Yesterday in Mekeel's, National Issue:
The U.S. Postage Stamp, 1870-1900, Part 5

by Lowell S. Newman & Peter T. Rohrbach *(From Mekeel's Weekly, Nov. 16, 1990 with images added)*

Chapter II

Stamps of The Depression: 1873-1877, Cont.

Despite the popularity of the postal card, there was of course a continuing and greater need for the on-going issuance of postage stamps to be used on mail sent in envelopes. The four-year contract which the government had with the National Bank Note Company was to expire in 1873, and so in December of 1872 the Post Office advertised for another bid to deliver postage stamps for the next four years. The bid specifications stipulated that the eleven designs and size of the 1870 stamps were to be continued. The lowest bid was tendered by the Continental Bank Note Company of New York City, and the contract for the delivery of new stamps was to go into effect on May 1, 1873.

This new issue by the Continental Bank Note Company is varyingly designated as the "Issue of 1873," the "Issue of 1873-75," and the "Issue of 1873-79." It was the second of what we have previously identified as the Bank Note Issues of the 1870s, three issues that would cause serious problems of identification for philatelists of future generations. These stamps produced by different printing firms in the 1870s were basically of the same denominations and designs (with one exception which will be noted) and the use of different types of paper on the various stamps plays an important role in properly identifying the origin of these stamps.

In 1873, the dies and plates which had been used by the National Bank Note Company for the Issue of 1870 were acquired by the Continental Bank Note Company for its new issue. In producing this issue over the next few years, the Continental Bank Note Company simply used the plates for the existing stamps in the denominations of 24¢, 30¢ and 90¢, although on sometimes differing papers and in differing colors. For the rest of the stamps, they used only the dies of the National Bank Note Company, from which new transfer rolls were made to lay down brand new plates. This allowed the Company to make very slight alterations in the design of the stamp that were imperceptible to the untrained eye. These very slight alterations have become known as secret marks.

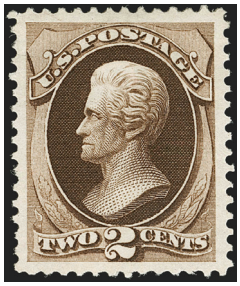
The insertion of secret marks was obviously the reason that the Continental Bank Note Company made new plates for those high use denominations of the stamps of the 1870s, and the purpose of those secret marks seems to have been an entirely commercial one, rather than any particular pride of creation. Since the printing process of that time was far from perfect there had been occasional complaints that particular sheets of stamps were of inferior quality, either as to color or impression.

Continental had no idea of how many inferior sheets had been issued among the multi-millions of stamps produced by the National Bank Note Company and it feared that since it was producing the same basic stamps it could very well be held liable for any previous stamps that might be returned by postmasters. There was the possibility, however remote, that they might be forced under the terms of the contract to make good on millions of stamps that had in fact been produced by their predecessor. Hence, the secret marks–the addition of a small line or dash, a bit of shading in one part of the stamp, or the deepening of some lines on the stamp. These marks were unnoticed by the general public that used the stamps in the 1870s, but of course they are of extreme interest to philatelists today.

Continental began printing some denominations in the Spring of 1873, but apparently the first of these stamps were not delivered until July of that year. During that first year of the contract only the eight low denomination stamps were produced, since there were still adequate supplies of the three higher denomination stamps, and during the life of the contract stamps were only produced according to demand by the Post Office. For instance, as we shall see, during the term of this contract Continental only produced one run of the 90¢ stamps. However, the firm did produce issues of all eleven stamps of the same design as the Issue of 1870. The only addition was the issuance of a 5¢ stamp in 1875, which was for international use, as we shall see in the following chapter.

These are the twelve stamps of the Issue of 1873, eleven with the same size and design as 1870 stamps, but in differing colors or papers, and often with the secret marks that we will identify here:

One cent, Sc. 156. Benjamin Franklin. In the same general shades of ultramarine as the 1870 stamp. The secret mark (page 11) on this stamp is a small curved dash in the small ball to the immediate left of the numeral 1. Secret marks like this were so unobtrusively placed on the stamp that it is often necessary to use a magnifying glass to discover them.



Two cents, Sc. 157. Andrew Jackson. The secret mark on this stamp is very difficult to spot, but it is there: a small diagonal line in the scroll work over the letters U. and S. at the top of the stamp, which connects two lines that were minutely separated on the National stamp. This stamp was first issued in shades of brown in 1873, but in 1875 it was issued in vermilion to distinguish it from the 10¢ stamp, which had been issued in brown. Like the 2¢ stamp of the National issue, it also occasionally was used in a bisected manner.

Three cents, Sc. 158. George Washington. The secret mark is a heavy shading below the upper fork of the ribbon that bears the word "THREE." It was issued in varying shades of green.

Five cents, Sc. 179. This is the only new stamp of this issue, and it was issued mainly for international mail purposes in 1875 when the United States joined the Universal Postal Union. Obviously, there was no need for a secret mark on this newly designed stamp. It featured a portrait of General Zachary Taylor, 12th President of the United States, and it is the only full-face portrait in the series, featuring the General in a double-breasted military coat and high white collar. This Taylor portrait had been used by the government for a tobacco revenue stamp in 1871, and the Continental Bank Note Company obtained that die and used it for this postage stamp. To conform with the rest of the series, the portrait was placed in the same type of design and medallion used on the 10¢ stamp, with the words U.S. POSTAGE above and the words FIVE and CENTS below, separated by the numeral 5. However, the head is too large for the medallion, and the resulting stamp is out of symmetry. It was printed in various shades of blue.

Six cents, Sc. 159. Abraham Lincoln. This stamp is noticeably different in color from the National Issue, being dull pink instead of the previously used carmine shade. The secret mark, usually visible to the naked eye, can be seen in the extreme left of the left ribbon. It consists of a strengthening of the four leftmost vertical lines.

Seven cents, Sc. 160. Edwin Stanton. This stamp was printed in the same basic vermilion tints as the Issue of 1870. The secret marks here are some of the easiest to see: two small

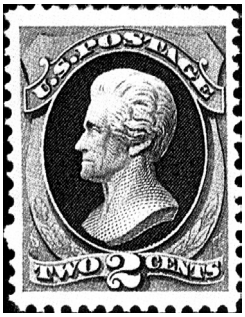
Text continues on page 12

Secret Marks, per the Scott Catalogue (from our Bank Notes Reference Manual)

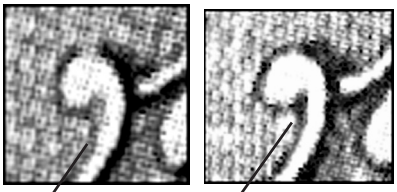
National, no Secret Mark, Sc. 134

National *Continental*

Crescent in the pearl to the left of "1"

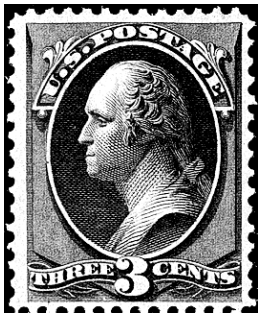


National, no Secret Mark, Sc. 135

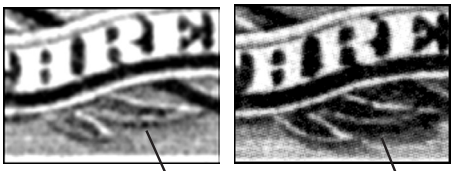


National *Continental*

Small diagonal line under the scroll to the left of "U.S.". Per Scott "This mark rarely shows clearly"

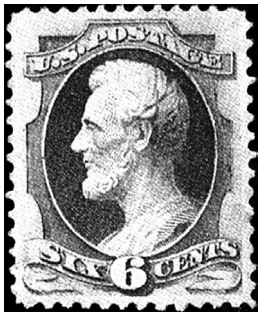


National, no Secret Mark, Sc. 136

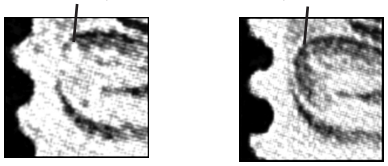


National *Continental*

Heavily shaded upper tail of the left ribbon

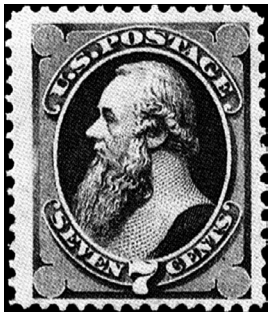


National, no Secret Mark, Sc. 137

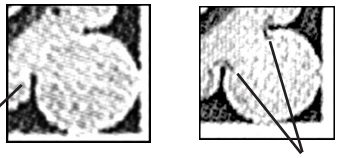


National *Continental*

Four strengthened lines in left ribbon



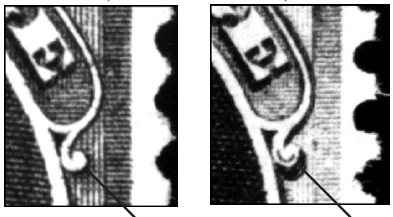
National, no Secret Mark, Sc. 137



National *Continental*

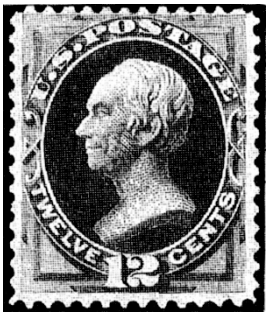
Small semi-circles in lower right ball

National, no Secret Mark, Sc. 137

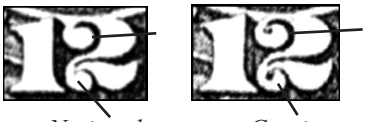


National *Continental*

Small semi-circles in lower right ball

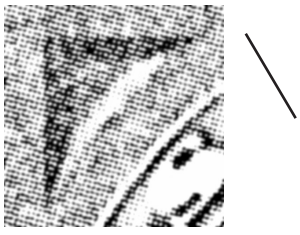


National, no Secret Mark, Sc. 137



National *Continental*

Both balls of "2" are crescent shaped



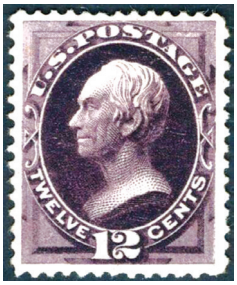
National, Sc. 141,
no secret mark

National, Sc. 141

Continental, with secret mark, Heavier shading creates a "V". Per Scott, not all Continental and American stamps show it."

semi-circles etched around the ends of the lines that outline the ornament in the lower right hand corner.

Ten cents, Sc. 161. Thomas Jefferson. Again printed in shades of brown. The secret mark here is a small crescent etched into the small ball directly under the "E" of POSTAGE.

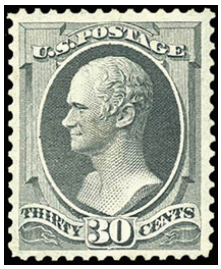


Twelve cents, Sc. 162. Henry Clay. Printed in violet as before, and another easily identifiable secret mark: the two circular parts of the numeral 2 have been altered so that they are round instead of crescent-shaped.

Fifteen cents, Sc. 163. Daniel Webster. This stamp was printed in shades of orange, as was the previous issue, but there is some dispute among philatelists as to whether the 1870 plates were used or whether a new plate was made with secret marks. Two lines in the upper left hand corner appear to have deepened, and it remains unclear whether this is a deliberate secret mark or just an idiosyncrasy of the printing process where older and worn plates were used. Not all examples show this "secret mark" clearly and examination of the paper and shade is sometimes more helpful in proper classification.

Twenty four cents, Sc. 164. General Winfield Scott. As noted, the 24¢ stamp of the 1870s was one of the least used denominations of the issue, and this Continental product left philatelists with a mystery that may never be completely solved. Company records indicate that 365,000 stamps of this denomination in the same purple color previously used were delivered to the Stamp Agent in 1875, the only delivery of the stamp during this contract. But there is some doubt if these 24¢ stamps were ever delivered to postmasters and put into use. The plate from the National Bank Note Company was used, and thus there is no secret mark.

In 1885 some 364,950 of the 24¢ stamps were destroyed by the Post Office Department as they saw no further need for that denomination. It is not known if these stamps were all from the Continental printing or were a mix of National and Continental produced stamps. The still-unanswered question is: If all of the destroyed stamps [364,950] were Continentals, what happened to the few remaining [50] stamps? [Shown here is the only certified example of the 15¢ Continental.]



Thirty cents, Sc. 165. Alexander Hamilton. Printed from the same plates as the 1870 issue, but in a gray black or greenish black, instead of the previous full black. No secret mark was added to this Continental value, although a recent discovery has disclosed a marking that may be a secret mark on the subsequent American Bank Note Issue.

Ninety cents, Sc. 166. Oliver Hazard Perry. From the 1870 plate, but here in a rose carmine, instead of a dark carmine.

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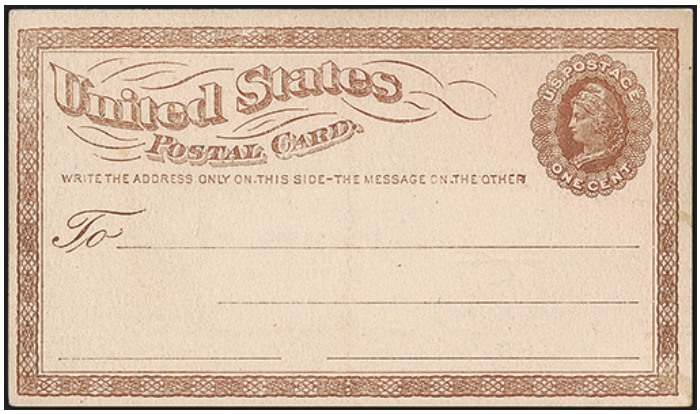
by Lowell S. Newman & Peter T. Rohrbach *(From Mekeel's Weekly, Nov. 30, 1990 with images added)*

Note: for the record, while it did not affect the flow of the text, this instalment should have preceded the installment that appeared in the January 2024 issue.



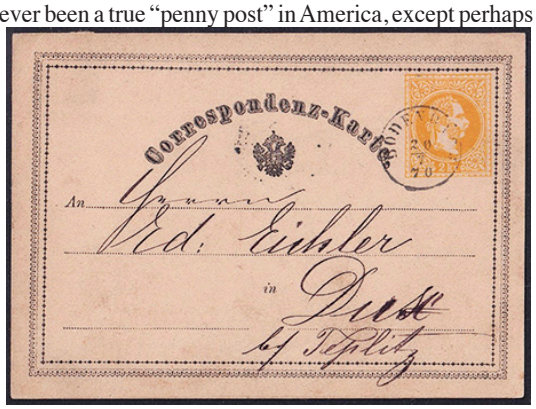
The first U.S. postal card, printed in brown on buff color watermarked card stock.

Chapter II
Stamps of The Depression: 1873-1877, Cont.

Struggling 19th Century Americans still wanted to communicate with relatives and friends around the nation, and Postmaster General James Creswell was able to come up with a postal device that was superbly suited to the times. It was not something he designed specifically as a postal remedy for the Panic of 1873, because it had been in his planning for some time, but by one of those fortuities of history he was to produce it at precisely the time it was needed the most.

In 1872, Creswell had approached the Congress with an idea that in some ways reached back to the beginnings of modern postal reform some four decades earlier in England with the concept of a "penny post" by Rowland Hill.

There had never been a true "penny post" in America, except perhaps for the intra-city carriers and private local posts that had flourished during the 1840s and 50s, and Creswell knew that in the 1870s there was no way he could reduce first class postage from three cents to one cent



The first postal card, issued by Austria in 1869, this example used July 20, 1870

But there was something he could do to enable citizens to use the regular mail service for the price of one penny. It was an idea that had been first started in Austria in 1869, and Creswell proposed to introduce it to America in the 1870s: the postal card, a prestamped card in the denomination of one cent, on which the sender could place the address on one side and the message on the other.

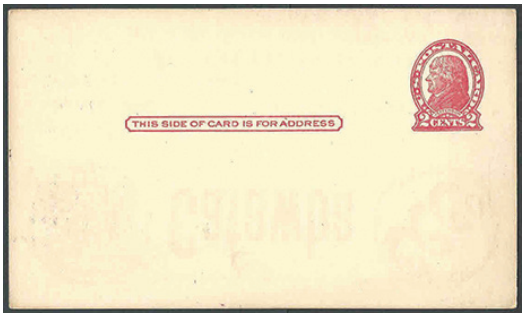
New York to Massachusetts postal card used on May 13, 1893. Springfield, Mass., was the only city in which the cards were available on the May 12, 1893 first day.

Creswell faced some objections in Congress that he had to answer: namely, that even though that total bulk of these cards to the Post Office would be less than the regular mail sent in envelopes, the costs to the Post Office would be identical to first class mail in terms of man hours employed in cancellation, transport, and delivery. Creswell's response was that it would be a governmental service to the ordinary citizenry for whom the difference between three cents and one cent was important; and that the projected popularity of these postal cards would bring an immediate amount of new revenue to the Post Office.

In both these assertions Cresewll was correct. Accordingly, by an Congressional Act of January of 1873, the Post Office was authorized to begin issuing one-penny post cards, the first in the history of the United States.

The cards went on sale May 1, 1873, and they proved an instant success with the people. Between May 1 and September 30 of that year, Creswell was to write: "The delivery of the cards on requisitions was commenced on the 1st of May last. As predicted, they have been favorably received. They have supplied a public want, and have made a new and remunerative business for the Department."

This new postal card continued to gain in popularity during the decade, and in 1880 alone more than 272,550,000 of them were issued. The messages on these cards could not, of course, be confidential and they were hardly the medium for communications of romance or secret business negotiations. But they provided a swift and economical use of the postal service for the common man. That one cent rate of 1873 was also to remain unchanged until 1952, except for a brief increase to two cents during the war years of 1917-1919; such postal rate stability for 80 years is utterly remarkable in itself.



The first 2¢ postal card, Sc. UX29, issued Oct. 22, 1917

Creswell's first U.S. postal card was, therefore, a real kind of success for the long-time champions of a "penny post," but for the depression-smitten citizens of the 1870s, who nevertheless still wanted to use the postal system, it was a blessed and welcome gift.