

The Winton M. Blount Postal History Symposia

Select Papers, 2010–2011

Edited by
Thomas Lera



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ABSTRACT

Lera, Thomas. The Winton M. Blount Postal History Symposia: Select Papers, 2010–2011. *Smithsonian Contributions to History and Technology*, number 56, viii + 134 pages, 126 figures, 9 tables, 2012.—Rarely do scholars of postal organizations and systems meet and discuss their ideas and research with scholars of philately. In an attempt to bridge this gap, the National Postal Museum and the American Philatelic Society hosted the first Winton M. Blount Postal History symposium on 3–4 November 2006 to bring together these two research groups to discuss postal history. This publication covers the next two symposia. The 2010 theme was “Stamps and the Mail: Images, Icons and Identity.” Stamps, as official government documents, can be treated as primary resources designed to convey specific political and esthetic messages. Other topics and themes for the symposium were stamp design’s influence on advertising envelopes and bulk mailings, censorship of stamps as propaganda as used on letters, and the role of the Citizens’ Stamp Advisory Committee or organizations that generate the designs. The 2011 symposium was held at the American Philatelic Center in conjunction with the United States Stamp Society’s annual meeting. The United States Stamp Society is the preeminent organization devoted to the study of U.S. stamps. It is a nonprofit, volunteer-run association of collectors to promote the study of the philatelic output of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing and of postage and revenue stamped paper produced by others for use in the United States and U.S. administered areas. The theme of the symposium was “How Commerce and Industry Shaped the Mails.”

Cover images, from left to right: Banking and commerce issue, 1975 (from the Smithsonian National Postal Museum Collection, 1985.0482.20067); Figure 4 from Rufe, “‘Live Chicks’ Require First Class Treatment”; and manufacturing steel plant parcel post issue, 1913 (from the Smithsonian National Postal Museum Collection, 2005.2001.289).

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Debating Identity and Origins with Early Twentieth-Century American Commemoratives

Sheila A. Brennan

Patriotic commemorations flowered following World War I in the United States, as did campaigns for securing limited-issue federal postage stamps. Beginning in 1920 with the Pilgrim Tercentenary issue, commemorative stamp subjects were moving away from solely advertising world's fairs as the U.S. Post Office Department (USPOD) celebrated battles, anniversaries, and individuals that were part of greater cultural trends that sought to define Americanness in post-World War I America. Because of the accessibility of American commemoratives, both in size and through imagery, these stamps served to reinforce and naturalize an exceptionalist and triumphalist vision of the American past that obscured the complicated legacies of conquest and inequality.

This paper will examine imagery from a few commemorative stamps from the interwar years and the circumstances of their printing that celebrated regional anniversaries held in Plymouth Rock, Mayport, and Minneapolis, as well as stamps honoring Polish military heroes Casimir Pulaski and Theodore Kosciuszko. Conversations revolving around these stamps, in correspondence or in the public media, demonstrate how the USPOD became a powerful institution that legitimized and distributed historical narratives and one that allowed ordinary citizens to engage with its government. Knowing of the postal service's power to circulate interpretations of the American past to millions of people, some citizens sought commemoratives as part of grander strategies fighting for social and political equality while others wanted stamps to perpetuate a romanticized view of colonial America. These debates over commemorative subjects reflected contemporary struggles over immigration restrictions, constructions of race, and definitions of citizenship in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s.

PILGRIMS AND ORIGINS

During the interwar years, attempts to craft the unique history of America's origins, particularly in nostalgic ways, were displayed through regional anniversaries that wove local events and people into official national narratives. Some of those stories were showcased on commemorative stamps.¹ For the Pilgrim Tercentennial celebration in 1920, poems and speeches glorified the legacy of the Massachusetts Pilgrims as nation builders and model immigrants. Plymouth was proclaimed to be the "corner stone of the Nation," and Vice President Thomas Marshall touted the achievements of the "pilgrim fathers" who "prepared the way" for "the birth of a new and mighty world." He used

Sheila A. Brennan, Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, MS 1E7, Fairfax, Virginia 22030, USA. Correspondence: sbrennan@gmu.edu. Manuscript received 27 March 2012; accepted 7 May 2012.



FIGURE 1. Pilgrim Tercentenary, 1¢, 1920. From the Smithsonian National Postal Museum Collection, Accession Number 1980.2493.6627.

the opportunity to argue for immigration restrictions, advocating that immigrants needed to follow the example set by the Pilgrims and commit to staying in United States rather than merely coming to work and returning home. According to Marshall, the Pilgrims came to America “to worship God and to make homes, determined never to return to Europe.”² Politicians and patriotic-hereditary groups used a perceived legacy of the Plymouth Pilgrims in the early twentieth century not only to assert the primacy of Plymouth as America’s birth place but also to speak to local and national concerns over immigration and labor.

This legacy was represented in the Pilgrim Tercentenary stamp series (Figure 1). Interestingly, the USPOD seemed so convinced that the world associated the story of the Pilgrims’ landing at Plymouth as quintessentially American that none of the three postage stamps printed in the series contained the identifying words “U.S. Postage,” which all other stamps prior and since carried. Even the U.S. Mint’s commemorative anniversary coin imprinted the words “United States of America” on the front of the half-dollar coin.³

Mayflowers, fittingly, flanked each stamp’s scene, and like the Columbians, the Pilgrim Tercentenary series formed a short narrative. The story began on the 1¢ stamp with the *Mayflower* appearing to sail west across the ocean on its journey, with the ship pointing to the left, with no land in sight—origin or destination. Similar to the Columbians, the landing occurs in the 2¢ stamp (Figure 2), which was the most commonly used because it was the standard rate of first-class postage from 1883 to 1932.⁴

This stamp’s engraving makes the landing look harsh, unexpected, and jolting for the party at Plymouth Rock. Although this image suggests that struggles lie ahead for the settlers, the rock is what grounded the travelers and is the object that grounded those celebrating the anniversary in the past. Plymouth was the ceremonial ground in 1920 and provided the physical connection to the past events. The journey’s symbolic end revealed itself in the 5¢, where the Mayflower Compact was signed, indicating political agreement, permanence, and divine right and blessing of their settlement as the central figure pointed toward the light



FIGURE 2. Pilgrim Tercentenary, 2¢, 1920. From the Smithsonian National Postal Museum Collection, Accession Number 1980.2493.6629.



FIGURE 3. Pilgrim Tercentenary, 5¢, 1920. From the Smithsonian National Postal Museum Collection, Accession Number 1980.2493.6633.

illuminating the signing (Figure 3). On the basis of a painting by Edwin White, the signing image illustrates families migrating together even though only men signed the document.⁵

The scene emphasizes that a community comprised of family units crafted the Mayflower Compact and pledged to work together. New England preservationists and genealogists argued that the Pilgrims were the true first Americans because family units arrived together to form a permanent settlement, unlike the commercially minded immigrants to Jamestown. By representing this scene, the tercentennial committee reiterated their argument and wanted all Americans to distinguish Plymouth as the birthplace of the America.

Placing Plymouth Rock at the center of the national American narrative was attacked by historians and angered heritage and preservation groups who desperately wanted to pull the Pilgrims down from their pedestal to broaden the story of European settlement in the New World. For many years, Virginians and New Englanders argued over where the American story truly began, Plymouth or Jamestown; a debate imbued with strong regional pride left over from the Civil War.⁶

In celebrating the founding of New York in 1924, the Huguenot-Walloon New Netherland Commission petitioned for

a commemorative stamp series as part of their mission to share the story of their ancestors with the entire United States. The commission wrote that the Walloons were pilgrims too and their story was “wonderful and romantic, and all Americans should know it.” Apparently the commission understood what they were up against in trying to educate Americans about their history because a few collectors wrote to the postmaster general puzzled by the printing of that series and inquired about the significance of those events. One collector begged for a short bibliography because “all of the histories I have at hand seem to be a bit deficient in matters relating to the events these stamps commemorate.”⁷

Collectors and citizens occasionally questioned the standard of “national significance” when they did not recognize subjects depicted on stamps. U.S. Post Office Department officials justified this choice by writing that the Huguenot-Walloon anniversary was “of more than ordinary interest particularly in those sections of the country where these colonists originally settled” (Figures 4 and 5), criteria that may have justified other commemorative choices in during the 1920s.⁸ In the case of these issues, the series contained no readily identifiable images and none were labeled. The *Nieu Nederland* sailed in 1624 east toward America in the 1¢ issue, and families landed in what became New York in the 2¢. The last stamp in the series is even more cryptic, with



FIGURE 4. Huguenot-Walloon Tercentenary, 1¢, 1924. From the Smithsonian National Postal Museum Collection, Accession Number 1980.2493.2359.



FIGURE 5. Huguenot-Walloon Tercentenary, 2¢, 1924. From the Smithsonian National Postal Museum Collection, Accession Number 1980.2493.2361.



FIGURE 6. Huguenot-Walloon Tercentenary, 5¢, 1924. From the Smithsonian National Postal Museum Collection, Accession Number 1980.2493.2363.

an unidentified monument facing a rising sun with palm trees and plants surrounding it that are not similar to the landscape pictured in the 2¢ settlement stamp.

The 5¢ denomination actually represents a stone monument erected by Jean Ribault, who explored the area near Mayport, Florida, in the 1560s to establish a refuge colony for French Huguenots (Figure 6). Before returning to France to pick up passengers for the trip back to Florida, Ribault erected a stone column festooned with the French king’s coat of arms to claim Florida in the name of France. As part of the Huguenot-Walloon anniversary in 1924, the Florida Daughters of the American Revolution chapters financed the building of a similarly shaped monument to honor Ribault and the “first landing of Protestants on American soil.”⁹

The Huguenot-Walloon Tercentenary Committee very specifically wanted the memorial commemorating Jean Ribault’s settlement to be pictured on a stamp to challenge the idea that the Pilgrims of Plymouth were the first and only Protestants to sail to America in search of religious freedom who helped to build a nation. Celebrating white settlers’ Protestant beliefs on stamps may have been yet another way that native-born Protestants clung to an idealized and fictional vision of a harmonious and homogenous American past. This vision saw immigrant radicals, Jews, and Catholics as threats and foreign to mainstream American culture. Battles over immigration, public education, and prohibition, for example, often divided the population along religious lines.¹⁰ Defining the United States as a Christian Protestant nation helped those remembering these early settlements to deal with an uncomfortably heterogeneous population of the 1920s. Ancestors of Huguenots and Walloons desired stamps to commemorate their contributions to early America stemming from regional, religious, and ethnic-racial pride as they staked their ground in New York City as the region’s original immigrants. By earning a series of stamps, the federal government appeared to endorse this interpretation.

The Norse-American Centenary stamp series provides another example of how the government endorsed a narrative of ethnic pride proposed by a regional commemorative committee. Similar to the Huguenot-Walloon celebration, this was a regional

anniversary with an organizing committee that petitioned for a commemorative as one piece of a larger festival honoring first waves of immigrants. A congressional joint resolution commended Norwegian immigrants who contributed to the “moral and material welfare of our Nation” and were credited with settling the “great Midwest,” rather than piling into cities like contemporary immigrants.¹¹ Imagery and narratives presented by the centennial committee sought to unite Norwegians in America to a heroic past, one that could be traced to Vikings such as Leif Erikson, whose arrival in the New World predated Columbus and the Pilgrims. The committee balanced asserting their differences as Norwegians while also claiming their right to be a part of the dominant official narrative of the American past.¹²

Again, this series of stamps emphasized immigration and a journey across the Atlantic that asserted that all of these groups were early immigrants and distinguished their stories of migration from those of new immigrants arriving in the United States in the early twentieth century (Figures 7 and 8). The 2¢, *Restaurationen*, shows the ship carrying the first Norwegian



FIGURE 7. Norse-American Centennial, 2¢, 1925. From the Smithsonian National Postal Museum Collection, Accession Number 1980.2493.2370.



FIGURE 8. Norse-American Centennial, 5¢, 1925. From the Smithsonian National Postal Museum Collection, Accession Number 1980.2493.2372.

immigrants, sailing west without land in site toward the United States in 1825. The second stamp does not represent the landing, but rather, the 5¢ issue featured an engraving of a Viking ship built for the Columbian Exposition. That ship sailed from Norway to Chicago to remind fairgoers and stamp consumers in the 1920s that Norwegian explorers had visited America long before Columbus, the English-Dutch Pilgrims, the Huguenots, or the Walloons. This particular image pointed the ship’s bow toward the east, or toward the homeland, yet on the stamp itself the Viking ship sails from a banner or shield of Norway toward one of the United States. The Norse-American Viking ship is flying colors similar to an American flag.

These stamps were in high demand from collectors because of the design and intensity of the ink colors, and collectors asked the USPOD to reprint these issues. Postal officials regretted that they had to treat all commemoratives consistently and could not reprint this series alone because they would hear protests from other groups claiming the Norwegians received preferential treatment.¹³ In this case, the USPOD understood that the subject matter represented on the stamp held great meaning for petitioners—past and future—and citizens. Postal officials were careful to balance the sensitivities of commemorative scenes chosen with interests of some collectors who focused more on the attractiveness and particulars of stamps’ designs. Regional anniversary committees took advantage of the opportunities available from the USPOD’s commemorative stamp program to legitimize their interpretation of the past and to insure that the founding stories of their ancestors were included in the broader story of America’s origins.

The timing of these commemorations spoke directly to the contemporary fights over immigration. Legislation in 1921 and 1924 established eugenically minded quotas developed by Congress to shape the racial biology of future American citizens. The Johnson-Reed Act (1924) drastically reduced the number of immigrating Poles, Greeks, Italians, and Russians entering the United States and completely eliminated immigration from Asia.¹⁴ It was not coincidental that these regional anniversary stamps also reinforced the idea that the United States was founded by white Protestant western Europeans and that the future national racial and ethnic salad bowl should aspire to achieve that ideal from the past.

HEROES FROM POLAND

Soon after Johnson-Reed, Polish Americans and immigrants petitioned the USPOD to honor two Polish Revolutionary War heroes on stamps as part of a larger strategy to portray Polish Americans as good Americans with ancestral ties to the birth of the United States as a nation. Efforts began in the early twentieth century to recognize the contributions of Count Casimir Pulaski and General Thaddeus Kosciuszko with statues and postage memorials. In 1910, monuments honoring both men were dedicated in Washington, Pulaski’s financed by Congress and Kosciuszko’s donated to “the people” by the Polish American Alliance.¹⁵

Pulaski was a Polish nobleman who volunteered to fight for the colonies and has been called the Father of the American Cavalry. He fought and died at the Battle of Savannah in 1779, and the city honored him as a local hero. To further extend Pulaski's reputation as a national hero, the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution spearheaded a stamp campaign in 1929. Honoring Pulaski as a war hero was not in question when President Herbert Hoover declared 11 October 1929 as Pulaski Day, yet no stamp came.¹⁶ Hoover and Congress acknowledged Pulaski as a national hero, but earning a commemorative stamp proved more difficult.

Surprisingly, strong rebukes came from a Polish newspaper the following year that may have influenced the government's decision to print a Pulaski commemorative. The paper accused U.S. postal authorities of using a double standard when choosing whom to honor on stamps, using the headline "Polish Proposition Refused—Germans Favored." According to this paper's editor, the USPOD honored a German Revolutionary War hero, Baron Frederic Wilhelm von Steuben, on a stamp but refused to reciprocate for a Polish Pulaski.¹⁷ French newspaper editors even decried the choice of a von Steuben stamp. They did not seek a Pulaski stamp, but rather sought recognition for French military officers who fought for independence, such as Lafayette and Rochambeau. Missing from the correspondence file were panicky or angry letters from government officials strongly urging the postmaster general announce a Pulaski stamp quickly.¹⁸ The world noticed when a government printed new stamps, making choosing and issuing commemorative stamps a challenging cultural and political task for postal officials. A few months later, nearly fifteen months after the Savannah anniversary celebration, a Pulaski issue was announced.

Even noncollecting Americans noticed new stamps and questioned the reasoning behind postal decisions. Present in the files was an angry letter from an American who asked why the USPOD honored Pulaski with a stamp and did not chose an American soldier. She spoke of her fears surrounding immigration held by many fellow citizens. Mrs. M. A. Van Wagner criticized Polish immigrants for coming to the United States only to "get employment here and take our American dollars back to Poland" while others remained unemployed (presumably she meant native-born citizens) in the early years of the Great Depression. For Van Wagner, the Pulaski stamp signified another way that America had been "forgnised," similar to the gangs of foreigners who were responsible for importing "poison" liquor during Prohibition.¹⁹ Her letter stands alone in the Pulaski file as one of protest, but her emotional reaction to this stamp reflects real sentiments felt by some Americans in the interwar period not only toward eastern European immigrants but also in the power she felt stamps possessed in representing, or perhaps misrepresenting in this case, an official narrative of the United States. Stamps may have been small, but their images were powerful.

Concurrent to the Pulaski stamp campaign, petitions arrived at the USPOD seeking a stamp to honor another Polish Revolutionary War hero, Thaddeus Kosciuszko. At the time of his death in 1817, Poles and Americans mourned his legacy as a

war hero and his commitment to fighting for liberty worldwide. His legacy continued on in the form of monuments and celebrations dedicated in his honor.²⁰ Among those commemorative efforts was one to immortalize his legacy on a postage stamp that would reach across the United States and abroad to his homeland, Poland. The Kosciuszko Foundation first petitioned the postmaster general in 1926, by way of New York Senator Royal S. Copeland, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the general's "coming" to the colonies.²¹

After those attempts failed, queries were reshaped, and the foundation asked for a stamp that would instead honor the 150th anniversary of his "naturalization as an American citizen."²² From 1931 to 1933, hundreds of endorsement letters arrived in the office of the postmaster general supporting this stamp, amounting to a greater volume than the support for Pulaski's stamp just a few years earlier. Seven years after the first requests, Postmaster Farley fittingly chose to announce the Kosciuszko issue on Polish Day at the Century of Progress World's Fair in Chicago. Farley claimed that he was "happy to convey (his) highest regard for the American citizens of Polish extraction" and declared that Kosciuszko's name would be "forever perpetuated in the hearts of American people."²³

Citizenship was a key element in pitching the stamp, which then was reflected in the announcements printed in newspapers. Kosciuszko's "admission to American citizenship" and the "privilege of becoming a citizen" were celebrated alongside his military service. Much like Farley, who paid homage to Polish citizens, other reactions to the issue emphasized that the general's legacy on a stamp "honors not only the man himself, but his countrymen who have come by the hundreds of thousands to the country he helped to establish as a land of liberty for all men."²⁴ Whether Kosciuszko actually became an American citizen was not questioned at the time, but the stamp offered a strong symbolic gesture and honor for all people with Polish heritage as bestowed upon them by the government. They were nation builders, too.

Choosing to honor Kosciuszko's "naturalization" proves to be a curious claim made by the foundation. There appears to be no documentary evidence to support the claim that he became an American citizen, even though he was held in high regard and called a friend by George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and other Revolutionary War era notable figures. After the war, Kosciuszko haggled with the new Congress, like other soldiers, to be paid back wages for his service in the Continental Army. He earned membership in the Society of the Cincinnati, which was limited to military officers who served during the Revolution. Kosciuszko returned to his native Poland to fight, unsuccessfully, against Russian occupation and oppression. On a trip back to the United States, Kosciuszko hoped to lobby support for Polish independence from American and French governments but found himself politically opposed to John Adams's anti-France policies. In light of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, Thomas Jefferson urged Kosciuszko to leave the country to avoid imprisonment. If Kosciuszko had been naturalized, he would not have needed to flee the country. According to Congressional records

in 1976, Representative John H. Dent tried to rectify that by submitting a resolution to confer citizenship upon Kosciuszko, perhaps in the spirit of the bicentennial celebrations.²⁵ Kosciuszko's actual status was less important than the way that Polish American cultural groups constructed his historical identity to be an American citizen. These groups believed there was a lot at stake by representing Kosciuszko as a citizen as well as a Revolutionary War military hero. Polish immigrants and Polish Americans were conflicted, much like the immigrants and citizens of Norwegian descent discussed earlier, about how best to balance their cultural and political identities as Poles and as Americans. These groups sought legitimacy to their interpretations of the past through representation on commemorative stamps.

Whereas the Norse-American Centennial Committee chose ships to represent their immigration stories, the Polish American groups chose portraits to represent Pulaski and Kosciuszko in very different ways. Pulaski visually is associated with Poland, with his portrait flanked by the modern flags of Poland and the United States. Generally, other commemoratives did not print the U.S. flag. Pulaski's portrait appears in the center, where he casts his glance to his left, to the side where the Polish flag appears from behind his portrait. In contrast, the Kosciuszko stamp did not feature either flag (Figure 9). Perhaps because the stamp commemorated the 150th anniversary of his "naturalization" as an American citizen, flags were not necessary for indicating his nation of origin; Kosciuszko was American, Pulaski was Polish. The stamp design selected depicts Kosciuszko wearing his uniform and standing, which actually is a reproduction of a full-bodied statue that sits in Lafayette Park across from the White House in Washington. Rejected designs represent Kosciuszko as a citizen, not as a soldier.²⁶ In the chosen design, he appears larger than life as he looks down upon the stamp reader from his pedestal. Like many other Revolutionary War officers represented on stamps, he is standing, not on horseback, and, with sword drawn, appears ready to lead a battle. Pulaski, who was a royal count, looks out from his portrait wearing a dress military uniform. Oddly, he is not on

horseback, although he is credited as founding the American cavalry. No identifying language tells a stamp consumer that Pulaski died at the Battle of Savannah. And unless one read the newspaper announcements discussing the stamp, the average American probably did not understand that the dates printed on the Kosciuszko, 1783–1933, celebrated his fictional naturalization.

Obtaining these commemoratives were great achievements for the fraternal and Polish heritage organizations to express ethnic pride, but they also used the stamps as another way to claim their status as racially white. Their members experienced discrimination and understood that Poles and other eastern European immigrants were defined as racially different from old stock immigrants hailing from western Europe, even as cultural and legal definitions of whiteness were changing in the United States. Celebrating Kosciuszko's naturalization suggests that it was important for the Polish National Alliance, Polish Roman Catholic Union, and other organizations to tie their heritage with American citizenship. Since only a "free white person" was eligible for naturalization, Kosciuszko qualified as white. Poles were inching their way out of a racially in-between status in the early twentieth century, a position also faced by other immigrants. The difference was that these organizations could flaunt on federal stamps the accomplishments of two Polish military men who volunteered (and died, in Pulaski's case) for the American cause during the Revolutionary War—the origin of the republic. Polish American groups received help from the USPOD in proving themselves as being fit for American citizenship since their ancestors helped to found the country. The legal and cultural murkiness of racial classification in the early twentieth century made it more imperative for first- and second-generation immigrants to be able to stake their claim to whiteness, and in the case of Polish immigrants, earning two stamps helped.

We can see through these stamp subjects from the 1920s and early 1930s that civic and cultural groups believed that the USPOD influenced the public's understanding of the American past through producing and circulating historical narratives. These groups, and many others whose petitions were rejected, desired federal recognition of their interpretation of segments of American history afforded by representation on a commemorative postage stamp.

NOTES

1. John E. Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 13–20, 169–185.

2. Charles A. Merrill, "Urges Revival of Pilgrims' Faith," *Boston Daily Globe*, 22 December 1920; "Urges Bar on Aliens," *Washington Post*, 20 February 1920. All historical newspaper references are from ProQuest Historical Newspapers, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/catalogs/databases/detail/pq-hist-news.shtml>.

3. Roger Brody, "Pilgrim Tercentenary Issue," [http://arago.si.edu/flash/?s1=5lsq=Pilgrim Tercentenary Issue&sf=0](http://arago.si.edu/flash/?s1=5lsq=Pilgrim+Tercentenary+Issue&sf=0). To view an image of the commemorative coin, see http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pilgrim_tercentenary_half_dollar_commemorative_obverse.jpg.

4. U.S. Postal Service, "Rates for Domestic Letters, 1863–2011," <http://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/domestic-letter-rates-1863-2011.htm>.



FIGURE 9. (left) General Pulaski, 2¢, 1931. (right) Kosciuszko, 5¢, 1933. From the Smithsonian National Postal Museum Collection, Accession Number s1980.2493.2503, and 1980.2493.2590.

