



## Meet the Stamps

Scott No. 372, left, and No. 373 display siderographer's initials. The imperforate stamp was ill-suited for most private vending machines.



# How the 1909 Stamp Was Born

## Commemorative Was Issued Only After Prolonged Wrangling

By Daniel A. Piazza, Smithsonian National Postal Museum

As early as 1905, prominent New Yorkers were planning a 1909 celebration of the anniversaries of Henry Hudson's navigation up the Hudson River in 1609 and Robert Fulton's New York-to-Albany steamboat service in 1807.

Although commemorations were planned all along the river, the event was of particular importance to New York City. Its last major exposition was the 1853 World's Fair, and the intervening years witnessed exponential growth. The Brooklyn Bridge connected Manhattan and Brooklyn in 1883. Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island were consolidated into a single municipal government in 1898. The subway system opened in 1904. The ambitious city was eager to show itself off on the national stage, and in 1906 a joint city-state commission was placed in charge of the Hudson-Fulton celebrations.

The Hudson-Fulton Celebration Commission petitioned the U.S. Post Office Department (USPOD) for a commemorative stamp in December 1908, just as the Washington-Franklin definitive series was making its debut. Postmaster General George von L. Meyer turned them down, citing the new regular issue and the fact that "other requests of this kind received ... have not been complied with."

The commission tried again in April 1909 with the new Taft administration, this time directing its request to the Treasury Department, which has oversight of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. It reminded the secretary that other expositions had received commemorative stamps for more than a decade. The commission still received an unfavorable response.

Undaunted, the commission mounted a congressional campaign. In the middle two weeks of August 1909, nearly every member of New York's congressional delegation wrote to Meyer's successor, Frank H. Hitchcock, supporting the stamp. The timing suggests that the commissioners took advantage of the August recess — during which congressmen flee Washington's heat and mosquitoes to spend time in their constituency — to buttonhole them at home.

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Don Bianchi Collection Courtesy of Betty Bianchi



### Source Images

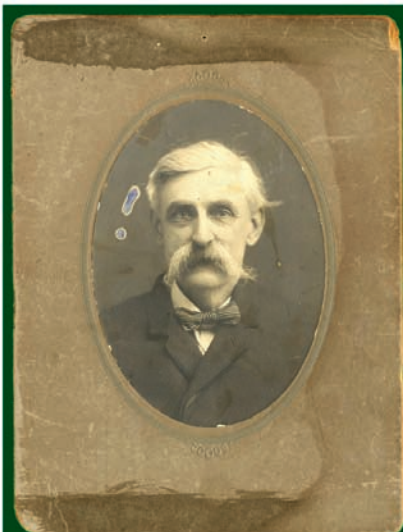
The Hudson–Fulton Celebration Commission supplied source images for the stamp. An artist’s conception shows the *Clermont* before construction began. The other shows it at Staten Island after launch but before its completion only a week before the celebration opened. Henry Hudson’s *Half Moon* is seen at New York Harbor. The replica was built in the Netherlands and brought to New York aboard the Holland-America Line freighter *Soestdijk* on July 22, 1909. The Hudson River Palisades are shown in another source photograph supplied by the Commission.

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U.S. Rep. J. Sloat Fassett of Elmira wrote, “New York State asks very little from the United States Government ... It digs its own canals, cleans its own rivers, [and] makes its own forest reserves, but we have no power to make our own postage stamps.” Finally, on August 16 and 17, the USPOD sent letters informing the New York delegation that an order had been placed with the Bureau of Engraving and Printing and that the stamp would be issued on September 25, the Hudson–Fulton Celebration’s opening day. The USPOD asked the Commission for design source material: specifically, images of Henry Hudson’s ship *Half Moon*, Robert Fulton’s steamer *Clermont*, and the Hudson River Palisades.

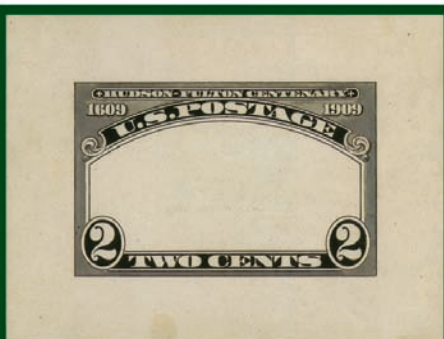
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### The Designer and His Art

Marcus W. Baldwin (1853–1925) designed and engraved the stamp. Ink-and-wash essays of the frame and vignette are on cardboard. It was believed for years that Clair Aubrey Huston was the designer, but discovery of the signed essays proved otherwise. This composite photographic model was approved twice by Postmaster General Frank H. Hitchcock. The second approval was necessitated by the Hudson–Fulton Celebration Commission's request to replace the word "Centenary" with "Celebration."



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The National Postal Museum is fortunate to own these source photographs, acquired in the 1970s with the transfer to the Smithsonian of the Third Assistant Postmaster General's papers. Four of them are published here for the first time on page 52. The photograph of the *Clermont* is especially interesting; it shows an unfinished replica of the famous vessel under construction at the Staten Island Shipbuilding Company in Mariner's Harbor. The single stack, wheels, and sails have been drawn in with a pencil and "irrelevant objects" have been scratched out of the background, presumably to ensure they did not show up on the stamp.

Veteran Bureau designer Marcus W. Baldwin turned out ink-and-wash essays for the

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Portrait: Heritage Auction Galleries, art: Robert A. Siegel

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frame and vignette on August 17. The Commission's original suggestion for the stamp's inscription — *Hudson-Fulton Celebration* — was changed to *Hudson-Fulton Centenary* because of USPOD concerns that the word celebration could be construed as an advertisement for the event rather than a commemoration of it. (This is the sort of mental jujitsu that only a bureaucrat can truly appreciate.) A composite photographic model bearing the word *centenary* was approved by the postmaster general and sent to the commission the same day.

Even before the model arrived in New York, members of the commission read descriptions of the stamp in the press. One of them started down to Washington by train to remonstrate with the USPOD about the inaccuracy of the word centenary; several sent telegrams. In response to the commission's requests, the wording was changed back to celebration and the profile of the *Clermont* above the waterline was lowered slightly. The postmaster general approved the changes on August 19. Proofs of the die, which was engraved by Baldwin, Robert Ponickau, and Edward M. Hall, were approved on August 31. Eight printing plates, each bearing 240 individual subjects, were prepared for use on the flat-plate press and placed into service. The press sheets were perforated 12 and cut down into four panes of 60 stamps for sale at post offices.

The stamp's oversize format drew criticism from some postal customers. A man in Oakmont, Pennsylvania wrote the USPOD to say "It is disagreeable enough to lick any stamp, but one of this size is positively offensive." Similarly, the postmaster at El Paso, Texas asked the department for permission to return 90,000 copies of the stamp for credit, say that their "extremely large size" made them "objectionable." His request was refused.

The *Washington Post* on September 26 carried somewhat fanciful stories of older postal customers at the city post office on Pennsylvania Avenue mistaking the stamps for Civil War-era postage currency and advertising cards.

The vast majority of people, however, appreciated that the additional room allowed for a more striking design. Commercial mailers seized the opportunity to use oversized, attractive stamps to draw attention to their mailings. A stationery firm in Rochester inquired after 10,000 copies "for advertising purposes." The postmaster at New York reported that one company wanted 25,000 stamps. In Washington, reported the *New York World*, 50,000 stamps were sold in the first half-hour. William Griest, a freshman congressman from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, used 5,000 of the stamps on a postcard (shown at right) mailing to his constituents informing



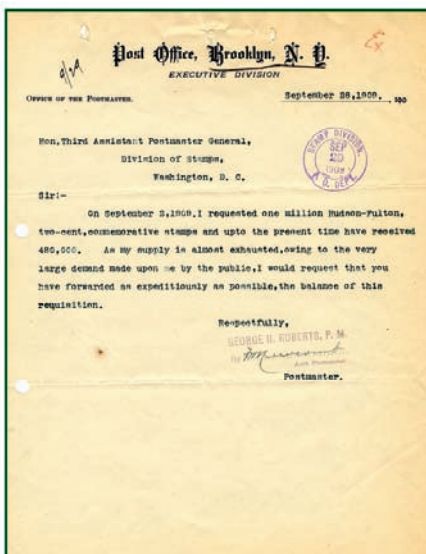
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them that Robert Fulton was born in Lancaster County. Fewer than 50 cards are known to exist today in are several varieties.

Demand was naturally heaviest in New York City. The postmaster at Brooklyn wrote to complain that he had received less than half of his initial requisition of 1,000,000 Hudson–Fulton stamps and was in danger of being sold out (right). On the third day of sale, September 28, the New York post office requested 3,000,000 additional copies. In addition to the initial delivery of 50 million Hudson–Fulton stamps, a second printing of 20 million copies was ordered on October 2 and a third printing of 1.8 million on October 23.

Even before the Hudson–Fulton stamps were issued, philatelists speculated that imperforate sheets would be issued as had been done for the other 1909 commemoratives. On September 11, the U.S. Automatic Vending Company of New York requested 102,000 imperforate stamps — or 425 press sheets — to use in their machines. Initially the department declined, pointing out that U.S. Automatic’s machines vended single stamps in manila holders and that this purpose could be served just as well by perforated copies. The company convinced the post office otherwise, however, and U.S. Automatic was supplied with imperforate sheets on the first day of issue.



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U.S. Automatic Vending Company, the only firm to receive imperforate stock directly from the USPOD, Type II guide line strip (top). Mail-O-Meter Type I guide line strip (middle). Schermack Type III guide line pair.

Smithsonian National Postal Museum Library, top; The Benjamin K. Miller Stamp Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, bottom



### **Double Transfer**

Imperforate Scott No. 373 exhibits double transfers on plates 5393 and 5494. The inset is from the left edge of the second stamp at the top of the block.

### **Freaks & Oddities**

Both the perforate and imperforate versions of have some interesting varieties, including paper folds that resulted in odd perforations.



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Individual collectors were permitted to request full imperforate panes from their local postmaster or to purchase singles, pairs, and other multiples from the Washington, D.C. City post office by mail. Ultimately 114,840 copies were sold in this way, for a total imperforate issue of 216,840. In addition to U.S. Automatic, the Mail-O-Meter, Schermack, and Brinkerhoff companies are also known to have applied their distinctive perforations to imperforate multiples of this issue as favors to collectors. Despite being philatelically contrived, these are scarce and highly sought after today.

### **REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING**

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### **About the Author**

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Don Bianchi Collection Courtesy of Betty Bianchi

