

A Study in Race, Racism and Presidential Politics: The Pursuit of Black Representation on U.S. Postage Stamps During the Early 20th Century

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Published in the March 2025 edition of *The American Philatelist*

Volume 139, Number 3, Whole Number 1,490.

Synopsis

On April 7, 1940, the U.S. Post Office Department announced that Booker T. Washington would be honored on a postage stamp and included in the Famous Americans Series. The Booker T. Washington stamp, featuring a famous educator and political leader, marked a significant milestone in the ongoing struggle for Black representation on U.S. postage stamps.

Our article presents, for the first time in American philately, a comprehensive study of the twenty-eight-year journey that began in 1912 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation on a U.S. stamp. We examined the fascinating and determined campaign led by Richard Robert Wright, whose remarkable accomplishments sharply contrast with his humble beginnings as a former slave born on May 16, 1855, on a plantation in Georgia.

Starting with President William Howard Taft's administration, the article explains how five presidential administrations refused to support a stamp honoring the Emancipation Proclamation or depicting a Black image on a postage stamp. This includes the Roosevelt administration's hesitation to endorse a stamp commemorating the Emancipation Proclamation or any Black imagery during its first term. Additionally, the article examines the political reasons behind the decision to feature Booker T. Washington as the first Black American on a postage stamp.

In preparing this article, our primary sources included the files of the Third Postmaster General of the United States, housed at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum. This fascinating collection contains a variety of documents, including internal U.S. Post Office Department (POD) memoranda, letters from members of Congress, response letters written by at least five Third Postmasters General, letters from the public, Black newspapers clippings from 1911-1940, and documentation received from many social, civic, religious, academic, and labor organizations.

These files were invaluable in documenting the beginning time of 1912 and include extensive correspondence between Richard Robert Wright, James Farley, and several of Farley's senior managers from 1933 to 1940.

Our research involved an extensive review of newspapers from 1911 to 1940. During this period, we found that several Black newspapers, including *The Chicago Defender*, *The Baltimore*

Afro-American, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *The Atlanta Daily*, played a crucial role in advocating for the inclusion of Black imagery on U.S. postage stamps. The large number of newspaper clippings throughout the Third Postmaster General files, especially for the Booker T. Washington and the 13th Amendment stamps, highlights the important role played by Black newspapers.

However, our research phase faced several challenges. Reviewing newspapers from 1911 to 1940 was especially difficult because some publications were not consistently digitized. To address this, we relied on a variety of sources, including online newspaper databases managed by the Library of Congress, the Pratt Library in Baltimore, Maryland, Howard University in Washington, D.C., the University of the District of Columbia, and the DC Public Library. This dedication to thorough research highlighted the quality of our work and the importance of our philatelic discoveries.

To support our research findings, we included images of key documents, such as a crucial memorandum from Robert Vann, a prominent Black presidential appointee, to James Farley, found in the files of the Third Assistant Postmaster General. This internal memo clearly explains why the Roosevelt Administration hesitated to issue a stamp with a Black image during its initial term. Another important document discovered in these files is a handwritten letter from C.F. Richards, a notable philatelist and one of the founding members of the American Philatelic Association, which later became the American Philatelic Society. His 1912 letter to Taft's Postmaster General was the first request for a U.S. postage stamp featuring a Black image. This marked the first time such a request was made for a U.S. stamp. These documents were vital in supporting our narrative. On the first page of our article, we displayed a large image of the Emancipation Proclamation to emphasize the theme, highlighting the historical context of "The Pursuit of Black Representation on U.S. Stamps During the Early 20th Century." Additionally, we included various stamp images to identify Black Americans initially recommended for honor on U.S. postage stamps during the 1920s and 1930s.

As a testament to the quality of our research and the significance of our philatelic discoveries, our article received a Reserve Grand and Large Gold Award at the recent Great American Stamp Show.