

Synopsis

United States Un-Officials: 1873 — 1884

The United States Official stamps of 1873-1884 were only used by Government Officials, not by the general public. The nine Executive Branch departments (including the Executive Mansion and Agriculture) were assigned such stamps as were deemed needed. These issues, both on hard paper, printed by the Continental Bank Note Company of New York, and on soft paper, from and after February 4, 1879 by the American Bank Note Company of New York, received a large share of the forger's nod, the fakers' skulduggery and the wily craftsmen's attempts in the form of facsimiles to allow the public to acquire these wares.

Careful examination of each and every stamp, specimen, proof and cover is an absolute necessity. Whether it is the thinned, gummed and perforated cardboard proofs of the Executive (shown front and back), the Atlanta Exhibition of 1881 trial color proofs -- here shown perforated, contrary to the way they were shown in Atlanta and made available by a notorious philatelic conman, or the G. Senf imitations for those collectors who could not afford one of the 363 copies of each of the \$5, \$10 and \$20 State Department officials and who settled for this German dealer's items, danger lurks.

Design sketches, circa 1910, originating in the Washington, D.C. area, have fooled both dealer and collector, including me. These were part of the Rae D. Ehrenberg collection, auctioned at the Crystal Sale in March, 1981, by Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries, Inc. and listed there as genuine, only to be withdrawn and given to me after I showed photocopies of more than fifty similar items of other U.S. regular and commemorative issues, ranging from the 1¢ 1861 to the 1909 Alaska-Yukon stamp.

Presentation copies marked 'X' or with a ruled straight line in either red or black are worthwhile additions to collectors. High ranking government officials satisfied constituents' needs by asking the respective Department to compromise their rules and allow copies to be obtained.

Even Senator Ernest R. Ackerman (N.J.), one of the greatest Official cover collectors, thought that the 10¢ Agriculture cover was genuine -- the stamp is a shaved proof pasted on the envelope. The May 1, 1875 cancels on several covers came to me at about the same time from three reputable dealers and caught my eye by the similarity; further checking proved that not only were the stamps shaved proofs, but also that the corner cards were never used by the government. The May 1, 1875 covers were the subject of a Philatelic Foundation Opinions Book article, while the defaced special printings have been well written about by both Rear Admiral W.V. Combs in his APS series and booklet and William E. Mooz, in a series of 1984 and 1986 articles in the American Philatelist. The shaved proofs have likewise been discussed in print by Mr. Mooz.

The 24¢ State Department cover, if genuine, would have been the second one recorded and it actually received a good Philatelic Foundation Certificate, only to have been reconsidered at my request and declared a fake, a very sad day in my philatelic life. Faked fancy cancellations on individual stamps or blocks have been added in an attempt to add additional value to an item. Two wonderfully fanciful examples are the "Skull and Crossbones" on a Post Office cut square as well as the "Bucking Bronco" on full cover.

My favorites of the Specimen obliterations are those of the Justice Department -- check the Scott catalog to see the value that was destroyed by these wanton acts of destruction. One could conceivably understand that the 1¢ and 2¢ denominations could be altered but who would destroy a 90¢ denomination, even though a used copy is much rarer than a mint one.

Office of origin cachets (corner cards) are also the subject of chicanery. The locomotive cachet on the War Department stationery is one of several known examples but whose author is not. A fictitious "Souvenir of the Peace Jubilee" is also included.

Covers mailed contrary to postal regulations by unauthorized persons or used with unusual combinations of stamps are another interesting facet of this most unusual collection which deserves study by not only the casual collector of United States Officials but by all 19th century classic United States collectors.

Caveat Emptor... and good hunting.

*Title page, synopsis page and an award history may be accessed on the worldwide web:
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