

# United States Official Stamps, 1873 - 1884



After years of abuse, Congress abolished the franking privilege in 1873 and authorized official stamps to be prepared for the Executive Office and its subordinate departments. In less than three months, the Continental Bank Note Company adapted the designs of the regular issues to produce 90 different stamps by July 1. A distinctive frame design and color was assigned to each department.

This was by far the most elaborate series of official stamps ever produced by any government: the expedient solution elsewhere was to produce a generic set or

simply overprint the regular issues. Two supplemental 24¢ values for Treasury and Agriculture were issued later that year. Stamped envelopes were also prepared for the Post Office and War departments. The stamp agent sent Post Office stamps directly to postmasters across the country but the other departments requisitioned their stamps on a quarterly basis and then distributed them to the field offices. Official stamps were valid only on government mail and were never sold to the public, so stamp-gatherers found assembling this long series a challenge. They could however purchase the special printings of 1875, which were ungummed and overprinted "Specimen" to discourage postal use. Official postal stationery and the special printings are outside the scope of this exhibit.

Between 1873 and 1877, official stamps accounted for 4.3% of the postage sold in this country. The original projected needs for many of these stamps was drastically overestimated. In 1877, Congress authorized the use of penalty franks, which was expanded to include field offices in 1879. During the transitional period when penalty franks and official stamps were valid concurrently, the use of official stamps declined steeply, and they were finally declared obsolete on July 5, 1884. Surplus stamps were supposed to be returned to the Post Office Department for destruction, but not all departments complied, and these remainders are the main source of unused stamps in collector hands today. At least 73 of the 117 stamps printed by Continental and American are rarer used than unused.

This exhibit focuses on how the official stamps were distributed and used across the country, with examples shown from every state and territory. Due to the scarcity of official covers, which were either purged from archives or discarded due to the unsentimental nature of their contents, cancellation studies of off-cover stamps have been utilized in order to tell the whole story. Because many of the higher value official stamps are not known to exist on cover, a special effort has been made to incorporate them with legible cancellations, to prove that offices outside of Washington, D. C. were furnished a complete set of official stamps and not just the lower values. Significant items are highlighted by triple matting.

At this time, over half the official mail emanated from the great departmental headquarters in the nation's capital. Outside Washington, D. C., the distribution of official stamps varied considerably from department to department. Some Executive letters were posted from President Grant's summer home in Long Branch, New Jersey, and the Department of State had a dispatch agent in New York for overseas mail. Navy stamps were used from yards along the Eastern seaboard, and Justice stamps were used from larger cities where U. S. Attorney Offices were located. Treasury

stamps were more widely dispersed, chiefly east of the Mississippi, in towns large enough to have a collector of Internal Revenue. Agriculture did not have field offices per se, but prestamped reply envelopes soliciting seed orders and crop reports were sent in from farmers across the land. The Post Office distributed official stamps to 33,780 postmasters across the country. Interior had Land Offices in most states and Indian Agents and surveyors in the Western territories. In the far West, usages of War stamps predominate, mailed from post offices in the forts established to protect the settlement routes from hostile Indians.

The period in which the official stamps were valid, 1873-1884, saw sweeping changes in the postmarking of mail and the canceling of postage stamps, and since with few exceptions the Post Office handled official mail in exactly the same manner as regular mail, a macrophilately study of official stamps can be used to show the decline of the hand-carved killer. In large cities with government-issue steel duplex cancelers, the obliterated gradually changed from carved cork or wooden insert plugs to cast steel target or ellipse devices incorporating a letter to identify a branch station or a numeral to identify a particular postal clerk. In smaller towns, where the postmasters were required to furnish their own cancelers, cut corks or pen cancellations were replaced by the commercial molded vulcanized rubber cancelers typified by the ubiquitous "Wheel of Fortune".

This change in canceling devices coincided roughly with the expanded use of penalty envelopes, which drastically curtailed the need for official stamps. Because they were distributed only to major cities, we would not expect to find strikes of the commercial rubber cancelers on Executive, State, Justice, or Navy stamps. They are also seldom found on Treasury or Post Office stamps, since both these departments had converted quickly to using penalty envelopes at their field offices. Instead, they are chiefly found on Interior stamps (extensive field office correspondence with private citizens, requiring supplemental postage), Agriculture (prestamped reply envelopes posted at small towns), and War (not cost-effective to print penalty envelopes for each of their tiny far-flung Fort post offices, so they continued using official stamps up until the bitter end).

## Exhibit Organization

- I. **Design Evolution of the Official Stamps** - essays, trial color proofs, plate proofs, issued stamps, plate and printing varieties: 14 pages.
- II. **Washington, D. C. Usages** - chronological by cancellation type, followed by rate studies: 37 pages.
- III. **Major City Usages** - in order of size, including New York, Philadelphia, Boston, New Orleans, Chicago and Cincinnati: 20 pages.
- IV. **Postmarks** - organized by type (Railroad, Registry, County and Postmaster, Third Class Double Ovals) and region (Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Western States and Territories): 12 pages.
- V. **Carved Killers by Design Type** - letters, initials, year dates, numerals, pictorial, anchors, fraternal, paddlewheels, crossroads, radial geometrics, grids, leaves, crosses, shields, jack-o-lanterns, stars, color canceling inks, used multiples: 24 pages.
- VI. **Cast Killers by Design Type** - stars, grids, fancy commercial rubber handstamps, initials, pinwheels, Maltese crosses, targets, bullseyes, rate markers, bottle stoppers, steel ellipses: 12 pages.