



POSTAL NEWS

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Classics Forever - Issued in celebration of the long history of U.S. postage stamps—and in appreciation of stamp collectors and philatelists everywhere. This souvenir sheet features new versions of six of America's earliest and most alluring stamps, now issued as Forever® stamps to make them easily distinguishable from the mid-19th-century originals.

The stamps featured (from top, left to right) are:

- George Washington stamp, first issued in 1851 at 12 cents.
- Benjamin Franklin stamp, first issued in 1851 at one cent.
- George Washington stamp, first issued in 1860 at 24 cents.
- George Washington stamp, first issued in 1860 at 90 cents.
- Abraham Lincoln stamp, first issued in 1866 at 15 cents.
- Benjamin Franklin stamp, first issued in 1861 at one cent.

The selvaige is composed of postal cancellations and script from envelopes contemporaneous with the stamps. These elements are arranged on a buff-colored background with a textured look to evoke stationery of the period. An inner border reminiscent of star-spangled patriotic bunting bears the title "CLASSICS FOREVER" at the top and bottom of the sheet and the words "THE CLASSIC ERA" on each side. Art director Antonio Alcalá designed the issuance. Eric Madsen created the selvaige artwork.

Classics Forever

This souvenir sheet features new versions of six of America's earliest and most alluring stamps, now issued as Forever® stamps to make them easily distinguishable from the mid-19th-century originals. America's early stamps presented a new means of honoring the Revolution's heroes. The 1851 George Washington and Benjamin Franklin stamps were issued when dramatically reduced rates made the mail more accessible to a growing, migrating population. (These are represented on the top row of the souvenir sheet.) The quick public appreciation of their beautifully engraved portraiture also made stamps a perfect mode of tribute to Abraham Lincoln, martyred just after guiding the Union to victory in the Civil War.

Whether a collector is interested in the great Americans depicted, the artistry, the printing technology of the day, the quirks and evolution of historical postal practices, or the communications enabled by the originals, there is something for everyone in these beautifully evocative stamps.

1851 George Washington, originally 12 cents

Several unusual aspects attract collectors to the George Washington stamp released in 1851. Although its original 12-cent denomination paid the way for certain heavy domestic letters sent afar, such use was uncommon and the rationale for a stamp of this particular value is not well understood. Envelopes bearing this Washington stamp tend to carry it in combination with other denominations or, more often, paired to cover the 24-cent rate for letters to the United Kingdom. The 12-cent stamp was sometimes cut in half to pay six cents of postage until the practice of using bisected stamps was prohibited.

Three printing plates were evidently created, but no trace remains of the second plate nor of any stamps printed by it. The tight spacing on the first plate was typical of the imperforate stamps it produced. Stamps from this plate were eventually perforated, with the perforations violating the edges of the design. The individual stamp images on the plate labeled "Plate 3" were spaced to accommodate perforation once that innovation came to U.S. stamps.

1851 Benjamin Franklin, originally one cent

Only George Washington has been honored on more U.S. stamps than Benjamin Franklin. The Franklin stamp introduced in 1851 was commonplace in its original use, sold for a penny, affixed to advertising circulars and local letters, and printed in great quantities. Although a single stamp design was intended, advanced collectors differentiate many types. Intricate engraved designs were not consistently transferred to the printing plates, so the scrolled ornamentation varies in detail from stamp to stamp. As plates wore, fine features became muted, then were re-emboldened as engravers scraped out grooves. Tiny curls appeared in some fraction of stamps—believed to be artifacts of fine threads left behind by printers' polishing cloths. Ink batches ranged from pale blue to indigo. Perforations were added in 1857. By studying such variations, some experienced and keen-eyed philatelists can assign a single stamp to its corresponding plate and to the specific position on that plate's grid of 200 stamps. These variations also help collectors narrow the stamp's period of origin within the decade-long press run. This stamp-collecting specialty, known as plating, requires time, patience, and the resources to obtain abundant stamps. Collectors who plate this stamp have kept it in high demand.

The profile of Franklin was engraved for Toppan, Carpenter, Casilear & Co., the printing firm that held the exclusive stamp-printing contract for a decade starting in 1851. The likeness is based on a bust carved by French sculptor Jean-Jacques Caffiéri, a likeness Franklin himself favored. Fittingly, this complex stamp honoring the nation's first Postmaster General continues to captivate the most advanced collectors.

1860 George Washington, originally 24 cents

The need for a 24-cent denomination, previously met by doubling the 12-cent Washington stamp, was realized in 1860 with another stamp honoring Washington. This was the first U.S. stamp issued exclusively with perforations. Like the 12-cent stamp of 1851, this engraved likeness is based on Gilbert Stuart's iconic Washington portraiture. Here Washington faces a bit to the viewer's right, a mirror image of the original Stuart portrait. Ink colors vary and are referred to by collectors as lilac and grey-lilac. Some stamps exist in red-lilac but were never in circulation. Those are believed to be printer's proofs.

Though the entire press run of 1860 Washington stamps was modest—estimated at about 736,000—a great many went unsold and were recalled by the Post Office Department, then destroyed.

1860 George Washington, originally 90 cents

Washington is honored once again on the 90-cent issue of 1860. The engraved portrait on this rarity, widely considered one of the most beautiful stamps of the period, is based on a John Trumbull painting, made circa 1792, that portrays General Washington in 1776. Trumbull had served as a personal aide to Washington during the Revolution and went on to share an artists' studio with Gilbert Stuart. At 90 cents, this was by far the highest denomination to date, a stamp meant to facilitate large international mailings.

The useful life of this stamp was less than a year. Mail service between the Union and the Confederacy ended as the Southern states seceded. A grace period during which older stamps could be traded for the new 1861 issues was cut short as tensions escalated into civil war. All stamps issued prior to the summer of 1861 were deemed invalid. The tactic of demonetizing the older issues rendered stockpiled stamps worthless and prevented black-market sales by Southerners to Northerners, transactions that would have helped to bankroll the Rebel cause. Following the war, piles of these obsolete stamps kept by Southern postmasters found their way to dealers. An unusual consequence of this is that mint-condition examples remain more common than genuinely used ones, so collectors must be wary to avoid faked cancellations on this 90-cent Washington, and authenticate its provenance.

1866 Abraham Lincoln, originally 15 cents

In a single momentous week in April 1865, Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Court House and Lincoln was assassinated. The Post Office Department honored the martyred president with a grey-black 15-cent stamp. Issued in 1866, it is considered by many collectors to be the world's first mourning stamp. Although it was not officially designated as anything other than a general release, the intent behind its issuance was unquestionable, as no previous stamp had been released so quickly after the death of its subject.

The beautifully engraved likeness is based on a photograph by Christopher Smith German, whose studios were located in Lincoln's hometown of Springfield, Illinois. The source photograph is one of the first in which Lincoln, then president-elect, revealed his newly grown beard.

It is a lesser-known aspect of Lincoln's career that he, like Benjamin Franklin, served as a postmaster. Legend has it that young postmaster Lincoln would deliver mail—stashed in his hat—as he crossed paths with residents of New Salem, Illinois. His tenure as a village postmaster was less illustrious than Franklin's national position, but the job familiarized Lincoln, then in his mid-twenties, with local citizens whose trust he earned in his position as postmaster and whose support he would come to rely upon as a politician.

1861 Benjamin Franklin, originally one cent

When pre-Civil War stamps were demonetized, replacements were needed. The National Bank Note Company won the exclusive contract to engrave and print stamps in 1861, a contract previously held by the firm of Toppan, Carpenter, Casilear & Company. National Bank Note produced a striking new design for the one-cent Benjamin Franklin stamp, released August 1861. Its portrait was based on a bust by French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon. The stamp was printed in an inadvertent variety of blues including shades that collectors describe as bright, deep, pale, and milky.

Dozens of other Franklin stamps have followed, as the U.S. Postal Service® takes great pride in its own Founding Father. Franklin was a communications genius who revolutionized mail service in the Colonies, served as the new nation's first Postmaster General, surveyed routes, standardized postal rates, and greatly sped delivery. His creation of a postal system safe from British control was among his greatest contributions to the American Revolution.

Stamps of this 1861 release are the oldest U.S. stamps still valid for use on mail, but the famously frugal-minded Franklin would undoubtedly advise against using the valuable originals for postage.