

Yesterday in U.S. Stamp News:

The U.S. Postage Stamp, 1870-1900

by Lowell S. Newman & Peter T. Rohrbach



Yesterday in Mekeel's, National Issue: **The U.S. Postage Stamp, 1870-1900**

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With this issue we bring back another wonderful series that we first published beginning in our October 5, 1990 issue. Lowell Newman and Peter Rohrbach wrote "American Issue, 1842-1869," which was published by Smithsonian Institution Press in 1985. "National Issue" was never published, so I am pleased to bring it back, with the possibility of publishing it in the event that we can afford to do so. JFD.

Introduction: National Issue

This chronicle picks up the story of the U.S. postage stamp in 1870 during the Reconstruction period following the Civil War, and it traces the growth and development of the stamp during the last three decades of the 19th Century, that pivotal epoch for the nation as it prepared to move into the modern age of the 20th century.

In our earlier volume, "American Issue: The U.S. Postage Stamp, 1842-1869," we traced the beginnings of the American postage stamp, starting with the first American stamp back in 1842, issued privately by the City Despatch Post in New York, and then the first federal stamps in 1847. We saw postal services grow and flourish during the 1850s and saw the American posts become bifurcated during the Civil War when there were two separate sets of stamps, North and South.

Now, as this chronicle begins, the nation has begun the shaky period of Reconstruction. Once again there is only one American postal service, one supplier of American stamps.

However, as in our earlier volume, we are not merely recounting the story of those physical stamps themselves—that "bit of paper," as it was originally called back in 1840 by the Englishman Rowland Hill, the father of modern postal reform—but also a narrative of the stamps in their own time. We will see how these U.S. stamps were used during those three decades of healing and growth, and we will see what a critical role the stamp played in the lives of Americans in that pre-electronic age. Indeed, the postage stamp was the principal mover of communications in the late 19th century. Also, as before, we will touch on the lives of the people who shaped the postal services and issued the stamps during this historically fascinating era.

The stamp was thus a communications and social phenomenon of American life during that time, binding together a developing nation which was still growing, both in population and geography. The postal system, which Herbert Samuel has called the "whole nervous system of the modern state," was the principal medium of communications for American people in those critical post-Civil War days.

As this chronicle begins, the quantity of U.S. stamps issued each year numbered in the millions, but 30 years later they numbered in the billions annually. However, these stamps were not only being used in greater numbers, but they were also being used in a postal system that was becoming increasingly efficient; and we shall recount the principal postal advances during this period, which saw the mail being delivered more frequently and more quickly.

We will also see the greater participation of all Americans in the system by the end of the century, principally rural Americans who for so long had not enjoyed the full use of the post. And we will see how the U.S. stamp acquired an international flavor during this period, first by our participation in the Universal Postal Union in 1875, and then by its use in the new territories the nation acquired after the Spanish-American War in 1898. Finally, we will see how the very design of the stamps themselves were improved and enhanced as the first U.S. commemorative issues began to be produced.

The time frame of this book spans three decades between the two American wars of the second half of the 19th century, the Civil War, which threatened to destroy the union, and the Spanish-American War, which

established the nation as an international power for the first time. During those 30 years U.S. postage stamps went through what we may consider their "second age." The years from 1842 to 1869 were a time of birth and early growth for the American postage stamp. These years from 1870 to 1900 are ones of maturation for our National Issue.

1: Stamps of A United Republic,

1870-1873

In 1869 Ulysses S. Grant, the hero of the Civil War, was inaugurated as the 18th President of the United States. General Grant's ascendancy to the presidency was very much in the 19th Century American tradition of considering military men of that highest of all civilian offices. Indeed, between 1824 when Andrew Jackson first ran for the presidency and 1892 when Benjamin Hamson last ran, there were only three national elections when no general was nominated. (In contrast, during the 20th Century when the United States engaged in two world wars, only one general—Eisenhower—was nominated by either party.)

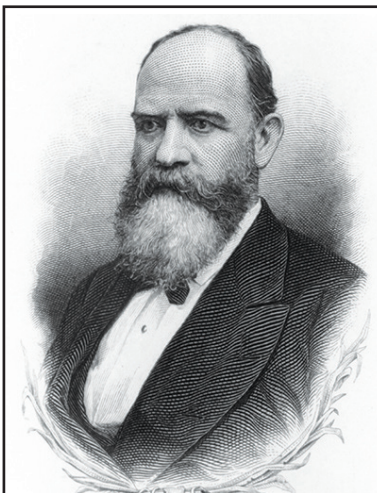
However, Grant was more than just another in this long line of superior American military men who were almost automatically considered as possible presidential candidates. He was a person of enormous heroic stature in the later 1860s—the savior of the Union, the determined soldier who had finally brought the bloody four-year struggle between the States to a definite conclusion after several Union generals before him had failed. Popularly viewed as a person of high moral character and unpretentious demeanor, he seemed the ideal candidate for those nervous days of the later 1860s, when a reunited but still shaky nation was trying to recover from the crises of that period.

There had been the Civil War itself, the trauma of Lincoln's assassination, the problems of the Reconstruction, and the embattled presidency of Andrew Johnson who had survived his removal from office by one vote in U.S. Senate impeachment proceedings.

When the Republicans nominated Grant for the presidency in 1868 he ran against the Democrat Horatio Seymour, former governor of New York, defeating him easily in the general election by 214 to 80 electoral votes. The hero of Appomattox would now try to lead the united republic as surely and successfully as he had led the largest American military force ever assembled to that date.

Unfortunately, it was not to be. Grant's eight years in office were plagued with scandal, dissensions and inefficiencies. It was not that Grant himself was either venal or corrupt; in fact, he seemed to distance himself from the scandals that swirled around him.

One part of his problem seems to have been that he considered the presidency as a sort of reward for his heroic efforts during the Civil War, rather than another task to be ruthlessly pursued; and on the other hand he was politically naive to the extreme in the selection of the high officials for his administration. His Cabinet seemed in constant turmoil during his years in office. Cabinet officers came and went



John A. J. Creswell, Postmaster General, 1869-1874, had many innovative ideas for improving postal services during the Reconstruction era. (Photo, Smithsonian Institution, the source for all Postmasters General in this work.)

regularly in a climate of graft and corruption that pervaded the Grant years in Washington.

* * * * *

Of pertinence to this chronicle is the fact that Grant had four Postmasters General during his eight troubled years in office. Surprising, both at the time and in retrospect, is that his first, John A. J. Creswell, who served from 1869 to 1874, was a quite efficient administrator who made some important improvements in the U.S. postal system.

John Angel James Creswell was a 41-year-old congressman from Maryland at the time Grant appointed him Postmaster General in March of 1869, and it appeared initially that this was just another of the many political and personal payoffs for which his administration was to become notorious. A lawyer by profession, he became deeply involved in Maryland politics, first as a Whig and later as a Democrat.

At the beginning of the Civil War, however, he became a staunch Republican, serving in the Maryland House of Delegates where he was a strong force in keeping his state in the Union. He was elected to the Senate in 1865, and he came to Grant's attention in 1868 when he was a vocal Grant delegate to the Republican National Convention in Chicago that year. This was one Grant payoff that worked.

* * * * *

One of the first matters Creswell had to face in office was the hostile reception that was being given to the first pictorial U.S. postage stamps, which were being put in circulation that spring of 1869. The "Issue of 1869" started by his predecessor, had been in production for over a year and consisted of ten new stamps, seven of which were pictorial scenes instead of the usual portraits of Ben Franklin and the earlier presidents. The scenes on the stamps included paintings of the landing of Columbus, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and scenes of a locomotive, a steamship, and a horseman riding at full gallop.

These first pictorials were handsome stamps, but they were never printed or sold in great numbers because they were greeted with either ridicule or indifference. They were criticized in the press as being too "busy"; and some of the individual designs were ridiculed; for instance, the galloping horseman on the two cent stamp was said to be inaccurate because all four of the horse's feet were raised off the ground simultaneously in the picture—and this equine controversy concerning the manner in which a horse gallops endured for many years.

Another factor in the poor reception given to this first pictorial issue was the fact that the more attractive designs had been used on the high denomination stamps, which were placed mostly on Foreign mailings and therefore were not seen or used by the greater part of the public.

If these aesthetic criticisms were not enough, there were also immediate complaints in 1869 about the practical use of these new stamps. First, these 10 stamps of the Issue of 1869 were in several sizes, but they

were all said to be too small for daily use and were difficult to cancel properly. Second, there were complaints about the inferior quality of the gum used on the stamps, which made them difficult to affix to envelopes—this, of course, has been a periodic complaint about various stamps throughout the history of the adhesive postage stamp.



The ten 1869 Pictorial Issue designs. Note that Scott lists 11 numbers, Scott 112-122, including Types I and II of the 15¢, Scott 118 and 119.



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Yesterday in Mekeel's, National Issue:

The U.S. Postage Stamp, 1870-1900, Part 2

by Lowell S. Newman & Peter T. Rohrbach (From Mekeel's Weekly, Oct. 12, 1990 with images added)

When James Creswell inherited the post of Postmaster General from Alexander Randall in March of 1869 he found that he had inherited an immediate problem: the new stamps then being issued. And this was no minor problem for the new Grant Administration, because in that pre-electronic age the postage stamp was a vital and daily tool in the daily life of Americans who used the postal system as the main vehicle of communication, both inter-city and intra-city.

Creswell, dealing with public dislike of the 1869 issue, made this one if his first orders of business in the new administration, and in his retrospective report of 1870 he wrote:

"The adhesive stamps adopted by my predecessor in 1869, having failed to give satisfaction to the public, on account of their small size, their unshapely form, the inappropriateness of their designs, the difficulty of cancelling them effectually, and the inferior quality of the gum used in the manufacture, I found it necessary in April last, to issue new stamps, of larger size, superior quality of gum, and improved designs."

The government at that time was still issuing stamps which were printed by private firms under contract to the government, and it would continue to deal with a series of these private firms over the next two decades, until 1894 when U.S. postage stamps first began to be printed by the government's own Bureau of Engraving. Creswell had discovered that the contract which Alexander Randall, his predecessor, had signed with the National Bank Note Company of New York City—a four-year contract which ran until 1873—contained a provision that *the stamps could be changed during the life of the contract and new designs and plates furnished at the pleasure of the Postmaster General.*

Creswell exercised the option he found in the extant contract with the National Bank Note Company and ordered the production of a new issue. He wanted new stamps that would be of larger size, improved adhesiveness, and which would display heads in profiles of "distinguished Americans". The portraits for the figures on these stamps were selected, as Creswell reported, "from marble busts of acknowledged excellence."

This new issue—to be known as the Issue of 1870—was first announced publicly in September of 1869, but they were not ready for distribution until early 1870. It is generally accepted that all denominations in the issue were issued in April 1870 (except for the 7¢, issued in April 1871) and that the first date of issue for any of the denominations was April 12, 1870.

There are 11 stamps in this issue, with denominations ranging from 1¢ to 90¢. They were no-nonsense stamps which seemed to have gained immediate acceptance among the populace of the 1870s. Complaints about the adhesive quality also seemed to have ceased with the issuance of these new stamps. Despite the many different denominations, they were all of uniform size—each was 20mm by 25mm—and all were larger than the varying size stamps of the Issue of 1869, which had ranged from the 1¢ stamps of 20-1/4 mm. by 20-1/4 mm to the 10¢ stamp of 20mm. by 19-3/4 mm. Probably most important was the return to designs showing individual portraits on the stamps, rather than the pictorial scenes on the Issue of 1869. They were familiar, work-a-day stamps. And the people liked them.

The 11 stamps of the Issue of 1870 were:

One cent. Features a traditional profile bust of Benjamin Franklin, facing to the left, as do all the figures in this Issue. There is a border of scroll work and foliated ornaments around the Franklin picture. The words U.S. POSTAGE are in a curved panel over the picture; and the words ONE and CENT appear at the bottom, separated by the numeral 1 in an ornate, heavy-faced figure. During the various printings in the years in which this stamp was issued it appeared in colors of ultramarine, pale ultramarine, and dark ultramarine.



Sc. 134

Two Cent. A profile bust of Andrew Jackson, after the Powers' statue, resting on a shield in an oval medallion. The words U.S. POSTAGE appear in an ornamented tablet on the top of the picture; and at the bottom the words TWO and CENTS, divided by the denomination, a numeral 2.

During the life of this stamp it was sometimes cut diagonally in two and used as a 1¢ stamp. This practice of bisecting stamps and using each section as half of the face value was an old one in postal history and had been accepted by post offices across the nation despite departmental regulations to the contrary.



Above, 1870 Ungrilled 2¢ Red Brown, Vertical Half Used as 1¢ (146b) tied across the cut by cork cancel on orange cover to Bidford Pa., with "Bidford Pa. Aug. 10" circular datestamp, scarce bisect on a locally used cover. Left, Sc. 135 "H" Grill block with National Bank Note Co. Imprint

It appeared over the years in red brown, pale red brown, and dark red brown.

Three Cent. Nearly the whole face of this stamp is a shield on which is placed a bust of George Washington in an oval frame, based upon Houdon's statue. A curved tablet at the top bears the words U.S. POSTAGE, and on a flowing ribbon at the bottom are the words THREE and CENTS, separated by a large numeral 3. It appeared in green, pale green, yellow green, and deep green. The postage rate in 1870 for first class mail was 3¢ per half ounce, and so this became the most used stamp of the Issue of 1870.



Sc. 136

Six Cent. A bust of Abraham Lincoln in an oval medallion. The source of this Lincoln bust has been a matter of disagreement among philatelists. In a panel over the picture appear the words U.S. POSTAGE, and on a waved ribbon at the bottom are the words SIX and CENTS, separated by a large numeral 6. It was printed in carmine, pale



1870 6¢ Carmine "H" Grill (Sc. 137) tied by clear strike of blue 4-bar square grid cancel, with matching "Chicago Ill. Jul. 29" circular datestamp on double-weight cover to Bristol Mills Me.

Page 9, 6¢ Carmine "I" Grill (Sc. 137A) tied by circle of Vs, also with red "New York Jul. 31" (1872) circular datestamp on blue folded letter to Wolverhampton, England, receiving backstamp, docketed at left, a rare example of the 6¢ I Grill on cover.

carmine, and carmine rose. Since this denomination was twice the first class rate it was frequently used on doubleweight letters and on a number of different foreign mailings.

Seven Cents.

A large rectangular tablet on which rests an oval medallion containing a profile bust of Edwin Stanton, Secretary of War during the Civil War, who had died in the preceding year. A curved panel on the top bears the words SEVEN and CENTS, separated by the numeral 7.

It was printed in vermillion and deep vermillion. It had been originally designed for pre-paid foreign mail, and as we shall see, did not appear for almost a year after the first stamps of this issue. It was to have limited use in the 1870s.



1871 7¢ Vermillion, 11 x 14 Point Essay Grill, Points Down (unlisted 138-E), extremely rare and possibly unique, believed to originate from Charles F. Steel (inventor and patent holder for grilling device), ex Earl of Crawford collection.



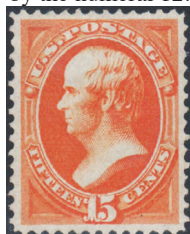
1870 10¢, Sc. 139

Ten Cents. A large shield on which rests a profile bust of a young Thomas Jefferson in an oval medallion, with the words U.S. POSTAGE above, and TEN and CENTS below, separated by the numeral 10. It appeared in brown, yellow brown, and dark brown during the printing contract until 1873.

Twelve Cents. On a lined rectangular frame is a panel with an oval medallion bearing a profile bust of Henry Clay, the great American statesman who had been Secretary of State under John Quincy Adams in 1825. On a curve above are the words U.S. POSTAGE, and below the words TWELVE and CENTS, separated by the numeral 12. Printed in a dull violet.



1870 12¢ Dull Violet, Sc. 140



1870 15¢, Sc. 140

Fifteen Cents. Another rectangular frame with an oval medallion bearing a bust of one of the most revered American political figures of the 1840s, Daniel Webster. In a curve above are the words U.S. POSTAGE, and below the words FIFTEEN and CENTS, separated by the numeral 15. Printed in orange, bright orange, and deep orange.

Twenty Four Cent. This is the most distinctive and graphically elaborate stamp of the issue.

It features an elliptical medallion with a profile bust of General Winfield Scott, commander of U.S. Forces during the Mexican War of 1846-48.

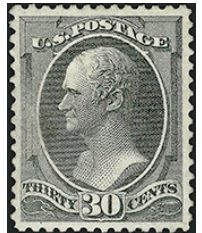


24¢ purple, left to right: 1870 with "H" grill, Sc. 142, unknown mint; 1870 without grill, Sc. 153; the unique 1873 Continental, Sc. 164

(Incidentally, the new President, Grant, had served under Scott as a young officer during that war.) The numeral 24 appears in each of the upper corners; there are 13 five-pointed stars; in the lower left is a flag and a piece of field artillery; in the lower right a stack of muskets; the words U.S. POSTAGE are worked in the stars; and the words TWENTY FOUR and CENTS appear below the portrait.

The stamp was printed in purple and dull purple. It was one of the least used stamps of the Issue and some historians have speculated that perhaps this stamp was not distributed in April of 1870 with the rest of the Issue, but rather at a somewhat later date.

Thirty Cent. This stamp features a heavy beveled tablet on which is placed an elliptical medallion bearing a bust of Alexander Hamilton. The words U.S. POSTAGE appear above the portrait, and below the words THIRTY and CENTS, separated by the numeral 30. It appeared in both black and full black.



1870 30¢, Sc. 143



1870 90¢, Sc. 144

Ninety Cent. This stamp, like the 24¢ stamp, has a little more elaborate design than the rest of the stamps in the Issue.

The theme is nautical, just as the theme of the 24¢ stamp is military. An elliptical medallion shows a profile bust of the naval officer Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry. The medallion is bounded by a rope, and a five-pointed star appears in each upper corner. In each lower corner appear the bottom parts of an anchor. The words U.S. POSTAGE are on the top of the medallion, and on the bottom the words NINETY and CENTS, separated by the numeral 90. This top value stamp of the Issue appeared in carmine and dark carmine.

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