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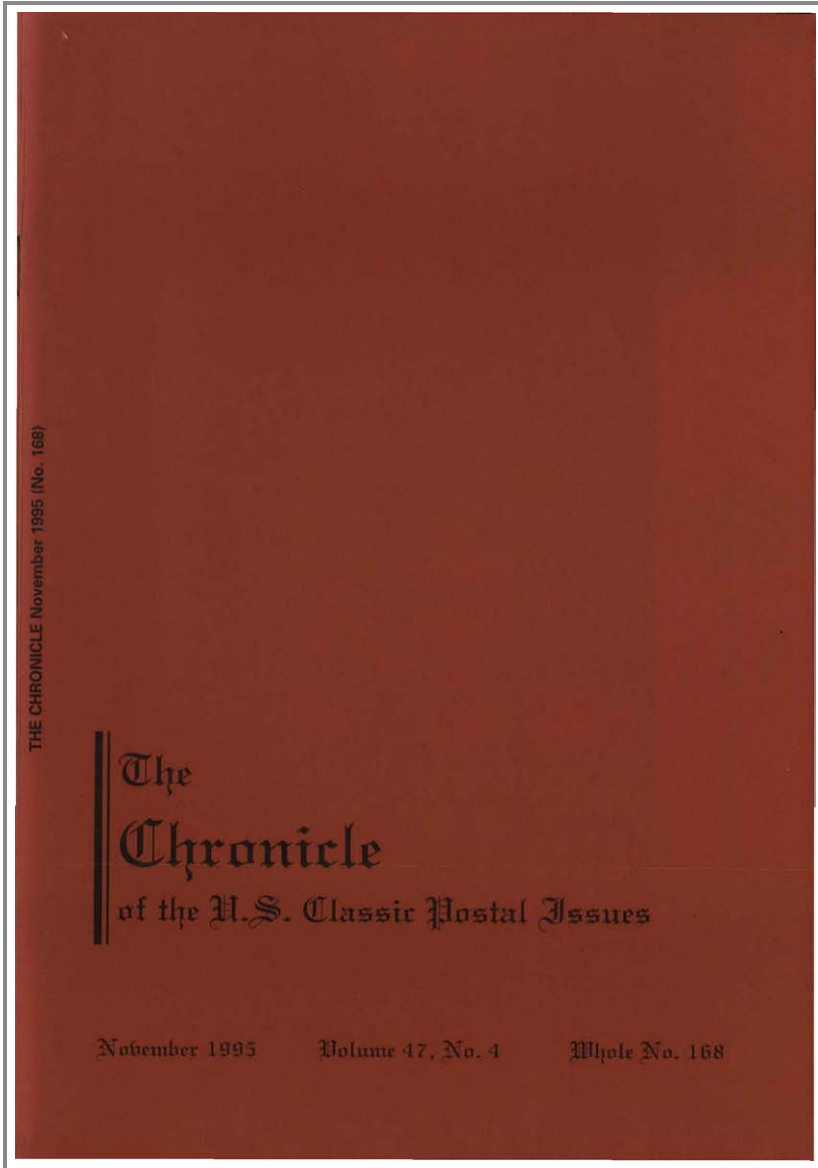


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THE DESIGN EVOLUTION OF THE UNITED STATES OFFICIAL STAMPS

ALAN C. CAMPBELL

Introduction

For many years, collectors of official stamps have been fighting entrenched prejudices against these “back-of-the-book” issues. Because their designs were adapted from the regular issue Bank Note stamps and because a single color was used for all denominations of a single department, they are often criticized for being derivative and monotonous in appearance. One prominent collector, whose exhibit had just won the grand prize at an APS national show, was informed that he was unlikely to fare well in international competition, the importance of his material being debatable since these stamps were never used by the general public. So much for the romance of covers addressed in the hand of President Ulysses S. Grant or Rutherford B. Hayes and franked with the special stamps prepared for their exclusive use!

The great scarcity of surviving official covers might incline the casual observer to conclude that the volume of mail carried by these stamps was relatively slight and insignificant, but this was definitely not the case. Prior to the introduction of penalty envelopes in 1877, official stamps accounted for 4.3% of the total face value of all postage stamps issued in this country. For the higher values, 6¢ and above, the proportion was much higher: 19.6%. These figures were arrived at by comparing the total requisitions for official stamps in the fiscal years 1874-1877 with the prorated figures for the Continental Bank Note Company regular issues over the same period, based on the quantities indicated in Brookman.¹ Between 1873 and 1879, Continental delivered to the stamp agent 312,000 copies of the 90¢ Treasury stamp alone, fully 59% more than the 90¢ regular issue over the same period.

So in the hope of earning some respect at last for these stamps (the downtrodden “Rodney Dangerfields” of U. S. philately), this article will address certain basic questions about their much accelerated schedule of production. Because the archives of the American Bank Note Company (Continental’s successor), dispersed at public auctions in 1990, contained no pertinent documents, and because the annual reports of Postmaster General Creswell tend to be laconic at best, the explanations advanced here will of necessity be speculative in nature. We will examine universal precedents for official stamps, political considerations at the time of their issuance, the rapid evolution of their designs, the logic behind the choice of colors, the sequence of die and plate production, the cause for certain amusing inconsistencies in engraving, and the cost of production.

International Precedents for Official Stamps

In an overview of worldwide philately, the United States official stamps of 1873 constitute by a wide margin the most elaborate production for its intended purpose before or since. The potential for abuse in either a free-franking system or a system where regular postage stamps are furnished gratis to government officials is a universal problem which every postal administration at one time or another has had to confront. To understand the motivations behind the creation of the U. S. official stamps, it is necessary to review alternative strategies developed in other countries prior to 1873. This is not to suggest that any of the foreign schemes served as a direct model for our own system, even though the Postmaster General might have had a passing familiarity with some of them, through the

¹Lester G. Brookman, *The 19th Century Postage Stamps of the United States*, Vol. II (New York: H.L. Lindquist, 1947).

open exchange of information with his counterparts in England, France and Germany just prior to the establishment of the General Postal Union in 1875. Lacking adequate documentation of the specific rationale behind the preparation of these stamps, we must attempt an explanation on the principle of parallel evolution, by extrapolating from other similar issues where archival materials have allowed the story to be more fully told.

The history of official stamps is as old as postage stamps themselves. In Great Britain, where abuse of the franking privilege was a serious problem, Sir Rowland Hill in 1840 had a stamp prepared for official use with the initials "V. R." (Victoria Regina) in the upper corners. 500,000 copies were printed but were withdrawn shortly before the announced date of issuance (see Figure 1).² Later, regular postage stamps were perforated with initials (and sometimes with a crown) and these controlled stamps were furnished for official use. In 1882, overprinted initials such as "I.R." (Inland Revenue) began to replace the perforated initials, and for twenty years this system of departmental overprints was expanded.



Figure 1. Great Britain's first official stamp (Scott #O1), unissued, 1840.



Figure 2. Indian official stamp (Scott #O10).

To Spain goes the honor of having printed the first stamps exclusively for official use, in 1854. Four values denominated by weight were supplied to the Royal House and a long list of ministries. These stamps shared a single coat-of-arms design and were all printed in black, but on differently colored papers. Prior to this, government mail had been franked with regular postage stamps. In 1866, the official stamps were replaced with a free frank system employing specially prepared handstamped cachets.³

In 1866, India introduced the expedient system of overprinting regular postage stamps with "SERVICE" in black and revenue stamps with "SERVICE POSTAGE" in green, and furnished both of these for official use (see Figure 2). Over time, the overprinting of regular postage stamps for official use proved to be the most popular way worldwide of discouraging the misappropriation of official stamps for private, illegitimate usage.

In South Australia, an extremely complicated and fascinating system was initiated in 1868, in which regular issue postage stamps were overprinted with the initials of 54 different departments (such as "L. A." for Lunatic Asylum and "P. A." for the Protector of Aborigines) and furnished free for official use. Prior to this, when regular stamps were furnished unoverprinted, there had been lax oversight and widespread misappropriation of stamps, which were sometimes then converted to cash (Dan Rostenkowski, take note!). In Figure 3, we illustrate one of the two surviving covers franked with the stamps overprinted "P.S." for the use of the Private Secretary. The stamps furnished for official use constituted a significant portion of all postage in South Australia, varying annually between 5.8% and 11.5%. Postmaster General J. W. Lewis, reporting on the success of his idea three months after it had been adopted, proudly stated:

²All foreign official stamps and covers illustrated courtesy of Ivy & Mader Philatelic Auctions, Inc., auctions June 28-30, 1995.

³Theo. Van Dam, *A Postal History of Spain*, Collectors Club Handbook No. 24 (New York: The Collectors Club, Inc., 1972), p. 107.



Figure 3. South Australian departmental stamps (Scott #O16PS), 4p regular issue overprinted "P.S.", used on cover from Adelaide, January 1, 1876.

The *initials* of the Departments being upon the stamps, has enabled a better check to be kept upon their improper use, than if the official sign had been a general one for service, as it enabled me to make enquiries at once, where there has been reason to suppose that official stamps were used for private correspondence, and in nearly all such instances a satisfactory explanation has been given.⁴

Lewis seems to have had a policy of zero tolerance for the misuse of official stamps, to the point of even opening mail from the Governor's Private Secretary to check if it was truly official business:

... since the official stamps have been initialled the clerks have on several occasions drawn my attention to their being affixed to letters from the Private Secretary's family and I now beg to forward an envelope addressed by that gentleman himself which covered a letter upon strictly private business.⁵

The printer for South Australia's stamps made the astonishing admission that he reserved his defective production—overinked, underinked, or misperforated sheets—to be overprinted for official use, thereby causing a real dilemma for specialist collectors in this area. The principal defect of this system was that it forced the Postmaster General to keep on hand a large number of stamps of every denomination for each department, so in 1874 the overprint was converted to a generic "O.S." (On Her Majesty's Service). In 1875, the departments finally began paying for the stamps they requisitioned, which in theory ought to have inspired the personnel in charge of the official stamps to be more vigilant about their misappropriation.

In 1871, Denmark prepared special stamps for official use. The design incorporated a small state seal, and a master die with no indication of value was used to produce three different values, whose colors corresponded to the central vignette of the bicolored regular

⁴A.R. Butler, *The Departmental Stamps of South Australia* (London: Royal Philatelic Society, London, 1978), p. 11.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 12.

issues (see Figure 4). Previously, government officials had enjoyed the privilege of free carriage of mail, but the system was abused, as attested by surviving *fri-bref* letters whose contents are clearly not of an official nature. When Iceland first issued its own stamps in 1873, the two official stamps produced were identical to the regular issue except for the abbreviation “PJON. FRIM” in the base of the oval (instead of “POSTFRIM”) and the different colors.⁶ The North German Postal District also issued a set of nine official stamps in 1870.



Figure 4. Danish official stamp (Scott #03a), 1871.

These predecessors of the United States official stamps demonstrate all the basic ways of differentiating official stamps from regular postage stamps: overprints, either generic (“O.S.” or “OFICIAL” or some variation thereon) or specific to a department or ministry; perforated initials, either generic or specific; and specially prepared official stamps. Argentina in 1913 adopted the system used by South Australia and Great Britain, overprinting regular issues with departmental initials. Most independent (as opposed to colonial) postal administrations at one time or another experimented with the concept of official stamps. Somewhat surprisingly, the only other country whose official stamps betray the slightest bit of artistic concern or imagination is Paraguay, which produced a set of seven stamps in 1886, a different design for each denomination, which were then overprinted “OFICIAL” diagonally on the front and had various control marks and letters printed on the back. Most countries, though, employed a uniform uninspired design for all values, so that by comparison the United States official stamps of 1873 are masterpieces of design and engraving.

Political Considerations in 1873

In order to fully understand why the United States official stamps were issued in the way they were, it is necessary to review the political climate in this country in 1873. President Grant’s second term stands midway in a long period of Republican supremacy (1861-1885) in which, due to the patronage system, bureaucracy personnel within the government was much stabilized. Although the evils of the patronage system were manifest to all and President Grant sought reform, it was not forthcoming until the Civil Service Commission was created in 1883. In this era, power in the federal government rested predominantly in the hands of Congress. While the departments carrying out the administrative work of government were technically part of the Executive branch, Grant took a passive role in their day-to-day operations and saw his main duty as making appointments. But even in this limited capacity, he was both inept and unlucky.

The post-war moral slump and rampant corruption in government came to a head in a series of scandals which focused closely on the immediate members of Grant’s cabinet during his second term. His private secretary, General Orville E. Babcock, was indicted in the investigation of the Whiskey Ring. His Secretary of the Treasury, William A. Richardson, guilty of gross negligence and incompetence in the case of the Sanborn contracts, was transferred to the Court of Claims. Grant nominated his Attorney General George E. Williams for Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, but had to withdraw the nomi-

⁶Ernest H. Wise, *Stamps of Denmark, Iceland, and Norway: The Earlier Issues* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1975), pp. 53-54.

nation after irregularities were discovered in his confirmation hearing. His Secretary of War, General William W. Belknap, was forced to resign before impeachment proceedings were brought over bribes taken from the award of a lucrative Indian post tradership. His Secretary of the Navy, George M. Robeson, was almost impeached for the conflicts of interest by which he enriched himself as a partner with various Navy suppliers. Vice Presidents Colfax and Wilson were disgraced in the scandal over the Credit Mobilier, and Grant's Second Assistant Postmaster General, Thomas J. Brady, was subsequently prosecuted in the trials over the star route frauds.

In this climate of pervasive corruption, it is no surprise to find that Congress did not trust the Executive departments any further than necessary. In order to prevent the misuse of public funds on lavish expenditures and unnecessary sinecures, Congress attempted to closely control the departments by means of meticulously itemized appropriation bills enacted by the House Committee on Appropriations and other competing committees, spelling out in minute detail the specific number of clerks and their salaries, the amount to be spent on horse feed, and even the amount to be spent on postage stamps.⁷

The flagrant and often hilarious abuses of the franking privilege have previously been well-documented.⁸ Congressmen, of course, were among the worst offenders. They too lost the franking privilege but were soon able to gain an increase in salary to offset their postage costs. It seems both hypocritical and vindictive that Congressmen should reserve for themselves the right to use (and abuse) regular postage stamps, while at the same time sanctimoniously requiring the untrustworthy bureaucrats in the Executive departments to use special official stamps. Still, it is important to bear in mind that Congress' primary motive in abolishing the franking privilege and replacing it with the new system of official stamps was reform, to prevent the misuse of public funds. Early in the 1870s, various plans were put forth to make the departments—and even divisions within the departments—accountable for their own mailing expenses. While a general set of official stamps, requisitioned and paid for on a quarterly basis by each department, would have solved the budget problem for the Post Office, it would not have provided the strict measure of security and accountability that was felt to be needed. To this end, an Act of Congress approved March 3, 1873 specified: "That the Postmaster General shall cause to be prepared a special stamp or stamped envelope, to be used only for official mail matter for *each* of the executive departments . . ."⁹ (Author's emphasis.) This and subsequent acts appropriated the funds necessary for each department to purchase its stamps on a quarterly basis. Then at the first session of the 43rd Congress held on January 5, 1874, the following resolution was passed:

Resolved, That the Secretaries of the Treasury, of State, of War, of the Navy, of the Interior Departments, the Postmaster-General, and the Attorney General, be requested to furnish the Senate with the number of officers and employs in or connected with their respective departments (classified so as to designate the name of the office) who are furnished directly or otherwise, with official postage stamps for the purpose of paying postage on official correspondence, and also to state whether or not it is customary when letters are written to persons not officers or employs of their respective departments asking for information, to enclose official stamps for return postage.¹⁰

(to be continued)

⁷Leonard D. White, *The Republican Era: 1869-1901, A Study in Administrative History* (New York: Macmillan, 1958).

⁸Fred Boughner, "Official Antics," *Linn's Stamp News*, issues of Oct. 23, Nov. 6, Nov. 20 and Dec. 4, 1978.

⁹John N. Luff, *The Postage Stamps of the United States* (New York: Scott Stamp and Coin Co., Ltd., 1902), pp. 201-02.

¹⁰Rae D. Ehrenberg, "Authorized Use of the U.S. Official Stamps by the Various Departments," *33rd American Philatelic Congress Book* (n.p., American Philatelic Congress, Inc., 1967), p. 36.