

A Short History of Postage Stamps – Part I

The Post Office Department issued its first postage stamps on July 1, 1847. Previously, letters were taken to a Post Office, where the postmaster would note the postage in the upper right corner. The postage rate was based on the number of sheets in the letter and the distance it would travel. Postage could be paid in advance by the writer, collected from the addressee on delivery, or paid partially in advance and partially upon delivery.

Alexander M. Greig’s City Despatch Post, a private New York City carrier, issued the first adhesive stamps in the United States on February 1, 1842. The Post Office Department bought Greig’s business and continued use of adhesive stamps to prepay postage.

After U.S. postage rates were standardized in 1845, New York City Postmaster Robert H. Morris, among others, provided special stamps or markings to indicate prepayment of postage. These now are known as Postmasters’ Provisionals.

On March 3, 1847, Congress authorized United States postage stamps. The first general issue postage stamps went on sale in New York City, July 1, 1847. One, priced at five cents, depicted Benjamin Franklin. The other, a ten-cent stamp, pictured George Washington. Clerks used scissors to cut the stamps from pre-gummed, nonperforated sheets. Only Franklin and Washington appeared on stamps until 1856, when a 5¢ stamp honoring Thomas Jefferson (Scott 12) was issued. A 2¢ Andrew Jackson stamp (Scott 73) was added in 1863. George Washington has appeared on more postage stamps than any other individual.



Commemorative Stamps - In 1893, the first commemorative stamps, honoring the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago, were issued. The subject — Columbus’s voyages to the New World — and size of the stamps were innovative. Standard-sized stamps were too small for engraved reproductions of paintings that portrayed events connected to Columbus’s voyages. The 16 (Scott 230-245) stamps of this set (1¢ - \$5.00) were 17.8 mm high by 34.1 mm inches wide, nearly double the size of previous stamps. This issue included the first denomination above a dollar.



Over the years, commemorative stamps have been produced in many sizes and shapes, with the first triangular (Scott 3130-31) stamps issued in 1997 and the first round stamp (Scott 3412) in 2000.

The first stamp honoring an American woman was the 8¢ Martha Washington stamp (Scott 306) of 1902. The first to honor a Hispanic American (his father was a Spanish citizen) was the one-dollar Admiral David Farragut (Scott 311) stamp in 1903. Native Americans were portrayed in a general way on several earlier stamps, but the first to feature a specific individual was 1907’s 5¢ stamp honoring Pocahontas (Scott 330). In 1940, a 10¢ stamp commemorating Booker T. Washington (Scott 873) became the first to honor an African American.



Next month we'll finish the short history of U. S. Stamps.