Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

*Articles of Confederation.* National Archives, The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, catalog.archives.gov/id/301687.

I used these scans to learn about how the Articles of the Confederation addressed the problems with coinage in the states. Article IX specifically addresses the power Congress has over coinage. While this regulation would become obsolete in following years, it demonstrates the process leading up to the creation of the Mint Act of 1792.


In early 1789, John Beale Bordley published his first essay in support of Jefferson’s plan for decimalization. However, he had the unique opinion that coinage should depict sheep or wheat, representing “employment.” Otherwise, the suggestions in his monograph are similar to Jefferson’s ideas.


This paper eventually led to the Mint Act of 1791, a bill authorizing the creation of the mint. While Hamilton’s plan might have worked if implemented, no money was
set aside to fund the institution. His original proposition is lengthy, with all of his proposed specifications for money given. This paper focused much more on the impact of American coinage in foreign countries than Jefferson’s Notes on Coinage did.


I used this letter to learn whom Robert Morris nominated as director of his mint. In the correspondence, Hopkinson makes his case to Jefferson for why he should be in charge of the mint: namely, his “integrity and attention.” However, David Rittenhouse would ultimately be chosen as the first director in 1792.


This text was Jefferson’s first official proposal for the new coinage system. The masterfully written document succinctly proves the superiority of his plan to Robert Morris’ plan. I believe this document is primary because even though the transcribers melded multiple versions of this report, nothing more significant than spelling errors were changed.

I used this source to determine Maclay’s reaction to Hamilton’s 1791 Mint plan in the Senate. The journal itself was his personal recollections of daily Senate proceedings, and the contents within provide a glimpse into what Congress looked like in the first years of its existence.


This letter describes how the Continental Congress could not raise money to fund a mint. Due to its ineffective tax plan under the Articles of Confederation, the Continental Congress had little money. According to the Articles, Congress could not set or raise taxes.


One of the lesser-known ideas proposed to the government was this article detailing how foreign coinage could be collected and used to fund the production of American paper money. Interestingly, the unknown author agreed with Jefferson’s ideas in exactly one regard: “The calculation of decimals [in money is] an invention that I consider as one of the most honorable of our improvements.”

This scan of the Coinage Act of 1857 helped me learn about how long it took for the United States mint to be fully functioning. Because the output of American coinage was insufficient to meet the public’s needs for the first 65 years, some Spanish coinage was still legal tender. This source is a scan of the original act that removed all foreign coinage as legal tender.


This webpage contains scans of a Congressional report that compiled both the Morris and Jefferson plans for coinage. This allowed me to compare the two ideas side by side. This was also the report where I read the details of Robert Morris’ proposition, which was immensely different than Jefferson’s. While Jefferson’s denominations fit nicely into his decimalized dollar, Morris’ denominations were bulky and difficult to calculate.

United States Senate. “Thursday, January 12, 1792.” Journal of the Senate of the United States of America, 1789-1793, 1792. Library of Congress, memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field(DOCID+@lit(sj001449)).
This resource has a transcription of the first draft of the Mint Act of 1792, from which I learned about the statue requiring the President’s bust to be present on American coinage. This section would spark a debate between the Senate and House of Representatives lasting over a month.


Within this letter, George Washington writes to James Madison about his fear of altered coinage as well as his support for Jefferson’s decimalized dollar. “Mr. Jefferson’s ideas upon this subject are plain and simple…without a coinage, or unless some stop can be put to the cutting and clipping of money…a man must travel with a pair of scales in his pocket.”


This is a primary source because none of the original wording is changed; it is simply a transcription. In his address to Congress, Washington talked about some of the preeminent problems in the states at the time: defense, the post office, uniformity across weights and measures, public debt, and coinage. This speech would at last prompt the Senate to create the Mint Act of 1792, the document that would finally authorize and fund the U.S. Mint.
Secondary Sources


The website of the United States Mint allowed me to find a quote for my penultimate paragraph in order to connect the events of this paper and present day.


This source has excellent information about the conflict between Morris and Jefferson between 1776 and the mid-1780s. I also used it to get a basic timeline of Jefferson’s Notes on Coinage and to learn about Jefferson’s development of the decimal system. Finally, I used it for some quotations in my paper.


I used this source to learn about the fundamentals of mercantilism. Breen describes the system and its beliefs in detail, from which I gleaned historical context and many other facts. Since mercantilism was the main cause of coinage issues in the colonies, this source was especially useful in providing background information.

This book is considered the standard reference for coins of the American colonial period, and it also dedicates a chapter to the contracted cents. I used this chapter to learn about the design elements on the “Fugio” cents and for a quotation about the contract Jarvis signed.


I used this website to learn more about the Nova Constellatio coins, the story behind their striking, and the coins that exist today. One piece recently sold for over one million dollars, which shows the significant impact these coins had on American history. I was also able to acquire the image for Appendix B from this source.


This webpage had excellent information on the contracted cents, nicknamed “Fugio” cents because of the Latin motto Fugio, meaning “I fly,” which appears in the design. The authors specifically addressed Jarvis’ bribe and Samuel Broome’s failures.

This article is one of the most comprehensive references on the coins Morris struck, nicknamed “Nova Constellatio.” This publication also described the technical process used to strike the coins, which shows the effort Morris went through to produce his coins and establish his mint. I used this article for background information about the plan, coinage, and hiring of Benjamin Dudley.


The American Numismatic Society has published many pieces of original research since their founding in 1858, and this monograph was written in 1992 about the money in the 13 colonies. I was specifically able to use a table he compiled of the coins in circulation in the late 1700s. Beyond listing the denominations and types, he also listed weights, which provided a fascinating insight into the variety of coins present in the economy of the colonies.


This article is a detailed memoir about William Barton, one of the people who proposed an “alternative” coinage plan. It was through this publication that I discovered his occupation and his connection with famous scientist and future mint director David Rittenhouse. I used this source to learn about one of the people who contributed to the formation of American coinage, and how his background motivated his proposition.

This book provided me general information and a guideline for the span of years between 1776 and 1792. It contained an excellent summary of the monetary problems in the colonies and a description of Thomas Jefferson’s and Robert Morris’ actions. One chapter gave a detailed description of the debate over coinage legislation between October 25, 1791, and April 2, 1792. I was also able to use this source to discover new sources which gave me more information.


This book has over one hundred pages of quotations from primary sources and his analysis, which I used to identify the major monetary events between 1776-1792. One piece of information I learned from this book was that Gouverneur Morris had actually written out most of Robert Morris’ coinage plan.