

# The National Philatelic Collection:



*This photograph from the 1930s shows Postal History Hall in the Arts and Industries Building.*

## A Century of Collecting, 1886–1986

by **Herbert R. Collins**

When the Smithsonian Institution was founded in 1846, its mission was defined by the wording in James Smithson's will. He directed that his bequest be used to found in the United States "an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men."

At first, the Institution collected only objects used for scientific research, but gradually the emphasis shifted. In 1881, the Division of History was founded and housed in the Arts and Industries Building. Early philatelic acquisitions were in the custody of that division.

The Smithsonian Institution had been in existence for forty years before the first philatelic objects, which included a pane of Confederate stamps, found their way into the collection in 1886. The National Philatelic Collection traces its origins to that year.

Early collecting concentrated primarily on postage stamps, rather than on three-dimensional objects. The first philatelic collection of any size came into the Smithsonian in 1888, when Spencer Baird, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution from 1878–87, bequeathed to it his collection of some 1,773 stamps.

The philatelic collection grew slowly until 1908, when a prominent New York philatelist, David W. Cromwell, donated to the Smithsonian his collection of almost 20,000 American and foreign stamps, valued at \$10,000. Portions of this collection were exhibited as open albums in 1908, and in 1911 the collection was shown more extensively in twenty-nine upright and slope-topped cases. This was the first major philatelic exhibition at the Smithsonian.

From the time of its formation until 1911, the U.S. Post Office Department, and not the Smithsonian, was the main

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repository for artifacts associated with postal history. In 1890, the department opened the nation's first U.S. Postal Museum in its Washington headquarters.

In 1911, however, the Postal Museum was closed, and its entire contents — some 200,000 objects, including a collection of stamps with an estimated value of \$200,000 — were transferred to the Smithsonian. Among the objects transferred was the original ledger kept by Postmaster General Benjamin Franklin during the years 1776–78, rescued from a burning post office building by a messenger on December 15, 1836.

Also included were the Dead Letter Book kept by the Post Office Department during the 1770s and 1780s, as well as the contents of the Dead Letter Office, which amounted to approximately 1,000 objects ranging from the Lord's Prayer in fifty-four languages to packages of arsenic, valentines, and a pickled three-foot-long alligator.

To care for this large collection, the Smithsonian hired Joseph B. Leavy, the first philatelist recruited for a museum under the Civil Service system. His annual salary of \$1,200 was comparable to that of other museum curators at the time.

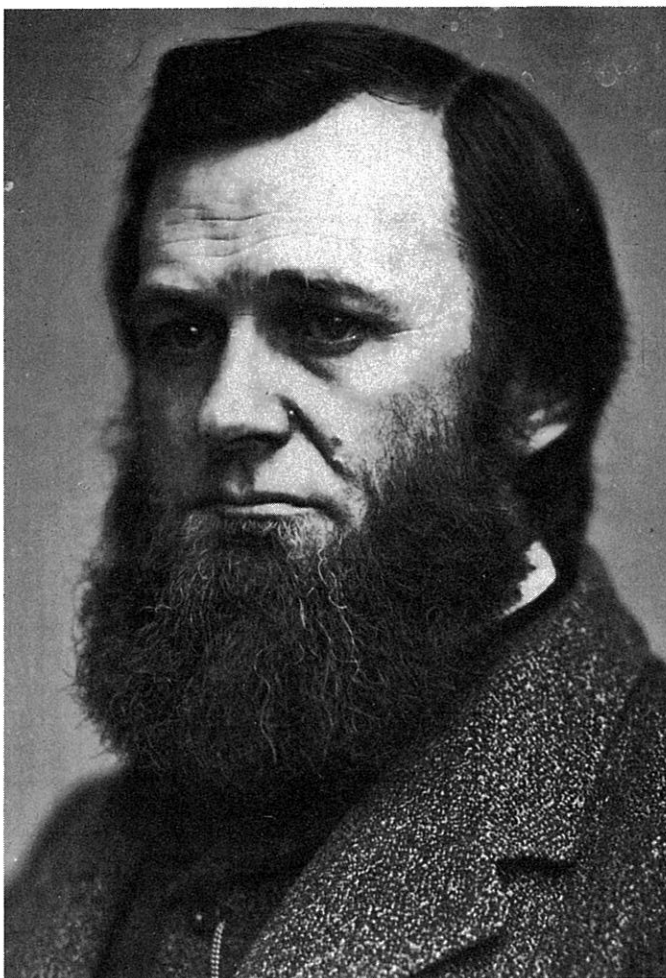
Mr. Leavy's first assignment was to install an exhibit of philatelic artifacts in the Arts and Industries Building of the Smithsonian, a task he completed in 1915, when the exhibition of the Post Office Department collection was opened to the public. Among his other assignments were classification and cataloging of the collection, and publication of a catalogue of both U.S. and foreign stamps held by the museum in 1919.

Leavy applied himself faithfully to the tasks assigned to him, and also found time to lecture and travel with exhibitions until his death in 1921. Mrs. Catherine Manning, who had worked for seventeen years for two Washington stamp dealers, succeeded Leavy as the Smithsonian's second philatelist — a post she held until her retirement some thirty years later.

From its inception in 1886 until 1948, the Smithsonian's philatelic collection was housed in the Division of History. In 1948, that division became a department, and philately was given division status. Catherine Manning served as acting curator of the Division of Philately.

The Division of Philately became the Division of Philately and Postal History in 1958. Then, effective November 1979, the division was elevated to a department headed by an executive director, and the name was changed to its present designation, the National Philatelic Collection.

The Smithsonian's philatelic collections



*Spencer Fuller Baird, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1878–87, bequeathed his stamp collection to the museum.*

totaled 391,131 objects in 1933; by 1972, that number had grown to twelve million. Today, the National Philatelic Collection contains more than sixteen million objects. From 1886 to 1964, the philatelic collections were housed and exhibited in the Arts and Industries Building. In 1964, to afford them more space and better exposure, they were moved to their present location in the National Museum of American History.

Although only a representative selection from the National Philatelic Collection is displayed at any one time, specimens are rotated regularly, and the museum mounts new temporary exhibitions every year. The rest of the objects remain in the reference collection, where they are available for scholarly research. The reference collection is supplemented by one of the world's largest philatelic libraries and reference resources, frequently used by postal historians and researchers.

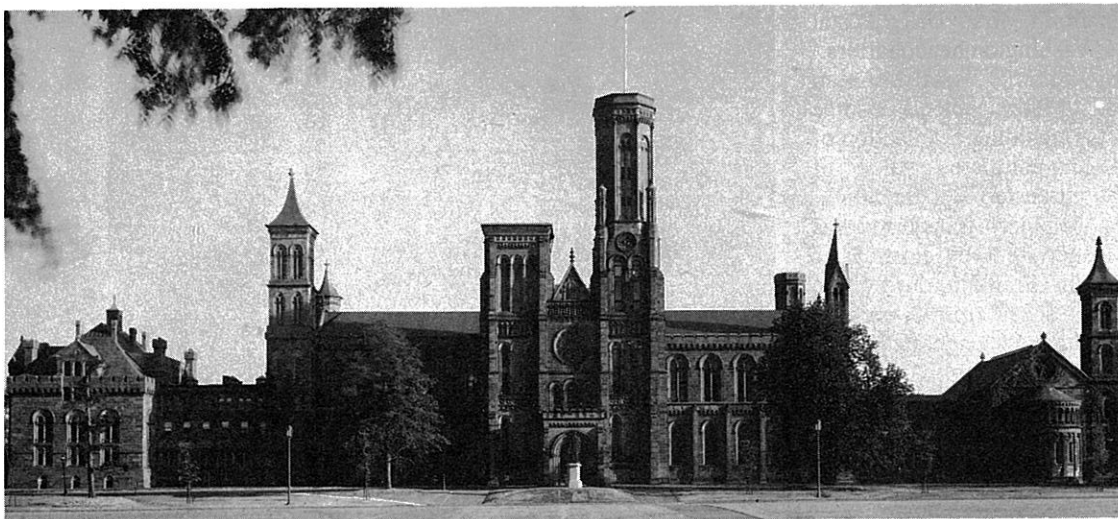
Because of its rapid growth and the limited exhibition area, the National Philatelic Collection has outgrown its reference, storage, and display space at the National Museum of American History. Solutions

to this problem have been discussed for several years, with the aim of ensuring that, in the not-too-distant future, better facilities will give the public broader and easier access to the nation's philatelic and postal history treasures.

## *The Collections*

During the early years of the National Philatelic Collection, the main emphasis was on stamps, rather than on the three-dimensional objects used to move the mails. Even with the acquisition of the Post Office Department's holdings in 1911, the Smithsonian was still very much in need of such objects. In recent years, more emphasis has been placed on collecting larger icons that tell the full story of postal history.

Today, however, the strength of the collection is still philately. Since the introduction of the adhesive postage stamp in the 1840s, the collecting of stamps has overshadowed the overall history of the postal service itself. And, while the present emphasis in collecting is on U.S. history, that has not always been the case.



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

Some of the Smithsonian's most complete and important holdings are specialized collections of various countries. These include Austrian fiscals, Mexican revenues, Swiss military stamps, and one of the world's finest collections of Israeli stamps. Other collections of significance are of Afghanistan, Albania, Australia, twentieth-century Belgium, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Egypt, France, Germany, Imperial Russia, India Feudatory States, Indonesia, Ireland, Italian States, Japan, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Ryukyus, Saar, Salvador, Spain, Transvaal, and Venezuela.

The popularity of topical collections has increased tremendously in recent years. Although it is impossible to collect samples

of all topical stamps, these, too, are well represented in national collections. The Smithsonian's collections include stamps relating to the United Nations, Rotary Clubs, Boy Scouts, the Red Cross, music, chess, maps, and zeppelins, to mention a few.

Although the National Philatelic Collection contains many rarities of the world, it certainly does not limit its collecting to "philatelic gems." Existing voids include many less rare stamps that should be acquired to round out the collection.

Some items have been purchased over the years, but the majority, like most objects in the Smithsonian Institution, have been donated by interested citizens and collectors. Exceptions, of course, are the transfers received on a continuing basis from the U.S. Postal Service and from foreign countries.

The Smithsonian continues to be the main repository for the history of the U.S. Postal Service and, in large measure, the National Philatelic Collection owes its very existence to the Postal Service and its predecessor, the U.S. Post Office Department. One of the unique collections the museum received from the Postal Service is of certified plate proofs. Because this is the only collection of its kind, it is afforded the highest security.

Another collection that deserves mention is the U.S. Revenue Collection, much of which was transferred to the National Philatelic Collection by the U.S. Treasury Department. This contains rare and unusual objects, as well as some of the best examples of iconography and graphic work.

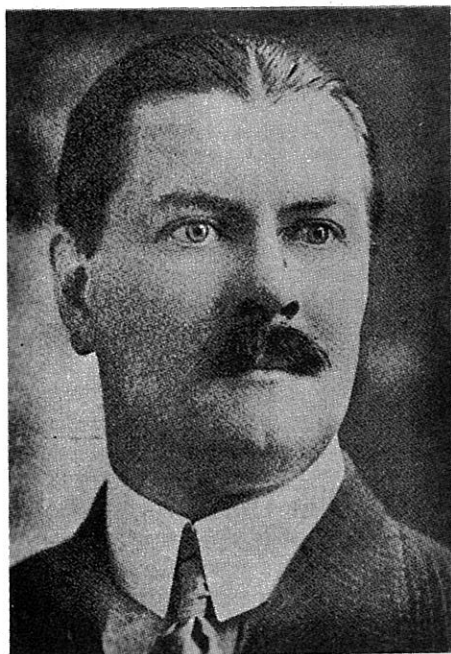
The National Philatelic Collection also includes objects that deal specifically with various modes of transporting the mails — from conveyances like the sleds, three-

wheeled vans, and "screen wagons" used over the years by Postal Service personnel, to trains, air mail flights, and ships. The reconstructed Dillsburg Post Office and Headsville Post Office represent final distribution outlets for the mails.

Production of adhesive postage stamps receives prominent attention in the exhibition hall, too. Printing presses on display include one used to print Confederate stamps and currency and a Stickney press, the latter being the prototype for printing presses used today.

As the Smithsonian begins its second century of philatelic collecting, the National Philatelic Collection not only will seek to acquire new and more complex objects, but also will try to fill many of the gaps that exist from the past. As new ideas emerge, objects must be searched out and selected that will most clearly define those ideas to generations of the future who will visit the museum.

This is the task of the professional museum curator, and it is illusory to think that his task will ever be finished. In philately, as in every other field of study, each generation reinterprets the work of its predecessors. AP



*Joseph P. Leavy was the first philatelist employed by the Smithsonian Institution.*

### **The Author**

*Herbert R. Collins is executive director of the National Philatelic Collection of the Smithsonian Institution. For information about the museum's philatelic reference collection and research resources, readers may write to him at the National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C. 20560. The American Philatelist thanks Mr. Collins, Jim Bruns, and Ray Norby for providing highlights of the National Philatelic Collection reproduced on the following pages.*