

Department of Justice

United States Official Stamps, 1873 - 1884



Historical Background: After the much-abused 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 the 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. Official stamps were sometimes furnished by this department for return mailings, although no such usages have survived. The Department of Justice converted quickly to using penalty envelopes and requisitioned only 2000 2¢ and 3¢ stamps after the fiscal year 1879.

The Exhibit: This is the first exhibit devoted exclusively to the stamps of the Department of Justice. The advantage of showing a single department is that it allows for the material to be shown comprehensively, whereas in the overall exhibit of all nine departments, there is room only for highlights. Although official stamps have received new prominence recently, viewers should not come away with the mistaken impression that material in this field is commonly available and easy to come by. This exhibit, assembled over the past twenty-five years, includes material from most of the great official collections: Ackerman, Ehrenberg, Lewenthal, Ward, the Weill brothers, Burrus, and Sheriff. It follows a traditional organization, showing in order essays, trial color proofs, proofs, issued stamps, special printings, cancellation studies, and covers. 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.

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 are shown instead, to dramatically illustrate how Continental prepared the dies for the new official stamps by adapting and modifying National's original dies for the large Bank Note regular issue. The most significant of these is the 12¢ value, where secret marks in the lobes of the numeral "2" prove conclusively that these essays were not printed as the original dies were being engraved at National in 1870.

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 the regular issues. The plate for this value was also printed in a wide range of experimental colors, all of which are displayed. The small die trial color proofs ("Goodalls") and the trial color plate proofs ("Atlantas") 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 is included, showing many skewed entries.

Issued Stamps: Especially noteworthy here are the unused multiples, including the only recorded plate number block of the 6¢, the only recorded plate number and imprint block of the 10¢, the only recorded blocks of the 15¢ and 30¢, and the only recorded pair of the 90¢. By far the most significant of the plate and printing varieties shown is the discovery copy of the 24¢ Justice short transfer. The double transfers listed in the catalogue for the 10¢ and 15¢ stamps have never been seen by modern scholars.

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. Of special interest is a complete sheet of the 1¢ second printing on ribbed paper, showing the small dotted “i” variety at two positions. Six different “SEPCIMEN” errors are displayed, including the 2¢ in a block of eight, the only recorded examples of the 12¢ and 24¢, and both known copies of the 15¢.

Cancellations: 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. 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 the cancellation types found on Justice department values. In addition to the familiar Washington, D.C. colored canceling inks (red, 1873-1875; purple, 1878; indigo, 1879-1880), the blue ink (in various shades) favored by postmasters in the mid-West (Chicago, Cleveland, and Cincinnati) is prominently displayed.

Covers: Only about one hundred twenty-five intact covers have survived, many of them from a single correspondence to Clarksburg, West Virginia. Shown here is the most comprehensive holding of these covers ever assembled including all denominations and paper varieties. Due to the nature of their contents, Department of Justice covers were generally legal-sized and did not warrant being saved for sentimental reasons. Although the majority of usages are from Washington, D.C., covers from the U. S. Attorneys in the Northern District (Chicago) of Illinois, the Eastern (Detroit) and Western Districts (Grand Rapids) of Michigan, and the Eastern District (Saint Louis) of Missouri are also shown. Highlights include the earliest recorded usages on cover 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, two of three recorded 30¢ covers (the third having been stolen with the Starnes collection in 1983), and the only recorded 90¢ cover. The spectacular mailing face on a tied bundle of court documents, franked with four 30¢ stamps and three 90¢ stamps, has the highest total postage of any intact departmental cover, and is one of only three recorded intact 90¢ official covers.

No registered covers, no foreign destination covers, and no mixed frankings in combination with regular issues have been reported.

Selected Bibliography:

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John N. Luff, *The Postage Stamps of the United States*.

Title page, synopsis, two example pages and an award history may be accessed on the worldwide web:
<http://www.franadams.com>