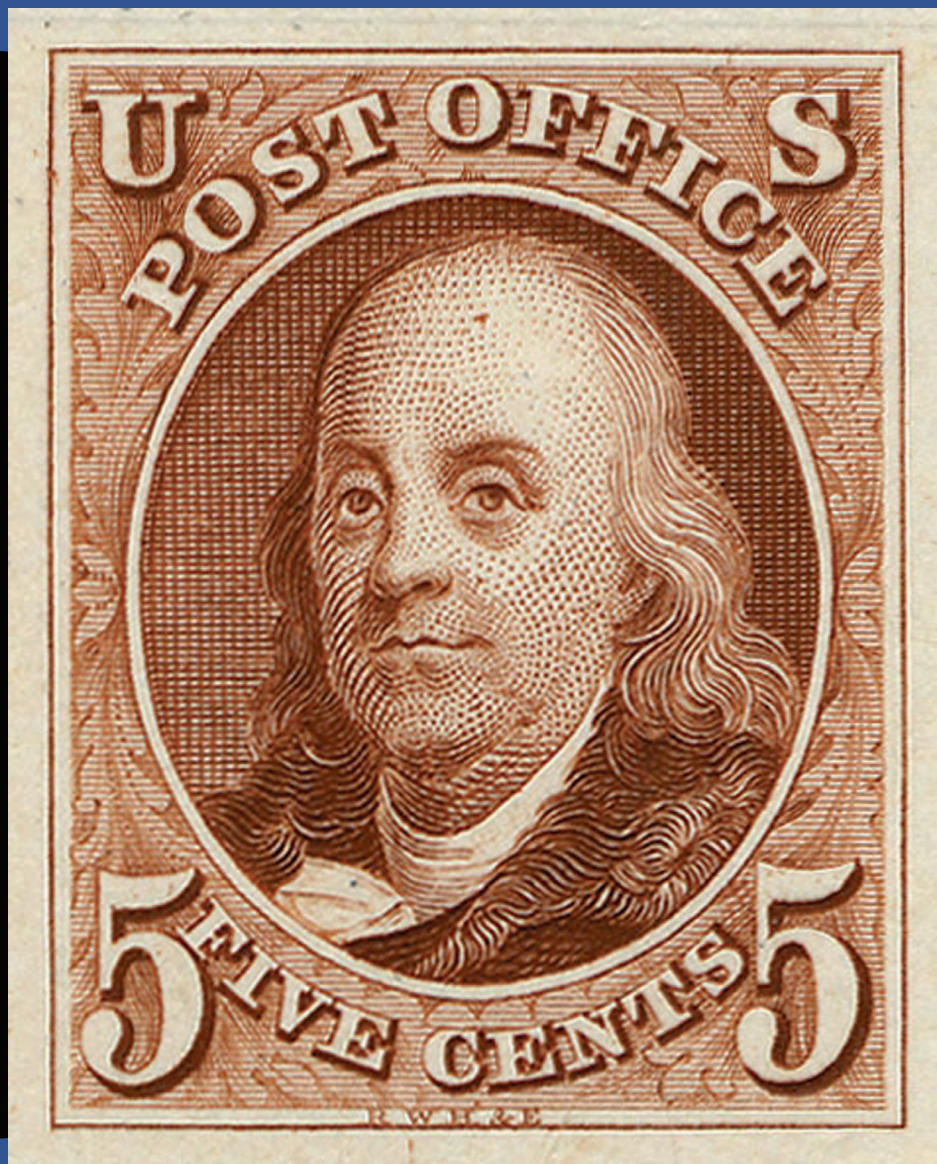


10 GREATEST AMERICAN STAMPS



1847 5¢ Benjamin Franklin – First U.S. Postage Stamp

Introduction

DONALD SUNDMAN

PRESIDENT

MYSTIC STAMP COMPANY

What makes a great stamp? The design? Or the price? The story behind the stamp? Its history? Or something else?

What is your favorite American stamp? I'll tell you my favorite at the end of this preface...

Several years ago, I worked with Janet Klug to write *100 Greatest American Stamps*. The book is still sold on Amazon and MysticStamp.com. It's a coffee table book showing the greatest American stamps. We surveyed collectors and asked them to vote for the stamp they feel is the most important. These are the



top ten stamps in order, as voted by collectors.

We expected to see rarities in the 10 Greatest, and there are. All are wonderful stamps that collectors dream of adding to their collection. The voting was very close. For example, a single vote separated #5 from #6. Both stamps are rare and valuable. Which stamp would you vote for?

These ten stamps are all rare or scarce. All have interesting stories. All are expensive, and one sells for over \$1 million!

Stamp collectors are naturally curious, so there are lots of fun and informative stories to satisfy that passion for knowledge. As you leaf



The "Penny Black"
World's First Postage Stamp

through the following pages, you'll find interesting behind-the-scenes stamp stories, technical information, and neat trivia. Current market values for each stamp are included too.

I hope you enjoy reading *10 Greatest American Stamps* and share it with your collector friends.

My favorite stamp is the 1918 inverted jenny airmail stamp, ranked #3 in this list. It's my favorite because it's the stamp non-stamp collectors know is rare and valuable. It's also the stamp most stamp collectors dream of owning. It's beautiful too!



Official seal of the United States Post Office Department, picturing a Pony Express rider.

Donald Sundman is president of Mystic Stamp Company in Camden, New York. He is chairman of the Smithsonian National Postal Museum's Council of Philatelists. He is a fellow at the Royal Philatelic Society London, and a member of the Club de Monte Carlo in Monaco.

He's an active supporter of the American Philatelic Society and has sponsored more than 9,000 collectors for membership, a record for the APS. The APS named Sundman Stamp Dealer of the Year in 2018 and awarded him the Luff Award in 2010.

He co-sponsors the Maynard Sundman Philatelic Lecture at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum with his brother David Sundman in honor of his father, founder of Littleton Stamp Company.

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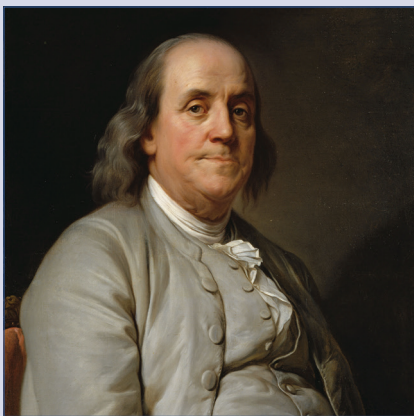
No.
ONE

AMERICA'S FIRST POSTAGE STAMP 1847 5¢ BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Scott #1 • Quantity Known: 3,600,000 • Current Mint Price: \$4,500

On April 7, 1845, Postmaster General Cave Johnson received a letter from a concerned citizen named J. Smith Homan that read:

“Post offices are frequently closed before the business hours of merchants are over; and there are at present no conveniences for the pre-payment of postage after the offices are closed. Stamps for single and double letters, could be prepared with a trifling expense; and would secure the pre-payment of many thousand letters which otherwise w’d not be prepaid, in consequence of the inconvenience (in large cities particularly) of making payment in advance by the present method.”



Benjamin Franklin was America's very first postmaster general, serving from 1737-1774.

The 1840s were a time of rapid economic growth for the United States, and with that came a need for faster communication. With that in mind, it's likely Postmaster General Johnson received a number of letters such as this one asking for improved mailing policies.

Great Britain had issued the world's first postage stamp in May 1840, but other countries took longer to adopt the idea. The United States instated new postal rates in 1845, then finally issued the first postage stamps on July 1, 1845. This included a 5¢ denomination with a portrait of Benjamin Franklin and 10¢ stamp picturing George Washington. (Interestingly, Andrew Jackson was almost pictured instead of Franklin.)

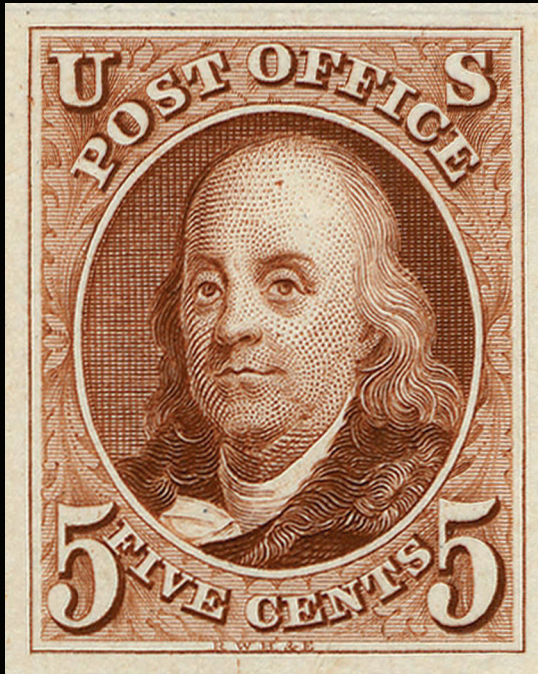
Rawdon, Wright, Hatch & Edson was the firm selected to produce America's first postage stamps. They printed the 5¢ denomination in red brown, though a number of other collectible shades exist, too. There are countless printing varieties available, as well, such as folded letters or envelopes with the stamp “on-cover.”

It's no surprise that one of America's first postage stamps was voted No. 1 in this booklet.

No.
ONE

AMERICA'S FIRST POSTAGE STAMP
1847 5¢ BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Scott #1 • Quantity Known: 3,600,000 • Current Mint Price: \$4,500



In the early days of postage stamps, rates were determined by the weight and distance letters were mailed. US #1 covered the cost of a letter traveling 300 miles or less. Postage was paid by the sender or the recipient.

No.
TWO

A NEW ERA IN U.S. MAIL SERVICE
1847 10¢ GEORGE WASHINGTON

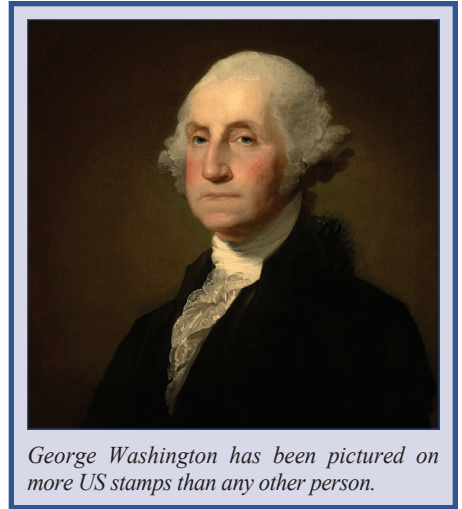
Scott #2 • Quantity Known: 863,800 • Current Mint Price: \$9,500

Along with the 1847 5¢ Franklin, the 10¢ Washington was one of the first US postage stamps ever issued. This combination of Washington and Franklin portraits on regular-issue stamps became a tradition that remained unbroken until the 1870s.

The 10¢ Washington paid the postage on letters sent more than 300 miles or double-weight letters sent under 300 miles. Before this, the rate for letters traveling over 400 miles was 25¢.

Interestingly, while postage stamps were newly available, post office customers could still pay for mail in the old way. That is, they could still send letters unpaid and have the Post Office collect the appropriate fee from the recipient upon delivery. The downside to this was any unclaimed letters were never paid for and the Post Office lost money.

Since most cancels at the time the 10¢ Washington was in use were black, this presented a bit of a problem for the post office. It was difficult to see black cancellation ink on the black stamp. In fact, one local postmaster complained that “There has [sic] been several stamps received that the cross upon them to distinguish they had been



George Washington has been pictured on more US stamps than any other person.

in use were so lightly done that a person could not have discovered it without a close examination and it is the opinion of many in this place that they could extract the ink and place them again.”

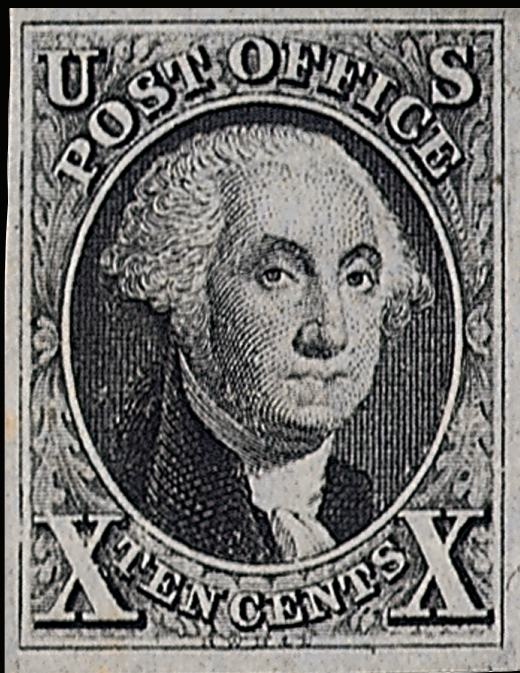
While the reuse of stamps would become quite a problem for the Post Office, they continued to use the 10¢ Washington until July 1851, when new stamps and cheaper rates came into use.

Today, the 10¢ Washington exists in a number of shades – yes, even black ink can have shade varieties – in addition to plate varieties and usages that lead to intense search and study. This makes it a fun adventure to collect.

No.
TWO

A NEW ERA IN U.S. MAIL SERVICE
1847 10¢ GEORGE WASHINGTON

Scott #2 • Quantity Known: 863,800 • Current Mint Price: \$9,500



This used horizontal pair features a rare black grid cancel on both stamps. Pairs of the 10¢ Washington are considerably more rare than the 5¢ stamp due to the usual practice of using two 5¢ stamps to pay the 10¢ rate. It was less common to send a letter requiring more than one 10¢ stamp.

No.
THREE

THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS STAMP
1918 24¢ JENNY INVERT

Scott #C3a • Quantity Issued: 100 • Current Mint Price: \$1,000,000+

The 1918 24¢ Jenny Invert is often considered to be the world's most famous postage stamp because it is known by collectors and non-collectors alike. The rarity and number of thrilling stories about the Jenny Invert have turned it into a legend in its own right.

The Jenny Invert came about in the middle of World War I. The Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP) was asked to create new Airmail stamps just two weeks before the first flights were scheduled to take place. Using a War Department photo, Bureau veteran Clair Aubrey Huston designed the new stamp. The Bureau's "Spider" flat press was used, printing sheets of 100 stamps each instead of the typical 400-stamp sheets.

Because the stamps were bi-colored, every sheet was fed through the press twice – first to print the red frame and a second time to print the blue vignette. In the end, the understaffed BEP worked around the clock to finish the stamps in time.

With the tight deadline met, the new stamps were placed on sale earlier than promised (late afternoon, May 13, 1918). Unknown at the time, nine sheets had been fed through the printing press upside down, creating an inverted vignette and positioning the

plate number on the bottom selvage. Eight sheets were later found in the BEP office and destroyed. However, one sheet made its way to a single post office in Washington, DC, where it was discovered by stamp collector William Robey.

Over the years, the Jenny Inverts have been owned by some of the world's most famous stamp collectors. The stamps have set sale records nearly every time they've come up for auction. In 2005, Bill Gross traded his newly acquired Jenny Invert Plate-Number Block to Mystic Stamp Company for the unique 1868 1¢ Z Grill Stamp. The trade made headlines everywhere.



The Jenny Invert Plate-Number Block. See upside down plate number below the bottom left stamp.

No.
THREE

THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS STAMP
1918 24¢ JENNY INVERT

Scott #C3a • Quantity Issued: 100 • Current Mint Price: \$1,000,000+



In 2013, the United States Postal Service issued a souvenir sheet of six Jenny Invert re-prints in honor of the famous rarity.

No.
FOUR

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS COMMEMORATIVE
1893 \$5 COLUMBIAN

Scott #245 • Quantity Issued: 27,350 • Current Mint Price: \$3,750

Most of us remember the childhood rhyme “In fourteen hundred and ninety two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.” And 1892 marked the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s journey. To celebrate the occasion, the United States organized the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The US Post Office Department issued a set of 16 new postage stamps to coincide with the event.

The \$5 denomination is the highest in the set, giving all 16 stamps a total value of \$16.34 at their time of issue. According to The MeasuringWorth Foundation’s inflation calculator, that equals \$2,650 in 2019 wages!



The \$5 Columbian stamp would have cost over \$800 to buy in today’s wages.

The \$5 black Columbian stamp features a bust of Christopher Columbus as the central design (vignette). It was based on a medal struck in Madrid, which was also used to make the 50¢ Columbian Commemorative Half Dollar. The \$5 Columbian stamp was almost the first US “coin-on-stamp” topical, but the bust of Columbus on the stamp faces left and the image on the half dollar coin faces right.

The two figures on either side of Columbus on the \$5 stamp represent Liberty (on the left) and America (on the right). The two engravers who worked on the stamp design were Alfred Jones and Charles Skinner. Printing was by the American Bank Note Company.

The 1893 Columbian stamps were the first commemorative of the United States. Their impact on stamp collecting was so great that the series’s degree of completion is often the “yardstick by which a US collection is measured” (Max Johl, 1947). However, the stamps were not without their critics. There were complaints about their large size, high cost, and low quality of paper, printing, and perforation. The stamps are prone to scuffs and creases, making premium examples difficult to find today.

No.
FOUR

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS COMMEMORATIVE
1893 \$5 COLUMBIAN

Scott #245 • Quantity Issued: 27,350 • Current Mint Price: \$3,750



The commemorative 1893 Columbus US Half Dollar pictures the bust of Columbus on the front and the Santa Maria on the back. It also includes the date of Columbus's voyage and the words "1893 World's Columbian Exposition Chicago."

No.
FIVE

1869 PICTORIAL ISSUE
90¢ ABRAHAM LINCOLN

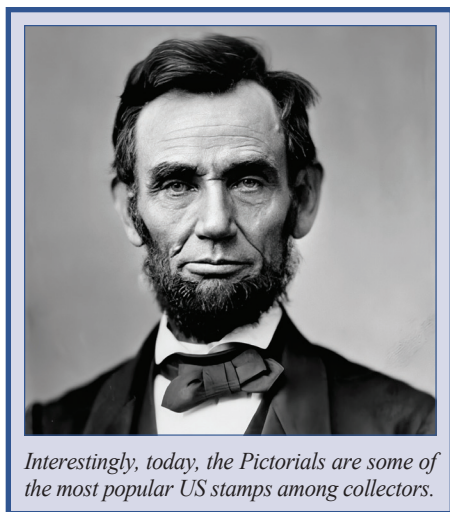
Scott #122 • Quantity Issued: 55,500 • Current Mint Price: \$6,000

In 1869, the United States was in the midst of Reconstruction after the Civil War, and the country was still reeling from the physical and emotional damages. Especially President Lincoln's assassination four years earlier.

After Lincoln's death, Andrew Johnson took office, but, just a few years later, faced the threat of impeachment. He narrowly avoided it as the Senate failed to reach a two-thirds majority vote. In the following election, Johnson was voted out and Union Civil War hero Ulysses S. Grant was elected as 18th president of the United States.

In the midst of all this political upheaval, the United States Post Office Department decided to release a new series of regular-issue stamps. They became known as the Pictorials and were criticized almost immediately for their square shape, poor gum quality, and the fact that only three stamps bore portraits – a tradition customers were used to.

The highest denomination of the 1869 Pictorial issue was the 90¢ Abraham Lincoln. It was printed with a carmine frame and black central design (the Pictorials were the United States' first bi-color stamps). Interestingly, the 90¢ stamp was the only one of the series that has no known inverted center errors.



Interestingly, today, the Pictorials are some of the most popular US stamps among collectors.

Lincoln's portrait on the 90¢ stamp came from a photograph by Mathew Brady.

As the highest denomination Pictorial stamp, the 90¢ Lincoln was printed in limited quantities (believed to be just over 55,000). Only one genuine cover with US #122 is known to exist – the famous “Ice House” cover mailed from Boston to “Mr. James H. Bancroft, Ice House, Calcutta, East Indies.” The cover was stolen from J. David Baker in 1967 and disappeared from knowledge until it was brought to auction in Chicago on January 4, 2006. After several years of investigation, it was determined the cover belonged to Baker's estate. It was later sold at auction on June 14, 2009.

No.
FIVE

1869 PICTORIAL ISSUE
90¢ ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Scott #122 • Quantity Issued: 55,500 • Current Mint Price: \$6,000



In 2009, the United States Mint issued four new pennies in honor of Lincoln's 200th birthday and the 100th anniversary of the Lincoln penny (released in 1909).

No.
SIX

1898 TRANS-MISSISSIPPI EXPOSITION \$1 WESTERN CATTLE IN STORM

Scott #292 • Quantity Issued: 56,900 • Current Mint Price: \$2,100

When it comes to beautiful stamps, few can compare to the visual appeal and significance of the 1898 “Western Cattle in Storm” stamp. In addition to its striking design, this stamp is also quite scarce.

The 1898 \$1 Western Cattle in Storm stamp was part of the series issued for the 1898 Omaha, Nebraska, Trans-Mississippi Exposition. The exposition opened on June 1, and ran for four months. It may not have been a financial success, but it brought much-needed economic help to an area experiencing much hardship at the time.

By the end of the four months, over 2,600,000 people had visited the Trans-Mississippi Exposition. One of the most famous attractions was the Indian Congress, the largest gathering of Native Americans of its kind. It included over 500 members of 28 tribes.

Due to the scandal of advertising events with stamps brought on by the Columbian Exposition, the Trans-Mississippi stamp series didn't include the name or dates of the event. The text on the Trans-Mississippi stamps simply relays the name of the photograph or painting its design was based on.

The Trans-Mississippi stamps were



This is a rare half-pane of US #292. Only two full panes are believed to exist today.

originally supposed to be printed in two colors. However, with the ongoing Spanish-American War, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing lacked the time and manpower needed to run the two-color press. The stamps were produced in one color each instead. A century later, modern collectors got the chance to see how these stamps were supposed to be printed. The United States Postal Service used the original bi-color dies to re-print them in two colors as intended.

No.
SIX

1898 TRANS-MISSISSIPPI EXPOSITION
\$1 WESTERN CATTLE IN STORM

Scott #292 • Quantity Issued: 56,900 • Current Mint Price: \$2,100



*In 1998, the United States Postal Service re-printed the Trans-Mississippi stamps in the two colors they were originally supposed to have. The original \$1 stamp was based on a painting called *The Vanguard*.*

No.
SEVEN

1869 PICTORIAL ISSUE

30¢ SHIELD, EAGLE, AND FLAGS

Scott #121 • Quantity Issued: 304,650 • Current Mint Price: \$3,500

The 1869 30¢ Shield, Eagle, and Flags is the second-highest denomination of the 1869 Pictorial stamps. It shares a number of design elements with the 10¢ issue, though that stamp was printed in only one color.

The flags and lettering on the 30¢ stamp were handled by a British-born engraver named Douglas S. Ronaldson. The frame of flags was printed in blue while the shield was printed in red, along with the denomination spelled out, which was printed over the blue flags. Famed philatelic author Lester Brookman said of the 30¢ stamp, “Were it not for the fact that the method of lettering in the denomination ‘Thirty Cents’ is most inartistic this stamp might lay claim to being a handsome stamp.”

The 1869 Pictorials can be found with or without grills. As explained earlier, the 1869 Pictorial Series was

unpopular at its time of issue. Grills did little to alleviate this as customers complained the grills weakened the paper and caused the stamps to tear when separated from each other.

In 1875, the US Post Office Department reprinted all 10 Pictorial stamps. These “Special Printings” were made in time for America’s Centennial Exposition celebrating our country’s 100th birthday. In 1934, Eustace B. Power said of the Special Printings that the “colors...are very brilliant, but it is almost impossible for me to distinguish them from the originals by description. Perhaps I might say that they appear fresher and that the colors are brighter and just a little bit deeper than the issued set and that the paper is white.” By this time, the Pictorial stamps’ place in history had been assured and they had become quite popular with collectors.



US #121 was the first stamp to picture a bald eagle in its design. Since then, America’s national bird has become a popular patriotic symbol on a number of our postage stamps.

No.
SEVEN

1869 PICTORIAL ISSUE

30¢ SHIELD, EAGLE, AND FLAGS

Scott #121 • Quantity Issued: 304,650 • Current Mint Price: \$3,500



In 2008, the US Mint established the Bald Eagle Commemorative Coin Program to celebrate the recovery of the bald eagle as a species as well as the 35th anniversary of the Endangered Species Act.

No.
EIGHT

1898 TRANS-MISSISSIPPI EXPOSITION
\$2 MISSISSIPPI RIVER BRIDGE

Scott #293 • Quantity Issued: 56,200 • Current Mint Price: \$3,500

The Trans-Mississippi Exposition stamps were issued in 1898 and symbolized impressive feats of the 19th century. Just 25,000 of the \$2 Mississippi River Bridge stamp are thought to exist, making it the rarest of the Trans-Mississippi set and essential to a complete collection.

The Trans-Mississippi stamps were the first commemorative stamps printed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. The designs were chosen to show off our country's growth west of the Mississippi River, the same goal as the exposition.

The \$2 Mississippi River Bridge stamp pictures the Eads Bridge, an unbelievable example of engineering prowess in America at the time. The bridge marks the boundary between the eastern and western portions of the

United States. At the time it was built, in 1874, it was the longest arch bridge in the world at 6,442 feet long.

The vignette of the \$2 Mississippi River Bridge stamp was the same design used on tickets for the 1896 Republican Convention in St. Louis. All of the stamps were printed in one day and were only sold for a limited time. Any unsold stamps were destroyed after that time was up. Even today, we're not sure exactly how many stamps were purchased by the public, but philatelic experts estimate around 25,000.

Due to the fact that many people were still trying to get all the Columbian stamps, many collectors couldn't afford the \$2 Trans-Mississippi stamp in 1898. That's one of the reasons why it's such a rare find today.



The Trans-Mississippi Exposition ran from June 1 to November 1, 1898, in Omaha, Nebraska.

No.
EIGHT

1898 TRANS-MISSISSIPPI EXPOSITION
\$2 MISSISSIPPI RIVER BRIDGE

Scott #293 • Quantity Issued: 56,200 • Current Mint Price: \$2,450



❖ 1998 Bi-Color Re-Issue of the 1898 Trans-Mississippi Stamp Designs ❖



In 1998, the United States Postal Service honored the Trans-Mississippi Series's 100th anniversary with a souvenir sheet of nine commemorative stamps. They were printed bi-color, as originally intended.

No.
NINE

SERIES OF 1922-25
\$5 AMERICA

Scott #573 • Quantity Issued: 1,652,167 • Current Mint Price: \$195

The \$5 America stamp was issued March 20, 1923, with only 1.65 million produced – far less than the quantity printed for other stamps of the Series of 1922-25. In addition to the low quantity, \$5 was a lot of money in 1923. When adjusted for inflation, \$5 in 1923 would be equal to over \$280 today. Many stamp collectors of the time were unable to invest in such an expensive stamp. Not as many were saved, so the \$5 America stamp is harder to find today than other stamps of the same series.

When the US Post Office began the new Series of 1922-25, they worked to create distinctly different stamps that were interesting and attractive. The new stamps featured prominent Americans along with scenes of national interest. The high-value \$5 stamp pictures the “Statue of Freedom,” also known as “Armed Freedom,” which graces the dome of the US Capitol Building. The stamp was printed in patriotic carmine and blue, making it the only bi-color stamp of the Series of 1922-25.

After eight years of construction and \$1 million, the Capitol dome was completed on December 2, 1863, with the hoisting of the *Statue of Freedom* to the top of the dome. The fanfare of the day included a 35-gun salute – one for

every state of the divided Union – and a return salute from 12 forts surrounding Washington, DC. The pageantry and the *Statue of Freedom* were visible from nearby Virginia – the seat of the Confederate States of America.



The Statue of Freedom weighs nearly 15,000 pounds and is 19 feet, 6 inches tall.

No.
NINE

SERIES OF 1922-25
\$5 AMERICA

Scott #573 • Quantity Issued: 1,652,167 • Current Mint Price: \$195



The Statue of Freedom was also featured on the 1895 1¢ Newspaper and Periodical stamp.



No.
TEN

GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON 1860 90¢ WASHINGTON

Scott #39 • Quantity Known: 25,000 • Current Mint Price: \$2,500

The 1857-61 stamps were the first US issues with perforations. Their designs were reproduced using the imperforate plates of 1851, however the 90¢ stamp was a new denomination. The third assistant postmaster general instructed Toppan, Carpenter, Casilear and Co., saying “With this stamp the Postmaster General desires the head of Washington and I need not suggest to you the importance of expending upon it all the talent you can command in respect to designing, engraving, and coloring.”

The printing firm followed the advice and based the 90¢ design on a painting of Washington in his dress uniform by John Trumbull. The stamps were printed in a rich shade of blue. The 1860 90¢ Washington is commonly called one of the most beautiful US stamps ever issued.

The 90¢ Washington covered the 20¢ per half-ounce rate for letters and packages sent over 2,500 miles. It was the highest-denominated stamp up to that point, exceeding \$200 in today’s wages. Few were printed, and most collectors of the day were unable to acquire it.

US #39 was issued in late 1860 as tensions grew between the North and South. After several states seceded, the federal government suspended postal service to the Confederacy. Then-current postage stamps were rendered invalid, including the newly-issued 90¢ Washington. Unsold inventories were returned to the US Post Office and destroyed. Because they were in use for such a short time, used examples are much rarer than mint stamps and have a higher market value.



John Trumbull's works have been the basis of a number of US postage stamps over the years.

No.
TEN

GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON
1860 90¢ WASHINGTON

Scott #39 • Quantity Known: 25,000 • Current Mint Price: \$2,500



In 1902, Martha Washington became the first woman pictured on a US stamp. This stamp is considered to be the most beautiful of the set.



1847 10¢ George Washington – Second U.S. Postage Stamp