on hand , including the melting down of worn @-@ out nickels , San Francisco found enough metal to strike 1 @,@ 000 @,@ 000 more pieces . Large quantities were saved in the hope they would become valuable , and the coin is not particularly rare today despite the low mintage .

A well @-@ known variety in the series is the 1937 ? D " three @-@ legged " nickel , on which one of the buffalo 's legs is missing . Breen relates that this variety was caused by a pressman , Mr. Young , at the Denver Mint , who in seeking to remove marks from a reverse die (caused by the dies making contact with each other) , accidentally removed or greatly weakened one of the animal 's legs . By the time Mint inspectors discovered and condemned the die , thousands of pieces had been struck and mixed with other coins .

Another variety is the 1938 @-@ D / S , caused by dies bearing an " S " mintmark being repunched with a " D " and used to strike coins at Denver . While the actual course of events is uncertain , Bowers is convinced that the variety was created because Buffalo nickel dies intended for the San Francisco mint were repunched with the " D " and sent to Denver so they would not be wasted ? no San Francisco Buffalo nickels were struck in 1938 , but they were produced at Denver , and it was already known that a new design would be introduced . The 1938 @-@ D / S was the first repunched mintmark of any US coin to be discovered , causing great excitement among numismatists when the variety came to light in 1962 .

When the Buffalo nickel had been in circulation for the minimum 25 years , it was replaced with little discussion or protest . The problems of die life and weak striking had never been solved , and Mint officials advocated its replacement . In January 1938 , the Mint announced an open competition for a new nickel design , to feature early President Thomas Jefferson on the obverse , and Jefferson 's home , Monticello on the reverse . In April , Felix Schlag was announced as the winner . The last Buffalo nickels were struck in April 1938 , at the Denver Mint , the only mint to strike them that year . On October 3 , 1938 , production of the Jefferson nickel began , and they were released into circulation on November 15 .

= = Design , models , and name controversy = =

In a 1947 radio interview , Fraser discussed his design :

Well , when I was asked to do a nickel , I felt I wanted to do something totally American ? a coin that could not be mistaken for any other country 's coin . It occurred to me that the buffalo , as part of our western background , was 100 % American , and that our North American Indian fitted into the picture perfectly .

The visage of the Indian which dominates Fraser 's obverse design was a composite of several Native Americans . Breen noted (before the advent of the Sacagawea dollar) that Fraser 's design was the second and last US coin design to feature a realistic portrait of an Indian , after Bela Pratt 's 1908 design for the half eagle and quarter eagle .

The identity of the Indians whom Fraser used as models is somewhat uncertain , as Fraser told various and not always consistent stories during the forty years he lived after designing the nickel . In December 1913 , he wrote to Mint Director Roberts that " [b] efore the nickel was made I had done several portraits of Indians , among them Iron Tail , Two Moons , and one or two others , and probably got characteristics from those men in the head on the coins , but my purpose was not to make a portrait but a type . "

By 1931 , Two Guns White Calf , son of the last Blackfoot tribal chief , was capitalizing off his claim to be the model for the coin . To try to put an end to the claim , Fraser wrote that he had used three Indians for the piece , including " Iron Tail , the best Indian head I can remember . The other one was Two Moons , the other I cannot recall . " In 1938 , Fraser stated that the three Indians had been " Iron Tail , a Sioux , Big Tree , a Kiowa , and Two Moons , a Cheyenne " . Despite the sculptor 's efforts , he (and the Mint) continued to receive inquiries about the identity of the Indian model until his 1953 death .

Nevertheless , John Big Tree , a Seneca , claimed to be a model for Fraser 's coin , and made many public appearances as the " nickel Indian " until his 1967 death at the age of 92 (though he sometimes alleged he was over 100 years of age) . Big Tree was identified as the model for the nickel in wire service reports about his death , and he had appeared in that capacity at the Texas Numismatic Association convention in 1966 . After Big Tree 's death , the Mint stated that he most likely was not one of the models for the nickel . There have been other claimants : in 1964 , Montana Senator Mike Mansfield wrote to Mint Director Eva B. Adams , enquiring if Sam Resurrection , a Choctaw was a model for the nickel . Adams wrote in reply , " According to our records , the portrait is a composite . There have been many claimants for this honor , all of whom are undoubtedly sincere in the belief that theirs is the one that adorns the nickel . "

According to Fraser , the animal that appears on the reverse is the American bison Black Diamond . In an interview published in the New York Herald on January 27 , 1913 , Fraser was quoted as saying that the animal , which he did not name , was a " typical and shaggy specimen " which he found at the Bronx Zoo . Fraser later wrote that the model " was not a plains buffalo , but none other than Black Diamond , the contrariest animal in the Bronx Zoo . I stood for hours ... He refused point blank to permit me to get side views of him , and stubbornly showed his front face most of the time . " However , Black Diamond was never at the Bronx Zoo , but instead lived at the Central Park Zoo until he was sold and slaughtered in 1915 . Black Diamond 's mounted head is still extant , and has been exhibited at coin conventions . The placement of Black Diamond 's horns differs considerably from that of the animal on the nickel , leading to doubts that Black Diamond was Fraser 's model . One candidate cited by Bowers is Bronx , a bison who was for many years the herd leader of the bison at the Bronx Zoo .

From its inception , the coin was referred to as the " Buffalo nickel " , reflecting the American colloquialism for the North American bison . As the piece is 75 % copper and 25 % nickel , prominent numismatist Stuart Mosher objected to the nomenclature in the 1940s , writing that he was " uncertain why it is called a ' Buffalo nickel ' although the name is preferable to ' Bison copper ' " . The numismatic publication with the greatest circulation , Coin World , calls it an Indian head nickel , while R.S. Yeoman 's Red Book refers to it as an " Indian Head or Buffalo type " .

In 2001 , the design was adopted for use on a commemorative silver dollar . In 2006 , the Mint began striking American Buffalo gold bullion pieces , using a modification of Fraser 's Type I design .