

Are these special?

Here I was, all set to launch into my stamp essays on “heroes and villains,” when along comes a note from my beloved niece Manda. She included a picture of two old stamps, on postcards, asking: Are these special?



1954

When a member of my intimate circle asks a philatelic question, I pay attention. It was tempting to send back a breezy email noting that both stamps were extremely common for their eras — the 4-cent Lincoln from the 1954 definitive series, and the 1-cent Franklin from the series that began in 1922. Sorry to be the bearer of such ho-hum tidings.

But since it was Manda, and since I was quite touched by her interest, I looked into it a bit more.

Sure, the 4-cent Lincoln is truly, genuinely ordinary. The Mystic stamp catalogue offers it for sale for a modest 40 cents, in mint condition. A cancelled copy should be available for practically nothing.

The 100-year old one-cent Franklin, however, turns out to be another story.

A bit of U.S. stamp history is called for. My principal source is the very useful Mystic Stamp Company catalog. (On sale for \$10, but often available for free at stamp shows or from stamp clubs.) It seems the 1920s was a transitional era in U.S. stamp production, as the printing process moved from old-fashioned flat plates to the more efficient rotary press system. Along with this fundamental change came experiments in perforations — the holes punched between stamps to facilitate tearing them apart for customer use. Something to do with the stresses of the rotary printing process. Mystic calls the 1920s “the great age of odd perforations,” which caused some unusual errors and varieties that created rarities and considerable value fluctuations.

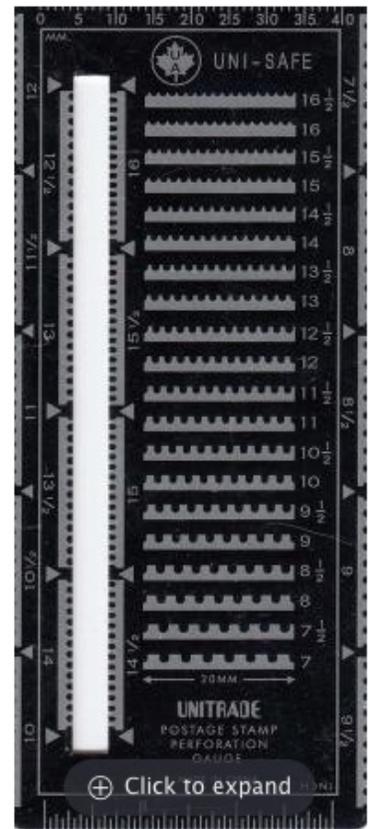


1922

Different perforation sizes do not excite me much, though they do create completely different stamps for the record. I've always found it difficult to use the perforation gauge (example at right), the arbiter of different sizes. The gauge is supposed to measure the stamp's perforation dimples. Mystic usefully demystifies the process: "A **perforation gauge** measures how many **perforations** fit in 2 cm. Line up the stamp to match a printed row and slide until it fits."

For this collector, gauging the difference between 10 1/2 and 11 perforations is an exercise in frustration, soon abandoned.

Odd perforation were not an issue in stamp production for long. Soon enough, standardized perforations were adopted. For the definitive issue of the 1920s, however, it was a big deal, as you will see below.



Here is an example of the 1-cent from the first set, issued in 1922. Mystic describes it as a result of flat plate printing, perforated 11. Prices: \$3.75 mint, 20 cents used.

No. 522

Next, in 1923, came an imperforate version — that is, with no perforations at all. These were used for private vending machines, according to Mystic. Prices: \$14 mint, \$9 used.



No. 575



The same stamp, printed for the first time on a rotary press, came out in 1923. It is perforated 11x10, and that small difference accounts for a whopping increase in value: \$145 mint, \$215 used.

No. 578



That early version was quickly replaced by another rotary press issue, perforated 10 all around. Prices: \$17 mint, 75 cents used.

No. 581

This stamp is a coil, which means it comes from a roll of stamps, not a full sheet. The perforations here are vertical, and the other two sides are flat. So you see how the coil unrolls. Prices: 60 cents mint, 20 cents used.



No. 597



In this coil example, the perforations are horizontal, so the roll unravels vertically. Prices: same as above.

No. 604



This example, from the issue of 1926, is perforated 11x10 1/2. I'd try to verify this with my perforation gauge except it's not that important. The stamp price from Mystic is only 50 cents mint, 20 cents used.

No. 632



No. 658



No. 670

This variety and the next one are obviously different from the rest. I include them as oddities. As Mystic tells it, during the 1920s, railroad holdups were common in the new states of Kansas and Nebraska. Thieves stole the stamps and sold them in other states. Authorities applied the typewritten overprints to discourage the practice. However, some postal workers refused to handle the strange stamps, and customers complained. The practice soon was abandoned. Because relatively few of the stamps were in circulation, prices for them are noteworthy: \$5 mint, \$4.75 used for the Kansas 1-cent overprint; \$5.75 mint, \$5.50 used for the Nebraska overprint.

There you have it — no fewer than 9 varieties of the 1-cent Franklin from the 1922 definitive series, with a wide range of values.



No. 552; \$3.75



No. 578: \$145



No. 632: 50 cents

Manda: What a long-winded response to your question, without a specific answer! The best I can do is this: Since it looks like the cancellation on your postcard is dated 1930, it is likely your stamp is No. 632, from the last issue of 1926. Not one of the valuable ones, I'm afraid. Thanks for asking.
Love, Your Uncle FMF