

The Surprising 1876 Specimen Cents

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I have found the study of Victorian cents involves many surprises. With the benefit of hindsight, some unexpected discoveries make you wonder why they were surprises at all. Others are so counter-intuitive as to defy prediction. The specimen dies used to mint Canadian cents dated 1876 provide surprises of both kinds.

Many collectors, if they stop to think about it, probably assume the Royal Mint and their surrogate, Heaton, produced only one variety of 1876 cent in specimen quality. It may surprise many people to learn they actually minted at least six types. Four of these have been known to numismatists for years. A fifth was known, but not correctly differentiated from the other four. I will introduce the sixth in this article.

After the very large issue of cents in 1859, the Canadian governments (the Province of Canada until Confederation in 1867 and the Dominion of Canada after) had no need to order more bronze cents until 1876. While executing that 1876 order, the Royal Mint responded to a prevailing public disdain for the thin provincial cent, which weighed only 4.54 grams, by increasing both the thickness and weight of the new Dominion cents by one-fourth to 5.67 grams. This newer, heavier weight of the cent closely matched that of the British halfpenny. At the then current exchange rate, the value of 1.01 Canadian cents equaled that of one halfpenny. Although the cent and the halfpenny were both token coinages, having intrinsic metal values less than their face values, this matching of value and weight to the halfpenny served to finally facilitate public acceptance of the Canadian decimal cent.

Collectively, the 1876 specimen cents suggest the Royal Mint considered multiple design variations and at least two metals for the new coin. One 1876 specimen cent paired the new Dominion cent obverse design with a reverse die not having the "H" mintmark normally associated with Ralph Heaton and Sons. Charlton has catalogued this coin as DC-18¹. At 5.61 grams, the bronze planchet

¹ Charlton numbers are the property of Charlton International, Inc and are used with permission.

weighed about the same as those of circulating 1876-H cents. The obverse of this coin displayed Charlton obverse C1A (see Figure 1).

In my book, *Dies & Diadems*², I concluded the obverse punch (designated as O2A in the book) and die that produced this coin reflected the original Dominion cent design that Leonard C. Wyon adapted from the Jamaican halfpenny design. My conclusion came from determining the sequence in which numerous stray marks³ and broken letters in the obverse legends appeared on the obverse C1A and C1 designs. This coin had some, but not all, of these minor tool marks and no evidence of the broken letters.

Curiously, the engravers apparently experienced some indecision over the appearance of the two letters "N" in the obverse legends of the new design. Wyon's original matrix had single serifs pointing to the left on the bottom of these two letters (see Figure 1). The DC-18 obverse die had double serifs re-punched over the single serifs on both letters.

The engraver created the DC-18 reverse die by adapting the provincial reverse design. The damage to the maple vine and leaf stems seen on this coin closely matches the final extent of damage seen on 1859 cents. The first two digits of the date match those from the 1859 cent. The engraver removed the last two digits from the 1859 punch, sank a die, and then manually punched "7" and "6" into that die to complete the new date. The size and location of the "76" on DC-18 differed from that of the adopted design, indicating a manually dated die.

Based on the previously mentioned sequence of marks and damaged letters, I believe Wyon originally intended to strike the 1876-H circulating cents using obverse C1A dies and this specimen coin was a trial strike of that intended obverse design. The unique reverse die, perhaps having no mintmark because it predated the decision to subcontract the mintage to Heaton, provides some corroborating, although by itself not conclusive, evidence. As several letters in the obverse

² Turner, Rob; *Dies & Diadems*; published by the author; Fountain Valley, California, 2009

³ Made by either engraver's tools or hand punches. The reader is referred to *Dies & Diadems* for a full explanation of these marks and the broken letters on obverse C1A and C1 cents.



1876 Specimen (No H) - Charlton DC-18 - Obverse C1A



Letter "N" in REGINA from DC-18. Note the re-punched double lower serif.



Letter "N" in REGINA from an 1876-H circulating cent. Note the single lower serif.

Figure 1

legends later broke on the punches used to replicate the dies, Wyon chose to repair the letters in a matrix and alter the obverse effigy to reflect the familiar obverse C1 design we now associate with 1876-H cents. Since Heaton struck all known 1876-H circulating cents with obverse design C1 and a slightly different reverse design, that technically makes DC-18 a pattern. About six or eight of these interesting specimen cents have survived, including one in the National Currency Collection at the Bank of Canada in Ottawa.

Surprisingly, the Royal Mint (or Heaton) reused the obverse die of Charlton DC-18 at least twice more. By 1881 the Royal Mint and Heaton had begun using obverse C1A on circulating coins, probably because of wear and tear on their obverse C1 working punches. They employed the DC-18 obverse die (and at least one other C1A die⁴) to coin 1881-H specimen cents. Two years after the engravers completed their transition to the obverse C2 design in 1884, they decided to consume the now obsolete DC-18 obverse specimen die by using it to mint business strike coins. All known 1886 obverse C1A cents were coined using the single DC-18 obverse die.

If we look back further, by the 1880's precedents existed for consuming unneeded Canadian specimen dies in this fashion. As an example, in 1858 and 1859 the Royal Mint re-used the specimen obverse die from the 1858 copper-nickel specimen (Charlton PC-7) to mint circulating 1858 and 1859 wide 9 over 8 cents.

One other 1876 specimen cent carried obverse C1A. The Royal Mint, or Heaton, struck it on a copper-nickel planchet weighing 5.81 grams. Charlton has designated this coin as DC-17. Curiously, they did not strike this coin from the DC-18 obverse die. Instead they minted it from a very similar die also sunk by Punch O2A. Like the DC-18 die, this obverse die had re-punched double serifs on both letters "N". The only example of this coin known to me resides in the collection of the American Numismatic Society⁵.

⁴ The National Currency Collection contains one 1881-H cent catalogued by them as a proof that was minted by an obverse die sunk from a different C1A punch, a punch designated as O2K in *Dies & Diadems*.

⁵ The author wishes to thank the American Numismatic Society for providing high resolution photographs of this coin during the preparation of this article.

Unlike DC-18, the reverse die used to strike DC-17 showed the ultimately adopted design. In this adopted design, the engravers once again converted the Provincial cent reverse design by changing the date to 1876 and this time adding the “H” mintmark. They also made several repairs to the damaged areas of the maple wreath. The copper nickel planchet probably signals that the Royal Mint considered coining the 1876-H cent in this metal, similar to the Jamaican halfpenny from which its obverse design derived, but possibly it was an off metal strike made solely as a presentation piece.

At some point the Royal Mint apparently, and nonsensically considering the monarch's then older age of 57, considered minting the new Dominion cents using the Provincial obverse design. In 1957 Bowman published a catalog⁶ that described a pattern cent dated 1876-H (Charlton DC-1). This pattern was struck with specimen dies. It mated the adopted laureate obverse design of 1858, with its very young looking effigy, and the same reverse die that struck DC-17, as evidenced by a distinctive die crack running through much of the maple wreath on both coins. It was struck on thin, bronze planchets (4.56 grams), like those used in 1858 and 1859. Only a few examples exist. One sold publicly in the Frontenac⁷ sale in 1991. Another resides in the National Currency Collection.

Either the Royal Mint, or Heaton, produced two other types of 1876-H specimen cents that differed from the final adopted design. Both were struck from the same die pair, one in copper nickel⁸ (weighing 5.83 grams) and one in bronze (about 5.67 grams). The single obverse die used to mint these two cents displayed obverse C1 (see Figure 2). The very same reverse die that minted DC-17 and DC-1 also minted these two coins.

The copper-nickel version has been known to numismatists for many years and considered by some to merely be another example of DC-17. Yet it differs significantly from DC-17 because it displays obverse C1

⁶ Bowman, Fred FRNS; *Canadian Patterns*; Canadian Numismatic Association; Ottawa; 1957.

⁷ Frontenac Sale; lot 5403; Bowers and Morena, Inc.; New York City; 1991.

⁸ The author wishes to thank Sandy Campbell of Proof Positive Coins for allowing me to examine an example of this coin.



Bronze 1876-H Specimen - Obverse C1 Trial From Punch O2D



Letter "N" in REGINA from the bronze 1876-H Obverse C1 Trial specimen.



Letter "N" in REGINA from an 1884 obverse C1 circulating cent.

Figure 2

instead of C1A. Consequently, it must be considered a separate type of 1876 specimen cent. The example examined by me last sold publicly in the 1996 Norweb sale⁹, but a few others exist.

I recently acquired a bronze version of this cent. It surprised me because I knew of no previous literature that documented it. Apparently it has passed the years unknown to the collecting community, being lumped together with the "normal" bronze 1876-H specimen cents that had the adopted designs on both obverse and reverse. Since that purchase, I have seen one other bronze coin from these dies. More may, or may not, exist.

The legends of the obverse die that made these two obverse C1 specimen cents have very nearly the same characteristics as one of the working punches used to produce 1876-H obverse working dies. That punch (labeled O2D in *Dies & Diadems*) had all the previously mentioned tool marks removed and all the broken letters, save one, were repaired by re-punching them in the matrix that raised this punch. The letter "T" in VICTORIA was left with a broken bottom left serif. In *Dies & Diadems* I concluded that this nearly pristine punch was the first obverse C1 working punch.

The engravers made two obvious alterations to this obverse C1 die. They re-punched the letter "T" in VICTORIA to repair its broken lower serif. They also re-punched the lower serifs of the two letters "N" to change the single serifs into double serifs. Unexpectedly, this die has a die crack near the bottom of the letter "E" in DEI, probably caused by the annealing and hardening processes. Although technically patterns, since 1876-H circulating cents all had single serifs on the letters "N", I believe that these copper-nickel and bronze specimen coins represent the first trial strikes of the obverse C1 design, so I will refer to them as the "Obverse C1 trials".

Although I have found no evidence that the Obverse C1 trial die was reused later, it would not be a big surprise if this obverse die turned up as having minted 1881-H or 1882-H business strike cents. What does surprise is the fact that a different working die sunk from the O2D punch, also with a repaired letter "T" and converted double serif letters

⁹ Norweb Collection; lot 714; Bowers and Morena, Inc.; Baltimore; 1996.

"N", shows up much later in the Victorian cent series. The single die used to mint the very scarce 1884 obverse C1 was sunk by this punch. Although not identical, the similarities between the Obverse C1 trial die and the 1884 obverse C1 die are unmistakable. Even the re-punched serifs on the letter "N" look similar (Figure 2). Quite possibly the engravers prepared two of these specimen dies in 1876, but only actually used the Obverse C1 trial die during that year. When they fully moved on to obverse C2 in 1884, they used up the extra obverse C1 specimen die minting circulating cents of that date.

Finally, the sixth type of 1876 dated specimen cent displayed the adopted designs (including single serifs on the letters "N") on both the obverse and reverse. It was struck in bronze and carried the 1876-H date. Based on the tool marks showing on this specimen cent, the obverse C1 die used to strike these coins came from a different punch (labeled O2E in *Dies & Diadems*) than the Obverse C1 trial die. The reverse die was also a different die than either the DC-18 reverse die or the single DC-17/DC-1/Obverse C1 trial die. This coin likely represents a "normal" presentation specimen coinage of the adopted designs that the Royal Mint (or Heaton) struck in several of the Victorian years. The reports of the major grading services suggest perhaps about twelve of these coins exist today.

The reverse dies used to coin the 1876-H specimen cents also tell an interesting story. In much the same way as they would produce a die, the engravers sank a new reverse 1876-H matrix from the punch used to produce the provincial cent reverse dies, which now had the last two digits of the date removed. They re-punched the existing "18" and manually entered the new "76" and "H" into that matrix. All the 1876-H reverse dies (excepting the 1876 die used on DC-18), including the business strike dies, have nearly identical dates, proving they derived from this new matrix. It would not be a shock if we later discover that the both the single DC-17/DC-1/Obverse C1 trial reverse die and the presentation specimen reverse die ended their lives striking 1876-H business strike cents.

When I wrote *Dies & Diadems*, I attributed all of the 1876-H reverse dies (but not the 1876 DC-18 die) to a single reverse punch (R1D). I did so based upon the study of many circulated 1876-H cents. In studying those circulated coins, the combined effects of coin wear and

die wear caused me to miss some very minute differences between coins. My study of these 1876 specimen cents, with their very sharp details, has now opened my eyes to the likelihood that two reverse punches, both raised from the same matrix, sank dies used to mint 1876-H cents. Once again, a surprise has altered what I thought I knew about these coins.

Upon close examination, the single reverse die used to mint the DC-17 cent, the DC-1 cent, and the two Obverse C1 trial cents differs slightly from the die used to strike the 1876-H presentation specimens. The single DC-17/DC-1/Obverse C1 trial die shows thinner, more delicate re-engraving of some of the damaged areas of the maple wreath (see Figure 3) than does the presentation specimen die¹⁰. The presentation specimen reverse die also shows a small linear tool mark¹¹ near the short stem to Leaf #2 (the second stem clockwise from 12 o'clock). These differences are subtle, but present nonetheless. In re-examining many business strike 1876-H cents, I found coins minted from dies of both varieties. Some have the thinner repairs and some have the thicker repairs. The dies with the thicker repairs consistently had the tool mark near Leaf #2. All of this points to working dies sunk by two different 1876-H punches.

The engravers clearly raised a punch from the 1876-H reverse matrix after only lightly repairing the maple wreath. They removed the small linear tool mark and used this first punch (call it R1D1) to sink the single reverse die that struck the DC-17/DC-1/Obverse C1 trial specimens and also a portion of the business strike working dies. They then made more repairs to the wreath in the same matrix and raised a second punch (call it R1D2), but did not remove the tool mark from this second punch. This second punch sank the die used to mint the presentation specimens and also the rest of the 1876-H working dies. Given the large mintage of four million coins in 1876, the existence of two reverse punches makes perfect sense. I will add this second punch to the next edition of *Dies & Diadems* (making punches R1D1 and R1D2 as the two 1876-H reverse punches).

¹⁰ The close-up photographs of the 1876-H presentation specimen in Figure 3 are courtesy of Henry Nienhuis.

¹¹ Dan Flynn first alerted me to the existence of this tool mark on some 1876-H reverse dies.

**Punch R1D1
Obverse C1 Trial**

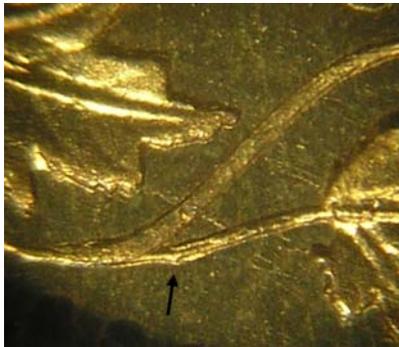


Leaf #2 - Tool Mark Absent

**Punch R1D2
Presentation Specimen**



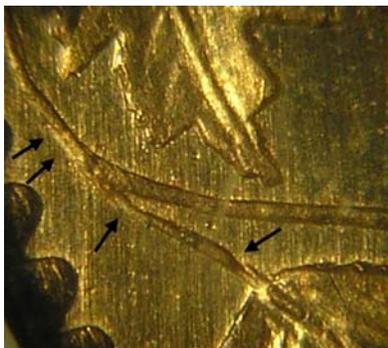
Leaf #2 - Tool Mark Present



Small Nub Stem #9



Large Nub Stem #9



Thin Stem #11



Thicker Stem #11

Figure 3

Interestingly, the small linear tool mark appeared to varying degrees on a few 1858 dies, a few 1859 over-dated dies (W9/8), and many 1859 narrow "9" dies. Clearly it originated as an incuse mark on the provincial reverse matrix and passed to the reverse punch in relief. Its erratic appearance record during provincial days probably resulted from varying strike pressures applied to the hard, thin bronze planchets. Die polishing, die wear, and filled dies may also have played roles in the visibility of this mark. The mark shows consistently on 1881-H reverse dies, but not those dated 1882-H. Since the 1881H and 1882H reverse punches both derived from the original provincial reverse matrix, this suggests the engravers left the mark on the 1881-H punch, but removed it from the 1882-H punch.

Summary Of 1876 Specimen Cents
All Coins Struck In Medal Alignment

Specimen Type	Charlton Desig.	Obverse Die Comments	Reverse Die Comments
1876 (No H) Trial Obv. C1A - Bronze	DC-18	Die From Punch O2A Die Re-used For 1881H Spec. & 1886 Circ.	Die From Punch R1C Die Re-use Unknown
1876-H Trial Obv. C1A - Cu Ni	DC-17	Die From Punch O2A Die Re-use Unknown	Single Reverse Die From Punch R1D1 Die Re-use Unknown
1876-H Pattern Prov. Obv. - Bronze	DC-1	Die From Punch O1A Die Re-use Unknown	
1876-H Trial Obv. C1 - Cu Ni	None	Single Obverse Die From Punch O2D	
1876-H Trial Obv. C1 - Bronze	None	Die Re-use Unknown	
1876-H Presentation Obv. C1 - Bronze	None	Die From Punch O2E Die Re-use Unknown	Die From Punch R1D2 Die Re-use Unknown

Figure 4

In my studies of Victorian cents I have often been surprised by these wonderful coins. It is part of the fun. I certainly never expected six different types of 1876 specimen cents minted from five different obverse dies and three different reverse dies. Yet, although difficult to prove beyond any doubt, it seems the engravers created each of the six types of 1876 specimen cents for a specific purpose. Five minted trial coins that turned into patterns as the engravers moved on and modified either the designs or the planchets. They created the sixth type of specimen cent as presentation pieces showing the final adopted design. The prospect of more such surprises provides the mystery that keeps me studying this beautiful and fascinating series of coinage.