



The United States Dante Commemorative Postage Stamp of 1965

By Christopher D. Cook

The United States Dante commemorative stamp of 1965 (Scott 1268) has an interesting history, worth exploring in depth. In 1965, ten countries (Argentina, East Germany, Italy, Malta, Mexico, Romania, Russia, San Marino, United States, and Vatican City) celebrated the 700th anniversary of the Italian poet Dante Alighieri's birth while five more (Ecuador, Monaco, Panama, Paraguay, and Uruguay) followed in 1966. Given Dante's prominent place in the pantheon of great Western poets, this number of stamp issues is not surprising. The United States would have been absent from this list of countries if it were not for the efforts of the Dante Society of America.



United States Dante Commemorative Stamp of 1965.

The Dante Society of America Lobbies Congress

By its own account, the Dante Society of America (DSA) was "[f]ounded in 1881 by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, and Charles Eliot Norton (the Society's first three presidents) and others" and is "the second oldest officially constituted organization in the world (after the Deutsche Dante-Gesellschaft, founded in 1865) dedicated to the furtherance of the study of the works of Dante Alighieri."¹ For the 1965 Dante anniversary, the DSA lobbied members of the United States Congress to provide for the issuance of an official commemorative postage stamp celebrating Dante's literary and political achievements. Congressman Robert N. Giaimo of Connecticut offered a bill to that effect on July 23, 1964, and Senator Paul H. Douglas of Illinois introduced a joint resolution on July 27.^{2, 3} The Postmaster General's decision to issue a Dante stamp followed in December of that year.⁴

Design and Production

The 5-cent Dante commemorative stamp was designed by American artist, illustrator, and author Douglas W. Gorsline (1913–1985). By 1965, Gorsline had illustrated a number of children's books, Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler* (New York: Limited Editions Club, 1948), and written and illustrated *What People Wore: A Visual History of Dress from Ancient Times to*

Twentieth-century America (New York: Viking, 1952) among many other works. Gorsline's philatelic work before the Dante stamp included the 1958 4-cent Fort Duquesne commemorative stamp (Scott 1123), designed with William H. Buckley, and the 1964 5-cent Shakespeare commemorative stamp (Scott 1250).



United States Fort Duquesne Commemorative Stamp of 1958.

Gorsline modeled his Dante stamp on an anonymous Florentine painting from the late sixteenth century now held by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., known simply as “Allegorical Portrait of Dante”.^{5, 6} According to the *Postal Bulletin*, the “design simulates the style of early Florentine allegorical paintings. Dante is shown wearing a laurel wreath, symbolic of poetry, against a background related to the poem ‘The Divine

Comedy.’” In the lower left corner of the painting are flames representing hell; Dante’s native city of Florence, with its iconic Duomo, is shown just above the flames. Mount Purgatory is depicted in the background on the right. Gorsline repeated the flames, the city, the book, and the laurel wreath in his stamp design.



United States Shakespeare Commemorative Stamp of 1964.



“Allegorical Portrait of Dante,” 16th century, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Gorsline's design was engraved by A. W. Dintaman and lettered by William R. Bunnell.⁸ Printing was done by the U.S. Bureau of Engraving and Printing in Washington, D.C., on Cottrell rotogravure presses using electric eye plates of 200 subjects. The stamps were printed in maroon ink on tan paper, line perforated ($10\frac{1}{2} \times 11$), and issued in panes of 50 (10×5). Marginal markings on the panes include plate block numbers (28108, 28109, 28110, or 281119), registration lines, and the "USE ZIP CODE" Mr. ZIP graphic. The initial authorized printing was 112,000,000 but 115,340,000 eventually were issued.¹⁰



United States Dante Commemorative Stamp of 1965, Pane of 50.

First Day of Issue

The Dante commemorative stamp was issued on Saturday, July 17, 1965, in San Francisco, California. The stamp went on sale in post offices on Monday, July 19, 1965, and was available through philatelic sales units until the close of business on Friday, December 2, 1966.¹¹

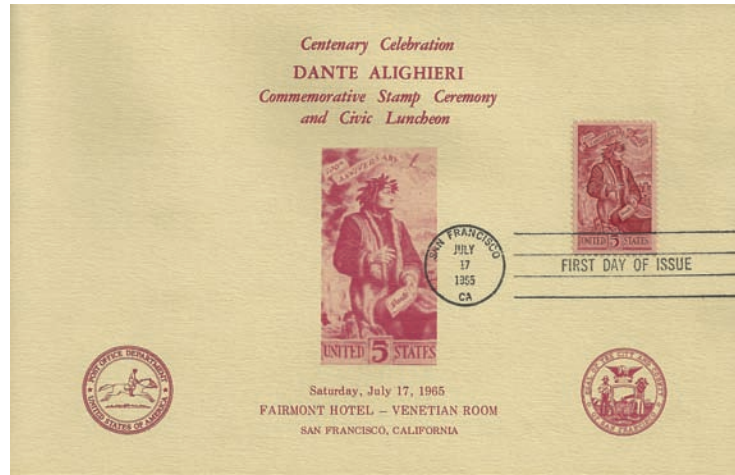
The first day of issue was marked by a ceremony and “civic luncheon” held in the Venetian Room of San Francisco’s Fairmont Hotel. The ceremony program lists distinguished guests and presenters including, for example: John A. Ertola, Supervisor of the City and County of San Francisco; Edward D. Re, Chairman of the Dante Alighieri Commemorative Stamp National Committee and later prominent federal judge; and Ralph Nicholson, Assistant Postmaster General.

The first day of issue ceremony was thoroughly described on the floor of the United States House of Representatives on July 22, 1965, by New York congressman John J. Rooney. The full text of Rooney’s speech may be found in the *Congressional Register*¹² and De Vito’s article in *Dante Studies* but a selection is reprinted here:

... Sponsored by the Dante Alighieri Commemorative Stamp National Committee, [the ceremony] was a moving and deserving tribute attended by many notable persons from all walks of life. Several of our distinguished colleagues served on the honorary committee, of which the senior Senator from Rhode Island, [John O. Pastore], was chairman. Dr. Edward D. Re, Chairman of the Foreign Claims Settlement Commission, who served at the request of Postmaster General Gronouski as national chairman of the committee, read the message of President Johnson in honor of the occasion....

The significance of the stamp was explained in an address by Assistant Postmaster General Ralph Nicholson representing the Postmaster General. Mr. Nicholson also made several presentations of Dante commemorative stamp albums.

Rooney also included in his speech the full text of Re’s statement given at the first day ceremony. A selection of Re’s remarks serves to illustrate the spirit of the Dante commemorative stamp:



United States Dante Commemorative Stamp Ceremony Program, 1965.

On this centenary celebration, therefore, we pay tribute to a man who also belongs to all ages. That he still lives in the hearts and minds of men everywhere is eloquently expressed by your presence at these ceremonies.

It is particularly appropriate that all Americans, and not merely Americans of Italian heritage, should honor Dante by this commemoration. For the genius of Dante honors not only the land that gave him birth but honors all humanity as well.

It is also fitting that this tribute should be in the form of a commemorative stamp which may be shared by all peoples and all nations everywhere. What better memorial, therefore, could serve to remind all humanity of the contributions of this great poet to the world's literary masterpieces?

Besides the stamp itself, perhaps the greatest achievement of the efforts of all those involved in securing official government recognition of the Dante anniversary was the message from President Lyndon B. Johnson read to the assembly at the first day of issue ceremony by Edward D. Re:

[Released July 17, 1965; dated July 15, 1965.]

Dear Chairman Re:

It gives me pleasure to join the millions of our citizens paying tribute to the immortal memory of Dante Alighieri on the 700th anniversary of his birth. A commemorative stamp in honor of this great Son of Italy is a fitting tribute to the universal contributions of an illustrious man who belongs to every age and to people of all ages.

Through his genius and creative achievement, Dante became forever a citizen of the world. Poet, philosopher, musician, political scientist and psychologist, Dante's renowned accomplishments are a lasting testament to his fully and richly rewarding life.

Dante's immortal *Divine Comedy*, with its sublime message of faith and hope, is his best known and most widely respected work. But for those who are charged with administering their nation's affairs, his provocative political ideas, expressed in his other literary masterpieces, have enduring meaning and significance.

I am both proud and happy to express at this time my congratulations to our entire Italian American community for sustaining in their new home the revered ideals and traditions of the old. You have my personal good wishes on this memorable occasion.

Sincerely,
Lyndon B. Johnson¹³

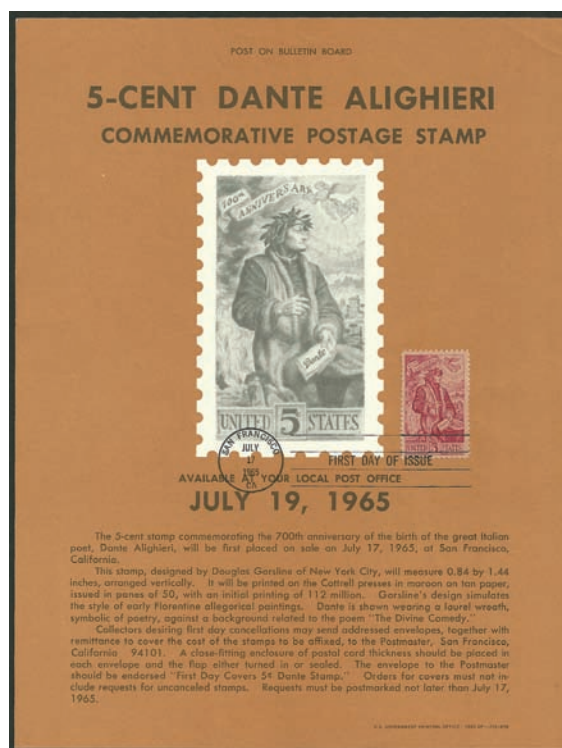
Finally, there is a curious statement in De Vito's article about a later ceremony: "On the 27th August, Postmaster General John S. [i.e., A.] Gronouski held a ceremony in Washington, D.C., during which he made presentations of Dante albums to members of the Dante commemorative stamp committee. On that occasion the Postmaster General and President Lyndon Johnson paid tribute to the genius of Dante and to the contributions of Italians to America."¹⁴ De Vito then cites the *Congressional Record* for July 22, 1965, to support this claim. The tribute by the Postmaster General is a letter¹⁵ dated July 14 that was read by Edmund D. Re at the first day of issue ceremony in San Francisco along with President Johnson's letter dated July 15. Clearly, these tributes took place before August.

First Day Covers and Other Memorabilia

The Dante Society of America reportedly sent a first day cover to all members,¹⁶ however, as of this writing, the author has not been able to identify an FDC displaying direct evidence of its association with the society. Mellone lists 28 first day covers (and one maximum card) for the Dante issue but numerous others exist.¹⁷ Of course, the number of hand-painted and add-on FDCs is unknowable. According to Post Office Department statistics, 424,893 covers were serviced on the first day of issue (and 652,458 stamps were sold).¹⁸

As noted above, the Assistant Postmaster General "made several presentations of Dante commemorative stamp albums" at the first day of issue ceremony, as did the Postmaster General at the later ceremony in Washington, D.C., on August 27, 1965. Again, the author has not seen an example of these albums.

Like for other issues of the period, the United States Post Office Department circulated stamp posters to local post offices for display which announced the upcoming Dante issue. True to form, the Dante stamp poster—printed by the U.S. Government Printing Office (1965 OF—772–879)—features an enlarged, black and white reproduction of the stamp, background information on the topic and design, and instructions to collectors on how to order first day cancellations. The poster often can be found stamped and first day cancelled.



United States Post Office Department Stamp Poster for Dante Commemorative, 1965.

Future Dante Stamps?

The year 2015 marks the 750th anniversary of Dante's birth and there will undoubtedly be foreign commemorative stamp issues that year celebrating the poet. As of this writing, the United States Postal Service has not released information on upcoming 2015 issues but the anniversary would be an ideal opportunity to celebrate one of the world's great poets and literary figures and pay tribute to the Italian culture that is so much a part of American history.

References

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2. 110 Cong. Res. 16882–16883 (1964).
3. 110 Cong. Res. 16996 (1964).
4. De Vito, Anthony J., "The First Hundred Years of the Dante Society," *Dante Studies* 100 (1982): 110.
5. "'Hell' to Be on New U.S. Stamp." *COROS Chronicle* 101 (April 1965): 26.
6. National Gallery of Art, "Allegorical Portrait of Dante," accessed October 27, 2013, <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/art-object-page.46156.html>.
7. "5-Cent Dante Alighieri Commemorative Postage Stamp," *Postal Bulletin* 86, no. 20478 (June 17, 1965): 1.
8. United States Post Office Department, *Postage Stamps of the United States: An Illustrated Description of All United States Postage and Special Service Stamps Issued By the Post Office Department from July 1, 1847 to December 31, 1967* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1968), p. 265.
9. United States Post Office Department, *Postage Stamps of the United States* (1968), p. 250.
10. United States Post Office Department, *Postage Stamps of the United States* (1968), p. 231.
11. "Postage Stamps Removed from Sale," *Postal Bulletin* 87, no. 20566 (December 8, 1966): 1.
12. 111 Cong. Rec. 17998–17999 (1965).
13. "Letter Concerning the Issuance of a Commemorative Stamp Marking the 700th Anniversary of the Birth of Dante Alighieri," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1966), 1965:367.
14. De Vito, "First Hundred Years," 110.
15. 111 Cong. Rec. 17999 (1965).
16. De Vito, "First Hundred Years," 110.
17. Michael Mellone, Monte Eiserman, and Edwin Zorn, *Mellone's Specialized Cachet Catalog of First Day Covers of the 1960s* (Stewartsville, N.J.: FDC Publishing Co., 1985), p. 226–227.
18. United States Post Office Department, *Postage Stamps of the United States* (1968), p. 265.