

The Department of Agriculture

History:

United States Official stamps were issued to the nine government departments of the Executive Branch for use beginning July 1, 1873. Congress had abolished the free franking mail privilege for government officials after widespread abuses produced huge postal deficits, estimated by the Postmaster General at more than \$5,000,000.00, approximately 90 percent of the Department's 1873 total. The Postmaster General authorized the Continental Bank Note Company to prepare Official stamps on hard paper. Designs were quickly adapted from the regular issue banknote stamps which Continental was then printing, with denominations assigned to each department according to its anticipated needs.

Official stamps were not popular; therefore on March 3, 1877, penalty franks were authorized for department offices only in Washington, D.C. Some departments converted immediately, while others used up the supply of existing stamps. In 1879, despite the expanded use of penalty franks, certain department stamps were printed again by the American Bank Note Company on soft porous paper. The use of penalty franks was gradually expanded to include field offices, and the use of Official stamps was finally discontinued on July 5, 1884. Penalty envelopes were used henceforth.

The Department of Agriculture was established in 1862, but was not made an Executive department until 1889. It was headed by a Commissioner who did not have cabinet rank during the stamp period. The bulk of its mail pertained to seed orders, crop reports and weather reports. Prestamped envelopes were sent out to many rural areas. The need for higher value stamps was badly overestimated in the beginning, and after 1875, additional supplies of only the one, three and six cent values were printed. Penalty envelopes were not extensively used during the transitional period (1877-84).

Exhibit Highlights:

This exhibit commences with an original watercolor sketch by the artist Joseph Claxton and includes a set of cardboard specimens of unknown origin, six large die trial color proofs, Pan Pacific proofs, India paper proofs on card, an unlisted trial color in blue, selected values from the Albert Goodall proofs (one of two surviving complete sets) and the 1881 International Cotton Exhibition proofs, issued stamps, a plate number strip, singles and blocks of the soft paper American Bank Note Company issues. Blocks of all denominations on hard paper are shown including shades. A set of specimens is shown as is the only reported set of 'SEPCIMEN' varieties from position 21. Printing varieties of the one cent specimen are exhibited as well. Cancellations on both hard and soft paper issues (only the three cent was legitimately used) are displayed.

Usages from the Department of Agriculture are by far the most difficult to obtain of all departmental covers, in part because the mailroom clerks in Washington, D.C. "skinned" the stamps off incoming mail and also because many stamps on outgoing mail were used on wrapper and parcel labels that were damaged or discarded upon opening by recipients. A virtually complete grouping of the known covers and wrappers is highlighted by the only 12 cent denomination reported on cover.

Purposely omitted is the foreign transfer of the six cent Agriculture, which was partially erased and shows only a minor portion under the design of the two cent Executive specimen, position 40. The Scott specialized catalog lists certain minor varieties (a double transfer on the three cent and ribbed paper varieties of the one, two and three cent values); the exhibitor, a consultant to the Scott editor has requested their removal from the 1995 catalog.