

Pierced Coins: Insights From eBay®

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Pierced coins for sale on eBay® may seem to have little relevance to those found in archaeological sites. Though without context, eBay® coins provide a different and perhaps broader universe than those from archaeological contexts in the Southeastern U.S. We develop a typology of pierced coins from eBay® based on observed physical variables related to minting, wear, and modification and note several patterns that we believe relate to how the finished product was perceived if not used. We conclude by examining the comparative utility of this typology.

PROBLEM

Treasure salvors have made the news recently for discoveries of sunken 18th and 19th century vessels carrying hundreds of thousands of coins, yet discoveries of coins—let alone pierced coins—are relatively rare occurrences in 18th and 19th century habitation sites in North America. Rarely are pierced coins found in a context that elucidates their use or meaning. Pierced coins, or coins with drilled or punched holes, are believed to have been altered to suspend them, for example, on a necklace. Coins that have been pierced are of various metals and from many nations.

Coins are highly curated artifacts because they maintain an intrinsic value in addition to whatever prescribed cosmological, charm, or other value they may also possess. Coins in general are as a result under-represented in the archaeological record. It is also probable that the types of pierced coins that find their way into the archaeological record are skewed by cultural practice.

Recent research focuses on the uses of pierced coins as charms, amulets, or talismans (Akin 1992; Davidson 2004). Most of this research addresses the spiritual, magical, and religious belief systems of enslaved or free people of African descent living in North America (Fennell 2000; Ferguson 1992; Handler and Lange 1978; Leone and Fry 1999; Russell 1997; Stine et al. 1996; Wilkie 1997, 1995; Young 1996). Folklore and ethnographic research (Puckett 1926, Rawick 1972-79) has been a central source of information on pierced coins, silver in particular, bringing luck or protection to ward off conjuring or other maligned spirits and illness.

Most information about charm use by enslaved Africans comes from the ex-slave narratives recorded by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s (Rawick 1972-1979). While no such similar survey exists for the general white population,

Davidson's (2004) research demonstrates that modification of coins by piercing and other means is certainly not restricted to people of African descent. Davidson presents a thorough examination of European precedent for coin charms and he presents a strong argument for pre-Christian coin charm use in Europe, specifically the British Isles. Akin (1992) also presents compelling research that the presence of Chinese coins, called *wen*, in the North American west was not for use as currency, but rather for "talismanic, gambling, decorative, and medicinal uses" (Akin 1992:59).

Analysis of pierced coins considers not only modification by piercing but also reinterpretation of design elements minted on coins and modification of coins to include additional design elements. From Davidson's (2004) research, silver metal was a key element of charm coin choice in Europe, while copper was strongly valued in West Africa. From European folklore, Davidson (2004) explored the importance of the imbedded cross incorporated in early English coinage from Celtic Druid and pre-Christian Saxon eras through the eradication of Catholic amulets and charms by the Protestant Queen, Elizabeth I. Consistently, folklore sources stated the use of a pierced silver coin was for luck and protection against witchcraft and illness (Davidson 2004:26-31).

The design of the Chinese *wen* coin incorporated a minted central square hole. "Coin swords" were shaped from coins tied together to bring good luck and to ward off evil spirits (Akin 1992:60). Former African-American slaves recalled using coin charms as protection from rheumatism, heart trouble, and indigestion, and to prevent conjuring, hoo-doo, voodoo, and witches spells (Davidson 2004:32).

The most informative archaeological context for pierced coins has been excavation of African-American burial grounds (Braley and Moffat 1995; Condon et al. 1998; Perry and Woodruff 2006). From this research, the number of coins recovered, the types of coins, whether they are pierced or not, and the location of coins in relationship to the body has proven informative. For example, a total of 9 copper coins were recovered from 376 burials excavated during the New York African Burial Ground Project. None of these were pierced and the most were recovered from the eye socket (Perry and Woodruff 2006:420). From the 1,150 burials excavated at the North Dallas Freedmen's Cemetery, only 20 pierced silver coins were recovered, predominantly from the neck areas but with 2 in association with the ankle (Condon et al. 1998; Davidson 2004).

Our research does not focus on a study of archaeological pierced coins or their spiritual meaning, but instead addresses an issue related to such study. By presenting an analysis of non-archaeological "heirloom" coins we hope to present a baseline useful in the analysis of archaeological specimens. It is our proposition that heirloom pierced coins such as those presented for sale on eBay® provide a large sample that is more representative of the pierced coins actually used than those found archaeologically. Of course, analysis of the difference between the heirloom and archaeological occurrence of pierced coins opens the door for addressing questions about the difference between these two samples, which will allow us to interpret more fully the meaning of the pierced coins

that we do find archaeologically by asking why they occur in these contexts and other forms do not.

METHOD

Data were collected from eBay® by using a standard search function on the category “Coins and Paper Money,” with a search topic “Holed.” The term “Holed” was found to yield greater results of pierced coins than the term pierced itself. Since most objects are listed on eBay for seven days or less (a seven day listing is the default), data were collected by periodic searches at intervals of seven days or greater. A total of 12 searches were performed between July 11 and October 8, 2007. After each search, digital photos of both the coin’s obverse and reverse sides, where available, were copied from the eBay® listing into a file for later analysis. Care was also taken to identify and exclude duplicates that resulted from relisting a coin that did not sell during a prior auction.



Examples of coins listed on eBay® illustrating different quality of data.

Using digital images from eBay® comes with limitations. While some of the images are high resolution and in-focus, others are of a very low resolution, are taken from a distance, are only partial images, or are very dark. A number of listings have photos of

only one side of the coin, generally the obverse (the side bearing the “main” design), and some have no photos at all. Listings with no images were not collected, and images that were of such low resolution or of such a poor quality that attributes could not be accurately identified were excluded from analysis. Data was collected for coins represented by a photo of only one side, but of course these offer incomplete data.

A somewhat arbitrary decision was made to focus only on coins from the United States minted prior to 1900. Listings on eBay® do include numerous foreign coins which we consider to be of interest for researchers in the Southeastern U.S., especially Spanish coins and coins from Mexico, central America, and South America, but these are not addressed in our current study. A total of 469 U.S. coins with useable information were included in our sample. Observations collected from each coin are:

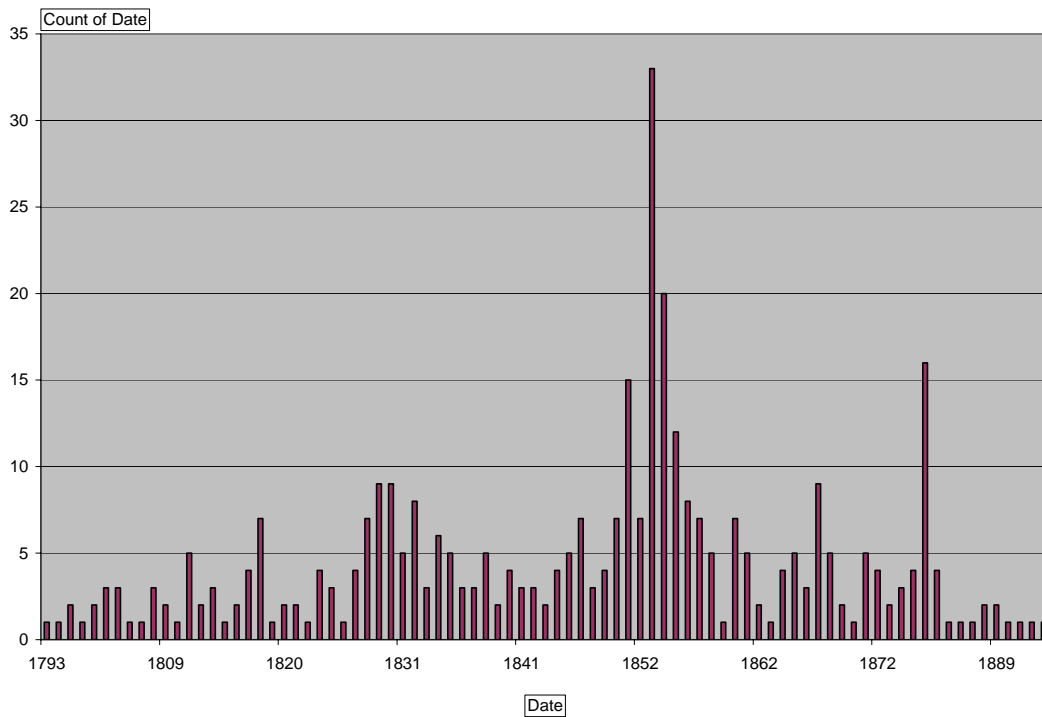
- Date
- Denomination (face value)
- Type (e.g., Capped Bust half dime, Liberty Seated half dime)
- Relative condition:
 - Good: Little wear
 - Medium: Obvious wear
 - Poor: Obliteration of major characteristics
- Number of piercings
- Description of each piercing:
 - Placement on obverse: clock hours (to the nearest hour)
 - Placement on reverse: clock hours (to the nearest hour)
 - Type: (round, square, rectangular, oval, irregular)
 - Direction of piercing:
 - Obverse to reverse
 - Reverse to obverse
 - Bidirectional
 - Indeterminate
- Other modifications, obverse or reverse (incising, stamping, etc.)

We acknowledge a number of assumptions in defining our sample from eBay® as “heirloom” coins. First is that the coins on eBay® are not coins looted from archaeological contexts. This of course is a bit of an unknown, but for the copper coins, which would corrode in many archaeological contexts, we did not see examples that suggested they had ever been buried. Second, it is of course possible for someone today to pierce an antique coin. This is also a bit of an unknown, but we are somewhat reassured by the fact that adding a hole to a coin in order to “fake” an antique pierced coin would actually diminish the value of the item.

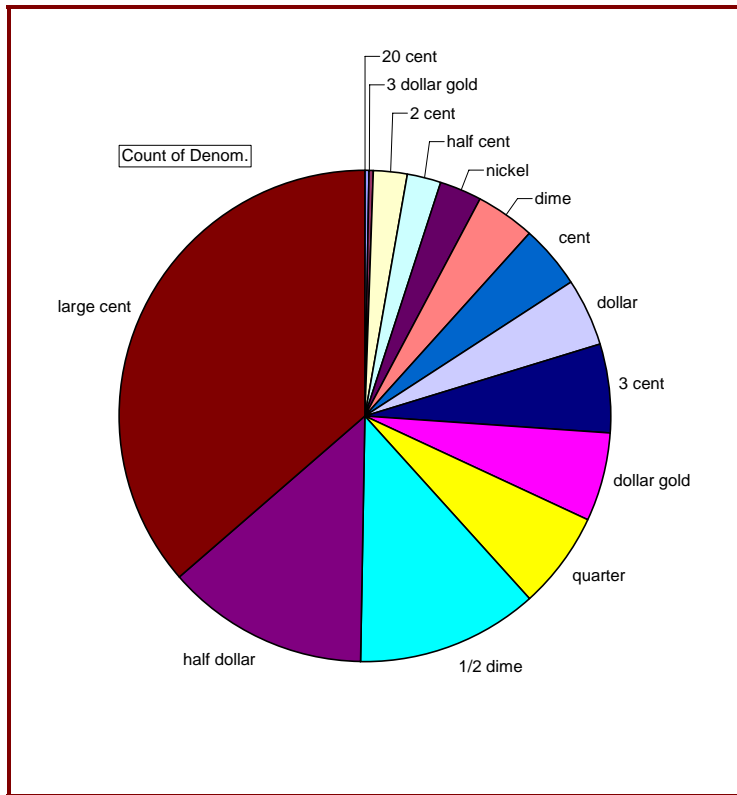
ANALYSIS

The 469 regular issue U.S. coins in our study sample were minted between 1793 and 1898. Hallmarks of the sample are:

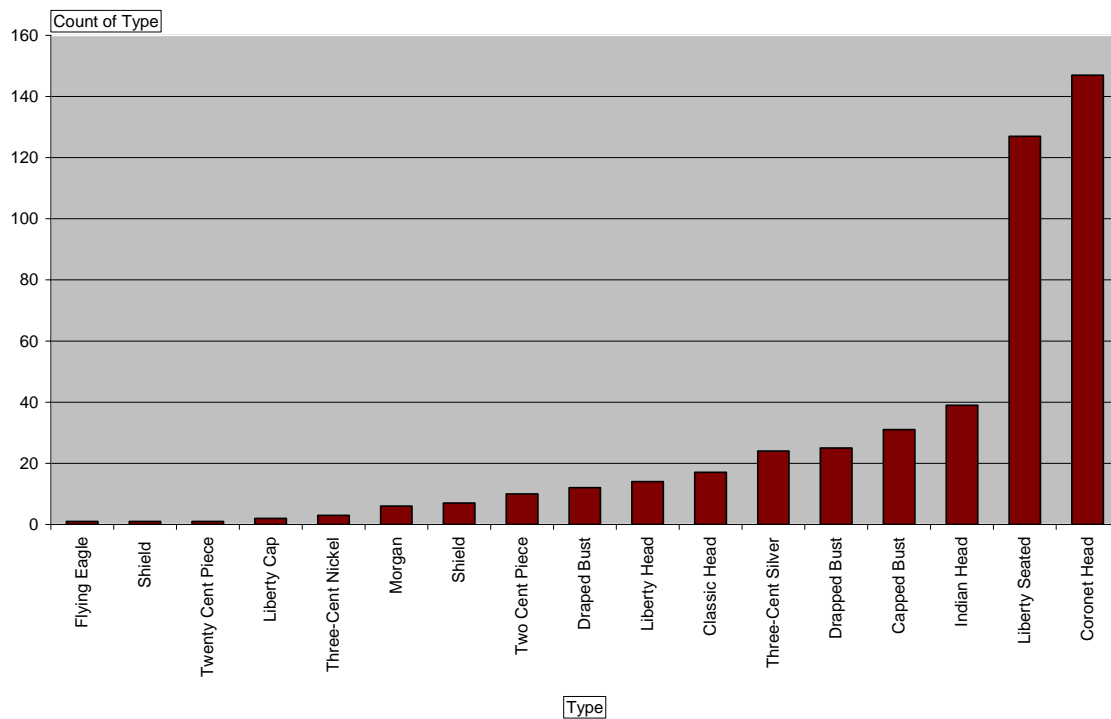
- The distribution of mint dates is quite uneven, with peaks between about 1825 and 1840 and between 1848 and 1859, with a noted decline after about 1885. The date of the coin does not equal the date of modification or use, but it does appear that the distribution by mint date is not random.
- The majority are silver (45%) and copper (45%), with a few gold (7%) and nickel (3%).
- The most common denomination is the cent (40%) of which most are large cents (36%); with half dollars (13%) and half dimes (12%) also being relatively common. The remaining 39% are divided among 10 denominations.
- The most common primary design is the Coronet Head (47%), found exclusively on large cents, followed closely by the Liberty Seated design (29%) on half dimes, dimes, quarters, half dollars, and dollars. Most primary designs are one form or another of the image of “Liberty.”
- The vast majority have only one pierced hole (93%), with substantially fewer having two holes (6%) or three or more holes (1%).
- On coins with one hole, most perforations are round (85%), with the remainder being irregular (7%), square and rectangular (5%), oval (3%), and triangular (1%).
- Most of the coins are in good condition (53%) with clearly visible detail, or in medium condition (29%), with some wear, and only a small number with substantial wear to the point of partial obliteration of design (18%).



Mint dates of all coin.



Importance of different denominations.



Primary design of coins.



Capped Bust half dollar.



Liberty Seated dime.



Coronet Head large cent.

The practice of modifying these coins with incising or stamping was extremely uncommon, and was restricted to just a few examples all of which involved placing initials on the coin:

- An extremely worn Coronet Head large cent die stamped with “W.T.W.” on the obverse.
- An extremely worn large cent of unknown type incised with “WP.”
- An 1883 Liberty Head nickel in good condition with “F.R” die stamped on the obverse.



Coronet Head large cent with “W.T.W.” die stamp.

It is difficult to determine in our context-devoid sample which of the preferences noted above are the result of conscious decisions by the original owners of these modified coins, or which are simply the random result of availability or expediency. For example, is the preponderance of copper cents a conscious choice because copper is a preferred metal, or were cents the most readily available and the least expensive?

We do nonetheless believe that choice can be determined to be a factor affecting the form of these pierced coins. One such choice related to how the coin was to be used; as a pendant suspended from a string around the neck, or as part of a multi-coin anklet? These choices would affect the number and placement of holes, and probably which side or face of the coin was chosen to be visible.

Coins With One Piercing: N=437

U.S. coins are minted so that if you are looking at one side with the image upright and turn the coin head-to-toe in your fingers the reverse side is upright as well. In other words, if you drill a hole at the top of the image on one side, the hole exits at the bottom of the image on the other. The placement of the hole on single-perforation coins may thus have a great amount to say about the importance of the image or which side was intended to be displayed; the presumption being that the upright image was for outward display. As a corollary, the placement of the hole in an apparently random fashion, such that neither side would be upright when suspended, would seem to indicate that the image on the coin was not of importance.



Liberty Seated half dollar showing piercing on Obverse and Reverse.

Our data very clearly indicates that the “proper” upright appearance of the image on a coin was a conscious choice during the process of placing a perforation. Most of the holes were round and only a few appear to have been made with a forged or cut nail (square or rectangular hole). A total of 56% of coins were perforated at about “12 o’clock” (top) of the coin’s obverse side; when the 11 o’clock and 1 o’clock coins (“near” top) are added this figure goes to about 69%. On the reverse of these same coins the perforation is, as predicted, at the bottom of the coin (67% were within the 5 to 7

o'clock range). In virtually all cases, except coins such as the two-cent piece, three-cent silver piece, and shield nickel, the image on the obverse is some form of "Liberty," either a bust or the full figure of "Liberty" in the Liberty Seated version.

It is noteworthy also that 7% of the holes on the obverse side of these coins were at the 6 o'clock position; 13% were between 5 and 7 o'clock. This suggests that in a lesser number of cases the image on the reverse side of the coin may have been chosen for outward display. The reverse side of many coins in the sample carry the U.S. eagle, but a substantial number do not. The two-cent, three-cent, and nickel pieces mentioned above are joined by the large cent, a very common coin in the sample, in not having the eagle or other zoo- or anthropomorphic image. When the large cent and the eagle-bearing half dollar are compared, which are the most numerous types in the collection, it is seen that slightly more (72%) of the large cents are perforated at the top of the obverse side than are the half dollars (64%). This lends soft support for the occasional selection of the half dollar's eagle to be the outwardly displayed side of the coin.

Another variable that may inform the choices made is the direction of perforation, with the presumption being that the direction of piercing indicates which face was to be outwardly visible. In our study, creation of a slight to very noticeable flange around the hole was accepted as evidence that the pressure creating the hole originated on the opposite side of the flange. For the entire sample, a sizeable percent of perforations appear to have been made by working from both directions (26%), on those where a single direction is indicated more were made from obverse to reverse (19%) than from reverse to obverse (11%). The pattern for large cents mirrors this overall finding, while that for half dollars shows a similar importance of obverse to reverse perforations (19%) and a surprisingly low importance for reverse to obverse (6% respectively). This lower incidence of reverse to obverse perforation is not exactly in keeping with the earlier findings on choice of the reverse side of half dollars in some cases. It is to be noted, however, that the photos available on eBay[®] were seldom of a quality that made good analysis of this variable possible.

Not all of the coins were pierced around the perimeter; 42 of the coins with a single hole were pierced through the center. Center pierced coins were probably not intended for suspension from a cord. These may have been bound together by overlapping the coins one on another and binding them together by looping a cord through the central holes such as was noted above for the *wen*.



Large Cent from eBay[®] with center hole.

This analysis shows that heirloom coins with a single piercing are most commonly:

- A large cent.
- Pierced with a round hole.
- Pierced at the top or near top of the obverse side, so as to display that side when suspended; the image thus selected was almost exclusively “Liberty.”
- Minted during the late Antebellum period, between about 1825 and 1860.
- Having no incised or stamped modification.

Around this characterization is a good amount of variability, but this is mainly related to variation in the denomination and design of the coin; most of the other generalizations apply across the board. Thirteen different denominations of U.S. coins are included in the sample with numerous variations in design; though substantially less common than the large cent, half dollars and half dimes are present in important numbers. The diameter of the coin may of course have had significant meaning regarding where it was worn (around the neck or around the ankle, on an adult or on a child), and the material (silver versus copper) may have had cultural meaning as well. It is our hope that comparison of an assemblage from the archaeological record against this sample of largely 19th-century heirloom coins may help to focus inquiry into these sorts of questions.

The coins with single perforations through the center turn attention away from coins suspended from a cord to coins used in a more involved way, and perhaps with difference meaning. This attention is continued in the examination of coins with multiple perforations.

Coins With Two Piercings: N=26

Coins with two pierced holes are the most common of the coins pierced with more than one hole but are nevertheless few in number. As is typical, these coins represent a variety of denominations and designs, but tend to be small coins with large cents and quarters being among the largest. These coins are:

- Four Coronet Head large cents:
 - Two pierced at 12 and 6 o'clock on obverse
 - Two pierced at 8 and 2 and one at 10 and 4 o'clock on obverse
- Two Indian head cents:
 - One at 9 and 3 and one at 10 and 2 o'clock on obverse
- Two two-cent pieces:
 - One pierced 9 and 4 o'clock on obverse
 - One pierced at 12 and 6 o'clock on obverse
- Four three-cent silver pieces:
 - One pierced 9 and 3 o'clock on obverse
 - Two pierced 12 and 6 on obverse and one at 11 and 5 on obverse
- Ten half dimes (four Capped Bust, six Liberty Seated):
 - Four pierced at 12 and 6 o'clock on the obverse
 - Four pierced at 9 and 3 o'clock on the obverse

- One pierced on the interior with small oval holes on the obverse, in a line with 12 and 6 o'clock (reminiscent of button holes).
- One Capped Bust dime pierced at 2 and 7 o'clock on obverse
- One Liberty Seated quarter pierced at 8 and 2 o'clock on obverse
- One Liberty Head gold dollar pierced at 12 and 6 o'clock on obverse

The most common piercing on these coins was either 12 and 6 o'clock or 9 and 3 o'clock on the obverse (with some that are very close to these axes). These coins were probably tied together with other coins to form a more complex artifact, such as a bracelet. One of the coins has perforations on the interior that is reminiscent of button holes, an interpretation that would work easily with this half dime.



Liberty Seated half dime.

Coins With Three Or More Piercings: N=5

Only 6 coins out of the 469 examined had three or more perforations:

- One Liberty Seated half dime (unknown date) with three holes: on the obverse side, one at 12 and one at 6 and a slightly smaller diameter hold at 3 o'clock.
- One Liberty Seated quarter (unknown date) with three holes: on the obverse side, one at 12, one at center, and one at 6 o'clock.
- One Morgan Dollar (1889) with four holes: relatively small holes placed midway between 12 and 3, 3 and 6, 6 and 9, and 9 and 12 o'clock.
- One Liberty Seated half dime (1830s), well worn, with four holes: relatively even sized holes placed roughly at 11 and 1, and 5:30 and 7:30 o'clock.
- One Coronet Head large cent (1820s) with five holes. This appears to be very purposefully executed but we have no suggestion as to why.

Though these coins are each different, several are consistent after a fashion with the perforations found to be common on the coins with two pierced holes. That is, most of these could have been combined with other coins to construct a bracelet or other compound jewelry. The Coronet Head large cent with five perforations is anomalous and does not fit this pattern.



Large Cents from eBay® including one with five pierced holes.

We expected that use of coins in compound artifacts such as multiple coin bracelets would have been more common. Multiple-pierced coins emerged from our study as a relative rarity. Collection of more data from eBay®, especially examples of complete multi-coin bracelets and other jewelry, could be valuable in terms of understanding how individual multiple-pierced coins, and center-pierced coins for that matter, were used in the past. This could help measurably to interpret individual multiple-pierced coins found in archaeological contexts.



Multiple-coin bracelet sold on eBay®.

DISCUSSION

Our study of pierced coins offered for sale on eBay® and which we believe are best characterized as heirloom coins clearly presents a useful comparative baseline for archaeology. We need only compare the pierced coins from the North Dallas Freedmen's Cemetery to our admittedly context-devoid heirloom collection to see the utility: all the coins from North Dallas were silver half dimes of the Capped Bust and Liberty Seated varieties. These varieties are present in our sample, but are substantially less common than the copper large cent which accounts for roughly half of all of our pierced coins. Are the pierced large cents in our sample derived from early 19th century use, as our plot of mint dates may suggest, and are no longer in common use by the time of the North Dallas interments?

We did not set out to address or even propose questions of this sort but it is for this ultimate purpose that we embarked upon our study. We believe our sample is sufficient to define the patterns in heirloom U.S. pierced coins and that additional collection of data from eBay® would suffer from rapidly diminishing returns. Attention would more productively be spent on a similar study of Spanish and coins of other nations that were in common use in the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries. Even more useful, however, would be developing a large and comprehensive sample of archaeological specimens which, when combined with studies such as ours of heirloom coins, could address the geographic, temporal, and cultural uses of pierced coins in the 18th and 19th century.

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