

All Dressed Up With Nowhere to Fly
The 1923 Series of Airplane Stamps

Bob Baltzell

(This article originally appeared in the August 2018 Airpost Journal)

A couple of years ago I entered a single frame airmail exhibit in a national stamp show. At the feedback forum my responding judge, a respected and grand award winning airmail exhibitor himself, mentioned that I had a date wrong in my synopsis. My chart showed all of the airmail postage rates in effect from 1918 through 1934 and I had the three cross country zone rates going into effect on July 1, 1924. The judge said the correct year was 1923. He noted this on my evaluation form and I'm sure it cost me some points.

I was puzzled since I was sure that I'd checked and double checked all of the dates and rates on my chart in multiple sources, but assumed the judge was correct and dejectedly returned home resigned to correct my careless mistake. What I have discovered since then is a conglomeration of ambiguous descriptions in numerous publications, including various editions of the American Air Mail Catalog, that could make anyone wonder what the correct date really is. Normally, when new stamps are issued for a postage rate increase, they are released shortly before the effective date of the increase. This would not be true however for the 1923 series of airmail stamps.

It did not take long after the Wright brothers made their historic powered flight of a manned glider in 1903 before the U.S. Post Office Department (U.S. POD) could envision using aeroplanes to transport mail. At first it was authorizing pilots to carry mail during barn-storming air events and experimenting with short routes, but the flying machines and their pilots were subject to many adverse conditions to depend upon them for any regular scheduled mail. Even the large prize of \$50,000 (about \$1.25 million today) that William Randolph Hearst offered in 1910 to the first pilot that could fly coast to coast in 30 days went unclaimed and expired (however this did leave us with those coveted Vin Fiz covers and postcards).

With the experience gained during World War I by the Army Air Corps, the U.S. POD hoped that their planes and pilots could establish a regular airmail route from Washington, D.C. to New York City. They named this the "Aeroplane Mail Service" (later changed to Air Mail Service) and issued the first U.S. airmail stamp (Scott C3) in 1918 specifically for this route. Later that year they added routes to Boston and Chicago and issued two more stamps, each reducing the rate from the original 24¢ cents to 16¢ (Scott C2) and then to 6¢ (Scott C1) on December 10th.

Unable to attract enough business to sustain the air mail routes the U.S. POD discontinued airmail rates on July 18, 1919, but announced that first class mail could be carried by air for 2¢ per ounce when space was available. Visionary postal authorities were still determined to implement a cross country airmail service from New York to San Francisco and started a service on September 8, 1920 that consisted of mail being carried by air during the daylight hours and on railroad cars at night, crossing the country in about 36 hours.

In a speech before the Marion, Ohio Chamber of Commerce on May 3, 1922, John H. Bartlett, First Assistant Postmaster General, espoused the great service the U.S. POD was providing and had this interesting comment about the Air Mail Service: *"The United States is the first country in the world to establish an air mail route. Last year the air mail service covered 1,500,000 miles and carried 5,000,000 letters. We now have a route in operation between New York and San Francisco. We have a factory where we are making our own airplanes. Our mail fliers are provided with a helmet over their heads, a mouthpiece before their mouths, and a wire 300 feet long trailing underneath, by means of which they can communicate with the department in Washington or other points as they fly through the air. They can also pass away their weary hours while in the air more pleasantly by listening to music and speeches hundreds of miles away"*.

After years of testing, training, planning, installing airport and beacon lights, the U.S. POD announced on June 21, 1923 that an experimental operation would start on July 1, 1923 with night flying between Chicago and Cheyenne on the transcontinental route (figure 1). This would allow the flights between New York-Chicago, and San Francisco-Cheyenne to be flown during daylight hours, thus enabling a continuous flying service coast to coast. A detailed flight timetable was released with the comment, *"The postage during the experimental flights only will be 2 cents an ounce, and letters should be marked "Via air mail from" or "Via air mail to"."*



Figure 1. The original Transcontinental Airways route stopped in 14 cities. Note missing “s”.

The grey clouds of controversy began to form however when they also simultaneously announced a new series of three air mail stamps that are, “. . . intended primarily for use in the new night flying Air Mail Service, soon to be established between New York and San Francisco, but valid for all purposes for which postage stamps of the regular issue are used”. It then describes each of the new 8¢, 16¢ and 24¢ airmail stamps (Scott C4, C5 & C6) (figures 2,3,4) and adds, “The new air mail postage stamps will first be placed on sale at the philatelic stamp agency, Division of Stamps, Post Office Department, within the next few days. They will not be placed on sale at all post offices but only at such offices as may be designated later. Postmasters should not draw requisitions for these stamps, as they will be furnished without requisition only to the post offices authorized to place them on sale when they are available”.



Figure 2 Scott C4 issued August 15, 1923. Sold at the APS convention and the Philatelic Division of Stamps, Post Office Washington, D.C.



Figure 3 Scott C5 issued August 17, 1923. Sold at the Philatelic Division of Stamps, Post Office Washington, D.C.



Figure 4 Scott C6 issued August 21, 1923. Sold at the Philatelic Division of Stamps, Post Office Washington, D.C.

When this series of airmail stamps was ordered in June it was anticipated that the new transcontinental airmail route could open in September, however cuts to the U.S. POD’s 1923 fiscal budget allowed no funds to implement flying the entire route on a permanent basis. Instead, they conducted trials beginning August 21st with flights originating from both San Francisco and New York over the next three days. Although the trials proved that the air travel time could cut off about

two thirds of the ninety hours it took the Railway Mail Service to complete the trip, it would have to wait until they could find the necessary funds in their 1924 fiscal year budget before this service could be implemented. They also intended to sell all three stamps at the 1923 APS convention, but production problems and the funeral of President Harding delayed releasing the last two issues. The convention was held at the Shoreham Hotel in Washington, D.C. and first day covers (figure 5) with the hotel corner card are highly prized.

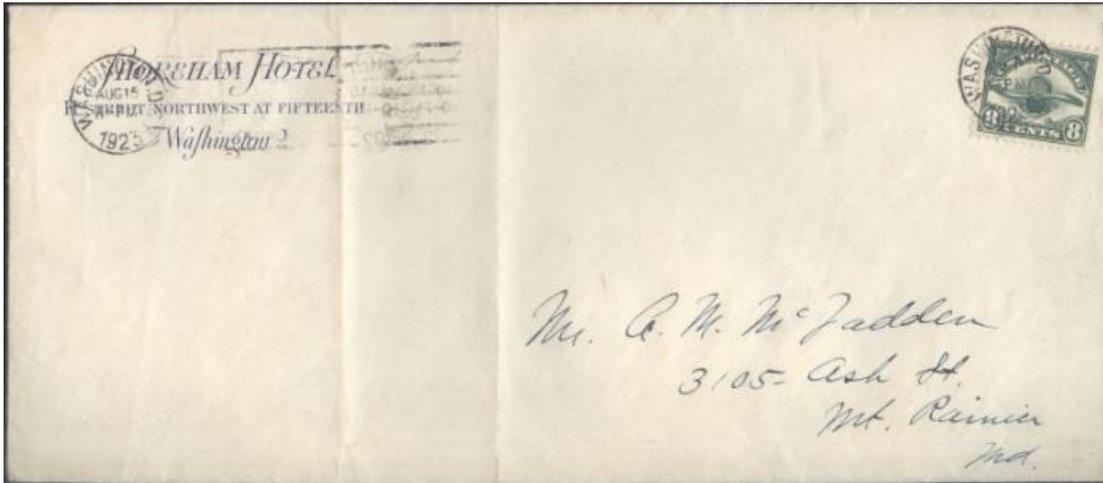


Figure 5. This cover was mailed during the APS convention from the Shoreham Hotel on Aug. 15, 1923. Only the new 8 cent stamp was ready in time to be sold at the convention.

On June 20, 1924 the U.S. POD released a new timetable for the transcontinental route (figure 6) and announced the new airmail zones rates of 8¢ per ounce per zone: “For the information of postmasters and postal employees, the following data concerning the new schedule of the air mail service in effect July 1, 1924, is furnished . . . Special airplane stamps are issued, but any stamps good for postage may be used, provided the envelope is plainly marked “Via air mail”. The New York-San Francisco route is the only one operated by the Post Office Department and, for rating of postage, is divided into three zones: (1) New York to Chicago, (2) Chicago to Cheyenne, and (3) Cheyenne to San Francisco. A rate of 8 cents for each zone or part of zone makes the cost of postage for each ounce or fraction thereof—for example, from New York to Chicago, 8 cents; New York to Cheyenne, 16 cents; and New York to San Francisco, 24 cents.”

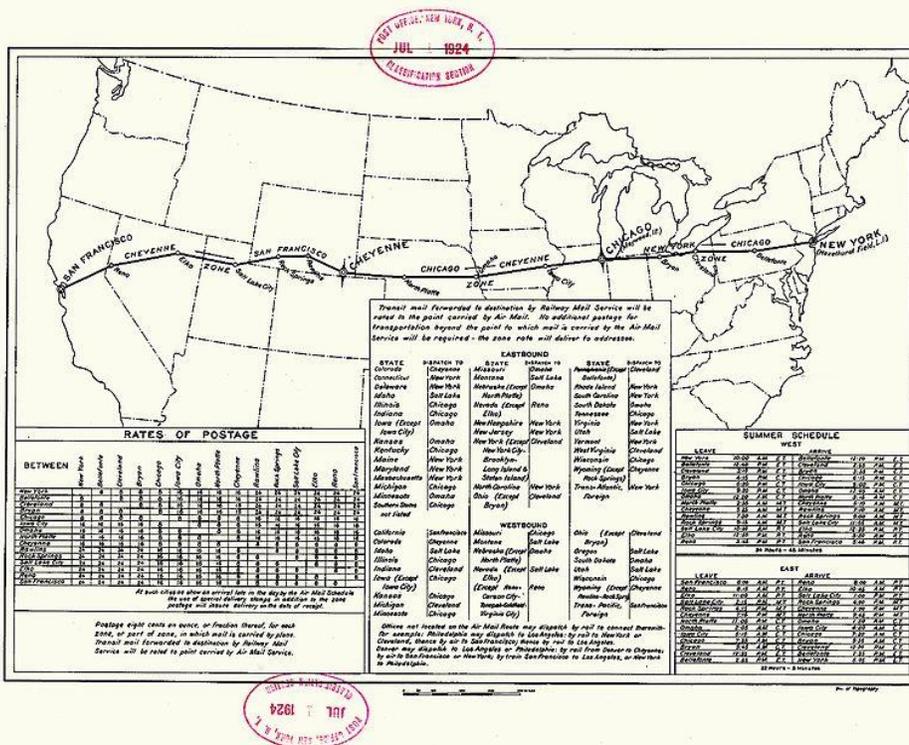


Figure 6. When the route officially opened on July 1, 1924 there were 15 cities.

This is the first time the U.S. POD mentions zone rates in conjunction with these stamps but troublingly states that, “special airplane stamps are issued”. This statement implies that the three zone rate stamps were *recently* issued and do not mention the time gap of over ten months. Some reference books that correctly state that the airmail zone rates went into effect July 1, 1924 also include misleading comments like, “*airmail stamps were issued*”. This misconception is repeated numerous times in many philatelic publications.

There are four references to the 1923 series of airmail stamps in the **American Air Mail Catalogs (AAMC)**.

U.S. Air Mail Stamps, C4 - 8 Cents Dark Green, C5 - 16 Cents Dark Blue, C6 - 24 Cents Carmine

- **4th Edition** - Gives the usual dates issued and statistical information for each of the three stamps including the purpose. For the 8¢ stamp, “*This value paid the postage on one ounce of air mail for one zone*”. For the 16¢, “*The sixteen cent rate covered the postage for an airmail letter of one ounce or less for two zones, or a double weight letter for one zone*”. For the 24¢ it reads, “*This value paid the postage on airmail letters from New York to the Pacific Coast*”.
- **5th Edition** - Repeats the same descriptions but adds the following comment for each stamp, “*Although the stamp was issued at the Philatelic Agency in Washington, D.C. actual distribution to postmasters was delayed until August 24th, but instructions were issued to withhold sale of the stamps because the new air mail service had not been implemented at that time. General sale to the public commenced on June 16, 1924 and the transcontinental route between New York and San Francisco was first flown on July 1 of that year*”.

Both editions correctly state the purpose of the 8¢ and 16¢ stamps but include an inexcusable comment for the 24¢ stamp that reduces its purpose to a singular usage. It was not restricted to just paying the postage on a one ounce airmail letter from New York to the Pacific Coast. The description reads like a bride telling her bridesmaids the when, where and why she bought her wedding dress but never disclosing the date of the wedding. The comment added in the 5th edition mentions a flight was held “on July 1 of that year” but leaves it up to the bridesmaids to speculate that is when the knot will be tied. It would be nice to explicitly state that the zone rates went into effect concurrent with the first transcontinental flights.

U.S. Government Flight Covers #162 1923 August 21-24

- **4th, 5th, 6th and 7th Editions** have almost identical descriptions. “*These test flights were the forerunner of our present coast-to-coast air mail system and this was the first U.S. air mail service to involve regularly-scheduled night flying, on the Chicago to Cheyenne segment, over newly lighted airways. Total flight length was 2,680 miles and crossed three ranges of mountains. These flights also introduced the 1923 series of U.S. air mail stamps of 8¢, 16¢ and 24¢ denominations, which were released on August 15, 17 and 21 during stamp conventions in Washington D.C. An 8¢ per ounce air mail rate was established for each of the three zones, running from New York to Chicago, from Chicago to Cheyenne, and from Cheyenne to San Francisco*”.

This entry is probably the chief cause of disseminating the misconception that the zone rates became effective in 1923. By connecting the stamps and the airmail zone rates to these flights leads one to believe that the rates went into effect when the stamps were “introduced”. A statement added in the 7th edition, “*Covers are also seen using a 2¢ rate regardless of zone coverage*” makes a feeble attempt to explain that a one ounce airmail letter could still be sent coast to coast for the first class postage rate of 2¢. It would also be nice to correct the remark about the stamps being released during the stamp convention. As the entry for the U. S. Airmail Stamps correctly describes, only the 8¢ airmail stamp was put on sale during the convention of the American Philatelic Society, not the other two.

U.S. Government Flight Covers #167 1924 July 1 – Transcontinental air Mail route – New York – San Francisco

- **4th, 5th, 6th and 7th Editions.** “*The long-awaited transcontinental air mail route involving night flying was inaugurated on this date. Country was divided into three postal rate zones costing 8¢ per ounce per zone. Planes left both New York and San Francisco simultaneously with discharge and reception of mail at thirteen intermediate cities.*”
- **5th Edition.** Added, “*Country was divided into three postal rate zones costing 8¢ per ounce per zone. First zone New York to Chicago was 8¢; second zone Chicago to Cheyenne, 16¢; and third zone Cheyenne to San Francisco, 24¢*”.

Even though this description does not plainly state that the three zone rates begin on this day it does have all the facts straight. It was perfect until that absurd phrase was inserted in the 5th edition that may have temporarily added to the confusion. Thankfully it was removed in the 6th edition as this only applied to a letter mailed from New York.

Airmail Rate Changes

- **5th Edition.** Shows the last day of the 2¢ rate as June 29, 1924 and the first day of the zone rates as June 30.

The one edition that has a chapter devoted to airmail rate changes managed to get the date wrong. First flight covers exist postmarked on June 30, 1924 (figure 7) and some considered this the date the rate went into effect, but the U.S. POD announcements clearly state that the zone rates are effective on the date the new airmail timetable begins, July 1st. On June 30th a one ounce airmail letter (figure 8) could be sent for the first class rate of 2¢; on July 1st it required 8¢ per zone.

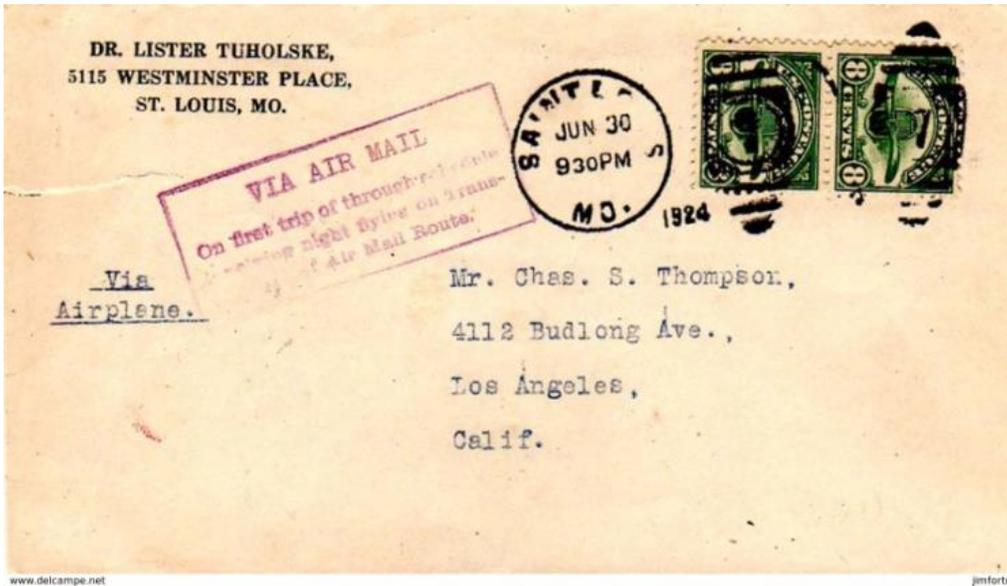


Figure 7. Many people mailed their letters early to make sure they got postmarked on time. Many received June 30 cancel. This cover franked with 16 cents was to pay the new zone rate for one ounce over two zones.

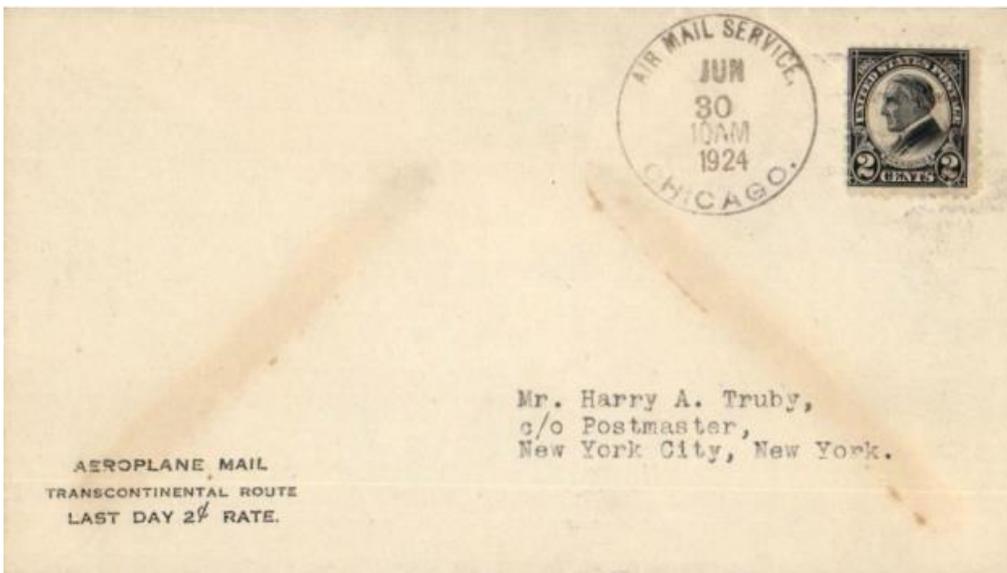


Figure 8. Airmail letters could still be mailed on June 30 for 1st class rate of 2 cents per ounce.

If you have read this far and your head is not swirling in a cloud of confusion you have my sincere admiration. Scholars, historians, catalogs editors and philatelic writers have used the American Air Mail Catalogs as the authoritative reference material for many generations and it is easy to see why it could be easy to assume incorrect dates and events from the

ambiguity of the various descriptions. Hopefully when these sections are included in a future edition they can be clarified and corrected.

Endnotes

Post Office Department announcements and statements taken from The Postal Bulletin

Volume 42, issue 12852

Volume 44, issue 13241

Volume 45, issue 13501

Volume 45, issue 13504

American Air Mail Catalogues

U.S. Air Mail Stamps

4th edition, Vol I

5th edition, Vol V

U.S. Government Flights

4th edition, Vol I, 1924 flight was #166

5th edition, Vol I, updates values for 1923 and 1924 covers

6th edition, Vol I, 1924 flight additional information on postmarks, cover values and volume of mail

7th edition, Vol III updates values for 1923 and 1924 covers,

Domestic Airmail Rate Changes

5th edition, Vol II

United States Stamps 1922-26 by Gary Griffith

Many first day covers are postmarked New York City, NY suggesting that all 3 stamps were sold there also in August 1923.

The headquarters of the Air Mail Service was transferred from Washington, D.C. to Omaha, Nebraska on October 1, 1924.

The first three editions of the AAMC are not considered in this discussion.

Some of the images are from on-line auction websites