

This Day in History... November 19, 1965

Start of the Prominent Americans Series

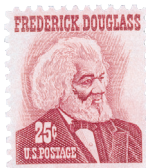
On November 19, 1965, the US Post Office issued the first stamp in a new series honoring Prominent Americans.

The Prominent Americans Series was first announced in April 1965 to replace the Liberty Issue. While the Liberty Issue, which began in 1954, had focused largely on political figures, the Post Office wanted this new series to honor more people from all walks of life.

As the Post Office stated, "The men and women honored by the Prominent Americans Series of United States postage stamps are as diverse as their contributions to the growth and development of America." Officials originally planned to honor 18 individuals, but later added seven others.



Lincoln stamp issued on this day in 1965.



Stamp issued on February 14, the date Douglass chose for his birthday.

The series began on November 19, 1965 with the issuing of a 4¢ Lincoln stamp, in honor of his Gettysburg Address 102 years earlier. Unlike previous definitive series in which all the stamps had a similar style and format, the Prominent Americans were drastically different. Each stamp was done in a different style by one of 13 different designers. The format of each portrait was different, some stamps had a bit writing on them, while others had the bare minimum. Plus, the stamps were printed in a few different sizes.

The Prominent Americans also marked a few "firsts." It was the first definitive series to include two women (Elizabeth Blackwell and Lucy Stone). Previous sets had included just one woman, Martha Washington in the Series of 1902, 1922, and 1938, and Susan B. Anthony in the Liberty Series. Additionally, this was the first definitive series to include an African American, Frederick Douglass. (Booker T. Washington had appeared on a commemorative in 1940.) Plus, this was the first definitive series in which Benjamin Franklin didn't appear near the beginning on the 1/2¢ or 1¢ stamp.

Despite the Post Office's effort to create a diverse set of interesting stamps, the collecting public wasn't as impressed as they would have hoped. After the first few stamps were released and people realized they didn't have a matching style, some took to calling the stamps the "Ugly Americans."

One notable story from the series revolved around the 5¢ Washington stamp. The stamp, #1283, was based on a painting by Rembrandt Peale. However, the stamp design had excessive shading around the lower part of Washington's face, leading the public to dub it the "dirty face" or "unshaven" Washington. The design was redrawn, resulting in US #1283B.



The original "dirty face" Washington



The 1967 redrawn Washington stamp

A number of technological changes developed during the course of producing the series, resulting in a number of varieties due to gum, luminescence, precancels and perforations plus sheet, coil and booklet formats. Additionally, seven rate changes occurred while the Prominent Americans Series was current, giving collectors who specialize in first and last day of issue covers an abundance of collecting opportunities.

The Prominent Americans Series lasted for about 15 years and was gradually replaced with the Great Americans Series.

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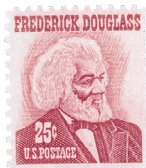
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