

# How I Became a Stamp Collector

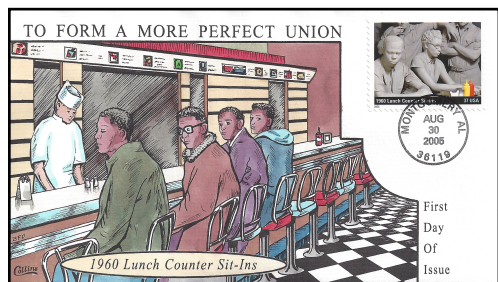
By Betty D. Session



The gift from a college roommate of a Martin Luther King, Jr. stamp lapel pin gave birth to my now decades-old stamp collecting. After discovering that the stamp reproduced on the pin was part of a United States Post Office series, the Black Heritage series, I began a fascinating journey of discovery. My curiosity took me to the reference section of the library where I learned of Scott's Catalogue and that the 1979 Dr. King stamp was the second issued in the Black Heritage series.

The questions were endless — and long before the Internet or eBay! After a subscription to Linn's Stamp News, membership in the American Philatelic Society, and attendance at many stamp shows, I began collecting first day covers and, later, traveling around the country to experience the unveiling of stamps that celebrated the African Americans who played so pivotal a role in advancing knowledge as well as freedom and justice for all in America. I was on a mission: those courageous Americans not only inspired me but could do so also for youth who too often seemed sadly uninspired. Perhaps the Black pioneers on stamps could lead them both to keep on pushing and to ever greater heights.

After many years of collecting first day covers, I wanted those stamps STUCK in the corners of envelopes to come alive and tell their stories in ever more dramatic ways. I wanted the children who might begin collecting stamps to “court their curiosity,” as I once heard the artist Robert Rauschenberg tell a young inquirer who was trying to learn the source of his relentlessly brilliant output. I began experimenting with my first-day cancellations. In one instance, I had the Paul Robeson stamp cancelled on the top of sheet music for “Ole Man River,” a song made famous through his extraordinary rendition. For the 1960 Lunch Counter Sit-In stamp, I asked for the cancellation to be in the middle of a brown paper lunch bag. My hope was that the next generation would ask, “Why?” If they courted their curiosity, they would discover that millions of Blacks were not allowed to eat with Whites. Instead, they had to have their meals taken out, the food placed in bags for them to retrieve from the back



of “White only” restaurants. I titled this piece, “Carry Out Only.” My love of stamp collecting, of creativity, and of how stamps can teach and inspire, remain a passionate and driving force. Born in the rural — and segregated — South, I was delivered not in a hospital, but in my grandparents’ home. According to my birth certificate, the address was “P.O. Box, Rembert, S.C.” A post office box!!! I was born to be a stamp collector.