

Synopsis: United States Large Numeral Postage Due Essays

Background: The United States introduced its first Postage Due stamps in 1879 approximately 20 years after they were invented by the French in 1859. While the concept of Postage Due on mail had been in place since the beginnings of the United States Post Office, it relied on the veracity of the postmaster to ensure that first the deficit was collected, and second that it was deposited in the Post Office account. This need for accountability caused the United States to finally adopt the French Postage Due concept. Postage Due stamps were required by postal law (under penalty of heavy fines and/or dismissal) to be affixed to all underpaid or other fee-required mail. Thus, the postmaster either had to have the collected money in his account for any Postage Due stamps used or the stamps in his inventory.

U. S. Postage Dues: The use of Postage Due stamps was approved by an Act of Congress on March 3, 1879 (HR Bill 6143). The exact design and denominations of the Postage Due stamps was left up to the discretion of the Postmaster General, but it was made clear that the use of the new Postage Due stamps was to commence on July 1, 1879. The use of Postage Due stamps was announced on May 5, 1879 in a Post Office Department circular (Form No. 3288) from A. D. Hazan, the Third Assistant Postmaster General. This circular also stated that the color of the new Postage Due stamps would be red-brown. Records indicate that the new Postage Due stamps were issued to postmasters starting on May 9, 1879 with strict orders that the stamps were not to be used before July 1, 1879.

Postage Due Stamp Production: To produce the new stamps, the Post Office Department turned to the American Bank Note Company, the holder of the United States stamp production contract at that time. Working quickly, the American Bank Note Company produced a model for the Postage Due stamps which was approved by A. D. Hazan (Third Assistant Postmaster General) on April 12, 1879 with the recommendation for minor changes. The model had a large central numeral as its vignette, thus giving rise to the Large Numeral Postage Due nomenclature. The minor changes suggested by Hazan were made and the American Bank Note Company set out to produce the United States' first Postage Due stamps. Plates of 200 stamps in the denominations 1¢, 2¢, 3¢, and 5¢ were made with the words "UNPAID POSTAGE" (as specified on the approved model) rather than "POSTAGE DUE" that would ultimately be on the issued stamps. Color selection by the Post Office Department was done from large die color proofs (on India paper backed by card) of the "UNPAID POSTAGE" design. Since the design of the issued stamps has the wording "POSTAGE DUE" these initial trial color proofs are now called essays. The American Bank Note Company must have been alerted to the fact that the design might be changed since they only assigned die numbers to the 1¢ denomination. A letter received by the American Bank Note Company on April 29, 1879 from A. D. Hazan changed the wording to "POSTAGE DUE" to better reflect the full scope of mail that required additional fees (not just underpaid mail). It should be noted that no essays were made for the 10¢, 30¢, and 50¢ Large Numeral Postage Due stamps since these stamps were issued several months after the final design had been adopted.

The Exhibit: This exhibit traces the development of the Large Numeral Postage Due stamps by examining the initial essays (the unique model and the large die essays) produced by the American Bank Note Company which were used to select not only the design, but also the color of the original United States Postage Due stamps. All known large die essays of the initial Large Numeral design are shown in this exhibit¹. These essays are quite rare with multiple examples known for only some of the color-value combinations. A previously unknown 2¢ essay in black-brown was discovered by the author and is shown in the exhibit. Through research, the author has shown that the wording change to “POSTAGE DUE” was made at the last minute and there was no time for proofs of the final design to be made and circulated back to the Post Office for approval². Most proofs (of the final design) available today were made after the initial Postage Due stamps were issued¹.

There were further essays made from the original "UNPAID POSTAGE" dies, including essays close cut, cut small, and essays on white ivory paper (prepared for use in the American Bank Note Company Executive Desk Books). The cut close essays are believed to have been cut from the initial large die essays. A representative sample of these cut small essays is presented in colors and denominations that are complementary to those of the large die essays. The cut small essays and the essays on white ivory were printed later as evidenced by the fact that all four denominations contain a die number. The cut small essays come in five colors and thus 20 cut small essays form a complete set. A complete set of the cut small essays is shown as part of this exhibit. It is estimated that less than five examples of each color value combination exist. It is believed that these cut small essays were used for presentation purposes-either by the Post Office Department or the American Bank Note Company.

The final series of essays printed on white ivory paper were incorporated into large desk books used by the Directors of the American Bank Note Company to show off their wares to prospective customers. These books were prepared around the year 1900, and it is estimated that only five or six books were made. These books, containing hundreds of proof and essay examples, were acquired by dealers and broken down into individual items for collectors. It is doubtful that any intact books or pages, for that matter, exist. This exhibit includes all the color-value combinations for the white ivory essays (16 in number). It also presents two images of intact pages from a director's desk book indicating where specific essays in this collection were located. A complete set (4) of the 5¢ denomination of the white ivory essays with the signatures of the designer and engraver are also part of this exhibit. These are believed to be unique.

The exhibit ends with a final woodcut essay for the 5¢ Postage Due stamp. It is of unknown origin and believed to be unique. It was described by Mason in 1912³ and illustrated by Brazer in his epic book⁴. The copy in the exhibit is the Brazer listing copy.

References:

1. Harry K. Charles, Jr., *United States Postage Due Stamp Essays, Proofs, and Specimens*, The Collectors Club of Chicago, 2013, pp. 14-33.
2. Harry K. Charles, Jr., *United States Postage Due Stamp Essays, Proofs, and Specimens*, The Collectors Club of Chicago, 2013, pp. 56-57.
3. Edward H. Mason, *More Essays for United States Postage Due Stamps*, Philadelphia: Percy McGraw Mann, April 1912, p. 13 (Type 140A)
4. Clarence W. Brazer, *Essays for U. S. Adhesive Stamps*, American Philatelic Society, 1941, pp. 292-295.