

Her Majesty's Stationer - Aug. 1881

PROCLAMATION OF FREEDOM TO MILLIONS! THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

"WHEREAS, On the twenty-second day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two, a proclamation was issued by the President of the United States, containing, among other things, the following, to wit:

"That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State, or any designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be thenceforward and forever free, and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.

"That the Executive will, on the first day of January aforesaid, by proclamation, designate the States and parts of States if any, in which the people thereof respectively shall then be in rebellion against the United States, and the fact that any State, or the people thereof, shall on that day be in good faith represented in the Congress of the United States by members chosen thereto at elections wherein a majority of the qualified voters of such State shall have participated, shall, in the absence of strong countervailing testimony, be deemed conclusive evidence that such State and the people thereof are not then in rebellion against the United States.



"Now, therefore, I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, by virtue of the power in me vested as Commander-in-chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, in time of actual armed rebellion against the authority and Government of the United States, and as a fit and necessary war measure for repressing said rebellion, do, on this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and in accordance with my purpose so to do, publicly proclaimed for the full period of one hundred days from the day of the first above-mentioned order, designate, as the States and parts of States wherein the people thereof respectively are this day in rebellion

against the United States, the following, to wit: Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, except the parishes of St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Jefferson, St. John, St. Charles, St. James, Ascension, Assumption, Terre Bonne, Lafourche, St. Mary, St. Martin and Orleans, including the city of New Orleans, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, except the forty-eight counties designated as West Virginia, and also the counties of Berkeley, Accomac, Northampton, Elizabeth City, York, Princess Ann, and Norfolk, including the cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth, and which excepted parts are, for the present, left precisely as if this proclamation were not issued.

"And by virtue of the power and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States and parts of States are, and henceforward shall be free; and that the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.

"And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free, to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defence, and I recommend to them, that in all cases, when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.

"And I further declare and make known that such persons of suitable condition will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.

"And upon this, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind and the gracious favor of Almighty God.

"In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

"Done at the city of Washington, this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the Independence of the United States the eighty-seventh.

"By the President:
"W. H. SEWARD, Secretary of State."

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

A Study in Race, Racism and Presidential Politics

The Pursuit of Black Representation on
U.S. Postage Stamps During the Early
20th Century

CALVIN MITCHELL AND BAASIL WILDER

You may know that the 10-cent Booker T. Washington commemorative stamp of 1940 – part of the 35-stamp Famous Americans series – was the first U.S. postage stamp to feature a Black American. But you may not know that it took almost three decades of advocacy for Black representation on U.S. stamps for this stamp to be printed.

This effort began as early as 1912 with a campaign for issuing a stamp or series to celebrate the upcoming 50th anniversary of the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. In the following years, advocates of this campaign suggested different candidates to represent Black Americans on stamps, including Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, and Crispus Attucks.

The prolonged struggle to gain representation of Black Americans on U.S. stamps spanned six postmasters general and six presidential administrations: Taft, Wilson, Harding, Coolidge, Hoover, and Roosevelt. As revealed in this article, presidential politics were a critical factor in issuing the Washington and the 13th Amendment stamps.



Figure 1. Richard Robert Wright.

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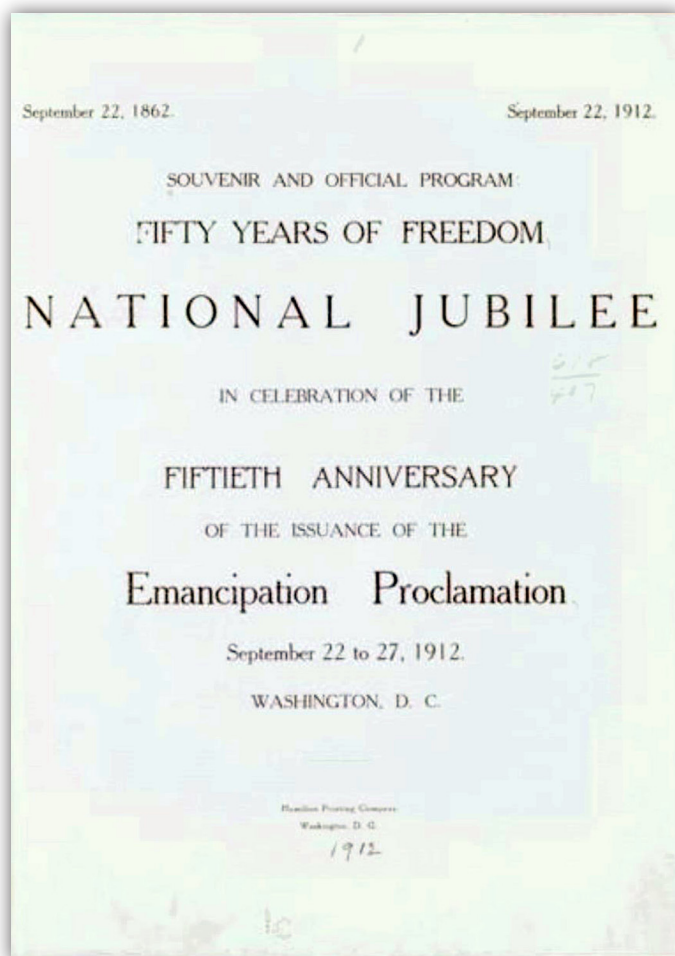


Figure 2. The National Jubilee of the Emancipation Proclamation program was held in 1912 in Washington, D.C.

A diverse source of information is a wealth of Black newspapers circulating between 1910 and 1940, the golden years of the Black press. These newspapers provide a rich tapestry of Black Americans' political and social sentiments.

Documents found in the Third Assistant Postmaster General files held by the Smithsonian National Postal Museum shed significant light on Postmaster General James Farley's role in the early efforts to commemorate Black history on U.S. postage stamps. These documents help identify and corroborate the factors influencing the emergence of Black imagery on U.S. postage stamps.

First efforts: 50th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation

Between 1909 and 1912, northern states with growing urbanized Black communities, such as New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia, began planning to celebrate Emancipation's 50th anniversary. This was the genesis of early efforts to pursue Black representation on U.S. stamps. State legislatures in New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois provided substantial funding for events that started in 1912 and continued through 1915. Newspapers, both Black and white, such as *The Washington Bee*, *The Chicago Daily Defender*, *The New York Times*, and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* reported

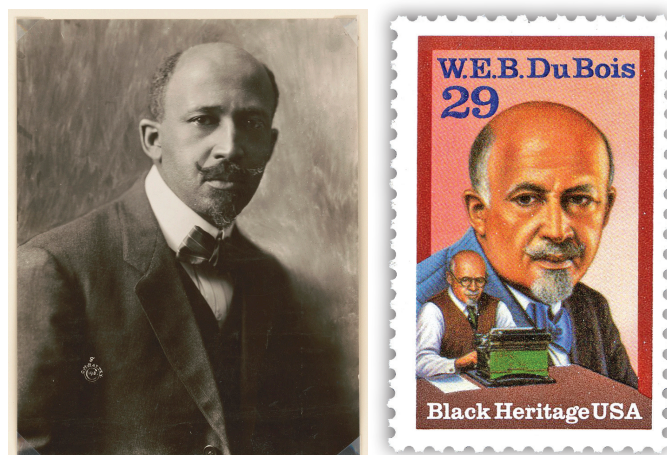


Figure 3. W.E.B. Du Bois, who was honored in 1992 on the 15th stamp to be issued in the Black Heritage series, Scott 2617.

on celebrations in those cities, including state and local events at churches, social clubs, educational institutions, and music halls.

At the national level, the American Emancipation Exposition was one of the leading organizations to actively solicit federal funding to finance and coordinate major 50th anniversary events. This organization was led by Richard Robert Wright, an extraordinary individual who became a crucial supporter of the early campaign for Black imagery on U.S. postage stamps.

Major Richard Robert Wright

Wright (Figure 1) was born into slavery on a Georgia plantation on May 16, 1855. During Reconstruction, he attended various mission schools and received his bachelor of arts degree in 1876 from Atlanta University, becoming one of the school's first graduates. Wright later rose to the rank of major in the Spanish-American War and was the first Black American to serve as an Army paymaster. Even after leaving the military, he kept the title of "major" throughout his life.

In 1891, Wright served as president of the Georgia State Industrial College for Colored Youth, which became Savannah State University in 1996. He later continued his education at the University of Chicago and eventually moved to Philadelphia, where, at age 67, he enrolled in the Wharton Business School at the University of Pennsylvania, becoming one of the first Black people to study there. Wright later founded the Citizen and Southern Bank and Trust Company in Philadelphia, one of the few Black-owned banks in the country that survived the Great Depression.

Wright's advocacy for an Emancipation Proclamation stamp

Wright was never a stamp collector. However, in 1911, he began considering a stamp commemorating the Emancipation Proclamation. He viewed the formal emancipation of the slaves in the Confederate states as the basic milestone

that contributed to the abolition of slavery in the United States and believed its 50th deserved to be honored on a United States postage stamp.

In June 1912, Wright appeared before congressional committees to solicit \$250,000 to finance 50th anniversary celebrations nationwide during the William Howard Taft administration (Figure 2).

Many representatives from northern states supported the funding, but most southern Democratic congressmen opposed it. Among these was Albert Burleson, a staunch segregationist from Texas who later became postmaster general during the Woodrow Wilson administration. Similarly, the funding request in the Senate never progressed due to southern opposition.

No records or documentation are currently available to the general public to corroborate Wright's discussions regarding his request for this stamp, but his appearance before congressional committees and discussions with sympathetic members of Congress were chronicled in several Black newspapers, including the *Baltimore Afro-American* and *The Washington Bee*. Wright's son, Dr. Robert Richard Wright Jr., a sociologist and theologian, and Dr. W.E.B. Dubois, a Black scholar and social activist (Figure 3), were

also engaged in a very active campaign in Washington, D.C. to pursue congressional funding to support various 50th anniversary activities.

Absence of support at the national level

Planning for the 50th anniversary celebration began during Taft's presidency (1909-1913). A Republican, Taft belonged to the party of President Abraham Lincoln, the originator and signer of the Emancipation Proclamation. However, Taft did not support congressional legislation for federal funding of anniversary activities. He gave a few speeches supporting the anniversary. One of his infrequent shows of support was a speech at the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church in Washington, D.C., according to reports in Black newspapers of the day. The Metropolitan A.M.E. Church was heavily involved in anniversary planning and celebrations.

In March 1913, while state and local jurisdictions were celebrating the 50th anniversary, Woodrow Wilson assumed the presidency. His administration showed outright hostility toward Black Americans, according to recent published works, including a 2013 book by Eric Yellin.

Previously, Wilson was the president of Princeton Uni-

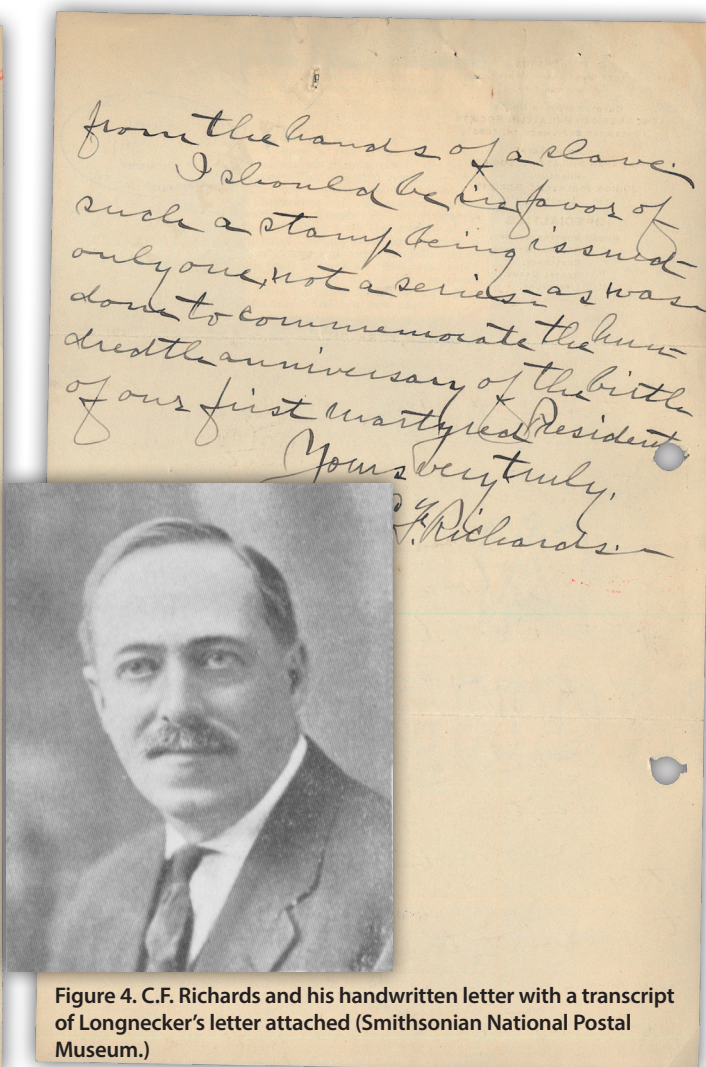
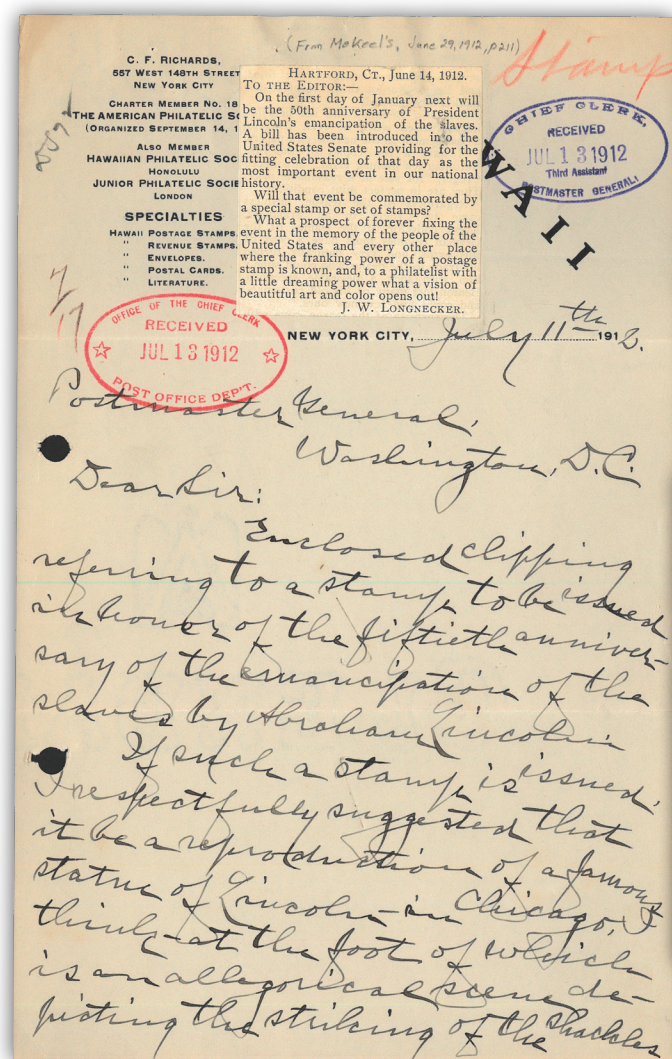


Figure 4. C.F. Richards and his handwritten letter with a transcript of Longnecker's letter attached (Smithsonian National Postal Museum.)

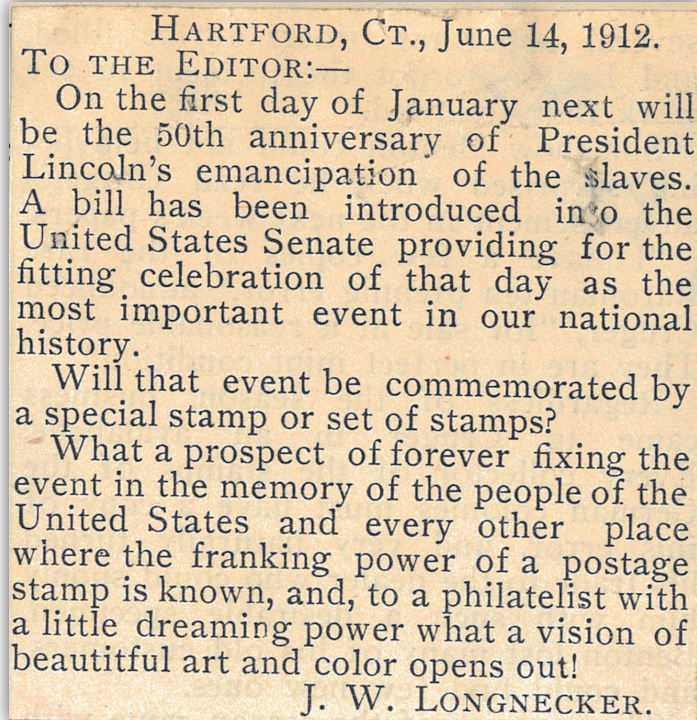


Figure 5. John William Longnecker's published letter supporting a commemorative stamp for the Thirteenth Amendment (Smithsonian National Postal Museum.)

versity and actively discouraged Black students from attending during his tenure. After Wilson took office, he allowed Postmaster General Burleson and Secretary of the Treasury William Gibbs McAdoo (Wilson's son-in-law) to implement racial segregation within their respective organizations. Their segregationist policies continued to be implemented long after Wilson had left the White House.

First letter to support celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation

In 1912, while Wright was organizing anniversary activities, including campaign efforts for the stamp, Charles Foster Richards, a white New York City resident, prominent stamp collector, and a charter member of the American Philatelic Association (later, the American Philatelic Society), wrote a letter to Taft's postmaster general, Frank Hitchcock, suggesting a stamp be issued to honor the 50th anniversary (Figure 4).

Enclosed with Richards' letter was another (Figure 5) written by John William Longnecker, a prominent white Hartford, Connecticut stamp collector, who inquired whether a special stamp or series would be issued to commemorate the anniversary, and who noted the campaign to pursue federal funding to finance the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.

However, Richards' letter advocated for a single stamp only and suggested that the vignette feature Thomas Ball's Emancipation Monument (Figure 6) in Chicago. Though this stamp was never printed, and Richards was mistaken



Figure 6. The Emancipation Proclamation statue in Washington, D.C.

regarding the statue's location (it's in Washington, D.C.), this suggestion to feature the Emancipation Monument was eventually realized on the 13th Amendment stamp, which was not issued for another 28 years.

Richards' letter, discovered in the Third Assistant PMG's files, represents the earliest request for a U.S. stamp depicting Black-related imagery. Third Assistant Postmaster General James I. Blakslee responded to Richards' letter (Figure 7).

In answer to your letter of July 11, which the Postmaster General has referred to me, you are advised that if a postage stamp is issued to commemorate the Fiftieth Anniversary of the emancipation of slaves, your suggestions will receive careful consideration. I thank you for submitting them.

Wright's efforts and Richards' and Longnecker's letters began advocacy for Black imagery on a U.S. postage stamp. This philatelic milestone was later acknowledged on October 26, 1940, in an article – "Emancipation Stamps Are a Result of a Long Fight," one of two published in the *Chicago Daily Defender*. Sadly, the response from Taft's Post Office Department (POD) indicated a lack of interest in celebrating a critical moment in American history.

The role of the Black press

During the 1920s, the Post Office Department expanded the postage stamp program by honoring national events, important buildings, and significant individuals. This increase was sparked by the growing popularity of stamp collecting throughout the country. Black newspapers

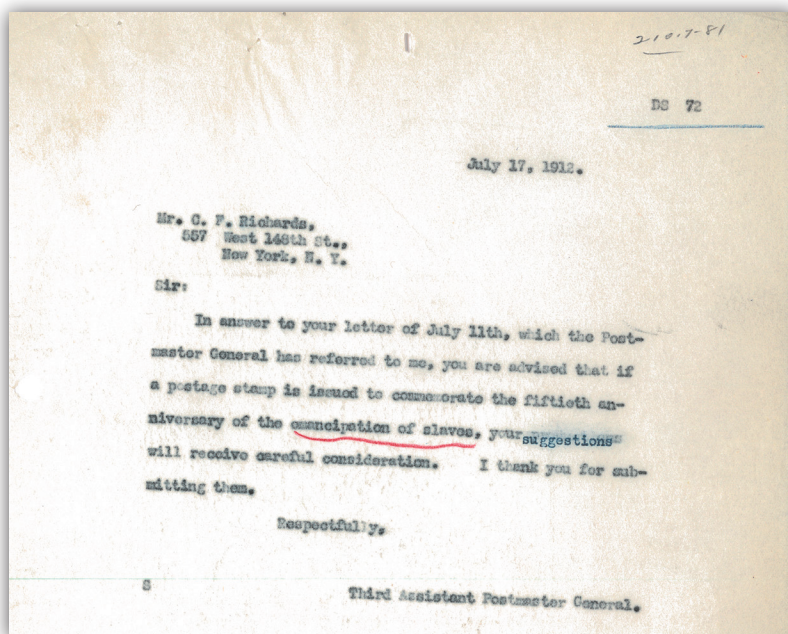


Figure 7. James I. Blakslee's response to C.F. Richards' suggestion for Black imagery on a postage stamp.

became aware of this trend and began writing about the need for Black imagery.

During the 1920s and 1930s, practically every major city had a Black newspaper, and several urban areas had more than one. They became the voice of Black America and, through columnists, writers, and editors, articulated a persistent, well-deserved desire to see Black imagery on a U.S. postage stamp.

For example, the *Chicago Daily Defender*, one of the most prominent Black newspapers in the country during the 1920s and '30s, published an editorial titled "By Way of Suggestion" on May 9, 1925. The editorial questioned why Crispus Attucks – a Black American who was one of five killed at the Boston Massacre in 1770 and one of the first colonists to die during the early days of the American Revolution – had not been honored on a stamp (Figure 8). That editorial marked the beginning of a 14-year struggle by Black newspapers to advocate for Black representation on a U.S. postage stamp. Sadly, Attucks has never been recognized on a U.S. postage stamp.

Other major Black newspapers also campaigned for specific individuals to be honored on a postage stamp. For example, the politically oriented *Washington Tribune* advocated for Frederick Douglass, and the *Atlanta Daily World* advocated for Booker T. Washington.

During this period, the topic of Black imagery on U.S. postage stamps was written about frequently in a very aggressive and persistent manner in the editorial pages and opinion columns of the nation's Black press.

Black journalists, such as Claude Barnett, a writer for the *Chicago Daily Defender* and founder of the Associated Negro Press (ANP), and Cliff Mackay, a columnist for the *Atlanta Daily World*, wrote about the campaign. Other unsung, but prominent, journalists supporting this effort

included Robert Vann, of *The Pittsburgh Courier* (who later joined the Roosevelt administration as a subcabinet appointee), Eugene Washington Rhodes, of the *Philadelphia Tribune* (and a close friend of Wright), and William Pickens, of *The Phoenix Index*.

An article titled "Booker Washington Stamp Climaxes 10-year Crusade" published on March 23, 1940, in the *Washington Tribune*, suggested by way of an informal poll that their Black readers, through petitions over the years, requested an image of Attucks to appear on a U.S. stamp, followed by images of Douglass and Washington.

The role of the Black community

Despite the U.S. stamp program's history of racism during the early 20th century, Black communities in America were determined to express their support for Black imagery on postage stamps to assert their presence in American culture and highlight their significant contributions to the country's history (Figure 9).

Letters, some handwritten, were submitted to the POD in the 1930s requesting stamps that honored the Buffalo Soldiers, especially the 9th and 10th cavalry units; Benjamin Banneker, the mathematician, naturalist, and surveyor who helped lay out Washington D.C.; Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the noted poet; and Henry Tanner, a noted painter. As early as 1935, at least three white philatelic writers, Michael Eidsness Jr., James Waldo Fawcett, and William T. Harris, wrote about the effort to advocate for stamps honoring Dunbar, Douglass, and Washington.

Also, the struggle to advocate for Black imagery on U.S. postage during the 1930s did not address Black women, such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, or Ida B. Wells-Barnett. This oversight reflected the inequitable ways in which women, especially Black women, were portrayed during this period. These distinguished women, for example, were all later commemorated on U.S. postage stamps.

Black communities, encouraged by the press, formed stamp clubs in historically Black colleges and universities, high schools, community social clubs, churches, and even Black postal unions like the National Alliance of Postal Employees. For example, Dunbar High School students in Washington, D.C. established a stamp club in 1932 to encourage their classmates to collect stamps and campaign for Black imagery on postage stamps. Black fraternities and sororities sent petitions to their U.S. representatives and senators, while individuals wrote letters and petitions to the Post Office Department. Even ministers like Rev. Dr. W.C. Williamson and Marshall L. Shepard voiced their support for this campaign in Black churches nationwide.

Also, during this period, Black citizens in northern cities with growing Black populations began sending letters to their senators and representatives asking for

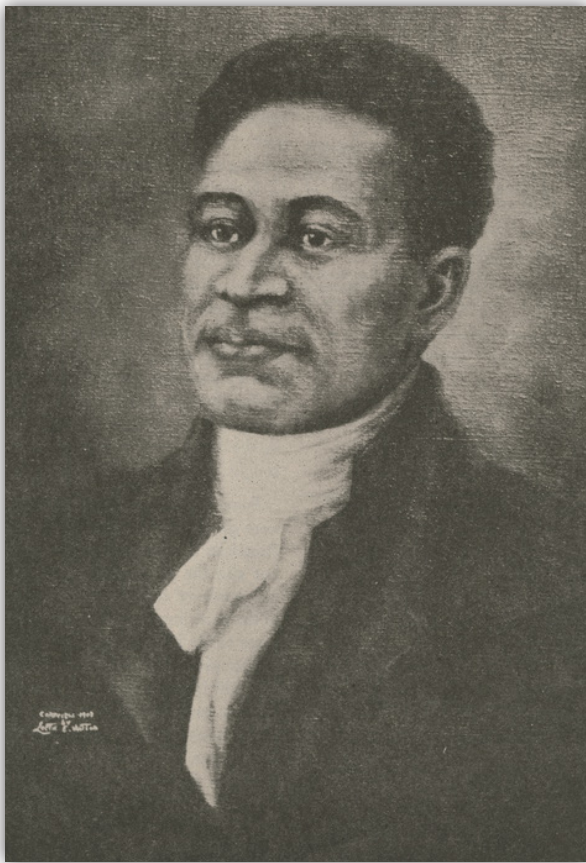


Figure 8. Despite strong advocacy from the *Chicago Defender* and the Black community, Crispus Attucks – who was among colonials slain at the Boston Massacre – was never honored with a U.S. stamp. Courtesy of New York Public Library Digital Collections.

their support for a stamp to be issued in honor of a Black American. For example, on January 23, 1931, George Young, of New York City, sent a letter to Senator Robert Wagner (D, New York) requesting that the POD consider a stamp honoring Frederick Douglass. Wagner's subsequent request was the first time the POD responded to a request by a senator to honor Douglass on a stamp.

In its response, the Post Office Department used its stamp production and release schedule as a reason to disal-

low a stamp honoring a Black hero, just as it had more than 19 years earlier in response to Richards' request. In 1931, Frederick A. Tilton, a third assistant postmaster general during the Hoover Administration, responded to Senator Wagner's request by saying:

The Department has outlined a very extensive program of commemorative postage stamps for 1931-1932, which will prevent consideration of any further application for stamps for some time to come. The General Pulaski stamp recently placed on sale is now in the process of distribution to postmasters. The next stamp to be issued will be for the 50th Anniversary of the founding of the Red Cross, to be followed later in the year by a stamp for the Yorktown anniversary. In addition, the Department has authorized a special series of stamps for the Washington Bicentennial, and it is the intention to have this series of stamps completed during the present year to be continued on sale throughout 1932.

... Therefore, with the extra amount of work involved in the preparation of the special stamps now in hand, the Department can not give consideration at this time to the issuance of a stamp in honor of Frederick Douglass.

Tilton's reply typified the response to Black Americans' requests for such stamps. An interesting letter dated August 14, 1939, from the Post Office Department to an individual who wanted to know about the earliest request for Black imagery on postage revealed that in early 1931, an individual, likely Senator Wagner, submitted the first formal request to have Douglass honored on a U.S. stamp. The letter, located in the Third Assistant Postmaster General's design files, went on to say that "the earliest request by a citizen to honor Booker T Washington was not made until 1933."

Consequently, we can be relatively sure that Douglass was the first Black American recommended to appear on a U.S. postage stamp, via Wagner's 1931 request. However, Douglass was not honored with a stamp for another 34 years when the POD included him in the 1960s' Prominent Americans series, a fitting honor for the distinguished abolitionist, journalist, and orator (Figure 10).



Figure 9. Black stamp images were initially requested for these stamps in the 1930s. Those that later received recognition via U.S. postage stamps include the Buffalo Soldiers (Scott 2818), Paul Lawrence Dunbar (Scott 1554), Henry Tanner (Scott 1486), and Benjamin Banneker (Scott 1804).

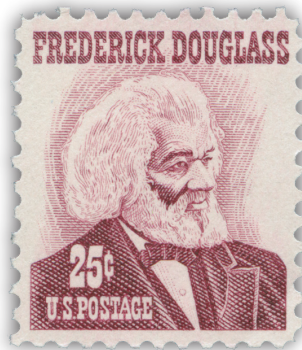


Figure 10. Frederick Douglass. Though not selected for portrayal on a stamp during the 1920s and 30s, his portrait was later used on three U.S. postage stamps, including in 1967 as part of the Prominent Americans set (Scott 1290).

Stamp campaign of Richard Robert Wright

In 1933, after a 20-year break, at the age of 78, Wright resumed his efforts to create a stamp that would commemorate the Emancipation Proclamation. He became a focused and astute campaigner for the cause, using various tactics to lobby for the stamp.

In May 1933, shortly after Franklin Roosevelt's inauguration, Wright wrote letters to Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt (Figure 11) and Postmaster General James Farley requesting approval of an emancipation stamp, with a proposed design depicting Douglass or Abraham Lincoln.

Wright reinvigorated emancipation celebrations in his adopted city of Philadelphia, organizing a "70th Anniversary of Negro Progress" in 1933 and a 75th anniversary event in 1935.

The events comprised several days of celebration, featuring parades, speeches, and Black progress and development displays. Both events attracted several thousand attendees, including national Black leaders and members of various civic and religious organizations. Wright used both events, especially the 1935 event, to encourage participants to write letters to Farley and FDR to issue a stamp celebrating the Emancipation Proclamation.

In 1934, Wright met with members of the Roosevelt Administration, including Farley, to advocate for the stamp. Sadly, his meeting did not result in any commitments from the Roosevelt administration.

Between 1933 and 1940, Wright frequently corresponded with Post Office Department executives. The recipients of his letters included Farley, Clinton Eilenberger (a former banker and the third assistant postmaster general before he died in 1937), Ray North (who succeeded Eilenberger), Ramsey Black (a senior executive at the POD), and Joseph F. Gallagher (the postmaster for Philadelphia). Wright always wrote on his bank's letterhead when corresponding with these officials.

In 1935, Wright had Joseph Guffy, a close acquaintance of Farley and a powerful white Democratic politician from Pennsylvania, discuss an Emancipation Proclamation stamp with Farley. (Guffy had been supporting an Emancipation Proclamation stamp since 1933.)

The postmaster general responded that he knew Wright's campaign for an "Emancipation progress stamp," and, echoing the words of the Taft and Hoover administrations, the

postal service, he said, could not issue the stamp because of prior commitments to the "extensive program of commemorative issues this year."

Farley's response to Guffy continued to typify the Post Office Department's reaction to any individual requesting a stamp commemorating a Black figure on a postage stamp and evaded discussions about a future date to approve such a stamp.

Also in 1935, Wright had Marshall L. Shepard, an influential Black state politician from Philadelphia, sponsored a resolution in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives requesting "... the Postmaster General of the United States issue an emancipation progress stamp commemorating the progress of the colored people of the United States since their emancipation January first one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three ..."

In the late 1930s, Wright began working with a prominent Black religious leader, Elder Michaux, who ardently supported the Roosevelt Administration. It was because of this friendship that Wright shifted his efforts from advocating for a stamp commemorating the Emancipation Proclamation to one commemorating the ratification of the 13th Amendment efforts that were eventually successful.

The Robert Vann Memo request

In 1934, Robert Vann (Figure 12) was appointed the special assistant to the attorney general and was an early member of a subcabinet of Black advisors in the Roosevelt Administration.

It is possible that Wright had a conversation with Vann about his difficulties getting his stamp proposal considered. Wright may have encouraged Vann to discuss this issue with Farley since Vann was now an insider in the administration. On February 16, 1934, Vann wrote a significant memorandum on official Department of Justice letterhead to Farley, requesting that a stamp be issued honoring the Emancipation Proclamation and commemorating the 70 years of progress and freedom of the American Negro (Figure 13). Vann wrote:

I have in mind submitting to you the proposition of issuing a postage stamp memorializing the seventy-odd years of freedom and progress of the American Negro. I happen to know that the Republican Party has been requested to issue such a stamp over the past 20 years, but the stamp was never issued.

There are 13 million colored people in this country, and you can imagine what the sale of the stamp would be. So much for the profit. The other angle is quite as important. The Proclamation was issued and written by Lincoln in September, and we could dramatize the issuance of the stamp in September in various parts of the country. I need not explain to you what effects this would have on the colored group.

I have talked to Mr. Eilenberger about it, and he and I have agreed that the possible sectional friction that might be created could be avoided by designing the stamp in such a way as to memorialize not only the progress of the American Negro, but the opportunity that this country offers to all of its groups. We could symbolize progress without the use of the

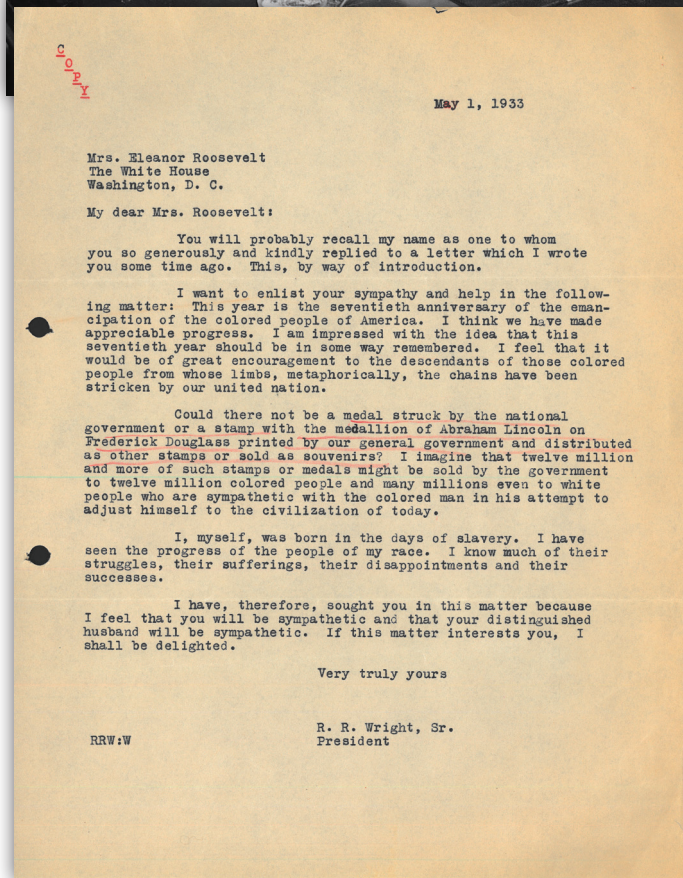
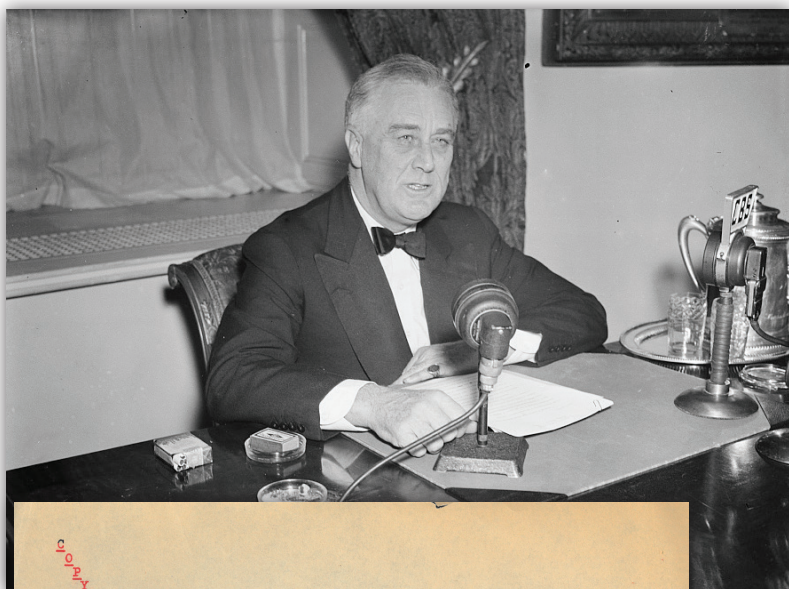


Figure 11. Franklin Roosevelt, our stamp collecting president, and Charles Foster Richards were inducted into the American Philatelic Society Hall of Fame in 1945. Below, Richard Robert Wright's letter to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt supporting an Emancipation Proclamation stamp (Smithsonian National Postal Museum).

photograph of any colored man. I believe the use of the photograph of any colored man would create friction, and Mr. Ellenberger and myself have agreed that some other suitable design could be had which symbolize progress and yet not emphasize the racial features. As soon as I get an opportunity to talk to you in detail about this stamp, I shall be very happy to do it. In the meantime, roll it over in your mind.

Sadly, this vital memorandum highlighted why the Roosevelt Administration was reluctant to honor a Black American on a separate U.S. postage stamp.

Vann's memorandum also validates the 20-year struggle



Figure 12. Robert Vann. Courtesy of Collections of the Pennsylvania Department, The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. <https://bellsforpeace.org/robertLVann.htm>

to have such a stamp issued, highlighting that none of the four Republican presidents from 1912 to 1933 responded favorably to requests from Black Americans to support a Black image on a postage stamp, despite Black Americans providing political support at the voting booth.

Farley's response to Vann's memorandum was cordial and brief, with no records of a subsequent meeting (Figure 14).

Vann's memo exposed a previous and honest conversation between him and Eilenberger, which addressed why the Roosevelt Administration would not depict Black imagery on a U.S. stamp. Farley's response was prepared and signed by Eilenberger. It was disappointingly consistent with the Post Office Department's policy on the Emancipation Proclamation stamp, reading, "Ever since the application for this stamp was first submitted, we have been overwhelmed with requests for special issues, and it cannot be stated when the stamp in question can be authorized."

Vann's internal memo and discussion with Eilenberger show that race was why a Black image would not appear on a U.S. postage during Roosevelt's first term. Simply put, the Roosevelt Administration was reluctant to issue a stamp commemorating a Black American due to concerns about losing support from white Americans, particularly from the southern states, a strategy that continued until 1939.

Sadly, Roosevelt and Farley did not prioritize honoring an anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation or a Black American on a single U.S. postage stamp, despite Roosevelt's active involvement in designing and selecting stamp images.

The influence of presidential politics during FDR administration

In the book, *The Black Cabinet: The Untold Story of African Americans and Politics During the Age of Roosevelt*, author Jill Watts chronicles in detail how the Black vote

played a pivotal role in the urban North's 1932 and 1936 presidential elections, shifting from the Republican to the Democratic Party, proving crucial for the Democratic Party's win in both elections.

In the mid-to-late 1930s, there was a growing concern within Black America about the Roosevelt Administration's responsiveness to their problems. Several Black sub-cabinet level advisors, including Vann, experienced problems with senior level southern white cabinet members. A growing number of Black newspapers and Black Americans started to perceive the administration as being slow to respond to Black concerns, which included the problem of rampant racial discrimination in the federal workforce, especially in agencies established to support the administration's New Deal initiatives.

Roosevelt was also seen as being too slow in supporting anti-lynching and voter rights legislation, especially in the South. With the fear of war rising in Asia and Europe, Black appointees hoped for the integration of the military. However, Roosevelt's military and civilian leadership firmly wanted to maintain segregation. Additionally, the Republican Party was attempting to win back Black voters by

spending campaign funds in urban areas with large Black populations and promising to address policy issues relevant to Black Americans.

Amid these growing concerns of Black Americans regarding the administration's domestic policies, the aggressive campaign for Black imagery on postage stamps finally led to the inclusion of at least one Black American in the Famous American series. For the Roosevelt Administration, the opportunity to address complaints of racism regarding postal imagery came on July 18, 1939, when the Post Office announced the selection of Booker T. Washington as one of 35 honored in the Famous Americans Series (Figure 15).

The selection of Washington, rather than Douglass, may have resulted from Roosevelt's and Farley's perception of Washington as a "safe" choice. Washington was regarded as an accommodationist who – unlike his contemporary, W.E.B. Dubois, or leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) – was not prepared to take on the white South regarding social and political equality issues.

Instead, Washington was seen as a Black educator whose institutional focus was on manual occupations and economic development of Black businesses that posed no threat to white southern employment or business; Washington's astounding achievements at Tuskegee made him an excellent choice to be honored in this group.

In January 1940, the Post Office Department announced that the Tuskegee Institute (Tuskegee University, as of July 1, 1985) would be the site of the first day of issue ceremony and that Farley would personally give the keynote speech.

Farley was contemplating running as the Democratic presidential nominee, and, despite his previous reluctance to issue a stamp with a Black image, he knew the political importance and value of speaking at a ceremony honoring the nation's first Black citizen depicted on a postage stamp. More specifically, he knew that Black Americans were a critical voting bloc of the Democratic coalition and was aware of the popularity of Washington with Black Americans, especially southern Blacks. Thus, he used the speech to appeal to Black Americans as a prelude to his possible presidential run, which ultimately did not occur.

Black response to Farley's speech at Tuskegee Institute

The first day ceremony capped a momentous three-day celebration at the Tuskegee Institute that began on Friday, April 5, 1940.

On Sunday morning, April 7, the Tuskegee Philatelic Society honored the descendants of Booker T. Washington with a short ceremony.

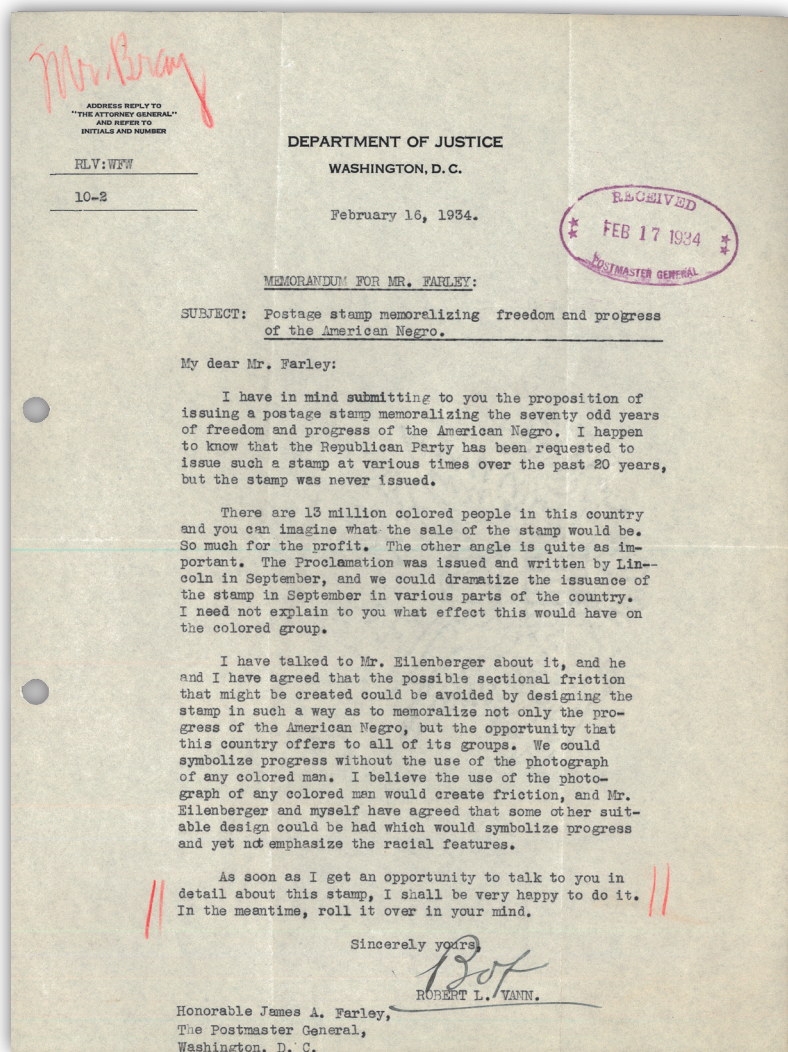


Figure 13. Robert Vann's memorandum to the postmaster general that advocated for a stamp honoring the Emancipation Proclamation.

ny. The Alabama Highway Patrol escorted Farley's entourage to the institute around noontime, with sirens heralding his arrival. The postmaster general gave the first day address on Founder's Day in the Tuskegee's chapel at 3:15 p.m. before a crowd of 3,500 people. It also was broadcast on national radio followed by a dramatic program about Washington, which was written by Langston Hughes and based on Washington's autobiography, *Up from Slavery*.

Farley's keynote speech outlined some of the reasons why Washington was selected. He referred to Washington as a "Negro Moses," a "Negro Solomon," and a Negro worthy of comparison to Robert E. Lee.

The group of Famous Americans honorees was diverse, consisting of three white women, 31 white males, and one Black male. This diversity and large number of stamps in the set allowed Farley and Roosevelt to minimize political exposure from the Democratic Party's southern base while still receiving praise from Blacks for honoring Washington on a postage stamp in an upcoming critical election year. Consequently, the Roosevelt Administration made history by being the first to feature a Black American image on a U.S. postage stamp.

Black Americans were ecstatic when the Post Office Department released the Washington's name as one of the honorees commemorated in the series. Letters poured in, particularly from the nation's Black communities and organizations. They praised Farley and Roosevelt for selecting Washington.

The announcement that Washington would be included as an honoree in the Famous Americans series was widely circulated in Black newspapers nationwide, especially those in the southern United States. Black ministers even made the announcement a focal point of their sermons the following Sunday.

This recognition of Black imagery in American philately was a crucial moment, and it instilled a sense of racial pride in Black Americans. The significance of the inclusion of Washington in the series was recognized by many, including Cliff Mackay, a noted columnist who wrote about philatelic issues for *The Atlanta Daily*. He wrote a passionate column

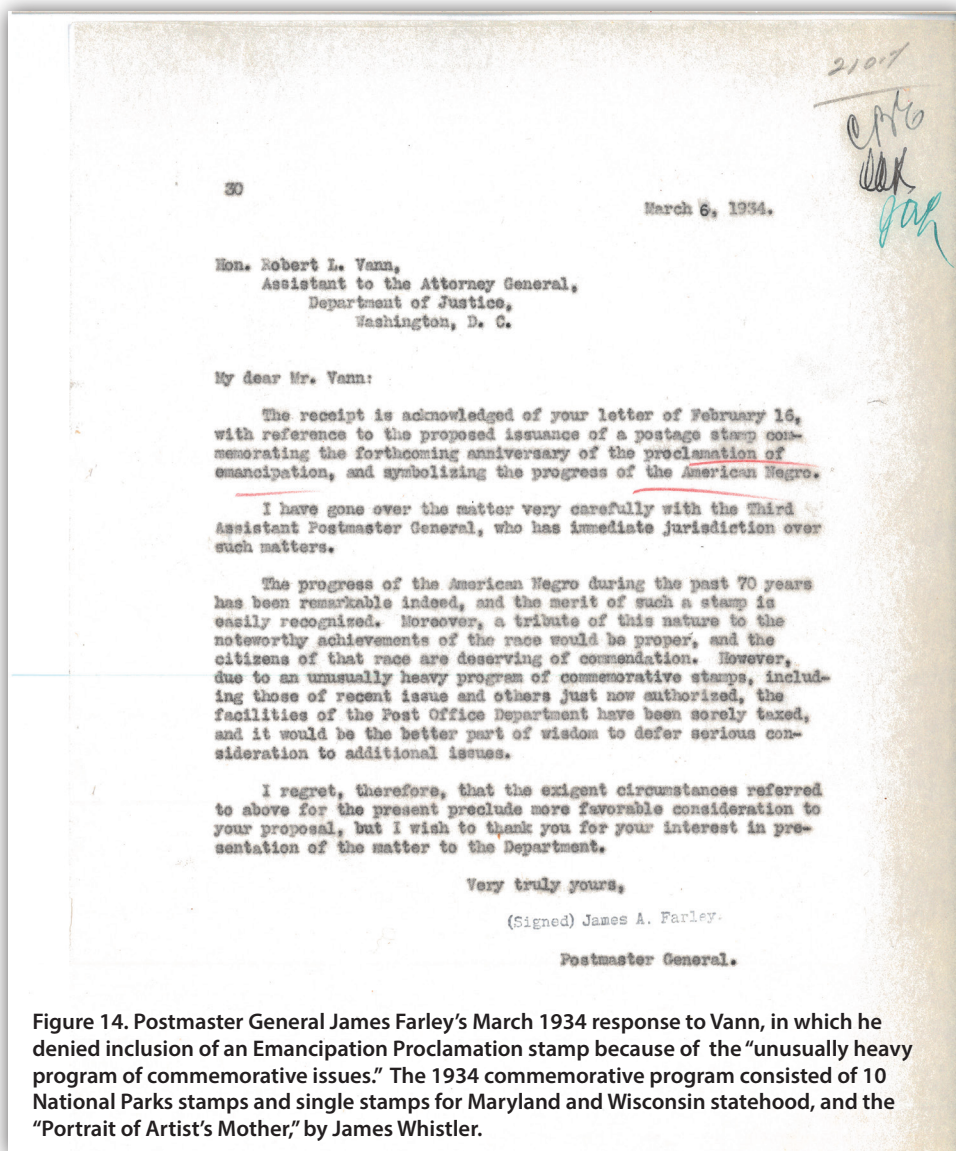


Figure 14. Postmaster General James Farley's March 1934 response to Vann, in which he denied inclusion of an Emancipation Proclamation stamp because of the "unusually heavy program of commemorative issues." The 1934 commemorative program consisted of 10 National Parks stamps and single stamps for Maryland and Wisconsin statehood, and the "Portrait of Artist's Mother," by James Whistler.

with insightful commentary on the importance of this achievement.

So you can hold up your head and proudly say. 'I am an American,' because I am a very part of America. No racial group has more right to be represented on the postage of my country than mine. I fought, I worked, I bled, I died that there might be an America. Who could justly challenge my right to enjoy its honors, its privileges, its freedom.

Mackay, aware of the political implications for the Washington stamp especially for the upcoming election campaign of 1940, aptly noted in the same column:

Some will vision political significance in the Booker T. Washington stamp, what with the important approaching presidential campaign and the important role you can play in the pivotal states of New York, Illinois and Ohio. It will appear strange to some that the announcement came at this particular and momentous time. You can answer those who would raise this question that a still stranger thing is that of all the long line of Republican administrators ardently avowing friendship for your race and possessing its whole-hearted support as they did not see fit ever to place a black face on a stamp.



Figure 15. The Booker T. Washington postage stamp of the 1940 Famous Americans series (Scott 873).

Some Black Americans were not as supportive of Washington being the first Black figure to be featured on a postage stamp. They began campaigning for Douglass to receive the same honor immediately after the Washington stamp was issued.

Black stamp clubs and various northern Black newspapers promptly sent letters to the Post Office Department requesting a stamp for Douglass. Unfortunately, Farley's response to the letters indicated that he was not ready to issue a stamp for Douglass anytime soon. He responded by saying:

While it will not be possible to increase the scope of our stamp program for the current year, as already authorized, your recommendation for a Douglass stamp will be kept in mind for appropriate consideration at a later date when conditions are more favorable.

Despite many letters sent to the Roosevelt White House and the Post Office, a Douglass stamp was never issued during the Roosevelt Administration.

White press response to the Booker T. Washington stamp

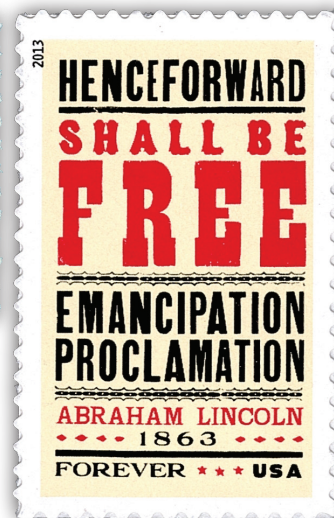
Several white news magazines and newspapers, such as *The Evening Star*, a Washington D.C. newspaper, clearly saw the Washington stamp as a political ploy. Frederick William Wile, a political columnist, wrote in a March 25, 1940, column segment titled "Farley Courts the Negroes":

Jim Farley's Southern barnstorming tour includes a visit to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama April 7, on the occasion of the issue of the Booker T. Washington 'educator series' postage stamp. As Tuskegee is celebrating its 60th year of existence, the Postmaster General's speech, presumably, besides being a panegyric of 'Booker T.' will pay tribute to the accomplishments of the Negro race since in the titular terminology of the Washington autobiography. It came 'up from slavery.' The Democratic-Republican battle for the colored vote will be one of the highlights of the 1940 campaign.

The Washington stamp did provoke complaints from some southern whites. For example, Rep. Joachim Octave Fernández, a white congressman from Louisiana, wrote a letter to Farley voicing his opposition to the designa-



Figure 16. Emancipation Proclamation stamps of 1963 (Scott 1233) and 2013 (Scott 4721). They were designed, respectively, by Georg Olden and Gail Anderson, both Black graphic designers.



tion of Washington on a U.S. stamp. His letter did not acknowledge Washington's name and, according to Fernández, he complained to Farley because he "... received numerous protests from officers and members of Crescent City Stamp Club." Fernández wrote:

While realizing that the Negro has certain fundamental rights for enjoying citizenship in the United States, we must all realize that Nature itself has made a plain distinction between this race and the Caucasian race. I do not for obvious reasons think that we should elevate the Negro to a same pedestal as enjoyed by our Caucasian race. I do not for obvious reasons think that we should elevate the Negro to a same pedestal as enjoyed by our high White order. This letter is not written in prejudice, but in a sense of fair interpretation of the facts and Nature about us.

Conclusion

Beyond its aesthetic value, stamp imagery is a powerful tool to gauge a country's perception of its citizens, their contributions, and cultural norms. The absence of postage imagery reflecting the diversity of a nation's people is a significant indicator of societal attitudes toward specific racial or ethnic groups at a given time in a nation's history. This observation was starkly exemplified during the early and arduous struggle to honor Black Americans on U.S. postage stamps and acknowledge their contributions to American society.

Yet many segments of the Black community – including newspapers, social organizations, clubs, churches, and individuals – enthusiastically supported the campaign to feature Black imagery on postage stamps.

However, postmasters general representing five presidential administrations denied requests to honor Black imagery on postage stamps with the rationale that prior production schedules would not permit consideration of "your postage stamp."

Nevertheless, fueled by the cynical objectives of presidential politics and racism, this struggle resulted in the issuance of stamps honoring Booker T. Washington and the Thirteenth

Amendment, marking the initial recognition of a Black American hero and commemorating an event that allowed America to truly acknowledge that “all men are created equal.”

Over the past 60 years, the United States Postal Service (USPS) and the Citizens’ Stamp Advisory Committee (CSAC) have worked diligently to honor the achievements of a diverse citizenry, representing a diverse nation, and to commemorate significant events that have helped shape the nation’s understanding of its own history (Figure 16). Their efforts stand as a testament to the progress made in diversifying postage imagery and the commitment to representing the true diversity of the nation.

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