

December 19, 2019

## Quarter and Half Dollar Coins: History and Proposed Designs

The Secretary of the Treasury, through the U.S. Mint, is statutorily required to issue specific denominations of circulating coins (31 U.S.C. §5112). Currently, the United States has six circulating coins—dollar, half dollar, quarter dollar, dime, nickel, and penny. All coinage is also required to have certain design elements, including specific words such as “Liberty,” or “E Pluribus Unum.” The quarter dollar has been redesigned twice in recent years (1997 and 2008), while the half dollar was last redesigned in 1964.

### Quarter Dollar Designs

The first quarters were issued in 1796 and depicted Lady Liberty on the obverse and an eagle on the reverse. Since then, the quarter dollar has been redesigned four times: in 1932 to place President Washington on the obverse, in 1976 for the Bicentennial of the United States, in 1997 when the 50-state quarter program was authorized, and in 2008 when the America the Beautiful program was authorized.

#### Washington Quarter

In March 1931, President Herbert Hoover signed a law (46 Stat. 1523) to change the design of the quarter dollar coin to commemorate “the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of George Washington.” The law required a portrait of George Washington on the obverse and “appropriate devices on the reverse....” The finished coin (as seen in **Figure 1**) had a “standard eagle” design on the reverse.

**Figure 1. George Washington Quarter, 1932-1998**



**Source:** USA Coin Book “1932 Washington Quarters,” at <https://www.usacoinbook.com/coins/2030/quarters/washington>.

**Notes:** The reverse of the Washington Quarter was redesigned for the American Bicentennial in 1976. See **Figure 2**.

#### Bicentennial Quarter

In October 1973, a law (P.L. 93-127) to redesign the quarter, half dollar, and dollar’s reverse to celebrate the bicentennial of American independence was enacted. The law required that the coins have two dates—1776 and 1976—and should “bear a design determined by the Secretary [of the Treasury] to be emblematic of the Bicentennial.” **Figure 2** shows the Bicentennial Quarter and Half Dollar.

**Figure 2. Bicentennial Quarter and Half Dollar, 1976**



**Source:** U.S. Mint, “1976 Bicentennial Coins,” at <https://www.usmint.gov/learn/kids/library/bicentennial-coins>.

#### 50 State Quarters

In December 1997, the 50 States Commemorative Coin Program Act was enacted (P.L. 105-124). The law mandated changes to the quarter dollar to honor each state. The 50 state quarters were first issued in 1999 in the order that the states ratified the Constitution or were admitted to the Union, starting with Delaware.

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This [50 State quarters] bill will reinvigorate our circulating coinage in a responsible, affordable way, serving the best interests of the general public, the national economy and the coin collecting community.... It will be educational and fun, will promote pride among the States and it will be a winner financially for the Government.

— Rep. Mike Castle, *Congressional Record*, November 12, 1997

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As initially enacted, the 50 state quarter program did not include the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, or the territories. On December 26, 2007, the quarter dollar program was amended to include the District of Columbia and the territories (P.L. 110-161). These quarters were issued after the 50 states, beginning in 2009.

### America the Beautiful Quarters

In 2008, legislation was enacted to redesign the reverse of the quarter to honor national parks and historic sites in each state, territory, and the District of Columbia. The America the Beautiful quarters were first issued in 2010. Five national parks or historic sites will be featured per year until 2021, when one final design will be featured. Quarters were issued in the order that the national park or historic site was created. **Figure 3** shows the 2020 America the Beautiful quarter for Weir Farm National Historic Site (CT).

**Figure 3. 2020 Weir Farm National Historic Site (CT) America the Beautiful Quarter**

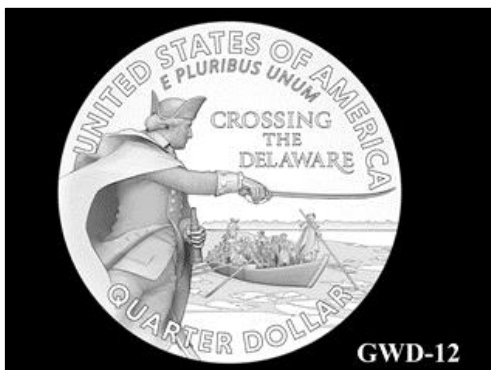


**Source:** U.S. Mint, "Weir Farm National Historic Site Quarter," at <https://www.usmint.gov/coins/coin-medal-programs/america-the-beautiful-quarters/weir-farm-national-historic-site>.

### Washington Crossing the Delaware Quarter

When the America the Beautiful quarter program ends in 2021, the quarter's design is scheduled to change. The quarter would then feature George Washington on the obverse (same as the current quarter) and an image of General Washington crossing the Delaware River on the reverse. **Figure 4** shows the Citizens Coinage Advisory Committee's (CCAC's) preferred design for the Washington Crossing the Delaware Quarter reverse. A final design decision is to be made by the Secretary of the Treasury.

**Figure 4. CCAC Recommendation for Reverse of Washington Crossing the Delaware Quarter**



**Source:** U.S. Mint, "CWD-12—George Washington Crossing the Delaware River Quarter-Reverse," at <https://www.usmint.gov/news/ccac-meetings/george-washington-crossing-the-delaware-river-quarter>; and Letter from Thomas Uram, chair, Citizens Coinage Advisory Committee, to Honorable Steven T. Mnuchin, Secretary of the Treasury, October 15, 2019, at [https://www.ccac.gov/media/calendar/lettersToSecretary/CCAC\\_October\\_15\\_2019\\_Recommendations\\_2.pdf](https://www.ccac.gov/media/calendar/lettersToSecretary/CCAC_October_15_2019_Recommendations_2.pdf).

### Design of the Half Dollar

The half dollar coin was initially authorized in 1792. Since 1964, President John F. Kennedy has appeared on the obverse and an eagle on the reverse (except for a change to the reverse for the Bicentennial). **Figure 5** shows the current design of the Kennedy Half Dollar.

**Figure 5. Kennedy Half Dollar, 1964 to Present**



**Source:** U.S. Mint, "Half Dollar," at <https://www.usmint.gov/coins/coin-medal-programs/circulating-coins/half-dollar>.

### Proposed Coinage Redesigns

A bill in the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress proposes a redesign of the quarter dollar to honor women's suffrage and the centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment. In addition, a proposal by the Mint calls for a redesign of the quarter and half dollar to celebrate American animals and youth sports. The Mint proposal would also redesign coins for the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Declaration of Independence in 2026.

### Nineteenth Amendment Quarters

The Women's History and Nineteenth Amendment Centennial Quarter Dollar Coin Program Act (H.R. 1923 and S. 2427, 116<sup>th</sup> Congress) would authorize a redesign of the quarter dollar beginning in 2021 to commemorate a "single prominent American woman" from each state, the District of Columbia, and territory, on the reverse, and maintain George Washington on the obverse. H.R. 1923 and S. 2427 were referred to committee. Neither has received further consideration.

### Animals and Sports Quarter and Half Dollar

In 2019, the Treasury officially proposed a redesign of the reverse of both the circulating quarter and half dollars when the America the Beautiful quarter program ends in 2021. Following focus groups and surveys, the Treasury believes that coins featuring American animals and youth sports would be best received by the American public. The Treasury proposal would feature American animals from 2022 through 2025 and youth and Paralympic sports from 2027 to 2030. In 2026, all circulating coins would be redesigned to celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. To date, the Treasury proposal has not been introduced in Congress.

For more information on circulating coins, see CRS In Focus IF10533, *Congressional Involvement in the Design of Circulating Coins*, by Jacob R. Straus.

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