“Philately has a distinct educational value,” asserts the Postmaster General of the United States in a 1957 government-issued guide to US stamps. “No one can pursue this hobby intelligently without developing a greater knowledge of his national heritage.”

The young me would have agreed enthusiastically with that. As a child, I absorbed vast loads of nominal knowledge from stamps, learning the names of battles and presidents, of explorers and inventors and national parks. Even as an adult I can’t deny that these shallow learnings were valuable at times—being able to describe the mission of SEATO or the adventures of the *USS Constitution* were useful skills in the pre-Wikipedia era.

But I can still remember the day when all that fell apart, when I realized that what stamps had actually taught me was a greater gullibility toward national propaganda.

Studying American stamps prior to 1982 is like studying the work of an author who constantly makes high-minded and totally superficial assertions about American heroism, American inventiveness, American institutions, American architecture, American wildlife, American places, and (above all) the nobility of American leaders—while carefully ignoring other aspects of the national story.

The founding of cities. Eminent statesmen. Important inventions. National parks. That time we defeated the British. That other time we defeated the British. State flags, state capitol buildings, state birds, state mottos, and the all-important dates when states entered the union. Professional associations. Famous universities. Railroads. Dams. Canals. The branches of the armed forces. Adventures in space. More victories over the British. A sixteen-part series celebrating the arrival of Christopher Columbus in Santo Domingo, which somehow overlooks the brutality he inflicted on the people he met there.

Above all this, however, the American stamp canon returns compulsively to the subject of George Washington. George Washington on every occasion, George Washington on every denomination, George Washington in all the different phases of his life. And then, for a little variety: George Washington’s wife. George Washington’s house. George Washington’s associates Adams and Hamilton and Jefferson. The places where George Washington stayed during the Revolutionary War. The battles George Washington won. The battles George Washington lost but from which he managed to escape. And, finally, the various imposing buildings in the city that is named for George Washington.

For anyone who has graduated from childhood and gone on to study history, the banality of all this is somewhat offensive. Great men, the stamp canon tells us, are really great. Battles and treaties are what our national life is all about. Legal formalities are ever so important. National symbols are to be honored. Triumphs are to be commemorated. Heroes are everything. Followers are nothing. Social movements are of little significance. Losers are to be forgotten.

Then again, so what? It is true that, as a historical narrator, the stamp canon is no more reliable than Hollywood westerns. Regardless of how falsely they lyricize some long-ago event or how grotesquely stamps honor some slaveowning president, they are nonetheless genuine artifacts of the society that printed them. If you re-contextualize stamp collecting as a way of thinking about extinct master narratives—about what Americans used to believe—the hobby changes shape, becomes much more interesting.