

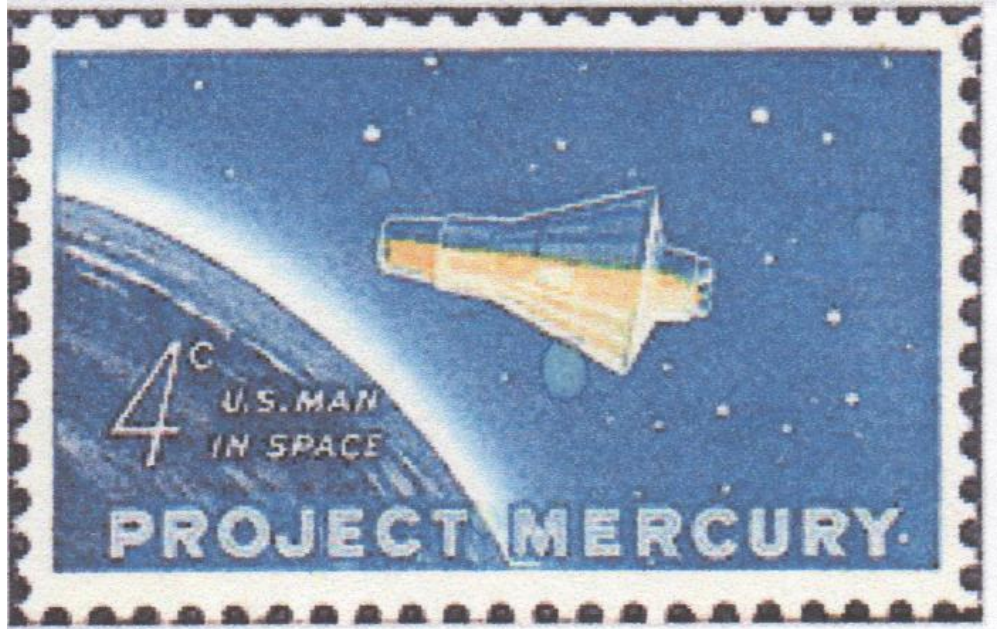
## 4¢ PROJECT MERCURY STAMP

### Philatelic History in the Making

By John Pollock

On February 20, 1962 when the Project Mercury spacecraft, Friendship 7, splashed down in the Atlantic Ocean, it was in the minds of most Americans who anxiously watched or heard the whole operation, that they knew that this was the end of an historical flight. The spacecraft was piloted by Astronaut Lt. Col. John Glenn Jr., who had just successfully orbited the earth, thus proving the United States mandate for the space program, by putting a person into space, to live there, function in that environment, and be returned safely. Glenn was the first American to do so, making three orbits around the earth that took 4 hours and 56 minutes, during which the spacecraft had travelled 81,000 miles. The success of this flight also provided the space center personnel at Cape Canaveral with a gigantic step forward in the learning curve, giving them more confidence for the follow-up flight operations in the program. This was a great achievement for the United States, even though the Russian Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin had accomplished a similar feat in April 1961. However, Project Mercury's successful orbit indicated to the world that the United States was rapidly closing the gap in the space race with the Soviet Union. And, by itself, it was a great morale boost, giving a sigh of relief to Americans, and alleviating anxiety that had prevailed since the Soviets hurled Sputnik I into space on October 5, 1957.

Almost simultaneously on that same day, February 20, 1962, the Post Office Department (P.O.D.) released a 4-cent commemorative stamp to honor the Project Mercury event. It was issued unannounced after it became known that Project Mercury was a success, and that John Glenn had safely returned to earth. The general public as a whole, and stamp collectors in particular, were taken by surprise when the stamps for this special occasion were released for sale. The Project Mercury stamp production was done by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, utilizing a new piece of equipment called the Giori Press, and executed in secret. Prior to Glenn's historic flight, the stamps in sealed packages had been sent to 305 post offices throughout the United States, and were marked "Top Secret". Even the Postmasters were not aware of what was inside them, until they were given the go-ahead to open them and immediately sell the stamps. When that occurred on February 20, one prominent philatelist hit the nail on the head with his comment, "P.O.D. made philatelic history", the reason being, that this was the first time a U.S. stamp was printed before the event took place and commemorated. When the P.O.D. announced the issue of this new stamp, many cachet makers and collectors got into the act big time by swamping the designated post offices, buying many stamps and purchasing stamped envelopes. The stamped envelopes had to be purchased through the Philatelic Sales Agency in Washington D.C. with the official first day cancellation city of Cape Canaveral, Florida. It became a hectic time for the hobby that day and weeks to follow.



**Figure 1** illustrates the stamp which shows a profile of the conical shaped spacecraft measuring approximately 10 feet long by 6 feet wide at its maximum width and juxtaposed with the curvature of the earth, on a starry blue sky background. Created by the well-known designer, Charles R. Chickering, this stamp became one of the most popular to be issued. The number of stamps produced were staggering; by the time the stamp was officially withdrawn on June 9, 1962, a total of 310 million had been printed. It was also believed to be more than twice the average number of commemorative postage stamps issued during that era.

Shortly after the release of the stamp, it did not take long for cachet makers to start producing First Day Covers. They worked furiously to satisfy the demand of collectors, many of whom later got involved with the challenge to acquire a cancellation from all of the 305 FD cities. Two collectors in particular became very active in spearheading the drive to obtain covers from all the cities. They were Monte Eiserman and Henry Scheuer, but there are probably others that I'm not aware of. These two AFDCS members wrote several articles in *First Days*, keeping all of us readers abreast of their pursuit. According to Monte, during that hectic time, a Mercury Cover Collectors Club was organized for trading and selling covers. And why not, there were plenty to go around, with over three million of them, including the unofficial ones.

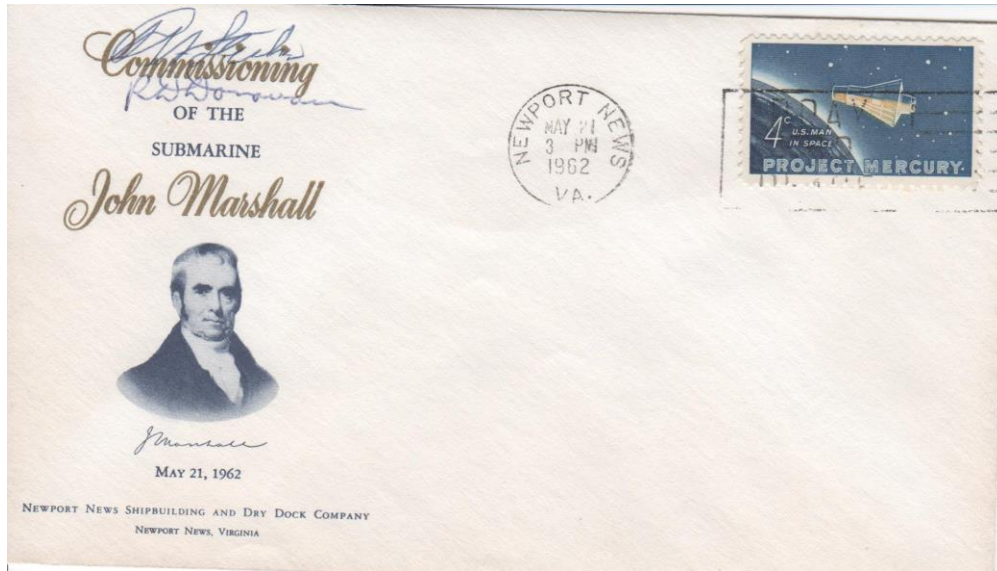


**Figure 2** illustrates a Marg FDC for the Project Mercury stamp with a Cape Canaveral cancellation, a unique cachet because it's Marg's FIRST cachet, having been issued only for advertising purposes. The sponsor for Marg covers was Edmund Shea, AFDCS member number 11737, and the owner of the Shea Advertising Inc. In the 1970s, Shea elected to sell the covers to collectors because of pressure from the philatelic public. A distinctive feature of all Marg cachets is the two-tone color in the design. If anyone can identify Marg's last cachet, which is presently unknown, please contact me or Norm Elrod, Mark Goodson, and John White, who coordinate the "First Cachets Update" project for the AFDCS.

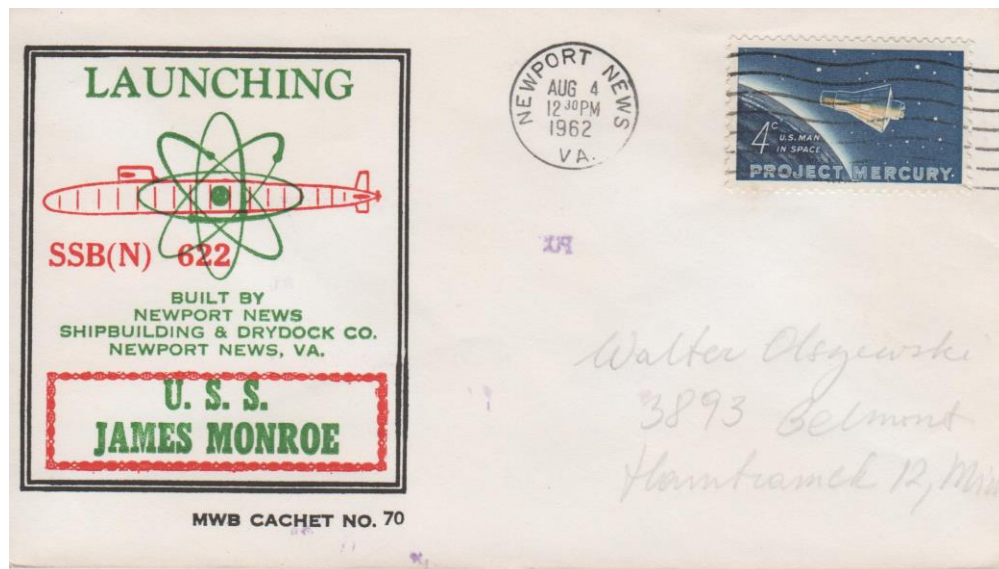


**Figure 3** illustrates another FDC posted at Los Angeles, one of the selected First Day of Issue cities other than Cape Canaveral. A statement printed at the addressee location on the envelope explains the historical flight taken by Glenn. The cachet clearly shows a rocket orbiting earth, and is intended to be a symbolic space craft of sorts. The cachet maker is unknown.

Other philatelic societies, stamp clubs, companies, and closet collectors took advantage of Project Mercury stamps popularity by preparing event covers, with a few being listed here.



**Figure 4** depicts a naval cover dated May 21, 1962 commemorating the commissioning of the Polaris ballistic missile nuclear submarine USS JOHN MARSHALL (SSBN 611) with a Newport News, Virginia postmark. The submarine was built by the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company as stated on the cover. The cachet also illustrates a portrait of this eminent American, remembered as the greatest chief Justice of the Supreme Court who served for a long time, 1801-1835.



**Figure 5** shows another event cover utilizing the Project Mercury stamp, this one being created for the launching of submarine USS JAMES MONROE (SSBN 622), also built by the Newport News Company, and launched on August 4, 1962. The cachet is designed by Morris W. Beck who was prolific in sponsorship, artwork, and printing of covers for many years. The submarine was named to honor the fifth President

of the United States, James Monroe, who served from 1817-1825, and is the author of what is commonly known today as the Monroe Doctrine.



**Figure 6** illustrates another launching, this one for the USS ANDREW JACKSON (SSBN 619) built at the Mare Island Naval Shipyard, Vallejo, California. This event cover, which also uses the Project Mercury stamp, and has a postmark of September 15, 1962, was prepared by the shipyard workers union NAS local 16. Andrew Jackson was the seventh President of the United States from 1829-1837. Prior to that, he was a General in the United States military who became a national hero at the last battle of the war of 1812, "The Battle of New Orleans". The USPS recently issued a Forever stamp commemorating that battle which depicts General Jackson on horseback rallying his defensive forces to victory against the British invaders.

Just to show how enduring the 4-cent Project Mercury stamp has been, an event cover was prepared and issued on October 29, 1998, for the Anniversary of space center 1962-1998, "from Friendship 7 (1962) to the space shuttle, STS 95 (1998)" utilizing an ArtCraft space fantasy cachet, as seen in **Figure 7**.



## References

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