POSTAGE STAMP COLLECTING
(The American Journal of Philately, Vol. 4, April 20, 1871)

One of the things I could and never can thoroughly understand is the passion that inspires some people in the collection of matters utterly worthless in themselves, and of no conceivable value as works of art or curiosity. For instance, the desire to gather together old postage stamps is singularly common. Within the past four or five years so many persons in this city have been bitten by this peculiar fancy that old postage stamps have become as rare, and almost as precious, as old gold. Those who hoard them up insert them with fastidious care in a volume prepared for the purpose, and exhibit them with an air of triumphant pride that is exhilarating to philosophy. They could not show off a row of marble-fronted warehouses on Broadway with a greater display of exultation. Some of them prefer to make a collection of all the postage stamps of all nations that indulge in such luxurious postal appliances, and then, of course, they do present a museum of some interest, for it involves a notion of the artistic and picturesque. But it cost much less to gather together an assortment of American postage stamps, and it is surprising what a fascination even children can find in such a pursuit! One would suppose that in accumulating these old stamps they were secretly amassing a fortune. Some of them, in fact, are so bewitched with the operation that they actually steal an old stamp to complete a collection of such curiosities, and a youth of the scarce and poetic name of Smith really was arrested here the other day for trying to pilfer some of these invaluable novelties! A Mr. Scott, in Nassau Street, who is a retailer of such things, detected Smith in stealing ten dollars’ worth while pretending a desire to purchase one dollar’s worth, and the little rascal confessed that he was in the habit of helping himself sans ceremonie, and could not avoid it. He was a victim of kleptomania, in the manner of stamps. The magistrate said he would stamp it out of him, and transferred him to the Tombs.

We copy the above article from Du Solle’s New York correspondence to the Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch, March 27. Du Solle’s understanding in reference to postage stamp collecting is very limited. This correspondent confines his appreciation of a collection of postal issues to the matter of their value as pieces of paper, and their utter want of value “as works of art or curiosity.” We reply, for said correspondent’s instruction, that certain postage stamps possess a marketable value similar to other articles of trade in fact, all genuine stamps, used or unused, have their price like all articles of commodity whose value is fixed by supply and demand. In reference to the merit and value of postage stamps as works of art and curiosity, we feel constrained to believe that Du Solle has never had the pleasure to fix and feast his critical eyes upon a collection of these interesting, artistic, and, in many cases, curious postal issues. For beauty of design and artistic skill, many of the postal stamps of Europe and America exhibit beauties and merits before which the works of some of our best manipulators of the pencil and brush, in other branches of fine arts, pale, whose superiority has been admitted by many of our best critics. Curiosities in the postal line are so often remarked upon that we can only refer this correspondent to any dealer’s store where he can gaze to the fill upon the stamps of Egypt, China, Moldavia, Cashmere, Turkey, Africa and others. We regret that this correspondence exhibits the fact for the first time that rogues have entered the ranks of the philatelic fraternity; although the temptation to a poor lad, to complete a series of stamps, by theft was great, and though it does not condone the crime it excites sympathy for the criminal whose offence might have been remedied by a recompense to the dealer and a reprimand, instead of branding the enthusiastic but misguided lad a thief, and making in all probability his future life one of misery and degradation.
During the last few years we have been personally cognizant of the facts of several cases that have been reported in the papers, and not one of them has ever been given any way near correct, so it is hardly to be expected that the above quotations are correct. We should have not taken notice of the occurrence, but as it has been extensively commented upon, we deem it our duty to our publishers to give the facts of the case to the public.

J.W. Scott & Co., the prosecutors in the above case, do an extensive retail trade in foreign stamps, and during the last year had stolen from their store five dollars worth of stamps a day in the average. Several persons have been sent to the Island for various terms for stealing from them, and many others have been detected in the act have been pardoned by them on account of their youth.

For several months past the young men, neither of whom, by the way, were named Smidt (sic), were suspected of embezzling stamps, but so carefully were their operations conducted that it was a long time before they were actually seen to pocket the goods. A clerk was immediately despatched for an officer, but they, suspecting they had been discovered, ran out of the store, and one of them succeeded in making his escape, but was subsequently arrested. Property to the value of $10 was found on the other on his being searched at the station house, besides a forged check for a similar amount. The young man's father, who is a wealthy and respectable citizen, searched his house and found stamps to the value of $300, which the culprit admitted he had stolen from J.W. Scott & Co. These were, of course, restored.

Out of consideration to their parents, one of whom was lying on the point of death; and as it was thought that a sojourn on Blackwell's Island would do them more harm than good, J.W. Scott & Co. kindly asked the Judge to suspend sentence, which he consented to do on consideration of their being sent out of the city.

By this it will be seen what ridiculous sentiments have been expressed for a common thief, although supplied with more money than he had any need of, stole for gain, as was shown by the fact that, although he had had part of the stamps for over six months, they had never been arranged, but several lost had been sold.