

The U.S. 1847 Issue: Stamps That Changed the System

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I. The Problem Was Deficits

By the 1840's, the U.S. Postal Service was incurring annual deficits of such magnitude that they threatened the very viability of the system itself.

There were 4 main causes of these deficits:

1. a complex system of postage rates that was not only expensive to administer, but which actually discouraged use of the mails by average citizens;
2. abuse of the “free franking” privilege by local Postmasters;
3. serious competition from independent posts that could deliver mail faster and more cheaply than the Postal Service; and
4. the practice of accepting letters whose postage was to be paid by the recipient. Often, these letters were carried hundreds, and even thousands of miles by the Postal Service and then were simply refused by the addressee and returned to Washington as “undeliverable.” Indeed, in his first annual “Report to the President” (1845) Cave Johnson (Postmaster General, 1845–1848), noted the “immense number” of letters sent collect but not paid for by the addressee. He stated that “*the service is performed in the transmission, and should be paid for at the time, and by the person seeking the aid of the department.*”

These were real problems and, clearly, reform was needed – desperately needed!

And reform came – beginning with the Postal Act of 1845. That Act of Congress dramatically lowered postage rates and established a consistent, weight-based system that was easy to understand and administer (5¢ per ½ ounce for letters traveling up to 300 miles, and 10¢ per ½ ounce for letters traveling beyond 300 miles – that was it). The Act also restricted the free franking privilege and it outlawed “private express companies,” which effectively eliminated competition from independent, inter-city mail companies.

II. Pre-payment Was the Real Need

The most important aspect of reform, however, was still missing. As PMG Johnson had noted in that same 1845 “Report to the President”: “*Prepayment of postage upon all matter passing through the mails ... is of so much importance that it cannot be too strongly recommended to the favorable consideration of Congress.*” But any start at addressing this need for prepayment had to wait until 1847, when Congress authorized the printing and distribution of adhesive postage stamps in the basic denominations of 5¢ and 10¢.

It should be noted that the concept of using adhesive postage stamps for the pre-payment of domestic letter postage was not a new idea. As early as June of 1840, Daniel Webster introduced a resolution in Congress stating that “*it is expedient to inquire into the utility of so altering the present regulations of the Post Office Department as to connect the use of stamps, or stamped covers, with a large reduction of the rates of postage.*”

Sen. Webster was, of course, taking his cue from the British who had just recently done exactly that – lowered the rates of postage and introduced adhesive stamps to evidence the pre-payment thereof.

And a few months later, when George Plitt, Special Agent of the Post Office Department, submitted his report summarizing his visit to England to study the recent postal reforms instituted there, he, too, suggested lowered rates of postage (indeed, he recommended 5¢ and 10¢ per ½ oz. - although he suggested they be used for distances of up to and over-500 miles). But it is significant that in his report, Mr. Plitt specifically recommended the use of stamps in those two denominations, which would be “*evidence of pre-payment of postage.*”¹

Congress, however, was not yet ready (or perhaps not even interested) in taking the big step of linking postage stamps and compulsory pre-payment of postage.

III. Stamps as the Mechanism

Experience had shown that the concept of pre-paying postage with adhesive stamps was a viable one, at least in other contexts. Private companies, as well as the federally-owned United States City Despatch Post in New York, used stamps as evidence of pre-payment. Indeed, there are even a few covers extant that show those New York carrier stamps accepted for the pre-payment of inter-city federal postage. And the Postmaster Provisionals, in use between 1845 and 1847 were specifically designed to pay inter-city postage.

Underlying it all, of course, was the successful British experience using the Penny Black.

Congress knew all that. Still there were some who doubted that the British system would work in America and others who, for political reasons, were unwilling to institute compulsory prepayment at all, whether by stamps or in cash.

In his ground-breaking work of 1887, John Tiffany specifically noted the problems involved. Discussing the Reform Act of 1845, he wrote that: “*The bill which was introduced in Congress in pursuance of this recommendation (that is, reduced postage rates that were to be based only on weight and distance), provided, it is said, both for obligatory prepayment and the use of postage stamps. But there was great hesitation in adopting the English system in the United States; the conditions were considered to be so different; the distances were so great that a greater rate was necessary; the country was so new that the risk from counterfeiting was much greater; the custom was not to prepay letters, and custom is stronger than law. Such and like objections were raised and the law was passed without adopting prepayment by stamp.*”²

And when Rep. Joseph Ingersoll, Whig Congressman from Pennsylvania, introduced a Resolution in February, 1846 that “*the Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads be instructed to inquire, and report on the expediency of introducing into the post office laws a provision for the prepayment of postage, and the charge of double postage when it is not paid,*” that Resolution went nowhere.³

So when Congress authorized the first Federal Issue of postage stamps in 1847, the ostensible purpose of those stamps was not to force pre-payment, but rather to simply provide a new convenience for the public, especially for commercial firms; stamps would provide an alternative to standing in line in order to prepay postage on letters in cash, and would also allow deposit of those pre-paid letters at the Post Office even outside of normal business hours. Stamps would also be a safeguard against messengers who might carry a letter and its cash pre-payment to the Post Office, but who might then pocket the cash and send the letter unpaid.

So those were the ostensible purposes of adhesive postage stamps and, in fact, stamps were widely used for those purposes of convenience and safety. But this paper takes the position that the most important benefit of the new adhesives could only be determined after the fact. Yes, it was thought they might be a good way to pre-pay postage, but once they were put into service, the stamps demonstrated that they were a great way to pre-pay postage. In fact, they showed that there were no cultural, logistical or operational obstacles to their use and acceptance. And that being the case, there really wasn't any reason why stampless mail could not be eliminated entirely and replaced by a pre-payment system using adhesive stamps – just as the Senator, the Special Agent, and the Postmaster General wanted.

And that is exactly what did happen. In 1856 Congress made it mandatory to pre-pay postage on domestic letter mail, and only by using stamps or stamped envelopes.

What gave Congress the confidence to change the system? How did they know it would work?

The answer to that was simply a function of actual experience. The multi-frame exhibit which accompanies this paper – it can be viewed in the main library room – shows that the use of adhesive postage stamps was totally inclusive geographically. The use of stamps was not confined to only one area, or to a particular group of states or to a limited region of the country. They came from everywhere, and stamps were used on every type of correspondence. Even though distribution was limited to only about 4% of all post offices, stamps were seen on letters from big cities and small towns, and they came from every state in the Union, as well the District of Columbia, Indian Territory, Wisconsin (when it was still a territory, as well as when it became a state), Minnesota Territory, and even tiny New Mexico Territory. We even have covers sent from towns that don't even exist any more. In short, just a small number of adhesive stamp users (approx. 2% of all letters), demonstrated that adhesive stamps could be used by everyone – regardless of where one lived, or what purpose the letters served.

As the exhibit shows, these letters were carried to the Post Office by individuals, by office workers, by foreign mail forwarders, hotels, government carriers and even privately-owned local mail services. For every way that mail could get to the post office, there are examples of stamped letters carried that way. And once in the system, adhesive-stamped letters were transported to their destination post office by every available means then in use: they were carried by coach, by horseback, over inland waterways, by coastal vessels, and certainly on the railroads – the latest emerging form of transportation at that time.

Adhesive stamps could be placed anywhere on the cover, even the lower right corner, and they were still accepted as evidence of pre-payment of postage. They were recognized by every postmaster through whose hands they passed; there is not a single example of a *bona fide* use of the 1847 issue that was rejected by any postmaster in the country.

Stamps were used to pre-pay postage on folded letters, on lettersheets and even on envelopes, whose use was also just beginning to grow because of postal reform. Any way you could “package” a letter, you could pay its postage with a stamp, and people did. And those letters were sent to every domestic destination our postal system served, as well as to Canada, South America, Great Britain, Western Europe, the Far East and even Africa - in short, to every part of the world where mid-nineteenth century mail was carried.

Sunday mail; holiday mail; mail that was mis-sent and re-directed; forwarded mail; mail sent in care of someone else; Registered mail; even mail with a bi-sected 10¢ stamp to pay the 5¢ rate – all these services and accommodations were provided to adhesive-stamped letters. In other words, during the four years of its currency, the actual usage pattern of the '47 issue demonstrated that adhesive-stamped mail could do everything, go everywhere, be accepted by citizens and postal clerks alike, and receive every

service that stampless mail received. If that was so, couldn't stampless mail be eliminated? And wouldn't that do away with unpaid mail?

IV. Conclusion – Did Stamps Change the System?

A. The Intention

The above experience notwithstanding, there are those who argue that stamps cannot be credited with changing the system – that they were not the agent responsible for eliminating stampless mail, because that was not their intended purpose. Their point is that stamps were issued only as another way to facilitate pre-payment of postage for those who wanted it – not to cause the actual demise of stampless letters.

But the issue here is not what stamps were or were not *meant* to do; the issue here is what stamps *actually* did! Denying that they caused the end of stampless mail because that wasn't their intended purpose – and I'm not sure whether it was or not, but even if it wasn't their intended purpose – saying that and, therefore, denying adhesives the credit for eliminating stampless mail, is akin to saying that Christopher Columbus cannot be credited with discovering America, because that is not what he set out to do – he set out to find a new route to India, so finding America doesn't count.

B. The Result

It may have been true in 1845, and even in 1847, that the only thing Congress really cared about was pre-payment, and that they were ambivalent regarding the means to that end. But once the new adhesives were in use, their acceptance and versatility could not be denied, and their future role became clear. By 1848, Cave Johnson, who wanted pre-payment of postage above anything else, was able to state in his "Report to the President" that: "*little inconvenience would be felt by the public since the adoption of adhesive stamps as the evidence of pre-payment of postage.*" His grammatical tense was wrong, but his thought was right.

Did Congress, based on the '47 experience, now agree that stamps were the answer - that they were all that was needed to eliminate the stampless system and thereby end the bane of unpaid mail? Well, that's the way they voted.

By 1850, in his "Report to the President," Postmaster General N.K. Hall recommended a further lowering of rates by 2¢ for pre-paid domestic letters. That new rate was adopted effective July 1, 1851 - 3¢ per ½ oz. for a pre-paid letter and 5¢ for a letter sent unpaid (both rates for letters traveling up to 3,000 miles).

This time there was much greater distribution of the stamps than had been the case in 1847, when only selected post offices received automatic distribution. The Act of 1851 (Section 3), required that "*it shall be the duty of the Postmaster General to provide and furnish to all deputy postmasters, and to all other persons applying and paying therefore, suitable postage stamps of the denomination of three cents, and as such other denominations as he may think expedient, to facilitate the prepayment of postage provided for in this act.*"⁴ All deputy postmasters – not just the 4% of postmasters who received the 1847 stamps! Indeed, in terms of my hypothesis, it is noteworthy that in the first month of availability, 10.5 million stamps of the 1851 issue were distributed; this compares to 5.5 million stamps distributed for the full four years of the 1847 issue.⁵ Clearly, by 1851 Congress and the Postal System had seen their way out of the dilemma of unpaid "collect" mail. Stamps would be the answer, and Congress wanted to be sure that stamps were widely available.

The key factor for the public was, undoubtedly, the preferential rate for prepaid letter mail that was obviously designed to capitalize on the American core value of “thriftiness.” Pre-payment was made a “bargain” and stamps were now readily available to facilitate that bargain. Would the two mesh? Would the plan work?

You bet it worked! It worked so well that by 1853, one reporter, who had conducted an extensive review of the New York Post Office, noted that: “*the stamp system is now becoming generally used in the United States. Nearly four-fifths of the paid home letters which are posted at New York are paid by stamps.*” Furthermore, he said, “*hardly three-fourths of the paid home letters which are received at New York are franked in this easy, simple process.*”⁶ Think about that: after little more than one year of the preferential rate for pre-paid letters, stamps were becoming “*generally used,*” with about 80% of paid domestic letters leaving New York, and almost 75% of paid letters coming into New York, being franked with adhesive postage stamps!

Pre-payment was not a problem. And cash versus stamps for prepayment? No contest!

So, prepayment had been established, and using stamps was obviously more desirable than cash from an administrative point of view, and now the public had confirmed that it, too, preferred stamps to cash as a pre-payment method.

It was all there - the stage was set. Congress had the confidence that stamps could do the job and first they made pre-payment of domestic letter mail postage mandatory in 1855. Six months later, the final step was taken when stamps and stamped envelopes became the only acceptable means of pre-payment for domestic letter mail.

With that, the loop was closed and the final piece of the Great Postal Reform Movement had been put in place. Postage rates were significantly lower; service was better; communications were enhanced; the use of the mails by ordinary citizens had grown exponentially; and, at last, “collect” letters (and, therefore, Post Office deficits) had been eliminated.

The key to all of that was the 1847 Issue. Using stamps to eliminate unpaid mail was probably the intention for many all along, but whether it was or not, the fact is that’s exactly what stamps did. And that demonstration - that stamps had the ability to completely change the system - was, without question, the most important benefit of our first American issue.

¹ Report of George Plitt, Special Agent of the Post Office Department, February 3, 1841 (26th Congress, 2d Session, Senate)

² Tiffany, John K., *The History of Postage Stamps of the United States*, (C.H. Mekeel, 1887), p.23

³ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States*, Volume 41, p.405

⁴ Chase, Carroll, *The 3¢ Stamp of the United States 1851-1857 Issue*, (Quarterman Publications, Inc., 1942), p. 3

⁵ Hulme II, W. Wilson, “July 1, 1851 Usages of the 1851 Issue,” *The 1851 Issue of United States Stamps: a Sesquicentennial Perspective*, (U.S. Philatelic Classics Society, Inc., New Orleans, 2006), p.107

⁶ “Metropolitan Post Offices – New York,” *The Illustrated Magazine of Art*, (John Cassell), London, 1853, Vol. I, p.268

