

Obituary: Canadian penny, 1858-2013

By Daniel Schwartz, [CBC News](#)

Penny, Canadian — Passed away peacefully on Feb. 4, 2013, when the Royal Canadian Mint stopped distributing the copper-coloured coin.

The penny's demise had been anticipated since March 29, 2012, when federal Finance Minister James Flaherty announced in the budget that his government had decided to phase out the smallest denomination of Canada's currency.

The Canadian penny traces its origins to 1858, when the then-province of Canada adopted the decimal system for its currency. Initially, it was struck at the Royal Mint in Great Britain. The 1858 penny had Queen Victoria on the obverse (or "heads") side and a vine of maple leaves on the reverse (or "tails") side.

Dominion of Canada coins were first issued in 1870, but the penny, then made from bronze, didn't join the family until 1876.

Moved to Canada in 1908

Penny production moved to Canada in 1908, when the Ottawa branch of the British Royal Mint opened. Countess Grey, the wife of Canada's governor general at the time, struck the first penny at the mint's official opening on Jan. 2. Until 1997, the penny's composition was at least 95.5 per cent copper.

From 1920 to 1936, the reverse side design featured two maple leaves, but that changed in 1937, when the current maple twig design was adopted. The design was the work of English artist George Edward Kruger Gary, whose initials, KG, appear to the lower right of the maple twig.

For 1967, Canada's centennial year, the penny's reverse design featured a rock dove. Since 1858, there have been five different designs used on the reverse side, including a period between 1911 and 1920 when the original vine design was augmented with the word "Canada." The obverse side has always featured a likeness of the reigning monarch.

After the penny

- Price rounding officially begins Feb. 4, though businesses may still accept the coin.
- According to Canada's Currency Act, you can only spend 25 pennies at once. You can always roll up more and bring them to the bank.
- Prices round up, and down. So \$1.01 or \$1.02 would round down to \$1, while \$1.03, \$1.04 round up to \$1.05.
- Rounding only takes place after taxes have been added.
- If you can't stand that, use your credit or debit card. You will be charged to the exact cent.

From 1982 until 1996, the shape of the penny was 12-sided rather than round.

In 1997, the penny's composition changed to 98.4 per cent zinc, with the rest copper plating. Since 2000, its composition has been 94 per cent steel.

Last penny minted in May

The year 2006 was a significant one for the Canadian penny, as it reached peak production. More than 1.26 billion pennies were minted that year. The last penny was minted in Winnipeg on May 4, 2012.

The cause of death for the penny was likely the drop in its purchasing power, as inflation took its toll. An 1870 penny would be worth about 31 cents today, adjusted for inflation. In its last year, one penny was costing the government 1.6 cents to produce. With the penny's passing, the government expects to save \$11 million a year.

The Canadian penny is pre-deceased by the Australian (1911-1964), New Zealand (1940-1989) and Irish (1928-2000) pennies. It is survived by the American penny (1793-) and the British penny, its royal and ancient ancestor, which dates back to the seventh century.

The penny will be missed by the other members of the Canadian coinage system, which are now expected to be more in demand. It will also be mourned by the 28 per cent of Canadian adults who told the Angus Reid polling firm in January 2013 that they disagree with the government's decision to take the penny out of circulation.

Canadians with pennies to spare are asked to call at banks and other financial institutions so that their pennies may be taken out of circulation and the metals recycled for use in other products. But those who are not quite ready to bid farewell to the dearly departed coin can continue using them — although not all businesses may accept them.

That is up to individual businesses to decide, but the government recommends rounding the total bill to the nearest .05 or .10. The penny will retain its value indefinitely.

In lieu of flowers, donations of pennies may be made to Canadian charities.