

# Department of Justice

## United States Official Stamps, 1873-1884



After the much-abused free 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.

Although usages were fairly widely dispersed across the country, more than half the mail probably originated in Washington, D.C. Covers returned to the main office in Washington, D.C. often had their stamps skinned off by clerks to be sold to schoolboys. Official stamps were sometimes furnished by this department for return mailings, although no such usages have survived. No registered covers, foreign destinations, or mixed frankings in combination with regular issues have been reported. The Department of Justice converted quickly to using penalty envelopes and requisitioned only 2000 2¢ and 3¢ stamps after the fiscal year 1879.

### Exhibit Structure:

This is the only exhibit ever devoted exclusively to the stamps of the Department of Justice. Assembled over the past twenty-five years, it includes material from most of the great official collections: Ackerman, Ehrenberg, Lewenthal, Ward, Burrus, Sheriff and the Weill brothers. A large size page format was chosen so that oversized material such as sheets and the legal size covers typical for this department could be gracefully accommodated. The exhibit follows a traditional organization, showing in order — regressive die essays, trial color proofs, proofs, issued stamps, special printings, cancellation studies and covers.

**Essays:** Although a unique artist's model for the 3¢ value has survived, no essays per se exist for this department. Five regressive die essays dramatically illustrate how Continental prepared dies for official stamps by modifying National's original dies for large Bank Note regular issues.

**Trial Color Proofs:** A large die trial color proof of the 3¢ value in green confirms that in the earliest planning stages, the official stamps were to be printed in the same colors as regular issues. The plate for this value was also printed in a wide range of experimental colors, all of which are displayed. The Goodall small die trial color proofs and the Atlanta trial color plate proofs were both printed later for display purposes.

**Proofs:** All proofs printed in the issued purple color are shown, including large die proofs, both sets of small die proofs ("Roosevelt" and "Pan-Pacific"), plate proofs on India paper, and plate proofs on card. An intact sheet of the 1¢ plate proof shows many skewed entries.

**Issued Stamps:** Unused multiples are noteworthy. Double transfers for the 10¢ and 15¢ stamps have never been seen by modern scholars. A comprehensive study of varieties is included.

- Only recorded plate number block of the 6¢
- Only recorded plate number and imprint block of the 10¢
- Only recorded blocks of the 15¢ and 30¢
- Only recorded pair of the 90¢
- Discovery copy of the 24¢ short transfer

**Special Printings:** Although collectors could not buy official stamps at the Post Office, they could order special printings from the Office of the Third Assistant Postmaster General. Because of the defacing "Specimen" overprint, these were not popular

- Complete sheet of 1¢ second printing on ribbed paper
- The 2¢ "SEPCIMEN" error in a block of eight
- Only recorded examples of the 12¢ and 24¢ "SEPCIMEN" errors
- Both recorded examples of the 15¢ "SEPCIMEN" error

**Cancellations:** Since few Justice stamps were used after 1879, strikes of the commercial cancelers of the early 1880's are seldom encountered. This exhibit includes an exhaustive treatment of cut cork cancellations. In addition to the familiar Washington, D.C. colored canceling inks (red, purple, and indigo), the blue ink favored by postmasters in the mid-West (Chicago, Cleveland, and Cincinnati) is prominently displayed.

**Covers:** Only about one hundred twenty-five intact covers survive. This is the most comprehensive holding ever assembled and includes all denominations and paper varieties. Special sections are devoted to U.S. Attorney and Solicitor of the Treasury usages.

- Earliest recorded usages of the 1¢ and 3¢ stamps
- Two of nine recorded 2¢ covers
- 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 (Repaired)
- Two of three recorded 30¢ covers
- Only recorded 90¢ cover