

This Day in History... November 12, 1903

Washington Flag and Shield Stamps

On November 12, 1903, the 2¢ Washington stamp was issued with a new design after the earlier stamp was deemed disappointing.

In 1902, the postmaster general commissioned an entirely new series of general issues. Until this time, the current regular issues had been in use since 1890 with relatively few changes.



The redesigned "Shield" stamp.



The "Flag" stamp was issued on January 1, 1903.

The ornate new designs, however, were not the only addition to the 1902 series. A slight change was also made in the format. Each stamp in this series bears the inscription, "Series 1902." This caused some concern abroad, as many European philatelists wondered whether the US was planning on issuing new stamps each year. Many of the stamps, however, did not even reach post offices until 1903, and the next general issues were not produced until 1908.



Type II stamp

When stamp experts saw the beautiful proofs of the 2¢ Washington stamp in black on India paper they were impressed with its crisp, clear image. After seeing these samples, a New York newspaper stated it was "the finest stamp ever produced." The stamp featured a portrait based on a painting by Gilbert Stuart. American flags draped Washington's portrait, which was the first time the banners had appeared on a US stamp since the 1869 Pictorials.



Scarlet variety issued in booklet form

However, when the actual stamp was printed on the softer stamp paper in red ink, the result was not as beautiful as anticipated. Many felt the overall design was poor, the portrait didn't resemble Washington, and the stamp appeared too crowded. Many found it disappointing and the stamp was severely criticized by the public. Some copies were so poor they were mistaken for counterfeits.



Imperforate "Shield" Stamp



Imperforate Type II "Shield" Stamp, like

Less than two months later, the postmaster general decided to replace it with a newly designed stamp. Known as the "two-cent revised design," the stamp was released on November 12 and featured Washington framed by a modified US shield. The public applauded the new design, which went to the opposite extreme. Today, it is considered by collectors to be the least artistic of the series.

US #301 is commonly known as the "flag" stamp, while redesigned #319 and the imperforate #320 are known as the "shield" stamps.

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