

This Day in History... January 28, 1818

Birth of George S. Boutwell

George Sewall Boutwell was born on January 28, 1818, in Brookline, Massachusetts, at a time when the young nation was still defining its political identity. Over the course of his long career, Boutwell became a key figure in state and federal government, shaping policy before, during, and after the Civil War.

Boutwell spent his childhood on his family's farm, where hard physical work was part of daily life. He attended local public schools, which provided him with a practical education rather than elite training. This background influenced his later views on public service and responsibility. After completing his schooling, Boutwell supported himself by working as a teacher and later as a shopkeeper. These early jobs gave him experience with ordinary citizens and local business, knowledge that proved useful in politics.

In 1841, at just twenty-three years old, Boutwell was appointed postmaster of Groton, Massachusetts. The position placed him at the center of community communication and local administration. One year later, he entered elected office. Boutwell was chosen to serve in the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1842. He served until 1844, then returned for additional terms from 1847 to 1850. During this period, he also worked as a state bank commissioner, overseeing financial practices at a time when banking regulation was limited and often unstable.

Boutwell's rise continued when he was elected governor of Massachusetts, serving from 1851 to 1853. As governor, he supported public education reforms and worked to improve state finances. After leaving the governor's office, he remained deeply involved in public affairs. He served at the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention, where delegates debated changes to the state's governing framework. He also helped found the Republican Party, which emerged in the 1850s in opposition to the expansion of slavery.

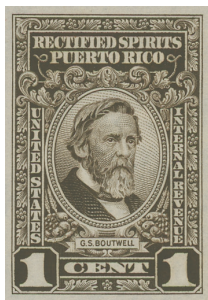
From 1855 to 1861, Boutwell served as secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education. In this role, he promoted standardized schooling and greater access to education. In 1861, as tensions between North and South reached a breaking point, Boutwell attended the Peace Conference in Washington, DC. The meeting sought to prevent the outbreak of civil war, though its efforts ultimately failed.

After the Civil War began, President Abraham Lincoln appointed Boutwell as the first commissioner of internal revenue in 1862. The position was newly created to fund the war effort. Boutwell helped establish systems for collecting federal taxes, including income and excise taxes, laying groundwork for modern federal revenue collection. In 1863, he was elected to the US House of Representatives, where he served for six years. While in Congress, he became known for his strong support of Reconstruction policies. He also served as one of the special prosecutors during the impeachment trial of President Andrew Johnson, arguing that Johnson had violated the law by defying Congress.

In 1869, President Ulysses S. Grant appointed Boutwell as secretary of the Treasury. In this role, he reorganized the department and improved bookkeeping practices. He worked to reduce the national debt left over from the Civil War. Boutwell also faced a major financial crisis during the Black Friday gold panic of September 23, 1869. To stop speculators from manipulating gold prices, he ordered Treasury gold released into the market, helping to stabilize the economy.

After leaving the Treasury, Boutwell returned to public service in Massachusetts, serving in the state senate. He later worked as US counsel for the French and American Claims Commission and practiced law in both Boston and Washington, DC. Boutwell died in Groton, Massachusetts, on February 27, 1905.

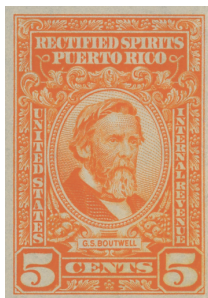
There is a historical irony in Boutwell's appearance on Puerto Rico revenue stamps. He was a vocal opponent of American imperialism and strongly opposed the US acquisition of overseas territories, including the Philippines. He helped found the American Anti-Imperialist League and served as its first president. Other members included Mark Twain, Samuel Gompers, and former President Grover Cleveland. Despite his opposition, the US acquired Puerto Rico after the Spanish-American War, and decades later, Boutwell's image appeared on its tax stamps—an unexpected reminder of his lasting place in American history.



Boutwell's signature appears on some of the earliest Internal Revenue documents issued by the US government.



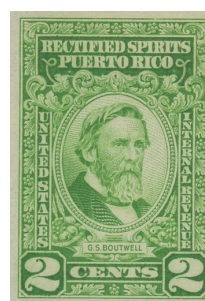
Boutwell was known for his strict views on fiscal honesty and openly criticized corruption in his own party.



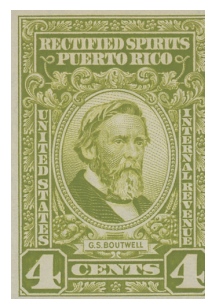
He was one of the earliest Republicans to argue that Reconstruction should include full civil rights protections.



Boutwell never attended college, yet rose to become one of the nation's top financial officials.



Boutwell supported paying down the national debt with hard currency rather than paper money, a controversial stance at the time.



As Commissioner of Internal Revenue, Boutwell helped create the first federal income tax system in US history.

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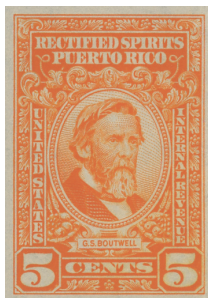
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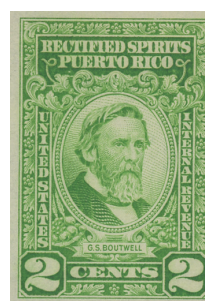
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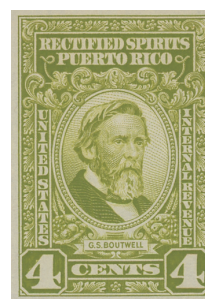
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