Stamping American Memory

Brennan, Sheila

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When Thomas Killride looked at the stamps he collected, he read “wondrous stories.” He felt patriotic about American achievements and proud of heroes who helped to “free Our great and mighty country.” Stories leaping out from American commemorative stamps, like the ones Killride alluded to, were shaped by decisions made by the postmaster general and his assistants and influenced by elected officials and the American public. Starting in 1892, the USPOD printed...
commemorative series advertising the US world’s fairs with imagery that revered American achievements in technology and American and European conquest of lands and peoples. History as depicted on ordinary postage represented a top-down approach by honoring American political and military figures, showing the faces of former presidents and military leaders. Commemorative stamps offered a government-approved version of American history that both collectors and noncollectors noticed.

By the 1920s, Americans petitioned the government and asked the USPOD to print stamps that commemorated a local anniversary or honored their favorite hero. By doing so, petitioners sought the legitimacy of the USPOD to broaden the American national narrative distributed and presented on commemorative, limited-issue stamps. Individuals and special interest groups framed their petitions by arguing that their event or hero exemplified American values, innovation, and leadership or played a foundational role in winning independence. Most petitioners did not collect stamps as a hobby, but because most Americans had been primed to see and read stamps as something significant beyond their practical use as postage, they saw that stamps held power as unique federal documents to tell stories with images that circulated widely throughout the United States and the world.

American commemoratives served as a powerful tool for disseminating federally sanctioned episodes of American history. This strategy proved successful for the USPOD as it became more interested in fostering philately as a consumer practice and hobby. After finding that commemorative world’s fair stamps would sell in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Department looked beyond national expositions and began designing stamps that recognized regional commemorations and individuals and significantly increased the number of commemoratives printed in the early twentieth century. From 1892 to 1919, the USPOD printed forty-seven different commemorative stamps, almost exclusively celebrating world’s fairs or regional expositions. Limited-issue production tripled between 1920 and 1940, when the USPOD printed and released 150 different commemoratives. After creating the Philatelic Agency in 1921, the Department was better equipped to handle the distribution of additional issues and respond to requests from collectors.

While the United States led the way in the production of limited-
issue stamps, it was not the only country producing commemoratives. Latin American nations celebrated centennials of independence between 1910 and 1924 with stamps. Sixty-two countries comprising the British Empire celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of George V’s reign by printing a stamp to commemorate this event, offering quite a catalog for the collector. Although originating the postal revolution, Great Britain did not issue its first commemorative until 1924, so this “Jubilee” set pleased collectors of British and British colonial stamps. When other nations began printed commemoratives, the USPOD was already printing a greater variety of limited issues. Global production increased greatly, so that all postal agencies printed more commemoratives during 1930–34 than had been printed in the previous decade (1920–29), or any time prior.¹

Federal statutes restricted the USPOD from printing the portrait of any living person on stamps, which privileged stamps—definitive and commemorative—that represented snapshots from the past.² As citizens and politicians petitioned the postal service, the USPOD did not accept all commemorative stamp requests. Officials carefully chose subjects for commemorative printing, and this authority elevated any story or individual into a broader official American narrative that told consumers that this person or event was nationally significant and worthy of representing the United States. These carefully chosen and constructed stamps were then collected and saved by philatelists, some of whom saw American stamps not only as “wondrous stories” but as “stepping stones of history” that traced, from beginning to end, the “Alpha and Omega” of America’s story.³ This perception was perpetuated by philatelists, teachers, and the USPOD, which justified the educational value of collecting stamps. Viewing the corpus of commemoratives in this way indicated that many collectors—and most likely many noncollectors—believed that scenes printed on stamps told accurate stories from the past and that individuals were chosen because of their undisputed significance in American history. These stories became memorialized as collectors saved stamps. Those stamps were transformed into miniature memorials to the subjects represented within.

Postmaster General James Farley, appointed by “First Philatelist” Franklin Delano Roosevelt during his presidency in the 1930s, recognized that these commemorative stamps acted as “permanent memorials.” Much like structural memorials built in public spaces, one vision
of the past dominates the stamp’s imagery, which screens out other perspectives. Stamps were small in size, but their availability made them more accessible than sites of national memory such as museums, archives, and monuments. These sites become nation-building tools that erase a personal, experiential memory of the past. For this reason, it is important to examine limited-issue commemoratives and their impact as if they are miniature memorials.

As the USPOD worked to present a united vision of the past, stamp scenes showed a decisively white, male, and Protestant vision of early America that obscured more diverse and complicated realities of slavery, violence, and oppression. Conversations revolving around these stamps demonstrate how the USPOD became a powerful institution that legitimized and distributed historical narratives, and one that allowed ordinary citizens to engage with its government. Americans always maintained a close relationship with the postal service, and when successfully petitioning for a stamp on behalf of their cause, some citizens actually influenced postal decisions and public memory.

*Interwar Colonial Revivals*

During the interwar period (1919–1940), some Americans celebrated a nostalgic, homogenous fiction of the American colonial past. Public celebrations of historic anniversaries were filled with patriotic sentiment, weaving together local, vernacular, events, and people into official national narratives, as was the case with commemorative stamps printed in this era. Commemorative committees, business leaders, and politicians actively pursued federal postage stamps celebrating regional anniversaries held at Plymouth Rock, Mayport, Minneapolis, Lexington and Concord, and Valley Forge, and states flaunted their foundings. Others fought for stamps honoring military men who transformed into cultural heroes, such as Casimir Pulaski and Thaddeus Kosciuszko. Knowing of the postal service’s power to sell an idealized and patriotic vision of the American past, some sought commemoratives as part of grander strategies fighting for social and political equality, while others perpetuated a romanticized, whitewashed view of colonial America. The battle for recognition on a federal stamp also reflected contemporary struggles over the construction of race and definitions of citizenship in the United States. Residents and citizens
with southern and eastern European ancestry, for instance, strove to be accepted as racially white, and that worked to further the chasm between whites and blacks, who still struggled as second-class citizens for political power and lacked visual representation on postage as actors in American history.\textsuperscript{6}

In the early twentieth century, the increased popularity of collecting stamps occurred alongside the swell of interest in local and family history fostered by historical societies that promoted genealogical research and historic site preservation. State-funded and privately funded societies, from libraries and archives to patriotic-hereditary groups, encouraged Americans to research the history of their families and save family heirlooms. Hereditary group members took pride in tracing their roots back to pioneering families who established communities in Pennsylvania, for example, before the American Revolution. These practices helped to build regional and state pride that connected small towns and counties to broader national narratives. Encouraging family history research also created dividing lines among old and new immigrant groups, as many older immigrants grasped onto their colonial lineage while ignoring the challenges faced by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century groups with similar European origins.\textsuperscript{7}

Memorials and monuments reflect more about the time when they are built than about the past events and people represented. Celebrations and pageants, such as the national Pilgrim Tercentenary, used commemorative moments to define Americanness in postwar America in the eyes of the event’s organizers. Regional preservation groups, such as the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA), erected memorials and preserved sites during this time tied to Virginia’s founding families that recast British settlements at Jamestown and Williamsburg as harmonious and homogeneous. For elite Virginian members of the APVA, post–Civil War political and cultural upheaval left them with a present they did not like. Preservation and reconstruction efforts let them—and other groups working in different states—return temporarily to time when white elites commanded power and deference from blacks and poor whites.

Americanization efforts in the early twentieth century attacked customs and practices of new and first-generation immigrants thought to be racially and socially inferior. Historic preservation and colonial revival movements grew in popularity because those preserving and reproducing iconography from the colonial period believed this style
was uniquely American. Preserved homes and historic sites were constructed to be places that taught new immigrants about America’s past, while “patriotic Americans” were urged to buy and display colonial-era reproductions in their homes.8

Colonial-themed stamps from the 1920s and 1930s coincided with growing interest in viewing, owning, and displaying physical evidence, or material culture, from colonial and early Republic eras. Wealthy businessmen and heiresses of industrial fortunes donated money to finance wings in museums and historic preservation. The American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened in 1924 to exhibit early American decorative arts and furnishings of “our ancestors”—where “our ancestors” meant a few selected to represent the many. Philadelphia’s Sesquicentennial Exposition boasted “High Street,” an attraction that featured rebuilt “colonial” structures of Philadelphia in 1776. Inspired by Henry Mercer’s collections of tools, Henry Ford began voraciously collecting a host of buildings and objects in 1919—anything from agricultural machinery to household and kitchen implements—that he would eventually display in Greenfield Village, Michigan. Uninterested in financing an established historic site like John D. Rockefeller, Ford created his own emulation of an “Early American Village” that opened to the public in 1931. Physical restorations and quests for “authenticity” at Colonial Williamsburg in the late 1920s and early 1930s encouraged some Americans to purchase antiques and replicas to decorate their homes.9 Calling upon the designs of the late colonial and early Republic periods during a time of American postwar conservatism in foreign policy, some Americans focused on building the image of United States as an exceptional place with a unique history.

This chapter will reveal how different groups reached backward to use images and individuals from the past to address cultural and political unease with 1920s and 1930s America through the medium of commemorative stamps.

Pilgrims and Origins

A new era in commemorative stamps began in 1920 with the Pilgrim Tercentenary, as the variety of commemorative subjects expanded
beyond promotions of world’s fairs to include significant anniversaries, military victories, and heroic individuals. The Pilgrim Tercentennial celebrated the landing of religious separatists on Cape Cod and their eventual settlement in the town of Plymouth, Massachusetts. From December 1920 through the summer of 1921, towns in many states organized pageants and parades to commemorate this anniversary. The stamp series created for this event was not the first to represent America’s founding mythologies (see the Columbians, 1892–93, and the Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition, 1907); the series was significant because it sparked interest from many citizens to ask the USPOD to highlight their community’s history and connections to America’s origins on stamps. As a reflection of contemporary politics, elected officials and patriotic-hereditary groups invoked the legacy of Plymouth Pilgrims both to assert the primacy of Plymouth as America’s birthplace and to speak to local and national anxiety over immigration in the 1920s.

Organized after World War I during a time when many US citizens were in favor of severe restrictions on immigration, the Pilgrim Tercentennial events highlighted perceived differences among good and bad immigrant groups. Poems and speeches glorified the legacy of the Massachusetts Pilgrims as nation builders and model immigrants, in contrast with a widely held belief that immigrants in the twentieth century tore apart an imagined American fabric. Plymouth was proclaimed to be the “corner stone of the Nation,” by Mayflower descendant Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who detailed how the Pilgrims’ success against adversity allowed America to grow into a great nation. Vice President Thomas Marshall also touted the achievements of the “pilgrim fathers” who “prepared the way” for “the birth of a new and mighty world.” He used the opportunity to argue for immigration restrictions, advocating that contemporary immigrants needed to follow the example set by the Pilgrims and commit to staying in United States rather than merely coming to work and returning home. According to Marshall, the Pilgrims came to America “to worship God and to make homes, determined never to return to Europe.”

The stamp designs commemorating the celebration promoted the Pilgrims’ cultural legacy as America’s first founders. Interestingly, none of the three postage stamps printed in the series contained the identifying words “U.S. Postage,” which all other stamps prior and since car-
ried. This cemented the story of the Pilgrims’ landing at Plymouth as quintessentially American, as it needed no marking as US postage. Even the US Mint’s commemoritive anniversary coin imprinted the words “United States of America” on the front of the half-dollar coin. Philatelists noticed this omission, concerned—and interested—that it might be an error in the printing, but the USPOD did not recall the stamps because the design was intentional. Editors of American Philatelist were disappointed with the series, claiming that the two- and five-cent issues were far too crowded with figures and decoration to be enjoyed.

Mayflowers, fittingly, flanked each stamp’s scene, and like the Columbians, the Pilgrim Tercentenary series formed a short narrative. The story began on the one-cent stamp with the Mayflower sailing west across the ocean on its journey with no land in sight—origin or destination (fig. 12). Similar to the Columbians, the landing occurs in the two-cent stamp—the most commonly used stamp to mail a letter and the standard rate of first-class postage until 1932. This stamp’s engraving makes the landing look harsh, unexpected, and jolting for the party at Plymouth Rock (see fig. 13). Men, women, and children huddle together, illustrating that family units migrated to the New England coast. Although this image suggests that struggles lie ahead for the settlers, the rock is what grounded the travelers, and is the object that grounded those celebrating the anniversary in the past. Plymouth was the ceremonial ground in 1920 and provided the physical connection to the past events.
The journey’s symbolic end revealed itself in the five-cent (see fig. 14), where the Mayflower Compact was signed, indicating permanence, and showed the first document of self-governance in what would become the United States. Copies of the Compact were printed and distributed for the Tercentenary. Divine right blessed this settlement as the central figure points toward the light illuminating the signing. Drawn from a painting by Edwin White, the signing image illustrates families migrating together, even though only men signed the document. The scene emphasizes that there was a community, comprising family units, who crafted the Mayflower Compact and pledged to work together. At the time of the anniversary, New England preservationists and genealogists argued that the Plymouth Pilgrims were the true first Americans because family units arrived together to form a permanent settlement through signing the Compact, unlike the commercially mind individuals who sailed to Jamestown. By representing this scene, the Tercentennial committee reiterated their argument and wanted all Americans to consider Plymouth as the birthplace of the America.

Virginians and New Englanders regularly argued over the true origins of the American story and which settlements contributed more to the development and character of the United States. Post–Civil War regional tensions can be read in written evidence found in newspapers and journals such the William and Mary Quarterly. In 1909, shortly after the tercentenary celebration of Jamestown’s founding, Virginia historians refuted declarations published by members of the New England
Historic Genealogical Society that there were “radical differences of character and influence” between Mayflower descendants and Jamestown settlers, because Plymouth “subordinated the commercial spirit (of Jamestown) to that of securing ecclesiastical and political freedom for themselves”—seen in the five-cent stamp. The *William and Mary Quarterly* responded that those charges were “so gross, so unprovoked, so untrue,” and the statement of such freedoms and strength of character in the north were exaggerated.17

Rivalries die hard, and Virginians did not let the Pilgrim Tercentenary pass without reminding Americans of their claim to the origins and contributions to American politics and governance. One address given at the College of William and Mary noted that Virginia’s contributions to the forming of the United States were far greater than any other state, but that Massachusetts came in second place. During the national celebration of the New England Pilgrims, this effort reminded Americans that the “first” settlement was at Jamestown.18 No one at this time recognized other colonial settlements in the western United States or acknowledged that the original residents of “America” were Native peoples who were displaced, attacked, manipulated, and feared by European colonizers.

Virginians and New Englanders weren’t the only ones wrestling over founding stories publicly, through representation on stamps, as descendants from other European “pilgrims” argued successfully for their stories to be told on commemoratives.
In 1924, the Huguenot-Walloons New Netherland Commission organized a series of events in New York to celebrate the first permanent settlement of Huguenots (French Protestants) on American soil, as well as the founding of New Netherland. They wanted to harness the circulation power of postage to share the story of their ancestors by requesting a Huguenot-Walloons commemorative stamp series. Framing the founding of New Netherland as the “Huguenot-Walloons” anniversary was contested at the time. The Dutch, including Henry Hudson, fur trappers, and merchants from the West and East India Companies were commonly seen as the founders of New York. The commission included the settlement of Walloon families, who were French-speaking Protestants from Belgium who had settled in Holland, in its narrative, while obscuring the role of the Dutch government and its business endeavors in the settlement story. Anniversary literature framed the founding of what became New York as motivated by religion rather than mercantilism by identifying the Huguenots and Walloons as pilgrims who were persecuted for their religious beliefs like those who landed near Plymouth. Formed by the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, the commission worked to make the Walloons’ history visible to all Americans, because their “advent marks a new epoch in the history of both Church and State.” Obtaining a set of commemorative stamps, and a coin, performed some of the work to acknowledge the little-known Walloon arrival as a significant episode in the American past.

The commission understood the challenges it faced educating Americans about their history. After the release of this commemorative stamp series, a few collectors wrote to the postmaster general puzzled by the subject of the series and questioned the significance of those events. One collector begged for a short bibliography about the Huguenots or Walloons, because “all of the histories I have at hand seem to be a bit deficient in matters relating to the events these stamps commemorate.” Collectors and citizens occasionally questioned the criteria that qualified an event or subject as nationally significant and worthy of printing on a commemorative. According to the post office, this anniversary was “of more than ordinary interest particularly in those sections of the country where these colonists originally settled.”
The silver half-dollar coin minted by the commission included the phrase “Founding of New Netherland” below the announcement of the “Huguenot-Walloon Tercentenary, 1624–1924,” alerting those purchasing the commemorative coin of the significance of the celebration. The stamp series, however, was not well described in print, baffling collectors and citizens confronted with the Huguenot-Walloon issues. Deciphering these stamps proved challenging for all, because the designs lacked readily identifiable images. On the one-cent issue, the Nieu Nederland sails in 1624 east toward America, and families land in the two-cent stamp with no visual aide indicating where the ship sailed from, where it landed, or who the Huguenot-Walloons were.

The third stamp in the series is even more cryptic, picturing an
unnamed monument facing a rising sun in what appears to be a tropical climate. Palm trees and plants surrounding the structure contrast with the rocky, sparsely planted landscape pictured in the two-cent settlement stamp. The five-cent issue actually represents a stone monument erected by Jean Ribault, who explored the area near Mayport, Florida, in the 1560s to establish a refuge colony for French Huguenots. Before returning to France to pick up passengers for the sail back to Florida, Ribault erected a stone column festooned with the French king’s coat of arms to claim Florida in the name of France. As part of the Huguenot-Walloon tercentenary in 1924, the Florida chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution financed the construction of a similarly shaped monument to honor Ribault and the “first landing of Protestants on American soil.”

Interestingly, the memorial to the Walloons erected in Manhattan’s Battery Park during the 1924 tercentennial does not mention their religion or status as persecuted religious refugees.

The Huguenot-Walloon Tercentenary committee specifically wanted the memorial commemorating Jean Ribault’s settlement to appear on a stamp representing the first Protestant settlement in America. Seeking to redefine the chronology and attribution of religious toleration in colonial America, committee members claimed that the Huguenots and Walloons brought with them a strong commitment to religious tolerance that “neither Pilgrim nor Puritan possessed.” Reacting to the Pilgrim Tercentenary three years prior, descendants of Huguenots and Walloons desired the stamps and the celebration to
counteract the “forgetfulness” of the “names and race of its founders” due to lost records. With the endorsement of the federal government, this stamp series elevated the narrative framed by the anniversary committee to make a claim on New York’s colonial history, and positioned the Walloons among America’s earliest religious pilgrims.

Norwegian Pilgrims

The Norse-American Centenary stamp series provides another example of how the government endorsed a narrative of ethnic pride proposed by a regional commemorative committee. Much like the Huguenot-Walloon stamps, this series promoted a regional celebration of another group of pilgrims whose event committee desired the stamps to be one piece of a large festival honoring first waves of immigrants. The Norse-American Centennial Committee secured a congressional joint resolution that commended Norwegian immigrants for contributing to the “moral and material welfare of our Nation.” They were credited with settling the “great Midwest,” rather than pouring into cities, crowding them, like contemporary immigrants were doing in St. Louis, Chicago, and other Midwestern cities. Imagery and narratives presented by the Centennial Committee sought to connect the story of Norwegians in America to a heroic past that could be traced to Vikings such as Leif Erikson, whose arrival in the New World predated Columbus and the Plymouth Pilgrims. The Pilgrim Tercentennial influenced how the Norse-American Centennial Committee shaped its message and why the committee rooted the message in celebrating pioneer fathers and their (debated) status as religious pilgrims. Like many other immigrant communities, the Centennial Committee balanced celebrating their distinct Norwegian heritage and culture with claiming their piece of the American past by earning a place on federal stamps.

Following the convention of earlier stamp series, this set emphasized the immigration and a journey across the Atlantic as way to assert status as original immigrants, distinguishing their stories of migration from that of new immigrants arriving in the early twentieth century. On the two-cent, Restaurationen, “the Mayflower of the Norsemen,” carries the first Norwegian immigrants to the United States, sailing west across the stamp without land in sight on July 4, 1825.
The second stamp does not represent the landing, but the five-cent issue features an engraving of a Viking ship built for the Columbian Exposition. That ship sailed from Norway to Chicago to remind fairgoers and stamp consumers in the 1920s that Norwegian explorers visited America long before Columbus, the English-Dutch Pilgrims, the Huguenots, or the Walloons. This particular image, interestingly, pointed the ship’s bow toward the east, or toward the homeland. On the stamp, the Viking ship sails from a banner or shield of Norway toward one of the United States, and the Norse-American Viking ship is flying colors similar to an American flag.

These stamps were in high demand from collectors because of the design and intensity of the ink colors, and they sold out. The USPOD
received letters requesting the issues be reprinted. Postal officials regretted that they had to treat all commemoratives consistently and could not reprint this series alone because they would hear protests from other groups claiming the Norwegians received preferential treatment. In this case, the USPOD understood that the subject matter represented on the stamp held great meaning for petitioners—past and future—and citizens. Postal officials were careful to balance the sensitivities of commemorative scenes chosen with interests of some collectors who focused more on the particulars of stamps’ designs and artful quality of the production.

Descendants of these early European settlers wanted to demonstrate that their immigrant ancestors were good immigrant-citizens and worked to transform the United States into a great and prosperous nation. Difficult to read in the stamps’ images, these feelings were expressed by the Norse-American Centennial Committee, which wanted to celebrate ethnic pride, but designed the celebrations to focus on messages of good citizenship and patriotism. Even the planning committee and other Norwegian Americans involved with the centennial felt conflicted over the messages of the celebration. Many Norwegians opposed American involvement in World War I and faced nativistic attacks, not as severe as German Americans, but strong enough to identify their group as outsiders. By 1925, Norwegian communities in the northern Midwest still debated how to balance Americanization and ethnically constructed heritage activities. Through public commemoration, Norwegian Americans of the Midwest declared that they were nation builders like the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. And with an episode of their past represented on commemorative stamps, the reach of their story stretched far beyond Minnesota.

Regional anniversary committees took advantage of the opportunities available from the USPOD’s commemorative stamp program to legitimize their interpretation of the past and to ensure that the founding stories of their ancestors were included in the broader story of America’s origins. Stamps represented European settlements and transatlantic journeys with images of ships and family groups of white Protestant settlers. Appeals to congressmen for stamps, and even for coins, emphasized the positive contributions each group and their descendants made to the character and strength of the United States.

The timing of these stamps and the language used to justify recogni-
tion also spoke directly to the contemporary fights over immigration. Legislation in 1921 and 1924 established eugenically minded quotas developed by Congress to shape the racial biology of future American citizens. The Quota Act of 1921 limited the numbers of immigrants to 3 percent of that nationality’s presence in the 1910 US census, which drastically reduced the number of southern and eastern Europeans entering the United States. The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 further limited quotas and completely eliminated immigration from all regions in Asia.28

Support of these restrictive laws was equally strong across political parties in Congress, with only a few congressmen speaking out in opposition. Some spoke loudly in favor of restrictions, including Ellison DuRant Smith. He believed that selective criteria and limited quotas would help the United States to thrive. “Without offense, but with regard to the salvation of our own, let us shut the door and assimilate what we have, and let us breed pure American citizens and develop our own American resources.”29 At a time when defining who was an American and who wasn’t changed, regional anniversary celebrations commemorated on stamps reinforced the idea that the United States was founded by white western European Protestants. Stamps contributed to the ongoing ways that the US government defined Americanness and constructed official founding stories. Starting in 1925, sesquicentennial celebrations of Revolutionary War battles moved discussions of colonial founding origins into dialogues about who fought to create the United States as an independent nation.

**Humble Heroes of the Revolution**

Commemorations of persevering Pilgrims figuratively gave birth to Revolutionary War heroes who fought for freedom against British oppressors as represented in stamps. Starting in 1925, a flurry of activity surrounded the 150th anniversary of the American Revolution, including many regional and local celebrations held across the country. Following the lead of the Pilgrim anniversaries, local committees petitioned their legislators seeking commemorative stamps and coins to recognize regionally significant battles and heroes. The House Committee on Coinage, Weights, and Measures grew tired of such requests
for commemorative coins. Responding to a request for a silver half dollar celebrating the Battle of Bennington and the independence of Vermont in 1925, the chair noted the committee did not favor “legislation of this class, because of the great number of bills introduced to commemorate events of local and not national interest.”

Anniversaries of local interest, however, continued to win commemorative stamps. The national sesquicentennial celebration in Philadelphia in 1926 encouraged a colonial revival, not only of design and style, but in storytelling through stamps. Surprisingly, while the Pilgrim anniversaries yielded small stamp series each, the “Sesqui” exposition itself did not. No narrative was told across three issues, leaving the Liberty Bell—the iconic symbol of the fair—to stand in as the only symbol of independence. Beginning in 1925, the USPOD told the story of the Revolution over fourteen stamps, or stamp series, related to these anniversaries.

Images from the Revolutionary War issues often represented portraits of victorious generals and elite soldiers or engravings of battle scenes. This was the case for the Lexington and Concord stamp series printed in 1925, which ushered in the anniversary celebrations. The Department released the stamps on April 4 to long lines of interested collectors and citizens waiting to purchase these stamps in Massachusetts. In April ceremonies commemorating the skirmish were celebrated in and around Boston, where salutes were fired and Paul Revere’s ride into Boston was reenacted on April 19 and 20, during Patriot’s Day festivities.

Unlike other series, the Lexington and Concord commemoratives did not proceed chronologically by denomination. The one-cent represented Washington assuming command of the Continental Army in Cambridge months after the initial skirmish. It was followed by a two-cent depicting the actual confrontation, and the five-cent completed the series memorializing the minuteman soldier. The image of Washington taking command of the Continental Army in Cambridge was a conglomerate of nineteenth-century prints that represented Washington on horseback, while the stamps shows Washington standing among his soldiers. This interpretation implies that Washington was a man equal to his soldiers, standing as a fellow citizen, even as he is set apart because he was not equal in rank or status. Ready for war, the collected armies are dressed uniformly, while one company marches in the right of the scene and another, larger company stands at attention.
in the background. The viewer is led to believe that the Continental Army organized soon after the first confrontation and was prepared for combat.

Based on a painting by Henry Sandham, the two-cent issue borrowed its victorious vision of the battle (fig. 21). The stamp mislabels the painting as “The Birth of Liberty,” while it is titled *The Dawn of Liberty*. Sandham painted the Minutemen as a disadvantaged band of soldiers on foot who engaged the British, who charged on horseback.  

The Minutemen appear larger in size but smaller in number in the foreground, standing victoriously with their arms in the air, shaking fists at the enemy, who appear smaller in size and larger in number and to be retreating in the background. This painting contrasts drastically with the vision etched by contemporary artist Amos Doolittle in May 1775. Doolittle represented the small band of Minutemen in
disarray after the first shot was fired as they scattered across the Lexington green in retreat. From other sources available, including other engravings by Doolittle, this representation seems to more accurately describe the events at Lexington.\textsuperscript{35}

While the British eventually retreated to Boston after a stand-off in Concord, the colonists did not defeat the British. The two sides exchanged fire and lost lives in this brief skirmish. Accuracy, however, was irrelevant to local history enthusiasts and residents who believed in the town’s centrality to the Revolution’s narrative, as its birthplace. The Lexington Historical Society purchased Sandham’s painting in 1886 to hang in the town hall, and this scene was an integral part of local history.\textsuperscript{36} Embedded in the residents’ memory was that their fictive ancestors were a victorious band of volunteer soldiers who held off the well-trained British and forced a retreat. This image of local importance circulated across the country and the world and confirmed what most schoolchildren learned as part of the War for Independence narrative.

Prior to the 150th anniversary, poems written by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow cemented this mythical interpretation of Lexington and Concord in American memory during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An engraving of Daniel Chester French’s \textit{The Minute Man} statue, dedicated in 1875, appeared on the five-cent stamp, which also included the first stanza of Emerson’s 1837 poem “The Concord Hymn.” Emerson composed the poem for one commemoration ceremony, and later it was engraved at the base of French’s statue commemorating the battle’s centennial. Most stamps include few words other than “U.S. Postage,” relying on the imagery to illustrate the stamp’s theme. By reprinting the first stanza of Emerson’s poem, readers of the stamp, most of whom would never see the statue in person, understood the symbol. Emerson’s words would have been very familiar to many Americans because “A Concord Hymn” often appeared in textbooks and school readers. The government endorsed this vision celebrating humble, inexperienced, and “embattled farmers” who “fired the shot heard around the world.”\textsuperscript{37}

French’s monument was similar in design to that of the common-soldier Civil War memorials erected in municipalities across the country in the late nineteenth century. Civil War memorials crafted as standing soldiers holding a rifle, not embattled, remembered those who fought and died in the 1860s and transformed into places for honoring all
veterans. In the case of the *Minute Man*, though the physical statue stood in Massachusetts, once on a stamp its representation became a national symbol of the earliest citizen soldiers who fought for independence. It was the stories of these men “who helped free our great and mighty country” represented on postage that collectors like Thomas Killride spoke of in his poem “My Stamps.” Civil War monuments acted in ways to unify the country by focusing on the individuals who fought rather than the reasons for fighting. During the Revolutionary War, northern and southern colonies fought together, even if it was for a loosely knit union. In 1925, the Massachusetts Minuteman acted as a unifying figure for celebrating white male citizenship throughout the United States.

Consumers of the Minuteman commemorative saw in the stamp design that this figure was to be remembered as a heroic freedom fighter. All commemorative stamps become miniature memorials once saved by collectors, but this particular stamp was designed to look like a memorial. The stamp represents the original sculpture and then frames it as if French’s piece was part of a large neoclassical memorial. Unlike the statue that stands in a field in Concord, the Minuteman on the stamp is flanked by two Doric order columns and two tablets bearing verses from Emerson’s hymn as if the verses are commandments, giving the statue the appearance of standing in an architectural niche. A niche highlights the figure inside it, and very often the figure is one to be worshipped or revered. Reverence of the Minuteman is reinforced with lighter shading behind the statue’s head on the stamp that draws the eye in to focus on an archetypal American hero.
Like physical memorials, commemoratives do not allow space for questioning of the subject’s interpretation. The Battle of White Plains and Vermont Sesquicentennial issues in 1926 and 1927 continued the theme of citizen soldiers as battle heroes. Unnamed, without military uniforms, men fought and represented the Green Mountain Boys in Vermont, for example, to defend their territory against British forces. In these stamps, and in the spirit of the commemorations, the white citizen-farmer-soldier stood as the archetypal American hero.

Washington as Common Man

In contrast to the Lexington and Concord series, which elevated the white citizen-farmer-soldier to the status of national hero, the 1928 Valley Forge anniversary stamp represented a mythical story about General George Washington that made him seem humble, like a common man. In the 1920s, Washington lived prominently in popular and political cultural as his name and face were used to market dishes, sell movies, and justify immigration restrictions. Prior to the Sesqui, mail-order catalogs sold colonial-themed, mass-produced knickknacks containing George’s image. One familiar scene was Washington kneeling in prayer at Valley Forge. A nineteenth-century print of this vignette, based on a painting by Henry Brueckner, circulated widely after the Civil War and again following World War I. A bas-relief of a similar image was installed at the YMCA West Side Branch in New York in 1904, and replicas were created and installed in churches, schools, and historical societies. Many viewed this print as visual evidence of Washington’s true piety, even though the image was completely contrived. Imagery that illustrated how a military leader turned to God for help in hard times was powerful. The scene was based on a tale first recanted by Parson Mason Weems in 1804. Weems perpetuated a cult of Washington through many stories he published about Washington, including the myth about chopping down the cherry tree.39

Supporters of the anniversary encampment at Valley Forge wanted to incorporate this familiar image on a stamp and began petitioning the USPOD in the mid-1920s. Malcolm H. Ganser asked in a letter to the editor of the New York Times for other readers to write to a very reluctant postmaster general to sway him into printing a stamp
commemorating this event. Requests were honored and the image of Washington kneeling in prayer would represent the anniversary at the encampment even as Rupert Hughes and other historians began questioning the accuracy of that scene. One newspaper columnist opined there was “no good reason to doubt,” and another stressed that neither the stamp engraver nor historians were at Valley Forge with Washington, so why would he doubt Washington’s actions? The myths of Washington were difficult to challenge in public.

Hughes was a biographer of Washington and was extremely critical of those wishing to mythologize Washington. Hughes and others criticized the stamp because they recognized that the government held immense power by endorsing images that stamp consumers might assume to convey historical fact. Interestingly, while Hughes was concerned about representations of the general and president, others were thankful that remembrances of the Revolution were not solely militaristic. Other anniversary stamps, including Lexington-Concord (1925), the Battle of White Plains (1926), and the Burgoyne Campaign (1927) depicted battle scenes and images of soldiers, cannon, rifles, and powder horns. Postal officials approved of Washington kneeling as a way to please those seeking representations of the “spiritual” side of war.

The stamp engraving is a voyeuristic view of Washington kneeling in prayer in the woods surrounding the Valley Forge encampment as if from the perspective of Isaac Potts, who was shown hiding behind a large tree. According to Weems’s tale, Potts was delighted when he came upon Washington praying in the woods. Potts decided at that moment that he could support the Revolution because Washington demonstrated that one could be a Christian and a soldier without moral conflict. This image provided a comforting message for some. Washington kneeling at Valley Forge also spoke powerfully to those who believed that the United States was not only a Christian nation, but one that benefited from the grace of God during hard times.

Four printed words solidified the notion that the entire nation believed in God: “In God We Trust.” These four words distinguished this stamp from any others printed at the time. This phrase appeared on contemporary US coins, but never on stamps. It would not be until another Red Scare in the 1950s when a stamp, this time a definitive, carried the motto. On the Valley Forge stamp, however, the phrase
acts as a label interpreting the scene, telling consumers that this is why we trust in God, because Washington trusted in God and the United States reaped the blessings of independence. Any debates over Washington’s religious beliefs or his aversion to prayer were settled in the minds of some Americans because the USPOD printed and circulated this interpretation of Washington’s private life.

This stamp held great meaning for some, particularly the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). They included the Valley Forge stamp together with a collection of papers and objects in a copper box—together with a Bible, a copy of the US Constitution, various DAR publications, including immigrant handbooks, and signed cards by President and Mrs. Calvin Coolidge—buried in the cornerstone of Constitution Hall in November 1928. That this stamp was included in this time capsule further illustrates how powerful, and sometimes transitive, stamp messages could be. The representation of Washington as a pious man held value for the DAR because the organization believed it was upholding ideals held by descendants of Revolutionary War heroes. Washington’s actions and values were therefore theirs because their ancestors served under Washington. One could argue that a stamp was chosen to represent these connections to Washington because of its small size, making it fit neatly inside a capsule. If true, the DAR easily could have purchased a definitive two-cent stamp used every day by millions of Americans to send first-class letters with Washington’s portrait. It had been a mainstay of US definitives since the

Fig. 23. Valley Forge issue, two cent, 1928
(Courtesy Smithsonian National Postal Museum Collection)
mid-nineteenth century. Instead, the DAR chose the Weems-inspired image of Washington in prayer.

We can see from the Revolutionary War sesquicentennial commemoratives that the USPOD glorified individuals and selective battles to instruct Americans, immigrants, and international collectors as to what and who was important to remember. Other stamps reflected similar patterns in design and message. Common white men were the heroes, and leaders were not elites but rather depicted as strong men who walked among their soldiers, and sometimes prayed. Seeing these stamps representing Revolutionary War men motivated other heritage and hereditary-based groups to pursue commemoratives for their humble heroes.

*Revolutionary Heroes from Poland*

Polish Americans and immigrants fought to honor two Polish Revolutionary War heroes on stamps as part of a larger strategy to portray Polish Americans as good Americans with ancestral ties to the birth of the United States as a nation. In the 1920s, Congress overwhelmingly approved immigration restrictions that imposed strict quotas on individuals arriving from eastern and southern Europe. Restrictions came in reaction to both political concerns over post–World War I radicalism and eugenically influenced charges of racial inferiority based on biology. Poles, for example, were described as a distinct “race” of people. Few legislators spoke out to oppose the quotas. Representative Robert H. Clancy, however, defended immigrants, including the Polish, for their positive contributions to the United States: “Polish-Americans are as industrious and as frugal and as loyal to our institutions as any class of people who have come to the shores of this country in the past 300 years.” Clancy also mentioned the contributions of Polish citizens during the Revolution to highlight a “high place” they had earned in American history. Polish American groups broadcast the achievements of Revolutionary War heroes to anchor their people to the origins of the United States and to distinguish themselves from other eastern Europeans by showcasing their long history of being loyal Americans.

Efforts began in the early twentieth century to recognize the con-
tributions of Count Casimir Pulaski and General Thaddeus Kosciuszko with statues and postage memorials. In 1910, monuments honoring both men were dedicated in Washington, Pulaski’s financed by Congress and Kosciuszko’s donated to “the people” by the Polish American Alliance. Pulaski was a Polish nobleman who volunteered to fight for the colonies and is known as the Father of the American Cavalry. He fought and died at the Battle of Savannah in 1779, and the city honored him as a local hero. To further extend Pulaski’s reputation as a national hero, the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution spearheaded a stamp campaign in 1929, cosponsoring an event commemorating the 150th anniversary of the death of Count Pulaski. Supporting the DAR’s efforts to secure a stamp was Georgia congressman Charles Edwards, who petitioned the postmaster general to support a Pulaski commemorative and commented that “the Daughters of the American Revolution would not sponsor anything that is not real meritorious and entirely worthy.” According to Edwards, the DAR properly vetted the stamp’s subject matter and it passed the patriotic test, demonstrating Pulaski was an early model Polish immigrant. Honoring Pulaski as a war hero was not in question when President Herbert Hoover declared October 11, 1929, as “Pulaski Day,” yet no stamp came. Hoover and Congress acknowledged Pulaski as a national hero, but earning a commemorative stamp proved more difficult.

Surprisingly, the following year, strong rebukes came from a Polish newspaper that may have influenced the government’s decision to print a Pulaski commemorative. The paper accused US postal authorities of using a “double standard” when choosing whom to honor on stamps with the headline, “Polish Proposition Refused—Germans Favored.” According to this paper’s editor, the USPOD honored a German Revolutionary War hero, Baron Frederic Wilhelm von Steuben, on a stamp, and refused to reciprocate for a Polish Pulaski. French newspaper editors even decried the choice of the von Steuben stamp. They did not seek a Pulaski stamp, but rather sought recognition for French military officers who fought for independence, including Lafayette and Rochambeau. Missing from the correspondence file were panicky or angry letters from government officials strongly urging the postmaster general to order a Pulaski stamp quickly. A few months later, however, nearly fifteen months after the Savannah anniversary celebration, a Pulaski issue was announced. This episode demonstrates that the
world noticed when a government printed new stamps, placing postal officials in a challenging role. Their decisions held enormous political weight and carried cultural meaning far beyond those petitioning for stamp subjects.

This can be seen in the ways that noncollecting Americans noticed new stamps and questioned the reasoning behind postal choices. Present in the archive’s files for the Pulaski stamp was an angry letter from a citizen who asked why the USPOD honored Pulaski with a stamp and did not choose an American soldier instead. She spoke of her fears of first-generation immigrants held by many fellow citizens. Mrs. M. A. Van Wagner criticized Polish immigrants for coming to the United States only to “get employment here and take our American dollars back to Poland,” while others remained unemployed (presumably she meant native-borns) in the early years of the Depression. For Van Wagner, the Pulaski stamp signified another way that America had been “forgnised,” as was the case with the “gangs” of foreigners who were responsible for importing “poison” liquor during Prohibition. Her letter stands alone in the Pulaski file as one of protest, but her emotional reaction to this stamp reflects real sentiments felt by some Americans in the interwar period not only toward eastern European immigrants, but also the power stamps possessed in representing, or perhaps misrepresenting in this case, an official narrative of her country. Stamps may have been small, but their images were powerful.

Many Americans supported the immigration restrictions in Johnson-Reed, so viewing an eastern European, Pulaski, on a stamp may have angered them. It seemed hypocritical of the government to limit immigration of specific groups of people because they were not considered fit for citizenship, and then a few years later honor an individual representing one of those groups on a federal stamp. This occasion was not the first time the US government recognized the achievements of Pulaski, but the accessibility of a commemorative stamp meant that more people—across the United States and around the world—saw firsthand that the federal government celebrated a Polish hero as an American one.

Concurrent to the Pulaski stamp campaign, petitions arrived at the USPOD seeking a stamp to honor another Polish Revolutionary War hero, Thaddeus Kosciuszko. At the time of his death in 1817, Poles and Americans mourned his legacy as a war hero and his commitment
to fighting for liberty worldwide. His legacy continued on in the form of monuments and celebrations dedicated in his honor. Among those commemorative efforts was one to immortalize his legacy on a postage stamp that would reach across the United States and abroad to his homeland of Poland. The Kosciuszko Foundation first petitioned the postmaster general in 1926, by way of New York senator Royal S. Copeland, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the general’s “coming” to the colonies.

After those attempts failed, queries were reshaped and the Foundation asked for a stamp that would instead honor the 150th anniversary of his “naturalization as an American citizen.” From 1931 to 1933, hundreds of endorsement letters arrived in the office of the postmaster general supporting this stamp, accumulating a greater volume than supported Pulaski’s stamp just a few years earlier. Seven years after the first requests, Postmaster Farley fittingly chose to announce the Kosciuszko issue on Polish Day at the Century of Progress World’s Fair in Chicago (1933). Farley claimed that he was “happy to convey (his) highest regard for the American citizens of Polish extraction” and declared that Kosciuszko’s name would be “forever perpetuated in the hearts of American people.”

Citizenship was a key element in pitching this stamp, which also was reflected in the announcements printed in newspapers. Kosciuszko’s “admission to American citizenship” and the “privilege of becoming a citizen” were celebrated alongside his military service. Much like Farley, who paid homage to Polish citizens, other reactions to the issue emphasized that the general’s legacy on a stamp “honors not only the man himself, but his countrymen who have come by the hundreds of thousands to the country he helped to establish as a land of liberty for all men.”

Whether Kosciuszko actually became an American citizen was not questioned at the time, but the stamp offered a strong symbolic gesture and honor for all people with Polish heritage as bestowed upon them by the government. Like the pre-Revolutionary Pilgrims, the Polish were nation builders, too.

Choosing to honor Kosciuszko’s “naturalization” proved to be a curious claim made by the Foundation. There appears to be no documentary evidence to support the claim that he became an American citizen, even though he was held in high regard and called a friend by George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and other notable figures.
After the war, Kosciuszko, like other soldiers, haggled with the new Congress to be paid back wages for his service in the Continental Army. He earned membership in the Society of the Cincinnati, which was limited to military officers who served during the Revolution. Kosciuszko returned to his native Poland, where he led resistance and fought, unsuccessfully, against Russian occupation and oppression. He published the “Act of Insurrection,” similar to the Declaration of Independence, and also freed the serfs in Poland in 1794. After some initial victories, Kosciuszko’s resistance was crushed by the Russian forces, and he was taken prisoner and held in Russia. A few years later he returned to the United States, committed to freeing his homeland.56

Kosciuszko hoped to lobby support for Polish independence from American and French governments, but found himself politically opposed to John Adams’s anti-France policies. In light of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, Thomas Jefferson urged Kosciuszko to leave the country to avoid imprisonment. If Kosciuszko had been naturalized, he would not have needed to flee the country. According to congressional records in 1976, Representative John H. Dent tried to rectify that by submitting a resolution to confer citizenship upon Kosciuszko, perhaps in the spirit of the bicentennial celebrations. Kosciuszko’s actual status was less important than the way that Polish-American cultural groups constructed his historical identity as an American citizen.57 These groups believed there was a lot at stake by representing Kosciuszko as a citizen as well as a military hero. Polish immigrants and Polish Americans were conflicted, much like immigrants and citizens of Norwegian descent discussed earlier, about how best to balance their cultural and political identities as Poles and as Americans.

Unlike the Norse-American stamps that depicted ships and represented migration, the Pulaski and Kosciuszko stamps depicted each man in very different ways. Pulaski visually is associated with Poland with his portrait flanked by the modern flags of Poland and the United States. Generally, other commemoratives did not print the US flag. Pulaski’s portrait appears in the center, where he casts his glance to his left, to the side where the Polish flag appears from behind his portrait. In contrast, the Kosciuszko design did not feature either flag. Perhaps because the stamp commemorated the 150th anniversary of his “naturalization” as an American citizen, flags were not necessary for indicating his nation of origin; Kosciusko was American, Pulaski was Polish.58
The final design represented Kosciuszko standing as a military officer, distinguishing his stamp from other Revolutionary War citizen-soldier stamps, and instead identified him as a leader.

The stamp engraving reproduces the full-bodied statue of him that sits in Lafayette Park across from the White House in Washington. Kosciuszko appears larger than life as he looks down upon the stamp reader from his pedestal. Like many other Revolutionary War officers represented on stamps, he is standing, not on horseback, with sword drawn, and appears ready to lead a battle. Pulaski, who was a royal count, looks out from his portrait wearing a dress military uniform. Oddly, he is not on horseback, although he is credited as founding the American cavalry. No identifying language tells a stamp consumer that Pulaski died at the Battle of Savannah. And unless one read the newspaper announcements discussing the stamp, or as a collector purchased the first-day cover, the average American probably did not understand that the dates printed on the Kosciuszko, 1783–1933, celebrated his fictional naturalization.59

Obtaining these commemoratives was a great achievement for the fraternal and Polish heritage organizations that fought for these stamps to demonstrate ethnic pride and claim a piece of American heritage, and as another means for establishing their status as racially white. Even as cultural and legal definitions of whiteness were changing in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, their members experienced discrimination and understood that Poles and other eastern
European immigrants were defined as racially different from old stock immigrants hailing from western Europe. Celebrating Kosciuszko’s naturalization tells us that it was important for the Polish National Alliance, Polish Roman Catholic Union, and other organizations to broadcast their hereditary claims to Revolutionary lineage and American citizenship. The first naturalization law in 1790 dictated that only a “free white person” was eligible for citizenship. Kosciuszko qualified as white and fit for citizenship, contradicting the justifications behind immigration restrictions of people from Poland found in the Quota Act and Johnson-Reed. In the early twentieth century, Polish Americans were inching their way out of an in-between status, racially, and used the accomplishments of two Polish military men who volunteered (and died, in Pulaski’s case) for the American cause during Revolutionary War as their connection to the origins of the republic.

Polish American groups received help from the USPOD in proving their people to be fit and loyal American citizens, since their ancestors fought to establish the United States as an independent nation. The legal and cultural murkiness of racial classification in the early twentieth century made it more imperative for first- and second-generation immigrants to be able to stake their claim to whiteness. For Polish immigrants, earning two stamps helped.

Commemorative stamp subjects from the 1920s and early 1930s tell stories about America’s origins and the nation’s founders. All of these subjects are male and of European descent. We can see through
the petitioning process that ordinary citizens became invested in the subjects of commemorative stamps. Civic, cultural, and political groups saw power that the USPOD held in influencing public understanding of the American past through printing and circulating historical narratives on stamps. Campaigning for and against commemoratives would continue into the 1930s, by unrepresented groups, as the number of stamps printed increased during Franklin D. Roosevelt’s presidency.