

The Newbury Cover (lot 533) History and Commentary

Discovered by Jacobs, Named for Newbury

One of the most outstanding items in American philately is the so-called “Newbury Ninety Cent” cover, named for Saul Newbury, the prominent Chicago collector who was fourth in line to own it, but was first in the minds of future generations who have and continue to revere both Newbury and the cover. If we honored the discoverer, it would be called the Jacobs cover.

The Newbury 90¢ cover was found in 1912, the year the Charnley & Whelen covers with St. Louis “Bears” came to light and the 1847 Bible Blocks were sold at auction. Members of the Howland family came upon a group of letters and covers in saved correspondence and sold them to Ernest R. Jacobs, a collector and dealer who later worked closely with Newbury. It is said that Jacobs kept his cherished find in a bank vault, pressed between two pieces of one-inch plate glass that were screwed together and wrapped in felt.

The Need for Ninety Cents

What makes the Newbury 90¢ cover so extraordinary is, of course, the 90¢ stamp—the first denomination of its kind and the highest issued in the United States from 1847 to 1893, when the dollar-value Columbian stamps were issued.

The reason for a 90¢ stamp—30 times the 3¢ domestic rate—is explained in a letter from A. N. Zevely, the Third Assistant Postmaster General, who thought it was “necessary to have a stamp in the denomination of Ninety Cents—not only to suit that particular rate of postage, but to prepay packages, to the amount, sometimes, of several dollars.”

Toppan, Carpenter & Co., the printers, engaged in some back and forth discussion with Zevely about the design. They based their engraving, a three-quarter portrait of a youthful Washington in military uniform, on one of several similar full-length portraits painted by John Trumbull. Zevely did not like it, but soon acquiesced and approved the novel design and chose the color blue, which was described as “the handsomest of them all.” The 90¢ Blue stamps were produced with perforations.

A Life Cut Short by War

Three months after the 90¢ was issued, in November 1860, an Illinois lawyer and one-time U.S. congressman named Abraham Lincoln was elected president on a Republican platform dedicated to preserving the Union and to laying the foundation for the eventual abolition of slavery. It was too much for the South. On December 20, 1860, South Carolina formally voted to secede from the Union, and other slave states soon followed. By April the first guns of the war were fired on Fort Sumter during Lincoln’s “I dare you” attempt to resupply the fort.

The 90¢ stamps issued in August 1860 were one of the war’s early casualties. In August 1861 the federal government demonetized all previous issues of postage stamps and replaced them with new stamps that would be distributed only to post offices in loyal states. The purpose of demonetization was to prevent the South from using stamps as a medium of exchange.

The stamps on the Newbury cover were used in Boston in July 1861, about one month before the demonetization and exchange process began. Lincoln had already announced the blockade of ports in the

rebellious states. Five days after the letter was written, the First Battle of Manassas (or Bull Run) was fought in Virginia. It was a disaster for Lincoln’s federal forces and gave the North a taste of what lie ahead for the next four years.

Stamp collecting as a hobby started in earnest during the Civil War. The first American album was published in December 1862 in Philadelphia, and a couple of enterprising dealers started furnishing stamps to collectors. It would be decades before collectors started to appreciate stamps still affixed to their original covers, but the 90¢ was always a desirable high value of the set.

The 90¢ 1860 is rarer in used condition, because it was valid for such a short time and was only required for very high postage rates. In fact, it is one of two regular-issue U.S. stamps in the classic era—excluding trial printings, reprints and reissues—which are worth more *cancelled* than *uncancelled*. The other is the 5¢ Orange Brown, Scott 30, which was issued in 1861 and is rarer in used condition for the same reasons—short life and limited use.

The demand for a 90¢ stamp in 1860 was already limited, but the Civil War demonetization policy stacked the odds against future collectors having many used examples. Unused 90¢ stamps would also be great rarities today if not for a cache of sheets discovered in Washington, D.C., which had been found in Southern post offices after the war and returned to the Post Office. These sheets were sold and traded to stamp dealers, and many of the unused stamps from 1859-61 printings come from this source.

The Edwin Howland Correspondence

Edwin Howland (1810/11-1864) was a merchant and agent for the Boston dry goods importing firm of Iasigi, Goddard & Co. In 1857 Howland became the firm’s representative in Port Elizabeth on the Cape of Good Hope. He married Harriett L. Evans in Boston on October 25, 1859, and in December of the same year the newlyweds set sail for the Cape on the bark *Race Horse*. The couple visited Boston in 1864 and returned to Algoa Bay in July of that year. After disembarking, Howland accidentally fell twelve feet and suffered a brain injury, to which he succumbed on August 8, 1864.

The letters Howland received in South Africa were brought back to the United States and sold by the Howland family in 1912 to Ernest R. Jacobs, a collector and dealer.

From Boston to South Africa in the Summer of 1861

The home office in Boston conducted regular mail correspondence with its agents and customers around the world, and were very familiar with the postal routes and rates. Letters from Iasigi, Goddard & Co. usually have a manuscript route directive specifying the transit country and the steamship departure for which it was intended. Covers to Howland were routed through England and usually directed to one of Cunard’s vessels.

The Newbury 90¢ was marked “*via England per Persia*” and, as directed, it was sent to New York City for the July 17 sailing of the Cunarder *Persia*. It made a quick nine-day summer voyage across the Atlantic and off-loaded the mail at Queenstown on July 26. *Persia* was a Cunard passenger and mail steamer that won the Blue Riband in 1856 for the fastest westbound transatlantic voyage. The vessel was the first transatlantic record-breaker constructed of iron and was the largest ship in the world in 1856. In 1861, during the Trent Affair, which nearly caused a war

between the U.S. and Great Britain, the *Persia* and several other Atlantic steamers were chartered to rush troops to Canada. *Persia* was the only ship to reach Quebec before ice closed the St. Lawrence River. After screw propulsion was introduced, the *Persia* was taken out of service in 1868 and scrapped in 1872, a relic of the paddle-wheel era.

The Magnificent Seven—90¢ 1860 Issue Covers

The presence of a 90¢ 1860 stamp on a cover has been recognized as something extraordinary since the early 1900s and possibly before that by a few prescient philatelists. To date, only six intact covers and one front address panel have been accepted as genuine by experts. They are listed below chronologically.

- 1 **September 11, 1860, Boston to Shanghai, China**, to Augustine Heard & Co., single franking for double 45¢ rate, stamp has sealed tears, ex Gibson, Hindes, Dr. Kapiloff
- 2 **November 3, 1860, New York to Barcelona, Spain**, used with 5¢ and 10¢ for 5-times 21¢ rate, ex Caspary, Rust, Dr. Kapiloff
- 3 **November 9, 1860, Boston to Shanghai, China**, to Augustine Heard & Co., used with 3¢, 5¢, 10¢ and 30¢ pair, \$1.68 rate, 90¢ reperfed on all sides, ex Needham, Paliafito, Ishikawa, Myers
- 4 **January 8, 1861, Cincinnati, Ohio, to Peoria, Illinois**, single on legal-size cover to Circuit Court, 30 times 3¢ domestic rate, ex Filstrup, Grunin, “Lake Shore,” Kramer
- 5 **January 16, 1861, Richmond to Amelia C.H., Virginia**, to Saml. R. Seay, used with 1¢ (two), 3¢, 12¢ (two) on package wrapper front only, total \$1.19, stamps and front have faults, Rumsey Auctions, Sale 76, lot 79, recent discovery
- 6 **July 16, 1861, Boston to Cape of Good Hope**, to Edwin Howland, used with 1¢ pair, 3¢, 10¢ and 30¢ for quadruple 33c rate, ex Jacobs, Ashbrook, Emerson, Newbury, Phillips, Ishikawa, Gross, **the cover offered in this sale**
- 7 **January 26, 1861, New York to Calcutta, India**, to Mackellop Stewart & Co., used with 12¢ and 30¢, \$1.32 rate, ex Armitage, Lapham, Dick, Walske, Gross

The two covers that have been and continue to be widely recognized as the finest of the group are the Barcelona cover (#2 above), ex Caspary, Rust and Dr. Kapiloff, and the Newbury cover offered in this sale. They are the most beautiful—each is a multicolor combination of stamps—and have the best provenance of the group.

The Newbury 90¢ Cover—from Discovery to Today

After acquiring the cover from the Howland family in 1912, Jacobs kept the 90¢ cover for nine years. In the spring of 1921, he sold the cover and other material to Scott Stamp and Coin Co. in New York. The transaction is mentioned in Stanley B. Ashbrook’s December 1921 article about the 90¢ 1860 on cover, but Ashbrook does not say he bought the cover. That information comes from Dr. Stanley M. Bierman, who reports that Ashbrook owned the cover from 1921 to 1929, when he sold it to Daniel F. Kelleher in Boston. Kelleher probably had a buyer for the cover lined up—Judge Robert S. Emerson, the prominent collector from Rhode Island and next owner of record.

Emerson displayed his stellar collection of United States covers during Providence Night at the Collectors Club of New York on March 20, 1929, the

same event in which he displayed pages of blocks from the collection of his Rhode Island friend, Webster Knight, who left his collection to Brown University upon his death in 1933.

Emerson, a former judge and practicing attorney, died in 1937, three years before Knight’s collection was mounted for display in frames located in the John Hay Library at Brown University. Emerson’s last major philatelic outing was at TIPEX, the Third International Philatelic Exhibition in New York in 1936, where he served as a judge and exhibited some of his collections non-competitively.

Known for his fastidious condition standards, Emerson assembled a spectacular collection of classics on and off cover, as well as revenue stamps and Confederate States. The collection was dispersed over a period of years, at auction and, for some of the most outstanding material, by private treaty. From 1937 through 1951, Kelleher, Doane and Harmer, Rooke & Co. conducted 26 auctions containing Emerson material (most through Kelleher). The quality of the stamps and covers in those catalogues, some of which by law could not be photographed, is outstanding and holds up even by today’s rigorous standards.

Jacobs got to experience the thrill of acquisition a second time, albeit vicariously, at the first Emerson auction, held by Kelleher on October 19, 1937—the year in which the Spanish Civil War raged, Hitler’s Germany was a rising threat, and Amelia Earhart disappeared over the South Pacific. When the 90¢ cover was offered as lot 119, Jacobs executed the winning bid of \$1,300 on behalf of Saul Newbury, a major collector and supporter of philately. Newbury exhibited the 90¢ 1860 cover at the May 1940 Centenary Exhibition held at the Collectors Club of New York to commemorate Great Britain’s first issue, at a time when the German Luftwaffe was bombing London. It was also one of the cornerstones of his U.S. 1840-1868 exhibit in 12 frames and 23 albums, which captured the Grand Award at the CIPEX show in 1947. Newbury died three years later, in 1950, and was inducted into the American Philatelic Society’s Hall of Fame. His collections were kept by his son, Michael, until 1961, when the Siegel firm held the first of a series of auctions to disperse one of the greatest collections of United States and China ever formed.

In the Newbury sale held on May 17-18, 1961, the 90¢ cover went up for bidding for the first time in a quarter century. Having been outbid by Philip G. Rust for the 90¢ cover to Spain in the 1956 Caspary sale, Weill was determined to buy the Newbury cover for his secret client, Benjamin D. Phillips. After a protracted bidding contest, Weill prevailed at \$11,000.

The Weills bought the entire Phillips collection in 1968 for \$4.07 million and consigned the Newbury 90¢ cover to the 1971 Rarities of the World sale. The next owner of record, and possibly the buyer in that 1971 auction, was Ryohei Ishikawa, a Japanese businessman who rode his country’s rise to economic power and formed several important collections, including the 1¢ 1851-57s. When Ishikawa sold the 1¢ collection and pursued building his 1847-1869 exhibit, he kept the Newbury 90¢ cover as one of the key pieces. William Gross acquired the cover in 1993 from Andrew Levitt, immediately after Levitt bought it in the Christie’s Robson Lowe auction of the Ishikawa collection.