

## This Day in History... June 17, 1898

### Trans-Mississippi Stamps Issued

On June 17, 1898, the prized Trans-Mississippi stamps were issued as part of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition in Omaha, Nebraska. Because of this, they were sometimes called the Omahas.

By 1898, the western part of the United States was beginning to flourish. Thousands of wagon trains had passed over its mountains, deserts, and Great Plains; transcontinental railroads now linked the West to the East; and many new states had been added to the Union. To call attention to the development of the land west of the Mississippi River, an international exposition was held in Omaha, Nebraska.

The Trans-Mississippi Exposition was held in Omaha, Nebraska, June 1 through November 1, 1898. Its goal was to further the progress and development of the resources west of the Mississippi.



*Marquette on the Mississippi*



*Farming in the West*

More than 4,000 exhibits showcased social, economic, and industrial resources of the American West. The expo wasn't a financial success overall, but it did revitalize Omaha, a community that had been devastated by drought and depression.

Over 2.6 million people attended the expo, which featured the Indian Congress, the largest Native American gathering of its kind. Over 500 members representing 28 tribes camped on the fairgrounds and introduced Americans from the East to their way of life. Reenactments of the explosion of the battleship *Maine* also fueled patriotism and support for the Spanish-American War.

To promote the event, the Postmaster General authorized a set of nine new stamps. The stamps all have the same border design. And rather than including the name or date of the event depicted, they're captioned with photograph or painting name on which the design is based. The stamps were supposed to be printed in two colors, but the Spanish-American War broke out. Demand for revenue was

high, and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing lacked the time and manpower needed to run the two-color press. So the stamps were produced in one color only. Even so, the Trans-Mississippi commemoratives are considered by many to be the most beautiful series ever produced.

The 1¢ "Marquette on the Mississippi" stamp pictures Father Jacques Marquette preaching to a group of Native Americans. The design is based on a William Lamprecht painting owned by Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The 1¢ denomination paid the postcard rate and also was used on overweight letters.

The 2¢ "Farming in the West" stamp pictures a team of horses plowing a wheat field. The design is based on a photograph taken in the field of the Amenias and Sharon Land Company, a 27,000 acre "bonanza farm" in North Dakota. Bonanza farms were very large operations that grew and harvested wheat on a large scale.



*Indian Hunting Buffalo*



*Frémont in the Rockies*

The design of the 4¢ Trans-Mississippi stamp was taken from an engraving by Captain Seth Eastman, a soldier who used his considerable artistic skills to capture scenes from the Old West. While assigned to Fort Snelling in Minnesota, he amassed a portfolio of paintings devoted to the study of "Indian character, and the portraying upon canvas of their manners and customs, and the more important fragments of their history." The painting on this stamp was among them. The Bureau of Engraving and Printing's designer and engraver eliminated background figures in Eastman's original painting and focused only on the racing Indian and buffalo.

The 5¢ stamp depicts "Frémont on Rocky Mountains." John C. Frémont climbed and raised the flag on one of the tallest peaks in the Rocky Mountains. His ability to draw detailed maps of unsettled territory greatly helped families moving west. He loved adventure and teamed up with Kit Carson more than once to explore the wilderness.

The 8¢ "Troops Guarding Train" depicts a pioneer wagon train winding its way across the prairies, escorted by a detachment of US soldiers. Based on a Frederic Remington drawing, "Troops Guarding Train" is one of the most

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visually appealing of the Trans-Mississippi series. The stamp was issued to pay the domestic registered mail fee.



*Hardships of Emigration*

The 10¢ “Hardships of Emigration” stamp is based on a painting by Augustus Goodyear Heaton. The 10¢ stamp could have paid the registered mail fee and the first-class rate. The stamp shows a family facing difficulties as it tries to cross America to find a new life in the West. The father in the family is bending over one of the horses as it is dying. Two small children are looking on from the side. The mother, holding a baby, and another daughter are looking out from inside the covered wagon. This image is a reflection of the dangers pioneers faced as they traveled the Oregon Trail. It was also used with other stamps to pay for heavier packages or mail sent to foreign destinations.



*Troops Guarding Train*

The 50¢ “Western Mining Prospector” was taken from a drawing by Frederic Remington, entitled *The Gold Bug*. It pictures an old prospector, who, with two pack burros, makes his way through mountain country in search of riches. This 50¢ stamp could have been used to pay the five times rate for first class plus the domestic registered mail fee. More often, it was used in combination with other stamps to pay for heavier packages or foreign destinations.



*Western Mining Prospector*



*Western Cattle in Storm*

The \$1 “Western Cattle in Storm” is considered by many to be the finest stamp ever engraved. It was initially going to be printed with light brown ink, but four days before printing began, the decision was made to change it to black. The design was taken from an 1878 painting by Scottish landscape artist J.A. MacWhirter entitled *The Vanguard*. After *The Vanguard* was completed, it was sold to an Englishman, Lord Blythwood. An American cattle company acquired a print of the painting and began to use it as a trademark without permission. Unaware of the image’s origin, the Post Office Department sought the cattle company’s permission to use it as the basis for the stamp’s design. When they learned of the painting’s true origin, the Post Office sent full apologies to Lord Blythwood, who felt no need to pursue litigation. Interestingly, the painting depicts a scene of cattle in a storm in the West Highlands of Scotland, despite being used to represent American cattle on this stamp.

The \$2 “Mississippi River Bridge” stamp pictures the Eads Bridge spanning the Mississippi River in St. Louis, Missouri. In the 19th century, this engineering marvel formed a natural boundary between East and West. At the time of its construction, it was the longest arch bridge in the world, with an overall length of 6,442 feet. This stamp was used in combination with other stamps to pay for heavier weight parcels or mail to foreign destinations.



*Mississippi River Bridge*

Originally, the Post Office Department didn’t plan on issuing 50¢, \$1 and \$2 stamps because there wasn’t a big demand for such high denominations. But Postmaster General James A. Gary wanted Americans to know about the achievements of the brave, hardworking, self-reliant people who settled the West. These three high-value stamps were produced after the original series and were on sale for only six short months.

However, collectors of the time protested these high-value stamps. Purchasing a complete set of the previously issued Columbian commemoratives had put a dent in many collectors’ pocketbooks. They resented another high-value set being issued, especially since the high-value Columbians were still on sale at post offices.

But the Postmaster General proceeded with his plans, stating “No one is compelled to buy the high values unless he wishes to do so.” Though sales were brisk at first, purchases quickly slowed to a trickle. By the end of the year the sales were disappointing, so the Post Office Department recalled and destroyed all the unsold stamps.

A century later, modern collectors got the chance to see how these stamps were supposed to be printed. The USPS used the original bi-color dies to print them in two colors as intended.

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