Yesterday in Mekeel's, National Issue:
The U.S. Postage Stamp, 1870-1900, Part 17

by Lowell S. Newman & Peter T. Rohrbach *(From Mekeel's, Nov. 1-Nov. 15, 1991 with images added)*

By the year 1881 the Fast Mail trains were making a comeback after the short-sighted reduction of postal fees to railroads by Congress in 1876, as mentioned earlier.

Cover to Fortress Monroe, Va., with 1879 3¢ (Sc. 184) tied by Washington, Conn. Nov. 22 duplex, with two strikes of N.Y. & Wash. R.P.O. Fast Mail Nov 24 1881 handstamps.

The New York Central and the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern Fast Mail trains had received a new coat of paint and were in service again. The Pennsylvania Railroad restored its Limited Mail, the Illinois Central inaugurated a fast mail run between Chicago and Cairo, and the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Line also instituted fast mail trains. In 1884, the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Linc inaugurated fast mail service between Chicago and Council Bluffs, Iowa. The first coast-to-coast Fast Mail service started in 1889 when the last link between Omaha and San Francisco was made, providing a scheduled time of 108 hours and 45 minutes between New York and San Francisco.

The Fast Mail train service continued to expand and improve for the rest of the century, and until well after World War I, when airmail service came into being, it was the fastest way to send mail. All during that time the improving technology also helped to speed the mail along, such as air brakes, steel-underframed cars, and more sophisticated signaling. During that late 19th Century period the Fast Mail train was the inspiration for many American poets and song writers who could see sharp images and symbols in those onrushing trains carrying the communications of a nation at the fastest possible speed.

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The machine canceling of postage stamps also came of age in the 1880s. We noted earlier that the Leavitt machine began to be used in a number of post offices in the late 1870s, but in 1882 Congress adopted Leavitt's Number3 machine as the standard type to be used in U.S. post offices. This was the third postage canceling machine designed by Thomas and Martin Leavitt of Boston. The Number 1 and 2 models were primarily designed for the postmarking of the new postal cards of 1873 which were, unlike letter mail, of uniform size and thickness. By 1882, the Number 3 Leavitt machine had been improved to process letter mail as well. These early Leavitt models were operated by turning a handcrank. But in 1884 the American Postal Machine Company purchased the Leavitt patents, and it brought out a belt-driven model in that same year.

This machine canceling of stamps not only put the end to that old fear of the washing and re-use of postage stamps, but it also expedited the swift passage of the mails. In 1880 it was estimated that a truly experienced and professional post office worker could hand-stamp about 1,500 letters per hour; but a speed trial with the first Leavitt machine demonstrated that it could cancel 25,000 post cards in an hour. By 1884, the power-driven Model Number 5 could cancel between 4,000 and 8,000 pieces of assorted letters and cards per hour.

1883 postal stationery entire with Leavitt cancel

Both machines and trains were therefore helping the mail to move faster in this last part of the 19th Century.

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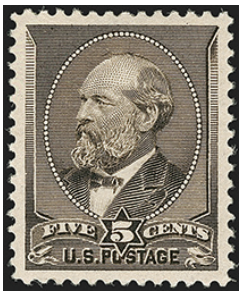
In 1882 Postmaster General Timothy Howe began to ask the American Bank Note Company to finally produce new designs for the postage stamps of the 1880s. Accordingly, over the next five years four new U.S. regular-use postage stamps of new designs would be issued. Sometimes these four stamps are grouped in one category as "The Issues of 1882-1887," but more commonly they are identified as individual issues over those five years. That is the way we present them here.

The first stamp to be addressed by Howe in 1882 was the 5¢ Taylor of 1875. As we indicated earlier, it was not an artistic success, principally because the Zachary Taylor portrait which had been used on a tobacco tax stamp four years earlier did not fit symmetrically into this stamp. However, this was now the stamp of international postage, and Howe felt it was causing us embarrassment and perhaps ridicule abroad.

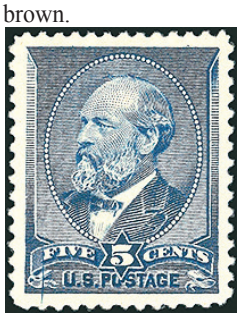


For this new 5¢ stamp (Sc. 205) the portrait selected was one of James Garfield, the President who had been assassinated only the previous year. This was an extremely popular choice at the time, because Garfield's death had rocked the nation even more perhaps than the death of Lincoln.

In some ways, Lincoln was regarded almost as a wartime casualty, but Garfield was a peaceable young man in his forties at the beginning of a promising administration. (Americans would feel the same sentiments almost a century later at the assassination of another young president.)

The original design for the stamp was shown to Garfield's widow. Lucretia, and it was explained to her that the stamp would be printed in black as a mourning stamp as had been done with the Lincoln stamp in the 1860s. However Lucretia Garfield did not want a black mourning stamp for her late husband, but insisted on something more positive. Accordingly, the 5¢ Garfield of 1882 was printed in shades of brown.

In the design of this five cent stamp, an elliptical medallion bearing the portrait of James Garfield rests on a rectangular lined shield. The medallion is bordered by a line of small white beads. The words U.S. POSTAGE are at the bottom of the stamp, and directly above them are the words Five and Cents separated by the numeral 5 set in a five-pointed star. The stamp measures 20 x 25-1/2 mm. For six years this stamp was printed in a brown, a yellow brown, and a gray brown.



In 1887, President Grover Cleveland wanted to retire this stamp and replace it with another 5¢ stamp honoring the recently deceased Ulysses S. Grant, but after making this announcement the Post Office then withdrew it and in 1881 reissued this same Garfield stamp in shades of blue and indigo (Sc. 216).

Postmaster General Howe was yet another official who believed strongly in delivering postal services at the lowest possible price, and in those early years of the 1880s he felt the time was ripe for a reduction in first class postage.

For one thing, prosperity had returned, times were good, and other

1888 5¢ Indigo, Sc. 216, ABNC Imprint & # Plate Block of 12

tax revenues were up. For another, the post office would actually see a profit in 1882 and 1883, as we noted.

No small part of the fact that the post office would be in the black those two years was due to the very large savings Thomas James had created by eradicating the corrupt procurement practices of the Star Routes, and now Timothy Howe felt that those savings could be returned to the people in the form of cheaper rates.

Howe lobbied Congress with this idea, and the result was the Postal Act of March 3, 1883. This Act "reduced the postage on first class matter to 2 cents a half ounce or fraction thereof on and after October 1, 1883." It also revised the money order system by raising the limit to one hundred dollars; and it created Postal Notes, a cheaper and more convenient means for sending sums of less than five dollars through the mail.

First class mail was therefore only two cents for a half ounce, and two years later, in 1885, Congress raised the weight limit to one ounce. This rate of two cents for one ounce established by the Acts of 1883 and 1885 remained unchanged until 1932, except for the war years of 1917-1919.

The Act of March 3, 1883, was Timothy Howe's final activity of postal reform, because he died at age 67 just three weeks after Congress passed the Act.

President Chester Arthur appointed in his place Walter Gresham, 51, a major voice in the Republican party and a bit of a political opportunist who had most recently served as a district judge in Indiana. This appointment was Gresham's entree into Washington, and he was one of the few 19th Century Postmaster Generals to be appointed solely for political reasons–which would not be the case in the 20th Century. Nevertheless, Gresham did a competent job in his 18 months in office.

The first task that faced Gresham upon taking office in the spring of 1883 was the implementation of the new rates that were to go into effect in October of that year. At that time, 2¢ would be the rate for first class postage and that meant that vast numbers of stamps of that denomination would be in demand.

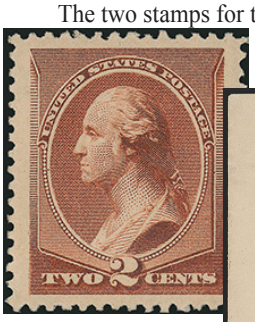
The only 2¢ stamp available was the Andrew Jackson 2¢ stamp of 1879, which had not been one of the high-use stamps re-engraved in 1881-82. Furthermore, departmental officials felt that the venerable 3¢ Washington would then become obsolete, and the workhorse stamp of the postal system would no longer honor the nation's first president (Actually, the 3¢ Washington did not become obsolete and it was printed and used in future years as a vehicle for multiple rates of fourth class mail.)

Gresham's decision therefore was to replace the 2¢ Jackson with a new 2¢ Washington. In his report to Congress, he wrote that "it was decided to replace the old 2-cent stamp by a new one bearing the profile of the first president, thus restoring it to its old place on the stamp in most general use." He also said that the Post Office would at the same time issue a new 4¢ stamp for its use in first class letters of one ounce–although that would not be needed two years hence when the single rate weight limit was increased to one ounce.

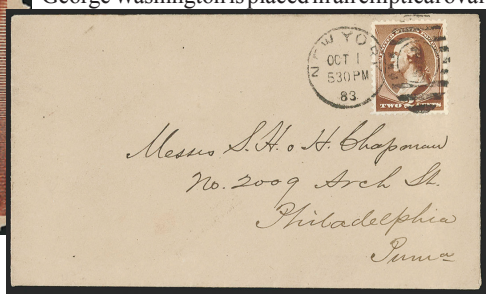
This new 4¢ stamp would bear the same portrait of Andrew Jackson that previously was used on the old 2¢ stamp. Thus, there was a quick shuffle of portraits in 1883–Washington went from the 3¢ to the 2¢ stamp, and Jackson went from the 2¢ to the new 4¢.

Furthermore, the American Bank Note Company moved quickly, and these two new stamps were ready for distribution on October l, 1883, when the new rates went into effect.

The two stamps for the Issue of 1883 are:



Two cent (Sc. 210) The profile portrait of George Washington is placed in an elliptical oval that is laid on a shield-like tablet. Above the oval surrounding the head are the words UNITED STATES POSTAGE, which represents a change since the stamps of the 1870s and the 5¢ Garfield of 1882 had used the abbreviation U.S.



1883 2¢ tied by "New York Oct. 1 5:30 PM 83" first day of issue duplex datestamp and oval numeral grid on cover to Philadelphia.

An unusual example of the new 2¢ rate, two singles of the 2¢ Red Brown (210), tied by "Cincinnati O. Jun. 15 '86" duplex cancels on 1¢ + 1¢ on Wove, Robert W. Mercer Paid Reply Card Essay (UY1E-TA), addressed to Mercer in Cincinnati with Trenton N.J. return address of stamp collector E.B. Sterling, message on back datelined Cincinnati, June 14, '86. The 2¢ paid letter postage as this essay was not a recognized postal card.

At the bottom of the shield are the words TWO and CENTS separated by the numeral 2. There are various shadings at the top and the bottom. In 1883 this stamp was printed in a reddish brown, and during the next four years this stamp, the most frequently used one, was printed in large numbers. By 1887 some 4.3 billion of the 2¢ Washington "Red Browns" had been printed. This stamp is one of the most common of all the 19th Century U.S. stamps, and it is readily available for collectors today. Like its predecessor, the 2¢ Washington in green also is quite available today.

Four cent. (Sc. 211). This stamp, generally used for double-weight first class postage, features the Andrew Jackson profile in an elliptical oval that is laid on a rectangular and beveled tablet covering the entire stamp. The words UNITED STATES POSTAGE follow the line of the oval at the top, and again they appear in this unabbreviated form. In each lower corner is a large white numeral 4, and running beneath them in a straight line are the words FOUR CENTS. In 1883 it was printed in a blue green, but in 1888 it was changed to carmine (Sc. 215), undoubtedly to avoid confusion with the 2¢ Washington that had been changed to green the previous year. Both the 2¢ and 4¢ stamps of this issue are the same size: 20 x 25-1/2 mm.

A double rate all over illustrated Diebold cover carried by a 4¢ Jackson single.

To Be Continued

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PMG Walter Gresham

Walter Gresham remained Postmaster General until 1884, and his most publicized event during that time was his fight with the Louisana Lottery, in which he succeded in excluding the lottery from the mails. On September 25, 1884, he accepted a stop-gap appointment as Secretary of the Treasury, and then a month later Chester Arthur named him Circuit Judge of the 7th judicial district.

PMG Frank Hatton

In that election year of 1884 Arthur appointed the incumbent assistant postmaster general, Frank Hatton, to fill out the few remaining months as Postrnaster General.

Chester Arthur had always been considered an accidental president by his own party and he failed decidedly in his bid for renomination. The Republicans in 1884 nominated James G. Blaine who had earlier alerted Garfield to the Star Route frauds and who had served him as Secretary of State. The Democrats nominated the 47 year old governor of New York, Grover Cleveland, who won the election by only 20,000 votes out of some 10 million cast. Cleveland thus became the first elected Democratic president since James Buchanan in 1856; and he would become the only U.S. president ever to serve two non-consecutive terms. He would also be the only Democratic president from Buchanan in 1856 to Woodrow Wilson in 1912.

PMG William Vilas

Grover Cleveland ran a no-nonsense administration and during his time in office he dealt firmly with labor problems, the tariff questions, and veterans' affairs. For his Postmaster General he chose William Vilas, 44, a Wisconsin lawyer and politican who had been chairman of the convention which nominated Cleveland. During his years in Washington, Vilas would be a counselor and close friend of the president, and he ran the post office department with the same brisk efficiency that characterized the Cleveland administration.

In his early days in office, Vilas sponsored the weight change in first class mail, and on July 1, 1885, the 2¢ rate began to carry first class mail of up to one ounce, instead of the previous one-half ounce single rate limit. There was some initial feeling in the post office department that this change would render unnecessary the present 4¢ stamp that was being used for the double first class rate, but it became evident that there was still use for the stamp and thus the 4¢ Jackson of 1883 continued to be produced.

The post office also continued to produce the 3¢ Washington of the re-engraved issue of 1881, although in 1887 the color was changed from green to vermillion (Sc. 214). During those years of the middle 1880s the post office continued to expand, and by 1885 there were over 50,000 post offices in the United States. The volume of mail was also increasing of course, and by 1886 the post office was handling 3,747,000,000 pieces of mail of all kinds per year.

One new general use postage stamp was produced during William Vilas' term in office, the new 1¢ Franklin of 1887 (Sc. 212). This was a high use stamp, employed for the basic fourth class rate, as well as for variations of other rates. The engraved Franklin of 1881, as discussed earlier, was far from an artistic success. Furthermore, this same high-use Franklin stamp had now been used for the last 17 years, from 1870 to 1877, and it seemed time for a new stamp. This new 1¢ stamp was issued on June 11, 1887, and it was the last of the four new regular use stamps produced during the late 1880s.

The 1¢ stamp was the only one of the four 1887 issues that had a new central design, a profile bust of Benjamin Franklin on a disk with a shaded background. The lower portion of the oval disk is bordered with pearls, and the upper portion with a curved panel containing the words UNITED ST A TES POSTAGE, again in unabbreviated form. The oval is placed on a shield-shaped tablet with a truncated pyramidal base, bearing on it the words ONE and CENT separated by the number l. The stamp is 20 x 25-1/2mm., and it was printed in ultramarine and deep blue. During the life of this stamp America printed some 1.3 million of them.

Despite the large numbers printed, the 1¢ stamp was generally used on classes of mail that were not saved, and so these stamps are somewhat scarcer today than other denominations of the same period.

PMG Donald Dickinson

In 1888, the Secretary of the Department of Interior, Lucius Lamar, was elevated to the Supreme Court, and Cleveland moved his old friend William Vilas over to Interior. For the last year of this, his first administration, Cleveland appointed as Postmaster General Donald Dickinson, a prominent Democratic lawyer from Michigan.

By 1888 the use of postage stamps had grown dramatically, and the chart below shows the number of stamps issued by the post office for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1888.

Those stamps issued by the Post Office in 1888 represent a mixed variety of sources and plates. Four of the stamps in 1888 were of the new issues printed from 1882 to 1887: the 1¢, 2¢, 4¢, and 5¢ stamps. Two of the stamps were of the re-engraved issue of 1881–1882: the 3¢ and 6¢. Some of the 10¢ stamps were of the new special delivery stamp of 1885, to be discussed in the next chapter, and others were of the re-engraved

	Quarter Ending				
	9/30/1887.	12/31/1887	3/31/1888	6/30/1888	Total
1 cent	89,936,700	113,015,900	125,318,700	121,718,200	443,989,500
2 cents	296,217,000	348,012,100	368,931,300	334,520,200	1,347,680,600
3 cents	101,500	604,100	1,884,700	1,441,100	4,031,400
4 cents	2,976,250	3,750,700	3,924,675	3,592,125	14,243,750
5 cents	7,704,889	8,719,100	10,740,629	8,945,500	36,299,229
6 cents	61,000	---	100,000	5,600	166,600
10 cents	4,320,780	5,239,780	5,699,870	4,671,230	19,931,660
15 cents	277,020	451,560	357,640	336,940	1,423,160
30 cents	67,370	181,120	98,480	95,760	442,730
90 cents	5,920	11,490	18,990	18,120	54,520

Whole number of stamps 1,868,173,140. Value $36,293,183.00

issue of 1882. And three of the stamps were the old National/ Continental stamps of the 1870s–the 15¢, 30¢, and 90¢.

But the total amount of stamps issued that year shows an amazing increase in just a few years. In the chart on page 14 for the fiscal year ending in 1880, there were some 875 million stamps issued, while this chart above just eight years later shows some 1.8 billion stamps issued. The total dollar amount of the stamps also increased, from $22 million in 1880 to $36 million in 1888. An even clearer indication of the increased usage can be seen in the number of first class stamps issued. In 1880, some 541 million 3¢ stamps, the first class rate at the time, were issued; but in 1888 some 1.3 billion 2¢ stamps were issued, the new first class rate.

It was a decade of returning prosperity during the 1880s and America was growing. The census of 1880 counted some 50 million people, but by 1890 the population had risen to 62 million. There were more and more Americans, more post offices, and more and more U.S. postage stamps were being used each year.

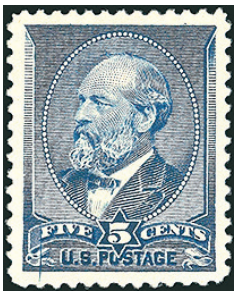
The Postage Stamps of 1887-1888

Scott 212

Scott 213

Scott 214

Scott 215



Scott 216

Scott 217

Scott 218

Scott E2