

Off the Shelf:

Newcomb's Book on the Cents of 1801–03

by David F. Fanning

In 1925, Howard R. Newcomb published *The United States Cents of the Years 1801–1802–1803* (Figure 1).¹ It was the first of three important volumes penned by Newcomb and George H. Clapp that did much to revitalize the study of early-date United States large cents.² Newcomb would go on to pen his masterpiece *United States Copper Cents, 1816–1857*, which remained the standard work on the middle- and late-date cents until recent years.³

Newcomb's 1925 study was published in a tall quarto format, in an edition that has been estimated at only 100 copies, but which was probably somewhat higher. It was well-received, with Dr. Sheldon famously writing that the book "marks a milestone in the cent literature. Approaching a field which had been left almost in chaos by the Doughty book, Newcomb assembled a vast quantity of numismatic material, ordered and reordered it, finally set up a new classificational system and a list which seemed adequate; and after testing the new list for upwards of a decade, published. The verdict of time on this work has been favorable."⁴ The book was published with five photographic plates, finer in quality than anything that had been published previously.

Of foremost concern to Newcomb was that the work be as accurate and complete as possible. He was realistic enough to know that it wouldn't be the final word on the subject, but he did his best to write a truly comprehensive reference. When Newcomb's die combination 1803 5^b = I^d was discovered after the page on which it belonged was already set, he had the relevant attribution points printed on slips on paper that were then tipped into the margin. As further data came to his attention, he updated unsold copies of the book by hand in pencil, so that buyers would find the latest information available.

The discovery of an entirely new variety, however, required more extensive measures. In January 1928, Newcomb issued a new plate, giving both the relevant text and a photograph of 1803 No. 24, which has a previously unknown reverse die, designated S. In October 1928, the 1801 No. 13 variety was published, with a previously unknown reverse die designated I (known only through an advanced die state and so designated I^b). Finally, in July 1931, Newcomb published 1801 No. 14, with a previously unknown reverse die designated J.

Collectors of large cent literature are aware that copies of Newcomb on 1801–03 are often encountered with two supplementary plates.⁵ What is less well known is that there are two varieties of each plate.

The plate issued for 1803 No. 24 exists in two rather similar versions (Figures 2 and 3). In fact, they are identical except for the photograph of the S reverse and the citation of Elmer S. Sears as discoverer. The photograph in the two variations is of the same coin (there only being one known example at the time), but on the one version it appears darker and less distinct. This, coupled with the fact that Sears is credited

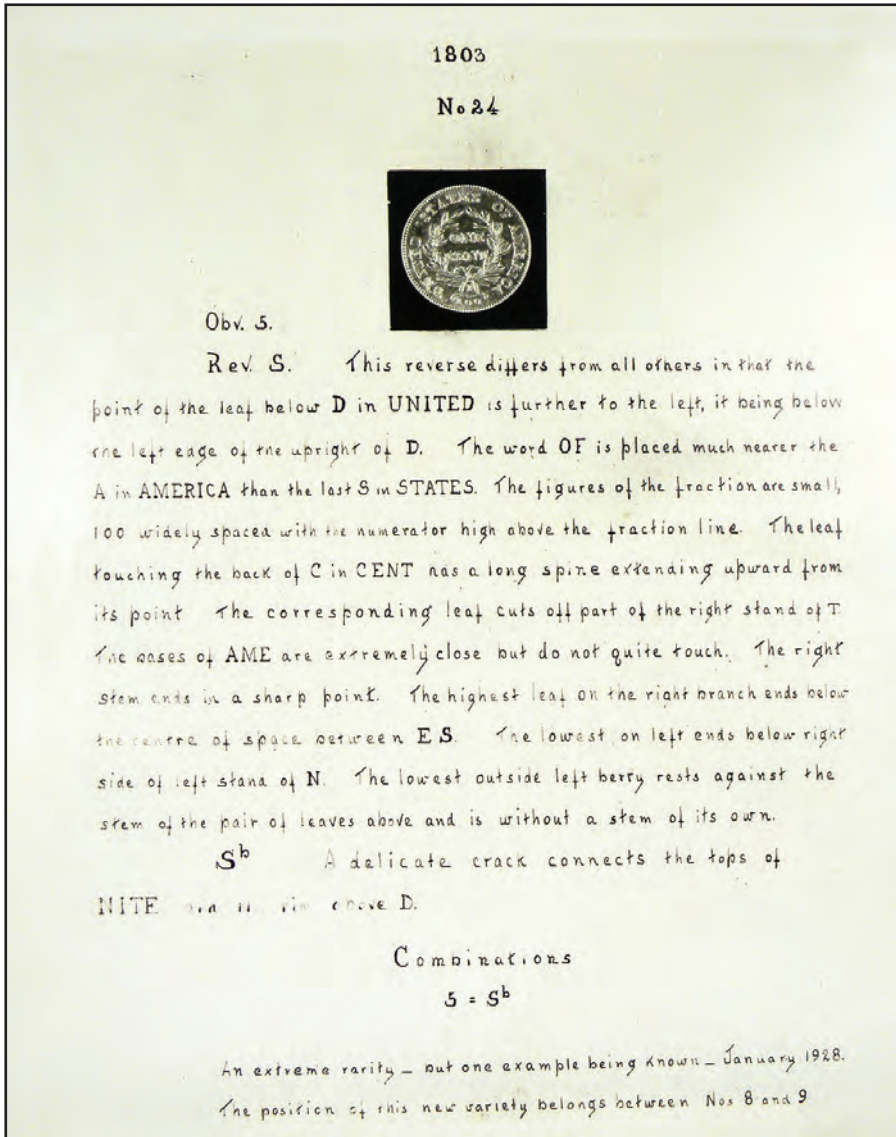


Figure 2: The first version prepared of the January 1928 supplementary plate for 1803 No. 24.

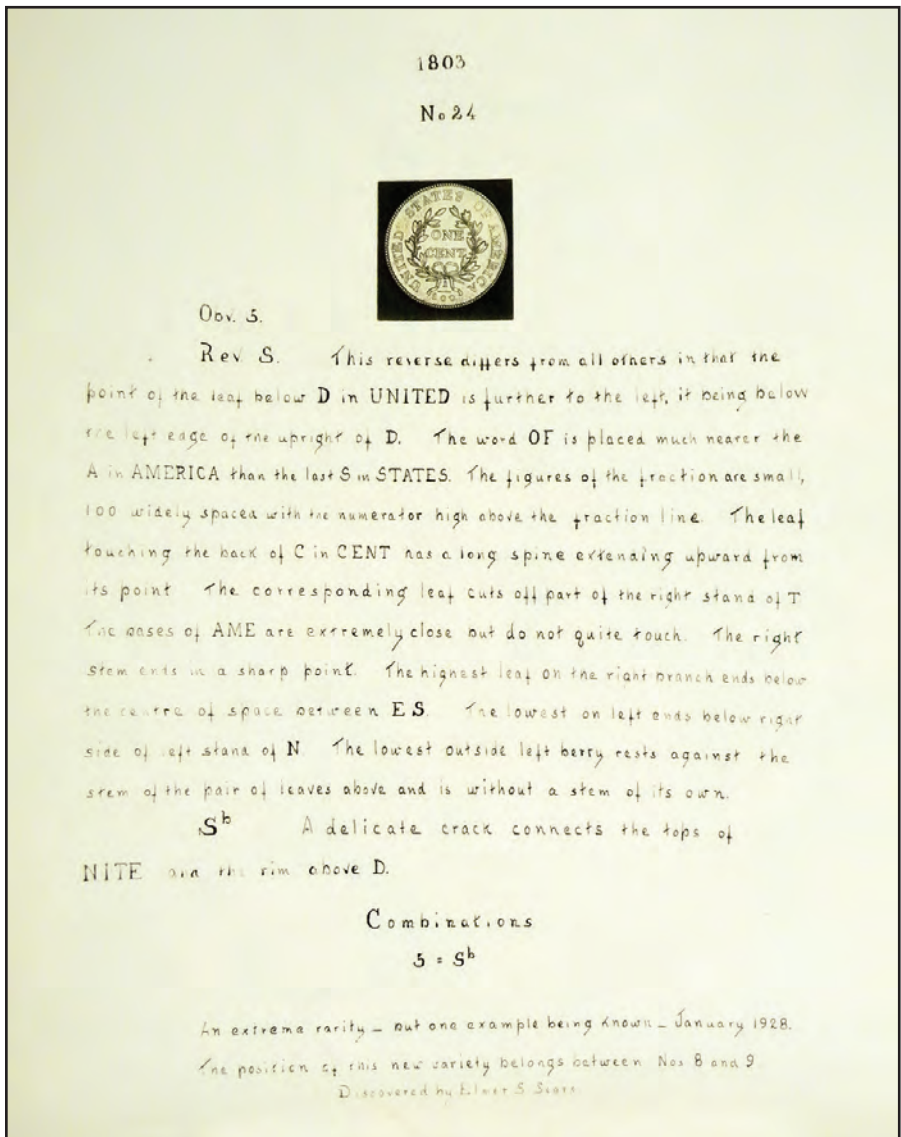


Figure 3: The second version prepared of the January 1928 supplementary plate for 1803 No. 24.

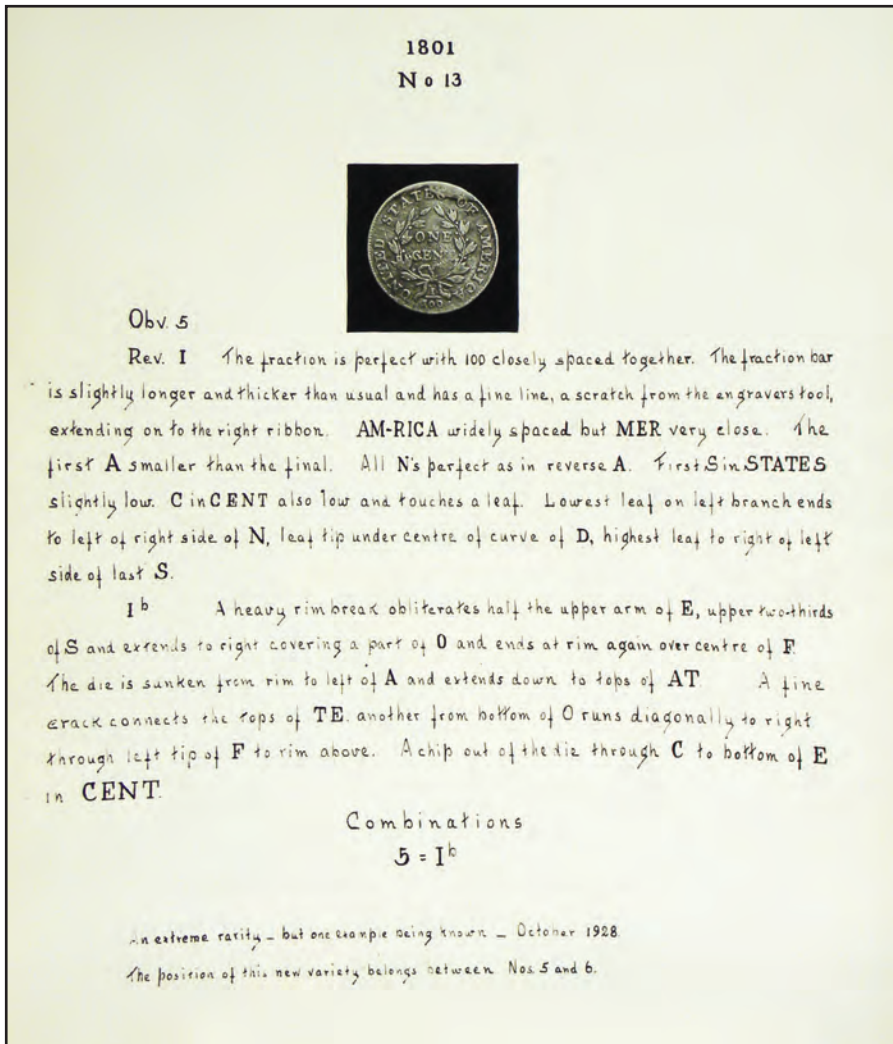


Figure 4: The October 1928 plate prepared to announce 1801 No. 13.

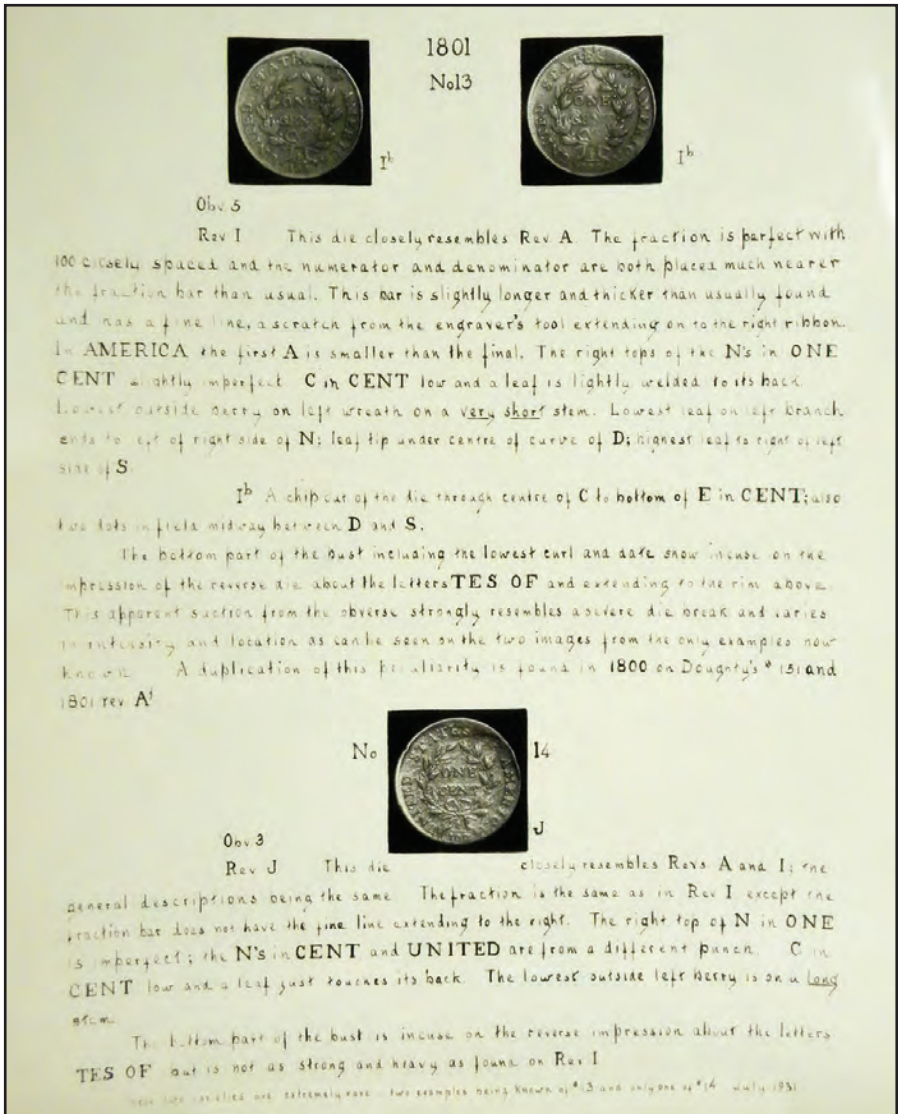


Figure 5: The July 1931 plate depicting 1801 varieties Nos. 13 and 14.

with the discovery on the variation with a more clear image, leads me to believe that the uncredited version with the darker image was produced first. Being found unsatisfactory, a more pleasing version was prepared—at which time Sears was added at the bottom of the plate.

The two versions of the other plate are more substantially different. A supplementary plate dated October 1928 exists providing the text for 1801 No. 13 and a photo of the new reverse die I (Figure 4). Almost three years later, another 1801 variety was discovered (No. 14), and Newcomb decided to prepare an entirely new supplementary plate giving the text for both varieties and depicting their reverses (Figure 5). Indeed, he chose to depict two separate examples of the 1801 No. 13 reverse I die on the new plate, which is dated July 1931.

As the differences in these supplemental plates are not generally known, they have not been remarked upon in the descriptions of copies of Newcomb's book when offered for sale. Hence, I have no real data to offer on rarity. That said, I would suspect the first version of the 1803 plate to be scarcer than the second, if only because it would seem that the second was produced to correct for inadequacies in the first. I would suspect that the second version of the 1801 plate is more common than the first because Newcomb would have replaced the old supplementary plate with the new one in any copies remaining available for sale. In both cases, though, these are just suppositions. Regardless, it is another aspect of this groundbreaking work to take into consideration.

Notes

1. Newcomb, Howard R. *The United States Cents of the Years 1801–1802–1803*. Detroit, 1925.
2. The others are Clapp's *The United States Cents of the Years 1798–1799* (Sewickley, 1931) and Clapp and Newcomb's joint production *The United States Cents of the Years 1795, 1796, 1797 and 1800* (New York, 1947).
3. Newcomb, Howard R. *United States Copper Cents, 1816–1857*. New York, 1944.
4. Sheldon, William H., Dorothy I. Paschal and Walter Breen. *Penny Whimsy. A Revision of Early American Cents, 1793–1814. An Exercise in Descriptive Classification with Tables of Rarity and Value*. New York, 1958. Page 23.
5. These supplementary plates are lacking from the 1976 reprint.



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