# Collecting Liberty Seated Half Dollars 

by Thomas Coulson



1839 Liberty Seated Half Dollar

The Liberty Seated Half Dollar's tenure (1839-1891) presided over a remarkable slice of United States History. At the coin's debut the Republic had around 17 million citizens; mostly residing in the East. When the Liberty Seated Half Dollar was replaced by the Barber Half Dollar in 1892, the Nation's population had expanded across the North American Continent and more than tripled to 63 million.

The Liberty Seated design first appeared as a pattern on the silver dollar designed by Gobrecht in 1836. The design was adopted for use on the Half Dime and Dime in 1837 and the Quarter in 1838. The Half Dollar was the last to see the design change in 1839. (though technically Liberty Seated Dollars were not issued for general circulation until 1840.) Throughout the 1840's, Liberty Seated Half Dollars were minted in ample quantities as one of the primary circulating coins in the United States. This followed from the tradition established by the Bust Half Dollar for being a principal denomination. Most Liberty Seated Half Dollars issues from the 1840's are readily available today because of this. (This is not so with the other Liberty Seated Demoninations, all of which are quite scarce from this era.) The Seated Halves of this era exude a character not found in later dates. Particularly at the young New Orleans Mint, there were a series of outmoded reverses (1840, Reverse of 1838; 1842 Small Letters reverse), and blundered dates (1844-O doubled date, 1845-O tripled date). The Philadelphia Mint added the 1846 over horizontal 6, 1847 over 46, and an 1849 doubled date. There are more examples of this sloppy workmanship from the 1840's that make the series fun to collect.

The United States was advancing in the 1840's along with the Seated Half. After
 the financial crises and real estate bubble of the late 1830's, the Republic was ready for new growth again. Opportunity continued to draw settlers further westward. Four new states entered the Union. One of these was the Independent Republic of Texas, which had been a separate nation for nearly a decade. The


1848-O Liberty Seated Half Dollar United States' hunger for new territory pushed the Nation to war with its southern neighbor, Mexico. The two Nations fought for most of 1846 and 1847 with the United States prevailing and gaining new territory to the West. Part of this new territory was to become the State of California; which changed the fortune of the United States and the World almost immediately following the war.

The great gold discovery of 1849 in California dramatically altered the World's commerce and the role of the Liberty Seated Half Dollar as well. Vast amounts of gold worked from the Western soil raised the value of silver reckoned in gold. The Liberty Seated Half became more valuable for its silver content than its utility as a coin. Mintages of Half Dollars fell from 1850 to 1852 and coins disappeared from circulation. It was the beginning of an extended period in which gold and silver coins were seldom seen in commerce. Today, the few survivors of this period are prized for their rarity.

With few coins to be found in commerce, the Mint recognized a need for change. The weight of silver coinage from the half dime to the half dollar were reduced to keep their value low enough to discourage metals speculators. To denote this change, arrows were added to the coin's date area and rays on the reverse for
1853. In 1854 and 1855, the rays were removed, but the arrows remained. Silver coming in hand with gold was also coined into quarters and half dollars at the new mint in San Francisco starting in 1855. The arrows disappeared from the design in 1856 and all seemed reasonably normal again as large quantities of Seated Half Dollars were coined. The largest issue of the entire series was the 1858-O Liberty Seated Half Dollar with a mintage of over 7 million pieces. As the 1850's commenced, the next momentus event to affect the Nation and the Seated Half Dollar was building to a head.


1853-O Liberty Seated Half Dollar Reverse

As tensions escalated in the years before the Civil War, citizens began to hoard coinage ahead of the perceived austerity. Beginning in the late 1850's coinage began to disappear from circulation again. The price of silver continued to remain dear in terms of gold as well; so any silver not taken by hoarders was removed from the market due to its intrinsic value. By the end of 1861, Seated


1860-O Liberty Seated Half Dollar Halves, along with any other form of precious metal coinage had disappeared from circulation. To further exacerbate the situation, the Nation lost the production capacity of the New Orleans Mint as well due to secession. Large amounts of our coinage left the Country, too; as evidenced by the Guatemala Hoard of Seated Halves dating from the early 1860 's. The Govenrment made the disappearance of precious coinage official on 30 December, 1861 with the suspension of specie payments and the introduction of 'Greenbacks' early the following year. As the bloody Civil War raged on, available quantities of Seated Halves and other silver denominations plummeted and were rarely seen. Most of the issues from this era are difficult to find today.

After the war, Liberty Seated coinage continued to be scarce. In the Eastern States, base metal coinage and paper money became the accepted medium of exchange, so there was little demand for silver coinage. Mintages at the Philadelphia Mint were fairly small. In the West, hard money was preferred; so the San Francisco Mint issues are more common in this era (though comparatively scarce to Philadelphia and New Orleans issues of the 1840's and 1850's). As they actually circulated, low grade survivors are obtainable, but high grade pieces are the exception and are eagerly sought.


1860-S Liberty Seated Half Dollar

The Comstock silver find in Nevada originated in 1859. This 'Bonanza' produced unprecedented amounts of silver which tipped the scale of valuation back in favor of gold. (Though, this would not happen until the mid-1870's.) Transporting all the silver to the financial center in San Francisco was expensive. The cost saving solution was to build a new Mint office in Carson City, Nevada. This had yet another impact on the


Close up of Carson City Mintmark Liberty Seated Half Dollar series: the introduction of the Carson City mint Half Dollar in 1870. The Carson City Mint would produce Half Dollars every year until 1878; though never in large quantities. Most are heavily worn today as citizens of the day cared little for saving or collecting coinage if they even bothered to notice where the coin was struck. Presently, Carcon City Mint Halves, along with all other Carson City coinage is prized by collectors for its rarity and romantic Western origin.

The Comstock Silver find continued to play a significant role in shaping the Liberty Seated Half Dollar series. The Bland-Alison act of 1878 called for surplus silver to be bought by the government and coined into a mandated amount of Silver Dollars every month. This forced the Mints to focus on silver dollar
production to the expense of subsidiary coinage. Emissions of Seated Half Dollars were small from 1879 to 1891; prompted by collector demand and sporadic need for coinage not satisfied by the large mintages of halves from 1875 to 1877.

After the Civil War, the Nation grew rapidly. Throngs of immigrants arrived in New York City to start a new life. Adventurers continued to travel West and settle the rugged country. New technology and greater efficiency led to modernation of the country. A Nation that looked not so different than it did during the Revolutionary War at the outset of the Liberty Seated Half series, transformed into a modern industrial Nation by the series end. After half a century of production, the time came for a new design on United States coinage. It was Charles Barber's new design, which was similar to the Morgan Dollar already in use that replaced the Liberty Seated design in 1892.


1875-S Liberty Seated Half Dollar

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1841-O Liberty Seated Half Dollar

## How to Collect Liberty Seated Half Dollars - Four Different Ways

## 1. The Basic Collection

A Liberty Seated Half Dollar collection is a major, but rewarding project. Most collectors will not assemble the entire set as there are many rare issues and a few nearly prohibitive rarities to acquire. This should not discourage a prospective collector; for even a partial set of attractive Seated Half Dollars is impressive and satisfying to see.

Assembling a partial circulated Liberty Seated Half Dollar set is practical for most intermediate to advanced collectors. The best starting point is to acquire a few nice, matched common date specimens and build the collection out from there as comparable pieces become available. The optimal grade for this collection is very fine to extremely fine. At this grade level, most issues are still affordable and details of the attractive design are still visible. Lower grade coins lack much of the design that makes the Seated Half so beautiful. Mint State coins are available for most dates, but many are very rare and expensive.

Patience is a virtue with Seated Half collectors. Perhaps 25 or 30 different issues are regularly encountered. The remaining 90 or so issues are not commonly seen. When the scarcer issues are available, they often trade for significant premiums over price guide levels. Even so, nice examples of these coins are likely good values due to their elusiveness.

To assemble the collection, I would suggest buying specimens from groups in the lists below starting with the first group and working down the lists in order.

The common dates or collection starters - These coins are regularly encountered. Look for coins in nice very fine to extremely fine condition with original surfaces and matching appearance. The coins in this group (in chronological order) are as follow:

| 1842 Lg. Dt. | 1854 | 1861 |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| 1842-O Lg. Dt. | $1854-\mathrm{O}$ | $1861-\mathrm{O}$ |
| 1843 | $1855-\mathrm{O}$ | 1875 |
| $1843-\mathrm{O}$ | 1856 | $1875-\mathrm{CC}$ |
| 1846 Med. Dt. | $1856-\mathrm{O}$ | $1875-\mathrm{S}$ |
| $1846-\mathrm{O}$ Med. Dt. | 1858 | 1876 |
| 1847 | $1858-\mathrm{O}$ | $1876-\mathrm{CC}$ |
| 1853 | $1859-\mathrm{O}$ | $1876-\mathrm{S}$ |
| $1853-\mathrm{O}$ | $1860-\mathrm{O}$ | 1877 |



The scarcer dates - These coins are tougher to find than the common coins, but can be acquired at similar price levels. This group of coins represents excellent value; though some of the S-mint coins will garner premiums in the higher grades. Try to match the look of the coins in the starter group:


| 1844 | $1859-\mathrm{S}$ | $1869-\mathrm{S}$ |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| $1844-\mathrm{O}$ | 1860 | 1870 |
| $1845-\mathrm{O}$ | $1860-\mathrm{S}$ | $1870-\mathrm{S}$ |
| $1847-\mathrm{O}$ | $1861-\mathrm{S}$ | 1871 |
| $1848-\mathrm{O}$ | $1862-\mathrm{S}$ | $1871-\mathrm{S}$ |
| $1849-\mathrm{O}$ | $1863-\mathrm{S}$ | 1872 |
| 1857 | $1864-\mathrm{S}$ | 1873 Cl. 3 |
| $1857-\mathrm{O}$ | $1866-\mathrm{S}$ | 1873 Arrows |
| $1858-\mathrm{S}$ | $1867-\mathrm{S}$ | 1874 |
| 1859 | $1868-\mathrm{S}$ | 1878 |

1866-S Liberty Seated Half Dollar

The scarcer dates II - These dates are much harder to find than the last group. Many of these are very hard to find. If you can find any problem-free coins on this list, just buy them if the price is even remotely reasonable. I've had a few of these slip through my hands over the years, and I regretted not buying them when I had the chance:

| 1839 No Drap. | 1850-O | 1867 |  |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| 1840-O Rev. ${ }^{\prime} 38$ | $1851-\mathrm{O}$ | 1868 |  |
| 1841 | 1855 | 1869 |  |
| 1842 Sm. Dt. | 1862 | $1872-\mathrm{CC}$ |  |
| 1845 | 1863 | $1872-\mathrm{S}$ |  |
| 1846 Tall Dt. | 1864 | $1873-\mathrm{S}$ |  |
| $1846 /$ Horiz 6 | 1865 | $1874-\mathrm{S}$ |  |
| 1848 | $1865-\mathrm{S}$ | 1891 | 1891 Liberty Seated |
| 1849 | 1866 |  | Half Dollar |

The Key Dates - These dates are genuinely rare and expensive. It will be a challenge to find nice coins for an evenly matched set. Some of these are much rarer than others on the list. These are listed chronologically and not by rarity. Also, some varieties are included that are not part of a true set; but are often collected with the set:


The Key Dates II, the 1880's - These coins have low mintages as the Mint was focussed on making silver dollars in the 1880's rather than subsidiary coinage. These are slightly different than the other key date coins. They are a bit more available and there are many high grade survivors from proof sets. They are still expensive, but readily available at a price:

| 1879 | 1883 | 1887 |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| 1880 | 1884 | 1888 |
| 1881 | 1885 | 1889 |
| 1882 | 1886 | 1890 |



1889 Liberty Seated Half Dollar

The Legendary Rarities - These Seated Halves are extremely hard to find. Very few collections will have them. The ' 78 -S Half Dollar is very rare; with perhaps 50 or so specimens known to exist. These can occasionally be found at major coin shows. A nice one can be purchased for about the price of a decent luxury automobile! The ' $53-\mathrm{O}$ No Arrows is one of the greatest U.S. Coin rarities and is generally available only in auctions. Its extreme rarity puts it in a class all its own with other legends like the 1884 and 1885 Trade Dollars and 1913 Liberty Nickel. In fact, according to Heritage Auctions, there have only been 16 occasions since 1885 when an 1853-O No Arrows Half Dollar crossed the auction block!

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

## 2. Seated Half Dollar Type Set

The Liberty Seated Half Dollar Series is extensive enough to become a lifelong pursuit. For those collectors that appreciate the beauty of Seated Halves but cannot devote the time or resources to completing a collection, a type set is an excellent alternative. The coins in a Liberty Seated Half Dollar type set are as follows:

Type I - No Drapery Obverse/No Motto Reverse with small letters (1839 only)
> Type II - Drapery Obverse/No Motto Reverse with small letters (1839-1842)


1841-O Liberty Seated Half Dollar

Type III - Same Obverse/No Motto Reverse with medium letters (1840-O only) (known as the reverse of 1838)

Type IV - Same Obverse/No Motto Reverse with large letters (1842-1853)


1839 No Drapery Liberty Seated Half Dollar


Type V - Arrows at date on obverse/Rays on reverse (1853 only)


1853 Liberty Seated Half Dollar

Type VI - Arrows at date/No Motto, Rays removed on reverse (1854-1855)

Type IV a - Arrows at date removed/No Motto Reverse with new weight standard (1856-66) There was a change in lettering on the reverse hub in the late 1850's resulting in a subtype with a slightly different reverse look.

Type VII - Motto " In God We Trust" to reverse (1866-1873)
 Type VIII - Arrows at Date/Motto Reverse (1873-1874)

Type VII a - Arrows at Date removed/Motto reverse resumed at slightly different weight (1875-1891)


A major challenge for collectors would be to obtain proof specimens of the different types above. The Type I, 1839 No Drapery Half is excessively rare; only 4 to 6 specimens are known to exist. The Type II coins are rare but they were issued in enough different years to allow collectors to find an occasional specimen. Available specimens are very expensive, though. The Type III coin does not exist as a proof since it was a branch mint issue. Type IV coins are rare, but also available at a price since they were made for several years. The Type V coin (1853 Arrows and Rays reverse) is also extremely rare with only 5 pieces known to exist. The type VI coin (1854-55) is very rare and difficult to find. The Type IVa is the first Seated Half that is easily encountered in proof. The type VII and VIIa are the first types of Seated Half Dollar that are readily available and afforable by most budgets. The Type VIII (1873-74) is scarce, but affordable for most serious collectors.


1891 Proof Liberty Seated Half Dollar

A variant of the type set is the mintmark type set where one assembles a collection of each type above struck at a particular mint. The table below illustrates which types belong in each mintmark's set:

| Type | Philadelphia | New Orleans | San Francisco | Carson City |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| I | $\checkmark$ |  |  |  |
| II | $\checkmark$ | $\checkmark$ |  |  |
| III |  | $\checkmark$ |  |  |
| IV | $\checkmark$ | $\checkmark$ |  |  |
| IV a | $\checkmark$ | $\checkmark$ | $\checkmark$ |  |
| V | $\checkmark$ | $\checkmark$ |  |  |
| VI | $\checkmark$ | $\checkmark$ | $\checkmark$ |  |
| VII | $\checkmark$ |  | $\checkmark$ | $\checkmark$ |
| VII a | $\checkmark$ |  | $\checkmark$ | $\checkmark$ |
| VIII | $\checkmark$ |  | $\checkmark$ | $\checkmark$ |



Reverse from Philadelphia


Reverse from New Orleans


Reverse from Carson City

## 3. 1861-O / Confederate/Louisiana Issues

The State of Louisiana seceded from the United States of America on January 26, 1861. The State joined The Confederate States of America on February 4, 1861. The New Orleans Mint produced Half Dollars for three different entities that year. The records show that 330,000 halves were struck for the Union at the New Orleans Mint before the secession of Louisiana. An additional 1,240,000 coins were struck for the State of Louisiana; and 962,633 coins were issued on behalf of the Confederacy. This makes the 1861-O Seated Half Dollar unique in that no other singular coin has ever been issued for three different governments! It is also the only coin of the Confederacy that is readily available.

Numismatic scholars have studied 1861-O Liberty Seated Half Dollars extensively. Dies have been sequenced in such a manner to identify which 1861-O Halves were made for the U.S.A., Louisiana, and the Confederacy. Three Confederate issues are detailed in Wiley \& Bugert's The Complete Guide to Liberty Seated Half Dollars. Further research was made possible from the many 1861-O Halves recovered from the S.S. Republic, which went down off the Georgia coast in 1865. With all its history, the 1861-O Liberty Seated Half Dollar is one of the most intriguing U.S. Coins ever made!

In addition to the 1861-O Seated Half Dollar issues, there were 4 coins struck with an 1861 Seated Half Dollar obverse and a distinctive Confederate reverse. These were made in 1861 as a pattern coinage for the Confederacy. A man named J.W. Scott purchased the Confederate Half Dollar Dies and produced tokens with the Confederate reverse and restrike coins made from 1861-O Halves. Five Hundred of these were produced in 1879.

Below is a summary of the types of 1861-O Halves and related items that can be collectable:

1861-O Half Dollar, Union Issue (3 varieties)
1861-O Half Dollar, Louisiana Issue (7 varieties)
1861-O Half Dollar, Confederate Issue (3 varieties)


CSA Set

The Cracked Confederate Obverse - This coin has a die crack running from the bridge of Miss Liberty's nose to the rim right of the 7th star. The crack is often faint and frequently goes unnoticed. I have found several of these over the years. It is the most popular of the Confederate issues because it displays the same crack found on the 4 Confederate Halves issued. Called the WB-102 in the Wiley-Bugert book.

Bisected Date - This coin has a faint die crack just to the left of the 6 in the date that extends to the rim. This is WB-103 in the Wiley-Bugert Book.

Speared Olive Bud - Two small die scratch lines touch the upper olive bead just to the left of the eagle's leg. This is WB-104 in the Wiley Bugert Book.

1861 Confederate Half with CSA reverse - Only 4 of these were reported to be made. None has been offered for sale in decades.

1861 Confederate Half with CSA reverse, Scott Restrike - 500 of these were made in 1879 for collectors. These were made from genuine 1861-O Halves with the reverses planed off. They are available, but usually fetch strong prices.

Scott Token - This token has the CSA Half Reverse and information about the original CSA Halves and Scott on the obverse

SS Republic Shipwreck Effect sets - These are sets of three Half Dollars recovered from the wreck of the SS Republic. Each three coin set contains a Union issued Seated Half; which may or may not be an 1861-O; a Louisiana issued 1861-O Half, and a Confederate issued 1861-O Half. These sets can frequently be purchased on eBay for $\$ 1,500.00$ to $\$ 1,800.00$.


1861-O Liberty Seated Half Dollar NGC Certified

## 4. Cull Seated Half Dollars



Large numbers of cull and heavily worn Liberty Seated Half Dollars still exist. These large silver coins from the 1800's still look impressive even when they are damaged. While buying cull coins may not be a great investment, it might be fun for the collector on a budget to find as many different cull Seated Halves as possible. It is an inexpensive way to acquire a decent variety of coins from the series.

# Read more about Liberty Seated Half Dollars 

Breen, Walter. Walter Breen's Complete Encyclopedia of U.S. And Colonial Coins. Doubleday Publishing, New York, 1988

Wiley, Randy and Bill Bugert. The Complete Guide to Liberty Seated Half Dollars. Virginia Beach, VA, 1993.

