

# U.S. Post Office Seals

by Peter A. Robertson

The subject of this visit to the John M. Luff Reference Collection is an area of philately unfamiliar to most collectors: U.S. post office seals. However, the late Mr. Luff avidly gathered everything he could in this obscure area, not only the stamps, but also any collateral information. Collectors can appreciate Luff's efforts since post office seals were not a subject of any publicity by the Post Office Department. They were initially intended for internal usage, and thanks to Luff's efforts, this area is well documented today.

Post office seals fall into two separate areas: those issued by the Post Office Department to be used by all postal employees, and those printed privately and sold to local postmasters. These latter were often used only at a single location or within a city. Naturally, the latter



Fig. 1

types are rarer, with many of them being unique or extremely rare. But let's look first at those issued for general usage.

The first Post office seal was issued in 1872. It differs from all later issues in that it was used as a type of internal official registered mail indicator, rather than as a device to close and indicate damaged or officially opened mail. Perhaps it might better be listed as the first registry stamp. It is one of the largest stamps issued by the United States. Its large format was intended to prevent tampering with official post office registered correspondence to which it was affixed.

Figure 1 shows Luff's copy as printed on horizontally laid paper. The great majority of these stamps were printed on normal white wove stamp paper. Luff was the first to identify this rare and unusual variety which is listed in the Scott Catalogue as OX1e. Two die proofs of this first stamp are also in the Luff Reference Collection and differ in shade and impression.

John Luff was the advisor to the Scott Catalogue when OX2, the 1880 special printing, was listed. Figure 2 shows the Luff copy of this stamp. It is interesting to note that there are two copies of this stamp in the collection. However, they have different shades and impressions. The first was purchased by Luff as a special printing. The second one Luff discovered, and it indeed has the characteristics he expected of a special



Fig. 2

printing. This made him question the status of the first stamp as a "special printing." Over the years, specialists in post office seals have agreed with Luff, and this second copy is the accepted special printing variety today.

The design adopted in 1877 is shown in Figure 3 (page 28) and its usage differs from the first post office seal. This seal was issued to local post offices and their "dead letter" offices. Like the first seals, this seal was printed by the National Banknote Company. The same basic design remained in use through 1919, with only very minor changes.

The stamp shown in Figure 3 is also interesting in that it used to be listed in the Scott Catalogue as OX5, an 1880 special printing.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

There is no documentation to support such a special printing, but the stamp is dramatically different from the normal stamp. The Scott Catalogue has seen fit to delete OX5, dropping it in the 1984 specialized catalogue. Now only a footnote remains to indicate the item. Luff's comment in the collection is that he purchased the stamp as a reprint but had no positive proof that such a thing ever existed. A lack of any official documentation also helped to delist it.

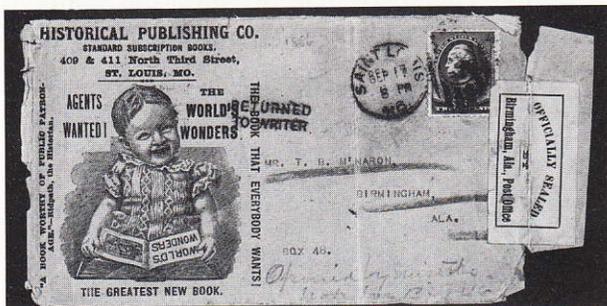


Fig. 5

Whatever the answer, though, this stamp is far different from the normal issues in deep brown, showing a fine impression, and on hard white paper. These are all characteristics of the U.S.

special printings. Perhaps this stamp is a special printing, and evidence may someday turn up proving its special printing status, thus allowing it to return to its rightful place in philately. Meanwhile, it remains as identified by Mr. Luff, available for study at any time.

The balance of the common design seals are broken down by issue. Each is studied by paper, shade, gum and the like. Blocks, sheets and part sheets round out the Luff collection in this area. Almost all Scott listed varieties are present. Figure 4 illustrates one of the more unusual ones, the 1888 perforated issue showing a double impression. Listed by Scott as OX7i, it is unpriced in the current catalogue.

The second part of this collection concentrates on the most interesting, not to mention the rarest, of all U.S. post office seals, those privately printed and used locally. These are usually referred to as the "typeset seals." All are listed in the Scott



Fig. 6

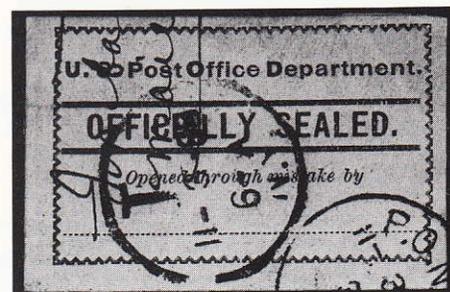


Fig. 7

Catalogue, thanks, no doubt, to John Luff's efforts; and the illustrations are accurate, as Luff had the material from which to work.

Figure 5 shows a seal issued at Birmingham, Alabama, properly used on a cover; while figures 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 show various other

types. These are shown as a sample of the many additional types in the collection. It should be pointed out that this area contains so many truly



Fig. 8

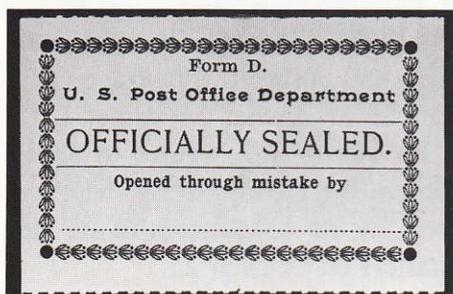


Fig. 9



Fig. 10

rare items that only a few collectors can ever form a good collection at any given time.

The collection ends with a study of those seals issued for use in the Philippine Islands. While there are not as many as in the U.S. area, Luff formed a nice study. Figures 11 and 12 show two of the more unusual varieties with "hyphen-hole" separations. Figure 11 is printed in orange-brown and Figure 12 in yellow. In order to show the design of this stamp, its can-

cellation in violet has been screened out in the photograph. It reads, "Received in bad



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

Order/Manila, P.I.," indicating its proper usage in the Philippines.

The design remained the same for the Philippines post office seals, issued in 1906 and used through 1935, when the Philippines became a commonwealth of the United States. The later designs are also in Luff's collection, as are a number of the earlier seals showing minor differences in color, paper and impressions.

This area of United States philately owes much to the late John Luff. No doubt this field eventually would have been studied, but later study probably would not have been as accurate as Luff's work, since he had access to material and the primary documentation while the material was still current. Luckily, a very capable philatelist was around and understood the need. He filled it, and philately benefited. ❖

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