

The Advent of Pressure-Sensitive Adhesive (PSA) postage stamps 50 Years Ago (But first there was Gum)

By: Bob Lamb

Before postage stamps existed, people receiving letters would have to pay for them. The payment was based on how many papers were in the envelope and how far the letter had traveled. In England, Rowland Hill came up with a solution of prepayment. This led to his invention of stamp gum in 1837. The world's first adhesive postage stamp was called the Penny Black. Many early stamps were not gummed. Extreme tropical climates were also a problem for many locations. Some stamps, intended only for sale to stamp collectors, have been issued without gum, for instance the United States *Farley's Follies* souvenir sheets of 1933. On the first stamps of Great Britain the gum was called cement and was made from a mixture of potato starch, wheat starch and acacia gum.

“Self-stick” adhesive stamps were first issued by governments in tropical climates such as Sierra Leone in February 1964 and Tonga in April 1969 to avoid the tendency of traditional water-activated Gum (WAG) stamps to stick together in humid conditions. The printing process also allowed for die cutting into fanciful and unique shapes.

The United States Postal Service first experimented with self-adhesives by producing the 1974 “Peace on Earth” Christmas stamp (Scott #1552). Issued on November 15th in panes of 12, the stamp featured the dove weathervane located on top of Mount Vernon. The Post Office wanted to prevent the reuse of postage, so the stamps had die cut slashes to thwart removal. The adhesive coating was produced by the label people at Avery Dennison. However, too many obstacles were discovered, including excessive printing costs, stamps could be peeled and reused, gum quality led to stained stamps and envelopes. Neither collectors nor customers were happy. The trial was doomed to failure.



15 years later - the USPS tried again with a different gum and paper type. The 29 cent Eagle and Shield stamp (Scott# 2431) was issued. A foldable book designed to be sold via ATM machines went on sale November 10, 1989 at VAPEX. The stamp was presented with a different printing process, paper type and format – coils and booklets. The stamp was designed by Jay Haden and printed by photogravure by the American Bank Note Company. The stamp was only marketed for 30 days in 15 test cities and public opinion was solicited. A 50-cent surcharge on each test strip and booklet was unpopular.

The Advent of Pressure-Sensitive Adhesive (PSA) postage stamps - (continued)

On May 18, 1990, a new PSA stamp was issued. Scott #2475 (25 cent flag) was printed on plastic paper and sold only in panes of 12 thru First National Bank ATMs in Seattle. This method was to test the popularity of selling stamps through Automatic Teller Machines (ATMs). While the plastic stamp proved unpopular, especially with environmentalists, the ATM format proved to be a success.



This stamp was followed by a quick duplicate. On June 21, 1991, an “F” value replacement to meet the postal rate increase followed the same format as #2475.

The 1994 Christmas stamps (2871-2874) ushered in the increasing use of PSA on definitive stamps. The festive stamps were

available in booklet and coil form.

The first PSA commemorative was issued for Tennessee statehood in 1996. (Scott #3070). With the new printing paper and improved printing process – the public became satisfied with the new format.

By 2002, the PSA stamps had gained public approval, and the USPS claimed that water activated gum paper was more expensive than pressure-sensitive adhesive. By 2005, nearly every US postage stamp was PSA.

There are endless varieties of die cut errors with all the PSA issues.

Sources:

Linn’s Stamp News 2020: <https://www.linns.com/news/us-stamps-postal-history/say-goodbye-to-the-lick-and-stick-us-stamp.html>

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-07-05-fi-20420-story.html>

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