

Collecting Large Cents

by Thomas Coulson



1817 Large Cent
Likely from the Randall Hoard

The first regular issue coins struck under the authority of the United States Mint were the 'Chain' cents struck in early March, 1793. Seven principal types of Large Cents were issued in all but one (1815) of the ensuing years up to 1857. The series consists of a multitude of varieties; especially in the early years when the Philadelphia Mint was using a ramshackle collection of production machinery and each of the dies (which were not at all durable) used to strike coins was hand cut. As the mint matured, the quality of the cents became progressively better owing to new technology and an improved physical plant.

To handle and collect the earliest Large Cents (1793-1814) is a fascinating endeavor for any U.S. History enthusiast. Five different designs were issued during this period: Chain, Wreath, Liberty Cap, Draped Bust and Classic. All of these types are appealing; but their artistic merit is almost secondary to their historic value. These coins are a literal testament to the tribulations endured by the new Union and its Mint. Striking these cents at a makeshift location with such limited resources was a complicated task. The minting process was mostly carried out by painstaking human labor. Copper was often scarce and had to be scrounged from many sources such as old nails, teapots, and other worn coinage. Even if enough material could be gathered to mint coins, there was no guarantee that the Mint's doors would remain open. Annual summertime Yellow Fever outbreaks were deadly and frequently caused the Mint to close for months. As late as 1802, many members of Congress judged the United States Mint to be a failure. Several attempts were made by legislators to close the Mint and opt for privately contracted coinage. It is a wonder that any quantity of these early cents were produced at all.

The Mint managed to survive and flourish from this humble beginning. By 1816, the Mint was refurbished with new facilities and modern machinery allowing for larger scale, more uniform production. These improvements eliminated most of the tedious human labor. Now, a few million Cents per year could be issued. Copper was no longer so difficult to procure. Dies were stronger and lasted much longer. These 'middle date' (Coronet, Matron Head) cents lack some of the more artistic attraction of the prior and latter issues. The design was modified a few times over the course of the series; making the features slightly more appealing. Collecting these Cents is still enjoyable and challenging. The coins circulated extensively; and more often than not were subjected to various kinds of damage. Nice, problem-free specimens are hard to locate in any grade. Once one realizes how scarce perfect chocolate brown coins are, they are sure to appreciate their beauty.



1823 Large Cent



1842 Large Cent

The Braided Hair design introduced in 1839 was an aesthetic improvement over the 'middle date' cents. Christian Gobrecht used Benjamin West's painting *Omnia Vincit Amor* (Love Conquers All) as a model for this coin. (Breen, P. 210) (Gobrecht also used this model for the long-lived gold Liberty series.) These coins circulated extensively as well and most were damaged or destroyed. However, enough were produced that many nice coins have survived. These are by far the most affordable large cents to collect.

The Mint continued to grow and improve during the 1840s and 1850s. Variety, plentiful in early large cents, was now limited mostly to differences in date logotypes. Although the Mint was far more efficient in 1850 than it was in 1800, it could not overcome rising materials costs. Millions of cents were now being struck each year and each of them cost more than a cent to produce. The Large Cent's days were numbered. After many experiments with new designs and metals, the end of the series came in 1857 with its replacement by the smaller, more cost effective Flying Eagle Cent.



*1857 Small Date
Large Cent*



*1857 Large Date
Large Cent*

The Large Cent is the cornerstone of United States Coinage. Its tenure stretched from the cradle of the Republic to the eve of the Civil War. Almost immediately after the series ended in 1857, citizens actively plucked stray Large Cents from circulation. Almost everyone could afford to save a handful of cents and they were often passed down generations even to modern times. The fact that Large Cents were treasured by many families as curiosities of a bygone era only adds to their appeal. Many higher grade cents and rarities of the series are pedigreed. Some cents' provenance can be traced back decades; possibly more than a century

on occasion. Previous owners might include some of the great names in numismatics of the past century. These Cents are full of history and character and they are eminently collectible.

Liberty Coin Service stocks a wide selection of United States Large Cents (both nice uncertified, PCGS, and NGC certified specimens) including Chain, Wreath, Liberty Cap, Draped Bust, Classic, Coronet, and Braided Hair types all for sale.

View Our Inventory of Large Cents for Sale [Here](#).

Note: Liberty Coin Service uses ANA grading standards to evaluate the condition of Large Cents like PCGS and NGC. Members of the Early American Copper Society (www.eacs.org) use different, more conservative grading standards.



1809 Large Cent

How to Collect Large Cents – Five Different Ways

1. The Basic Collection

The Large Cent Series is extensive. A complete date set is a massive undertaking. These coins have such a rich character and history that they are worthy of consideration by any numismatist. As with many lengthy and expensive series, the collection can be broken into subsets. The collection could be started with the late date coins, which are most plentiful and affordable. Once that run is complete, the collector can move back in time to the scarcer coins. The series could be split as follows:

- **The Early Dates (1793-1814).** These are the most historic and interesting of all the large cents. They are wonderful reminders of the early Republic and Mint. They are the subject of one of the greatest numismatic monographs, Penny Whimsy, by Dr. William Sheldon. Originally written in 1948 under the title Early American Cents, Dr. Sheldon not only popularized early cents but also laid the foundation for modern grading. His introduction to the series is beautifully written and worth the price to purchase. There are five distinctive early cent types (Chain, Wreath, Liberty Cap, Draped Bust, and Classic Head). Problem-free, attractive coins of this era are very scarce and highly sought after whenever they become available. Strong demand has continually driven prices higher, particularly over the last decade. This has made many of the early issues great investments. Because these coins can be quite expensive, due diligence is important for the prospective collector. Gaining knowledge about the market will greatly assist the collector in deciding which coins and grades to buy.



*1798 Draped Bust
Large Cent*

- **The Middle Dates (1816-1839).** While these 'Coronet Cents' are not so distinguished as their predecessors, they still have a charm and warmth that is characteristic of old copper. As with all Large Cents, coins with fresh appealing surfaces are the exception rather than the rule. Nice coins of any grade make a wonderful collection. All dates are available



1819/ 8 Large Cent

(though not common) and reasonably affordable in fine to very fine condition. These grades represent excellent value. Extremely fine and mint state specimens are much more elusive and expensive for many middle dates. It will be a task to complete a set in these grades. However, dates from 1817 to 1820 are readily available in mint state grades due to the Randall Hoard find (ca. 1868). These coins are beautiful in glossy brown uncirculated grades with traces of mint red. They once were a bargain when located; but recently have become more expensive.

- **The Braided Hair Cents (1839-1857).** This group of cents is perfect for the collector who wants historic Large Cents on a limited budget. All dates are available in nice grades and none are particularly expensive. Nice very fine to extremely fine coins would make a wonderful collection for no more than \$1,000.00 to \$1,500.00 to complete. Mint State coins are also frequently encountered; though less so in the early 1840s dates. The Braided Hair



1847/ 7 Large Cent

portrait is much more uniform than earlier types; however, there are many interesting date varieties such as the 1844 over 81, the small, medium, and large dates of 1846, the doubled dates and 7 over 7 types of 1847, the 1851 over 81, and the 1855 knob on ear.

Click [Here](#) for a free Collector's Checklist to Help You Get Started!

2. The Type Set

Collecting a complete date set of Large Cents is an expensive proposition. However, Large Cents are so interesting that everyone should own a few. For collectors wishing to do so without laying out substantial amounts of cash, a type set of Large Cents might be a great option. To be sure, the 1793 types are still expensive. For collectors on a budget, a low grade specimen might suffice. (I own a 1793 Wreath Cent with the date worn off but otherwise pleasing portrait and surfaces. Though worn, it is still one of my favorite coins because of its historic value.) The other types are easier to buy and can be collected in higher grades. Depending on budget, any coins grading fine to extremely fine with nice surfaces would make a great collection. The coins in a Large Cent type collection are as follows:

1. Chain Cent (1793)
 - a. Ameri. Reverse
 - b. America Reverse
2. Wreath Cent (1793)
 - a. thin leaf sprig
 - b. 'Strawberry Leaf'
3. Liberty Cap Cent (1793-96)
 - a. Lettered Edge, High Relief Portrait (1793-94)
 - b. Lettered Edge (1794-95)
 - c. Plain Edge (1795-96)
 - d. Jefferson Head (1795)
4. Draped Bust Cent (1796-1807)
 - a. Type I Hair (1796-98, 1800)
 - b. Type II Hair (1798-1807)
5. Classic Head Cent (1808-1814)
6. Matron (Coronet) Head Cent (1816-1839)
 - a. Scot's Design (1816-1835)
 - b. Kneass-Gobrecht redesign (1835-39)
7. Braided Hair Cent (1839-57)
 - a. Petite Head (1839-43)
 - b. Mature Head (1844-57)



1793 Wreath Cent



1794 Large Cent



1798 Large Cent



1814 Large Cent



1839 Large Cent



1833 Large Cent

For most collectors, one of each type would be sufficient for a collection. The rarest major type is the Chain Cent. The rarest subtype coin is the 1793 'Strawberry Leaf' Wreath Cent. The 1795 Jefferson Head Cent subtype is a very rare non U.S. Mint production.

3. Pick a Date, any Date

The Large Cent Series is full of variety. Some dates have so many varieties that collecting them could be a lifetime endeavor. Varieties of the early dates (1793-1814) are described in Penny Whimsy. The later date varieties (1816-1857)



*1855 Large Cent
with Knob Ear*

are covered in the book United States Copper Cents (1816-1857) by Newcomb. The date with the most varieties is 1794, with over 60. A few issues such as the rare 1804 Large Cent, the 1806 Large Cent, and the scarce 1809 Large Cent have only one variety. Some dates have few varieties but each is rare or scarce such as the 1793 Large Cents, 1799 Large Cent, 1821 Large Cent, 1823 Large Cent, and 1857 Large Cent.



*1857 Small Date
Large Cent*



*1857 Large Date
Large Cent*



*1847 Double Date
Large Cent*



1844/ 81 Large Cent

4. Cull Large Cents

Most Large Cents did not escape destruction over the past century and a half. Of those that survived, the majority are corroded, cleaned or otherwise damaged. Though not be so pretty as the problem free coins, these coins are still worthy to collect. They have their own rugged character; as if each blemish



Pile of Cull Large Cents

adds an episode to the coin's life story. For a modest outlay, one can buy quite a few interesting old coppers. Some of the especially fun coins to buy would be the Liberty Cap and Draped Bust coins worn nearly slick. These could provide hours (or days, years) of entertainment in trying to attribute the variety (and sometimes date). Later date cents are sometimes seen counterstamped with a merchant name acting as a calling card. Though most of these merchants' information is forever lost to history, sometimes they can be attributed to a particular location. Large Cents hosting known merchants can be quite valuable.

5. Hard Times Tokens

Westward expansion in the 1830's caused a speculative boom in real estate prices in many parts of the Union. This activity was coupled with an excessive and inflationary printing of currency by private banks. In order to curtail this excess, the Jackson administration issued the specie circular of 1836 which forbade the acceptance of any money in payment for public lands except for gold and silver coinage. The ensuing Panic of 1837 caused citizens to hoard any coins they encountered. To fill this void, some merchants contracted to have their own large cent sized token cent pieces issued. There are many different varieties of these tokens. They are often politically themed; though other types exist. Some of the most popular types to collect are the anti-slavery themed tokens. Most are very reasonably priced. These tokens remind us that our forebears struggled with the same economic crises we seem to encounter every generation or two.



Hard Times Token



1853 Large Cent PCGS
Certified MS65BN

Learn more about United States Large Cents and Related Topics

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www.1794largecents.com.

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Low, Lyman. *Hard Times Tokens.* Durst Numismatic Publications, New York, 1984.

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