

Precancel Progress by Josh Furman

I guess the first question is, “What is a precancel?” The answer: It’s changed over the years. Read on.

When mail was canceled before it even got to the Post Office, the stamps on that mail were pre-canceled. The Postmaster, who was probably also the grocer, butcher, printer and purveyor of many other community services, would have been happy not to have had to cancel each of the same item in a mailing to the local population. So, he sold the mailer stamps that he could identify as canceled, so as to not have to do the work himself. The identification might have been a sign or symbol, but mostly it was the name of the city (or town or village) and state of mailing set between two lines. It might have looked like **Figure C1**.



Figure C1

As you can imagine, printers in different towns might have used different styles of typesetting, different sizes of type, or different lengths or thickness of bars or lines. So, there wasn’t much consistency from town to town in these local precancels. These are referred to as “Towns and Types” or “locals”. As you can imagine, there are lots of these. There are around 43,000 towns and types listed in the *Town and Type* catalog. Each type can be found on multiple Scott numbers. There are estimates that there are well over 4 million individual precancels known to exist.

The first attempt to supply precanceled stamps from the Bureau of Printing and Engraving occurred in 1916. The Bureau supplied precancels to three cities, and these are considered to be the forerunners of all bureau precancels. The demand for these stamps increased as companies used the postal service more and more to deliver their mail, catalogs and packages. In May 1923, precanceling was adapted to the web-fed Stickney Rotary Intaglio press that was then used for the production of all U. S. postage stamps. Bureau precancels were produced on it and various other presses until 1978. Postmasters needed to order

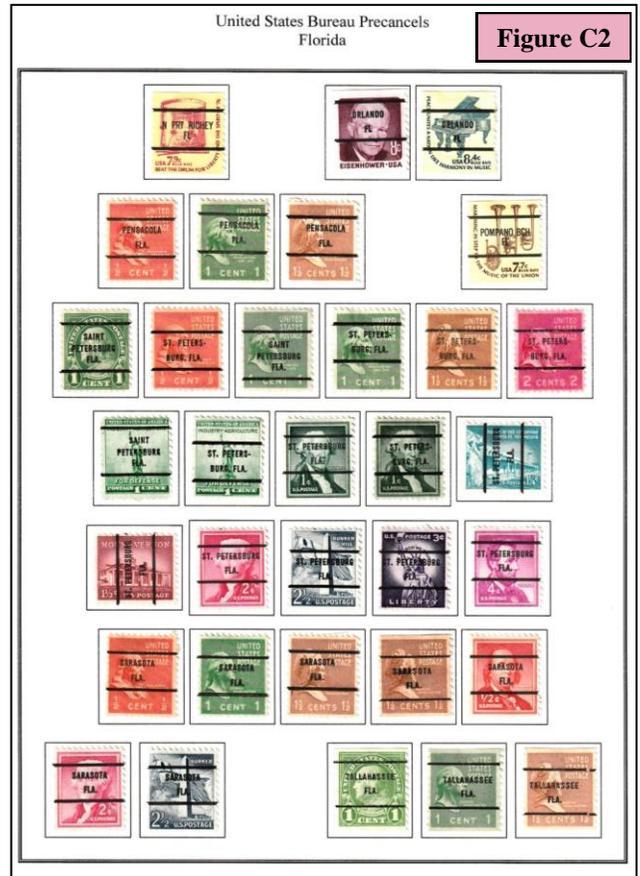


Figure C2

500,000 stamps in sheets, or 250,000 stamps in coils.



Figure C3 (T), C4 (B)

The Precancel Stamp Society has just issued the Sixth Edition, April 2020, of the *Catalog of United State Bureau Precancels*. In it are listings for 9,414 different Bureau precanceled stamps. That’s all the Bureau precancels there are -- it’s a fixed number, and there won’t be any more. So as a collector one has an easily viewed goal of a complete collection. Accomplishing the goal will be a challenge, especially if one doesn’t win the lottery. But having a nice collection is not too difficult. Most



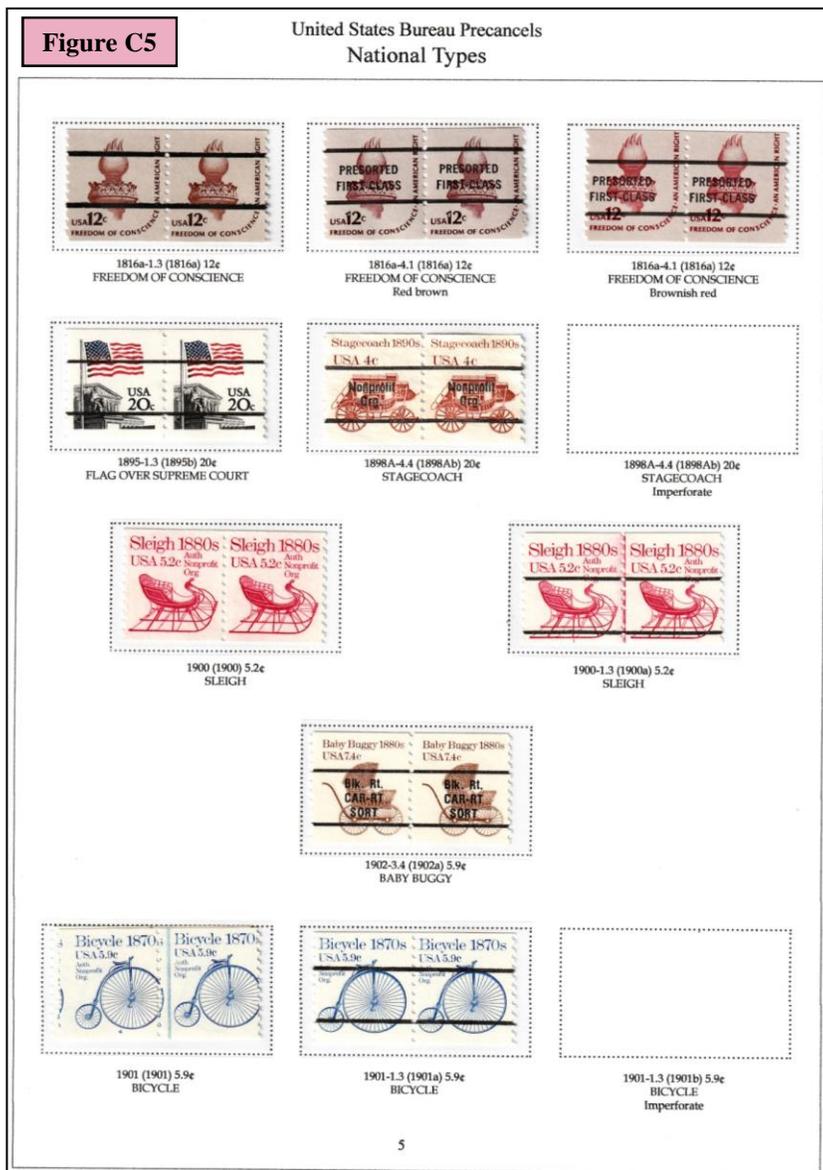
precancels are valued at twenty or twenty-five cents, not a strain on one’s wallet and album pages are easily available. You can even create your own, as I did. See **figure C2** for an album page from my collection of Bureau precancels, showing some of the precancels from the state of Florida, including the two from Orlando.

So, what happened in 1978? The Bureau introduced a new concept in Bureau precancels, the

National, “lines only” type of overprint. This style of precancel would be valid at any post office, so didn’t need the city and state designation. **Figure C3** is an example of that style of precancel.

Two years later the Bureau printed the first of a class of special service precancels designed to be used on a particular class of mail. This type of precancel, the “service-inscribed” precancel, is also valid at all post offices. See **Figure C4**.

Since these types didn’t conform to the previous standard precancel format they are not included in the new edition of the Bureau catalog mentioned above. But there is a supplement to the sixth edition of *The Precancel Stamp Society Catalog of United States Bureau Precancels*. The new catalog in progress is the *Catalog of National and Service Inscribed Precancels*, First Edition, 2020. The word “bureau” is not mentioned in the title of the new catalog. Although some of the stamps in this catalog were printed by the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, many of them were printed in the private sector. So far, there are about 300 of these “lines only” or “service-inscribed” types.



Many of these types are coil stamps, so I have decided to collect them in pairs, just the way I collect coils of other U. S. issues. Before the Postal Service settled on having the service requirement printed on the stamps there was a variety of styles. **Figure C5** is a page from my National Types album showing stamps that are lines only, stamps with lines and service designation printed between the lines, stamps with service designation printed on the stamps, and stamps with service designation printed on the stamps with lines added. I have ignored the plate numbers and the possibility of line pairs. You’ll notice there are some spaces without stamps. These are for imperf pairs, known to exist, but, unfortunately, not in my collection yet.

If you look carefully, you’ll see the catalog numbers with some additional digits. These digits represent the exact style and format of the precancel as described the new *Catalog of National and Service Inscribed Precancels*. Once the catalog is published, I’ll have to re-do my pages to be sure my stamps’ identifications agree with what’s in the new catalog.

So, here’s a brand-new collectible for all of you whose current collections have become so good that you can’t afford to add to them.

Start afresh! And the prices are reasonable: most of the stamps are priced under \$1.00, although there are some pricier, and some—just a few, as in all collections—that need serious consideration.

How’s that for Precancel Progress?