

Early History of the Postcard

Tracing back the origins of the picture postcard is difficult because postcards were not simply invented — instead, they evolved. Their history is inevitably linked with the development of the postal service, but also features innovations in printing and photography, daring proposals... and even a 300-meter tower! We chronicle the history of postcards through a timeline of relevant events, going back a few centuries to provide the context that culminated in postcards being officially issued and recognized by a postal operator, on October 1st 1869.

17th to 19th Century

Following the popularization of printing presses, visiting cards, bill heads, writing paper and other types of paper ephemera started to have illustrations on them, often with delicate engravings and tasteful designs.

Already in 1777, French engraver Demaison published in Paris a sheet of cards with greetings on them, meant to be cut and sent through the local post, but people were wary of servants reading their messages... so the idea was not very well received.



1840

A postal reform in the UK unified the cost of domestic mail delivery to 1 penny per envelope, to be pre-paid by the sender. The proposals of Sir Rowland Hill also included that the pre-payment was to be made by issuing printed sheets of adhesive stamps. The Penny Black, the world's first adhesive postage stamp, made its debut in May 1840.

Simultaneously, decorated prepaid letter sheets (similar to today's aerograms) were also put on sale by the post office. These were designed by William Mulready and showed Britannia with a lion at her feet, sending mail messengers to all parts of the world. Though this particular design turned out to be unpopular and often ridiculed, this was the first postal stationery item issued by the post office that had decorations on the outside. They were replaced the following year by plain pink envelopes, with a printed 1 penny stamp on the corner.

Already that year, Theodore Hook Esq, a British writer, mailed himself a caricature of post office workers, shown to be writing mail in order to sell more stamps. Most likely mailed as a joke (and delivered against the post office regulations of the time), this could probably be the earliest record of a postcard being sent through the mail.



A few years later, in 1843, Sir Henry Cole produced the first Christmas greeting card, a drawing of himself and his family. This was the year in which Charles Dickens *A Christmas Carol* was published.

1861



In late February, the US Congress passed an act that allowed privately printed cards, weighing one ounce or less, to be sent in the mail.

Later that year, John P. Charlton from Philadelphia patented a *postal card* and sold the rights to Hymen Lipman (founder of the first envelope company in the US and inventor of the lead-pencil and eraser). However, with the start of the Civil War a month later, these *Lipman Cards* as they became known were forgotten and not used until almost a decade later.

The earliest record of Lipman card's being used is from October 25, 1870, sent from Richmond, Indiana. It featured an illustrated advertisement of Esterbrook Steel pens, and was the first pictorial postcard to be mailed in the USA.

To be continued in February issue no. 54

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