



**THE
DECEMBER
DILEMMA**

U.S. Christmas Stamps, 1962-1972
Jody L. Pritzl

Booksbyjody.com

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Author's Note

The Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee agendas and minutes are utilized as dialogue passages. If the speaker was not attributed, "member" or "artist" was used in the dialogue tag. Abundant historical stamp columns and newspaper interviews also served as dialogue. In both instances, the number in the first speaking line indicates the endnote which correlates to the source document.

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Preface

With boxes of gifts tucked under my chin, for once, I was actually ahead of the Christmas rush. Given my frugal chromosome, I wanted to beat the priority mail cost of sending love. Anticipating the usual chaos that is the post office in December of 2023, to my surprise, there were only two customers ahead of me. While watching one person wave a yellow slip, signifying the need to pick up a package, I overheard the middle-aged man standing at the counter. He leaned forward, closer to the postal clerk, nearly in tears, with a desperate look on his face.

"But you have to have stamps. Christmas stamps."

"No, I'm sorry, we don't have any stamps, much less Christmas ones."

"But you're the post office. You print millions."

Digging in her drawer, the clerk found a booklet with a modern design.

"Well, we do have these, I'm not sure what they are."

"I can't go home with those. My wife asked for Christmas stamps, to mail her cards."

"Sorry, next in line."

Defeated, dejected, and empty-handed, the man shuffled to the exit.

I felt bad for the husband and worse for his wife. She must have put thought into her cards, whittled her list down to a manageable number, erring on more than fewer greetings to be sent.

In that post office moment, I was struck by the power of a tiny paper square. It was the magic of connection. Without stamps, nothing traveled via the U.S. Postal Service, and it had been that way for over 150 years. Envelopes containing bills, bad news, good cheer, and anniversary and birthday wishes landed in mail boxes every day. All manner of emotions, from excitement to reluctance, or worse, were delivered, six days a week, (and sometimes seven).

I appreciate stamps. When I was a young girl, my grandmother, Caty, bought me a thin, H. E. Harris stamp album, with a cover depicting soldiers of the Revolutionary War. I looked forward to sitting next to her in an oversized Buick and driving to the post office whenever a new commemorative stamp was announced. Sometimes, she read the announcement in the newspaper; other times, she learned of it from the large bulletin board hanging in a post office lobby. However the news came, I was dazzled at the age of nine.

I inherited my love of stamps from two grandmothers in different ways. When my father died, my sister and I didn't fight over who would own his classic Mustangs, his house, or his investments. No, we turned red-faced and crabby while arguing over who should get his stamps. Besides his own, Dad had his mother's odds and ends of postage. Grandma Julia's assortment included pieces of cardboard from mail

order packages and envelope scraps torn from bills. She had kept them in a burgundy box tied with a cord that didn't quite keep the bulging stamps from spilling out.

Tiny paper scraps—meaningless time capsules of iconic places, inventions, conservation, space flights, famous people, and anniversaries. In our grief, that's what my sister and I fought about. We reverted to being children, instead of fifty-something grown women. We sat crossed-legged on a floor, like children playing jacks. "Two for you, two for me." We argued over duplicates and caught ourselves thinking the task might not end if we kept fighting. We stopped when the piles in front of us, like marbles or coins, were equal. I took my stamps and stuffed them in another box of my father's treasures.

After the post office incident, where the poor husband had presumably skulked back to disappoint his wife, I stood on a chair and pulled down the box where Grandma Julia's stamps and my album were tucked away. In my meager collection, and among her scraps, I found the 1962 Christmas stamp. I thumbed through my stamp album pages for others that had been issued prior to 1962, but found none. Huh? Christmas stamps had only been around as long as me? No, not possible. Nearly everything of note had happened way before I was born. But holiday postage hadn't. I looked it up. It wasn't until 1962, that the United States issued a stamp for Christmas. As I found out later, the Post Office Department didn't even call it a Christmas stamp. They labeled it a regular stamp--appropriate for the season that occurred between November and December.

How hard could it be to issue a Christmas stamp? As it turns out, very hard and very contentious.

Why?

Because people with opinions make decisions. Then, as now, a committee from various walks of life, professional philatelists, artists, businessmen, newspaper columnists, lawyers, and Post Office Department employees--debated and approved what became a stamp. They operated under different influences, including fear, circumstances, values, perceptions, and conflicting views about history and art. Then (but not now), the Committee was hampered by the limits of printing technology at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing in Washington, D.C.

The man with the final say, like the Wizard of Oz, was the powerful Postmaster General. From 1962 onward, like Santa Claus arriving, he settled the annual December dilemma of the Christmas stamp.

Chapter 1
The Stamp Problem: 1956-1957

The president owed him and, in Washington, D.C., political favors, acts of patronage, turned into titles. In 1952, Dwight Eisenhower paid his debt to Arthur Summerfield by appointing him "United States Postmaster General", abbreviated as PmG.

Summerfield chaired the Republican Party in the early 1950s and played a commanding role in Eisenhower's two political campaigns. On election night in November of 1956, Summerfield's Sheraton-Park apartment was celebration central for congratulatory handshakes with the president and his 11-man cabinet.

Rewarded with a second term as postmaster general, Summerfield earned \$25,000, the identical salary of all undersecretaries, like Treasury and Defense.¹ Considering a rural mail carrier was paid \$4,581 per year, Summerfield's paycheck wasn't outlandish.² Profits from selling his family's General Motors dealership in Flint, Michigan, supplemented his income.

The job was complex. Summerfield controlled 500,000 Federal employees, 37,000 buildings, and a fleet of 30,000 trucks that delivered the equivalent of 60% of the world's mail.³ He loved the work and felt inspired by the excitement of Washington and being close to the throne of power. Each day was like a game, employing different moves and strategies. Senators, representatives, lobbyists, and ambassadors were both peers and opponents. Challenges sometimes continued into nights.

A D.C. cab driver once said, "In other parts of the country people have three meals a day, here in Washington they have three cocktail parties [a day]."⁴ Summerfield was expected at elegant dinners and lavish social functions. Sometimes, he played host on board the Secretary of the Navy's yacht--the *Sequoia*. Often, his spouse, Eva, who wouldn't buy an evening gown if it couldn't be accessorized, eagerly accompanied him. In the era before women's rights, wives defined a gathering's prestige with their hair styles. A significant soiree, one with visiting heads of state, prompted a session at the beauty parlor. For a run-of-the mill cocktail party, a wife curled her own locks.

Juggling vodka martinis and shrimp cocktails, petitioners targeted the powerful for information and favors. For the U.S. PmG, the topic often turned to postage. Summerfield anticipated being poked and prodded about a simple, three-cent item that he rarely had tucked in the pocket of his white tuxedo. Stamps had become a source of his rising frustration. Even in small talk moments, people might bring up

to the postmaster general a glaring omission: "Say, my wife wants to know, why there isn't a Christmas stamp?"

In those days, United States postage had five classifications or types. Issued infrequently were the stamp memorials for officials who died in office. There was also air mail, and special stamps. Everyday postage was called "regular issue"--available from four to eight years.⁵ The last of the five, commemorative stamps, with their limited lifespan of six to twelve months, were the most anticipated.⁶ Three thousand annual requests, the equivalent of ten per day, were transmitted by letter, phone call, or in-person to Summerfield.⁷

Commemorative honors were sought to honor a person, anniversary, invention, or an organization's founding. During Summerfield's tenure, James Douglas, head of the Department of the Air Force, preached the need for an Aerospace stamp.⁸ The U.S. Department of Agriculture banded together with the Secretary of the Interior, and Commerce Secretary for a Forestry Council issue. When their requests were declined, senators sponsored bills pushing Summerfield to say "yes". When such legislation passed and the Post Office Department approved a commemorative, subcommittees then began the lengthy process of agreeing on artistry. An estimated 75% of proposed designs were submitted by members of Congress or lobbyists.⁹

Stamp lobbyists visited Summerfield's headquarters at 12th and Pennsylvania. With its three American flags waving in the center columns of the curved granite building, complete with clock tower, it was an impressive landmark. Entering the lobby, some lost their bearings. The compass needle in the marble-wall pointed in the wrong direction. South was north in relation to the nearby world map.¹⁰

Once cleared by security, guards escorted visitors to one of sixteen elevators.¹¹ The physically fit, opted to climb three flights of the stately staircase, held together with twisted serpent balustrades, to reach the Postmaster General's Reception Room. It wasn't a cozy setting. A newspaper reporter joked about the space, "It could hold 4,873 job hunters at one time."¹² Words echoed off the expansive marble floor and walls, while high-hung chandeliers glistened overhead. Many were cowed into lowering their voices to a childlike whisper.

Mounted in nooks, as sentries of history, were statues and busts of Ben Franklin, the father of the post office system and an Alaskan snowshoe carrier. Nearby, a Hawaiian postman, an air carrier pilot, a pony express rider, and the first Postmaster General, Samuel Osgood, were similarly honored.

The grand room was off-limits to the 20 million stamp collectors who spent \$10 a year on their hobby.¹³ Locals and tourists shopped at the first floor philatelic agency in the headquarters building. Waiting in line, they gossiped like teenagers in a record store. Customers swapped news of errors caused by misaligned presses--mistakes that were reported earnestly in the stamp columns of Syd Kronish, Ernest Kehr, Belmont Faries, and Franklin Bruns.

The columnists' writings in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *New York Herald-Tribune*, and *Evening Star* were reprinted nationwide. In a co-dependent relationship, much of their content was fed to them by the Post Office Department. The government issued hundreds of press releases and answered obscure requests for plate numbers and statistics. In return, the journalists mostly said nice things about stamps and instructed collectors how to purchase first-day cancellations.

Peering through magnifying glasses, both the press and collectors scrutinized new postage. Comparisons, almost stamp envy, were often made to the superior issues of countries like Australia, England, and Canada. For decades, the United States' designs were considered predictable and classic.

Summerfield wearied of Congress lobbying for stamp subjects, design critics, and a backlog of 2,600 requests for commemoratives.¹⁴ Many people seemed to be owed something. The postmaster general's Christmas card list included 2,000 recipients.¹⁵ In Washington, D.C., there were three ways to say "no". 1) Assign a staff member to write a letter, 2) Stall to view the amount of pressure exerted, or 3) Form a committee. Since he already used letters and delays, Summerfield maneuvered in the government's favorite way.

Seven men on Summerfield's flank, new guys to say "no," would form a Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee, often called by its acronym CSAC ("Sea-sack"). The members would vote on commemorative subjects, examine designs, but defer final decisions to the postmaster general. The idea to form a committee wasn't novel. A group of New York artists and philatelists offered their talents to improve stamps in 1941, but the onset of World War II caused momentum to be lost.

In 1956, Summerfield outlined the Committee's purpose. The mission: "Advise the Post Office Department on subject matter, design, production, and issuance of postage stamps with the most appropriate and appealing themes."¹⁶ Meetings would be held four times per year. The postmaster general delegated the operating of the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee to his right-hand man, L. Rohe Walter. No flunky, nor fresh-out-of-college, Walter earned his living as a marketing professional and past president of the Direct Mail Association. He knew teamwork, having served in the Navy during World War II.

From inception, CSAC was an invitation-only, closed group. Like a multitude of other Washington boards and commissions, the appointments were completed before a contest would have been announced. Summerfield proclaimed his committee nobly as, "An effort to give citizens a choice in the selection of new stamps".¹⁷ Likely together, Summerfield and Walter came up with the criteria for membership. Each man would either be connected to professional art, accomplished in the field of stamps--philately, or employed by the government.

To stifle critics, professional artists were vital as stamp designers, but who were they? Walter knew where to start: New York City, the epicenter of marketing and publishing. Advertising agencies were

pulling America out of World War II's scarcity by pushing new brands and products sold with sizzle. Flash mattered for the new media of television.

In November of 1956, Walter wrote to Ervine "Erv" Metzl, the artistic son of Jewish immigrants, and leader of 500 members of the Society of Illustrators.¹⁸ He also contacted William "Bill" Buckley, who represented the 480 members of the New York Art Directors Club.¹⁹ Lastly, Walter recruited Arnold "Arnie" Copeland as the third CSAC artist member. After serving in the Army, Copeland worked in advertising, played his trumpet, and presided over the Westport Artists Club. Together, Erv, Bill, and Arnie knew 1300 commercial artists who comprised 95% of all art skills in America.²⁰

Just before Thanksgiving of 1956, Walter wrote to the CSAC artists about a meeting to "discuss the stamp design problem".²¹ Hectic schedules pushed the November date into December and finally a firm date of January 7, 1957 was set.²² On that date, at 4 West 43rd Street in New York City, Bill and Erv shook hands with Walter. Arnie greeted the postmaster general's liaison warmly, since they had collaborated previously. The four sat down at a table, covered in linen and china, surrounded by wood paneling, at the private Columbia Club. After concurring that U.S. postage could be improved, the men debated for two hours on a new design process.

Walter spoke on behalf of his boss, Summerfield who would receive an official record of the meeting.²³

"The Post Office Department would submit to you three, designs for a subject chosen by the postmaster general and any art proposed by the stamp sponsor."

Respecting the new group, one of the artists suggested, "Perhaps the full committee should be involved [in choosing the designs]."

On his typewritten agenda, Walter crossed through representatives of the three artist groups and added the Stamp Advisory Committee. He moved on to designs.

"The Post Office Department thinks you three could hold a contest amongst the network of artists."

"Won't that be a lot of choices?" one artist asked.

"Give us the three best designs and the postmaster general will pick the winner."

"Ok, so how is the Bureau of Engraving and Printing involved?"

"We'll give the final design, when it is done, to the Bureau for engraving."

The Bureau of Engraving and Printing had printed 388 commemorative issues since 1893.²⁴ A government agency, Bureau artists also had designed most of the stamps. Sometimes referred to as draftsmen, they illustrated not only postage but U.S. currency. Their template was familiar--an American statesman portrayed on the front and a famous building on the reverse side.

Two Bureau artists in particular, Victor McCloskey and Charles Chickering, had designed 60% of all stamps between 1932 and 1957.²⁵ McCloskey had been around since Franklin Roosevelt handed him a

rough sketch to be made into a stamp in the 1930s. His new colleague, Chickering, known as "Chick", was a fresh-faced magazine illustrator with ten years of Bureau experience. The pair, plus two other colleagues, depicted 80% of all stamps made from 1932 to 1957.²⁶ Loyal employees, the men shrugged off criticism that their designs failed to meet art expectations.

It was a seismic shift in philosophy for the Post Office Department to consider switching from Bureau staff to commercial artists.

At the January, 1957 meeting, the artist members challenged Walter who said, "The artist will be paid \$500 for their services."²⁷

"Will their name be on the stamp?"

"No, but we'll publicize the designer in all press releases."

As the meeting adjourned, Erv suggested a follow-up discussion in February. Walter, confident the design problem of stamps could be licked, returned to Washington, D.C., to have his notes typed as a memorandum for Summerfield.

With his trio of professional artists now on board, Walter pondered knowledgeable stamp champs—men who knew philately inside and out. He had to pick men who would consider a commemorative subject's overall worthiness and how Americans would perceive the honor. Walter wanted Franklin Bruns, a stamp columnist and manager of the Division of Philately, to be CSAC chairman. As a government employee, Bruns could navigate the bureaucratic tasks of agendas, scheduling, and hosting. However, according to Washington, D.C. protocol, Bruns could only be appointed if his superiors authorized the extra work. Walter communicated with Remington Kellogg, Director of the Smithsonian Institution National Museum, who oversaw the Division of Philately. Outranked by the cabinet-level postmaster general, Kellogg told Walter the administration would be grateful to have Bruns serve on CSAC.

Two additional philatelic experts were honored to participate. Harry Lindquist had waited sixteen years for a chance to improve postage designs. He was one of the men who had suggested that a committee like CSAC be formed prior to World War II. Lindquist edited *Stamps Magazine* and owned a publishing company. One of the books his firm printed was by his friend and peer on CSAC, world renowned philatelist, Solomon "Sol" Glass who wrote *Know Your Country's Stamps*.

The seventh man, Abbott Washburn of the U.S. Information Agency, served on CSAC in neutrality, as he had no stated passion for art or stamps. His vote could break ties between the philatelists and artists. He could insert global perspective into how U.S. postage was viewed. Stamps personified American ideals—a type of propaganda for liberty and democracy. Perhaps it was a patronage appointment. Washburn was a Republican-Eisenhower loyalist.

On behalf of Summerfield, Walter assembled the homogenous CSAC-1. The seven men were all white professionals, with an average age of fifty-five, who resided on the east coast. They did differ somewhat in religious faith: two were Jewish, three were Christians, and two were unaffiliated with any religion.

Newspapers received an advance press release from the Post Office Department introducing the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee. Reading it with anticipation was Nona Brown, one of the first female byline reporters for the *New York Times*. She revised her column for the *Times*' Sunday magazine of March 24, 1957. While praising Postmaster General Summerfield for seeking outside assistance, Brown critiqued past shortcomings of U.S. postage. "The *Polio* Stamp, modeled after a medal design, was not very effective as a flat postage stamp, the *Children's* Stamp was mediocre due to the crowded faces, and the *Nassau Hall* commemorative was just uninteresting."²⁸ Brown called for CSAC and artists to create a single, dramatic theme portrayed through a simple, striking design.

Hamstrung by a single-color printing press, United States postage had retained a consistent look, focused on history and patriotism. To critics, post-World War II stamps looked like railroad station murals. But in Washington, D.C., where a request for internal communication preceded an actual memoranda, and months of work were discarded by a hand wave, change came slowly and happened in meetings.



The December Dilemma-U.S. Christmas Stamps 1962-1972 available from Amazon

Chapter 1:

¹ (1957, May 29). Ask. *The Indianapolis News*, p. 26.

² Post Office Department. (1958). *The Postmaster General Reports on the Services of the United States Post Office Department During Fiscal Year 1957*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), p.1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ McMillin, M. (1964, April 30). A visit with Gronouski in Washington D.C. *The Capital Times*, p.12.

⁵ Walter, L. Rohe. (1956, December 19). [Letter to Ervine Metz]. From the files of the Third Assistant Postmaster General's Collection of the Smithsonian's National Postal Museum and Library, Folder 06-03-01, Washington, D.C.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ (1959, September 28). [Minutes of CSAC]. From the files of the Third Assistant Postmaster General's Collection of the Smithsonian's National Postal Museum and Library, Folder 06-03-01, Washington, D.C.

⁹ (1948, September 29). Gum up time. *Time Magazine*, p. unknown.

¹⁰ (1934, June 16). Where "north" is south. *The Evening Star*, p.14.

¹¹ (1934, June 17). F.D.R. Hawaiian trip relives three bureaus. *Buffalo Courier Express*, p.28.

¹² Smith, R. (1934, June 15). Daily mirror of Washington. *The Star Press*, p.14.

¹³ Hoffman, R. (1961, September 3). Troubles over? *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, p.50.

¹⁴ Walter, L. Rohe. (1956, December 19). [Letter to Ervine Metz].

¹⁵ (1957, December 27). Asks about scarcity of 4-cent stamps. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, p.6.

¹⁶ Post Office Department. (1959, January). *Guide to the Selection of United States Commemorative Postage Stamps*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), p.4.

¹⁷ Bruns, Franklin Jr. (1957, March 31). The world of stamps. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, p.100.

¹⁸ Walter, L. Rohe. (1957, January 9). [Letter to Arthur Summerfield]. From the files of the Third Assistant Postmaster General's Collection of the Smithsonian's National Postal Museum and Library, Folder 06-03-01, Washington, D.C.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Copeland, Arnold. (1956, November 27). [Letter to L. Rohe Walter]. From the files of the Third Assistant Postmaster General's Collection of the Smithsonian's National Postal Museum and Library, Folder 06-03-01, Washington, D.C.

²² Walter, L. Rohe. (1956, November 29). [Letter to Richard Lockwood]. From the files of the Third Assistant Postmaster General's Collection of the Smithsonian's National Postal Museum and Library, Folder 06-03-01, Washington, D.C.

²³ Walter, L. Rohe. (1957, January 7). [Memorandum]. From the files of the Third Assistant Postmaster General's Collection of the Smithsonian's National Postal Museum and Library, Folder 06-03-01, Washington, D.C.

²⁴ Post Office Department. (1959, January), p.9.

²⁵ Davidson, C. and Diamant, L. (1990). *Stamping our History*. New York: Carol Publishing, p. xiv.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Walter, L. Rohe. (1957, January 7). [Memorandum].

²⁸ Brown, N. (1957, March 24). Artistic postage. *The New York Times*, p. unknown.