Stamping American Memory: Collectors, Citizens, and the Post

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In her revised PhD thesis, which was written at the George Mason University, Sheila A. Brennan, combining postal history, philately, and memory studies, reconstructs the cultural history of stamp collecting in the U.S. from the end of the Civil War to 1940 and analyzes how this practice has shaped the issuance of commemorative stamps in this period.

In the first chapter, Brennan describes how the collecting of stamps emerged as a hobby in the 1870s and how this activity was increasingly ‘professionalized’ in the following decades, as pertinent clubs such as the American Philatelic Association (later renamed the American Philatelic Society) were founded, which established standards of practice for obtaining, classifying, arranging, preserving, and displaying stamps and represented philately as a ‘science’ (p. 17), and as hundreds of philatelic magazines were published, which tried to give themselves the appearance of academic journals and thus lend respectability to this pastime. Moreover, the collecting of stamps was standardized by the creation of stamp albums, which indicated ‘empty spaces’ (p. 37) and hereby encouraged the completion of the collection.

The second chapter traces how the public learned to ‘read’ stamps (p. 43), as they became aware that stamps carried culturally significant messages, which could be decoded, and that stamps were educational, teaching their users about history, geography, and politics. Such learning processes were triggered by the use of stamps in schools, the awarding of merit badges for stamp collecting by the Boy Scouts, philatelic exhibitions at museums and other institutions of learning, and journalistic reporting on stamps by newspapers, magazines, and radio programs.

The third chapter shows how the federal government began printing limited-issue stamps not solely for the benefit of the postal system, but in response to the widening philatelic activities of the population. In 1892, the first commemorative stamp was issued and their number continuously increased until the 1930s to generate additional revenue for the United States Post Office Department (USPOD), which knew that there were numerous collectors who would buy the stamps with no intention of ever using them as postage. Moreover, the first national postal museum was founded by the USPOD in 1894; its holdings, for lack of space, being transferred to the Smithsonian in 1913, which had already created a philatelic collection displayed at the Art and Industries Building on the National Mall in DC. Furthermore, in 1921, the USPOD
founded the Philatelic Agency in 1921 to handle stamp requests by, and communicate with, collectors.

The topic of the fourth chapter is the function that stamps served as part of the American memory culture in the 1920s and 1930s. Brennan calls stamps ‘miniature memorials’ (p. 99). They presented a particular narrative of America’s past, which was centered on white men of West European descent such as the signers of the Mayflower Compact, the first Huguenot-Walloons settlers, or the Revolutionary War heroes. However, she also demonstrates that those excluded from the official version of America’s history frequently challenged prevailing practices and lobbied to obtain a place in the nation’s philatelic memory. For example, the Polish-American community was successful in pressuring the Postmaster General into issuing two stamps commemorating Count Casimir Pulaski in 1931 and General Thaddeus Kosciuszko in 1933, who had both taken prominent positions in the Continental Army, in order to assert the place of ethnic Poles in American society, which was threatened at the time because of stringent immigration quotas for Eastern Europeans.

The final chapter explores how Franklin Delano Roosevelt, America’s ‘First Philatelist’ (p. 132), who not only suggested ideas for topics to be dealt with on stamps, but also sketched designs for them, used stamps to garner support for his New Deal programs such as the National Recovery Administration and the expansion of the National Park Service. Also, to promote national unity, the first stamps celebrating women’s right to vote (1936), the accomplishments of African-American civil rights leader Booker T. Washington (1940), and the emancipation of slaves (1940) were printed. However, in order not to offend conservative and segregationist Southerners, these stamps were designed in a fashion that made the achievements of the 13th and 19th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution not appear as the result of agitators threatening the established order, but of the actions of law-abiding citizens and benign white, male politicians.

Professional historians have rarely used stamps as primary sources – despite the fact that few other media could match their circulation numbers and that millions of Americans were collecting stamps in the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century. Instead, they mostly left the study of these historical artifacts to hobby-philatelists who were largely not trained in how to analyze and contextualize sources. Stamping American Memory is therefore a pioneering study in that it is the first to carefully reconstruct the emergence of the practice of stamp collecting in the U.S. (by going through philatelic literature and retrieving pertinent comments on the subject from the general press) and to examine how the federal government deliberately used stamps for its political purposes (by doing meticulous research in the Records of the Post Office Department and the National Postal Museum). Not only is her book fascinating for the insights it provides into stamp collecting and production; it is also eloquently composed, not at all overloaded with either philatelic jargon or with too much academic theorizing. It should therefore be appealing to both scholars of late 19th- and early 20th-century U.S. cultural history and to stamp collectors, seeking to expand their knowledge about the larger context, in which stamps were produced. It is also praiseworthy that the University of Michigan Press have published this monograph as an ebook that can be downloaded free of charge at http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9847183 [2]. This should ensure a wide readership.

Being among the first to academically research stamp collecting, Brennan naturally leaves some relevant topics unaddressed. For example, the heyday of stamp collecting was far from over in 1940, but continued unabated for many decades. So one is left wondering about the post-1940 philatelic history of the U.S., particularly since Brennan does not provide a reason why she stopped her investigation in this year (she mentions that after America’s entry into the Second World, the USPOD increasingly chose subjects for stamps that would support the military, but this does not really constitute a significant break in the history of stamp production or collecting). At least in terms of the stamp selection process, 1957 might have been a more plausible end date, since from that moment the topics and designs of stamps were no longer simply determined by the Postmaster General and his staff, but by the Citizens’ Stamp Advisory Committee, which was created to formalize and de-politicize the selection process.

Moreover, Brennan’s book is very American-centered in that we learn little about transnational connections
between stamp collectors and about the international impact of U.S. stamps. Instead, she focuses on
domestic groups (mainly women and African-Americans) as they tried to make their mark on the national
memory. However, the most fascinating aspect of stamps, this reviewer finds, is their transnational nature.
Unlike a currency, the use of which is mostly confined to one nation-state (the Euro is a modern-day
exception here), stamps, from their very conception, have crossed borders, being produced not only for the
domestic, but also for the international postal traffic. Collectors therefore usually included foreign stamps in
their collections. Aware of the international reception of stamps, governments sometimes deliberately
selected stamp topics and designs for sending political messages abroad. Brennan, however, only
emphasizes the domestic functions of stamps as a national medium. In a related manner, she also exclusively
refers to American literature on stamps. In particular, she does not seem to be aware of the stamp theorizing
of the founder of iconography Aby Warburg and the philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin, which
are highly influential within European research on stamps.

Neither omission, however, should be considered grounds for a reproach to Brennan, whose groundhreaking
study is carefully researched, well written, and full of significant insights. To the contrary, as Stamping
American Memory shows the fruitfulness of investigating stamp collecting as a social practice and stamp
issuing as a culturally significant production of meaning, it should encourage other scholars to take her lead,
appreciate the value of stamps as historical sources, and explore those issues not yet tackled by Brennan.

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