

## Chapter Two: The Earliest Regular Issues

### A Postal Landmark: The First Stamps

From the appointment of the first US Postmaster General (Benjamin Franklin) in 1776 until 1845, there were no official postage stamps produced in the United States. Instead, post office clerks would determine postage on a per-letter basis, according to how many sheets of paper the letter comprised and how far it was being sent. Since an envelope was considered an extra sheet of paper, most early letters were simply folded, sealed with wax, and addressed. The customer had the option of paying in advance, or the receiver could pay for the letter after it arrived at its destination post office. If the customer did elect to prepay the calculated cost, the clerk would write or stamp “PAID” on the letter to record that postage had already been collected. This method required the customer to hand-deliver the letter to the post office; however, until 1863, all mail was transported only from one office to another, so mailing a letter from home was never an option.

With the growth of the country’s population and increasing demand for postal services, a law was finally passed by Congress in 1845 standardizing postage rates. It also allowed the use of envelopes for sending letters, by no longer considering them as separate sheets of paper for the purpose of determining the postal fee. Even more importantly, this law opened the door for a simpler means of indicating that postage was prepaid. Government-issued adhesive postage stamps were already in use in England (having begun with the famous “Penny Black” in 1840). The United States Postal Department did not immediately adopt this method, however. Instead, eleven Post Offices printed their own stamps for use on letters originating from their office. These early stamps are now known by collectors as “Postmasters’ Provisionals”.

Finally, on July 1, 1847, the United States Postal Department released its first two postage stamps, marking the beginning of what came to be

known as the “Classic Period” of postage stamp production in the United States. It was a time of much experimentation with various techniques for printing, gumming, and perforating stamps. The earliest stamps were not perforated, meaning that they had to be hand-cut prior to use. The backs of these stamps were also gummed by hand; later, machines would take over this task. Between 1847 and 1894, five different private banknote companies printed the stamps, using a variety of different paper types. After 1893, this job was postage stamps were printed by the United States Bureau of Printing and Engraving.

Ironically, despite the implementation of postage stamps, most customers still mailed their letters without stamps. It has been estimated that only one in fifty customers actually purchased a stamp for their mail. Stamp use went up somewhat in 1851, when the Postal Department modified its rates so that prepaid letters cost three cents, while postage for the same letter cost five cents if paid by the recipient. The requirement that the postage for all letters be prepaid was implemented four years later, on April 1, 1855. Beginning in January 1, 1856, all letters were required to have postage stamps on them.

### ***1847-55 Regular Issues Type Set***

***Scott #1, 2, 9, 11, 12, 14, 17***

This chapter examines the stories behind some of the earliest official postage stamps, printed between 1847 and 1855. The stamps are known as *Regular Issues* to distinguish them from other kinds of stamps that were later printed, such as commemoratives (the topic of the next chapter), air mail stamps, parcel post stamps, special delivery stamps, and others. The term *type set* is a technical designation used by philatelists to indicate that the set contains an example of every design used on a stamp over that time period. Some of the same designs were reused for different denominations, printed with different colors of ink. Those stamps constitute *varieties* of a single type. While this set includes all types, it does

not include all of the varieties within that type, though they are briefly mentioned in the text that follows.

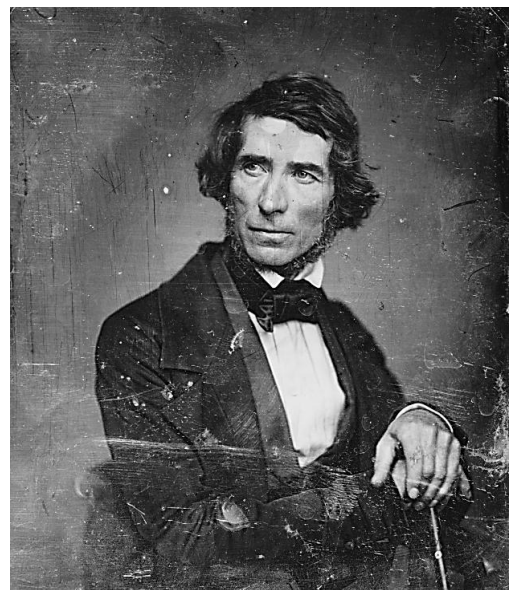
## **The Rawdon, Wright, Hatch, and Edson Issue of 1847:**

### **Scott #1 and #2**

America's first two postage stamps, the five cent Benjamin Franklin and ten-cent George Washington, were designed and printed in 1847 by the New York City bank note engraving firm of Rawdon, Wright, Hatch, and Edson. Operating under a four-year contract, the company engraved the initials "RWH&E" at the base of both stamps that it printed. Although Rawdon, Wright, Hatch, and Edson produced only two stamps (another company won the second printing contract in 1851), the quality of their designs set a standard for future postage stamp releases. The engraved designs for both stamps had been crafted years earlier by Asher Brown Durand, originally for use on bank notes. Durand (*Figure 2.1*) was a famous painter of the Hudson River School, renowned for his depictions of Catskill Mountain landscapes.

The engraving process began with engraving a precise image, in reverse, onto a steel die. A band of softer steel, called a "transfer roll", was rocked over the die to produce an impression of the image. The transfer roll was pressed onto a printing plate, producing multiple reverse images. That plate was then used for printing the stamp. Both denominations were printed onto a thin bluish wove paper in sheets of

two side-by-side panes of one hundred stamps each. The dies used for printing the first two postage stamps were not made



**Figure 2.1.** Asher Brown Durand, c. 1845-50; photo by Matthew Brady of painting by unknown artist. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-109970.

especially for them, but were ones that happened to be in stock, having been used previously for printing bank notes.

Both stamps were put on sale at the New York City post office on July 1, 1847, and they arrived at the Boston post office on the following day. Other post offices were supplied during the month of July. The first person to purchase a pair of 1847 stamps is believed to have been Congressman Harvey Shaw of Connecticut, who kept the five-cent stamp for himself and presented the ten-cent stamp to his state governor. The earliest documented use of the five-cent Benjamin Franklin was July 7, 1847, and the first documented use of the ten-cent George Washington was five days earlier, on July 2. Once used for posting a letter, a stamp would be cancelled. Postmasters at the larger post offices received an official hand-stamp with a circular, seven-bar enclosed grid used to cancel each stamp. Smaller post offices were expected to cancel each stamp by hand, with an "X" in pen. However, many smaller post offices obtained unofficial hand stamps, or even custom-made their own, instead.

The 1847 Regular Issue stamps were only in use for four years. During that time, postal rates were five cents for letters travelling under 300 miles, and ten cents for letters going over 300 miles. On July 1, 1851, new postal rates (along with a new issue of stamps) rendered the founding pair – both the five-cent Franklin and ten-cent Washington – obsolete. In fact, after that date, neither stamp was accepted for postage. It is possible that this unusual step was taken in order to avoid unauthorized printing of the first two postage stamps. This event was one of only two instances in U.S. postal history that stamps were demonetized; the second was at the beginning of the Civil War, a decade later.

## Scott #1: 5¢ Benjamin Franklin

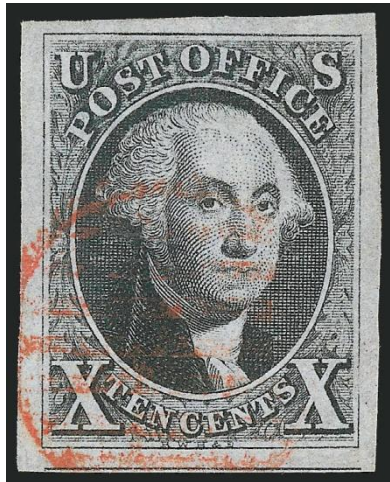


**Figure 2.2.** Five-cent Benjamin Franklin regular issue, 1847.

Originally, General Andrew Jackson had been considered for the honor of appearing on the nation's first stamp, but it was decided to recognize America's first Postmaster General, Benjamin Franklin, instead. Franklin had been appointed by the Continental Congress in July of 1775, and served until November of 1776. The five-cent stamp features an image of Franklin based upon a painting by James Barton Longacre. The stamp itself has a colorful past. Although generally described as printed in light brown ink, there are actually over twenty-five different color shade classifications for this stamp. While some shades are fairly common, others are quite rare. Ironically, the original design for this stamp called for printing it in two colors, a practical method at the time for thwarting counterfeiters.

The five-cent Franklins also changed in appearance from one round of printing to the next. The stamps were printed on five different occasions, with the first printing being the sharpest. Each time the stamps were printed again, a fuzzier image resulted due to abrasion caused by earthen pigments in the brown ink that was used. By the third printing, the image had become quite blurry due to residual ink on the plate. The plate was then acid-etched prior to the fourth and fifth printings, making deep lines sharper while fine lines almost vanished. Over the span of the five printings, about 4.4 million of these stamps were produced in all; about 3.7 million were sold. As America's first official national postage stamp, the five-cent Benjamin Franklin was recently ranked #1 in a book on the 100 greatest American stamps.

## Scott #2: 10¢ George Washington



**Figure 2.3.** Ten-cent George Washington regular issue, 1847.

Also issued in 1847, the ten-cent Washington's design was based upon a portrait by Gilbert Stuart. It is unusual among US postage stamps because the denomination on the stamp is given in Roman numerals. There are fewer variants of this stamp than of its five-cent counterpart. Partly because a non-abrasive, carbon-based black ink was used, the printing plates did not become noticeably damaged with time, so all four printings of this stamp are close to identical. Furthermore, the stamp does not exhibit as vast a range of color shades. Some postmasters complained about its black color, however, because it made cancellation marks difficult to see.

Relatively few of these stamps were printed – about 1.05 million in all. Of that number, about 863,800 were sold. The ten-cent George Washington was recently ranked #2 in a book on the 100 greatest American stamps.

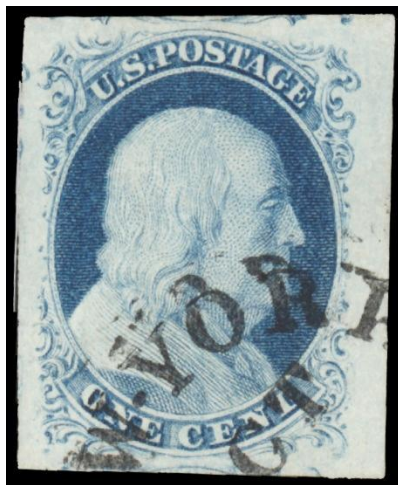
About one hundred of the existing ten-cent Washington stamps have been *bisected*, or cut in half, often on the diagonal. This was done so that the stamp could be used in place of five-cent stamps. Most likely, this was permitted in order to use up the remaining ten-cent stamps prior to July 1, 1851. On that day, both 1847 stamps were officially demonetized, and therefore no longer valid for sending mail. Nonetheless, about fifty examples of invalid uses of this stamp after that date are known, although in some cases the stamp was not accepted by postal authorities and the recipient of the letter was charged for postage due.



## **The Toppan, Carpenter, Casilear & Co. Issue of 1851-1861: Scott #9, #11, #12, #14, and #17**

In 1851, new postal rates went into effect to encourage the public to use the federal postal system more. People could send a letter ten times the distance for forty percent less than before. Along with the reduced rates came the need for new stamps. A six-year printing contract (later extended to 1861) was awarded to Toppan, Carpenter, Casilear and Company. All stamps in this series were produced in both perforated and imperforate formats. They were designed by Edward Purcell, with vignettes most likely engraved by Joseph Pease. Two of them – the three-cent and five-cent – are bordered by intricate scrollwork, engraved by Cyrus Durand with a geometrical lathe he had invented. Cyrus was the elder brother of Hudson River School painter Asher Durand. Because all of the stamps in this series had complex border designs and were printed with several tones of ink, there was considerable variation when the stamps were printed.

Scott #9: 1¢ Benjamin Franklin



**Figure 2.4.** One-cent Benjamin Franklin regular issue, 1851.

Printed in indigo blue ink, the one-cent stamp depicts former Postmaster General Benjamin Franklin, based upon a bust by Jean Jacques Cafferi. A penny was the newly-established rate for “circulars” (junk mail). This stamp was printed several times, in sheets of two hundred, over ten years. From 1851 until 1857, the stamp was released as imperforate; perforations were added in that year. The ornate edges of this stamp caused printing difficulties, particularly with the top and bottom edges. The stamp is classified into several types (and Scott numbers) according to the relative completeness

of the border design. The stamps with intact borders, assigned Type I, are also the rarest among the imperforated specimens of this stamp. Type V, the most common, is also the one with the incomplete borders on all four sides.

#### Scott #11: 3¢ George Washington



**Figure 2.5.** Three-cent George Washington regular issue, 1851.

On March 3, 1851, the cost for mailing single letters was reduced from five cents to three, making the three-cent Washington the most commonly used stamp of the 1851-57 issue. The design shows George Washington in profile, from a 1785 terra cotta bust by Jean-Antoine Houdon. Over its ten years of use, the three-cent Washington was printed in shades of orange and red, and experienced minor design changes. Most stamps issued were printed on white wove machine-made paper. Like the one-cent Franklin, this stamp was printed without perforations until 1857. The color diversity, subtle design variations, and presence/absence of perforations have generated many collectible varieties.



Scott #12: 5¢ Thomas Jefferson

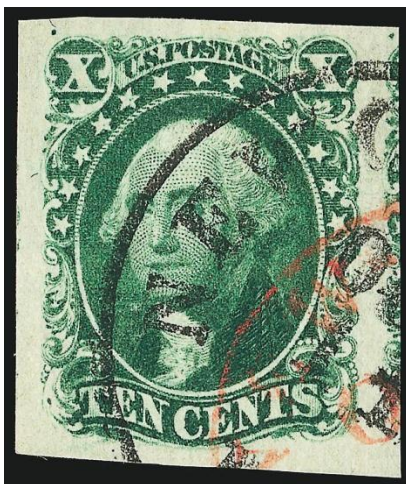


**Figure 2.6.** Five-cent Thomas Jefferson regular issue, 1856.

Featuring a design based on a portrait by Gilbert Stuart, the red-brown five-cent Jefferson was the first U.S. stamp to celebrate the third President. Unlike the other stamps in this series, it was not issued in imperforate form until 1856; the earliest known use date is March 14<sup>th</sup> of that year. In 1857, perforations were added, and over 2.3 million perforated stamps were eventually issued. The stamp's value gave it few domestic uses; instead, it was likely intended to cover the U.S. Internal Rate for British packet ships transporting mail between the United States and England.

Applied to an envelope in strips of three, it was often used to send a letter to France. Jefferson, an ardent Francophile, would have been pleased.

Scott #14: 10¢ George Washington



**Figure 2.7.** Ten-cent George Washington regular issue, 1855.

According to the Postage Stamp Act of March 3, 1855, postage for letters travelling over three thousand miles was raised to ten cents, making a ten-cent postage stamp an urgent necessity. The dark green ten-cent Washington was issued on May 12, 1855. The design was based upon a life portrait by Gilbert Stuart, an image that had already appeared on the twelve-cent Washington of 1851. The frame and lettering were engraved by Henry Earle. Design variability and the presence or absence of perforations resulted in many variants of this stamp and five recognized types. Over five million imperforates were

printed, and sixteen to eighteen million in the perforated format. It was often used for sending a letter across the country from coast to coast.

Scott #17: 12¢ George Washington



**Figure 2.8.** Twelve-cent George Washington regular issue, 1851.

When the twelve cent Washington was released on July 1, 1851, it had the highest value ever printed on a U.S. stamp up to that time. The image came from the same Gilbert Stuart portrait as the ten-cent stamp, but it was printed in black ink. Because twelve cents covered half the regular rate of a letter to England, it was often used in pairs. About 8.3 million were printed, of which 2.5 million were imperforate and the remaining 5.8 million perforated. Like the ten-cent George Washington stamp of 1847, this twelve-cent stamp also suffered the fate of being bisected vertically or diagonally, to cover the six cent postage rate. However, this practice was soon outlawed by the Postal Department.