

19th century American Philatelic Images of Thomas Jefferson

And the Artists behind them

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Chicagopex 2026 REV. 1 – Sept 21, 2026



Treatment and Importance Thomas Jefferson's presence on 19th-century American philately is a part of the complex engraving transitions and postal rate changes in 19th century philately. The **purpose** of this study is to chronicle the evolution of the Jefferson portrait from the 1856 5-cent issue through the turn of the century, on both stamps and postal stationery. It focuses on the art work that inspired each issue, identifies engravers who created the philatelic image, and notes the printers who turned them into final products.

The exhibit links art history and philately and notes some controversies – for example, the PMG statement that the 1890 10-cent issue was based on a bust by Cerrachi is challenged, because that work allegedly had been destroyed by fire 40 years before (with no replica or copy). Subsequent research seems to refute that challenge, but in any event the stamp is more likely based on a statue by Powers. The exhibit also stresses the PMG's reference to Chappel's painting as the source of the 1885 postal card, even if more recent sources refer to other sources. And it firmly confirms that Gilbert Stuart's "Edgehill" painting was the source for the first "Jefferson stamps."

Subject Knowledge / Personal Study Research on this exhibit over almost two decades has required extensive review of journals, books and biographies on the artists and engravers behind the portraits. To identify stamp engravers, I primarily relied on Gene Hessler's *The Engraver's Line* (Port Clinton, OH: BNR Press. 1993), but looked to articles in the *Essay Proof Journal* and Clarence Brazer's writings in early issues of *Collectors Club Philately*, and also the useful <https://stampengravers.blogspot.com/>.

Scope: *The story begins* with links between engravers and philatelic images that were precursors to the first Jefferson stamp vignette. This led to study of obsolete currency and images in the Library of Congress. Frajola and Mayer write that review of obsolete currency does not reveal any likely portrait engravings that could have been used for the 1856 5-cent issue. Nevertheless, this exhibit contains two 1855-1857 notes that do seem to be actual precursors, one of which was printed by the same company that prepared the stamp.

The story ends on the cusp of the new century, just as the Bureau started to print stamps and different Jefferson portraits appeared. This is an appropriate cut-off point as artists, stylistic approaches and

printers were in the process of changing. (It also is a "hard cut-off," as opposed to the varying views on what was the "classic period.")

I inserted a small eyeglass symbol to show particular personal study, but there is actually a lot more such research throughout to draw together art and philatelic history. 

Rarity / Condition The exhibit features several highly notable items identified in **bold red type**, including, but not limited to:

- **Six trial color proofs** of the first 5-cent issue. Only 20 to 25 exist of each color other than black (for which there is only one, which I do not have and likely never will). Brookman, Vol III, p. 228 says there are seven versions; Frajola and Meyer show 6 (which I show as well) plus the single black at p. 13; Scott lists 8. I remain vigilant to find the missing (non-black) version. Earl Oakley wrote about these in 1963. One of my stamps has his initials on the back.
- **Cover with single use of 1856 5-cent issue** (131 known examples from 1856); and **the defective transfer position 23R1** for both the 1856 and the 1861 5-cent stamps (1 out of 400 issued)
- **Earliest documented use of 1878 and 1894 issues** and **(second) earliest documented use of the 1870 H Grill issue on cover** (the stamp itself is rare enough and **only 6 covers** with this stamp are reported in the latest census)

I draw special attention to the **½ ounce snuff taxpaid issue of 1872** (Springer TE27), and the **500 cigarette taxpaid issue of 1868** (TC3). A copy of the snuff stamp is in the U.S. Philatelic Museum in Washington, DC; three were sold at auction over the last two decades, and I exhibit one of **estimated 10 existing**, either used or unused. The 500-cigarette taxpaid stamp was issued in 1872 (per the Act of July 16, 1868); it was superseded in March 1875 and is very difficult to find in any condition. (I've seen one other in 20 years of looking) Other revenue stamps included in this exhibit do not open a Pandora's box, because Jefferson was shown on only a small number of taxpaid revenues. Nevertheless, they are a part of the story and should be included. (The taxpaid beer stamps are among the few issues that cross the 19th century mark.)

Proofs and essays are included in the mix to show the artistry of these stamps and the best examples of each item in the exhibit that I could

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find. I include examples of usage for certain early issues, but not so many as to over-balance the story line (or create a postal history). For completeness, I have included two issues from the Confederate States of America, also based on Stuart. (This is why the title is “American Philatelic Images” rather than “U.S.”)

Postal stationery completes the exhibit. All the basics are shown, including a wide variety of envelopes; the original essay for the first Jefferson postal card, signed by the engraver; territorial overprints; and a well-known but scarce counterfeit.

What's Not here? A comprehensive story about the Jefferson portrayals on U.S stamps does not require *every* color variation or error of *every* stamp and envelope (e.g., *all* Atlanta 1875 trial colors, which were not valid for postage) or every plate flaw. To tell the story requires showing the steady development of Jefferson images and identification of the artists behind the stamps in an appealing way, which this exhibit is designed to do. Where there are especially interesting variations, I sought to show them, such as the full set of official stamps or the 1856 plate reliefs.

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Further reading, with hyperlinks

On the 1856 issue that started the Jefferson portrayals, see the 1890 Third Ass't Postmaster-General's official description of the “obsolete” stamp designs, stating that the 1856 Jefferson portrayal was based on Stuart, available at [Report of the third assistant postmaster-general. ... 1888-90 1888-1890 | HathiTrust Digital Library](#), “Obsolete issues...” (1890) pg. 865. The PMG reported this was the first “official” printed description. John Tiffany wrote an article four years earlier describing these issues.

For more detail, see Frajola, R. and Mayer, F., *The United States Five Cent Stamp of 1856* (Collectors Club, 2005). See also U.S. Philatelic Classic Society, “1856 5c Issue,” at <https://www.uspcs.org/stamps-covers/uspod-issued-adhesives/the-1851-1860-issue/1856-5c-issue/>. Earl Oakley described the four reliefs to be found on the stamp in *The Chronicle*, July 1963, vol. 45, pg. 14, as well as the defective transfer (shown in the exhibit), which is also referenced in Frajola's book. See http://chronicle.uspcs.org/pdf/Chronicle_45/16588.pdf and I include **Oakley's copy of the 1861 defective transfer** in the exhibit (signed in pencil on the back and a certificate issued in his name). Because his article shows small close ups of the actual reliefs, I thought it better for this exhibit to hand draw larger blow ups of the four different marks.

Guides to stamped envelopes, also with background information on the 10c Jefferson portrayal, is “The All New 10 Cent US Envelopes of 1870-1874,” an eBook at [reay.pdf \(upss.org\)](#) and Richard Frajola's “The 10 Cent US Envelopes of 1870-1874 at [RT10c.pdf \(rfrajola.com\)](#). And, of course, the UPSS catalogs are invaluable resources for identifying pertinent postal stationery. 51882600

On the later 1890 designs, see generally Brookman, Lester G., *The United States Postage Stamps of the 19th Century* (Lindquist, New York, 2nd ed., 1966) (Vol. III, pg. 153 refers to the boat wreck that destroyed many of the 50c issue, noted in the exhibit). Support for questions about the 1890 stamp issue being based on the bust by Ceracchi were found in an 1898 article in [McClure's magazine v.11 1898 May-Oct.](#), pg. 47 (“there seems to be neither replica or copy” of the Ceracchi bust). Subsequent research refutes this claim – there is a copy of the bust at Jefferson's Monticello!

If you are interested in the artistic elements, Stuart's works and life are comprehensively described in “[Life Portraits of Thomas Jefferson | Thomas Jefferson's Monticello](#)”. Not necessarily for judging this exhibit, but if you are *really* interested, I would be glad to show you Barratt, C.R. and Miles, E.G., *Gilbert Stuart*, exhibition catalogue organized by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York & National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution (2004), at pg. 277 *et seq.* Also of interest is Kimball, Fiske, *The Life Portraits of Jefferson and Their Replicas* (American Philosophical Soc'y, 1944).

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THE EXHIBIT

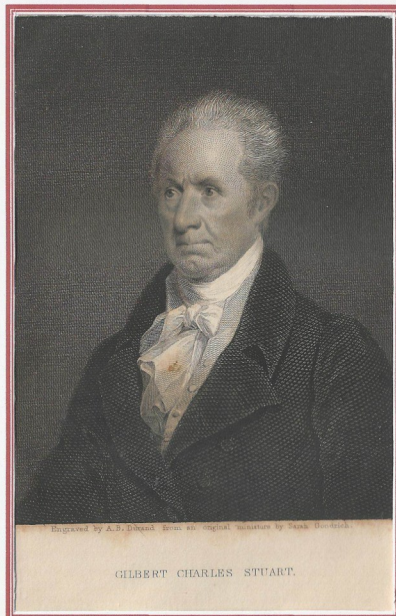
This experimental exhibit (formerly called a special study) shows 19th century images of Thomas Jefferson on American stamps and related items, linked to the artists (including engravers) behind the images. Its scope starts with engravings on obsolete currency as the precursors to early stamps, and ends with territorial overprints on postal cards at the cusp of the century and an epilogue to the 20th century.



ABOVE, the first 5c Jefferson issue

THE KEY

- Special items: **bold red** – the symbol © indicates expert certificate
- Boxed text give further info on stamps, artistic works and engravers
- Personal research is shown throughout by linking artists with stamp issues and in particular instances by an eyeglass symbol
- Structure is loosely chronological within frame categories



FRAME ONE: GILBERT STUART

- Precursors to 1856 5-cent
- 5-cent 1856, 1857-1861, 1861-1868
- Usage during the Civil War
- Illegal Usage 1863
- Taxpaid Revenues 1868-onward

FRAME TWO: NEW ARTISTS

- **JOHN TRUMBULL**
Precursors and Pictorials 1869
- **HIRAM POWERS**
Large Bank Notes 1870-1878
Official Stamps 1873-1879
- **GIUSEPPE CERRACHI**
Small Bank Notes 1890
First Bureau Issues 1894-1898

LEFT, MOST INFLUENTIAL ARTIST - Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828). Engraving after watercolor on ivory by Sarah Goodridge, c. 1825. Experts say: "[L]ittle is known about the designer of the 5-cent [1856] stamp, and no design essays survive...."

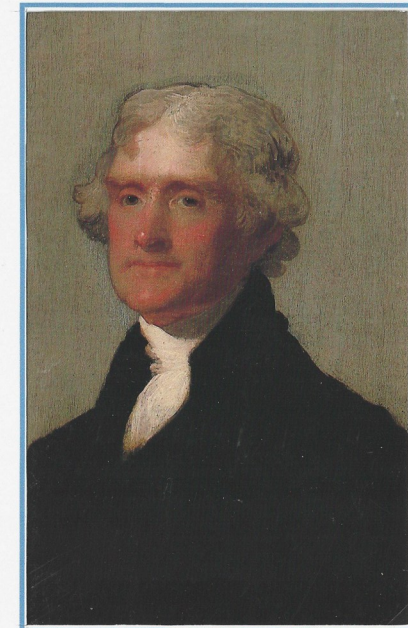
Scholars say Stuart's work was the "predominant icon of Jefferson" throughout the 19th century. Despite some claims that the early 5-cent issue derived from a 1800 oil painting by **REMBRANDT PEALE**, in 1889-1890 the Third Asst Postmaster-General confirmed that the 1856 Jefferson portrayal was based on Stuart.

FRAME THREE: POSTAL STATIONERY

- **HIRAM POWERS (Again)**
Stamped Envelopes 1870-1886
Wells Fargo Envelopes
- **ALONZO CHAPPEL (after STUART)**
Postal Cards 1885
Postal Cards 1894 & 1898
- **CHARLES BALTHAZAR JULIEN FÉVRET DE SAINT MÉMIN**
Postal Cards 1886
- **ALONZO CHAPPEL (Again)**
Postal Card Territorial Overprints 1899

EPILOGUE—THE 20th CENTURY

RIGHT, INSPIRATION FOR THE FIRST JEFFERSON STAMP — Stuart likely started the so-called "Edgehill" portrait in 1805, shown on the postcard from Monticello at right, but he only delivered it in 1821 at Jefferson's insistence.



Stuart's "Edgehill" painting inspired many 19th century stamps, but certain later issues (e.g., the 1954-1968 Liberty series) were based on his so-called "Bowdoin" version. A key difference is a hair ribbon behind Jefferson's back on the *Bowdoin* painting, absent from the *Edgehill* painting and the 19th century 5-cent issues.