

33. Massachusetts Cent

1788 | Boston Common, Downtown



This coin beautifully illustrates a period in history soon after the end of the Revolution in 1783 when the American victors were faced not only with the results of their own success—power and self-rule—but also with the responsibility to set up a new government to fill the gaps left by royal powers.

Boston's population in 1780 was just 10,000 individuals, almost 5,000 less than in 1770, before the war. The flight of the Tories, the flight from the siege, and deaths from fighting were all largely to blame for the decline in population. The first two decades after the Revolution, dramatic rises in population and economic prosperity occurred, after getting off to a slow start; there were 18,000 residents in 1790 and 25,000 by 1800.¹

Several important things occurred after the war in Boston, beginning in the 1780s: the Massachusetts constitution was passed, which declared that “all Men are born free and equal.” This assertion resulted in a lawsuit by the enslaved Elizabeth Freeman (Mum Bett) and the eventual abolishment of slavery in Massachusetts; a lack of demand caused Boston's shipbuilding industry to crash; Boston established its own direct trade with China, resulting in a resurgence of trade in the city; and tremendous numbers of English immigrants began to fill areas such as the North End. Throughout this period, Boston confirmed its place at the political and emotional center of the new nation.²

In 1787, the Constitutional Convention was held in Philadelphia to draft a constitution that would settle disputes that had arisen between states after the Revolution by establishing a strong federal government.

Without a national mint and given the abandonment of the British pound, several states began producing their own coinage. Massachusetts first started producing copper coins in the value of a half-penny and one cent in 1787. The dies were produced by Joseph Callender, an apprentice of Paul Revere, who had a shop on State Street,³ and about 100,000 coins were struck. This coin was struck the following year (obverse shown in figure 33.1), the same year the United States voted in its first president, George Washington.

It was Thomas Jefferson who came up with the idea of establishing the dollar based on the Spanish silver dollar, with subdivisions including the cent ($\frac{1}{100}$ of a dollar), dime ($\frac{1}{10}$ of a dollar), and so on.⁴ A federal resolution in 1785 established Jefferson's ideas as policy, but the local mints throughout the new country used several systems that typically included a percentage copper weight to a troy ounce of silver. Massachusetts was the only mint—at

FIGURE 33.1
Obverse of 1788
Massachusetts cent.



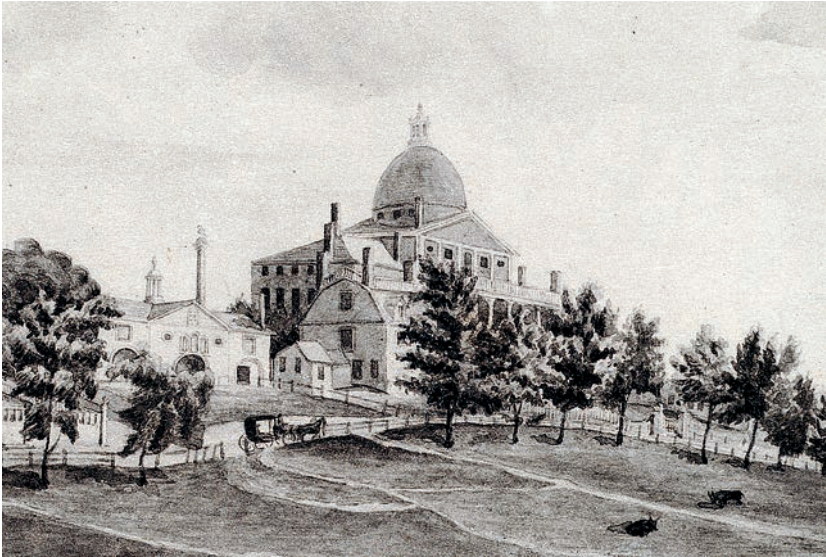


FIGURE 33.2
View of the
Massachusetts
State House built
in 1795 (Curtis
and Cameron
1808–1812 [ca.];
image courtesy of
the Boston Public
Library).

the time including state and private operations—to use the decimal system, establishing the cent as $\frac{1}{100}$ of a dollar.

The confusion of coinage systems, which often resulted in the use of foreign coins for commerce, led in 1792 to the creation of the US Mint, which began creating and circulating the only legal coinage.

The 1788 coin depicts a Massachusett Native American holding a bow and arrow, and features a star above his shoulder. This symbol would later become the Great Seal of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, reflecting the commonwealth's Native heritage as well as establishing the state's self-identity (figure 33.2), which persisted throughout the eighteenth century and on into the present.