

Department of Justice

United States Official Stamps, 1873-1884

After the much-abused franking privilege was abolished effective July 1, 1873, the Executive departments were required to use special Official stamps. The Continental Bank Note Company hastily produced this elaborate series, modifying National's original dies for the large Bank Note regular issues. A distinctive frame design and color was assigned to each department. Requisitioned quarterly from the Stamp Agent in New York, these stamps were valid only on official business mail and were never sold to the general public. In general, official mail was handled through the same channels as regular mail, and the same rates were applicable. In 1877, Congress authorized use of penalty franks, which was expanded to include field offices in 1879. During the transitional period, usage of Official stamps gradually diminished, and they were declared obsolete on July 5, 1884.

The Department of Justice, newly established in 1870 and headed by the Attorney General, was provided ten denominations, omitting only the 7¢ value (since little Justice foreign mail was anticipated). The Justice stamps were purple, consistent with the color of a doctorate hood for a degree in law. They were distributed to 172 U.S. District Attorneys, U.S. Marshals, and Clerks of the U.S. Courts; still, fewer Official stamps were used than by any other department, except for the Executive Office itself. Official stamps were sometimes furnished by this department for return mailings, although no such usages have survived. The Department of Justice converted quickly to using penalty envelopes and requisitioned only 2000 2¢ and 3¢ stamps after the fiscal year 1879.

Due to the nature of their contents, Department of Justice covers were generally legal-sized and did not warrant being saved for sentimental reasons. Although usages were widely dispersed across the country between 1873 and 1879, more than half the mail originated in Washington, D.C. Covers returned to the main office there, often had their stamps skinned off by clerks to be sold to schoolboys. Only about one hundred twenty-five intact covers from this department have survived. A large percentage of these derive from a single correspondence to Clarksburg, West Virginia. No registered covers, no foreign destination covers, and no mixed frankings have been reported.

This exhibit begins with regressive die essays, trial color die and plate proofs and continues with die and plate proofs in the issued purple color. The issued stamps and special printings are then displayed in singles and multiples. A selection of cancellations is followed by the most comprehensive holding of Justice covers ever assembled, including all denominations and paper varieties. Highlights of this exhibit include the only recorded blocks of the 15¢ and 30¢ values, the only recorded 90¢ pair, a complete sheet of the 1¢ special printing, six different "SEPCIMEN" errors, the earliest recorded usages on cover of the 1¢ and 3¢ stamps, a 3¢ cover from St. Louis addressed to the Indian Territory, one of three recorded 3¢ soft papers on cover, the only recorded 6¢ soft paper on cover, one of four recorded 10¢ covers, three of nine recorded 12¢ covers, three of nine recorded 15¢ covers, one of two recorded 24¢ covers, two of three recorded 30¢ covers, and the only recorded 90¢ cover.

Free Frank - Unauthorized Private Usage



William Wirt served as Attorney General from 1817 to 1829 during the administrations of Presidents James Monroe and John Quincy Adams. This private letter to his son represents a typical misuse of the franking privilege.