

This Day in History... December 27, 1980

Great Americans Series

On December 27, 1980, the USPS issued the first stamp in the Great Americans Series, which would go on to become the longest-running US definitive series.

The Great Americans Series was created to replace the Americana Series, which had begun in 1975. The new series would be characterized by a standard definitive size, simple design, and monochromatic colors.

This simple design included a portrait, "USA," the denomination, the person's name, and in some cases, their occupation or reason for recognition. The first stamp in the new series was issued on December 27, 1980. It honored Sequoyah and was issued in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. The stamp fulfilled the new international postcard rate that would go into effect in January 1981.



Sequoyah stamp issued on this day in 1980.

The Great Americans Series would honor a wider range of people than the previous Prominent Americans and Liberty Series. While those series mainly honored presidents and politicians, the Great Americans Series featured people from a number of fields and ethnicities. They were all important individuals who were leaders in education, the military, literature, the arts, and human and civil rights. Plus, while the previous series only honored a few women, the Great Americans featured 15 women. This was also the first definitive series to honor several Native Americans, with four stamps.

The Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP) produced most of the stamps, but private firms printed some. Several stamps saw multiple printings. The result was many different varieties, with tagging being the key to understanding them. Though there were also differences in perforations, gum, paper, and ink color.



Bernard Revel stamp with an unauthorized secret mark.

The series wasn't without its own share of controversies. In 1986, the \$1 Bernard Revel stamp had a Star of David added to the design without approval. It was discovered that a BEP engraver had added it to the die (between Revel's beard and mustache) without receiving authorization. This led to an internal investigation of the BEP's stamp dies from the prior 10 years.

Another controversy surrounded the Dennis Chavez and Earl Warren stamps. While the BEP printed several stamps in the series, private contractors printed many because it was cheaper. The Canadian Bank Note Company, as it turned out, had printed these two stamps. Once the public learned of this, it set off a widespread "Buy American" campaign and the issue was debated in Congress.



Printed outside the US, this stamp caused a bit of controversy.

All the stamps pictured individuals except for one, which pictured Lila and Dewitt Wallace. Many of the honorees were generally unknown to the public and

its believed they were produced to satisfy political agendas. Even still, the series was one of America's most popular. All the stamps were issued as sheet stamps, plus the Jack London stamp was also issued in a booklet. Additionally, the \$5 Bret Harte stamp was the first definitive to be issued in a miniature sheet format.



This was the last stamp in the series.

The final stamp in the series was issued on July 17, 1999, honoring Justin S. Morrill. Spanning 20 years, the Great Americans was the longest-running US definitive series. It was also the largest series of face-different stamps, with a total of 63.

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