Stamped Cards and Postcards

Stamped cards, called *postal cards* prior to 1999, refer to mailing cards issued by the Postal Service with postage stamps imprinted on them. *Postcards* refer to privately printed and sold cards that require a stamp for mailing. In popular usage, the terms *postal card* and *postcard* (also spelled post card) were often used interchangeably.

Postal Cards First Issued in the United States in 1873

In October 1869, Austria became the first country to issue mailing cards imprinted with postage stamps, called postal cards.[1] Other European countries soon followed Austria in issuing postal cards, to overwhelming public response.

In November 1870, pointing to the success of postal cards in Europe, Postmaster General John Creswell recommended to Congress the issuance of a one-cent postal card in the United States. Creswell told Congress that there had long been a need for a "prompt and easy mode of communication by mail, adapted to the convenience and habits of business men, as well as of that large class of persons who have not the time or the inclination to write formal letters."[2]

In 1871, Representative John Hill of New Jersey introduced a bill in Congress authorizing postal cards, but approval was delayed, due in part to concerns about the privacy of messages. James Garfield, a representative from Ohio (and later, President), thought that open messages on cards would be too dangerous. By passing through so many hands, he thought that a postal card with a libelous message might "be a vehicle of great injury to the person to whom it was addressed."[3] Garfield warned a colleague that he might "find these postal cards coming back upon him like barbed arrows, from anybody who may wish to shoot at him."[4] Garfield, among others, wanted a postal card constructed with a cover or gummed flap to conceal the message.

After much debate, Congress left it to the Postmaster General to determine the proper form and size of the card. The Act of June 8, 1872, authorized the Postmaster General to issue postal cards for the "transmission … at a reduced rate of postage, of messages, orders, notices, and other short communications" on "good stiff paper, of such quality, form, and size, as he shall deem best adapted for general use."[5] Through an oversight, Congress did not simultaneously appropriate funds for their manufacture; this was rectified by the Act of January 8, 1873. Two weeks later, the Post Office Department advertised for bids, and on March 28 awarded the contract for postal card production to the lowest bidder, the Morgan Envelope Company of Springfield, Massachusetts. After a flurry of printing activity, the first postal cards were ready to be shipped to Post Offices in May.

The first postal cards went on sale in Springfield, Massachusetts, on May 12, 1873, and in other cities the next day. The card measured three inches by five and one-eighth inches and had a one-cent stamp impression ("indicium") in the upper right corner. The indicium bore a profile of the Goddess of Liberty surrounded by a lathe-work border, with the words "U.S. POSTAGE" above and "ONE CENT" below. The other side of the card, intended for the message, was entirely plain. The card was light buff in color, and the ink, brown. At a penny each, the cards cost only a third as much as the 3-cent stamp for a letter.[6]

The public responded enthusiastically. On May 14, 1873, the day after the first postal cards were issued in New York, *The New York Times* reported that the city's postal clerks sold 200,000 cards in two and a half hours. In their first week of issue, *The New York Times* tested the delivery of postal cards by directing reporters to mail twelve cards from and to various addresses in the city. Ten cards, mailed in the morning, were delivered the same day; two that were deposited in collection boxes after noon were delivered before noon on the next day.[7]

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[1] Postal cards were first proposed by a German postal official, Heinrich von Stephan, in 1865. Von Stephan proposed the idea chiefly "to dispense with the ridiculous length of titles, complimentary phrases, and mock servility of address, which, for some centuries, had encumbered German correspondence" (*The American Exchange and Review*, July 1875, 230-231). His idea was not adopted at that time; Germany issued its first postal cards in July 1870.

[2] *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1870, 32.

[3] *The Congressional Globe*, 2nd Session, 42nd Congress, April 9, 1872, 2301.

[4] Ibid. In 1881, in the first year of his Presidency, Garfield was shot by a disappointed office-seeker and died from his wounds.

[5] 17 Stat. 304.

[6] Because of their price, postal cards were often popularly called "penny postcards." Except for a 20-month period during World War I, postal cards cost only a penny to purchase and mail until January 1, 1952, when the price rose to 2 cents.

[7] *New York Times*, May 19, 1873, 8. Prior to 1950, city letter carriers commonly collected and delivered mail several times daily.

Nationwide, customers bought 31 million postal cards by June 30, 1873, and more than 64 million by the end of September. In October 1873, the publishers of *The Atlanta Constitution* announced that they could "furnish parties with postal cards in any quantity with their business circular or other matter printed on them."[8] Some businesses purchased cards by the thousands and had them preprinted with advertisements or fill-in-the-blank messages, simplifying communications with customers and colleagues. Banks mailed postal cards to customers, acknowledging deposits; libraries used them to send overdue book notices; and merchants and wholesalers used them to advertise prices. In 1875, more than 100 million postal cards were issued (see Table 1, "Number of Postal Cards Issued from 1875 to 1910," on this page).

Postal cards were popular with individuals as well — some critics thought they were *too* popular. In 1903, a writer for the *Baltimore Sun* lamented that "there are people who would write anything on a 'postal,' from a recipe for fruit cake to the last quarrel that they had with their husbands."[9] In 1911, Elizabeth Van Rensselaer, etiquette columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*, advised: "As a general rule, a postal card should not be used except for business purposes. … If it is an absolute necessity to send one to a friend … the sentences should be short. … all personal messages should be omitted."[10]

The annual number of postal cards mailed peaked in 1950 at more than 3.4 billion. They remained more popular than postcards until the mid-1960s. (See Table 2, "Number of Postal Cards and Postcards sent Via First-Class Mail, 1930 to 1995," on page 4.)

On May 4, 1956, the Post Office Department issued a postal card with an indicium that was novel in two ways — it was bi-colored, and did not feature a human portrait. This unique card, which was first issued at the Fifth International Philatelic Exhibition, had an indicium featuring the torch and arm of the Statue of Liberty in a triangular carmine red frame with violet blue writing.

Ten years later, on May 27, 1966, the Department issued its first postal card with illustrations on the back (address) side at the Sixth International Philatelic Exhibition. This 11-cent international postal card featured the phrase "Visit the USA" in the indicium and four American scenes on the left side of the back.

On July 29, 1972, the Postal Service issued its first postal cards with pictures on the front. Each of the five cards in the *Tourism Year of the Americas* — '72 postal card set featured scenes of five U.S. tourist attractions — four on the front and a fifth in the indicium on the other side.

In 1989, the Postal Service issued its first glossy picture postal cards with the release of two cards celebrating two Washington, D.C., landmarks: the White House (on November 30) and the Jefferson Memorial (on December 2). The limited edition cards were priced at 50 cents, including the cost of postage, and were sold mainly in the Washington area. Five years later, on October 18, 1994, the first postal card sets featuring collectible artwork were issued. These were sold in packets or booklets of 10 to 20 cards and were imprinted with postage and matching designs; the first issue featured the *Legends of the West* stamp images.
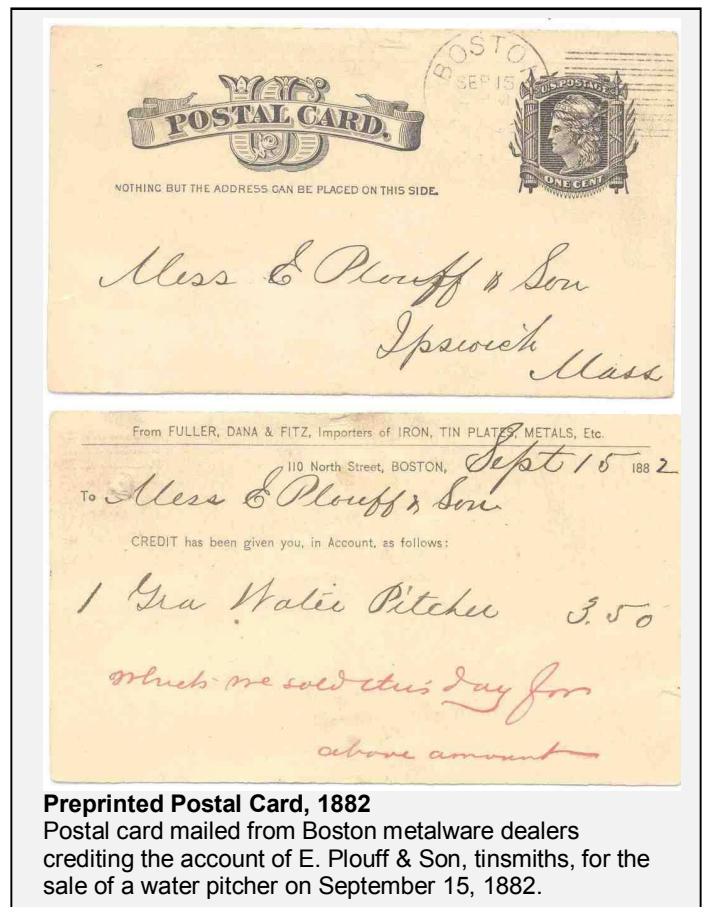
Preprinted Postal Card, 1882
Postal card mailed from Boston metalware dealers crediting the account of E. Plouff & Son, tinsmiths, for the sale of a water pitcher on September 15, 1882.

Table 1: Number of Postal Cards Issued from 1875 to 1910	
Year	Number Issued
1875	107,616,000
1880	272,550,500
1885	339,416,500
1890	429,515,350
1895	492,305,550
1900	587,815,250
1905	728,584,550
1910	726,441,000
Source: *Annual Report of the Postmaster General* for listed years	

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8 *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 2, 1873, 3.
9 Reprinted in *Boston Daily Globe*, June 18, 1903, 8.
10 *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 8, 1911, F5.

On January 10, 1999, the Postal Service changed the term for postal cards to "stamped cards" and increased their price to one cent more than the postage rate in order to pay for the paper and printing of the card. The additional charge increased to two cents on January 7, 2001, and later rose higher.[11] In 2007, the term for stamped cards with collectible artwork was changed to "premium stamped cards."

Privately Printed Postcards in Use by 1870, But Charged Letter Rate until 1898

In 1861, John P. Charlton of Philadelphia obtained a copyright on a privately manufactured postcard, which he transferred to Hymen L. Lipman, a fellow stationer in Philadelphia. The earliest known "Lipman Postal Card" was postmarked October 25, 1870, and required letter-rate postage.[12] Few mailed examples of these cards are known. Lipman tried but failed to patent his card — several other stationers are known to have sold postcards in the early 1870s.[13]

In 1893, souvenir postal cards featuring views of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago were sold at the exposition, from May through October 1893. Several publishers printed and sold these souvenir cards, which are considered to be forerunners of the picture postcard. Views of the exposition were printed on the message side of one-cent government-issued postal cards, and also on plain card stock.

Souvenir cards were also issued at other expositions in the 1890s, including at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta in 1895. In Atlanta, all the cards were printed on plain card stock. Many people incorrectly assumed that these souvenir postcards required the same one-cent postage as government-issued postal cards and mailed them with one-cent stamps. At the time, the minimum letter rate — which applied to postcards — was two cents. The *Atlanta Constitution* tried to set the record straight: "IT TAKES TWO CENTS," began a headline on September 20, 1895, and "NOT POSTAL CARDS: Uncle Sam Has Been Greatly Annoyed," began another on October 12.[14]

Relief for mailers and Post Offices alike came on May 19, 1898, when Congress approved a special one-cent rate for postcards — the same rate in effect for postal cards — beginning July 1, 1898. As privately-printed postcards became more and more popular, the Department issued more one-cent stamps to keep pace. Between 1900 and 1903, the number of one-cent stamps issued by the Department increased by nearly 43 percent, from 965,632,600 to 1,377,294,800.

The Postcard Craze, 1905-1915

The first two decades of the 1900s are considered to be the golden age of postcards. The craze for sending and collecting postcards began in Europe in the 1890s and soon infected the United States. An article in the November 1, 1903, issue of the *San Francisco Call* noted that the fad was "spreading fast in this country." A confluence of events created perfect conditions in the United States for the spread of "postcarditis," as some journalists called the craze. First and foremost among the contributing factors was the Post Office Department's

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[11] See "Rates for Stamped Cards and Postcards," at http://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/rates-historical-statistics.htm, for a complete fee history.

[12] On February 27, 1861, Congress passed a law which allowed for the mailing of blank or printed cards in packages weighing at least eight ounces but not more than four pounds, at the rate of one cent per ounce or fraction thereof (12 Stat. 169). The law was worded unclearly, leading some readers to conclude that it embraced the mailing of single cards. Section 13 of the law read: "*And be it further enacted*, That cards, blank or printed, blanks in packages weighing at least eight ounces, and seeds or cuttings, in packages not exceeding eight ounces in weight, shall also be deemed mailable matter …" Before its passage, Postmaster General Joseph Holt explained that the intent of the legislation was to apply the rate of one cent per ounce to "cards, blank or printed, when put up in packages of at least eight ounces" (*Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1860, 33). After the law's passage, the editor of the monthly newspaper the *United States Mail and Post-Office Assistant* revised the text of section 13, for clarity, when informing Postmasters of the new law: "The following sections [of law] … are now in force, and all postmasters should see that they are duly observed: … Sec. 13. *And be it further enacted*, That cards, blank or printed, in packages weighing at least eight ounces … shall also be deemed mailable matter" [*United States Mail and Post-Office Assistant*, May 1861, page 31, Volume 1, of the two-volume reprint (Chicago, IL: Collectors Club of Chicago, 1975); James Holbrook, the publisher, was a special agent of the Post Office Department who began publishing this monthly newspaper in October 1860, largely to educate Postmasters on postal policy and regulations].

[13] See Charles A. Fricke, *A Contemporary Account of the First United States Postal Card, 1873 – 1973, Volume 2 … 1870 to 1875* (Philadelphia, PA: self-published, 1973).

[14] In 1883, the cost to mail a letter was reduced from three cents to two cents and remained so until 1932, except for a twenty-month period during World War I. See "Rates for Domestic Letters Since 1863," at http://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/rates-historical-statistics.htm.

creation of a national network of daily, free home delivery of mail.

The Department first experimented with home delivery of mail in the countryside — called "rural free delivery" or RFD — in 1896. Rural delivery brought mail directly to farms; before, farmers had to make lengthy, periodic trips into town to pick up their mail. Rural delivery was enormously popular and was made a permanent service in 1902. The delivery network grew rapidly, with the number of rural carriers skyrocketing from fewer than 500 in 1899, to more than 32,000 in 1905. In 1909, Fourth Assistant Postmaster General Peter DeGraw noted that rural delivery "enlarged the amount of mails handled," calling particular attention to "the enormous use of souvenir or picture post cards."[15] The peak growth years of rural delivery — 1901 to 1909 — coincided with the postcard craze.[16]

Women especially benefited from rural delivery and contributed to the growing popularity of postcards.[17] A study of early 20th century postcards found that women sent three times as many as men and received four times as many.[18] Many of the cards sent were holiday postcards, which emerged around 1903 and soon became so popular that Post Offices struggled to keep up with delivery.[19] On February 14, 1907, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that "the valentine mail … is the greatest in the history of the local post office," with one-third consisting of "pictorial postal cards bearing cupids, hearts, flowers, and lovely maidens." On March 31, 1907, the *New York Times* reported on a "perfect flood of Easter mail," stating that "all records … have been broken, and the flood was still on last night."

Postcards were also embraced by travelers and tourists. In the summer of 1908, the *Washington Post* reported that postcards were "daily received by home-staying government employees from fellow clerks who have gone on vacations to cooler climes."[20] Arctic scenes were popular, including "cards portraying polar bears calmly riding through cool waters on the top of giant icebergs."[21]

Developments in photography added to the postcard craze. In 1902, Kodak began marketing paper for printing postcards and in 1903 the company began making an easy-to-use folding camera that created postcard-size negatives for printing directly onto postcard paper.[22]

courtesy Library of Congress
Postcard Stand, New Orleans, 1908
A news dealer in New Orleans advertised postcards at 3 for 5 cents or 15 cents for a dozen in 1908.

Table 2: Number of Postal Cards and Postcards sent Via First-Class Mail, 1930 to 1995

Year	Postal Cards	Postcards
1930	1,325,000,000	298,000,000
1935	1,495,000,000	295,000,000
1940	1,953,000,000	525,000,000
1945	2,093,000,000	612,000,000
1950	3,438,000,000	976,000,000
1955	2,120,000,000	1,163,000,000
1960	1,502,000,000	1,140,000,000
1965	1,095,000,000	1,284,000,000
1970	798,483,000	1,569,263,000
1975	488,367,000	1,627,228,000
1980	334,384,000	1,488,934,000
1985	347,819,000	2,007,984,000
1990	482,812,000	2,824,264,000
1995	440,529,000	2,576,651,000

<u>Sources</u>: POD *Cost Ascertainment Report* (annually to 1968) and *Revenue and Cost Analysis* (1969 and 1970); USPS *Cost and Revenue Analysis* (annually since 1971, exact title varied)

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[15] *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1909, 352.

[16] The 1950 *Annual Report of the Postmaster General* included a chart showing the growth in the number of rural routes from 1897 to 1950 (177-178). From 1901 to 1909, 1,351 to 9,447 new routes were added annually. In every other year no more than 850 routes were established.

[17] In 1909, one customer claimed that in his community, rural delivery had "cut down the cases of suicide and insanity among farmers' wives fully 50 percent ("Rural Delivery of Mail Now Costs Uncle Sam $120,000 a Day," *The Boston Sunday Globe*, December 5, 1909; SM3).

[18] Robert Bogdan and Todd Weseloh, *Real Photo Postcard Guide* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 5. See also Daniel Gifford, *American Holiday Postcards, 1905-1915* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2013), 193-195.

[19] See Gifford for a history of holiday postcards.

[20] *The Washington Post*, August 16, 1908, 12.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Bogdan and Weseloh, 17-18.

Postcards with views of local scenes soon popped up in drugstores, newsstands and other shops. In 1908, one postcard manufacturer noted that "a few years ago picture postal cards were on sale in about 100 stores and shops in the United States; to-day they may be had in 80,000 different places."[23]

In addition to domestically produced postcards, the American market was flooded with imports from Europe. During the height of the craze, most postcards sold in the United States were made in Germany. In 1908, one American manufacturer complained that "the view post cards on sale at the principal hotels and news stands of Washington … [are all] stamped on the back 'Made in Germany'."[24] In 1909, Congress increased import duties on foreign-made postcards, largely to protect American manufacturers from cheaper German imports.

The postcard craze peaked around 1910.[25] Some historians credit the 1909 tariff act and World War I — which interrupted the flow of high-quality, low-cost imported cards — with ending the fad, but it may also be that the fad had simply run its course. Shortly after RFD connected the nation, telephone lines began crisscrossing America, offering an alternative form of quick communication.[26] More recently, the rise of email and other digital media has coincided with declines in the number of cards mailed.[27]

Although stamped cards and postcards no longer dominate the American cultural landscape, they continue to play an important role in American life. In 2013, nearly 3.5 billion stamped cards and postcards were mailed, many by businesses advertising products, services, special offers and events.[28]

For a history of postage rates, see "Rates for Stamped Cards and Postcards" at http://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/rates-historical-statistics.htm.

Deltiology: The Study and Collection of Postcards
(from Greek *deltion*, small writing tablet, and English *–logy*, the study of)

Although postcard collecting, called "deltiology," is no longer a national craze like it was in the early 1900s, in recent years it has become more popular. Virtual communities and online auction sites powered by the Internet, enabling the easy exchange of information, ideas, and objects, have helped renew interest in the hobby. Postcards are valued both for the images and messages they contain, and for the stamps and postmarks which forever mark their place in time.

Collectors often categorize postcards both by type — for example, view cards, holiday cards, and art cards — and time period, generally defined as shown below.

"Private Mailing Card" Era, 1898-1901	The Act of May 19, 1898, authorizing a special postage rate for postcards, required that the words "Private Mailing Card" appear on the address side.
"Post Card" Era, 1902-1907	On December 24, 1901, the Postmaster General ordered that "Post Card" be printed on postcards in lieu of "Private Mailing Card," although previously-issued cards bearing the earlier phrase could still be mailed.
Divided Back Era, 1907-1914	Until March 1, 1907, postal regulations prohibited written messages on the address side of postcards. The period before 1907 is sometimes called the "undivided back" era.
White Border Era, 1915-1930	During this period, printers often left a white border around the entire postcard image.
Linen Era, 1930-1944	Postcards were often printed with colorful ink, with or without a border, on paper with a linen-like texture.
Photochrome Era, 1945-to date	Photochrome postcards have a shiny finish and photographic images.

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[23] Edw. H. Mitchell, *Tariff Hearings Before the Committee on Ways and Means of the House of Representatives, 60th Congress, 1908-1909*, Vol. VI (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1909), 6170.

[24] H. M. Rose, Ibid., 6227-6228.

[25] Gifford, 22, 37; Roger L. Welsch, *Tall-Tale Postcards: A Pictorial History* (Cranbury, NJ: A. S. Barnes and Co., Inc., 1976), 14-15.

[26] See Gifford, 82-85 and 177-179, for a discussion of the substitution of telephone calls for postcards, especially in rural areas.

[27] Between 2000 and 2010, internet usage by U.S. households nearly doubled, from about 41 to 80 percent. At the same time, the number of postal cards and postcards mailed by individuals annually decreased by nearly half, from 2.7 to 1.4 billion.

[28] See "Number of Stamped Cards and Postcards Sent via First-Class Mail Since 1926," at http://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/rates-historical-statistics.htm.
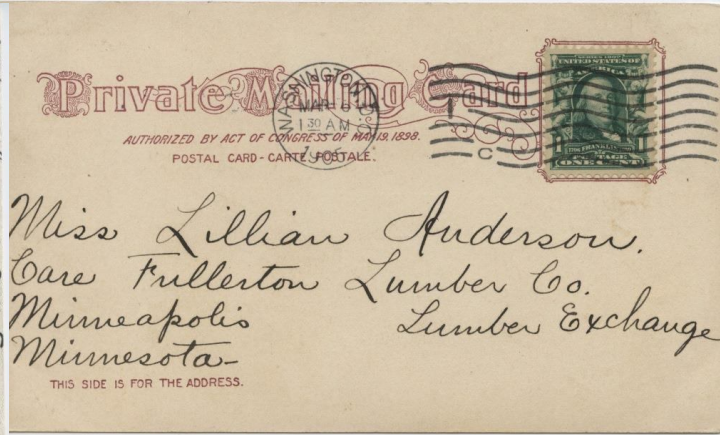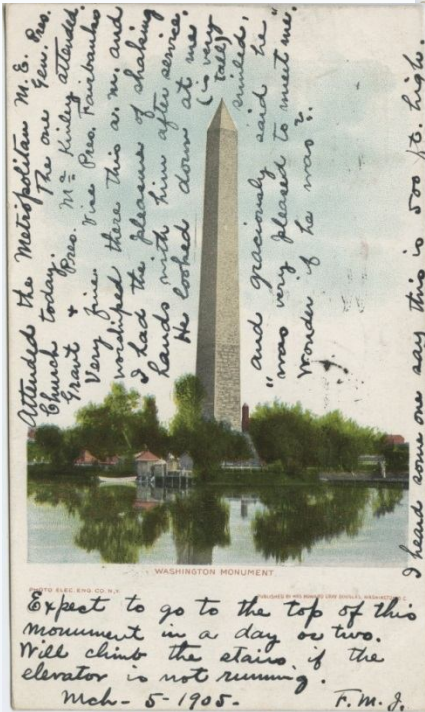
View "Private Mailing Card" with Undivided Back, Mailed 1905

Holiday Postcard with Undivided Back, Mailed 1907

The Three of Us Have Pants.

Comic Postcard with Divided Back, Mailed 1910

Real Photo Postcard, Mailed 1906

Leather Postcard, Mailed 1906
Leather postcards, popular from about 1905 to 1910, could be mailed as merchandise at the rate of one cent per two ounces. If any messages were written on them, they were charged the more expensive letter rate. Holes were punched in this card to facilitate sewing – some young ladies liked to collect and sew leather postcards into seat cushions and other items.

Tall-Tale Postcard, circa 1909
Tall-tale postcards became popular around 1907. Photographers used a technique called "photomontage" to create fantastical arrangements, photographing objects separately at different scales, then cutting and pasting elements together and re-photographing imagined scenes, such as farmers with oversized harvests and hunters dwarfed by game.

courtesy Library of Congress