

Your Guide to Postal Rules and Philately

Rules concerning philatelic postmarks were reproduced in *Linn's Stamp News*, April 16, 1996, in an article entitled "Postal Rules That the USPS Refuses to Publish." They were condensed from section 160, "Philately," in issue 45 of the old, softbound *Domestic Mail Manual*, the Postal Service's bible for post offices and services in the United States. The rules cover most postmark subjects of interest to collectors....

Fred Baumann wrote, "Unfortunately, the illustrated 13-page section from which this was taken was last published in the *DMM* in 1992. Since then, the *DMM* has been published in a baffling loose-leaf format in a 12-tabbed, 3-inch binder. On postmarks, the lone 'Philatelic Services' page in the most recent issue of this loose-leaf *DMM* (Section G 900.1.5) now unhelpfully informs the use, 'Details on USPS policy on philatelic postmarking...are in the *Postal Operations Manual*'." Unlike the *DMM*, the *Postal Operations Manual* is not updated quarterly, nor to our knowledge is it available by subscription....

Until the USPS again makes this information easily accessible, you might want to clip and keep this page for ready reference.

163 Distribution and Sale of Stamps, Postal Stationery, and Philatelic Products

163.34 Temporary Philatelic Stations

163.341 Purpose of Participation. Post offices establish special temporary stations to provide philatelic services and to sell commemorative stamps and philatelic products. These stations may include specially constructed counters or mobile retail units. They are most frequently located at stamp shows, philatelic exhibitions, stamp dedications, state fairs, conventions, parades, or at other locations of activities of significant public or philatelic interest.

163.342 Requests for Participation. Requests for Postal Service participation at such events should be made by the sponsors or organizers to the local postmaster for initial action. Only requests for first-day-of-issue or other special support that must come from the national level should be directed to the Stamp Product Development Branch. All first-day ceremonies are conducted under the direction of the Stamp Product Development Branch. The payment of fees for space may not be authorized below the Headquarters level. Once a postmaster has agreed to participate in an exhibition, a unilateral withdrawal from such a commitment may not be made without the approval of the Stamp Marketing Division, based on a showing of good cause.

163.343 Authorization. Temporary philatelic stations may be authorized by the postmaster. Postmasters are authorized to participate at events where admission fees are charged by the sponsor, but, in these cases, the same cancellation used at the event must be available on request to those not attending the event.

163.346 Arrangements

h. Cancellation Service

(1) Cancellation service should be provided separately from stamp sales. A sufficient number of clerks should be available to provide speedy service.

(2) Clerks should be trained in advance how to provide handstamped postmarks of philatelic quality. (Refer to 164.3 for cancellation regulations.)

164 Cancellations for Philatelic Purposes

164.1 Definition and Policy

164.11 Postmark. A postmark is a postal cancellation containing the post office name, state, and ZIP Code and month, day, and year the canceling post office accepted custody of the material, except as provided in 164.71 and 164.74. Other postal markings are made by validators, obliterators, or special-purpose cancelers.

164.12 National Publicity. The Postal Service must endeavor to make all unusual postmarking service widely known to collectors through advance national publicity in order to avoid such postmarks being available only to small groups of people.

164.13 Backdating. It is the policy of the Postal Service to prohibit the backdating of mail, except in the following cases:

- a. Postal operating requirements and public demand necessitate that cancellation commence before and continue after the date contained in the postmark.
- b. Damaged, defective, or missing cancellations or covers require replacements.
- c. All requirements for cancellations are met by customers but cancellations are not applied because of errors made by postal personnel.
- d. The general manager, Philatelic Sales Division, authorizes the backdating in writing.

164.2 Philatelic Postmarking

164.21 General. Postmarking of philatelic purposes is provided at the request of collectors or cover services for postmarking outside ordinary mail processing. This service requires special procedures and arrangements so that other postal operations and services are not interfered with or disrupted. It may involve hand-stamping requested whether on a handback or mailback basis and may entail the holding of mail for cancellation. Before this specialized service can be provided, all its conditions must be met. As a free service, it is limited to transactions with fewer than 50 envelopes or other items. For 50 or more envelopes or other items, advance approval of the Philatelic Sales Division is required before service can be provided.

164.22 Cooperation With Collectors

164.221 Clear and Legible Postmarks. Employees should strive to furnish clear and legible postmarks to stamp collectors by ensuring that cancellation machines and hand-stamp devices are properly inked. Postal employees must give special attention to mail bearing an

endorsement of philatelic value or to requests for light cancellations and should avoid canceling stamps by pen or illegible smudging; however, stamps must be canceled sufficiently to protect postal revenue.

164.222 Covers in Mailstream. The Postal Service cannot provide special attention to a philatelic cover if it is routinely entered into the mailstream by the sender.

164.223 Postmarking Devices. Postmarking devices may be used only under the supervision of authorized postal personnel, except that contractors who are working under an active contract with the USPS to cancel stamps also may use postmarking devices when and in the manner authorized by the contract.

164.224 Hand-Stamped Postmarks. All hand-stamped postmarks must be made with black ink, unless the customer specifically indicates a preference for the color otherwise in use.

164.225 Handling. Employees should exercise care in handling all philatelic covers to ensure that they are not damaged in mailhandling. These covers are generally identifiable by a design printed on the left side of the envelope. Postal employees should ensure that philatelic covers are not overcanceled, backstamped, marked “received this date,” or otherwise defaced on front or back; used as a top piece in a bundle for destination package for labeling purposes; or bent, folded, mutilated, or damaged by rubber bands.

164.23 Handback and Mailback Service

164.231 Procedure. Postmarks rather than other obliterations should be used to provide the handback and mailback services whenever they are available.

164.232 Handback Service

a. Post offices must honor requests for “handback” cancellation service where a customer personally presents an addressed or unaddressed envelope, postal card, or other item described in 164.73 to a postal clerk for cancellation with the current day’s postmark and immediate return or hand back to the customer.

b. The envelope, card, or other item does not enter the mailstream. All such materials must bear uncanceled postage to the applicable First-Class rate.

c. So that service to other customers is not disrupted, there is a limit of 50 cancellations that can be provided for any single customer.

d. This service may be provided for special die hub or regular machine cancellations only if the particular cancellation machine is readily accessible to the postal clerk, where the providing of such service does not interfere with other sales or mail-processing operations, and does not inconvenience other customers.

164.233 Mailback Service. Mailback service refers to that service authorized by the Philatelic Sales Division for stamp dealers and cover servicers that permits envelopes, cards, or other items submitted for cancellation to be returned in bulk through the mail.... This form of mailback service must be approved in writing in advance by the Philatelic Sales Division. Mailback service must not be provided for special die hub or machine cancellations.

164.4 Types of Postmarks or Cancellations

164.42 Pictorial Cancellations. These cancellations are authorized to be used only at temporary philatelic stations and at other philatelic outlets. They must not be used at regular stamp windows for special local celebrations. Cancellations used are generally hand stamps, except when volume requires the use of a machine cancellation. They may be used only during the operation of the temporary philatelic station. Mail-order requests for such cancellations must be postmarked no later than 30 days after the date of the cancellation to qualify for service. A station may be authorized only one pictorial cancellation during its operation at an event. Different cancellations for each day of an event are authorized only for international philatelic exhibitions recognized by the Office of Stamps and Philatelic Marketing and held in the United States.

164.43 Special Die Hub Cancellations. Special die hub cancellations contain words relating to an event. These cancellations are applied by machine to live mail. Handback service may be provided only as described in 164.232. Mailback (return in bulk) service must not be provided; but, cancellation can be provided on addressed envelopes or postal card that are delivered to the addressee or addressees through mail delivery. Cancellations of philatelic quality are often not possible.

164.44 Standard Cancellations. Circular hand-stamped cancellations with or without killer bars may be provided on request at post offices, stations, and branches. They are available every day the office is open for business. No slogan or pictorial material may be included. Mail requests for these cancellations must be at the post office offering the service on the date of the cancellation to qualify for service.

164.46 Regular Machine Cancellations. Post offices may not machine-cancel mail with the regular postmark when the envelopes are unaddressed or when the customer requests handback service, except as described in 164.231. Mailback (return in bulk) service must not be provided, but cancellations can be provided on addressed envelopes or postal cards that are delivered to the addressee or addressees through mail deliver.

164.534 Unacceptable Covers. The issuing post office must not provide cancellation service on covers submitted through the mail that are unaddressed or bear stamps issued after the issue date and before the submittal cutoff date, or bear previously canceled stamps; nor may the post office provide handback service on any items presented after the first day of issue. These restrictions can be waived only by written authorization of the Philatelic Sales Division.

164.7 Conditions for Philatelic Postmarking

164.72 Preparation Requirements. Post cards, postal cards, and envelopes submitted through the mail must bear postage at the applicable rate and complete addresses.... Materials for handback service need not be addressed.

164.73 Special Materials on which Cancellations Requested. The materials described in this section may be canceled as indicated. Photographs, postcards, or other materials with a glossy-coated or hand-calendared surface, or any material that does not readily accept ink, are submitted for cancellation at the customer's risk, the Postal Service is not responsible for smudged cancels or offsetting on such material.

a. Plain Cards, Slips of Paper, and Blank Envelopes. Postal employees may not place postmarks for customers on plain slips of paper, plain cards, or blank envelopes that do not bear unused postage in an amount equaling or exceeding the First-Class rate.

b. Picture Postcards (Maximum Cards). Picture postcards with the stamp affixed on the face of the card rather than on the address side are known as maximum cards. Postmasters may cancel these cards and hand them back to the person presenting them.

c. Posters, Portfolios, and Other Memorabilia. Posters, portfolios, and other memorabilia with the stamps affixed thereon may be canceled when presented in person for hand-back service. Submittal and return through the mail is not permitted.

d. Already Canceled Stamps/Multiple Cancellations. Items bearing previously canceled stamps and postmarks are acceptable for additional cancellations if uncanceled First-Class postage

e. Currency. Currency bearing unused postage stamps of First-Class value or items bearing currency with stamps affixed or adjacent thereto may be canceled when presented in person for handback service. Submittal and return through the mail is not permitted. The Postal Service does not accept responsibility for currency in its possession in conjunction with philatelic services.

f. Backs of Envelopes. Post offices may cancel unused stamps when they are affixed to the reverse side of envelopes bearing already canceled stamps. This service is available only for envelopes presented for handback service. They may not be returned through the mail, even when outer envelopes are provided. Such a cancellation denotes only that the item was presented to the post office for postmarking on that date; it does not denote that the envelope was carried by the Postal Service...This type of cover may be presented, for instance, in situations re-enacting Pony Express routes, promoting special airline flights, balloon ascents, and the like, on which covers are carried outside the mail service.

g. Foreign Postage Stamps. Unused foreign postage stamps may be canceled with a U.S. Postal Service postmark only when unused U.S. Postage of the appropriate rate is canceled with the same stroke.

164.74 Holding Mail

164.741 Time Limit. Post offices may hold mail to comply with customers' requests that the mail be postmarked on a specified date. Post offices may not, however, hold mail for an event where the date of occurrence is not certain or when the office is closed, except as authorized by the Philatelic Sales Division. In these latter instances, the envelopes submitted should be returned, unserviced and in an outer envelope, to the customer with a short note explaining why the requested service cannot be performed.

164.742 Maximum Number of Covers. There is a limit of 50 covers per customer that may be held for cancellation...Quantities above this number must receive the prior written authorization of the Philatelic Sales Division. The Philatelic Sales Division may also authorize the holding of mail for events of nationwide interest.

164.75 Damaged or Missing Covers

164.751 Requests for Replacements. Requests for replacement of first-day cancellations, pictorial cancellations, and standard cancellations may be accepted at the appropriate post office for a period of 60 days from the postmark date for first-day and pictorial cancellations or for 30 days from the date of cancellation for standard cancellations.

164.752 Conditions for Replacements. Replacement cancellations are made for poor quality of cancellation, damage to the envelope, or other similar defects. Replacements are not made, however, in cases where envelopes were marked on the back by letter-sorting machine code numbers as they moved through the mail system.

164.753 Customer Returns. The customer must return the unsatisfactory cover or covers to the appropriate post office for replacement.

164.754 Stale Postmarks. Replacement covers must be returned to the customer in a penalty envelope so that a stale postmark does not appear in the mailstream.

164.756 Covers Not Replaced. The Postal Service does not replace missing or unsatisfactory standard machine cancellations, special die hub cancellations, or flight cancellations, as these cancellations are made in the course of live mail processing.

164.757 Time Limit for Claims. All claims for nonreceipt of other covers submitted for servicing by the Postal Service must be sent to the appropriate post office no later than 60 days from the date of postmark or from the date cancellations were last applied. Claims for replacement cancellations filed after this time are not honored but are returned to the customer with a short explanation as to why the request cannot be honored.

164.758 Cacheted Covers. The Postal Service is not responsible for damage or loss of cacheted covers or of other items of value.

164.76 Special Requests. Requests for cancellations at postal facilities that normally do not cancel mail must be made in writing to the field director, marketing and communications, at least 60 days in advance to permit authorizations and appropriate national publicity. These requirements also apply to requests for cancellations at offices that are inaccessible to the public or to requests for cancellations at any offices on dates when mail is not normally canceled; i.e., Sundays and holidays. Cover servicers [requiring two or more covers]... must submit their requests for cancellations to the Philatelic Sales Division.

164.77 Military Post Offices. Military post offices, including APOs and FPOs, may hand-stamp covers both on a handback basis and on mail-order requests in conformance with all policies and under all conditions and procedures in this section, except that

a. The postal chief at each such installation may establish the maximum number of covers individual collectors or dealers may submit.

b. Military post offices may establish temporary philatelic stations or provide pictorial cancellations on an exceptional basis. Requests to establish temporary philatelic stations must be sent, at least 90 days in advance of the commemorative event, to the responsible postmaster (New York City or San Francisco) for approval and coordination with the Headquarters Stamp Marketing Division.

164.9 Cancellation Services at Temporary Philatelic Stations

164.91 Approvals

164.911 Standard. Postmasters may request authority from the field director, marketing and communications, to provide cancellations service at temporary philatelic stations. Only the standard circular cancellation may be provided, unless the sponsors or organizers apply to the postmaster for use of a pictorial cancellations at least 10 weeks before the event. The sponsors or organizers must also propose a design and finished artwork for a pictorial cancellation. The cancellation service and design require the approval of the postmaster and the field director, marketing and communications.

164.912 Exceptional. As an exception to 164.911, requests for approvals of pictorial or special cancellations for National Stamp Collecting Month (NSCM) in October of any year may be sent to postmasters directly to Postal Service Headquarters. Postmasters must submit their requests by August 1 to: NSCM Program Manager, U.S. Postal Service. Postmasters must also send file copies of such requests to the directors, marketing and communications, at the MSC and the division. Requests for NSCM cancellations must include a contact name and telephone number, dates the cancellation is to be offered, a clear copy of the original cancellation artwork for publication in a philatelic news release, and a complete mailing address for customers requesting the cancellation. For the cancellation designs, post offices may use clip art printed in the annually distributed NSCM guidebook, or they may create their own artwork. NSCM cancellations may be offered for 1 or more consecutive days during October. These pictorial and special cancellations must be applied by rubber handstamps locally procured by the requesting

office.

164.92 Requirements. All cancellations must carry the name of the exhibition or event, followed by the word “Station” or “Sta.,” the city, state, and ZIP code, and the month, day, and year. Pictorial cancellations that endorse the ideals, policies, programs, products, campaigns, or candidates of religious, antireligious, commercial, political, fraternal, trade, labor, public-interest, or special-interest organizations may not be approved. However, cancellations may be approved that recognize events such as meetings or conventions sponsored by or involving such organizations, providing their designs do not include words, symbols, or illustrations referring to ideals, policies, programs, products, campaigns, or candidates. If there is doubt as to whether a proposed cancellation meets these requirements, the manager, Stamp Market Development Branch, USPS Headquarters, should be consulted before granting approval. Overall dimensions must not exceed 4 inches horizontally and 2 inches vertically.

164.93 Publicity. The field director, marketing and communications, must submit a reproducible copy of pictorial cancellation (actual size) to the Stamp Market Development Branch so that appropriate national publicity can be arranged. The use of standard cancellations at temporary philatelic stations must also be reported. All reports should include the dates the temporary philatelic stations are to be open. Reports and copies of pictorial cancellations must be submitted the first of each month for those cancellations authorized 2 months later (e.g., January 1 for March authorization; February 1 for April, etc.).

164.94 Equipment. Pictorial and standard cancellations must be applied by rubber hand stamps purchased by the region. If more than 100,000 pieces of mail are anticipated, the region may apply to the Stamp Market Development Branch a least 60 days in advance for purchase of a metal die for machine cancellation. These cancellations may be provided only for the duration of the temporary philatelic station.

164.95 Service Limitations. Except for the exhibition or convention sponsor, hand-stamping as a free service is limited to 50 covers for any single individual or group. The sponsor may obtain any reasonable amount of handbacks free of service charge for its members, and special folders or programs prepared by the sponsor may be canceled and made available at the opening of the show. Individuals or groups requiring more than 50 hand-stamped cancellations may obtain this service only by paying a special fee. Written application for this service must be made in advance to, and authorized by, the Philatelic Sales Division.

164.96 Use and Return of Equipment. Philatelic cancellation hand stamps, like other canceling devices, may be used only under the supervision of authorized postal personnel and must be returned by the postmaster to the field director, marketing and communications, 65 days after close of the exhibition or convention, by which time all replacement requests are to be handled. The field director, marketing and communications, must destroy the cancellation device on receipt.

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