

*Hook Students To History With First Day Covers  
Warm Up Lessons Using Stamps, Postmarks and Artwork*

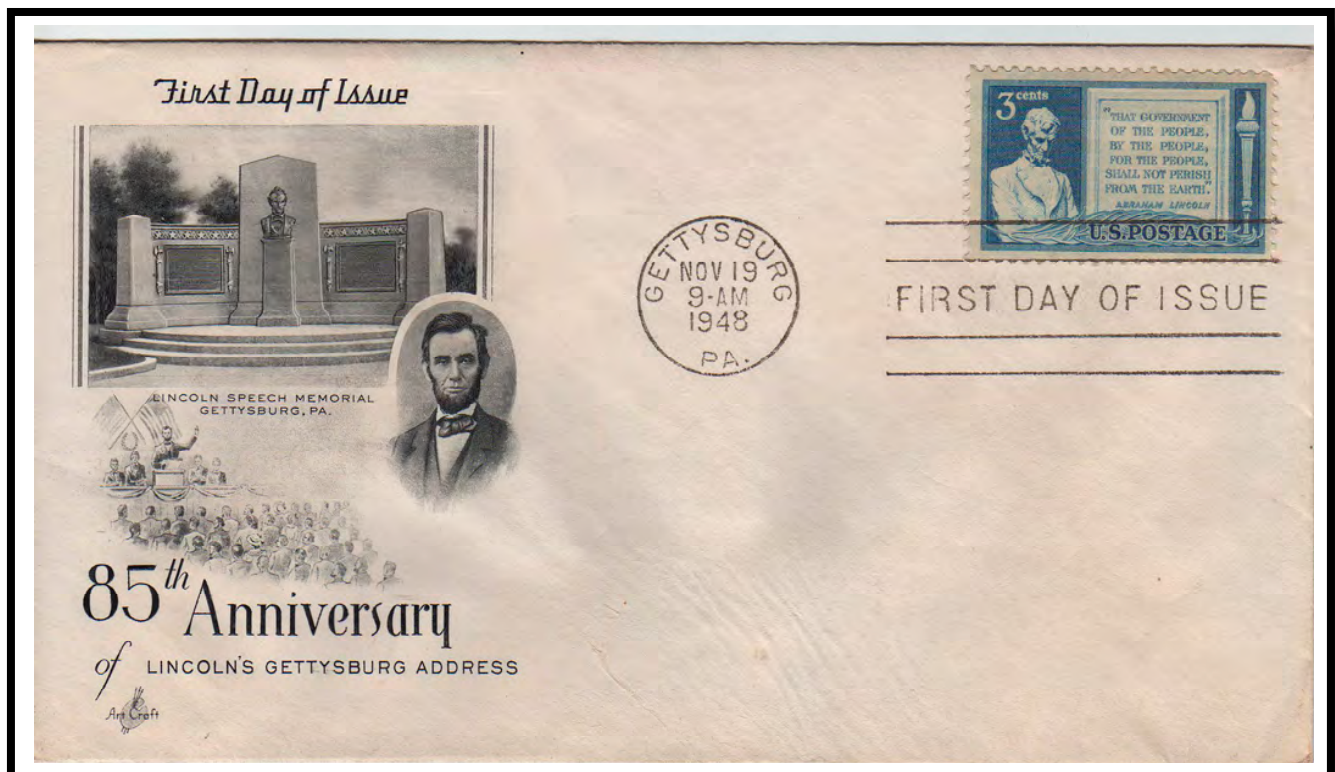
By Kris McIntosh

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Like many history teachers who travel in the summer, in June of 1998 I stopped at an antique store in the Gettysburg, Pennsylvania area, just to browse. As usual, looking led to buying something that could be used in my classroom. What I found this time was an envelope commemorating the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gettysburg Address. It had a stamp containing an excerpt of the speech along with a sculpture of Lincoln. It was postmarked from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania on Nov. 19, 1948. On the left side of the envelope was artwork depicting the event. I had not seen such an envelope and the fact that the envelope itself was fifty years old intrigued me, so I bought it. Next fall, while teaching the Civil War, the envelope was part of my bulletin board display and a point of discussion with and among my students.

Fast forward to 2008 and I find myself mentoring social studies teachers who are required to include a warm up activity in their lessons. One evening I had a watermark moment, why couldn't this Gettysburg envelope serve as a warm up? It's a primary source and a visual aid, which to me is the perfect combination to hook the student's interest. So I developed a brief warm up lesson based on the students analyzing the envelope and discussing their findings. Questions from the teacher could either review the previous lesson about the battle of Gettysburg or lay the foundation for a discussion about the Gettysburg Address.



Students are first asked to analyze the First Day Cover and list all the facts they see. As the students verbally share their findings, the teacher can interject questions such as:

- Where was the envelope postmarked?
- What is significant about that place?
- Why is that battle memorable?
- Why was President Lincoln giving a speech at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania?
- Why would the stamp designer choose this excerpt from the speech, *that government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth* for the stamp?
- Because of the battle and the speech, has the momentum of the war changed?

There are so many questions that can be asked, by the teacher or the students, thus the First Day Cover serves as a springboard into a deeper lesson on the Gettysburg Address, or it can be used as a way to condense material and move on.

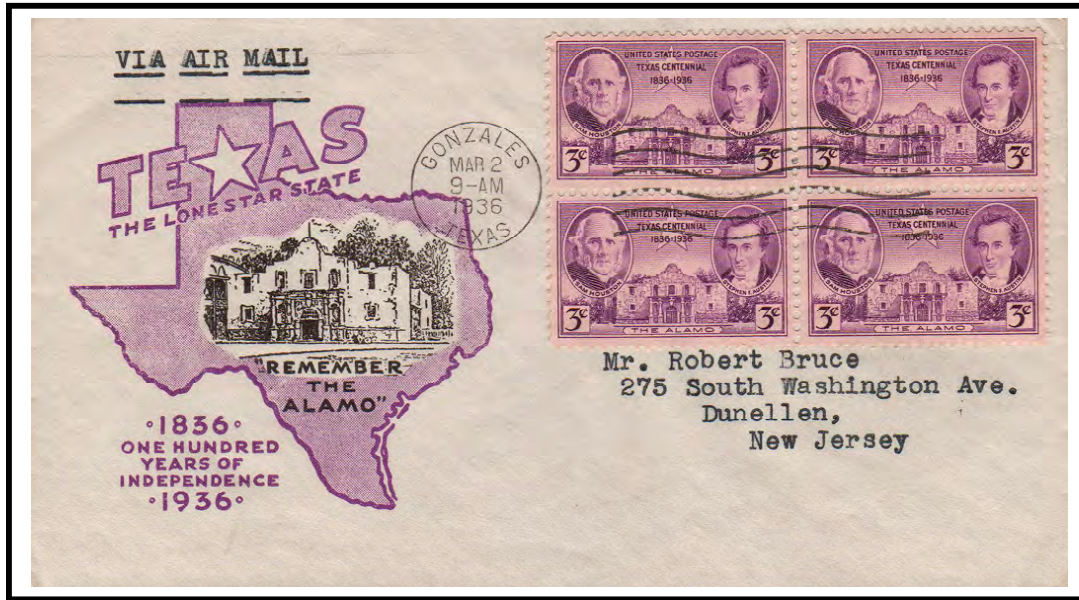
In order to create a lesson using this envelope, I thought I better do some research.

I found out several things, such as the envelope is officially called a First Day Cover (FDC) because it is cancelled on the first day that the stamp is issued by the U.S. Post Office. Secondly I learned that the postmark wasn't just a chance coincidence, but well planned out by the Post Office - *On November 20, 1947, Pennsylvania's Senator Francis J. Meyers introduced legislation to have a stamp issued on the anniversary of the famous speech. President Truman signed it into law on June 29, 1948, and the stamp was issued on November 19 of the same year.* (National Postal Museum) Next I learned that the artwork was not done by the Post Office, but by an individual artist who had acquired the envelope and stamp. In this case, the artist worked for a business called Art Craft. Further research taught me that many individuals had purchased this same First Day Cover from the Post Office and drawn their own interpretation of the Gettysburg Address event.

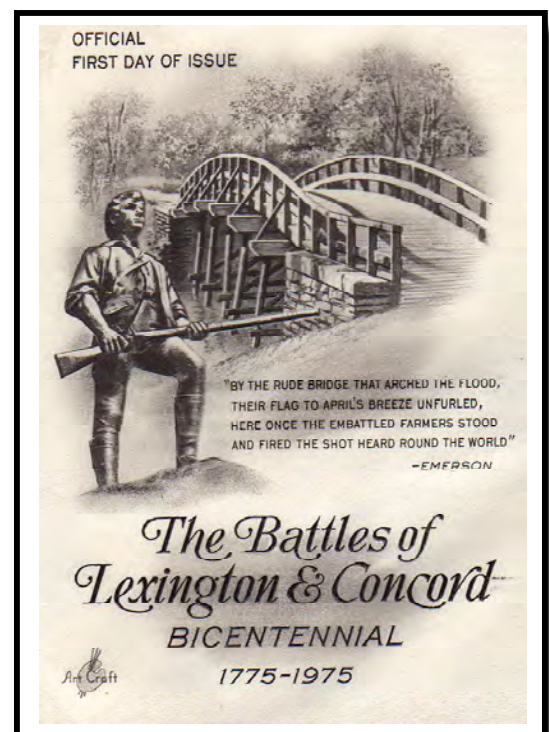
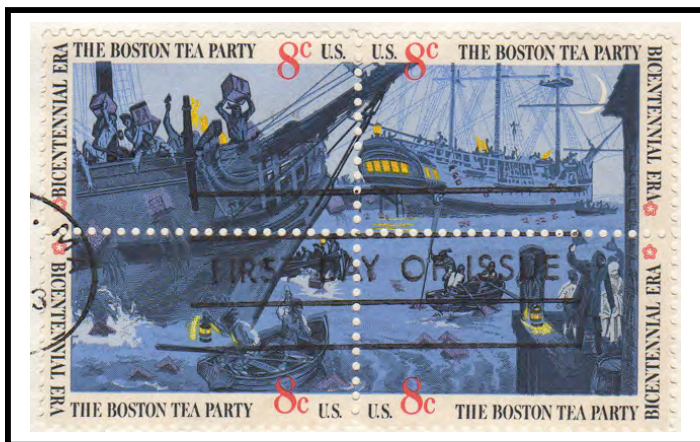
From this research, an entire new world of primary sources opened up for me and I will admit, I am now a collector of First Day Covers. I've joined the American First Day Cover Society ([www.afdc.com](http://www.afdc.com)) and attend monthly meetings of the Fred Sawyer Chapter to learn from other collectors. Stamp conventions whether on the local, regional or national level are a wonderland for me. I spend hours, still prowling through antique stores or clicking through eBay and FDC websites looking for the "perfect" First Day Cover commemorating and depicting an event in United States history. With each purchase, whether it is honoring an individual such as Booker T. Washington (the first African American on a stamp),



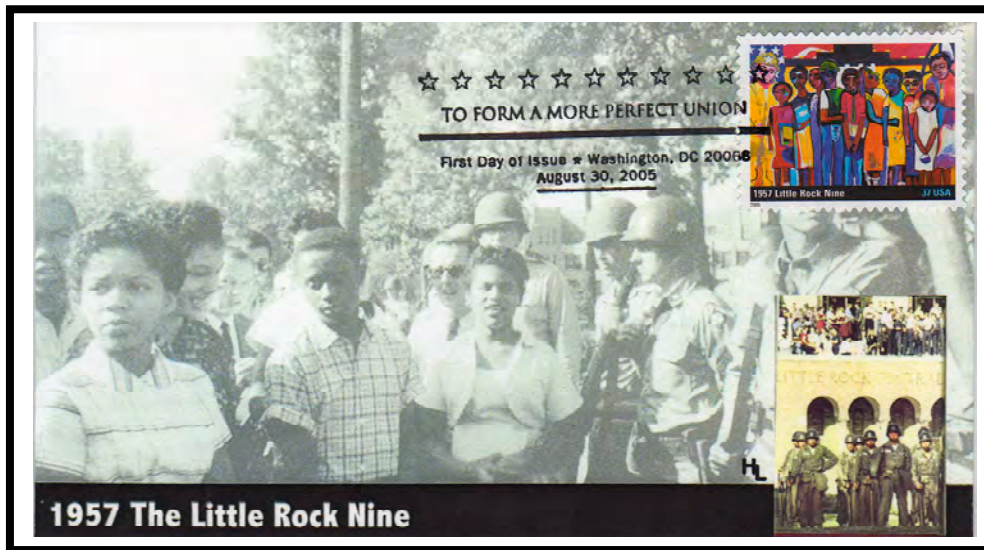
an event as the Texas Centennial Celebration, or a document as in the Bill of Rights, I imagine how that FDC can bring history alive for students and teachers.



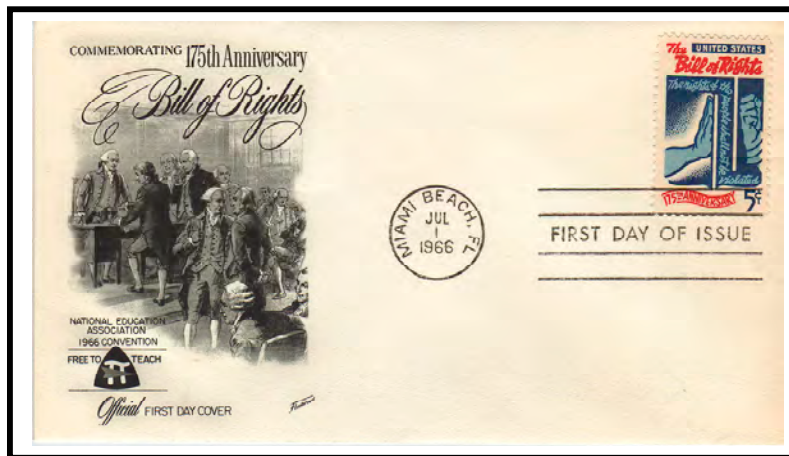
Besides being the anchor in a warm up lesson, there are many different ways to use these primary sources. For example, an FDC can be used to condense material. The 200th anniversary of the Boston Tea Party is depicted on this 4 panel stamp series and the entire event could be discussed through this primary source. At the end of the semester to review several units, the teacher can print out several FDCs and give each student one of the copies with the instruction to study the information on the envelope. Students will then put themselves in a human timeline by the event, not the postmark. As students explain their event to the class, the teacher helps the students make connections between the events, such as the Boston Tea Party and the Battles of Lexington and Concord.



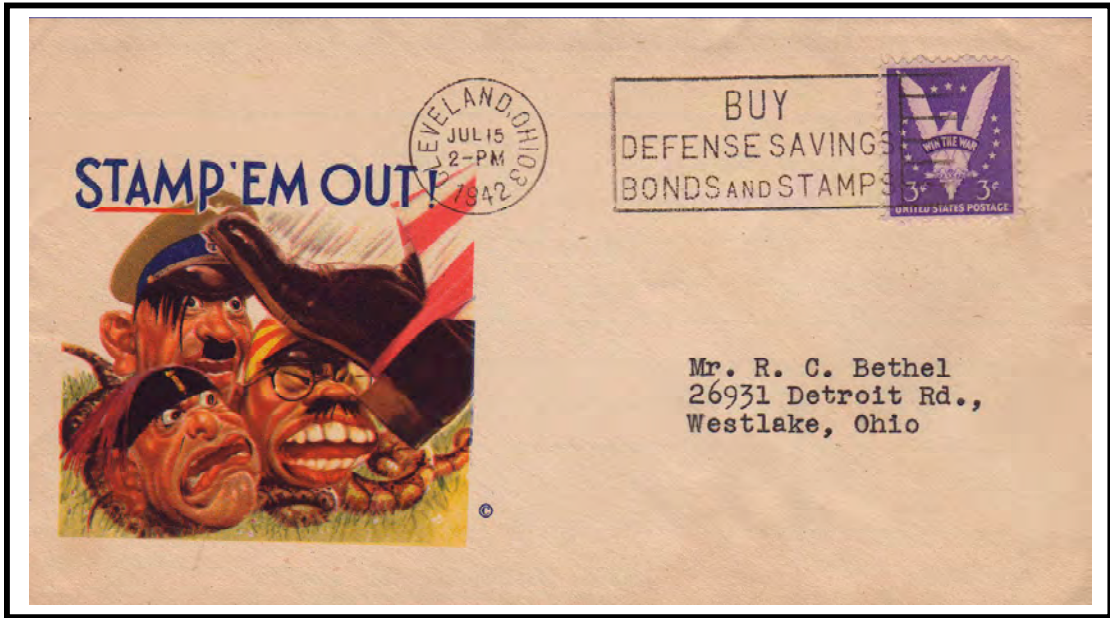
Another activity would have the students role play individuals in the artwork and explain what they are feeling, hearing, seeing, thinking. What would it be like to be one of the “Little Rock Nine”? How did those students help To Form a More Perfect Union?



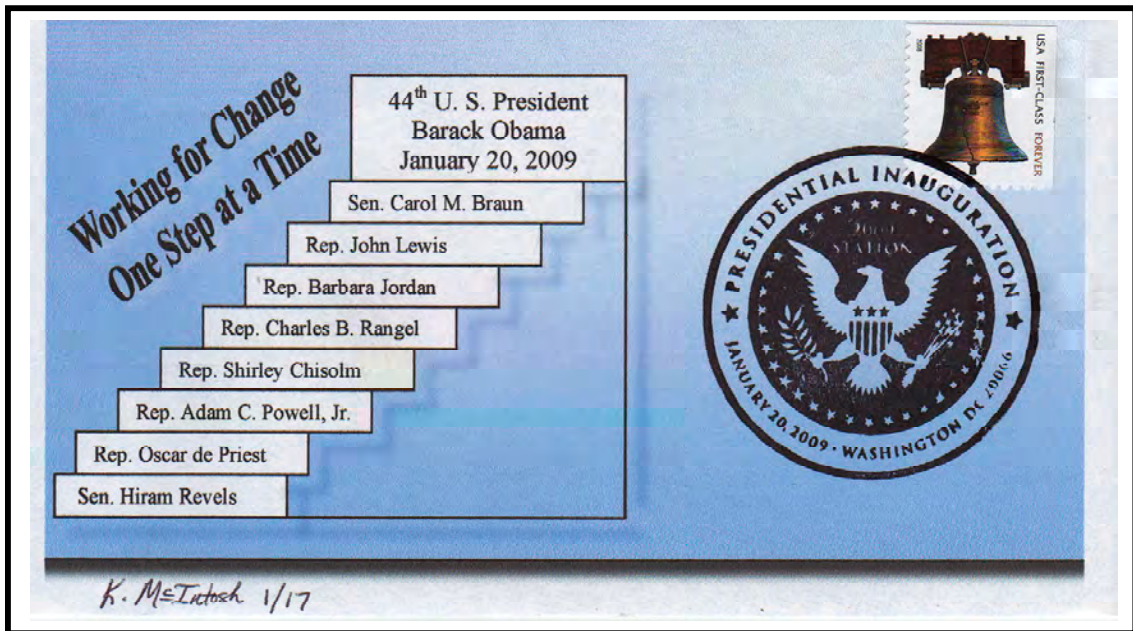
Students can also “update” an event. For example, it is now 220 years since the first ten amendments were added to the Constitution. Assign students to design a new FDC for that anniversary.



Even if the post office is not issuing a stamp for an anniversary, such as the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of the NAACP, students can create an entire First Day Cover – stamp, postmark and artwork, to celebrate that organization. Some FDCs can be analyzed for their propoganda and compared to current world situations, such as this World War II stamp and artwork. Who does the shoe represent? How did you determine that it was Uncle Sam? Who were the Axis of Evil in 1942, compared to the Axis of Evil in 2002? What would a stamp or FDC for today’s War on Terrorism look like? What city would be honored with the postmark? Would today’s cancellation include a propoganda statement? Ask the students to draw it, not just talk it.



Also teachers can check with the U.S. post office and find out what stamps are to be issued in the coming months and have students create a First Day Cover for that stamp when it fits in the curriculum:  
<http://shop.usps.com/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/TopCategoriesDisplay?storeId=10001&catalogId=10152>  
By sending the covers into the post office, the envelopes can be canceled as First Day of Issue. The possibilities are endless. (And if you don't have time for this activity, why not ask the art teacher to try it.) Make a note in your lesson plan folder to have your students make a First Day Cover for the winner of the presidential election in 2012. Look for the instructions to get this special inauguration cancellation by reading the *Linn's Stamp News Newsletter* (<http://www.linns.com/>).



Also the post office has a teacher resource page for commemorative stamps being released that contains lessons plans, activities, and a poster of the stamp.

<http://www.usps.com/communications/community/classroom.htm>

If you want to look for your own First Day Covers, start your journey by searching the Smithsonian's National Postal Museum (<http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/>) to see what topics or people are found on stamps. Then go to eBay, (<http://www.ebay.com>) type in first day covers, or the name of the person, event or document, choose stamps as the category, click "Search" and you'll be surprised to see what is available to help hook your students on history!

I believe that First Day Covers are just another tool to add to a teacher's bag of strategies. It may be a small envelope but it is a huge primary source that is quick and easy to use and helps to "stamp history on students' minds!"