Press Release
February 4, 2022

Historic RittenhouseTown to Honor Clarence Holbert, African American Designer of the First Currency of the State of Eritrea

The Board of Directors of Historic RittenhouseTown will be awarding the 2022 David Rittenhouse Award to Mr. Clarence Holbert. The event will take place at Historic RittenhouseTown, 208 Lincoln Dr. Philadelphia, PA 19144 at 3:00 p.m. on Saturday, February 26, 2022. The award is made in honor of Mr. Holbert’s work as the second African American engraver to work at the U.S. Bureau of Engraving and Printing.

The David Rittenhouse Award honors those who demonstrate excellence in their chosen fields, especially science and technology, and who contribute to the progress of their communities and the world at large. In his lifetime, David Rittenhouse was an astronomer, inventor, mathematician, surveyor, revolutionary patriot, first Director of the United States Mint, and the successor to Benjamin Franklin as President of the American Philosophical Society. Historic RittenhouseTown reserves this prestigious award for multi-faceted individuals who have made significant contributions to their fields.

Clarence E. Holbert was the second African American engraver to work at the U.S. Bureau of Engraving and Printing. He is best known as the chief designer of the currency of the newly independent country of Eritrea on the Horn of Africa.

Mr. Holbert was born in 1944, in Rutherfordton, North Carolina, was raised in Washington D.C., and attended the University of the District of Columbia. He started his work with the Bureau of Engraving as a security guard. Mr. Holbert gained a reputation at his work as a skilled self-taught illustrator, and was eventually offered an apprenticeship in engraving, which led to a position as a designer.

The newly independent nation of Eritrea approached the U.S. Bureau of Engraving in 1994 for support in the design of its currency. The Bureau assigned the task to Mr. Holbert. In an interview with the online news journal Madote, Holbert said the assignment was a “dream come true.”

Mr. Holbert said he spent two and a half years designing the paper bills for Eritrea. The Eritrean President and Cabinet emphasized that the currency needed to show average Eritrean people and their daily life, rather than famous people or government figures. Holbert studied dozens of photographs of everyday life in Eritrea and conducted research trips to the country. His designs represent people from all nine of the ethnic groups that make up Eritrean society, and particularly emphasize the strength of women. The new currency was produced in units of a new Eritrean monetary unit, the nakfa.

In his interview with Madote, Mr. Holbert recounted the joy he experienced in forging connections between African Americans and Africans in Africa: “The Eritreans who met me at the airport came over and hugged me. One of them told me, ‘You don't know how good it made us feel to see that it was one of us who designed our currency.’...That melted my heart. Being a Black American in the United States, you know - the things you go through; doing such a deed for the people of Eritrea made me feel good that the country has embraced me.”
Speaking about his experience advancing at the Bureau of Engraving, Mr. Holbert said, “When I had a chance to move up, everyone was behind me—security guards, janitors, postal workers. They were like, 'We made it.'"

After the completion of the nakfa design, Mr. Holbert retired. He became very active in his church, was ordained, and served as a minister. He died of cancer in 2018 at the age of 73. At his memorial service, his family placed a nakfa in his pocket.

Previous recipients of the David Rittenhouse Award have included John Mercanti, Chief Engraver of the U.S. Mint, Derrick Pitts, Chief Astronomer and Planetarium Director of the Franklin Institute, Keith Thompson, Executive Officer of the American Philosophical Society and Owen Gingrich, Professor Emeritus of Astronomy and of the History of Science at Harvard University and a Senior Astronomer Emeritus at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory.

Historic RittenhouseTown, a National Historic Landmark District, is an authentic 18th century early industrial village and site of British North America’s first paper mill. Six Rittenhouse structures survive including David Rittenhouse’s birthplace, the 1707 Rittenhouse Homestead.

Steve Jones, a Historic RittenhouseTown Board member, welcomed the opportunity to celebrate Mr. Holbert as part of Black History Month. “We think of RittenhouseTown as an important intercultural ‘safe space’ in Philadelphia. Honoring Clarence Holbert has been wonderful way for us to make connections with new friends and partners including Hands Across Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Chapter of the NAACP, the Kush World cultural program, and many others. This event is connecting people of African descent in this country with people in Africa, and it also connecting people of all backgrounds here in Philadelphia.”

For further information, please contact Amy Ricci, Executive Director, Historic RittenhouseTown at amy@rittenhousetown.org.