

My Introduction to Postal History

By Richard Pederson

As a youth, I was hooked on stamp collecting at the age of 7 when my Great Uncle Walter handed me an old stock book containing a mixture of U.S. and foreign stamps. There was probably nothing of great value in that stock book, but it started me on an adventure of discovery that I have continued to this day and hope to continue the rest of my life.

As a beginning collector, I was content with attempting to fill the spaces in my U.S. and world stamp albums, but then one day I encountered an item that greatly expanded my interests. My great uncle died when I was 12 and I was fortunate enough to obtain some of the things from his collection. One of those items was a cover containing a copy of the 3 cent dark blue Byrd Antarctic Expedition issue (Scott 733). This stamp (see Figure 1, Byrd Antarctic Issue) was issued for use on mail sent through the base post office, for Admiral Richard E. Byrd's second expedition, at the Little America base in Antarctica. Although this stamp could be used on all first class mail, it was only available through the Philatelic Agency in Washington, D.C. and was primarily intended for use on mail to Little America. Those sending mail to Little America were also assessed a 50 cent surcharge for each letter to cover processing fees.

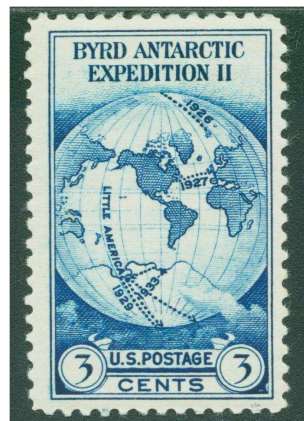


Figure 1. Byrd Antarctic Issue

As I examined the cover (see Figure 2, Byrd Delayed Mail Cover), I noticed a couple of things that were unusual. First the stamp and cancellation were inverted in relationship to the address and return address and, second, there was a message or postal marking stamped at the lower left of the cover in relationship to the stamp and cancellation. The marking said, "THIS LETTER HAS BEEN DELAYED FOR ONE YEAR BECAUSE OF DIFFICULTIES IN TRANSPORTATION AT LITTLE AMERICA, ANTARCTICA". The cover immediately had all of my attention.

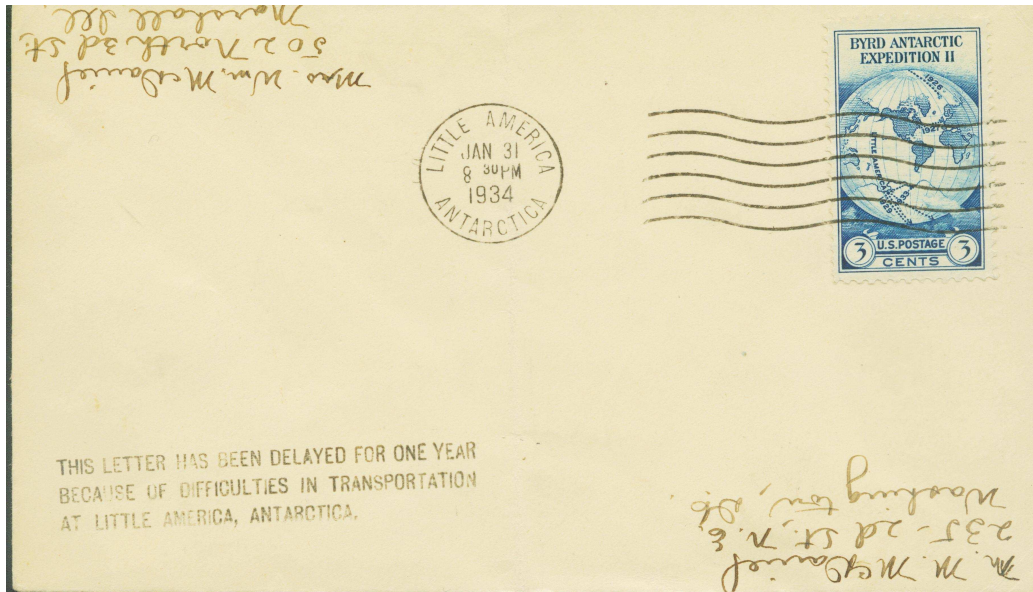


Figure 2. Byrd Delayed Mail Cover

I looked more closely at the postmark which was dated 8:30 PM on January 31, 1934 at Little America, Antarctica. I then turned the cover over (see Figure 3, Byrd Delayed Mail Cover Reverse) and found a receiving mark stating “LITTLE AMERICA MAIL RECEIVED” at 11 AM on March 25, 1935 at San Francisco, California. The evidence was clear, the letter had been delayed in mailing for over one year. Combined with the seemingly exotic destination, this was a very interesting and special cover. Only when I became an adult and was able to further research the cover using more than a Scott catalog did I find out that my cover was one of 56,000 (two-thirds of the total received) that were delayed in transit during the second Byrd expedition.



Figure 3. Byrd Delayed Mail Cover Reverse

The delayed mail encountered for the Byrd second expedition is the first example of what is now known as “winter-over” mail. Steve Pendleton, who writes frequently about far away and exotic places, including Antarctica, wrote an excellent article in the September 3, 2001 issue of Linn’s Stamp News discussing delayed or winter-over mail and how that category of mail is dealt with today. Those further interested in articles about the stamps and postal history of the polar regions should contact the American Society of Polar Philatelists, which publishes the informative journal, Ice Cap News. The society is an APS affiliate and their web site is www.polarphilatelists.org. Currently, they have a cover from the second Byrd edition, signed by Postmaster General James A. Farley, displayed on their main page with a link to an interesting article on the second Byrd expedition by Paul Skowron.

Although researching my letter did not result in my having a rare postal history item, it certainly did not make me any less interested in postal history. I have already learned numerous interesting facts about the second Byrd expedition and its postal history that I did not know before my search commenced many years ago. I also learned to keep items I receive in the mail, or acquire from other sources, intact until I fully understand them, so that I will not inadvertently destroy valuable postal history. The quest started with this one envelope bearing markings from the Byrd second expedition and continues today as I delve into many other areas of postal history. Every now and then, I still pull out that first cover that intrigued me and wonder if there is something else I can discover about it. After all, who is the sender, M. McDaniel of Washington, D.C., why did he or she put the stamp upside down in relationship to the address, and who is the intended recipient, Mrs. William McDaniel of Marshall, Illinois? Those are questions to be answered another day.