

# The Story of the Buffalo Nickel



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The **Buffalo nickel** or **Indian Head nickel** was a copper-nickel (75% copper and 25% nickel) five-cent piece struck by the United States Mint from 1913 to 1938. It was designed by sculptor James Earle Fraser.



From the very beginning, the history of The Buffalo nickel reflected the desire to depict the history and highlight the spirit of independence of the American West. Said, designer Fraser, “Well, when I was asked to do a nickel, I felt I wanted to do something totally American—a coin that could not be mistaken for any other country’s coin. It occurred to me that the buffalo, as part of our western background, was 100% American, and that our North American Indian fitted into the picture perfectly”

## **The Coin**

However, the story of the Buffalo nickel starts some years before during the administration of President Theodore Roosevelt. In 1904 President Roosevelt expressed his dissatisfaction with the artistic state of American coinage. Remember back in 1904? No, of course, you don’t; but the American coin scene was in deplorable condition, no disrespect intended to [Mint Chief Engraver] Charles E. Barber. The dollar coin was the head of Ms. Liberty (Morgan dollar), the half dollar was the head of Ms. Liberty (Barber), the Liberty head quarter dollar (Barber), the Liberty head dime (Barber), the Liberty head Nickel (V Nickel), the Liberty head Double Eagle... get the picture?

Theodore Roosevelt was known as being an energetic personality, a lifelong naturalist, an army war hero, and a cattle rancher, as well as a US president. Roosevelt embodied the rugged individualist, fiercely independent explorer and pioneer associated with settling the US west. As president, Roosevelt established the United States Forest Service and signed into law the creation of five National Parks. He also established the first 51 Bird Reserves, four Game Preserves, and 150 National Forests. The area of the United States that he placed under public protection totals approximately 230,000,000 acres. Consequently, his challenge that eventually resulted in the creation of the Buffalo Nickel was especially appropriate.

As part of a drive to beautify the coinage, five denominations of US coins received new designs between 1907 and 1909. In 1911, Taft administration officials decided to replace Charles E. Barber’s Liberty Head design for the nickel, and commissioned Fraser to do the work. They were impressed by Fraser’s designs showing a Native American and an American bison. Fraser completed the models by June 1912, and prepared coin-size electrotypes. He brought the models and electrotypes to Washington on July 10, where they met with the enthusiastic agreement of Secretary of the Treasury, Franklin MacVeagh.

In July 1912, word of the new design became publicly known, and coin-operated machine manufacturers sought information. Replying to the inquiries, MacVeagh wrote that there would be no change in the diameter, thickness, or weight of the nickel. This satisfied most firms. However, Clarence Hobbs of the Hobbs Manufacturing Company, of Worcester, Massachusetts which made mechanisms to detect slugs in nickel-operated machines requested further information. Discussions continued for most of the rest of 1912, with Hobbs demanding various changes to the design, to which the artist was reluctant to agree. In December 1912,

when the Hobbs Company submitted a modified design for the nickel, MacVeagh strongly opposed it. So, although the designs were approved in July 1912, they were delayed until February 1913, when Secretary MacVeagh decided to issue the coins despite the objections.

The first coins to be distributed were given out on February 22, 1913, when then President, William Howard Taft presided at groundbreaking ceremonies for the National American Indian Memorial at Fort Wadsworth, Staten Island, New York. [The memorial, a project of department store magnate Rodman Wanamaker, was never built, and today the site is occupied by an abutment for the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge.] Forty nickels were sent by the Mint for the ceremony; most were distributed to the Native American chiefs who participated. The coins were officially released to circulation on March 4, 1913, and quickly gained positive comments as depicting truly American themes.

On March 11, 1913, Charles E. Barber wrote that the dies were being used up three times faster than with the Liberty Head nickel. His department was straining to produce enough new dies to meet production. In addition, the date and denomination were the points on the coin most subject to wear, and the Superintendent of the Philadelphia Mint, John H. Landis, feared the value on the coin would be worn away entirely. Barber made proposed revisions, which Fraser approved after being sent samples. These changes enlarged the legend "FIVE CENTS" and changed the ground on which the bison stands from a hill (Type 1) to flat ground (Type 2). Additionally, the thickness of the numerals in the date were gradually increased, making them more durable; however the problem was never completely solved and even many later-date Buffalo nickels have the date worn away.

The piece was struck more than 1.2 billion times in all, and at all three mints (Philadelphia, Denver and San Francisco). In 1921, a recession began, and no nickels at all were struck the following year, 1922. Also, no nickels were struck in 1932, nor in 1933.

When the Buffalo nickel had been in circulation for the minimum 25 years, it was replaced with little discussion or protest. The problems of die life and weak striking had never been solved, and Mint officials advocated its replacement. In January 1938, the Mint announced an open competition for a new nickel design, to feature early President Thomas Jefferson on the obverse, and Jefferson's home, Monticello, on the reverse. The last Buffalo nickels were struck in April 1938, at the Denver Mint, the only mint to strike them that year. On October 3, 1938, production of the Jefferson nickel began, and they were released into circulation on November 15.

## **The Models**

Although the identity of the Native Americans whom Fraser used as models is somewhat uncertain, due to various claims over the years, in December 1913, he wrote to Mint Director Roberts that his purpose was not to make a portrait but a type and that he had used three Indians for the piece. Further, in 1938, Fraser clarified, stating that the three Indians had been "Iron Tail, a Sioux, Big Tree, a Kiowa, and Two Moons, a Cheyenne".

According to Fraser, the animal that appears on the reverse is the American bison Black Diamond. In an interview published in the New York Herald on January 27, 1913, Fraser was quoted as saying that the animal was a "typical and shaggy specimen" which he found at the Bronx Zoo. Fraser later wrote that the model "was not a plains buffalo, but none other than Black Diamond, the contrariest animal in the Bronx Zoo".

However, Black Diamond was never at the Bronx Zoo, but instead lived at the Central Park Zoo until his death in 1915. As the placement of Black Diamond's horns differed considerably from that of the animal on the nickel, it led to doubts that Black Diamond was Fraser's model. One candidate cited by numismatic historian and coin dealer Q. David Bowers, is Bronx, a bison who was for many years the herd leader of the bison at the Bronx Zoo.

## The Artist



The coin was designed by James Earle Fraser, a student of legendary sculptor and designer of the Eagle and Double Eagle coins, Augustus Saint-Gaudens. James Earle Fraser was born November 4, 1876, in Winoona, Minnesota. He grew up on the plains in Mitchell, South Dakota where he experienced the flavor of the west, pioneers and Native Americans which significantly influenced his later work. He studied art at the Art Institute of Chicago, and at the Academie Julian and Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. He completed his best known piece, “End of the Trail” in 1894 before he was 17 years old. Some of Fraser’s other noted works include statues of Thomas Jefferson, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark (State Capitol Building, Jefferson City, Mo.), Alexander Hamilton (United States Treasury Building, Washington, D.C.) and a seated Thomas Edison (Edison Institute, Dearborn, Mich.). Fraser died October 11, 1953, in Westport, CT.

## The Rest of the Story

The Buffalo nickel was much admired as an elegant design and has always been a symbol of the heritage of the United States. Its embodiment was simply plagued by operational shortcomings in the engraving and minting process. Consequently, the United States Mint revived the popular design in 2001 with the release of the American Buffalo Commemorative Coin and again as a gold coin in 2006.



Additionally, the American Bison was brought back in 2005 as part of the commemoration of the bicentennials of the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark expedition, being depicted on the reverse side of the Jefferson nickel as part of the Westward Journey Nickel Series.