

The Half Dollar

by [Michael E. Marotta](#)

Silver dollars are big and shiny, but for over 150 years the half dollar was really America's most important silver coin. The first half dollars were delivered from the US Mint on December 1, 1794.

When America was young, hard money was scarce. The dollar was the official unit of our nation's currency, but the half dollar carried far more commerce. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, the US Mint gave top priority to three kinds of coins: the five dollar gold, the large cent, and the half dollar. Bags of half dollars were bought and sold among banks for their hard money reserves.

In the early days of the Republic, the demand for half dollars forced the US Mint into hasty workmanship. As a result, there are hundreds of varieties. These are called "Bust Halves" because of Miss Liberty's ample profile. Bust Halves are a specialty area for collectors with a keen eye for re-punched dates and other varieties and errors.

In the years before the Civil War, a half dollar represented a day's wages in a prosperous factory. At the turn of the century, a half dollar would buy six dressed chickens, or five cans of salmon, or a bushel of corn, or 10 pounds of white rice.

In all, there are seven types of half dollar. Most of them feature Miss Liberty. Benjamin Franklin's portrait appeared on the half dollar from 1948 through 1963. Most collectors believe that the Walking Liberty Half Dollar, issued from 1917 until 1947 is one of the most beautiful coins ever produced at any time.