

Chapter Seven:

The Early Airmail Stamps

The Birth of Air Mail Postal Service

After a slow start in recognizing the potential of airplanes for postal transport, the United States Postal Department launched a series of experiments in air mail service in 1911 and 1912. The first one took place on Long Island from September 23rd to 30th, 1911. That week, Earle Ovington made daily flights in a Bleriot XI monoplane from Garden City Estates to Mineola, New York. Over fifty more flights in 1912 convinced the Post Office Department that permanent mail routes should be established.

Efforts to move beyond temporary demonstration runs at air shows and fairs, however, met with opposition from Congress, which was unwilling to appropriate the funds necessary to establish air mail routes. Finally, in 1918, \$100,000 was allocated for beginning air mail service in the U.S. Lacking both airplanes and experienced pilots to fly them, the Postal Department turned to the U.S. Army Signal Corps for help. Mail service from New York to Washington by way of Philadelphia, operated by Army pilots flying Curtiss Jenny training planes, began on May 15, 1918. On July 1 of that year, the first leg of a planned



Figure 7.1. First air mail flight; Postmaster General hands mail to pilot, 9/23/1911. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ggbain-09723.

New York to San Francisco transcontinental route was inaugurated. A month later, on August 12, the Post Office Department officially took over the Air Mail Service from the Army, hiring four experienced civilian pilots.



Figure 7.2. First official Air Mail Service, Polo Field, Washington, D.C., May 15, 1918. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-DIG-hec-10833.



Figure 7.3. First official Air Mail Service, Polo Field, Washington, D.C., May 15, 1918. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-DIG-hec-10843.

First Airmail Issues (The “Curtiss Jennys”, 1918): Scott #C1, C2, and C3

With air mail service scheduled to begin May 15, 1918, there was an urgent need for air mail stamps. A Congressional act signed on May 11th authorized the Postal Department to carry air mail at a rate of twenty-four cents per ounce. The first route served Washington, D. C., Philadelphia, and New York.

The first three air mail stamps are known as Jennys, after the Curtiss Jenny airplane depicted on them. They were issued separately, a result of adjustments to air mail rates. Although now identified by Scott numbers that increase with the stamp’s value, the higher value stamps were actually issued first. To maintain the historical narrative, the Jennys will be discussed in chronological order rather than Scott catalogue sequence.



Figure 7.4. Six-cent Jenny, Scott #C1, 1918.



Figure 7.6. Twenty-four cent Jenny, Scott #C3, 1918.



Figure 7.5. Sixteen-cent Jenny, Scott #C2, 1918.

Scott #C3: 24¢ “Curtiss Jenny” and Scott #C3a: “Inverted Jenny”

In the patriotic fervor of wartime America, the Postal Department decided to issue its first air mail stamp in red and blue against a white paper background. The chosen subject was the Curtiss Jenny, a biplane being manufactured in great numbers for use in European military operations, and also chosen by the United States Postal Department for airmail use. Ironically, the plane photographed as a model for this stamp broke down in its maiden postal flight out of Washington, D. C. on May 15, 1918. The vignette was engraved by J. Eissler and the frame, lettering, and numerals by E. M. Hall. In all, 2,134,888 of the 24¢ Jennys were issued, beginning May 13th. The twenty-four cent postage rate included both a fourteen-cent air mail fee and a ten-cent special delivery fee. Although specifically intended for airmail purposes, these stamps were also valid on U.S. regular mail, registered mail, and parcel post. The 24¢ “Curtiss Jenny” was recently ranked #27 in a book on the 100 greatest American stamps.

The 24¢ Jenny went on sale on May 13, 1918 – just two days before the first airmail flights. It was, among other firsts, the first U.S. Airmail stamp, the first definitive airmail stamp anywhere in the world, the first bicolor airmail stamp, and the first airmail stamp printed with an error. Bicolor printing lent itself to inversion errors, in which the printer would accidentally turn the stamp sheet 180 degrees before printing the second color (the frame). After an invert sheet was discovered, the Bureau of Printing and Engraving decided to add the word “TOP” to the top of the stamp sheet after the first print run, to try to prevent this error. It was first added only to the blue vignette plates, but soon afterward was added to both plates. Because the blue “TOP”



Figure 7.7. Glenn Curtiss in his biplane. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-B2-1039-8.

only run was such a small batch, sheets with only the blue “TOP” are quite valuable today. In addition to the invert and TOP variants, other varieties of 24¢ Jenny can be identified by where the vignette was printed in relation to the frame. Categories include “slow” planes, “fast” planes, “grounded” planes, and “high-flying” ones.

Rarest and most valuable as single stamps are the inverts, because only one sheet of 100 stamps with that error was ever sold. They have become quite famous among philatelists worldwide. In 2005, a plate block of the 24¢ “Curtiss Jenny” invert sold at auction for \$2.97 million! The 24¢ “Curtiss Jenny” invert was recently ranked #3 in a book on the 100 greatest American stamps.

Scott #C2: 16¢ “Curtiss Jenny”

After an initial flurry of enthusiasm for airmail, sales dropped off considerably, because twenty-four cents – eight times the special wartime domestic first class postal rate of three cents – was too expensive for many. Even special delivery mail cost only ten cents, less than half the total airmail price. So in mid-July, a new postal rate of sixteen cents was set, and a new run of Jennys printed. The new stamp was printed in green and with a different denomination, but otherwise was identical to the first one. Nearly 3.8 million of these stamps were printed, in sheets of 100. The sixteen-cent stamp covered the six-cent airmail fee and the ten-cent special delivery fee through mid-December of 1918. However, sales of this stamp continued until 1922.

Scott #C1: 6¢ “Curtiss Jenny”

In late 1918, the United States Postal Department made a second move to further reduce airmail rates. This time, it was decided not to require airmail customers to pay the ten cent special delivery mail fee, which reduced regular airmail cost down to six cents, or only two times the

first class domestic rate then in effect. By this time, the airmail industry itself had taken off, with the addition of several airports in the Midwest to the available routes. Apart from having the lower denomination and being solid orange in color, the six cent Jennys were identical to the two earlier stamps in this series. In July, 1919, the airmail rate was reduced a third time, down to the regular domestic postage rate of two cents an ounce, making the six cent Jennys much less necessary. Just over two million stamps were printed, and were sold until 1927.

Second Airmail Issues (1923-24): Scott #C4, C5, and C6

In September 1919, the first transcontinental airmail delivery service was pioneered, in a four-day journey from New York to San Francisco that included stops in Chicago and Cheyenne. Beginning in October, 1919, cross-country postal air transport began operating on a regular schedule. The route could carry mail across the country in only three days, compared with the five days necessary for transport by rail. This competitive edge enabled the Postal Department to raise airmail fees, which were determined by dividing the cross-country trip into three zones: New York to Chicago, Chicago to Cheyenne, and Cheyenne to San Francisco. Mail that traveled within one zone cost eight cents an ounce, and if it was sent between adjacent zones, the cost was twice that. Mail sent across the country was priced at twenty-four cents an ounce.

Finally, in 1924, a new Transcontinental Mail Route opened that relied on both night and day flights to transport mail even more rapidly across the continent. Three new US Airmail stamps were designed for use over the three established airmail zones, at a cost of eight cents per ounce per zone. They were completed well before the Route was ready to operate, and were released to the Philatelic Stamp Agency and a few Post Offices in August, 1923, but were not officially placed on sale until June 16, 1924. The Transcontinental Mail Route began operation on July 1. By the end of the year, postal service airplanes were regularly traversing the entire route in only thirty-four hours.

Scott #C4: 8¢ Radiator and Wooden Propeller



Figure 7.9. Eight-cent Radiator and Wooden Propeller, Second Airmail Issues, 1923-24.

This stamp featured the radiator and propeller of a de Havilland DH-4 biplane. The de Havilland was a workhorse aircraft with twice the flying range of the Curtiss Jenny, replacing it on air mail routes. The stamp was designed by C. A. Huston and engraved by H. Dawson and E. M. Weeks of the Bureau of Printing and Engraving. It was issued on August 15, 1923. Eight cents covered the cost for mail within one of three zones on the Trans-continental Mail Route. Over six million copies of this stamp were printed.



Figure 7.10. Lieutenant Tilson in front of a de Havilland biplane, 1918. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-DIG-hec-11492.

Scott #C5: 16¢ Air Service Emblem



Figure 7.11. Sixteen-cent Air Service Emblem, Second Airmail Issues, 1923-24.

Released on August 17, 1923, the deep blue sixteen-cent Air Service Emblem was the first stamp to have the words “Air Mail” appear on it. The central design is the official insignia of the Air Mail Service, comprised of an open circle with spread wings. The stamp was designed by C.A. Huston and engraved by H. Dawson and E. M. Hall. Sixteen cents covered postage for a one-ounce postal item through any two zones of the Transcontinental Mail Route. Approximately five million of these stamps were printed.

Scott #C6: 24¢ De Havilland Biplane



Figure 7.12. Twenty-four-cent DeHavilland Biplane, Second Airmail Issues, 1923-24.

This deep carmine stamp was designed by C. A. Huston and engraved by J. Eissler and E. M. Hall. The vignette depicts a De Havilland 195 biplane in flight. Released on August 21, 1932, this stamp covered transcontinental air postage (across all three zones). Over five million were printed.

U.S. Airmail Planes and Map Series of 1926-27: Scott #C7, C8, and C9

In 1926, the United States Postal Department issued its first series of long, rectangular airmail stamps. The new shape was intended to make the airmail stamps easier for clerks to distinguish from standard postage stamps at the time. Released in February of 1926, September of 1926, and January of 1927 respectively, the three stamps reflected a new contract airmail service, which began in February of 1926. Under the new pricing scheme, one-ounce letters cost ten cents for transport up to a thousand miles, fifteen cents for up to fifteen hundred miles, and twenty cents for over fifteen hundred miles. Each stamp featured the same design, courtesy of C. A. Huston: a topographical map of the United States with two De Havilland DH-4 single-engine biplanes in flight, facing each other at opposite ends of the country. The map, provided by the United States Geological Survey, reflected the various topographical features used by pilots to follow their postal routes. Under the contract system, the postal service delivered mail to and from airports, and then the contractors provided the air transport. The first such contract route ran from Detroit to Chicago to Cleveland and back, and was operated by Ford Motor Company. The maiden flight of this new route was on February 15, 1926.



Figure 7.13. De Havilland biplane, undated photograph. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ggbain-31452.

Scott #C7: 10¢ Planes and Map



Figure 7.14. Ten-cent Planes and Map, Airmail Series of 1926-

This was the first of the new long rectangular design to be released, in February, 1926. It covered airmail postage for a one-ounce letter travelling up to 1,000 miles. Over 42 million ten-cent Planes and Map stamps were issued.

Scott #C8: 15¢ Planes and Map



Figure 7.15. Fifteen-cent Planes and Map, Airmail Series of 1926-

Released in September, 1926, this denomination of stamp covered airmail postage for a one-ounce letter travelling up to 1,500 miles. Unfortunately, a new flat rate of ten cents per half ounce for all airmail items went into

effect on February 1, 1927, making the fifteen-cent Planes and Map considerably less useful than the ten and twenty cent versions. Over 15 million copies of this stamp were released.

Scott #C9: 20¢ Planes and Map



Figure 7.16. Twenty-cent Planes and Map, Airmail Series of 1926-27.

This stamp was the last of its design to be released, in January of 1927. It covered airmail postage for a one-ounce letter travelling over 1,500 miles. At the time, however, no contract mail routes of this length had been established, making the stamp far less useful

than the other two in this series. Once the airmail rates were changed a month later, this stamp covered twice the half-ounce airmail rate for sending anywhere in the United States. Over 17 million twenty-cent Planes and Map stamps were issued.

U.S. Airmail 10¢ Lindbergh Stamp of 1927: Scott #C10

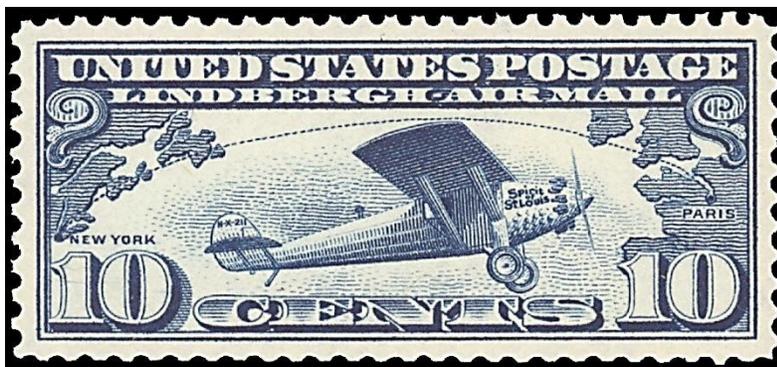


Figure 7.17. Ten-cent Spirit of St. Louis, 1927.

Issued to celebrate Charles A. Lindbergh's famous solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean from New York to Paris, this U.S. stamp was the first one to honor a living American. However, law prevented the Postal Department from

depicting a living person on a stamp, so the central design featured Lindbergh's name along with his airplane, the Spirit of St. Louis, instead. Charles Lindbergh's flight took place on May 20-21, 1927; this stamp was

issued only a month later, on June 18, 1927. The stamp's production was the fastest achieved by the Bureau of Printing and Engraving up to that time. Only one week elapsed between approval of the model on June 3 and the first printing run on June 10. Over twenty million copies were printed. Like the Map and Planes stamps, the ten-cent Lindbergh was in the shape of a long rectangle. It covered the half-ounce rate for airmail postage, but only until July 31, 1928, when the rate was changed yet again.

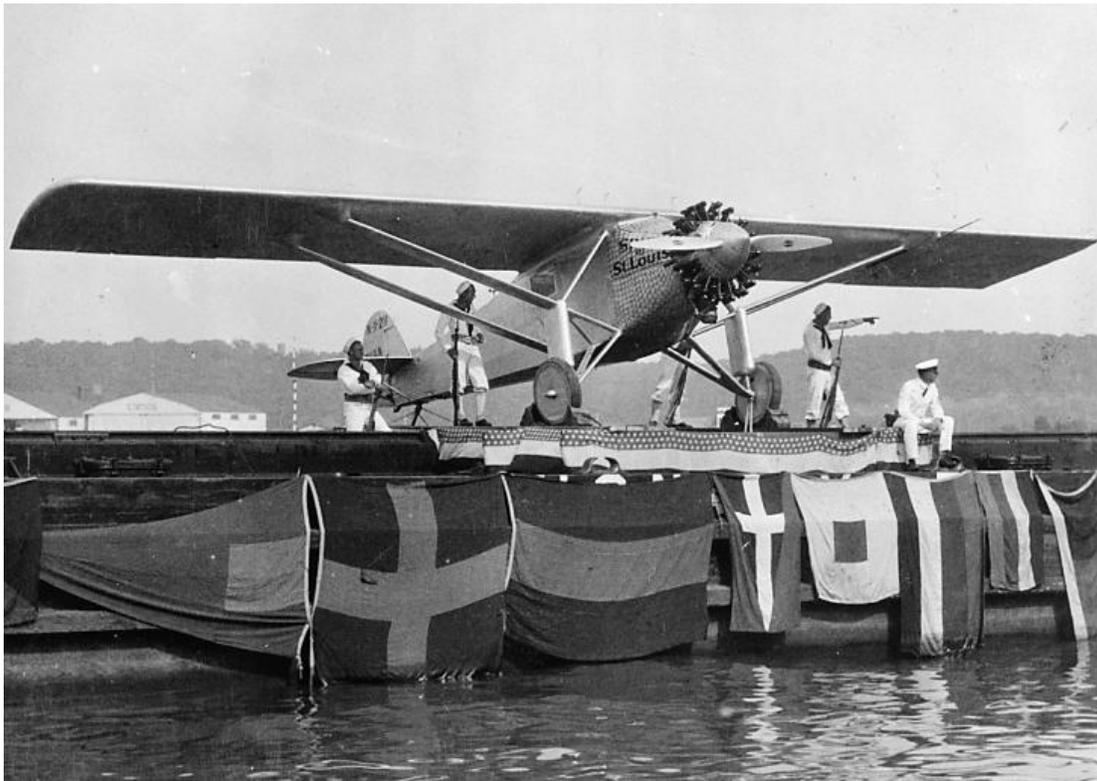


Figure 7.18. The Spirit of St. Louis in an undated photograph. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-108514

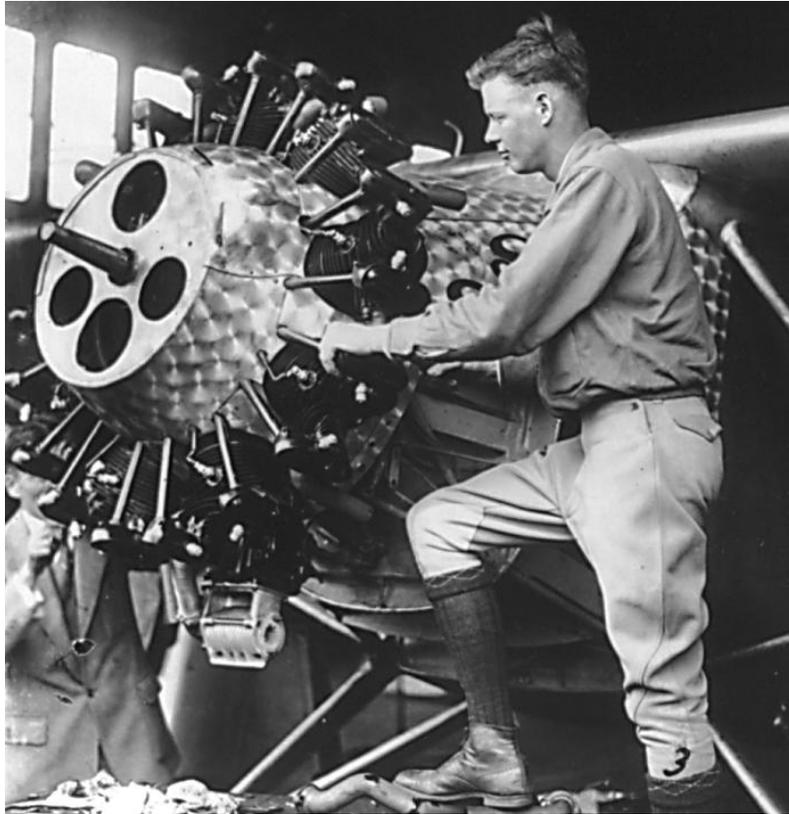


Figure 7.19. Lindbergh working on the Spirit of St. Louis, circa 1927. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-51834.



Figure 7.20. Charles A. Lindbergh, 1923; photo by John M. Noble. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-68852.

U.S. Airmail 5¢ Beacon Stamp of 1928: Scott #C11



Figure 7.21. Five cent Beacon, 1928.

On August 1, 1928, the Post Office Department instituted a dramatic reduction in airmail rates, from ten cents per half-ounce letter to five cents per one-ounce letter. Accompanying this change was a new five-cent stamp released on July 25th. Printed with a dark blue vignette and a red frame, it was the first bicolor airmail stamp issued since the Jennies of 1918. The stamp depicted an airmail beacon light

for nighttime navigation, located on Sherman's Hill in the Rocky Mountains of Wyoming. The engraving was based in part on a photograph of the Sherman's Hill Beacon; however, when the photos were developed, it was found that the top of the tower had not been captured in the image. Therefore, a photograph of a second beacon tower outside Omaha, Nebraska, was used as a model for the top of the Sherman's Hill Beacon. The resulting composite image was used by A.R. Meissner to engrave the stamp. Although biplanes were still being used for mail runs, Meissner depicted a monoplane instead, because he felt that it made the scene look more modern. Over 106 million of these stamps were printed.

The stamp was quite popular; not only was it beautiful, colorful, and a non-standard size, but airmail demand increased dramatically following the rate reduction. It was finally replaced by a new, single-color stamp (the five-cent Winged Globe) in 1930, because it took less time to print. Also, the unusual size of the 5¢ Beacon meant that only 100 stamps could be printed per sheet, as compared with 200 of the horizontal rectangle design characterized by the Map and Planes series of 1926-27.

U.S. Airmail 5¢ Winged Globe of 1930: Scott #C12



Figure 7.22. Five cent Winged Globe, 1928.

The next stamp issued by the United States Postal Department marked a return to the horizontal rectangle airmail style. It also marked a return to the faster, and less costly, single color format.

Printed in violet, the 5¢

Winged Globe stamp featured a central globe, labeled “U.S. Air Mail” with a pair of outstretched wings, copying the insignia of airmail pilots. The stamp was issued on February 10, 1930, and over 97 million of them were eventually printed. Five cents was the airmail postage rate for letters weighing one ounce or less.

The Graf Zeppelins (1930): Scott #C13, C14, and C15

In the world of U.S. stamp collecting, the Graf Zeppelin stamps of 1930 are in a class of their own. They were not true airmail stamps, nor were they traditional commemoratives. They were aimed primarily at the philatelic world, promoting a single trip on the “Europe – Pan America” route, from May 18 to June 6, 1930. (Other countries that also issued stamps to support the route included Germany, Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia.) Aboard the German airship LZ127 Graf Zeppelin, passengers could travel in comfort from Friedrichshafen, Germany to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and from there to Lakehurst, New Jersey, with intermediate stops in Seville, Spain and Pernambuco, Brazil. The Graf Zeppelin held twenty passengers and featured ten sleeping cabins and a dining room. Following its 1930 trip, it continued transporting passengers across the Atlantic until the 1937 Hindenburg disaster made airships highly unpopular.

Because this trio of stamps was, collectively, very costly (\$4.55 in all for a mint set), and because they were issued during the Great Depression, relatively few were purchased at the time. Released at post offices in mid-April of 1930, they were withdrawn at the end of June, and all remaining copies destroyed. Of the more than three million Zeppelin stamps printed, only 227,260 were sold. The Graf Zeppelin stamps remaining in the hands of collectors have become highly valuable since then.

Scott #C13: 65¢ Zeppelin over Atlantic Ocean



Figure 7.23. Sixty-five-cent Zeppelin over Atlantic Ocean, 1930.

The 65¢ Graf Zeppelin depicted the 775-foot-long rigid airship flying east across the Atlantic Ocean. The Graf Zeppelin operated without incident from 1928 to 1937, and was finally scrapped in 1940. This stamp covered card postage rate for a single leg of the Pan American Route. If used on that route, most of the proceeds went to the Zeppelin Company in Germany; however, if purchased by collectors and not used for transporting mail aboard the zeppelin, all profit from sale of the stamps went to the U.S. Postal Department. A total of 93,536 of these stamps were sold by the end of June, 1930, when the remainder was destroyed.

Scott #C14: \$1.30 Zeppelin between Continents



Figure 7.24. One-dollar-and-thirty-cent Zeppelin between Continents, 1930.

The \$1.30 Graf Zeppelin showed the dirigible traveling west between Europe and North and South America. This stamp could be used for postage on items being transported on the Pan American Route, with costs dependent upon distance between the point of origin and the destination. A total of 72,428 of these stamps were sold in 1930, and the remainder from the print run was subsequently destroyed.

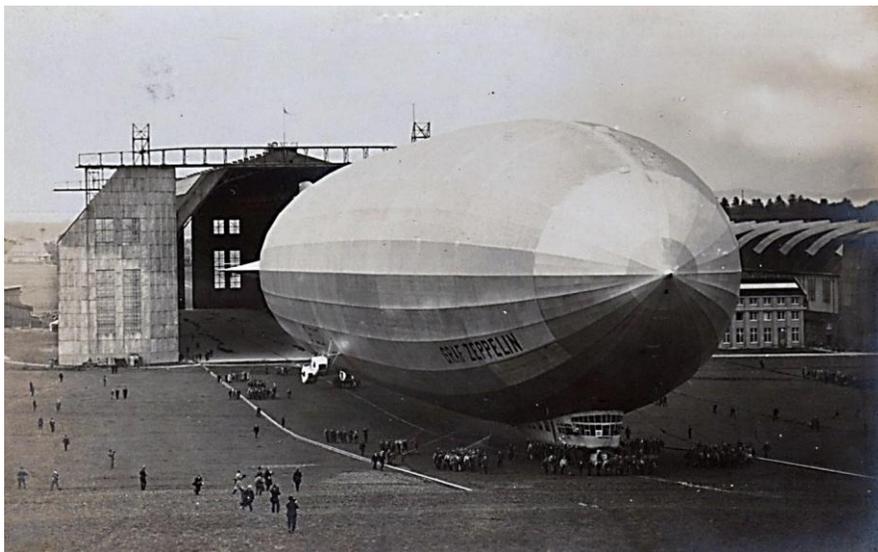


Figure 7.25. Graf Zeppelin leaving its hangar on its first flight, September 18, 1928; photograph courtesy Airships.net.

Scott #C15: \$2.60 Zeppelin Passing Globe



Figure 7.26. Two-dollar-and-sixty-cent Zeppelin Passing Globe, 1930.

Designed by C.A. Huston and A.R. Meissner of the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, this fanciful stamp shows the Graf Zeppelin emerging from the clouds, with the Earth visible beyond. At \$2.60, it was a costly acquisition during the Great Depression. Most of the postage (\$2.15) went to the Zeppelin Company to defray trip expenses, with 40¢ going to the United States government, and the remaining 5¢ to the government of Germany. A million stamps were printed, but only 61,296 sold over a sales period of only five weeks and two days, making them fairly scarce today. The stamp covered the letter postage rate for stops on the Pan American Route, or

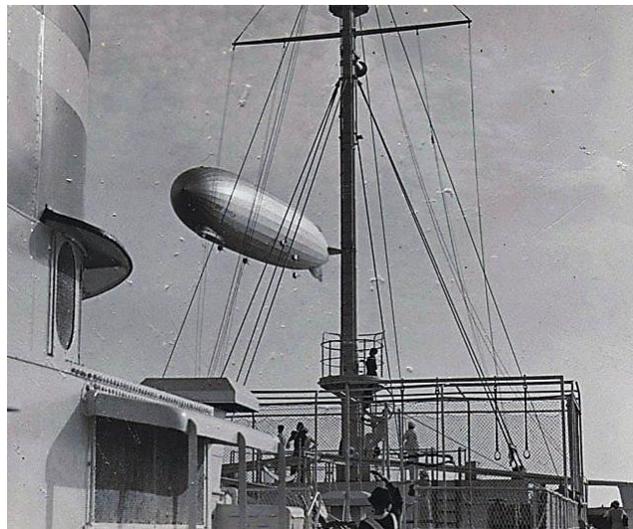


Figure 7.27. Graf Zeppelin flying above an ocean liner; photograph courtesy Airships.net.

could have been combined with a \$1.30 stamp to pay the round-trip letter rate, for philatelists desiring franked stamps as souvenirs of the historic journey. The \$2.60 Zeppelin Passing Globe was recently ranked #11 in a book on the 100 greatest American stamps.

U.S. Airmail 5¢ Winged Globe of 1931: Scott #C16



Figure 7.28. Five cent Winged Globe, 1930.

In August, 1931, the Postal Department offered a new issue of the 5¢ Winged Globe from the previous year. To save money, the new stamps were printed on a rotary press instead of a flat plate one. Although the Postal Department

did not consider this stamp to be a new release, it can be distinguished easily from the earlier run of five-cent Winged Globes because it was perforated $10\frac{1}{2} \times 11$, while the earlier flat plate printing had been perforated 11. About 60 million of these stamps were issued.

U.S. Airmail 8¢ Winged Globe of 1932: Scott #C17



Figure 7.29. Eight-cent Winged Globe, 1930.

In July, 1932, airmail rates were raised to eight cents an ounce, requiring a new postage stamp. Two months later, on September 26, the eight-cent Winged Globe was released.

Printed on a rotary press, the stamp was altered from the previous one only in print color and denomination.

U.S. Airmail 50¢ Chicago Century of Progress, 1933: Scott #C18



Figure 7.30. Fifty-cent Chicago Century of Progress, 1933.

In 1933, the Postal Department issued a new stamp featuring the Graf Zeppelin, which has since become known by collectors as the “Baby Zep,” to distinguish it from the three rarer and higher-priced members of the 1930 series. The Zeppelin Company had agreed to arrange a dirigible route from Friedrichshafen, Germany to Chicago, site of the World’s Fair that year, and this stamp was intended to help fund the trip. The phrase “A Century of Progress” refers to the name of the fair. Designed by Victor S. McCloskey, Jr. of the US Bureau of Printing and Engraving, the stamp depicts the Graf Zeppelin flying between a hangar in Germany on the right and an image of the Federal Building on the grounds of the Chicago

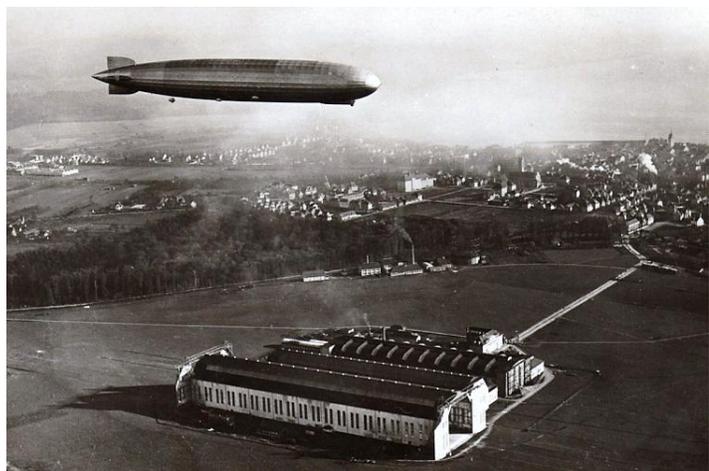


Figure 7.31. Graf Zeppelin over the airship hangars at Friedrichshafen; image courtesy Airships.net.

World's Fair on the left.

This stamp was almost a footnote in history. Not only was the United States Postal Department initially opposed to it, but President FDR, an avid philatelist, rejected the idea as well. He argued that there had already been three stamps celebrating the Graf Zeppelin. The Graf Zeppelin's commander, Hugo Eckener, personally intervened to demand that the stamp be printed and that a large portion of the revenue from its sale be paid to the Zeppelin Company to defray costs for the trip, threatening to cancel it otherwise. The stamp was issued in early October, just before the Graf Zeppelin left Germany for Brazil, Miami, Akron, and Chicago. About 4.3 million of these stamps were issued.



Figure 7.32. Chicago World's Fair poster, 1933. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZC4-11941.

U.S. Airmail 6¢ Winged Globe of 1934: Scott #C19



Figure 7.33. Six cent Winged Globe, 1934.

On July 1, 1934, another postal rate change required another Winged Globe stamp issue. This time, rates dropped from eight to six cents an ounce. Because July 1 was a Sunday, some of the new stamps were

actually issued the Saturday before, mostly from the Baltimore Post Office. First day covers from that early release are quite rare and valuable. A little over 300 million of these stamps were printed.