

# Three-cent piece (United States coin)

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The [United States three cent piece](#) was a unit of currency equaling 3/100th of a [United States dollar](#). The mint produced two different three-cent [coins](#): the three-cent [silver](#) and the three-cent [nickel](#). Its purchasing power in 1851 would be equivalent to \$0.78 today.

## History

The three cent coin has an unusual history. It was proposed in 1851 both as a result of the decrease in [postage](#) rates from five cents to three and to answer the need for a small-denomination, easy-to-handle coin. The three cent silver featured a shield on a six sided star on the obverse and the [Roman numeral](#) III on the reverse. The coin was initially composed of 75% silver and 25% [copper](#) to ensure that the coin would be considered real currency yet not worth [melting down](#) for the silver. The coins were physically the lightest weight coins ever minted by the United States, weighing only 4/5 of a gram and with a diameter smaller than a modern dime and only slightly greater than the smallest gold dollars. The silver coins were known as "fishscales". The term "trimes" is often used today for these coins but that was first used by the director of the [United States Mint](#) ([James Ross Snowden](#)) at the time of their production.

Starting in 1854, the three cent silver had its silver metal content raised to 90% in order to encourage circulation. At the same time, its weight was reduced to 3/4 of a gram by reducing thickness. The coin went through a design change at the time such that three lines were now used to border the star on the obverse. A final design change occurred in 1859 because of striking problems: the number of lines bordering the star was reduced to two, and the font was made taller and slightly more narrow. The size of the date numerals also varied through the years, with 1860-1863 featuring the smallest date numerals of any US coin. In 1851 only, the [New Orleans Mint](#) struck some of the silver three-cent coins. It was minted from 1851 to 1873 at the [Philadelphia Mint](#). In the later years there were very small mintages and the 1873 issue was in [proof](#) state only. However, an earlier date silver three cent piece can be bought in worn condition for a relatively low<sup>[vague](#)</sup> price. The silver three cent piece (along with the silver dollar, the half dime, and the two cent piece) was discontinued by the Coinage Act of 1873.

[Civil War](#) era silver shortages led to widespread [hoarding](#) of all silver coins, and most one and five cent coins as well. Various alternatives were tried, including [encapsulated postage](#) and privately issued coinage. The [Treasury](#) eventually settled on issuing [fractional currency](#). These small denomination (1 to 50 cent) [notes](#) were never popular, as they were easy to lose and unwieldy in large amounts. The answer to this issue was reached in 1865 with the introduction of the three cent nickel coin. This coin was composed of copper and nickel and was larger than the silver coin of the same denomination. The coin featured a Liberty head obverse and another Roman numeral 'III' reverse. The three cent nickel was never intended as a permanent issue, only as stopgap measure until the wartime hoarding ceased. However, production of the coin continued until 1889, 16 years after the three cent silver was discontinued. One reason often given for the discontinuation of the three cent nickel piece in 1889 is that this coin and the [dime](#) (10 cent silver coin) were identical in diameter, and hence caused confusion upon the introduction of mechanical [vending machines](#).<sup>[dubious – discuss](#)</sup> Another factor may have been that in 1883 the letter postage rate dropped to 2 cents, thus removing the justification for this coin.

The three cent nickel was only minted in Philadelphia and, except for a larger date on the 1889 pieces, had no design differences throughout its run. Over the course of the series mintage declined, and some of the dates are scarce. But, with an 1865 mintage of over eleven million, a type piece can be inexpensively obtained.

## Mintage figures

### Three Cent (silver), 1851-1873

- 1851 P - 5,447,400
- 1851 O - 720,000
- 1852 P - 18,663,500
- 1853 P - 11,400,000
- 1854 P - 671,000
- 1855 P - 139,000
- 1856 P - 1,458,000
- 1857 P - 1,042,000
- 1858 P - 1,604,000
- 1859 P - 365,000
- 1860 P - 286,000
- 1861 P - 497,000
- 1862 P - 343,000
- 1863 P - 21,000
- 1864 P - 12,000
- 1865 P - 8,000
- 1866 P - 22,000
- 1867 P - 4,000
- 1868 P - 3,500
- 1869 P - 4,500
- 1870 P - 3,000
- 1871 P - 3,400
- 1872 P - 1,000
- 1873 P - 600 (ALL PROOF)

### Three Cent (nickel), 1865-1889

- 1865 P - 11,382,000
- 1866 P - 4,801,000
- 1867 P - 3,915,000
- 1868 P - 3,252,000
- 1869 P - 1,604,000
- 1870 P - 1,335,000
- 1871 P - 604,000
- 1872 P - 862,000
- 1873 P - 1,173,000
- 1874 P - 790,000
- 1875 P - 228,000
- 1876 P - 162,000
- 1877 P - About 510 (ALL PROOF)
- 1878 P - 2,350 (ALL PROOF)
- 1879 P - 38,000
- 1880 P - 21,000
- 1881 P - 1,077,000
- 1882 P - 22,200
- 1883 P - 4,000
- 1884 P - 1,700
- 1885 P - 1,000
- 1886 P - 4,290 (ALL PROOF)
- 1887 P - 5,000
- 1888 P - 36,500
- 1889 P - 18,125