

= Flying Eagle cent =

The Flying Eagle cent is a one @-@ cent piece struck by the Mint of the United States as a pattern coin in 1856 , and for circulation in 1857 and 1858 . The coin was designed by Mint Chief Engraver James B. Longacre , with the eagle in flight based on the work of Longacre 's predecessor , Christian Gobrecht .

By the early 1850s , the large cent ( about the size of a half dollar ) being issued by the Mint was becoming both unpopular in commerce and expensive to coin . After experimenting with various sizes and compositions , the Mint decided on an alloy of 88 % copper and 12 % nickel for a new , smaller cent . After the Mint produced patterns with an 1856 date and gave them to legislators and officials , Congress formally authorized the new piece in February 1857 .

The new cent was issued in exchange for the worn Spanish colonial silver coin that had circulated in the U.S. until then , as well as for its larger predecessor . So many cents were issued that they choked commercial channels , especially as they were not legal tender and no one had to take them . The eagle design did not strike well , and was replaced in 1859 by Longacre 's Indian Head cent .

= = Inception = =

The cent was the first official United States coin to be struck at the Philadelphia Mint in 1793 . These pieces , today known as large cents , were made of pure copper and were about the size of a half dollar . They were struck every year , except 1815 due to a shortage of metal , but were slow to become established in commerce . Worn Spanish colonial silver pieces were then commonly used as money throughout the United States .

The Mint then struck silver or gold in response to deposits by those holding bullion , and made little profit from those transactions . By the 1840s , profits , or seignorage , from monetizing copper into cents helped fund the Mint . In 1849 , copper prices rose sharply , causing the Department of the Treasury to investigate possible alternatives to the large one @-@ cent pieces . The cent was unpopular in trade ; as it was not a legal tender , nobody had to take it , and banks and merchants often refused it . The cent was disliked for its large size as well . In 1837 , the eccentric New York chemist Lewis Feuchtwanger had experimented with a smaller cent size in making model coins as part of a plan to sell his alloy ( similar to base @-@ metal German silver ) to the government for use in coinage . His pieces circulated as hard times tokens in the recession years of the late 1830s and early 1840s .

By 1850 , it was no longer profitable for the Mint to strike cents , and on May 14 , New York Senator Daniel S. Dickinson introduced legislation for a cent made out of billon , copper with a small amount of silver . At the time , it was widely felt that coins should contain a large proportion of their face value in metal . The coin would be annular ; that is , it would have a hole in the middle . The Mint struck experimental pieces , and found that it was difficult to eject such pieces from the presses where they were struck , and that it was expensive to recover the silver from the alloy . Provisions for a smaller cent were dropped from the legislation that gave congressional approval for the three @-@ cent piece in 1851 . Numismatic historian Walter Breen suggested that one factor in rejecting the holed coins was that they reminded many of Chinese cash coins with their minimal purchasing value . A drop in copper prices in 1851 and early 1852 made the matter of a smaller cent less urgent at the Department of the Treasury , which supervised Mint activities .

Copper prices resurged in late 1852 and into 1853 past the \$ 0 @.@ 40 per pound that the Mint viewed as the break @-@ even point for cent manufacture after considering the cost of production ; 1 pound ( 0 @.@ 45 kg ) of copper made 42 ? large cents . In 1853 , patterns using a base @-@ metal alloy were struck using a quarter eagle obverse die , about the size of a dime . Some of the proposed alloys contained the metal nickel . Also considered for use in the cent was " French bronze " ( 95 % copper with the remainder tin and zinc ) and various varieties of German silver . In his 1854 annual report , Mint Director James Ross Snowden advocated the issue of small , bronze cents , as well as the elimination of the half cent , which he described as useless in commerce . A number of pattern cents were struck in 1854 and 1855 . These featured various designs , including

several depictions of Liberty and two adaptations of work by the late Mint chief engraver , Christian Gobrecht : one showing a seated Liberty , which Gobrecht had placed on the silver coins in the 1830s , and another of a flying eagle , which Gobrecht had created based upon a sketch by Titian Peale .

= = Preparation = =

In early 1856 , Snowden proposed legislation to allow him to issue a smaller cent , but leaving the size and metallic composition up to him and Secretary of the Treasury James Guthrie . Under the plan , the new piece would be legal tender , up to ten cents . It would be issued in exchange for the old Spanish silver still circulating in the United States . In the exchange , the Spanish silver would be given full value ( 12 ½ cents per real , or bit ) when normally such pieces traded at about a 20 % discount due to wear . The loss the government would take on the trade would be paid for by the seignorage on the base @-@ metal pieces . The new cents would also be issued for the old cents , and in exchange for the same value in half cents ? that denomination was to be discontinued . The bill was introduced in the Senate on March 25 , 1856 . The old cent weighed 168 grains ( 10 @.@ 9 g ) ; on April 16 , the bill was amended to provide for a cent of at least 95 % copper weighing at least 96 grains ( 6 @.@ 2 g ) and passed the Senate in that form .

While the legislation was being considered , Mint Melter and Refiner James Curtis Booth was conducting experiments on alloys that might be appropriate for the new cent . In July 1856 , Snowden wrote to Guthrie , proposing an alloy of 88 % copper and 12 % nickel as ideal and suggesting amendments to the pending bill that would accomplish this . Booth also wrote to Guthrie to boost the alloy ; both men proposed a weight of 72 grains ( 4 @.@ 7 g ) as convenient as 80 cents would equal a troy pound ( 373 g ) , although the avoirdupois pound ( 454 g ) was more commonly used for base metals .

The Mint 's chief engraver , James B. Longacre , was instructed to prepare designs for pattern coins . Initially , Longacre worked with Liberty head designs such as were common at the time , but Snowden asked that a flying eagle design be prepared . This occurred as Booth 's experiments continued ; the first cent patterns with the flying eagle design were about the size of a quarter . To promote the new alloy , the Mint had 50 half cents struck in it , and had them sent to Washington for Treasury officials to show to officials and congressmen . In early November 1856 , Longacre prepared dies in what would prove to be the final design , depicting a flying eagle on the obverse and a wreathed denomination on the reverse , in the size sought by Booth .

The Mint struck at least several hundred patterns using Longacre 's flying eagle design in the proposed composition . In an effort to secure public acceptance of the new pieces , these were distributed to various congressmen and other officials , initially in November 1856 . Two hundred were sent to the House Committee on Coinage , Weights and Measures , while four were given to President Franklin Pierce . At least 634 specimens were distributed , and possibly several thousand ; extra were available on request . This was the origin of the highly collectable 1856 Flying Eagle cent , which is considered by numismatists as part of the Flying Eagle series although it was actually a pattern or transition piece , not an official coin , as congressional approval had not yet been granted . Additional 1856 small cents were later struck by Snowden for illicit sale , and to exchange for pieces the Mint sought for its coin collection .

In December 1856 , Snowden wrote to Missouri Representative John S. Phelps , hoping for progress with the legislation , and stating that he was already " pressed on all hands , and from every quarter , for the new cent ? in fact , the public are very anxious for its issue " . When the legislation , amended to include the weight and alloy the Mint had decided on , was debated in the House of Representatives on December 24 , it was opposed by Tennessee Congressman George Washington Jones over the legal tender provision ; Jones felt that under the Constitution , only gold and silver should be made legal tender . Phelps defended the bill on the ground that Congress had the constitutional power to regulate the value of money , but when the bill was brought back up to be considered on January 14 , 1857 , the legal tender provision had been removed . This time , the bill was opposed by New York Congressman Thomas R. Whitney , who objected to a provision in the

bill that legalized the Mint 's practice of designing and striking medals commissioned by the public , feeling that the government should not compete with private medallists . The provision was removed , and the bill passed the following day . The House version was then considered by the Senate , which debated it on February 4 , and passed it with a further amendment allowing the redemption of the Spanish coins for a minimum of two years . The House agreed to this on February 18 , and President Pierce signed the bill on the 21st . The act made foreign gold and silver coins no longer legal tender , but Spanish dollars were redeemable at their nominal value for two years in exchange for the new copper @-@ nickel cents . The half cent was abolished . The new pieces would be the same size ( 19 mm ) , though somewhat heavier , than cents are today .

In anticipation of the success of the legislation , most of the 333 @,@ 456 large cents struck in 1857 never left the Philadelphia Mint , and were later melted . Snowden purchased a new set of rollers and other equipment so that the Mint could produce its own cent planchets , the first time it had done so in over 50 years . Although the legislation was still a day from final passage , Snowden recommended Longacre 's designs to Guthrie on February 20 . Guthrie approved them on the 24th , though he requested that the edge of the coin be made less sharp ; Snowden promised to comply . Flying Eagle cents were struck beginning in April 1857 and were held pending official release . The Mint stored the pieces pending accumulation of a sufficient supply ; in mid @-@ May , Snowden notified Philadelphia newspapers that distribution would begin on May 25 .

= = Design = =

Longacre 's obverse of an eagle in flight is based on that of the Gobrecht dollar , struck in small quantities from 1836 to 1839 . Although Gobrecht 's model is not known with certainty , some sources state that the bird in flight was based on Peter the eagle , a tame bird fed by Mint workers in the early 1830s until it was caught up in machinery and killed . The bird was stuffed , and is still displayed at the Philadelphia Mint .

Despite its derivative nature , Longacre 's eagle has been widely admired . According to art historian Cornelius Vermeule in his book on U.S. coins , the flying eagle motif , when used in the 1830s , was " the first numismatic bird that could be said to derive from nature rather than from colonial carving or heraldry " . Vermeule described the Flying Eagle cent 's replacement , the Indian Head cent , as " far less attractive to the eye than the Peale @-@ Gobrecht flying eagle and its variants " . Sculptor Augustus Saint @-@ Gaudens , when commissioned in 1905 to provide new designs for American coinage , sought to return a flying eagle design to the cent , writing to President Theodore Roosevelt , " I am using a flying eagle , a modification of the device which was used on the cent of 1857 . I had not seen that coin for many years , and was so impressed by it that I thought if carried out with some modifications , nothing better could be done . It is by all odds the best design on any American coin . " Saint @-@ Gaudens did return the flying eagle to American coinage , but his design was used for the reverse of the double eagle rather than the cent .

The wreath on the reverse is also derivative , having been previously used on Longacre 's Type II gold dollar of 1854 , and the three @-@ dollar piece of the same year . It is composed of leaves of wheat , corn , cotton and tobacco , thus including produce associated with both the North and the South . The cotton leaves are sometimes said to be maple leaves ; the two types are not dissimilar , and maple leaves are more widely known than cotton leaves . An ear of corn is also visible .

= = Release , production , and collecting = =

The Philadelphia Mint released the new cents to the public on May 25 , 1857 . In anticipation of large popular demand , Mint authorities built a temporary wooden structure in the courtyard of the Philadelphia facility . On the morning of the date of release , hundreds of people queued , one line for those exchanging Spanish silver for cents , the other for those bringing in old copper cents and half cents . From 9 am clerks paid out cents for the old pieces ; outside the Mint precincts , early purchasers sold the new cents at a premium . Snowden wrote to Guthrie , " the demand for them is enormous ... we had on hand this morning \$ 30 @,@ 000 worth , that is three million pieces . Nearly

all of this amount will be paid out today . " The 1856 specimen became publicly known about the time of issuance , and had the public checking their pocket change ; 1856 small cents sold for as much as \$ 2 by 1859 . The public interest in the new cents set off a coin collecting boom : in addition to seeking the rare 1856 cent , some tried to collect sets of large cents back to 1793 , and found they would have to pay a premium for the rarer dates .

The Mint had trouble striking the new design . This was due to the hard copper @-@ nickel alloy and the fact that the eagle on one side of the piece was directly opposite parts of the reverse design ; efforts to bring out the design more fully led to increased die breakage . Many Flying Eagle cents show weaknesses , especially at the eagle 's head and tail , which are opposite the wreath . In 1857 , Snowden suggested the replacement of the eagle with a head of Christopher Columbus . Longacre replied that as there had been objections to proposals to place George Washington on the coinage , there would also be to a Columbus design . Despite the difficulties , the 17 @, @ 450 @, @ 000 Flying Eagle cents struck at Philadelphia in 1857 constituted the greatest production of a single coin in a year at a U.S. mint to that time .

In 1858 , the Mint tried to alleviate the breakage problem using a new version of the cent with a shallower relief . This attempt led to the major variety of the series , as coins of the revised version have smaller letters in the inscriptions than those struck earlier . The two varieties are about equally common , and were probably struck side by side for some period as the Mint used up older dies . Efforts to conserve dies were the probable cause of another variety , the 1858 / 7 , as 1857 @-@ dated dies were overstruck to allow them to be used in the new year .

The Mint prepared pattern coins with a much smaller eagle in 1858 , which struck well , but which officials disliked . Snowden directed Longacre to prepare various patterns that he could select from for a new piece to replace the Flying Eagle cent as of January 1 , 1859 . The Mint produced between 60 and 100 sets of twelve patterns showing various designs ; these were circulated to officials and also were quietly sold by the Mint over the next several years . Longacre 's design showing Liberty wearing an Indian @-@ style headdress was adopted , with a wreath with lower relief for the reverse of the Indian Head cent , solving the metal flow issues . On November 4 , 1858 , Snowden wrote to the Treasury Department , stating that the Flying Eagle cent had proved " not very acceptable to the general population " as they felt the bird was not true to life , and that the Native American design would " giv [ e ] it the character of America " .

By September 1857 , the volume of Spanish silver coming to the Mint had been so large that Snowden gave up the idea of being able to pay for it just with cents , authorizing payment with gold and silver coins . On March 3 , 1859 , the redemption of the foreign pieces was extended for an additional two years . As commerce was choked with the new cents , Congress repealed this provision in July 1860 , though Snowden continued the practice for more than a year without authorization from Congress . Bankers Magazine for October 1861 reported the end of the exchange , and quoted the Philadelphia Press : " the large issue of the new nickel cents has rendered them almost as much of a nuisance as the old Spanish currency " . According to Breen , " the foreign silver coins had been legal tender , receivable for all kinds of payments including postage stamps and some taxes ; the nickel cents were not . They quickly filled shopkeepers ' cashboxes to the exclusion of almost everything else ; they began to be legally refused in trade . " The glut was ended by the hoarding of all federal coinage in the wake of the economic upset caused by the Civil War .

After the war , the hoarded Flying Eagle cents re @-@ entered circulation . Many remained there only a few years , being pulled out from among the new bronze cents in Treasury Department redemption programs in the 1860s and 1870s ? thirteen million copper @-@ nickel cents were retired by exchange for other base @-@ metal coinage . By the 1880s , it was a rarity in circulation . Today , Flying Eagle cents are relatively inexpensive in well @-@ worn grades . The 2015 edition of R.S. Yeoman 's A Guide Book of United States Coins lists the 1857 , 1858 large letters , and 1858 small letters each at \$ 28 in Good @-@ 4 condition , the lowest collectable grade . The 1856 is \$ 7 @, @ 000 in that grade , rising to \$ 22 @, @ 000 in uncirculated MS @-@ 63 . The 1858 / 7 starts at \$ 75 in G @-@ 4 , rising to \$ 10 @, @ 000 in MS @-@ 63 . An 1856 cent in MS @-@ 66 condition sold at auction in January 2004 for \$ 172 @, @ 500 .

