

# U.S. Departmentals, 1873 to 1884

The purpose of this exhibit is to show the development of the U.S. Departmental stamps from 1873 to 1884.

## Reason for Departmentals

In 1775 a Free Franking privilege was granted for mail of Continental Congress members and soldiers. Over the years the use expanded and the privilege was abused, especially after the Civil War. On July 1, 1873, free franking was discontinued. To provide an accounting of postal expenses, special postage stamps were issued for the Executive Branch of Government.

## Production History

Over three months, 90 stamp designs were produced for the President's Executive Office and eight subordinate departments. Two additional values were added later. Regular Banknote issue portrait vignettes and value tablets were incorporated with new frames containing each department's name and associated symbols. Post Office stamps had large numerals to differentiate them from regular issue stamps. Each set is a different color that in most cases is associated with the department. The Departmentals are without a doubt the most elaborate ever produced for exclusive government use in the world.

Over 11 years, 212 stamps were produced with 117 regular issues and 95 special printings. Initially printed on hard paper by the Continental Banknote Co. and later on soft paper by the American Banknote Co. American used unaltered Continental plates. The special printings were sold to the public with "SPECIMEN" overprints.

## Demise of Departmental Stamps

As departments had to buy stamps out of their existing budgets, an effort to eliminate their use began immediately after their release. Changes in postal regulations culminated with penalty clause mail in 1877, which slowly replaced the stamps. Since the 1879 American issue was produced after the start of penalty mail, only 25 values were printed. In January 1882 the Attorney General ruled that penalty clause mail could not be used by field offices to private citizens resulting in renewed use of stamps. On July 5, 1884, Departmental stamps were discontinued and saw limited use after this date.

**Exhibit organization:** Executive is displayed first and subordinate departments follow in the order of their 1873 rank of importance as indicated on the following official notice: Executive, State, Treasury, War, Navy, Interior, Justice, Agriculture, Post Office, and Epilogue. Each section has its own introduction. Selected essays and proofs start each department followed by stamps, plate multiples, production varieties, used multiples, cancels, and covers. Items with 5 or less recorded are highlighted with text and important items are additionally highlighted by a blue mat.

## Depth and Research

As most contents had no sentimental value, covers were discarded and few survive. Over half of the covers were used in Washington, D.C., limiting available cancellations. Covers can be ranked by the difficulty of acquisition with Agriculture first followed by Executive, Justice, Navy, and State. Unlike regular issues of the period, few high denomination covers have survived. For a third of the 99 values known on cover, five or less covers are recorded for each. Six covers are recorded with four different 90¢ stamps. All four values are shown for the first time.

## The exhibit includes the most complete showing ever assembled in the following areas:

- Plate multiples
- Values on cover
- Foreign destinations
- Used multiples
- Unique values on cover
- Fort covers

## Published and unpublished original research includes:

- Plate blocks and strips - number and largest recorded
- Used multiples - number and largest recorded
- Values on cover - number recorded per value
- Foreign destinations - number recorded to each
- Consular covers - number recorded from each country
- Fort covers - number recorded per fort

## Regressive Die Proof

Signed D.S. Ronaldson, frame engraver

Similar dies with the portrait and value tablet were produced for all values except the 10¢, 24¢ and 90¢ values. Upon close examination of this 12¢ regressive die it is noted that the Continental secret mark in the foot of the "2" is present. Proving this regressive die was produced by the Continental Banknote Company and used for the production of Departmental stamps. The 6¢ Post Office incomplete engraving in the Post Office section is an example of this technique.