

**Behind
the
scenes
at the**

National Postal Museum

Highlights from the Postal Museum's collection



The only surviving U.S. mail piece postmarked July 4, 1776, a letter from lawyer William Bant to Declaration of Independence signer John Hancock complains about the British stealing his horse.



The first postal stamps issued by the United States became valid for use on July 1, 1847. The Benjamin Franklin stamp paid the rate for a half-ounce sent up to 300 miles. The George Washington stamp paid for longer distances or heavier mail.



Though the Smithsonian's National Postal Museum in Washington, DC, is celebrating its 25th anniversary, the stories it tells began with the founding of the nation.

Since 1993, the National Postal Museum has surprised millions of visitors by explaining how the Post Office helped to build, and bind together, a growing country. Most of the museum's visitors take the mail for granted, but leave the building with a greater understanding of the amazing logistics behind moving the mail and of the

central role the Post Office had in making the United States what it is today, as well as a newfound appreciation of stamps and philately (the collection and study of postage stamps), head curator Nancy Pope said.

"We want people to understand just how deeply entwined the post office was in the creation and the building of this nation," she said. "Many people don't realize that this is one organization that is in the Constitution, with Congress being given the power to create post offices and post roads, and that was a power that helped in the expansion of the country."

Visitors to the Postal Museum often find a newfound sense of wonder for something most see as a routine part of life, she said.

"You have the collection boxes on the street. You have the mailbox at your house. You have the letter carriers walking up and down the street. You've got the post offices in the town. It is so much a part of our daily life that we don't see it," Pope said. "We like to show people that this stuff that we take for granted has a really fascinating story behind it and a very intriguing history. We take it for granted that when we put a letter in the mailbox it will get there; we don't think about the mechanisms that have



The National Postal Museum is located in Washington, DC, next to Union Station.

A statue of Benjamin Franklin looks out over the museum's first floor.



In 1918, the Post Office issued a stamp to commemorate its new air mail service using the Curtiss JN-4H "Jenny" airplane, with an image of the airplane. One sheet of 100 stamps was inadvertently

fed into the printing press upside down, creating a sheet of "Inverted Jennys" that were erroneously sold. Inverted Jennys are now among the most famous—and valuable—rare stamps with errors.

Behind the scenes at the National Postal Museum



The museum is housed in the former Main Post Office building and maintains the antique feel.

been developed over the centuries to get that letter there.”

The Postal Museum occupies the former Main Post Office building in Washington, DC, an ornate Beaux Arts-style building that opened in 1914. It is host to 6 million objects—the second-largest collection of all the Smithsonian museums, after the Museum of Natural History. The building, including the grand marble and bronze details in its lobby, was restored shortly after the Postal Service stopped using it for mail service in 1986. The edifice is now part of the museum’s story, honoring a past when public buildings were works of art in themselves.

Inside, visitors learn about the crucial role of the Post Office and the fascinating innovations that have kept the U.S. Postal Service delivering to the country.

In the main lobby, several aircraft once used for airmail loom overhead, including the Wiseman-Cooke airplane, the first to carry U.S. mail. A team led by Californian Fred Wiseman built it from nothing but drawings and photos of other aircraft, and Wiseman took it on its maiden mail flight in 1911, with a handful of mail, about 20 miles from Petaluma to Santa Rosa, CA. He flew about 100 feet off the ground at up to 70 mph. Though Wiseman delivered most of his mail after landing, he sometimes tossed mail into yards from the air. He was met by a crowd in Santa Rosa that gathered to cheer his historic flight.

A large airmail beacon also is on display, a reminder of the advances the Post Office made in aviation navigation technology. Next to the beacon, visitors can walk into a mail rail car and learn how railroads sped up mail delivery. To quicken things even more, postal employees sorted mail on the cars while en route to their destination on specialized cars like the one in the museum. Using hooks to grab mailbags in each town instead of stopping kept the train on schedule, a technique later used for airmail.

And, of course, it wouldn’t be a postal museum without an LLV.

Aside from many other intriguing, and sometimes strange, technologies used throughout our history to move the mail—from horse-drawn mail wagons to letters sent to soldiers overseas via microfilm to pneumatic tubes—the museum shows the story of how postal delivery bound a young, growing nation together. As the country expanded, the Post Office went with it. Mail service was an essential part of life that put a town on the map, sometimes literally.

“Post offices were quite often one of the first things that a new town had,” Pope said, “and if you look at so many towns, especially on the frontier, you’ll find that they were named for their first postmaster.”

By transferring news, vital documents, money and goods from town to



A mail piece carried by the famous Pony Express took a few years to cross the continent and reach its destination in New York. It comes with a notation: “recovered from a mail stolen by the Indians in 1860.” By the time it reached New York in 1862, the Pony Express had already dissolved.

On Aug. 2, 1971, U.S. astronaut Dave Scott postmarked mail on the moon—an act as nationally symbolic as planting a flag. During an Apollo 15 moonwalk, Scott pulled from a pouch an envelope bearing die proofs of two 8-cent stamps issued to commemorate lunar exploration. Scott postmarked the envelope on the moon as the Postal Service officially issued the stamps on Earth. The first postmark Scott made was faint, so he made another below it. He left visible smudges of moon dust on the envelope.





1

Planes, trains and automobiles are just some of the ways the Post Office has moved the mail. Visitors find out more in this exhibit.



7

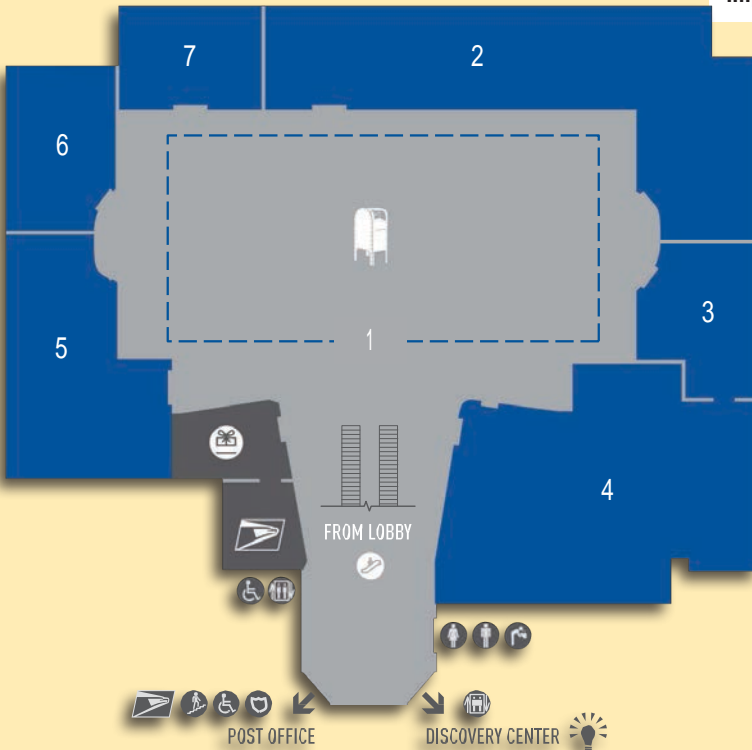
Mail Call explores how the military postal system works and why the mail is an important resource.

LEVEL 1

- DISCOVERY CENTER
- MUSEUM SHOP
- STAMP STORE
- MAIL IN AMERICA GALLERIES
 - 1 MOVING THE MAIL
 - 2 BINDING THE NATION
 - 3 CUSTOMERS AND COMMUNITIES
 - 4 SYSTEMS AT WORK
 - 5 BEHIND THE BADGE
 - 6 SPECIAL EXHIBITION GALLERY
 - 7 MAIL CALL

The exhibit explores the processing technology of the postal system and how those systems have evolved over the last 200 years.

4



The Post Office was instrumental in helping to form the United States. This exhibit examines how the country relied on the mail as it expanded across the continent.

2

This gallery presents rotating exhibits on topics of special interest.



3

Customers and Communities uses a series of exhibits to examine the evolution of mail delivery to vastly expanding urban and rural populations in the 20th century.

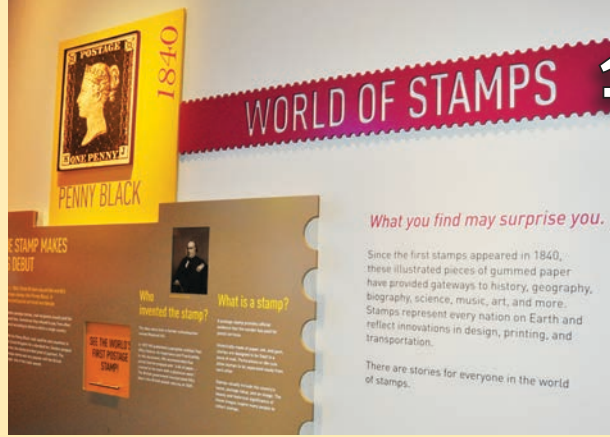


5

The United States Postal Inspection Service—one of our nation's oldest federal law enforcement agencies—protects mail, post offices and postal employees.

LEVEL 2

-  HISTORIC LOBBY
-  INFORMATION
-  WILLIAM H. GROSS STAMP GALLERY
 - 1 WORLD OF STAMPS
 - 2 GEMS OF AMERICAN PHILATELY
 - 3 MAIL MARKS HISTORY
 - 4 CONNECT WITH U.S. STAMPS
 - 5 NATIONAL STAMP SALON
 - 6 STAMPS AROUND THE GLOBE
 - 7 POSTMASTERS GALLERY



1 As visitors step into this introductory gallery, they encounter the world's first postage stamp—the 1840 Penny Black—and learn how it revolutionized communication. Stamp images—including the top-selling 1993 Elvis stamp, and the stamp that helped raise almost \$72 million for breast cancer research—illustrate how stamps have shaped history and honored people and places worldwide.

7 The Postmasters Gallery presents rotating exhibits on topics of special interest.

Here, visitors have access to 275 pullout frames displaying tens of thousands of stamps and pieces of mail from the National Philatelic Collection along with the Postmaster General's and Benjamin K. Miller collections.



GEMS of American Philately

Like gems of the mineral and pieces of mail are rare.



They tell history. Revolution, one of the design, famous.

2 These rare stamps tell stories about important moments in U.S. history, from the Stamp Act and the American Revolution to the Apollo 15 Moon landing. Each one conveys significant information about stamp design and production, including one of the most famous stamp printing errors ever made.

At wall displays supplemented by exhibit frames, visitors investigate markings on mail transported on land and across seas, by air and in space. Among the many historic artifacts are a 1390 Silk Road letter, a letter mailed aboard *Titanic* during its first and only voyage, Amelia Earhart's brown leather flight suit, a mailbox remnant from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, and a mailbox from Sept. 11.



6 At interactive displays flanking a large globe, visitors explore examples of how stamps reflect their countries of origin and connect people, places and cultures worldwide.



4 In this highly interactive area, visitors are immersed in examples of how stamp content, design and production have changed over time and how modern U.S. stamps reflect the nation's identity.



town and throughout rural areas, along with building roads for that purpose, the Post Office Department kept a sprawling nation united.

And, in the process of creating and constantly reinventing its postal system, the United States demonstrated the power of innovation and technology, combined with a skilled and dedicated workforce, to move things on an enormous scale across an entire continent.

That power is on display in the museum's "Systems at Work" exhibit, which recreates the various ways letters, magazines, parcels and other mail have traveled from sender to recipient over the last 200 years.

And in its "Customers and Communities" exhibit, the museum looks at how city delivery shaped expectations for service and kept families in touch as the population grew more mobile.

Free city delivery transformed the Post Office into a customer-based system that made mail an easy and inexpensive tool for everyone. Before free city delivery was initiated in 1863, customers went to the local post office to send or receive mail. In a few large cities, private couriers would bring mail to customers' homes, if they could afford that service.

The introduction of free city delivery required an expanded workforce of

letter carriers. Many of the earliest letter carriers were Civil

War veterans. By the end of the 19th century, 13,696 letter carriers were delivering mail in cities—a workforce that numbers about 200,000 today.

This month, the Postal Museum is recognizing the 100th anniversary of the world's first regularly scheduled airmail service with a temporary exhibit. The "Postmen of the Skies" exhibit recognizes the pilots who delivered through the air, beginning with a flight from Washington, DC, to New York City on May 15, 1918, in a Curtiss JN-4H, a plane nicknamed "Jenny" (see the Inverted Jenny stamp on page 23). By 1920, airplanes were whisking mail across the country from New York to San Francisco.

Army pilots were the first to fly mail, but the Post Office Department took over the airmail system with civilian pilots a few months after the maiden flight. Some Army aviators took jobs with the Post Office to continue their work on the new enterprise. They were pioneers with a dangerous mission—more than 30 pilots died flying the mail. In death, they were heralded as heroes.

When private air carriers emerged, the Post Office began contracting the work to them. By 1927, all airmail was flown by private airlines, ending the postal airmail system, but the valuable airmail contracts kick-started the development of commercial aviation. "Postmen of the Skies" will close on May 27, 2019.

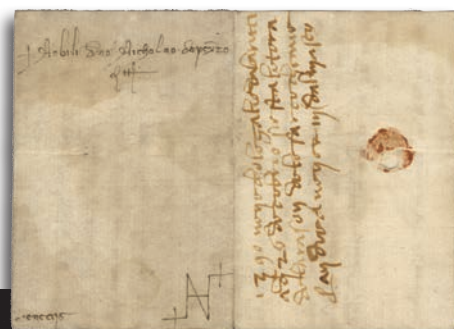
The Postal Museum explains more than how we deliver envelopes—the

Owey was a stray mutt that befriended postal employees at the Albany, NY, post office in 1888. Soon, the scruffy dog was riding on mail trains, where clerks considered him a good-luck charm. Many clerks marked his travels with metal tags on his collar. Owey rapidly became the country's most famous dog, as newspapers reported on his travels nationwide. He even took an around-the-world trip in 1895, traveling with mailbags on trains and steamships to Asia and across Europe before returning to Albany. After the dog died in 1897, his body was preserved, and it is on display at the museum, still adorned with the tags that marked his travels. Visitors to the museum can watch an old-timey filmstrip about Owey.



The tiny South American colony of British Guiana issued a few temporary stamps, including 1-cent and 4-cent values, in 1856 while the postmaster waited on a shipment of stamps from England. Multiple

copies of the 4-cent stamp have survived, but the purple-hued 1-cent stamp on display at the museum is the only one of its kind, and the most valuable stamp in the world. The "One-Cent Magenta" set records for stamp auction prices the last four times it was sold, most recently for nearly \$10 million.



The oldest paper letter in the museum's collection, the 1390 "Silk Road Letter" discusses prices of luxury fabrics and spices such as cinnamon and pepper. Mailed by a Venetian merchant in Damascus on Nov. 24, 1390, it traveled to Beirut, then by sea to Venice, a journey that took a month.



Edison E. Mouton and Rexford Levissee were employed by the U.S. Post Office Department as airmail pilots. On Sept. 11, 1920, Mouton flew the last leg of the nation's first cross-country airmail flight, landing at Marina Field, CA, after flying the 250 miles from Reno to San Francisco in one hour and 58 minutes, a new flight record for that distance.

contents of the envelopes help the museum tell personal stories. For instance, in the temporary exhibit "In Her Words: Women's Duty and Service in World War I," letters written by women affected by World War I bring to light their perspectives on the change that the "Great War" brought to their lives. The exhibit is open through Aug. 5.

And, of course, the museum has many historic and valuable stamps, as encouraging the appreciation of their design and collection is a central part of its mission. The museum hosts the William H. Gross Stamp Gallery, the world's largest gallery dedicated to philately. It contains more than 20,000 stamps and other objects of interest both to casual visitors and experienced collectors.

The museum's stamp gallery is far from a mere collection of postage. The miniscule pieces tell stories from American history and beyond. Along with historic stamps and other items related to their place in history, the Postal Service keeps much of the original art used in the production in the "Postmaster General's Collection," which is on long-term loan to the museum. Among the works are original paintings of Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe that were considered but not used for stamps memorializing these American icons.

The magic of the Postal Museum lies in the way the Post Office relates to nearly every aspect

of American life at every time in our history, according to museum director Elliot Gruber.

"We have an opportunity to make a much more significant impact, not only related to postal history and philately, "but on bringing any American story to life," he said.

Because the museum is competing with other activities and demands in the busy lives of its visitors, especially related to families, it focuses on bringing the displays to life in engaging, three-dimensional ways. "Twenty or 30 years ago, you would build an exhibit behind glass cases," Gruber said. To attract and interest today's visitors, "you need to create those experiences that will be interesting to people while they're also learning."

Even philately gets a modern, colorful display in the stamp gallery, as many items, including tiny stamps, are surrounded by multimedia displays and other artifacts that help to explain their significance. Visitors can take digital photos and use a computer tool to design and print their own stamp.

The museum continues to mine its rich collection for new stories to bring to the public. Next year, it is planning an exhibit on baseball.

"It starts with our postal history and our stamps," Gruber said. "From that, how do we bring experiences that inform our visitors even more?" The museum will bring the full story of baseball as seen through postal



The U.S. Postal Inspection Service not only protects the integrity of the mail—it protects lives. In 1996, postal inspectors finally caught up with the "Unabomber," Ted Kaczynski, who had been sending bombs by mail since 1978. His bombs killed three people and injured 23. In his isolated cabin in Montana, Kaczynski was arrested by postal inspectors with these handcuffs.



'Secret' items from the vault

eyes to the exhibit by borrowing items from other Smithsonian museums, the Postal Inspection Service, the Baseball Hall of Fame in Coopers-town, NY, and private collectors to craft an immersive experience.

The story of the mail isn't over yet. The Postal Service and the men and women who fulfill its mission are helping to shape our economic future through e-commerce. New technology and a changing economy are transforming the way postal employees do our jobs, and this is sure to continue. The Postal Museum will have more to show us in the next 25 years.

"I'm very excited about where we're going," Gruber said, "because it's incredible the stories we can tell."

The museum may also bring a booth to NALC's national convention in Detroit in July. If you are there and meet someone from the museum, be sure to share any interesting ideas—museum staff always want to hear from letter carriers.

The National Postal Museum is open seven days a week from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., except Dec. 25. It is located at 2 Massachusetts Ave. NE, in Washington, DC, next to Union Station. Admission is free.

If you can't come to the Postal Museum in person, you can take a virtual tour. Go to postalmuseum.si.edu/visit/virtual-tour.html to follow the map through the exhibits and view 360-degree panoramas of the galleries. **PR**

The Postal Museum has many other items of interest in its vault that are not on permanent display because there simply isn't enough space. *The Postal Record* asked the curators to give us a peek at a few of the pieces in the vault that relate to letter carriers.



This uniform jacket was worn by letter carrier Adolph Morgen of the St. Paul, MN, Letter Carrier Band around 1904.



A member of the New York City Letter Carrier Band played this French horn. It was found in the James A. Farley Post Office in New York.

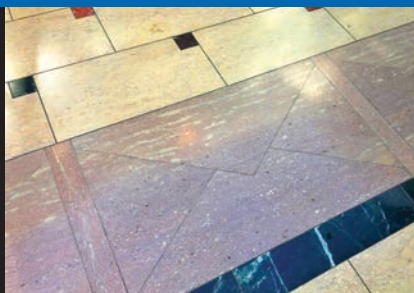


This antique U.S. mail cart was manufactured by the Fairbanks Company and used by the Kansas City, MO, post office.



The well-worn seat of this postal bicycle shows that letter carriers or mail messengers used it frequently for deliveries. The wire mesh basket is a hand-constructed addition.

In 1941, a Japanese bomb sunk the *U.S.S. Oklahoma* in the attack on Pearl Harbor. Years later, divers recovered a stark reminder of this tragic date in history—a stamp cancellation device used on the ship, still set to the day before the attack, Dec. 6, 1941. The hand-stamp was used to cancel stamps on incoming mail to sailors on the battleship. Many of those sailors did not live to read letters from home again.



If you visit the Postal Museum, be sure to look in all directions at the exhibits, and then look down. In the lower lobby, even the floor is a nod to the mail—the tiles resemble envelopes.