The 1979–1981 San Francisco Mint "Filled S" vs "Clear S" Varieties

(Type 1 and Type 2 Mint Marks Explained)

Introduction: Why the Small "S" Matters So Much

From 1979 through 1981, the San Francisco Mint produced proof coins with an "S" mint mark that went through a surprising evolution. What looks like a tiny design detail—just the shape of the "S"—actually creates two major collectible varieties:

- **Type 1 (Filled S / Blob S)**
- **Type 2 (Clear S)**

These varieties appear on **all six coins in proof sets** (cent, nickel, dime, quarter, half dollar, and Susan B. Anthony dollar) for the affected years. The difference is not a mint error—it is the result of **changing mint mark punches and wear at the Mint itself**.

Quick Visual Comparison

Below is a general visual guide showing the difference in appearance:




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1979



Type 2
Clear



Type 1
Filled

The Two Varieties Explained

Type 1 – "Filled S" (Blob S)

The **Type 1 mint mark**, often called the *Filled S*, is the earlier style used at the San Francisco Mint.

Key characteristics:

- The "S" looks **soft, blurry, or clogged**
- Internal spaces of the "S" appear partially filled with metal

- Serifs (the ends of the letter) are weak or missing
- Overall appearance often described as a **“blob S”**

Why it happened:

The Mint used an older mint mark punch that had been in service since the late 1960s–early 1970s. Over time, it became worn. When it was punched into dies, the detail weakened and metal flow during striking made the letter appear “filled in.”

Collectibility:

- **Most common variety in 1979 and 1981 proof sets**
- Lower premium in typical grades
- Still collected as part of the full type set

Type 2 – “Clear S” (Sharp S)

The **Type 2 mint mark**, often called the *Clear S*, is the improved and later punch style.

Key characteristics:

- The “S” is **sharp and clearly defined**
- Internal loops are **open and clean**
- Serifs are **bold and bulbous**
- The letter stands out distinctly from the field

Why it exists:

The Mint replaced the worn punch in an effort to improve quality and consistency in proof coin appearance. This new punch created a more modern, readable mint mark.

Collectibility:

- **Scarcer variety**, especially in 1981 proof issues
- Often commands a premium in high grades
- Considered the “better struck” mint mark style

The Timeline: 1979 to 1981 Transition

1979: The Beginning of the Change

- Early proof sets show the **older Filled S (Type 1)**
- Later in 1979, a new punch begins appearing (Clear S / Type 2)
- This creates the first widely collected split-year variety in modern proof coinage

1980:

- Most coins use the **Clear S style**
- This becomes the dominant punch going forward

1981:

- Another subtle change occurs
- The Mint introduces a slightly modified version of the Clear S
- Collectors recognize **two distinct 1981-S types**, often cataloged as:
    - Type 1: earlier Clear S style
    - Type 2: refined later version with different serif and shape characteristics

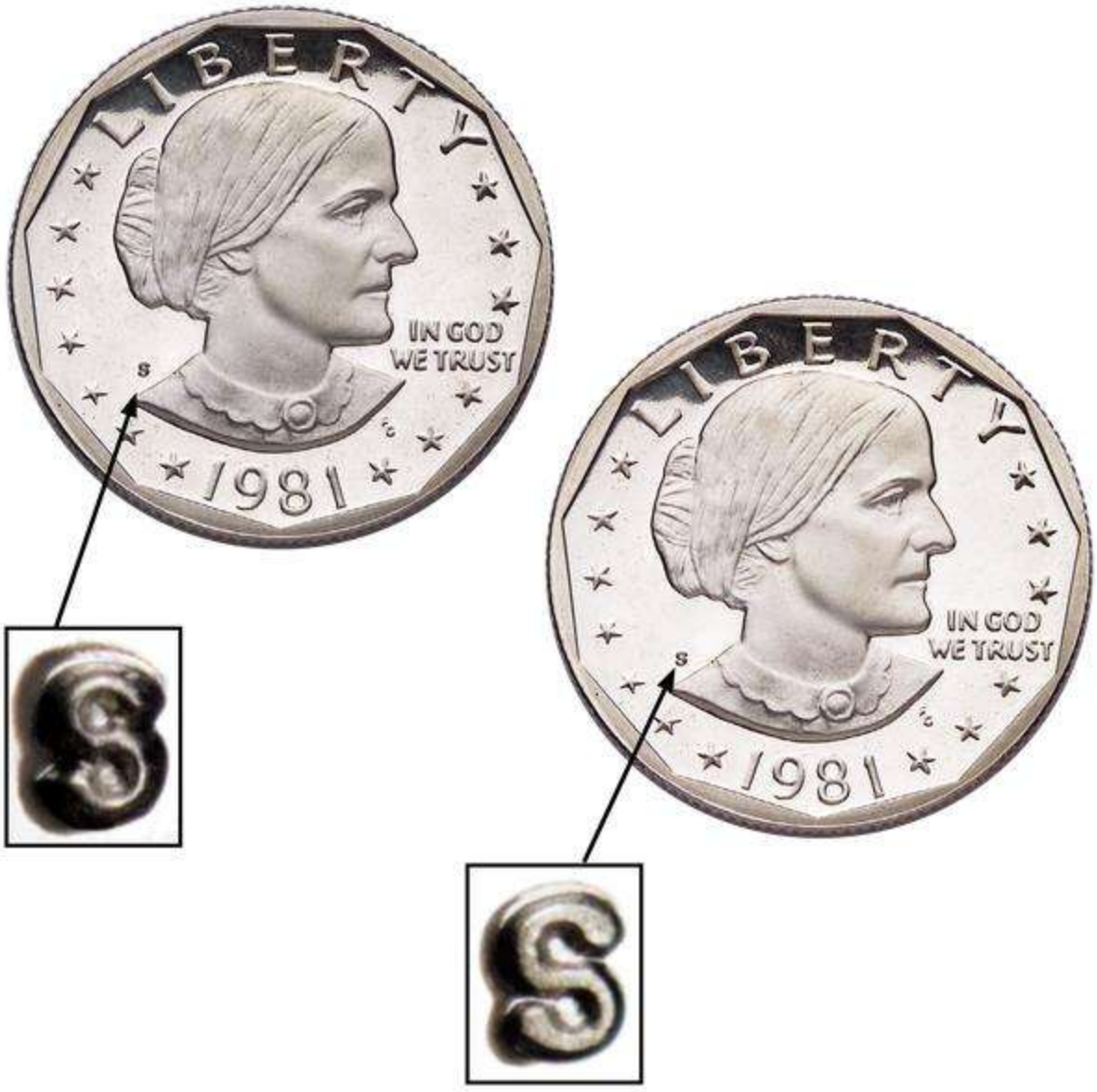
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1981-S: The More Complex Year

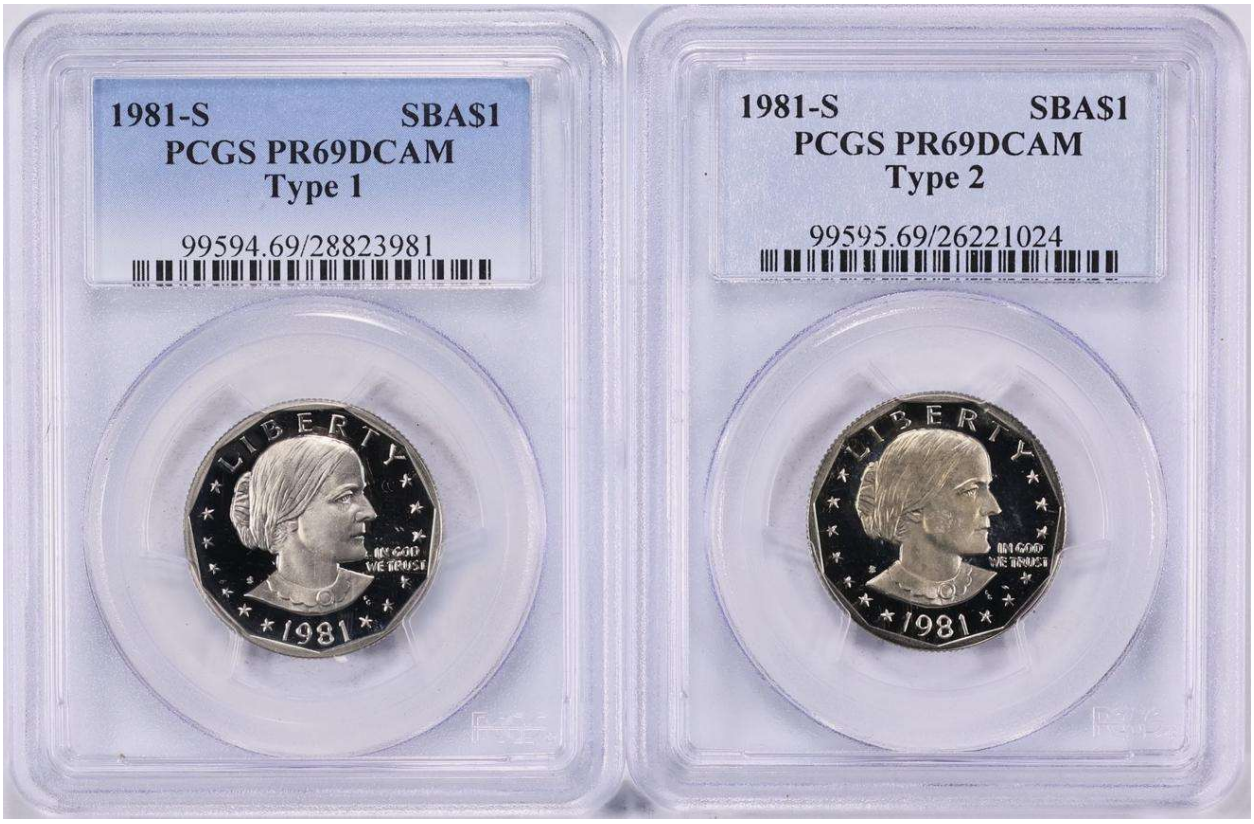
By 1981, the San Francisco Mint had essentially refined the earlier redesign again, resulting in a more subtle but important distinction.

Type breakdown in 1981 proof sets:

- **Type 1:** Clear S (rounded, earlier punch style)
- **Type 2:** Sharper “flat-top” style S with more defined serif structure


LIBERTY
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1981
S
LIBERTY
IN GOD
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1981
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Why collectors care:

- The **Type 2 (1981-S)** is generally scarcer

- Found in fewer proof sets compared to Type 1
- Recognized as a key modern proof variety

What Coins Are Affected?

All proof coins from San Francisco in those years can show these varieties:

- Lincoln Cent
- Jefferson Nickel
- Roosevelt Dime
- Washington Quarter
- Kennedy Half Dollar
- Susan B. Anthony Dollar

The mint mark difference is consistent across the entire proof set.

How to Identify Them

Collectors typically use **10x magnification** or stronger.

What to look for:

Filled S (Type 1):

- “S” looks muddy or clogged
- Weak edges
- Poor internal definition

Clear S (Type 2):

- Sharp edges
- Clean interior openings
- Strong serif structure

A simple rule:

If the “S” looks like it’s melting → Type 1
If it looks crisp and engraved → Type 2

Why These Varieties Matter

These varieties are important because they represent:

1. A real mint production change

Not a damage error—an intentional punch replacement.

2. One of the most collected modern proof distinctions

Especially for:

- 1979-S Susan B. Anthony dollars
- 1981-S proof sets

3. A teachable moment in U.S. Mint history

They show how even small tools (like a mint mark punch) can create major collectible differences.

Value Overview (General Market Trend)

- **Type 1 (Filled S):** common, lower premium
- **Type 2 (Clear S):** scarcer, higher premium
- **1981-S Type 2:** often the most desirable of the group

High-grade proof examples (PR69–PR70 Deep Cameo) can show noticeable price differences between varieties.

Final Thoughts

The 1979–1981 San Francisco “S” mint mark story is a perfect example of how **tiny manufacturing details become major numismatic varieties**. What started as a worn punch and a replacement tool ended up creating one of the most widely studied modern proof distinctions.

For collectors, the key takeaway is simple:

- **1979–early 1981 = Filled S (Type 1 dominance)**
- **Late 1979–1981 = Clear S (Type 2 emergence and refinement)**
- **1981 = final refinement and most collectible variation split**