Notes from one of stamp collecting’s great treasures

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From Queen Victoria to the King of Rock ’n’ Roll, the World of Stamps gallery answers the questions, “Where did stamps come from?” and “Why do people collect them?”

America’s National Postal Museum

A Walk-Thru of the New William Gross Gallery.

Last month I promised American Stamp Dealer and Collector readers that I would walk you through the new William H. Gross Stamp Gallery over the course of the next eight months. The Gross Gallery is, in reality, six galleries-within-a-gallery, plus a Welcome Center in the Historic Lobby and a Learning Loft in the mezzanine area above.

More than ninety percent of the museum’s visitors enter from the side of the building that faces Union Station. The first Gross Gallery exhibit they will encounter is titled World of Stamps. About half of our visitors tell us that they are not, and never have been, stamp collectors. The World of Stamps serves as an introduction to stamps and stamp collecting, and is a great place for collectors who come to the museum with their non-collecting spouses and families to stop and explain their hobby.

The gallery opens with a multimedia installation, consisting of programmed monitors working in concert with each other to display U.S. and worldwide stamps that “loop” through a variety of themes. This both attracts visitors in from the museum’s Historic Lobby and helps move them through the World of Stamps exhibit.

The exhibit content begins with the story of Rowland Hill and the Penny Black, the world’s first postage stamp, and explains how the idea of prepaid postage spread around the world in the mid-nineteenth century. The rest of the exhibit explores some of the reasons that stamps are attractive to collectors—the stories they tell, how they have influenced historical events, and focused attention on social and military achievements and struggles. One panel introduces visitors to a basic philatelic vocabulary, so that they will understand terms like “cover” and “essay” when they encounter them in the rest of the exhibits.

A real highlight of this gallery will be a genuine spider press and an intaglio printing plate on long-term loan to us from the estate of Richard Sennett, one of the pioneers in the privatization of U.S. stamp production. In time, we hope to train some volunteers to operate the press and demonstrate it for visitors—until then, a short film will show how the press was operated. Some readers will remember this press as the one that Sennett Security Products used to bring to stamp shows. Now it will serve as an introduction to the Inverted Jenny story, which will be presented in the Gems of American Philately gallery, the subject of next month’s column.

But before I go, I wanted to share with you a photo of the Gross Gallery taken during the week of October 1, 2012 (which was my deadline for submitting this column). This shot was taken from the Union Station end of the gallery, standing roughly in the space that will become Gems of American Philately. The windows that look out on Massachusetts Avenue are at left. Demolition is complete, and all vestiges of the former brewery restaurant are gone. This is exciting! As conditions permit, I’ll try to end each of these columns with the latest construction photo.