

National Air Mail Week: A Big Deal in 1938



Greater
Philadelphia
Stamp
&
Collectors
Club

By Michael L. Wilson

Greater Philadelphia Stamp & Collectors Club

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Overview

- Describe the planning, events and outcome of National Air Mail Work (NAMW) using original sources such as *The Postal Bulletin* and newspaper reports
- Provide photos of the events not seen in other articles and presentations
- Show the range of NAMW collecting possibilities based on a sampling of covers
- All covers are in presenter's collection



**National Air Mail Week:
Planning, Events and
Outcome**

NAMW – The Brainchild of Postmaster General James A. Farley

A political kingmaker from New York, Farley served as Franklin Roosevelt's campaign manager in 1932

After FDR was elected, he appointed Farley PMG, a cabinet-level position with significant patronage power (and 5th in line of succession to the president after the VP)

Rightly credited with keeping the Post Office Department (POD) afloat through the Great Depression, he also had a knack for self-promotion (e.g., the “Farley Follies”)

Air travel and national weeks of celebration were novelties in 1938, so a week celebrating the 20th anniversary of air mail was too good for Farley to pass up



PMG James A. Farley with some of the hundreds of thousands of letters mailed during NAMW.

***The New York Times* was Among the Papers to Pick-up the POD**

February 15, 1938, Press Release

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 1938.

"Air-Mail Week" In May

To celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the inauguration of regular air-mail service in this country the Post Office Department has announced plans to observe the first "National Air-Mail Week" from May 15 to 23.

At that time hundreds of smaller communities which never have had the benefit of direct-mail plane connections will be served temporarily through the employment of privately licensed pilots, who will become air-mail carriers for a day, flying the mail from "interior" offices to the regular air-mail stops.

Another part of the observance will be the authorization of an "official cachet," or envelope decoration, for mail originating at Kitty Hawk, N. C., known as the birthplace of aviation because of the pioneering experimental flights made there by Wilbur and Orville Wright. Philatelists and other souvenir collectors are expected to mail thousands of such commemorative covers from Kitty Hawk.

Local Cachets Authorized

Every other postoffice in the country, of which there are more than forty-five thousand, will be authorized to arrange its own local cachet appropriate to the occasion, if desired.

Postmaster General James A. Farley will be honorary chairman of the committee arranging the celebration and Paul R. Younts, postmaster at Charlotte, N. C., who is a director of the National Association of Postmasters, will be active chairman.

On May 15, 1918, air-mail service was started between New York, Philadelphia and Washington. From a small beginning this service has spread to cover all key points in the nation and some foreign cities.

The Man in Charge - NAMW Operating Chairman Paul R. Younts



Paul R Younts

“I am confident that the Air Mail week will add a glorious chapter to the history of American aviation and will so impress upon the American people the great value of air mail that the time will be brought rapidly nearer when a large percentage of all first-class mail will bear the distinctive air mail stamps.”

Younts as quoted in the *The Grand Island Daily Independent*, May 16, 1938

Paul R. Younts, Postmaster of Charlotte, North Carolina, and Active Chairman of the NAMW Committee. Younts served as postmaster of Charlotte from 1933 to 1940. He served in the Army during World War I and in the Army Air Force during World War II, achieving the rank of Colonel. During his civilian life, he was a successful businessperson in Charlotte.



Second Assistant PMG Branch, in charge of airmail service, is pictured in the far right as First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt marks the opening of NAMW on May 15, 1938, by airmailing the first letter from a temporary post office installed in a large transport plane in front of the Department of Commerce. To the left of Mrs. Roosevelt is Vincent C. Burke, Postmaster for Washington, D.C.

The Postal Bulletin

WASHINGTON, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 1938—Two Pages

SECOND ASSISTANT POSTMASTER GENERAL,
Washington, February 23, 1938.

NATIONAL AIR MAIL WEEK

The Post Office Department will celebrate the Twentieth Anniversary of the inauguration of regular air mail service on May 15, 1918, by observing the first National Air Mail Week from May 15 to May 21, 1938.

To honor the Wright Brothers, an official cachet will be authorized for use at Kitty Hawk, N. C., the birthplace of aviation. All other post offices are authorized to use such private cachet as may be furnished by the chamber of commerce or similar representative body.

A national organization is now being set up to plan and carry on the campaign. Every postmaster in the country will be chairman of the campaign in his respective city. It is hoped that all other postal employees will give their fullest cooperation to make this anniversary and National Air Mail Week a complete success. I am sure that you can be counted on to do so. It is expected that as a result of this campaign every American will be impressed with the air mail service and the progress which has been made in aviation since the air mail service was established. It is also expected that every citizen will be acquainted with the advantages which the air mail service affords.

HARLEE BRANCH,
Second Assistant Postmaster General.

Farley, as Honorary Chairman Stated His Hopes to POD Employees on March 15

The Postal Bulletin

WASHINGTON, TUESDAY, MARCH 15, 1938—Two Pages

It is my desire that every postmaster, and every official and employee of the postal service, give his whole-hearted support to make this campaign in which the public is being invited to participate a complete success. I know that it is only necessary to request your cooperation.

JAMES A. FARLEY,
Postmaster General.

Note: Given the era, it's not surprising Farley would write "his" support when referring to postal employees. But in 1938, there were around 15,600 female postmasters and assistant postmasters. Women represented a third of all postmasters and managed some of the largest post offices in the country, including Los Angeles, the sixth largest.

The Post Office Department Heavily Publicized NAMW



NAMW advertising poster



Main Post Office, New York City, during NAMW



NAMW Lapel Pin,
Presenter's Collection

Short Film Promoting NAMW:
<https://youtu.be/v5hRE08qgpc>



FDR Added His Enthusiastic Support

The Postal Bulletin

WASHINGTON, TUESDAY, APRIL 5, 1938—Three Pages

NATIONAL AIR MAIL WEEK

THE WHITE HOUSE,
Washington, March 19, 1938.

MY DEAR MR. POSTMASTER GENERAL:

I have noted with much interest the plans of your Department to observe the twentieth anniversary of the inauguration of Air Mail Service on May fifteenth and to celebrate this event by the observance of a National Air Mail Week.

We have seen the Service which was begun so modestly 20 years ago with small 80 miles-an-hour planes on a short 218-mile route grow into the world's greatest air-transportation system, with 62,826 route miles over which the most modern planes last year flew a total of more than 70,000,000 miles, transporting not only mail but also passengers and express at speeds undreamed of in 1918.

With such remarkable growth in these two decades of pioneering we may, with assurance, look to the next decade to bring even more remarkable progress. I shall observe with a great deal of interest the commemorative events which will bring to the attention of the public the great strides made in aviation and the benefits which our people enjoy through the Air Mail Service.

Very sincerely yours,

The Honorable, THE POSTMASTER GENERAL,
Washington, D. C.

Franklin D. Roosevelt

Communities and Local Newspapers Embraced NAMW



First outgoing air mail from Doylestown, Pennsylvania, May 19, 1938. That was the day thousands of pilots were licensed as air mail pilots for one day. Pictured prior to takeoff are John Sweeney, mayor; Bill Webb, pilot; and Francis Fonash, postmaster.



Doylestown, PA, Drabyk PA189a/1

If the pilot was female, that would garner special attention because it showed “women were capable of holding their own as aerial mailmen with the other sex,” as the Chicago Tribune reported on May 20, 1938.

Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph

FRIDAY, APRIL 1, 1938

Commercial aviation, which means so much to us already, and is going to mean a great deal more, as additional air service is developed, was made possible by giving aviation transport companies contracts to carry the mail.

It was the air mail service that made it possible to carry passengers. Had it not been for the Post-office Department's aid, commercial aviation would have languished.

That is but one of the things to think of in connection with the observance of National Air Mail Week.

The importance of aviation in national defense is another subject that calls for attention.

It is none too soon to begin preparations that will make the local observance of National Air Mail week an educational and patriotic rally long to be remembered.

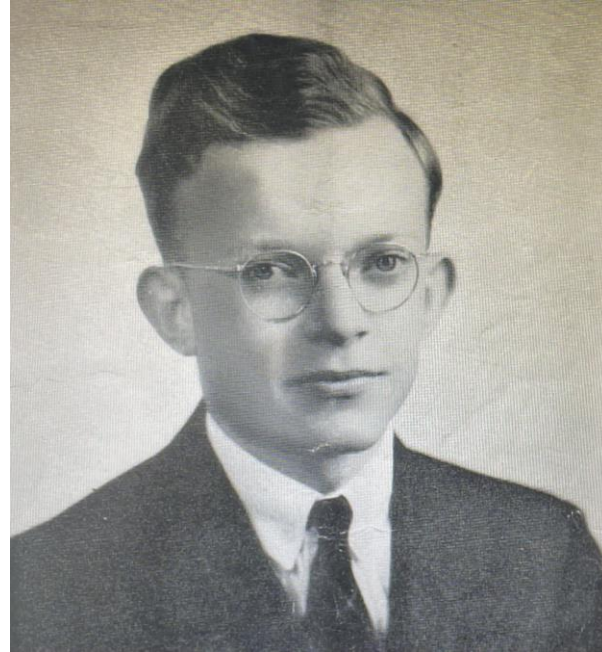
A Sampling of Local Events:

- Glowing editorials were run in many papers such as the *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph* (left)
- A race was held between a carrier pigeon and a mail plane in Portland, Maine; no report on who won
- In Detroit, mail was handed off from a horse to a stagecoach (which almost tipped over) to a plane to illustrate the progress in speedy mail delivery
- In Hawaii, four carrier pigeons were released in Honolulu to carry letters to Maui; why, no one seems to know
- The Mutual Broadcasting System broadcast an aerial parade over the Chicago Loop from an American Airlines plane

Two National Contests Were Sponsored



NAMW essay winners with Postmaster Vincent Burke, Washington, D.C.: Ellen Peak, Manhattan, KS, 2nd prize; Perry Morrison, Arcadia, CA, 1st prize; and Homer Still, Jacksonville, FA, 3rd prize.



Perry Morrison

A nationwide high school essay contest on the subject of “Wings Across America” attracted more than 500,000 entries. Excerpts from the winning entry by Perry Morrison:

“A nation is no stronger than the ties that bind it together. Air transportation and communication constitute such a tie – an agent in binding our country into one unit.

“Wings Across America help to keep us united yet democratic; efficient yet free – an ideal much of the world has given up.

“Speed and dispatch are now at every man’s disposal for the purchase of an air mail stamp. To what end? United for the nation; more abundant life for the individual.”

National Poster Contest Winner



13-year-old
Rosemary Niederle
of Portland, Oregon

Note: I had a conversation with Rosemary's granddaughter. She recalls her grandmother mentioning NAMW and the contest, but she never saw the poster until I sent her the photo at right.



Rosemary's poster depicted "a map of the United States on a blue background with a transport plane soaring overhead with the words 'U.S. Air Mail.'"

Child Actor Shirley Temple Entered a Poster As Well

From *Time* Magazine May 23, 1938:

“Looking no more like a bug-eyed flying fish than an airplane should to a nine-year-old who has never flown in one, Shirley’s conception of an airliner has the indubitable distinction of having a self-portrait of the artist in the foreground, an autograph in the lower right-hand corner.”



Shirley Temple was Not Hollywood's Only Star Roped Into NAMW



PMG Farley receives airmail plane model from Marion Weldon, Paramount Studio actress



Original caption from 1938:

“Blonde airmail package for the Postmaster General. Washington, D.C., May 18. Postmaster General James A. Farley, signs for a package of loveliness sent, via airmail, from the former airmail pilots who are taking part in the Paramount production of ‘Men With Wings’ a story of the history of the air mail. The package happens to be Miss Marion Weldon, who is in Washington taking part in National Airmail Week and is also starred in ‘Men with Wings.’”

Of Course, Businesses Took Advantage of the Frenzy

WASHINGTON, D. C., FRIDAY, MAY 20, 1938.

**IS ELECTED
CHAPLAINS**

loses Convention.
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e Presidents.
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aleigh Hotel by dr-
1939 in Cincinnati.
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A. McCallum,
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shington, and Rabbl
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ents include David
bster, W. T. Bruns-
John O. Lindquist,
nd John H. O'Brien.

**ISSORIES
CAMERAS
PLIES**

D'Albert Inc.
plete Photographic
Washington
W. A. 4712

**VERN
REAM**

The Palais Royal

G Street at Eleventh District 4400

A Feature of National Air Mail Week



Last Day
Tomorrow

**See Him! Hear Him!
Talk With Him!**

G. E.'s Amazing Electrical
HILL BILLY

Man's Trav-L-Bags

Of Light Weight Leatherette
Substantially Made

\$7.75

This Fulco Trav-L-Bag keeps your clothes pressed while you travel. A separate compartment for shoes and toilet kit, and an inside compartment for shirts and



This is National Air Mail Week

See our fascinating special display in one of our G Street Windows. Use the **air mail** service . . . you serve yourself and serve progress, too.

Walgreens (right) and Sears were among the national retailers who hyped NAMW. Local businesses (above) also jumped on board.

AT WALGREEN'S

**FOR NATIONAL AIR MAIL WEEK
MAY 15—MAY 21**



**A VANILLA PLANE
in a
STRAWBERRY SKY
of
WALGREEN ICE CREAM**

Creamy, velvety - smooth
ice cream — famous the
country over for its deli-
cious flavor and outstand-
ing quality. Quart Brick,

42¢

Free! to the Children
**A MODEL
PLANE
that whistles
as it
ZOOMS
thru the air!**

FREE with brick of this
ICE CREAM



What Would a Major Philatelic Event Be Without a New Postage Stamp?!



Air mail stamp design sketched out by President Roosevelt



Air Mail Stamp Issued May 14, 1938, for NAMW (Scott C23). First day ceremonies were held in Dayton, OH and St. Petersburg, FL (site of the AAMS 1938 convention).

More than 230,000 FDCs for C23 were cancelled in Dayton and St. Petersburg

Amount of air mail that week was mind-blowing:

- Nearly 16.3 million letters, bearing over 10,000 different state and local cachets
- 9,000 parcels were carried

NAMW Was a Resounding Success

The Postal Bulletin

WASHINGTON, TUESDAY, JUNE 7, 1938—Four Pages

OFFICE OF THE POSTMASTER GENERAL,
Washington, June 3, 1938.

NATIONAL AIR MAIL WEEK

Because of the enthusiastic cooperation which the Post Office Department received from postal officials and postal employees, as well as the general public, National Air Mail Week was one of the most successful Nation-wide campaigns ever conducted in this country. Speaking for the Post Office Department, I gratefully acknowledge this cooperation.

I received such a deluge of air-mail greetings and cachet covers that for the first time in my life I am unable to write a personal acknowledgment to every sender. The greetings and covers sent me number many thousands. Other officials of the Post Office Department also received thousands of such greetings and covers and they, like me, find it impossible to reply to all of them. Therefore, we hope that all those who so kindly remembered us will accept this notice as evidence of our appreciation.

Thanking you all, I am,
Sincerely yours,

JAMES A. FARLEY,
Postmaster General.



**National Air Mail Week:
Collecting Possibilities**

What Can be Collected?

- 389 cachets on first day covers (FDCs) for Scott C23
- 10,000+ cachets for NAMW from all 48 states at the time, 7 possessions, railroad post offices, ship cancels and foreign cancels (Tijuana).
 - See Jon E. Drabek's compilation cited under "Resources."
 - His scheme for numbering NAMW cachets is used in this presentation, as is his "rarity factor" – 0 being common, 5+++++ being rare
- Collect NAMW covers from your hometown or state; covers to specific destinations; covers that traveled over certain Contract Air Mail (CAM) routes; first flight covers from towns with their first-ever air mail service on May 19; covers signed by PMs and/or pilots; covers franked with stamps other than C23, etc.
- My collection is a paltry ~40 covers, but the range of collecting possibilities – at an affordable cost – is still evident

Scott C23 FDC Dayton, OH May 14, 1938



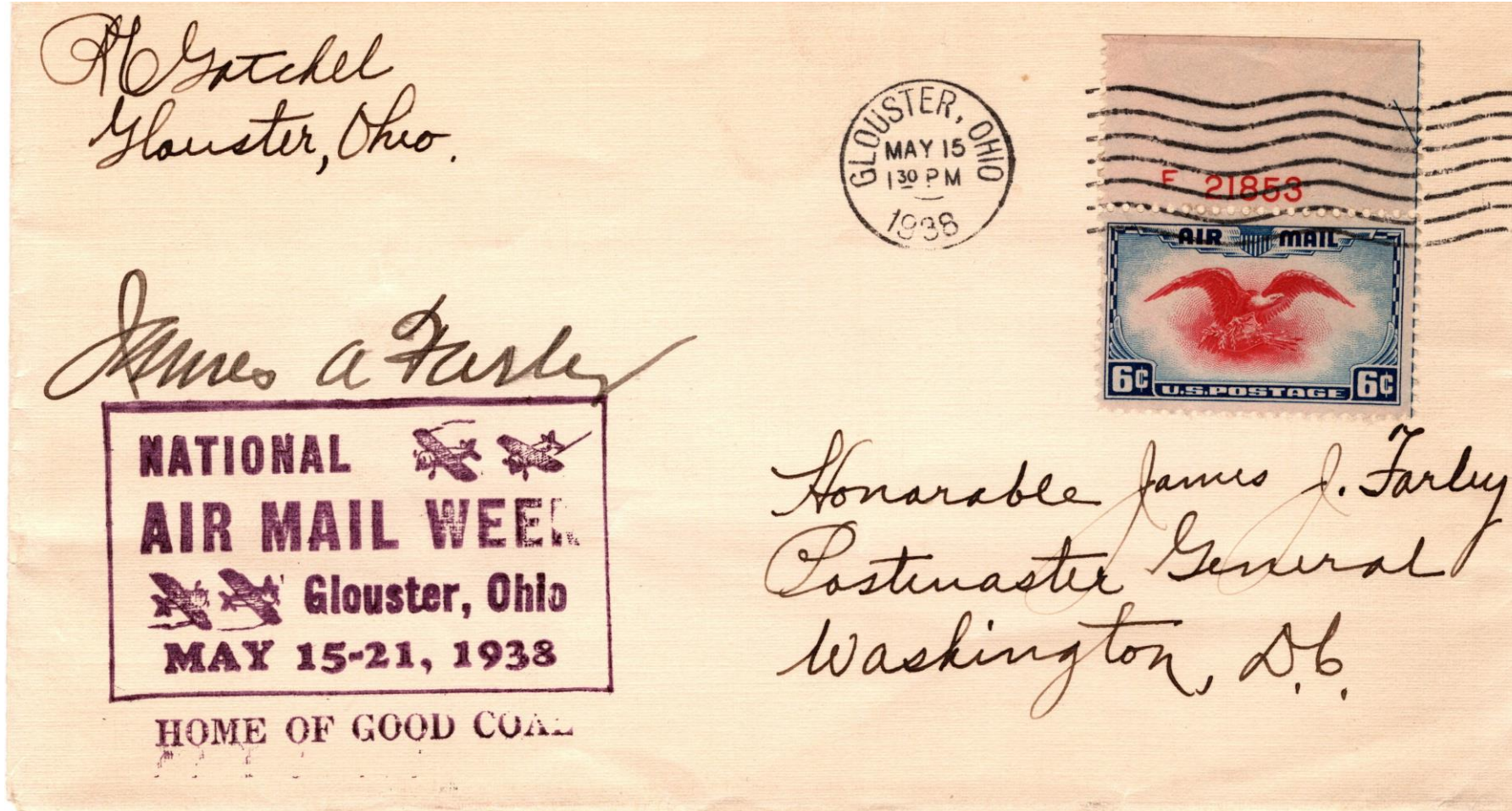
Cachet designed by Beverly Hills (Planty C23-32.12). Cover is franked with a center line block.

Scott C23 FDC St. Petersburg, FL, May 14, 1938, with AAMS Convention Station Postmark



Cachet designed by Henry Grimslund (Planty C23-35). Cover is franked with a center line block.

NAMW Cover Signed by PMG Farley



Farley admitted that he stopped acknowledging receipt of NAMW covers because of the volume. This one was mailed on the first day of the event, and the deluge probably did not hit him until the special air mail day of May 19. He signed this cover in black ink, not in his hallmark green.

Glouster, OH, Drabyk OH143b/5+++++

Charlotte, NC Cachet, Hometown of PM Paul R. Younts



Charlotte, NC, Drabyk NC019b/1

Cover is franked with a trio of the Army Issue of 1936-37: Scott 785, 786 and 787.

This cover was one of six NAMW covers in a boxful of 19th and 20th century covers that I acquired at an auction in 2022. They were my introduction to NAMW.

Official NAMW Cachet



Interesting, a special cachet was not designed for use on the original air mail route from Washington, DC to New York via Philadelphia. After all, celebrating that original flight was the purpose of NAMW. The POD corrected that oversight on May 6 by permitting the use of the official cachet on that route.

Kitty Hawk, NC to Dividing Creek, NJ via Dayton, OH cover with official NAMW cachet, Drabyk NC079a/0

Circular Date Stamp on Back



Cover Flown Over Original 1918 Air Mail Route from Washington, DC to New York



Washington, D.C., Drabyk DC003a/1

Two Covers from Danbury, CT Signed by Pilot Frank Hawks



Frank Hawks (1897-1938)

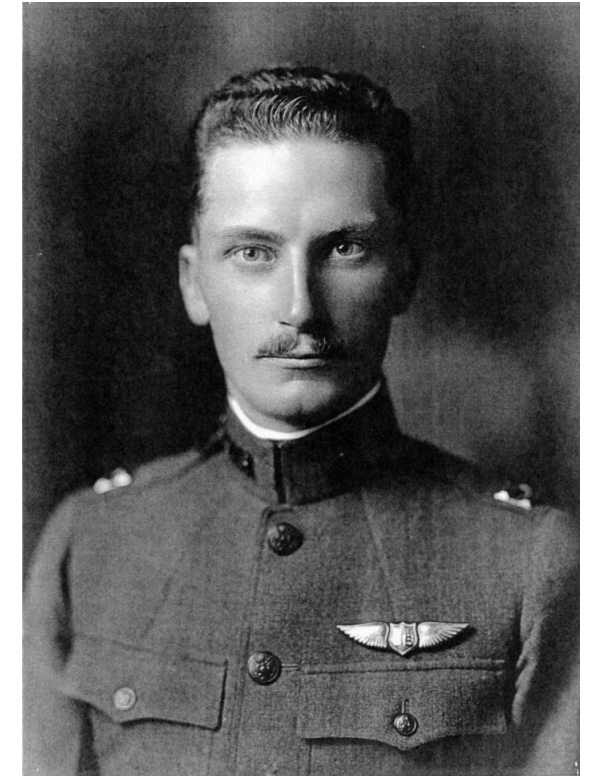
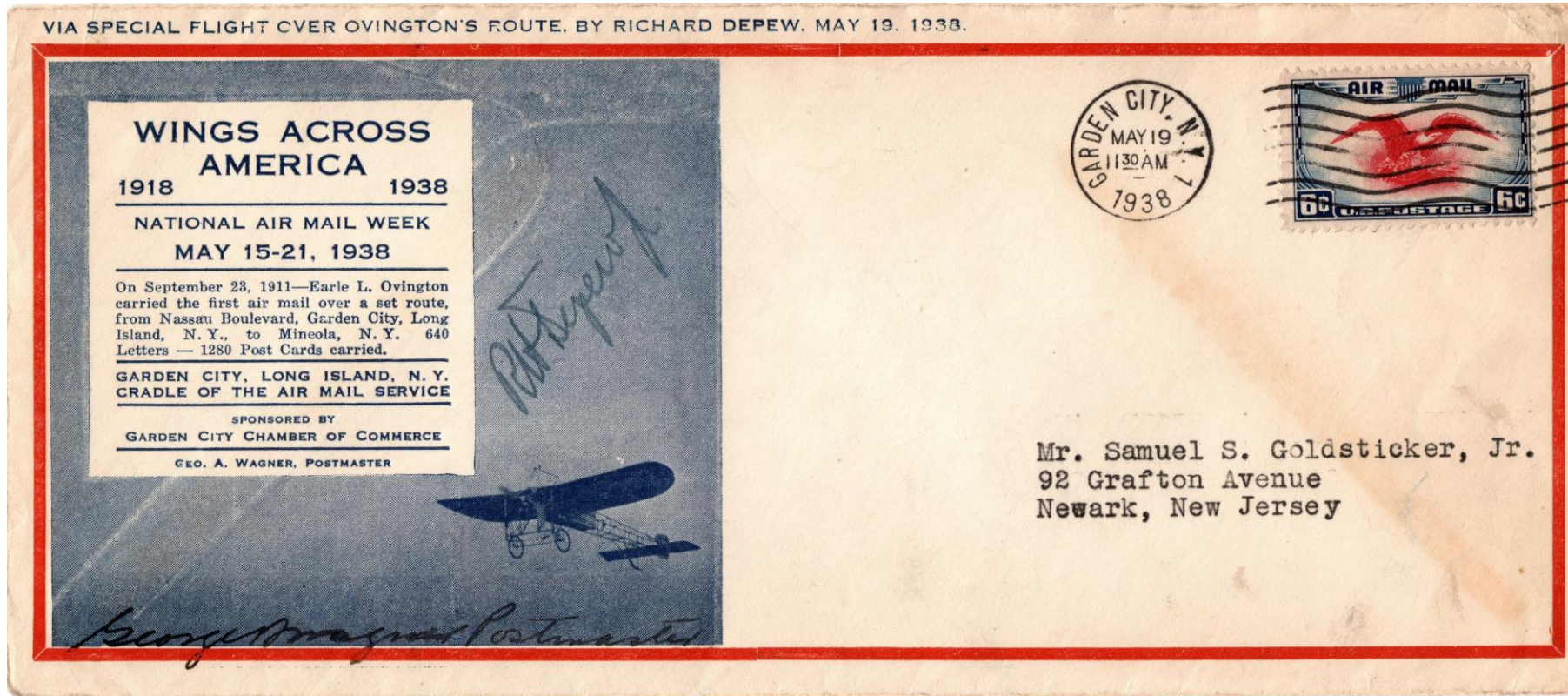
Famous for his speed records, he died 3 months after NAMW flying an experimental aircraft.



Above: Drabyk CT031a/1+ (printed)

Right: Drabyk CT031b/1 (rubber stamped); franked with Scott

Pilot and PM Signed Cover from Garden City, NY



Richard DePew (1892-1948)

Cover signed by Pilot Richard DePew and Garden City Postmaster George A. Wagner.
Garden City, NY, Drabyk NY215/2

The cachet celebrates an experimental airmail flight in 1911 that carried 1,280 postcards a grand total of 2 miles!

DePew was an aviation pioneer, making his first solo flight in 1911

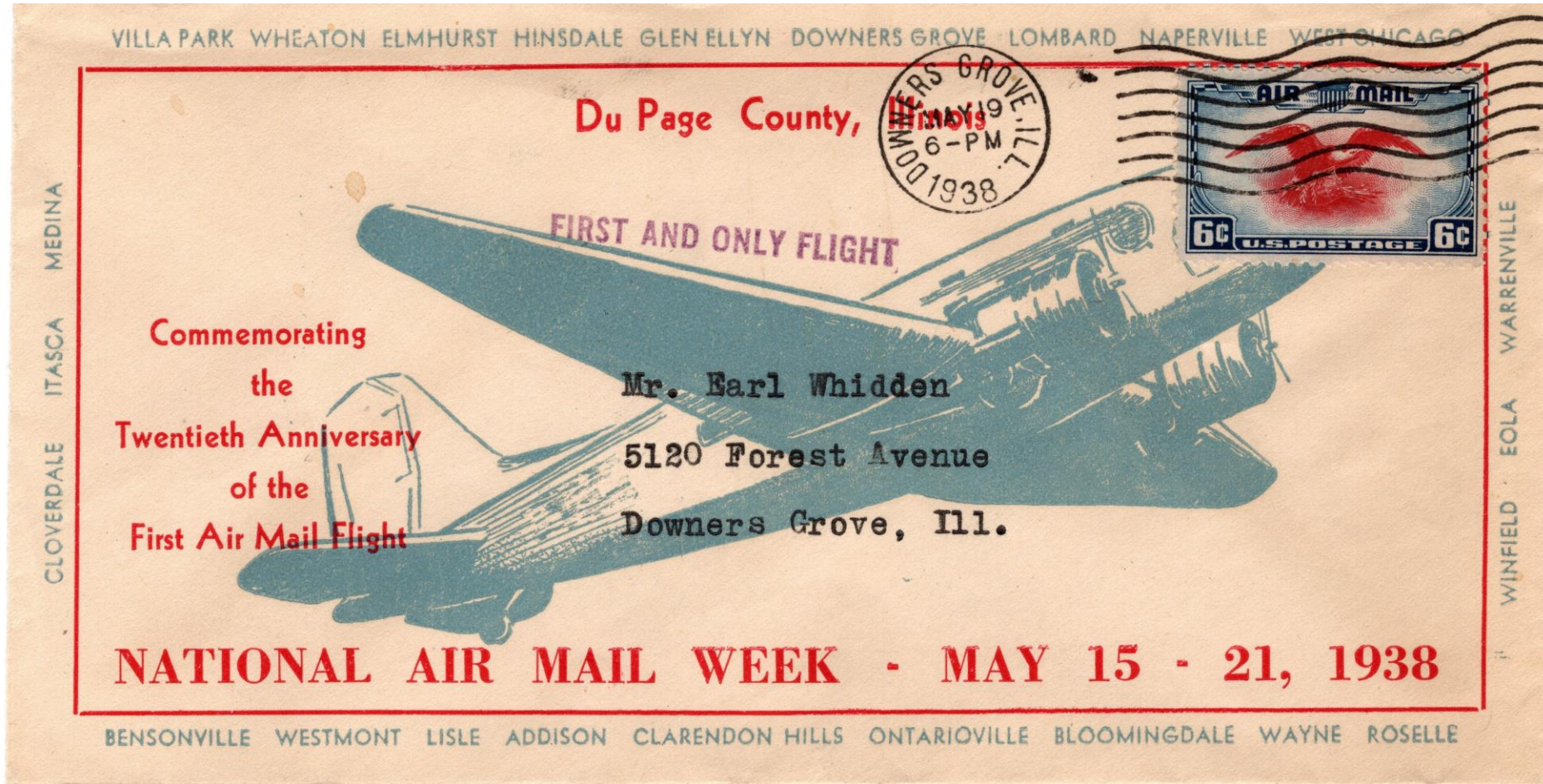
But Many of the NAMW Pilots Were Unsung



Estern Russell Lambert (1889-1970) was just one of the thousands of uncelebrated private pilots to be designated an airmail pilot for a day.

Example of NAMW cover on stamped envelope (Scott UC3)

First Flight Cover, Downers Grove, IL



This cover was designed by the Postmaster Association of DuPage County. The plane is a DC-3, a workhorse aircraft that entered service in 1935. More than 16,000 were built and a few remain in commercial use today.

DuPage County, IL, Drabyk IL078a/5+++++

Somber and Whimsical Cachets

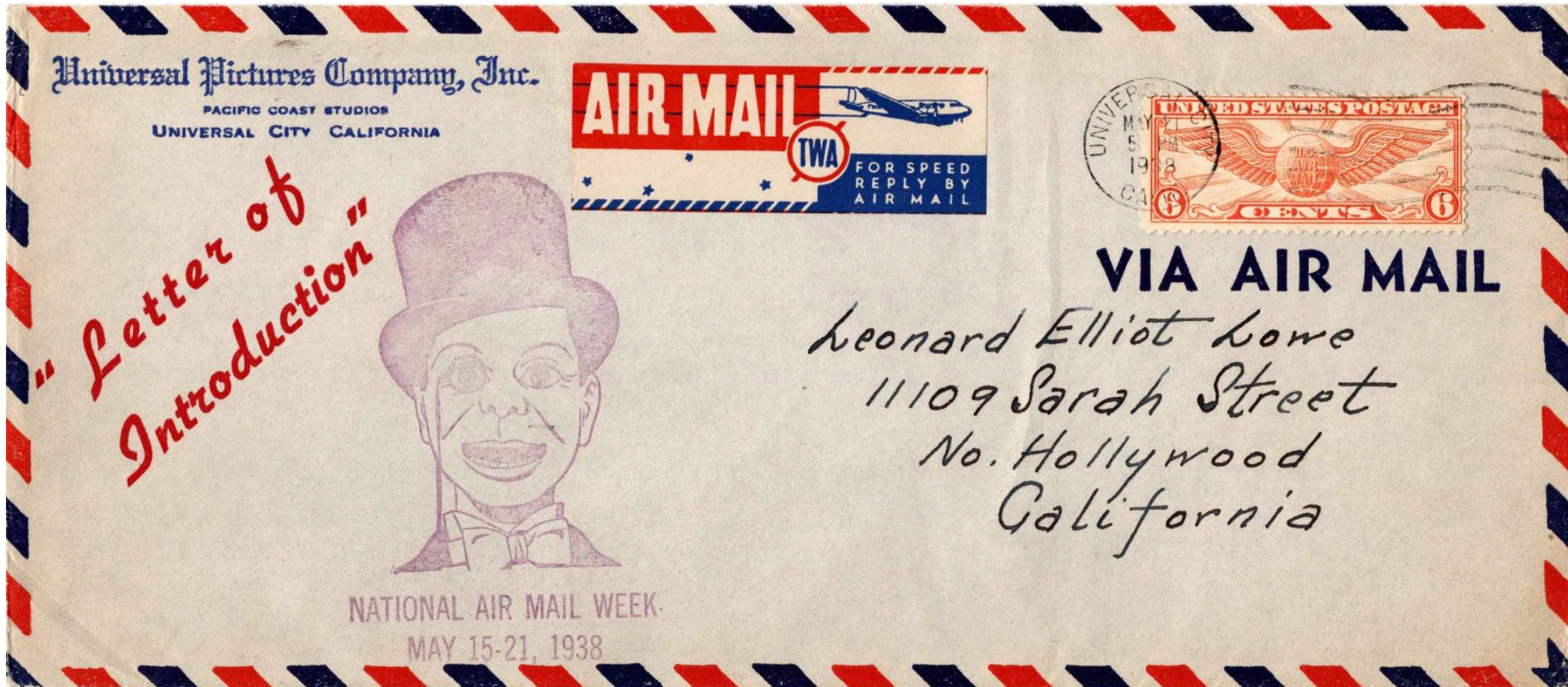


Johnstown, PA, Drabyk PA353c/3+

Hope, AR, Drabyk AR022a/5



More of the NAMW Hollywood Connection with "Charlie McCarthy"



Franked with
1934 "Winged
Globe" Issue
(Scott C19)

Advertising Cover, San Pedro CA



“Chicken of the Sea” and “White Star” tuna fish were canned by the Van Camp Seafood Company founded in San Pedro in 1914.

MR. B. PRICE,

AIR MAIL

From- W. H. Smith, - 242 N. Harbor Blvd.,
San Pedro, Calif.

San Pedro, CA, Drabyk
CA547a/5+++

This cachet was designed by Walter G. Crosby, a well-known cachet maker.



AIR MAIL

Ad Cover for KEX Radio Station, World's "First Radio Post Office"



KEX aired a special program on May 7, 14 and 21 from 11:00 p.m. to midnight touting NAMW. The Portland PM set-up a temporary post office at the station so that letters could receive the special KEX cachet and postmark. This one was postmarked 11:30 p.m. on May 14, 1938.

Portland, OR, Drabyk OR101k/3

Cover is franked with two Scott 790 (Navy Issue), one Scott 785 (Army Issue) and one Scott 798 (Constitution Sesquicentennial).

Cover from the U.S. Territory of Hawaii



Franked with
Scott C19
from 1934.

Honolulu, HI, Drabyk HI003d/3

Legitimate Business Use Cover from NAMW?



Cleveland, OH, Drabyk OH079/0

Vast majority of NAMW covers are philatelic. This one probably is not given that it is a business-to-business cover franked with a 16-cent Special Delivery air mail stamp (Scott CE2).

Note: The sender is The Higbee Company, the Cleveland-based department store made famous in the 1983 movie *A Christmas Story*.



Conclusion

- NAMW was a big event in 1938 – the country had never seen anything like it
- It was a legitimate celebration of the strides made in air transportation and travel, due in large part to the efforts of the Post Office Department over a two-decade period
- NAMW covers offer a wide range of collecting possibilities at an affordable price



Questions or
Comments?

Resources

The definitive compilation of NAMW cachets is without a doubt that assembled by The National Air Mail Historical Society under the direction of the late Jon E. Drabek. First published in 1986 and updated eight times through 2005, this monumental work totals almost 1,200 pages. Over 10,000 cachets are listed with many subvarieties (i.e., color, printed, hand-stamped, etc.). This compilation is only available on CD. The American Philatelic Research Library is one source.

For an online source of NAMW cachets, albeit must less comprehensive than Drabek's, the website "Aerodacious" is worth bookmarking: <http://www.aerodacious.com/NAMW.HTM>.

For a listing of Scott C23 FDC cachets, you cannot go wrong with Douglas H. Henkle's compilation at <https://www.folklib.net/fdc/bibliog/planty-c23.shtml>.

The National Postal Museum has a description of the NAMW covers Farley gifted at this link: <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/finding-guide/james-a-farley-%E2%80%9Cnational-air-mail-week%E2%80%9D-may-15-%E2%80%9321-1938>.

Write-ups on NAMW:

- My article that can be found here: <https://www.mypostalhistory.com/post/national-air-mail-week-a-big-deal-in-1938>. This article will be published in Kelleher's *Stamp Collector's Quarterly* in two parts in 2024.
- The AAMS's *Airpost Journal*, available at <https://www.americanairmailssociety.org/>, has had several articles on NAMW over the years. Issues to peruse include March, May, and June 1938; May 1988; March 1990; November 2003; January and April 2019; and September and December 2021.

Resources (Continued)

The AAMS website has two detailed write-ups on NAMW cachets from Massachusetts and Wyoming.

If you cannot access the AAMS materials because you are not a member, your best option would be to join the AAMS. But if you opt not to do so, you can read this article on Stamporama.com by Steve Swain, a frequent contributor to the *Airpost Journal* on NAMW: https://stamporama.com/articles/display_article.php?id=RAbK0s3pGc8SQ.

Ron Breznay wrote, “Trending? Viral Videos? Influencers? All Old News When You Consider James Farley and National Air Mail Week 1938” for the May 2018 edition of *The American Philatelist*. That issue is available on the American Philatelic Society’s website <https://stamps.org/> and at <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/64035251/the-american-philatelist-may-2018>.

Tony L. Crumbley authored “National Air Mail Week Revisited on the 100 Anniversary of the First Air Mail Service” for the Summer 2018 issue of the *North Carolina Postal Historian*. You can access his article here: http://www.ncpostalhistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/NCPHS_Journal-143-2018-Summer.pdf

Some online collecting forums have a thread on NAMW. One with some interesting covers is <https://thestampforum.boards.net/thread/4979/national-mail-week-covers-cachets?page=3>.