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The Prexie Era

The Newsletter of the BIA 1938 Presidential Era Study Group

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A M.S. Gripsholm Exchange Forerunner

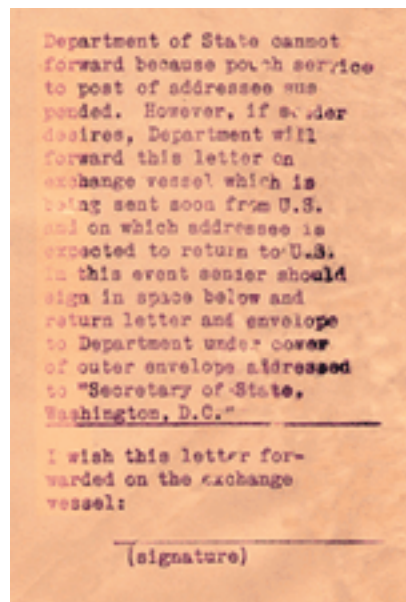
by

Louis Fiset

This World War II era cover, originally postmarked October 21, 1941, was addressed to the writer's husband via the State Department in Washington D.C. Gerald Warner, Esquire was a member of the diplomatic corps in Japan with an assignment to Kobe. The letter, properly franked for international surface mail, would have been forwarded by diplomatic pouch had war not intervened. The letter, however, was returned to the writer.



The interesting details of this cover lie with the instructions on the back.



In them, the State Department advises the writer of the suspension of mail service, but “will forward this letter on exchange vessel which is being sent soon from U.S. and on which addressee is expected to return to U.S.” The vessel referred to would be the *M.S. Gripsholm* which sailed from New York harbor on June 18, 1942,

and rendezvoused with the Japanese exchange ships *M.V. Asama Maru* and *S.S. Conte Verde*, at Lourenço Marques, Mozambique, the Portuguese colony in East Africa. On this first of two exchanges with Japan, most of the diplomatic corps of the two countries were exchanged, including Ambassador Joseph C. Grew and his staff as well as the addressee. Each country exchanged approximately 1,500 civilians.

This cover, postmarked ten weeks prior to the *Gripsholm's* departure for Mozambique, is a forerunner of the interesting postal history associated with the *Gripsholm* in World War II. The Swedish vessel, under charter to the State Department from May 1942 to March 1946, undertook sixteen "voyages of mercy" to deliver tons of relief supplies and to repatriate 20,000 civilians and wounded servicemen whose motherlands fell on both sides of the conflict.

I know of only one other cover similar to this one, and neither this one nor the other has a signature authorizing the letter to be forwarded on the exchange ship. Prexie Era collectors should watch for these.

[**Editor's Note:** The International Society for Japanese Philately recently published Monograph 14, "United States and British Exchanges With Japan 1942 - 1943" by Michael Ruggiero. I recommend this 62 page, highly illustrated study to anyone who is interested in the subject matter. Several of the illustrations are from Louis Fiset's collection.]

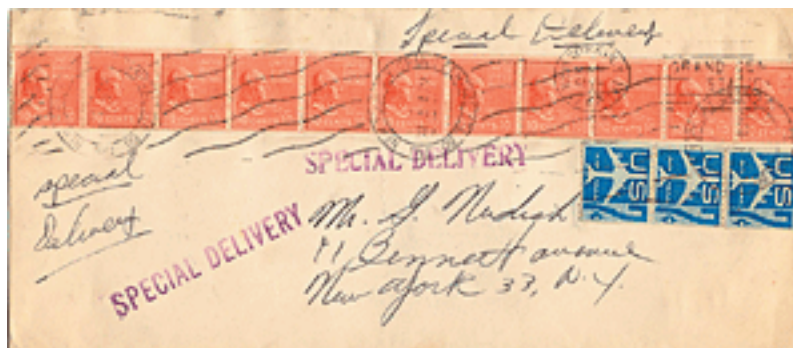
Two 10 Cents Prexie Coil Items *Extraordinaire!*

by

George Wagner

Here are two Prexie 10 cents coil items that reside in my holdings.

The first is a cover dated March 9, 1952. The roller cancel is repeated on the back.



Just when I thought I had seen everything, I got lucky again. Here is a wonderful example of the coil that I found on Australian Ebay. It is on a package front, and is dated August 4, 1956. [The illustration appears on the next page] Can anyone show any other spectacular usages of the ten cents coil?

Many subscribers have switched to the Newsletter's digital edition. They not only see all illustrations in color, but they also have received a full run of back issues on CD-R.

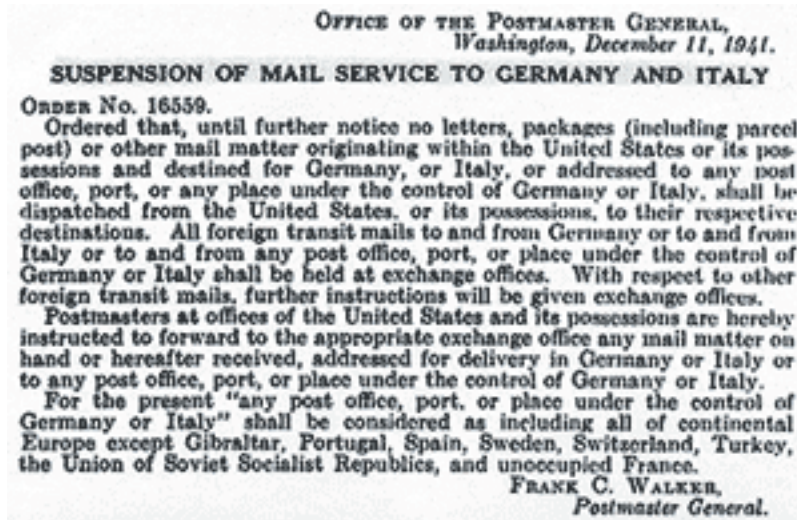


First Day of Suspended Mail Service to Italy

by

Steven M. Roth

On December 11, 1941, the Post Office issued its Order suspending mail service to Germany and Italy as well as to Axis occupied and controlled countries. The Order was published in the *Postal Bulletin* on December 12, the effective first day of the suspension.



There were exceptions to the suspension of service although the exceptions were not set forth in the Order. For example, mail addressed to prisoners of war or to internees was permitted, provided the sender followed strict rules imposed by countries on both sides of the conflict.

I show on page 5 a cover addressed to Italy, postmarked December 12, 1941, demonstrating the first day of the *blanket* suspension of service to an Axis country imposed by the United States. I also have in my collection several earlier service suspended covers which illustrate the *ad hoc* suspension of service as the result of local conditions and/or actions taken by belligerents (*e.g.*, covers intercepted at the border by Italy during its invasion of Greece in 1940) or by reason of temporary decisions made by the United States as the result of

unstable conditions in combat areas (e.g., the temporary suspension of mail service to Finland during the “Winter War” fought between Finland and the USSR.)



The \$1.00 Wilson Watermark Error

by

John Borgeaud



In March 1953, a New York stamp dealer was sorting through some used blocks of stamps. As he inspected a block of the then current \$1.00 Woodrow Wilson Prexie definitive, he noticed what he thought was a crease. On closer inspection, he discovered that the block was not creased at all, but that the block bore the double-line USIR watermark. Since the Post Office Department had ceased using watermarked paper for postage stamps in 1916, and the USIR watermarked was intended for use for revenue stamps, the alert dealer knew that he had found something special.

The dealer kept his discovery secret, and he and a friend traveled the East and the South in search of additional copies of the error. During the next 7 months they would visit approximately two hundred post offices. They located approximately four hundred mint stamps from the Charleston, South Carolina vicinity. They also found about one hundred-fifty used copies in wholesale lots. In October 1953, the Associated Press revealed the find, and the “cat was out of the bag.” The hunt was now on. Dealers and collectors searched dealers’ stocks, albums, and trash bins for the stamp that we now know as Scott 832b. So..., in the fifty years that have passed since its discovery, what, if anything, have we learned about Scott 832b?

While speculation abounds, it still is not known exactly how the whole thing happened other than that some sort of mix-up had occurred. No one has come forth to admit guilt, and postal officials have not offered any definitive answers.

Some of the production facts we do know are: (i) the paper used for the \$1.00 Prexie was cut from sheets of the same size as that supplied to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing for revenue use; (ii) the water-marked revenue stamps were printed on the same type intaglio presses used for the \$1.00 Prexie; and, (iii) the watermarked revenue stamps paper had to be accounted for just like the paper that was used for currency. Theoretically, watermarked paper could not go from one location to another like a “phantom in the night”.

One clue to where the paper came from might be the watermark itself. The watermark is sideways. The watermark letters can be found upright or inverted. They also can be found in left to right orientation or in right to left orientation. [See illustration] Paper fresh from the mill would tend to have the watermark in the same orientation on each sheet. No such care would have been taken in forming a pile of scrap paper, like the odds and ends left over after short revenue press runs.

Another 832b mystery is its date of issue. Having been unplanned with apparently no documentation of its origin, an exact issue date is impossible to determine; however, clues exist to narrow the possibilities. There were three distinct printings of the \$1.00 value. The first two printings were done by the wet print intaglio process on un gummed paper, which are indistinguishable from each other as single stamps, and both printings share the same plate numbers. The first printing, however, is characterized by plate number blocks which have arrow and crow foot alignment markings between the plate numbers for proper color registration. The second printing, which began in 1950, lacked both the arrow and crow foot markings. The third printing, which began in 1954, was performed by the dry print method on pre-gummed paper, and the second color was red-violet rather than purple. This printing is different enough to have earned the Scott catalog number 832c.

All known watermark error copies have been of the wet print variety; all plate number blocks and sheets are missing the arrow and crow foot markings, as with the example pictured, which places them in the second printing produced between the years of 1950 and 1954.



Sixteen possible plate number combinations are attributed to error plates. All but the one (the underlined combination indicated below) have been observed by this author:

22096-22085 22097-22085 22098-22085 22099-22085 22096-22086
 22097-22086 22098-22086 22099-22086 22096-22094 22097-22094
 22098-22094 22099-22094 22096-22095 22097-22095 22098-22095
 22099-22095

A more precise clue to the date of issue comes from the cancellations on used copies. All date indicative copies that I have seen have been from either 1951 or 1952, with the earliest being May 9, 1951 from Niagara, Wisconsin. In a 1987 update of his 1954 report, long-time stamp dealer and researcher of this error, Al “Tag” Boerger, identified this as the earliest known use he had seen. As in early United States stamp issues, an

EKU is a record just waiting to be broken; and, with the stamp still being found on sale in 1953, later year cancellations should be expected to turn up as well.

Unlike other 832b uncertainties, it is clear that this error stamp received widespread distribution. By 1954, mint copies had been found in post offices from both coasts, the South, the Midwest, and even Guam and Japan; and cancelled copies appeared from 15 states, and 4 APO's also were reported. Since that time numerous other state cancels have been added to the list, as well as an October 19, 1951 used block of 16 from Guam and a used block of 4 with a San Juan, Puerto Rico roller cancel. No identifiable distribution pattern seems to exist. Both large city and small town cancellations are represented, including several copies from the small northern Wisconsin town of Niagara, covering an 8-month period during 1951 and 1952, one of which appears to be the earliest known use of this stamp.



Just how scarce is this error? That is another 832b mystery as well. No one really knows exactly how many were printed, or how many were used and destroyed during the 2-years or so before their existence was discovered. By February 1954, at least 21 full sheets had been reported with more to follow. In the June 1, 1956 edition of *Mekeel's*, a letter from H.J. Holtzclaw, Director of the BEP, to Philip H. Howard, Jr., stated, "that perhaps a stock of 1000 sheets of the watermarked paper went to press inadvertently, thereby resulting in 200,000 stamps being placed in circulation." While probably thousands of single copies exist today, many U.S. dealers have never owned either a mint or used copy, and this stamp is missing from most U.S. collections. One old-time dealer friend of mine has watermarked thousands upon thousands of the \$1.00 Wilson stamp without success. In 1996-7, a small hoard of about 6 full sheets appeared and was quickly absorbed by the market. Well centered mint NH copies and sound used singles or blocks with clean, readable city/date cancels are the exception rather than the rule, and should not be expected to be had for only a small fraction of catalog. And, with plate blocks being only 1 of every 100 stamps printed and with only a small fraction of the original production surviving, they are only rarely available.

So, if you like mysteries and would like to extend your collecting horizons, perhaps the \$1.00 watermark error is for you. If you are a cover collector, remember to keep your eyes peeled for \$1.00 Prexie covers and parcel tags from 1951 and 1952, especially if they are from Guam, a Pacific APO, Camp Pendleton, CA, or little Niagara, Wisconsin. And, don't forget, should you have an earlier first use cancel or additional information on this stamp, feel free to contact me through the Newsletter's editor. Good hunting.

Acknowledgement: I would like to take the opportunity to credit the late Al "Tag" Boerger for much of the early 832b accounts, quotes, and information presented here. His personal curiosity, research, and willingness to share his knowledge have provided much towards our understanding of the \$1.00 Prexie watermark error.

A Scarce Famous Americans Airmail Rate to South Africa

by

John Grabowski



Upon first glance this airmail cover from Sumter, SC (postmarked March 11, 1940) to South Africa does not seem too unusual. The 55¢ per ½ oz. airmail rate was in effect for over 13 months, between July 1, 1939 and August 5, 1940 (after which the rate was raised to 95¢). It is only when you consider that the 5¢ Famous Americans stamp first became available on February 5, 1940 (the first 10¢ was released on February 13) that the scarcity becomes evident – it was only possible for 5¢ and 10¢ Famous Americans stamps to pay this 55¢ rate for a period of 6 months.

The only shorter rate is the \$1.10 per ½ oz. airmail rate to South Africa (via the trans-Pacific route due to wartime mail disruption) which was only in effect July 18, 1941 to December 1, 1941 – about 4 ½ months. A Prexie cover, from Steve Suffet's collection with this \$1.10 airmail franking to South Africa sold for \$1,300 (+10%) in Nutmeg's April auction! The 55¢ cover pictured above sold on eBay in May for \$85.

Editor's Note: I was the underbidder for the cover shown above. I had no idea of the significance of the Famous Americans until I had lost the Lot and asked John why he had bid as he did. I was interested only in the route and the rate. FYI, here is an example of the \$1.10 rate trans-Pacific airmail cover showing the 4-1/2 month rate John mentioned. Now, see the **mystery cover!**



Mystery Cover

The mystery cover (see page 1 for illustration) is franked with \$1.10 postage for airmail carriage from the United States to South Africa. The cover is postmarked March 17, 1942. It contains a lightly written admonition "Via/Trans Atlantic Air Mail" below the address. The cover was censored upon arrival in South Africa. The only marking on the back of the cover is the postmark of the mailing post office; there is no Miami, Florida transit marking.

1. Was this cover properly franked for either \$1.10 postage or for 55c [x2] out-of-perod?
2. What route did this cover travel?
3. Was this merely a convenience (or an erroneous) over-franking?

Please send your thoughts to me. I will publish a response(s) in the next Issue.

The Steve Suffet Presidential Postal History Auction

by

John Grabowski

This premier Prexie postal history collection was sold via a mail auction by Nutmeg Auctions on April 15, 2003. Although the realized prices were not made public, several Prexie Era Study Group members have pooled their knowledge to reconstruct at least some of the auction prices.

Looking at some of these realized prices, the sale appears to have been quite successful. There apparently was fierce competition for some key items, including many which might not be offered again for a generation. No doubt, as time passes, and collectors scrounge the hinterlands, a lot of this material is becoming genuinely scarce.

I have reports on 128 of the 400 lots offered for sale. These 128 lots sold for a total (hammer) price of \$39,174. Anyone desiring a listing of the 128 prices, in Excel spreadsheet format, may send me a request at minjohn@alum.mit.edu.

Fourteen of the 128 known prices realized at least \$500 and deserve special mention:

Lot #	Description	Hammer Price
1173	\$5 solo on piece, 1956 APO	\$7500
1157	11c solo, 3 oz. UPU letter parcel to Denmark	\$2000
1504	50c Phil. a/m rate, 12/5/41, re-routed, due 20c	\$2000
1434	\$1.10 short 4.5-mo. a/m rate to S. Africa	\$1300
1165	19c unusual solo, registry + 1c indemnity	\$1100
1172	\$2 solo, registry + indemnity	\$1100
1281	35c Wake Is. airmail rate	\$1000
1288	10c Midway to Hawaii airmail rate	\$900
1494	45c reg'd a/m PC w reply, to Warsaw, 1941	\$700

Lot #	Description	Hammer Price
1228	\$3.06 reg'd cover	\$650
1283	40c Guam airmail rate	\$650
1341	\$3.00 airmail + registry rate to Chile	\$625
1517	3c Prexie coil to the Manhattan Project	\$600
1372	\$1 solo to G.B., a/m + registry	\$500

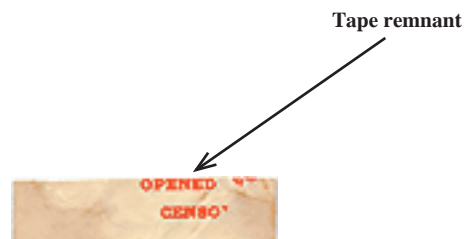
Steve's collection was the 3rd "pioneer" collection to be disbanded over the last few years – the others being Rustad's (sold as two lots by Siegel!) and Len Piskiewicz', sold via net price sale and on eBay. It will be interesting to view the progress of the new generation of Prexie postal history collectors, especially with all this material disbursed.

Another British Horseshoe Route Cover from the United States

by

Steven M. Roth

At first blush this cover seems to be an obvious candidate to be one which traveled to its destination via the trans-Pacific route. At second look, however, it would seem to be a candidate for routing via FAM 22 [because of its date of mailing]. In fact, it probably was neither.



Although the sender's (or post office clerk's) admonition handstamp requested routing via FAM 14, this route no longer was available to Asia or the Middle East after December 1941. It would seem, therefore, that this March 1942, cover would have been flown via FAM 22 which began operations on December 06, 1941. I do not believe it was so flown.

Bob Wilcsek, an authority on airmail rates and routes during the Prexie Era, has published a very convincing case that (i) commercial airmail over FAM 22 did not take hold until sometime in May 1942, and (ii) covers without a Miami, Florida transit backstamp (such as this cover) most likely did not travel over FAM 22 even after May 1942. ["FAM 22: The First Six Months/When Did It Start, Where Did It End and Who Flew It?", *Airpost Journal* (January 1999)]

I believe that this cover was flown to Lisbon via FAM 18 (trans-Atlantic route) and then to England. Then it traveled by ship to Durban, South Africa, and then went by airmail to Palestine. I am confirmed in my belief by a remnant of censor tape present on the back of the cover which was applied by South African Censorship.

I discussed two other United States via British Horseshoe Route covers in *The Prexie Era*, Issue No.26.