

What is the First Christmas (Postage) Stamp?

By: Pat Morgan



Figure 1. 1962 US Christmas Stamp (Scott #1205)

What is the first Christmas stamp? If you limit your answer to U.S. postage stamps, the answer is Scott #1205 (fig. 1). The #1205 features a wreath with a red bow, two candles, and the inscribed words “Christmas 1962.” This stamp was issued in Pittsburgh, PA, on November 1st, 1962, at the annual convention of the National Association of Postmasters.

For many years before this USPS-issued Christmas postage stamp, there were Christmas Seals—stamp look-alikes with no postage value—sold to raise money for causes like tuberculosis treatment. While these seals were popular to adhere to Christmas mail the customers also demanded Christmas-themed postage stamps and since 1962 the USPS has issued at least one Christmas stamp every year.

However, if we broaden our scope beyond the U.S. to answer the question of what was the first Christmas stamp worldwide, Canada can, and does, claim the world’s first Christmas postage stamp connection. While I expect nearly all of you have seen the Canada Scott #85 (fig. 2) and #86 (fig. 3) stamps issued on December 8th, 1898, I wonder how many of you ever looked close enough to observe they both say “XMAS 1898”?

In 1898, Canada issued the Scott #85 and #86. They were not intended to celebrate the Christmas holiday, but to mark the inauguration of the Canadian 2 Cent Imperial Penny Postage. Because they were specifically created to be used starting on Christmas Day they were inscribed with “XMAS 1898” (fig. 4) giving them the distinction of being the first Christmas stamp.

In 1898, the Imperial Postal Conference in London agreed to standardize a penny postage rate for domestic and international mail throughout the British Empire. So why is the Canadian stamp 2 Cents? Currency conversion, the English Penny was worth about 2 Canadian cents at this time. As a result, Canada saw a 1 cent rate reduction on December 25th, 1898 since the previous Canadian postage rate had been 3 cents.



Figure 2. 1898 (CA Scott #85)

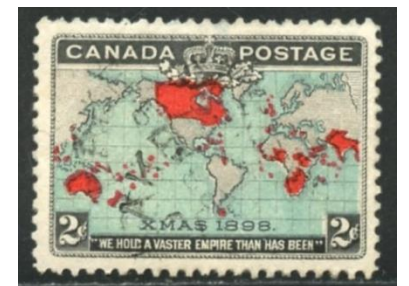


Figure 3. 1898 (CA Scott #86)

Interesting facts about the stamp design beyond the inscription of “XMAS 1898”:

- due to the electrotpe printing method used to produce these stamps, there are many variations of these stamps,
- the stamp used a Mercator projection map so that the countries in the British Empire all appeared larger than they were,
- the inscription at the base “We Hold A Vaster Empire Than Has Been” was a phrase taken from *A Song of Empire* written by Sir Lewis Morris for Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee in 1887, and
- the crown at the top of the design is the Crown of St. Edward.



Figure 4. “XMAS 1898” (CA Scott #85/86)

Getting back to the original question, “What is the first Christmas stamp?”, be sure you include all the context of the question. As you have learned the answer changes from one country to another and can vary by over 60 years.

As always, I hope you enjoyed this article!



Feel free to send any questions and comments to me at pjmorgan622@gmail.com.