

This Day in History... June 16, 1938

Jefferson Counterfeits

On June 16, 1938, the post office issued a 3¢ Jefferson stamp, which was convincingly counterfeited.

The 3¢ Jefferson stamp was the fifth issue in the popular Presidential Series, affectionately known as the “Prexies.” The series was issued in response to public clamoring for a new Regular Issue series, as the current series had been in use for more than a decade.

Franklin Roosevelt, the stamp-collecting president, personally approved every stamp. Every US president deceased when the series was created was honored. America’s first 29 presidents were featured on stamps with denominations corresponding to the numerical order of their term of office. In addition to the presidents, Benjamin Franklin, Martha Washington, and the White House were commemorated.

On June 16, 1938, the Thomas Jefferson stamp was placed on sale. Paying the 3¢ first-class letter rate, the Jefferson stamp was the most commonly used and in-demand stamp of the series. In fact, it would remain in use even after a new series was issued in the 1950s – until 1958. It would be produced in booklet, sheet, and coil format over the course of the series.

In New York City, 33-year-old Nathan Levine developed a scheme. Using a blend of photography and lithograph printing, he produced counterfeited copies of the 1938 3¢ Thomas Jefferson stamp. Levine easily sold 100,000 stamps in sheets of 100 perforate and imperforate stamps for \$1.75 each.



*Counterfeit Stamp
with Perforations*

Levine’s forgeries were convincing enough they went unnoticed for several years. What finally caught a postal clerk’s attention was a mail order business that over-paid their postage with the 3¢ stamps every day on multiple packages to every postal zone. And when he looked closer, the eagle-eyed clerk noticed that the perforations didn’t look like they should.

The clerk set the packages aside and called in the US Postal Inspection Service. Postal inspectors carefully removed the stamps from the packages and examined them closely. The genuine Jefferson stamp was perforated 11 x 10.5, while the fakes measured 12 x 12. Plus, the gum on the back of the stamp was different. The genuine stamp was printed on the Stickney Rotary Press, which caused the stamps to curl vertically. To combat this, horizontal gum breaks were added to cut down on the curling. The counterfeit stamps lacked the gum breakers. And while the counterfeit’s printing was close to the genuine stamp in color, the background lines were less distinct and some were connected by splotches of ink.

Once the stamps were confirmed to be counterfeits, the FBI was alerted. They found more than eight million counterfeit 3¢ stamps in Levine’s home, some perforated, some partially perforated, and some imperforate. Levine had grown a mustache and dyed his hair to evade capture, but eventually turned himself in, admitting it was only a matter of time before they’d catch him. Levine along with 16 others were charged with “conspiracy to sell 10,000,000 counterfeit 3¢ stamps.” Nine of the conspirators were indicted and sentenced to prison terms, while the rest received shorter sentences.

Today, Levine’s counterfeits are more valuable than the genuine stamp, which is a seldom occurrence.



*Genuine 3¢ Jefferson
Stamp*



*Imperforate
Counterfeit Stamp*

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