Left, the front of Headsville (courtesy Smithsonian Institution Archives). Right, the post office today at the American Philatelic Center.

The Headsville Post Office:
From West Virginia to Bellefonte

RON BREZNAY

One of my favorite places to visit at the American Philatelic Center (APC) in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, is the Headsville Post Office. I make it a point to stop in every time I visit.

The post office was built in Headsville, Mineral County, West Virginia, in the 1860s, as a post office and general store. Figure 1 shows the post office on its original site in the 1970s when it was closed for business.

In the early 1970s, the post office was disassembled and moved to the National Museum of History and Technology at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Around 2007, it was moved to American Philatelic Center, headquarters of the American Philatelic Society, where it remains to this day on loan from the Smithsonian.

It is the original post office, not a reproduction. And it is not just a museum piece that you admire from behind a velvet rope; you can go inside and look around. Though it is not an official post office now, until recently

Figure 1. The Headsville Post Office on its original site in the 1970s.

it served as a contract postal unit, so you could buy stamps and post mail there.

The first post office serving Headsville was established on January 2, 1813, in Sheetz's Mill, which was an early name for Headsville. Charles Marshall was the first postmaster. At the time, the town was located in what was then Hampshire County, Virginia. In 1863, that section of the state split off from Virginia and became West Virginia, and in 1866, Mineral County was carved out of Hampshire County. Headsville, in the far northeast portion of the state, is located near the intersection of Patterson Creek Road (County Route 11) and Fountain-Headsville Road (County Route 16).

The post office was discontinued on May 3, 1815. Then it was re-established on January 14, 1828, with Frederick Sheetz initially serving as postmaster.

Henry Head, shown in Figure 2, served as postmaster from February 26, 1855, to February 23, 1857, and again from March 24, 1858, until the Sheetz's Mill post office was discontinued September 29, 1866.

The simple rectangular, wooden-sided building housing the Headsville post office was constructed in the early 1860s as a general store, and the post office was established in the store on March 5, 1868, with Head as postmaster. He held this position until Isaac H. Carskadon was appointed postmaster on November 10, 1869. Head served again as postmaster from March 21, 1871, until July 8, 1880.

Ed McDonald, who is currently vice president of the Mineral County Historical Society and is the great-great-grandson of Head, said that the Headsville store/post office stood on his family's property, the McDonald family farm.

Another member of the Mineral County Historical Society, Terry Beeseck, said his mother-in-law has a model of the post office that someone made many years ago. Figure 3 shows the familiar front of the building on the left and the not-so-familiar back on the right.

The cover in Figure 4 shows a Headsville postmark from 1882, nearly 70 years after the first post office opened in the hamlet.

The cover in Figure 5, from April 2, 1906, has a Doane cancellation. Doane cancels were the Post Office Department's first attempt to improve postmark legibility by issuing rubber handstamps. Prior to this, cancels were made from cork, metal, wood, or other materials,
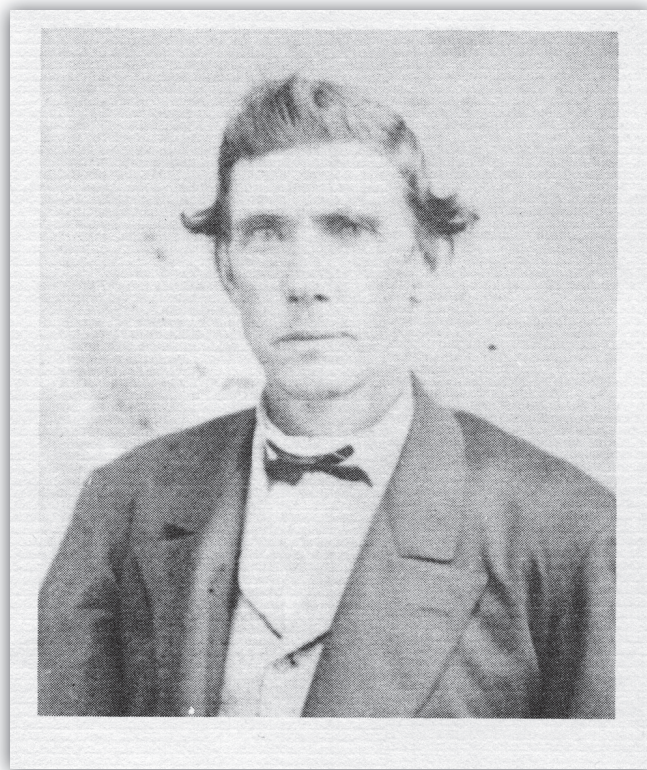

Figure 2. Henry Head.

Figure 3. A model of the post office with the familiar front of the building on the left and the not-so-familiar back on the right. (Courtesy of Terry Beeseck.)

Figure 4. A cover with Headsville postmark from 1882. (Courtesy of Wayne Farley.)
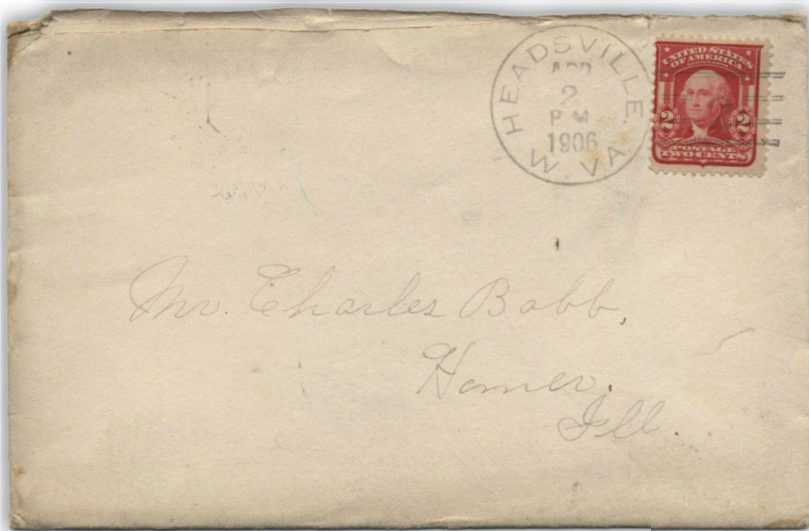
Figure 5. A cover with Doane cancellation from 1906.

Figure 6. Last Day of Post Office cover for the Headsville Post Office, which closed permanently on December 31, 1951.

Figure 7. The disassembly of the post office by the Smithsonian Institution in July 1971. (Courtesy Smithsonian Institution Archives.)

often hand-carved. The name honors Edith R. Doane, a postal historian who, in the 1950s, became interested in these early 20th-century handstamps. She published her first research findings in 1978.

When John E. Staggs became postmaster of Headsville on March 8, 1914, he moved the post office to his own business, apparently shown in the cachet on the cover in Figure 6. The building that housed the now-former Headsville post office continued operating as a general store until it went out of business during the Depression era of the 1930s.

Staggs' post office continued in operation until December 31, 1951, as shown on the "Last Day of Post Office" cover in Figure 8. Staggs was still the postmaster at the end of 1951.

After this post office closed, Headsville's mail was routed to Keyser, which is the county seat, or to Burlington, depending upon the address.

In the late 1960s, curators at the Smithsonian's National Museum of History and Technology wanted to present aspects of the American experience to visitors of the museum in different ways. Instead of using "sterile techniques which have too frequently given visitors the false impression that all objects were clean, in perfect condition, and unrelated to the people who built and used them," curators wanted to create exhibits that visitors could identify with more personally.

Carl Scheele, curator for the Division of Postal History, knew of the perfect object — a post office — that would be personal and identifiable by almost everyone who visited the museum, but he did not know where to find one, according to an article posted in the online Smithsonian Institution Archives.

When Scheele was searching for a post office to exhibit in the museum, he looked at more than 600 post offices in 13 states. The one in Headsville was among the oldest he examined.

McDonald related that when Scheele was looking for a general store/post office, he made a chance discovery of the one in Headsville. Scheele was driving around West Virginia and was stopped by a flagger at a road construction site. He asked the flagger if he knew of a general store/post office in the area, and the flagger directed him to Headsville.

Scheele chose the Headsville post office for the Smithsonian because, as reported in a 1971 Keyser (W.Va.) newspaper at the time, "it had remained unaltered in structure, both inside and out, from its earliest days. The original counters, shelving, floor, windows,

Figure 8. Invitation to the dedication of the post office on September 27, 1971.
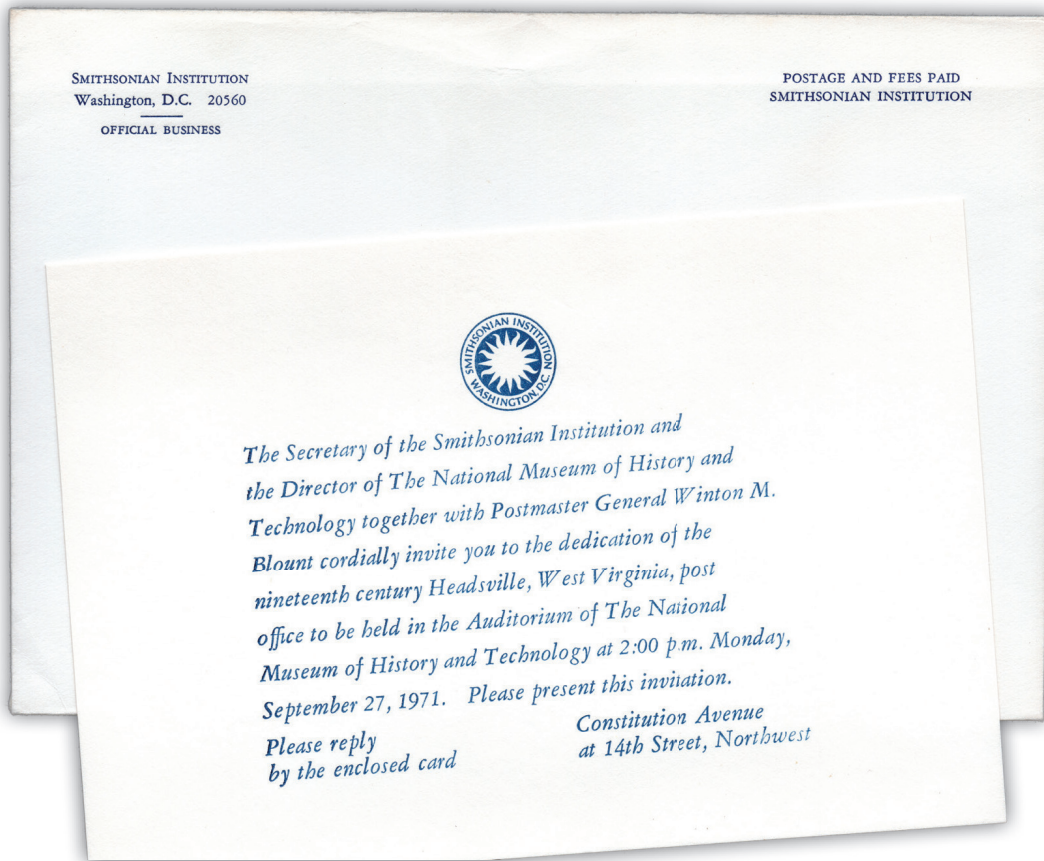
shutters, walls and ceiling were intact. There are even inscriptions written on the shutters by Civil War soldiers who were stationed in the area or who passed that way. An iron pot-bellied stove had been added before the close of the 19th century, and the building was wired for electric lights about World War I, but these changes seem to be the only alterations to the original structure, with the exception of a front porch we believe was added prior to 1900."

The article goes on to quote Scheele: "The Headsville Post Office is a natural addition to a museum depicting the cultural and technological history of America. The Postal Service is the single institution that has been common to virtually every American's experience throughout 200 years, and the most representative type of post office in American history — the most numerous and widespread — has been the country store-post office."

McDonald said that his grandfather, Edgar H. McDonald, sold the building to the Smithsonian for $7,500. The building still contained the general store's original stock of non-perishable goods, which had remained largely untouched for roughly 60 years, including high button shoes, spices, patent medicines, slate pencils, and poultry lice medicine.

As shown in Figure 7, a Smithsonian restoration specialist named Charles H. Rowell, assisted by Reverdy Marcey, carefully took the building apart bit by bit, coding each piece. The process took about two weeks.

Figure 9. The photo of the exterior of the post office when it was at the Smithsonian. (Courtesy Smithsonian Institution Archives.) A postcard shows the interior of the post office when it was at the Smithsonian.

The post office was reassembled at the Smithsonian's National Museum of History and Technology, near the Constitution Avenue entrance. (In 1980, the museum was renamed the National Museum of American History.)

The dedication of the post office was scheduled for September 27, 1971, at 2 p.m. Shown in Figure 8 is an invitation to the dedication.

Shown in Figure 9 is a photograph of the exterior of the post office when it was at the Smithsonian, while the interior is shown on a postcard.

The post office was dedicated by Postmaster General Winton M. Blount. During the dedication ceremony, Blount hand-canceled an envelope bearing the postage stamp showing the logo of the newly established United States Postal Service (Scott U.S. 1396) as well as a 1946 commemorative stamp honoring the Smithsonian (Scott U.S. 943).

As shown in Figure 10, Blount hand-delivered the cover to Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley as the crowd looked on. Also present was National Museum of History and Technology Director Daniel J. Boorstin. This was the first known pictorial cancellation that was not a first day cancellation.

The post office was a working post office at the Smithsonian, with special cancellations used. The most popular sale items were postcard stamps for tourists and current stamps for collectors.

A 2006 article in the Machine Cancel Forum states that both machine and hand cancels were struck. They are easy to tell apart as the machine cancels have round postmarks (which the Machine Cancel Society calls "dials") and the hand cancels have oval postmarks. All of the cancels used a flag-shaped killer (which the Machine Cancel Society calls "flags"). The machine cancels were used concurrently with the hand cancels.

For the machine cancels, the Machine Cancel Forum article lists two different dials and two different flags, with three different combinations. For the hand cancels, there is one dial and five different flags.

In Figure 11 are the two machine dials. Dial 1 has no space between "Smithsonian" and "Sta." and Dial 2 has a space.

Figure 10. At the dedication ceremony, Postmaster General Winton M. Blount hand-delivered a commemorative cover to Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley. (Courtesy Smithsonian Institution Archives.)

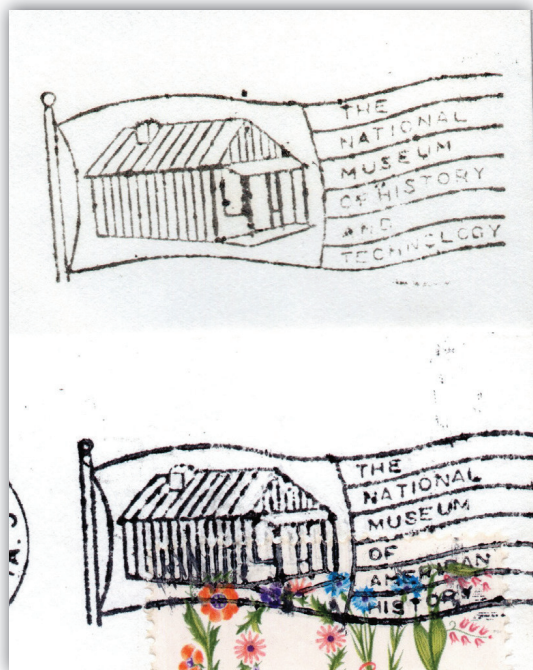
Figure 11. Machine Dials 1 and 2.

Figure 12. Machine Flags 1 and 2.

As shown in Figure 12, the two Machine Flags had the same layout: the canton contains a drawing of the post office, and the stripes have the name of the museum. Flag 1 has the original name of the museum, The National Museum of History and Technology, and Flag 2 has the new name, the National Museum of American History.

Dial 1 was used only with Flag 1, and Dial 2 was used with both Flag 1 and Flag 2. Therefore, there are three different machine cancellations.

The cover in Figure 13 has the combination of Dial 2 and Flag 2, which was used from 1982 to 1989.

The machine cancels were made using an old International Postal Supply Company HD-2 Model Number 170 hand-driven canceling machine. The machine was found stored at the Topeka, Kansas, post office. Sheele had the machine shipped in August 1971 to Washington, where it was restored. Pitney-Bowes engraved the canceling die for the museum. Once restored for use, the cancellation machine was installed in the Headsville Post Office. Unfortunately, the machine impressions are generally poor because of worn parts that could not be adjusted.

The hand cancels all had the same layout, as shown in Figure 14: an oval postmark, a flag with the name of the museum in the canton, and a separate drawing of the post office.

There also were two commemorative cancellations. The first flag variety contained the old name of the museum, the National Museum of History and Technology. Hand Flag 1 was used from 1971 to 1981. This cover is from the dedication of the post office exhibit on September 27, 1971.

The cover in Figure 15 has Hand Flag 2, which was a special cancellation for the opening of the Hall of Stamps and the Mails, with this event noted in the stripes of the flag. Hand Flag 2 was used from 1972 to 1973. This cover marks the opening of the Hall of Stamps and the Mails on November 17, 1972.

The cover in Figure 16 has Hand Flag 3, which was a special cancellation noting "100 Years/Haenlein/to Apollo." The cancellation has a drawing of an Apollo spacecraft instead of the Headsville Post Office, and the commemorative slogan in place of the name of the museum in the canton. Hand Flag 3 was used from 1972 to 1973.
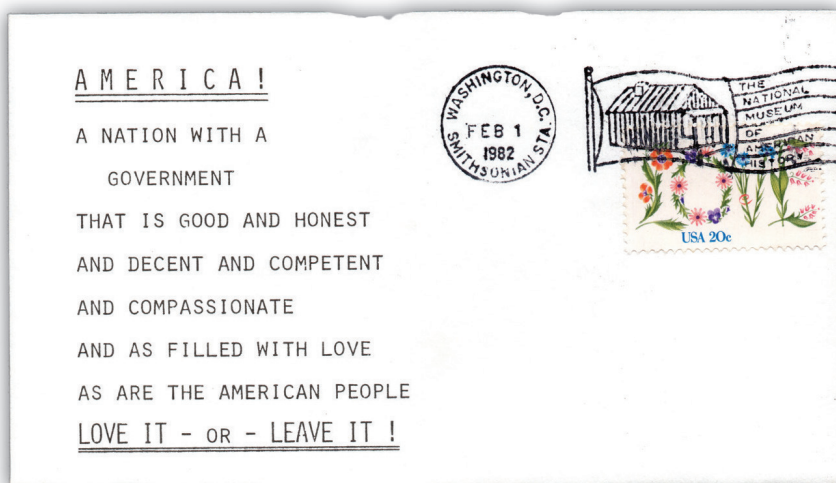

Figure 13. Cover with the combination of Dial 2 and Flag 2, which was used from 1982 to 1989.

Figure 14. A cover with Hand Flag 1, which was used from 1971 to 1981. This cover is from the dedication of the post office exhibit on September 27, 1971.
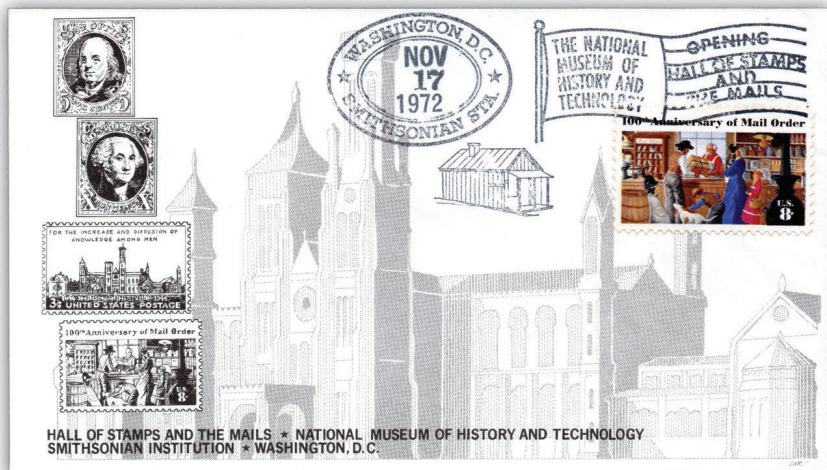

Figure 15. A cover with Hand Flag 2, which was a special cancellation for the opening of the Hall of Stamps and the Mails, with this event noted in the stripes of the flag. Hand Flag 2 was used from 1972 to 1973. This cover marks the opening of the Hall of Stamps and the Mails on November 17, 1972.

Figure 16. Cover with Hand Flag 3, which was a special cancellation used from 1972 to 1973.
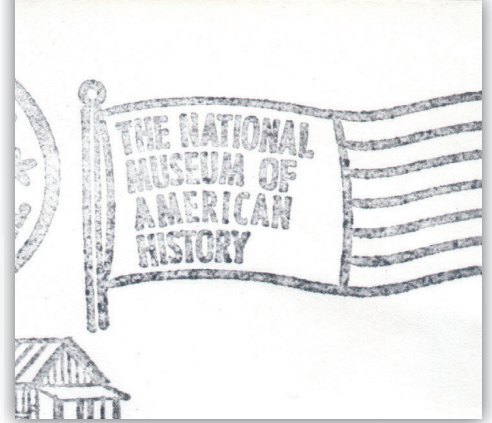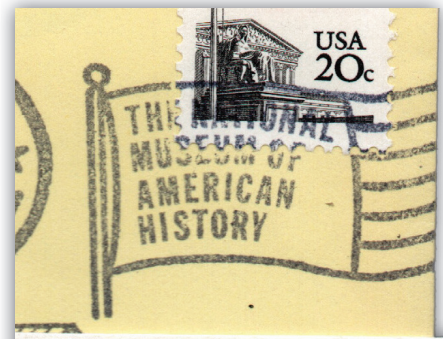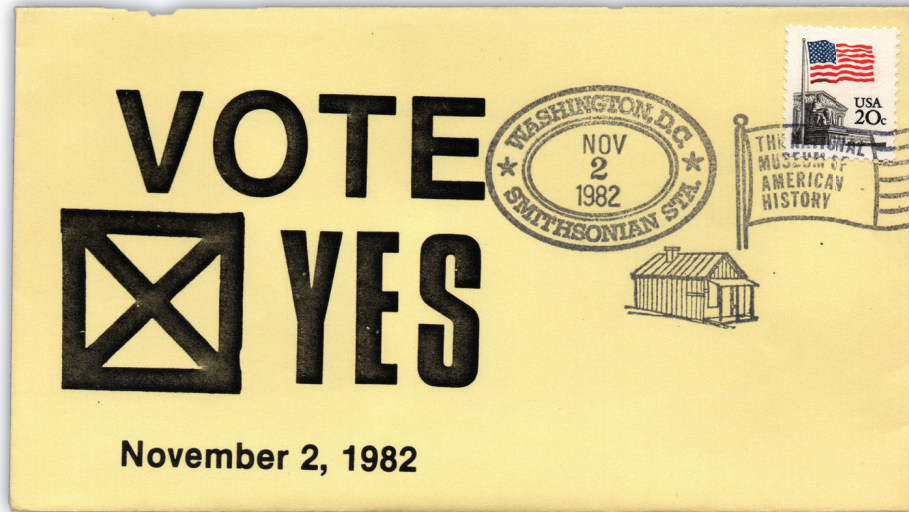

Figure 17. A comparison of Hand Flags 4 and 5.

Figure 18. Cover with Hand Flag 4, which was used beginning in 1981 until the post office closed at the Smithsonian in 2006.

| Headsville Postmasters		
Name	**Date Appointed**	**Name of Post Office**
Charles Marshall	January 2, 1813	Sheetz's Mill
Frederick Sheetz	January 14, 1828	Sheetz's Mill
Henry Head	February 26, 1855	Sheetz's Mill
Henry Head	March 24, 1858	Sheetz's Mill
Henry Head	March 5, 1868	Headsville
Isaac H. Carskadon	November 10, 1869	Headsville
Nathan Wilson	August 22, 1870	Headsville
Henry Head	March 21, 1871	Headsville
Joseph W. Shoemaker	July 9, 1880	Headsville
George T. Carskadon	February 12, 1881	Headsville
John W. Powell	October 25, 1881	Headsville
Mrs. Mollie W. Carskadon	March 26, 1883	Headsville
Mary E. Fink	December 16, 1895	Headsville
William B. Daugherty	February 3, 1898	Headsville
Thomas B. Doman	May 19, 1898	Headsville
Franklin Haines	March 9, 1909	Headsville
Then the post office was moved to John E. Staggs' store.		
John E. Stagg	March 18, 1914	Headsville
Staggs was postmaster until the post office was discontinued on December 31, 1951.		
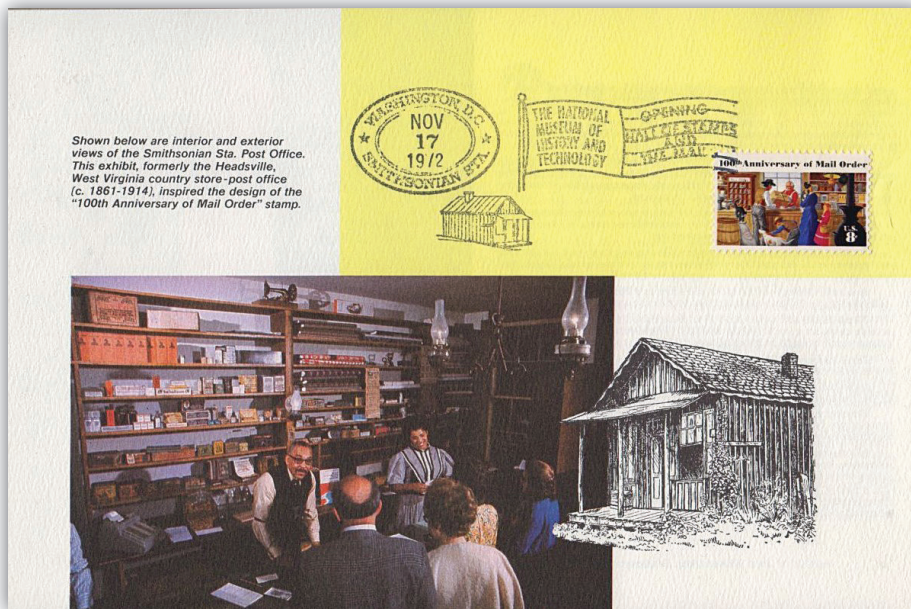
Figure 19. Part of the brochure for the opening of the Hall of Stamps and the Mails on November 17, 1972.

Paul Haenlein was a German engineer who invented the first internal combustion engine to be used on an aircraft. The engine was first used in a dirigible in 1872. This cover commemorates Apollo 13, which was headed for the moon in 1970, but because of equipment failures, was forced to loop around the moon and return to earth.

Hand Flags 4 and 5 have the new name of the museum, The National Museum of American History, in the canton. This cancellation has two varieties, as shown in Figure 17. In Flag 4, the second "A" in "American" is over the "Y" in "History." In Flag 5, the "C" in "American" is over the "Y" in "History."

The cover in Figure 18 has Hand Flag 4, which was used beginning in 1981 until the post office closed at the Smithsonian in 2006. November 2, 1982, was Election Day. This cover was apparently in favor of a ballot question to approve the constitution of New Columbia, i.e., statehood for Washington, D.C. The "ayes" prevailed as the D.C. voters approved the constitution, but it does not appear that it went anywhere as D.C. did not become a state.

The Hall of Stamps and the Mails opened on November 17, 1972. This precursor to the National Postal Museum was in the National Museum of History and Technology. The page from the brochure shown in Figure 19 has the 1972 Mail Order stamp (Scott U.S. 1468), which depicts the interior of the post office when it was at the Smithsonian. The
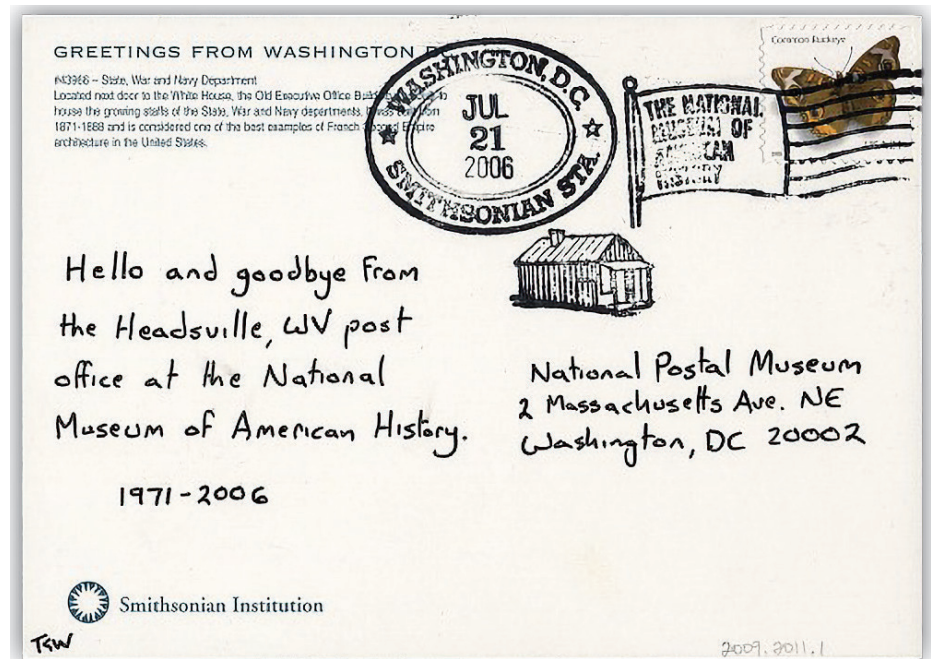

Figure 20. A last-day cover marking the closing of the Headsville Post Office at the Smithsonian on July 21, 2006. (Courtesy Smithsonian Institution Archives.)

cancellation has the oval postmark with "Opening/Hall of Stamps/and/the Mails" in the stripes of the flag.

The Smithsonian intended to keep the post office for only a short time, but it became so popular that it ended up keeping the exhibit for 35 years. In 2004, it was announced that the post office would be removed as part of a general renovation of the museum, and perhaps also because of the 1993 opening of the National Postal Museum.

The post office was closed on July 21, 2006, as shown on the last day cover in Figure 20. The National Museum of American History was closed for extensive renovations from September 2006 to November 2008.

The Smithsonian planned to warehouse the post office until the APS got involved. On September 20, 2006, the APS announced its proposal to relocate the post office from the

The Headsville Post Office Project
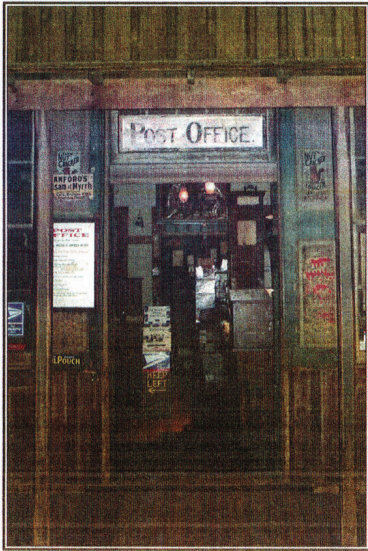
For the past thirty-five years the Headsville Post Office served as an exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, showcasing its dual role as a country store and rural mail center. This treasure from our nation's past is now the cornerstone of the next phase of the APS Ten-Year, $10 Million Campaign for Philately.

The APS has proposed relocating the nineteenth-century West Virginia post office and general store — which operated from the early 1860s until 1914
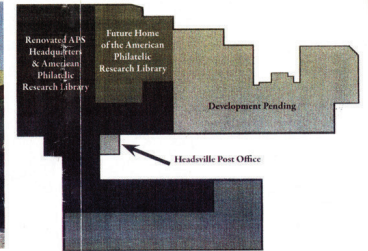
The building's interior as it was featured on the 1972 eight-cent stamp issued to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Mail Order Industry.

A cover commemorating the opening of the Headsville Post Office Exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History featured a drawing of the post office.

— to the American Philatelic Center in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania.

Sharp-eyed stamp collectors should find the building familiar — its interior was featured on the 1972 8-cent stamp issued to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Mail Order Industry. Many of the store's original fixtures -- letter sorting cases and cabinets, counters, tables, and etc. -- will also be on display in its new location.

Under the proposed relocation plan, the Headsville Post Office will find a new home just off an open-air patio in a structure specifically built to showcase the tiny building, as well as to preserve

Figure 21. Part of a brochure that the APS issued for the relocation of the post office from the Smithsonian to the American Philatelic Center.

Figure 22. A commemorative cover for the dedication of the Gordon and Mary Morison Pavilion signed by Stephen Reinhard, Peter Mastrangelo, Gordon Morison, and Janet Klug.

Smithsonian to the American Philatelic Center. Figure 21 shows the brochure that the APS issued for the project. The APS intended to build a special, climate-controlled pavilion to house the post office. The funding goal of the APS for the relocation was $350,000.

The post office was dismantled and the pieces were moved to the APC in late 2007 and early 2008.

The loan of the Headsville Post Office to the APS is a three-year renewable loan. The APS is required to send the Smithsonian regular reports of hourly temperature, humidity, and light readings, with photos.

One time, a photo in a report showed something inside the stove, which the APS had to investigate. It was found that the mystery object was just a piece of bubble-wrap left over from the move.

During Aerophilately 2007, held at the APC in October 2007, the new pavilion was dedicated. It was named the Gordon and Mary Morison Pavilion.

The commemorative cover shown in Figure 22 was signed by Stephen Reinhard, who is a judge of aerophilately and later had a term as president of the APS; Peter Mastrangelo, then APS executive director; Gordon Morison; and Janet Klug, immediate past president of the APS at the time.

Gordon Morison was a former assistant postmaster general and was very active in organized philately, including with the APS. His wife, Mary, was also a stamp collector and active in the stamp community. Figure 23 shows the program for the dedication of the Morison Pavilion.
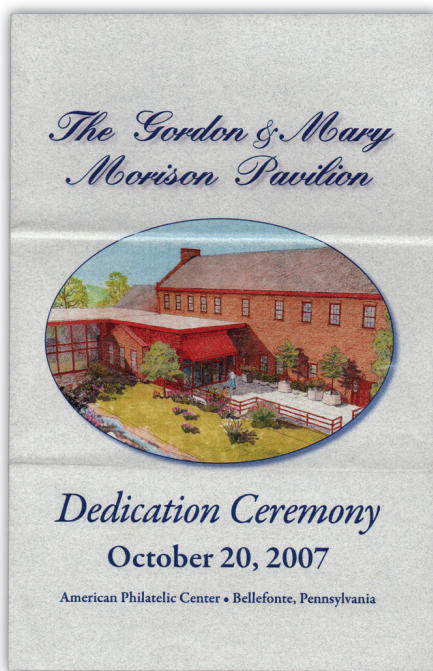
Figure 23. The program for the dedication of the Morison Pavilion.

Figure 24. Above, the Morison family prior to the dedication ceremony. Right, an image from the dedication ceremony with (from right) Postmaster General Benjamin Bailar, Gordon Morison, and Ken Martin. Instead of cutting a ribbon, they cut a coil of stamps.

Figure 25. A commemorative cover for the opening of the Headsville Post Office at the American Philatelic Center on March 3, 2008.

Among those at the dedication, as shown in the photo in Figure 24, were former Postmaster General Benjamin Bailar; Janet Klug; Charles J. Peterson, then Secretary of the American Philatelic Research Library; Gordon Morison; and Ken Martin, then Executive Director of the APS. Instead of cutting a ribbon, they cut a coil of stamps.

Construction of the pavilion and assembly of the post office was completed on February 8, 2008. As shown on the cover in Figure 25, the post office opened on March 3, 2008, with ZIP code of 16823. It opened as a contract postal unit.

According to the USPS website, a CPU is "a supplier-owned or supplier-leased site operated by the supplier, under contract to the Postal Service™ to provide postal products and services to the public at U.S. Postal Service prices."

Though the post office opened on March 3, the dedication ceremony was held on June 21, just before the 2008 APS Summer Seminar.

Today, visitors can see the Headsville Post Office at the APS during business hours (8:30 a.m.-5 p.m., Monday through Friday). Mail may be sent from the APC, which also sells current U.S. stamps and often has stamps that are not generally available in post offices, such as the Classics Forever stamps of 2016 (Scott U.S. 5079).

Over the years, the post office has been stocked with antiques, many loaned by employees of the APS. Sometimes the employees took their items with them when they left, so not all the antiques in these photos are still on display. Figure 26 shows the post office counter and a packing case that was used to mail eggs.

The Headsville Post Office has come a long way since its establishment in 1868, and it continues to educate and enthrall visitors today. Be sure to check it out during your next visit to the American Philatelic Center.

Acknowledgements

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Information and photos from Cindy Pyles, president of the Mineral County Historical Society; Ed McDonald, vice president of the Mineral County Historical Society; Dinah Courrier, Mineral County Museum coordinator; and Terry Beeseck, member of the Mineral County Historical Society.

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Milhoan, Patrick. "Neither Snow nor Rain: a West Virginia Post Office in the Smithsonian," Published September 13, 2016. Accessed July 15, 2023. https://siarchives.si.edu/blog/neither-snow-nor-rain-west-virginia-post-office-smithsonian

Figure 26. The counter at Headsville Post Office and a packing case that was used to mail eggs.