

The Earliest Black Portrayals on US Stamps 1864 –1872


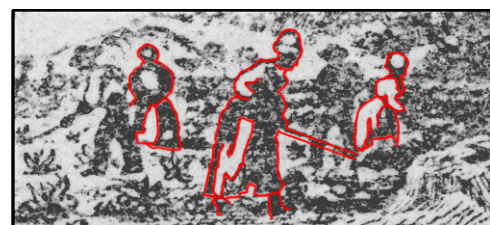
Purpose and Significance This exhibit presents the earliest portrayals of Black people on US stamps: depictions of Black tobacco workers used as vignettes for several cigar and tobacco tax stamps issued 1864–1872. This imagery is significant because it establishes a much earlier representation of Black history in US philately than previously thought. Specifically, collectors have long regarded the Booker T. Washington postage stamp of 1940 as the landmark for Black representation on US stamps. However, these tax stamps were issued as much as 76 years earlier. This exhibit is founded entirely on original research, often indicated with a  magnifying glass icon. **Blue text** denotes major rarities.

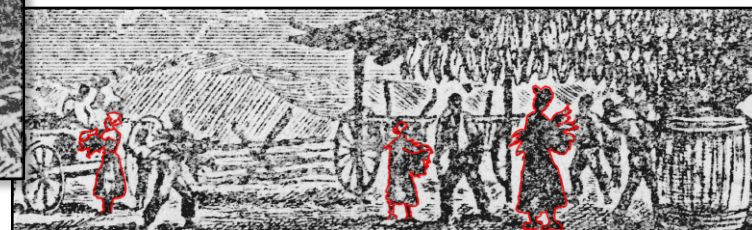
Exhibit Plan

- ▶ **1864** American Phototype Company: 2nd Issue Cigar Stamps
- ▶ **1868** Continental Bank Note Company (CBNCo): 5 designs for **Manufactured Tobacco Stamps** and 1 **Paper Wrapper Imprint**
- ▶ **1869 to 1872** CBNCo **Tobacco Strip Stamps**: 1 primary design & variants


1864 Cigar Stamps (2nd Issue), American Phototype Company




Left Vignette (excerpt):
Cultivating tobacco



Right Vignette (excerpt):
Bringing harvested leaves to a drying barn for curing

 **The Vignettes** (artist unknown) depict at least 24 men, women, and child laborers on a tobacco plantation. Original research published in *The American Philatelist* (Feb. 2020) established that these are scenes of **Black enslaved labor**: 1) Blacks were the predominant workforce in tobacco farming; 2) the women's dresses and head coverings, highlighted in red at left, are typical of enslaved female agricultural workers of the period; 3) stamps issued while the Civil War was still being fought.

 **Usage:** Government-appointed cigar inspectors affixed these stamps individually to every box of cigars they assessed for taxation. Cigars were taxed at one of 5 different rates according to their value, hence the 5 denominations. Issued in September 1864, supplied imperforate and un gummed. Replaced in July 1865 with stamps of entirely new designs.

The Continental Bank Note Co. Manufactured Tobacco Tax Stamps with Vignettes of Black Tobacco Workers

1868

On July 20, 1868, Congress passed new tobacco tax legislation requiring tax stamps to be affixed to all tobacco products, not just to cigars as in previous years. CBNCo contracted with the Treasury Dep't to produce the required stamps: 29 denominations in various sizes to suit different kinds of packaging (pouches, boxes, barrels, jars, etc.) and 4 designs for imprinting on paper tobacco wrappers. Vignettes portraying Black tobacco workers were selected for 5 "manufactured tobacco" stamps (including a rejected design) and 1 wrapper imprint, all shown in this exhibit.

Cigar Stamps
1867...
1866...
1865...

Large Die Proof of Source Artwork



Loading Cotton (1866). The ½ lb. stamp's vignette was based on this stock CBNCo engraving of three men loading a bale of cotton onto a cart. The scene was rendered after a commissioned illustration by **Felix O.C. Darley**, the foremost illustrator of his day. As explained at right, the scene was modified for the stamp's vignette.

"Manufactured Tobacco" refers to products made by breaking down whole tobacco leaves, such as smoking tobacco, chewing tobacco, and snuff. By law these products could only be packaged in specific weights, hence the ounce and pound denominations of these stamps. The "Class" inscriptions refer to the tax levied per pound.

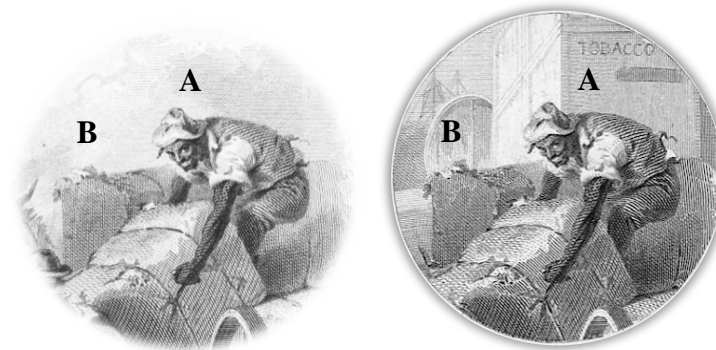
1/2 Pound

Large Die Vignette Essay on India on Card

3-5 Examples Known



First, CBNCo's designers isolated the Black worker grappling the cotton bale. Then they embellished the scene to force the perception that he is on a loading dock handling a bale of tobacco (even though tobacco wasn't packaged in bales) by adding: [A] a large packing crate, clumsily labeled TOBACCO; [B] a tall ship's rigging and a large cask in the background.



Loading Cotton

Stamp Vignette

As published in *The American Philatelist* (July, 2021)

Plate Proof



Unused



Used with Blue Oval Handstamp

