

# Bringing back the past through Black Heritage stamps

When I lived in New Castle 26 years ago, there was a Caucasian man living there who was guilty of "Random Acts of Kindness." His name was Miles Marshall. And I was a recipient of one of Marshall's acts of kindness.

One day on a trip to the local post office Marshall discovered something new. The post office was selling the first in a series of Black Heritage Stamps – "person stamps" to honor African-Americans.

Marshall thought perhaps I would like some of those first issue historic stamps. He was absolutely right. And thanks to Marshall, I have been collecting Black Heritage Stamps ever since that day.

The Black Heritage Stamp Series began in 1977 with one African-American being honored each year. Twenty-six have been honored as of February 2003. Some well-known personalities who have been honored in this historic series include Martin Luther King, Jackie Robinson, former Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall (on this year's Black Heritage Stamp), and Malcolm X. Yes, Malcolm X!

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I was as surprised as anyone that the post office issued a stamp of Malcolm X because Malcolm X was considered a controversial person. Truth be told, Martin Luther King was also considered a controversial figure when he was alive. King did not become a beloved and much-quoted American icon until long after his death.

The Black Heritage Stamp No.1 of Harriet Tubman leads the way. How fitting, because Tubman led the way many times during her lifetime. She was famous for leading more than 300 slaves to freedom. Tubman was well-known as "The Moses of her People" as she successfully led them Up North and even into Canada through a series of hiding places provided by white abolitionists and free blacks; hiding places called "The Underground Railroad."

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Black Heritage Stamp No. 16 honored Dr. Percy L. Julian, a renowned research chemist. Dr. Julian's scientific research should be appreciated by everyone who has glaucoma or arthritis or muscular discomfort. Dr. Julian was a research chemist at DePauw University in Greencastle in 1932. In the chemistry lab Julian succeeded in synthesizing physostigmine, the drug used in treating glaucoma.

Dr. Julian's biggest achievement occurred when he was the leading research chemist at the Glidden Company in Chicago. He discovered how to extract white crystals called sterols from soybean oil. From sterols he produced Compound S – from which synthetic cortisone could be made and could be manufactured commercially at a price people could afford.

On Sept. 12, 1992, Dr. Mae Jemison, a Chicago physician, was the first black woman to venture into outer space as one of the seven-member crew aboard the space shuttle Endeavor. But Bessie Coleman, Black Heritage Stamp No. 18, was "in the air" long before Mae Jemison was born! Coleman was the first licensed African-American pilot (1921).

She was trained in France because no American flight school would accept blacks. Upon her return to America in 1922, "Brave Bessie" thrilled the crowds with her barnstorming flights. She also gave lectures in black schools and churches and was an inspiration to the young people. A 12-year-old girl wrote a letter to Coleman, "I like to see our race do brave things."

Langston Hughes was on last year's Black Heritage Stamp No.

25. He was honored as one of America's great African-American poets. His poem "I, too, sing America," written so long ago, is very up to date. "I, too, sing America. I am the darker brother" reminds me of the unnoticed, unacknowledged patriotism of African-Americans in spite of being buffeted with unchanged indignities from "way back then."

My father served in France during World War I. He returned home to even more Jim Crow laws. My brother returned from to Korea and endured segregation wrath when he drank at the wrong water fountain. My great-nephew returned home from Desert Storm to target racial profiling. Another great-nephew is in Kuwait right now. If he survives Kuwait, I wonder what's in store for him when he "comes marching home again."

Twenty-six Black Heritage Stamps and 26 years later, I am wondering whatever happened to that kind man, Miles Marshall. Is he still doing "Random Acts of Kindness?" I'll have to ask my friends who live in New Castle. They know everything!

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