

Synopsis

The Merry Widow

10¢ Special Delivery Issue of 1908

The Merry Widow, the Helmut of Mercury, the Special Delivery Stamp of 1908 is all the same stamp, depending on who does the calling.

This short-lived issued was initially designed by Whitney Warren, a leading American Beux Arts architect, who studied in Paris and produce three pen and ink sketches prior to 1908, which he brought back with him and exhibited to his friend George Von L Meyer, the US Postmaster General. Two of these sketches are in this collection and the third one is in the William L.L. Peltz special collection at the John Hay Library, Brown University, Providence, R.I.

Von Meyer liked the design and forwarded it to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing where their designers were miffed that they had not been asked to design this new stamp. Their essays in blue and green, poorly cast the design and were rejected by the PMG and the artist. Finally, a model was made in acceptable form and a die proof done with a deep frame line.

Warren's sketches used berries on the foliage, lettering of different styles, and even interconnected the TS of CTS. The hat was both with and without shading and emphasis marks placed in the tablet with the lettering.

These initial design sketches were then cut into woodblocks, probably at Girauld's studio in Paris where Warren was studying, and touched up in various ways. One such woodblock was dated 1904 so Warren had been working on this project for a new United States special delivery stamp for a long time before it was finally issued. The woodblocks were done in various colors and more than a dozen are shown, both in single and multi-colors, some with lined background in the text palette.

Warren even noted on one "This looks about right to me". Some were signed and gifted by the artist.

The Bureau's initial work shows both an unshaded and shaded hat and with heavy background, not the delicacy of Warren's Paris designs. The berries were likewise removed from the BEP product.

Finally, an acceptable large die proof was approved on November 30, 1908. The stamp was first made available on December 12, 1908 although no cover is known before the 14th. Only two 1908 usages are recorded.

Although the first Roosevelt proof book did not contain this stamp, since it was made in 1903, a later book did include this stamp and seven supposedly exist. The Pan Pacific printing of 1915 is shown and there are three recorded in private hands.

Warren signed a large die proof, the presentation copy. One impression is recorded from Die 440 which was not used to make the plates to print this stamp.

Only four plates were used to print this stamp, the sheets being 280 subjects and issued in panes of 70 stamps each with two plate numbers, a top and a side and a bottom and a side plate number. A large double transfer in the lower right pane from plate 4920 is shown.

Plate finisher George Davis(GD) etched his initials in one plate and Sideographer John P. Prender's initials can be found on another, as well as Lloyd B. Brooke's initials, another Sideographer. The Bureau of Engraving and Printing imprint appears before each of the four plate numbers.

Warren also signed at least one early copy, possibly from the first sheet issued in 1908, only dated by him 1908.

No specimens are recorded but one stamp overprinted "Ultramar", being a copy sent to a Portuguese post office by the Universal Postal Union has survived. The stamp is in purple.

Several towns precanceled the stamp. Claremont, NH had a four bar line precancel.

Few interesting cancellations are found on the stamp, registration and railroad markings are shown.

The only recorded cover showing first class postage due is in the collection. Usages on post and postal cards are extremely difficult, especially one mailed on the Railway Post Office. Few advertising envelopes survive. The most famous clock-face receiving mark, from Boston, Mass.(Type F) is illustrated on a late use cover.

Territorial destinations are difficult. Cuba is shown. Registry and special delivery service shown on one envelope is unusual as is forwarded mail; if there was a change of address on file, the fee was claimed by the second office; if not, the second sending went regular mail only, since the service was taken. The only use from a ship, the U.S.S. North Carolina, forwarded by R.P.O. is shown.

When special delivery service meant something, delivery to a train and a ship on time was important. Two covers illustrating such uses are included.

Usage from Alaska and the Philippines Islands are rare. Foreign usages are almost unknown since there were no special delivery treaties with any country until January 1, 1923, long after the end of the usage period. A cross-border usage from Canada illustrates the informal arrangement in effect with Canada since 1900 at least. Delivery problems are shown by a handstamp on this cover, from the Buffalo, N.Y. postmaster.

While the stamp was neither demonitized nor withdrawn from Post Offices, on June 9, 1909, the new Postmaster General withdrew the stamp wrongly claiming that it was confused by Clerks in the post office with the one cent stamp and so the postal service went back to the 1902 bicycle stamp design. A last day cover is shown together with a late use. The wonderful design was finally killed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

E7, The issue of 1908, Exhibitor, 1975 American Philatelic Congress Book, pps.

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