

Raleigh Coin Club Newsletter

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Some United States Coin Origins

by Alex Armstrong

As with all names of people, places, and things, they change and evolve. As a historian and sometime genealogist, I search to find the origins of things. Here is a short genealogy of some early United States coins.

Dollar:

Up until about the Civil War, one was more likely to have in one's possession a Spanish Colonial Milled Dollar rather than a United States Seated Silver Dollar. The sheer numbers of these Spanish coins were large in this country, and they were accepted as legal tender up until this time. However, the name "Dollar" is not Spanish, but has an evolved beginning.

During the period of the 1100's the 1400's (12th through 15th Centuries), coins changed from thin small coins to larger and thicker coins. Some were called "gros" because they were bigger and thicker (ie; The French Gros and English Groat). During this same period, especially during the Renaissance, more and more larger medals were struck and were popular items for royalty and the wealthy. In the mining regions of Austria and Germany, very large round mining coins were issued. These were very popular as they usually portrayed the local king or prince, the coat of arms for the royalty's family, and the name and coat of arms of the country or province. The first large examples of these "coins" are from Joachimsthal. These were known as "Joachimstalers" as a nickname ("of Joachimstal"). As time progressed the name was shortened to Thaler. The taler evolved into regional areas as Taler in Austria and Germany, the Dutch Daalders, and Daler in Sweden. The name began as a mining and banking weight and ended up as the proper trading denomination. The Spanish connection would evolve later.

In the late 1500's and throughout the 1600's in America, one was more likely to see Austrian/German/Polish Thalers, British Crowns, and Belgium Lion Daalders as the largest silver coin. In the 1700's, however, the sheer numbers of Spanish Colonial coins (8 Reales or Pieces of Eight) brought up from Central and South America overran all other trading coinages (by a factor of 1000+ to 1). Because early on, the fact that the "thaler" was an established name, it stuck for all "Thaler" or "Dollar" sized coins as it traded as a consistent standard or "Trade" Dollar. The piece of eight or 8 Reales is firmly fixed in our minds since it is the most common treasure coin find due to sheer numbers alone and so many ships sank that were carrying them.

Quarter:

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Most of Europe had fractional half denominations of their "dollars." This means the each lower denomination was half of the parent. Some exceptions are of those countries that had a Dollar that was made up of different parts like the British Crown or 5 Shillings, the French 5 Franc, and the dutch $2\frac{1}{2}$ and 3 guilders.

Like the Spanish and German Systems, the US has a "half dollar" and a "quarter dollar", but the US does not have an $\frac{1}{8}$ Dollar like the Spanish System. The term "2 bits" represents the Quarter and is directly related to the Spanish Milled Dollars or 8 Reales. The name "2 Bits" is for 2 pieces or bits from an 8 Reales Spanish Dollar. In the poorer "sailor" islands around Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean, the Spanish Coins were cut to make small change. Note that this was not a common practice in the US since there were huge numbers of Spanish Coins. There are many cut counterfeits of milled Spanish coins since they are easily made, and are supposedly related to "Treasure." This is not the case. The quarter is a true $\frac{1}{4}$ of the dollar an in decimal form 25 cents or parts of a hundred.

Cent:

This is an unusual attempt by many countries in the decimal system and may or may not be related to the parent denomination. The name "Cent" is Latin and translates as 100 or part of 100. It is found in other countries such as Centavo in Spanish countries, and Cent or Centimes in France and the Low Countries. In these other countries, however, the decimal 100th may not represent that part of a Dollar, but part of another Standard. Note that the British Penny of the realm did not reflect the decimal part of a Dollar either, but did reflect a nickname for the smallest denomination name. United States Cents are sometimes called pennies for the same reason. During a large part of the 1700's, the most common small denomination in America was the British pennies and half-pennies, and some similarly but smaller sized French Liards and Dutch doits.

Dime:

I do not pretend to know this one. I would welcome conversation on this one. The 1792 pattern "Disme" is interesting for a couple reasons. During that time period in France, there evolved the Decime and later the "Demi Franc" which was one half of a Franc which made it $\frac{1}{10}$ of a French Dollar (one half of 1 Franc of a 5 Franc coin). Close similarity, No? There is no Spanish equivalent since the Spanish denomination from the quarter would be half of a quarter or 1 real which converts to $12\frac{1}{2}$ cents! I bet a lot of merchants did well exchanging current US dimes for similar sized (but not in weight) Spanish 1 Reales and then melting them down! This same situation also exists for the half dime. I expect a lot of reaction to this comment.

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The United States has a wonderful evolution of its coinage as it had to use other countries coins at first, then it had to meet the rest of the world's standards, and not always successfully. This is what makes US coins fascinating to me.

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