

Living Legends

by Michael E. Marotta

No living person can be portrayed on American money. Or so we believe. Actually, several people have been alive when their images were used for our nation's coins.

When we won our independence from Britain, we steered away from the protocols and flourishes of monarchy. There were those who suggested that even calling the chief executive "Mr. President" was too imperial!

Therefore, no actual person appeared on any US Coinage until 1909. However, in the 1800s, famous people such as Lewis and Clark, Abraham Lincoln, and others did grace paper money. So it is no surprise that in time, our views softened. In the 1920s and the 1930s, living Americans were honored on commemorative half dollars.

Arkansas governor T. E. Kilby appeared in the centennial half dollar of 1921. Later, in 1936, Arkansas governor, senator, and vice presidential candidate Joseph T. Robinson appeared on a reissuance of this coin. Also in 1936, Lynchburg, Virginia native, Carter A. Glass was commemorated along with his town, over his own strong objections.

The only living US president to appear on a coin was Calvin Coolidge. In 1926, the government issued a half dollar to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. That coin carried the so-called "Damon and Pythias" motif with both George Washington and Calvin Coolidge on the obverse.

Commemorative half dollars in honor of the living proved so unpopular that it has been almost 50 years since such a coin was issued.