



1869 PICTORIAL ISSUE

THE NATIONAL BANK NOTE CO. CONTRACT extended through August 1868 gave National the opportunity to introduce grilling to prevent cleaning and reuse of stamps. As the contract expiration date approached, PMG Alexander W. Randall advertised for bids for a new contract. PMG Randall was a Johnson administration appointee, and he solicited bids in June 1868, but Randall's term would not last long. In November 1868 the election was won by Ulysses S. Grant and in March 1869 his administration appointed a new PMG, John A. J. Creswell. Competition for the 1869 stamp contract had been fierce, and PMG Randall's decision to award National was bitterly contested by Butler, Carpenter, who argued that their bid was significantly lower than National's. Despite their protests the choice was maintained, apparently due to National's exclusive license to use Steel's patented grilling machine and the persuasive argument that Butler, Carpenter lacked the required fireproof facilities. Although the contract was signed by Johnson's PMG in February 1869, the Grant administration inherited what was to become the 1869 Pictorial Issue.

While preceding issues had been current for seven to ten years and the 1870 portrait issue lasted eighteen years, not even a year was given to the 1869 Pictorial Issue. It was sandwiched in between the 1861-68 and 1870-88 issues with the shortest life of any regular issue. Looking back today, the artistry and themes of the 1869 Pictorials seem elegant and dignified. However, contemporary critical review was unexpectedly negative. Perhaps the general attitude was opposed to anything related to the old Johnson administration. It could also be that Butler, Carpenter's well-documented admonishments over the poor quality and excessive cost of the 1869 Pictorials influenced postal officials.

Unlike their predecessors, the ten 1869 stamps were designed in an almost square format. The 1c through 12c values were smaller than previous issues and could be printed in sheets of 300—two panes of 150—instead of the regular 200-stamp sheet format (something that Butler, Carpenter felt was an inequity in the bidding contest, with some justification). The 15c, 24c, 30c and 90c values were printed in normal-size sheets of 200, but each stamp was bicolored, requiring separate plates and printing for the frame and vignette colors. The stamps were also grilled (Scott-listed G Grill).

Three of the ten 1869 stamps had traditional portraits: 1c Franklin, 6c Washington, and 90c Lincoln, the highest denomination of the set. Reaction to the portrait stamps was generally positive. The other values represented a radical departure from the portraiture of all previous issues. The theme of fast communication was chosen for three values: the 2c postal carrier on

horseback, the 3c locomotive train, and the 12c S.S. *Adriatic*, a symbol of fast ocean navigation. The remaining monochrome value was the 10c, which had a patriotic motif represented by an eagle with outstretched wings perched on a shield. This eagle-and-shield design was adapted for the 30c bicolored stamp with the addition of draped flags. The bicolor 15c and 24c had the most dramatically different designs. The 15c stamp's blue vignette was a miniature engraving based on an 1839 oil painting entitled *Landing of Columbus* by John Vanderlyn. The 24c vignette was engraved from John Trumbull's oil painting, *Signing of the Declaration of Independence*.

Numerous 1869 essays with different vignettes and portraits were reviewed and rejected before the final selection was complete. National submitted highly-finished essay products in the form of gummed, grilled and perforated sheets printed from carefully-prepared plates. Several values were modified by enlarging the numerals, requiring a new set of dies and plates. There is no doubt that National made every effort to ensure its success in obtaining the 1869 stamp contract by producing a set of stamps under the watchful and talented supervision of its foremost artists and engravers. Nevertheless, once the stamps were in the public domain, it became clear that artistic innovation was unwelcome as the 1869's received a barrage of negative daily editorials.

The 1c Franklin portrait was described as marred by the "No. 1 court plaster fixed upon the left breast [that] gives to the head an appearance similar to that of a policeman, or fireman." The 2c horse and rider was described as "Booth's death ride into Maryland." The meaning of the locomotive on the 3c was surmised "to represent how Congressmen make money." The 6c portrait of Washington escaped the public's wrath. Not so the orange-yellow color of the 10c: "This stamp would be beautiful if the color were any other than orange." Praise was actually bestowed on James Smillie's depiction of the S.S. *Adriatic*. Although the intricacy of the 15c engraving was admired, its place on a postage stamp was criticized: "As a postage stamp we consider the 15 cent article a failure; as a pretty picture for an illuminated ABC book, a decided success." A sarcastic thumbs-down was also given to the 24c: "Strangers, especially foreigners, would stare as the group of stately looking Quakers, and wonder whether they were enjoying a peep of Congress or gazing into the President's House." Of the bicolor 30c, one reviewer wrote "...the meanest looking stamp we have ever seen, reminds us more of a bunch of rags hung out of a junk shop than anything else." The distinguished portrait of Lincoln was admired, but the "prison bars" behind his head were criticized.