

A History of Picture Postcards

Deltiology, the official name for postcard collecting, is thought to be one of the three largest collectable hobbies in the world, along with coin and stamp collecting. Postcards are popular because of the wide range of subjects, with just about every subject imaginable being at some time, portrayed on a postcard. History itself can be tracked on postcards, be it historical buildings, famous people, art, holidays, streets, etc.¹

A postcard or post card is a rectangular piece of thick paper or thin cardboard intended for writing and mailing without an envelope and at a lower rate than a letter. The United States Postal Service defines a postcard as: rectangular, at least 3.5 inches high by 5 inches long and .007 inch thick and no more than 4.25 inches high by 6 inches long and .016 inch thick.²

For the purpose of clarification, the term “Postal Card” refers to cards that were printed and sold by a governmental body on which postage paid indicia were preprinted on the cards themselves. The term “Postcard” refers to cards which were privately produced and were not sold with postage prepaid.³

First Use of Postcards in the U.S.

Until the middle of the 19th century, people mailed messages to each other via the privacy of sealed letters. The idea for the postal card originated in Germany in 1865. It was the Austrian government, however, that on October 1, 1869, issued the first postal card. The early postal cards had their critics. Many people thought it was improper to mail messages on cards that anyone, especially the servants, could read. Because postal cards could be mailed for much less postage than the normal letter rate, however, they soon became a hit with the general public.

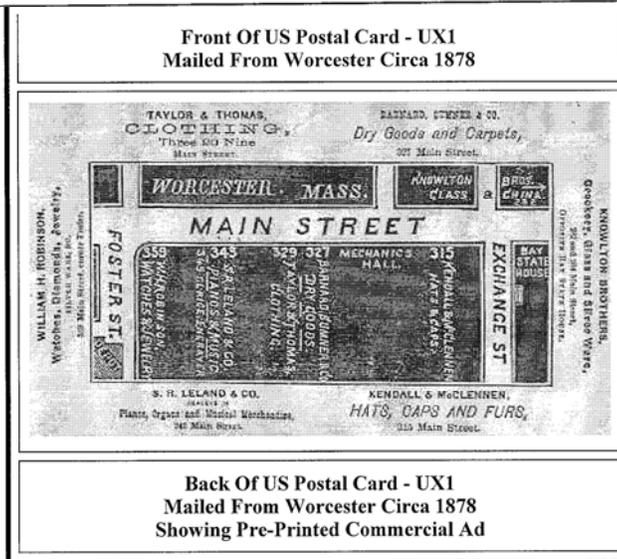
Due to government postal regulations, postcards were a long time in developing. Prior to postcards came the lithograph print, woodcuts and broadsides. The direct ancestor of the postcard seems to be the envelopes printed with pictures on them. These first envelopes were produced by D. William Mulready, E.R.W. Hume, Dickey Doyle, and James Valentine. The envelopes were often printed with pictures of comics, Valentines or music. Thousands of patriotic pictures appeared on U.S. envelopes during the Civil War period of 1861-1865 and they became known as “Patriotic Covers.”⁴

A copyright on a private postal card was issued to John P. Charlton of Philadelphia as early as 1861. This copyright was transferred to his fellow townsman, H.L. Lipman. These early postcards, decorated with a slight border pattern and labeled “Lipman’s postal card, patent applied for,” were for sale until 1873 when the first government postcards appeared.⁵ The United States Post Office Department (USPOD) issued America’s first postal card on May 13, 1873. The indicia on this buff-colored card depicts the bust of Liberty and the inscription “U S Postage – One Cent” in an oval. The card was issued on watermarked card stock. The watermark consists of the letters “U S P O D” in a 90mm by 60mm monogram. This watermark can be found in the normal position, inverted, reversed and inverted and reversed in combination. The Scott Catalogue has given the designation UX1 to this postal card.

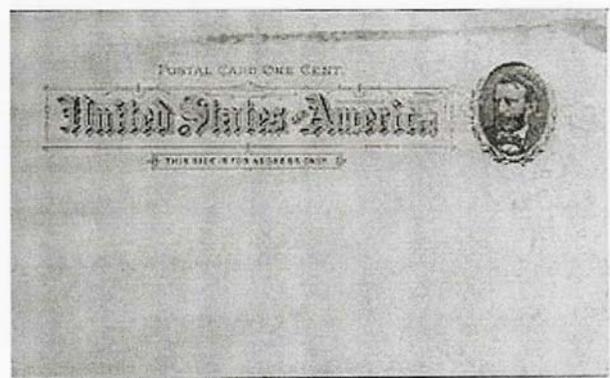
Pioneer Era (Pre-1898)

Postcards prior to 1898 are placed in what is called the Pioneer Era. In the United States, these early postal cards were used mainly to mail commercial ads and information.⁶ The greatest concentration of these postcards is from New York, Philadelphia, and other large metro areas in

the U.S. and abroad.⁷ Writings were not permitted by law on the address side of any postcard until March 1, 1907. For this reason, many postcards up to 1907 have messages across their fronts (the picture side of the postcard).⁸ The two images shown below depict an example of a UX1 with a printed ad on the reverse. It was mailed in Worcester in the late 1870s.



Most pre-1898 postcards share a few common traits. First, the postcard is characterized by an undivided back (no line going down the center of the back of the postcard). Second, many contain printed lines on the back for the name of the addressee and his address only. As indicated earlier, most were from big Eastern cities. It is also noteworthy that during this time only the government was allowed to use the word “Postcard” (one word) on the back of the postcard. Privately published postcards of this era will have the titles “Souvenir Card,” “Correspondence Card,” or “Mail Card” on the back. Government cards will also have an imprinted U.S. Grant or Thomas Jefferson head



1 cent stamp on them. Private postcards required a 2 cent postage.⁹

Postcards, in the form of government postal cards and privately printed souvenir cards, became very popular as a result of the Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893, after postcards featuring buildings were distributed at the fair.¹⁰

Private Mailing Card Era (1898-Dec. 24, 1901)

By an Act of Congress on May 19, 1898, publishers of privately printed mailing cards, or postcards, were granted permission to sell cards to the general public that could be mailed at the same one-cent rate as the penny postal cards that were issued by the USPOD.¹¹ This marks the beginnings of the so-called Private Mailing Card (PMC) Era. Most of the PMCs were souvenir cards and/or early “greetings from” types. Americans went wild for picture postcards. Only the address was allowed on the stamp side, and space was left around the image for any message from the sender. The “Private Mailing Card” logo could be found in many varied styles. Below are three examples of the PMC logo:



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During this PMC Era, many early Pioneer Era postcards were reprinted as PMCs. Postcards of this era had undivided backs. About 1900, Real Photo postcards (RPs, postcards on film stock: i.e., pictures) began to filter into use. These early real photo images were mainly advertising pieces.¹⁵

Undivided Back “Postcard” Era (Dec. 24, 1901 to March 1, 1907)



On December 24, 1901, the U.S. Government granted the use of the words “Post Card” to be printed on the undivided back of privately printed cards and allowed publishers to drop the authorization inscription previously required. Writing was still not permitted on the address side. The publishing of printed postcards during this time frame doubled almost every six months. European publishers opened offices in the U.S. and imported millions of high quality postcards. By 1907, European publishers accounted for over 75% of all postcards sold in the U.S.¹⁶

Divided Back Era (March 1, 1907-1915) (the Golden Age of postcards)

Postcards with a divided back were finally permitted on March 1, 1907. This meant that the image could now take up the entire front side of the postcard. The address had to be written on the right side of the back of the postcard while the left side was reserved for writing messages. Postcards from this period are most collectible when they do not have writing on their fronts. At this time in American history the



use of postcards became a public addiction. For the fiscal year ending June 30, 1908, the U.S. Post Office said that over 677 million postcards were mailed. This was at a time when the U.S. population was less than 89 million people. Publishers printed millions of cards in this era.¹⁷

The first decade of the 20th century is considered the “Golden Age” of picture postcards. Although some picture postcards depicting America were printed in the United States, the majority of the postcards sold in the U.S. were printed in Germany where lithography was an art.¹⁸

At the height of the country-wide postcard mania, however, the advent of World War One caused a crash in the hobby. The start of the war in Europe caused the supply of postcards from Germany to end. Poorer quality postcards came from English and U.S. publishers. The lowered quality of the printed postcard, recurrent influenza epidemics, and WW1 war shortages killed the American postcard hobby. During the war years, the telephone replaced the postcard as a fast, reliable means to keep in touch.¹⁹

White Border Era (1915-1930)

As the postcards during the years 1915 (1916 in some sources) to 1930 were usually printed with white borders around the picture, this time period is called the White Border Era.

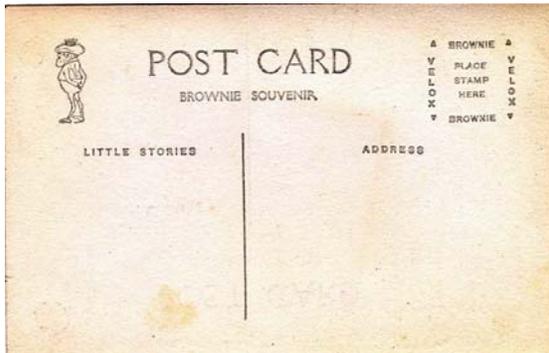


During World War One the white border reduced the image size and thus saved on ink costs. After the war ended, the German publishing industry was never rebuilt. Other European publishers were forced out of the U.S. market by high tariff rates. Despite this lack of foreign competition, the production of postcards by U.S. companies still lagged after the war for several reasons. The higher costs of post-war publishing combined with an inexperienced domestic labor caused the production of poorer quality postcards. This came at a time when the American public was increasingly losing interest in postcards. Movies replaced postcards as a visual experience. Higher competition in a rapidly narrowing market caused many domestic postcard publishers to go out of business.²⁰

The one major exception to this general decline in postcards production and demand was in the “real photo” postcards. Unlike their more colorful lithographic cousins, real photo cards were produced in black and white or sepia tones. Starting in 1906, the Eastman Kodak Company in Rochester had begun producing various models of Kodak “postcard” cameras that had negatives that were postcard size. The resulting postcards had such clear images, adding greatly to their popularity. In addition, some of these models had a small thin door on the rear of their camera body that, when lifted, enabled the photographer to write an identifying caption or comment on the negative itself with an attached metal scribe.²¹ Because these real photo cards were true photographs, postcard collectors have tended to consider them more collectible than lithographic cards—their unaltered presentation of the life and times of the early 20th century.²²



Shown below are the front and back sides of a Kodak postcard showing a bridge in Seneca Falls, NY. Note how the back side of the card says “Brownie Souvenir.”



Shown beside this wording is an example of a Kodak postcard camera negative with a person’s attempt to write some words on the negative before it was placed on the postcard. (All three Kodak postcard photos are courtesy of Kay Irland of Seneca Falls.)



Linen Card Era (1930-1945)

Changing technology now enabled publishers to print cards on a linen paper stock (paper with a high rag content). The rag content gave these postcards a textured “feel.” They were also cheaper to produce and allowed the use of bright dyes for image coloring. They proved to be extremely popular with roadside establishments seeking cheap advertising. Linen postcards document every step along the way of the building of America’s highway infrastructure. Most notable among the early line publishers was the firm of Curt Teich. The majority of linen postcard production ended around 1939 with the advent of the color “chrome” postcard.²³



Photochrome Era (1939 to the present)

The movie *The Wizard of Oz* affirmed America’s love for color images. In 1939, the Union Oil Company in their western service stations launched a new era of postcards with its photochrome (also called “Chrome”) postcards. This new process



made it possible to produce very easily postcards of high photo quality and in color.²⁴

Postage Rates for Postcards²⁵

Date	Rate in \$
1926	.01
January 1, 1952	.02
August 1, 1958	.03
January 7, 1963	.04
January 7, 1968	.05
May 16, 1971	.06
March 2, 1974	.08
September 14, 1975	.07
December 31, 1975	.09
May 29, 1978	.10
March 22, 1981	.12
November 1, 1981	.13
February 17, 1985	.14
April 3, 1988	.15
February 3, 1991	.19
January 1, 1995	.20
July 1, 2001	.21
June 30, 2002	.23
January 8, 2006	.24

¹ www.emotionscards.com/museum/historyofpostcards.htm
² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcard>
³ www.geocities.com/Athens/2088/history.htm?200829
⁴ www.shilohpostcards.com.webdoc2.htm
⁵ www.geocities.com/Heartland/Meadows/2487/pchistory.htm?200829
⁶ www.geocities.com/Athens/2088/history.htm?200829
⁷ www.geocities.com/Heartland/Meadows/2487/pchistory.htm?200829
⁸ www.geocities.com/Heartland/Meadows/2487/pchistory.htm?200829
⁹ www.geocities.com/Heartland/Meadows/2487/pchistory.htm?200829
¹⁰ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcard>
¹¹ www.geocities.com/Athens/2088/history.htm?200829
¹² www.geocities.com/Athens/2088/history.htm?200829
¹³ www.rayboasbookseller.com/LINWOOD/postcardhistory.htm
¹⁴ www.geocities.com/Heartland/Meadows/2487/pchistory.htm?200829
¹⁵ www.geocities.com/Athens/2088/history.htm?200829
¹⁶ www.geocities.com/Heartland/Meadows/2487/pchistory.htm?200829
¹⁷ www.geocities.com/Heartland/Meadows/2487/pchistory.htm?200829
¹⁸ www.geocities.com/Heartland/Meadows/2487/pchistory.htm?200829
¹⁹ www.geocities.com/Heartland/Meadows/2487/pchistory.htm?200829
²⁰ www.geocities.com/Heartland/Meadows/2487/pchistory.htm?200829
²¹ www.geocities.com/Heartland/Meadows/2487/pchistory.htm?200829
²² www.geocities.com/Athens/2088/history.htm?200829
²³ www.geocities.com/Heartland/Meadows/2487/pchistory.htm?200829
²⁴ www.geocities.com/Heartland/Meadows/2487/pchistory.htm?200829
²⁵ www.prc.gov/rates/postcardhistory.htm