E Pluribus Unum, Part 1

Out of one came many design elements of an obscure and mysterious Latin legend.

TO THE non-numismatist, one of the more puzzling features of U.S. coins is the legend E PLURIBUS UNUM. Few Americans realize this phrase is Latin. Its actual meaning is an even bigger mystery, which fuels the fires of conspiracy theorists who place great significance on supposed Masonic secrets hidden within our coins and paper currency. (Hollywood has capitalized on this suspicion in popular films, such as the two *National Treasure* movies starring Nicholas Cage.) This month I'll attempt to de-mystify the legend and trace its history on U.S. coinage.

The first appearance of E PLURIBUS UNUM seems to have been on the Great Seal of the United States adopted in 1782. The Seal features a bald eagle with its beak grasping a banner inscribed with the legend, which is a clear reference to the then-current Confederation of States.

The phrase was next included on dies engraved in England by Thomas Wyon for a proposed common coinage for the Confederation, a petition that was rejected in 1785. Numismatic researcher and author Walter Breen writes that Walter Mould, seeking not to waste his investment on dies, paired this reverse type with customized obverse dies for the copper coinage of New Jersey.

GREAT SEAL: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

▲ E PLURIBUS UNUM in its early stages on a New Jersey copper produced from 1786 to 1789 (left); a 1792 Kentucky token (center); a 1798 Draped Bust Heraldic half eagle (right), on which the incorrect placement of arrows was an omen of war; and an 1807 half dollar.

These pieces were produced from 1786 to 1789 as a commercial venture, though the last examples were dated 1788. As seen on the Wyon patterns and the circulating New Jersey coppers, the Latin legend encircles a shield similar to that on the Great Seal and later utilized on federal coinage starting in 1795.

The legend's next appearance was on undated copper pieces that American collectors commonly call "Kentucky tokens." These actually are tradesmen's tokens made in Birmingham, England, in the early mid-1790s. Their lettered edges reference British businesses, although the imagery is distinctly American.

Plain-edge examples clearly circulated in the United States for a time, and they are popularly collected as part of the American series. The legend E PLURIBUS UNUM surrounds a pyramid comprised of 15 stars imposed with the first initial of each state. "K" for Kentucky appears on the top-most star, hence the name of the token.

Late in 1795, the federal silver dollar received a new reverse featuring a replica of the Great Seal of the United States. Numerous stylistic differences exist between the original and Robert Scot's 1795 interpretation (the most startling being his transposition of the arrows of war with the olive branch of peace. Proper ▶

COIN PHOTOS: WWW.COINFACTS.COM (LEFT), WWW.COINS.ND.EDU (CENTER), WWW.WIKIMEDIA.ORG (RIGHT) & ANA ARCHIVES

heraldry dictated that the latter occupy the position of dominance within the eagle's dexter (right) claw, indicating a preference for peace. Scot, perhaps forgetting he was engraving a mirror image of the actual coins, placed the arrows of war in the right (and dominant) position. As portrayed on the Great Seal, E PLURIBUS UNUM appears on each of the Heraldic Eagle reverse coins inscribed upon a banner grasped in the eagle's beak.

John Reich's capped bust version of Liberty was paired with his "sandwich board" eagle, and this combination of designs was adapted to various silver and gold denominations starting in 1807. Reich returned the olive branch to its correct position within the eagle's dexter claw; E PLURIBUS UNUM, however, was removed from the eagle's beak and placed on a banner above its head.

William Kneass and Christian Gobrecht slightly revised these designs during 1828-34, yet the legend survived in this position on the half dime, dime and half dollar. Mint Director Samuel Moore objected to its presence, as he considered the phrase redundant on coins already inscribed with UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. He ordered the legend's removal from the modified quarter dollars of 1831-38 and from the reduced-weight quarter eagles and half eagles of 1834-39. In 1836, when Gobrecht produced a sleek, new interpretation of Reich's 1807 design for the half dollar, this coin, too, lost its Latin phrase.

When the country's coin denominations underwent complete design transformations between 1837 and 1840, none carried E PLURIBUS UNUM, and the legend went unused for decades. This is perhaps just as well, as the adoption of the motto IN GOD WE TRUST in 1866 on the larger silver and gold denominations otherwise would have been nearly impossible. The space above the eagle where the phrase was inserted almost certainly would have been occupied with the older legend, since that is where it appeared on the coins of 1807-37. The Mint's engravers would have resembled air-traffic controllers trying to find a suitable location for the new motto to avoid a collision with the old one! Edge lettering, a practice last used at the Mint in 1836, may have been revived for one or both phrases, as it would be in later years.

As the U.S. Mint entered its second century of operation, numerous varied and clever placements of the aging legend E PLURIBUS UNUM followed. Some of these would involve new technology, as artists struggled to squeeze this increasingly obscure and curious phrase onto coins without distracting from their simple beauty. The challenge would be great, and it was not always met successfully.

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E Pluribus Unum, Part 2

Artists were challenged to squeeze this obscure legend onto coins without distracting from their simple beauty.

OUR STUDY of the somewhat puzzling Latin legend "E Pluribus Unum" moves to the mid-19th century, when the only U.S. coin to carry it was the double eagle (gold $20). Introduced in 1850, the issue featured this phrase on a pair of baroque banners that seemingly hung in space at either side of the bald eagle. As few Americans were wealthy enough to use a $20 piece, however, the Latin text was largely unknown.

For the U.S. trade dollar, which debuted in 1873, William Barber placed the Latin legend on a banner above the eagle on the reverse. The newer motto, "In God We Trust," was thus displaced to the obverse. George T. Morgan's fresh design for the standard silver dollar in 1878 incorporated E PLURIBUS UNUM into the obverse in bold letters; this placement was rare before and since.

Charles Barber balanced his reverse design for the new 5-cent piece of 1883 quite nicely with this phrase, only to relocate it a few months later. His omission of the word CENTS had prompted felonious individuals to gold-plate these coins so they would pass as $5 pieces. Thus, E PLURIBUS UNUM was moved to a small space above the wreath to make way for a declaration of value.

When Barber was drafted to create new designs for the fractional silver coinage of 1892, he returned to the Great Seal as a common reverse for the quarter dollar and half dollar. Unlike Robert Scot in 1795, however, Barber got the placement of the arrows and olive branch correct, with the latter in the eagle's right, or dexter, claw.

From this point onward, nearly all U.S. coin types included the Latin phrase, regardless of how awkwardly placed. One example of such ill-conceived placement is James E. Fraser's Indian Head, or Buffalo, nickel. Squeezed into a small space above the bison's back, the lettering is nearly unreadable, even on proofs. Charles Barber sharpened the letters a bit for the Type 2 reverse, but frequent die-clashings in this part of the design often obscured the phrase, which clearly should have been omitted altogether.

Victor Brenner used tiny letters to fit the legend E PLURIBUS UNUM on the Lincoln cent.

More appealing was Augustus Saint-Gaudens' placement of this legend to the right of the bald eagle on the gold $10 piece in 1907. It also provided a nice balance when the motto IN GOD WE TRUST was added to the left of the eagle the following year. To avoid clutter on the more complex design of the double eagle, Saint-Gaudens asked that the Latin phrase be placed on the edge of the coin in raised letters. Though it was a bit of a technical challenge that required a segmented, three-piece collar, the U.S. Mint complied with this request quite successfully.

When the Lincoln cent debuted in 1909, artist Victor D. Brenner was able to fit E PLURIBUS UNUM at the top of the reverse in tiny letters that drew little notice. The design would have benefited from its omission, but this feature evidently satisfied the bureaucracy.

The new fractional silver coins of 1916 drew heavily on classical imagery, and the inclusion of a Latin phrase was entirely in keeping with this theme. Adolph Weinman's dime and Hermon MacNeil's quarter dollar utilized small letters and discreet placement of the legend to help balance their design elements, but Weinman was not so successful with his half dollar. E PLURIBUS UNUM is obviously forced and intrusive, being perhaps the only negative feature of this otherwise magnificent coin.

Awkward, too, is the placement ▶

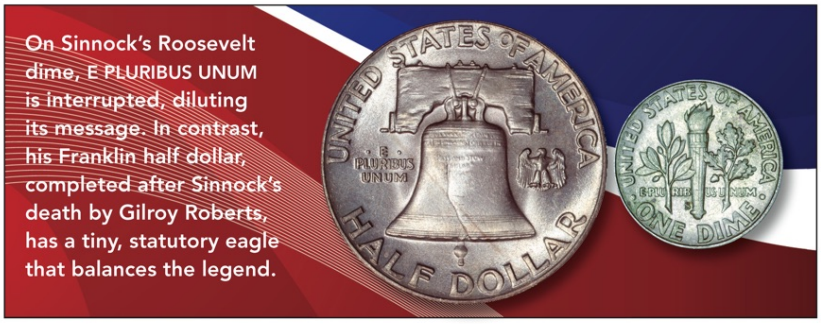
Small letters and discreet placement of E PLURIBUS UNUM balance the reverse design elements on Adolph Weinman's Mercury dime. On his Walking Liberty half dollar, however, the legend appears forced and intrusive.

ILLUSTRATION: ISTOCKPHOTO/GLORY ROBINSON

COIN PHOTOS: ANA ARCHIVES/JOHN NEBEL

of this phrase on John Flanagan's Washington quarter dollar of 1932, a design which has been widely criticized for its crowded reverse. Six years later, Felix Schlag repeated Brenner's solution to fine effect on his new 5-cent piece, though the Mint replaced his original, Art Moderne lettering with a more conventional, Roman font on the final models.

John R. Sinnock's attempt to wrangle this legend onto the Roosevelt dime in 1946 resulted in letters that were interrupted by other design elements, further obscuring its purpose in the eyes of casual viewers. Much more successful was Sinnock's half dollar of 1948, in which E PLURIBUS UNUM balances the tiny eagle added as an afterthought to comply with the law requiring an eagle to appear on all coins of higher value than the dime. Gilroy Roberts actually did most of the sculpting, as Sinnock had died the year before, and this may have been his solution.



The use of the Presidential Seal for the reverse of the Kennedy half dollar automatically incorporated this legend, and it has appeared on every U.S. coin since that time (1964). This archaic Latin text now is written into the laws specifying all new coin types, including commemoratives, and seemingly no one in Congress or at the Mint ever questions its validity.

Illustrating "what's past is prologue," the Mint placed this legend on the edge of each Presidential dollar when this series debuted in 2007, just at it had with the double eagle one century earlier. This resulted in clean and attractive designs (other statutory text, such as IN GOD WE TRUST, was moved to the edge, too), but Congress, responding to complaints of "godless" coins that failed to receive their edge lettering, mandated that both phrases be placed on the face of each new Presidential dollar starting in 2009!

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