

This Day in History... November 1, 1962

First U.S. Christmas Stamp

On November 1, 1962, the US Post Office issued its first-ever Christmas stamp, starting a popular tradition that continues to this day.

There's some debate as to which country issued the first-ever Christmas stamp. Canada often gets the honor for its 1898 issue that pictured a map and had the inscription "XMAS 1898." In the coming years, other countries issued stamps with similar holiday inscriptions, and eventually with religious or holiday-themed designs.



Stamp issued on this day in 1962.



The second Christmas stamp, picturing the National Christmas Tree and the White House.

By the early 1960s, the US Post Office was receiving 1,000 letters a year (for several years) asking for a Christmas-themed stamp to frank their holiday mail. The Citizens Stamp Advisory Committee supported the idea and recommended a Christmas stamp, which was officially announced in May 1962. In his announcement, Postmaster General J. Edward Day stated that there were two subjects he knew were popular with the public – the US flag and Christmas. He went on to say, “This coming Christmas season, there will be a special stamp especially appropriate for use on Christmas cards.”

America's first Christmas stamp was then issued on November 1, 1962, at a special ceremony in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. At the dedication ceremony, Postmaster General Day said this stamp would be the first in a new series of Christmas stamps. The Post Office expected there would be a great demand for the issue, so they printed 350 million stamps – the largest print run for a special stamp up to that time. Those 350 million stamps sold out quickly, leading the Bureau of Engraving and Printing to produce



America's first se-tenant (two or more stamps with different designs or values printed together on the same sheet).



America's fourth Christmas stamp

more stamps – reaching one billion by the end of the year.

While the Christmas stamp was very popular, it wasn't without its detractors. Some didn't agree with the idea of the post office issuing a stamp honoring a religious holiday. Others wanted Christmas stamps that were more religious. The Post

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Office would continue to issue Christmas stamps in the coming years that featured the National Christmas Tree, seasonal plants, and an angel in 1965. The angel was considered less controversial because angels are included in many religions, not just Christianity.



The first Traditional Christmas stamp

Then in 1966, the Post Office had a new idea. They could produce Christmas stamps utilizing classic paintings of the Madonna and Child. These stamps wouldn't violate the separation of church and state because they were a celebration of culture. So on November 1, 1966, they issued the first US Madonna and Child stamp in Christmas, Michigan. The stamp featured the 15th century painting, *Madonna and Child with Angels*, by Flemish painter Hans Memling.



This stamp features a larger version of the painting above.

That stamp was very popular and over 1.1 billion were printed. The design was so popular, it was used again on the Christmas stamp of 1967. However, the 1967 stamp was larger and showed more of the painting. The stamp's continued popularity led the Post Office to issue another traditional Christmas stamp in 1968, this time picturing the Angel Gabriel. For the 1969 issue, they reverted back to the non-religious theme, with a stamp picturing a painting called *Winter Sunday in Norway, Maine*.

Then in 1970, the Post Office made a big change.

To keep people in both camps happy, they issued one traditional Christmas stamp, picturing a classic painting of the Nativity, plus a block of four picturing Christmas toys. That decision proved popular and they have continued to issue stamps with both traditional and contemporary Christmas themes ever since.



Stamp pictures the Angel Gabriel and is titled The Annunciation.

In recent decades, the USPS expanded its holiday themed stamps even further. In 1996, they introduced the Hanukkah Series. They followed this up the next year with the Kwanzaa Series. The first Eid stamp was issued in 2001 and a Diwali stamp in 2016.



Stamp pictures a painting called Winter Sunday in Norway, Maine.

The Christmas series has seen several interesting "firsts" over the years, including the first self-adhesive stamp (#1552), the first non-denominated stamps (#1579 and 1580), and the first self-adhesive coil stamps with a plate number (2799-2802).

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