

Synopsis: The United States 2¢ Columbian of 1893

Sarasota National Stamp Exhibition, January 16-18, 2026

A single stamp exhibit – the story of one stamp – is a quintessential example of traditional philately. This exhibit is a traditional exhibit of the United States 2¢ Columbian stamp issued in 1893.

Treatment. This exhibit is organized in a traditional manner, with five chapters that show (i) archival material, material that illustrates the production of the stamp (including identifiable transfer reliefs, plate markings, plate layout varieties and non-constant production varieties), and first day covers, (ii) the operation of the World's Fair Station, (iii) domestic usages of the stamp, (iv) foreign usages of the stamp and (v) usages that are notable for their place of origin (such as ship mail and territorial usages) regardless of the destination. The exhibit ends with an Epilogue that includes a Roosevelt die proof, printed in 1903. Because the 2¢ Columbian was part of a series issued to honor the Columbian Exposition, and because the US post office had a model post office at the Exposition, the second chapter of the exhibit shows cancellations, other postal markings and usages of the 2¢ Columbian from the World's Fair Station. The 2¢ Columbian was widely available in post offices in 1893 and 1894, with the last stamps being delivered by the American Banknote Company in April 1894. Consistent with this delivery schedule, except for one cancellation from January 1895, all dated or datable covers included in the exhibit are from 1893 or 1894.

Collateral material, including government forms and copies of the reverse of covers, is included to help explain visually the material with which it is included. Certain material and text are in boxes; these items are intended to either summarize or expand on the points made by the adjacent material.

Importance. The 2¢ Columbian was the letter-rate stamp in the first series of commemorative stamps issued by the United States. Because it paid the letter rate, the 2¢ Columbian was the most produced, visible and used stamp of the Columbian series. The 2¢ Columbian was widely used – in the first six months of 1893, more than two-thirds of the letter-rate stamps distributed by the Post Office Department were 2¢ Columbians. The Columbian series were also the last stamps printed in the 19th Century by the American Banknote Company before it lost its contract to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing.

Rarity. The material in this exhibit has been gathered over more than 45 years from countless public auctions, mail bid sales, show dealers and on-line sources. As with any single stamp "vertical," relevant material crosses any number of more general "horizontal" specialties, such as essays and proofs, EFOs, first days, exposition material, machine, fancy, mobile post office and other cancellations, auxiliary markings and many usage-related specialties, including registered and special delivery mail and mail to foreign destinations. This overlap increases the challenge of acquiring any particular item when it is offered.

Highlights of the exhibit include substantial archival material, pre- first day and first day covers, an imperforate pair (now listed by Scott as a plate proof), and rare World's Fair Station markings. Highlights also include rare domestic usages and rare uses to Mexico, Canada and various Universal Postal Union destinations. Notable items are matted on red.

Omissions. Most of the essays that are not included in the exhibit are unique. Only four sets of Panama Pacific die proofs are in private hands. The fifth is in the National Postal Museum. To the best of the exhibitor's knowledge, a Type F Specimen overprint was last available at auction in December 1998. Five World's Fair Station markings are not included. Most of these are known in quantities of ten or fewer, not all of which are on 2¢ Columbian covers. The Scott Catalog lists a quadruple transfer; the exhibitor has never seen one or seen an illustration of one.

Harry Brittain has reported that two formulations of ink were used to print the 2¢ Columbian. The exhibitor understands that the formulations can only be detected using professional-grade scientific instruments and that the differences are not visible to the naked eye, so no examples are included.

Knowledge and Research. The 2¢ Columbian has been extensively studied since it was issued (although published research relating to the stamp is relatively sparse compared to, for example, the 2¢ red brown of 1888). The exhibit includes a newly discovered stage of the Short Line relief, one of the transfer reliefs used to layout the printing plates. This relief is characterized by a broken vertical frameline at lower right (which is listed in Scott). The break is progressive. The new stage was discovered on a plate block that includes the previously reported first stage of the broken frameline in the second row of stamps (positions 12 to 15), but no breaks in the stamps in the top row (positions 2 to 5). There is, however, a break in the top frameline that is common to all the stamps in the block. This discovery will be discussed in a forthcoming article in the *Chronicle*, and is matted in red.

In writing up the exhibit, the exhibitor undertook substantial research in primary sources relating to postal operations, especially the *Postal Laws & Regulations* published in 1893. The statistical information relating to postal operations for 1893 and 1894 that is included in the exhibit is drawn from the *Official Postal Guides* for those years, as well as the *Report of the Postmaster General* for the fiscal year 1893, which ended June 30, 1893, that was submitted to Congress on November 25, 1893. The latter reference also includes an extensive description of the operation of the Columbian Exposition postal station, the operation of which concluded less than one month before the report was submitted. Primary research from all of these sources is designated with a symbol:



In addition to issue specific literature, the exhibitor consulted many broader subject matter articles and handbooks in researching the items included in the exhibit and writing the descriptions. The exhibitor also has had extensive private correspondence with experienced experts in "horizontal" subject matters to confirm the descriptions of various items in the exhibit.

New Material. A prior version of this exhibit was shown in the spring of 2025. The most significant updates from the prior version are the inclusion of the Short Line plate block discussed above, the addition, in response to judges' comments, in the first three frames of stamps with plate varieties on covers, and the addition of a registered parcel front to the Netherlands that includes a commercial use of a dollar value Columbian.

References: (The first two are helpful in understanding the printing varieties in the first three frames of the exhibit.)

Blaikie, William G., *The Two Cent Columbian – A 60 Year Study* (1992).

Copeland, L.H., "20 Added Years of Research on the Two-Cent Columbian," 75 *American Philatelist* 668 (1962) (especially pages 668-69 and 674-75).

Corette, Thomas, "The 2-cent Columbian 'broken har': accidental or deliberate?" 58 *American Philatelic Congress* 29 (1992).

Corette, Thomas, "The 1893 2¢ Columbian imperforate error," *The Congress Book* 2008, at 81 (2008).

Mayo, David W., "Unpaid and Short-Paid Mail Franked with the 2¢ Columbian Stamp," 74 *Chronicle* 81 (2022).

Mayo, David W., "Third- and Fourth-Class Mail with 2¢ Columbians," 74 *Chronicle* 172 (2022).

Mayo, David W., "Mail with Canada and Mexico in the Early 1890s," 103 *Collectors Club Philatelist* 21 (2024).

Finally, the exhibitor thanks his friend Mashiho Yuasa for her help in translating the Japanese postal markings on the short-paid and forwarded cover shown in frame 7.