

Certified Mail and Its First Day of Issue

By Patrick Crosby

A stamp collector can complete a Scott U.S. back-of-the-book category with just one stamp valued at 75¢ mint or used. I'm referring to the 1955 Certified Mail stamp (Scott # FA1) which helped the U.S. Post Office Department (P.O.D.) inaugurate Certified Mail service. This stamp and Certified Mail become much more interesting when on cover, like the featured postcard's first day of issue usage.



Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield called the new Certified Mail service a "change in the registered mail service," reducing costs to patrons and speeding delivery on at least 25 million letters a year. Registered mail requires special bundling, recording of information, and security at every handling point. For 15¢ Certified Mail would offer proof of mailing and proof of receipt with no indemnity (insurance) or special security on first-class items that have no intrinsic value as opposed to the minimum 40¢ registry fee.

A patron would pay for first-class postage and the Certified Mail fee, then he would receive a numbered receipt. The mailed item would be entered into the ordinary mail stream (unless airmail or special delivery) with a two-part Certified Mail label, one part adhered to the envelope. When delivered, the carrier or postal employee was to have the receipt portion signed by a recipient, then remove the receipt portion where rouletted and return it to the delivery post office for filing. If the patron had requested a return receipt (showing when, where, and to whom an item was delivered) it would have been noted on the mailed item and a fee of 7¢ would have been paid for in postage. If the patron did not pay for a return receipt but later needed delivery confirmation, he could request it from the delivery post office for up to 6 months for a 10¢ fee. However, after June 30, 1957 a return receipt fee was required for any confirmation.

The 15¢ Certified Mail stamp was only to be used to pay the fee for the service – it had no other postal validity. However, the stamp wasn't required for the service fee, any postage stamps or meter stamps would do. The Certified Mail stamp essentially became obsolete in just over two years when the fee increased to 20¢ on July 1, 1957. Certified Mail was only a domestic service and not for the international mails (this caused P.O.D. headaches and items without return addresses were sent to the dead letter office).

Before the stamp was issued on June 6, 1955, postmasters were advised to post a copy of the Certified Mail instructional notice to their bulletin board, give information to the press, and notify all local stamp clubs about the stamp issue. In addition, for every postal truck a post office had, two posters advertising the new service would be sent, one for each side of a truck, and were to be used for the first 15 days of June. The P.O.D. said, "Collectors shall refrain from requesting hand cancellations since covers will be machine canceled so far as practicable." It seems that First Day of Issue hand cancels were used for proper cancellation of blocks of four.

The 15¢ Certified Mail stamp and service were available only in Washington, D.C. beginning on June 6, 1955, and the rest of the country had to wait until June 7th. The P.O.D. requested that ordinary size envelopes be used for first day cancellation requests, sent to Washington, D.C. with 3¢ postage attached, and the envelope unsealed so that the mailer's portion of the certified mail form could be enclosed. So, having the first day cancel on a postcard, as shown, is unusual but, unfortunately, does not come with the mailer's receipt. The P.O.D. stated, "...each cover must have a 3¢ stamp affixed, or if airmail service is

desired a 6c stamp, when submitted". The sender of the featured postcard attached the 3¢ requested, even though the postcard rate was only 2¢. A P.O.D. amendment on August 2, 1955, stated that effective immediately any mailable matter of no intrinsic value may be sent as Certified Mail, so for sure a postcard or postal card would be allowed at the first-class card rate. Notice how the 3¢ stamp is creatively tied by the machine cancel – it is tied only to a strip of selvage left attached to the stamp (which is a plate number single).

The featured card is also interesting as a first day cover because it wasn't sent back to the sender but was actually used for a message, addressed to a collector friend. The P.O.D. required that a horizontal open space be on the left side of the envelope for the Certified Mail sticker, which the sender of this card did not do. Some first day cover cachet makers artistically provided for this space.

Certified Mail started at the end of the Prexies era, that is, the 1938 presidential definitive series, which is popular among U.S. postal historians. Besides postage stamps being used to pay for first-class postage and the Certified Mail fee, stamps were also used on the same covers to pay for return receipts, restricted delivery, and special delivery, if requested.

In searching "certified" at www.PostalHistory.com I spotted 9 different Prexies (out of 30 total) used on Certified Mail covers. Also collectible are the Liberty Series definitives (which began 1954) and include the 30¢ Robert E. Lee stamp shown here on cover. The 30¢ paid the then 20¢ Certified Mail fee and 10¢ return request fee. From the scribbled out "Special Delivery" handstamps it seems the sender decided he didn't need speedy delivery (also costing 30¢), but instead wanted confirmation of mailing and delivery.

Today Certified Mail service is still popular, but costs \$3.50 instead of 15-cents. The featured card cost me \$5.00.

Most of the information provided is found in the P.O.D.'s *Postal Bulletins* for 1955 and *U.S. Domestic Postal Rates, 1872-2011* by Henry Beecher and Anthony Wawrukiewicz.

Patrick Crosby is a member of the Nevada Stamp Study Society and collects U.S. postal cards, especially used, including first days; the 1886 Grant Letter Card (or Sheet); UC16, the first U.S. aerogram; and postal history on business or picture post cards.

