

National Commemorative Medals are a Category of United States Mint Medals (By Donald Scarinci)

The publication of two books on the subject of *national commemorative medals (NCM)*, separately researched and written by different authors without knowledge of the other, has created some confusion and a misconception that needs to be clarified. The two books present three different numbering systems and there are some differences in the medals included and excluded in both. The central misconception is that these medals can be cataloged separately and independently from the body of United States Mint Medals, which is what they are.ⁱ

Both books, *National Commemorative Medals of the United States Mint*, by John T. Dean, published privately, 2008 and *National Commemorative Medals of the United States Mint Since 1873* by William Swoger, published privately, 2008 are excellent pieces of scholarship and contain important information about this category of United States Mint medals

The two books substantially confirm each other's research and contain consistent information with respect to mintage figures, the circumstances of each medals issuance, and most of the details about each medal. However, where the two books differ is far more fundamental and highlights the core problem: Exactly what are *national commemorative medals*?

Dean and Swoger do not agree on the definition of a *national commemorative medal*. Dean defers to Turner for his definition. His book is intended as an update of Turner's research. Turner's information was previously available only in articles from the *Numismatist*. Thanks to Dean this information is now

available in a single book updated to the present.

Turner requires an act of Congress to give a medal the status of a *national commemorative medal*. Swoger does not, as long as it was made after 1874. Turner requires that the medal be struck at the United States Mint, not merely designed or engraved there. Swoger does not, it need not be struck at the U.S. Mint but it must be engraved or designed by U.S. Mint employees. Furthermore, Turner requires that a *national commemorative medal* must be listed and sold as such by the medals' sponsor or at the event for which it was made but "not over the counter at any US Mint facility. Swoger does not, but Swoger creates other limitations to the definition of "commemorative."ⁱⁱ

Swoger cites to a law passed in 1874ⁱⁱⁱ giving authority to strike medals "of a national character" to the Superintendent of the U.S. Mint, subject only to the approval of the Director of the Mint.^{iv} Swoger interprets this law as sufficient to confer national status to commemorative medals that are produced at the discretion of the Mint Director and Secretary of the Treasury without an act of Congress. He also uses this law to grant support U.S. Mint status for medals not struck at the U.S. Mint.

Swoger then defines a *national commemorative medal* as one that marks an important current event or significant anniversary of an event of national consequence that is "struck for a limited time." He uses this definition to select the medals he includes, but he admits to bending his definition in the later sections of his book. These later sections include medals to help raise money for commemorative events, maintain memorials; or to help raise money for private organizations.^v

The first medal listed by Turner is the 1940 Greenwich, Connecticut Tercentennial

medal. The first medal listed in Swoger's book is the 1875 Centennial of the Battle of Lexington, which is listed in Julian as CN-24. Swoger also lists the 1875 Mecklenburg Declaration, CN-28, the 1876 Nevada Dollar, CN-36; the 1882 Founding of Pennsylvania, CN-40 & CN-41 and other late 19th Century and early 20th Century medals issued by the U.S. Mint without specific Congressional enabling legislation.

Swoger's application of the 1874 law to the definition of a *national commemorative medal* creates a confusing and unsettled distinction between this new category of the *national commemorative medal* and the existing category by Julian of *commemorative medals*. If Swoger's logic were followed a persuasive argument can be made for many other *commemorative medals* listed in Julian to receive the designation of *national commemorative medal*. The distinction between the two categories would depend on a subjective determination whether a medal made after 1874 without specific Congressional enabling legislation is 'Commemorative' or not. There is simply no need for this duplication, debate and confusion.

The logic of Turners position that a *national commemorative medal (NCM)* requires a specific act of Congress to be categorized as such is far more compelling. The fact that Congress passes a law with a majority vote of its members and that law is signed by the President of the United States, is de facto proof of the subject's "National character" If the medal also commemorates persons places or things, then the medal should be categorized as a *national commemorative medal (NCM)*.

Clearly the trend at the U.S. Mint for the last half century at least has been against producing medals without congressional authority. The *national commemorative medal (NCM)* is a legitimate and necessary new

category for these medals. Julian's category of *commemorative medal (CM)* should continue to be used to catalog those late 19th Century and 20th century commemorative medals that do not have specific congressional enabling legislation.

Swoger is correct to abandon Turners artificial starting point of 1940 for *national commemorative medals*. Turner begins his list of "national commemorative medals" with the 1940 Greenwich, Connecticut Tercentennial because, according to Dean, he viewed these medals as "filling the gap for specialty collectors" following the discontinuation of the United States commemorative coinage program in 1954. In the preface to his book, Swoger relates a conversation he had with Turner pointing out that there are U.S. Mint made commemorative medals authorized by specific acts of Congress before the 1940 Greenwich, Connecticut issue and that Turner said he was simply unaware of them.

Whatever reason Turner had for choosing to begin the category of *national commemorative medal* in 1940, that reason appears to be arbitrary and unjustifiable. If Turner's thinking were to be followed, approximately 11 medal types from the 1884 World's Industrial & Cotton Centennial Exposition to the 1925 Norse American Centennial which otherwise meet Turners core criteria as a *national commemorative medal* would not be cataloged as such.^{vi}

Swoger is also correct to include as *national commemorative medals* those medals engraved or coordinated by the United States Mint personnel pursuant to the terms of the Congressional enabling legislation even though these medals were struck at a private mint.^{vii} Government can and often should subcontract its work to private entities that can perform more cost effectively or produce a product that government might not be best equipped to produce. Well patinated, high relief medals

lend themselves especially to subcontracting by the Mint. They are no less than full U.S. Mint products because they are subcontracted any more than the printed leaflets and packaging they are sold with.

While revisions and updates are always needed, it is unnecessary to revisit Julian's categories and Julian's numbering system. They have stood the test of time and many collectors are invested in this system. What is necessary is a comprehensive catalog of U.S. Mint medals beginning where Julian stops, about 1893.^{viii}

When the 20th century catalog is prepared, Julian's categories and numbering system should be preserved and expanded. In addition to *national commemorative medals (NCM)* other new categories will be necessary such as a category for *Congressional Gold Medals (CG)*, *Mint Director medals (MD)*, *Secretary of the Treasury medals (ST)*, and *national series 1—First Spouse medals (NS1)*, allowing for other National Series medals in the future as Congress may determine.

There is a category of *Commemorative Medals (CM)* created by Julian and that should be continued along with many other of his categories—*Presidential Medals (PR)*, *Personal Medals (PE)*, etc. If a medal is commemorative but it is not authorized by an act of congress then it should be placed in Julian's category as a *commemorative medal (CM)* and sequentially numbered as such with its earlier struck brethren.

The subject of a numbering system for United States Mint medals is not as daunting as the task ahead for the researchers working on the so-called dollar update. United States Mint products are definable and subject to public disclosure by law. There is reason to believe that the current Director of the United States Mint will welcome and even assist in a cataloging project. With the extensive research already conducted by three fine numismatists,

Turner, Dean and Swoger, it should be possible to create a simple, Julianic numbering system beginning with NCM-1.

Auction catalogers, grading services and writers should not be encouraged to use any of the current numbering systems for *national commemorative medals*. The Medal Collectors of America needs to act quickly to encourage and even actively create and coordinate a research group charged with the mission to define the *national commemorative medal*; to agree on the medals that should be included in that category; and to agree on numbers for them. A dialog also needs to begin on the parent project—*A Comprehensive Catalog of Medals of the United States Mint, Volume 2*.