

Celebrating the U.S. Constitution: History on U.S. Stamps

John Trumbull documented Declaration of Independence

by Jack Dempsey

Four joined 1976 stamps simultaneously commemorate the Declaration of Independence and John Trumbull (1756-1848), a revolutionary-era artist who was the closest thing to a photographer at work during that period.

On June 11, 1776, the Continental Congress delegated the responsibility for drafting a declaration of independence to the Committee of Five, made up of Robert Livingston, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson served as principal author.

In less than a month, the committee presented the finished draft in full session to John Hancock, president of the Second Continental Congress. A cropped image in the stamps captures the moment.



Trumbull, son of a Connecticut governor and a graduate of Harvard University, aspired to become an artist in spite of being blind in one eye. After fighting in the revolution, he went to England to study painting under Benjamin West.

West convinced Trumbull to make a career of capturing the people and events of the revolution. Trumbull warmed to the idea and began painting a small portrait of the presentation of the Declaration of Independence.

In the news: Choose photos you think capture the people and events that shape history.

Jefferson was in Europe at the time and helped Trumbull develop an historically-accurate layout of the presentation. The heads were intentionally left blank until Trumbull could return to the U.S. to observe and draw the signers. He traveled up and down the east coast sketching historic sites and people in preparation for several paintings.

After the War of 1812 left the Capitol damaged, Congress decided to add works of art to the Capitol's Rotunda, including eight 12 by 18 feet paintings and selected four of Trumbull's paintings to enlarge. The scene that featured the Declaration of Independence was completed first.

In the painting, Hancock (seated, right of center) accepts the draft of the declaration from the Committee of Five. John Adams and the taller Jefferson stand closest to the "camera." Members of Congress witness the historic occasion in Independence Hall, Philadelphia.

Intentionally or not, Trumbull injected some humor into the image of the solemn occasion. Close inspection of the large canvas in the Rotunda reveals that John Adams is standing on Jefferson's foot!

For more information: www.ushistory.org/Declaration/trumbull.htm

The late Jack Dempsey, columnist for North Carolina's Outer Banks Sentinel, looked into the world of stamps and found a history lesson. Reprinted with permission. Distributed by the NC Press Foundation, 2009.

Bill of Rights ensures freedoms

by Jack Dempsey

Our current U.S. Constitution was adopted by the 13 states in 1788. The first ten amendments spelled out certain rights that limited governmental control over the people. Because this Bill of Rights was ratified after the adoption of the U.S. Constitution, some believe it was just an afterthought. Nothing is farther from the truth, which explains why the United States Postal Service issued the 1989 commemorative stamp below.

The war for independence began at Lexington and Concord in 1775 and ended with the acceptance of the Treaty of Paris by the Continental Congress in 1784.

During the period between 1775 and 1784, "radical" groups seized power in the colonies from officials loyal to England, drew up their own constitutions for free and independent states and called for a meeting of the Continental Congress.

After the war, the Articles of Confederation continued a weak Continental Congress and exposed the need for a new constitution giving the central government the authority it needed to function effectively.

Leaders did not agree on how much power to vest in a central government. Conservatives such as Alexander Hamilton wanted a strong national government, while others wanted more power left at the state level.

The conservatives prevailed but feared that not having a bill of rights might keep states from ratifying the constitution. Given their experiences with England, the states feared too much power in government, and most had included a bill of rights in their wartime constitutions. But many questioned whether state constitutions provided enough protection?

In the news: Find stories that show the Bill of Rights in action.

During the ratification process for the national constitution, state after state expressed alarm at the absence of a bill of rights. States ratified the constitution, but they also resolved to send delegates to the first new Congress who would add a bill of rights. The delegates did so in the form of ten amendments. Together, the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights constitute a complete blueprint for government.

Rights such as freedom of speech, press and religion were spelled out as were several protections from abusive law enforcement and judicial systems. These were viewed as inalienable rights, not gifts from a benevolent government. Securing rights, after all, was why our revolution was fought. The bills of rights in both state and national constitutions were clearly not afterthoughts.



For more information: www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/bill_of_rights.html

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Freedom of religion guaranteed

by Jack Dempsey

Freedom of religion in the American colonies took a beating between 1630 and 1660. Civil authorities promoted uniformity of religious belief and opposed dissenters. Two cases dramatize the tragic consequences for dissenting religious groups. Quakers bore the brunt of the persecution.

In the century before 1630 in Europe, the Protestant Reformation spawned bloody conflict between Catholics and Protestants and among rapidly-proliferating Protestant sects. Believing religious pluralism threatened stability in society, civil authorities in several countries persecuted religious minorities. As a consequence, many gravitated to the New World seeking sanctuary.

Puritans by the thousands sailed to New England in the 1630s motivated by a desire to reform and “purify” England’s state church. From the beginning, Puritans excluded dissidents.

Back in England, the new Quaker denomination grew rapidly. Because its beliefs did not conform to the beliefs of the established religions, more than a thousand Quakers landed in jail, and small groups began migrating to the colonies. Those who entered the Puritan colony and began preaching were quickly exiled. Later, many were publicly punished and four were hanged, the ultimate religious persecution.

Further south, Peter Stuyvesant arrived to govern the Dutch colony of what is now New York. He immediately started “reforming” the colony by making religious life miserable for everyone except members of his Dutch Reformed Church. He particularly disliked Presbyterians and Baptists.

Stuyvesant’s religious cleansing directly contradicted the tradition of religious tolerance in the colony and at home in the Netherlands. Stuyvesant’s crackdown was his own idea and not his church’s. Puritan New England united church and state, and actions taken there against dissenting groups represented both religious and governmental authority.

When Quakers arrived in Flushing, NY in 1657, non-Quakers allowed them to hold prayer meetings in their homes. As part of his crackdown on minorities, Stuyvesant prohibited the gatherings. Thirty non-Quakers risked their own safety by protesting the prohibition in writing.

The Flushing Remonstrance, commemorated in the 1957 stamp above, stated courteously but firmly that “our desire is not to offend one of [God’s] little ones ...whether Presbyterian, Independent, Baptist or Quaker ...”

This event marks the first time a group of colonists formally petitioned civil authorities for the right to worship.

These two cases contributed over the next century to a growing belief that civilly-enforced religious uniformity created more societal instability than it prevented. Thus, the U.S. Constitution’s first amendment prohibited the federal government from meddling in religion. It was signed by congressmen representing eight different denominations including Congregationalists (Puritans), Quaker and Dutch Reformed.

For more information: <http://tinyurl.com/FlushingRemonstrance>

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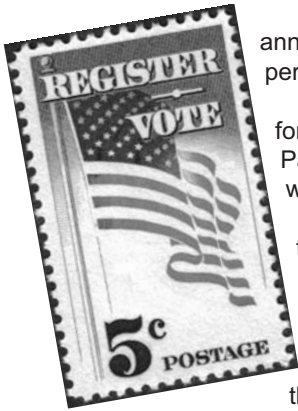


In the news: Find stories that explain different religious practices.

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15th and 19th amendments reformed voting

by Jack Dempsey



This 1964 stamp is typical of many postal issues that simply announce a topic and leave the interpretation of its meaning to each person.

Registering to vote and exercising that right represent core values for the United States. In colonial times, the inability to vote in Britain's Parliament on matters such as taxation significantly contributed to the war of independence.

More to the point, the U.S. Constitution after the war stated that this is a government of the people, by the people and for the people -- an excellent definition of democracy. Voting serves as the principal means for citizens to exercise their control of government.

But was it?

In truth, only a small percentage of people could vote at the beginning of our nation. Fifty percent of the people couldn't vote because they were women. Voter eligibility varied among the states, but typically excluded were Indians, slaves and racial minorities, illiterates, felons, the mentally ill, immigrants, non-landowners and members of certain religions, recent residents and those unable to pay a poll tax. A voting aristocracy had replaced a British aristocracy.

The history of voting in the United States highlights efforts to close the gap between the oratory in the Constitution and the reality at the polls. Since its founding, the United States experienced a long, tedious process of expanding voter eligibility.

Many states took the initiative to reform their voting laws. By 1830, most, but not all, had abolished property and religious voting tests. Beginning with Wyoming in 1869, many states over the next 40 years enfranchised women. To ensure uniformity among the states and in pursuit of near-universal suffrage, the federal government amended the Constitution several times.

In 1870, the 15th Amendment enfranchised African-American males. Of all the amendments, the 15th faced the most resistance. In 1920, the 19th Amendment enfranchised women in all states.

Other amendments have focused on smaller groups. For instance, voting rights were extended to the District of Columbia in 1961, and the voting age nationwide was lowered to 18 in 1971.

Over the last several decades, the focus shifted from expanding voter eligibility to encouraging those eligible to actually register and vote. Too many eligible voters have chosen not to vote. Low voter turnout compromises the very mechanism that allows us to call our nation a democracy.

For more information: www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=44
and www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/amendment_19/

In the news: Locate stories about actions and issues that involve voting in and outside North Carolina and the United States.

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John Jay put integrity before friendship

by Jack Dempsey

In 1789, George Washington appointed John Jay (1745-1829) to be the first chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. Shortly after, Jay faced a defining moment in his career.

Alexander Hamilton asked him to join other federal departments in opposing a pending Congressional bill. Jay refused Hamilton's request, stating the Supreme Court's sole purpose was to rule on issues of constitutionality.



Rejecting his friend's request was difficult for Jay. He and Hamilton were close friends. They had worked together during the turbulent times surrounding the War for Independence. Together with James Madison, they had written The Federalist Papers in support of a new constitution.

Jay had risen to the position of chief justice for his integrity as well as his ability. The Supreme Court was entrusted with a specific role in the new nation, and Jay believed personal loyalties had no place there.

John Jay had been born into a wealthy family of New York City merchants. The young lawyer distinguished himself in government service, represented the state at the first Continental Congress and was elected president of the second Continental Congress in 1778. Between the two congresses, he served briefly as New York's chief justice. During the war, he served as an envoy to Spain then joined Benjamin Franklin and John Adams in Paris to negotiate a treaty recognizing the independence of the colonies.

When Jay returned to the new United States, he found that, in his absence, he had been appointed the first secretary of state under the Articles of Confederation, a position that gave him more responsibility than authority. To establish stronger federal authority, he, Hamilton and Madison pursued a new constitution.

After appointing Jay his chief justice, President Washington sent him to England to negotiate a new treaty. While there, Jay was elected governor of New York without even running for the position.

Voters and political leaders alike considered Jay so able and so trustworthy that he didn't even need to be in the country to be appointed or elected to high office.

After resigning from the Supreme Court, Jay governed New York for two terms and then left public life. Perhaps the centerpiece of his gubernatorial years was a 1799 act to phase out slavery, the first of its kind in the states.

Popular history has accorded due praise to Founding Fathers such as Washington, Jefferson and Franklin, but Jay also deserves credit for the ability and integrity he demonstrated as a leader of the young nation.

**In the news:
Identify a leader
who demonstrates
ability and integrity.**

For more information: www.ushistory.org/Declaration/related/jay.htm

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John Adams left own mark

by Jack Dempsey

Can you name the second president of the United States? John Adams (1735-1826) served one term as the nation's second president. He may be less well known than some other presidents because he was sandwiched between the revered, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

John Adams, an energetic and brilliant Massachusetts lawyer, rose quickly to the top echelon of early advocates for independence from England. He popularized the notions of no taxation without representation and trial by a jury only of one's peers.

Massachusetts sent Adams to the first and second Continental Congresses. There, he and Thomas Jefferson became instant friends. His relationship to Jefferson defined much of the rest of Adams' life.

Jefferson and Adams served on the committee to draft a declaration of independence. Jefferson penned the draft with enthusiastic support from Adams. Later, both made successful diplomatic trips to Europe.

After the U.S. Constitution was ratified, Adams was elected George Washington's vice president for both terms.

Without England as the common enemy to unite the political leaders, factions developed in Washington's Federalist Party. Alexander Hamilton advocated for a strong national government that would serve the business community. Jefferson led the opposition, supporting an agrarian economy and favoring a decentralized government that empowered

local people. Adams occupied a middle position.

With Washington's retirement, Jefferson ran against Adams for the presidency. He lost but became Adams' vice president. During the Adams administration, in 1798, a deteriorating relationship with France nearly led the United States into war. Jefferson and Adams disagreed bitterly about relations with revolutionary France.

In the election of 1800, Jefferson and his new party defeated Federalist Adams in his bid for a second term. The era of confrontation between the two ended. Adams withdrew to Massachusetts.

What is not clear is the depth of the strain on the friendship between Jefferson and Adams during Adams' term of office and the two electoral contests. After Adams' defeat, until 1812, the two men went their separate ways.

In that year, a mutual friend convinced Adams to write Jefferson. The communication re-ignited their friendship, and they exchanged at least 158 letters over the next 14 years.

On his deathbed, Adams muttered something unintelligible except for two words, "Thomas Jefferson." He didn't know that Jefferson had died earlier that same day. The date was July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

For more information: www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/johnadams/

In the news: Identify situations in which current leaders work together, despite differences of opinion.

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Belva Lockwood struggled for justice

by Jack Dempsey

Using a disaster as a springboard to prominence takes a special type of person. Belva Lockwood (1830-1917) was such a person.

Born into a poor farm family in upstate New York, she married and bore a child, then in 1853 her husband died. She could have returned to her family's farm to make a marginal living, but she rejected doing so.

Temporarily entrusting her daughter to her parents, she successfully earned a degree at Genesee College (now Syracuse University) and began a career in education. Immediately after the Civil War, she moved to the nation's capital and started a small school of her own.

Hearing that a western school had accepted its first female law students, she applied and was rejected by all of Washington's law schools. But a new law school in the District of Columbia (now George Washington University) did accept her. She completed the coursework despite harassment by male students and faculty but was denied a diploma.

Lockwood appealed directly to a board member (President Grant), received her diploma and started a law practice in D.C.

Her requests to take cases to federal courts were denied explicitly because she was a woman. Undeterred, she successfully lobbied Congress to pass a bill making gender discrimination in federal courts illegal. Shortly after the bill became law, she became the first woman to argue a case before the U.S. Supreme Court.

A small women's suffrage party half-seriously nominated her to run for the presidency in 1880. Despite knowing in advance that victory was impossible and ridicule certain, she accepted and campaigned vigorously to spread her ideas on equality and justice for all. She was the first woman to campaign seriously for the presidency.

Meanwhile, a case was bubbling to the surface in North Carolina. In the 1830s, the federal government seized land owned there and in contiguous states by the Cherokee nation. Most members of the nation were forcibly relocated to Oklahoma and never compensated for the loss of their land.

Led by Jim Taylor, the Eastern Cherokees filed suit against the federal government. The case wound slowly up to the U.S. Supreme Court which affirmed an unprecedented award of \$5 million in compensation.

The Cherokees' lawyer was Belva Lockwood. She was able to represent them effectively because of heroic persistence on her own and on their behalf.

Belva Lockwood's success offers an uplifting end to a story that began disastrously.

For more information: <http://tinyurl.com/belvalockwood>

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Lyndon Johnson championed civil rights

by Jack Dempsey

President Lyndon Baines Johnson (1908-1974) may be remembered for experiencing more extreme highs and lows than any president.

John F. Kennedy selected the Texas Democrat and Senate majority leader to run for vice president with him in 1960. The assassination of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963 elevated Johnson to the presidency.

The stage was set for sweeping changes. Johnson had the support of a Democratic Congress, the economy was strong, and the nation's mood was optimistic.

During 1964 and 1965, Johnson signed into law Medicare, Medicaid, The War on Poverty (Economic Opportunity Act) and civil rights legislation.

He took special pride in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act authorizing unprecedented federal support for local education.

Not since President Roosevelt in the 1930s had the country seen such a massive outpouring of social legislation.

In the 1964 presidential election, Johnson easily won his first full term, defeating Republican Barry Goldwater.

Subsequently, Johnson miscalculated by greatly increasing U.S. ground troops in Vietnam. Doves rejected the war on principle, and hawks demanded an all-out war. High casualties alarmed the general public.

Indebtedness from the war and the new social programs limited further legislative initiatives. Simultaneously, long-suppressed racial tensions in black urban ghettos surfaced. Riots broke out in Harlem in 1964 and Watts (Los Angeles) in 1965. The assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968 triggered riots in more than 100 cities.

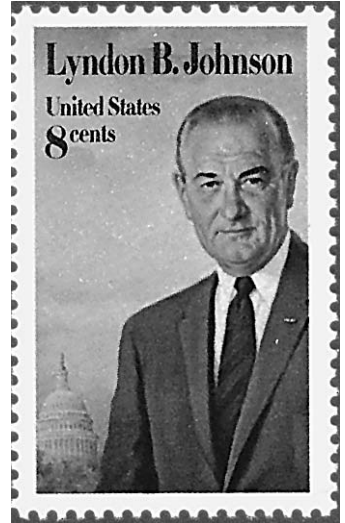
The backlash from the poverty programs and the rioting, the growing discontent with the war and the seemingly out-of-control federal spending nearly destroyed Johnson's popularity. Johnson was eligible to run for a second full term in 1968. But the widespread turmoil in society had begun to destroy Democratic unity.

In the news: Identify someone fighting for civil rights in this country or elsewhere in the world.

Hubert Humphrey had the support of mainline party bosses and unions. George Wallace appealed to reactionary white southerners. Robert Kennedy drew support from Catholics and blacks. George McGovern and Eugene McCarthy competed for the anti-war vote. LBJ had lost control of his own fractured party.

Sensing that re-election was impossible and concerned about his cardiac problems, LBJ announced he would not run for a second term.

Four years later, at age 64, Johnson suffered a fatal heart attack. He savored his early legislative successes during his brief retirement and considered the voting rights act as his greatest contribution to society.



For more information: www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/Johnson/lbjforkids/main.htm

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Pay tribute to someone or something in the news

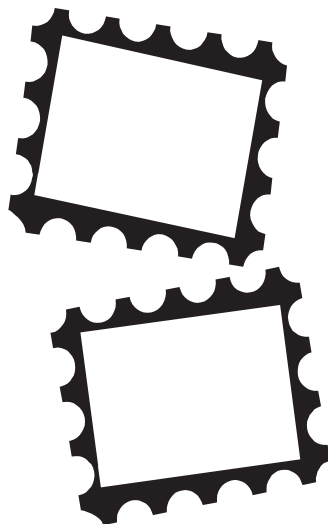
On its Web site, the Postmaster for the United States Postal Service says it issues commemorative stamps on “a wide range of diverse American icons with something that will appeal to everyone.” What appeals to you?

Search your print newspapers, Web sites and e-Editions for someone or something noteworthy on the local, state and/or national level to honor with a commemorative stamp.

Choose a photo and/or image of some current person, place, event or object that deserves recognition, or draw your own image based on a story, photo or illustration. Collect and save the news related to your choice.

After conducting research, explain the historic significance of your choice.

1. What people, places, events and objects did you consider?
2. Who or what did you choose?
3. What’s the relevant news?
4. Why did you choose this “icon” and not another?
5. What’s the historic significance of your selection?



In the news: Search your newspaper’s Web and/or e-Editions for stories about commemorative stamps, the United States Postal Service, email and other systems used today for communication. What did you know before your research? What did you learn? How are you affected?

State your case:

Pretend your class must choose one image from the many that students produce. In speaking and or writing, persuade your classmates that they should support your selection.

Pretend to write the post office. Write a letter that argues for your selection to become a commemorative stamp.

Quotation source: www.usps.com/communications/news/stamps/2005/sr05_054.htm

The late Jack Dempsey, columnist for North Carolina’s Outer Banks Sentinel, looked into the world of stamps and found a history lesson. In this activity, students search the local, state and national news for someone or something that left a mark or “stamp.”

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