

Synopsis

Tobacco Stamps of 1868-1869 and African-American Portraiture

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This article represents a continuation of our research into the earliest portrayals of black people on US stamps. In our first article on the subject, "Re-valuing a Philatelic First: The Earliest Depiction of Black History on US Stamps" (*The American Philatelist*, February 2020) we identified as many as 24 black tobacco plantation workers in the vignettes of the second issue Inspectors Stamps (cigar stamps) of 1864.

The article submitted for your consideration examines the second earliest portrayals, dating to 1868, from a series of taxpaid tobacco stamps designed by the Continental Bank Note Company, under contract with the Bureau of Internal Revenue. Of the seventeen denominations of these stamps, the ½ ounce and 1, 3, and 5 lb. stamps of this series prominently depict male and female African-Americans working in various phases of tobacco production and transportation.

Our research represents the first time philatelists have explored the cultural and societal stereotypes that influenced the portrayals of African-Americans. We established that the black imagery used in these Reconstruction-era stamps were actually antebellum portrayals, and examined how the same vignettes saw continued use as decorative embellishments in US taxpaid stamps, checks, and securities produced as late as 1872. We also addressed the cultural stereotypes represented in the vignettes of the other stamps in the series, all of which reflected societal perceptions of smokers in the mid-nineteenth century.

In preparation for this article we referenced primary sources, including a unique presentation sheet of plate proofs displayed at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum, the original 1868 newspaper advertisement calling for contract proposals, and internal memoranda from the US Treasury Department and Bureau of Internal Revenue stored at the National Archives and Records Administration (College Park, Maryland). Additionally, our search of digitized newspaper archives uncovered a critique of the African American imagery of these stamps in *The Charleston Daily News* on July 29, 1869. We believe this represents the first time an American newspaper wrote about black imagery on stamps issued by the US Government.

Most unusual is that the vignette of the 5 lb. stamp depicts a black farmhand wearing an earring. We extensively researched this aspect of the vignette, identifying the original artist commissioned to illustrate the scene for Continental, and tracing the historical use of the earring as an artistic device in the depiction of black men in Western art. Towards that end we consulted with a curator from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the supervisory librarian at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and studied reference works such as *The Images of the Black in Western Art, Volume III: From the Age of Discovery to the Age of Abolition*, and *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710–1940*.