The United States launched the world’s first government airmail service in 1918. The use of airplanes in World War I established aviation as a critical element of national defense. Still, using planes to carry the mail struck many as impractical, if not impossible. Representative Martin B. Madden of Chicago told Captain Benjamin B. Lipsner, the key organizer of the first airmail service, “...I know of nothing that is more ridiculous or asinine than a venture of this sort. If I had my way about it, I would see that you are thrown into the federal penitentiary, and the key thrown away.” Undeterred by naysayers, Postmaster General Burleson, Second Assistant Postmaster General Otto Praeger, Captain Lipsner and others worked furiously to make airmail a reality, preparing the men and equipment for the May 15th inauguration date.

The first airmail route ran between three cities: Washington D.C. to the south, New York City to the north, and Philadelphia in between. A relay of modified Curtiss JN4-H “Jenny” biplanes carried the mail bags in both directions, leaving New York and Washington D.C. at the same time. The mail was transported between the airfields and post office by truck. A letter sent from Washington in the morning arrived in New York, about 218 miles away, by the afternoon, and a special delivery messenger delivered it to the recipient. Or, at least that is how it was supposed to work. On the inaugural flight day, with President Woodrow Wilson, the First Lady and numerous dignitaries gathered at the Potomac Park airfield, the Curtiss biplane would not start. After realizing it had never been fueled and there was no aviation fuel on the field, the mechanics siphoned enough from a nearby plane. With the “Hisso” engine roaring, Lieutenant George L. Boyle took flight and cleared the tree tops, barely. An observant few noticed he was headed in the wrong direction. After flying south instead of north, the confused pilot attempted to land in a farmer’s field near Waldorf, Maryland, but flipped the plane after the wheels sunk into the soft ground. Lt. Boyle and the mail were unharmed, but the northbound flight from Washington never made it on the 15th. The mail and additional “First Trip” mail were carried on the following day.

The southbound flights fared better. Lt. Torrey H. Webb flew from Belmont field at 11:30 a.m. and arrived in Philadelphia (Bustleton) one hour later. Lt. James C. Edgerton filled in for the missing Lt. Boyle and departed Bustleton at 1:14 p.m. The first airmail to the nation’s capital arrived at 2:50 p.m.

The Airmail Special Delivery Stamp
To facilitate payment of 24¢ postage on a letter carried by airmail, the Post Office Department issued a new stamp. The rate included all postage and the 10¢ fee for special delivery service. To promote the enterprise, the stamp was designed with an image of the biplane. This was the second U.S. stamp to picture a plane—the first was the 1913 20¢ Parcel Post issue, which depicts an early model biplane with the prophetic caption “Aeroplane Carrying Mail.”

President Woodrow Wilson with Lt. George L. Boyle on the morning of the ill-fated northbound flight from Washington D.C.
The new airmail stamp was designed by Clair Aubrey Huston, one of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing’s most talented artists and the designer of the Washington-Franklin and 1922 series, as well as the 20¢ Parcel Post stamp six years earlier. Huston’s design relied on the airplane image to convey the stamp’s purpose and left out the word “airmail” or “airpost.”

Working with Huston were two other masters of security engraving, Marcus W. Baldwin and Edward M. Weeks. For more than 30 years after the stamp was issued, Weeks received credit for engraving the “Jenny” vignette, based on misinformation in the BEP records. In 1952 researchers studying Baldwin’s work diary found entries confirming that Baldwin was the sole engraver of the vignette, and Weeks had engraved the frame and lettering.

Marcus W. Baldwin (1853-1925) started his career at the American Bank Note Company, apprenticing under Alfred Jones and Luigi (Louis) Delnoce. In 1880 he formed his own engraving company, Baldwin, Gleason & Co., in New York City. Baldwin joined the BEP in 1897 and spent more than two decades there before returning to American. One of his earliest engravings for the BEP was the vignette for the $1 Trans-Mississippi stamp, considered by many to be the most beautiful ever issued by the United States. Coincidentally, Baldwin had also designed and engraved a bookplate for Col. Edward H. R. Green, several years before the Colonel’s involvement with the Inverted “Jenny” (The Essay-Proof Journal, No. 47, pp. 123-124).

The War Department provided the BEP with a photograph of a Curtiss biplane to use to create the stamp. No one could have known at the time that the plane in the photograph—tail number 38262—would be the actual plane to take off from Potomac Park on May 15.

Instructed to have the issue ready by May 13, the BEP was under tremendous time pressure to prepare the dies and plates, and to print the stamps. On May 4 Weeks began work on the frame die. On May 8 Baldwin started on the vignette die. After the engravings were approved, the frame plate 8492 and vignette plate 8493 were made by Samuel DeBinder, whose initials “S.DeB.” are engraved on the frame plate. DeBinder was a siderographer, the person responsible for transferring the engravings to the plate, using a cylindrical transfer roll.

The colors chosen for the 24¢ stamp were red and blue. Printed on white paper, the design was a patriotic tribute during the World War.

Coincidentally, the tail number 38262 on the stamp was the same number on the first plane that departed from Washington D.C. on the May 15 inaugural flight.
The bicolored printing was done in two separate operations on an older “spider” press, so named for its appearance. Unlike the Pan-American stamps, which had been printed vignette first, frame second, the 24¢ airmail stamp was printed frame first, vignette second.

For each impression, the plate was removed from the press and warmed to allow the ink to flow smoothly into the recessed lines. Before the paper was put into position, the plate was thoroughly wiped and polished to remove ink from the surface, leaving ink only in the recessed lines. The dampened sheet of paper was carefully placed on the press, and the wheel was turned to apply enormous pressure, forcing the paper into the recessed lines. Each sheet was removed and stacked face down for drying. This operation was repeated for the second pass (in this case, the blue vignette printing).

The sheets were gummed, perforated and, for the First Printing only, trimmed on two sides to make them the correct size for distribution. In the trimming process, the top selvage with plate numbers was removed, a factor which probably contributed to the inverts slipping past examiners. The trimmed sheets with straight edges at top and right also appeared to come from 400-subject plates, which led to confusion over how many invert sheets were printed and in circulation.

Human error in this multi-step printing process created the potential for an invert error. If the sheet with frame designs were rotated 180° from its correct orientation before the second pass, the vignettes would be printed upside down. BEP employees explained in interviews that the invert error also could have occurred if the plate were rotated 180° when it was placed back on the press after warming. Down the line, if the error were overlooked during the gumming, perforating and inspection process, the sheet might reach the public through a post office window.

The potential for human error and the release of an invert were very much on William T. Robey’s mind in the days leading up to the release of the new bicolored airmail issue.

**William T. Robey’s Good Fortune**

William T. Robey, a 29-year old employee of the Washington D.C. brokerage firm W. B. Hibbs & Company, was eagerly anticipating the new airmail issue. He wrote to his friend and fellow philatelist, Malcolm H. Ganser, on May 10, “It might interest you to know that there are two parts to the design, one an insert into the other, like the Pan-American issues. I think it would pay to be on the lookout for inverts on account of this.” The first day of issue was May 13, but the post office nearest to Robey’s employer was the New York Avenue branch office, where the stamps went on sale the next day, May 14.
In recollecting the events of that day in a 1938 article for *Weekly Philatelic Gossip*, Robey said he went to the post office just after noon with $30 he had withdrawn from his bank account. Robey claimed that he had been there earlier in the day, but did not buy any stamps. When he returned, he asked the window clerk for the new airmail stamp, and "The clerk reached down under the counter and brought forth a full sheet and my heart stood still. It was the sheet of inverts." He immediately paid $24 for the sheet of 100 stamps and asked if he could buy more sheets. The clerk showed him three more, but none were inverts. [This account differs from those published in the days following his discovery].

Robey looked for more inverts at a nearby branch office, without success, then returned to his place of employment and told his colleagues about his exciting discovery. He also told the newspapers. The next day, May 15, the *Washington Post* reported the news of Robey's purchase of a sheet of "upside down" airmail stamps.

Concerned that other sheets might turn up, Robey began seeking offers for his newfound treasure, but the reception he received from stamp dealers was decidedly tepid. Eustice B. Power of Stanley Gibbons in New York offered a meager $250. H. F. Colman, a Washington D.C. dealer, first offered $500, then raised it to $18,000 the day after Robey reached his deal with Eugene Klein. Scott Stamp & Coin offered to sell the sheet on commission (probably hoping to sell it to Colonel Green). Percy Mann made a $10,000 offer, which John Klemann of Nassau Stamp Co. called "crazy." While Robey visited New York stamp dealers, he stopped by Colonel Green's office, but was told that the Colonel was away.

Another respected dealer and agent, Elliott Perry, was contacted by Robey soon after the discovery. Perry hoped to sell it to Senator Ernest R. Ackerman and attempted to obtain first right of refusal, going so far as to mail Robey a $1 silver certificate to confirm the agreement, but Robey refused to enter into a binding agreement and returned Perry's dollar.

On his way back to Washington, disheartened over the cool reception his sheet had received, Robey met Percy Mann at the Philadelphia station, and the two visited dealer and auctioneer Eugene Klein at his home. Klein knew Mann had offered $10,000, but he asked Robey to name a price, to which Robey replied he would not accept an offer of less than $15,000. Klein agreed, subject to an option until the afternoon of the following day, Monday, May 20.

Klein telephoned Robey the next day, exercising his option and confirming it with a registered letter. On May 21, 1918, exactly one week after William T. Robey purchased what has become the most famous postage stamp in the world—the "Upside-Down Airplane"—the sheet of 100 changed hands for $15,000. As Robey would later recall, "Promptly at noon, the sheet was delivered to Mr. Klein at his office in Philadelphia, receiving a certified check in payment. Thus, within one week, stamps that originally cost $24 were sold for a profit of $14,976."
Shortly thereafter, H. F. Colman and Joseph B. Leavy, the curator of the National Museum collection, received permission from New York Postmaster Thomas G. Patton to search through all of the 24¢ sheets in the post office vault. Anticipation was undoubtedly very high, especially since many still believed Robey’s discovery sheet was only one quarter of the printed sheet of 400. Package after package of full sheets were opened and inspected. All had the airplane flying rightside up.

Eugene Klein, who had been approached by Percy Mann and Joseph Steinmetz before Robey’s arrival, formed a partnership with them whereby the profits from resale would be shared among them (as it turned out, Klein received half, apparently with the others’ blessings). After securing the option to buy the invert sheet, Klein also arranged to sell it to Colonel Green for $20,000. When Klein confirmed the purchase on May 20, he was undoubtedly certain of a $5,000 profit for the partnership.

Colonel Edward Howland Robinson Green (1868-1936) was the logical buyer for the sheet, as Robey himself must have known when he tried to meet with Green in New York. Green’s mother, Hetty, a shrewd investor and one of the world’s wealthiest individuals, died in 1916 and left her $100 to $200 million estate to her two children. With his newly-inherited fortune, Colonel Green went on a buying spree, collecting everything from stamps and coins to jewelry and pornographic literature. At one point he owned all five 1913 Liberty Head nickels. And, of course, in May 1918 he became the owner of the Inverted “Jenny” sheet.

Colonel Green authorized Klein to break up the sheet and sell stamps to others, after selecting some of them for his own collection. Before dividing the sheet Klein lightly penciled the position number on the gum side of each stamp, enabling future philatelists to cite every stamp by its exact location in the sheet.

William T. Robey was never to own a single copy of the famous Inverted “Jenny.” In many interviews over the years that followed his discovery, he never expressed a desire to acquire one for his stock or collection. After all, he had been given that once-in-a-lifetime thrill to discover and acquire the original sheet, and to possess it for a full seven days. He loved stamp collecting and continued to collect until his death in 1949. By then, he had observed the many sales of Colonel Green’s enormous collection and undoubtedly enjoyed seeing his Inverted “Jenny” stamps give pleasure to collectors around the world.