

372 SCOT, ROBERT

Engraver

Fredericksburg

Engraver of currency and medals for the Commonwealth of Virginia (1778-81).

Scot was perhaps the best known engraver in early-Republic America as a result of his long service as Chief Engraver of the United States Mint (1793-1823); but he likely would never have gained that appointment without his prior service to the Commonwealth of Virginia as its currency-engraver during the Revolutionary War.

Sources vary on Scot's origins, but federal government records indicate that he was born in Scotland, possibly in Edinburgh, though he came to America from England already a trained silversmith and watchmaker. As a result, Scot was also a talented and practiced engraver as was common then in those trades from the need to ornament their wares. One nineteenth-century trade history suggests that Scot had trained as engraver in London with Sir Robert Strange, the copperplate engraver who was knighted by George III for his historical imagery, thus explaining Scot's "extraordinary" competence.

By 1775, Scot was established independently in business in Fredericksburg, which led to his engagement in about 1778 as the engraver of the Virginia treasury notes issued by the state government during the Revolution; in that role, he was a central player in uncovering and thwarting a scheme to counterfeit such notes, for which he was handsomely rewarded in 1780 by the administration of Gov. Thomas Jefferson. Scot also provided the medallions that Jefferson gave as gifts to visiting native chieftains during his gubernatorial tenure. Yet Scot evidently found his fortunes limited in Virginia and so he relocated to Philadelphia in spring 1781, then the principal printing center in the country, to ply his trade.

In the national capital, Scot quickly found work producing illustrations for books that were in production there and soon took on an apprentice to help him, a young Scottish immigrant named Samuel Allerdice; in 1783, when that apprenticeship ended, the pair formed the firm of Scot & Allerdice, which went on to produce substantial numbers of plate-illustrations for Philadelphia imprints, including Robert Dodson's celebrated *Encyclopedia*, continuing until Allerdice's premature death in 1798. Scot also engraved currency plates independently from their firm, serving the Pennsylvania government just as he had served that of Virginia. It was a trade focus that he never lost. After Allerdice's death, he built a working relationship with the Massachusetts engraver Jacob Perkins (1766-1849) to introduce steel-plate engraving to the currency business; in 1814, Scot induced Perkins and his partner, Gideon Fairman (1774-1827), to join him and another of his apprentices, John Draper (d. 1860), in Philadelphia as part of the note-printing concern of Murray, Draper, Fairman & Co. – managed by engraver George Murray (d. 1822); their innovative work led to the company's long-term survival, despite the deaths of its founders, becoming the American Bank Note Company in 1858.

Scot was required to take on a background role in that concern because of his appointment to his long-serving position in the federal government. As part of Alexander Hamilton's fiscal programs, Congress established a federal mint in Philadelphia in 1793. As president, George Washington was empowered to appoint the mint's managers, choosing David Rittenhouse

(1732-96) as its director and Joseph Wright (1756-93) as its chief engraver; Wright had a considerable reputation as a portrait engraver, having completed Washington's favorite printed-likeness of himself in 1783; but the yellow-fever outbreak of the summer of 1793 in Philadelphia carried Wright away, among thousands of others. Faced with replacing Wright as promptly as possible, Washington followed the recommendation of Thomas Jefferson, then secretary of state, to appoint Scot based on his commendable performance in Virginia when he had been governor; so on November 23, 1793, Washington named Scot in Wright's stead; he would hold the position until his death in 1823, just under thirty years later.

As the chief engraver at the U.S. Mint – then the only one, and situated in Philadelphia as it remains today – Scot was required to concentrate on engraving dies for coins, then the sole currency produced by the federal government. As a result, he was responsible for the first appearances of the bald eagle and Lady Liberty – both capped and draped – on an American coin; he also produced the first copper penny. Numismatists today report that his talents paled in comparison to European contemporaries, but they also say that Scot was likely the most talented engraver on this side of the Atlantic, suggesting that Washington chose well. Such is suggested as well by the notable length of his tenure and the absence of controversy during that tenure. Indeed, the quiet competence Scot exhibited so long meant that when he died in November 1823, in "the seventy-ninth year of his age," the reports of his passing published in American newspapers were simple single-sentence notices.

Personal Data

Born:	ca. 1745	Scotland [possibly Edinburgh].
Married:	ca. 1770	Unnamed wife died in Philadelphia in April 1806.
Died:	Nov. 1 1823	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
Children:	No record of off-spring yet uncovered.	

Sources: Stauffer, *American Engravers*; Cutten, *Silversmiths of Virginia*.