

U.S. Postal Service Honours distinguished writer Charles W. Chesnutt with 2008 Black Heritage Series Stamp



CLEVELAND, OH — Charles Waddell Chesnutt will be immortalized on a stamp in the popular Black Heritage commemorative stamp series issued by the U.S. Postal Service. He is considered the first African-American writer to receive major acclaim. He made an important breakthrough when his short story, “The Goophered Grapevine,” appeared in the August 1887 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*.

The stamp will be dedicated Thursday, January 31, in an 11 a.m. ceremony at the Cleveland Public Library. Chesnutt, a distinguished writer recognized as a major innovator and singular voice among turn-of-the-century literary realists, will become the 31st person inducted into the series.

“Charles Chesnutt was an American original, a gifted writer and social activist whose candid discussions of race in America helped set the stage for the successful civil rights movement of the 20th century,” said

Delores Killete, vice president and consumer advocate for the Postal Service. Killete will officially dedicate the stamp.

Joining Killete at the event will be Elizabeth Baker Keffer, publisher of the *Atlantic Monthly*; Nathan Oliver, founder of the Charles Waddell Chesnutt Literary Society; Andrew Venable, director of the Cleveland Public Library; A. Grace Lee Mims, host of the radio show, “The Black Arts”; and performers from the Karamu House, staging a theatrical interpretation of Chesnutt’s life.

“I’m pleased that my grandfather has received this recognition,” said John Chesnutt Slade. “He is not a famous man, but I hope this stamp will help people learn more about his contributions to our country.”

Chesnutt made an important literary contribution when he was published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. He was one of a few African-American writers to have been published in a major literary magazine at that time.

“Rooted in the abolition movement, and with a 150-year history of supporting the early work of some of the best American authors, the *Atlantic* is proud of publishing Charles Chesnutt’s first short story,” said Elizabeth Keffer, the magazine’s publisher. “Chesnutt laid the foundation for generations of African-American writers seeking freedom of expression. But his pioneering work should inspire all Americans, and the release of this stamp both reminds of his story and celebrates his legacy.”

“The Goophered Grapevine” and other stories were collected in Chesnutt’s book, *The Conjure Woman*. The stories in this book were poised between comedy and tragedy. The eminent writer and critic William Dean Howells once wrote, “The stories of *The Conjure Woman* have a wild, indigenous poetry.... Character, the most precious thing in fiction, is faithfully portrayed.”

Today, Chesnutt’s writings are admired for their probing psychological exploration and for their progressive thinking on questions of race. His stories often started out entertaining, but quickly turned to issues of injustice. He once called racism “a barrier to the moral progress of the American people.”

Chesnutt was of mixed racial descent, and provided insight into various perspectives along America's color line. With light skin and blue eyes, Chesnutt could have disregarded his black roots, but he detested such actions. He believed that people of color who tried to "pass" or represent themselves as white would never achieve political or social equality. His first novel, *The House Behind the Cedars*, explored this theme.

Near the end of his life, he wrote, "As a matter of fact, substantially all of my writings, with the exception of *The Conjure Woman*, have dealt with the problems of people of mixed blood, which ... are in some instances and in some respects much more complex and difficult of treatment, in fiction as in life."

Chesnutt's writings include novels, books, essays, poems, a biography of Frederick Douglass and several unpublished works. His work in political and civic affairs and his stance against racial discrimination earned him in 1928 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Spingarn Medal, which recognizes distinguished merit and achievement among African Americans.

Chesnutt was born in Cleveland, June 20, 1858, and grew up in Fayetteville, NC. He died in his hometown in 1932. Scholars describe Chesnutt not as a household name but note that, in recent years, his work has attracted growing interest.

The Postal Service began issuing its popular Black Heritage stamp series in 1978 with a stamp honoring Harriet Tubman. Chesnutt joins a long list of legendary African-American leaders, inventors, educators, scientists, entrepreneurs, entertainers and athletes, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Langston Hughes, Ella Fitzgerald and Jackie Robinson.

Art director Howard Paine wanted a stamp that emphasized Chesnutt's intelligence and dignity. The portrait painted by stamp artist Kazuhiko Sano was based on a 1908 photograph from the collection of Fisk University's Franklin Library.

The Charles W. Chesnutt stamp sheet is available for purchase in Post Offices, on usps.com and by calling 800-STAMP-24 starting Thursday, Jan. 31.

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