

Chapter Three:

The Columbian Exposition Issue of 1893

The First U.S. Commemorative Stamps

The year 1893 marked a dramatic event in the history of philately in the United States. Up until that year, all stamps released had been “regular issues”, intended strictly for posting letters and packages. But beginning in 1893 and continuing to the present, the United States Postal Department also began issuing postal commemoratives. Initially, at least, these stamps were intended to celebrate famous people and events in United States history. Intended for both collectors and postal patrons, they were issued in limited numbers, and withdrawn from sale after a certain period of time, often one year. As discussed below, the new stamps were launched by Postmaster General John Wanamaker in dramatic fashion: a set of sixteen stamps, the highest with a face value of five dollars, all celebrating and promoting the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. This set was quite controversial at the time, though historians believe that it played a role in the Columbian Exposition’s enormous success: opening day alone drew 129,000 visitors, and a total of 27 million attended over the entire 179 days that it was running.

The Columbian Exposition

Before we examine the stamps that heralded the Fair, a few words are necessary about expositions in general, and the Columbian Exposition in particular. It was the first of several fairs to be advertised on U.S. postal commemoratives. Later we will explore three others: The Trans-Mississippi Exposition of 1898, the Pan-American Exposition of 1901, and the Panama-Pacific Exposition of 1915.

Expositions, also known as world's fairs, began in London in 1851, at an event that was famous for being held in what was then the world's largest glass structure, the Crystal Palace. World's fairs have been held every few years (or sometimes much longer apart) in cities around the globe ever since. The purpose of the fairs was, and remains, twofold: first, to introduce visitors to exotic cultures and new technologies; and second, to be a profitable venture. Celebrating the hopes, desires, and creations of human civilization, world's fairs were combinations of historical pageants, museums of science and technology, showcases of exotic cultures, and amusement parks.

The Columbian Exposition of 1893 fit that description beautifully. Held in a series of white stone buildings (the "White City") constructed just for that purpose near the Chicago waterfront, the Exposition featured the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building, which was the world's largest such structure at the time. But what really drew visitors was another world's first at the fair: a massive Ferris wheel that was invented and built by George W. Ferris. Even though a ride of twenty minutes (two revolutions) cost as much as the entrance fee to the entire Fair, one and a half million people rode on it over the course of just five months.

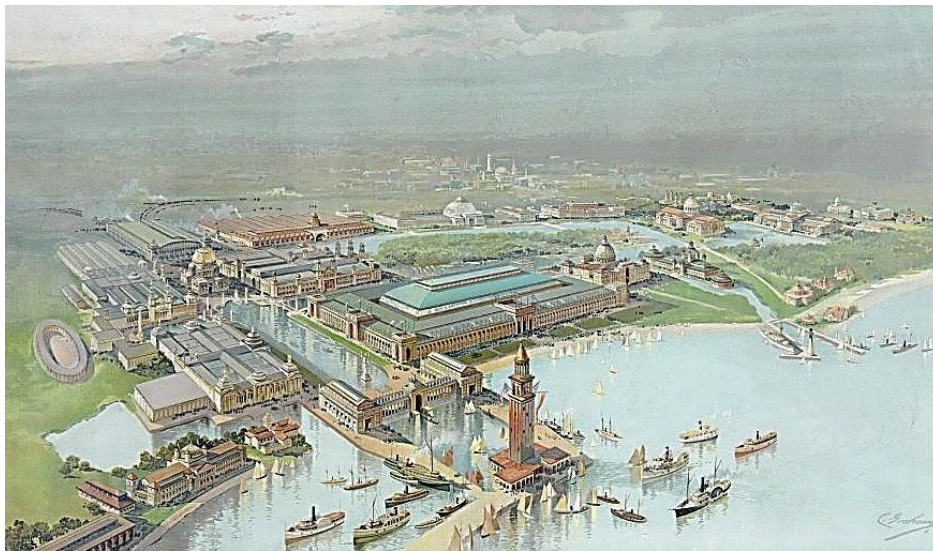


Figure 3.1. Official bird's eye view of Columbian Exposition. Manufactures & Liberal Arts Building is at center of image. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-DIG-pga-03065.



Figure 3.2. Opening day crowd at the Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893.
Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-125751.



Figure 3.3. The Ferris Wheel, Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893.
Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-50927.



Figure 3.4. Palace of Mechanic Arts and lagoon at Columbian Exposition. Photograph by Frances Benjamin Johnston. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-50927.



Figure 3.5. Exposition grounds, Chicago, 1893. Photograph by Frances Benjamin Johnston. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-104794.

The Columbian Exposition Issue

Scott #230 to 245

John Wanamaker, founder of the Wanamaker's department store chain, was Postmaster General from March 2, 1889 until March 6, 1893. He got the idea to commemorate, or recognize, an historic event with special stamps designed for that purpose. The ultimate result was the Colombian Exposition issue. This colorful and elegant series of stamps, the first commemoratives ever issued in the United States (or the world, for that matter) celebrated the 400th anniversary of Columbus's landing in the New World in 1492, by portraying a number of scenes from Columbus' life. Instead of presenting them in chronological order with increasing postage value, Wanamaker decided to portray the most important events in his life on the least expensive (and most commonly used) stamps in the series.

Printed by the American Bank Note Company, the Columbians were the nation's first commemoratives; they were also the last nineteenth century United States postage stamps to be printed by a private company. The Columbians were double the width of previous U.S. regular issues, in order for the images on each stamp to be shown best. Unfortunately, the resulting stamps were all similar in size to the original blue Special Delivery stamp in use at that time (see Chapter Eight). In fact, that stamp has even been referred to as the "One-Cent Deep Blue Columbian". In order to distinguish the two more effectively, the Postal Department issued a new Special Delivery stamp employing the previous design, but printed in orange instead of blue.

Despite its many images from Columbus' life, the series was mainly intended to advertize the Columbian Exposition of 1893, also known as the Chicago World's Fair. Many people, including several Congressmen, argued that the stamps were a way for the Postal Service to get rich by appealing to collectors. In fact, an organization was founded with the express purpose of discouraging sale of the most expensive stamps in this

set. Called the Society for the Suppression of Speculative Stamps, the group issued the following statement to the public (quoted from a New York Times article on stamp collecting): "The society recommends collectors to refuse to purchase these stamps, and so assists in preventing the issue of stamps intended mainly for the purpose of sale to collectors and speculators." Complaints were vociferous enough that legislation to block sale of the Columbians actually reached Congress. Senator Wolcott of Colorado sponsored the resolution. Fortunately, it did not pass.

Fifteen Columbians were issued on January 2, 1893. The sixteenth, and eight cent value for the registry rate, was issued on March 3rd. Elmer Stuart, quoted in Volume Three of Lester Brookman's The United States Postage Stamps of the Nineteenth Century, provides a colorful vignette of the rush to acquire the stamps on their first day of issue: "Gentle old maids were wedged in between corpulent business men and small boys carrying books already muddled and prepared for the new prizes.... The sharp featured stamp speculator betrayed himself in his eagerness to get ahead of the next man. The clerks handled the crowds admirably....." Unfortunately, the clerks refused to sell buyers one of each kind of stamp, insisting that customers purchase stamps in reasonable quantities if they desired more than one kind. As a result, collectors had to go through post office lines multiple times in order to obtain all fifteen Columbians.

Ultimately, an amazing two billion Columbians were sold, contributing significantly to the success of the Exposition a year later. The stamps were no longer issued after April 12, 1894.

Scott #230: 1¢ “Columbus in Sight of Land”



Figure 3.6. One-cent “Columbus in Sight of Land,” Columbian Exposition Commemorative Issue, 1893.

The image on this stamp was adapted from a painting by William H. Powell, engraved by Alfred Jones. Jones added three Indians to the sides of the image, making this the first United States postage stamp to depict Native Americans. The event on the stamp probably never happened. According to voyage records, a sailor aboard the Pinta first noted land at two o’clock in the morning on October 12, 1492. At that time, Columbus was likely sound asleep aboard the Nina.

This stamp was used to cover the cost of either the postal card rate or third class mail. A total of 440,195,550 one cent stamps were printed. The one-cent “Columbus in Sight of Land” was recently ranked #46 in a book on the 100 greatest American stamps.



Figure 3.7. “The First Sight of the New World”; 1892 lithograph by M. F. Tobin. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-5339.

Scott #231: 2¢ “Landing of Columbus”



Figure 3.8. Two-cent “Landing of Columbus,” Columbian Exposition Commemorative Issue, 1893.

The picture on the purple maroon two-cent Columbian was adapted from a painting by John Vanderlyn that now hangs in the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, D. C. Engraved by Douglas Ronaldson, it depicts a scene one day after the image on the one cent Columbian. Yet while the earlier stamp shows the renowned explorer looking clean-shaven, here he has a full beard!

Because two cents covered first-class mail at the time, 1,464,588,750 two-cent stamps were printed, making it the most common Columbian today.



Figure 3.9. “Columbus Taking Possession of the New Country”; 1893 lithograph. Courtesy the Library of Congress, LC-USZC2-1687.

Scott #232: 3¢ “Flag Ship of Columbus”



Figure 3.10. Three-cent “Flag Ship of Columbus,” Columbian Exposition Commemorative Issue, 1893.

Engraved by Robert Savage, the green three-cent Columbian depicting the *Santa Maria* was probably inspired by a Spanish engraving. Because it did not cover a specific postal rate, it was a “make-up” stamp, used in conjunction with other stamps to meet postage costs. Just over 11.5 million of these stamps were printed.



Figure 3.11. Photograph of reproduction of the Santa Maria, Columbus' flag ship, 1915. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-58029.

Scott #233: 4¢ “Fleet of Columbus”



Figure 3.12. Four-cent “Fleet of Columbus,”
Columbian Exposition Commemorative Issue,
1893.

There has been much debate surrounding the image on the ultramarine four-cent Columbian. Did it come from a Spanish engraving, like the three-cent stamp, or was it from a picture in a book published in 1892? The stamp covered double postage on heavier first class items; in all, 19,191,550 four-cent stamps were printed. Two sheets of these stamps were accidentally printed in blue ink rather than ultramarine. These “four-cent blue” stamps are highly valued today.

#234: 5¢ “Columbus Soliciting Aid of Isabella”



Figure 3.13. Five-cent “Columbus Soliciting Aid of Isabella,” Columbian Exposition Issue, 1893.

The chocolate five-cent Columbian depicts Columbus asking Queen Isabella of Spain for help financing his expedition to the New World. The image was engraved by Alfred S. Major, and inspired by an 1884 painting by Vaclav Brozik, a Czech painter. Five cents was the half-ounce international postage rate at the time; 35,248,250 of these stamps were printed.



Figure 3.14. Painting by Vaclav Brozik (1884) used as model for the five cent Columbian. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-DIG-pga-03133.

Scott #235: 6¢ “Columbus Welcomed at Barcelona”



Figure 3.15. Six-cent “Columbus Welcomed at Barcelona,” Columbian Exposition Issue, 1893.

The illustration on the purple six cent Columbian was taken from a bronze door panel designed by Randolph Rogers. The Columbus Doors now hang at the east entrance to the U.S. Capitol Building. This image, engraved by Robert Savage, shows Columbus on his return from his first voyage, evoking the three-dimensional quality of Rogers’ original work.

King Ferdinand of Spain is shown

to Columbus’ left, while Vasco de Balboa, a later Spanish explorer, stands to his right. This stamp covered three times the first class postal rate. In all, 4,707,550 of these stamps were issued, but 48,400 remainders were destroyed in Washington in 1899. Exposure to sunlight over the years has caused many of the remaining six-cent Columbians to fade to a dull blue.



Figure 3.16. School children viewing Columbus Doors, c. 1899. Photograph by Frances Benjamin Johnston. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-34447.

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Scott #236: 8¢ “Columbus Restored to Favor”



Figure 3.17. Eight-cent “Columbus Restored to Favor,” Columbian Exposition Issue, 1893.

A latecomer to the series, the eight-cent Columbian was added on March 2, 1893, after the US registered mail fee was lowered. It was the first eight-cent stamp ever issued by the United States. This design came from a painting by the Spanish artist Francisco Jover y Casanova, showing Columbus being restored to favor by Ferdinand and Isabella. A total of 10,656,550 of these stamps were issued.



Figure 3.18. Christopher Columbus kneeling in front of Queen Isabella I. Lithograph circa 1840s. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZC4-2919.

Scott #237: 10¢ “Columbus Presenting Natives”



Figure 3.19. Ten-cent “Columbus Presenting Natives,” Columbian Exposition Issue, 1893.

Engraved by Robert Savage, the image on the ten-cent Columbian came from a painting by Luigi Gregori, completed between 1882 and 1884. At first glance, the setting appears to be indoors; however, ship masts in the background indicate it is actually outside, under a canopy. This denomination of stamp covered the registered mail fee. A total of 16,516,950 ten-cent stamps were issued.



Figure 3.20. Columbus at the Court of Barcelona, lithograph copyright 1893. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZC2-1589.

Scott #238: 15¢ “Columbus Announcing His Discovery”



Figure 3.21. Fifteen-cent “Columbus Announcing His Discovery,” Columbian

The inspiration behind the fifteen-cent Columbian, a painting by Spanish artist Ricardo Baloca y Cancico, is presumed to have been destroyed during the Spanish Civil War. Columbus is shown in his imperialistic glory, presenting captured Caribbean natives to the Court of Spain. This stamp could be added to other stamps to meet postal costs for heavier items. In all, 1,576,950 were issued.

Scott #239: 30¢ “Columbus at La Rabida”



Figure 3.22. Thirty-cent “Columbus at La Rabida,” Columbian Exposition

Based upon a design by Spanish artist Felipe Maso, the thirty-cent Columbian depicts Columbus being encouraged by Franciscan friars of the Convent of Santa Maria de Rabida to ask the King and Queen a second time to underwrite his first voyage. (His first request for funding was rejected.) Used chiefly as a “make-up” stamp to help cover postage on heavier items, only 617,250 thirty-

cent Columbians were issued. Although the original color of this stamp was bright orange brown, the color fades easily, leaving many remaining specimens (particularly used ones) dull brown instead.

Scott #240: 50¢ “Recall of Columbus”

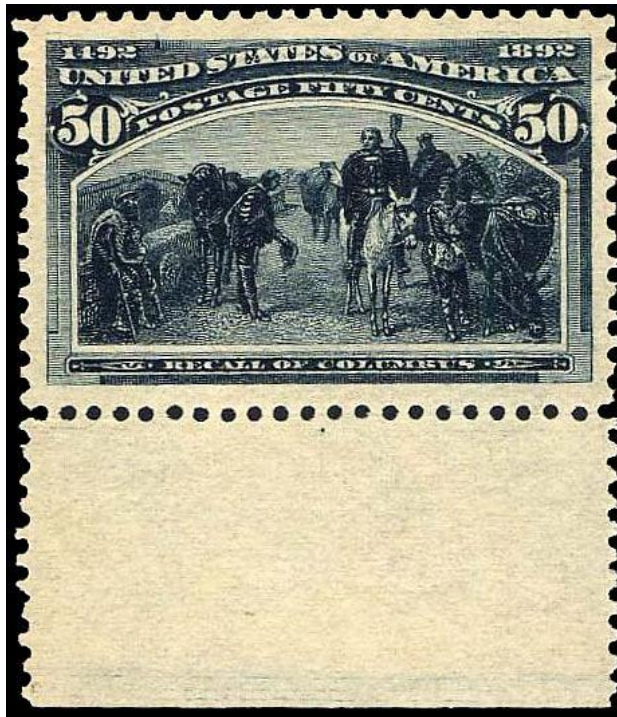


Figure 3.23. Fifty-cent “Recall of Columbus,”
Columbian Exposition Commemorative Issue,
1893.

The first fifty-cent postage stamp ever printed, this Columbian features an image based on a painting by American artist Augustus Goodyear Heaton that is now owned by the United States Senate. The scene shows Columbus receiving a messenger from the court of Queen Isabella of Spain, which he had left a short time before. After initially refusing financial support for his voyage, she was recalling him to tell him that she had decided to fund the expedition after all. The usefulness of this stamp was limited to heavyweight international items; therefore, only 243,750 of these stamps were issued.

Scott #241: \$1 “Isabella Pledging Her Jewels”



Figure 3.24. One-dollar “Isabella Pledging Her Jewels,” Columbian Exposition Issue, 1893.

The image on the salmon one-dollar Columbian, engraved by Robert Savage, was based upon a painting by the Spanish artist, Antonio Muñoz Degrain. It shows Queen Isabella offering to sell her jewels to support Columbus’ journey, supposedly in order to encourage her noblemen to lend their assistance also. Unfortunately, this event never happened. Isabella gave her approval for the voyage, but offered very little financial support. The expedition was primarily financed by a group of bankers, instead. This stamp was the first ever issued at a value above ninety cents. Like the other even-more-costly stamps in this set, it was intended mainly to appeal to collectors, serving as a source of revenue for the US Post Office Department while also advertising the Columbian Exposition. Because they were so expensive, there were far fewer of these dollar-value stamps printed; in the case of the one-dollar Columbian, only 55,050 were ever produced. The one-dollar “Isabella Pledging Her Jewels” was recently ranked #24 in a book on the 100 greatest American stamps.

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Scott #242: \$2 “Columbus in Chains”



Figure 3.25. Two-dollar “Columbus in Chains,”
Columbian Exposition Commemorative Issue,
1893.

This Columbian is one of only two in the series (along with the two-cent “Landing of Columbus”) that depicts Columbus in the New World. The image was based upon a painting by Emanuel Leutze, a German-American artist famous for his “Washington Crossing the Delaware”. There is some mystery surrounding Leutze’s painting, because the image in the stamp shows two figures (one at either

end) that are not depicted in Leutze’s framed painting as it currently exists. Were the figures added by the engraver, or was the painting reduced in width at some point in time? The scene takes place after Columbus was taken prisoner in the New World by Admiral Francisco de Bobadilla, who had accused him of financial mismanagement and dragged him back to Spain to stand trial. Ultimately, Columbus was exonerated of wrongdoing. Like the one-dollar stamp, this one was mainly acquired by collectors. Only 45,550 were printed. The two-dollar “Columbus in Chains” was recently ranked #48 in a book on the 100 greatest American stamps.

Scott #243: \$3 "Columbus Describing Third Voyage"



Figure 3.26. Three-dollar "Columbus Describing Third Voyage," Columbian Exposition Issue, 1893.

Another Robert Savage engraving, this stamp was inspired by a second painting by Francisco Jover y Casanova, artist of the original image on the eight-cent Columbian. Casanova died at age 54, only three years before this stamp was released. Only 24,713 of these stamps were sold. An additional 2,937 were printed, but were subsequently destroyed by the Postal Department in June, 1899.

The three-dollar "Columbus Describing Third Voyage" was recently ranked #36 in a book on the 100 greatest American stamps.

Scott #244: \$4 "Isabella and Columbus"

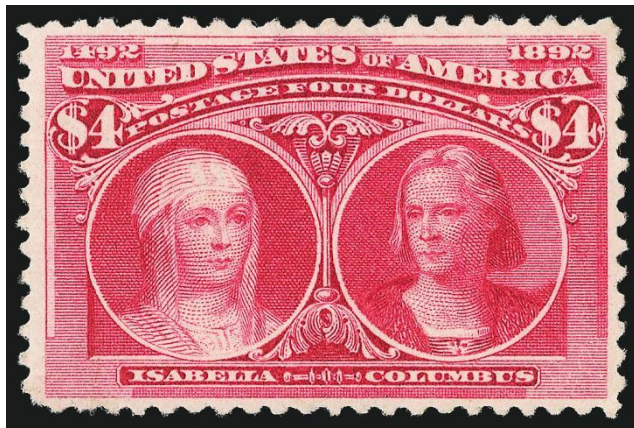


Figure 3.27. Four-dollar "Isabella and Columbus," Columbian Exposition

The carmine four-dollar Columbian was the first US postage stamp to depict a woman, Queen Isabella of Spain. Another nine years would pass before a second woman, Martha Washington, was honored with a stamp. The portrait of Columbus was based upon a work by Lorenzo Lotto, a 16th Century northern Italian painter. The source of the image of Isabella is unknown, but

may have been a painting in Madrid. Only 22,993 of these stamps were sold. An additional 3,357 were printed, but were subsequently destroyed by the Postal Department in June, 1899. Because the carmine ink fades easily, it is difficult to find a dark-shaded specimen of this stamp today. The four-dollar "Isabella and Columbus" was recently ranked #40 in a book on the 100 greatest American stamps.

Scott #245: \$5 “Columbus”



Figure 3.28. Five-dollar “Columbus,” Columbian Exposition Issue, 1893.

The five-dollar Columbian features a coin engraved with a bust of Christopher Columbus. Alfred Jones engraved both the stamp and the original half-dollar coin issued by the United States Mint. The design for both was taken from an earlier Columbus medal struck in Madrid, probably designed in turn by Olin L. Warner of New York. The figures on the left and right of Columbus, engraved by Charles Skinner, were allegorical figures representing Liberty and America, respectively.

The most popular stamp in the Columbian series, the five-dollar Columbian “has an almost mystical aura in the United States philatelic community,” according to Alexander Haimann of the National Postal Museum. Philatelic historian Lester Brookman describes this stamp as “the very peak of desire for a great many collectors.” Only 21,844 were sold. An additional 5,506 were printed, but were subsequently destroyed by the Postal Department in June, 1899. The five-dollar “Columbus” was recently ranked #4 in a book on the 100 greatest American stamps.