



THE 1893 COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION ISSUE

INTRODUCTION

The World's Columbian Exposition was held in Chicago in 1893 to promote industry, commerce, technology, the arts and social causes. Over 183 days, from May 1 to October 30, the Columbian Exposition attracted nearly 27 million visitors to the specially constructed "White City." They came to see a spectacular array of exhibits, amusements and demonstrations, and to ride on the original Ferris Wheel.

The Columbian Exposition provided the Post Office Department with its first opportunity to capitalize on the increasingly popular hobby of stamp collecting with the country's first commemorative postage stamps. During the planning stages in 1892, the Postmaster General in President Benjamin Harrison's cabinet was John Wanamaker, a successful businessman and founder of Wanamaker's department store. Postmaster General Wanamaker and his Third Assistant, General Abraham D. Hazen, sensed an opportunity to profit from stamp collectors by creating a special Columbian commemorative set. In the words of a commercial merchandising giant, Postmaster General Wanamaker reported:

The introduction of the Columbian series of postage stamps will contribute in a marked way to the great recognition given by the Government of the United States to the Columbian Exposition, and they will create for it, both in this country and abroad, an interest that will help it financially and in many other ways. In addition the 'mania,' as it is called, for collecting postage stamps, as specimens, is universal throughout the world. It affects every class and condition of people, and is not confined to age or sex. It is shared, perhaps, by millions of people, from the school boy and girl to the monarch and the millionaire, and the value of stamps in private collections which will never be drawn upon to pay postage may safely be placed at many millions of dollars. The beauty and unique character of the new Columbian stamps will cause their sale in large quantities simply for use in collections, and not only will they be purchased in single or partial sets by collectors, but in view of the limited time in which they will be issued they will be accumulated in great quantities by dealers and others to meet future demands... The net profits to be derived from their issue, that is, the extra amount beyond the ordinary revenue that would have resulted from the sale and use only of ordinary stamps, may be fairly placed at \$2,500,000.



Benjamin Harrison
President 1889-1893



John Wanamaker
Postmaster General
March 1889-March 1893



Wilson S. Bissell
Postmaster General
March 1893-March 1895

Wanamaker's vision was prophetic, but his timing was off. President Harrison won the 1888 election for the Republican Party by defeating Grover Cleveland, who had been the first Democrat elected to office since the Civil War. Harrison's term was overshadowed by financial and political troubles, and in 1892 Cleveland became the only president to ever win two non-consecutive terms. When the Columbian Exposition opened in May 1893, President Cleveland had been in office only two months, and his new appointee, Postmaster General Wilson S. Bissell, had inherited the Columbian stamps created by his predecessor. Dark clouds were already looming over the financial markets, and the stock market crash of June 27 led to the Panic of 1893 and the country's most severe economic depression up to then. It was hardly the time to push the sale of costly commemorative postage.

The Columbian Issue Contract and Production

The sixteen Columbian stamps, commemorating the 400th anniversary (1492-1892) of Christopher Columbus's voyage to America, were issued in denominations ranging from 1¢ to \$5.00, for a total face value of \$16.34—about \$411 in today's dollars. Fifteen of the stamps were ready for sale on Sunday, January 1, 1893. Since most post offices were closed on Sunday, the First Day of Issue is both January 1 and 2. The 8¢ was issued in March to pay the recently reduced registry fee. The 10¢ Special Delivery stamp was issued in 1893 in a new color—bright orange yellow—to avoid confusion between the blue Special Delivery stamp and blue Columbian stamps in the same shape and size.

Postmaster General Wanamaker skipped the usual bidding process and awarded the Columbian stamp contract to the American Bank Note Company, the printers who held the contract for printing regular postage stamps. *The New York Times* (October 3, 1893) criticized the former Postmaster General for paying 17¢ per thousand Columbian stamps versus 7.45¢ per thousand for the regular contract. American argued that the stamps' larger size, roughly twice the 1890 designs, necessitated greater compensation on a per-stamp basis. The same article reported that Postmaster General Bissell was attempting to negotiate a settlement with American Bank Note Company to reduce the cost of the contract. In 1894 the responsibility for printing postage stamps was taken over by the government Bureau of Engraving and Printing, a crushing blow to private security printing firms such as American, whose fortunes rose and fell with government contracts.

The 1¢ and 2¢ values were printed from plates of 200 on the larger presses. The 2¢ was also printed from plates of 100 on the smaller presses, along with the rest of the series. The sheets of 100 were divided into panes of 50 for distribution to the post offices.

The stamps were printed on unwatermarked paper (watermarked paper was used for postage stamps by the BEP starting in 1895). There were two types of gum applied, differing in composition for winter and summer weather. The perforations, consistently gauge 12, come in two types: the first with clean-cut holes, and the second with roughly-punched holes and numerous unpunched discs between the perforation teeth. The latter perforations are typical of early BEP work and were probably applied to the supply of unfinished stock turned over by American to the BEP.

The Columbian Issue was on sale for one year. The quantities printed are known from official reports, but the quantities actually issued have not been fully documented. John N. Luff published figures from POD reports of certain denominations and quantities destroyed, but it is not known if these were all of the stamps destroyed. Contemporary newspapers reported that the entire supply of \$1.00 Columbian stamps had been sold out to "speculators," one of whom dressed in disguises to make 300 purchases at the Washington D.C. post office (*The New York Times*, May 5, 1894). Other sources state that some of the 55,050 \$1.00 stamps printed were destroyed.

Use of Columbian Issue Dollar Values

The 50¢ was a new postage denomination, as were the dollar values (the highest previously issued was 90¢). Postmaster General Wanamaker's own words make it clear that the Columbian stamps were issued to find a place in collectors' albums, but contrary to contemporary criticism in the lay and philatelic press, the dollar-value stamps did pay legitimate postage rates on heavy packages.

In 1893 the domestic first-class rate was 2¢ per ounce, and the Universal Postal Union rate was 5¢ per half-ounce. A 4-ounce letter—heavy for a standard envelope—would require only 8¢ domestic or 40¢ UPU postage (registration was an additional 10¢ prior to March 1893, and 8¢ thereafter). However, heavy packages and insurance on registered UPU mail could require large amounts of postage. A 3-pound registered package to a UPU country required nearly \$5.00 postage, including the registry fee, so there was a reasonably low threshold for using a \$5.00 Columbian stamp. For this reason, \$1.00, \$2.00 and \$5.00 denominations were issued in the non-commemorative 1894-95, 1902-03 and subsequent definitive series.

The Columbian high values were sold and cancelled to satisfy collector demand, especially in Europe, where used stamps were more popular. Some of the stamps intended for collectors were sold and cancelled at fourth-class post offices to raise the postmaster's compensation, a portion of which was rebated to the customer buying the stamps. Fourth-class postmasters did not receive salaries, but earned a commission based on the annual revenue for box rentals and cancelled stamps, as well as for other goods or services provided. In exchange for buying the high-value Columbian stamps and having them cancelled at the post office, the postmaster would give the customer a kickback paid from his commissions, thereby reducing the cost of the stamps.

Evidence of one such scheme is found in government records and philatelic material offered in this sale. The postmaster of the small coal mining town of Cato, Pennsylvania—S. M. Buck—applied to the government for a \$44.75 adjustment to his compensation for three quarters in 1892 and 1893 (*Secretary of the Treasury, Estimate of Appropriations, Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1895*). The dollar-value Columbian covers postmarked at Cato were obviously “hand-back” covers used in the kickback scheme (lots 141-143).

In March 1894 the government brought fraud charges against Charles H. Mekeel, the St. Louis stamp dealer and publisher, and a group of postmasters. The case was dismissed by the judge on the grounds that citizens were permitted to buy stamps, and postmasters were free to share their compensation with them, thus no crime had been committed.

The Columbian Issue Engravers and Designs

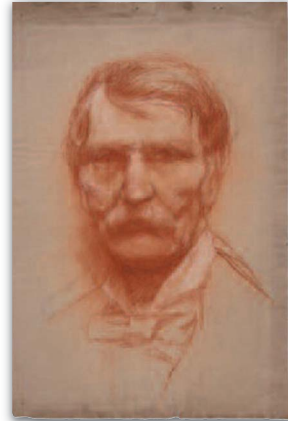
Aesthetically, the Columbian stamps were a significant departure from previous issues. The larger horizontal format was an innovation that would become dominant in commemorative issues to follow. The depictions on the stamps are miniature works of art, based on paintings, drawings and sculpture that romanticize (or invent) the story of Columbus and his voyage to America. They are extraordinary examples of the engraver's art and the most prized of all United States commemorative stamps.

The entire set was designed by Alfred S. Major, foreman of the Modeling Department at the American Bank Note Company and a future director. The engravers responsible for the figurative elements of the designs were Alfred Jones, Charles Skinner and Robert Savage. Work on the frames, lettering and numerals was accomplished by Douglas S. Ronaldson and George H. Seymour.

The following pages present information about each Columbian stamp, including the source or basis of the design, the engravers responsible for the different elements, and the quantity printed and/or issued.



Alfred S. Major



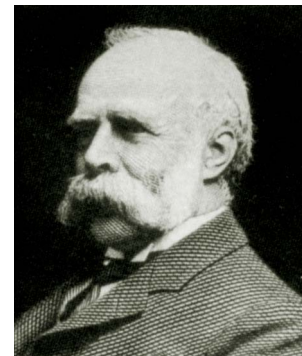
Alfred M. Jones
Self portrait by the artist
American Antiquarian Society



Robert Savage

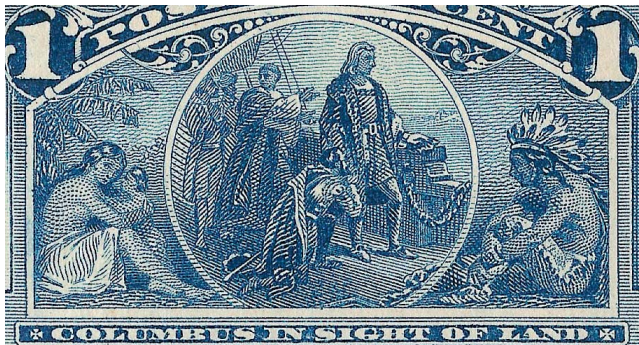


Douglas S. Ronaldson



Charles Skinner

1893 COLUMBIAN ISSUE DESIGNS, ENGRAVERS AND QUANTITIES



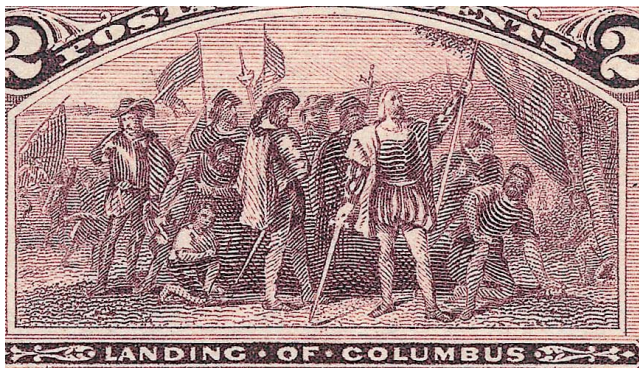
Source of Design for 1¢ “Columbus in Sight of Land”
Columbus in Sight of Land, painting by W. H. Powell

Vignette
A. Jones



William H. Powell

Frame	Lettering/Numerals	Quantity
C. Skinner (side figures)		449,195,550
D. S. Ronaldson	D. S. Ronaldson	



Source of Design for 2¢ “Landing of Columbus”
Landing of Columbus, painting by Vanderlyn in Rotunda of Capitol Building in Washington D.C.

Vignette
A. Jones
C. Skinner



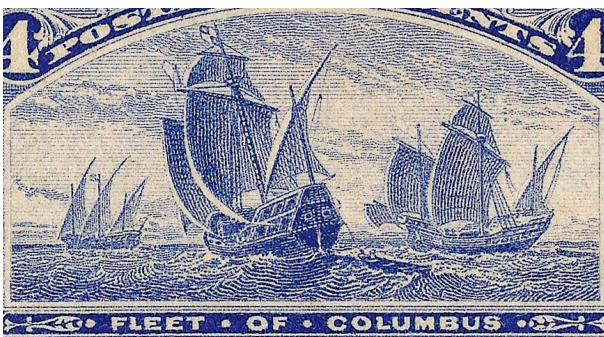
Frame	Lettering/Numerals	Quantity
D. S. Ronaldson	D. S. Ronaldson	1,464,588,750



Source of Design for 3¢ “Flag Ship of Columbus”
Flagship *Santa Maria*, possibly from Spanish engraving

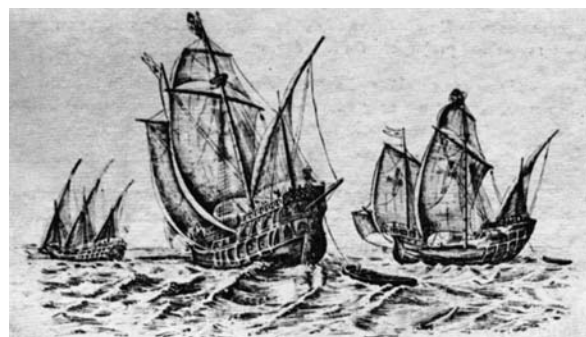
Vignette
R. Savage

Frame	Lettering/Numerals	Quantity
D. S. Ronaldson	G. H. Seymour	11,501,250

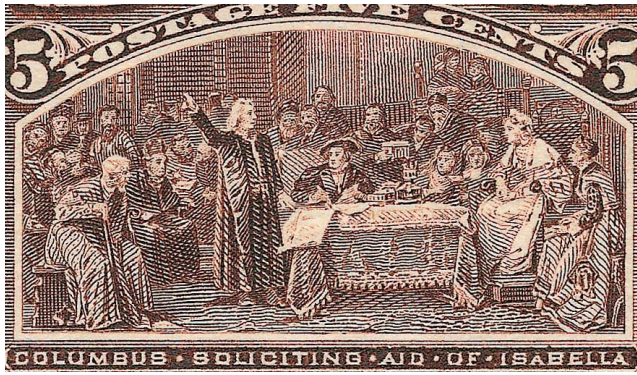


Source of Design for 4¢ “Fleet of Columbus”
Original ABN artwork based on a book illustration

Vignette
C. Skinner



Frame	Lettering/Numerals	Quantity
D. S. Ronaldson	G. H. Seymour	19,181,550



Source of Design for 5¢ "Columbus Soliciting Aid of Isabella"

Columbus at the Court of Ferdinand and Isabella, painting by Vaczlav Van Brozik, deaccessioned from Metropolitan Museum at Hotel Manoir Richelieu in Canada

Vignette

C. Skinner



Frame

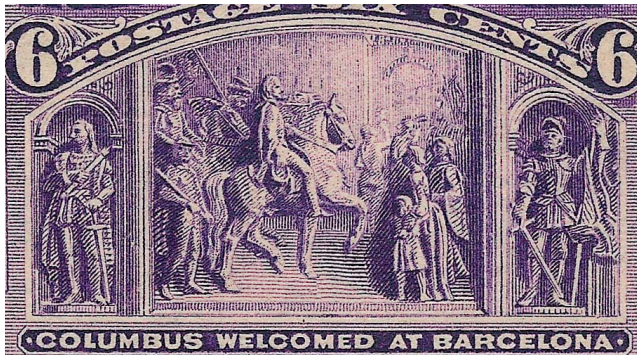
D. S. Ronaldson

Lettering/Numerals

D. S. Ronaldson

Quantity

35,248,250



Source of Design for 6¢ "Columbus Welcomed at Barcelona"

Columbus' Triumphal Entry into Barcelona by Randolph Rogers on bronze doors in Rotunda at the Capitol

Vignette

R. Savage



Frame

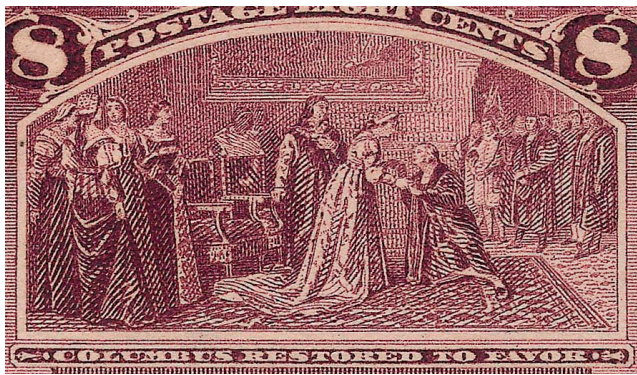
D. S. Ronaldson

Lettering/Numerals

G. H. Seymour

Quantity

4,707,550



Source of Design for 8¢ "Columbus Restored to Favor"

Columbus Restored to Favor, by Francisco Jover y Casanova, painting reported to be in a museum in Spain

Vignette

C. Skinner



Frame

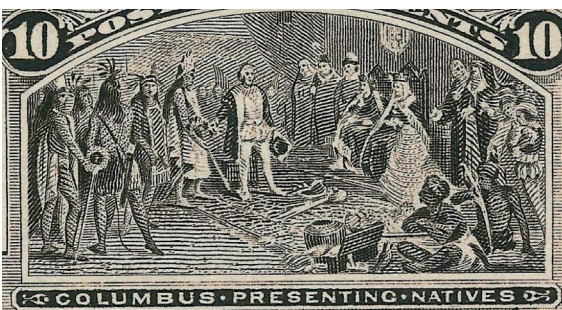
D. S. Ronaldson

Lettering/Numerals

D. S. Ronaldson

Quantity

10,656,550



Source of Design for 10¢ "Columbus Presenting Natives"

Return of Columbus and Reception at Court, painting by Luigi Gregori, at University of Notre Dame

Vignette

R. Savage



Frame

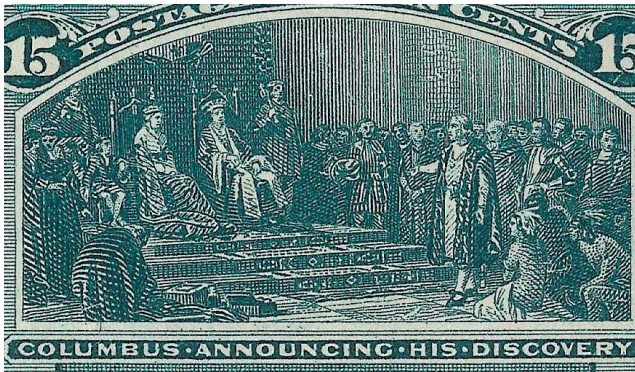
D. S. Ronaldson

Lettering/Numerals

D. S. Ronaldson

Quantity

16,516,950



Source of Design for 15¢ “Columbus Announcing His Discovery”
Columbus Announces His Discovery, painting by Ricardo Baloca y Cancico, possibly lost during Spanish Civil War

Vignette
 C. Skinner

Frame
 D. S. Ronaldson

Lettering/Numerals
 D. S. Ronaldson

Quantity
 1,576,950



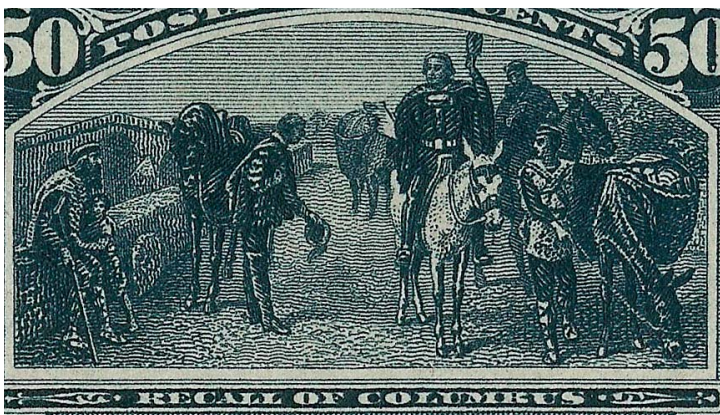
Source of Design for 30¢ “Columbus at La Rabida”
Columbus Before the Franciscans at La Rabida, after a painting by Felipe Maso de Falp

Vignette
 A. Jones

Frame
 D. S. Ronaldson

Lettering/Numerals
 G. H. Seymour

Quantity
 617,250



Source of Design for 50¢ “Recall of Columbus”
Recall of Columbus, painting by Augustus Goodyear Heaton in the Capitol in Washington D.C.

Vignette
 C. Skinner

Frame
 D. S. Ronaldson

Lettering/Numerals
 D. S. Ronaldson

Quantity
 243,750



Source of Design for \$1.00 "Isabella Pledging Her Jewels"

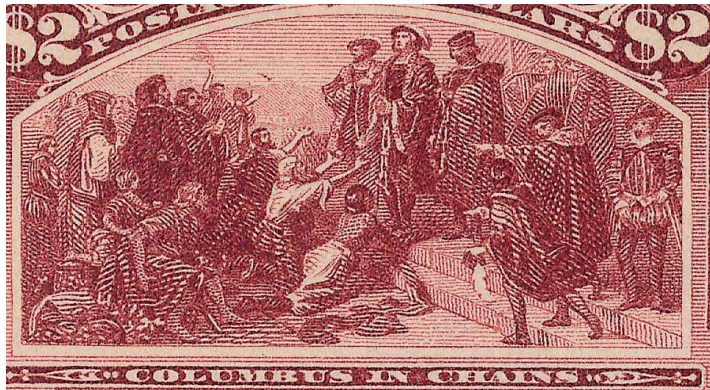
Isabella Pledging Her Jewels, painting by Antonio Muñoz-Degrain

Vignette
R. Savage

Frame
D. S. Ronaldson

Lettering/Numerals
G. H. Seymour

Quantity
55,050 [1]



Source of Design for \$2.00 "Columbus in Chains"

Return of Columbus in Chains to Cadiz, 1841 painting by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, painting reported owned by Albert Talbot of Providence R.I.

Vignette
C. Skinner

Frame
D. S. Ronaldson

Lettering/Numerals
D. S. Ronaldson

Quantity
45,550 [1]



Source of Design for \$3.00 "Columbus Describing Third Voyage"

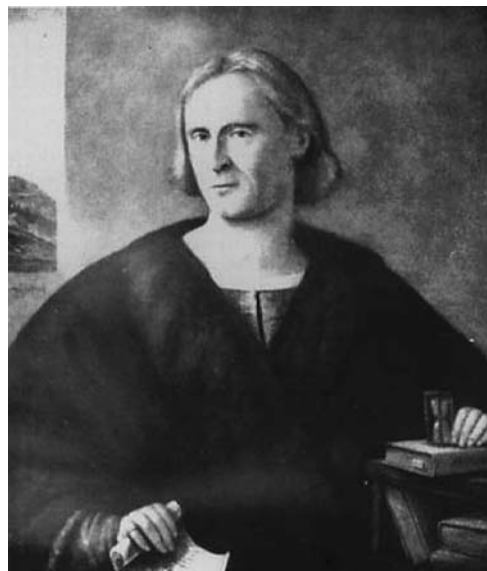
Columbus Describing His Third Voyage, by Francisco Jover y Casanova, painting reported to be in a museum in Spain

Vignette
R. Savage

Frame
D. S. Ronaldson

Lettering/Numerals
D. S. Ronaldson

Quantity
27,650 [2]



Source of Design for \$4.00 "Isabella-Columbus"

Portrait of Isabella from unknown source, possibly a portrait by Bermejo; Portrait of Columbus from a painting by Lorenzo Lotto

Vignette

A. Jones

Frame

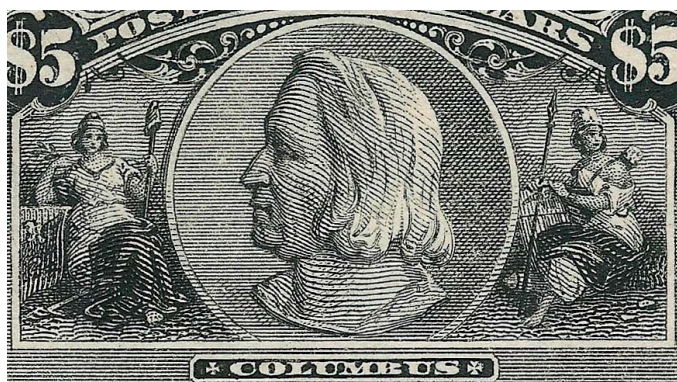
G. H. Seymour

Lettering/Numerals

G. H. Seymour

Quantity

26,350 [3]



Source of Design for \$5.00 "Columbus"

Portrait taken from medal, possibly Spanish; also used for commemorative half-dollar issued for the Exposition

Vignette

A. Jones

Frame

C. Skinner (side figures)
D. S. Ronaldson

Lettering/Numerals

D. S. Ronaldson

Quantity

27,350 [4]

Notes regarding quantities:

[1] The printed quantity includes an unknown number of stamps that were destroyed

[2] Luff reported 2,937 \$3 stamps were destroyed in June 1899, leaving a total of 24,713 sold to the public (assuming no more were destroyed)

[3] Luff reported 3,357 \$4 destroyed in June 1899, leaving a total of 22,993 sold to the public (assuming no more were destroyed)

[4] Luff reported 5,506 \$5 destroyed in June 1899, leaving a total of 21,844 sold to the public (assuming no more were destroyed)