

Chapter Six: Panama-Pacific Exposition Issues, 1913-1915

The Panama-Pacific Exposition

Also known as the World's Fair, the Panama-Pacific International Exposition was held in San Francisco, California from February 20 through December 4, 1915. Officially, the event commemorated the recent completion of the Panama Canal, along with the 400th anniversary of Vasco de Balboa's discovery of the Pacific Ocean in 1513. But the selection of San Francisco as the host city also turned the event into a celebration of the city's recovery from the devastating earthquake and fire of 1906. Indeed, a Panama-Pacific Exposition postcard (*Figure 6.1*) featured prominent images of the city both after the earthquake and post-recovery, with images of the exposition buildings limited to small panels near the card's bottom corners.

The Exposition showcased some of the most elegant buildings ever constructed for a world's fair, including "palaces" devoted to food products, education and social economy, agriculture, liberal arts, transportation, manufacturers, mines and metallurgy, the varied industries, and the fine arts. The centerpiece was the 435-foot Tower of Jewels, bedecked with over one hundred thousand glass "jewels" that sparkled in the sunlight by day and were illuminated by sixty searchlights at night. Alas, the buildings were constructed to be only temporary structures, and were taken down when the fair ended in late 1915. Only the Fine Arts building remained to fall slowly into ruins, until reconstructed in 1960. It now houses a hands-on science museum called The Exploratorium.

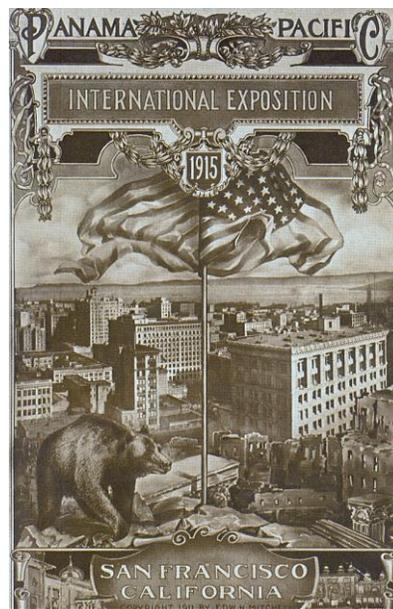


Figure 6.1. Postcard, San Francisco, 1915. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-19051.

The Exposition was a grand success, drawing over 250,000 visitors on opening day alone, and nearly nineteen million in all. Among the visitors were former Presidents William Howard Taft and Theodore Roosevelt, future President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Thomas Edison, and Ansel Adams. One performer at the fair was Art Smith, a renowned barnstorming aviator (*Figure 6.3*). Smith later worked for the fledgling United States Air Mail Service, discussed in the next chapter. Tragically, on a night flight over Ohio in 1926, he crashed his airplane into a grove of trees, becoming only the second air mail pilot to die in the line of duty.



Figure 6.2. Airplane view of Panama-Pacific International Exposition grounds, San Francisco, 1915. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZCN4-8.



Figure 6.3. Court of Palms, with Palaces of Liberal Arts (left) and Education (right); Panama-Pacific Exposition, 1915. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-118634 .



Figure 6.4. Court of Palms, with west entrance to Palace of Manufactures, Panama-Pacific Exposition, 1915.

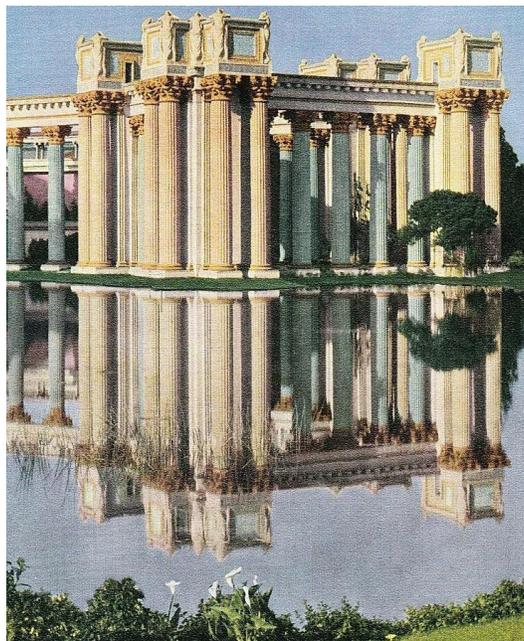


Figure 6.5. Colonnade of the Palace of Fine Arts reflected in the Fine Arts Lagoon, Panama-Pacific Exposition, 1915.



Figure 6.6. Aviator Art Smith at Panama-Pacific Exposition, San Francisco, 1915. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-55736.

The First Panama-Pacific Exposition Issue (1913 release, perforated 12)

Scott #397-400A

The Panama-Pacific Exposition issue was released by the Postal Department to “commemorate” (i.e., publicize) the 1915 Exposition in San Francisco. Although the stamps were inscribed “San Francisco, 1915”, all but one was released to the public on January 1, 1913. (The two-cent was released two weeks later.) Clair Aubrey Huston of the Bureau of Printing and Engraving designed all four images. The set celebrated people, places, and events significant to the histories of San Francisco and Panama. A sizeable number of each stamp was printed (approximately 168 million in all), and they proved quite popular with collectors at the time. The stamps had twelve perforations (“teeth”) per two centimeters; this distinguishes them from the more uncommon 1914 issue, with stamps having ten perforations for every two centimeters instead (Scott #401-404).

Scott #397: 1¢ “Balboa, 1513”



Figure 6.7. One-cent “Balboa, 1513”,
Panama-Pacific Exposition Issue, 1913.

The one-cent Panama-Pacific commemorated the “discovery” of the Pacific Ocean by Vasco Nuñez de Balboa (1475-1519) in 1513. At thirty-eight, Balboa crossed Panama from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific, arriving at the shore of what he named the “South Sea” in early October. Five years later, Balboa was accused of high treason by a jealous rival, and beheaded. The vignette on this stamp was engraved by J. Eissler, and the frame by E. M. Hall.

This stamp would have paid the postcard rate in 1913. Over three hundred million of these stamps in the twelve perforation format (“perf 12”) were produced by the Bureau of Printing and Engraving.



Figure 6.8. Balboa claiming the South
Seas on behalf of the King of Spain, 1893
lithograph. Courtesy The Library of
Congress, LC-USZ62-3016.

Scott #398: 2¢ “Panama Canal”



Figure 6.9. Two-cent “Panama Canal”, Panama-Pacific Exposition Commemorative Issue, 1913.

Due to a postal error, the two-cent Panama Pacific was not released until two weeks after the other three in this set. The original photograph used for this engraving showed the Pedro Miguel locks along the Panama Canal, but the first stamps printed were labeled “Gatun

Locks” instead. These stamps were recalled and destroyed, though a few valuable proofs remain as evidence that this mistake was made. The stamps were re-printed with the generic label “Panama Canal”.

How the locks were changed is a marvelous philatelic story, recounted by Max G. Johl in Volume 1 of The United States Commemorative Stamps of the Twentieth Century, published in 1947 by H. L. Lindquist, New York. Johl explains that

after it had been decided to use a picture of the Canal on the two cent stamp the Gatun Locks were selected as a subject, but the photographs sent up from Panama were not satisfactory. Director Ralph, of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, visited the model prepared by the Bureau of Insular Affairs, on exhibition at the War Department, in the hope of being able to get a picture of it that could be used. The water was turned on, miniature ships placed in the model locks, and then photographed.

Unfortunately, the resulting image, used by M. W. Baldwin to engrave the vignette, was not of the Gatun Locks after all. The error escaped detection until between twenty and thirty million of the stamps were printed. The

Postal Department managed to destroy all of them, although a few “Gatun Locks” proofs have survived.

Most of the two-cent Panama Pacific stamps were printed in the conventional shade of red used at the time. However, a very small number were printed in darker red, or “carmine lake”, and these stamps are exceedingly scarce and quite valuable. (Out of a pane of seventy carmine lake stamps once sold by the San Francisco Post Office, only forty still exist.)

Two cents was the domestic first class postage rate, so the stamp was one of the most commonly used of the Panama Pacific series. About five hundred million perf 12 two-cent Panama Pacific stamps were printed.



Figure 6.10. Pedro Miguel Locks, Panama Canal, circa 1909-1919. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-DIG-npcc-19356.

Scott #399: 5¢ “Golden Gate”



Figure 6.11. Five-cent “Golden Gate”,
Panama-Pacific Exposition
Commemorative Issue, 1913.

The dark blue five-cent Panama-Pacific stamp, bearing a design engraved by L.C. Schofield, depicts Golden Gate Harbor near San Francisco at sunset. The view does not include the Golden Gate Bridge, which was not constructed until 1933-37. Five cents paid the international first-class postal rate. About 29 million per 12 Golden Gate stamps were printed.

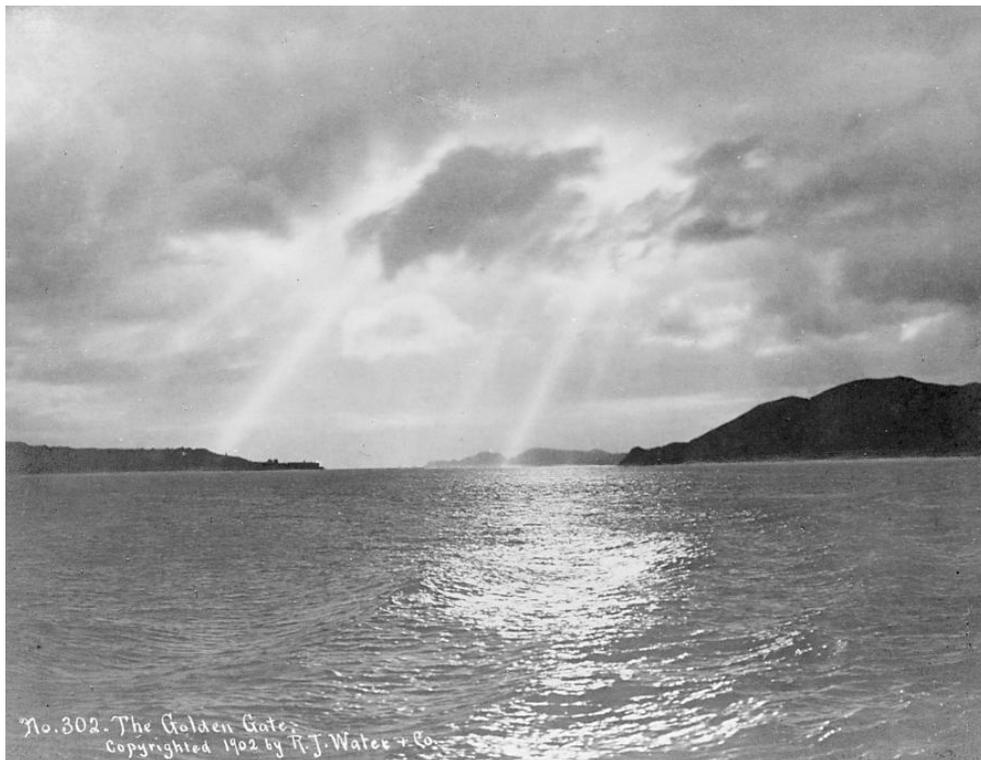


Figure 6.12. Golden Gate Bay, California, before the bridge was constructed,
1902. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LOC# LC-USZ62-107985.

Scott #400 and #400A (color variant): 10¢ “Discovery of San Francisco Bay”



Figure 5.13. Ten-cent “Discovery of San Francisco Bay”, original orange-yellow issue (Scott #400), 1913.



Figure 5.14. Ten-cent “Discovery of San Francisco Bay”, dark orange issue (Scott #400A), 1913.

Original plans for this stamp’s design called for using a portrait of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, who discovered California in 1542, but no pictures of him could be found. Instead, the ten-cent Panama-Pacific stamp depicts the discovery of San Francisco Bay by Gaspar de Portola, another Spanish explorer. On November 4, 1769, de Portola glimpsed the bay from atop Sweeney Ridge near present-day Pacifica. Based upon a painting by Charles F. Mathews, the image was engraved by M. W. Baldwin. The stamp was printed in two different colors: first in orange-yellow (#400) and then in darker orange a few months later (#400A), enabling the design to be more visible. Because the alternate color version of the stamp was not considered a separate variety by the Postal Department, collectors did not acquire as many copies at the time, and the darker orange edition commands a much higher price today. This stamp was recently ranked #100 in a book on the 100 greatest American stamps.

The Panama-Pacific Exposition Issue (1914-15 release, perforated 10)

Scott #401-404

The second release of the Panama-Pacific Exposition Issue was intended as experimental. For years, postmasters had been complaining that stamp sheets broke apart too easily, because the perforations (“teeth”) were too closely spaced. In order to correct this, the Postal Department decided to produce stamps with ten perforations every two centimeters instead of twelve. Unfortunately, this move went too far, and postmasters were soon complaining that some stamps were getting torn apart during efforts to separate them. The tale of *Goldilocks and the Three Perforations* ends on a happy note; eleven perforations per two centimeters turned out to be “just right”.

The Panama-Pacific Exposition stamps were released as perf 10 in 1914-15, making them the only U.S. flat plate commemoratives ever issued in more than one perforation. As many perf 10 stamps were printed as perf 12 ones, or about 168 million. However, since collectors purchased fewer of them when they were released, they are scarcer and more valuable today than their perf 12 counterparts.



Figure 6.15. Perforating stamps, using 46 machines (total capacity of 105,000 sheets/day), 1914. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-DIG-npcc-31460.

Scott #401: 1¢ “Balboa, 1513”



This is the perf 10 release of the original one cent stamp, Scott #397. It was the only one of the four Panama-Pacifics issued in perf 10 in late 1914; the others were released early the following year.

Figure 6.16. One cent “Balboa, 1513”,
Panama-Pacific Perf 10 issue, 1914.

Scott #402: 2¢ “Panama Canal”



This is the 1915 perf 10 release of the original two-cent “Panama Canal,” Scott #398.

Figure 6.17. Two cent “Panama Canal”,
Panama-Pacific Perf 10 issue, 1915.

Scott #403: 5¢ “Golden Gate”



Figure 6.18. Five cent “Golden Gate”,
Panama Pacific Perf 10 issue, 1915.

This is the 1915 perf 10 release of the original five-cent “Golden Gate,” Scott #399.

Scott #404: 10¢ “Discovery of San Francisco Bay”



Figure 6.19. Ten cent “Discovery of San Francisco Bay,” Panama-Pacific Perf 10 issue, 1915.

This is the 1915 perf 10 release of the darker orange version of the ten-cent stamp, Scott #400A. Released six months after the others in this issue, it was on sale for less than six months. Largely overlooked by dealers and collectors at the time, it is now one of the most desirable “non-error” U.S. commemorative stamps of the 20th century.