

By Neil Offen

DURHAM — Ricky Johnson wants John Hope Franklin on postcards, letters, bills and more.

David Price and a number of other Congressmen agree with him.

So do members of the Ebony Society of Philatelic Events and Reflections.

They are all trying to get the image of the renowned African-American historian, former Duke University professor and long-time Durham resident on a U.S. postage stamp.

"To be honored on a U.S. stamp is one of the highest honors that can be bestowed on an American, like winning the Congressional Medal of Honor," said Johnson, a house restorer in Durham who is a member of the society.

"John Hope Franklin was the greatest historian, the greatest African-American historian, since W.E.B. Dubois," Johnson said in an interview. "He deserves this great honor."

Johnson and members of the society, along with Bill Bell, the mayor of Durham, have been petitioning the national Citizens Stamp Advisory Committee to put Franklin on a stamp.

They were joined recently by five members of Congress, including Price.

"John Hope Franklin had a profound impact on the history profession, on the many lives he touched as a life-long educator, and on our country's quest for social justice," said Price, who taught at Duke at the same time as Franklin.

"I was pleased to join this effort because I counted him as a colleague and friend and believe his work as a chronicler of the American and African-American experience deserves broad recognition."

While many people from across the nation are working to get a Franklin stamp, Johnson said, "this is a national initiative that originated in North Carolina, that started right here in Durham."

It started with members of the society, formed nearly 25 years ago in North Carolina to "promote the collecting of stamps and philatelic material depicting people and events related to the African diaspora and to encouraging and supporting the interest and participation of black people in all aspects of philately."

The society was born after Charlotte's Esper Hayes met the great African-American track star Jesse Owens at a stamp show in the 1970s. Hayes noted that few blacks were at the show and made a promise to Owens then that she would work to make African Americans learn more about their history and take more pride in it.

At a state chapter meeting of the society in 2009 shortly after Franklin died, Johnson — who didn't know the historian but had once seen him at a local mall — raised the idea about a stamp in his honor. The chapter voted in favor of the idea.

"Then we took it to the national board of directors and they were in favor of it, too," he said.

They launched a national initiative and started gathering signatures on petitions.

"We got real signatures, on paper, not online," Johnson said. "We wanted it to be signatures of people who actually use postal stamps."

The petition drive got nearly 4,000 signatures, and those petitions were submitted to the stamp advisory committee, which advises the U.S. Postal Service on images for stamps.

"We have received a letter informing us that our petitions have been accepted," Johnson said.

"But they receive somewhere between 40,000 to 50,000 nominations per year before narrowing it down to around 125 possibilities. So what we're trying to do now is get support from legislators and work behind the scenes to make this happen."

The advisory committee, which convened this past week, didn't have the Franklin stamp on its agenda. The committee doesn't meet again until October.

At their meetings, the committee members can either set aside a suggested stamp for future issuance or reject the idea. Rejected ideas for stamps can be resubmitted again after three years.

The postal service has the final say on issuing approved stamps, and they usually take the CSAC recommendations.

But even if approved, it would likely be some time before a Franklin stamp is issued.

A general announcement of all commemorative stamps to be issued during a coming year is made by the postmaster general in the fall of the preceding year and the general guidance from the postal service is that stamp subjects should be submitted three years ahead of target issuance year because of the time required for consideration and design.

Despite the hurdles still to come, Johnson remains optimistic.

"Oh, gosh, yeah," he said. "I think it's a foregone conclusion. I would never have brought the idea up if I didn't think it wouldn't happen."

"And when it happens, we're going to lobby to have that first issue ceremony right here in Durham. Durham has spearheaded this effort."