

VARIETIES OF FRANKLIN HALF DOLLAR REVERSE DESIGN

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In 1956, 1958 and 1959 there occurred some interesting design varieties on the reverse of certain Franklin half dollars. Because the story of these varieties seems to emanate from the eagle device in the design, a few words concerning the eagle on our coinage might be appropriate.

On April 29, 1948, while celebrating at the Franklin Institute, Philadelphia, the next-day issuance of the Franklin Half Dollar, (*) Mrs. Nellie Taylor Ross, Director of the Mint, declared that for long she had harbored the hope that during her tenure of office a portrait of Benjamin Franklin and a replica of the Liberty Bell might be incorporated in a new coinage design. During World War II, she recalled, demand for one-cent coins became so great it was felt for a time that in order to lessen the strain on the Mint's capacity it might be necessary to add another denomination. Accordingly, Mrs. Ross had Chief Mint Engraver John R. Sinnock prepare obverse and reverse designs incorporating the Franklin and Liberty Bell motifs. (Mr. Sinnock died in May 1947.) It did not become necessary to issue a new denomination, and it was sometime later that decision was made to utilize the designs for a new half dollar coin. Mrs. Ross comments further on the development of this half dollar:

"I point out that the new fifty-cent piece is unique in one important respect. On it, the eagle is for the first time given a subordinate position on any of the silver coins of denomination above the dime. The coinage law under which we operate and which was enacted in 1873 provides that each of these silver coins must bear the figure of an eagle or representation thereof; ambiguous language that, you will agree. What could be a representation of an eagle but an eagle itself! We tried to persuade ourselves that the eagle was

(*) The Numismatist, June 1948

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supposed to represent strength and freedom and that the Liberty Bell would suffice as a representation thereof. But in the end we decided that discretion was the better part of valor and we had better put it on to assure conformity with the law. Accordingly, Mr. Roberts, our capable sculptor at the Mint, very cleverly, and with pleasing effect, we think, added a small eagle at the right of the bell to balance with E Pluribus Unum on the left of it. (Perhaps there was no eagle in the design because the design had not been prepared for a silver coin. - Author)

"The subordination of the eagle on this particular coin is an interesting coincidence inasmuch as Benjamin Franklin, as Dr. Allen reminded me, condemned, in strong and picturesque language, the use of the eagle as a United States emblem. He called it a bird of prey, of bad moral character - a coward, lazy. The turkey, he contended, was more worthy and being a distinctly American bird would be a more suitable emblem."

The Commission of Fine Arts, commenting in November 1947 on the proposed designs for the Franklin half dollar, declared, "..... the Commission are not satisfied with the model of the reverse. The eagle shown on the model is so small as to be insignificant and hardly discernible when the model is reduced to the size of a coin.....," but apparently the Secretary of the Treasury exercised his authority to approve the proposed design, as it had been more than twenty-five years since the half dollar designs had been changed.

On the coin the original eagle design (Variety I) appeared rather pathetic and looked just like what it was - an afterthought. Possibly this circumstance contributed to the creation of the varieties with which this article is concerned.

Presumably, authoritative officials of the Treasury Department decided that the original reverse design (Variety I) of the Franklin half dollar with the "stepchild" eagle was no longer acceptable for proof coinage, for

(*) Taxay, "The U. S. Mint and Coinage"

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in 1956 the design was slightly modified for proof coinage only. Hitherto the circulation strike and proof designs had been identical. The principal modification was to the eagle where the wing feathers were enlarged and extended in sharp detail from the eagle's breast to the wing tips. There was a marked increase in relief throughout the eagle device; and, although still relatively small, the eagle now became an attractive and conspicuous element of the new Variety II (proof) reverse design. All Franklin half dollar proof reverses of subsequent years (1957 thru 1963) were of the Variety II design but not all 1956 proofs had the new design - and the proof half dollar with the Variety I reverse is a very scarce coin.

In 1958 and 1959, not only did all the proof halves have the Variety II reverse design, but some Philadelphia-minted circulation strikes for both years had the Variety II reverse design. Undoubtedly some "proof" design dies became mixed with the dies intended for circulation coinage. (They were not proof dies, literally, because they had not been highly polished.) A few Franklin half dollars of years other than 1958 or 1959 with the Variety II reverse have been found in circulation, but until such a coin in uncirculated or near-uncirculated condition is found, they must be presumed to be proof coins. No Variety II reverse design halves from the Denver Mint for any year have ever been authenticated. The San Francisco Mint was not operating during ^{this} period, so circulation-strike coins with the Variety II reverse are known from the Philadelphia Mint only -- and only for the years 1958 and 1959. Introduced on the new series in 1948, the "normal" Variety I reverse design continued to be used on circulation strike coinage until issuance of the Kennedy half dollar in 1964.

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In 1959 there occurred a variety of half dollar reverse design presently referred to by those persons aware of it as Variety III. In the preparation of a working die of this period it was necessary to press the working hub several times into the working die blank, annealing the die between impressions. In this instance the first impressions in one of the die blanks were properly made by a working hub of the Variety I design, while the last impression in this particular working die was inadvertently made by a hub of the Variety II reverse design. Thus the Variety III reverse design on the 1959 Franklin half dollar is possibly unique in that it represents a third design created from a combination of the elements of two other designs.

This makes the Variety III reverse, in effect, a "doubled-die" coin. Although there is no doubling per se evident in the newly-created eagle, doubling is clearly obvious elsewhere in the Variety III design. In fact, it is because no doubling was apparent in the Variety III eagle that the true origin was so long shrouded in mystery. When it was finally rationalized that an un-needed third design almost had to be an accident, the pieces of the puzzle began to quickly fall into place. Certain elements of design peculiar to Variety I or Variety II could be detected in the Variety III design while other modified elements of design were attributable to a wedding of the comparable elements of the other two designs.

All Variety III reverse design halves are from the same working die as evidenced by certain light buffing marks (a raised line) which appear on all coins of sufficiently high grade to exhibit them. One of several

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possible identification marks is under the last S in STATES, running approximately east and west. Another mark is between the T and E of STATES, pointing toward the lower section of the E.

Why it was necessary to buff this Variety III die is an enigma. There is no evidence of clashing, which is the usual reason for buffing. Inasmuch, however, as this is a "doubled-die" design it would seem possible that initial inspection of the completed working die revealed doubled characteristics throughout the reverse design, particularly in letters of the legend - where the most vigorous buffing was done. Doubling evidence was removed from the legend but remained elsewhere on the die. Such could account for the buffing scratches on all coins and the absence of consistent doubling evidence throughout the reverse design.

There follows a Variety Identification Guide which should make possible identification of the three varieties of Franklin half dollar reverse designs. There may be found additional small differences in the varieties.

When inspecting Franklin halves for reverse design characteristics, please keep in mind that only well-struck, high-grade coins will display all the characteristics described.

V A R I E T Y I D E N T I F I C A T I O N G U I D E

VARIETY I

Eagle: Low relief. Large feathers not distinct except near tips. Four feathers to left and right of eagle's perch. Curved beak.

Motto: Some adjacent letters "conform." (See photo)

VARIETY II

Eagle: High relief. Large feathers are rounded off the field and distinct throughout their length. Three feathers to left and right of eagle's perch. Flat hooked beak.

Motto: L upright in PLURIBUS is slightly concave from base rather than starting about the middle as in the Variety I. The I is not crooked nor do the other letters "conform" as in Variety I.

Legend: E in UNITED has smaller center bar than other E's in legend and is smaller than comparable E in Varieties I and III.

VARIETY III

Eagle: Medium relief. Feathers more distinct than Variety I. Three feathers to right of eagle's perch (viewer's left). Three outward extensions of large wing feathers from eagle's left wing (viewer's right) appear to be composed of one prominent and one "weak" feather. Flat hooked beak.

Motto: Lettering "appears" similar to Variety I but no serif on upper tip of S. Motto is doubled - most obvious in E, first U in PLURIBUS and S. Dot to left of E is doubled.

Bell: Bell bracket pivot on right appears to be slanted upward due to doubling. The quarter-circle patch of metal on the right side of hanger by which bell is suspended is doubled. Tip of bell striker is doubled.

	<u>Total Produced</u>
1956 Proofs - - - - -	669,384
Estimated Breakdown:	
Var. I 67,000 (10% of total)	
Var. II 603,000	
 1958-P Circulation Strikes - - - - -	 4,042,000
Estimated Breakdown:	
Var. I 3,233,600	
Var. II 808,400 (20% of total)	
 1959-P Circulation Strikes - - - - -	 6,200,000
Estimated Breakdown:	
Var. I 3,937,000	
Var. II 2,170,000 (35% of total)	
Var. III 93,000 (1½% of total)	

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Now, as to the significance of these statistics. First, observe that any classification by which the official total quantity of half dollars produced in 1958 and 1959 is sub-divided results in some very low mintage figures. Also to be considered is the quantity melted and the number lost or otherwise unavailable to the variety collector. These quantities will never be known; nevertheless they are a factor, and after 17 to 20 years the number of these half dollars available to the collector must be considerably less than the estimated production quantities shown.

Estimated production of the Variety III could be high due to the fact the one working die producing this variety was buffed at least two times during use, suggesting the possibility of a shortened die life.

Because these Franklin half dollar reverse varieties are relatively unknown (in 1976), but a small percentage of dealer stocks has been "cherry picked," so none of the varieties at this time should be considered extremely scarce; however, it wouldn't take a great demand to develop some real scarcities in these Franklin half dollar reverse varieties.

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ANALYSIS OF VARIETY III DESIGN

The reader will no doubt have noted positive assertions that the Variety III reverse design of the 1959-P half dollar is a combination of Varieties I and II; that it is from a "doubled die" which resulted when a Variety I design in a working die was over-impressed by a Variety II design hub.

The description of the Variety III design, together with the Variety Identification Guide, should leave little doubt of the origin of this design. There is available, however, additional evidence, some of which is presented here.

"S" in the Motto

A complete "S" is plainly superimposed over another in the word PLURIBUS in the motto of the Variety III design. Comparison of the comparable "S" in the Variety I and II mottos reveals that the "S" in the Variety II design is furthest from the adjacent "U." The complete "S" in the Variety III design is to the right of the underlying "S;" hence, it is furthest from the preceding "U."

There is a serif on the upper loop of the "S" in the Variety I design; there is none on the Variety II design nor is there a serif on the "S" of the Variety III design. As noted above, the complete "S" is slightly to the right of the underlying "S;" therefore, when the initially-impressed Variety I design in the working die was over-impressed by the Variety II design the serif on the upper loop of the "S" was obliterated.

Dot above the Motto

The dot to the left of the first "E" of the motto on Variety III is doubled. Measurement from the center of the full dot and from the center of the incomplete dot to the center of the dot to the right of "E" will show these center-to-center measurements to be the same as the measurements for Varieties II and I respectively.

In other words, the center-to-center measurement of the dots on the Variety II design is slightly greater than the same measurement on the Variety I design. If the working die had been reimpresed by the same design hub, there would have been no variance in the dot-to-dot measurement.

Ribus of Motto

PLURIBUS in the motto of the Variety III reverse plainly shows the different lettering of Varieties I and II. Because the working die was first impressed by a Variety I hub, the Variety I lettering of the motto will appear closest to the field of the coin, with the Variety II lettering appearing to be "on top." Particularly in the RIBUS letters there is a sharp demarcation where the Variety I "joins" the Variety II letter. This "doubling" can best be noted if the edge of the coin nearest the motto is toward the viewer with line of vision along the word PLURIBUS. The Variety I letters, with their serifs and "crooked" lettering, as opposed to the Variety II lettering with no serifs and "straight" lettering, appear to be "under" the Variety II letters. A headon view of the motto will also show parts of the Variety I lettering visible at the left of the Variety II letters.

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The Eagle

The eagle in the Variety III design, as previously stated, is a composite of Variety I and II. Several of the characteristics of the Variety III eagle are easily attributable to either the Variety I or II design, and those which are not attributable to either are a combination of the comparable character in the other two varieties.

SUB-VARIETIES 1959-P VARIETY III REVERSE HALF DOLLAR

All 1959-P Variety III reverse halves may be divided into two sub-varieties, designated III-a and III-b, and may be differentiated by certain distinctive buffing scratches. These scratches will appear on all well-struck uncirculated coins but will not consistently be apparent on a grade lower than extremely fine. Two of the distinctive scratches are: mark under the last S of STATES running approximately east and west, and mark between T and E of STATES, pointing toward the lower section of the E.

Inasmuch as all Variety III reverse halves of sufficiently high grade exhibit certain buffing scratches in common, it is believed that the working die which produced these coins was buffed before use in an effort to remove the doubled design, which certainly was more obvious prior to buffing.

Variety III-a: Shows the STATES scratches common to all Variety III reverse design halves and in addition displays many more small, and several rather prominent, scratches. Possibly one of the most distinctive scratches of the Variety III-a is the scratch extending toward the west, or 8:00 o'clock, from the apex of the A in DOLLAR. There are also distinctive scratches in and around the R of DOLLAR. Approximately ten percent of the Variety III reverse halves are Variety III-a.

Variety III-b: For whatever reason, the Variety III-a working die was buffed again, creating Variety III-b. Distinctive scratches in the area of the A and R of DOLLAR were removed and in their stead the R of DOLLAR displays a "tail" which extends for some distance parallel to the rim of the coin. There is a scratch below the vertical member of the letter R and a scratch between L and A in DOLLAR.

A slight raised area below the end of the eagle's right tail feather (viewer's left) is the result of buffing the edge of this incused space on the working die, but this is hard to detect on some coinage - depending on the quality of the strike and the condition of the die at the time. In the very early stages of the Variety III-b working die it developed a small crack from the eagle's mouth, down his neck, through center of chest to juncture of legs. Consequently, this small die break on the eagle will appear on practically all Variety III reverse halves, although it is not diagnostic.

Variety III-b, in the early die stage, is characterized by buffing scratches in all directions throughout the field of the coin. As the die continues in use the surface of the struck coins becomes progressively more rough, or "grainy," the tail of the R is more difficult to discern, and the weaker scratches are no longer evident. The distinctive scratches, however, as well as the characteristic Variety III scratches, continue to be fairly prominent on all coins.

PLURIBUS
UNUM

1958 Variety II-a

PLURIBUS
UNUM

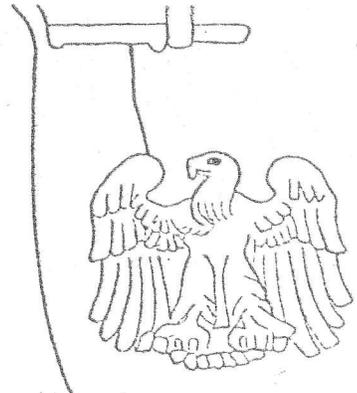
1958 Variety II-b

PLURIBUS
UNUM

1958 Variety II-c

PLURIBUS
UNUM

1958 Variety II-c-1



PLURIBUS
UNUM

1958 Variety II-a-1

LOOKS LIKE BEGINNING
OF II-d



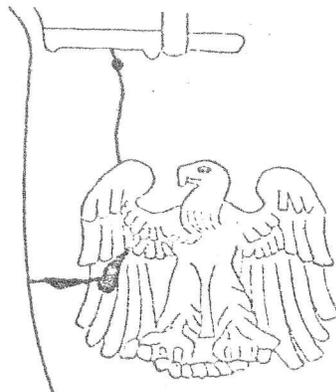
PLURIBUS
UNUM

1958 Variety II-d-1



PLURIBUS
UNUM

1958 Variety II-d-2



PLURIBUS
UNUM

1958 Variety II-d-3



PLURIBUS
UNUM

1959 Variety II-a



1959 Variety II-b



1959 Variety II-c

MORE SUB VARIETIES

Published research on reverse design varieties of the Franklin Half Dollar would not be complete without inclusion of information on additional interesting half dollar reverses which one will inevitably encounter while searching for or studying these Franklin Half Dollars.

In addition to the sub-varieties of the 1959-P Variety III reverse design, interesting reverse conditions are found on the 1958-P Variety II and the 1959-P Variety I and II reverses. Also of interest is the "Open Eagle" frequently found on the 1958 and 1959 Variety II reverse of both circulation strike and proof halves.

1958-P VARIETY II REVERSE

Several examples of die deterioration in and about the motto and the eagle exist on the Variety II reverse of the 1958-P half dollar. It is estimated that 30 to 40 percent of all coins will exhibit evidence of some sort of die defect in the area of the motto.

Variety II-a: "PL" in PLURIBUS lightly joined by small die break at area of greatest proximity.

Variety II-a-1: "PL" joined as in Variety II-a. Die crack from "shoulder" of eagle wing to bell bracket above.

Variety II-b: Filled die, result of die chip between "I" and "B" in PLURIBUS of motto, similar to "RIIBUS" cent. In Variety II-b the extra metal is rounded from the "B" toward the "I" and does not extend the full length of the "B."

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Variety II-c: Filled die, result of small die chip at apex of open area within the left leg of the "M" in motto.

Variety II-c-1: "RIIBUS" motto but chipped differently than Variety II-b. Extra metal is shaped similar to adjacent "I" except doesn't extend quite to bottom of letter. There is also a filled die in the letter "M," and a die gouge under the letter "D" in UNITED in both sub-varieties proves that Varieties II-c and II-c-1 represent a progressive deterioration of the same working die.

Variety II-d-1, -2, -3: These sub-varieties exhibit the "PL" and "RIIBUS" die breaks as well as die breaks from eagle wing to the bell bracket above. Although similar and in almost the same location, this is not the same die break as that in II-a-1. There is also a crack from about the center of the eagle wing to the bell.

Three coins, plainly showing progressive die deterioration, have been studied. Grading only "Fine" to "Very Fine," the coins do not show break progression in PLURIBUS, but it is quite evident in the eagle die breaks.

The "PL" connection is similar to sub-variety II-a, but the "RIIBUS" is different than Variety II-b or II-c. In these sub-varieties the extra metal between the "I" and "B" is shaped similar to Variety II-b except it is lower on the letter "B," so it could not be from the same die.

Variety II-d-3 has developed a rather large die break, approximately the size of the eagle's head, in the eagle's right wing. It is suspected that the die break extending from this area to the bell is connected to the break within the wing, but the condition of the coin examined makes it impossible to determine precisely.

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1959-P VARIETY I-a

Discovered in 1976, this die crack on the bell in the reverse design of the 1959-P Franklin Half Dollar might well be dubbed the "Bicentennial Liberty Bell Crack." It begins on rim of bell to the right of the historical crack, crosses crack and continues erratically along rim of bell but does not extend to edge of bell. Protruding from this area of high relief in the design, this crack would be subject to extreme abrasion when in circulation or when being transported as uncirculated coinage in mint bags. For this reason a coin showing the full crack, in full relief, would be rather scarce.

The "Bell Rope" crack begins at right side of clapper, extends downward across clapper and begins to curve upward toward left rim of bell disappearing before reaching lower edge of rim.

There is also a small die crack from the eagle's mouth down his neck, through center of chest to juncture of legs, very similar to the die crack on the 1959-P Variety III-b.

1959-P VARIETY II-a

There is a die crack from the shoulder of the eagle to the bell bracket above. There is a die break in PLURIBUS of the motto causing the typical "RIIBUS" effect; i.e., a chipped die between the I and B giving the effect of an extra letter "I" in PLURIBUS.

Inasmuch as the use of reverse dies is not ordinarily restricted to any particular year (being used so long as condition permits), it might reasonably be inquired whether this 1959 sub-variety is from the same die as one of the 1958 sub-varieties. The answer is negative, but these repetitive cracks and breaks indicate an inherent weakness of the dies in the areas where deterioration occurred, due quite probably to the modifications by which this Variety II reverse design was created.

1959-P VARIETY II-b and II-c

These two small die cracks extend from the eagle's lower right wing feather to the bell. Sub-Variety II-b extends from near the tip of the feather in a southwesterly direction while Sub-Variety II-c extends from the outside tip of the feather in a south-southwesterly direction to the bell.

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OPEN EAGLE

On some Variety II reverses of the 1958 and 1959 Franklin halves, both proof and circulation strike, there is a rather conspicuous "open" area in the eagle's wings, next to his body, being more pronounced in the eagle's left wing (viewer's right). The flat field of the coin is visible in this area instead of the feathers in relief as on the "normal" Variety II reverse. On the same coin there will probably be a flat field area between the larger feathers while in the normal Variety II the feathers appear to join at the field.

This condition seems to have been first questioned around 1966, and it was thought at that time that this might be a new variety. It took considerable study and the passage of some time to conclude that this phenomena of the "open eagle" had resulted from the use of overly-polished (or overly-buffed) dies. Proof dies, according to the Mint, are frequently polished during use in order to maintain the "mirror" field on proof coins. Circulation-strike coinage dies are buffed, or polished, ordinarily because the dies have clashed, with no planchet between them, and the buffing is an attempt to remove the evidence of clashing. Where this polishing, or buffing, of the working dies is too vigorous, or too frequent, the results can be dramatic because a part of the design is removed. Such is the case with the "open eagle", and apparently several dies were involved as the degree of open area is not consistent on all coins. There are well-known instances of severely polished dies such as the "Fishhook R" in LIBERTY of the Kennedy Half, and the nickels and cents where the die has been buffed to such an extent that Jefferson and Lincoln have their neck almost removed.

Findings and conclusions of this study have evolved over a period of several years, beginning with a group study of the subject in 1966 by Jack Caviness, Jr., John Hinkle, James G. Johnson, Wm. L. Matthews, Joseph D. Rivnyak and the author. I wish to thank all these people for their cooperation and contributions, and in particular I wish to acknowledge the contribution of Wm. L. Matthews who coincidentally and independently of the author arrived at the conclusion that the 1959-P Variety III half dollar was a combination of Variety I and II designs.