

THE LOST DIE

By Steve M. Tompkins

One of the most intriguing and much sought after die combinations, are the ones found with the reverse denominational error showing a 25 punched over 50. These examples are found in the Early Bust Quarter series and are on two different die marriages six years apart. They are the 1822 Browning-2 and 1828 Browning-3 die marriages, which share this unique reverse die. The 1822 B-2, which is a very rare and much coveted die marriage, commands a healthy price premium over the more common 1822 B-1. The 1828 B-3 die marriage while not as rare, is still considered scarce, and trades at a higher level than the other 1828's. Interestingly enough, in the early days of collecting, most collectors would choose to pass over these diverse varieties, preferring instead to find a coin with a "perfect" obverse and reverse.

Walter Breen mentions in his 1992 update of Browning's **Early Quarter Dollars of the United States**, that this die was made in 1822 and "...was laid aside in horror, becoming one of Scot's closet skeletons..." (in reference to the then current mint engraver Robert Scot). In his **Complete Encyclopedia of U.S. Coins** published in 1988, Breen stated that this reverse die "...was briefly resurrected in 1828, when the new Mint Engraver William Kneass could blame it on his late predecessor, and excuse its exhumation on grounds of economy." As far as my research has found, his slanderous comments against Scot were based solely on his opinion and not on any known facts, as are many of Breen's comments, conjectures and outright fables.

It is my contention that **this reverse die was engraved in 1818 not in 1822!** It would be four years after it's original creation before it would have its first opportunity to become one of our most fascinating early federal coinage anomalies.

To determine when this 1822 B-2 / 1828 B-3 reverse die was originally engraved, one can look at many different aspects and telltale signs found on the die itself and therefore the coins struck from that die.

First, when working dies are prepared, certain devices are initially transferred from a master die hub or punch. For the reverse in the Large Capped Bust Quarter series, these devices consisted of the central eagle motif with a blank shield and the ribbon above, already containing the motto *E Pluribus Unum*. On many die marriages of this type there is a die defect or damage visible on the underside of the ribbon just under the S in *Pluribus*. (See **Fig. 1**)



Figure 1

This defect is *not* present on the 1815 reverse or two of the 1818 reverses, but *is* present on all other reverses through 1828, *except* for 1822 B-2 and 1828 B-3, which share the common blundered reverse. It appears that the defect or damage had occurred early in 1818 on either the master hub and was not just part of an individual working die due to its appearance on many different reverse dies. (See **Table 1**)

Secondly, look at the shape of the over punched 2 in the denomination shown in **Figure 2**. This curl base style punch (*Type 2*) that was repunched over the erroneously punched 5, was the same one used in all of the 1818 die marriages and in the 1819 B-3 and B-4 marriages. (See **Table 1** for a listing of these marriages). At first glance, the style of the 2 looks more like the flat-based 2 used after 1819 (*Type 3*) due to the upward serif off the lower right side. But when put under close scrutiny one can see that this serif is from the previously punched 5, with the outer curve of the 5 lining up with the end of the base of the 2, not from the 2 punch itself. (See **Fig. 2**)



Figure 2

Third, the shape of the repunched 5 is more consistent with the ones used in 1818 and 1819 (*Type 2* - again, See **Table 1**), however it was strengthened and made heavier with a hand graver, possibly to cover up more of the under digit. If the die had been “*laid aside in horror*” as per Breen, I doubt it would have been resurrected in 1822, let alone repunched, in fact double repunched at the 5, with the correct denomination as it surely was in 1818 not 1822!



Type 1
Plain Top
Curl Base 2

Large
Curved Top
Plain Knob 5

Type 2
Plain Top
Curl Base 2

Small
Straight Top
Plain Knob 5

Type 3
Fancy Top
Flat Base 2

Type 3
Curved Top
Ball Knob 5

Type 4
Fancy Top
Curl Base 2

Type 3
Curved Top
Ball Knob 5

Fourth, if one counts the number of dentils on this die and compares that number to all of the reverse dies from 1815-1828, you will find that the total for the 1822 B-2 and 1828 B-3 is 115, which is more consistent with a majority of the dies of 1818 rather than any of the later years. (See **Table 1**)

TABLE 1

| DATE | DIE MARRIAGE | REV DENTIL COUNT | RIBBON DEFECT | 2 TYPE IN DENOMINATION | 5 TYPE IN DENOMINATION | MIDDLE TALON BROKEN AT ARROWSHAFT |
|------|--------------|------------------|---------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1815 | B-1 | 101 | | 1 | 1 | |
| 1818 | B-1 | 85 | X | 1 | 1 | |
| | B-2 | 123 | | 2 | 2 | |
| | B-3 | 123 | | 2 | 2 | |
| | B-4 | 127 | X | 2 | 2 | |
| | B-5 | 127 | X | 2 | 2 | |
| | B-6 | 118 | X | 2 | 2 | |
| | B-7 | 118 | X | 2 | 2 | |
| | B-8 | 116 | | 2 | 2 | |
| | B-9 | 118 | X | 2 | 2 | |
| | B-10 | 118 | X | 2 | 2 | |
| 1819 | B-1 | 120 | X | 3 | 3 | |
| | B-2 | 122 | X | 3 | 3 | |
| | B-3 | 124 | X | 2 | 2 | |
| | B-4 | 124 | X | 2 | 2 | |
| 1820 | B-1 | 122 | X | 3 | 3 | X |
| | B-2 | 121 | X | 3 | 3 | X |
| | B-3 | 121 | X | 3 | 3 | |
| | B-4 | 123 | X | 3 | 3 | X |
| | B-5 | 121 | X | 3 | 3 | X |
| 1821 | B-1 | 123 | X | 3 | 3 | X |
| | B-2 | 122 | X | 3 | 3 | X |
| | B-3 | 123 | X | 3 | 3 | X |
| | B-4 | 121 | X | 3 | 3 | X |
| | B-5 | 123 | X | 3 | 3 | X |
| | B-6 | 119 | X | 3 | 3 | |
| 1822 | B-1 | 123 | X | 3 | 3 | X |
| | B-2 | 115 | | 2 | 2 | |
| 1823 | B-1 | 124 | X | 3 | 3 | X |
| 1824 | B-1 | 124 | X | 3 | 3 | X |
| 1825 | B-1 | 124 | X | 3 | 3 | X |
| | B-2 | 122 | X | 3 | 3 | X |
| | B-3 | 126 | X | 3 | 3 | X |
| 1827 | B-1 | 123 | X | 4 | 3 | X |
| | B-2 | 122 | X | 3 | 3 | |
| 1828 | B-1 | 123 | X | 4 | 3 | X |
| | B-2 | 124 | X | 3 | 3 | X |
| | B-3 | 115 | | 2 | 2 | |
| | B-4 | 122 | X | 4 | 3 | X |

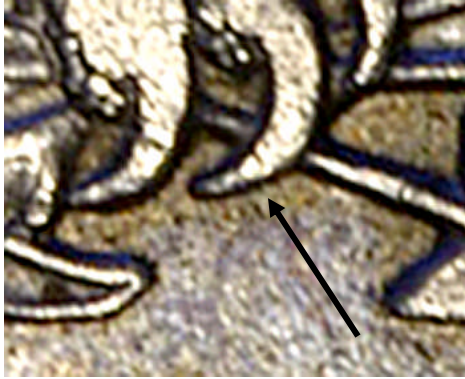


Figure 3

Remembering that the eagle motif was part of the master hub or punch, this claw section evidently was broken off at some point on the master hub and this defect was then transferred to all of the subsequent working dies for the rest of the series. We find that the blundered die has the characteristics of the earlier dies with a complete claw, not the later ones showing a broken one. All of these clues combine to show us that the die was indeed prepared in 1818 not 1822.

And Finally, when looking at the eagle's middle left talon (the reader's right), one finds that the earlier dies have the talon extending below the lower arrow shaft, as shown in **Figure 3**, and on the later dies it is broken off and ends at the shaft (see **Figure 4**). The die marriages showing these differences are compiled in **Table 1**.

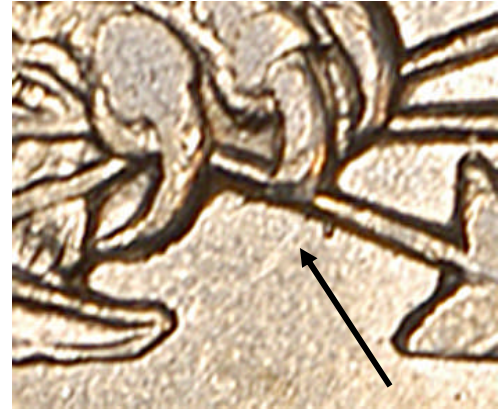


Figure 4

CONCLUSIONS

Through various observations of the many different devices found on coin dies one can come to some conclusions as to the order of manufacture or the engraving of dies, however one can sometimes only guess at a true striking sequence. If we take the premise that the reverse dies were continuously used until damaged or there was a design change, then the new reverses were engraved as needed and not necessarily at the beginning of every year. Regardless of when they were engraved, they could be used in multiple years as long as they were serviceable. Such natural occurrences are shown repeatedly in the large Capped Bust Quarter series, especially in 1820-21, where the reverse dies were used with multiple die marriages across different years and in many other denominations as well.

With this in mind, it isn't hard to imagine the sequence of events that may have taken place in late 1817 or early 1818. When this particular reverse die was engraved and all of the devices were added to the working die, the denomination was accidentally punched with the numerals for a half dollar and not the quarter dollar! After effacing the die to try and remove the error as much as possible, it was repunched with the correct numerals. Then, seeing that they had punched the 5 numeral too low, they tried to grind this out and re-punched it once again. (*The lapping or grinding off of the mis-punched 5 that was too low also affected the dentils, as they are much shorter, flatter, and wider than the surrounding dentils due to this process*). The result of this was a die showing an absolute mess at the denomination more properly labeled as **25 over 5 over 50!**

Keep in mind that due to the numeral punches used, this attempt to correct the error had to have been accomplished in 1818, as different style numeral punches were employed before 1822. After all of this corrective work, the still unused blundered die was put away at the time in favor of other dies. It was only pressed into service in 1822, when Robert Scot was nearing the end of his life and it took more effort to prepare dies, or due to his inability to create them as fast as the production needs would dictate. My guess is, and it's only a guess, that late in the production run of 1822 another die was needed and the only completed one was this blundered die. So for expediency, it was used to complete the 1822 production run. Possibly this was the group struck for delivery on 12/20/1822 (Warrant #905), a total of 8,572 coins. This total of struck coins would account nicely for the scarcity of the 1822 B-2 die marriage.

Since it was only used for a limited time, the blundered reverse die was still in good serviceable condition when the run of 1822 bust quarters was finished and it was again put back into the coiners vault. It would be another 6 years before it was once again pressed into service at the end of the 1828 production run to produce the scarce 1828 B-3 die marriage. Again, it would survive the striking of this die marriage as currently there are no known 1828 B-3 coins showing any reverse die cracks, just a small amount of rust damage due to improper storage of the die. One can only wonder if the coinage redesign of 1831 hadn't taken place, if this prolific and still usable die would again have had its day!

How is it possible for a die to be put away and forgotten for four years, that was prepared early in the 1818 production run (when more reverse dies were needed and produced), after taking countless man-hours to create and great effort to correct? Then, in 1822, after being pulled out of obscurity and put into brief production, it was once again retired and forgotten for *another* 6 years! Perhaps the only way we will ever know for sure what took place will be when someone invents a time machine so that we can go back and see for ourselves how this became...*The Lost Die!*



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