

The Western Airletter Project

CHICAGOPEX 2026

Purpose & Scope: This is a multi-frame exhibit of the 32 Airletter stamps issued as part of the Western Airlines, Burlington Express, American Express, and P.R.I.D.E. programs. First Day covers, privately issued First Day covers, commercial mail, and documentation from the Airletter Collector's Centre are shown.

Treatment: This exhibit is linear, by carrier: Western Airlines, Burlington Express, American Express, and P.R.I.D.E.). It covers the FDCs (issued by carrier and privately issued), commercial mail, and the Airletter Collectors Centre created to service FDCs.

Background: The Western Airletter program was launched on February 15, 1982, to expedite mail delivery utilizing excess capacity on Western Airlines jetliners. The sender purchased a stamp ("service indicator") from Western Airlines and placed it on the envelope. The mail would be flown by Western Airlines to the closest destination city and was deposited with the United State Postal Service for local delivery.

When the philatelic community learned about the use of stamps there was an instant demand for the stamps and for FDCs. Western Airletter handled the first few issues on their own, but created a service staffed with philatelists to handle future issues. That group, the Airletter Collector's Centre, took over through the termination of the stamp program in 1984.

The Airletter Collector's Centre commercialized the FDC process and communicated to members through letters delivered with shipments and eventually the Airletter Collector's Centre Newsletter. They encouraged commercial activity through the following:

- the introduction of First Day of Service covers for Burlington Airletter (a set of 14 covers),
- the introduction of a buy/sell mail-order system for previously issued covers,
- the introduction of the Airletter album, and
- the introduction of the Airletter Collector's Catalogue.

In 1984 the Western Airletter program ceased the use of stamps as a cost savings measure. Thus, ending the stamp program.

Philatelic Importance: Lacking the use of United States Postal Service (USPS) stamps, these covers would have little philatelic importance. The program was a means to expedite delivery of a letter without Airletter completing the last mile delivery.

Knowledge, Personal Study, and Research: The amount of published information on the Airletter service is limited. Information from 1982 through 1984 comes from newspaper and philatelic articles, letters from Western Airlines to collectors, the Airletter Collector's Centre newsletter (9 issues), and the Airletter Catalogue (1983). Additional articles continued to be published, with little valuable information. The Western Airletter: Specialized Catalogue (2013) is largely a reprint of the Airletter Catalogue with updated pricing.

The Airletter collection that I acquired in 2024 contained research that does not appear to have been previously published. Among other things it contained an interview transcript with Jim Hannafin and an exhibit by Ray Cartier. Both contributed to the exhibit. The acquisition of material not in the initial collection has contributed to new findings.

- Western Airletter created a mailing list of 2,000 customers and each was assigned a member number, printed on the envelopes when the covers were delivered.
- The Airletter Collector's Centre took the place of Western Airlines cover handling in 1982.
- Most privately issued FDCs were created by the Collector's Choice LTD.
 - They issued FDC's for the first covers.
 - They issued a set of covers mailed on Christmas Eve, 1982.
 - They issued a cover featuring the first stamp to be commemorated on February 15, 1983, however, the cancellation date was wrong. While the cover states the cover date is in error the story is only told in the original paperwork sent by Collectors Choice LTD to their customers.

Challenge of Acquisition, Significant Items, and Rarity: Airletter FDCs are not difficult to obtain. Some covers appear less frequently, but a dedicated collector can obtain all FDCs issued by the carriers. First Day of Service covers by Burlington Express are a challenge and this exhibit is missing two of the 14.

Privately issued FDCs by the Collector's Choice LTD can be located, but homemade FDCs along with commercial covers are exceedingly rare and if in auction can have spirited bidding. Preproduction material has not been seen on the market since 2021, although one item (a sketch) is included in this exhibit.

This exhibit includes a preproduction sketch by Marianne Garehime. One of the color omitted varieties (one of two known per the Western Airletter Specialized Catalogue) is

The Western Airletter Project

CHICAGOPEX 2026

included. The first five covers signed by Jim Hanifin and Ken Maul (the only set known per Jim's letter) are included in the exhibit.¹ Multiple commercial covers are included.

References

McKnowle, Robert. Western Airletter: Specialized Catalogue. General Trade Corporation. 1983.

¹ The letter from Jim Hanifin notes that the covers are a replacement for five covers. He notes that the covers are usually signed solely by Ken Maul, but he has signed them and they are the only known set containing both signatures, per his understanding.

The Western AirLetter Project

Purpose: This exhibit explores how the Western AirLetter (WAL) project transformed from a mail processing to a First Day Cover (FDC) processing venture due to the advertising and demand of their first stamp (or service indicator).

Background: The Western AirLetter (WAL) project was introduced in 1982 as a means to utilize the excess capacity of Western Airlines jetliners to transport first-class mail to the closest city to the recipient, where the mail would be deposited for delivery by the United States Postal Service (USPS). WAL introduced its own stamp (or service indicator) to add legitimacy to the product. The service indicator combined with United States Postal Service stamps showed payment of the WAL rate and the first-class mail rate.

The coverage of the project generated demand for the stamp and FDCs. WAL was unaware of and unprepared for the philatelic interest in their project. After demand for the first two stamps exceeded their processing capabilities they established a "governing body" and finally the Airletter Cover Centre, a commercial entity, to help it fulfill demand. As Western AirLetter added American Express, Burlington Northern Airfreight, and PRIDE as partners it created the

opportunity for the creation of more stamps and more covers. Between 1982 and 1984 29 stamps were issued and when combined with the First Day of Service covers for Burlington Airfreight a total of 40 official covers exist.

Treatment: Western AirLetter issued branded stamps for American Express, Burlington Northern Airfreight, and PRIDE. Each organization is broken down into its own section as illustrated by the exhibit plan.

Importance: The Western AirLetter was an attempt to expedite the delivery of first-class mail via a private organization. Their goal was to deliver business mail to its recipient within 48 hours of receipt for second day service and next day for special delivery services.

Condition: The condition is the best that can be found.

Items of importance are indicated with a red box around the item. Original research will have a magnifying glass next to it.



This cover was used to deliver the initial first FDC. On subsequent covers the mailing label included the Collector's Number.
This cover paid the \$1.00 Western AirLetter rate for second day service and the USPS 1st class letter rate (double weight).

- Exhibit Plan
- Western Airletter
 - The Inaugural Issues
 - Issued Stamps
 - First Day Covers
 - Commercial Mail
 - Burlington Northern Airfreight
 - Issued Stamps
 - First Day Covers
 - First Day of Service Covers
 - American Express Airletter
 - Issued Stamps
 - First Day Covers
 - P.R.I.D.E.
 - Issued Stamps
 - First Day Covers