

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
April 6, 2005

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News Release Number: 05-020

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**'Stamps Take Flight' exhibit from Postmaster General's Collection  
showcases world's rarest 'uncollectibles' at National Postal Museum**

WASHINGTON — One-of-a-kind priceless “uncollectible collectible” envelopes and stamps—ranging from the first U.S. airmail delivery nearly 150 years ago to lunar postmarks—are now showcased in the *Postmaster General's Collection* housed at the Smithsonian's National Postal Museum in Washington, DC. The collection is a major component of the Museum's “Stamps Take Flight” exhibit that highlights the history of U.S. stamp-making.

“This is the stamp collector's dream album – with U.S. stamps and other rare postal artifacts you won't find anywhere else in the world,” explained John Potter, Postmaster General and Chief Executive Officer of the U.S. Postal Service during the grand opening ribbon-cutting ceremony here today.

Not long after the first U.S. stamps were issued in 1847, the *Postmaster General's Collection* began as a Post Office stamp reference file in the 1860s. Thousands of stamps later, it evolved into a unique philatelic resource encompassing the full range of U.S. stamp production—original stamp artwork, die proofs, color proofs, press sheets, full panes, test printings and unused stamp designs. The new exhibit, with artifacts worth millions of dollars, is a tiny fraction of the collection.

The “Stamps Take Flight” exhibit also includes historic one-of-a-kind treasures from the National Postal Museum. Unless otherwise noted, the following sampling of items is from the *Postmaster General's Collection* (*background information follows*).

- The Postmark from the Moon. The Apollo 15 Mail Pouch, inkpads and the postmarked envelope—as evidenced by fingerprints of lunar dust when postmarked on the Moon's surface.
- The 1918 *Inverted Jenny* stamp often is considered the world's most famous stamp error. At that time, intaglio printing required stamp sheets to pass through a press once for each color. One sheet was inadvertently turned upside down between passes, resulting in the mistake.
- The “Top Secret Stamp,” known as the *Project Mercury* stamp, celebrated John Glenn's 1962 orbit of the earth. It was issued at the same time as the event it celebrated and designed and printed in total secrecy in case the mission failed.
- The 1859 Balloon *Jupiter* envelope. The only known surviving piece of mail from the first official U.S. airmail flight—made by the hot-air balloon *Jupiter*—which flew 30 miles from Lafayette, Indiana, to Crawfordsville, Indiana, in August 1859 (Smithsonian).

**The Evolution of Stamp Printing**

Materials from the *Postmaster General's Collection* and other sources tell the story of several carefully selected stamps, each representing major stamp printing methods.

- Engraving or Intaglio — In broad terms, an engraver follows a design called a model, cutting the design by hand into a small metal plate called a die. Once approved, the die is copied to

- a small metal cylinder known as a transfer roll. During printing, the designs on the plate fill with ink. Paper is pressed into the plate, and ink transfers to the paper, creating stamps.
- Gravure — Similar to engraving, this process uses a series of fine dots rather than etched lines for better color separation. In modern gravure printing, stamp designs are separated into at least four color layers—cyan, magenta, yellow and black, with a different plate of recessed dots produced for each color layer. Each ink is applied separately to the plate for that color.
  - Lithography — Modern stamp lithography can offer sharper detail in some instances. It uses process color, with separate plates for each color layer; each layer is made up of very fine dots. The first U.S. stamps printed entirely with full-color lithography appeared in the early 1990s.

### **Not Quite the Color of Money**

Of particular interest to stamp collectors is a full pane of 13-cent 1909 *George Washington* stamps printed on “bluish paper.” In 1909, the Post Office Department briefly experimented with printing stamps on paper similar to paper currency. It used paper with some cloth content instead of the standard 100 percent wood-pulp paper. The resulting paper had a faint bluish or blue-gray tone, commonly referred to by collectors as “bluish paper.” The security benefits did not justify the added production cost.

Curator of Philately Wilson Hulme of the National Postal Museum and guest curator Joseph Brockert of the U.S. Postal Service organized the “Stamps Take Flight” exhibit from the *Postmaster General’s Collection*. The display is supplemented with materials from the National Postal Museum and items borrowed from the U.S. Bureau of Engraving and Printing, the U.S. Air Force and private collections.

“Stamps Take Flight” will be on view in the Philatelic Gallery of the National Postal Museum through March 19, 2006. The National Postal Museum is located at 2 Massachusetts Ave. N.E., in the Old City Post Office Building across from Union Station. The museum is open daily, except Dec. 25, from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. For more information visit [www.postal.si.edu](http://www.postal.si.edu).

Since 1775, the Postal Service has connected friends, families, neighbors and businesses by mail. It is an independent federal agency that visits 142 million homes and businesses every day and is the only service provider delivering to every address in the nation. The Postal Service receives no taxpayer dollars for routine operations, but derives its operating revenues solely from the sale of postage, products and services. With annual revenues of more than \$69 billion, it is the world’s leading provider of mailing and delivery services, offering some of the most affordable postage rates in the world. The Postal Service delivers more than 46 percent of the world’s mail volume—some 206 billion letters, advertisements, periodicals and packages a year—and serves seven million customers each day at its 37,000 retail locations nationwide.

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## **Background Information**

### **Rarities and Special Holdings of the “Stamps Take Flight” Exhibit**

A special room of the “Stamps Take Flight” exhibit at the Smithsonian’s National Postal Museum showcases some of the rarest and most unusual holdings of the *Postmaster General’s Collection*.

Originally, postage stamps were the responsibility of the Third Assistant Postmaster General. By the 1860s, the Third Assistant PMG established a small reference collection to preserve a record of current and previously produced stamps. As more stamps were issued, the archive expanded, eventually growing into today’s wide-ranging collection of die proofs, full panes, stamp art, and more.

The exhibit tells the story of the vast range of U.S. air-and-space mail transport, from a 19th-century balloon to a trip to the Moon. In addition to rare die proofs of the *Inverted Jenny* error, they bring together two extraordinary holdings of the National Postal Museum and the *Postmaster General’s Collection*—the only known surviving letter carried on the balloon *Jupiter* in 1859, and the Apollo 15 cover canceled on the Moon. Unless otherwise noted, these items are from the *Postmaster General’s Collection*.

#### **First U.S. Airmail**

In 1859, the well-known American balloonist (or “aeronaut”) John Wise made history when he transported the first official U.S. airmail in a locked U.S. mailbag aboard his hot-air balloon *Jupiter*. Wise originally planned to depart from Lafayette, Indiana, on August 16. A failed valve forced him to reschedule the flight for the next day, August 17.

Wise had hoped to reach New York City, to which the mail was addressed, or Philadelphia. A lack of wind shortened the trip, however, and he landed in Crawfordsville, Indiana, about 30 miles away. Upon landing, he transferred the mailbag to a railroad postal agent, who put it aboard a train to New York. The envelope and enclosed letter displayed here are the only known surviving letter from the flight.

In 1959, the Post Office commemorated the 100th anniversary of the *Jupiter* flight with a seven-cent stamp. Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield gave a speech in Lafayette, and a balloon re-enactment flight and helicopter demonstrations added to the occasion.

The envelope and letter on display make up the only known surviving piece of the first officially sanctioned U.S. airmail, out of a total of 146 pieces sent aboard the *Jupiter*. The sender marked the envelope “via Balloon *Jupiter*,” following published instructions by the Lafayette postmaster. A later hand incorrectly added the date 1858, a year before the actual flight.

(Property of the Smithsonian’s National Postal Museum)

#### **Moon Mail**

The Apollo 15 mission was the first to include the Lunar Rover, a wheeled vehicle that greatly expanded the range of lunar exploration. During their three days on the Moon, astronauts Dave Scott and Jim Irwin went on three excursions with the Rover.

At the end of the third trip, before re-entering the lunar module, Scott took out this cloth pouch. The envelope in the pouch carried two die proofs of the eight-cent 1971 stamps honoring the 10th anniversary of the space program (one shows the Rover). The stamps were issued the same day on Earth with a first-day ceremony at Florida’s Kennedy Space Center.

Scott canceled the die proofs with a cancellation device and ink pad from the pouch, producing a postmark that reads UNITED STATES / ON THE MOON / AUG. 2 1971 / FIRST DAY OF ISSUE. The postmark was faint enough that he tried again directly below it. Scott also added dusty “thumbprints” with his space suit glove. These may be the smudges on the left side.

The Apollo 15 crew included Colonel David Scott, the mission commander; Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Worden, the command module pilot; and Colonel James Irwin, the lunar module pilot. All three were U.S. Air Force officers. As in other Apollo missions, two astronauts (Scott and Irwin) landed on the Moon; Worden stayed in orbit in the command module.

The cover was canceled on the Moon by astronaut Dave Scott on August 2, 1971, during the Apollo 15 mission. It carries two advance, hand-perforated die proofs of stamps celebrating the U.S. space program.

This mail pouch and stamp pad went to the Moon and back on the Apollo 15 mission; the cancellation device is a duplicate. The original reportedly was left on the Moon in the section of the lunar lander that remained behind.

### ***Inverted Jenny Die Proofs***

The *Inverted Jenny*, a rare flawed printing of the first U.S. airmail stamp of 1918, is perhaps the world's most famous philatelic error. For the first U.S. airmail stamp, designers chose the Curtiss JN-4H ("Jenny") airmail plane. Plates were engraved for the red frame and the blue plane inside. Almost all the stamps were printed correctly. But then something went wrong; either a plate was put in backwards after cleaning, or the paper was turned around before it went through a second time. The result was an airplane flying upside down.

Several sheets with the error were caught and destroyed, but one made it through to a Washington, DC, Post Office on New York Avenue near 13th Street. There it was sold to William T. Robey, in perhaps the most famous discovery in U.S. stamp collecting. The clerk who sold the sheet to Robey didn't catch the mistake because he had never seen an airplane. To avoid the inversion error in the future, the word TOP was later added to each plate. It appears in both colors at the top of the full pane.

At the request of the Post Office, a very small number of die proofs have been deliberately printed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing over the years to illustrate the error. This is the largest collection of these die proofs ever exhibited.

The first two *Inverted Jenny* die proofs were produced by the Bureau in February 1922 at the request of Third Assistant Postmaster General William Glover. One was retained for the official U.S. die proof album; the other was used for exhibitions, starting with the Brazilian International Centennial of that year.

Over the years, the Post Office requested die proofs for a limited number of other exhibitions, as well as at least one additional die proof for internal purposes.

The *Inverted Jenny* die proof on display was printed in late February 1960 by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. The Post Office requested it for display later that year at the International Philatelic Congress in Barcelona, Spain.

### **The "Top Secret" Stamp**

On February 20, 1962, John Glenn became the first American to orbit the Earth. Minutes after his safe return, the Post Office released the *Project Mercury* stamp—the first U.S. commemorative stamp issued at the same time as the event it celebrated. It had been prepared in complete secrecy in case the mission did not succeed.

To keep the project quiet, the stamp's designer worked from home while claiming to be on vacation. The picture engraver also gave the impression he was on leave, but came in at night. Another engraver did the lettering on weekends.

At the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, a rumor was spread that a new multicolor Giori press was locked away for printing test runs of multicolored money. In fact, the new press was being used to print the *Project Mercury* stamp—well before John Glenn's mission took place.

Just over 400 people knew the secret; about half of them postal inspectors. As the day approached, stamps were sent in sealed packages to 305 post offices, still a mystery even to the postmasters themselves.

### **Bluish-Paper Stamps**

In 1909, the Post Office briefly experimented with printing stamps on paper with some rag, or cloth, content (standard stamp paper was 100 percent wood pulp). The paper had a faint bluish or blue-gray tone, and the stamps printed on it are known as "bluish-paper" stamps.

More than three million one- and two-cent U.S. stamps were printed on bluish paper and sold through Post Offices. The paper was not adopted. All bluish-paper stamp denominations above the one-and two-cent values are rare. The intact 13-cent pane on display is unique.

### **High-Value Panes**

The *Postmaster General's Collection* holds full panes of U.S. stamps from many periods, from very common to extremely scarce issues. Full panes are somewhat unusual for any stamp, since panes are often broken up for sale into blocks and pairs. These full panes of high-value stamps from the early 20th century are some of the rarest in the collection.

The stamps belong to a larger series of 28 stamps issued between 1908 and 1921 and known to collectors as the "Washington Franklins." Each stamp depicts either George Washington or the first Postmaster General, Benjamin Franklin. Their portraits are based on busts completed in the men's own lifetimes by French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon.

Most of the Washington Franklins were printed and sold in small values such as one-, two- or five-cents. These stamps with high values of \$1, \$2 and \$5 were most typically used on registered shipments of money between banks, and comparatively few were sold. Today, full panes of these stamps are almost unknown.

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