

This Day in History... August 19, 1918

U.S. #523 Color Error

US #523, the 1918 \$2 orange-red Franklin error stamp, was first used on or around August 19, 1918. However, it would be two years before the error was discovered.



The orange-red Franklin color error

The ravages of World War I caused a famine in Russia and threw the rest of Europe into disarray. In the US, relief agencies as well as private individuals mailed food, clothing, machine parts, and valuable Liberty Bonds to Europe. These packages were expensive to send by ship across the Atlantic and required high-value stamps. For this purpose new \$2 and \$5 stamps were issued in August 1918.



The green \$5 Franklin stamp issued around the same time.

Both stamps featured a similar design of Benjamin Franklin with a difference in denomination and color. The \$2 stamp had an orange-red frame, while the \$5 stamp had a green frame. Many of these stamps were bought and used on packages to Europe. Then two years later, on November 1, 1920, the \$2 stamp began appearing in a different color – carmine. Stamp collectors believed they had found a new error! When philatelic writers inquired about the new color, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing informed them “this stamp has always been this color.”

The Bureau investigated and discovered the earlier color had been the error. All communications between the Post Office Department and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing listed the newer stamp’s colors as carmine and black. No longer considered an error, the newer “correct” version of the stamp was given the Scott number 547. However, it wasn’t around for long before being replaced by the Series of 1922-25 stamps.



The carmine Franklin stamp that was issued two years later

Because the discovery was made more than two years after US #523

had been issued, collectors who’d overlooked it scrambled to get the stamp. Many, however, had served their function and been discarded.



Scarce lake color variety of the \$2 Franklin

Legendary stamp expert and author Max G. Johl stated in his classic *United States Postage Stamps, 1902-1935*, that due to the limited availability, the limited number issued, and the confusion concerning the stamp’s error status, “these stamps in mint condition will become very desirable in a short time....”

Only 743,680 #547 stamps were issued, and of those, a much smaller number were printed in the lake color, making #547a even more scarce.

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