

Collecting Three Cent Silver Coins

by Thomas Coulson



1871 Three Cent Silver

It is difficult to understand today why the United States Mint would create such an unusual coin as the three cent silver. From our perspective, it is an odd denomination that seems unnecessary with half cents, cents, or half dimes available. Also, because the coin was so thin and tiny, it was prone to being damaged or lost. But in 1851, the Three Cent Silver coin posed a real solution to a specific problem of the day.

That year, the rate for newfangled postage stamps was three cents. Buying a stamp could be a challenge, though. Silver coinage (including half dimes and foreign silver) had disappeared from commerce. This was an unintended consequence of the gold discovery in 1848. Silver became more valuable when reckoned in gold which caused its withdrawal by hoarders and profiteers looking to cash in on its premium. Half Cents were scarce. Large Cents were bulky and unpopular due to their token status. The Three Cent Silver coin addressed all of these issues. It was the exact amount needed to purchase a postage stamp. The first issue (1851-1853) was made of billon, a low grade silver. This made it unappealing to hoarders and profiteers. The coin was small, so it was convenient to carry. The first Three Cent Silvers were initially very successful. They were used extensively for the purchase of stamps, as a substitute for fractional foreign silver coins, and as an all-around medium of exchange in the absence of almost every other type of coin. However, the coin's heavy use exposed significant problems. The 'fish scales' as they had come to be known, were easily damaged or lost. The billon alloy wore rapidly and became unattractive. The general lack of varied coinage and the issues with the Three Cent Silvers resulted in wholesale changes made to all U.S. silver coinage in 1853. That year, the minting of the first type of Three Cent Silvers was suspended.

The second type of Three Cent Silver was released in 1854. The new coins had a larger diameter and they were struck in .900 fine silver instead of billon. These modifications improved the appearance of the coins initially. They were still thin and therefore easily damaged. The rims were thin which caused the coins to wear out quickly. Mintages were rather low; as coins of the first type were still common in circulation.



1854 Three Cent Silver

A slightly improved third type design with more prominent rims was introduced in 1859. Mintages of the third type were low. Demand was weak at first due to the large number of earlier Three Cent Silver coins circulating. At the outbreak of the Civil War, these coins were hoarded along with all other kinds of silver and gold. In response to the shortages, first the Three Cent Fractional currency note was introduced; then the Three Cent Nickel coin. The Three Cent Nickel coin was larger and far more durable than the tiny 'fish scales'. Both the note and the copper nickel coin replaced the Three Cent Silver coins. Mintages were less than 10,000 specimens per year after 1867. Collecting demand was weak, however, and many proofs that remained unsold when the series ended in 1873 were melted.



1851-O Three Cent Silver Reverse

Like the other small denomination coin types of the Nineteenth Century, the Three Cent Silver design was plain. All three types portrayed a six sided star on the obverse and three Roman numeral I's inside a large 'C' on the reverse. The early Three Cent Silvers are one of only two (the other being the wartime Jefferson Nickel) circulating United States coins made of billon. The 1851-O Three Cent Silver holds the interesting distinction of being the only O-mint coin issued under the denomination of five cents.

Despite these interesting facts, the Three Cent Silver is unpopular among collectors. Its small size, obscurity, and rarity keep potential collectors away from the series. It is difficult to appreciate the true scarcity of these coins unless one has witnessed the many thousands of surviving low grade, damaged pieces. Those willing to try assembling a collection of Three Cent Silvers will undoubtedly find reward in the rich history, challenge, and value of the coins.

View Our Inventory of Three Cent Silver Coins for Sale [Here](#).



1860 Three Cent Silver

How to Collect Three Cent Silvers – Two Different Ways

1. The Basic Collection

The Three Cent Silver series consists of three principal types. The type I coins issued from 1851 to 1853, the type II coins issued from 1854 to 1858, and the type III coins issued from 1859-1873. The simplest way to form a collection of these coins is to work on each subset of coins. Each type could be collected as a stand-alone group. If the goal is to assemble a nice date run of circulated coins, it would be wise to end the run at 1862, as the later dates are almost non-existent.



*Counterfeit 3 Cent Silver
from hand-cut dies*

The billon issues from 1851 to 1853 are by far the most common. All dates are readily available, though the 1851-O Three Cent Silver is also sought after by collectors of O-mint type coins. Like all Three Cent Silvers, the coins are small and thin, which means that most specimens were either lost or damaged. Problem free coins are elusive in almost any grade above very good. The optimal circulated grade for this type is Extremely Fine. At that grade, coins are still attractive looking, harder to find, but also affordable. Since there are only four different type I Three Cent Silvers, they can also be collected in certified Mint State grades on a budget. A complete set of 4 coins can be assembled for around \$2,500.00 in Mint State 63 to 64 grades.

The type II issue, struck from 1854 to 1858 is scarce. None of these five dates are frequently encountered. If they can be found without cleaning or excessive rim wear, they are bargains. Collectors will gain a true sense of accomplishment by completing this run with nice circulated coins. The optimal circulated grade to collect is Extremely Fine. Coins below this grade will often exhibit some wear into the date or legend. A run of the 5 different dates in Mint State grades is still worthy of consideration. However, the type II coins are much more expensive than the type I coins.

The type III group issued from 1859 to 1873 presents a major challenge to collectors. The 1860, 1861, and 1862 Three Cent Silvers are readily available and inexpensive. There is also the 1862/1 overdate Three Cent Silver which is not particularly scarce. For many collectors, it might make sense to abbreviate the collection to 1862. All dates from 1863 to 1873 are rare and almost never encountered outside of auctions. These late dates will cost thousands of dollars each in mint state grades. Proofs are more available (and the only option for 1873 Three Cent Silvers) and while expensive, are less so than the uncirculated coins. For the 1859 to 1862 dates, Extremely Fine is probably the best circulated grade to collect. After 1863, circulated coins are nearly non-existent. Mint state or proof coins may be the only examples practically available.

There is an interesting contemporary counterfeit 1861 Three Cent Silver as well. This is a struck counterfeit made from hand cut dies. These 'coins' are slightly off-color and the legend and date characters are uneven. At a quick glance, these coins will pass as genuine. In fact, I have seen a couple offered for sale as such. Die struck contemporary counterfeit coins are fun and fascinating to collect. This particular counterfeit coin deserves consideration as part of a complete Three Cent Silver collection.

Click [here](#) for a printable checklist of Odd Type Coins to help you start!

2. Three Cent Type Set

The Three cent denomination recounts much of the complex and dynamic story of coinage in the mid-Nineteenth Century. It starts with the unique billon experiment aimed at keeping coins in circulation by reducing their intrinsic value. The Type II and III coins are the result of the 1853 coinage reform intended to stem the outflows of all silver coinage. The Three Cent Encased Postage is an example of privately issued currency made in response to the extreme lack of coinage during the Civil War. The Three Cent Fractional notes demonstrate the drastic measures taken by the Republic to keep money in circulation during wartime. The Three Cent Nickel represents the birth of the new nickel alloyed coinage that would dominate United States coinage a century later. Here is a list of coins and notes that might comprise a three cent type set:

1. Feuchtwanger Three Cent Token (1837) Rare!
2. Type I Three Cent Silver (1851-1853)
3. Type II Three Cent Silver (1854-1858)
4. Type III Three Cent Silver (1859-1873)
5. Ayers Three Cent Encased Postage Stamp (1862)
6. Three Cent Fractional Currency, Third Issue, Fr. 1226 & 1227 (1864-1869)
7. Three Cent Nickel (1865-1889)



Type I Three Cent Silver



Three Cent Copper Nickel



Three Cent Fractional Currency



Type II Three Cent Silver



Type II Three Cent Silver

Read more about Three Cent Silvers

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

Fivaz, Bill, and Stanton, J.T. The Cherrypickers' Guide to Rare Die Varieties, Volume 1. Stanton Books and Supplies, Savannah, GA. 2001.

