

This Month in History: The First Credit Card

By Diane McLaughlin | Banker & Tradesman Staff | Sep 25, 2022 | [Reprints](#) | [Unlock Link](#) | [Print](#)



Front and back of a sample of the card used in the 1958 Fresno Drop. National Numismatic Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution | CC0

What: Bank of America Launches First Credit Card

When: Sept. 18, 1958

Where: Fresno, California

While the first half of the 20th century saw consumers using charge cards, like the Diners Club, to make purchases and later pay off the balance, Bank of America was the first bank to launch a large-scale card program providing consumers with a revolving line of credit.

The BankAmericard launched through what became known as the “Fresno Drop,” a mass mailing of plastic credit cards to 60,000 residents of Fresno, California. Residents received no notice about the cards, but more than 300 merchants had agreed to accept the BankAmericard before the drop. The mass mailing of credit cards would later be outlawed in the U.S.

While encountering fraud, consumers who decided not to pay and other problems as the cards went out to more Californians, Bank of America began to profit from the credit cards within three years. BankAmericard would become Visa in the 1970s.

“Here began the trickle of what we now call ‘financial products,’ aimed largely at the middle class, that would become, by the 1980s, an avalanche. Here was the first inkling of the gradual but enormous changes in financial habits and assumptions of the middle class. ... Though this transformation wouldn’t become apparent for another 20 years, and though it continues to this day, this is when the American middle class began to change the way it thought about, and dealt with, its money.”

—Joseph Nocera in a 1994 *Washington Post* article adapted from his book, “A Piece of the Action: How the Middle Class Joined the Money Class.”

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The Warren Group | 2 Corporation Way, Suite 250 | Peabody, MA 01960 | 617-428-5100 |

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