

to create an industrial juggernaut in the American heartland. Indeed, the continued importance of merchant shipping and maritime improvements to global trade was only recently demonstrated by the panic that followed the recent grounding of the *Ever Given* container ship in the Suez Canal.

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*Stamping American Memory: Collectors, Citizens, and the Post* by Sheila A. Brennan.

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018. x + 223 pp.; illustrations, appendix, notes, references, index; clothbound, \$50.00; paperback, \$24.95; online, open access at <https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/dj52w5765>.

The creation of the prepaid postage stamp in the 1840s revolutionized communications worldwide. Previously, the addressee paid the cost of delivery, which resulted in some potential recipients refusing to accept their letters. The new system required senders to prepay the postage—generally based on size and weight, rather than distance traveled—by purchasing and affixing stamps to the mailed object. Sheila A. Brennan explores several fascinating aspects for public historians of this “stamping,” primarily between 1880 and 1940: what inspired some Americans to not only mail, but also collect, these small pieces of colored paper; what motivated federal government officials to produce commemorative postage stamps to remember selected individuals and moments in US history; and what symbolic and cultural meanings reside in the stamps themselves.

Brennan’s analysis of our instinct to collect stamps is one of the book’s highlights—and a topic that previous cultural historians have not explored in much depth. In 1900, psychologist Caroline Burk determined that “90 percent of the children [she] surveyed collected something and most kept between three and four collections at a given time” (50). Taking advantage of this childhood instinct, educators “encouraged their students to collect stamps, . . . because, as teachers remarked, their students learned facts about foreign countries as easily as they learned the rules of marbles” (51).

Stamp collecting was also the *raison d’être* for many of the philatelic communities that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These included membership clubs—albeit ones “comprised predominantly of white male members of financial means” (13)—as well as plentiful articles in newspapers and magazines that promoted the hobby and even radio programs that highlighted “the drama of the postage stamp” (17). Brennan investigates the membership rolls of these clubs to document the relative absence of women, even as the American Philatelic Association’s symbol was an allegorical female, the goddess Philatelia. Similarly, “these clubs were not welcoming for people of color,” even when a leading African American such as Cyrus Fields Adams was a devoted collector of stamps (24).

Complementing the efforts of private organizations and publications to promote collecting was the prominent role played by the federal government. Of course, all legal postage stamps came only from the US Post Office Department (USPOD), which “was more closely tied to the daily lives of the American public” than any other federal agency (68). However, the USPOD did not recognize the splendid opportunities presented by stamp collectors and collecting until the late nineteenth century when it expanded the subject of its stamps beyond the dull portraits of “prominent white American politicians or military officers” (72).

*Stamping American Memory* is particularly strong in telling the story of how Postmaster General John Wanamaker—who had made his fortune by creating the first modern department store—“brought his business acumen and understanding of customer relations” to the USPOD (73). Realizing that the stamps collected by philatelists would never be used for postage—and thus would be pure profit for the USPOD—Wanamaker made sure that collectors had many more design options than the usual likenesses of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. As a result, the USPOD printed the world’s first commemorative stamps in 1893 to promote the World’s Columbian Exposition, which was taking place in Chicago at that time to mark the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s arrival in the Americas. Most of the sixteen stamps in the Columbian series focused on Columbus’s life in Spain and thus had little relationship to the Americas. Moreover, some had face values of two to five dollars and thus were “never meant to pay for actual postage, as the highest domestic rate in 1893 equaled ninety cents” (79). Nevertheless, these commemorative stamps became extremely popular among collectors and marked a “turning point” for the USPOD, “which now actively encouraged stamp collecting as a hobby” (80).

The final two chapters of *Stamping American Memory* examine how Wanamaker’s creation of the Columbian commemorative stamps became the USPOD’s bread and butter throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The number of different commemorative stamps tripled from the years prior to 1920 to the period from 1920 to 1940. Recognizing that such “stamps offered a government-approved version of American history that both collectors and noncollectors noticed” (98), a wide variety of interest groups and advocacy organizations successfully petitioned the USPOD to commemorate their own achievements—no matter how obscure, such as the Huguenot-Walloon Tercentenary in 1924 and the Norse-American Centennial in 1925. Given the ancestries of such groups, these commemorative stamps “showed a decisively white, male, and Protestant vision of early America that obscured more diverse and complicated realities of slavery, violence, and oppression” (100).

More diverse representations emerged during the 1930s, thanks in large part to the sensibilities of President Franklin D. Roosevelt—a stamp collector himself from childhood. Suffragist Susan B. Anthony appeared on a 1936 stamp, and in 1940 came Booker T. Washington, the first African American to be so honored. Having appointed his former campaign manager, James Farley, as Postmaster General,

Roosevelt used the USPOD to promote many of his initiatives—from the National Recovery Act (which got its own stamp in 1933) to the beauty of national parks (a series of twenty stamps in 1934 and 1935).

Admittedly, today’s digital landscape means that far fewer people use postage stamps for mailing, or even receive mail that bears anything other than machine-printed postage. Nevertheless, Brennan’s book provides a fascinating look back at a time when mail mattered. One minor complaint is that the illustrations in *Stamping American Memory*’s print version appear as unappealing black-and-white images, which hardly do justice to the intricate art of the stamps themselves, especially when Brennan whets our appetite by praising “the design and intensity of the ink colors” (111). However, the good news is that the University of Michigan Press has also issued an online, open-access version of the book, which beautifully reproduces those designs and colors.

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*Contested Commemoration in U.S. History: Diverging Public Interpretations* edited by Klara Stephanie Szlezák and Melissa M. Bender. New York: Routledge, 2019. xii+227 pp.; illustrations, notes, bibliography, index; clothbound, \$160.00, paperback, \$44.95, eBook, \$40.45.

*Contested Commemoration in U.S. History: Diverging Public Interpretations* offers eleven case studies that demonstrate why commemoration remains a central tool for (re)defining American identity and challenging the established national historical narratives which underpin it. Set against the backdrop of the Donald J. Trump presidency and associated surges in nationalist and populist sentiments of the last decade, this multidisciplinary volume is framed through four primary questions: “Who has the right to interpret and memorialize particular historical events? Whose voices, experiences, and images are included and excluded from historical representations? What is at stake for various constituencies in acts of commemoration? How has the current atmosphere of populist, nationalist, and racist rhetoric intensified public responses to commemoration media?” (9).

The historiographical framing of this volume draws our attention to a plateau in histories of commemoration and the broader study of memory. The field has certainly expanded from its initial “boom” in the 1990s. In the last fifteen years alone we have seen the publication of critical interventions by Erika Doss, Kirk Savage, Michael Rothberg, Tamir Sorek, Tiya Miles, Alison Landsberg, and others. These scholars expanded our understanding of how memory functions and its limitations as well as its relationships to white supremacy, racial hierarchy, and oppression broadly. They show how memory can be mobilized for civic progress; its ties to citizenship, consumerism, and tourism; and the centrality of affect and nationalism. More common to the literature, however, are the flurry of case studies demonstrating that memory and the system of representations that help to