

New Evidence Shows that Two Half Eagle

Varieties do *Not* Exist

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For more than eight years, I have been studying Carson City half eagles and verifying the existence of the listed die varieties within this series. I have been using the book, *Gold Coins of the Old West, The Carson City Mint 1870 – 1893* by Douglas Winter and Lawrence Cutler, published in 1994, as my guide to this series. This reference book provides large, clear pictures for most of the die varieties so that a positive identification can be made. I have personally examined several hundred pieces over the years, and have searched auction catalogues and the Heritage Auction online archive in an attempt to identify examples for each of the listed varieties.

I have been successful in locating examples for most of the listed varieties, but I have *not* been able to find an 1875-CC Variety 1-A half eagle or an 1877-CC Variety 1-A half eagle. These varieties are listed in the reference book but the pictures provided are not of actual coins. Instead, the images presented are scans of photographs from the book *United States Gold Coins, an Analysis of Auction Records, Volume IV, Half Eagles* by David W. Akers, published in 1979. I can find no other reference to these varieties! One might say that the two varieties are just very rare and that I have not searched hard enough for them, but I believe that there is another reason why they have not appeared on the market in recent years.

The reverse images for the 1875-CC and 1877-CC half eagles illustrated in the Akers book have not been verified by actual coins. Suppose that while the Akers book was being written, the author or one of his assistants interchanged the reverse pictures for the 1875-CC and 1877-CC half eagles! The two extremely rare and

unverified 1-A varieties now become examples of the 1-B varieties for their respective years, very common die pairs for each date. While this theory offers a reasonable explanation for the listing of two unverified varieties, it is yet another thing to prove that such an error was actually made some thirty years ago.

I needed some real evidence to prove that an error was made in the 1979 reference book, so I spoke to David Akers at the 2008 ANA convention in Baltimore and asked him about the procedures used in obtaining the pictures for his book. He indicated that many of the pictures were of coins from the National Collection at the Smithsonian Institution, and that they were taken by Larry Stevens, who developed the film and identified the prints by date and mint after they were developed. Akers indicated that he was very careful when placing the photographs and checked each image to make sure that it was on its proper page. However, the images were created from negatives on rolls of film and then marked after they were developed. Akers indicated that he could not rule out the possibility that two prints could have been transposed at some time during the process. He then indicated that Tom Mulvaney had photographed some of the same coins from the National Collection at the Smithsonian Institution for the book, *Encyclopedia of U.S. Gold Coins 1795 – 1933* by Jeff Garrett and Ron Guth, published in 2006.

With this lead, I then contacted Tom Mulvaney at the ANA convention and asked him about his procedure in obtaining images for the gold encyclopedia in 2006. He indicated that he had taken high resolution digital images of the coins for the encyclopedia and had identified the date and mint on the images as they were being taken. He was therefore confident that all of his images were correctly identified and properly placed in the encyclopedia. He also stated that while many



Image of the 1875-CC half eagle from Encyclopedia of U. S. Gold Coins 1795 - 1933 by Jeff Garrett and Ron Guth. The coin is from the Smithsonian Institution's National Numismatic Collection. Tom Mulvaney took the pictures.

of the coins illustrated in the encyclopedia were from the National Collection, some were obtained from other sources. However, he identified the coins from the National Collection with a gold star at the lower right of the image.

With the information I received from Akers and Mulvaney, I returned home and started to compare images from the Akers book with those in the Garrett and Guth encyclopedia. After a careful review of several of the images in these books, I found the evidence I needed to prove that an error had been made in the placement of the pictures in the Akers book. The photograph of the 1875-CC half eagle in the Garrett and Guth encyclopedia is an illustration of an example from the National Collection as indicated by the gold star to the lower right of the image. A review of the Akers images shows that the **same coin** is illustrated in the Akers book. This specific coin can be positively identified by surface nicks and toned areas on both illustrations in the two books. The image of this coin as shown in the Garrett and Guth encyclopedia is illustrated with this article.

The illustrations for the obverse of the 1875-CC half eagle in both books show a defect below the left edge of the digit 7 in the date. There are also defects on the bust to the right of Liberty's mouth, to the right of her eye and to the left of the two curls on her neck. There is also a field mark midway between the first and second stars and Liberty's neck. All of these defects are minor, but they clearly indicate that the same coin is illustrated in both books.

The illustration for the reverse of the 1875-CC half eagle in the Garrett and Guth encyclopedia has a number of defects that can be used as markers to identify this coin. There is a defect in the field between the eagle's neck and the wing on the left, another in the field just below the lower beak, another in the field between the neck and the wing on the right and still another in the field just above the

head. There is a small defect on the left edge of the shield just below the second set of vertical stripes. There is some dark toning through the F in OF and to the right of this letter near the tip of the wing. There is also dark toning through the D in the denomination as well as through other letters on the reverse. These features make a picture of this coin easy to recognize when it appears in another book.

An illustration of the 1875-CC half eagle reverse from the Garrett and Guth encyclopedia does appear in the Akers book, but it has been placed on the page for the 1877-CC half eagle. That is to say, the picture for the reverse of the 1875-CC half eagle has been placed in a position to represent the reverse of an 1877-CC half eagle in the Akers book. This implies that the die pairs for the 1875-CC and 1877-CC half eagles do not represent actual coins but misplaced pairs from different coins. Since the only known references for the 1-A varieties for these two years are scanned images from the Akers book, I must conclude that the 1875-CC Variety 1-A and 1877-CC Variety 1-A half eagles **do not exist**.

(Images courtesy of Jim Hughes, Associate Curator of the National Numismatic Collection at the Smithsonian Institution)