



The Curious Collector

by Len Augsburger, LSCC #1271

Coins Without Mintmarks



A few coins in the U.S. series were struck at Branch Mints, yet bear no mintmark. The best known example is the 1922 Plain cent, which is actually a 1922-D cent with the D apparently polished off the die prior to striking. Within the Liberty Seated series, the 1866-S dime often comes without a mintmark, again due to die weakness. Such pieces are distinguished from the 1866 Philadelphia strike by the date position – the 1866-S will have a downward sloping date while the Philadelphia piece is closer to level. It's an important distinction, as the Philadelphia piece is scarcer. These two examples both relate to die polishing or die weakness and simply represent vagaries of the coining process. The 1840-O WB-4 Liberty Seated half falls into a different category (see image above) – this piece was flat out struck from dies that bore no mintmark to begin with. This coin came up during the LSCC Zoom call on December 7, when I incorrectly attributed this discovery to Randy Wiley. It was in fact a co-discovery by Bill Bugert and Randy Wiley.

Randy first discussed this variety in the November 1978 Gobrecht Journal. At that time he identified the reverse as that of the Bust half dollar. Randy pointed out a number of key differences between the Bust and Seated dollar half reverses, including the larger shield on the Bust half. This one is easy to see with the naked eye and doesn't require a microscope with measurement reticles. Further, the Bust piece exhibits three feathered arrow shafts, while the Seated coin reveals two. Randy referred to this piece as the "1840-R38" as the WB nomenclature had not yet been developed. In this article, Randy speculated that this reverse die had previously been mated with a Bust obverse but he was not aware of a confirming example.

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Bill Bugert continued the thread in the March 1987 Gobrecht Journal. Research in the National Archives uncovered the fact that the New Orleans Mint had five (Bust) reverse dies on hand in 1839, defaced four, and held over a single die for use in 1840. Note that for the Bust coinage, the mintmark appeared on the obverse die. The reverse die that was held over therefore did not bear a mintmark. Bugert theorized that the 1840 Seated half, with Bust style reverse, was actually a New Orleans product. The puzzle now was to confirm that the held over Bust reverse die was in fact used in New Orleans. As it turns out, there is no known 1839-O Reeded Edge half that uses this reverse, so that path fails. However, Wiley proposed that the “1840-R38” obverse might have been used on another 1840-O half dollar, and this was quickly confirmed. Indeed, this Bust-style reverse was used with two different Seated obverses from New Orleans, and today these are identified as the 1840-O WB-4 and WB-12 varieties – both New Orleans issues that do not bear mintmarks.

The New Orleans connection was thus discovered first through archival evidence that suggested the coin should exist, and then examining actual coins to prove that it did. To Bugert and Wiley goes equal credit for collaborating on this discovery. Two examples of this piece (both WB-4s) are being presented in the upcoming sale of the John McCloskey collection and may be referenced at the Heritage Auction site using the following links:

<https://coins.ha.com/c/image-preview.zx?id=63177011779> (NGC F12)

<https://coins.ha.com/c/image-preview.zx?id=63177011119> (NGC XF Details)

[images for this coin appear on the previous page]

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