

The 1876 Centennial Exposition Issue of Postal Entires: A Study of Uses

Purpose: To display the first American commemorative postal stationery. These envelopes were issued in 1876 to honor the Philadelphia Centennial International Exposition, which celebrated the 100th Anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia.

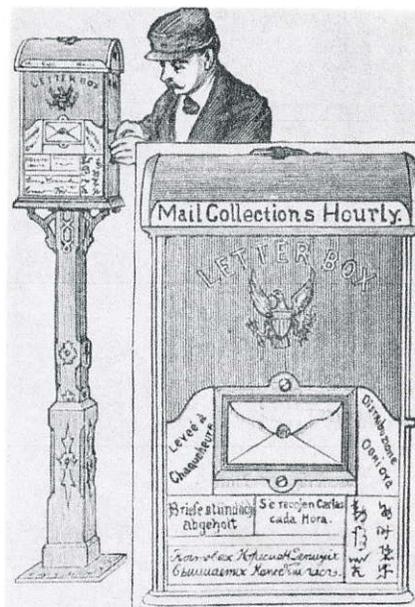
Scope: Domestic and foreign-bound uses will be shown, as well as the earliest documented uses of both green and vermilion designs, as well as the earliest documented example with the address typed at the Exposition. Exceptional uses are outlined in red.

History: Shortly before the 1876 Exposition, The Plimpton Manufacturing Company of Hartford, Connecticut, had perfected a machine which would gum the envelopes as well as perform all of the other operations. With the permission of the Post Office, one of these machines was installed in the space devoted to the Post Office Department in the Government Building in the Centennial Grounds in Philadelphia, and kept it in operation during the Exposition. This improved machine, with the exception of cutting the blanks or patterns, would perform folding, stamping, gumming, and if desired, printing a return request. Attached to the machine was an automatic counter, separating the envelopes into packages of 25. These groups of 25 were banded together with blue bands bearing the gold monogram “CSE”, probably standing for Centennial stamped envelopes. The machine was handsomely ornamented, and was in almost constant operation during exhibition hours, from the opening on May 10 to November 10 1876, and was capable of producing about 20,000 envelopes per day. At first it was intended to only issue these commemorative envelopes to the Philadelphia Post Office, but there was such an immediate demand for them that the privilege of obtaining them was extended to every post office in the country, effective May 23 1876. A total of 4,775,000 of the full letter size and 4,227,000 of the larger commercial size were reported issued.

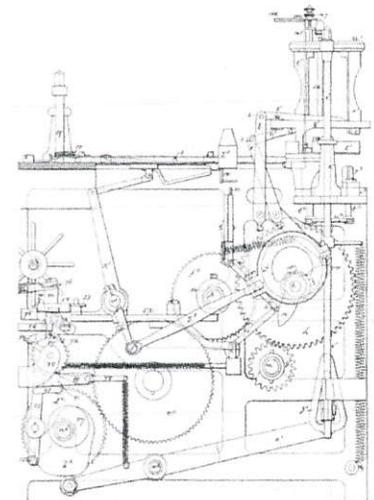
A special design for the stamp and dies was prepared by Henry Mitchell to commemorate the Centennial celebration in 1876. The design included a mail carrier on horseback, representing 1776, and an express train, with telegraph wires overhead, representing 1876. The stamp was printed in green for the full letter size 7, knife 30 (3.25” x 5.50”), and in vermilion for the larger commercial size 8, knife 36 (3.38” x 5.88”). The paper was especially manufactured for this issue with a watermark consisting of “U S C 1876” in monogram (known as watermark 3) shown below.



Watermark shown half size



The Centennial Letter Box. Fifty collection boxes were scattered through the Exposition grounds and buildings. Ten carriers were employed, making seven daily deliveries of letters and hourly pickups.



The 1876 Plimpton envelope machine



Die 71 – single line under “POSTAGE”



Die 72– double line under “POSTAGE”