

Yesterday in STAMPS:

That Pristine Presidential Design

by Barbara R. Mueller (From *STAMPS Magazine*, April 9, 1988, with images added)

Public participation in stamp design competitions is a fairly common procedure these days but it is usually limited to special issues which will not circulate long periods of time. The “Prexies” (Scott #803-834, issued 1938-43) are unique in the sense that they comprise the only U.S. regular or definitive issue designed by the public, that is, through an open competition.

Accustomed as we are today to frequent informative press releases that disseminate every possible bit of information about new stamps, it is difficult for us to understand the taciturnity of postal officials half a century and more ago. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his Postmaster General, James Farley, began the process of opening up channels of communication so that by 1937, when the competition was announced, the philatelic press was supplied fairly complete information.

For instance, from it we learned that 1,122 entries were submitted at the call of Edward Bruce, Chief of the Division of Painting & Sculpture of the Procurement Division of the Treasury Department. This competition was a direct result of a suggestion made by President Roosevelt to Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau early in 1937, with the announcement of the winners coming in the autumn.

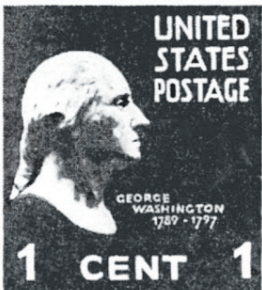
According to a report in the November 1937 issue of *The Bureau Specialist*, the jury spent one day going over the entries, eliminating all but about 150 for further consideration. On the second day those were reduced first to about 30 and then to 12 runners-up. A written vote of the jury for five of that group in order of preference decided the awards. A \$500 first prize went to Elaine Rawlinson of New York, with the second of \$300 to Charles H. Bauer, and a third of \$200 to E.H. Austin.



Elaine Rawlinson. This photo is from an article by her son, who described his own battle with arthritis and how he saw his mother debilitated by arthritis and unable to continue her artwork.

This competition was sponsored by Treasury, not the Post Office Department, perhaps because the Bureau of Engraving and Printing is under Treasury’s supervision. The POD had not, at that time, committed itself to utilize these designs, undoubtedly recognizing that developing models to make them suitable for the methods of production available might necessitate many changes.

The Rawlinson essay and the stamp, Scott 804, as issued



Rawlinson also designed the 1/2¢ and 1-1/2¢ Prexies, Sc. 803 and 805

Philatelic reaction to the announcement of a new, long series of regulars was mixed, colored perhaps by a Great Depression era mentality of parsimony. But the strangest of all reactions came from one of the top students of contemporary philately, Hugh M. Southgate.

Southgate was the president of the Bureau Issues Association during this period. In addition, as an executive of a large industrial concern that was under contract to maintain BEP production equipment, he had ‘open sesame’ carte blanche to all the printing activities. Although he never abused his privileges, he generously shared his nonclassified knowledge with fellow collectors through the medium of *The Bureau Specialist* (now *The U.S. Specialist* journal of the United States Stamp Society).

Analyzing the remarks that he managed to insert into even straightforward technical reports, it appears that he favored a minimum number of denominations in the design mode of good old bank note scroll-heavy, lettering-ponderous portraits. Instead he got Elaine Rawlinson’s elegant, spare, timeless design that stood up well to the rigors of long production runs despite his prediction that “this first prize design is not especially well suited for reproduction by intaglio plates. The heavily cut background, necessary to bring out the beauty of this design, is probably impracticable in recess work and a washed out appearance of the stamp may probably develop, especially when the plates become worn.”

Time proved him wrong on this score as well as several others which involved denominations, colors, and portraiture. Southgate disapproved of the addition of Martha Washington and the White House, stating in his April report, “Mother had better keep the baby’s bank out of the way as there is no question but that with the coming of this issue there is going to be a serious financial strain placed upon the collector’s household, and doubtless many a youngster will go without shoes and with a patch in his pants.”

He even went so far as to state flatly that he could not see any excuse for a presidential series as a regular issue. “There is a valid excuse from an educational point of view for such a set of stamps, but it would logically be commemorative and in low denominations.”

In the June *Specialist*, Southgate took aim at the other aspects. He contended that it would be difficult to maintain the color of the 1¢ Washington and that the 1-1/2¢ was chocolate brown but certainly not Baker’s chocolate; The 2¢ was “whiskey” red, but he did approve of John Adams as a “fine looking ‘old boy’.” John Quincy on the 6¢ was less fortunate—“John is wearing sideburns or are they Burnsidés? Somehow he seems more undressed than necessary.”

Furthermore, he felt that the uniformity of design would hamper

quick identification of the denominations, asserting, "There are not enough suitable colors to cover the series of nearly a third of a hundred stamps and the same color will have to be duplicated or possibly triplicated. If a cancellation obliterates the figures of value the postal clerk will have to 'know his onions,' or to be more polite, recognize the likenesses of a long list of executives and when they were doing duty."

Before the year was completed, another BIA member took over the task of recording the vital statistics of each new stamp and Southgate as critic was heard from no more except for a brief note in the March 1939 issue asking whether anyone had noticed the resemblance of the portrait "of that staunch Democrat, Grover Cleveland, to that of that solid Republican, William Howard Taft."

The Essays

Back in his initial report on the about-to-be-issued Prexies, Southgate noted, "According to the competition conditions, all sketches, with exception of those winning awards, remain the property of the contestants, so that this group of essays will be scattered to the four winds. If future competitions are held, it would certainly seem desirable for all competing designs to become the property of the Bureau."

It does seem odd that if these thousand-plus drawings were returned, more of them have not turned up on the market as "rare essays." They certainly would have more right to the term than many other such "maquettes" from foreign countries that float in and out of the market. But what would prevent an artist from duplicating his own design and selling more than one version?

At any rate, just four of the entries are listed in Clarence Brazer's "Essays for U.S. Adhesive Postage Stamps," and those were done by Brazer's friend and associate in The Essay-Proof Society, Thomas F. Morris, Jr. One of them is shown on this week's STAMPS cover.



I was unable to find a better version of the example on that old STAMPS cover, so I show it here, left, along with another of the Morris essays that Southgate apparently preferred.

All four are described as "representative of the others" in the competition but they are definitively derivative of past U.S. designs in style. Of the other submissions Southgate said that they showed a European influence and "several reminded one of the beautiful Edward VIII stamps of Great Britain, which in my opinion is one of the finest designs ever produced for postal use."



Great Britain Sc. 203

That certainly would be true of the Rawlinson design, too, which Southgate condemned with faint praise. But he went on to say of the essays, "The influence of the Bureau... designers was likewise clear in numerous instances, but the general tendency of such designs departed from the simplicity desirable in a postal label."

Two of the Morris designs were indeed very similar in feeling to the 1932-33 William Penn and Oglethorpe issues, with a basically col-

orless background to the heads. Another was nearly identical to that shown [on the 1988 front cover], with only minor changes in the labels. All are described as being 6 x 7 inches, "water color design on white artist's cardboard 6-5/8 x 7-3/4 inches, green (unique)."

Morris was not a professional stamp designer but more of an amateur artist who derived his not inconsiderable talents from his more famous father, T. F. Morris, Sr. In the latter part of the 19th century he was chief of the engraving division (a misnomer, since he was more designer than engraver). There he was responsible for the first series of U.S. postage stamps printed by the Bureau, the 1894 series "with triangles in corners."

The younger Morris was a highly successful businessman who was also one of the founding members of The Essay-Proof Society along with Brazer. So it is no mystery why his designs, derivative, retrogressive, and the exact opposite of the chosen concept, now represent the Prexies in the accepted authority on U.S. essays.

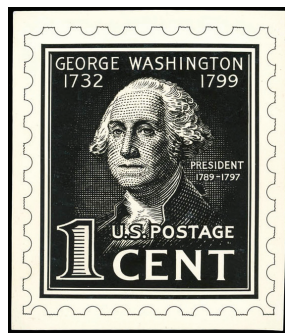
Speculation on what might have been is always intriguing but usually useless. Would there have been more collectible plate varieties in the fussy, conventional designs? Would there have been such remarkable unity of appearance? Was the successor Liberty series of 1954 a nostalgic reaction to pre-Prexy days, a reaction to cold, classic design?

It really doesn't make much difference now. The passage of fifty years has given the Prexies their own kind of nostalgia, the kind that is beginning to lend respectability in the eyes of those high priests of the hobby, the accredited exhibition judges. So at least we can look forward to increasing displays of a nearly forgotten, almost unknown woman's pristine concept of stamp design.

After I completed my image search, I did not need it, but I came across a wonderful resource for the Prexy designs, a lot from a Siegel Auction, <https://siegelauctions.com/2014/1090/pdf/1046.pdf> that contains drawings, photos and source material used for design through the \$5. JFD.

**

Barbara R. Mueller continues today as an active philatelist (In fact, she recently renewed her subscription to Mekeel's & STAMPS.). Much more significant, per the APS website, the annual award "for the best article published in a single year of The American Philatelist is the U.S.S.S. Barbara Mueller Award, named for the United States Stamp Society and for one of its most prominent members, authors, and editors, Barbara R. Mueller. Among her many other honors in six decades of devotion to philately, Mueller is a member of the Hall of Fame of both the USSS and APS Writers Unit 30. She was the recipient of the APS John N. Luff Award for Distinguished Philatelic Research in 1956."



Another essay, this one a photographic reproduction of a pen & ink drawing submitted by Walter E. Corbin for the stamp competition of 1937 using the Washington portrait "from the current 3¢ stamp", as per the notes on the reverse.

U.S. SALE LISTS
 • U.S. Used • Mint • Airmail • Special Deliveries • Farleys
 Washington-Franklin Heads • Plate Blocks, Strips • Sheets
 Including BELOW FACE Plates and Mint Sheets
ALL CONDITIONS, ALL PRICED TO SELL
 Please specify which list(s)
STAMP NEWS SALES, 42 Sentry Way, Merrimack, NH 03054
 Ph. 603-424-7556 • Fax 800-977-7550 • jd@stampnewsnow.com
<http://www.stampnewsnow.com/StampSales.html>