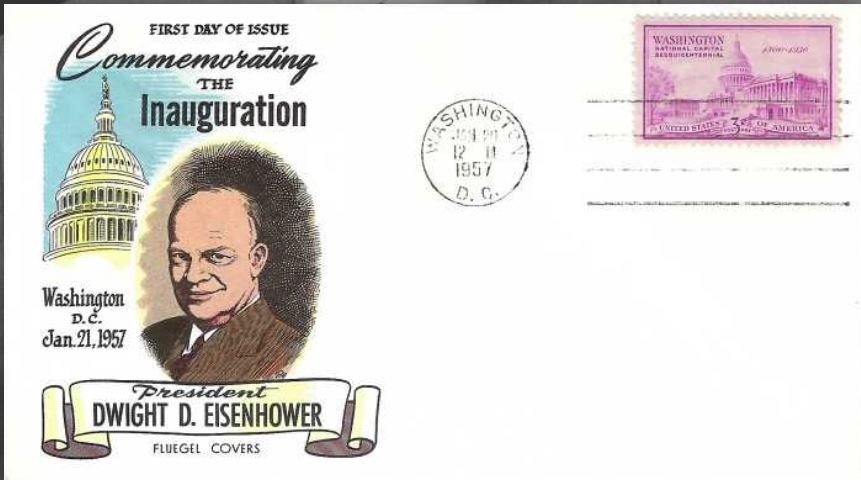


FIRST DAYS

JULY-AUGUST 2024 — NO. 477



Dwight David Eisenhower
Inaugurations: 1953 & 1957 page 42

the journal of the



American First Day Cover Society



FIRST DAYS

JULY - AUGUST 2024 — VOL. 69, NO. 4 — NO. 477

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Figure 1. First day cover of Bermuda Scott 318-321, April 28, 1975.

Celebrating 50 Years of Airmail Service to Bermuda: A FDC Cover from 1975 and Maybe One from 1925?

by Michael L. Wilson

On April 28, 1975, Bermuda issued four stamps to celebrate the 50th anniversary of airmail service to the archipelago (Figure 1). The stamps actually celebrated four milestones in Bermuda’s airmail history:

- The April 1925 flight of the airship USS *Los Angeles* that carried mail both to and from Bermuda (17 cents, Bermuda Scott 319).
- The inauguration, in June 1937, of regular air service from Bermuda to the mainland United States via Imperial Airways *Cavalier* flying boat (pictured on the 5-cent stamp, Scott 318) and Pan Am’s *Bermuda Clipper*.
- The transition from flying boats to the land-based four-engine Lockheed Constellation in January 1946. This change was made possible by the large airfield built by the Americans during World War II (20-cent stamp, Scott 320).
- And finally, the dawn of Boeing 747 flights operated by both Pan Am and British Airways, the successor to Imperial Airways, in August 1970 (25-cent, Scott 321).

Designs for the four stamps were sketched out by Geoffrey Osborn (1922-2011) in 1971. Osborn was an avid stamp collector who served on the Bermuda Government Stamp Design Advisory Committee in 1970 and 1971. He was also a World War II Royal Air Force bomber pilot who was recognized on a Bermudian stamp issued in 2018 (Scott 1149). He described his thought process and shared his sketches in an article titled “50th Anniversary of Air Mail to Bermuda” in the April 1975 issue of the *British Caribbean Philatelic Journal*.

Osborn's drafts were professionally executed in England. The final stamps were true to his vision with one exception: Since this issue was ostensibly to celebrate the 50th anniversary of airmail service, he pictured the *Los Angeles* on the denomination that satisfied the inland postage rate in Bermuda (4 cents when he designed the stamp but 5 cents by the time the stamp was issued). The government, however, opted to picture the *Cavalier* flying boat on the 5-cent stamp because it reasoned more people would remember that than the *Los Angeles* airship. The fact that the *Los Angeles* graced the 17-cent stamp was apropos, however, because that was the cost of airmailing a letter to anywhere in the world from Bermuda in 1975.

Note in Figure 2 that Osborn penciled in "Feb 1925" as the date of the first airmail flight to Bermuda, but the final rendition of the stamp states "April 1925." That discrepancy will be explained momentarily.



Figure 2. Osborn's sketch of the airship *Los Angeles* stamp (left - source: British Caribbean Philatelic Journal, April 1975) and the final stamp issued on April 28, 1975, from Figure 1.

The 17-cent stamp featuring the airship *Los Angeles* caught my attention because of the role it played in introducing airmail service to Bermuda. It was also at a point in aviation history where it was a toss-up whether the future of aviation belonged to airships or fixed-wing airplanes. (For a riveting account of that competition, I highly recommend *Empires of the Sky* by Alexander Rose, published in 2020.)

The *Los Angeles* (Figure 3) was a fabric-clad rigid airship built by Luftschiffbau Zeppelin GmbH (the German Zeppelin company) and delivered to the US Navy in October 1924. It was part of the war reparations that Germany was required to pay following World War I. The *Los Angeles* was roughly three-quarters the size of the more famous German-operated *Graf Zeppelin*. (As an aside, the *Graf Zeppelin* has appeared on four US airmail stamps; the *Los Angeles* has appeared on precisely zero.) It was one of four rigid airships that the US Navy operated in the 1920s and 1930s, and the only one that did not end in a disaster. It was dismantled in 1940.

Los Angeles made several test flights, including one over Manhattan on January 9, 1925, which was front-page news. Later that month, off the coast of Nantucket, it carried a group of scientists aloft to witness a total solar eclipse.

By then, the Navy felt confident enough to plan the *Los Angeles*'s first flight to Bermuda. It was scheduled to fly between February 16 and February 26, 1925, depending on weather conditions. Several dignitaries were scheduled to be on board, including Rear Admiral

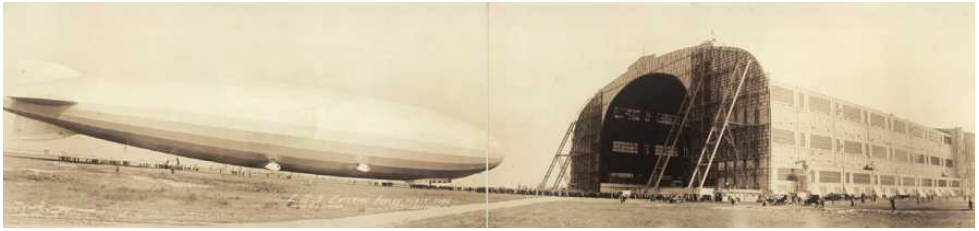


Figure 3. *The Los Angeles arriving for the first time at its hangar in Lakehurst, New Jersey.* Source: Library of Congress.

William A. Moffett, chief of the Bureau of Naval Aeronautics. Since Bermuda did not have a mooring facility, the Navy dispatched the USS *Patoka* to Bermuda, an airship tender equipped with a mooring mast, fuel, helium supplies and other servicing necessities (Figure 4).



Figure 4. *The Los Angeles tethered to the Patoka, circa 1931.* Source: US Naval Historical Center.

The purpose of the estimated 15-hour flight was to test the feasibility of employing airships for the long-distance transportation, not only of passengers but of mail. In the mainland United States, airmail was on the verge of becoming a regularly scheduled service across the country. Indeed, the transcontinental route featuring both day and night flying had been operating since July 1, 1924. However, when it came to transporting mail 700 miles across the open ocean between New York and Bermuda, steamships were the only option, and the fastest of those took 40 hours to reach Bermuda. Consequently, the *Los Angeles* was slated to carry 200 pounds of mail from the United States to Bermuda at the rate of 2 cents per ounce per letter and 2 cents for a postcard (as stated in *The Postal Bulletin* of February 17, 1925).

The *Los Angeles* lifted off on its maiden journey to Bermuda on the afternoon of February 20. Making excellent time, it arrived at Bermuda 12 hours later, but it could not moor to the *Patoka* due to bad weather. It cruised over Bermuda for six hours before returning to

Lakehurst, but before that, it dropped the mail bags it was carrying on the grounds of the Government House in Bermuda. The result was that February 21, 1925, marked the first time airmail was delivered to Bermuda; the date for the first airmail to depart Bermuda was still off in the future.

The cover shown in Figure 5 is one of the covers dropped from the *Los Angeles* on February 21. Like most of the covers carried, this one is philatelic. It was postmarked twice: once on February 18, when it entered the mail system, and again on February 20 with an “Air Mail Service/New York” postmark. It has two backstamps, both dated February 21 – one from Hamilton and the other from St. Georges. Albert C. Roessler (1883-1952) created the cachet. Roessler was a stamp dealer best remembered for his cachets on first day and airmail covers.



Figure 5. Cover carried on the first flight of the *Los Angeles* to Bermuda on February 20-21, 1925. Postmarked New York February 18 and February 20, 1925, and franked with a 2-cent Washington from the 1922-25 issue (Scott 554). The image at the right is the backstamp.

Publicly, the Navy was elated with the flight. According to United Press International, Admiral Moffett heralded the flight as perhaps the beginning of “daily aerial service between the United States and Bermuda.” He predicted the *Los Angeles* would make another trip to Bermuda within a week, and he expected the airship to deliver mail to England by the summer of 1926.

Behind the scenes, the situation was far less rosy. The *Los Angeles* had suffered significant structural damage during its roundtrip flight to Bermuda. Calcium chloride used to keep ballast water from freezing leaked and corroded several duralumin hull plates. That was not made public until mid-March when a second flight to Bermuda was abruptly canceled. Another complicating factor was that the *Patoka* was temporarily assigned another mission.

The Navy was finally ready to try again on April 16. The *Pakota* was standing by in Bermuda, and once again, about 200 pounds of mail, most of it canceled on April 15, 1925,

were stowed aboard the *Los Angeles*. Alas, mechanical problems and weather struck again, and the flight was delayed. Once those were addressed and the weather cleared, the *Los Angeles* departed for Bermuda on the afternoon of April 21.

This time, the flight went off without a hitch. On the morning of April 22, the *Los Angeles* moored to the *Patoka*, and its cargo of mail was offloaded and delivered in Bermuda. It then picked up several bags of Bermudian mail, and on April 23, it departed Bermuda bound for Lakehurst with the first airmail from the island. It arrived in Lakehurst shortly before 5:00 a.m. Eastern Time on April 24. Its return trip took more than 20 hours – versus 14 hours for its return in February – as it battled gale-force winds.

Figure 6 shows one of the covers carried on the *Los Angeles* to Bermuda in April. It was postmarked in New York on April 15, 1925, and is labeled “VIA AIRSHIP *Los Angeles*/ FROM LAKEHURST, NJ.” On the back is a receiving circular date stamp from Hamilton dated April 22, 1925, 5:00 p.m.

This cover was sent by a stamp store named “The Home of the Postage Stamp” located in Jackson Heights, New York. The store was run by J. Van Kirk Wells (1865-1947) and his wife Janet (1879-1958). They dealt primarily in mint European stamps and promoted their “personal service” in philatelic publications. This cover was addressed to their son Joseph, who was on holiday in Bermuda. Sadly, Joseph passed away two weeks after receiving this letter at age 24.

Based on contemporary news stories in the *Royal Gazette* and *Colonist Daily of Bermuda*, it’s fortunate in hindsight that the *Los Angeles* was not able to moor to the *Patoka* in February because it’s doubtful there would have been any Bermudian mail to carry back.

It wasn’t until April 1, 1925, that the *Royal Gazette* expressed hopes that postal authorities would make plans for mail to be carried on the *Los Angeles* “since our treasury has the opportunity of reaping an [sic] harvest from the sale of special stamps” to collectors worldwide. As late as April 8, the *Royal Gazette* wondered whether the opportunity would exist to

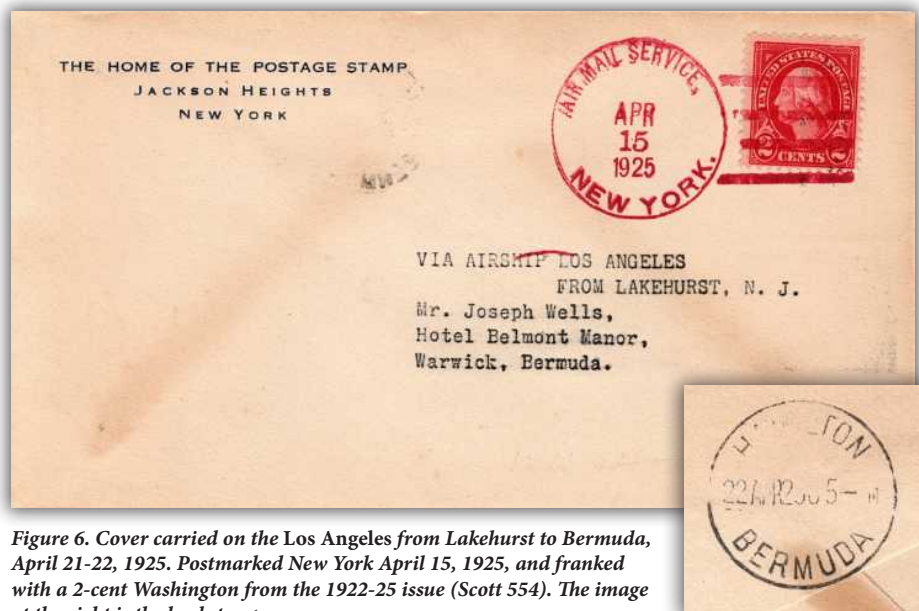


Figure 6. Cover carried on the *Los Angeles* from Lakehurst to Bermuda, April 21-22, 1925. Postmarked New York April 15, 1925, and franked with a 2-cent Washington from the 1922-25 issue (Scott 554). The image at the right is the backstamp.

send airmail from Bermuda. At last, on April 16, the *Royal Gazette* happily reported:

We are informed that if the ship comes to its moorings on this occasion arrangements will be made to send a mail by her but the following posting rules must be observed: all mail must be marked "Via Airship Los Angeles"; this mail must not be posted in the ordinary foreign boxes but must be handed in at the windows at the GPO [General Post Office] to the clerk on duty; normal rates of postage will prevail.

Bermudians responded enthusiastically to this news. Most of the Bermudian mail carried by the *Los Angeles* was canceled April 16, with the GPO setting a cutoff time of 5:00 p.m., April 18. The *Royal Gazette* reported on April 18, "quite a quantity of mail has been received at the General Post Office, which is intended to go by airship. Thinking that letters by this air service would enhance the value of stamps, many people posted envelopes containing every denomination of Bermuda stamps. and some were so covered that scarcely room was left for the address." By April 20, the *Royal Gazette* said, "The quantity of mail, we understand, weighs about 200 lbs."

Edward Worden (1875-1940), a chemist by trade from Millburn, New Jersey and one of the pioneers of first day covers (FDCs) and cover collecting, in general, figured prominently in the first airmail from Bermuda. His participation even warranted a story in the May 22, 1925, *Royal Gazette*:

Many residents of St. George's are doubtless rather annoyed that they did not avail themselves of the opportunity to send mail to be despatched by the Los Angeles on her first trip from Bermuda to the States. The few who did have reaped a good investment on their original outlay, as latest advices show that the price to-day is \$7.50 with every prospect of that figure being much exceeded shortly. Mr. Worden Milburn [sic], a New York broker, is probably a happy man to-day. His original outlay of £50 in Bermuda stamps, at to-day's value is roughly \$16,000, as envelopes bearing £1, ten shillings and stamps of all values safely reached their destination, the stenographer who posted them we hear, being inclined to regret not posting a few in her own interest, but thought at the time 50 cents were safer invested in ice cream.

Figure 7 shows one of Worden's covers carried on the *Los Angeles*. It's postmarked April 13, 1925 (Figure 8), with a typed "Via Air Mail Service, 'Los Angeles'" notation at the bottom. It has a hand-stamped "BERMUDA FIRST/OVERSEAS AIRMAIL" cachet, one of two cachets (not including a version with two inverted letters) seen on these covers. This cover was sent registered mail and bore blue crossed lines on the front and back, harkening back to the 19th century when registered mail was tied with green linen tape, ribbon, or string. The back of the cover bears double oval registry postmarks dated April 24, New York and April 25, Millburn.

The cover also bears a "FIRST DAY COVER" cachet. But is this truly a first-day cover?

Worden franked his letter with a block of four of a 1-shilling "Caravel" stamp. (Equal to 48 pence, that amount of postage far exceeded the required 5-1/2 pence for postage and the registry fee.) This design went through multiple printings by De La Rue in Great Britain, three prior to 1925. All three printings were in black ink, but the first two were on a different paper than the third, so they look quite different.

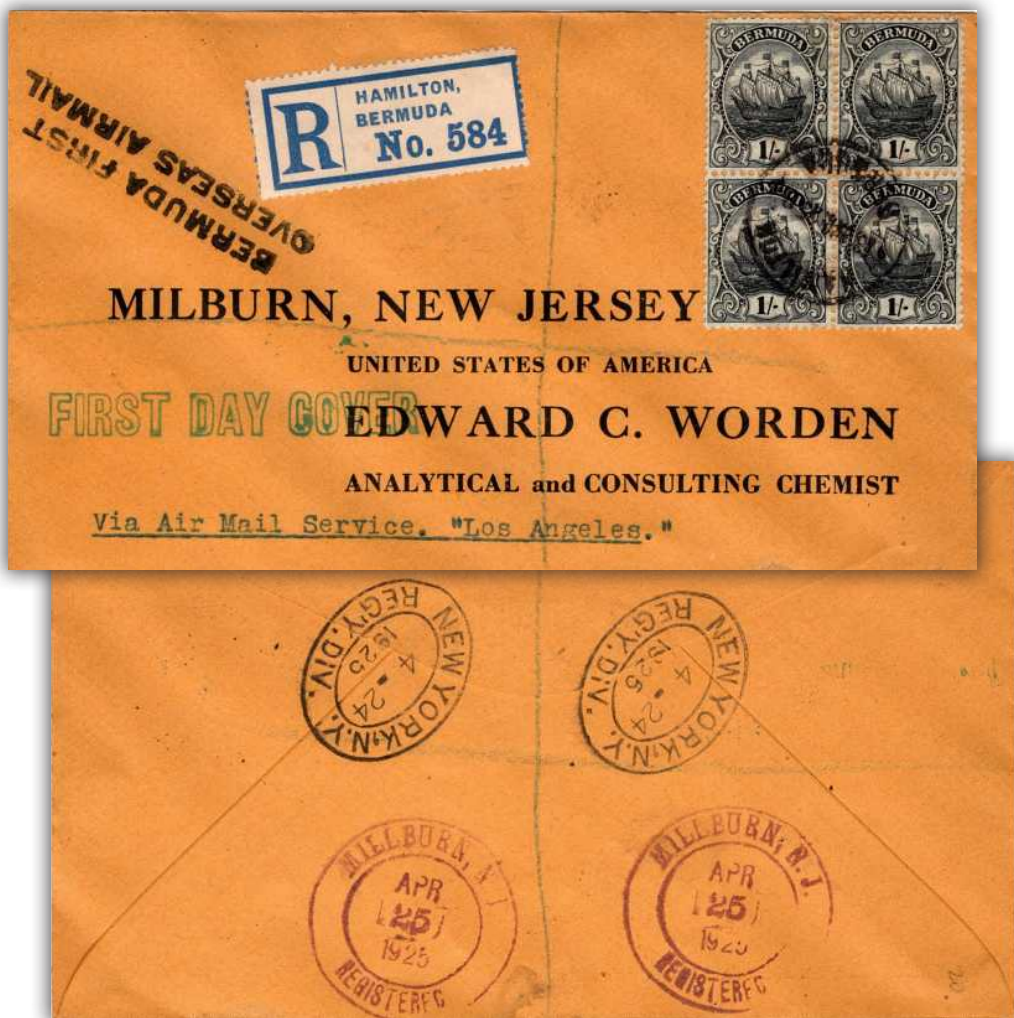


Figure 7. Front and back of cover carried on the Los Angeles from Bermuda to Lakehurst, April 23-24, 1925. Postmarked April 13, 1925, Hamilton, Bermuda and franked with a block of four of the 1-shilling Caravel issued in 1925 (Scott 48a).

Based on M.H. Ludington's findings published in 1978 in his marvelous *The Postal History and Stamps of Bermuda*, the first batch of 24,690 was received in Bermuda on May 9, 1910, and the first day of issue was March 26, 1912. Another set of 50,400 was received on November 19, 1912. There are slight differences between those two printings, but both are listed as Scott 48 (and Stanley Gibbons (SG) 51). The distinguishing feature of those first two printings is an unambiguous green hue due to the paper (see Figure 9).

A third batch, numbering 46,680 of the 1-shilling, was received in Bermuda on April 28, 1919. These were printed on pale olive-colored paper and appear much more black than the first two printings. This version is listed as Scott 48a (and SG 51a) and is the variety Worden adhered to his cover.

Both Scott and SG list the issue year of this third printing as "1925," but neither provides a specific date. A fairly exhaustive dive into news reports from the time and subsequent philatelic literature sheds no light on when this third printing was issued. Con-

sequently, there is no way to prove that this third printing was issued on April 13, 1925, which is the postmark on Worden's cover.

On the other hand, I would argue that it is more likely than not the actual date of issue for this third printing. My points include:

Worden was an astute collector. He was a member of the American Philatelic Society and a charter member of the American Air Mail Society. I've already mentioned that he is considered a pioneer in the FDC field.

The comings and goings of the *Los Angeles* were major news in the New York papers, and given that Millburn is just west of New York City, I'm confident Worden was well aware of its travel plans and the Navy's intentions to carry mail to and from Bermuda.

Even though the GPO didn't officially confirm that the *Los Angeles* would carry mail on its return trip to the States until April 16 or thereabouts, Worden likely anticipated that would be the case based on the February 20-21 flight. Perhaps the stenographer who assisted Worden had good connections in the GPO and was privy to its plans? If the *Royal Gazette* was correct that Worden spent £50 on stamps – equivalent to about \$4,300 today – maybe he was provided advanced notice as a preferred customer. That may explain why he had covers postmarked as early as April 13, 1925.

And he did have more than one cover postmarked on that date. The cover shown in Figure 10 is another Worden cover postmarked April 13, 1925, franked with a block of four 3-pence stamps (Scott 88) that were issued in 1924. This cover looks very similar to the cover in Figure 7, but with one exception: There is no "FIRST DAY COVER" cachet. I don't know if the FDC cachet was applied by the stenographer in Bermuda or by Worden himself when the cover arrived in Millburn, but clearly, either his Bermuda contact or Worden understood there was something different about the 1-shilling stamp versus the 3-pence stamp.

Further to that point, Figure 11 shows another Worden cover from the return flight, this one postmarked April 17, 1925 (after the GPO announced that the *Los Angeles* would carry mail back to the States), franked with a single 2-1/2 pence stamp (Scott 86) issued



Figure 8. Close-up of postmark from cover in Figure 7 rotated 180 degrees.



Figure 9. Bermuda Scott 48 (SG 51) on the left; Scott 48a (SG 51a) on the right.

in 1923. The stamp on this cover is canceled with the other first flight cachet that reads “Air Mail/Service/Bermuda.” The poor strike is typical for this cachet. Nowhere is this identified as an FDC.

That’s circumstantial evidence, obviously, but I think it is compelling.

What isn’t in doubt is the impression the *Los Angeles* made in Bermuda. Despite Admiral Moffett’s prediction of “daily aerial service” to Bermuda via airship, the visits of

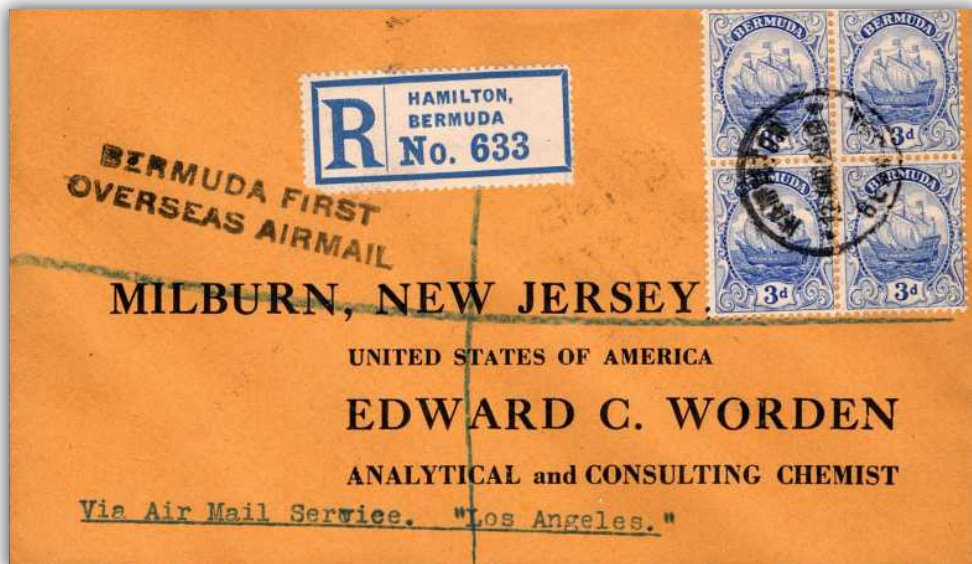


Figure 10. Covered carried on the *Los Angeles* from Bermuda to Lakehurst, April 23-24, 1925. Postmarked April 13, 1925, Hamilton, Bermuda and franked with a block of 4 of the 3-pence Caravel issued in 1924 (Scott 88).

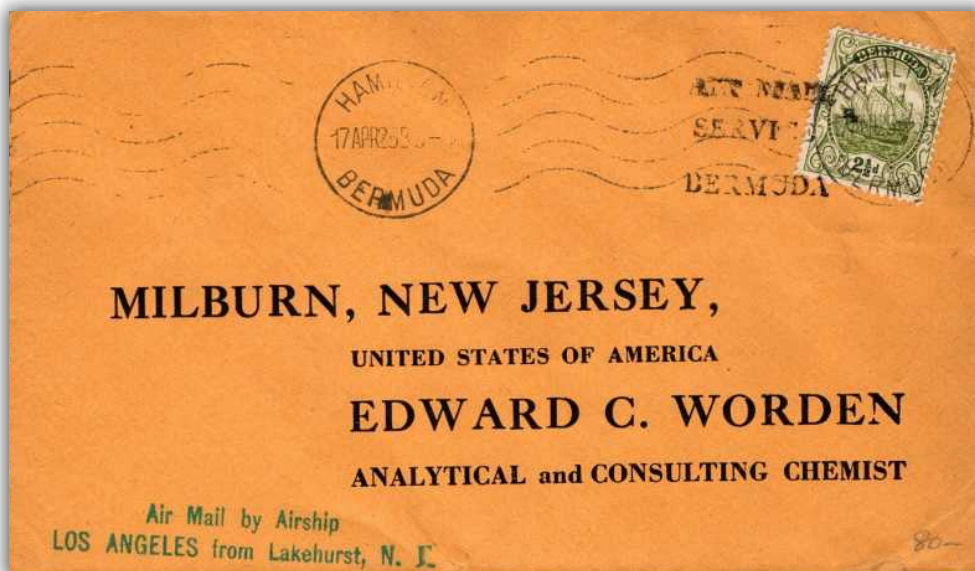


Figure 11. Covered carried on the *Los Angeles* from Bermuda to Lakehurst, April 23-24, 1925. Postmarked April 17, 1925, Hamilton, Bermuda and franked with a single 2-1/2-pence Caravel issued in 1923 (Scott 86).

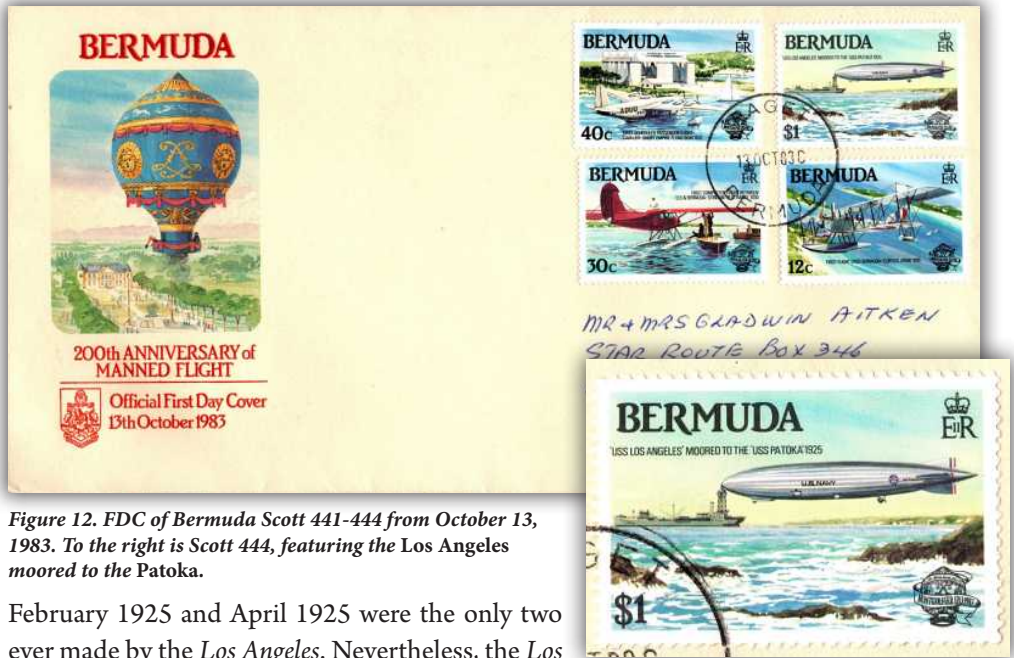


Figure 12. FDC of Bermuda Scott 441-444 from October 13, 1983. To the right is Scott 444, featuring the Los Angeles moored to the Patoka.

February 1925 and April 1925 were the only two ever made by the *Los Angeles*. Nevertheless, the *Los Angeles* has appeared on two Bermuda stamps: Scott 319, the stamp that started me on this journey, and Scott 444 issued in a set of four in 1983 to celebrate the 200th anniversary of manned flight (Figure 11). This is quite a tribute, to be sure, but an appropriate one for the airship that introduced Bermuda to airmail. 🐣

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About the Author

Michael L. Wilson primarily collects postal history and enjoys delving into the postal histories and the social histories of covers in his collection. He is a member of several societies, including the Bermuda Collectors Society, the American First Day Cover Society, the American Air Mail Society, and the American Philatelic Society, and he edits the newsletter and manages the website for the Greater Philadelphia Stamp and Collectors Club. Michael has published articles in *The Airpost Journal*, *Kelleher's Stamp Collectors Quarterly*, and *First Days* and will have one in *The American Philatelist* in 2025. He resides in Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

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