

# An A.B.C. of Precancel Collecting

## FOREWORD

The purpose of this ABC is to give the essentials of precancel collecting – those things that will help you become familiar with the terms and expressions used by precancel collectors. If precancel collecting seems confusing at first, don't be disturbed. Some of today's most enthusiastic collectors also found it so when they started. What follows is generally limited to adhesive postage stamps – although envelopes and wrappers, postal cards and revenue stamps have also been precancelled.

If your interest leans toward a particular phase of collecting, pursue it. Your own inclination is the best guide in determining what you should collect. If the broadest possible approach suits you, collect everything in precancels. If that seem too large a pursuit, consider limiting your collection to your home state. A town or type collection gives broader geographical coverage in a more compact form. Bureau prints have always been a popular starting point for those who do not wish to take on too large a field.

## WHAT ARE PRECANCELS?

Precanceled postage stamps, or precancels, may be defined broadly as stamps that have been canceled before being affixed to mail matter. Several narrower definitions have been proposed, but none has universal acceptance. However, most collectors and nearly all catalogs require that the stamps be precanceled with a device made specifically for that purpose.

As you would expect, most such devices precancel several stamps at once, as they are intended to be applied while the stamps are still in sheets or panes. Thus, each stamp in the sheet would show the same legend; generally the name of the town and state between parallel lines. In other words, the legend usually "fits" the stamp.

Saving time is most often given as the reason for precanceling stamps. Long ago, someone recognized that precanceling 100 stamps in a sheet would take less time than canceling individual stamps on 100 pieces of mail. Thus was born the idea of making stamps already canceled available to mailers of large amounts of printed matter, usually advertising. To encourage such mailers to use these precanceled stamps, the Post Office Department offered them a slightly lower postage rate if they would also sort their mail for handling by the post office. Over the years, thousands of mailers have used precanceled stamps on such third-class mail, and many precancels of higher denominations have been used on fourth-class mail.

## WHAT DO PRECANCELS LOOK LIKE?

The Post Office Department first authorized the precanceling of stamps in 1887. A few cases of "unofficial" precanceling occurred earlier. They usually consisted of lines drawn across the stamps with a pen or brush. Obviously, they can only be distinguished from ordinary used stamps when they are on original cover. Moreover, the return address of the mailer gives the only clue to the post office of origin. Such covers are scarce and need only concern the specialist.

Some post offices turned to the printing press to replace pen strokes and the like. What was printed on the stamps was still largely narrow or wide lines or slugs not easily identified as to post office. In a few cases, distinguishing characters were used. Glastonbury, Conn., printed a large "G" on the 1¢ denomination of the 1869, 1879, and 1882 issues. Glen Allen, Va., used a five-pointed star distinguishable from other star cancellations by a heavy border surrounding a center of fine parallel lines. All these early attempts at precanceling that do not show the post office name are classed as "Lines and Bars" or "Silent" precancels.

By the 1890s, the notion of including the post office name had taken hold. Some precancels had only the city name without including the state. Indianapolis, Indiana even included "U. S. A." Some were fancy, including railroad tracks, medallion like shapes or even tombstones. Some offices included month and year dates for a period of time. This wide divergence in practice probably led to the Post Office Department circular of May 26, 1903. It specified that the name of the post office and state between two parallel heavy black lines be printed across the face of each stamp. This pattern has been pretty much the rule ever since, because the Post Office Department and US Postal Service have supplied most precanceling devices since 1913.

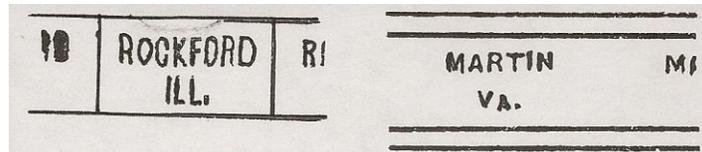
## DISTINGUISHING PRECANCELS FROM POST-CANCELS

Because many post-canceled stamps also show the city and state between parallel lines, they may be confused with precancels. However, all ordinary cancellations are applied by hand, whereas precancels are made by about every conceivable duplicating device. Thus, the possibility of confusion is really limited to handstamps.

In other words, all overprints showing the name of the city and state PRINTED in deep black printers' ink are precancels. Hand-applied overprints, whether cancellations or precancellations, usually show grayish ink, and further clues must be used to determine which is the case.

Because precanceling devices usually put the name of the city and state on each of several stamps at once, they generally read straight across the stamp, either horizontally or vertically. Furthermore, the legend is complete on each stamp. If the stamp is still on paper, the precancellation does not run off onto the paper. If a stamp meets all three of these conditions, it is a precancel with few exceptions.

With single stamps off paper, one cannot apply these three rules rigorously. Post-cancelations occasionally run straight across the stamp. Well-centered cancelations from towns with short names sometimes seem to fit single stamps:



Note that the post-cancelation below is a common type that shows vertical lines that place the inscription in a box. Such cancelations are therefore often designated as "box-killers." Only a few precanceling devices have such vertical lines, and they have them spaced the width of ordinary-sized stamps.



Another type of post-cancel that looks similar to precancels is the "box-roller". The vertical lines between town and state again can distinguish these, as well as the size usually runs off the paper. This is not a precancel:



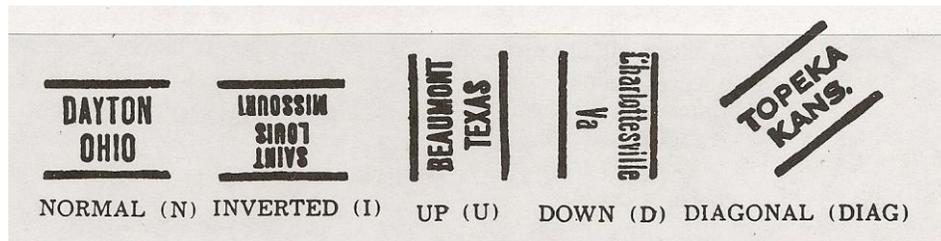
Even the rule that the cancelation not run off onto the paper is not foolproof. In emergencies, postal employees will occasionally "precancel" stamps with handstamps made for post-canceling or other purposes. Because stamps so over printed cannot be distinguished as precancels once they are removed from the original paper, they are not recognized as true precancels. They are usually called "provisionals"; often they consist of just the name of the city and state in one line.

For distinguishing handstamped precancels from post-cancelations, there is really no substitute for experience. Until you have gained experience, save any stamp that you think might be a precancel. Meanwhile, study your stamps and whatever precancel literature you may have acquired. Before long, you will be able to decide in 99% of the cases whether a given stamp is indeed a valid precancel.

## DESCRIBING PRECANCEL IMPRINTS

A few terms are useful in describing precancel imprints in words. They have to do with position, continuity from stamp to stamp, and styles of letters.

Although most precancelations run straight across the stamp, they are not always right side up, or "normal," on the stamp. Terms used to describe the position of the imprint are "normal", "inverted", "up", "down" and "diagonal".



Inverted imprints, or "inverts," most often occur when a postal clerk unknowingly picks a handstamp up the wrong-way, or when a printer sets up his press to center the imprint on sheets of stamps with selvage on one side and finds some sheets with it on the other. As you would expect, inverts are usually less plentiful than normals. Most imprints reading up or down do so because the device was made to fit the vertical heights, rather than the width, of the stamps. Diagonal imprints other than provisionals, arise either through carelessness or because a sheet of stamps curled or slipped in a printing press.

Stamps showing two impressions in any position are called "doubles"; three impressions, "triples"; and so on. They usually occur because the first impression missed some of the stamps in the sheet. Inasmuch as handstamps can easily be applied in any position, most catalogs only list different positions of imprints when they are mechanically applied.

Continuity between stamps is determined by the lines above and below the name of the city and state. On most precanceling devices, these lines run continuously across the width of the device. Thus, a single stamp will usually show the lines seeming to run off at both sides. Some precancel devices, however, have a break in the lines between adjoining horizontal subjects; the resulting short lines are called "bars." Examples are shown below.



Lines



Bars

On precanceling devices that have lines, the lines necessarily end at the extreme left and right sides of the device; thus, stamps from the opposite edge rows usually show lines running off on one side and the end of the line on the other.

Descriptions of the style of lettering on precanceling devices always specify two things. The first is whether the city and state are shown entirely in capital letters ("caps"), or whether only the first letter of each word is capitalized ("caps and lower case"). The other has to do with the shape of the letters: if the ends of the strokes seem to spread, the letters are said to have "serifs" or be "serifed"; if not, they are called "sans-serif," "block," or "gothic" letters. Examples are shown below.



With serifs



Without serifs

## CLASSIFYING PRECANCELS

Precancels may be conveniently considered as falling into two main classes: those imprinted by mechanical means, and those imprinted by hand. The first group comprises precancels made by feeding the stamps through a printing press, a mimeograph, or some other semi-automatic machine. The second group includes precancels made by stamping, rocking, or rolling a simple inked device upon the stamps by hand. A third category encompasses precancels made by any of these methods but also showing the mailer's initials and date of use.

## PRINTED PRECANCELS

Because of the deep black ink and sharpness of the impressions, printed precancels are the easiest to recognize. In the early days, most of them were printed from type set up by the local printer who was given the job of making precancels for the post office. Since 1913, most have been printed from 100-subject electroplates furnished by the Post Office Department to the local postmasters. In addition, since 1923, post offices needing large quantities have been supplied with precancels made in the Bureau of Engraving and Printing in Washington.

### Typesets



Precancels printed from set type or linotype slugs are known as "Typesets." They differ widely in appearance and often reflect the individuality of the printer, as demonstrated by the early fancy designs. Each printer used whatever typefaces were in the print shop. In some

cases, there was not enough type of one style and two or more styles were used in setting 100 individual subjects.

In most cases, typeset precancels are neat and attractive; perhaps because of the printer's pride in craftsmanship as well as the distinctiveness of design. Nevertheless, because each subject is set up individually, all sorts of variations between subjects can occur. Interest in typeset precancels is heightened by the hunt for misspellings, inverted words or letters, wrong type fonts, and other minor differences.

## **Electros**

Precancels printed from electroplates, usually of 100 subjects, are called "Electros." Although a few precanceling electroplates have been made locally, the majority have been supplied from Washington. These plates have been made for the Post Office Department under contract since 1913. As the contractors changed, so also did the style and appearance of the precanceling imprint on the plates. In addition, changes in government specifications at various times have altered the appearance of electro imprints.



With the locally made electroplates, there are about as many different styles as there are plates, much as with typesets. But then, such plates are made by setting up one or more subjects in type and duplicating it. Hence, locally made electros cannot always be distinguished from typesets. Some of these plates consist of only 50 subjects: when they are used, half a sheet of stamps is precanceled, the sheet is turned end-for-end, and the other half is printed; inverted unless the plate is also turned. In a few cases, curved plates have been made for use on a Multigraph machine; if the machine is operated with a ribbon rather than printer's ink, the impressions show lines of fabric as though printed through a typewriter ribbon.

The usual practice has been to use larger letters on plates for towns with shorter names, and condensed letters for towns with long names. In some cases, towns with very long or two-word names have been shown in two lines, with the state on a third line.

Because of declining use, the Postal Service had discontinued supplying electroplates by the mid 1970s.

## **Bureau Prints**

Bureau Prints are precancels that are printed at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing in Washington. They came about when the Post Office Department felt that large quantities of precancels could be prepared cheaper than by hiring local printers to make them from government-issues electroplates. Actually, they are varieties of U.S. postage stamps made for restricted use.

Although a few experimental precancels for three cities had been made at the Bureau in 1916, the practice did not become general until 1923. At that time, the manufacture of regular-issue

postage stamps of denominations from 1¢ to 10¢ was switched to high-speed rotary presses. It then became a simple matter to incorporate rotary precanceling plates in the presses and have the finished stamps come out precanceled. The number of post offices using Bureau Prints grew steadily; over 9,500 different Bureau Print precancels have been issued in denominations from 1/2¢ to \$1.00.

Five simple rules will help you to distinguish Bureau Prints (other than the Experimentals) from other printed precancels:

1. They occur only on rotary-press stamps (except for the 8¢ of 1954).
2. They occur only on the regular issues of 1923 (Perf. 10), 1927-31 (Perf. 11x10½), 1932 (3¢ Stuart), 1938 (Presidential), 1940 (Defense), 1954 (Liberty), on subsequent general (not commemorative) issues, and on corresponding coil stamps of all these issues. (Nearly all printed precancels on coil stamps are Bureau Prints.)
3. They always show single lines above and below the city and state; never bars or double lines.
4. They are always in the normal position, except on stamps that are wider than they are tall; on these stamps, the precancelation usually reads down.
5. They have very uniform styles, some of which are shown below.



In September 1978, the Postal Service discontinued the use of city names on bureau precancels. Concurrently, a new type of precancel was introduced, one which included the class of service rather than the city and state name. In addition, some denominations were produced with just two parallel lines – these were intended primarily for use on parcels. Over time, and as rates changed, the service inscriptions were incorporated into the stamp designs, rather than being added as an overprint. Eventually, the Postal Service ended its relationship with the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, choosing to have all stamps produced by private contractors. Many collectors prefer to call the service inscribed and lines only stamps “National Precancels” because they are intended for use at any post office in the nation.

### Electroplate Errors

Both local and Bureau Print precancels made from electroplates occasionally show errors. The frequency of such errors in a sheet of 100 stamps depends on how the plate was made. If it were cast from 100 subjects of set type, a given error would occur only once per 100 stamps. If 50 subjects were set up and duplicated to make plates to print 100 stamps; as is the case with Bureau Prints, a single error would occur twice on the sheet. If a row of ten subjects were set up and duplicated ten times to make the plate, any error would occur ten times on the sheet. The most common type of error is the omission of a period after an abbreviation.

## MIMEOGRAPHED PRECANCELS



The typewriter lettering usually identifies mimeographed precancels easily. Moreover, they often show other characters found on a typewriter keyboard [# , \* , ( , ) , / , - ] in place of the usual lines or bars. As each subject is typed separately, errors and variations are common. Any attempt to imitate mimeographed precancels by direct typing on a stamp can be readily detected; the mimeographed impression does not create indentations in the paper.

## MACHINE-PRECELANCED COIL STAMPS

One further type of mechanical device has been used extensively for precanceling. It was devised specifically for precanceling coil stamps in rolls, rather than stamps in sheets. Obviously, no flat printing plate could conveniently be used to precancel stamps in strips of 500 or 1,000. The sole exception is the privately perforated coil stamps of 1902-22 which do exist precanceled with flat electroplates. In these cases, imperforate sheets of stamps were first precanceled and then made into coils by cutting and splicing.

The invention of automatic stamp-affixing machines created a big demand among large mailers for precanceled coil stamps. About 1920, the first machines to precancel rolls of coil stamps were supplied to a few post offices. On these machines, the stamps were unrolled from one spool, passed beneath an inked roller that did the precanceling, and rewound on another spool. In keeping with the designated form of precancelation, the first machines printed the name of the city and state between bars:



However, sometimes the stamps and the precanceling roller did not travel at the same speed, and each stamp did not carry the entire precancelation. To overcome this problem, the format was changed to a vertical arrangement whereby the city and state usually appear about twice on each stamp:



## **HANDSTAMPED PRECANCELS**

In cases where precancels are needed, but not in large enough quantities to justify having them printed, post office employees made them by hand. The Post Office Department has supplied devices used to make such precancels since 1913, but some handstamps were also obtained locally from other sources. Effective July 5, 2007, local precanceling was discontinued. The last devices were furnished by the Postal Service in June 2007.

### **Government-Issued Handstamps**

Much as with electroplates, the Post Office Department has had precanceling handstamps made for it under contract since 1913. They also show changes in style and appearance as the contractors changed, and narrower spacings between lines since 1938. Again, wider letters are used for towns with short names, etc. The number of stamps precanceled at one time by these handstamps has changed over the years. The earliest devices had five or ten subjects, 1 or 2 horizontal rows of five subjects each. Soon thereafter, the standard became 25 subjects, 5 by 5.

Since mid-1934, all government-issued handstamps have been of ten subjects, 2 horizontal by 5 vertical. From 1913 to 1932, the printing surface was flat and made of rubber. From 1932 to 1958, handstamps were made of metal with slightly curved surfaces for rocking across an ink pad and across the stamps (these devices are sometimes called "hand electros"). Since 1958, all handstamps have been flat and made of a synthetic rubber called "vinyl," more resistant to wear and cleaning than the old rubber handstamps.

### **Locally Made Handstamps**

Local handstamps are of three kinds. A number, showing many different designs, were made before the Post Office Department began supplying such devices. Some have since been made to order for local postmasters who couldn't wait to get a device from Washington or who had trouble making satisfactory impressions with government-issued devices. Others have been made by mail-order houses to precancel stamps they received as remittances for merchandise ordered from them.

These devices differ widely and precancel from one to 25 stamps at one time. Although most of them have flat rubber printing surfaces, a number have been made in the form of a wheel, or roller. Such rollers will continue to repeat the precancelation when rolled across stamps so long as they carry enough ink to make an impression. They usually are distinctive in design and show two or more staggered legends:



If they did not have such novel arrangements of city and state names, they would be nearly impossible to distinguish from ordinary post-canceling rollers.

### Handstamped Impressions

With all types of handstamps, the sharpness and blackness of the impression varies with the kind and amount of ink of the pad, the smoothness and hardness of the surface beneath the stamps, and the skill of the individual doing the job. Moreover, impressions from rubber handstamps vary somewhat in size with the pressure of application, and they sometimes show distortion due to warping of the rubber. As with electros, the frequency of errors depends on how the handstamp was made.

### DATED PRECANCELS

Concerned with a loss of postal revenue from the possible reuse of precanceled stamps, a Post Office Department order dated June 4, 1938, specified that precanceled stamps above the 6¢ denomination should also carry the initials of the user and the month and year of use. To make room for this additional information on each stamp, many electroplates and all handstamps issued since 1938 have had narrower spacing between lines. All precancels that carry this added legend are called "Dateds."

Addition of the user's initials and date can be done either by hand or by printing in some manner. In most cases, little dating handstamps have been made and "blobbed" onto the stamps. Even though the possible variety of handstamped dateds is nearly infinite and many are not especially attractive, they have still aroused interest among some precancel collectors. On the other hand, because the variety of dates by press printing or mimeographing is more limited and the resulting precancels are neat, they are more avidly collected.

When the same device that does the precanceling does the dating, the precancels are called "Integrals." Only a few dozen mailers used enough precancels to justify the expense of having integral devices made. Integrals are usually handstamps:



However, a few distinctive ones have been made from set type:



Because they include the precancelation, they are recognized as precancel types and are collected by those who do not collect precancels with dates added separately.

---

## INTERNATIONAL PRECANCELS

The United States was not the only country to recognize the benefits of precancels in processing large amounts of mail. A number of other countries also precanceled their stamps. Some examples are shown below.

### ALGERIA



---

### BELGIUM



## CANADA



## FRANCE



## HUNGARY



## LUXEMBOURG



---

## MONACO



---

## NETHERLANDS



---

## TUNESIA



---

## METHODS OF COLLECTING PRECANCELS

The preceding survey of precancels may well leave you with the impression that precancel collecting is a big field. And so it is; big enough to suit the fancy of about every kind of collector. Some folks like to collect in a boundless field; some like to keep their interests broad but limit their collections to samples of larger areas; some like to limit their attention to smaller fields where they can see a chance of completion. Precancel collections are of all types, and some shadings in between. A few words about popular ways of collecting may help you decide how you would like to build your personal collection.

## **General Collecting**

Collecting all varieties of precancels, other than dateds, is known as "General Collecting." Although it is an extremely large field, many collectors seem to enjoy it because they can so easily add items to their collections. No single current catalog lists all of the millions of stamps that have been precanceled. The last general catalog for the entire United States was the 16<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Hoover Brothers Official Precancel Stamp Catalog*, issued in two volumes dated 1937 and 1940.

General collections may be mounted in many ways. A good way to start is to set aside a page for each state. Then, when you have acquired several varieties from one town, add a page for that town. Later on, you may find you have many varieties that show the same style or type of precancelation from the town; you can then put these items on a separate page. As you become familiar with precancel types, you may want to put your Bureau Prints on separate pages from the local city-types.

General collecting is highly recommended to the beginner as the best way to learn about and gain experience in precancels. Even though one then narrows the interest in any way desired, the collector will have a sound background in the whole field.

## **Bureau Prints**

Of the narrower fields of precancel collecting, perhaps the most popular is Bureau Prints. It appeals especially to the individual who likes to collect in a well-mapped area. Probably no other field of stamp collecting is so well documented; government records show what Bureau Prints have been made and how many copies of each. A current catalog is available, as are specially printed albums. Minor variations, repaired plates, and the like also furnish ample challenge to the person who likes to study stamps under a magnifying glass.

## **Precancels of One State**

A popular way of narrowing the field of general collecting is to collect the precancels of one or more states that interest you. Individual catalogs are available for many states; in the absence of official records for local precancels, they list all varieties that were known to the editor when they went to press. If you collect only a few states, you can trade other precancels that come your way for new ones from your pet states. You can thus build up a better showing faster than in general collecting.

## **Towns and Types**

Another way to narrow the precancel field is to collect just one precancel from each town that has issued them. A complete town collection would contain over 21,300 precancels. For this kind of collection, little knowledge of precancel types is needed. Lest town collecting seem too simple, bear in mind that many towns are scarce and no collection contains them all.

When town collecting slows down, many collectors expand their interests to types. In such a collection, they try to get one stamp imprinted with each precanceling device that has been used. Collecting types requires nearly as broad a knowledge of precancels as general collecting. In a sense, it is general collecting in miniature.

*The Precancel Stamp Society's Town and Type Catalog of the United States and Territories* is the best source of information for the town & type collector. There are over 42,300 types listed.

### **Other Specialized Fields**

A good many other ways of collecting part of the precancel field appeal to individuals with widely differing tastes. Some folks collect precancels on only one issue of U.S. stamps: Washington Bicentennials, National Parks, Defense issue, Postage Dues, etc. Others collect all precancels from towns with Indian names, religious names, boys' or girls' names, etc. Still others collect towns along a certain river, railroad, or transcontinental highway. Some collect precancel commemoratives or airmail stamps. Others collect all precancels in a particular style of overprint; probably the most popular have been the Double-Line Electros (DLEs).

Perhaps no other field of stamp collecting offers as much opportunity for individuality in collecting as does precancels.

### **IN CLOSING**

Whatever you decide to collect in the precancel field, you will come to derive much pleasure from the hobby. This statement is doubly true if you don't just accumulate precancels but also study them. Few experiences are as rewarding as discovering something that no one else noticed before. Precancels are about as fertile a field for such discovery as there is.

A word of warning: Don't spoil your fun by becoming a "condition crank." Of course, we all want stamps in fine condition, but many precancels just do not exist that way. Your best bet is to collect whatever copies come along and replace them with better copies when and if you can. However, don't pay fancy prices for poor copies until you learn which are really scarce in any condition.

You will further increase your enjoyment of precancels by personal contacts with other collectors. Such contacts are easy to make through membership in the Precancel Stamp Society and in active local groups.

Good hunting and collecting!

Revised 2009