

Official Needs, Post Civil War Nationalism, and the
Designs of United States Stamps in the Nineteenth Century

by

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The stark contrast between the relative plainness of nineteenth century regular issue United States postage stamps and those of the twentieth and twenty first centuries is evident to anyone who casually leafs through a **Scott's Guide to United States Postage Stamps** or any other philatelic catalogue. Nineteenth century stamps are in large measure monochromatic "great white men," dominated by George Washington and Benjamin Franklin. The contrast between the relative artlessness of nineteenth century stamps and other government as well as privately issued paper items of commerce of the nineteenth century is equally stark. At a time when the American Bank Note company and other printers offered a vast array of subjects and designs to the public and the federal and state governments in the form of advertising envelopes, trade cards, bank notes, and other ephemera the range of subjects and designs on postage stamps proved remarkably narrow. Several factors can be cited to explain this marked contrast between the categories of nineteenth century material culture.

First is the simple matter of the purpose of a postage stamp and the context in which they first appeared. Before 1847 (with few exceptions) citizens in the United States presented folded sheets of paper at their post office for weighing and a determination of the cost of mailing. The fees were then paid, the item so marked, and the object "mailed." If not prepaid, the post office worker marked the item "Due" the appropriate rate and then placed it in the mail, the fee to be paid by the recipient.

For a people accustomed to a direct and personal interaction with a postal employee who would determine the cost of mailing and mark a folded letter paid or in some other way designate officially that it could be delivered, the idea of simply affixing a sticker or "ticket" to an envelope must have been an innovation cautiously accepted. How was the purchaser of what became known as postage stamps to know that it was an official governmental issue and that a

particular denomination was adequate to secure the delivery of the letter or item to the intended recipient. The initial designs on nineteenth century postage stamps were intended to ameliorate the former concern while changes in postage rates resolved to a considerable degree the latter. By the end of the Civil War the public had accepted these new innovations (and the requirement of pre-paid postage). The designs on postage stamps then became less functional in terms of assuring the public of their veracity and more overtly political by celebrating the American experience and more importantly its national (and largely Union) heroes.

The early designs of U.S. postage stamps necessarily included three things: 1) an identification of the stamp as an official U.S. issue; 2) a numerical illustration of the value of the stamp in terms of miles of delivery (the postal act of 1847 specified a rate of five cents for a one ounce letter mailed less than 500 miles, 10 cents for a greater distance); and 3) an assurance of the authenticity or reliability of the stamp.

Most regular issue nineteenth century stamps specify U.S. Postage in clear text (#s 1 and 2 stipulate U.S. Post Office) and the denomination of the stamp in both numeral and text form. The imagery of the stamps is Washington, Benjamin Franklin or Thomas Jefferson until 1861 and 1866 when Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln respectively were added. Scenes and other symbols (as opposed to individuals) appeared initially in 1869 but these proved (along with the Columbian Exposition issues of 1893 and the Trans-Mississippi Exposition issues of 1898) to be the exception until well into the twentieth century.

This emphasis on past prominent individuals is in marked contrast to the reliance in many countries on contemporary leaders. Great Britain's postage stamps, for example, at the outset in the 1840s simply bore an image of Queen Victoria with the denomination of the stamp in

numerical script. Confederate States of America issues too were dominated by representations of their president, Jefferson Davis. Even today, in a great many countries, current leaders routinely appear on the postage stamps issued by their governments.¹

A focus on present day leaders is also a common characteristic on the coins and currency of many nations. In the nineteenth century President Jefferson Davis, members of his cabinet, and Confederate state governors appeared on the currency of that nation and its constituent states. Throughout the nineteenth century reigning monarchs of European and other nations too appeared frequently on their respective nations' coins and currency as well.

In contrast, United States coinage, currency and stamps have largely excluded living political leaders—a tradition first set by President Washington with regard to coinage and currently mandated for stamps by statute. The distinction is an important one that reflects the relative stability of the American regime and the brevity of the terms of its highest political leaders. By that I mean that unlike many contemporary regimes that include images of their presidents or kings and queens on current stamps in order to bolster the stability of the regime and to promote allegiance to its current leaders, the United States government emphasized past political and military leaders as symbols of the federal government whose authority and power stood behind these men and the postal system they symbolized.

In the 1840s then the issue for the United States post office was assurance – how could the postmaster general allay fears or concerns about this new system of prepaid postage. Local postmasters had faced a similar dilemma when they developed in the first half of the decade postmaster provisionals – precursors of the federal issue stamps that like stamps could be purchased in advance and affixed to a letter as proof of the payment of postage. Most postmaster

provisionals bore the signature or initials of the local postmaster -- individuals known in their own communities -- which attested to the reliability of the stamp. The New York City postmaster, however, selected an image of George Washington, in all likelihood because Washington's image (like the name of a local postmaster) was well known to most Americans. Indeed Washington at mid century was the most well known and most frequently reproduced image in American popular culture. His representation appeared across the country on state and federal currency, on privately printed forms, contracts and other paper ephemera, as well as on advertising for various products including Washington Cut Plug tobacco while his name constituted the number one place name across the American landscape.² Washington's image offered assurance to Americans in 1847 and throughout the nineteenth century that the "Father of His Country" stood firm with the current federal government and its post office in vouchsafing the reliability of the stamp attached to an envelope.

Two other Americans held similar places of stature and reverence in mid nineteenth century America. Both also became recurring images on United States postage stamps. Benjamin Franklin occupied a position akin to that of Washington as a national icon in mid nineteenth century America. The "founder" of the postal system of colonial America, the author of "Poor Richard's Almanac," and a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, Franklin was a highly recognized and respected figure in the United States. Likewise Thomas Jefferson, principal author of the Declaration of Independence, architect of the Virginia statute for religious freedom and founder of the University of Virginia, came to be the third individual whose image graced a nineteenth century stamp.³ Americans in all likelihood recognized all three of these men whose appearance lent credibility to the new stamps on which they rested.

Because of their recognizable visage, none of the early stamps bore their names, but all three men assured users of the envelopes to which they were attached they would be delivered.

The uncertainty of postal patrons was in the late 1840s exacerbated by the 1847 postal act which established rates dependent on the number of miles an item was to traverse. . Congress in large measure resolved that issue in the postal act of 1851. The rate for mailing a one ounce letter became three cents for distances under 3,000 miles. Therefore, with the exception of the small number of letters mailed coast to coast, a postal patron could by affixing a three cent Washington stamp to his envelope, be assured that it would be transmitted to the appropriate destination.

The improvements in the mail system occasioned by the adoption of postage stamps quickly won over the body politic (There is an account of a postmaster who refused to accept the new stamps as a proof of payment in 1848)⁴ but the negative (i.e. absent) evidence is of popular acceptance. Further proof of that acceptance occurred during the Civil War.



Fig. 1

Specifically, in 1862 the federal government responded to the shortage of coin in circulation (the war precipitated hoarding of specie) by approving the “Postage Currency Act.” This act authorized the issuance of bank notes in three to fifty cent denominations (Fig. 1). In order to overcome popular wariness of these new and substantially smaller bank notes (regular

issue notes in 1862 measured approximately 3 by 7 inches while the fractional currency notes were less than half that size) the initial designs of the notes bore images of postage stamps of Washington and Jefferson as a mechanism to assure citizens of the value and authenticity of this new and different currency.

A second response to the shortage of specie in the North during the war also involved postage stamps. Various merchants sealed mint United States stamps in mica and zinc. These encased pieces served a dual purpose. They allowed merchants to advertise their shops or products even as they functioned as specie in day to day transactions at the face value of the stamp⁵.

Although the stimulus to both of these developments was a shortage of specie, they offer concrete evidence of the acceptance of postage stamps by the body politic less than fifteen years after their introduction. This acceptance in turn proved to be a pre-condition to two significant shifts in the content of postage stamps, first in 1869, and again in 1870. In the former year the post office issued a new set of stamps that included traditional designs of Franklin, Washington and Lincoln, but added scenes illustrating “improvements in mail transportation, scenes of great historical significance and symbols of the nation – some in non-mono chromatic colors.”⁶ In 1870 the post office replaced these designs with a new series of “Heroes” who celebrated implicitly the triumph of American nationalism and the North in the late Civil War.

For collectors in the twenty first century, the postage issues of 1869 constitute one of the most attractive series of nineteenth century stamps. The one and six cent issues feature Franklin and Washington respectively and represent no substantive subject change from previous issues. The two, three and twelve cent issues, on the other hand, feature a post horse and rider,

locomotive and the S.S. Adriatic – intended to illustrate “the improvements in mail transportation from the primitive rider on horseback to the train for the land service and the steamship for the ocean. The remaining six stamps are “distinctly national.” The ten and thirty cent issues feature an American shield and eagle, the latter with additional flags and “the national colors red white and blue.” The fifteen and twenty four cent issues highlight significant historical events in American history that “recall the opening of this continent to the advancement of modern civilization,” also in multiple colors. The ninety cent stamp features president Lincoln who in the words of one contemporary observer “symbolizes“ a new era of universal freedom” and implicitly the triumph of the North in the war.⁷ This new series, newspaper across the country reported, was designed to contrast the monarchical symbolism of European postage with national symbols of republican leaders and institutions in the United States.

The design changes represented a significant albeit short lived shift in the emphasis of nineteenth and to a considerable degree early twentieth century stamps. The issue proved unpopular with a public accustomed to only “heroes” on their stamps. Complaints about their small size, the inadequacy of the gum, and dissatisfaction with their design led to their withdrawal after a relatively brief period of availability.⁸

The successors to the issues of 1869, referred to among collectors as “Bank note issues” because the American Bank note company printed the bulk of them, returned to the tradition of American heroes, although with the addition of new figures who implicitly symbolized and celebrated the triumph of northern nationalism in the recent Civil War.

Thus, while all five of the men who had appeared on U.S. stamps before 1869 reappear on the “Bank note” issues, a number of new figures join them in the 1870s and 1880s. Rather

than repeat the figure of Washington on various denominations as had been the case in the 1850s, new figures appear on the various denominations. General and former President Zachary Taylor, a hero of the Mexican-American war, appears on the five cent, Edwin M. Stanton, Lincoln's Secretary of War, the seven cent stamp, Henry Clay, former secretary of state and presidential candidate on the twelve cent and Daniel Webster, former senator and secretary of state the fifteen cent stamp. A likeness of General Winfield Scott, Lincoln's first military commander, graces the twenty four cent. Alexander Hamilton, co-author of the Federalist Papers and the first secretary of treasury under the new Constitution, appears on the thirty cent denomination. Finally, Commodore O.H. Perry, commander of American naval forces during the Battle of Lake Erie during the war of 1812, concludes the series on the ninety cent stamp.

Although many of these men are virtually unknown to the public in the twenty first century, they occupied conspicuous places in the minds of mid-nineteenth century Americans. One illustration of their stature can be found in the Union patriotic envelopes of the 1861 to 1865 period. During the war, printers in the North published and distributed tens of thousands of copies of patriotic envelopes, i.e. envelopes with a pre-printed design or patriotic slogan. Approximately fifteen thousand different designs appeared in the North during the war and large quantities of many of those designs sold. Patriotic envelopes bore images (in the North) of the United States flag, eagles, scenes, Gods and Goddesses, the liberty bell as well as state flags, state seals and a host of other images. They also bore images of Washington, Franklin and Lincoln as well as Jackson, and most of the other men who subsequently appeared on post Civil War postage stamps. Their portraits and names were often accompanied by slogans and mottos which I believe provide a particularly relevant measure of the significance of these men to Americans in the post Civil War era.⁹

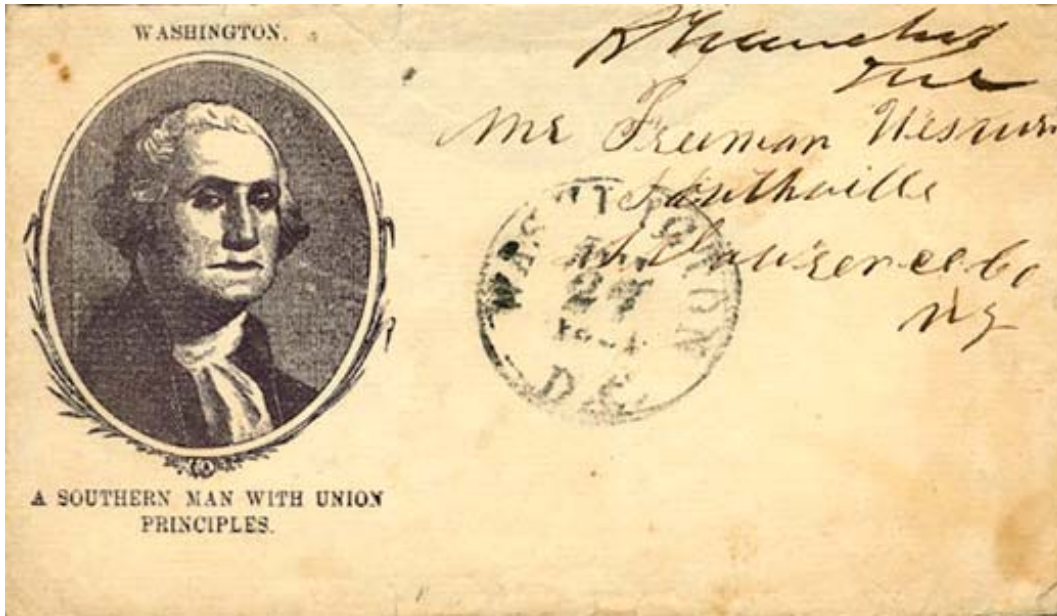


Fig. 2

For example, numerous different Washington design envelopes exist. Illustrative of the genre is an 1862 cover that links him to the cause of the Union (Fig.2).

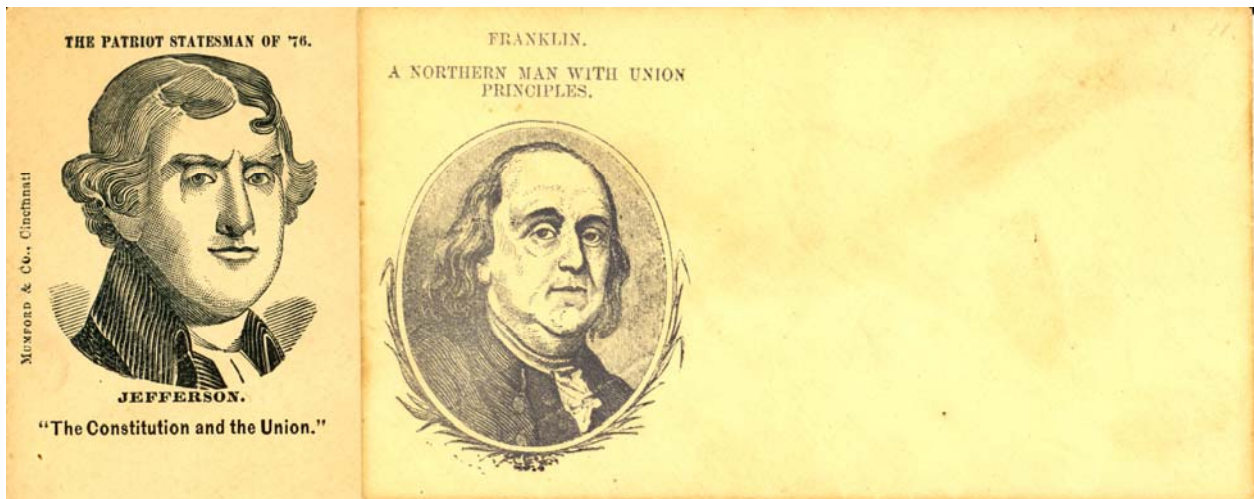


Fig. 3

These same printers also presented Benjamin Franklin as a “Patriot of 1776” and a “Northern Man with Union Principles” (Fig.3). Comparable patriotic envelopes with Jefferson’s visage identified him as a “Southern man with Union principles.” Andrew Jackson, the only

other man to appear on pre-war postage stamps, also represented for Americans of mid century, as presented on Union patriotic envelopes, the Union which “Must and shall be preserved.”

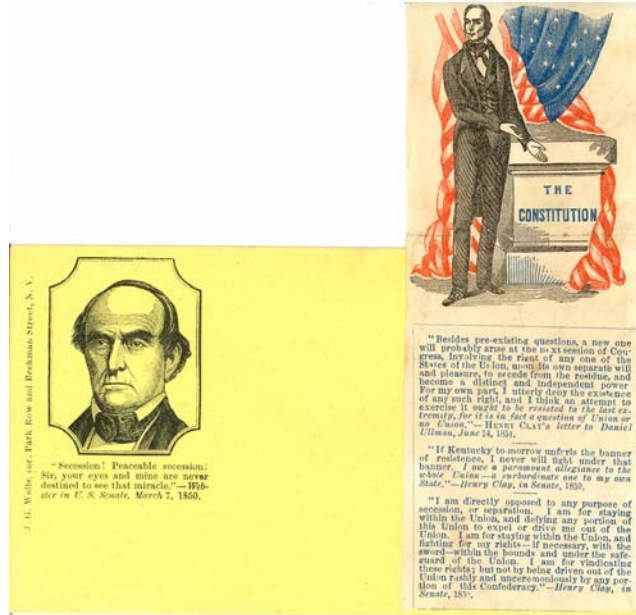


Fig. 4

The patriotic covers of 1861-1865 also illustrated the like Union principles of many of the men added to the stamps in the 1870s and 1880s (Fig.4). The new icons of the 1870s, Clay and Webster, for example, both appeared on patriotic envelopes. One 1861 Union cover bore Clay’s statement, “If Kentucky tomorrow unfurls the banner of resistance, I never will fight under that banner. I owe a paramount allegiance to the whole Union.” Two variations of a second design cover reiterated the same point with each man standing beside a document labeled Constitution, and pledging their respective support to the Constitution and the Union.



Fig. 5

Edwin Stanton, who served as Lincoln's Secretary of War, was likewise inextricably linked to the North's victory in the popular mind in the 1870s as was General Winfield Scott, Lincoln's first military commander and a man repeatedly honored in 1861 on Northern covers as a defender of a single United States (Fig. 5).



Fig. 6

Arguably the most obscure of the Banknote heroes today was Commodore Oliver Perry, the “hero” of the Battle of Lake Erie in 1814. For the men and women of the 1870s, however, Perry too was a familiar figure who occupied a place, along with Jackson, on the “Pillar of Glory” of men who provided an example to the men of 1861 to emulate in the then current battle to preserve the American nation.

In essence, the men honored on postage stamps of the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s expanded to encompass not only those who had distinguished themselves as “Founders” of the American republic, but as its successful defenders. Hamilton, Clay and Webster all supported a broad interpretation of federal power culminating in their support for the preservation of the American Union at all costs. Perry, Taylor, Scott and Stanton mirrored that commitment by their performance on the field of battle in the wars of 1812, 1846 and 1861 against dire threats to the existence of the Republic. Even James A. Garfield, the martyred president, symbolized to the American people at the time of his assassination in 1881 the “Radical Republican” commitment to the preservation of the Union and reconstruction of the defeated South.

During the decade of the 1890s the United States post office redesigned the “regular” issue stamps. As in the 1870s, the panoply of heroes expanded as additional civilian nationalists and Union Civil War heroes were added to the galaxy of men to be honored. Thus in the 1890 and 1894 series (repeated in 1898) civilian nationalists President James Madison and Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court John Marshall and Union generals (and president), Ulysses S. Grant (in uniform) and William T. Sherman appear for the first time. Madison of course served as President during the War of 1812, but his greater fame related to his and John Marshall’s support for broad Federal power and a nationalist understanding of the Constitution. Grant, although an enormously popular president at the time, secured his place in the popular

mind as “Unconditional Surrender” Grant while Sherman’s role in the Civil War remains etched in the psyche of the American people even today.

The postage stamps of post Civil War America then, as I interpret their designs, changed in 1869. Their original function shifted to an overtly political message of reminding the American people of the triumph of federal supremacy and celebrating the North’s victory in the Civil War. Although the designs reverted to men rather than pictorials in 1870 (and it was only men until the Columbian Exposition issues of 1893), the men who appeared on U.S. stamps symbolized to ordinary Americans the triumph of a constitutional understanding of the broad powers of the federal government and served as a reminder of the North’s victory in the Civil War.

It should also be noted that not until 1937 are the Union commanders of the North were not joined by their Southern counterparts in a set of United States stamps. The “Army” set of 1936-1937 included for the first time not only Union generals Scott, Sherman, Grant and Sheridan, but Confederate commanders Robert E. Lee and “Stonewall” Jackson, the latter appropriately enough on a monochromatic grey stamp. The civilian leadership of the South continues to be absent on United States postage stamps.

If I may make one final observation, my analysis of the designs of nineteenth century United States stamps contradicts to a considerable degree recent trends in the historiography of post Civil War America.¹⁰ The theme of reconciliation and “remembering” of the war in a way that emphasized the common sacrifice of ordinary soldiers North and South does not appear on United States postage stamps until 1949 and 1951 with the issuance of GAR and UCV commemoratives respectively. Nineteenth century stamps emphasized instead the nation and its

preservation, and the men who led that successful battle, Generals Scott, Grant, Sheridan and Sherman and their civilian counterparts who insured the preservation of a single American nation.

¹ See Jack Child, *Miniature Messages: The Semiotics and Politics of Latin American Postage Stamps* and Donald M. Reid, "The Symbolism of Postage Stamps: A Source for the Historian," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 19 No. 2 (April 1984), pp. 223-49.

² George Washington as Civil War Icon,, "A Paper Presented at the George Washington Conference, Shreveport, La., September 1998.

³ See Merrill Peterson, *The Jeffersonian Image in the American Mind*: (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960) and Richard D. Miles, "The American Image of Benjamin Franklin," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 9 No. 2 (Summer 1957), pp. 117-43.

⁴ *The Liberator* (Boston), September 24, 1847.

⁵ Wayne L. Youngblood, "Stamps and Money," *U.S. Stamp News*, May 2006, p. 10.

⁶ *Boston Daily Advertiser*, March 17, 1869

⁷ *Bangor Maine Daily Whig and Courier*, March 26, 1869

⁸ *Daily Arkansas Gazette*, Little Rock, September 17, 1869.

⁹ See my *Patriotic Envelopes of the Civil War: The Iconography of Union and Confederate Covers* (Baton Rouge, La. 2010).

¹⁰ See, for example, David W. Bright, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Ma., Harvard University Press, 2001).

*All newspaper cites are from *Nineteenth Century Newspapers*, Gale Group Databases accessed through the University of Texas at San Antonio Library.

