

U.S. Departmentals, 1873 to 1884

Reason for Departmentals

In 1775 a Free Franking privilege was granted for mail of Continental Congress members and soldiers. Over the years the use expanded and the privilege saw abuse, especially after the Civil War. On July 1, 1873, the franking privilege was discontinued. To provide an accounting of postal expenses, special postage stamps were issued for the Executive Branch of Government.

Production History

Over three months, 90 stamp designs were produced and printed for the President's Executive Office and the eight subordinate departments. Two additional values were added within two months. Regular Banknote issue portrait vignettes and value tablets were incorporated with new frames containing each department's name and associated symbols. Post Office stamps had large numerals to differentiate them from issues being sold to the public. Each set is a different color that in most cases is associated with the department. The Departmentals is without a doubt the most elaborate ever produced for exclusive government use in the world.

Over 11 years, 212 stamps were produced with 117 regular issues and 95 special printings. Initially printed on hard paper by Continental Banknote Co. and later on soft paper by the American Banknote Co. American used unaltered Continental plates. The special printings were sold to the public with overprints to prevent private use with no official use recorded.

Demise

As departments had to buy stamps out of their existing budgets an effort to eliminate their use began immediately after their release. Changes in postal regulations culminated with penalty clause mail in 1877, which slowly replaced the Departmentals. Since the 1879 American issue was produced after the start of penalty mail, only 25 values were printed. In 1879 the use of penalty clause mail increased and stamp use declined. In January 1882 the Attorney General ruled that penalty clause mail could not be used on mail from field offices to private citizens resulting in renewed use of stamps in field offices. On July 5, 1884, Departmental stamps were discontinued and saw limited use after this date but they were never declared invalid for use.

Exhibit organization: Executive is displayed first and subordinate departments follow in the order of their 1873 rank of importance as indicated on the following official notice. An introduction for each department provides department specific information. Selected essays and proofs start each section followed by stamps, plate multiples, production varieties, used multiples, cancels, and covers. Items with 5 or less recorded are highlighted with text and important items are additionally highlighted by a blue mat.

Depth and Research

As most contents had no sentimental value, covers were discarded and few survived. Over half of the covers were used in Washington, D.C., limiting the range of cancellations. Covers can be ranked by difficulty of acquisition with Agriculture first followed by Executive, Justice, Navy, and State. Unlike regular issues of the period, few high denomination covers have survived. For more than half of the values known on cover, less than ten covers are recorded.

The exhibit includes the most complete showing ever assembled in the following areas:

- Plate multiples
- Used multiples
- Values on cover
- Unique values on cover
- Foreign destinations
- Fort covers

Published and unpublished original research includes:

- Plate blocks and strips - number and largest recorded
- Used multiples - number and largest recorded
- Values on cover - number recorded per value
- Foreign destinations - number recorded to each
- Consular covers- number recorded from each consulate
- Fort covers - number recorded per fort

Regressive Die Proof

Signed D.S. Ronaldson, frame engraver

Similar dies with the portrait and value tablet were produced for all values except the 10¢, 24¢ and 90¢ values. Upon close examination of this 12¢ regressive die it is noted that the Continental secret mark in the foot of the “2” is present. Proving this regressive die was produced by the Continental Banknote Company for the production of Departmental stamps. The 6¢ Post Office incomplete engraving in the Post Office section is an example of this technique.