ABSTRACT

MINTING AMERICA:
COINAGE AND THE CONTESTATION OF AMERICAN IDENTITY, 1775-1800

by James Patrick Ambuske

“Minting America” investigates the ideological and culture links between American identity and national coinage in the wake of the American Revolution. In the Confederation period and in the Early Republic, Americans contested the creation of a national mint to produce coins. The catastrophic failure of the paper money issued by the Continental Congress during the War for Independence inspired an ideological debate in which Americans considered the broader implications of a national coinage. More than a means to conduct commerce, many citizens of the new nation saw coins as tangible representations of sovereignty and as a mechanism to convey the principles of the Revolution to future generations. They contested the physical symbolism as well as the rhetorical iconology of these early national coins. Debating the stories that coinage told helped Americans in this period shape the contours of a national identity.
MINTING AMERICA:

COINAGE AND THE CONTESTATION OF AMERICAN IDENTITY, 1775-1800

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Faculty of Miami University

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of History

by

James Patrick Ambuske

Miami University

Oxford, Ohio

2006

Advisor______________________

Andrew Cayton

Reader_______________________

Carla Pestana

Reader_______________________

Daniel Cobb
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Introduction

Coining Stories

“My fellow Buckeyes,” Cliff Radel of The Cincinnati Enquirer implored his readers, “we need to get on the stick.”¹ Radel’s plea followed the introduction of the Delaware State quarter into general circulation within the United States in the late winter of 1999. Although the bust of George Washington remained on the obverse, the American eagle featured on the reverse of twenty-five cent piece since 1932 had disappeared.² In its place was Caesar Rodney, the delegate to the Continental Congress, who despite illness and severe weather, journeyed through the night to Philadelphia in early July 1776 to cast the deciding vote for American independence. The image of Rodney and his horse on the reverse of the quarter constituted the first issue in the “50 State Quarter Program” created by the United States Mint to honor each state in the Union with a design reflecting some aspect of state history. Five new designs would appear each year over the course of a decade in the order that each state had ratified the Constitution. Delaware, being the first to do so, was afforded the honor of kicking off the program by placing Rodney and the phrase “THE FIRST STATE” on the first comprehensive redesign of the Washington quarter in over sixty years.³ The announcement of the program and the introduction of the Delaware Quarter prompted Radel’s call for Ohioans, whose quarter would appear in 2002, to begin thinking seriously about how Ohio should define within the American Union.

The state quarter program encouraged citizens to submit designs to committees of state officials tasked with choosing up to five concepts for evaluation by mint officials. “Before it can be minted,” Radel wrote, “the Ohio quarter needs a design for its backside. A big blank won’t do.”⁴ Radel asked his readers to send in their ideas to the Enquirer. The Ohioans in Radel’s contest offered an array of designs to honor the state. Some featured scenes from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Underground Railroad while others depicted the state flower and bird. Others still wanted to recognize Ohio’s contributions to the cheese coney or to manned flight and space exploration. One young man, Alex Dabney from Anderson Township, wanted to keep it simple by placing an individual reading a book under a tree with the caption “land of opportunity” draped in the tree’s branches.

² “Obverse” and “Reverse” are the numismatic designation for the front and back of coins.
³ The reverse of the Washington Quarter was redesigned in 1975 and 1976 to honor the American Bicentennial
⁴ Radel, "You Can Put Your Stamp on the Quarter."
Although they did not know it, the Ohioans in Radel’s contest were participating in a very old debate. For centuries North Americans have constructed cultural, social, and political identities through the use of various forms of money. Money— or material objects jointly recognized by a group of people to hold value in commercial exchange— functions also on a cultural level. The objects people used in economic interactions to acquire goods, pay debts, or contract labor signified their identities and the manner in which they understood their membership within a larger political, cultural, or social organizations. Money is not only a means to acquire goods and wealth, but a medium of cultural transmission. In effect different forms of money served as calling cards between different groups of people. These forms of exchange told stories about the people who carried them. The material employed to create the money along with any iconographical representations indicated a contested sense of place and community.

Ohio’s problem with the design for the 50 State Quarter Program is a modern day example of this ongoing process. Ohioans debated about the proper way to represent Ohio to the rest of the nation. The intrastate discussion produced tensions between citizens as they negotiated their collective state identity.

Americans faced a similar dilemma in the beginnings of the republic. In the late eighteenth-century citizens of the new United States struggled to develop a sense of national identity through their fledgling monetary system. The coinage of the Early Republic helped to establish a sense of a distinct American identity. A largely Protestant nation with strong ties to Great Britain, the United States needed to define itself as an autonomous nation culturally as well as politically. This issue became central when the Constitution of 1787 divested power among the states to a new federal government. The administration of President George Washington needed to find ways to establish the legitimacy of the new government as well as encourage the public to identify principally as citizens of one America nation. Coinage played a significant role in this evolution. American coins became a battleground on which people fought to shape the nature of the government and its relationship with its citizens.

Most scholars agree that the idea of an American national identity emerged in the era of the American Revolution and became contested in the early republic. Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood see the ideological arguments of liberty and constitutionalism at the heart of American continental unity and the formation of the republic. Yet while Bailyn contends that the
Constitution of 1787 represents the fulfillment of the principles of the Revolution, Wood argues that the radicalism of the Revolution shaped American society long into the nineteenth century. Wood contends that the Revolution reorganized the basic framework of American society. A world transformed from one of hierarchy and patronage to one in which individuals believed they were on equal footing had important implications for how Americans chose to represent themselves through coinage. If the British monarch provided a unifying symbol of patriarchal authority within the empire, separation from the crown left Americans with many symbols to represent their individual states. These multiple identities conflicted with one another as Americans during the formation of the republic struggled to develop a national institution that would coin new symbols representative of all Americans.5

Scholars such as Charles Royster argue that George Washington and the Continental Army embodied the identity of the United States during the Revolutionary War and served as a symbol with which American patriots could unite behind. The survival of the army ensured the persistence of the United States, making possible later debates over a more concrete definition of identity. This argument has implications for a national system of coinage as well. The army and its frequent needs necessitated the development of a government organization to ensure the institution’s survival. The creation of a national mint and a unified system of coinage was partially contingent upon the need for hard specie to repay debts contracted by the Continental Congress during the war.6 The lack of a significant supply of hard money in British North America, as T.H. Breen has recently argued in an attempt to link economic consumerism with radical political ideology, inhibited the ability of colonists to purchase goods they wanted, thereby constricting consumer choice in the aftermath of the Seven Years’ War. Breen contends

that the resulting protest boycotts on British goods provided the basis for American unity that in turn fostered the rhetorical political arguments of the Revolution.⁷

Yet what if one actually looked at the scare money supply? American historians rarely analyze coins as primary sources. Indeed, scholars scarcely pay attention to American coins outside the numismatic realm. Why is this so? Historians and archaeologists studying the ancient world use coinage to reconstruct the histories of peoples lacking written documents. Consider the case of the Parthian Empire, which existed as a buffer state in the Middle East between the Roman and Persian Empires from roughly 200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. The constant warfare between the latter two states reduced much of Parthian controlled territory to rubble, destroying documentary evidence and making it difficult for scholars to craft even a basic political chronology of that empire. Yet coinage excavated from various archaeological sites, as the historian Percy Gardner has noted, has given scholars some “important light on the dress, government, and religion of the country.”⁸ The images of Parthian kings on coins have enabled scholars to reconstruct a basic political history of the empire. The coinage has allowed historians to get a sense of Parthian culture through depictions of clothing as well as the influence of outsiders on Parthian society through the appearance of Greek deities on Parthian coins. The evolution of these images allows scholars to trace the progress of the Parthian Empire and its interactions with other peoples.

The Roman Empire is another example of the ways in which scholars have utilized coinage to reconstruct the history of an ancient civilization. Archaeologists often fix the dates of Rome’s arrival in a certain part of the world through the appearance of Roman coins in the archeological record. The location of the Battle of Teutoburg Forest was confirmed in large part by the presence of Roman coins. In 9 C.E. an army of Germanic warriors led by Arminius ambushed and destroyed three Roman legions, (approximately 20,000 men) under the command of Publius Quinctilius Varus along the Rhine Frontier. The Germans lured the Romans into a narrow pass between two wooded hills. They attacked when the column was roughly a quarter of the way through and bottled up the enemy. The exact location of the slaughter remained unknown to scholars until 1987 when fragments of bone and weapons along with coins were discovered in the narrow pass. The coins played a major role in determining the location as none

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minted past 9 C.E. appeared in the archaeological record. This coinage, combined with weapons bearing the mark of one of the destroyed legions, led scholars to conclude the area was the battle site. These coins also marked the northern most boundary of the Roman Empire.9

Coinage, then, plays an important role in ancient historical scholarship. It allows historians and archaeologists to piece together ancient worlds, gathering some sense of the political and cultural history of peoples whose written records are scarce. Ancient coins tell the stories of peoples when other sources are lacking. The absence of written documentation, however, is not a problem for historians of American history. Bailyn, Wood, Breen, and Royster construct their works from a vast wealth of readily available written sources, creating narrative arguments that did not necessarily have to take into consideration seemingly esoteric sources.

But mediums of exchange have long played important cultural roles in North America. Trade between Europeans and Indian peoples in the Iberian Mesoamerican colonies and the Anglo-Dutch colonies produced cultural conflict. For Mesoamerican cultures agriculturally produced money such as the cacao bean reinforced a sense of place and identity intimately connected with the land. An agriculturally intensive crop that required special care and specific climatic conditions, cacao beans served as one of the main forms of exchange within the Aztec empire. The Spanish, understanding the importance Mesoamericans placed on the beans, used them in the early stages of colonization to facilitate trade between the two peoples. The creation of a mint in the 1530s in Mexico City to produce metallic coinage, however, reflected an attempt by the Spanish conquistadors to impose an imperial authority on native peoples. This action produced tension between the conquerors and the Aztecs who resisted Spanish attempts to depose their native currency. As the Spanish sought to eliminate the cacao beans from circulation the native peoples resisted this policy by refusing to obey Spanish orders to use coins and throwing 200,000 copper pesos into Lake Texcoco.10

By comparison the adoption of wampum by the Anglo-Dutch colonists created tension with neighboring Algonquin and Iroquoian speaking peoples. For these native groups, wampum, beads crafted from certain types of sea shells, served as a means of trade between Indians. More

important the beads transmitted cultural knowledge. The English and Dutch, who observed the
great value Indian people gave to wampum, embraced the beads as a means to facilitate
commerce between the two cultures. Yet in doing so they helped wampum to acquire a dual
meaning. While the introduction of European iron tools made the creation of the desired beads
easier, these “mass produced” shells lacked the refinement that Indian made wampum exhibited.
As a result native peoples began to distinguish between their beads and those of the Europeans.11

Money in American academic scholarship, however, has fallen almost exclusively under
the domain of economic historians. They use coinage and other forms of currency to write about
banks, economic growth, or explain resistance to British imperial reforms.12 As a subject in
historical writing outside the academic field, however, the money of the United States has
enjoyed attention from members of the numismatic community. Among the most prominent is
Eric P. Newman whose interest in the colonial period has led him to publish several small
pamphlets and an edited collection of essays.13 While the writings of Newman and other
numismatists are fantastic for those interested in the physical aspects, mintage numbers, or
mechanical implements necessary to create coin and currency, the body of work does not address
the ways in which money embodied the stories Americans told about themselves and served as
markers of identity.

Histories of American currency are primarily narratives lacking any major attempt at
interpretation. They are excellent sources of background information and helpful in establishing

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11 See Mary W. Herman, "Wampum as a Money in Northeastern North America," Ethnohistory Vol. 3, no. No. 1
(1956); Alberto Francisco Pradeau, Numismatic History of Mexico: From the Pre-Columbian Epoch to 1823 (New
York: Sanford J. Durst: Numismatic Publications, 1978); Neal Salisbury, Manitou and Providence: Indians,
primary source illustrating the dual meaning of wampum see "Letter of Isaack De Rasieres to Samuel Blommaert
1628," in Narratives of New Netherland, 1609-1664, ed. J. Franklin Jameson (New York: Charles Scriber's Sons,
1909).

12 See for example, Joseph A. Ernst, Money and Politics in America, 1755-1775: A Study in the Currency Act of
1764 and the Political Economy of Revolution (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973); John Jay
Knox, A History of Banking in the United States (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1969); Herbert E. Sloan,
Principle and Interest: Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Debt, 1st University of Virginia ed., Jeffersonian

13 A sampling of Newman’s work includes, Eric P. Newman, Coinage for Colonial Virginia (New York: American
Numismatic Society, 1956); Eric P. Newman, The Secret of the Good Samaritan Shilling. Supplemented with Notes
on Other Genuine and Counterfeit Massachusetts Silver Coins (New York: American Numismatic Society, 1959);
a chronological framework, but they fail to speculate on the broader implications of money outside the economic realm. William G. Sumner, an economic historian of the late nineteenth century, believed “the history of American finance and politics as a most important department which lies as yet untouched,” prompting him to publish his study, *A History of American Currency with Chapters on The English Bank Restriction and Austrian Paper Money*.14

A more recent and comprehensive treatment is *A History of United States Coinage* by Ted Schwarz. An author on subjects ranging from photography to home safety, Schwarz’s work reflects his enthusiasm for numismatics and commitment to illuminating the role of money in a manner far broader than Sumner. He covers much the same material as his nineteenth-century counterpart, evaluating the kinds of money—wampum, tobacco, coinage—used in North America since the colonial period. But Schwarz argues his book to be “different from other books about money. It was written to tell the ‘human’ side of the history of our nation’s coinage.” Instead of delving into the actual production of coinage and the important but often mundane statistics that dominate other numismatic works, Schwarz seeks to tell “the intricate role coinage has played in the development of the nation.”15

It is more important, however, to examine the ways in which money tells stories about Americans in a particular historical period. The materials used to make money and iconographical images appearing on coinage or paper money constituted cultural conversations that reflected competing ideas. Money complements written documentation. Although the history of American money is too vast and comprehensive to be treated here, we can begin the discussion by offering new avenues for scholars to pursue by evaluating in a more concrete manner the development of a national system of coinage in the Early Republic. Zooming in on this small segment of time (roughly 1775-1800) may challenge scholars to explore alternative ways in which Americans of the Early Republic negotiated a national identity.

To tell this story I have drawn on other scholars whose works have shaped my thinking for this thesis. Richard R. John argues in his study of the postal system in the early republic, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse*, that the creation of a national institution to carry the mail sparked a communications revolution which bound the young nation together through the distribution of printed news and personal correspondence.

The Post Office Act of 1792 facilitated this innovation by allowing newspapers into the mail at reduced rates, preventing the public officials from using it as a means of surveillance, and creating procedures that allowed the expansion of the system into the trans-Appalachian West.\footnote{Richard R. John, \textit{Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse} (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 31.} The placement of post offices around the country provided a visible presence of the federal government on the local level. More important, it fostered an “imagined community in which the government encouraged its far-flung citizenry to participate directly in the political process through an ongoing discussion of the leading events of the day.”\footnote{Ibid, 112.} The transmission of the news within the United States allowed Americans to read about the happenings in other regions of the country, enabling them to imagine themselves as part of a large collective whole. John argues that reading the newspaper was for millions of Americans “rather like attending a political rally or a religious revival, a great collective ritual in which the faithful joined together to affirm their fundamental beliefs.”\footnote{Ibid, 168.}

The creation of an institution to issue national coinage produced tangible representations of an association with a larger community. Debate over a national mint was part of a larger process in the Early Republic in which Americans debated the boundaries of citizenship through various mechanisms, including print culture, celebrations, and parades. David Waldstreicher explores these themes in his work, \textit{In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820}, an examination of early American political culture. Waldstreicher argues that forms of celebration such as parades, toasts, or ballads were forms of discourse that helped cultivate and refine definitions of American nationalism. Although he is less interested in the emergence of a national identity than in the relationship between nationalist ideology and its role in the political realm, Waldstreicher’s approach encourages scholars to explore these concepts through other means.\footnote{David Waldstreicher, \textit{In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820} (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 3.} The movement from a system in which individual states produced their own money toward a single national system of coinage afforded Americans the opportunity to negotiate a national identity. They contested national symbols and they stories they told about themselves. State coins reflected regional worlds and a sense of place exhibited by celebrated iconographical symbols. Discourse over the creation of national money functioned
much the same as the kind of stories Americans told through parades and other forms of expression.

The final work providing a foundation for this thesis is Simon P. Newman’s *Parade and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic*. Examining what he terms “popular political culture,” Newman argues it “allows us to see and make some sense of the ways in which politics extended far beyond the ruling elite, for in their parades, festivals, civic feasts, songs, crowd actions, and badges many ordinary Americans” took part in national discussions. More important, Newman argues that the creation of a national mint and coinage proved for some Americans of “the spirit of Aristocracy in America.” The attempt to place Washington’s likeness on the first coins to increase the prestige of the federal government sparked an intense debate among Americans over symbols that represented liberty to some but power to others.

The ultimate goal of this thesis is to show how money helped construct a national identity in the confederation period and early republic. The two chapters that follow explore the contestation of paper currency and coinage from the Revolutionary War through the end of the eighteenth century. Chapter One, “‘Ever to turn brown paper into real dollars’: Contesting the Symbolism of the Continental Dollar in the American Revolutionary Era,” explores the relationship between paper money and political rhetoric in the American Revolution. It traces the origins of the ideological arguments that Americans later used to make the case for the production of coinage in the Confederation period. Paper money, issued by the Continental Congress to finance the War for Independence, became a hated experiment in the American colonies. Many Patriots believed that the failure of the paper money could lead to the end of independence. Loyalists, however, used the bills and their iconographical markings to attack what they saw as a lost cause.

The second and final chapter, “‘Coin answers the purpose of monuments’: Revolutionary Ideology, American Identity, and Coinage, 1780-1795,” explores the creation of a national coinage system from the Confederation period through the mid 1790s. It traces the tensions between competing groups of Americans who argued over the necessity of a national system. More important, the chapter examines the iconography of state issued coinage in the

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21 Quoted in Ibid., 55.
Confederation period and national coinage after the adoption of the Constitution as a means of exploring the ways in which Americans made sense of their local and national identities while in the process of coining stories and minting America.

The process of contesting identity through coinage by no means ended with the creation of a national mint. As Ohioans illustrated with their state quarter, the discussion is on-going. Cliff Radel’s lighthearted fun proved only the beginning of a serious debate among Ohioans as they contested with one another over the state’s historical identity. Thousands of citizens submitted designs to officials in Columbus each believing their particular rendering defined Ohio among the other states. Many of these drawings highlighted Ohio’s role in powered flight. It was true Ohio, wrote the editor of The Toledo Blade, that Ohio “has certainly had an aerospace history… [but] whatever image is selected for Ohio, it needs to be unique and distinctive.”

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Chapter 1

“Ever to turn brown paper into real dollars”: Contesting the symbolism of the Continental Dollar in the Revolutionary Era

Observing John Adams’ arrival in New York in the spring of 1789 to assume the vice presidency, a citizen could not help but notice a striking “analogy between the fate of the old Continental money and that of the old Congress who made it.”23 The Continental Congress, remarked a correspondent of The New-Jersey Journal and Political Intelligencer, “began and compleated [sic] the revolution – so did the [Continental money] – and if the former somewhat depreciated, did not the latter also?”24 The old Congress never had the funds to support itself, he argued, and the currency never gained the public’s confidence. Both lived to see themselves neglected by the people they served. “Alike in their lives,” he wrote, “they were not dissimilar in their deaths. As the former had a calm and easy exit, so the latter expired without a groan; and as the latter died without hope of resuscitation, so may the old Continental be set down among lost cases.”25

Americans contested a national identity through coin and currency. Citizens of the United States in the confederation period and early republic debated the national stories coinage and paper money might pass down through history. Indeed, the correspondent’s musings reflected the hope of many Americans that the new federal government might finally introduce a unifying medium of exchange that would define the United States in the Atlantic world. His comments marked a turning point in a negotiation that began in the late 1770s. Since the introduction of Continental currency, issued by the Congress in 1775 to finance the War for Independence, Americans had debated the ways in which coin and currency reflected a sense of their political and cultural cohesion. For Americans in this period, the implications of coin and currency went beyond economics. To be sure, frustrations over multiple exchange rates, scarcity of specie, and paper currency depreciation appeared with frequency in the public discourse. Beyond the numbers, however, coin and currency functioned as contested symbols of revolutionary and republican ideology. During the War for Independence many Americans saw paper money as an evil. They equated the Continental money’s rapid depreciation with the incompetence of the

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
Continental Congress. Patriots in many instances tied the stability of the Continental paper with the fate of the Glorious Cause. For Loyalists the unsuccessful paper and the iconographical representations printed on the money served as a means to attack what they believed to be a futile effort.

Coinage was rare in the British North American colonies for several reasons. Unlike the Spanish, who possessed large gold and silver mines in Mexico and Peru, the English did not have the precious materials preferred for coinage. In fact, some of the coin that circulated in the British colonies came from the Mexico City mint. Spanish pieces of eight, along with limited quantities of British and Dutch coinage, composed what little hard money existed in the colonies. When the English colonies did build of reserves of coinage, they then exported it across the Atlantic to settle accounts with creditors. In addition, English law prohibited the export of sterling coin to the colonies and the government refused the idea of a single colonial coinage. To compensate, colonial merchants turned to a barter credit system in which goods such as tobacco, sugar, and wheat passed for payment. Colonial legislatures also authorized paper currency in certain instances to finance local wars or to temporarily relieve a lull in the money supply. Colonies then taxed the paper issues out of existence to prevent depreciation. In some cases colonies did not always follow this course. In 1703 South Carolina printed paper notes to finance an expedition against Spanish St. Augustine. Instead of using tax revenues to remove the paper money from circulation, however, the legislature spent the returns on local defenses. The colony continued to issue additional paper notes and by 1721 the sterling exchange rate had jumped to five to one.26

South Carolina’s example, along with other similar instances, concerned many colonial Americans who believed that mismanaged paper money placed them at the mercy of a few wealthy individuals. In April 1729, Benjamin Franklin argued in A Modest Enquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper-Currency that too little paper money in circulation favored the interest of large land owners, prominent merchants, and lawyers. Franklin, writing as the Pennsylvania legislature considered an emissions bill, believed that increasing the supply of paper money would reduce interest rates, promote industry, and create less dependence on the “Consumption of English and European Goods, in Proportion to the Number of the People, than

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there would otherwise be.” Lawyers and other men involved with legal matters would probably be against an increase in the money supply, he argued, “because People in that Case will have less Occasion to run in Debt, and consequently less Occasion to go Law and Sue one another for their Debts. Tho’ I know some even among these Gentlemen, that regard the Publick Good before their own apparent private Interest.”

Franklin’s understanding of monetary policy in this piece was as one commentator put it “seriously confused.” His argument distilled to its rhetorical components, however, equates paper money as a means to reduce individuals to the status of a dependent or a slave. He appealed to public virtue, arguing that there “is no Science, the Study of which is more useful and commendable than the Knowledge of the true Interest of one’s Country; and perhaps there is no Kind of Learning more abstruse and intricate, more difficult to acquire in any Degree of Perfection than This, and therefore not more generally neglected.” For the good of Pennsylvania, colonists need to seriously think about this issue. It was in the interest of the colony as a whole, Franklin believed, to increase the supply of money for if they did not “the Common People in general will be impoverished” and the wealth of the colony concentrated in the hands a few men. While paper money could be a very good thing, it had the potential to lead to something much more sinister.

Suspicion of paper money persisted throughout the colonial period, complicating matters for the Continental Congress in the 1770s. In June 1775, when the Congress began issuing Continental money to help finance the War for Independence, some Americans refused to accept the bills as payment. The lack of stock bullion to back these notes caused rapid depreciation. This decline in value undermined the credibility the paper bills and by extension that of Congress. On January 11, 1776 the Congress took steps to enforce its authority. “It appears to this Congress,” noted a resolution appearing in several newspapers,” that several evil disposed persons, in order to obstruct and defeat the efforts of the United Colonies in the defence

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28 Ibid.

29 For commentary on Franklin’s theories see the introduction to the electronic version of this piece supported by the Electronic Text Center of the University of Virginia http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/FraMode.html

of their just rights, have attempted to depreciate the BILLS of CREDIT emitted by the authority of this Congress.”32 The refusal to accept Continental money, Congress argued, accelerated the rate of depreciation thereby threatening the Glorious Cause. The legislative body appealed to Americans on the basis of the common good, warning that “if any person shall hereafter be so lost to all virtue and regard for this country as to refuse to receive the said bills in payment, or obstruct or discourage the currency or circulation thereof…such person shall be deemed, published, and treated as an enemy of his country.”33 John Cowgill, a resident of Little Hundred Creek in Delaware’s Kent County, received such a rebuke from the local Committee of Inspection. Noting that “keeping up the credit of the Continental Currency is essential to support (sic) the United Colonies in their virtuous opposition to Ministerial oppression,” the committee publicly censured Cowgill as “an enemy to his country, and ought to be treated as such by every friend to American Liberty.”34 The committee advised the public to avoid all dealings with him.

Counterfeiting proved a serious problem as well. An extract from a letter printed in The New-York Gazette: and the Weekly Mercury reported an instance in which a group of men were printing fake pieces of Continental money. “Minute-Men were ordered out the same Day, in search of them,” the letter reported. “They were all taken with what Cash they had struck off, likewise their Press, Tools, &c.”35 For their actions the counterfeiters found themselves in the gaol. Newspapers routinely printed stories such as these and published the serial numbers and signatures placed on authorized paper bills to help citizens detect false money. Following the Declaration of Independence many states enacted death penalty statutes to deter counterfeiters. The New Jersey legislature declared those caught printing false money “shall be adjudged felons, and be punished with death.”36 Virginia sought to punish the soul as well as the body. Counterfeiters apprehended by that state suffered death “without benefit of Clergy.”37

Some writers attempted to bridge the gap between legislative appeals to virtue and citizens who refused or counterfeited Continental currency. In The Pennsylvania Evening Post the author “Conti” reasoned in September 1776 that the uncertain outcome of the American War necessitated the use of the paper money. “It is a grand Continental experiment we are trying,” he

33 Ibid.
34 "In Committee, Dover, January 4, 1776," Dunlap's Pennsylvania Packet or, General Advertiser, 15 January 1776.
36 "In the Convention of the State of New-Jersey, Trenton, July 18,1776," Dunlap's Pennsylvania Packet or The General Advertiser, 22 July 1776.
argued, “and nothing but the experiment itself can determine the expediency; we are not to look on our present situation as a matter of choice, but necessity; we have got into a labyrinth, and must get out of it as well as we can.”

Conti believed that instilling confidence in the Continental money legitimized the United States, leading to trade opportunities that might “weary out Great-Britain, or involve her in a war with some of her European neighbours.” Americans could then take their own time paying off debts that they, as citizens of a sovereign nation, had contracted. The author chastised the “many timid people” who were “very apprehensive for the fate of the Continental currency, and are vesting it, with great expeditions, in lands and certainties of various kinds” in anticipation of a British victory. Even if the King’s forces triumphed, he argued, it would not be in the interest of the British government to abolish Continental paper. Nothing would please them more than to leave Americans shouldered with the burden of debt. Conti, though, emphasized the unlikelihood of a British conquest. “I trust we reside in a Paradise from which the powers of Great-Britain can never expel us.”

Conti’s message implored Americans to stand together behind the Continental money. The success of the “grand Continental experiment” required an unbreakable chain of unity between the states and their citizens. Congress attempted to promote this sense of fellowship through the emission of paper money, but also through the iconographical representations printed on the bills. In June 1775 Congress created a committee of five men, including Benjamin Franklin, to oversee the creation of Continental money. They were also charged with developing representations emblematic of American unity. The aging Franklin’s interest in currency had extended well beyond his 1729 treatise. As a printer, Franklin often received contracts from colonial legislatures to print bills. Following the publication of his treatise the Pennsylvania legislature “thought fit to reward me by employing me in printing the money; a very profitable jobb (sic).” Franklin’s appointment also made sense in light of his knack for creating iconographical political commentary. His “JOIN, or DIE” serpent design for the 1754 Albany

39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
Congress and the 1765 “MAGNA Britannia: her Colonies REDUC’D” illustration of imperial tensions communicated ideology through rhetorical imagery.44

Franklin attempted to convey a strong sense of American unity through the devices on Continental paper money. He also understood that the paper bills, like his previous political drawings, could function as propaganda.45 In late 1775 Congress issued bills of ten different denominations featuring emblems Franklin selected largely on his own. The designs and Latin mottos were from several emblem books in his personal library. He drew principally on Joachim Camerarius's 1702 work, Symbolorum ac Emblematum Ethico-Politicorum.46 It made sense to use paper money as a tool to impart “Some important Proverb of Solomon, some pious moral, prudential or oeconomical (sic) Precept, the frequent inculcation of which by seeing it every time one received a Piece of Money might make an Impression upon the Mind especially of young Person, and tend to regulate the Conduct.”47 The imagery urged Americans to stay the course in the struggle ahead.

Despite Franklin’s efforts the public seemed unwilling to comment on his designs. With a population largely unable to read Latin, the messages were lost on the majority of Americans. Somewhat confused as to why “No explanation of the devices on the continental bills of credit having yet appeared,” Franklin found it necessary to offer the public a key.48 Concealing his identity under the name “Clericus” to give the appearance of an uninformed observer, Franklin authored a letter explaining the messages behind the images. He first outlined the two main components that comprised each design. “An emblematical device, when rightly formed,” Franklin wrote, “is said to consist of two parts a body and a mind, neither of which is compleat (sic) or intelligible, without the aide of the other. The figure is called the body, the motto the mind.”49 The two mechanisms worked in tandem to create meaning.

45 For a concise discussion of Franklin’s involvement with the paper currency of the Revolutionary Era see Benjamin H. Irvin, "Benjamin Franklin's "Enriching Virtues"", Common-Place Vol. 6, no. 3 (2006).
47 Quoted in Irvin, "Benjamin Franklin's "Enriching Virtues"."
49 Ibid.
Franklin made it clear that the currency served an ideological purpose. The imagery related “to the present struggle between the colonies and the tyrant state, for liberty, property, and safety on the one hand, for absolute power and plunder on the other.” On one bill appeared a harp with the motto “MAJORA MINORIBUS CONIONANT.” Translating it to “the greater and smaller ones sound together,” Franklin noted that a harp was an instrument composed of “great and small strings, included in a strong frame, and all so tuned as to agree in concord with each other.” The frame, therefore, was “intended to represent our new government by a continental congress; and the strings of different lengths and substance, either the several colonies…or the various ranks of people in all of them, who are now united by the government in the most perfect harmony.” Another bill featured a large tree representing the overshadowing influence of Great Britain in American commerce. The United Colonies, depicted as a beaver, gnawed at the tree while the phrase “PERSEVERANDO” reminded patriots that perseverance “will probably reduce [British] power within proper bounds.” Americans only had to keep chewing to bring the great tree down.

While the designs of 1775 drew little public commentary, those of 1776 caused a stir. The most significant motif appeared on fractional currency, bills that equaled a small portion of a Continental dollar. Franklin’s design featured a chain of concentric circles bearing the names of the colonies. Within this ring a sunburst with the legend “AMERICAN CONGRESS” declared “WE ARE ONE.” On the opposite side of these bills rays of light illuminated a sundial with the Latin motto “FUGIO” (Time Flies) and the English phrase “MIND YOUR BUSINESS.” The words reminded farmers, merchants, and patriots to use their time wisely in the fleeing hours of the day. The chain design signified the unity and interlocked destinies of the colonies. The marker of congressional authority within the chain illustrated the power relationship between the colonies and the Continental Congress. Lines from each individual ring connected with the congressional motif, signifying that power flowing from each colony gave birth to and sustained the national legislature. Unlike the designs issued on paper money in 1775, the chain device was

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50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 CLERICUS, "From the Pennsylvania Gazette," Thomas's Massachusetts Spy Or, American Oracle of Liberty, 13 October 1775.
55 Olson, Benjamin Franklin's Vision of American Community: A Study in Rhetorical Iconology, 122.
Franklin’s own creation. Although the origin of the motif is unclear, some historians have speculated that Franklin may have drawn upon his experience printing treaties between Pennsylvania and the Iroquois Confederacy. These pacts used phrases such as “chain of friendship,” or “chain of union” to describe the relationship between the two parties. Franklin printed at least thirteen treaties between 1736 and 1762 that contained these kinds of phrases. Unfortunately we do not have an explanation from Franklin, only the few conceptual sketches found among his papers for the device.

Loyalist Americans attacked the new fractional currency. They especially mocked the unity illustrated by the chain design. Joseph Stansbury, a Philadelphian with a gift for poetic verse, satirized the emblems used in 1775 and then directed lyrical shells at Franklin’s new creation. “But the last fashion’d Money we all must commend,” began the tenth stanza:

Where a Circle of Rings,  
join in Rings without end,  
Each Ring is a State,  
and (the Motto Explains)  
They all are a Congress---  
a Congress in Chains!

In the midst a small Circle  
resplendent is seen  
Surrounded with Glory  
and Picketed in,  
To make Jest of our Creed  
this was certainly done,  
For who can believe  
that Thirteen are but One?58

Stansbury lambasted the supposed solidarity of the Continental Congress. He though it impossible for thirteen colonies to overcome their individual interests in favor of virtue. Indeed, his rhyme conveys a belief that selfishness weighed down the national body in chains of gridlock. The lines flowing from the rings to the center did not indicate a mutual power

56 Newman, "Benjamin Franklin and the Chain Design: New Evidence Provides the Missing Link": 2271-2281.  
57 Olson, Benjamin Franklin’s Vision of American Community: A Study in Rhetorical Iconology, 122-123n.  
relationship, but a Congress “Picketed” in by disorganization and advancing British armies.59

The remaining stanzas attempted to convince rebellious Americans of the futility of their cause. “On the Face of the Bill the Reverse doth appear/ Almost Shorn of his beans the Sun’s quitting
his Sphere/ ‘I am going,’ he cries ‘who was late your delight/ Mind your Business—Repent—I
must bid you good night.’”60 In Stansbury’s view the sun was not rising, but setting. He twisted
Franklin’s reminder to use daylight efficiently into a warning that the war effort had little time
left, imploring patriots to recognize their errors and return to the British fold. “Return to your
Duty,” he argued, “Great Britain is kind/ And all past Offense She’ll give to the wind.”61

Loyalists used poetic commentary on paper money to undermine the credibility of the
freemen’s rights they wanton play/ At their command, we fast and pray/ With worthless paper
they us pay/ A fine device of Congress.”62 The verse characterized Congress as reckless and
wrong to ask for public for prayers while issuing unusable currency. In December 1777 a poet
attacked Congress through the “FUGIO” motif: “Amid all the Plenty of Goods, this Vexation/
Arises, where shall we get the Money to buy/ For all our Old Paper’s of no Valuation/ With these
great Importers of Wet Goods and Dry./ They mistake it, my honey! For the Congress Money,/ Whose Motto, you know, it is ‘Fugio,’ I fly!”63 The lines conveyed a stigma that became
associated with Continental money. The poet associated the phrase “I fly” with the fleeing
public confidence in the currency. It also mocked Congress’s fragile claim to legitimacy. In
doing so the author illuminated the precarious state of the body’s authority. A Maryland loyalist
continued the assault by intimating that Congress lacked the decisiveness to successfully
prosecute the war. Noting that the two-dollar Continental bill featured a Latin motto meaning
“thrashing makes rich,” a reference to agricultural production, the loyalist argued that the

59 I generally follow Olson’s interpretations of Stansbury’s poetic meanings. Yet whereas Olson argues that the
chains represent potential imprisonment for members of Congress if captured by the British, I believe that these two
stanzas must be taken as a whole with the key lying in the last line of the eleventh verse. Stansbury’s rhetorical
question, asking how thirteen colonies could act as one, put into words what many loyalists and Europeans
themselves thought. Even John Adams, who wondered how it would be possible to get thirteen clocks to strike as
one, understood the difficulties of getting the colonies bound together for the common cause to move as a single
unit. For Olson’s view see Olson, Benjamin Franklin’s Vision of American Community: A Study in Rhetorical
Iconology, 126-127.

60 Stansbury, "The History of Peru, Etc." : 2283

61 Ibid.


63 Quoted in Olson, Benjamin Franklin’s Vision of American Community: A Study in Rhetorical Iconology, 126.
meaning was not explicitly clear: “But what kind of thrashing they do not explain/ Whether beat by the English, or beating our grain/ And since we’re left dark, we may fairly conclude/ That both will enrich them, and both do them good.” While the poet believed agriculture to be a worthy pursuit, he thought that the rebels could use a good thrashing as well.

Curiously, Patriots rarely spoke of the iconography on Continental money. Yet the prevalence of Franklin’s chain design in the 1770s and 1780s on battle standards, dinnerware pieces, and some state paper emissions indicates to some degree the extent to which some Americans accepted the implications of the design. New Hampshire’s Second Regiment displayed the chain iconography and phrase “WE ARE ONE” on its flag in 1777.

Patriots did, however, continue to create an ideological link between Continental money and the fate of the war. Appearing in a spring 1778 edition of The Connecticut Journal, the “Honest FARMER’S POLITICAL CREED, And RESOLUTION” held that “if no effectual measure are taken, and so the paper money continues to depreciate, an army sufficient for our defence cannot be kept in the field.” The argument is significant because farmers normally favored depreciated currency as a means to lessen the burden of debt. Yet in this instance the creed preached that the “honest farmer” favored stable Continental currency as a means to secure American independence. To that end, the Patriot farmers resolved to “join together to support all good laws enacted by public authority, in order to support the credit of our paper money…to pay an army of 60,000 able bodied men, and to establish justice and righteousness in the land.”

The link between the Continental money and the survival of the army was a constant theme. The “Honest FARMER’S POLITICAL CREED, And RESOLUTION” offered one example of how Americans argued that a stabilized currency meant the preservation of George Washington’s army. Patriots had previously appealed to the people on the basis of virtue to accept paper money as a means to support opposition to the British crown. Now, they refined their arguments to draw a distinct correlation between paper money and the army. As the Farmer’s Creed example illustrates, Americans increasingly saw Washington’s band of soldiers

65 Olson, Benjamin Franklin’s Vision of American Community: A Study in Rhetorical Iconology, 132.
66 “The Honest Farmer's Political Creed, and Resolution (Suited to the Present Times.)," The Connecticut Journal, 1 April 1778.
67 Ibid.
as the embodiment of the United States.\textsuperscript{68} Destruction of the army meant the end of independence.

The writer “Theophilus” explored this connection more concretely in late April 1778. Writing a few weeks after the appearance of the Farmer’s Creed, Theophilus began the last of a three-part series on “the great things which God has done for us” by fleshing out “what it is to do good, that no evil may touch us.”\textsuperscript{69} He argued that evil in a political sense was the opposite of civil liberty, which he defined as “natural liberty restrained in such a manner, as to [make] society one great family; where every one must consult his neighbour’s happiness, as well as his own.”\textsuperscript{70} Deliberate attempts to subvert this kind of state were “an evil and the greatest evil in this life.”\textsuperscript{71} To do good, he believed, required submission to God and a willingness to lead humble lives of integrity and decency. Without such efforts by the whole of society, Theophilus implored, God would not offer salvation from the evils of a selfish world. To achieve God’s glory “the patriot must throw off…his self ambitious views, or he must expect to fall into the pit he has digged (sic) for his neighbour.”\textsuperscript{72} Those who sacrificed for the good of the country were glorious martyrs, he argued, but Americans whose “self interest and inglorious ambition have been the only motives in his breast; and that his sole aim has been to remove a tyrant that he himself might have the hellish pleasure of tyrannizing.”\textsuperscript{73} In the wake of the American victory at Saratoga in late 1777 and the Treaty of Amity and Commerce with the French in February 1778, Theophilus called upon Americans to renew their faith in the Cause.

For Theophilus, merchants and farmers constituted prime examples of a selfish lack of virtue. “When we were suddenly plunged in a bloody campaign, without a medium to support an army for our defence,” he wrote, “how did we rejoice when our paper money, by universal consent was made a currency!”\textsuperscript{74} The creation of the Continental currency provided a common means of exchange, but it also gave the Continental Congress a measure of legitimacy. The issuing of paper money defied British law, representing an assertion of sovereignty on the part of

\textsuperscript{68} The theme of Washington’s army as an embodiment of the United States is discussed most thoroughly in Charles Royster, \textit{A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783} (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Va., by the University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

\textsuperscript{69} Theophilus, "To the Americans," \textit{The Freeman's Journal or New Hampshire Gazette}, 21 April 1778.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
the American Congress. Theophilus argued that establishing a universal currency provided the means to keep the army together. The military, the physical manifestation of American sovereignty and the supposed chief beneficiary of stable Continental money, depended upon the virtue of Americans to accept the paper bills. Theophilus believed the people had abandoned the cause of civil liberty in favor selfish interests. “[T]he merchant and farmer, seem united to render the money inadequate to the important use we designed for it,” he argued. Refusing to accept the currency that was created to support the soldiers, Theophilus contended, was the same as rejecting the army itself. “Should we still,” he wrote, “blind to our own interest, deaf to the remonstrances (sic) of our own conscience, and callous to every impression of public and private justice, go on in this way, our army must be disbanded…and our country be sunk into slavery.” The only thing keeping the army together at that point was the soldiers’ “real love of their country, and the bright example of their illustrious GENERAL.” Gratitude to Washington should be reason enough for Americans to accept Continental paper money.

Despite these repeated appeals for some virtue Americans continued to refuse the Continental currency. A Loyalist calling himself “Pacificus” took stock of the situation in the spring of 1778. In a piece that circulated in several papers, the author characterized the war as “an expensive amusement; yet our gallant adventurers, like a set of giddy mad caps, entered the dance without money to pay the piper.” He criticized the leaders of the American Revolution as a group of idealistic men who hastily led their country into war without considering the full implications of such an undertaking. This hubris, he argued, left the Continental Congress with the task of funding an army without the benefits of a well established currency system. Congress “undertook to create what they could not otherwise supply, and to keep up the ball with a droll kind of money, which they call continental dollars! They flattered themselves that they had found the philosophers stone, and that it consisted of nothing but brown paper.” Pacificus put into prose what Joseph Stansbury expressed in poetic verse. The Continental Congress was a weak institution incapable of sustaining a national union, let alone a war effort. The author pointed to the fact that Congress had to force the money into circulation under threat of imprisonment and loss of property.

75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Pacificus, "From the Pennsylvania Ledger," The Pennsylvania Evening Post, 20 March 1778.
79 Ibid.
In Pacificus’s mind, compelling citizens to accept paper money was an indication of Congress’s lack of legitimacy. The people were not fools, he argued. They “cannot but know that it is utterly impossible for these masters of the mint, by any arts of sophistication, ever to turn brown paper into real dollars.” Continental money could only be considered promises of Congress that the bills might someday be redeemed for gold or silver. The real question, Pacificus contended, was “how much those promises are worth [and it] is a question easily answered; it is well known that the leaders and rulers of the people hold their money as cheap as their.” Even members of Congress had no faith in the paper currency and yet still threatened punishment for those who refused to accept it. This alone proved that these promises carried no weight. “The plain truth is that the people have been artfully misled into rebellion,” Pacificus wrote, “their leaders are deeply interested in compelling them to persevere, which they know can be no longer than this bubble of continental money can be some how or other supported; for it is the principal means of supporting their own importance and usurped authority.”

Pacificus had a point and the members of the Continental Congress knew it. Supplying the country with stable paper money proved a more difficult task then imagined. In a January 1779 circular letter to the states the national legislature tried to instill public confidence in the Continental money by explaining its necessity and the reasons for its failure. “Humbly relying on the favour of Heaven in a righteous cause,” Congress wrote, “…we, from necessity, embraced the expedient of emitting paper money, on the faith of the United States, for the expenses—an expedient which had often been successfully practiced in separate States, while we were subjected to British domination.” In some cases, such as South Carolina’s 1703 example, paper money had productively been used in the past. Congress argued that it was necessary to emit large sums of money to fund a defense against the “implacable vengeance with which we have been pursued.” Admittedly, too much of this currency in circulation contributed in part to the depreciation. Yet instead of accusing Americans of lacking virtue, Congress placed the majority of the blame on subversive measures employed by the British and Loyalists. They could not subdue the United States in battle or through negotiation so as a last resort they turned

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80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
83 "In Congress, January 13, 1779," The Providence Gazette; and Country Journal: Containing the freshest Advices, Foreign and Domestic, 13 February 1779.
84 Ibid.
to fraud. Writers such as Stansbury and Pacificus fueled the fears of the people through
“misrepresentation; while our enemies of the highest rank have not hesitated to counterfeit the
bills of credit, and disperse them through the United States.” Arguing that a flood of illegal
money printed by agents of the crown caused the nation’s woes, Congress promised to take steps
to remedy the problem. The proposed plan ordered the existing bills replaced with new paper
containing more advanced security devices. These would then be taxed out of existence over a
period of eighteen years.

“Britannicus” hammered the congressional plan as a joke. Addressing “the Inhabitants of
the Revolted Colonies in America,” he wrote in New York’s Royal Gazette, ironically the state
in which most of the counterfeiting took place. “[Y]our Congress, driven to extremity, are
amusing you with apologies for the necessity of emitting large and indefinite sums of paper, and
at the same time charge the depreciation on the number of counterfeits.” Britannicus accused
Congress of knowing that its policies would cause rapid depreciation and argued that the
people’s “distress and ruin was an argument of little weight in opposition to the views of their
ambition.” If they knew from the beginning that these bills would reduce so quickly, the writer
asked, “where was their honour, their justice and humanity, when they forced the circulation of
those bills upon you with such cruel and bloody penalties; How many thousands in this unhappy
country, when were born to affluent fortune, have by this inhuman policy been brought to
beggary! How many helpless orphans have cause to make their hitter complaints to Heaven of
such perfidy and pernicious tyranny!” Here, said Britannicus, is proof of Congress’s
incompetence. Citizens could expect nothing but “tyranny and oppression… until you return to
the allegiance from which you have been seduced.”

Congress responded “to the Inhabitants of the United States of America” by reaffirming
the necessity of emitting Continental money and the plan to reverse its downward spiral. “For
defraying the expences of this uncommon war,” the members again asserted, “your
representatives in congress were obliged to emit paper money; an expedient that you knew to

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85 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
have been before generally and successfully practised (sic) on this continent.”90 They justified frequent emissions because Britain’s vigorous prosecution of the war made it difficult to borrow money from abroad or collect taxes at home. They again placed blame on “the artifices of men who have hastened to inrich (sic) themselves by monopolizing the necessaries of life.”91 Yet on this occasion Congress criticized both farmers and merchants, much as Theophilus had done, who sold their goods at high prices. The members argued they could not develop an effective economic plan or reform the paper money if Americans did “not zealously co-operate with them in promoting their designs, and use your utmost industry to prevent the waste of money in the expenditure.”92 They were sensitive to the fact that “raising these sums should press heavily on some of our constituents,” but argued it was necessary to support the “venerable clergy, the truly helpless widows and orphans, [and] your most gallant, generous, meritorious officers and soldiers.”93 Congress asked for diligence and wisdom, noting that the alliance with France brightened the prospects for the future. To win the war and preserve independence required public virtue. Americans also needed to be patient.

By 1779, however, patience with Continental currency had run out. The paper bills plummeted from a rate of 5 bills to 1 Spanish silver dollar in March 1778 to 75 to 1 by the fall of 1780.94 “We ask not who introduced the evil [of depreciation and high prices], how it arose, or who encouraged it,” wrote a summer 1779 correspondent in The American Journal and General Advertiser.95 “Vox Populi’s” piece appeared with reprints of Congress’s latest appeal to Americans. “In the midst of money we are in poverty, and exposed to want in the land of plenty. You that have money, and you that have none, down with your prices, or down with yourselves; for by the ever-living and eternal God, we will bring every article down to what it was last Christmas, or we will down with those who oppose it.”96 Patriots had turned out against the British, he argued, and they were not about to be put out by “monopolizers and forestallers” who worked against the common good.97 An author calling himself “Libertas” compared

90 Continental Congress, "To the Inhabitants of the United States of America," The Pennsylvania Evening Post, 5 May 1779.
91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
95 VOX POPULI, "The Crisis!" The American Journal and General Advertiser, 17 June 1779.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
Congress’s paper currency policy to taxation laws issued by the British. “Some of our great statesmen,” the writer argued, “tell us, that it is best for the whole that such a law [to issue paper money] should exist….But has not Lord North [the British Prime Minister] as concise and specious arguments for the support of his plan of subjugating us [?] He could say, that though the raising of revenue from America was not quite just, yet, as he governs by general laws, it would be best for the empire, and therefore right.”98 For Libertas, as for many Americans, the distinction between the British government and the Continental Congress was no longer clear.

Continental paper money was a dismal failure.99 More than a troubled economic policy, however, the currency functioned as an ideological weapon for Americans on both sides of the revolutionary debate. Loyalists used the bills and the imagery imprinted upon them to attack the legitimacy of the Continental Congress and patriot unity. Rapid depreciation enabled Loyalists to point to the worthless currency as a symbol of a futile cause. How, they asked, could the colonists expect to sustain themselves as an independent nation if their representatives could not even manage to supply the country with usable paper money? As Pacificus and other authors hammered home this point, writers such as Joseph Stansbury used poetry to ridicule the iconography. Benjamin Franklin’s chain design, meant to convey a sense of unity among the thirteen colonies, became for Loyalists an illustration of Patriot hubris. They twisted the intended meanings of the pictures, mocking the devices and mottos as indications of American incompetence.

For Patriots the divisive nature of paper money was more complex. Unlike Loyalists, who consistently used Continental currency as a symbol of revolutionary futility, Patriots grappled with the issue on many levels. Many linked the fate of the War for Independence with the success of the currency. The need to fund army, which some Americans viewed as the embodiment of the United States, was in part necessary to ensure its survival. The Continental Congress appealed to virtue as a means to convince citizens to accept the new money. Other Americans made the same push, threatening to ostracize those who did not receive the paper bills. As the war continued and depreciation accelerated, Americans began to point fingers at each other and at Congress for the currency’s failure. Some people began to attack congressional authority, questioning the legitimacy of the national congress. As they traded insults, placed

99 Indeed, the failure was such that the government of the United States did not attempt to issue paper money again until after the Civil War.
blame, and doubted their leadership in newspapers Americans argued over the stories paper money told about them as an independent people. The ideological rhetoric espoused over the currency constituted a ritual in the formation of an American identity. Negotiating how Continental dollars reflected their unity, ability to finance the war, and faith in the Congress, Americans created a dialogue in which they argued over issues of patriotism, virtue, and the right to call one’s self a true American.

The failure of the Continental currency prompted Congress to shift its tactics. Some members began to think seriously about replacing paper bills with hard specie. In the 1780s coinage, a medium of exchanged used by many cultures for thousands of years, became an attractive prospect to many Americans. As Congress debated the implications of coining money under the authority of the United States, citizens began to argue over the symbolic nature of coinage. The negotiation that began with paper money extended to coinage as Americans debated the kinds of stories coins might pass down through history. Unlike paper money, on which Patriots commented little on the devices and mottos imprinted on the bills, Americans in the 1780s and 1790s were much more concerned about the iconography of the nation’s new coins. Some recognized that the depictions could serve as monuments of the past. More important, many drew a link between the physical production of coinage, the imagery, and national identity. Americans argued over the proposition of minting coins with images specifically designed to represent the United States. Through this contestation they began to flesh out more concretely the contours of an American identity.
“Coin answers the purpose of monuments”: Communicating Revolutionary Ideology and American Identity through Coinage, 1780-1795

“It is surprizing to every well wisher to the American cause,” wrote a correspondent in April 1780, “that our rulers which I wished to think the wisest and justest [sic] men among us, can’t find out how to make the Continental money good.”100 “An Old Faithful Friend to the American Cause” found it curious that the members of Congress could not find the means to put Continental dollars on a sure footing despite having “pledged the faith, honor and all what is sacred to the Thirteen United States, for the redemption of it.”101 As the war progressed and depreciation persisted, Americans continued to link the honor of the United States and the paper money’s failure. They also continued to blame Congress. “Every attempt to revive the credit of our paper currency has hitherto failed, because [of] crude and ill digested [plans],” remarked another writer.102 The author proposed reviving quitrents, to be paid in silver and gold, as a means to build up a stock of bullion. He believed that excise taxes could then be paid in specie, but cautioned “those, who have the direction of our affairs, to take care how they adopt measures, which may not answer on experiment; ever remembering that HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY.”103

The failure of the national paper money prompted the Continental Congress to undertake another experiment. In 1781 the United States began an eleven-year effort to establish a national mint that would produce distinctly American coinage. On the surface this endeavor was intended to correct the country’s woes by circulating hard money. Yet the issue was much more complex. Americans in the late confederation period and in the beginnings of the early republic viewed coinage for more than its ability to purchase goods. The creation of a mint and the production of coins served as a mark of sovereignty for the new nation. Citizens and statesmen debated the necessity of a mint, but they also contested the images that might appear on the coins. As some Americans identified paper money with the fate of the Revolution, they also believed a national mint would define the United States as a sovereign entity in the Atlantic

100 An Old Faithful Friend to the American Cause, "To the Printer of the Pennsylvania Packet," The Pennsylvania Packet or the General Advertiser, 1 April 1780.
101 Ibid.
102 “A Hint,” The Pennsylvania Packet or General Advertiser, 28 November 1780.
103 Ibid.
world. Further, Americans greatly contested the imagery of the new coinage. Though they were consciously aware that the iconography constituted representations of their national identity, not everyone agreed which emblems were the most appropriate.

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Robert Morris had his hands full. The Superintendent of Finance for the Continental Congress, known simply as the “Financier” in many circles, took office in the spring of 1781 with the task of bringing order to the nation’s budget. A portly man of English birth, Morris served in both the Continental Congress and the Pennsylvania Assembly where he gained experience negotiating loans and shoring up credit. He amassed a considerable fortune first as a merchant and then as the owner of several privateer ships which seized British cargo in the Atlantic during the American War. As a member of the Pennsylvania legislature Morris worked on currency reform issues and advocated for the abolition of penalties for people who failed to accept paper money. By the time he took over as superintendent the nation’s finances were in shambles. The United States was in debt by roughly $25 million and the Continental dollar continued its rapid slide. Indeed, as one Morris biographer had noted, the public had begun to use the currency as wallpaper. “In Philadelphia,” wrote Ellis P. Oberholtzer, “men who wore the bills as cockades in their hats marched in a procession through the public streets accompanied by a dog which was covered with a coat of tar in which the despised pieces of paper were thickly set.” Morris’s appointment made sense to Alexander Hamilton who knew “of no other in America who united so many advantages” and believed the Philadelphian “the Man best capable of performing this great work.”

Congress gave Morris broad authority to get the nation’s finances under control. He was also charged with devising ways to provision George Washington’s underpaid and ill-supplied army. To that end, Morris recommended to Congress in May 1781 that it establish a national bank that could lend the United States credit to fight the war. Describing his rationale to

105 Ibid., 188.
106 Ibid., 61.
Benjamin Franklin, who was then serving as the American minister to the Court of Versailles in France, Morris believed that “no Country is truely [sic] independent untill [sic] with her own Credit and resources she is able to defend herself and correct her Enemies.” The Financier believed that a bank would be the best way to generate funds for the United States because obtaining “the Money of Individuals for the benefit of the Union [would] thereby bind those individuals more strongly to the general cause, by the ties of private interest.”

Investing in this bank, he argued, would give private citizens a greater stake in the public interest. Creating this new institution, however, required starter capital. Morris hoped Franklin might obtain assistance from France while John Jay sought help from the Spanish monarchs in Madrid. “[A] considerable Sum of Money is necessary…to the efficacy of this plan,” Morris wrote, “as well as to the establishment of a Mint which would also be of use[.]”

The subtle reference to a mint in Morris’s letter did not indicate the importance the author gave to the project. As he developed his plan for a national bank, the Financier spent considerable time drawing up a separate proposal for a mint. Three days after his July 13th letter to Franklin he wrote to Benjamin Dudley, a recent English immigrant living in Boston, who had lately assayed a large cache of copper stored in that city. Dudley found the metal purer than had been previously thought. Morris then asked him to come to Philadelphia to evaluate different kinds of metals that might be used in coinage. Over the next several months Dudley essayed foreign coins circulating within the United States and performed experiments on various metals while Morris, assisted by former Continental Congressman Gouverneur Morris, fleshed out a plan for a national mint. On January 15, 1782 Robert Morris seized an opportunity to bring his proposal to the attention of Congress. Ordered a few days earlier to prepare a table of rates outlining the kinds of foreign coins circulating within the United States, Morris instead presented the legislative body with a comprehensive report detailing the necessity of producing American coinage.

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110 Ibid., 283. Alexander Hamilton expressed similar thoughts in his letter to Morris of April 30, 1781 in which he argued for the necessity of a national bank.

111 Ibid.

112 Diary Entry: 16 July 1781 in Ibid., 303. See also the text of John Bradford’s letter to the Continental Congress informing the government of the copper and Dudley’s abilities in Taxy, The U.S. Mint and Coinage: An Illustrated History from 1776 to the Present, 13-14.
Morris outlined several reasons for the creation of a national mint. The United States was lucky, he argued, that weights and measures used throughout North America were generally the same. “With respect to our Money,” the Financier noted, “the Case is very widely different. The Ideas annexed to a Pound, a Shilling, and a Penny, are almost as various as the States themselves. Calculations are therefore as necessary for our inland Commerce, as upon foreign Exchanges; and the commonest Things become intricate where Money has any thing to do with them.”

The presence of circulating foreign coins complicated matters for Americans. By the 1780s British, Dutch, and Spanish coinage passed as money in the United States. The problem, as Morris saw it, was the absence of any uniform coinage standard for the country. Even simple commercial transactions could become enormous headaches. Morris offered an example to illustrate his point:

A Farmer in New Hampshire, for Instance, can readily form an Idea of a Bushel of Wheat in South Carolina, weighing sixty Pounds, and [placed] at one hundred Miles from Charlestown; but if he were told that in such situation it is worth twenty one shillings and eight Pence, he would be obliged to make many Enquires, and form some Calculations before he could know that this Sum meant, in general, what he would call four Shillings; and, even then, he would have to enquire what kind of Coin that four shillings was paid in, before he could estimate it in his own Mind according to the Ideas of Money which he imbibed.

Morris’s farmer not only had to contend with different kinds of foreign coins, he also had to deal with the diverse exchange rates within the several states. The United States could not continue to function in this way, Morris argued, and “as we are now shaking off the Inconveniences of a depreciating [paper] Medium, the present moment seems to be that, in which a general Currency can best be Established[.]”

For Morris the creation of a mint and coinage that unified the United States had a dual benefit. On the one hand it would solve the problem that the farmer in his example faced. Simplifying the monetary system might spark American commerce. On the other hand Morris saw his plan as a way for Congress to increase its power. Morris, who believed in a stronger

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114 Ibid.
115 Ibid., 31.
central government, wished to strengthen the national congress by working within the framework of the Articles of Confederation. By making the Congress a more centralized and efficient administrative apparatus Morris hoped to bring about a stronger Union.\textsuperscript{116} Though the Articles of Confederation granted Congress “the sole and exclusive right and power of regulating the alloy and value of coin struck by their own authority, or by that of the respective States,” the document forced the national legislature to share the power to coin money with the individual states.\textsuperscript{117} A national mint would enhance Congress’s prestige and better serve the Union by centralizing coinage operations within one specific authority.

At the heart of Morris’s argument was the issue of sovereignty. The power sharing arrangement between the Continental Congress and the states worried Morris less than did the prevalence of foreign coins in use within the United States. “The Nature, Value and Use of Money have always occasioned strong Temptations of the Commission of Fraud,” he noted, “and of Consequence the Practice of Counterfeiting is coeval with that of Coining.”\textsuperscript{118} Governments had long fought to maintain the integrity of their coinage, not always successfully, but a unified system made the task somewhat easier. Where coin denominations were few and simple individuals could become acquainted more readily with their money. The American situation presented a special kind of hell. “Where the Coins are so numerous that the knowledge of them is a kind of Science,” as in the case of the United States, “the lower [uneducated] Order of Citizens are constantly injured by those, who carry on the Business of debasing, sweating, clipping, counterfeiting and the like. It is therefore to be lamented that we have so many different Coins in the United States.”\textsuperscript{119} With no effective means to regulate the metallic content of foreign coinage, unscrupulous citizens were free to remove bits of silver and gold from these coins or create counterfeits made of lesser metals. An inability to stop these practices undercut the legitimacy of the national government.

Worse, foreign coins exposed Americans “not only to the tricks of Individuals, but should it su[it the] Interest or Convenience of any Sovereign to make base Money for us, there is

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{117} U.S. Articles of Confederation, art. 9, sec.6.
  \item \textsuperscript{118}Morris to the President of Congress 15 January 1782 in Morris, \textit{The Papers of Robert Morris, 1781-1784}, vol. 2, 31.
  \item \textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
nothing to prevent it.”\footnote{120} He feared foreign rulers might cheat Americans by diluting the purity of precious metals with others such as copper or tin. The United States could not continue to rely on other nations to supply its coinage. Minting and declaring the value of coins was “the great Privilege” of a sovereign power. “A Trust so important could not indeed be vested anywhere else, because the Danger of abusing it was too great; and History informs us, that Sovereigns themselves have not on this Occasion behaved with that Integrity, which was alike due to their Subjects[.]”\footnote{121} Independence from Great Britain made the United States a sovereign entity capable of issuing its own coinage struck under public authority. A lack of national coinage, in Morris’s view, weakened the nation. Americans needed the ability to make their own coins.

Congress gave the Financier’s plan a lukewarm reception. Though Congress assented to the proposal and ordered Morris to draw up a more comprehensive report, he was determined to see his plan fully realized.\footnote{122} Going beyond his mandate, Morris made inquires with companies that constructed the machinery necessary for coin production. He also contracted Benjamin Dudley to create several sample coins to present to Congress.\footnote{123} After several delays Dudley delivered to Morris in early April 1783 “a Piece of Silver Coin being the first that has been struck as an American Coin.”\footnote{124} This was a significant statement. The new coin was the product of the first directed effort to create coinage for the United States. In 1776 a few pewter specimens using Benjamin Franklin’s chain iconography were struck to test the feasibility of circulating hard specie along with the faltering paper money. Congress, however, had neither the resources nor the machinery to carry out such an operation and the idea was quickly abandoned. The 1783 coin became the first struck under the authority of the Union as part of a larger effort to bring order to American coinage. Shortly thereafter Dudley produced a few more samples which were laid before Congress on April 23, 1783.\footnote{125}

The designs used for the new coins attempted to convey a sense of unity in a manner similar to Franklin’s chain motif. Each piece featured the same devices. On the obverse thirteen

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{120}{Ibid., 32.}
\footnote{121}{Ibid.}
\footnote{122}{Taxy, \textit{The U.S. Mint and Coinage: An Illustrated History from 1776 to the Present}, 16-17.}
\footnote{123}{See diary entries in Morris, \textit{The Papers of Robert Morris, 1781-1784}, vol. 2, 125, 306,321,429,435,444.}
\footnote{125}{Robert Morris to the President of Congress (Elias Boudinot) 23 April 1783 in Morris, \textit{The Papers of Robert Morris, 1781-1784}, vol. 7, 740.}
\end{footnotes}
stars ringed the Eye of Providence while the inscription “NOVA CONSTELLATIO” framed the iconography. The stars acted to illustrate the union of the thirteen states. Unlike Franklin’s design which expressed ardent solidarity, however, the motto and the All Seeing Eye suggested that the United States was fundamentally different than other nations. This “New Constellation” had divine support for its grand continental experiment. By virtue of its lineage the design invoked the legacy of the American Revolution. The iconography was a synthesis of various devices used on public objects during the War for Independence. The eye and ring of stars appeared on the Continental $40 bill in 1775. More important, the stars were incorporated onto the blue field of the so-called “Betsy Ross Flag” adopted by Congress in June 1777. The device replaced the British King’s colors in the Grand Union Continental flag with a “union [of] THIRTEEN STARS white in a blue field, representing a new constellation.” The legion of General Casimir Pulaski carried the Eye of Providence ringed by thirteen stars as its standard in 1778. The coins struck by Dudley in 1783 preserved the rhetorical symbolism made popular during the war. The motif espoused divine favoritism for a new union that, as the reverse of the coins illustrated, championed peace with “LIBERTAS” and “JUSTITIA” for its citizens.

As word reached the public that Congress was considering a national mint, some citizens debated the implications of American coinage. Like Morris’s sample pieces, some Americans believed that coins provided the perfect vehicles for conveying the meaning of the Revolution. “The custom of the Greeks and Romans,” suggested a correspondent in the Massachusetts Spy, “in perpetuating [sic] the great achievements of their patriots and heroes, by significant inscriptions on their current coin, was a policy very worthy of imitation.” Writing in February 1784, the author suggested that the “piece of greatest value” feature a likeness of George

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126 Francis Hopkinson, appointed to the Navy Board in 1776, probably helped design the “Betsey Ross Flag.” He also probably had a hand in designing the $40 Continental note. In 1778 Hopkinson designed several items for Congress including the seals for the Board of Admiralty and the Board of Treasury. For Hopkinson as Morris’s inspiration for the “Nova Constellatio” design see Howard Michael Madaus, “Nova Constellatio: The Story of a Shared Heritage,” The Numismatist: For Collectors of Coins, Medals, Tokens, and Paper Money Vol. 96, no. 2 (1983): 238-246.

127 “In Congress, June 14, 1777,” The Pennsylvania Evening Post, 30 August 1777; Madaus, "Nova Constellatio: The Story of a Shared Heritage": 244.


Washington. He believed General Washington should appear on the obverse “in armour [sic], with a wreath around his head: His right hand pointing to a globe, supported by liberty with her spear and cap; and on the globe the continent of North-America.” The writer proposed the inscription to read “WASHINGTON, the FATHER of his COUNTRY.” Washington was a natural selection. In the eyes of many Americans the Virginian and his Continental Army, more so than Congress, symbolized the United States. Appearing in armor with a wreathed head, the proposed Washington motif characterized an American victory over Great Britain. The general pointed to North America on a globe supported by the Roman goddess Liberty, suggesting the potential global impact of the Revolution. The scene invokes Thomas Paine’s suggestion that “the cause of America is in great measure the cause of all mankind.” The device illustrated that the seed of liberty, or at least the way Americans understood it, took root in North America.

For the reverse of this coin the correspondent suggested a “shepherd reclined under a pine, playing on a reed, with oxen before a plough and sheep near him” with the legend “PEACE, the FRUIT of GLORIOUS WAR.” The virtuous nature of the conflict enabled an outcome which established tranquility throughout the land. The writer advocated designs for other coins depicting Generals Richard Montgomery, Horatio Gates, and Nathaniel Greene. The most powerful suggestion, though, proposed to honor Joseph Warren. Commander of the Minutemen at Bunker Hill in 1775, Warren fell to the Redcoats as they made several attempts to take the ground. “It was said that General Warren was sensible of the perilous situation of the party on Bunker’s Hill,” the author wrote. Yet Warren “thought there was a propriety at the commencement of hostilities, that the foes to his country, should feel and dread the American resistance; and he fell a sacrifice to that sentiment.” No fitting tribute could be given Warren, the correspondent argued, than a coin depicting:

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130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
132 See Charles Royster, A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783 (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Va., by the University of North Carolina Press, 1979).
135 Ibid.
136 Ibid.
137 Ibid.
A warriour with his sword drawn, standing near a slight fortification, from which might rise clouds of smoke; just before it, the enemy flying, and some lying dead. Inscription. WARREN, AMERICA’s FIRST MARTYR- On the reverse; the hero’s bust, and over it FAME, with her trumpet in on hand and a wreath in the other. Inscription, HE LIVES IN COLUMBIA’s WARM REMEMBERANCE-- 1775.138

The correspondent believed that the men he proposed to be placed on national coins embodied the ideological foundations of the United States. He suggested that American identity was fundamentally linked with the Glorious Cause. Coining that identity, he argued, would perpetuate the principles on which the war was fought. In doing so, the stories of these men “might be handed down to posterity, in the most diffusive and permanent manner. Current coin is more or less in the hands of all; and endures when statues of marble lie prostrate in the dust.”139 Like the coins of the Greeks and the Romans, he argued, American coins would tell the national story long after great sculptures fell victim to the erosion of time.

But the probability of coined monuments seemed a bleak prospect. Indeed, as early as August 1783 Robert Morris informed Benjamin Dudley of his “doubts about the establishment of a mint and desired [Dudley] to think of some employment in private service.”140 Congress dragged its feet through the end of 1783 and into 1784. In July of that year an individual tried to spur Congress to action. The Providence Gazette and Country Journal published a report by Thomas Jefferson entitled “Notes on the Establishment of a Money- Mint, and of a Coinage, for the United States.” Jefferson, who chaired a congressional committee that considered Morris’s proposal, issued a report that agreed with the Financier’s plan to create a decimal system of coinage. The newly appointed ambassador to France, however, disagreed with the size of Morris’s denominations and proposed a model similar to that currently used in the United States. Jefferson’s tract was sent among the delegates of Congress and subsequently sent to the states for review. The correspondent who asked the piece be published recognized that no action on the measure was likely in lieu of Congress’s impending summer recess. “By [the report’s] being

138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
published in your Gazette,” the citizen hoped, “the next Congress may avail itself of the sentiments of the virtuosi on this subject.”

Robert Morris left his post in November 1784 without having accomplished his vision. During the remainder of his tenure some Americans remained hopeful that a mint lay in the near future. And they continued to argue that coinage served a purpose beyond economics. Writing in The Political Intelligencer and New-Jersey Advertiser a correspondent expressed surprise that “the wisdom and attention of Congress should be so long with-held from the coinage of copper--a branch of national manufacture so lucrative that it must be obvious to the meanest capacity.” The author lamented the importation of copper coins from England and Ireland, contending that twenty-one coppers could be bought for a shilling in those countries. Frequent imports reduced the value further. Equally damaging was the inability of the United States to produce its own coinage. The writer recognized that a people’s coins helped define their national identity. “In other countries,” he wrote, “coin answers the purpose of monuments, to hand down to posterity their most conspicuous era, at the same time that it serves for the purposes of traffic, and the medium of commerce.” American coinage was an attractive prospect that served a dual purpose. “This is not only a necessary or needful historical record,” the author wrote, “but the most political that could be adopted; for, while it answers the purposes we have just mentioned, it keeps in the mind, by the frequency of its appearance, some period that makes every susceptible heart glow with the love of its country.”

The writer’s argument in The Political Intelligencer was in the same vain as that of the author who proposed minting the likenesses of Washington and Warren. Both agreed that coins served as historical markers that could attach people to their country. The devices told stories meant to convey a sense of the past, but also spark warm sentimental feelings for the nation. Frequent use, the author believed, would help foster a sense of American nationalism by providing tangible representations of membership in a larger community. Coins would also distinguish the United States among other nations, providing hard evidence of the country’s sovereignty. An extract of a letter published in The Independent Ledger and the American

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142 “Elizabeth Town, August 10,” The Political Intelligencer and New-Jersey Advertiser, 10 August 1785.
143 Ibid.
144 Ibid.
Advertiser in August 1785, expressed “hopes of seeing a copper, if not a silver and gold coin, soon issued by authority of Congress.” Commentary provided by the newspaper’s editor noted that copper coinage might provide a source of revenue for the treasury while more valuable silver and gold coins could carry “some local emblem, to shew [sic] that their coins belonged to the United States of North America.” The editor also indicated that sources in Philadelphia believed that the establishment of a mint was now a higher priority for Congress. Perhaps coin production might soon commence.

“A Buckskin” hoped Congress would create a mint as well. The writer argued that if the United States were to ever gain a share of the global market it had to be willing to manufacture its own products. To achieve that end he believed Americans should “invest Congress with a controuling [sic] power over the commerce of the whole” and encourage local production. The author listed copper coinage as an essential item of manufacture. “A great part of the copper coin, circulating in the United States is extremely base,” he wrote, “and large quantities of this kind of trash have been lately introduced among us.” As such genuine British coins passed for twice their normal rate because of the inundation of coppers made of poor alloys. Buckskin’s message encapsulated much of what Robert Morris feared in his mint plan: large influxes of low quality foreign coins exposed Americans to the sinister devices to counterfeitters or foreign governments. In New York City, reported The Pennsylvania Evening Herald and the American Monitor, “copper coinage, current in this city, is a reflection on the police, and must, in the end,

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146 Ibid.
147 The editor states that his Philadelphia source “assures us, that there is a very ingenious gentleman there, perfectly acquainted in all the branches of coinage, as carried on in Europe.---Besides his being possessed of the necessary apparatus, he is the only person on the North-American continent capable of cutting the dies---his superior abilities have received the applause of almost every person of judgment and taste in Philadelphia, and his ingenuity is not unknown to some conspicuous members of Congress.” The identity of this artist is not entirely clear. The editor’s correspondent apparently had contact with this artist who intimated that the mint was now a high priority for Congress. Benjamin Dudley seems a likely candidate given his background and prior association with the project. Another strong candidate is die maker Jacob Perkins of Newburyport, Massachusetts. A goldsmith jeweler by trade, Perkins engraved Massachusetts’s state coinage in 1788. In 1792, following the establishment of a mint, several newspapers reported (incorrectly) that Perkins was on his way to Philadelphia to coin the first federal coins. For a short bio on Perkins see John Macone, “Jacob Perkins Was Port's Inventive Genius,” The Daily News (MA), 14-15 August 2004. For a sample newspaper claiming that Perkins was headed to Philadelphia see "Newbury Port, July 18,” The Columbian Centinel, 27 July 1792.
148 A Buckskin, "The Following Piece Is Taken from the Philadelphia Herald, and Is Now Reprinted, as Worthy the Attention of Every Real Friend to the Independence of America. It Is Hoped, That the Several States Will Be Influenced by Such National Principles as Are Recommended by This Writer, Who Appears in Every Respect the Real Patriot and Politician.,” The Salem Gazette, 27 September 1785.
149 Ibid.
be a general loss to the citizens, as the intrinsic value of most of the coppers in circulation, is not half what they pass for.”150 The arrival of British vessels constantly brought more poorly made coppers, the paper noted, and the authorities failed to regulate these imports. “Base metal is passed with impunity and indifference” by citizens who had little option.151 They were neither afraid of punishment nor offered a viable solution. Lack of national coinage denied the United States agency with its citizens and in the world.

In the early months of 1786 Americans remained hopeful that a national mint would be soon established. One writer in The Pennsylvania Packet thought Congress might “find it expedient to establish a mint for the coinage of a money…which will give a spring to agriculture and commerce.”152 In May reports surfaced in London, England that the United States had begun producing coins, but these accounts proved “not true. The piece spoken of, bearing the inscription, “Libertas et Justitia, &c. ” was not made in America, nor by the directions of Congress.”153 According to the paper a New York merchant employed coiners in Birmingham to strike counterfeit coins with designs similar to the devices proposed to Congress in 1783. Merchant ships then brought the fakes to America where they entered circulation.

Finally, in October 1786, Congress passed “An Ordinance for the Establishment of the Mint of the United States of America.”154 “Had this measure been adopted at an earlier day, immediately after the war, before the destructive rage of importation had so effectually drained this country of its specie, it would have been more honourable, more profitable, and more useful,” remarked a correspondent in a South Carolina paper. “However, agreeable to the old adage, it is better late than never.”155 The ordinance provided for an administrative apparatus and listed several reasons why the national institution had become necessary. Noting that the “great quantities of base copper coin… is become so highly injurious to the interest and commerce of the same, as to require the immediate interposition of the power vested by the confederation in the United States in Congress,” the document declared foreign coins illegal after September 1, 1787.156 It also provided the death penalty for gold and silver counterfeiters. Those

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151 Ibid.
152 “America,” The Pennsylvania Packet, and Daily Advertiser, 27 February 1786.
154 The bill was introduced on September 20, 1786 and passed on October 16 of that year.
155 “Coinage,” The Columbian Herald or the Independent Courier of North-America, 20 November 1786.
minting false coppers suffered fines and imprisonment. The ordinance made no mention of potential designs for the new coins, but Congress probably intended to use motifs of an eagle for the five and ten dollar gold pieces. A report by the Board of Treasury issued earlier in the year determined that such coins, if ever issued, “be stampt [sic] with the impression of an eagle.”

Yet the very Articles of Confederation that Robert Morris hoped to strengthen through national institutions such as a mint effectively killed the coinage ordinance. In the ordinance, Congress cited the problems of foreign coins and base copper as justifications for the centralization of minting power. As we have seen, Morris believed that locating this kind of administrative authority exclusively within Congress would strengthen the Union. The Articles, however, forbade the national legislature to directly tax the people. As such Congress had no means to acquire revenue that would support a mint. Some members thought the mint an unnecessary expense anyway. Why not, they asked, simply contract out coin production to private mints? Additionally, the Articles empowered the states to mint their own coins. Congress could regulate state coinage, but could not deny their production.

The ability of the states to coin money complicated a coined national identity. As Congress moved slowly on the mint issue throughout the 1780s, states began to produce their own coins. They symbolized the confederated nature of the United States while carrying devices that reflected local worlds. In 1785, Vermont issued copper coins depicting the regional landscape on the obverse. A sun burst illuminated a scene of the Green Mountains while in the foreground a plow rested on the earth. The sun’s light united the thematic elements of wilderness and agriculture in a marriage representative of the Vermont landscape. The Latinized words “VERMONTIS REPUBLICA” wrapped around this depiction was equally significant. Vermont, technically a part of New Hampshire and New York, declared itself an independent republic six months after the Declaration of Independence. Vermont asserted its sovereignty through coinage. In New Jersey the state authorized copper coins with an image of a nag’s head and a plow. Issued in 1786, the images derived from the state coat of arms and bore the inscription “NOVA CAESAREA.” “Caesarea” referred to the ancient Roman name of the Island of Jersey in the English Channel. The Romans called it “Caesar’s Island” and through

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157 Samuel Osgood and Walter Livingston, "Board of Treasury, April 8, 1786," ed. United States Board of Treasury (United States Congress, 1786), 7. This report also adopted the dollar-decimal system in use today.
158 For the governments experiments with contract coinage see Taxy, The U.S. Mint and Coinage: An Illustrated History from 1776 to the Present, 26-43.
transliteration Caesarea became Jersey. More significant, however, were the coins issued by Massachusetts. The coppers of Massachusetts carried motifs taken from the state seal adopted in 1780. An Algonquin Indian stood with bow and arrow in hand gazing toward a single star. The words “COMMON WEALTH” framed this image. The arrow points down signifying peace while the star represented the state. Ironically, the Massachusetts copper features a representation of the people with whom English and Dutch settlers traded wampum almost two hundred years before the coin’s issue.159

These images indicated the symbolic ways in which the states chose to represent themselves as sovereign entities. It is equally important to note the depictions on the opposite sides of these pieces. While the reverse of all three coins contain emblems indicating membership in the Confederation, the positioning reflects the subordinate nature of the national union to state sovereignty. The Vermont copper features the Eye of Providence surrounded by a constellation of thirteen states, the same device offered to Congress by Robert Morris in 1783. The motto “STELLA QUARTA DECIMA,” the Fourteenth Star, illustrated Vermont’s desire to join the United States as an equal member. The New Jersey copper’s reverse depicted the shield of the American Republic along with the national motto, “E PLURIBUS UNUM.” The reverse of the Massachusetts coins featured a modified version of the Great Seal of the United States.160

Other state designs gave some Americans pause. For some observers the devices on Connecticut’s coppers too closely resembled images of the British monarch and Britannia. “Martinus Scriblerus” wrote that a “Penny of the new coinage of the state of Connecticut, has lately fallen into my hands, and although I am thought skilled in the medallick [sic] science, yet I must own that I could not decypher [sic] the meaning of the legends, or inscriptions of this piece.”161 He offered the public a description of the piece in hopes someone could make sense of the iconography. “On one side of the medal,” he wrote, “a head- encircled with a civick (sic) crown, with the legend: AUCTORI : CONNEC: On the reverse a woman with disheveiled (sic)

159 For depictions and some commentary on state coinage see Breen, Walter Breen's Complete Encyclopedia of U.S. And Colonial Coins, 59-90; University of Notre Dame The Department of Special Collections, Coin and Currency Collections at the University of Notre Dame, Department of Special Collections (1998 [cited 13 May 2006]); http://www.coins.nd.edu/. This excellent website contains digital scans of the major coinage of the colonial, confederated, and republic periods as well as descriptions of the mottos and devices of each. I have relied on this site and Breen to further my understanding of the iconography.

160 The Department of Special Collections, Coin and Currency Collections at the University of Notre Dame, Department of Special Collections (cited).

161 Martinus Scriblerus, "From the Philadelphia Gazetteer," The Massachusetts Centinel, 1 August 1787.
hair, holding a nosegay in her dexter hand, and a constable’s staff in her sinister, sitting on
something I could not well discern [sic], but resembling upon the whole the famous Britannia
stamped upon the English pennies, with the legend: INDE : ET LIB and on the exergue,
1787. Indeed, the coin did closely resemble the British penny. The obverse featured the bust
of a man draped in a toga donning a laurel wreath, an image that bore similarities to the heads of
George II and George III used on British coinage. The Latin legend indicated the coin was
struck under the authority of Connecticut. The iconography on the reverse, which the author
thought bore resemblance to Britannia seated on a throne, was an image of Liberty holding an
olive branch in her right hand and a liberty pole and cap in the other. The abbreviated Latin
inscription read “Independence and Liberty.” The coin meant to convey a sense of authority by
using familiar images that represented a powerful empire. The coin, however, was to
Scriblerus, “a silly and servile imitation of the British pence.”

These expressions of state sovereignty through coinage, argued the correspondent
“Nestor,” could destroy the union. Some papers attributed the widely circulated February 1787
piece, written in the wake of Shay’s Rebellion, to Benjamin Franklin. Nevertheless it was a
well-chosen pseudonym. In Homer’s Iliad Nestor, the wise and respected king of Pylos, counsels
reconciliation between the glory-seeking Achilles and the power-hungry Agamemnon. The
competition of ego between the two men, the old sage argues, leaves the Greeks little chance to
storm the walls of Troy. Dispensing with pride for the greater good was the only way for Troy to
fall. Our eighteenth-century Nestor, writing on the eve of the Constitutional Convention, thought
in much the same terms as his Greek counterpart. As the latter believed that Achilles’s fierce
defense of his individual sovereignty would destroy Greek unity, the former argued that state
coinage represented an expression of local sovereignty with dangerous implications for the
American union.

The modern Nestor took note of news reports indicating Rhode Island intended to
establish a mint to coin copper and silver. “Every act of this kind in a particular state,” he

162 Ibid.
163 See a general discussion of the Connecticut coppers at The Department of Special Collections, Coin and
Currency Collections at the University of Notre Dame, Department of Special Collections ([cited].
164 Scriblerus, “From the Philadelphia Gazetteer,” 1 August 1787.
165 See "Boston, January 16," The Massachusetts Gazette, 16 January 1787; "Charlestown, Friday, January 19," The
American Recorder and the Charlestown Advertiser (MA), 19 January 1787.
166 Nestor, "From the Pennsylvania Packet," The Independent Journal or, The General Advertiser (NY), 14 February
1787.
wrote, “calls to my mind the evils we suffer for want of union among the states. That idol of the people, state sovereignty, will forever disappoint the hopes we entertain of peace, happiness and respectability, and prevent any sovereignty at all.”\textsuperscript{167} What, he asked, could states possibly hope to gain from a mint? Nestor foresaw two advantages; “eithee [sic] an increase of the circulating specie, or the preservation of the purity of the coin.”\textsuperscript{168} The first was not really an advantage at all. Too many different kinds of coins circulated throughout the United States. Any addition would add further confusion to an already complex situation. “The other advantage expected from a mint; the preservation of the purity of coin,” Nestor believed, “should not be local. The mint of the United States will answer this purpose.”\textsuperscript{169} This was an important purpose of a mint, but it made no sense to have more than one. “We want to annihilate all state-distinctions of money,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{170} There need be only one general coinage for the whole of the continent produced and regulated by the national government. Continued production of local coinage “will help to keep alive the jealousies of the states…. Is there not more danger of deception among a number than in one?”\textsuperscript{171} In his closing paragraph Nestor argued that the United States needed a stronger national government to resolve these issues. He prayed:

\begin{quote}
[T]hat such local ideas may be obliterated, that Congress may be enabled to regulate the coin and render it uniform currency—that state-currencies of bills may be destroyed [sic] and none emitid [sic] but under the authority of Congress, that paper, if we must be harrassed [sic] with it, may have a general circulation. It is impossible to be a flourishing and happy people, without a single power over the whole. The petty advantages that the states attempt to obtain by their individual sovereignty, are all lost, because the struggle is mutual. I was a warm friend to the revolution, and it is mortifying to see the states so blind to their own interest, as to oppose the ends which that even might answer. Conviction is wrought in a gradual manner; but however flow its progress, time and necessity must eventually open the eyes of people. A compulsory power must exist somewhere, and it is probable the people will create it; if they do not it will certainly create itself.\textsuperscript{172}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item 167 Ibid.
\item 168 Ibid.
\item 169 Ibid.
\item 170 Ibid.
\item 171 Ibid.
\item 172 Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
Nestor summarized many of the arguments made by those who had long favored national coinage. A single American mint would end the confusing circulation of foreign and state coinage while providing a source of unity for the country. One editorialist argued in a Philadelphia paper that “this making of coppers by the states, is only a refinement of the evil of making paper money.” A national mint would also eliminate the need for state issued paper money, which states began doing in the 1780s to counter the failure of the Continental currency. More important, however, it would represent the people as a collective whole. The American Revolution had not been fought for the independence of two or three states, but for the whole of the people. American coinage, Nestor believed, would tangibly embody national sovereign identity and perpetuate the legacy of the Revolution.

Transforming state loyalties into a national identity through coinage required an expansion of national power. The proposed new federal constitution, written during the summer months as the Continental Congress experimented with contract coinage, stripped the states of their power to coin money and vested it, along with regulatory power, solely within the national legislature. This change was a “good consequence of the new constitution,” wrote “A Jerseyman” in late 1787. “The citizens of each state will be well acquainted with the money of the others, which will give great facility and convenience to trade and all negociations [sic] in business.” Strangers and travelers, the writer argued, would no longer suffer difficulty or embarrassment because of an overwhelming number of coin types. “However slender this tie may appear to some,” he wrote, “I have no doubt but the sameness of money in every state, will have a powerful influence on our union.”

James Madison agreed with the Jerseyman’s thoughts. “In this instance,” Madison argued in Federalist 44, “the new provision is an improvement on the old. Whilst the alloy and value depended on the general authority, a right of coinage in the particular states could have no

174 In April 1787 Congress approved a resolution to contract out copper coins featuring Franklin’s 1776 chain and sundial iconography. Around 400,000 of these coins were produced but few, if any, ever made it into circulation. For more see Taxy, *The U.S. Mint and Coinage: An Illustrated History from 1776 to the Present*, 26-38; The Department of Special Collections, *Coin and Currency Collections at the University of Notre Dame, Department of Special Collections* (cited).
176 Ibid.
177 Ibid.
other effect than to multiply expensive mints and diversify the forms and weights of the circulating pieces.”

Madison contended that nationalizing coinage would reduce many of the headaches Robert Morris outlined in his January 1782 report. A single system would alleviate what Nestor called the jealousies of the states, binding them together with a unified American coin. This was important, Madison argued, since some states currently emitted paper bills in addition to coins. “Had every State a right to regulate the value of its coin, there might be as many different currencies as States, and thus the intercourse among them would be impeded…and thus the citizens of other States be injured, and animosities be kindled among the States themselves.”

If foreign powers took note of such infighting among the states “the Union [would] be discredited and embroiled by the indiscretion of a single member.” A sound system of coinage, Madison understood, would display American unity to the world.

The ratification of the Constitution altered the debate over coinage. Instead of talking about the necessity of a mint, Americans began discussing how best to create national coins. Indeed, some like “T.C.D.,” believed it the proper time to again discuss the potential composition and iconography of the prospective coinage. In July 1789, four months after the Constitution took effect, T.C.D. asked the publisher of *The Pennsylvania Mercury* to reprint a Virginia gentleman’s “Remarks on the Resolve of Congress, Fixing a New Money of Account.” Originally written in response to the 1786 mint ordinance, T.C.D. was “sure [the essay] will be at this time both useful and agreeable to the public; the rather as government will probably soon have the coinage under their consideration.”

The essay argued that silver should be the metal of choice for American coins. The supply of gold was uncertain and he thought copper an unworthy metal. Drawing on several of John Locke’s treatises on money, which argued that silver should be the metal of choice as it was recognized by common consent to hold value, the essayist believed that “the current money ought to be made of but one species of metal…[which] ought to be silver.”

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179 Ibid

180 Ibid

181 T.C.D., ”From the Pennsylvania Mercury,” *The Daily Advertiser (NY)*, 14 July 1789.

But what images to put on these coins? T.C.D. thought he had the answer. Appending to the “Remarks,” T.C.D. proposed that all national “coins may have the American eagle on one side, with the reading, ‘U.S. of America.’” Each denomination would feature difference devices on the opposite side with the intent of preserving the memory of the Revolution. For ten and five-dollar pieces he suggested “a monument on a rock: on the pedestal, read, ‘4th July 1776,’ and in the field 13 stars—one of the rays, just above the top of the monument, pointing down.” The author recommended “In perpetuum” as the motto to accompany the image. The dollar, half-dollar, and quarter-dollar would feature “a full woolled [sic] sheep, representing a fleece-a great national object-A shaft of wheat, or rather a field of it, may also be in view—Read, ‘Employment.’” A dove and olive branch, symbols of peace, would grace the dime while on the cent the writer envisioned “a man, comfortably clothed [sic], standing erect with a spade in his hand—Read, ‘Fro[m] indus[tr]y, cents become eagles.”

The order of the iconography suggested the ways in which T.C.D. believed hard work should define Americans. As the denominations ascended from cents to dollars, the imagery marked the progression from nothing to plenty. Americans began with a spade and determination, the coins argued, and ended with peace and prosperity. Healthy sheep and fields of wheat represented both the nation and the individual American, the result of a commitment to both a personal and collective industrialism. Working for the greater good while pursuing one’s own private interests created eagles. The symbolism engraved on these largest of coins signified the fulfillment of Revolutionary ideology. If Americans followed the path suggested by this coin sequence, they would perpetuate the principles upon which they had fought the War for Independence.

In order for suggestions such as T.C.D.’s to come to fruition the new federal government had to create a mint. The new Congress began considering the issue shortly after convening in New York for its second session in the winter of 1790. It was still unclear whether Americans would have their own mint or if private firms would get government contracts to do the work. That spring Congressman Thomas Tudor Tucker of South Carolina received a letter from a Charleston constituent, John H. Mitchell, with a proposal he believed would solve the nation’s

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184 Ibid.
185 Ibid.
coinage problems. Mitchell, a Deputy Quartermaster General during the American War, reported a letter he recently received from a friend in England who was skilled in the art of coinage. This acquaintance, Matthew Boulton of Birmingham, was “esteemed one of the first mechanical geniuses in the world” and held contracts with the British government to produce copper coins.\(^{186}\)

Boulton was eager to do the same work for the United States, Mitchell wrote, and for a rate considerably less than what other private mints might demand. In portions Mitchell copied into his letter, Boulton believed his machines could mint coins that were at once both works of fine craftsmanship and safe from counterfeiting. He had seen a design for “an American halfpenny with a sun-dial on one side, with the motto ‘mind your business,’ and on the other a chain with 13 links” and found it dangerously susceptible to forgery.\(^{187}\) Benjamin Franklin’s design would not do, but thought “the head of General Washington, or a beautiful female figure, representing by proper attributes the 13 United States, and on the reverse suppose there was a chain of 13 links, with the Arms of the 13 States in thirteen links, it would not only be a handsomer piece of money but more difficult to copy.”\(^{188}\) Boulton also sent a few specimens of his work along for Mitchell to lay before Congress. The Englishman hoped that that quality of his work and the messy coinage situation in United States would illicit a quick response from the American government.

Boulton’s request for a speedy reply was granted. He did not, however, receive the desired answer. The House of Representatives passed Mitchell’s letter with Boulton’s proposal along to Thomas Jefferson, now serving as Secretary of State, with instructions to prepare a response. Jefferson’s interest in coins continued past his chairmanship of the 1784 congressional committee on the mint. While ambassador to France he had spent considerable time observing the French methods of coin production. He even attempted to convince noted Swiss inventor Jean Pierre Droz to remove to the United States to head American operations. His experience with coins developed into a hobby, making Jefferson the appropriate official to respond to Boulton’s proposition.

\(^{187}\) Ibid., 344.
\(^{188}\) Ibid.
Jefferson agreed with many of Boulton’s basic assertions. Citing confirmation “from other sources of information” the Virginian accepted the Englishman’s purported skill level and his ability to mint coins difficult to counterfeit. No doubt, Jefferson argued, once the United States authorized a coinage “it will be desirable [sic] to aim at this kind of perfection.” Boulton’s scheme made great sense on a number of levels, the Secretary of State reported. Birmingham housed the raw materials, the mint master, the machinery, and the engravers to produce all of America’s copper coins and perhaps even gold or silver. All the United States had to do was draw up a contract and wait for the first shipment of newly minted coppers to arrive.

But it was for precisely these reasons that Jefferson rejected Boulton’s offering. “[That] the propositions under consideration suppose that the work is to be carried on in a foreign country, and that the implements are to remain the property of [Boulton],” he wrote, “render them inadmissible [sic].” Jefferson understood that the implications of coins transcended economics. “Coinage,” he declared earnestly, “is peculiarly an attribute of sovereignty. To transfer it’s [sic] exercise into another country is to submit it to another Sovereign.” In two short sentences Jefferson stated decisively what had taken others paragraphs to say. Coins were physical representations of a nation’s independence. Allowing another power to carry out this work for Americans created a dependent relationship with a foreign entity that weakened the autonomy of the United States. Congress would have little oversight ability. “The reputation and principles of the present Undertaker are safeguards against the abuses of a coinage carried on in a foreign country, where no checks could be provided by the proper sovereign, no regulations

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189 Jefferson, Report on Copper Coinage, 14 April 1790 in Ibid., 346.
190 Ibid.
191 Ibid., 347.
192 Ibid.
193 John Locke, whose arguments Jefferson, Robert Morris, and others echo, said much the same thing in his 1692 treatise, Some Consideration of the Consequences of the Lowering of Interest, and Raising the Value of Money. Governments, he argued, instituted systems of coinage to facilitate smooth transactions between people. This eliminated the “inconveniencys” of weighing pieces of silver upon payment and using scales determine the metallic content. The mark of the sovereign was critically important. “The stamp was a waranty of the publique that under such a denomination they should receive a peice of such weight and such a finesse that is they should receive soo much silver. And this is the reason why the counterfeiting the stamp is made the highest crime and has the weight of treason laid upon it, because the stamp is the publique voucher of the intrinsic value. The royall authority gives the stamp, the law allows and confirmes the denomination and both together give as it were the publique faith as a security that sums of money contracted for under such denominations shall be of such a value that is shall have in them soo much silver.” To put it succinctly, authorized coinage represented a compact between a people and their government. See Patrick Hyde Kelly, ed., Locke on Money / Edited, in Two Volumes, Together with Ancillary Manuscripts, an Introduction, Critical Apparatus, and Notes, vol. 2 (Oxford [England]: Oxford University Press, 1991), 503-616, esp. 586-587.
established, no police, no guard exercised, in short none of the numerous cautions hitherto thought essential at every mint.”194 Equally worrisome, shipment across the Atlantic Ocean would expose American coins to the dangers of piracy, war, and natural disasters. American artists would also lose the opportunity to participate in the creation of their country’s emblems. The consequences of allowing a foreign enterprise to coin the identity of Americans were far too great. “That a mint, whenever established,” Jefferson argued, “should be established at home.”195

That Jefferson, who envisioned a nation of yeomen farmers governed by a weak national authority, would favor an institution symbolic of centralized power may seem contradictory. Yet it made sense because the only alternative to coinage was the hated paper money. As a member of the Virginia tobacco gentry Jefferson depended on the debtor-credit system for his livelihood. He and others of his class often bought goods from merchant houses on store credit with payment expected later. Hard money, coins, satisfied debts more readily than paper money, which like Continental dollars could rapidly depreciate. Declining paper values made it more difficult to pay off debts. For an eighteenth-century gentleman like Jefferson, virtue and personal honor dictated that debts be paid in a timely manner. According to historian Hebert E. Sloan, to Jefferson debt threaten an individual’s very independence.196 In his mind debt was a form of slavery that crushed future prospects by chaining a person to creditors, passing on the burden to the next generation. Paper money was the slave master’s whip. As the depreciation that began during the War for Independence deepened in the 1780s, men of Jefferson’s stature began seeing paper money as an evil that threatened their notion of the proper social order.197

Following Jefferson’s advice Congress dismissed the Boulton proposal.198 The man charged by Congress to develop a mint plan, however, was not Jefferson. Instead the House asked his chief political rival, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, to work out the

195 Ibid., 348.
198 It should be noted, however, that the United States Mint eventually contracted for supplies of raw copper. See the numerous record group “Boulton Correspondence” in Record Group 104 at the Mid-Atlantic Branch of the National Archives. These documents, along with associated materials, provide a glimpse of the basic operations of the first American mint. As far as I have been able to determine no scholar has tapped these extensive records. They are not useful in this study, but would add greatly to the understanding of the labor, economic, and legal history of the mint.
details for national coinage. At the time Hamilton was at work on a plan for a national bank. An
institution such as a mint seemed a natural extension of his bank proposal. Indeed, he delivered
his thoughts on the mint on January 28, 1791 a week after the Senate approved the bank bill.199
Though perturbed, Jefferson was somewhat placated when the Treasury Secretary’s ideas closely
resembled those he had espoused the previous summer in a report on the uniformity on weights,
measures, and coins for the United States. In that report, submitted in July 1790, Jefferson had
noted that four years prior the Continental Congress had adopted his suggestion that the money
unit be a decimal-based system that coincided with Spanish denominations circulating within the
United States. Congress also set the weight of the dollar coin at 375.6 grains of silver. Jefferson
attempted in his report to extend the decimal system to all measured standards in the country,
uniting it under one single scheme. A decimal ratio was “within the calculation of every one
who possesses the first elements of arithmetic.”200 Moreover, Jefferson believed that his plan
revealed a natural symmetry. His conception of an ideal ounce, calculated as a thousandth of a
cubic foot of rainwater, was the same as his proposal for the standard weight of a dollar. He took
this as a sign that a certain order governed the world.201

The dollar proved the difference between Jefferson’s and Hamilton’s plans. It also
revealed the ideological gulf between the two. Hamilton’s report proposed a dollar consisting of
371.25 grains of pure silver, lighter than what Jefferson wanted. Throughout the course of his
rigorous research, Hamilton discovered that the weight of the Spanish dollar, against which
Jefferson originally backed his findings, actually fluctuated between 370 and 377 grains. This
ebb and flow complicated global exchange rates because the value of the coin was tied directly to
the metallic weight and content. Hamilton’s proposal of 371.25 grains, or 24.75 grains of pure
gold, rectified the problem and established a gold to silver ratio of 15-1, approximately the same
as those used in the London and Amsterdam markets. Jefferson’s report was based upon ideas of
symmetry, whereas Hamilton’s consisted of research derived from an examination of European
systems and institutions.202

234-238.
Hamilton gave Jefferson a sneak peak out of courtesy before sending the report to Congress. “[T]aking [Jefferson’s proposal] as the proper standard of the dollar…for the sake of incorporating so systematic an idea, would appear desirable,” Hamilton wrote.203 “But if the principles which have been reasoned from in this report are just, the execution of that idea becomes more difficult.”204 Jefferson replied that he received the report “with a great deal of satisfaction,” but still disagreed with Hamilton over the dollar.205 “It must be admitted by all the world,” Jefferson wrote, “that there is great uncertainty in the meaning of the term, and therefore all the world will have justified Congress for their [1786] act of removing the uncertainty by declaring what they understood by the term.”206 Jefferson argued that changing the consistency of the dollar to Hamilton’s specifications reintroduced the element of “incertainty.” In his mind, Congress’s original 1786 act created stability and Hamilton was attempting to wreck the symmetry that his own report espoused. Historians Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick note that the dollar issue was the last straw for Jefferson. He no longer signed his letters to Hamilton “with affection,” but simply “with respect.”207

Both Jefferson and Hamilton agreed that the United States should mint copper, gold and silver. Others thought silver should be the only metal of choice. Silver coinage could also be used to spread Revolutionary ideas around the globe. If the United States minted only pure, alloy-free silver coins, argued one writer, then American coins would become “the money of the world.”208 In a lengthy February 1791 essay that some papers ascribed to New York’s chief judge Robert R. Livingston, the author contended rather boldly that pure silver coins would allow the United States to continue the radicalism of the American Revolution.209 No other nation had dared attempt such a feat. “Let [America] free [her coins] from alloy,” he argued.210 “Foreigners will then acknowledge her mint; when she is compelled to ship them she will do it with less loss; and her Eagles will soar where the Princes and Potentates of Europe will not dare

203 Ibid., 605.
204 Ibid.
206 Ibid.
207 Elkins and McKitrick, The Age of Federalism, 234-238.
208 “Thoughts on Coinage, and the Establishment of a Mint, Submitted to the Consideration of Those Statesmen Only, Who Dare to Quit the Beaten Path,” The Daily Advertiser (NY), 19 February 1791.
209 The October 26, 1791 edition of The Columbian Centinel names Livingston as the author of the piece.
210 “Thoughts on Coinage, and the Establishment of a Mint, Submitted to the Consideration of Those Statesmen Only, Who Dare to Quit the Beaten Path.”
to shew [sic] their brazen faces.”

If Americans were able to produce these kinds of coins, the writer believed, the United States might dominate the world market. Inherent in Livingston’s argument was the issue of sovereignty. Like previous authors, Livingston believed national coins constituted an expression of autonomy. Coins of pure silver would set the United States apart from other countries, identifying Americans and their nation as a unique power in the world.

Despite advocates such as Livingston, Congress adopted Hamilton’s plan and began drafting legislation. While the legislature worked to put the final touches on the bill, Americans again considered the kinds of iconography that might serve to represent the nation. A bill in the Senate proposed to place the likeness of George Washington on the nation’s first coinage, sparking a heated debate over American national identity. The President was, as he had been in the 1780s, an obvious choice to place on coins. Washington exemplified the ultimate embodiment of virtue, symbolizing the very principles of the Revolution. Yet, other Americans asked, have we removed one George from our coins only to replace him with another? An image of Liberty, the classical Roman symbol of freedom, would better suit the United States they argued. In Congress, Representative John Page of Virginia argued “that it had been a practice in Monarchies to exhibit the figures or heads of their Kings upon their coins...to show to whom the coins belonged.” The American coins, Page noted, would represent the people of the United States and “no Republic has paid such a compliment to their Chief Magistrate.” Page was certain that it would “be more agreeable to the citizens of the United States, to see the head of Liberty of their coin, than the heads of Presidents.” Samuel Livermore of New Hampshire countered Page, arguing that “the President was a very good emblem of Liberty” and found it incomprehensible “how the President’s head being on our coins could affect the Liberty of the

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211 Ibid.
212 Caroline Winterer, "From Royal to Republican: The Classical Image in Early America," *The Journal of American History* Vol. 91, no. No. 4 (March 2005): 1264-1290. Winterer’s article provides a nice discussion of the transformation of classical imagery in early America. “Classical imagery in and of itself did not point to revolutionary ideology,” she notes, “but that imagery was reinvented to suit the ends of a new political program. The classical world, whether in words or pictures, was no more inherently republican, peaceful, and enlightened than it was monarchical, violent, and ornate. Rather, Americans deliberately made the classical past represent republicanism in the hope of using the moral authority of Greek and Roman antiquity to convey new meanings.”
213 *Annals of Congress*, 2nd Congress, 1st session, 484.
214 Ibid.
215 Ibid.
When a Republican amendment succeeded in replacing Washington’s likeness with that of Liberty, Livermore wanted to know “what is this Liberty which some appear so found of?”

Like some Americans in the 1780s, Livermore believed Washington the embodiment of liberty and the perfect image for coinage. But what message might this send, replied John Francis Mercer of Maryland? “The circumstance of having the President’s head stamped on a coin,” he argued, “could not be justly considered as doing him an honor [and would make him] no better character than a Nero, a Caligula…or a Trajan.”

“As a friend to the President,” Page added, “I am unwilling to offer him a compliment which, if accepted, might damn his reputation. Were I in his place, I would cut off my hand rather than it should sign the act.” Some citizens did not adhere to this logic. “The first words in the Constitution of the U. S. are ‘WE THE PEOPLE,’” wrote a correspondent in the Columbian Centinel. “Now, who, say they, is the Representative of the sovereignty of the People? THE PRESIDENT chosen by them, most surely, is the answer!”

In the end the advocates for Liberty won. In April 1792 President Washington signed into law a bill creating a national mint. After a decade of struggles Americans finally had their own institution to produce markers of their national identity. The first coins, copper cents and half-cents, appeared in 1793. The new coins featured an image of Liberty with disheveled hair paired with a liberty cap and pole on the obverse. On the reverse a laurel wreath with the prominent inscription, “UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.” In December, a London merchant remarked to a friend that “the specimen of your coinage is a proof of your having able artists amongst you.”

Ironically, mint engravers based their designs for Liberty on a French medal. Struck in 1783 at the request, appropriately, of Benjamin Franklin to commemorate Battles of Saratoga and Yorktown, the medal paid tribute to American liberty. Called Libertas Americana, the medal depicted an image of Liberty similar to that which appeared on American coins. On

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216 Ibid., 487.
219 Ibid., 489
220 “Boston, Saturday, April 21,” The Columbian Centinel, 21 April 1792.
221 Ibid.
the reverse baby Hercules, representing the United States, strangled two serpents while Liberty shielded the youngster from the attack of a lion.223

Though the Hercules motif did not appear on American coins the common obverse offered a lesson in the shifting symbolism of rhetorical iconography. Before the American Revolution the liberty cap, which the goddess Liberty hangs on her staff on the obverse of the first American coins and the French medal, signified a struggle for freedom, but not necessarily independence.224 Roman masters often gave these caps to newly emancipated slaves as a symbol of their freedom. The emblematic nature of the cap changed, however, after the American War. Now it stood for freedom and independence from an oppressive ruler.

This Liberty device then crossed the Atlantic and became popular in Louis XVI’s France. Only there it did not yet take the meaning that it had in the United States. Indeed, gold specimens of the Libertas Americana medal were given to the King and Queen while prominent French government officials received copies in silver. By 1793 the Liberty motif had taken on a whole new meaning for the French as the symbol of their revolution. On American coins this image of a revolutionary Liberty slowly faded away toward the end of the century.

The contestation of an American national identity through coinage did not end in 1793 with the first coins. Despite their welcome site, Americans wanted silver and gold. In an August 1794 edition of the Gazette of the United States, a correspondent was “anxious to learn how soon the directors of the mint…mean to furnish the public with gold and silver.”225 Silver dollars were minted in 1794, but in such small numbers they proved rare in circulation. Gold coins appeared in 1795. “About 8000 Half Eagles (value Five dollars) have been issued from the mint of the United States,” remarked The Courier of Boston. “They are,” the paper continued, “finely executed. LIBERTY is represented by a female head, in which the finest touches of the graver, display the most perfect symmetry [sic] of feature, animated with the truly beneficient

expression of a DEITY." The Rural Repository thought the image to have a “mild, yet 
resolute, the firm, yet feminine soul….”

Nor did the contestation end with the introduction of gold and silver coinage. Indeed, the 
process that began in the mid-1770s has continued throughout the course of United States 
history. The cultural conversations Americans had with each other in the 1780s and 1790s 
sparked an ongoing national dialogue in which citizens have negotiated the terms of a national 
identity through coinage. Many Americans understood that coins could serve as monuments that 
would far outlast anything carved into stone. They still do today. And like citizens of the 
eighteenth-century they cannot agree on what images best represent the nation. Americans are 
constantly debating the stories that coins tell. Rhetorical iconography— the product of ideology, 
culture, and the historical moment—provides powerful illustrations of a nation’s progress. One 
need only see Benjamin Franklin’s designs in the context of the political turmoil of late 
eighteenth-century North America. Or, to take a more recent example, one might argue that 
Sacagawea’s appearance on the dollar coin is a product of the social movements of the 1960s and 
the culture wars of the 1990s. Coins and the interest they generate offer the historian another 
tool to measure the rhythms of American history. Contextualizing the iconography and 
measuring public perceptions provides markers of American identity as it has evolved. In 
examining the ways in with citizens have minted America, historians and the general public alike 
will find evidence of their past in the palm of their hands.

\[ \text{226 "Gold Coinage," } \textit{The Courier, 21 October 1795.} \]
\[ \text{227 "Gold Coinage," } \textit{The Rural Repository, 29 October 1795.} \]
Epilogue

The Cents of a Nation

On any given day one might turn on the television and find a home shopping network guru charming his audience into purchasing American coins. Like a televangelist preaching to his flock, the salesman touts the beauty, antiquity, and investment potential of the coinage for sale. As a collector for over fifteen years I have watched such presentations on many occasions, partly to admire the products, and partly to laugh at people paying entirely too much for their coins. Yet in my amusement a question emerged that ultimately became the foundation of this thesis: Why are Americans so enamored with their coins? The U.S. Mint indicates that 150 million Americans, half the population of the United States, collect coins associated with the 50 State Quarter Program. One half-million Americans subscribe to popular coin publications.228 One news article, reflecting on the phenomenon, called coin collecting “a great American hobby.”229

But as I have tried to illuminate in the preceding pages the interest Americans have in their coinage exceeds that of a simple hobby. Coins tell stories. Since the beginning of the republic, citizens of the United States have contested the national narrative portrayed through their coins. The iconography, composition, and even the size of their coins have factored into larger discussions of national identity. In the age of the American Revolution and the Early Republic, Americans debated the ways in which coins could serve as a vehicle to communicate the principles of that era. This discussion began with the failure of the Continental paper money. As the paper bills rapidly depreciated Patriots increasing linked the Continental Congress’s experiment with the brown dollars to the fate of the Glorious Cause. Largely ignoring mottos and devices imprinted on the bills designed to promote continental unity and faith in the Congress, Patriots saw the collapsing paper as a direct threat to the war effort. The inability to fund the Continental Army, the institution that many Americans saw as the embodiment of the United States, risked the success of the Revolution. Loyalists, however, attacked both the imagery and the physical existence of the Continental Dollar. For this group, the mottos and devices designed by Benjamin Franklin and others were vehicles to lambaste the supposed unity

229 Ibid.
among the colonies. Congressional acts compelling Americans to accept the paper bills were, in the eyes of Loyalists, indicative of a lack of legitimacy. The paper money represented a futile effort.

Their experience with paper money during the War for Independence prompted Americans to call for a national system of coinage. Yet, for many citizens of the new republic coins had value beyond their role in commercial transactions. The creation of a unifying medium of exchange and a national mint held great symbolic importance for some Americans as they debated the contours of American identity. They believed coins offered a way to pass the meaning of the era down through history. While some suggested that depictions of revolutionary heroes should tell the American story, others suggested that a neutral figure, such as the Roman goddess Liberty, was a better choice to represent Americans. Though they debated the ways in which coin iconography constructed a historical narrative, many citizens agreed that coins were concrete representations of American sovereignty. Producing coins offered evidence that Americans were worthy of membership among the nations of the world. Combined with the imagery, coinage provided an important vehicle for discussions of American identity.

The contestation over coinage and American identity that began in Revolutionary era and Early Republic is still at work today. As the introduction’s example of the Ohio state quarter illustrates, Americans are greatly concerned with the ways in which they are portrayed through their coinage. The important place of coins in American culture is greatly evident in the current controversy over the penny. The one-cent piece, the first denomination produced by the national mint in 1793, serves as the final example of coins and American identity in this thesis. Some Americans, most notably Representative Jim Kolbe of Arizona, seek the elimination of the penny. Citing cost of production issues and polls indicating that some Americans find the penny to be a nuisance, Kolbe introduced legislation in July 2006 that would terminate the one-cent piece. Purchases would be rounded up or down to the nearest five-cents as a result of the penny’s absence. “Today [the penny is] a joke,” argues Tony Terranova, a coin dealer from New York City who paid over $400,000 for a 1792 prototype of the first American cent.230 “It’s outlived its usefulness.”231

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231 Ibid.
But as Jeff Donn, a reporter for The Associated Press argues, the penny “somehow carries a reassuring symbolism that Americans hesitate to forsake.”\textsuperscript{232} That is the position of the pro-penny group, Americans for Common Cents, a coalition of about 40 groups that formed in the early 1990s in response to congressional attempts to eliminate the penny. “The penny,” the groups argues, “is part of our nation’s history and culture. It was the first coin authorized to be minted by the government, with Benjamin Franklin suggesting its original design. Over the centuries, the penny’s design has symbolized the spirit of the nation, from Liberty to [Abraham] Lincoln. The penny has been an integral part of the American experience.”\textsuperscript{233} What would an American childhood be, they ask, without penny candy? Pennies also serve a large charitable role in the United States. Think of the coin collection boxes at a McDonald’s drive thru window or the annual UNICEF collection campaigns in which children are given small cardboard boxes to fill up. The penny, Americans for Common Cents argues, embodies the generous spirit of the nation’s citizens, standing for much more than its economic value. Eliminating the one-cent piece would disrupt the story the penny has told about Americans since 1793. While the image Liberty conveyed the ideology that created the republic, Abraham Lincoln depicts the resolve that saved it.

This short example is a reminder of the ongoing discussion over coinage and American identity. What began as a conversation over paper money in the Revolutionary Era and continued with coins into the Early Republic has endured into the present. With greater public participation, enhanced technology, and regular debate citizens of the United States continue the process of minting America. If American civilization is unfortunate to suffer a similar fate as the Parthian Empire, the ancient nation sandwiched between the warring Roman and Persian states, perhaps coins will serve as monuments when the last bricks will have turned to dust.

\textsuperscript{232} Ibid.
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