



## 1847 ISSUE

TWO YEARS AFTER THE 1845 POSTAL reform reduced and simplified rates, Congress authorized stamps for general distribution to post offices, the total number of which surpassed 15,000 by 1847. The Act of March 3, 1847, signed by President Polk, specified that PMG Cave Johnson “be authorized to prepare postage stamps, which when attached to any letter or packet, shall be evidence of the payment of the postage...” The law’s effective date was July 1, and the Post Office acted immediately to secure a contract with Rawdon, Wright, Hatch and (the new partner) Edson, so that stamps could be distributed by that date.

Two well-known letters from RWH&E, dated March 20 and 31, 1847, document the proposals to print 5c and 10c stamps “from steel plates.” The second of these letters also states that the numbers “5” and “10” would be overprinted on each stamp in red ink, a common security practice in bank note printing, but this element of 1847 stamp production was obviously discarded. Another letter indicates that the contract was signed in late May.

The portraits of Benjamin Franklin and George Washington used for the 5c Brown and 10c Black designs, respectively, can be traced to existing works of art. The Franklin portrait is based on a painting by Joseph S. Duplessis, which depicts the elder statesman in a fur-collar coat (see Figure C). The engraving is believed to have been made by Asher B. Durand from a miniature now located in the Museum of Art in Philadelphia. The Washington vignette is based on the iconic image painted by Gilbert Stuart and copied many times (see Figure C). Both master dies used by RWH&E were probably acquired from Durand, Perkins & Co. after that firm dissolved in 1831. Detailed information concerning the printing contract and design origins, compiled by Clarence Brazer and Dr. Julian Blanchard, can be found in *The Essay-Proof Journal* No. 14 (April 1947) and subsequently repeated in other publications.

Contemporary sources confirm that the stamps were ready for delivery to the Post Office Department on June 26 and that the first distribution was made in New York City on July 1. The agent responsible for delivering the 1847 stamps, Third Asst. PMG John Marron, travelled from New York City to Boston on July 2, arrived in Philadelphia on July 7, and delivered the balance in Washington D.C. on July 9. Baltimore received its allocation on July 16, and subsequent deliveries were sent out to offices on July 29. The late Susan M. McDonald described these events in her article, “A Day to Remember: July 1, 1847”, published in the May 1972 *Chronicle*.

The 1847 Issue was valid for four years, from July 1 through June 30, 1851. A new issue of stamps corresponding to the 1851 rate changes was issued on July 1, and the 1847 stamps were simultaneously demonetized. The government’s decision to invalidate stamps printed by RWH&E has been attributed to the fact that the 1847 contract did not provide for Post Office Department custody of all dies, transfer rolls and plates. These materials were, however, destroyed in December 1851, according to source documentation.

The ink used to print the 5c stamp was altered over time, resulting in a wide range of shades. Furthermore, the corrosive effect of certain components of the 5c ink required an overhaul of the plate sometime after the third printing. As a result the 5c stamps present not only color shades, but double transfers (before and after the plate was re-worked) and considerable variation in the quality of impressions. The most comprehensive study of 5c printings was made by Calvet M. Hahn in his three-part article, “Reexamining the 1847 Colors” (*Collectors Club Philatelist*, Vol. 65, Nos. 3-5). The 10c stamp, printed in carbon black, was less susceptible to corrosion and variation, and impressions are fairly consistent.



**Figure C.** The Duplessis portrait of Franklin and Stuart’s iconic image of Washington were chosen for the first General Issue.