Delivering Hope: FDR & Stamps of the Great Depression

Cheryl R. Ganz and Daniel Piazza
with M.T. Sheahan
The first stamp issued during Franklin D. Roosevelt’s presidency celebrated the 150th anniversary of the end of the American Revolution. It shows General Washington’s headquarters at Newburgh, New York, where the Continental Army was disbanded in 1783—twenty miles from FDR’s home at Hyde Park. Postmaster General James A. Farley visited the Bureau of Engraving and Printing on the day the stamps went into production. He signed and dated the first sheets off the rotary press and hung one in his office at postal headquarters. The choice of a stamp topic that was patriotic and honored the end of crisis also brought recognition to New York state, the home of both FDR and Farley.
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Exhibition dates
June 9, 2009 to June 6, 2010

Smithsonian National Postal Museum
Washington, D.C., 2009
Since opening in 1993, the Smithsonian National Postal Museum has created dozens of exhibits which have delighted and engaged its millions of walk-in and online visitors. I am especially proud of our latest exhibit—Delivering Hope: FDR & Stamps of the Great Depression, which offers a fresh perspective on how stamps communicate with the American people.

I spent the majority of my career at the United States Postal Service. Just as President Franklin D. Roosevelt held a close relationship with Postmaster General James A. Farley, I had the privilege to serve in various positions and had the opportunity to build a relationship with each postmaster general in office during my time. President Roosevelt and PMG Farley understood how the power of visual imagery and mail touch every American’s life.

The National Postal Museum is grateful to the donors of Delivering Hope: FDR & Stamps of the Great Depression for their support. Thanks to the ongoing generosity of donors like you, the National Postal Museum is able to continue to host compelling philatelic exhibits that appeal to a wide range of visitors.

I am proud to announce that the NPM is working with its Council of Philatelists and donors to create a new Stamp Gallery, which will showcase more of the wonderful treasures from the Smithsonian National Philatelic Collection. The centerpiece will feature a permanent exhibition of great rarities and the story of American postage stamps.

We are excited that you have invested in our current exhibits and programs and hope to have your ongoing support as we expand and build the Stamp Gallery, the premier philatelic center of excellence.

I invite you to visit the museum online at www.postalmuseum.si.edu to learn more about our future plans and how you can participate.

Sincerely,

Allen R. Kané
Director
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Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945) by Henry Salem Hubbell, 1935

Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Willard Hubbell
Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Stamp Collecting President

The stock market crash on October 29, 1929, ended an era of prosperity and cast the world into the Great Depression, a decade-long economic struggle. Roosevelt began his presidency in 1933, the low point for morale and fiscal crisis. Postage stamps issued during FDR’s first two terms offer a new way to examine his efforts to restore confidence.

The rewards of stamp collecting blessed much of FDR’s life. As a child, he looked to stamps for knowledge about the world. As a polio-stricken adult, they offered solace. Throughout his entire life, including his presidency, he spent time each day with his collection. FDR worked on his collection just hours before his death.

Roosevelt appointed James A. Farley, his campaign manager and trusted advisor, to the position of postmaster general. Farley relied on FDR’s advice and approval for stamp subjects and designs. FDR influenced design, color, and occasionally submitted sketches of his preferences. Together the two purposefully transformed the appearance of United States postage stamps as part of a strategy to uplift the nation’s demoralized spirit.

Roosevelt’s sketches for six stamps issued during the Great Depression and their die proofs appear on the following pages. A die proof is made from the original engraving used to create the printing plates.

“I owe my life to my hobbies—especially stamp collecting.”
Franklin D. Roosevelt

Flash-O-Lens Illuminated Magnifier, 1938

Watermark Tray, c. 1930s
Loan from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, Hyde Park, New York

Stamp Box, c. 1940s
This rather nondescript wood and brass box was the president’s constant companion. He carried his stamps in it wherever he traveled, including his cruises on USS Houston, and worked on his collection for at least a half hour each day. The box was sent in early 1945 to Minnie Astor, who intended to commission a leather copy as FDR’s Christmas gift that year. The president died on April 12, however, and Mrs. Astor returned the box with shipping labels still attached.
Loan from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, Hyde Park, New York
FDR Sketches for Stamp Designs

3c Byrd Antarctic Expedition Sketch by FDR, 1933
3c Byrd Antarctic Expedition Small Die Proof, 1933

To help support Richard Byrd’s second expedition to Antarctica, President Roosevelt approved a stamp as partial payment for mail to the special post office in Little America. After rejecting four proposals, FDR sketched a design with mapped routes of Byrd’s expeditions.
Although originally intended to honor artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler, FDR directed that the stamp be issued to honor mothers for Mother’s Day mail. The designer altered the painting Whistler’s Mother by removing the background and the woman’s feet and adding a vase of flowers.
When FDR saw the model for the Susan B. Anthony stamp, he sketched a revision and added a dark oval frame around the portrait of the women’s rights activist. Because the stamp was issued in an election year and honored the sixteenth anniversary of women’s right to vote, critics claimed it was politically motivated.
Roosevelt’s design for the stamp commemorating the colony of Roanoke’s 350th anniversary featured an image of the first English child born in America. He requested this square stamp honoring Virginia Dare be 5c and in the color baby blue.
The red and blue bicolor stamp featuring the American eagle was based on a design FDR sketched to help distinguish airmail letters from regular mail. The first day of issue coincided with National Air Mail Week, a nationwide campaign to promote the use of airmail.
North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, and Washington each wanted a commemorative stamp for its fiftieth anniversary. FDR instead drew a single stamp that incorporated all four states on a map. Each state released the stamp at its capital city on the anniversary of its admission to the Union.
Many stamps issued during FDR’s administration promoted his personal interests. This was an unprecedented use of presidential prerogative.

Special interests recognized by stamps included important institutions in FDR’s life. Having served as secretary of the navy, he requested stamps featuring both Annapolis and the U.S. Navy. The Panama Canal stamp credited his cousin, President Theodore Roosevelt, with that engineering feat.

**5c Naval Academy, 1937**
Issued on May 26, 1937, the stamp design includes the academy’s official seal and two midshipmen in historic and modern uniforms.

**Navy Academy Chapel Essay (detail), 1937**
Rejected designs for the 5c stamp issued in 1937 to commemorate the Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland, were watercolor and ink essays depicting views of the academy and navy symbols.

**6c Bas Obispo Cut Large Die Proof (detail), Canal Zone, 1939**
The design depicts the widening and deepening of the Bas Obispo Cut near Gamboa, Panama, c. 1905.

**7c Bas Obispo Cut Large Die Proof (detail), Canal Zone, 1939**
USS Houston, a navy cruiser that carried FDR on several occasions, is shown transiting the Panama Canal. Roosevelt suggested this stamp series to highlight the difference in the landscape during and after the canal construction.
President Roosevelt selected designs for stamps that created intense visual images of the nation’s role in a modern world. In this way, he strengthened his own political position, reinforced national confidence in American greatness, and responded to his critics.

Stamps honoring anniversaries in the 1930s linked constitutional and presidential authority to national greatness. Iconic scenes of the White House, the Constitution’s ratification, and Washington’s inauguration reminded citizens of the solidity of American politics and the president’s role.

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”
Franklin D. Roosevelt

New Deal programs created jobs and put many people back to work. Critics, however, charged that FDR concentrated too much power in the federal government.

Stamps show the massive Boulder Dam (Hoover Dam) and improvements made throughout the national park system by the Civilian Conservation Corps as some of FDR’s great accomplishments. The National Recovery Administration, which protected workers’ interests, underscored FDR’s belief that government must protect the welfare of American citizens.

The White House appeared on a stamp for the first time with this value from the Presidential Series.

The stamp reinforced the goals of FDR’s Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to preserve national resources and create jobs. CCC work included landscaping and construction at Oregon’s Crater Lake National Park.
James A. Farley (1888-1976) by Howard Chandler Christy, 1938
New York state politicians Farley and FDR worked together during the 1920s. Farley, the son of an Irish brick maker, played vital roles in the Hyde Park aristocrat’s political rise, including organizing FDR’s presidential campaign. In 1933 Roosevelt appointed Farley postmaster general, the highest patronage position in the United States.

For all the visibility Farley brought to the Post Office Department, many people remember him for “Farley’s Follies.” Using his position as postmaster general, he purchased the first sheets of imperforate, ungummed stamps to use for political favors. Philatelists complained, demanding access to the sheets. Farley ordered additional special printings of those stamps, now called “Farley’s Follies.”

James A. Farley: Postmaster General

Playing baseball allowed Farley to meet every voter in his hometown area, where he was elected town clerk at age twenty-two. When as postmaster general he announced a baseball commemorative, subject ideas and demands from patrons deluged him. He compromised by choosing a boys’ sandlot game. Critics claimed inaccuracies in the details, from glove use to pitcher stance to umpire clothing. Farley attended the stamp’s first day of issue ceremony in Cooperstown, New York.

Postmaster General Farley with mail from National Air Mail Week, 1938

Baseball Centennial Commemorative Stamps sold by
Postmaster Cooperstown N.Y.

3c Baseball Presentation Sheet, 1939

3c Baseball Presentation Sheet, 1939

Postmaster General Farley with mail from National Air Mail Week, 1938
Farley’s Follies

Postmaster General James Farley frequently bought imperforate, ungummed sheets of stamps right off the printing press. Both Farley and FDR signed in the margins. Farley presented the first sheet off the press to FDR and frequently saved the second for his own family. Farley often presented other sheets as souvenirs or political favors to friends. He did this twenty times during his tenure. When exposed, the practice angered the philatelic community and political opponents. Feeling deprived of access to these unique and invaluable sheets, critics lobbied Congress and demanded justice. To quell the mounting tension, Farley ordered all twenty sheets reprinted in a special printing without gum or perforations and offered for sale to every American who desired the sheets. The reprintings began on March 15, 1935. Stamp collectors refer to the scandal and the reprinted sheets as “Farley’s Follies.”

The public has rarely seen the original full sheets that created the uproar. Fifteen of the twenty original uncut press sheets appear on the following pages, shown in full color together for the first time.

Postmaster General Farley visited the Bureau of Engraving and Printing in 1933 on the day when the 3c Peace of 1783 stamps went into production. He signed and dated the first sheets off the press before they were gummed and perforated. Later he would autograph press sheets of other stamps that would remain uncut and ungummed.

This block of four of the reprint autographed by Farley in his signature green and dated March 15, 1935, is the first day of issue of the special printing.
Farley honored mothers of America by issuing a stamp for use on Mother's Day mail. Though printing began on April 13, the public could not purchase the stamps until May 2. The first uncut press sheet went to FDR and the second to his wife, Eleanor, who attended the initial printing ceremony.
Farley started the press machinery at the ceremony to initiate production. The stamp features an image of French explorer Jean Nicolet, the first European to see Lake Michigan, encounter Winnebago Indians, and explore the region of present-day Wisconsin.
The famous El Capitan is featured at the right of the design. Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes also obtained uncut press sheets of the National Park Series.

“...The excitement over the stamp sheets was really a tempest in a teapot.”

James A. Farley
2c Grand Canyon (National Parks Issue) Original Uncut Press Sheet, 1934

The Grand Canyon vignette features a view of rock temple formations and the Bright Angel Canyon. The dated signatures prove that these are not reprinted sheets.
Farley autographed the second sheet off the press of the Mt. Rainier and Mirror Lake issues for his three children. The first sheet always went to President Roosevelt, who also provided his autograph.
Cliff Palace, a ruin of prehistoric cliff dwellings, is central to the design of the Mesa Verde stamp.
5c Yellowstone (National Parks Issue) Original Uncut Press Sheet, 1934

Farley and FDR signed five sheets of the stamp depicting geyser Old Faithful at Yellowstone National Park.
Crater Lake fills the basin created by the Mount Mazama (Oregon) volcano. The FDR sheets were part of his philatelic estate, sold at auction in 1946.
The rock promontory “Great Head” represents Acadia National Park, located at Maine’s Mount Desert Island.
The massive rock formation “Great White Throne” dominates the Zion National Park issue. Farley autographed the sheets in his famous green ink at the time he purchased them off the press. He later obtained FDR’s signature.
9c Glacier (National Parks Issue) Original Uncut Press Sheet, 1934

The Glacier National Park issue features an image of Mount Rockwell and Two Medicine Lake.
Mount Le Conte is central to the Great Smoky Mountains design. FDR’s Civilian Conservation Corps workers built roads and trail bridges in many national parks.

“Postmaster General Farley has a splendid chance of being elected Philatelic Enemy No. 1.”

American Philatelist Magazine
American Philatelic Society Souvenir Sheet on Original Uncut Press Sheet, 1934

The Post Office Department prepared a souvenir sheet of six of the Mt. Rainier stamp to sell to stamp collectors at the 1934 stamp show in Atlantic City, New Jersey.
Central to the Great Seal stamp’s design, the eagle symbolizes unity, virtue, strength, and independence on this special delivery airmail sheet.
Trans-Mississippi Philatelic Exhibition Souvenir Sheet on Original Uncut Press Sheet, 1934

The Post Office Department issued souvenir sheets of the 1c Yosemite stamp for the 1934 stamp show in Omaha, Nebraska.
Roosevelt used his knowledge of existing trends in design, color, and popular entertainment to communicate a message of progress. Postage stamps issued during the Great Depression followed a trend in the decorative arts begun in the 1920s. Designers used ultra-modern fonts and streamlined images. The aerodynamic look suggested efficiency and made a bold statement about the future.

The Post Office Department opened its first design competition in 1937 for the Presidential Series. Many artists’ entries reflected the streamlined style’s uncluttered sophistication. Winner Elaine Rawlinson was the first woman to design a U.S. postage stamp.
A color revolution swept the 1920s, mirroring the nation’s pre-Depression lightheartedness. Popular psychology recognized color’s power to affect moods, and manufacturers applied this insight to marketing strategies. Clothing, automobiles, kitchen dishes and appliances appeared in brighter hues during the late twenties.

Roosevelt understood the color revolution’s usefulness. Seeking ways to revive the nation’s optimism, he transformed the look of America’s postage stamps by selecting lighter violets, blues, and greens for Depression-era issues.

President Roosevelt suggested the rose lilac color for this stamp, evidence of his influence in proposing a spectrum of color.

The president favored the Charter Oak tree, a symbol of freedom, to represent the state of Connecticut on the 300th anniversary of its settlement.
American World’s Fairs of the 1930s

Chicago, San Diego, San Francisco, and New York hosted world’s fairs during the 1930s, highlighting progress as a prominent theme. Millions escaped their daily concerns by visiting the fairs, where forward-looking exhibits encouraged them to believe in a better future.

Stamps communicated the idea of progress through themes and colors. One of the stamps issued for Chicago’s “A Century of Progress” bore an image of the Graf Zeppelin, an undeniable representation of modern technology.

Farley sent mail to his wife via Graf Zeppelin using the special 50c stamp issued for the flight. The airship represented both technological progress and streamlined efficiency.

President Roosevelt’s opening speech at the 1939 New York World’s Fair underscored the federal government’s endurance against many threats and its citizens’ unity in their desire to move forward.

Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, Hyde Park, New York
End of an Era

The Great Depression ended when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and the United States entered World War II. From that point forward, FDR’s focus changed. Stamp designs also changed to reflect shifting national concerns.

The Roosevelt-Farley era ended in 1939 when FDR’s decision to run for a third term destroyed Farley’s presidential aspirations. Farley, however, undertook one last mission for his old friend, traveling to Poland to help Americans leave before the German invasion.

Mail Postmarked during Pearl Harbor Attack, 1941
This is one of a handful of surviving envelopes processed in the Honolulu post office during the December 7 attack on Pearl Harbor, which commenced at 7:48 a.m., local time. A marine stationed on Oahu mailed it to his friends back in Iowa.
Acknowledgements / Further Reading

Regardless of political leanings, philatelists identify with Franklin D. Roosevelt, the stamp-collecting president. For the curators of philately at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum, it was a joy to study the role of stamps in his life and the postal politics of the 1930s. By looking at his life, his hobby, and the postage stamps issued during the Great Depression, we were able to tell new stories and offer fresh insights.

The bulk of the items in this exhibition and publication are drawn from Postmaster General James A. Farley’s personal philatelic collection of nearly 33,000 stamps and envelopes, which he donated to the Smithsonian Institution in 1958. Highlights include six stamp design sketches by FDR and fifteen of the original uncut, ungummed, and imperforate press sheets autographed by FDR and Farley that led to the “Farley’s Follies” scandal and reprinting. This booklet illustrates these treasures for the first time printed in full color.

Many donors made Delivering Hope: FDR & Stamps of the Great Depression possible. Members of the NPM’s Council of Philatelists were especially generous with their time, expertise, and financial support. Tracey and Charles Shreve donated the paper and Nieman Printing donated the printing for this booklet. Exhibit sponsors at the Presidential Philatelist level include the National Postal Museum Philatelic Fund, Tito and Laura Giamporcaro/Raimondo and Anna Maria Craveri, and Ashton Potter Security Printers. Cabinet Member sponsors are Ian C. Gibson-Smith and David Womack; and Steven J. and Francine D. Rod, in loving memory of Henoch T. Rod. Additional sponsors include Michael E. Aldrich, Tom Alexander, James Bagley, Camille Bradford, Michael Beck, Roger Brody, Charles J. DiComo, Cheryl R. Ganz, John M. Hotchner, James Kloetzel, Janet Klug, Van Koppersmith, Al Kugel, Thomas Mazza, Peter P. McCann, Robert Odenweller, Daniel and Jill Piazza, Omar Rodriguez, Robert G. Rose, Wade E. Saadi, M.T. Sheahan, Linda Stevens, Herbert A. Trenchard, Charles Verge, Alan Warren, and Gerhard and Diana Wolff.


No exhibition of this caliber can be staged without a very talented exhibit team. Thank you to Linda Edquist, conservation; Marty Emery, website; Dan Falk, exhibits; Meradyth Moore, public relations; April Parreco, development; Nancy Pope, history of postal operations; Elizabeth Schorr, collections management; Roxanne Symko, project manager; and Allison Wickens, education.

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Many NPM staff worked on various aspects of the project, including Caitlin Badowski, exhibit preparation; Polone Bazile, finance; Erin Blasco, public programs; Katie Burke, research; Pat Burke, exhibits; Katie Dorin, events; Manda Kowalczyk, exhibit preparation; Bill Lommel, website design; Tom Lea, research; Jeff Meade, tours; Christine Mereand, Arago website; Patricia Raynor, loans; Kim Wayman, contracting; and Helen Young, conservation.

Finally, we thank Allen Kane, director of the Smithsonian National Postal Museum, for supporting philately that provides advanced collectors with access to great rarities while also offering all visitors the experience of understanding the significance of postage stamps and mail in their lives.

Cheryl R. Ganz and Daniel A. Piazza

Curators


U.S. entry into World War II signaled a new purpose for American postage. Roosevelt selected the model of the American eagle with wings outstretched and suggested a single stamp in purple. Issued on July 4, Independence Day, the "Win the War" stamp featured thirteen stars and an eagle whose wings formed a V for victory. Twenty billion copies were ultimately issued, transforming everyday correspondence into an agent of patriotism.
The Smithsonian National Postal Museum is excited to announce a Stamp Gallery expansion project that will transform the museum’s national profile and change the way that museum visitors engage in philately. The new Stamp Gallery at the National Postal Museum is projected to add space to the existing museum and give visitors direct access to the museum from Massachusetts Avenue. It will feature a welcome center, an education center, and philatelic galleries. The new welcome center will introduce museum spaces and integrate philately with the history of postal operations.

The Stamp Gallery will educate and inspire people of all ages through galleries that feature philately as a window to the American experience, emphasizing the ways stamps and mail have an impact on every American’s life. The centerpiece will be a permanent exhibit of outstanding philatelic proofs, stamps, and mail from the National Stamp Collection matched with interactive computers.

To learn more about giving opportunities associated with the Stamp Gallery, please contact Allen Kane, Director, at 202.633.5501 or April Parreco, Director of Development, at 202.633.5101.

The National Postal Museum is devoted to presenting the colorful and engaging history of the nation’s mail service and showcasing the largest and most comprehensive collection of stamps and philatelic material in the world.

It is located at 2 Massachusetts Avenue N.E., Washington, D.C., across from Union Station. The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (closed Dec. 25). For more information about the Smithsonian, please call (202) 633-1000 or TTY (202) 633-5285. Visit the museum Web site at www.postalmuseum.si.edu.