T
here is always a piece of a little child inside of me (and many others, I suspect), that wakes up every morning, and wonders, “Is it Christmas yet?” For us as stamp collectors the delivery of the daily mail can also seem like Christmas. But how many collectors know some of the fascinating pieces of history, and a type of postal history, associated with Christmas stamps, particularly those from the United States?

To start, though, let’s take a trip not too far away to Canada, the origin of what many consider the world’s first Christmas stamp, although, as you will see, a salute to the holiday more by accident than design.

At a conference on postage rates held in July 1898 in London, England, Canadian Postmaster General Sir William Mulock proposed an Imperial one-penny letter rate, and a resolution was approved to allow Empire countries to opt into this rate scheme. The proposal was adopted by Great Britain, Canada, and a couple dozen others, including Newfoundland, Cape Colony, and Natal. A handful, such as Australia and New Zealand, initially rejected the system.

Canada moved for the rate to be effective on Christmas Day, December 25, 1898, and the Canada post office planned a 2-cent commemorative stamp for that date, effectively lowering the rate to participating United Kingdom countries by 3 cents.

The stamp includes the phrase, “XMAS 1898” [Figure 1]. Whole articles can be written on this stamp, so we’ll hold back any further discussion here.

Over the next 60 years, various countries occasionally issued stamps that showed a Christmas symbol or scene, but were not exclusively or specifically issued for Christmas. In 1904, Denmark sold the first Christmas seals, which were not valid for postage. The Netherlands issued a set of four semipostals depicting flowers of the four seasons, including one showing a child and a Christmas rose. Some say two stamps issued in 1937 by Austria are Christmas stamps, but the stamps include no direct reference to the holiday. Three stamps from Hungary in 1943 (Scott 617–619) featuring the Nativity are the first to actually depict a Christmas theme.

In December 1951, Cuba printed two postal tax stamps that depicted a poinsettia and the word “Navidades” Spanish for “Christmas season.” In 1957 the first regularly issued annual Christmas stamps were issued by Liechtenstein, Korea, and Australia. Other countries followed suit.

1962 — Politics and Religion

In November 1962, the United States issued its first Christmas stamp, with the intention that the stamp would be an annual issue.

Anticipating a huge demand, the U.S. Post Office Department had 350 million printed, the largest number produced for a special stamp until that time. The red-and-green 4-cent stamp features a wreath, two candles, and the words “Christmas 1962” [Figure 2]. The initial supply sold out quickly and by the end of 1962, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing printed a total of 862 million stamps.

The decision to print a Christmas stamp generated some controversy from groups concerned about maintaining the
separation of church and state. There was debate also about a federal office printing religious stamps — particularly since they only created stamps for Christmas and not for any other religion’s holidays.

Some people may have held the opinion that Catholics were required to do anything the pope or Catholic hierarchy told them to do and saw a Christmas stamp as one concrete example of religious interference from the administration of President John F. Kennedy, a Catholic. This was notwithstanding the fact that 92 percent of Americans in 1960 identified themselves as participating in a religion that celebrated Christmas. Others may have been trying to apply the June 1962 Supreme Court decision of Engel v. Vitale, in which the Court made coercive public recitation of a prayer in public schools unlawful. Nonetheless, legal actions taken to bar the stamps were not successful.

On a side note, 1962 was also the only year that President Kennedy lit the National Christmas Tree. He did not light the tree in December 1961, because his father, Joseph P. Kennedy Sr., had suffered a major stroke, so Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson lit the tree.

1963 — Mr. ZIP and Tagging

The last commemorative/special stamp issued under Kennedy was the Christmas stamp depicting the National Christmas Tree (November 1 for regular and November 2 for the luminescent tagged version). This was the first purposely issued stamp with both the non-tagged version and the tagged version.

The first day of issue for the regular stamp took place in Santa Claus, Indiana [Figure 3].

The following details on the issuance of the tagged 1963 Christmas stamps (Scott 1240a) came from the March–April 1981 edition of First Days, the journal of the American First Day Cover Society, and the 1986 edition of Alfred Boerger’s First Day of Issue catalog.

The Bureau of Engraving and Printing had but five working days to create 5 million of the tagged stamps, with 4 million ordered for Dayton, Ohio, and the rest designated for Washington, D.C. Dayton was chosen as the primary first day because that was where experimental equipment — new facer readers — was installed.

There was trouble in Dayton. The first day had been well publicized, but the stamps were not there yet. Also, it was a Saturday, so post office hours were only until noon. The postmaster apologized and explained to disappointed collectors and cover dealers that the stamps would not be issued until Monday, November 4. He offered to accept orders, payments and instructions for unserviced covers, and promised to have them franked, postmarked, and mailed back under separate registered mail, apparently at the U.S. Post Office Department’s expense.

Some of those gathered agreed to this; others returned Monday, when all covers were cordially serviced at the main Dayton post office, as well as smaller post offices in Dayton [Figure 4]. Because this was a limited release and handled locally, the familiar “First Day of Issue” postmark was not used. The standard November 4 postmark, however, was made available for the next 30 days.

Meanwhile, in the nation’s capital, the stamps had indeed arrived on time at the Sales Agency in the main Washington, D.C., post office. There, on November 2, the public could buy the stamps and have them serviced. But because all attention had been focused on Dayton, there was no ceremony and few customers. Boerger had a servant on hand. At one point, au-
How Did Tagging Come About?

One major postal mechanization was the development of an automatic facer-canceler machine. This would face the letters before canceling, meaning that letters could be put into the machine in any direction and all the mail coming out of the machine would be facing the same direction. This eliminated the need to have letters stacked and ordered by hand before being canceled. Letters could enter the machine and be canceled at rates of up to 500 a minute. This machine increased efficiency by allowing cancellation of approximately 75 letters per minute, compared to 25 letters per minute with manual facing.

The initial facer-cancelers used light sensors to detect where the stamp was in order to orient the stamp to be canceled correctly. Optical sensors located the position of stamps by detecting any kind of color contrast that would be present between the color of the envelope and the color of stamps. This process had a drawback in that approximately 16 percent of the time, the sensor could not find a sufficient color contrast and would reject the envelope.

The next development in the facer-canceler machine was to change the sensing device from being able to distinguish color contrasts to being able to detect stamps that were coated, or tagged, with luminescent substances.

The first stamp issued where all were tagged with a phosphorescent code was the 5-cent City Mail Delivery stamp of October 1963. Experiments had initially been conducted in Dayton with the 8-cent Jet Over Capitol tagged airmail stamp. The tagged stamp, when lit by the ultraviolet light from the facer-canceler machine, would glow green, which the machine sensed.

This version of the machine did not process the letter mail much faster than its predecessor, but the rejection rate was between 1 percent and 2 percent, resulting in a 30 percent increase in letters canceled.

Between 1963 and 1965, approximately 15 definitive stamps were issued in tagged varieties, and the 1964 and 1965 Christmas stamps also had tagged versions. The reason for the dual issues was economics.

Only a small percentage of any issued stamp would be processed through Dayton in the two-year test period. Second, as reported by the postmaster general, tagging cost approximately 8 cents per 1,000 stamps. With an average printing of 1.28 billion stamps, the cost of putting the luminescent tagging on all of the Christmas stamps would have been $100,000 per issue. With the average salary in 1966 of $7,000, that would have been a colossal waste of money. For the 1963 stamp, it is recorded that approximately 11 million, or 1 percent of the total, were tagged.

The tree-lighting ceremony that year was scheduled for December 18. After President Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, Lyndon Johnson declared an official 30-day period of national mourning, which delayed lighting of the National Christmas Tree until December 22. The official 30-day period of national mourning also delayed issuance of two scheduled commemorative stamps: the John James Audubon stamp was delayed from November 29 to December 7, 1963, and the Sam Houston stamp was delayed from December 13, 1963, to January 10, 1964.

The stamp debut of the Mr. ZIP cartoon printed on the selvage occurred with the issuance of the Sam Houston stamp in January 1964. The only earlier direct-stamp related usage of the image was on a $1 stamp booklet issued in October 1963 with Mr. ZIP on the cover. The U.S. Post Office Department introduced ZIP (Zone Improvement Plan) code to America on July 1, 1963, as a way to speed mail delivery. By 1979, ZIP code was used on 97 percent of the mail. Mr. ZIP’s image last appeared in the margins of the two 1985 Christmas stamps.

With the implementation of the ZIP code system, the Post Office Department began looking for other ways to become more efficient in the processing of the mail, and decided to invest in mechanization. Processing within the post offices
received the most mechanization effort. It consists of culling (separating of letters from other mail), facing (turning addresses right side up), canceling (the stamp), sorting (dividing mail into destination piles), sacking, and dispatching. This was a lot of manual labor. During the late 1950s through the early 1960s, research was intensified in automation and mechanization of highly repetitive and routine mail-handling tasks.

Phase 2 of the tagging program began in March 1966 and had its hub in the Cincinnati postal region, which included the surrounding areas of Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana. The Post Office Department reasoned that since approximately 12 percent of mail volume passed through this area, 12 percent of new stamps should have the phosphor tagging. Starting in August 1966, the remaining nine commemorative stamp issues for the year (including the Christmas stamp) were issued in both tagged and untagged versions. Total tagged stamps delivered by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing in this period was approximately 153 million, with an average per-issue production of 17 million stamps, at an additional cost of $1,360 per issue. As of the first issue of 1967, the National Grange stamp, all stamps were issued tagged at an average increased cost of $10,000 per issue.

1964 — First Se-tenant

The 1964 U.S. Christmas stamp continued the series with a design of symbols associated with the secular festival. Consistent with the wreath in 1962 and the Christmas tree in 1963, the design was four plants associated with the holiday season: holly, poinsettia, mistletoe, and an evergreen bough.

This stamp made history in a different way. It is the first U.S. se-tenant commemorative stamp [Figure 6].

Yes, souvenir sheets were issued in 1936, 1947, and 1956 with multiple stamps pictured in honor of the decennial stamp exhibition, but these sheets all contained reprints of stamps that had been previously issued, and were imperforate between the stamps. They more fit the definition of a miniature sheet, which is a small sheet containing a stamp or stamps valid for postal use at time of issue sold at post offices as an individual entity. Se-tenant stamps are slightly different, being generally defined as attached stamps or stamps printed together on the same sheet that are different from one another in design, color, denomination, or overprint. Se-tenants could appear in a miniature sheet, and a miniature sheet may contain se-tenant stamps. Being more specific about the description, the 1964 Christmas issue was the first U.S. “free-standing” se-tenant issue.

1965 — Religion Appears

The 1965 Christmas stamp finally addressed the elephant in the room. How could you issue a stamp to commemorate Christmas without addressing the central theme of religion? This year’s design featured a folk art image based on a watercolor painting of an 1840 church weather vane in the shape of the angel Gabriel blowing a trumpet [Figure 7]. The stamp was designed to appease detractors because Gabriel is mentioned in the holy texts of several religions.

There was controversy over the issuance of a stamp commemorating a religious holiday among stamp collectors and the general public alike. Some took the position opposing the lack of explicitly religious content in the Christmas stamp and viewing it as too commercial.

This year was the debut year on television for A Charlie Brown Christmas, in which Lucy tells Charlie Brown, “Look, Charlie, let’s face it. We all know that Christmas is a big commercial racket. It’s
run by a big eastern syndicate, you know.”


The concern over state and religion carried forward to the next year, when the Post Office Department sought an opinion from legal counsel as to whether a stamp based on a painting of the Madonna and Child would violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution. The obvious answer, because the stamps were issued, was no, and likely contained advice to refer to the stamp design as being based on a work of art, not a religious item.

**1969 — Return to Secular, Precancels**

After three years of secular-themed Christmas stamps and four years of religious-themed ones, the Post Office Department went back to a secular theme. The 1969 stamp, “Winter Sunday in Norway, Maine” [Figure 8], was chosen for an experiment in improving the speed of mail handling. What if mail could be processed without canceling the stamp, while at the same time protecting the revenue? This idea had been in regular use since the early 1900s for bulk mailings of advertising circulars and catalogs. Mailers save the postal system time and effort by prearranging to use precancel stamps showing the city and state of origin. The stamped mail is delivered to the post office either ready for sorting or already sorted by destination. The use of precancel stamps had been authorized on first-class matter under special conditions since 1924.

In the 1969 test, 30 million stamps were overprinted with the names of one of four cities (New Haven, Connecticut; Baltimore, Maryland; Memphis, Tennessee; and Atlanta, Georgia) between bars in green or black [Figures 9]. There was no limitation on sales to the public in those cities or use of the stamps for any class of mail, either in 1969 or later. The test was to avoid having envelopes with these stamps go through the canceling process, and so move more quickly.

Specific instructions were provided to post offices that they did not have to cancel or deface these experimental precanceled stamps before delivery of envelopes to the recipients. From information in the *Postal Bulletin*, approximately 90 percent of the stamps sold at these four cities were the precanceled version. The test program must have at least met expectations as a larger test was implemented in the 1970 Christmas season.

**1970 — More Precancels, Two Printings**

After an equal number of secular-themed and religious-themed Christmas stamps, the Post Office Department made a decision. Starting in 1970, both religious and secular stamps would be issued annually for use on Christmas season mail.

This practice occurred each year through 2014, except for three. The first instance was in 2000, when no Christmas stamps were issued at all, citing existing supplies on hand. The second was in 2005, when only secular-themed stamps were issued. The third is this year, 2015, again with no new religion-themed stamps being issued. The U.S. Postal Service stated there are plenty of religious-themed stamps in stock from previous years to meet demands.

Based on the preliminary positive acceptance of the precanceled stamps in 1969, the Post Office Department issued both plain and precanceled versions of both the secular (four antique toys) [Figure 10] and religious (Nativity) stamps [Figure 11]. The number of test cities was expanded, although it is hard to say the exact number. While the Scott *Specialized Catalogue of United States Stamps and Covers* reports 68 cit-
ies, the Postal Bulletin states that precanceled stamps were sent to all post offices in Region 1 (New England) and 68 major cities in other regions.

The 1970 religious stamp also is noted for having two separate printings that are distinguishable to the eye, and both printings were issued plain and precanceled. The original order for this stamp was 1.7 billion impressions, and was printed (Type 1) on a pregummed gravure paper with a smooth finish and no gum breakers. The resulting stamps had a blurry impression and a mottled “snowflake” sky at the top of the scene. An additional order of 200 million stamps was needed to meet demand, but supplies of the original paper ran out.

The reprint (Type II) used an ungummed paper with a “creamy” shiny surface, and it was released near the end of November. The change in paper resulted in a better impression showing sharper, more defined images.

An Associated Press article in March 1971 reports that the Post Office Department considered the trial to be a success. An unnamed spokesman said that the stamps saved $750,000 in reduced staffing (due to no canceling), and may have generated more stamp sales to collectors who had to purchase two of each of the five stamps in both the plain and precanceled version. As an additional twist, the Post Office Department declared that the 1970 precanceled stamps would not be valid for postage after January 31, 1971. While there was

Figures 10. Covers showing a regular 1970 Mechanical Toy Tricycle stamp (Scott 1417) at top and the same stamp as a precancel, bottom, mailed from Washington, D.C.

Figure 11. A first-day cover for the 1970 Nativity stamp (Scott 1414). The cover carries both a Type I (left) and Type II version of the stamp. This cover was created for the first day of issue for the Type II version of the stamp.
It was the Christmas gift that some U.S. collectors wished had fallen off Santa’s sleigh. It’s all about the small numbers that appear in the selvage, the surrounding waste paper, of a sheet or pane of stamps. Most people remove and toss away the selvage when using stamps to mail something. But a bit of selvage — that part containing the number of the printing plate — has always been collecting gold.

For many years, the plate block numbers were stuck in a corner of the selvage. Specialist collectors of U.S. stamps would save the selvage with the plate number and four stamps near the number, thus creating a “plate block.”

In the late 1960s, though, and for about the next 15 years, the number of stamps needed to collect a proper plate block increased from four to as many as 20. And the number of blocks needed to collect a complete set for a single stamp went from a handful to the thousands.

Possibly with revenue protection in mind, the USPS (having converted from the U.S. Post Office Department in 1971) again chose a Christmas stamp with which to make a test. In addition to the now standard religious- and secular-themed stamps, an additional stamp was issued showing a weather vane in the shape of a dove, but it was different from all other stamps in two ways.

This stamp was the first U.S. pressure sensitive (a.k.a. “self-adhesive”) one, a forerunner for the stamps of today. The adhesive used, however, was not a successful first effort. Over time, it discolors the stamp, as there is no barrier between the gum and the stamp design. Also, the stamp [Figure 12] was issued with die cuts in a sideways T-shape in the image of the dove. This was done so that the
grammed with arrows and thick lines. Details on the stamp and all of its challenges have been well documented from the beginning.

In July 1968, the Post Office Department issued a news release stating: “Panes of 50 will contain either seven or eight plate numbers, to the mathematical potential of 27,000 different combinations from original plates. Each replacement plate will add another 900 combinations.”

Philatelic journalist Belmont Faries checked out the press and forewarned of its challenges several months before the stamp was released. “Obviously, completeness will be an impossible goal for plate number collectors,” he wrote.

Why so many combinations? When the press was fully plated, there were 90 shallow plates, each with its own number. Plates were 20 subjects wide and two deep; 30 plates were needed to complete a cylinder. The standard pane of 50 stamps was created with 2½ plates, an oddity that resulted in seven plate numbers printed alongside some five-stamp sequences; eight on others.

On a typical pane of 100 Gabriel stamps there are seven or eight numbers in different colors spread out along the selvage adjacent to five stamps on one side of the pane. Each number represents a specific plate that was used.

Luckily for collectors, the number of yellow plates was low and in sequence. But there were more than 300 plates altogether, and they often moved into different positions thus creating thousands of seven- and eight-number sequences in the selvage. In the end, there were about 6,300 known combinations of plate numbers and there could be as many as 7,000 if they could all be found, according to an article published in 1973 in Linn’s Stamp News. Even collecting a block (or strip) of 10 showing each plate number would require as many as 150 strips, Linn’s stated.

On top of that, the “completist” collector might want matching panes from both the right and left side of the plate, so you can double those combinations if you wanted to try for a complete collection.

The 1968 cost of 14,000 blocks of 10 Angel Gabriel stamps: $8,400. The Angel Gabriel was the first stamp to get the full treatment of this plate-numbering system. It wasn’t long before plate-block collectors threw up their arms and stopped investing in these gigantic blocks.

In the early 1980s a new system of plate numbering was introduced that once again lowered the number of stamps in a proper block.

Oh, and did we mention the multitude of Angel Gabriel stamp blips and bumps involving misplaced tagging, perforations, and color application that created many other errors and oddities?

Let’s just say Santa’s workshop had a bad year.
the die-cutting process caused a production delay, resulting in the issuance of the stamp three weeks afterward.

A proper usage of the Weather Vanes stamp is shown [Figure 14].

Overall, this third test seems to have produced the same type of results from the prior two tests. It appears that the use of precanceled stamps on first-class mail did not provide enough savings to the Postal Service to offset the cost and make it worth pursuing.

1975 — Nondenominated

Postage stamps usually take several months from design to printing, and in 1974, the issue date for the Christmas stamps was advanced up to late October, and planned for that same time period in 1975. Early in 1974, the first-class letter rate had increased from 8 cents to 10 cents, and by mid-1975 there was talk of another postage rate increase. As the end of 1975 approached, there was uncertainty as to whether a rate change would occur in 1975 or later.

The Postal Service wanted to avoid reprinting millions of stamps should the rate increase go into effect prior to the holiday. These two Christmas stamps became the first U.S.-issued nondenominated stamps [Figure 15], and sold at a face value of 10 cents. Unlike earlier U.S. holiday issues, because of the Universal Postal Union agreement at that time that stamps used internationally must bear denominations, these stamps could be used only on mail to U.S. addresses. The expected rate increase did occur December 31, 1975, and 13-cent stamps were issued in November 1974. It was not until the next rate change, in May 1978, that the “alphabet” non-denominated stamps were first placed into use.

Because of the current commonality of Christmas stamps, both from the U.S. and around the world, and the self-proclaimed single purpose of them, it is easy to make an assumption that such stamps are “fluff.” Sure, they have pretty pictures, really “just topicals” and might not be considered “serious philately” to some. But when we look at today’s U.S. stamps, we see se-tenant, self-adhesive, non-denominated issues that are not easily soaked off paper and reused, with embedded indicators that allow high-speed processing of the mail. All of these changes were first tried with Christmas stamps, giving them their own, if unrecognized, place in postal history, and the history of stamps.

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