

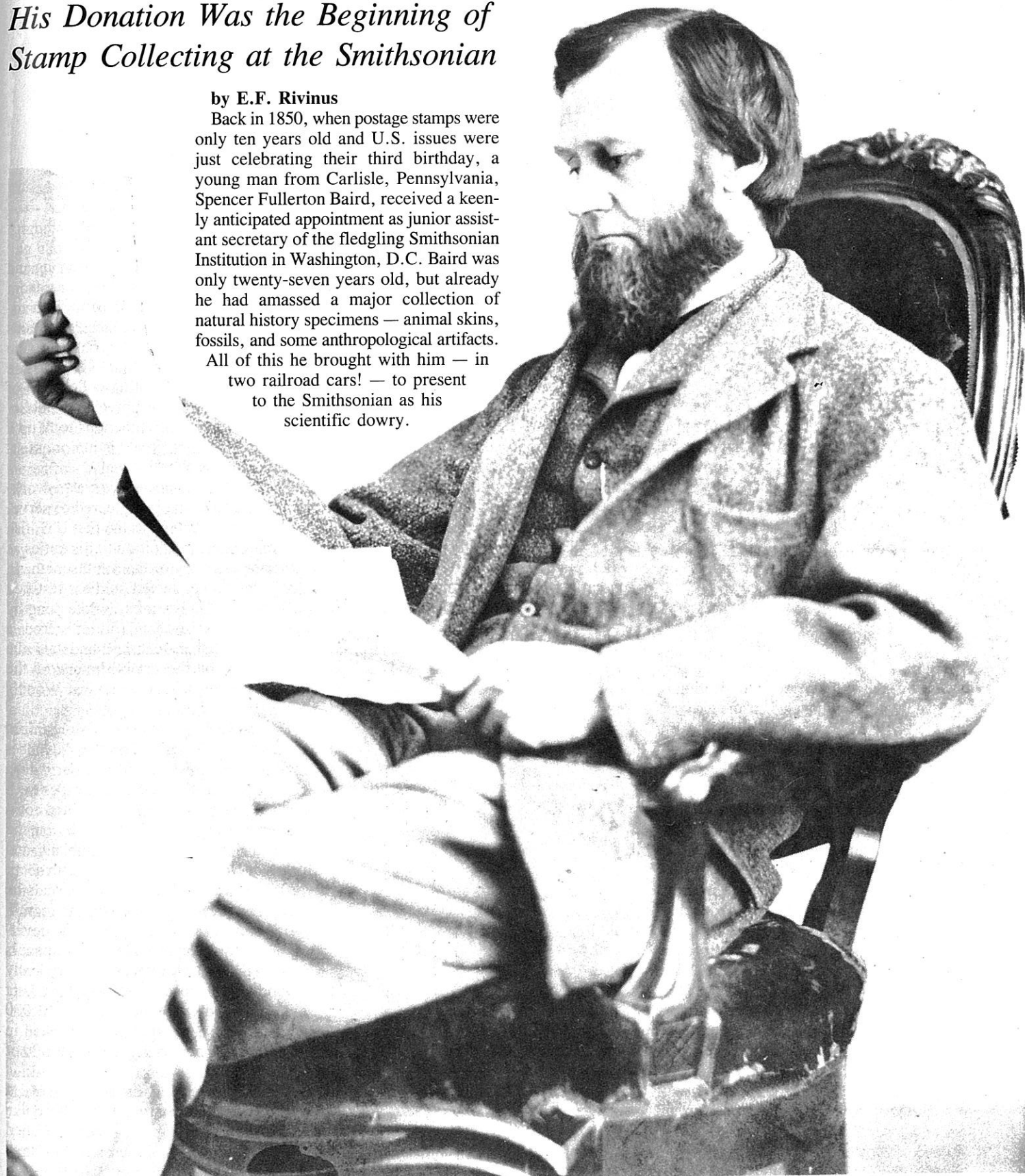
Spencer Fullerton Baird: The Collector of Collectors

*His Donation Was the Beginning of
Stamp Collecting at the Smithsonian*

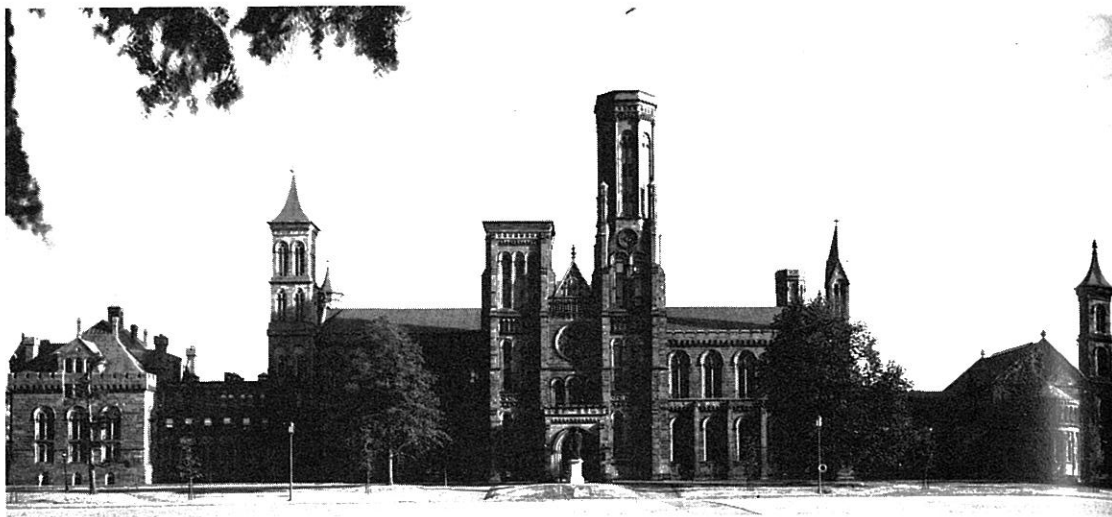
by E.F. Rivinus

Back in 1850, when postage stamps were only ten years old and U.S. issues were just celebrating their third birthday, a young man from Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Spencer Fullerton Baird, received a keenly anticipated appointment as junior assistant secretary of the fledgling Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Baird was only twenty-seven years old, but already he had amassed a major collection of natural history specimens — animal skins, fossils, and some anthropological artifacts.

All of this he brought with him — in two railroad cars! — to present to the Smithsonian as his scientific dowry.



The original Smithsonian Institution building is now known as "The Castle."



Spencer Baird was a naturalist by avocation and later by vocation — at the time of his appointment he was professor of natural science at his alma mater, Dickinson College in Carlisle. His intimate knowledge and published accounts of the vertebrates of Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, and of other American areas as well, had already earned him the respect and friendship of such leading natural scientists of the day as John James Audubon, Louis Agassiz, Asa Gray, Richard Bache, and James Dwight Dana. Most importantly, he and his accomplishments had attracted the attention of Professor Joseph Henry, secretary of the Smithsonian.

Above all else, Baird was a collector. His two carloads of natural history specimens laid the foundation for the collections of the United States National Museum, while his personal collection of postage stamps ultimately became the basis of the National Philatelic Collection. But in addition, Baird was a collector of collectors.

This was the era of the great explorations and surveying expeditions that fanned out over the western parts of North America — all, for many years, under the control and administration of the army. In 1846 Baird had married Mary Churchill, daughter of a colonel who providentially became inspector general of the army. This relationship provided Assistant Secretary Baird with the contacts and the influence he needed to have naturalists, usually selected by him, attached to every expedition.

Many of these men were army surgeons, but all were interested in natural sciences and were assigned the second mission of collecting natural history specimens of all sorts, conserving them in alcohol — usually cheap whiskey — and sending them to Professor Baird at the Smithsonian. Baird

trained many, if not most, of his collectors in his scientific style of observation and reporting, and in several cases officers were detailed to the Smithsonian during their Washington assignments to work with the assistant secretary in arranging and labeling their collections.

Baird had a number of demanding jobs under Secretary Henry, who, for a number of reasons, opposed the establishment of a museum and charged his assistant secretary primarily with production of the Smithsonian's publications. Baird also was assigned responsibility for an international exchange program (still operating today), which involved packaging American scholarly publications for shipment to a wide array of overseas recipients (mostly

European in those days), and receiving and distributing comparable shipments from overseas to a broad circle of American addressees. Henry considered these functions substantially more appropriate to the Smithsonian's mandate to diffuse knowledge than exhibiting collections of "curiosities" to an unappreciative public. In consequence, such functions took up a significant percentage of his junior assistant secretary's time.

Spencer Baird, however, was a workaholic. In 1871, he volunteered to serve, without remuneration, as the first U.S. fish commissioner, in addition to his duties as assistant secretary of the Smithsonian. In that role, he conducted studies, testified before state legislatures, wrote lengthy reports, organized and administered a number of fish hatcheries, and laid the foundation for the establishment of the Marine Biological Laboratory at Wood's Hole, Massachusetts.

He was secretary of the newly organized American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and served on committees of the National Academy of Science (NAS). He wrote and edited comprehensive and significant books on the birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and fishes of North America, while from about 100 European magazines and journals he drew materials for regular weekly, monthly, and annual reports on scientific developments for prominent U.S. newspapers and magazines. He attended a chronically invalid wife, helped raise a daughter, kept a journal, and wrote an average of 3,000 letters a year — a number that peaked in 1874 when he personally dictated 5,500 of them!

When Joseph Henry died in 1878, Baird was appointed secretary of the Smithsonian and director of the newly established United States National Museum. The devil found no work for Spencer Baird's hands.



Spencer Fullerton Baird, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1878–87. (Courtesy of the Photographic Division, Smithsonian Institution.)

Of particular interest to readers of *The American Philatelist* is Baird's concern with philatelic matters. He collected stamps, exerted a noteworthy influence on postal policy, and, upon his death, bequeathed to the Smithsonian his personal collection of 1,733 stamps, thus providing a major impetus for establishment of the National Philatelic Collection, so ably described by Executive Director Herbert R. Collins and his associates in the May 1986 issue of the *AP*.

Baird collected stamps in part out of personal interest and in part with ulterior motives, as he noted in a letter he wrote to his good friend, George Perkins Marsh, in December 1874: "Lucy [his daughter] . . . has rather gotten over her craze for stamps, and indeed now denies ever having had any for this branch of collections, being more interested in ancient Rome than in modern stamps. Such things, however, answer a good purpose in propitiating friends who have favors to confer."¹

A couple of Marsh's responses to Baird's requests are entertaining, both in themselves and as indications of the newness of the idea of stamp collecting. On March 27, 1867, he wrote, "I send stamps and will save them more carefully hereafter. What on airth [*sic*] do you want 'em for?" And in June of the same year, he wrote, "I . . . will comply with thy friend's request, though I doubt his sanity, and think it would be truer charity to send him hellebore rather than stamps."²

In fact, it is only through my careful perusal of Baird's extensive correspondence that the extent of his interest in stamps has come to light. He made no reference to stamp collecting in his journals and diaries, and none of his biographers or eulogists noted this element among his extraordinary diversity of interests.

The first mention of stamps that I encountered was in a letter he wrote to Mrs. Mary A. Parker in New York, dated November 8, 1867. In it, he requested a list of her duplicate American stamps, "exclusive of U.S. issues," noting, "I am richer in this class than in old world ones."³ He closed with an offer to Mrs. Parker of his own duplicates. Two years later, on December 11, 1869, he wrote again to Mrs. Parker, "Many thanks for the offer of the Natal stamps. I have, thanks to you, all that have been issued."⁴

More revealing evidence appears in the extensive correspondence he carried on with his close friend and fellow ornithologist, Thomas M. Brewer.⁵ Remarkably, I've encountered no mention of stamps in Baird's legible letters to Brewer, but in a letter to Baird, dated March 31, 1867, Brewer wrote:



Scott No. 2198. The magnifying glass in the upper left corner belonged to S.F. Baird, and is part of the Baird memorabilia in the Smithsonian's Museum of American History. (Courtesy of the Photographic Division, Smithsonian Institution.)

Lucy [Brewer's daughter] is delighted with her new p.o. stamps. . . . She had one duplicate not in yours of papal stamps [illegible word] which she wishes me to enclose for you, and she also wishes me to send you for examination and return a stamp which none of us can decipher or find described. Frank Storer says it is Belgian, but we can not find it so put down.

I bought of Mr. Kline a copy of John Edward Gray's illustrated catalog of postage stamps, which is the latest and best put out. I shall go to work at once in re-arranging my collection and in finding out what I have and what I have not. In the course of a week I will write you a list of my desiderata.⁶

No reply from Baird is available, but, on April 14, Brewer wrote:

Lucy wishes me to say to you that she has just had two Greek stamps given her, 10 lepton or lepta, I believe, and she hopes that you have some yourself, but that you may have something equally rare to exchange with her.⁷

On another occasion, he noted that Lucy "has 257 including revenue stamps," but

that her cousin was ahead of her with 292. Then on April 21, Brewer wrote:

I do not remember what I wrote for Lucy, but it was intended to be this. 1st — she has a duplicate of Victoria four-pence, red, and one each of 10, 30, and 60 of Brazil issue of 1854, which, if you do not possess already, are at your service. She would be glad of anything you might offer from your abundance if you have any to spare her — e.g., Peru, [illegible], Venezuela, Turkey, Sweden, Costa Rica, or any state of which she now has none — always provided you want either or all of these.⁸

Obviously, with an average annual correspondence of 3,000 letters, most of which either were in response to letters to him or generated replies, Baird had a fertile source of postage stamps. Furthermore, he had correspondents in virtually every country of Europe and many in Latin America.

An obvious source of foreign stamps for Baird was his friend Marsh, who, in the

1860s, was first the U.S. minister to the Ottoman Empire in Constantinople and subsequently was U.S. minister to Rome, prior to the unification of the Italian States. Both Baird and his wife, Mary, kept up an active correspondence with the Marsh family for many years. In November 1867 Baird wrote to Marsh, "Thanks for the stamps. I have all the common ones now."⁹ What most of us would give to have even "all the common ones" of the Italian States!

In other letters, Baird enclosed stamps to a nephew and to the sons of an associate, John S. Newberry, professor of geology and paleontology at Columbia University's School of Mines. And finally, in a letter dated November 12, 1874, to Capt. C.E. Dutton at the U.S. Arsenal, he commented on the difficulty of obtaining Canadian stamps "from the provinces; the parties generally sending the common Confederation series instead of the earlier ones." He added that he had written to a friend in the Ottawa post office department to try to get "the original issues of the provinces."¹⁰

While Baird evidently gave stamps away to "friends who have favors to confer," or to their sons, he kept a collection of his own, which his widow, Mary Churchill Baird, presented in 1888 to the Smithsonian in his memory, and which, as Herbert Collins noted, was "the first philatelic collection of any size [to come] into the Smithsonian."¹¹

However, Baird's interest in influencing post office policy, and particularly postal rates, stemmed from a concern apart from his philatelic activity. For a number of years, he supplemented his \$2,000 annual income from the Smithsonian by contracting with *Harper's* and with, first, the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, and, subsequently, the *New York Tribune*, to contribute regularly to these publications as "Science Editor." In this role, he prepared weekly, monthly, and annual summaries of scientific progress and developments, in part from European and American scientific journals and magazines to which he subscribed, and in part from a stable of scientific contributors from all of the important disciplines — all, however, selected and edited by himself.

Under the postal regulations of the day, book manuscripts could be mailed from publisher to author and back at a low book rate, but manuscripts for magazines and journals were treated as regular letter mail, and consequently were charged a higher rate — a distinction that Baird, an author and editor for periodical publications, found discriminatory. He evidently had raised this issue in social contacts with the Honorable James A. Garfield, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee

The Smithsonian Institution.



The Smithsonian Institution, in behalf of the United States National Museum, returns a grateful acknowledgment to

Mrs Mary H. C. Baird,
1445 Mass Ave.

City
for the gift of the objects mentioned in the accompanying list.

Ly Brownford

Assistant Secretary,
In charge of U. S. National Museum.

Washington City, U. S. A.

February 13, 1888.

Receipt acknowledging Mrs. Mary H.C. Baird's gift of her late husband's stamp collection to the United States National Museum — the beginning of the National Philatelic Collection. (Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Archives.)

and later U.S. president, when Congress was considering a new postal regulations bill in 1873, and he followed up with a letter to Garfield dated January 14, 1873:¹²

Dear General,

In response to your request, I send you herewith memoranda of the most salient points in the postal regulations and laws, in which I think they deserve to be straightened out.

You will oblige me, however, by not mentioning my name in connection with the matter. I fear that the post office authorities may take some exceptions to the criticisms, and as my personal relations are intimate with the Postmaster General, I should dislike to be

brought into any sort of antagonism with them.

You can readily see for yourself how the case stands, and are more competent than I am to draw the proper conclusions. I enclose a memorandum of a resolution, which, if enacted, may possibly bring about the desired improvement.

Very truly yours,
Spencer F. Baird

Baird's proposed resolution unfortunately is not to be found in the correspondence files in the Smithsonian archives, but the following letter, which he wrote to J.W. Harper of Harper and Brothers, gives a reasonably clear idea of what it contained.

The American Philatelist

Washington, Feb. 22, 1873

Dear Mr. Harper,

I doubt very much whether any change will be made this present year in the matter of postage. The bill as it passed the House, simply requires the pre-payment on all printed matter, and makes no changes in existing rates of printed matter, excepting for daily papers, the postage of which is to be fifteen cents a quarter instead of thirty.

The rate of letter postage is also reduced to two cents instead of three. If any law whatever is passed, it will undoubtedly be compiled with a stipulation that no matter, of whatever nature shall go free through the mail, not even weekly newspapers within the country of publication nor exchanges between publishers, and the principle of compulsory prepayment of periodicals is also a settled thing. The principle of having newspapers and periodicals, as far as manuscripts and corrected proof go, placed on the same footing as books, has been adopted, and I think largely as the result of my intervention. In discussing the principles of the Senate Bill, I have suggested that a better arrangement will be to make the three cent rate of postage apply to one ounce instead of two cents for a half ounce. Thus for packages or even single rate [this] will be a much greater reduction in proportion than the other, amounting to 48 cents per pound instead of 64 cents.

I also suggested that the distinction between printed books and periodicals, pamphlets etc., be abolished, and that all be allowed to go at the rate of one cent for each two ounces, the limit for books to be four pounds, and for all other kinds of matter two pounds, making no distinction therefore in the rates for printed matter, the variation being only with the quantity to be forwarded.

I have also urged that whatever rate be adopted for periodical postage, publishers be permitted to pay it in bulk at so much per pound. This for [illegible] at present rates is four cents. Perhaps they might be induced to bring it [illegible], so as to make it more nearly equal to newspapers, which will be charged one cent per pound.

I do not think that any action on the part of printers and publishers will prevent the enactment of this condition of prepayment. It is claimed that less than one third, or thereabouts, of the postage are actually collected, and that the only way to secure the full revenue due on this matter, is to require prepayment at the office of mailing. I think, however, that such a measure will be very greatly to the interest of the publisher, as it will avoid the objection of many to receiving periodicals by mail rather than through dealers. Of course where you send packages to dealers, giving them a discount, you will charge them for the amount of postage.¹³

In the remainder of this letter, Baird made no further mention of postal rates. However, in a letter to Roswell C. Smith of Scribner's, dated February 15, 1873, he noted:

I succeeded in having magazine manuscripts placed on the same footing with that for books, the measure having been accomplished by the

LIST OF SPECIMENS RECEIVED.

*Collection of 1733 American
and Foreign Postage Stamps,
collected by the late Professor
Spencer F. Baird*

The 1,733 stamps that Baird bequeathed to the Smithsonian served as the foundation for the National Philatelic Collection. (Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Archives.)

aid of General Garfield, to whom I made a communication on the subject.¹⁴

Baird's continued involvement in postal rate policy on manuscripts for periodicals surfaced in a further letter to Harper, dated May 17, 1875:

A few days ago the Postmaster General Marshall sent for me to come and consult in reference to a letter he had received from you as to the Post Office regulations concerning proof corrections, and as to what is legitimately allowable under this head. The letter was in the hands of the Solicitor of the office, who had never printed a book and was very wild as to the duties connected with proof reading.

After describing at some length his explanation to the postmaster general of author-publisher interactions, he concluded, "I have reason to believe that an order will be issued, covering at least the point in regard to typography, so that there will be no trouble hereafter on that score."¹⁵

As Director Collins made clear in his May 1986 *AP* article, the national philatelic collection has, for more than 100 years, been a steadily growing feature of the Smithsonian's record of American history. It now contains more than 16 million "objects."

In 1986, the Smithsonian celebrated the

The Author

Edward F. Rivinus, who is writing a biography of Spencer Fullerton Baird and enjoying his "Golden Years," says he sold the mostly U.S. collection of his youth to buy an engagement ring. Today, the ring is worth about what he paid for it; the collection, had he held on to it. . . . Mr. Rivinus held a number of positions at the Smithsonian Institution, including director, from 1971 until his retirement in 1986.

institution's first century of stamp collecting. But it is worthy of special note that the man who became the second secretary of the Smithsonian had himself developed a collecting interest as early as the 1860s and that his collection — the work of nearly thirty years — became the foundation of the Smithsonian's great collection of today. Further, Baird was able to take advantage of his respected position as assistant secretary of the Smithsonian Institution to influence significantly U.S. postal policies at a key point in U.S. postal history.

Endnotes

1. Letter from Baird to George Perkins Marsh, dated December 12, 1874. Spencer Fullerton Baird papers, box 6, vol. 17, Smithsonian archives.
2. Smithsonian archives, Baird papers, box 29, vol. 20.
3. Smithsonian archives, Baird papers, box 3, vol. 6.
4. Smithsonian archives, Baird papers, box 3, vol. 7.
5. Thomas M. Brewer, 1814–80, a medical doctor from Boston, Massachusetts, later a publisher. Brewer was an ornithologist by avocation and a pillar of the Boston Society of Natural History. He was the foremost oologist (egg specialist) of his day, wrote widely on ornithological subjects, and co-authored with Baird and Robert Ridgway the monumental work, *A History of North American Birds*.
6. Smithsonian archives, Baird papers, box 15, folder 22.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Smithsonian archives, Baird papers, box 3, vol. 6.
10. Smithsonian archives, Baird papers, box 6, vol. 16.
11. Herbert R. Collins, "The National Philatelic Collection: A Century of Collecting, 1886–1986," *The American Philatelist*, 100 (May 1986): 430.
12. Smithsonian archives, Baird papers, box 5, vol. 14.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. Smithsonian archives, Baird papers, box 6, vol. 18.