

The United States Reference Manual

The First Postage Stamps Used in the United States



Sc. 40L1

6LB1

6LB7

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L01

As the title suggests, this Reference Manual section does not refer only to the 1847 General Issue. Instead, it is an attempt to put that issue in perspective, along with other issues of that era that were created to evidence payment of postage.

These excerpts from a summary at Wikipedia will be a good place to start:

The introduction of postage stamps in the UK in May 1840 was received with great interest in the United States...however, it would be private enterprise that brought stamps to the U.S.

On February 1, 1842 a new carrier service called “City Despatch Post” began operations in New York City, introducing the first adhesive postage stamp ever produced in the western hemisphere, which it required its clients to use for all mail. This stamp was a 3¢ issue bearing a rather amateurish drawing of George Washington, printed from line engraved plates in sheets of 42 images.

Alexander M. Greig was advertised as the post’s “agent,” and as a result, historians and philatelists have tended to refer to the firm simply as “Greig’s City Despatch Post,” making no mention of [the company founder, Henry Thomas Windsor.] In another innovation, the company placed mail-collection boxes around the city for the convenience of its customers.

A few months after its founding, the City Despatch Post was sold to the U.S. Government, which renamed it the “United States City Despatch Post.” The government began operation of this local post on August 16, 1842, under an Act of Congress of some years earlier that authorized local delivery. Greig, retained by the Post Office to run the service, kept the firm’s original Washington stamp in use, but soon had its lettering altered to reflect the name change. In its revised form, this issue accordingly became the first postage stamp produced under the auspices of a government in the western hemisphere.

An Act of Congress of March 3, 1845 (effective July 1, 1845), established uniform (and mostly reduced) postal rates throughout the nation, with a uniform rate of five cents for distances under 300 miles and ten cents for distances between 300 and 3000 miles.

However, Congress did not authorize the production of stamps for nationwide use until 1847; still, postmasters realized that standard rates now made it feasible to produce and sell ‘provisional’ issues for prepayment of uniform postal fees, and printed these in bulk. Such provisionals included both prepaid envelopes and stamps...

Eleven cities printed provisionals stamps in 1845 and 1846:

- Alexandria, Virginia
- Annapolis, Maryland
- Baltimore, Maryland



What some collectors regard as the first U.S. postage stamp, Sc. 6LB1, on its August 16, 1842 First Day of Use.

- Boscawen, New Hampshire
- Brattleboro, Vermont
- Lockport, New York
- Millbury, Massachusetts
- New Haven, Connecticut
- New York, New York
- Providence, Rhode Island
- St. Louis, Missouri

The 1845 Congressional act did, in fact, raise the rate on one significant class of mail: the so-called “drop letter”, i. e., a letter delivered from the same post office that collected it. Previously one cent, the drop letter rate became two cents.

The first stamp issues authorized by an act of Congress were approved on March 3, 1847 [for use beginning July 1, 1847]. The earliest known use of the Franklin 5¢ is July 7, 1847, while the earliest known use of the Washington 10¢ is July 2, 1847. Remaining in postal circulation for only a few years, these issues were declared invalid for postage on July 1, 1851....

The use of stamps was optional: letters could still be sent requiring payment of postage on delivery. Indeed, the post office did not issue any 2-cent value for prepaying drop letters in 1847, and these continued to be handled as they had been....

The post office had become so efficient by 1851 that Congress was able to reduce the common rate to three cents...necessitating a new issue of stamps. Moreover, the common rate now applied to letters carried up to 3,000 miles. This rate, however, only applied to prepaid mail: a letter sent without a stamp still cost the recipient five cents—clear evidence that Congress envisioned making stamp use mandatory in the future (it did so in 1855).

The 1-cent drop-letter rate was also restored, and Post Office plans did not at first include a stamp for it; later, however, an essay for a 6-cent Franklin double-weight stamp was converted into a drop-letter value. Along with this 1¢ stamp, the post office initially issued only two additional denominations in the series of 1851: 3¢ and 12¢, the three stamps going on sale that July and August. Since the 1847 stamps no longer conformed to any postal rate, they were declared invalid after short period during which the public could exchange old stamps for new ones.

[We should also point out that the Wikipedia summary does not mention that when the 1851 stamps were issued in three denominations—1¢, 3¢ and 12¢—the Post Office also created a special “Carrier Stamp”, the non-denominated (1¢) Franklin Carrier, with Franklin facing left to distinguish it from the postage stamp on which he faces right. We will return to this subject when we get to the Official Carriers.]

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