

## **“Why No Black Faces on Greenbacks?”**

Even before we were a nation, blacks contributed mightily to the development of what is now the United States. From mining to the space program, black Americans today serve integral roles in our society, leading in fields such as education, politics, religion and sports.

One cannot pick up a newspaper, turn on the radio or television, or surf the Internet without seeing the contributions of our community

But blacks are excluded from arguably the most important medium in use today in this nation and around the world — U.S. currency. Our money is a key medium of exchange, unit of account, and store of value. There are currently no black images on standard American dollars or coins.

It has not always been this way. Between 1840 and 1880, over 75 bank notes with depictions of black slaves were produced by the governments of slave states and former slave states as well as by individual banks in those states. Why would the Confederates, of all people, put blacks on money?

University of Alabama professor Henry N. McCarl said it was due to their importance to the economy of the South. McCarl told the *New York Times*: “Cultures put on their money objects that are important to them and their economy, and the South had an interest in showing to the world that the slaves were well-treated and happy.”

Well-treated and happy? Hardly. But black Americans were being honored for their contributions, however demeaning. That’s not the case today.

In modern times, blacks are behind money more than on the front of it. For example, sculptor Isaac Hathaway was the first black American to officially design a U.S. coin. He created a Booker T. Washington commemorative half-dollar coin in 1946 and one for George Washington Carver in 1951. While it is officially credited to U.S. Mint engraver John Sinnock, the Roosevelt dime is thought to be based on a work by black sculptor Selma Burke.

Additionally, the signature of Azie Taylor-Morton, the first and only black treasurer of the United States, who served between 1977 and 1981, can be found on bills printed during her service.

More recently, there was a commemorative dollar coin honoring blacks soldiers in the American Revolution, and a bill the just passed the House of Representatives to create one honoring the Civil Rights Act. But it’s still not standard, everyday money.

For many, black images on real U.S. currency would engender a greater sense of acceptance, ownership, pride and national allegiance. In certain circles, the

appearance of a black American on money might induce a psychological lift. This increased awareness could lead to an increased interest in saving and investing.

Zekita Tucker, a freelance writer, drafted an Internet petition (<http://www.petitiononline.com/4NIAMBI/petition.html>) to the government asking for black faces on our currency. Thus far, it has received only modest support.

Be that as it may, what further actions must black Americans undertake to make “black money” a reality? Which great black Americans deserve to appear on a bill or coin? Should there be new denominations altogether, such as a 25-dollar bill?

Black historical and cultural contributions to American culture are rich and priceless. Clearly, we do not desire to cheapen our tradition nor infer that acceptance of a black image on a U.S. dollar is all that is needed to acknowledge our role in developing this nation. It is reasonable, however, to ask for the respect that is conferred by placement of black images on currency.

All things considered, there is no good explanation for the absence of black Americans from our money. It is a correctable oversight. Therefore, we should seriously consider making “black dollars” a reality.

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