

Gobrecht's Flying Eagle

A confusing variety of dollars was struck in the mid to late 1830s, creating a series ripe for study.



Y NOW, EVERYONE knows the story of the 1804 Bust dollars and their 1801, 1802 and 1803 proof sisters struck by the U.S. Mint in 1834. For those who do not, there is an entire book on the subject—*The Fantastic 1804 Dollar* by Eric P. Newman and Kenneth E. Bressett (ANA Library Catalog No. GB22.N42).

The following year, 1835, the Mint moved to resume production of silver dollars. When Chief Engraver William Kneass became ill that year, Mint Director Robert Patterson hired Christian Gobrecht as second engraver. Gobrecht's first assignment was to produce a new dollar. Thomas Sully designed the obverse and Titian Peale the reverse, and Gobrecht prepared the dies.

Gobrecht's first dollars, featuring a seated image of Liberty on the obverse and an eagle flying up to the left on the reverse, may have been struck in December 1836 and weighed 416 grains, the standard established by law in 1792. In 1837 the weight was lowered to 412.5 grains, and the die alignment rotated, which may distinguish these coins from the originals that were possibly struck in 1836. The series may have run until 1839, with none produced in 1837. However, from the late 1850s to the '70s, the Mint produced Gobrecht dollars for collectors.

This much everyone agrees on, but exactly what varieties were struck and when is a matter of discussion. *A Guide Book of United States Coins* (the "Red Book") lists 1,600 specimens representing eight different types, while *Walter Breen's Complete*



◀ This 1836 "original" dollar (top) exhibits Die Alignment I. The 1836-dated restrike (bottom) was made in March 1837 and has Die Alignment IV. On both coins, the engraver's name appears on the base of the rock.

Encyclopedia of U.S. and Colonial Coins (ANA Library Catalog No. GA40.B65) noted 16 varieties, with an estimated mintage of 2,925 to 4,125. There is no way to determine the original quantities, but pinning down the number of known types is a different story. As numismatist John Dannreuther always says, "The coins speak for themselves."

For the original 1836 dollar with Gobrecht's name featured *below* the base of the rock on which Liberty sits, Breen identified one type he called "Die Alignment I." He also suggested the possibility that different originals were made in 1836, but none survive, or that none ever existed.

On the other hand, J. Hewitt Judd, in his *United States Pattern, Experimental and Trial Pieces* (ANA Library Catalog No. GA90.J8), maintained there were 18 originals with Alignments III and IV, plus numerous re-

strikes. But were all or just some struck in 1836, or were they made in 1858 or 1859?

For the original 1836 dollar with Gobrecht's name *on* the base, 10 types are possible. Alignments I, II and IV weighing 416 grains were made either in 1836 or before January 18, 1837, or perhaps in 1858 or 1859.

A few 412.5-grain coins with Alignments II or IV could have been made after January 18, 1837, with others in 1858 or 1859 or later. Breen ascertained that Alignments I and II represented original strikings, but that has not been fully verified.

The 1838 seems to be a pattern that is available with the name below the base, on the base or apparently polished off the base. Judd believed Alignment IV was original and that any with Alignment III were restrikes. I cannot even venture a guess when the 1838s were made.

As for the 1839, it has been seen with Alignment IV and several variations thereof. Whether it is original, a restrike or both is a matter of conjecture. Breen felt all 1839s with Alignment IV were restrikes, while Judd called them originals. Judd noted that those with Alignment III were restrikes. The Smithsonian Institution's National Numismatic Collection contains both 1838- and 1839-dated coins, with the eagle in slightly ascending position.

And then there are the restrikes of all the dates, which display Alignment III or IV. Breen says all coins with Alignment III are restrikes. In any case, only a couple hundred specimens of all dates and varieties have been certified by Professional Coin Grading Service (PCGS) and (Numismatic Guaranty Corporation (NGC).

If it appears I have raised more question than answers, it is because no one actually knows if originals



▲ Gobrecht's name was removed from the base on some 1838s.

exist. The subject has been under study by John Dannreuther, Andrew Lustig and friends for years. I expect they will address all the questions I have posed when they publish their findings next year.

This column marks my last for *The Numismatist* on the solitary subject of dollars. Thanks to all who have helped in its preparation over the last year and a half and to those readers who have shared their thoughts and ideas. Beginning next month, I'll explore numismatic auctions, past, present and future. *berman@money.org*