

Glossary of Philatelic Terms

A

Accessories: The tools used by stamp collectors, such as tongs, hinges, etc.

Adhesive: A gummed stamp made to be attached to mail.

Aerogrammes: Air letters designed to be letters and envelopes in one. They are specially stamped and ready for folding.

Aero philately: Stamp collecting that focuses on stamps or postage relating to airmail.

Album: A book designed to hold stamps and covers.

Approvals: Stamps sent by a dealer to a collector for examination. Approvals must either be bought or returned to the dealer within a specified time.

Auction: A sale at which philatelic material is sold to the highest bidder.

B

Bar code: A series of vertical full bars and half bars representing the ZIP Code information printed on a mail piece to facilitate automated processing by bar code reader equipment.

Black Jack: The nickname for the very popular U.S. two-cent black Andrew Jackson stamp, which was issued in various forms between 1863 and 1875.

Block: An unseparated group of stamps, at least two stamps high and two stamps wide.

Bluish Paper: Used to print portions of several issues in 1909; the paper was made with 35 percent rag stock instead of all wood pulp. The color goes through the paper, showing clearly on back and face.

Board of Governors (BOG): As the governing body of the Postal Service, the Board is comparable to a board of directors of a private corporation. The Board includes nine governors who are appointed by the president with the advice and consent of the Senate. The nine governors select a Postmaster General, who becomes a member of the Board, and those 10 select a Deputy Postmaster General, who also serves on the Board. The Board directs and controls the expenditures and reviews the practices and policies of the Postal Service.

Bogus: A completely fictitious, worthless "stamp," created only for sale to collectors. Bogus stamps include labels for nonexistent values added to regularly issued sets, issues for nations without postal systems, etc.

Booklet Pane: A small sheet of stamps specially cut to be sold in booklets.

Bourse: A marketplace, such as a stamp exhibition, where stamps are bought, sold or exchanged.

C

Cachet (ka-shay'): A design on an envelope describing an event. Cachets appear on first day of issue, first flight and stamp exhibition covers, etc.

Cancellation: A mark placed on a stamp by a postal authority to show that it has been used.

Centering: The position of the design on a postage stamp. On perfectly centered stamps the design is exactly in the middle.

Cinderella: Any stamp-like label without an official postal value.

Classic: An early stamp issue. Most people consider these to be rare stamps, but classic stamps aren't necessarily rare.

Citizens Stamp Advisory Committee (CSAC): A group of independent citizens appointed by the Postmaster General to review the more than 40,000 suggestions for stamp subjects the Postal Service receives each year.

Classification Reform: On July 1, 1996, the Postal Service adjusted the domestic mail classification system to establish a simple, more consistent rate structure and to keep its products in line with the changing needs of the marketplace.

Coils: Stamps issued in rolls (one stamp wide) for use in dispensers or vending machines.

Commemoratives: Stamps that honor anniversaries, important people, special events, or aspects of national culture.

Compound Perforations: Different gauge perforations on different (normally adjacent) sides of a single stamp.

Condition: Condition is the most important characteristic in determining the value of a stamp. It refers to the state of a stamp regarding such details as centering, color and gum.

Cover: An envelope that has been sent through the mail.

Cracked Plate: A term used to describe stamps which show evidence that the plate from which they were printed was cracked.

Customer Perfect!: A quality process management system that builds customer satisfaction and excellence into every process and procedure of the Postal Service.

D

Definitives: Regular issues of postage stamps, usually sold over long periods of time. They tend to be fairly small and printed in large quantities often more than once.

Denomination: The postage value appearing on a stamp, such as 5 cents.

Deputy Postmaster General (DPMG): A member of the Board of Governors, jointly appointed by the Postmaster General and the Board of Governors.

Die Cut: Scoring of self-adhesive stamps that allows a stamp to be separated from the liner.

Directory Markings: Postal markings that indicate a failed delivery attempt, stating reasons such as "No Such Number" or "Address Unknown."

Double Transfer: The condition on a printing plate that shows evidence of a duplication of all or part of the design.

Dry Printing: Begun as an experiment in 1953, this type of printing results in a whiter paper, a higher sheen on the surface, a thicker and stiffer feel and designs that stand out more clearly than on more standard "wet" printings.

Duplicates: Extra copies of stamps that can be sold or traded. Duplicates should be examined carefully for color and perforation variations.

E

Electronic Commerce Services (ECS): An umbrella of services that would bring electronic mail up to the same level of acceptance that regular mail enjoys today. ECS includes a time and date stamp, return receipt, registered, certified, verification of sender and recipient, and archival services. Plans also call for creating public and private authentication keys to enable individuals to prove who they are when communicating on the Internet.

Electronic postmark: An electronic time and date stamp on electronic mail that will authenticate a document's existence at a particular point in time.

Entire: An intact piece of postal stationery, in contrast to a cut-out of the printed design.

Error: A stamp with something incorrect in its design or manufacture.

Exploded: A stamp booklet is said to be "exploded" when it has been separated into its various components for show.

Express Mail: The Postal Service's premium delivery service, providing guaranteed overnight delivery for documents and packages weighing up to 70 pounds. Both domestic and international services are offered.

External First-Class Measurement System (EXFC): A test conducted by an independent accounting firm whereby First-Class Mail service is measured from the customer's perspective (from point of deposit to point of delivery or door to door).

F

Face Value: The monetary value or denomination of a stamp.

Fake: A genuine stamp that has been altered in some way to make it more attractive to collectors. It may be repaired, reperfed or regummed to resemble a more valuable variety.

First Day Cover (FDC): An envelope with a new stamp and cancellation showing the date the stamp was issued.

First Day Ceremony Program: A program given to those who attend first day of issue stamp ceremonies. It contains the actual stamp affixed and postmarked, a list of participants, and information on the stamp subject.

First-Class Mail: A class of mail including letters, postcards and postal cards, all matter wholly or partially in writing or typewriting, and all matter sealed or otherwise closed against inspection.

Foreign Entry: When original transfers are erased incompletely from a plate, they can appear with new transfers of a different design which are subsequently entered on the plate.

Franks: Written, hand-stamped, or imprinted markings on the face of the cover indicating that it is carried free of postage. Franking is usually limited to official government correspondence.

Freak: An abnormal variety of stamps occurring because of paper fold, over-inking, perforation shift, etc., as opposed to a continually appearing variety or a major error.

G

Global Priority Mail (GPM): A category of international mail that provides fast service at attractive rates to 27 countries.

Grill: A pattern of small, square pyramids in parallel rows impressed or embossed on the stamp to break paper fibers, allowing cancellation ink to soak in and preventing washing and reuse.

Gum: The coating of glue on the back of an unused stamp.

H

Hinges: Small strips of gummed material used by collectors to affix stamps to album pages.

Hologram: An image that appears to be three-dimensional when viewed from an angle. Holograms have appeared on some modern stamps and stationary.

I

Imperforate: Indicates stamps without perforations or separating holes. They usually are separated by scissors and collected in pairs.

L

Label: Any stamp-like adhesive that is not a postage stamp.

Laid Paper: When held to the light, the paper shows alternate light and dark crossed lines.

Line Pairs (LP): Most coil stamp rolls prior to 1891 feature a line of ink (known as a "joint line") printed between two stamps at various intervals, caused by two or more curved plates around the printing cylinder.

Liner: The backing paper for self-adhesive stamps.

Loupe: A magnifying glass used to examine details of stamps more closely.

M

Miniature Sheet: A single stamp or block of stamps with a margin on all sides bearing some special wording or design.

O

On Paper: Stamps "on paper" are those that still have portions of the original envelope or wrapper stuck to them.

Overprint: Additional printing on a stamp that was not part of the original design.

Optical Character Reader (OCR): An automated mail processing machine that optically scans letter mail, locates the address and translates the address information into a bar code representation of the ZIP+4 delivery point bar code.

P

Pack and Send: A pilot retail service offered at selected post offices that allows customers to bring in any mailable item to have it securely packaged and, if they wish, mailed.

Packet: A presorted unit of all different stamps. One of the most common and economical ways to begin a collection.

Pane: A full "sheet" of stamps as sold by a Post Office. Four panes typically make up the original sheet of stamps as printed.

Par Avion: French for mail transported "by air."

Perforations: Lines of small holes or cuts between rows of stamps that make them easy to separate.

Philately: The collection and study of postage stamps and other postal materials.

Pictorials: Stamps with a picture of some sort, other than portraits or static designs such as coats of arms.

Plate Block (PB) (or Plate Number Block): A block of stamps with the margin attached that bears the plate number used in printing that sheet.

Plate Number Coils (PNC): For most coil stamp rolls beginning with #1891, a small plate number appears at varying intervals in the roll in the design of the stamp.

Postage Due: A stamp issued to collect unpaid postage.

Postal Cards: See "stamped postal cards."

Postal Inspection Service: The investigative arm of the Postal Service responsible for internal audits and investigating criminal acts involving the mails and misuse of the postal system.

Postal Rate Commission (PRC): An independent federal agency that makes recommendations concerning Postal Service requests for changes in postal rates and mail classifications.

Postal Stationery: Envelopes, aerogrammes, stamped postal cards, and letter sheets with printed or embossed stamp designs.

Postal Stores: A modernized Postal Service retail unit that has postal products on open display, offering customers self-service selection and full service counter assistance.

Postcards: Commercially-produced mailable cards without imprinted postage.

Postmark: A mark put on envelopes or other mailing pieces showing the date and location of mailing.

Postmark America: The Postal Service's first large-scale retail store, debuting at the Mall of America in Bloomington, MN, designed to test the market interest in postal-inspired clothing and other products.

Postmaster General (PMG): The chief executive officer of the Postal Service, appointed by and serving at the pleasure of the Board of Governors.

Post Office Express (POE): A postal retail unit located within an independent business to serve consumer needs related to merchandise and postal products and services.

Precancels: Stamps cancelled by a proper authority prior to their use on mail.

Presort Stamp: A discounted stamp used by business mailers who presort their mail.

Prestige Booklet: A booklet commemorating a special topic and containing stamps, narrative, and images.

Priority Mail: Priority Mail provides two to three day delivery service.

Processing and Distribution Center (P&DC): A large mail sorting and dispatching plant that serves as a hub for mail originating from post offices, collection boxes and customer mailboxes, and large-volume mailers in a designated service area.

R

Registered Mail: First class mail with a numbered receipt, including a valuation of the registered item. This guarantees customers will get their money back if an item is lost in the mail.

Reissue: An official reprinting of a stamp that was no longer being printed.

Replicas: Reproductions of stamps sold during the early days of collecting. Usually printed in one color on a sheet containing a number of different designs. Replicas were never intended to deceive either the post office or the collector.

Reprint: A stamp printed from the original plate after the issue is no longer valid for postage. Official reprints are sometimes made for presentation purposes, official collections, etc., and are often distinguished in some way from the "real" ones.

Revenue Stamps: Stamps issued as proof of payment of certain taxes but not valid for postage.

Ribbed Paper: Paper which shows fine parallel ridges on one or both sides of a stamp.

Rouletting: The piercing of the paper between stamps to facilitate their separation, often giving the appearance of a series of dashes.

Rural Free Delivery (RFD): Began in 1896 as an experiment in West Virginia, RFD brought daily mail delivery to farmers and others living outside urban areas.

S

Scrambled Indicia®: A patented process that conceals encoded text or graphics within the visible design. These hidden images can only be viewed through a special lens, the Stamp Decoder™, available from the U.S. Postal Service.

Se-tenant: An attached pair, strip or block of stamps that differ in design, value or surcharge.

Secret Marks: Many stamps have included tiny reference points in their designs to foil attempts at counterfeiting and to differentiate issues.

Self-adhesive Stamp: A stamp with a pressure-sensitive adhesive.

Selvage: The unprinted paper around panes of stamps, sometimes called the margin.

Semipostal Stamp: A First-Class Mail stamp priced to include an additional charge earmarked for a specific purpose, e.g., breast cancer research.

Series: A number of individual stamps or sets of stamps having a common purpose or theme, issued over an extended periods of time (generally a year or more), including all variations of design and/or denomination.

Set: A group of stamps with a common design or theme issued at one time for a common purpose or over a limited period of time (generally less than a year).

Souvenir Sheet: A small sheet of stamps with a commemorative inscription.

Special Issues: Stamps with a commemorative appearance that supplement definitives and meet specific

needs. These include Christmas, Love, Holiday Celebrations, airmail, Express Mail, and Priority Mail stamps.

Speculative: A stamp or issue released primarily for sale to collectors, rather than to meet any legitimate postal need.

Stamp Decoder™: A device with a special lens that reveals hidden images on stamps. It is available from the U.S. Postal Service.

Stamped Postal Card: The current term for a mailable card with postage imprinted on it.

Stamped Envelope: A mailable envelope with postage embossed or imprinted on it.

Standard Mail: New name for the merger of third-class mail and fourth-class mail as one class under Classification Reform implementation of July 1, 1996.

Star Route: A mail route serviced by an outside contractor rather than a postal employee.

Strip: Three or more unseparated stamps in a row.

Surcharge: An overprint that changes the denomination of a stamp from its original face value.

Sweatbox: A closed box with a grill over which stuck together unused stamps are placed. A wet, sponge-like material under the grill creates humidity so the stamps can be separated without removing the gum.

T

Tagging: The marking of stamps with a phosphor or similar coating (which may be in lines, bars, letters, overall design area or entire stamp surface), done by many countries for use with automatic mail-handling equipment. When a stamp is issued both with and without this marking, catalogs will often note varieties, as "tagged" or "untagged."

Thematic: A stamp collection that relates to a specific theme and is arranged to present a logical story and progression.

Tied On: Describes a stamp whose postmark touches the envelope.

Tongs: A tweezers-like tool with rounded or flattened tips used to handle stamps.

Topicals: Indicates a group of stamps with the same theme—space travel, for example.

U

Unhinged: A stamp without hinge marks, but not necessarily with original gum.

United States Postal Service (USPS): The successor to the Post Office Department, the USPS was established by the Postal Reorganization Act of July 1, 1971, as an independent, self-supporting federal agency within the executive branch.

Universal service: The Postal Service's mandate and commitment to the nation to provide mail delivery service at uniform and reasonable rates to everyone, everywhere, six days a week.

Unused: The condition of a stamp that has no cancellation or other sign of use.

Used: The condition of a stamp that has been canceled.

V

Variety: A stamp that varies in some way from its standard or original form. Varieties can include missing colors or perforations, constant plate flaws, changes in ink or paper, differences in printing method or in format.

W

Want List: A list of philatelic material sought by a collector.

Watermark: A design pressed into stamp paper during its manufacture.

Water-activated Gum: Water-soluble adhesives such as sugar-based starches on the back of an unused stamp.

Wet Printing: Has a moisture content of 15-35 percent, compared to 5-10 percent for "dry" printings, also has a duller look than "dry" printings.

Wove Paper: A uniform paper which, when held to the light, shows no light or dark figures.

Z

Zoning Improvement Plan (ZIP): Established in 1963, a system of five-digit codes or ZIP codes that identifies the individual post office or metropolitan area delivery station associated with every mailing address. This system was later expanded to ZIP+4, which includes more defined delivery areas.