

The First Commemorative Postal Issue

by Patrick Crosby

Did you know that a post boy, the namesake of our monthly *Post Boy* journal, appeared on the first United States, and perhaps the world's first, commemorative postal issue of any type? He is shown on a galloping horse along with a multi-line telegraph and an express train with mail car, showing how far U.S. communications had come by 1876. But this is not an adhesive postage stamp like the 1893 Columbian Commemorative series, this a stamped envelope.



Two colors of the 1876 Centennial envelope, red on commercial size envelope, and green on personal size envelope.



Scott #113

A post boy on the 2¢ stamp (shown) is from an 1869 postage stamp series that also included the scenes of The Landing of Columbus and The Declaration of Independence. However, these are considered to be regular, definitive stamps and not commemoratives.

As part of the United States' 100th anniversary celebration of independence, Philadelphia, PA hosted the 1876 Centennial International Exposition of American Cultural and Industrial Progress. The exposition was an overall success with 30,864 exhibits of products, art, and manufacturing from almost every country in the world. Back in 1871 when planning started there was apprehension over Great Britain since, we had secured our independence from them. Surprisingly, Great Britain and her colonies provided 3,584 of the exhibits! The exposition opened May 10 and closed November 10, 1876.

Instead of an adhesive stamp or a postal card, the USPOD (United States Post Office Department) decided to issue a commemorative envelope which would be printed and available only at the exposition. Future demand necessitated additional production in Hartford, CT, and nationwide distribution upon the request of postmasters. There were two sizes of the envelope, both 3¢, which was the current first-class letter rate. The smaller size was considered to be for personal use and the stamp was printed in green. The slightly larger, commercial size envelope was in red.



1876 Centennial Watermark with "U" around "S" and "1876"



Earlier watermark also found on Centennial Envelopes with "US" intertwined with "POD"

For the collector of stamped envelopes, the 1876 Centennial Issue includes very few types – Scott shows four and the UPSS (United Postal Stationery Society) catalog shows ten, three of which are rare oddballs. Not only were there just 2 sizes, but they were only issued on high quality white paper. By contrast, the previous 3¢ issue came in seven sizes and envelope paper colors included white, amber, fawn, cream and blue. For the most common Centennial covers the value range is \$30 to \$50 used and \$60 to \$100 mint.

There were two watermarks used, as shown in the scans. UPSS Watermark 3 was especially prepared for these Centennial envelopes. UPSS Watermark 2, in use since 1870, also was used on both sizes. A watermark is a pattern impressed on wet paper and can be seen later by looking through the envelope paper to a strong light. Watermarks were a USPOD requirement for security purposes, and sometimes changed to identify an envelope manufacturer.



Double line under "POSTAGE"

Seven to ten working dies for printing were prepared using a single master die, but some of the working dies ended up printing a single line under "POSTAGE" and the other dies produced a double line. Both Scott and the UPSS recognize these as separate dies. Find the double line die on a red envelope and you're rich – it is known only mint and valued in the UPSS catalog at \$56,000! (Now, where did I put my copy?)

When first seen in the mail stream there was confusion as to whether these Centennial envelopes were legitimate. It was the first stamped envelope without a portrait, and it was on a shield-shaped background, plus the USPOD in Washington, DC had given little notice of its issuance. The used example, shown on the right, is postmarked from Washington, IA and the sender mistakenly addressed it to Troy, NY. Then somehow Troy, NY knew to redirect the envelope to Troy, OH and used an inappropriate "Forwarded" hand stamp.



One of the booths at the exposition was for The Remington Arms Company, who had teamed up in 1873 with an early developer of the typewriter. The first big commercial showing of the typewriters was at the exposition. People waited in line at their booth to have a letter typed, and also to admire the skill of the pretty typists. Until about the end of June a fair attendee could have a personal letter written. Then, to speed things up, form letters were used with only the salutation, closing, and date actually typed. This cost 25¢ and included a 3¢ Centennial envelope with a typed address. Both these letters and the typed envelopes are highly collectable. The envelopes could be dropped in one of 50 pillar mail boxes throughout the grounds or at the Centennial Post Office. All these would receive a circle dated "Centennial" handstamp and a cork killer. There were also two railway mail cars at the fair where mail could be dropped and they would receive a "Centennial R.P.O." handstamp, which is

now rare. At the time there was a social stigma attached to printed letters, being considered impersonal, if not insulting, whether for personal or commercial use. It was another five years before the typewriter took off.

What higher compliment is there than to be copied? Yes, there are forgeries, but I refer to a 13¢ 1976 Bicentennial envelope, respectfully called the Centennial of 1876 Envelope. Shown is an example used to mark the occasion of the Final Trip of the last Railway Post Office route. The cachet shows the different post markings used over the years on this route. So this 1976 envelope commemorates the 1876 commemorative envelope and was used to commemorate the last Railway Post Office. Whew!



13¢ 1976 Centennial Indicia of 1876 Envelope

Thanks to my wife, Mary Beth, for the photos of the watermarks and to John Walter for his constantly expanding layout and editorship skills.

References:

Wm. H. Maisel, United States Commemorative Stamped Envelopes 1876-1965, Lutherville, MD: Wm. H. Maisel, 1974, 3-13. (This booklet is still available from UPSS.org)

William J. Bomar, Postal Markings of United States Expositions, North Miami, FL: David G. Phillips Publishing Co., Inc., 1986, 7-10.

Undersander, Dan, editor, Catalog of the 19th Century Stamped Envelopes, Letter Sheets, and Wrappers of the United States, Chester, VA: United Postal Stationery Society 2018.

Scott 2019 Specialized Catalog of United States Stamps and Covers, Sidney, OH: Amos Media, 2018.

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.