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Coins and Medals Celebrating the Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence

On July 4, the United States celebrates the anniversary of the 1776 signing of the Declaration of Independence with a federal holiday called Independence Day. For certain milestone anniversaries, Congress has authorized the temporary design of circulating coins, or the issuance of medals or commemorative coins. These milestone celebrations occurred in 1826, 1876, 1926, and 1976. The 250th anniversary occurs in 2026. This In Focus provides a historical overview of circulating coins, medals, and commemorative coins for past anniversary celebrations and the announced coins for the semiquincentennial (250th) anniversary.

Circulating Coinage

For two anniversary celebrations—1976 and 2026—Congress authorized the temporary redesign of circulating coins.

1976—200th Anniversary

For 1976, to celebrate the bicentennial, Congress authorized special designs of the quarter, half-dollar, and dollar (P.L. 93-127). Congress specified that the bicentennial coins maintain the same obverse as then-circulating coins, but include two dates—1776 and 1976—rather than the standard single date. Further, “the reverse side of all dollar, half-dollar, and quarter-dollar coins ... shall bear a design determined by the Secretary to be emblematic of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution.” **Figure 1** shows the bicentennial quarter, half-dollar, and dollar coins.

Figure 1. 1976 Bicentennial Coins



Source: U.S. Mint, “1976 Bicentennial Coins,” Image emailed to the author by the U.S. Mint, August 27, 2021.

The bicentennial quarter has a portrait of George Washington on the obverse and a colonial drummer on the

reverse. The bicentennial half-dollar features a portrait of John F. Kennedy on the obverse and Independence Hall on the reverse. The bicentennial dollar includes a portrait of Dwight D. Eisenhower on the obverse and the Liberty Bell and the moon on the reverse.

2026—250th Anniversary

For the 2026 semiquincentennial celebration, Congress authorized the temporary redesign of all circulating coins (P.L. 116-330). The law states that the Secretary of the Treasury is to select coin designs after consultation with the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) and the Citizens Coinage Advisory Committee (CCAC). The law authorizes the Secretary to “change the design” on any circulating coin “during the one-year period beginning January 1, 2026, in celebration of the United States semiquincentennial” (§3). The U.S. Mint has announced new designs for 2026 circulating coins for the semiquincentennial. For more information and images of the 2026 semiquincentennial coins, see CRS In Focus IF13165, *Commemoration of the 250th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence: Coins and Medals*, by Jacob R. Straus.

Commemorative Medals

On two occasions (1876 and 1976), Congress authorized the issuance of commemorative anniversary medals.

1876—100th Anniversary

In 1876, the United States celebrated its 100th anniversary. To help celebrate the centennial, Congress authorized medals be struck to commemorate the “one hundredth anniversary of the first meeting of the Continental Congress and the Declaration of Independence.” The law (18 Stat. 76) stated

That medals with appropriate devices, emblems and inscriptions, commemorative of the Centennial Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence be prepared at the Mint at Philadelphia for the Centennial Board of Finance....

These medals were issued as part of a larger Centennial International Exhibition of 1876 (i.e., Philadelphia World’s Fair). Official medals were struck in silver, bronze, and gilt. The medals featured liberty on the obverse and “In Commemoration of the Hundredth Anniversary of American Independence” on the reverse. **Figure 2** shows the Independence Centennial Medal.

Figure 2. 1876 Centennial Medal



Source: Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, “Independence Centennial Medal,” image emailed to the author by the Smithsonian, September 14, 2021.

1976—200th Anniversary

In February 1972, Congress authorized the U.S. Mint to strike medals for the American Bicentennial in 1976 (P.L. 92-228). The American Revolution Bicentennial Commission (ARBC) determined the medal’s design, subject to the approval of the Secretary of the Treasury. The medal depicts the Statue of Liberty on the obverse with the dates of 1776 and 1976, along with the words “Life Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness,” and five pointed stars on the surround edge [not pictured]. The reverse features the Great Seal of the United States, with the Bicentennial logos, and the words “American Revolution Bicentennial” at the top and “We the People” at the bottom. The ARBC sold the medal to help fund its bicentennial activities. **Figure 3** shows an image of the 1976 Bicentennial Medal.

Figure 3. 1976 National Bicentennial Medal



Source: U.S. Mint, “1976 National Bicentennial Medal.” Image emailed to the author by the U.S. Mint, August 27, 2021.

Commemorative Coins and Numismatic Products

For one anniversary celebration—the 150th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 1926—Congress authorized the issuance of commemorative coins. For the 250th Anniversary, legislation was introduced in the 117th Congress (2021-2022) to authorize commemorative coins for 2026, but was not enacted. For the 250th anniversary in 2026, the Mint has announced several numismatic products. These 2026 numismatic products are not considered to be commemorative coins because they were not specifically authorized by Congress to raise money for a designated recipient group. For more information on commemorative

coins, see CRS In Focus IF10262, *Commemorative Coins: An Overview*, by Jacob R. Straus.

1926—150th Anniversary

In 1926, to celebrate the sesquicentennial (150th anniversary) of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Congress authorized commemorative quarter-eagles (\$2.50 cent coins) and half-dollars (43 Stat. 1254). The quarter-eagles featured Liberty on the obverse and Independence Hall on the reverse, while the half-dollar featured Presidents Washington and Coolidge on the obverse and the Liberty Bell on the reverse. **Figure 4** shows the 1926 sesquicentennial quarter-eagle and half-dollar.

Figure 4. 1926 Sesquicentennial Quarter-eagle and Half-dollar



Source: U.S. Mint, “Sesquicentennial of American Independence Quarter-eagle,” <https://go.usa.gov/xFzcC>; and “Sesquicentennial of American Independence Half-dollar,” <https://go.usa.gov/xFzcg>.

2026—250th Anniversary

For 2026, the U.S. Mint plans to issue several numismatic products. These include a nonround gold coin and silver medal and a “Best of the Mint” series that would honor five historic coins with gold coins that feature the coin’s original design and silver medals that feature a modernized version inspired by the original design. Additionally, the Mint has a proposed gold semiquincentennial coin. For more information on these items, see CRS In Focus IF13165, *Commemoration of the 250th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence: Coins and Medals*.

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