

This Day in History... November 16, 1908

Washington-Franklin Series

On November 16, 1908, the first stamp in the Washington-Franklin Series was issued.

When the Series of 1902-03 was issued, the Post Office Department received numerous complaints from collectors, as well as the public, concerning the stamps' poor designs. One particular gentleman, Charles Dalton, even wrote to his senator! He severely criticized the Stuart portrait of Washington in use on the 2¢ stamp and suggested the profile, taken from the bust by Jean Antoine Houdon, be put back into use.

Dalton also recommended that this portrait be used on all US issues. To support his idea, he used the example of Great Britain's stamps, which all carried the profile portrait of King Edward VII. After careful consideration, the postmaster general and department officials adopted Mr. Dalton's suggestions for the new Series of 1908-09. The decision was made to keep Benjamin Franklin on the 1¢ stamp; however, his portrait was also to be in profile, modeled after Houdon's bust.

A simpler and more modern-looking border design was selected to be used on all denominations. The simplicity and uniformity of the new design greatly reduced production costs and extended the life of the steel printing plates. Due to lower international rates and higher weight limits per unit, the need for the \$2 and \$5 stamps diminished.

The first stamp in this new series, the carmine 2¢ Washington, was issued on November 16, 1908. With a design based on Houdon's bust of Washington, US #332a paid the domestic letter rate for a one-ounce letter. Immediately upon its release, the stamp received positive feedback. However, people quickly noticed there was something wrong with the stamp. It didn't follow the regulations established by the Universal Postal Union that required stamps have their denominations in numerals. Some expected the new stamp would be withdrawn from sale, but the postmaster general announced it would not.



This booklet stamp was the first issue in the long-running Washington-Franklin Series.



The same design was released on December 1 in sheet format.

Early printings were made with plates featuring a standard spacing of 2mm between the stamps, a marginal imprint of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, and a plate number. About 10% of the sheets had to be discarded because paper shrinkage caused faulty perforations. To fix the problem, star plates were introduced with 3mm vertical spacing between the six outer rows on each side of the full sheet of 400 subjects. The rest of the spaces remained at 2mm since the inner stamps were less impacted by shrinkage. This new process decreased the waste to about 1%.

When the Post Office Department issued the 1908 series, there were not enough different color inks for each denomination. Therefore, various shades of each color were used. For example, the 1¢ and 8¢ were both printed in green, and the 3¢ and 50¢ in purple, and the 5¢ and 15¢ in blue. Postal clerks complained that the stamps were too similar, making them difficult to distinguish, especially if they were in a hurry. In addition, the poor artificial lights hindered their ability to differentiate between the subtle shades.

Experiments were conducted using different inks printed on colored paper. These tests, however, determined this was not an effective solution to the problem. Finally, it was decided that the series should simply be split in half. The first seven stamps in the Series of 1912 (1¢ – 7¢) carried the portrait of George Washington, while the remaining stamps (8¢ – \$1) pictured our first postmaster general. The stamps bearing Benjamin Franklin's picture were given a new border design, which like the previous one, was simple yet artistic.

The Washington-Franklin stamps were meant to simplify postage but resulted in 220 major and 99 minor stamp varieties. These stamps utilize five different designs, two paper types, three printing methods, at least 14 perforations, several colors, and 20 denominations. They were also the last US postage stamps printed on USPS watermarked paper.

Mystic Stamp Company • Camden, NY 13316



An exceptionally rare coil waste variety.



One of the rarest non-errors in the series, with only about 20 known.

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