

The First Small Cents

by [Michael E. Marotta](#)

On May 25, 1857, two long lines of eager people formed outside the US Mint in Philadelphia. In one day, the mint gave out 3 million of the new, small cents.

Up until 1857, there was so little federal coinage in circulation that foreign gold and silver remained legal tender. Spanish and Mexican silver coins were the mainstay of American commerce. Finally, Congress removed the legal tender status of foreign coins. At the same time, the US Mint created a new kind of cent coin, made of copper-nickel alloy, to replace the older, Large Cents. Those big old coppers were almost the size of a modern half dollar. The new small cents were the same size as today's Lincoln penny but, being almost one-eighth nickel, those first small cents weighed nearly twice as much as the ones in your pocket.

The first small pennies carried an image of a flying eagle on the front or "obverse." The tails or "reverse" showed a wreath made of corn, wheat, cotton, and tobacco to represent America's agriculture.

Because of the high nickel content in the new cents, they were called "nicks" on the street. Today, we call them Flying Eagle Cents.

The Flying Eagle cent lasted only two years, and was replaced by the native American Princess of the Indianhead type. Today, you can buy one of the first official small cents of 1857 for about \$10 or \$15 in common condition. The higher grades run from about \$60 to over \$200.

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