

THE 'PLS SAVE' PROJECT

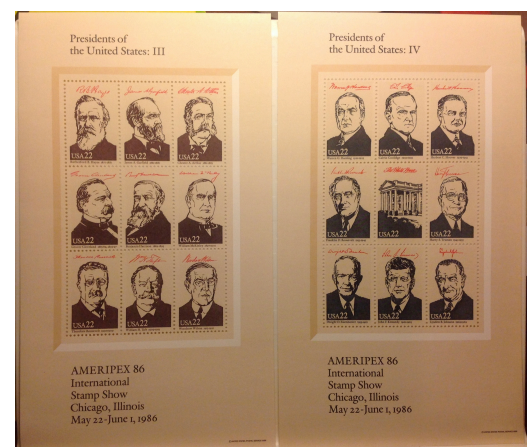
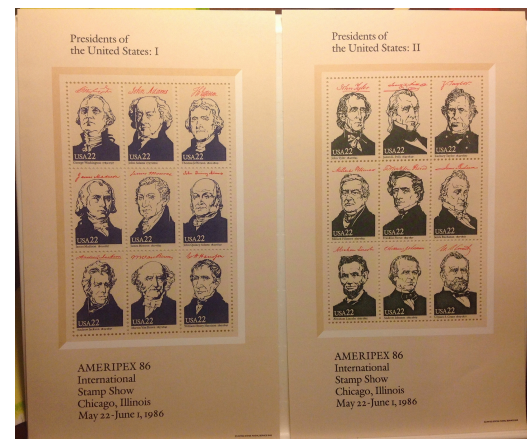
"PLS SAVE." The inscription stands out in the stamp-corner of the envelope, like an S.O.S. signal — Save Our Stamp. I draw a circles around my pleas, with arrows shooting out and pointing at whichever unusual stamps I have affixed to the envelope to help pay the postage. If the charge is, say, \$1.17, I might use three 18-centers, two 31-centers, and a 2-center to make it exact.

Why am I doing this, other than to pass the time, make my envelope more colorful or philatelically exotic? The answer to that question leads into one of the many weedy wilds of stamp collecting. This time, my expedition's quarry is cancelled copies of stamps that you rarely if ever see on envelopes. My modus operandi is to stick these sought-after stamps, in mint condition, on envelopes I send to Loved Ones, asking them to "please save" the cancelled stamps and eventually get them back to me.

It's not as far-fetched as it sounds. There's a sound mercenary reason for trying to add these stamps to my collection. Or rather, two sound reasons. The first reason itself has two parts. One, You are using a stamp for its full value, and two, you get the stamp back and can add it to your collection. The second reason has to do with the stamps themselves, and their value. If you check your Scott catalogue, or Mystic's U.S. Stamp Catalog (a bargain at \$5 from nearby Camden, NY), you will notice strong prices listed for particular cancelled stamps. For example, to buy the set of four miniature sheets that featured U.S. presidents (1986) would cost you \$34.95 at Mystic. That's for MINT sheets. But USED sheets would still cost you a hefty \$32.50. Why so much? Maybe because not many people bothered to use them and get them cancelled, so the sheets and the stamps are relatively rare in that condition.



These two recent examples aren't rare, just a bit unusual. Above: a small stamp from a large sheet of landscapes, this one featuring Carlsbad Caverns National Park (why so small?). Below: one of a small series of scenes from post office murals, this one showing early airmail service.



Similarly, the four Bicentennial souvenir sheets issued in 1976 with famous paintings of revolutionary scenes would cost you \$27.50 mint, and the exact same \$27.50 for four USED sheets.

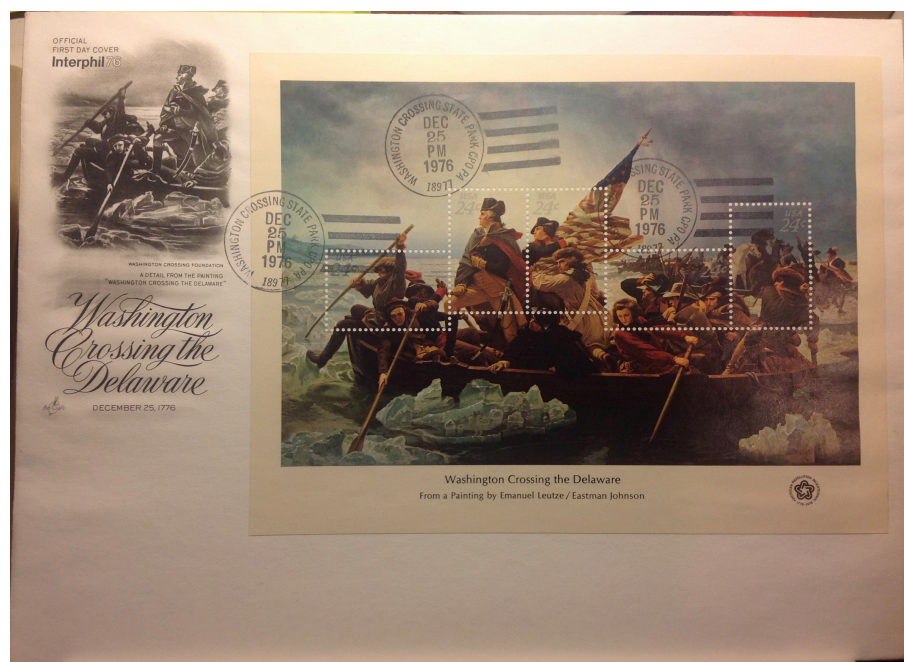


Above is the illustration of the Bicentennial sheets in Mystic's catalog. I no longer have the mint sheets myself, for reasons you will learn when you read on.

At left is a first-day cover of one of the sheets that I put together myself on July 4, 1976, when I was living in Philadelphia. Notice how I added the four-stamp strip in the upper-right-hand corner showing the same famous painting by Trumbull. (Actually, the strip reproduces a larger painting of which the souvenir sheet image turns out to be a detail.) The sheet was carefully cancelled to cover every stamp, which means I have "used" copies of them all, and a first day cover of many varieties.



I can't resist showing off this cover as well, which consists of the famous painting of Washington crossing the Delaware River, by Leutze. Although the cover was issued July 4, I saved it until Christmas and drove the several miles north from Philadelphia to Washington Crossing, Pa., where a special post office window was open to supply a postmark reading "Washington Crossing, Pa., Dec. 25, 1776." Pretty cool, eh? (I have no idea what it's worth. Probably not much. First day covers never became a big thing, certainly not with me.)





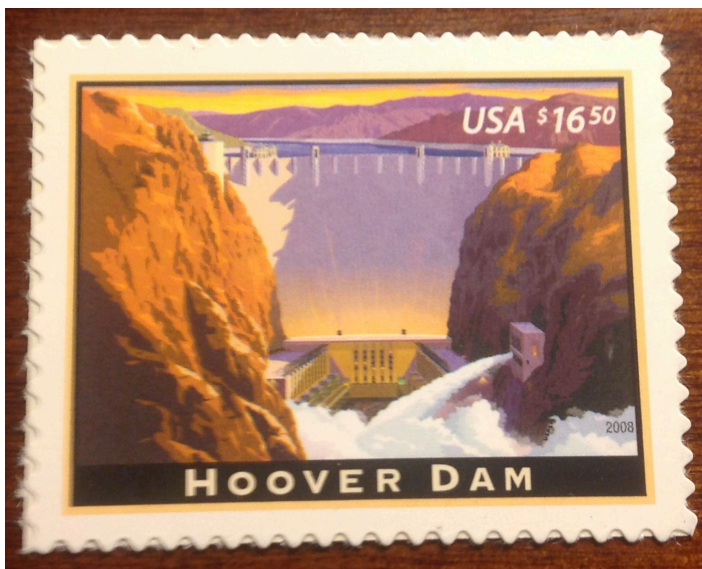
More examples of pricey cancelled stamps involve high-value Priority and Express Mail labels that you rarely see in the mail. The series that began in 2007 by now includes two dozen beautiful American landscape designs, with the first value starting at \$4.80 (Mt. Rushmore), ascending to the current high value — for some kind of super-duper-instant-

will-even-beat-Amazon express delivery service, I guess — \$26.35 (Grand Island Ice Caves).



I have spent hundreds of dollars buying single copies of these high-value stamps from the USPS, hoping they will be a good investment. They also are pretty to look at. So far I don't have any of the highest-value stamps cancelled, and I don't plan to mail something just to get that high-value used stamp. (I suppose I could ask the postmistress here in tiny Minoa, N.Y. to hand-cancel a high-value stamp for me. But what's the point of that?) I have tried, with some success, to snag postally used copies of more affordable stamps from the series over the years via the PLS SEND method — for example, using them on Christmas present packages, when mailing books, or other heavy or bulky

items. You will see examples from my collection, illustrated below. Now consider the catalog prices for these high-value stamps — mint and used — as per the Mystic catalog:



2007

\$4.80 (Mt. Rushmore) Mint: \$18.50; used: \$14.95

\$16.50 (Hoover Dam) Mint: \$57.95; used: \$45.00 ... **



Mint (left); used (right)

2009
\$4.95 (Redwood Forest) Mint: \$14.50;
used: \$12.95



\$17.50 (Old Faithful) Mint: \$49.95;
used: \$39.95

2010
\$4.90 (Mackinac Bridge) Mint: \$16.50;
used: \$12.95 (Hmm. I don't seem to
have this one in my collection yet!)



\$18.30 (Bixby Creek Bridge) Mint: \$54.95; used:
\$42.95

\$4.95 (New River Gorge Bridge) Mint: \$14.95;
used: \$11.95 **



... and on through the
years. You will notice
for each listing, the
used stamps continue
to command strong
catalog prices.

Nosy question: Why did the
USPS issue two Priority stamps,
one in 20010, one for \$4.90, the
other for \$4.95? Just askin ...



A few more examples: The first Priority stamp, the \$9.95 eagle (1983) has a Mystic price of \$32.95, mint, \$27.50 used ...

... a \$14.40 Express Mail stamp from 2003 featuring an X-plane is priced the same, mint or used — \$43.95 ...





... and an Express Mail stamp featuring the presidential helicopter Marine One (2007), with a face value of \$16.25, commands Mystic prices of \$55 mint, \$45 used.

Are you getting the idea of why I collect these used stamps? Are you still with me? Don't you want to find out how my PLS SAVE campaigns have gone? Do the Loved Ones who receive my exotic envelopes notice the stamps and my hand-written, circled plea ("PLS SAVE"), follow the arrows to the stamps and figure it out? (I must have told them a thousand times!) Then, if they do set aside the envelope, when will they get around to cutting off the stamps? And if they put the cut-off stamps aside, when will they actually mail the darn things back to me? Do people even send letters any more? Ach! the tongs and hinges of outrageous philately! Will it ever end? (I hope not!)

Most recently I have been using stamps from the 1976 Bicentennial sheets and U.S. presidents sheets (1986) in my PLS SAVE project. Our basement flooded a couple of years ago, and I hate to admit that a few of my carelessly stored stamps suffered water damage! This included a set of four Bicentennial Sheets, with stamps valued at 13, 18, 24 or 31 cents. Also damaged was a set of sheets of the (dead) U.S. presidents, Washington through LBJ, each stamp a 22-center. Trying to turn this disaster into an opportunity, I managed to recover many of the water-damaged stamps without further harm, but also without gum. (For those who don't remember "gum," this was a shiny surface on the back of a stamp that you licked to make it "gummy" so you could stick your stamp on your envelope.) A mint stamp without gum is pretty much worthless to a collector — though it still is worth its face value for mailing purposes. Plus, I could regain some philatelic value by creating an intact cancelled stamp, which of course is not supposed to have gum since it has been used.

Accordingly, I removed the stamps that were "embedded" in the souvenir sheets — carefully folding and tearing along the perforations to separate the individual stamps, with their detail of the larger design. Then I used my handy glue stick to paste these unused, unusual stamps on letters and larger envelopes, in various combinations to meet the correct postage amount. My goal: to secure a decent representation of these stamps that rarely have been used in the U.S. mail. Some fun, eh?

A Gallery of PLS SAVE covers — ready to go!



Notice the top of my glue stick, at right. Below it is part of the scale I use to weigh envelopes and calculate postage.



Enough background — cut to the philatelic phinish. Did I get any of these stamps back? You betcha!

A note from one Loved One, accompanying a batch of PLS SAVE stamps, began: “Here, finally, are your precious cancelled stamps ...” I have included illustrations of returned stamps, on cover ...

A gallery of PLS SAVE covers, cancelled and returned



... soaked and off cover ...



... dried ...

... sorted ...

... and mounted!



The "cancelled" presidents set still has a few gaps.
As for the Bicentennial sheet singles ...





What are they waiting for?

... they must rank among the oddest stamps in the U.S. catalog! Off-center, garishly hued, with numbers you can hardly read. Who is that in the frame? What are they doing? Charitably one would conclude this was



This dour group is no Mt. Rushmore, that's for sure. The extraneous book, hands and quill don't help make the scene any clearer ...



Jefferson appears to have been heavily into the sherry; who knows what the *bon vivant* Franklin is up to?

not the most successful project in U.S. postal history — particularly when you consider the beautiful sheets with embedded singles put



Hey, who's in charge here? And how did Greta Garbo get into the boat?



Wha ...?

out by the USPS in later years. (See in particular the 12-sheet Nature in America series, 1999-2010.) Granted, the Bicentennial scenes were from famous paintings, and the artists hardly anticipated their work would be cut up into a half-dozen rectangular stamp designs. But still ... where were we?



Here's a weird one. No one looks very resolute, including the fellow doffing his cap. And do you see the ghostly face framed by in his arm? Brrr!

Be warned, fellow expeditioners: The PLS SAVE philatelic project can be hazardous to your stamps' health. Be prepared for disappointment. As the accompanying illustration

shows, some of the precious collectibles I carefully placed on the envelope — lovingly hand-cancelled by the friendly postmistress in my village of Minoa — didn't make it to my collection. I don't fault the USPS for damaging the stamps. I don't fault anyone, really. I will just make this observation: None of my Loved Ones is a stamp collector (though my oldest two played with stamps as kids). No matter how much I lecture about stamp protocol, it doesn't leave much of an impression. It's as though

discussing the technical aspects of stamp collecting causes a gauzy haze to settle all around the subject, and nothing sinks in. This means my Loved Ones may or may not save the envelope with my precious stamps on it; someone may jam it in a cubbyhole, or step on it; a child or dog may knock it into the recycling bin. Somehow the envelope gets creased, thereby creasing a stamp or two as well. Calamity! Then, in cutting out the stamps, a Loved One might accidentally tear, slice or fold a stamp. Ouch! Don't do that! The results are easy to see, but painful to look at. I suppose I could keep these damaged stamps as mementos of the PLS SAVE project — but that's against my rules. A damaged stamp is not worth keeping, except in the most extraordinary circumstances (I have a couple, which I may tell you about some day ...)

In view of the hazards, it's a boost to notice how many stamps make it through the mail mill intact!



Damage assessment: Poor Warren Harding had his handsome face chopped; Benjamin Harrison nearly had his beard shaved; Woodrow Wilson got a nasty abrasion on his upper forehead; as for Gen. Burgoyne or whoever it is, I'm afraid his coat is irreparably creased.

I consider PLS SAVE a success, on the whole. Even if some stamps never come back, and others come back damaged, I haven't lost anything, because I've "used" them already. Brilliant!

A final note: The illustrations at the top of this essay show a couple of PLS SAVE stamps that aren't valuable, but which come from unusual souvenir sheets. I've had tons of fun over the years, scheming to collect cancelled sets of these less-common stamps. Striving for completeness is one of the deep pleasures of

stamp collecting — particularly when you achieve it by filling out a long set. I have on my wall two frames containing each example of the 50-state series of birds and flowers (1982) — every one of them cancelled (Mystic prices — Mint: \$39.95; used: \$24.95.



** EDITOR'S NOTE: I have listed stamp prices from Mystic's catalog only for comparison purposes, not to suggest how much the stamps are worth. You may be able to find better deals on the Internet — or bid at an online auction and get a real bargain!

TO BE CONTINUED



My latest PLS SAVE missive, launched just yesterday. Hope never dies!

