Did You Know?

The First United States Postage Stamps
By: Alex Gill

With the passage of the Congressional Act on March 3, 1847, the United States would create their first postage stamps following unprecedented demand for the nation's ever-expanding postal service. At the time, the United States was experiencing rapid economic growth and immigration from Europe prompting the need for better and faster means of communication. Although various cities issued provisional stamps, these stamps had distance and usage limitations thus creating a communication gap. In response, the U.S. Government sought to streamline mail delivery by issuing stamps that could be used throughout the country and the world.

New York City based Printing firm Rawdon, Wright, Hatch, and Edison renowned for printing banknotes were responsible for preparing the essays and engraved designs for the stamps. At the time, Postmaster General Cave Johnson wanted the stamps to memorialize recently deceased President Andrew Jackson on the 5-cent stamp and George Washington on the 10-cent stamp. However, in a letter dated March 20, 1847, written by Rawdon, Wright, Hatch and Edison, the printer decided a portrait of Benjamin Franklin, based on artwork James B. Longacre was more appropriate. After all, Benjamin Franklin was the first postmaster general appointed by the Continental Congress. The printer also explained Franklin would serve as a better icon because of his role in helping secure American Independence.

The stamps were first offered for sale on July 1, 1847 in New York with Boston receiving stamps the following day and additional cities in the following days. The 5-cent stamp paid for letters weight less than 1/2 oz and traveling up to 300 miles. However, the 10-cent stamp was used for deliveries to locations greater than 300 miles or twice the weight deliverable for the 5-cent stamp. When issued, the usage of stamps was optional as letters were sent requiring payment of postage on delivery. However, 3,700,000 copies of the 5-cent stamp and 865,000 copies of the 10-cent were sold.

By 1851, Congress was impressed by how efficient the post office had become and responded to reducing the common rate to three cents which would remain the same for over 30 years. To promote stamp usage, the three-cent common rate applied only to mail carried up to 3000 miles with prepaid Additionally, new stamps were issued in response and by 1851, Congress made usage of stamps a requirement for mail. With the issuance of new stamps and rates in 1851 the 1847 stamps did not meet postal rates and were declared invalid on July 1, 1851 and the public could exchange stamps for new ones.

It is believed both stamps were engraved by hand in steel and laid in sheets of 200 stamps. Existing copies of the 5-cent stamp are often found with poor impressions as result of the type of ink used contained pieces of quartz that eroded the steel plates. However, the 10-cent stamp is renowned for its strong impressions and exceptional engraved design. Today, the first stamps of the United States, their usages, and printing varieties are highly sought after by collectors and offer a window into the early history of mail delivery in the United States.