

After the introduction of America's uniform postal rates in 1845, but before the Post Office Department issued its first general issue stamps of 1 July 1847, several US cities produced what are today called Postmasters' Provisionals. These early US stamps, which were produced by individual postmasters and were valid only in their local areas, are now some of the most sought after items in American philately.

US Postmasters' Provisionals, 1845–1847

By Peter Martin

Great Britain's Penny Black, released 6 May 1840, is universally recognized as the world's first postage stamp. Brazil and the Swiss cantons of Geneva and Zurich were next to issue their first stamps in 1843. The United States and Mauritius followed in 1847 and France and Belgium were added to the list of postage stamp issuing countries in 1849. By 1860 about 85 countries or entities had issued stamps. In the United States, the first stamps were the 5c. and 10c. general issues of 1 July 1847. The stamps (SG 1/2, Scott 1/2) feature Benjamin Franklin, the country's first postmaster general, and George Washington, the nation's first president.

But before the Post Office Department issued these stamps and received a monopoly on postage stamp issuing, there were several cities that produced what are today called Postmasters' Provisionals. All are rare and command a hefty premium when they appear on the market. Values in the *Stanley Gibbons North America Catalogue* range from £325 to £270,000 with most in the four- and five-figure range.

Fig 1 The 5c. New York Postmaster's Provisional with red 'A C M.' initials (Courtesy Smithsonian Institution, National Postal Museum)



Some background is in order. Prior to 1845 US postage rates were very high and their complexity made them difficult for the public, and even many postmasters, to comprehend. The prevailing custom was for mail to be delivered to the addressee before the Post Office Department was paid for its service. This system was cumbersome and did not encourage the use of the mails.

The Act of 3 March 1845, which became effective on 1 July of that year, finally provided for uniform postage rates that were considerably lower and easy to understand. Once the act went into effect, a letter could be mailed up to 300 miles for 5c. per half ounce. Letters travelling more than 300 miles were charged at the rate of 10c. per half ounce.

The new act did not provide for the government to issue postage stamps but it did allow individual postmasters to issue stamps that would be valid only at their local post office.

A small number of postmasters pursued this opportunity and their stamps, known to collectors as the Postmasters' Provisionals, served the same purpose as the Penny Black: they allowed the postal patron the opportunity to purchase the stamps in advance and then attach them to the letter, which could be deposited at the post office day or night.

The Postmasters' Provisionals' place in American philately is historically significant and the formation of a collection of these early stamps is one of the most challenging areas of advanced philately.

New York City: The first Postmasters' Provisional

The first postmaster to take advantage of the new law was New York Postmaster Robert Hunter Morris, who took office on 21 May 1845. Upon the assumption of his duties, he quickly proceeded with plans to issue an adhesive stamp. While Morris was a forward-thinking individual, he also figured that a stamp would impress his superiors in Washington, DC, while also adding to his salary. During that time, a postmaster's compensation was tied to the receipts of his post office.

Morris asked Postmaster General Cave Johnson to allow him to issue stamps for prepayment of letters going through his office and when his request was approved Morris contracted with Rawdon, Wright & Hatch of New York, to print a five-cent stamp bearing an image of George Washington.

Rawdon, Wright & Hatch became one of the most prominent printing and engraving firms in nineteenth-century America. The company's artistry set the standard for succeeding US printing and engraving firms. The 1858 merger of an expanded Rawdon, Wright, Hatch & Edson with seven other firms created the American Bank Note Company with RWH&E holding the largest share in the new company (23.9 per cent).

Fig 2 (below left) Exterior view of the Dutch Reform Church at Nassau and Liberty Streets that became the New York City Post Office in 1844

Fig 3 (below right) Interior view of the New York City Post Office showing clerks sorting the mail. The postmaster's office was located behind the eagle, a spot that allowed him to see everything that was going on

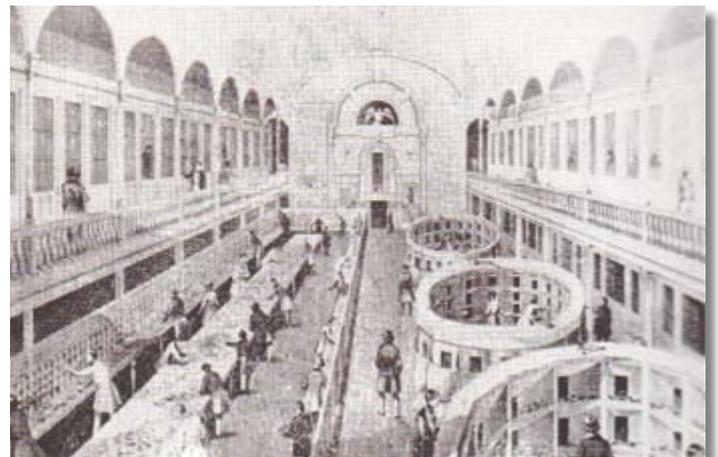




Fig 4 A 5c. New York Postmaster's Provisional with red grid and 'Paid' markings on a cover to Providence, Rhode Island (Courtesy Smithsonian Institution, National Postal Museum)

The die used for Washington's head was taken from a medallion using a famous Gilbert Stuart portrait that was being used on contemporary banknotes. It had a small flaw, a line extending from the corner of the mouth down to the chin, however, that was corrected for the stamps. The engravers added a dignified frame and added the words 'New York,' 'Post Office' and 'Five Cents.'

The stamps (SG 55/65, Scott 9X1/9X3, Fig 1) were printed in sheets of 40 with eight horizontal rows of five. The first shipment of 1200 stamps arrived at the main New York City Post Office on Saturday 12 July 1845 but it appears that the stamps were not placed on sale until Monday 14 July.

On the day the stamps were received, Morris wrote to the postmasters in Albany, NY; Boston, Mass.; Philadelphia, Pa.; and Washington, DC, telling them that he had produced a stamp that he sold for 5c. and enclosing a stamp specimen.

The New York Post Office had just moved from the rotunda on the north-east corner of City Hall Park to the former Dutch Reform Church building at Liberty and Nassau Streets (Figs 2 and 3) and the stamps were issued there and at the branch in the Merchants Exchange Building on Wall Street, the same building in which Rawdon, Wright and Hatch had their plant and printed them.

When the stamps were first put on sale they were sold as issued. After a few days, to prevent the misuse of the stamps, Morris started to initial each stamp with his 'R H M.' initials in red ink. Soon thereafter, he delegated this duty to Alonzo Castle Monson, a postal clerk who was also his brother-in-law. Monson applied his 'A C M.' initials, also in red ink (Fig 1), and most of the New York provisionals are found with his initials.

Later yet, red circular grid and 'PAID' handstamps were used (Fig 4), but these are considerably scarcer.

Morris figured that a stamp would impress his superiors, while also adding to his salary

Between 12 July 1845 and 7 January 1847 RW&H made 18 deliveries of sheets to the New York Post Office, for a total of 3590 sheets of 40, or 143,600 stamps.

The stamps were printed in a variety of wove papers varying in thickness from pelure to thick and in colour from grey to bluish and blue. Initially, a thick brown gum was used, succeeded by a thin white transparent gum.

The 12 major and minor *Scott Catalogue* listings for the New York provisional reflect the specialized classification of paper colours and initial types. A census of this stamp indicates there are about 5500 surviving copies, of which 500 are uncancelled.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the New York provisional is that its success demonstrated the efficacy of adhesive postage stamps to the public and to Congress, paving the way for the 1847 general issue.

The New York City experience quickly motivated ten postmasters in other US cities and towns to issue their own stamps. An overview of these ten Postmasters' Provisionals follows.

Alexandria, Virginia

Alexandria, Virginia, was a major colonial port city that was ceded to the District of Columbia in 1791 and ceded back to Virginia by the US Congress on 6 July 1846. In September 1846 the issue was put up for a resident's vote and approved, but it was not until March 1847 that the Virginia General Assembly enacted the recession.

The Alexandria Post Office, with Daniel Bryan as postmaster, was actually part of the District of Columbia when the provisional stamps were used before March 1847.

All documented examples of Alexandria provisional stamps (SG 1/2, Scott 1X1/1X2, Fig 5) are cut to shape. The round stamp features a circle of asterisk-like rosettes surrounding 'Alexandria *Post Office*' with a 'PAID 5' in the centre. There are two types. One has 40 rosettes, the other has 39 rosettes. The stamps are black on buff and all catalogue at least \$100,000.

There also is a unique example on blue paper. Known as the 1847 5c. Alexandria Blue Boy (Fig 6), the stamp is on a cover addressed to Richmond Virginia that contained a love letter that was supposed to be destroyed. It is one of the rarest items in the world. In 1981, the Blue Boy sold for \$1 million.



Fig 5 (above) A cut-to-shape 5c. Alexandria, Virginia, Postmaster's Provisional.

Fig 6 (right) The unique 5c. Alexandria Blue Boy Postmaster's Provisional on a cover addressed to Richmond, Virginia



Annapolis, Maryland



Fig 7 Annapolis, Maryland, Postmaster's Provisional

Little has been written about the Annapolis, Maryland, Postmaster's Provisional. Postmaster Martin F Revell issued a 5c. envelope and lettersheet (SG 5, Scott 2XU1, Fig 7) showing a red, circular design with 'Post Office Annapolis Md.' surrounding an eagle. A '5 PAID' handstamp in red or blue was also applied. The provisional is known on two sizes of envelope.

The circular design in blue, without the numeral or 'PAID' handstamp, is known to have been used as a postmark.

The Annapolis provisional is extremely rare and is valued at £270,000 in the Gibbons *United States Catalogue*.

Baltimore, Maryland

Baltimore Postmaster, James Madison Buchanan, a successful lawyer and prominent politician, was appointed to his office on 8 April 1845. When the new postal rates were announced, he anticipated a significant increase in mail volume passing through his post office.

He was correct. The first day saw a huge increase in mail volume and on the second day there were 1500 more letters deposited than on the first day. This situation not only created more work for his clerks but also made for congestion in the post office.

To help rectify the situation, in early July Buchanan issued envelopes bearing his handstamped signature and 'PAID' and rate markings. The envelopes (SG 10/30; Scott 3X1/3X4, 3XU1/3XU4, Fig 8) were prepared in two denominations, in stamp and handstamp formats, by postal employees prior to sale to the public.

While neither the printer nor the printing process have been documented, it is known that the adhesive stamps were printed from a plate of 12 (2x6) containing nine 5c. stamps

and three 10c. stamps. Within each boxed rectangle were the signature of James M Buchanan and the denomination.

The 15 July 1845 edition of the *Baltimore American* featured this news item:

'Post Office Stamped Envelopes—We learn that the Postmaster of this city, with laudable desire to promote the convenience of businessmen and others, has caused to be prepared five and ten cent envelopes, with which letters may be mailed at any hour of the day or night without the trouble attendant upon paying postage at the window, waiting until the office is opened, etc. These envelopes may be procured at the office from the clerks; sixteen of the five cents are furnished for a dollar. We observe that this system has been adopted in some of the Eastern States.'

While the envelopes were placed on sale in July, the earliest documented use is a buff envelope dated 7 September.

The colour of the paper and the inks used to prepare them varied over time. The 5c. envelopes were produced on manila, buff, white, salmon and grey paper with manila the most common. All 10c. envelopes are rare with manila and buff the most frequently seen. Only one 10c. on salmon paper is recorded.

Values in the Gibbons Catalogue range from £5500 to £80,000.

Boscawen, New Hampshire



Fig 9 Boscawen, New Hampshire, Postmaster's Provisional

Boscawen is small a town in Merrimack County, New Hampshire. Some time around 1846, Postmaster Worcester Webster issued a provisional handstamp.

The handstamp was an adaptation of a postmark and simply read 'PAID/5/CENTS,' typeset in blue on a yellowish paper (SG 35, Scott 4X1, Fig 9). Only one documented example has been identified. It is uncanceled and on a cover with manuscript postal markings. It currently lists in the SG *United States Catalogue* at £270,000.

Brattleboro, Vermont



Fig 10 Position ten of the 5c. Brattleboro, Vermont, Postmaster's Provisional (SG 40) (Courtesy Robert A Siegel Auction Galleries)

Brattleboro Postmaster Frederick N Palmer issued his provisional some time in 1846. The exact date is not known because in later accounts neither the postmaster nor the printer could recollect the approximate date. Based upon a surviving folded letter dated 27 August 1846, the best estimate seems to be in mid-summer 1846.

The Brattleboro provisional was engraved by Thomas Chubbuck of Brattleboro, who also was the printer. The stamp was printed in black on a thick buff paper from a plate of ten (5x2) with the engraver's name below the position eight stamp. There remains a question about whether 500 stamps or 500 sheets (5000) stamps were printed.

The small, rectangular stamp (SG 40, Scott 5X1, Fig 10) features the postmaster's manuscript 'F N P' initials within a frame surround by 'Brattleboro VT. P.O. 5 Cents.' Palmer applied the gum himself with a camel-hair brush.

About 35 stamps, on and off cover, have been documented. A single used stamp catalogues for £11,000 in the Gibbons Catalogue (£23,000 unused) while a stamp on cover is valued at £32,000.

Lockport, New York



Fig 11 The Lockport, New York, Postmaster's Provisional

Lockport is a small city in Niagara County, New York, in the Buffalo-Niagara Falls area. Its name is derived from a set of Erie Canal locks within the city.



Fig 8 A 5c. Baltimore Postmaster's Provisional on white paper (SG 10). The cover, which is addressed to Port Tobacco, Maryland, bears a blue 'Baltimore Md. Jan 21' (1847) circular datestamp and matching 'Paid' handstamp (Courtesy Robert A Siegel Auction Galleries)

In 1846 Postmaster Hezekiah W Scovell produced a red double oval handstamp (SG 45, Scott 6X1, *Fig 11*) with 'LOCKPORT NY' in the outer oval. A separate red 'PAID' and a black manuscript '5' are in the centre oval.

Only one example on a buff cover has been documented, although there is another cover with two small fragments that has been identified. The documented cover currently is valued at £270,000 in the SG Catalogue.

Millbury, Massachusetts



Fig 12 The Millbury, Massachusetts, Postmaster's Provisional

Millbury is a town in Worcester County, in south central Massachusetts. First settled in 1716, Millbury has a long history as a New England mill town, from which its name was derived.

In 1846, Postmaster Asa H Waters produced the Millbury provisional (SG 50, Scott 7X1, *Fig 12*). It was printed from a woodcut, singly on a hand press. The stamp features an image of what is believed to be President George Washington centred in a triple circle with 'POST OFFICE***PAID 5 Cts.***' in the second circle.

Printed in black on bluish wove paper, it is known cancelled with a straight line 'PAID' and a red circular 'MILBURY, MS.,' date in centre.

The stamp is valued at £46,000 used, \$120,000 mint and \$110,000 on cover in the SG *United States Catalogue*.

New Haven Connecticut



Fig 13 The New Haven, Connecticut, Postmaster's Provisional handstamp

The New Haven, Connecticut, Postmaster from 1844 to 1849 was Edward A Mitchell who used a brass handstamp to make prepaid envelopes for local customers. The envelopes were made by impressing the brass die into the upper right corner.

The handstamp (SG 55/58, Scott 8XU1/8XU4, *Fig 13*) was produced in 1845. The design, engraved by Augustus E Lines, features a truncated double-line frame surrounding the words 'POST OFFICE/NEW HAVEN, CT/5/PAID/_P.M.' Mitchell signed 'E.A. Mitchell' in a variety of coloured inks in the space provided.

Since customers would bring envelopes to his office for stamping, a variety of envelopes were used. Examples of cut to shape and cut squares are known for two issues but each of the on-cover listings is for unique examples. The Gibbons catalogue values for the handstamp on complete envelopes range from £95,000 to £110,000.

Reprints of the handstamp were made in different colours during 1871–74, 1923 and 1932 before the handstamp was given to the New Haven Colony Historical Society



Fig 14 A complete sheet of 12 of the 5c. and 10c. Providence, Rhode Island Postmaster's Provisional (SG 71a) (Courtesy Robert A Siegel Auction Galleries)

Providence, Rhode Island

Providence is the capital and most populous city in Rhode Island and was one of the first cities established in the United States. In 1846, Providence had a population of 36,000 and the post office was a distributing office that served about 300,000 people in Rhode Island, Connecticut and Massachusetts. More than 80,000 letters were processed each quarter by the post office.

With that kind of volume, Postmaster Welcome B Sayles, who was appointed in 1845, had good reason to create a Postmaster's Provisional. In the summer of 1846 Sayles ordered a copper plate from George W Babcock, who was considered the best engraver in the city.

Originally, the plate was supposed to have 12×5c. and 4×10c. stamps making the sheet face value \$1 but this was changed to 11×5c. and 1×10c. to approximate the expected usage.

The stamps (SG 70/71, Scott 10X1/10X2, *Fig 14*) were printed on hard, thin greyish

handmade paper by Henry A Hidden & Co., a firm that had the best printing equipment in Providence. The printer completed his work on 26 August 1846 and delivered the plate and printed stamps, in five bundles of 300 sheets each (16,500 5c. stamps and 1500 10c. stamps), to Postmaster Sayles.

The stamps were delivered without gum so Assistant Postmaster Robert H Barton gummed the sheets from two packages (600 sheets). The gum penetrated the paper enough to give it the familiar creamy tint.

The first day of sale was Monday 24 August with record sales but the earliest documented use currently is 25 August. Total sales of the Providence Postmaster's Provisional were 6184 5c. stamps and 548 10c. stamps. Compared to the other Postmasters' Provisionals, the Providence stamps are the most readily attainable, with catalogue values starting at just £325.

Reprints in different colours were made from the original plate in 1898. All were produced without gum.

St Louis, Missouri



Figs 15 to 17 5c., 10c. and 20c. St Louis, Missouri Postmaster's Provisionals (SG 75/77) (Courtesy Robert A Siegel Auction Galleries)

The only provisionals not issued by an East Coast state were produced in St Louis, Missouri. John M Wimer served the mid-western gateway city of St Louis as postmaster, alderman and mayor and, in 1845, he had his own provisional stamps printed.

The basic design of the St Louis provisional stamps (SG 75/82, Scott 11X1/11X8, *Figs 15, 16 and 17*), two bears holding the state coat of arms, was chosen to symbolise Missourians' rugged durability. The bears stand on a ribbon bearing the inscription *SALUS DOPULI SUPREMA LEX ESTO*, meaning 'let the people's welfare be the supreme law.'

The St Louis 'Bears' engraving is one of the most elaborate of all US Postmasters' Provisionals.

On 5 November 1845 the *Missouri Republican* contained the following notice: 'LETTER STAMPS. Mr. Wimer, the postmaster, has prepared a set of letter stamps, or rather marks, to be put upon letters, indicating that the postage has been paid. In this he has copied

after the plan adopted by the postmaster of New York and other cities. These stamps are engraved to represent the Missouri Coat of Arms, and are five and ten cents. They are so prepared that they may be stuck upon a letter like a wafer and will prove a great convenience to merchants and all those having many letters to send post paid, as it saves all trouble of paying at the post-office. They will be sold as they are sold in the East, viz.: Sixteen five-cent stamps and eight ten-cent stamps for a dollar. We would recommend merchants and others to give them a trial.'

One week later on 12 November, the same paper published a follow-up announcement:

'POST-OFFICE STAMPS. Mr. Wimer, the postmaster, requests us to say that he will furnish nine ten-cent stamps and eighteen five-cent stamps for one dollar, the difference being required to pay for the printing of the stamps.'

The second announcement likely was published to amend the number of stamps sold for a dollar from 'sixteen' to 'eighteen' for the 5c. and 'eight' to 'nine' for the 10c., which corresponds to 90c. in stamps for one dollar in money.

The 'Bears' were printed from an engraved copper plate comprising six subjects arranged in two vertical rows of three. The original plate was made by J M Kershaw, a local engraver and owner of the Western Card & Seal Engraving Establishemnt. Not having any means of mechanical reproduction he had to cut each design separately by hand. Consequently, each stamp differs from every other stamp on the plate.

The plate was altered twice and the states of the plate (1, 2 and 3) roughly correspond to the papers used (greenish, grey-lilac and bluish pelure), so there were three printings.

First printings of these stamps were issued in denominations of 5c. and 10c. in black on greenish-grey wove paper. They were printed in two vertical rows with three 5c. stamps in the left row and three 10c. in the right. In 1846, a 20c. value was introduced to cover the double rate on a letter going more than 300 miles. The denomination was created by changing the 5c. values on the plate to 20c. This 20c. denomination plate was later changed back to the 5c. value.

A second printing of the three imperforate values was issued in 1846 on grey-lilac paper, and a third printing was introduced later that year on bluish paper.

The earliest documented use of any St Louis 'Bears' stamp is on a cover postmarked 13 November (1845). The stamp remainders on hand when their use was discontinued, as well as the plate, were lost with Wimer's other possessions when a Mississippi boat sank during the Civil War.

SG Catalogue values for these stamps range from £4500 to £70,000.

The end of an era

The Postmasters' Provisionals era ended when the Act of Congress of 3 March 1847, authorised the postmaster general to issue government stamps to satisfy the postal rates. The first government stamps, the 5c. Benjamin Franklin and 10c. George Washington, were distributed on 1 July 1847, making the Postmasters' Provisional stamps invalid.