

## This Day in History... September 27, 1916

### First Unwatermarked Stamp of the 20th Century

On September 27, 1916, the US Post Office issued its first postage stamp on unwatermarked paper in over 20 years. The change was in response to war-time constraints, but would become permanent.

The first watermarked US stamps were issued in 1895, when the Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP) took over stamp production. The Bureau had been printing US Revenue stamps since 1862 and had started printing them on watermarked paper around 1878. This was to satisfy a law that required government securities to be printed on watermarked paper. The BEP likely believed that US stamps fell into this category of securities and began preparing watermarked paper for US postage stamps.



*The first US postage stamp printed on watermarked paper in 1895.*

A watermark is a pattern impressed into the paper during its manufacture. While still in the wet pulp stage, the paper passes through a “dandy roller” which has “bits” attached to it. These bits are pressed into the paper, causing a slight thinning, thus imprinting the design. The first US watermark consisted of the letters USPS (United States Postal Service) and is described as “double-lined.” The letters were repeated across the entire sheet, and as a result, only a portion of one or more letters appear on a stamp.

The Bureau continued to use watermarked paper for several years. In 1910, they made the decision to change the USPS watermark. In addition to reducing the size of the letters, the style was changed from a double line to a single line. The purpose was to strengthen the paper and give it a more uniform thickness since the old watermark tended to weaken the structure of the paper.

By 1916, the US was already close to a wartime economy as World War I raged in Europe. Looking to save money, the BEP found that unwatermarked paper could be purchased at a much lower price than the specially created watermarked paper and made it a requirement of their contract effective July 1, 1916. The unwatermarked paper was first used on August 22 on US #462, which was issued on September 27, 1916. However, single watermarks on previous stamps were often quite hard to identify, and collectors were slow to recognize that a new type of paper was being used.

Adding to the confusion was the continued use of 10 gauge perfs. A year earlier, 11 gauge perforations had been introduced, and the collecting community expected to see new stamps with that gauge. But in another cost-cutting move, the BEP continued to use the 10 gauge perforating rollers until they wore out completely. The Series of 1916 Washington-Franklins used the same design as previous stamps. Since it was easy to miss whether it was new unwatermarked paper or paper with faint single marks, many collectors overlooked these stamps when they were first issued.

The 1¢ denomination on this stamp paid the postcard rate, and was commonly used with other denominations for heavier, as well as foreign, mailing rates. Respected philatelic author Max Johl called #462 “one of the most desirable stamps of the 20th century.” It was only current for less than six months, yet another reason it was overlooked by many at the time. During the brief time this stamp was current, the BEP also experimented with precanceled stamps for the first time. These precancels were printed for Augusta, Maine, New Orleans, Louisiana, and Springfield, Massachusetts.

No more stamps were intentionally printed on watermarked paper after this, though there were two notable errors – US #519 and #832b.



*Because the single line watermark on previous stamps was so faint, this stamp was largely ignored by collectors and dealers.*



*The single line watermarked stamp #462 replaced.*

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