

When 15 comes before 13

First U.S. coins with stars bear 15 (or more), but growing nation forces standardization

By John H. MacMillan
Special to COIN WORLD

The United States Mint began issuing regular coinage in 1793. Very quickly, it began using stars or chain links (the latter only on 1793 Flowing Hair, Chain cents) to represent each state in the union.

For early issues, prior to 1797, 15 links or stars were used, one each for the 15 states in the union at that time. Upon the admittance of Tennessee to the Union in 1796, a problem presented itself. Obviously many new states could enter the Union in the future, and putting on many new stars, espe-

cially on small coins such as half dimes or dimes, could prove impractical. Therefore, after the 18th century, the Mint usually rolled back the stars to 13, one each for the Original 13 Colonies that broke with Britain in 1776.

Since that time, vast numbers of circulating and commemorative coins have been issued with stars and a high majority carry 13 stars. Therefore, the exceptions to the rule are a fascinating exercise in history, as many of the exceptions have a historical basis.

I have identified six types of exceptions to the "Rule of 13 Stars" usually practiced by the U.S. Mint.

In several instances the star count also gives us important clues as to the year the coin was actually struck.

Many dies with earlier dates were reused in later years for

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THE FIRST COIN struck at the Philadelphia Mint, the 1793 Flowing Hair, Chain cent, left, set a precedent with the 15 links on the reverse representing the 15 states then in the nation. The 1795 Flowing Hair dime at right bears 15 stars on the obverse.



THE EARLIEST COINS, like the 1794 Flowing Hair dollar, left, and 1797 Draped Bust dime, right, usually bear a number of stars equal to the number of states in the young nation. The dollar bears 15 stars, while the dime bears 16 stars.



EARLY IN THE 19th century, Mint officials began to standardize the number of stars to 13. This 1804 Capped Bust gold \$2.50 quarter eagle bears 13 stars each on the obverse and reverse. Some 1804 Capped Bust quarter eagles, however, bear 14 stars.

Regular issue U.S. coins						
DENOMINATION	YEAR	DESIGN	STARS	SIDE	TYPE	COMMENTS
Half cent	1828	Classic Head	12	OBV	F	
Cent	1793	Flowing Hair, Chain	15	REV	A	Links in the chain (not stars)
Cent	1794	Liberty Cap, Starred Reverse	94	REV	E	Tiny stars between dentils
Half dime	1794 to 1797	Draped Bust	15	OBV	A	
Half dime	1797	Draped Bust	16	OBV	A	
Half dime	1797	Draped Bust	15	OBV	F?	Tennessee joins union
Dime	1796	Draped Bust	15	OBV	A	
Dime	1798/7	Draped Bust	16	REV	A	
Dime	1804	Draped Bust	14	REV	F	Tennessee joins union
Quarter dollar	1796	Draped Bust	15	OBV	A	
Quarter dollar	2000	State, New Hampshire	9	REV	B	
Quarter dollar	2001	State, New York	11	REV	B	
Quarter dollar	2002	State, Indiana	19	REV	C	
Quarter dollar	2003	State, Illinois	21	REV	C	
Quarter dollar	2004	State, Texas	1	REV	E	Texas is the "Lone Star State"
Half dollar	1794 to 1796	Flowing Hair and Draped Bust	15	OBV	A	
Half dollar	1796	Draped Bust	16	OBV	A	
Half dollar	1797	Draped Bust	15	OBV	F	Tennessee joins union
Half dollar	1964 to date	Kennedy	50	REV	A	16 states in union
Dollar	1794 to 1796	Flowing Hair and Draped Bust	15	OBV	A	
Dollar	1797	Draped Bust	16	OBV	A	
Dollar	1798	Draped Bust	15	OBV	F	2 varieties, Tennessee joins union
Dollar	1799/8	Draped Bust	15	OBV	F	16 states in union
Dollar	1836	Gobrecht	26	REV	A	Struck in 1837; Michigan admitted as 26th state
Dollar	1878 to 1921	Morgan	2	REV	E	
Dollar	1776-1976	Eisenhower, Bicentennial	2	REV	E	
Dollar	2000 to date	Sacagawea	17	REV	D	
\$2.50 quarter eagle	1796 to 1797	Capped Bust	16	REV	A	
\$2.50 quarter eagle	1804	Capped Bust	14	REV	F	Tennessee joins union
\$5 half eagle	1795	Capped Bust, Heraldic Eagle	16	REV	A	Struck in 1798
\$5 half eagle	1795 to 1797	Capped Bust, Small Eagle	15	OBV	A	
\$5 half eagle	1797	Capped Bust, Small Eagle	16	OBV	A	
\$5 half eagle	1798	Capped Bust, Heraldic Eagle	14	REV	F	Tennessee joins union
\$10 eagle	1795	Capped Bust, Small Eagle	15	OBV	A	
\$10 eagle	1796 to 1797	Capped Bust, Small Eagle	16	OBV	A	
\$10 eagle	1797	Capped Bust, Heraldic Eagle	16	OBV	A	Tennessee joins union
\$10 eagle	1907 to 1911	Indian Head	46	EDGE	A	
\$10 eagle	1912 to 1933	Indian Head	48	EDGE	A	New Mexico, Arizona join union
\$20 double eagle	1907 to 1911	Saint-Gaudens	46	OBV	A	
\$20 double eagle	1912 to 1933	Saint-Gaudens	48	OBV	A	New Mexico, Arizona join union

American Eagle bullion coins				
DENOMINATION	YEAR	STARS	FACE	TYPE
American Eagle gold \$5	1986 to date	50	OBV	A
American Eagle gold \$10	1986 to date	50	OBV	A
American Eagle gold \$25	1986 to date	50	OBV	A
American Eagle gold \$50	1986 to date	50	OBV	A

Early Commemorative coins					
1892 to 1954					
DENOMINATION	ISSUE	YEAR	STARS	SIDE	Type
Half dollar	World's Columbian Expo	1892 to 1893	2	OBV	E
Silver dollar	Lafayette Memorial	1900	2	OBV	E
	Lafayette Memorial		2	REV	E
Half dollar	Missouri Centennial	1921	1	OBV	E
	Missouri Centennial		24	REV	C
Half dollar	Alabama Centennial	1921	22	OBV	C
Half dollar	Grant Memorial	1922	1	OBV	E
Gold dollar	Grant Memorial	1922	1	OBV	E
Half dollar	Oregon Trail Memorial	1926 to 1939	5	OBV	E
Half dollar	Wisconsin Centennial	1936	2	REV	E
Half dollar	San Francisco Bay Bridge	1936	4	OBV	E
Half dollar	Cleveland, Great Lakes Expo	1936	9	REV	E
Half dollar	Battle of Antietam	1937	5	OBV	E
Half dollar	Arkansas Centennial	1937 to 1939	17	REV	E

Modern Commemorative coins					
1982 to date					
DENOMINATION	ISSUE	YEAR	STARS	SIDE	TYPE
Gold \$5 half eagle	Mount Rushmore	1991	5	OBV	E
Silver dollar	Korean War	1991	8	OBV	E
Silver dollar	U.S. Olympiad	1991	6	OBV	E
Half dollar	XXV Olympiad	1992	8	OBV	E
Silver dollar	Women Veterans	1994	4	OBV	E
Gold \$5 half eagle	Civil War Battlefield	1995	2	REV	E
Silver dollar	Jackie Robinson	1997	8	REV	E
Gold-platinum \$10 eagle	Library of Congress	2000	2	REV	E
Half dollar	Capitol Visitors Center	2001	50	OBV	A
Silver dollar	Lewis and Clark	2004	17	REV	D

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1869-S NGC AU-55.....	1,800.	1896 PCGS MS-63 Very Nice.....	1,685.
1871-S NGC MS-60 Nice.....	4,150.	1897 PCGS MS-63 Nice.....	1,110.
1872-S NGC AU-55 P.L. Very Nice.....	1,050.	1898-S PCGS MS-63.....	1,140.
1874-CC NGC EF-45 Very Nice.....	1,800.	1906-S PCGS MS-63.....	2,340.
1874-CC NGC AU-50 Nice Color.....	2,120.	1910 NGC MS-62.....	695.
1874-CC NGC AU-55.....	3,250.	1911 PCGS MS-63 Nice.....	1,795.
1875-CC NGC AU-50.....		1913 PCGS MS-63.....	2,525.
Nice Touch P.L.....	1,620.	1914 NGC AU-55 Very Nice.....	875.
1876-S NGC EF-40.....	675.	1920 PCGS MS-62.....	695.
1876-CC NGC VF-20 Nice.....	1,090.		
1876-CC NGC EF-45 Very Nice.....	1,400.		
1876-CC NGC AU-58 Very Nice.....	3,375.		
1877-CC ANACS VF-30 Very Nice.....	1,380.		
1877-CC NGC EF-40 Nice.....	1,510.		
1877-CC NGC AU-55.....	4,500.		
1878 NGC MS-60 Nice.....	815.		
1883-CC NGC EF-45 PQ.....	1,405.		
1883-CC NGC AU-55 Very Nice.....	2,250.		
1884-CC NGC EF-40 Nice.....	1,380.		
1884-CC NGC AU-50 Nice.....	1,550.		
1888-S PCGS MS-63 Nice.....	5,040.		

OTHER GOLD
\$10 1880-S NGC AU-53..... 295.
\$10 1881-CC NGC EF-40 Very Nice..... 675.
\$10 1889-S PCGS MS-63 Very Nice..... 1,350.
\$10 1908 Motto NGC MS-62..... 680.
\$10 1909 NGC MS-63 Nice..... 1,840.
\$10 1913-S NGC AU-58 Nice..... 2,240.
\$2 1/2 1834 NGC AU-58 Very Nice..... 2,325.

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THE OBVERSES OF both the Capped Bust half dollar, left, and Seated Liberty half dollar, right, bear a standard 13 stars, representing the original 13 Colonies. Mint officials abandoned the idea of adding a star for every state early in the 19th century. The designs could have become cluttered with stars with the growth of the nation.

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purely practical reasons. A good die was a good die, and frugal early Mint employees often used it until broken. They would not let a small matter such as the wrong date stand in the way!

One example of this practice is a 1795 Capped Bust, Heraldic Eagle gold \$5 half eagle, but with 16 stars on the reverse. The piece was actually struck in 1798, after the admittance of Tennessee as the 16th state. A reverse die from 1797 or 1798 was married with an old 1795 obverse die.

Another example is an 1836 Gobrecht silver dollar with 26 stars on the reverse. The piece was actually struck in 1837, when the 26th state, Michigan, was admitted to the union.

More puzzling examples include 1798 or 1799 Draped Bust silver dollars with 15 stars on the obverse for the 1798 Small Eagle dollar, and 15 stars on the reverse for the 1798 and 1799 Heraldic Eagle dollars. These are probably Mint errors as 16 states were in the union at that time.

The accompanying tables (on Page 70) show all U.S. coins identified as having stars, but deviating from the "Rule of 13." Separate tables are provided for circulating coinage, early and modern commemorative coins, and bullion coins.



THE TWO STARS on the reverse of the Morgan silver dollar, flanking the denomination, probably represent ornamentation and nothing more. Artistic license was permitted.



MINT OFFICIALS abandoned the 13 stars standardization on the Saint-Gaudens double eagle. The first versions bear 46 stars on the obverse, with the number rising to 48 in 1912; each reflects the number of states.

Also listed is the probable reason grouped by six different types, identified as A through F.

Type A: Number of states in the union the year the coin was struck.

Type B: A state's order in its ratification of the Constitution.

Type C: A state's order in joining the union after the Constitution was ratified.

Type D: Number of states in the union at the start of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in 1804.

Type E: Probably artistic license.

Type F: Probably Mint error.

John H. MacMillan, Ph.D., a collector for more than 50 years, is a chemist and teacher who lives in suburban Philadelphia. His collecting interests are U.S. type coins, Civil War tokens, Hard Times tokens and ancient coins. His numismatic research is on identifying trends or statistics that have not been identified before in existing data. He would like to hear from collectors and researchers who may offer further insight on the star numbers, additions to the list, or other errors, and he can be contacted at jhm@ix.netcom.com.

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ESOTERIC ISSUES: 1792 Half Dimes, Bar Cents, 1776 Continental Dollars, 1861 Confederate Half Dollars and Cents.

KEY DATE COINS: 1799 and 1804 Large Cents, '56 Flying Eagles and '77 Indians. 1877 3 cents and 5 cents Nickel, 1916/16 and 1918/7-D Buffalos. 1916-D, and '42/1 Overdate Mercuries. 1916 and 1918/7-S Standing Quarters. 1921-PDS Walking Liberty Half Dollars. Seated Dollars-1851-1852-1854-1855 plus '70-'73-CC Seated Dollars. '89-CC and '95-P Morgans.

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