Notes from one of stamp collecting’s great treasures

American’s National Postal Museum

2013: The year of the fabulous new William Gross Gallery.

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First Official U.S. Airmail. On August 17, 1859, balloonist John Wise attempted a transcontinental flight from Lafayette, Indiana, in the balloon Jupiter but was forced to land 30 miles outside of Lafayette.

Last month, I took you through the Gems of American Philately, one of six permanent exhibit galleries within the new William H. Gross Stamp Gallery. This month we look at Mail Marks History, where visitors learn how the stamps and markings on mail can reveal how it was transported.

How did mail travel? What route did it take to reach its final destination? How long did it take? What obstacles did the mail encounter along the way? These considerations, which collectors refer to as postal history, are addressed by Mail Marks History.

Gallery curators Cheryl Ganz and Daniel Piazza have divided this enormous topic into several smaller, thematic areas. “On Land & Sea” traces the development of overland and ship mail from the 13th to the 20th centuries, including one of the oldest paper letters in the National Postal Museum’s collection (a letter that traveled via the Silk Road in 1390). “By Air & Space” tells the intertwined stories of aviation and the mail from the earliest balloon flights through modern space exploration. Two unique items are shown here: the cover carried in John Wise’s balloon Jupiter flight on August 17, 1859 and the only piece of mail carried by NC-4, the first airplane to fly across the Atlantic Ocean, in 1919. “In Times of Trouble” explores how the mail must go through—even during wars, natural disasters, epidemics, and other types of adversity. One large case is devoted entirely to postal operations in and around the World Trade Center at the time of the 2001 terrorist attacks. This will be Washington, D.C.’s second permanent exhibit dealing with the events of September 11, and one of just a handful in the nation.

Other special sections of Mail Marks History will be devoted to Amelia Earhart, the first woman to pilot solo across the Atlantic Ocean, who financed her exploits partially through philately. A permanent display of her custom-made, leather-and-flannel flight suit from the 1920s will be accompanied by a computer interactive that invites visitors to explore Earhart’s life and interest in philately. In addition to the many covers on display, visitors will see numerous postal devices for weighing mail, dispensing postage stamps, and producing postmarks, cancellations, and a variety of other markings.

Before I go, I want to share with you a construction photo of the Gross Gallery taken the day after Christmas 2012. Coincidentally, it shows the area that will become Mail Marks History as seen in the accompanying designer’s elevation photograph. Next month in this space, we will look at the gallery called Connect with U.S. Stamps.