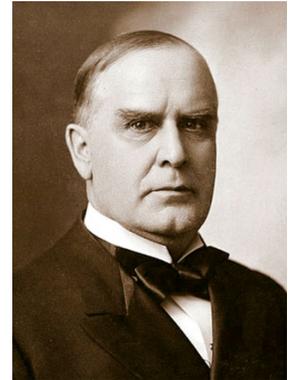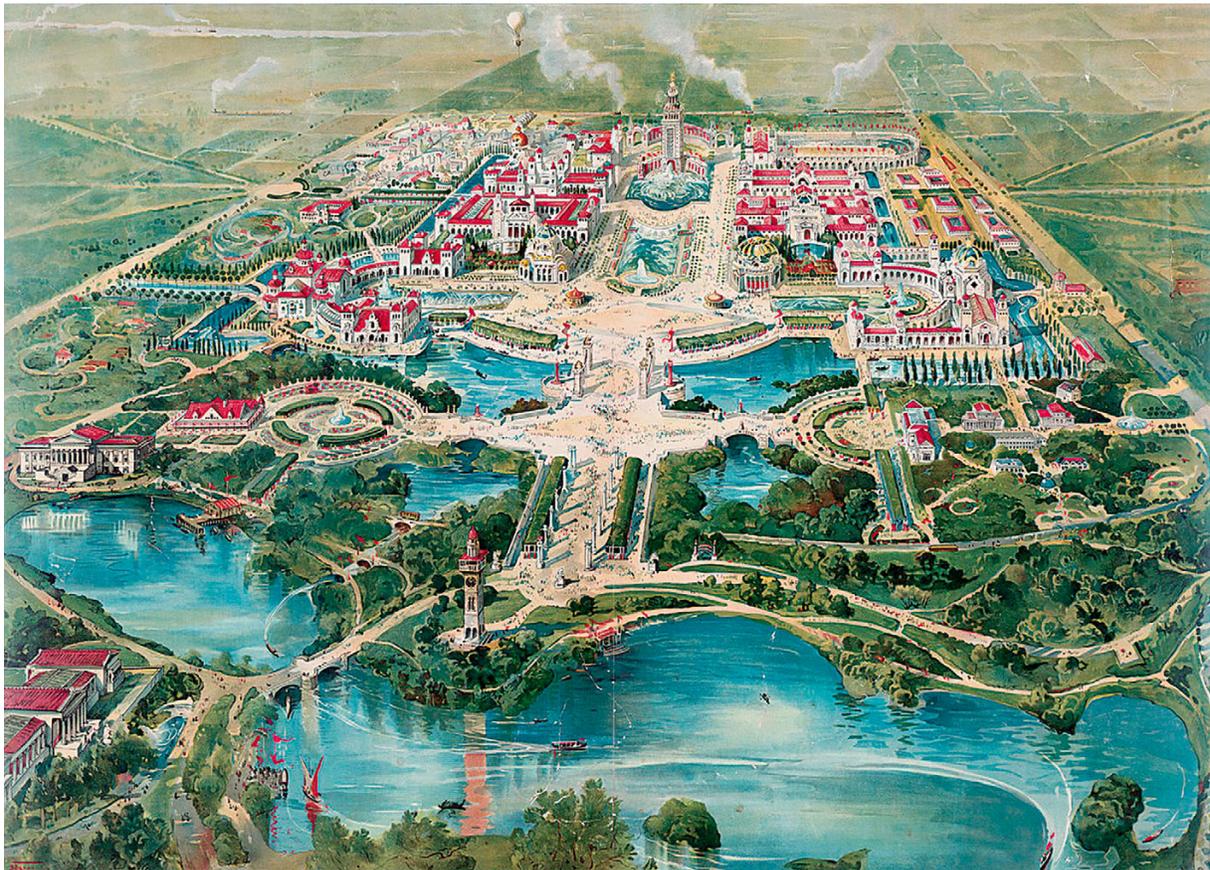# 1901 Pan-American Issue

THE PAN-AMERICAN ISSUE WAS THE FIRST SET OF UNITED STATES STAMPS OF THE 20th century. The six-value commemorative issue was released for the Pan-American Exposition, held in Buffalo from May 1 to November 2, 1901.

The Pan-American Exposition—to promote "commercial well being and good understanding among the American Republics"—was conceived in 1897 and originally intended to be held in 1899 on Cayuga Island, just north of Niagara Falls. For logistical and other reasons the venue was changed to Buffalo, and due to the outbreak of the Spanish-American War the opening was delayed until May 1, 1901. From May to November, the 350-acre exposition grounds featured a wide variety of exhibits and attractions in more than a dozen faux marble buildings specially constructed for the event. The buildings and grounds were illuminated using Tesla's recently invented alternating-current system for transferring electricity across long distances.

President William McKinley

Toward the end of the exposition, on September 6, 1901, President William McKinley was shot while he greeted the public inside the Temple of Music. The assassin was Leon Czolgosz, an anarchist who was disgruntled over the loss of his job. For a week President McKinley seemed to be recovering, but the internal abdominal wound had turned gangrenous. On September 14 the President succumbed to the infection. Czolgosz was quickly tried and executed in the electric chair just six weeks later, on October 29.
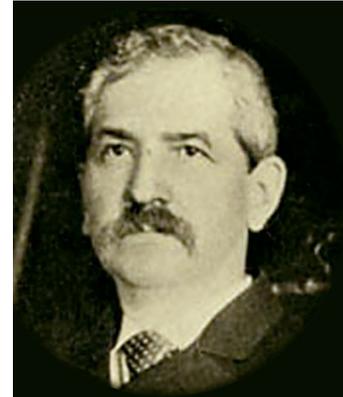

Contemporary birds-eye view of the Pan-American Exposition fairgrounds in 1901

President Theodore Roosevelt

Upon McKinley's death, Vice President Theodore Roosevelt was sworn into the President's office and served out the remainder of the term. Roosevelt, a Republican, was successfully elected to a second term in 1904.

Charles Emory Smith was postmaster general under McKinley and Roosevelt, from April 1898 until January 1902. While Postmaster General Smith did much to improve the postal system, including the expansion of free rural delivery service, his department was marred by a series of scandals involving influence peddling and kickbacks for government contracts. Smith was succeeded by Postmaster General Henry C. Payne in January 1902.

PMG Charles Emory Smith
McKinley-Roosevelt Administration
April 1898 – January 1902

In 1899 the Pan-American Exposition promoters petitioned the Post Office Department for a set of commemorative stamps to be issued in conjunction with the event. The philatelic community was wary of the idea, still feeling burned by the costly Columbian and Trans-Mississippi sets. There was also a problem with the inscription that was requested—"Pan-American Series–1901"—because it was deemed to be a commercial advertisement by Assistant Attorney General James N. Tyner and, therefore, prohibited by law from appearing on postage stamps (*New York Times*, July 14, 1900).

The protests of collectors against high face-value stamps in response to the earlier commemorative issues had been heard. The six Pan-American stamps were issued with denominations totaling 30 cents, versus $3.80 for the Trans-Mississippi or $16.34 for the Columbian Issue. They became immediately popular with the public, and shortly after the Pan-American set made its debut, the *New York Times* reported that 5 to 6 million stamps per day were being purchased.

The Pan-American Engravers and Designs

The Pan-American stamps depict images capturing new concepts and ideas for a new century—an automobile, train, fast steamships, and a man-made canal. To express this high-tech era with enthusiasm, each stamp was printed in two colors. The set was the Bureau of Engraving and Printing's (BEP) first attempt at bicolored postage stamps and the Post Office Department's first bicolored issue since the 1869 Pictorial Issue. The BEP had intended to print the Trans-Mississippi Issue in two colors, but the color scheme was changed to a single color for each stamp due to demands on the BEP for revenue stamp production resulting from the 1898 taxes enacted to finance the Spanish-American War.

Raymond Ostrander Smith,
Pan-American Issue designer

The stamps were printed from frame and vignette plates of 200 subjects each, arranged in 20 horizontal rows of 10, with imprints at the top and bottom. Vignettes were printed first, followed by frames. Full printed sheets were cut horizontally into upper and lower panes of 100 stamps with straight edges at the top or bottom. The panes could be further divided vertically into two panes of 50.

The entire set was designed by Raymond Ostrander Smith (1873-1933). Smith started working at the American Bank Note Company in New York City at the age of 14. He later he joined the BEP and continued working there until the end of 1902, when he returned to employment with American. During his BEP years, Smith designed many of the most beautiful stamps ever produced by the United States, including the Trans-Mississippi commemorative issue.

The vignettes used on the 2¢ through 10¢ were engraved by Marcus W. Baldwin (1853-1925), one of the most talented and accomplished security engravers of all time. Baldwin apprenticed at the American Bank Note Company 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.
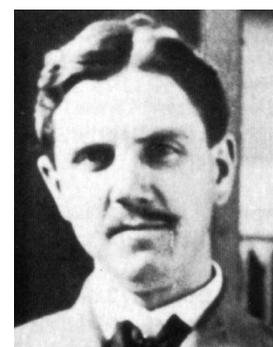

Marcus W. Baldwin, engraver of the 2¢-10¢ Pan-American vignettes

The 1¢ vignette was engraved by George F. C. "Fred" Smillie (1854-1924), who studied under his uncle, James, and Alfred Jones. After working for the American Bank Note Company from 1871 to 1887, and for various other bank note printers from 1887 to 1894, Fred Smillie joined the BEP in March 1894 as chief engraver. He worked for the BEP until 1911, when he left to join American. His diary of work records approximately 300 portraits and 135 vignettes.

George F. C. Smillie, engraver of the 1¢ Pan-American vignette

Two other engravers worked on the Pan-American Issue: Lyman F. Ellis (b. 1870) and Robert Ponickau (1846-1920). Ellis worked for the BEP at different times between 1894 and 1923. Ponickau started working for the BEP in 1894. The Hessler and Johl books are in agreement that the lettering and numerals were executed by Ellis. However, the two sources have conflicting information about the frame engravings. Johl states that Ponickau engraved the frame of the 1¢ only, and Ellis engraved the letters and numerals (as well as the 2¢-10¢ frames). Hessler lists Ponickau as the frame engraver for all values, which is supported by the BEP records.
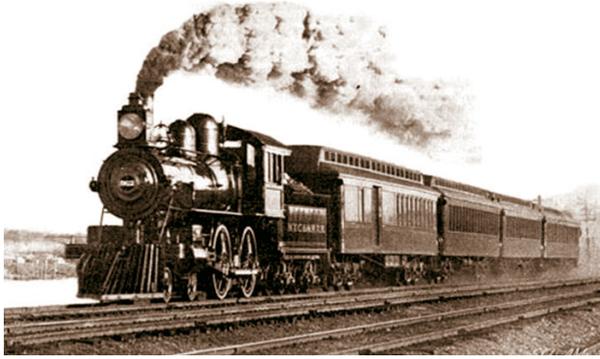

Lyman F. Ellis, who engraved the letters and numerals

The vignettes for the Pan-American Issue were based on contemporary photographs and illustrations. Each was selected to represent technological advancement in transportation.

Photograph of *City of Alpena* used as the basis of 1¢ vignette engraving

The 1¢ vignette is captioned "Fast Lake Navigation," and it depicts a steamship based on a contemporary photograph of the *City of Alpena,* a 1,282-ton sidewheel steamer that navigated the Great Lakes (the 10¢ Pan-American stamp depicts an ocean steamship). The vessel on the 1¢ stamp is sometimes confused with others with a similar name. This ship was launched in 1893 by the Detroit & Cleveland Line, which served ports throughout Lake Erie and Lake Huron. The *City of Alpena* could carry 400 passengers and commercial freight. She operated under different names until 1957.

A. P. Yates photograph of Locomotive 999, the Empire State Express, on the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad

The 2¢ "Fast Express" vignette was another Baldwin engraving, based on a photograph of "Locomotive 999" taken by A. P. Yates on May 10, 1893, in Syracuse. The 999 pulled the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad's passenger train, the Empire State Express. On the run captured in Yates' photograph, the 999 set the speed record for a land vehicle when it reached 112.5 miles per hour.

The 4¢ vignette was an unusual—and perhaps unethical— choice for a postage stamp. The electric automobile pictured in Baldwin's engraving was operated by the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad to transport passengers throughout areas surrounding their stations. The service was first established in Washington D.C. on April 1, 1900. Over the next five months it was extended to B&O's stations in Philadelphia (May), Chicago (July) and New York (September).

The electic-powered hansom cab on the stamp is depicted in front of a building. The building is, in fact, the U.S. Capitol, and the engraving was based on a larger illustration from the B&O's advertising brochures. The passenger in the car is Samuel Bittner Hege (1855-1929), B&O's passenger agent who served on the committee for President Theodore Roosevelt's inauguration in 1905.

When 4¢ Pan-American Invert "Specimen" stamps were given away by Third Assistant PMG Madden, the list of lucky recipients included one identified as "J. H. Hige... B&O Railroad... December 20, 1901." The similarity in last names and absence of anyone named "Hige" in connection with B&O (or in city directories) suggests that Samuel B. Hege not only got an Invert, but his image was put on a stamp—contrary to law— and the B&O got some free advertising for their new electric-powered hansom cab service. This sort of influence peddling was soon to be the focus of public criticism and an attorney general's investigation.
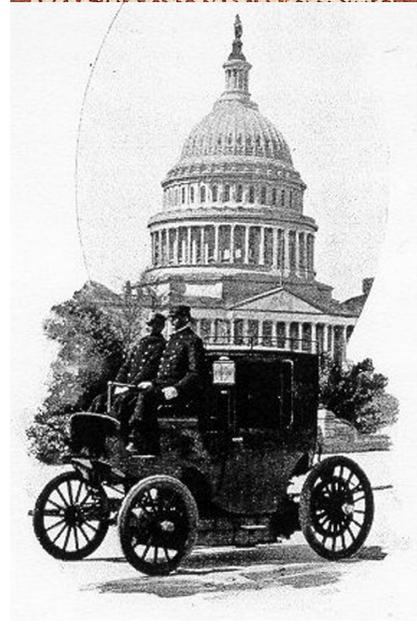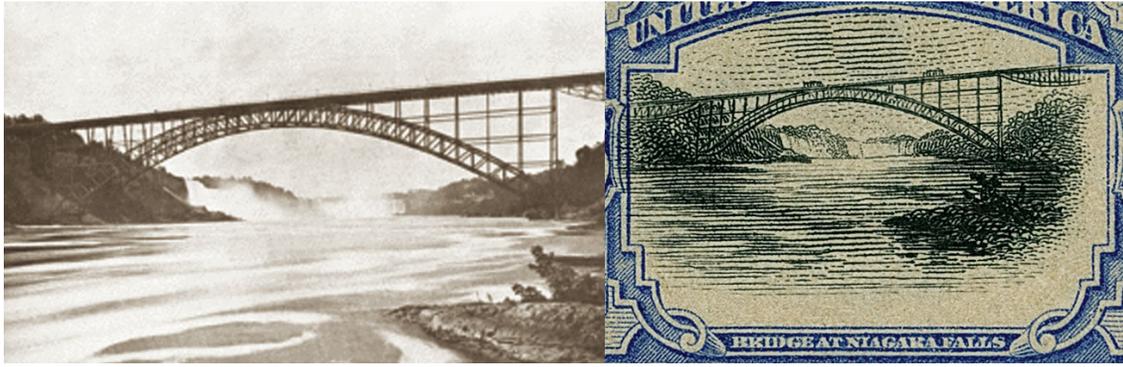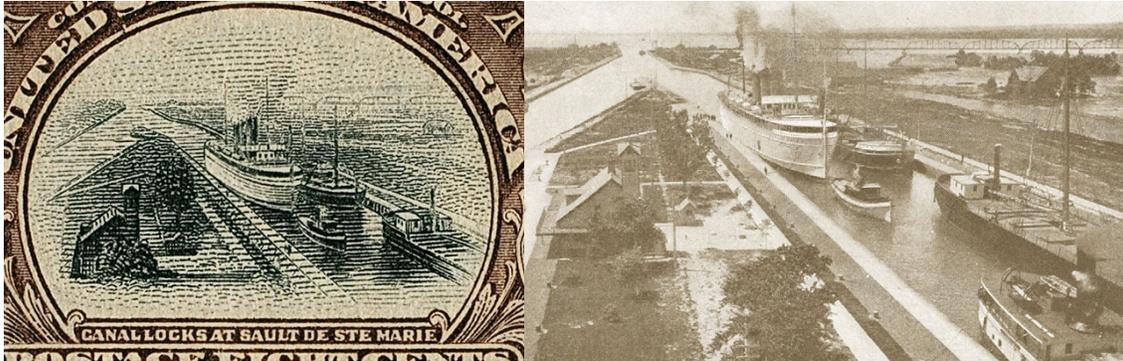

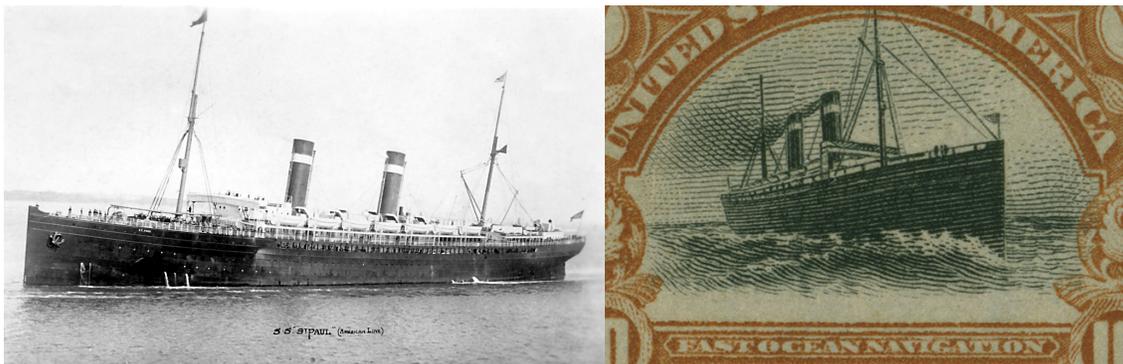Illustration of Baltimore & Ohio Railroad's electric-powered hansom cab

Enlargement of chauffeur (steering at right) and passenger as depicted on stamp and in B&O illustration

The Upper Steel Arch Bridge at Niagara from same perspective as engraved on the 5¢ Pan-American stamp

Photograph of Soo Locks, Saulte Ste. Marie, used as basis for 8¢ Pan-American—the ships are in the same positions

The S.S. *St. Paul* ocean steamer in a photograph and the engraved vignette from another perspective

The theme of the Pan-American Issue continued with the 5¢, 8¢ and 10¢ values. The 5¢ depicts the Upper Steel Arch Bridge across the Niagara River, which at the time was the longest single-span steel bridge in the world. Its location near Buffalo and the site of the Pan-American Exposition made the bridge a suitable image for the 5¢ stamp, which was printed with a blue frame to conform to Universal Postal Union standards (5¢ was the basic UPU international rate). In January 1938 the Steel Arch Bridge collapsed during a winter flood.

For the 8¢ value, which paid the registration fee, the vignette was based on a photograph of the Soo Locks, located at Sault Ste. Marie on the St. Marys River between Lake Superior and Lake Huron, between the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and the Canadian province of Ontario. At the time the Soo Locks were the world's largest, and they were the first to be powered by electricity.

Finally, the high value of the set, the 10¢ stamp, depicts the S.S. *St. Paul*, a 14,810-ton commercial ocean steamship that was commissioned for naval service during the Spanish-American War. It was returned to commercial service after the war and was scrapped in 1923.