

United States Official Stamps

1873 — 1884

The United States Official stamps were issued to the nine government departments of the Executive Branch (including the Executive Mansion) for use beginning July 1, 1873. Congress had abolished the free franking mail privilege for government officials after widespread abuses produced huge postal deficits, estimated by the Postmaster General at more than \$5,000,000.00, approximately 90 percent of the Department's 1873 total budget. The Postmaster General authorized the Continental Bank Note Company to prepare Official stamps on hard paper. Designs were quickly adapted from the regular issue banknote stamps which Continental was then printing, with denominations assigned to each department according to its anticipated needs.

Official stamps were not popular, therefore, on March 3, 1877, penalty franks were authorized for department offices only in Washington, D.C. Some departments converted immediately, while the Executive used remaining stamps left over from the Grant administration for personal mail. Others used Official stamps and penalty franks simultaneously during the transitional period (1877-1884). In 1879, despite the expanded use of penalty franks, certain needed values of six Departments were printed again, by the American Bank Note Company, on soft porous paper. The use of penalty franks was gradually expanded to include field offices, and the use of Official stamps was finally discontinued on July 5, 1884. Penalty envelopes were used henceforth.

Official announcement

This exhibit is organized by department in the same sequence as the displayed autograph sheet of President U.S. Grant's cabinet. Eight departments begin with the original watercolor sketch for the design signed by the artist Joseph Claxton. Examples of all known essays are shown including the evolution of the Post Office stamps from portrait head to numerals. Selected large die trial color proofs, Goodall small die trial color proofs and Atlanta trial color plate proofs are also included. The two cent Navy green/black trial color plate proofs are presented in all surviving forms. Complete card plate proof sheets for dollar value State Department stamps are shown, as well as the most complete collection of inverted center State Department cardboard proofs ever assembled. All 117 issued stamps are displayed unused as singles or multiples along with selections of the most complete set of unused blocks (109 of 111 known) ever formed, including the only recorded blocks of the one cent Executive, 24 cent Interior on soft paper, 90 cent Treasury on soft paper, and two and five dollar State. Plate and printing varieties exhibited include double transfers, imperforate multiples, three cent Post Office printed on both sides, three cent War double impressions, and the unique 90 cent Navy double impression. Selected sets of special printings are displayed along with examples of the "SEPCIMEN" error in each of the departments where found, including the only known complete error sets from the Department of Agriculture and State. Bracketed numbers under the "SEPCIMEN" errors indicate quantities newly researched as existing.

Cancellation varieties are illustrated for each department with emphasis on military fort postmarks and the only recorded New York foreign mail cancellation on cover. Official covers are much scarcer than regular issue banknote covers because their size and contents did not generally recommend saving for sentimental reasons, except for Presidential mail. Special attention is placed on mixed frankings, registry usages, forwarded covers and foreign destinations. Highlights include China, Japan and Hawaii destinations, combination covers of the State Department six, 30 and 90 cent to Mexico and the famous library parcel front to Germany, franked with a 10 cent, 17 copies of the 30 cent and the only known dollar value (\$2) so used.