

Diamond Jubilee, 1918-1983

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The Story of America's Inverted Airmail

Original photograph of the block of four stolen from Ethel B. McCoy in 1955.

[Editor's note: This is a significant year in stamp collecting history, for 75 years ago on May 14, 1918, a shy, self-effacing man by the name of William T. Robey walked into a Washington, D.C. post office and into philatelic immortality. Parts of this story are by Henry Huff in January 1947 issues of *Philately* magazine. Other parts are contemporary, added by the editors of USS&PH.]

Our nation was in the midst of World War I. Woodrow Wilson was President. Airplanes (aeroplanes, as they were then called) were playing an important part in the war and people were beginning to regard them as really practical. Pressure had been exerted upon Congress to pass legislation making possible experimental air mail service. An appropriation of \$100,000 was authorized and on May 11, 1918, the Second Assistant Postmaster General issued a bulletin:

"Aeroplane mail service will be established May 15, 1918, between Washington, Philadelphia, and New York, one round trip daily, except Sundays. Letters and sealed parcels, the latter not exceeding 30 inches in length and girth combined, may be mailed at Washington, Philadelphia, and New York for any city in the United States or its possessions or postal agencies.

"The rate of postage will be 24 cents per ounce or fraction thereof, which includes special delivery service. Postage may be paid by affixing either the distinctive aeroplane stamp or its equivalent in other postage stamps. When the latter are used, the mail should be endorsed, 'By Aeroplane'. Mail by Aeroplane may be registered by prepayment of 10 cents registry fee in addition to the postage."

Now let us take into account the dizzy succession of events in the inauguration of America's first official air mail service:

Friday, May 10: The law making possible the establishment of air mail service was passed by Act of Congress.



Saturday, May 11: The bill was signed by President Wilson.

Sunday, May 12: The special 24-cent air mail stamp was put on the presses.

Monday, May 13: The first stamps were placed on sale at Washington.

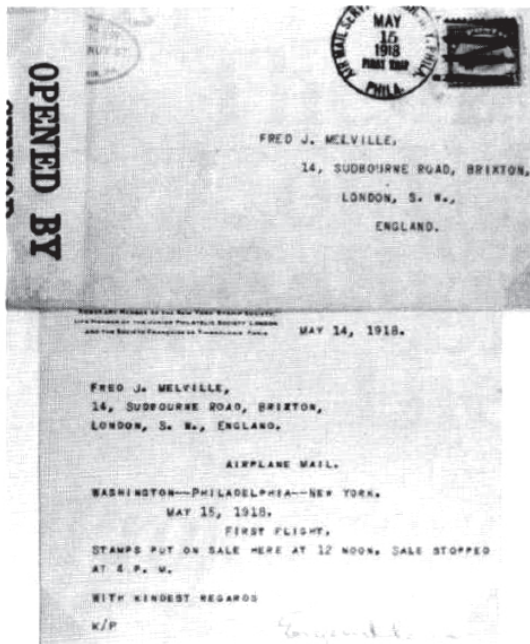
Tuesday, May 14: the stamps were placed on sale at 9 AM in New York, Philadelphia, and again in Washington. Fateful day.

Wednesday, May 15: the first mail-carrying flight out of each of the three cities took place.

Newspapers carried a report that the new airmail stamps would be printed in two colors. Philatelists recalled that twice before, in 1869 and in 1901, when the Post Office Department issued bicolored stamps, several denominations were placed in circulation with inverted centers. The memory of the five-cent error stamps of 1917, in which dies of a five-cent stamp were accidentally impressed in three positions on a plate from which two-cent carmine stamps were printed, were still vivid. Would the new 24-cent air mail stamp produce some more inverts?

Knowing that the Bureau of Engraving and Printing was operating 24 hours per day to keep up with the wartime demand for Liberty Bonds, war savings stamps, postage stamps, and paper money and that there was a shortage of help, the possibility of some more inverted center sheets of stamps showing up was something of a safe bet.

In Washington, William T. Robey, employed in the office of W.B. Hibbs & Co., stock brokers and bankers, had become interested in United States stamps. He had arranged through



Philatelically historic mail: After William Robey had bought his sheet of inverts the Washington post offices immediately stopped all further sales of the 24c issue until stocks could be inspected before other possible inverts were sold. Eugene Klein, Robey's eventual purchaser, dispatched a letter to dealer Fred Melville in England saying, "Stamps put on sale here at 12 noon. Sales stopped at 4 P.M." Oddly enough, this letter was sent on the first scheduled air mail flight from Philadelphia to New York on May 15, 1918.

correspondence to exchange first-trip covers with collectors in Philadelphia and New York. Early on the morning of May 14, he visited the New York Avenue branch post office, not far from his place of employment, and asked to see some of the new air mail stamps. It is said that, before arriving at the post office, he had dreams in his head of somehow being lucky enough to purchase one of the new 24-cent stamps and that they would, by fate, have inverted centers!

In any case, the few sheets in stock were poorly centered and the clerk at the window explained that more were expected around noon; so Mr. Robey returned later in the day. The same clerk was on duty.



Position number one from the sheet of inverted airmail issues: the upper left corner margin single.

Upon inquiry as to whether new supplies of the 24-cent stamps had arrived, the clerk reached under the counter and produced a full sheet of stamps. To Mr. Robey's shock and amazement, it was a sheet of inverts. Without comment, Mr. Robey paid for the sheet and inquired whether the clerk had any more sheets. The clerk reached under the counter and pulled out three more sheets, stating that they were all he had. An exami-

nation showed these sheets to be normal. Mr. Robey returned the sheets to the clerk and then called his attention to the fact that the sheet he had purchased had the airplane designs printed upside down [Editor's note: *in actuality, it is the frame on the stamp that is inverted; the vignettes were printed first, then on another flat bed press, the sheets were then printed with the frame.*]. Without comment, the clerk left the window and hastened to the telephone to notify the Post Office Department of the error sheet.

Mr. Robey hurried away with the sheet of inverts tucked safely under his arm. He stopped at another branch post office, but an examination of their stock failed to reveal any inverted center panes. Returning to Hibbs & Co., he showed fellow employees what he had and some of them went out to look over the stock in other branch post offices, but none of them had any irregular issued stamps. Telegrams were sent to friends in Philadelphia and New York advising them of the find and giving the plate number. No other sheets of the rarity were discovered. It was later learned that, following the report of the inverted center pane to the postal officials, the windows of the post offices in New York and Philadelphia has been closed for two hours while a search of the air mail stock on hand could be made to determine whether any more inverts had escaped detection. None was ever reported.



Aside from pilot George Leroy Boyle's aborted attempt to fly the first air mail from Washington to New York and the USPOD's flub in allowing the Bureau of Engraving and Printing's error-filled stamps to be put on sale for Robey's fateful purchase, pilot Stephen Bonsal Jr. added insult to error by crashing the second scheduled air mail flight from New York on May 16, 1918, on the Bridgeton, N.J. fairgrounds. It was certainly a week when not too many things went right!

Two postal inspectors called on Mr. Robey within an hour after his return to work and asked whether he had purchased a sheet of the new air mail stamps with inverted centers. He replied in the affirmative. They then asked to see them. This he refused. The inspectors threatened to confiscate the stamps if he would not willingly return them for a regular sheet, but Mr. Robey had the courage not to be intimidated. He told the men that they had better first recover the 1869 inverts and the Pan American inverts and other error stamps before attempting to take the sheet away from him.

The late Percy Mann of Philadelphia was at that time editing the new issue column in *Mekeel's* and Mr. Robey sent him a telegram telling him about the sheet of inverts. The next day he received a reply from Mr. Mann who advised him that he was

coming to Washington to inspect the sheet. After examining it thoroughly, Mr. Mann stated that he was prepared to offer \$10,000 for the sheet of 100 stamps and would Mr. Robey accept that amount? Mr. Robey replied that he had decided to go to New York and see what offers he could get there. On Saturday, May 18, Mr. Robey started making calls on New York stamp dealers. His first stop was at the office of Colonel E.H.R. Green at 111 Broadway, who was known to be a purchaser of valuable stamps. Mr. Green was out of town. No offers anywhere near that of Mr. Mann were made by New York stamp dealers so Mr. Robey telephoned Mr. Mann in Philadelphia that his offer had not been equalled. Mr. Mann requested that, on his way back to Washington, Mr. Robey stop off at Philadelphia and have a further talk about the stamps.

PILOT'S DAILY REPORT.

Plane No. Date May 16th 1918
 Temp.
 Weather Clear
 Condition of field Good Stephenson
 (Pilot)

	TIME.		TIME.	
	From -	To -	Started	Landed
1	N. Y. ✓ Phila.	Phila. ✓ N. Y.	11:29	
2	Phila. Wash.	Wash. Phila.		

Mark "X" after any of the following questions NOT found O. K.

Does engine lack power?

Does engine hesitate when accelerating?

Does engine misfire?

Any leaks? Gas Oil Water

Does carbureter spit?

(a) In normal flight?

(b) In accelerating?

Any tendency to turn? Right Left

Is balance correct?

Water temperature normal?

Any excessive vibration?

Any strange noise?

Are instruments recording?

Landing gear Tires Skids

Structural parts? Fuselage Wings

Note—Use other side for forced landings, time lost, causes of delay, remarks, etc.

2209

The "Pilot's Daily Report" card with pilot Stephen Bonsal's signature. He indicated the weather as "clear," but note the blank space under "Landing." He didn't "land," he crashed.

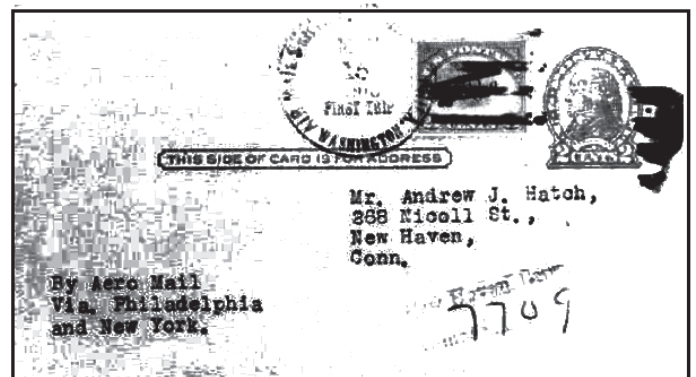
Upon arrival in Philadelphia, Mr. Robey was met at the railroad station by Mr. Mann and was immediately taken to the home of Eugene Klein, prominent Philadelphia stamp dealer, who was in later years to become president of the American Philatelic Society. After looking at the sheet, Mr. Klein asked him to set a price. Mr. Robey stated that he would not accept less than \$15,000 and Mr. Klein asked for an option on it until 3:00 PM, Monday, May 20. A short time before the expiration of the option, Mr. Klein phoned Mr. Robey agreeing to purchase the stamps and requested delivery at his office. At noon the following day, just one week after he had acquired the rarity, Mr. Robey received from Mr. Klein a certified check for \$15,000, a profit of \$14,976 on his \$24 investment at the Washington branch post office window.

It had been quite a week for the normally unassuming Robey. One can only imagine his anxiety at having such an obviously great rarity in his possession. Henry M. Goodkind, who con-

ducted a study of the inverted Jenny in 1956, said that Robey was "highly nervous" during that seven days. Robey died in 1949, but his daughter Louise has kept a scrapbook of memorabilia about her father's historic contribution to philately.

It appears from an advertisement which Mr. Klein inserted in *Mekeel's* on May 25, 1918, that he had planned to break up the sheet himself and was offering fully perforated stamps at \$250 each and the straight edge copies at \$175 each. The following week, Mr. Klein announced that, "After writing last week's advertisement, I sold the entire sheet of 100 24-cent issues with inverted center to a philatelist. Consequently, I am obliged to cancel the prices quoted. The purchaser incorporated a portion of the sheet with his collection and authorized me to sell the balance, thereby giving collectors an opportunity to secure an otherwise unobtainable stamp. Price on application."

As is generally known, Mr. Klein sold the sheet of stamps to Col. Green, son of the Hetty Green who was in her time reputed to be "the world's richest woman." The price paid was \$20,000. Stupendous as it appeared at the time, it was really an average of only \$200 per stamp, not a very large amount to pay for what was, even then, deemed to be destined to be one of America's great philatelic treasures. Col. Green's judgment as an investor was confirmed when a single block of four stamps from the sheet sold in an auction in 1946 for more than he paid for all 100 stamps. A recent 1992 realization for the plate number block of four was put at over \$1 million.



Among the most sought after air mail postal history: an item postmarked May 15, 1918, for dispatch on the first scheduled air mail flight from Washington, D.C., and bearing the 24-cent airmail issue.

When the last of Col. Green's stamp holdings were disposed of in the spring of 1946, the total of all sales had reached an astounding \$1.7 million. But the "Jenny" was to be known as his most famous purchase.

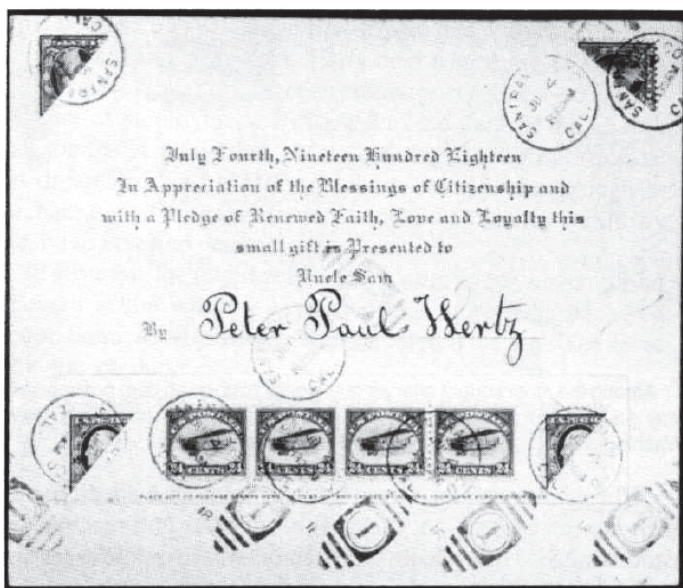
At first, Col. Green felt tempted to hold the sheet of 100 stamps intact as a sort of "show piece." However, he was advised by Mr. Klein that if he did so it might never greatly appreciate in value. Instead, Mr. Klein recommended that he break it up, reserving the position blocks for his own collection and disposing of the remainder. In this way, some of the stamps would change ownership at increasingly higher prices as the years passed, thereby establishing a higher market value for his own holdings. The idea looked sound and Col. Green agreed to it.

Before breaking up the sheet, a pencil notation was made on the back of each stamp indicating the numerical position in the sheet. To this day, these notations have helped entities like the Philatelic Foundation, Inc. keep provenance of ownership and authenticity of each stamp or block as it moved through the

hands of numerous collectors. One of the 100 stamps, by the way, still resides inside a glass-enclosed "bubble" locket that Col. Green commissioned as a souvenir for his wife.

Four blocks of four were disposed of privately, probably all line blocks. The other stamps were sold in singles and in pairs. The single stamps were sold for \$250 and the straight edges at \$175. Significant of the stigma that stamp collectors place on straight-edge stamps (which are, after all, actually rarer than fully perforated copies), of the 19 stamps on the two outer edges of the sheet, 16 were disposed of in the Green auctions, indicating that only three had been previously sold. Only one perforated on all sides stamp was included in the Green auctions. The straight-edge copies realized from \$750 to \$1,100 each. The block of eight (one stamp detached) with plate number and arrow, \$27,000; the crossed center line block, \$22,000; the lower left corner block, \$17,000; and the left side arrow block were all purchased by Y. Souren of New York, a dealer who specialized in inverts.

The four blocks of four inverts that were sold at the time the sheet was broken up have changed ownership many times during intervening years. Unusual among them was the block (containing positions 65, 66, 75 and 76 from the sheet) eventually owned by Mrs. Ethel B. McCoy who purchased it in 1936 from Spencer Anderson, after it had changed ownership nine times, the late Arthur Hind being one of its original owners. On Sept. 23, 1955, at the APS annual convention in Norfolk, Va., where McCoy had graciously exhibited her rarity, the block was stolen.



In what was certainly a strange year for airmail stamps, the Savings Dept. of the Anglo-California Trust Company, San Francisco, devised these cards to help pay America's World War I debts. Patrons were asked to buy postage stamps without intention of using them, thereby saving the government the cost of mail service. Stamps were to be placed on this card to be either cancelled or defaced by the customer. On the reverse of the card is a photograph of the painting of the Signing of the Declaration of Independence.

For more than 20 years, the F.B.I. investigated the mysterious theft and finally, in the late 1970's and early 1980's, two singles—positions 65 and 75—were recovered. By then, McCoy had died and had left her interest in the block to the American Philatelic Research Library in State College, Pa. Having sold position 75, the library still retains position 65, which is now displayed at the APS annual STaMpsHOW convention.

The most detailed story of the 24-cent inverted airmail

appears in *Jenny!*, a book authored by George Amick, and published by the Amos Press, Inc. in 1986. Tracing the history of most of the stamps in the sheet, it is a story of intrigue, mystery and high finance.

Scott No. C3 was printed from flat plates, engraved, and the printing was done on unwatermarked paper. The stamps are perforated 11 x 11. Two color varieties exist—carmine rose and blue and dark carmine and blue. Central design of the stamp is a Curtiss biplane in flight, nose up to the left. The number of the plane, "38262," appears on the tail portion of the plane and is clearly visible on the stamps. The picture is a reproduction of the plane that was to carry the first load of mail from Washington airport on May 15, 1918. The selection of this particular plane for the design proved a jinx as the plane had a forced landing soon after taking off and the first trip had to be postponed until the following day.



"The greatest show piece in all philately," as this block of eight was once described in the Harmer, Rooke and Co. auction catalog of the Col. E.H.R. Green sale (No. XVII) in 1944. It shows positions 85, 86, 87, 88, 95, 96, 97 and 98 of the sheet of 100, with the bottom arrow and inverted partial plate number. Dealer Y. Souren, in behalf of collector Amos Eno, purchased the block in the Green sale for \$27,000. Positions 85, 86, 95 and 96 were broken from the block and eventually sold as singles. Positions 87, 88, 97 and 98 now comprise the plate number block of four which recently sold at auction for more than \$1 million. It was owned twice by Raymond H. Weill of New Orleans, who exhibited it for the public at ANPHILEX '71, INTERPHIL '76, and AMERIPEX '86, the latter two showings in behalf of the owner to whom Weill had sold it in 1971 for \$150,000. [Facts: *Jenny!* by George Amick, Amos Press, Inc., 1986.]

Plates for the stamps were hastily prepared and are slightly out of register. In the printed sheet, the airplane is nearer the top of the frame in the upper rows and nearer the bottom in the lower ones. It can be great fun collecting used copies that show the plane all over the vignette area.

The first official air mail flights from the airports in Washington, New York, and Philadelphia on May 15, were occasions for great ceremony, with dignitaries and large groups of spectators present. President Woodrow Wilson and Postmaster General A.S. Bursleson were present to witness the flight in Washington and signed one of the first flight covers which was sold for \$1,000 to benefit the Red Cross.

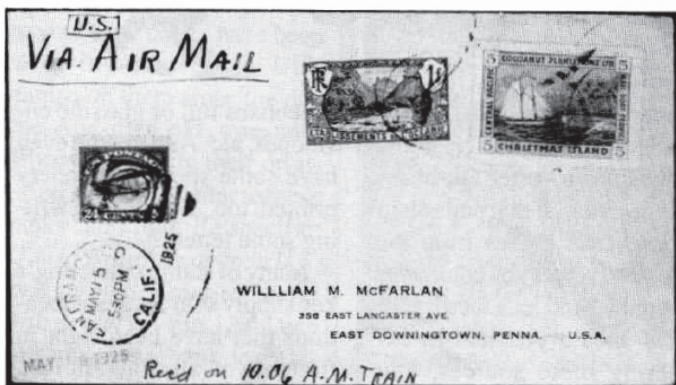
At 11:47 AM, Lt. George Leroy Boyle, in airplane number 38262, soared from the Washington Polo Grounds with his load of mail for Philadelphia and New York. Eighty minutes later he descended at Waldorf, Md., after experiencing engine trouble. The mail (4,000 letters) dispatched on this unfortunate flight was returned to Washington by mail truck and held over for the next day's trip. Mail transported on the second day also carried "First Trip" postmarks. [Editor's note: for a full account of Boyle's ill-

fated attempt to fly the mail, see *USS&PH*, Summer 1992 issue, p. 49.]

On the initial trip from New York, which occurred on schedule at 11:30 AM, Lt. Torrey Webb took off from Belmont Park, Long Island, in a Curtiss type bi-plane, number 38278, with an Italian motor. About 10,000 pieces of mail for Philadelphia and Washington were in the bags.

In Philadelphia, air mail service began when Lt. Howard P. Culver in airplane number 38275 took to the skies from Bustleton airport at 2:15 PM, carrying mail from Philadelphia only as the plane from Washington failed to reach his city.

At first, the U.S. War Department handled the experimental air service, furnishing planes and pilots, and conducting the flying and maintenance operations. This continued until August 12, 1918, when the Post Office Department took over the entire operation of the air mail service, furnishing both equipment and personnel until Contract Air Mail Service (CAMS) began in 1926.



An extremely rare usage of the 24-cent airmail issue on a cover mailed in 1925 on the mailboat service from Christmas Island, then part of French Oceania.

The story of the 24-cent airmail issue and America's first official air mail service is one of bloopers followed by eventual successes, which may have even seemed commonplace at the time. After all, when the post office clerk who sold William T. Robey his sheet of inverts was asked by his employers as to how he'd let Robey have the stamps in the first place, he replied:

"A fellow asked for a sheet of airmails and I handed him one without looking at it. And anyway, how was I to know the thing was upside down? I never saw a plane before." ☐

[Editor's note: Photos this article courtesy of A. Don Jones, Harry Hagendorf, and Lowell Newman.]

Harry Hagendorf and the C3a Blocks of 4

Harry Hagendorf, owner of Columbian Stamp Co., has recently been involved in something the stamp dealers of the "Golden Era" of the 1920s and 1930s were famous for: helping an important collector build a great holding of major rarities. Bidding at the auction of the formidable Kobacker collection, Hagendorf was successful in obtaining not one, but two blocks of C3a: the corner margin and centerline blocks of four.

Less than a year later, the horizontal line block came on the market; a block that many dealers were planning to bid on since it could be broken up into singles. Hagendorf's client was appalled that someone might "destroy" a great rarity and so, he purchased it for the sake of philately. Hagendorf says: "My client had now gone from wanting to acquire only a single C3a to being one of a select few to own at one time three of the existing blocks of the world's most famous stamp."

You can see all three blocks in the Columbian ad on p. 19. One of them is shown on our cover in full color.

"Jenny": Behind the Story

☐ When the Col. Green philatelic holdings were sold at auction, many C3a's were described thus: "no gum," "small thin spot," "gum creases, or "perf short." Experts theorize that Green must have grossly mishandled some of the stamps when in his possession.



A fraudulently reperfed copy

☐ The original sheet contained 19 straight edge copies. Several, including the copy shown here from the Philatelic Foundation archives, have been reperforated in an attempt to pass them off as normal copies.

☐ A fake copy of C3a has been manufactured and is now in the hands of the American Philatelic Research Library. A faker carefully cut away the "Jenny" vignette from a normal copy and replaced it upside down, followed by a meticulous rebacking and regumming of the stamp.

☐ In the late 1980's, a C3a was accidentally dropped on the floor by its owner, later to be sucked up by a vacuum cleaner! It was recovered, but in rather poor shape.

☐ Aside from Eugene Klein, who bought the sheet from William Robey, the dealer who has, at various given times, owned and sold more C3a's than any other is the firm of Raymond H. Weill of New Orleans. The Weill brothers have brokered all of the known blocks of four and numerous singles and pairs.

☐ It is not known if all 100 of the stamps are still in existence. Few records were kept concerning the early buyers and sellers of the issue. The Philatelic Foundation, however, has expertized 96 of the stamps known in collector hands.

☐ The "Inverted Jenny" owned by British nobleman John Crichton-Stuart was stored in a safe deposit vault when, on Sept. 24, 1940, the facility was bombed during the London blitz. After putting out the ensuing fires, the collection containing the C3a was found immersed in three feet of water. The stamp survived, however, sans gum.

☐ At present, only one "Inverted Jenny" is on regular view to the public: position 70, held by the Smithsonian's National Philatelic Collection and soon to be on display at the new National Postal Museum in Washington, D.C. Donated to the Smithsonian by the Weill Brothers.

☐ The most complete record of ownership of the 96 existing copies was compiled by author George Amick and published in his book, "Jenny!", published in 1986 by the Amos Press. *

☐ Evidently somewhat proud of their error-laden rarity, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing authorized two die proofs of the inverted version of the stamp to be struck in order that they might be put on display at the P.O. Department's exhibit at the Brazilian International Exposition in 1922. Records show the Bureau ordered more "invert" die proofs on at least three other occasions.

* Some of the information in this article was gathered from Mr. Amick's book, with our appreciation.