



Early Mexican postage stamps featuring Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla

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Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla and Mexico's first stamps and postal stationery

By Douglas Files

Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla (1753-1811) is recognized by Mexico as the "Father of the Nation". He was a Roman Catholic priest, a college professor and he helped lead the Mexican War for Independence. During the early 1800s Mexico was a colony of Spain. A revolt began in 1801 by peasants lashing out against the Spanish colonial government and the Viceroy who was in charge. On the 16th of September 1810 the liberal professor Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla gave a rousing speech, then gathered an army of nearly 90,000 farmers as he marched across Mexico. Spanish colonial authorities were surprised at the size and the fervent nature of the protests. After a few skirmishes with Spanish authorities the "peasant army" promoted Hidalgo to the rank of "generalissimo" and declared he should be addressed as "His Most Serene Highness". Soon thereafter the crowd attacked Spanish troops at the Battle of Calderon Bridge and were soundly beaten. Hidalgo took his surviving countrymen north but one of his people told the Spanish where he was. Hidalgo was captured and executed for treason in July 1811. This instantly made him a martyr to the cause and Mexicans continued to rebel against the Spanish. Hidalgo was celebrated as the "Father of Mexican Independence" and his death rallied the people. Though a hero, he was not sainted, as this priest was said to have fathered children with three different women. Conservative bishops also excommunicated him from the Roman Catholic church twice for his

revolutionary activities. Many more years of low-level guerilla warfare followed during which up to one tenth of all Mexicans perished.

But eventually the rebels wore down the Spanish colonialists and King Ferdinand VII of Spain – who had been weakened by Napoleon Bonaparte - finally agreed to Mexican independence in 1821. Mexico thus became a constitutional monarchy. The new nation struggled and ten years of economic decline took a toll on the people.

The state of Hidalgo in Mexico is named for the famed martyr, as is Hidalgo County, Texas. Artist Diego Rivera painted Hidalgo into his murals at least 6 times. The rebel priest's birthday is celebrated in Mexico as a national holiday. And the first stamps and postal stationery issued by Mexico celebrate the father of the nation's independence.



One peso gray Hidalgo stamp

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Stamps and Postal Stationery

The first Mexican postage stamps emerged in 1856. Five denominations ran from ½ real to 8 reals. Each imperforate stamp bore a brightly-colored portrait of Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla. Before being sold most stamps were overprinted with the name of the district where they originated. The 1861 and 1864 issues also honored Hidalgo's sacrifice to his nation. Collectors should note that the Scott catalog warns that reprints and counterfeits exist for all these early stamps.



Hidalgo postal stationery envelope

Scan by the author of an item in his collection

The first Mexican postal stationery envelopes were issued on May 1st, 1874. They included a 5-centavo brown-violet, a 10-centavo green and a 25-centavo blue envelope, all featuring a bust of Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla. The envelopes were printed by the American Bank Note Company in New York to specifications set by the Mexican postal service. The next six issues of Mexican stationery envelopes also showcased this hero of the revolution.

Thus philately can not only highlight the heroes of a culture, but they can help preserve history. The author wondered sufficiently who this man was on Mexico's stamps and stationery to research and pen this article. Hidalgo will certainly be remembered by generations to come by virtue of his portrait being shown on the early postal issues of Mexico.

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