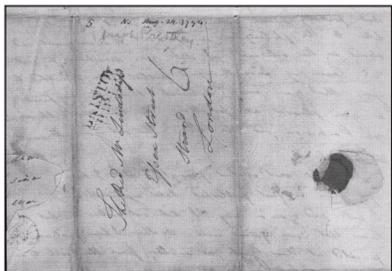


# THE JOSEPH PRIESTLEY HOUSE, A PHILATELIC REMEMBRANCE

By John B. Sharkey, Emeritus Professor of Chemistry, Pace University, New York

The correspondence of Joseph Priestley, a prolific letter writer, survives in various collections throughout the United States and England. His legacy also lives on with the many scientific meetings that have taken place at the Priestley House over the past 140 years. For someone who is interested in both postal history and chemistry this is an interesting area of exploration.



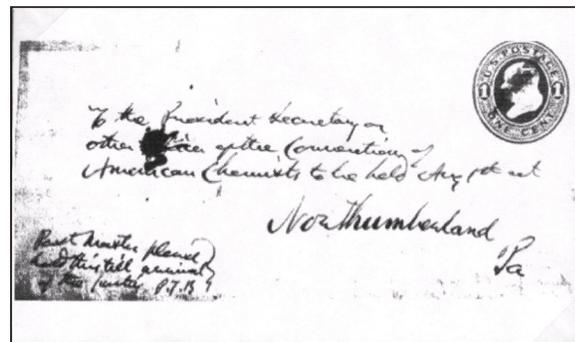
Priestley wrote some three hundred letters during his last decade, despite, in some cases, the six to eight months required to complete an exchange. Fig. 1 shows a copy of one of Priestley's early letters from Northumberland, dated August 24, 1794. It is written to his friend Theophilus Lindsay, an English theologian and clergyman. Priestley's faint signature is in the center top, below the year 1794. Priestley mentions that he has the expectation that mail service will soon be improving, as a stage is about to be set up between Northumberland and Philadelphia and a post three times a week. Priestley signed the face of the letter.

## [1] (Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, Dickenson College)

This is a stampless cover with no Northumberland postmark. The former is easy to explain as stamps were not issued in the United States until 1847 and postmarks were not used in Northumberland until 1804. The Northumberland PA post office was established on November 13, 1795, just three years after the establishment of the United States Post Office Department (now the U.S. Postal Service). Northumberland used manuscript cancellations starting in 1804 until the 1850s, with the first recorded postmark in 1837. Thus no cancellations or postmarks are known before 1804, the year of Priestley's death. In America he became a friend of Thomas Jefferson, who sought his advice on plans for founding the University of Virginia. These letters survive in the Library of Congress Jefferson Papers Collection.

## The Northumberland Meeting, August 1, 1874

On August 1, 1874, American chemists met in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, Joseph Priestley's home for the last ten years of his life, to commemorate the centennial of his discovery of oxygen. Today, that gathering of less than a hundred chemists is recognized as the first National Chemistry Congress held in the United States. Although there is no consensus on this point, this meeting was certainly one of the factors that led to the formation of the American Chemical Society two years later in New York. Fig. 2 shows the only item of postal history that I have been able to find from this meeting. Found in H. C. Bolton's *Priestley Memorial Scrapbook*, the one-cent stamped envelope is addressed to the officers in charge of the upcoming meeting at Northumberland, with a note to the postmaster to hold the envelope until the meeting.



## [2] (Courtesy of Library of Congress, Rare Books/Special Collections)

## The Golden Jubilee Meeting of the American Chemical Society, 1926

In 1919, there were plans to demolish the Priestley House in order to make room for a new railroad. In order to prevent this, Dr. George Pond of Pennsylvania State College purchased the house at auction in order to preserve it as a museum. Dr. Pond's untimely death in 1920 put an end to plans to move the Priestley House to the campus of Penn State, seventy miles away. Dr. Pond's Memorial Association decided instead to restore the house and to build a fire-proof museum, called the Pond Museum, for Priestley's apparatus and books. On September 5, 1926, the "Golden Jubilee" of the ACS began in Philadelphia with a chartered train trip to Northumberland to pay their respects at Priestley's grave and to dedicate the Pond Museum. I am unable to locate any postal history from this meeting.

## The Biennial Conference on Chemical Education and The Second “Centennial of Chemistry”

The Priestley House was designated as a National Historic Landmark on January 12, 1965. In October 1970 the restored Priestley House was dedicated after a two-year restoration project by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. The laboratory was restored and the house generally refurbished. On April 25, 1974 more than 400 chemists attending the MARM meeting at Wilkes-Barre PA made a pilgrimage to the Joseph Priestley House on the occasion of the bicentennial discovery of oxygen. Dr. Bernard Friedman, ACS president, presented the Priestley Medal to Dr. Paul Flory of Stanford for his pioneering research on polymers. It was the first time the Priestley Medal was presented at the Priestley House.

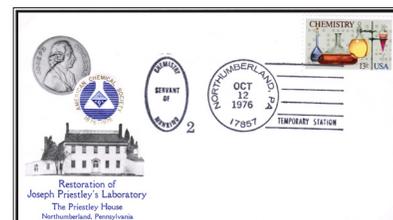


From July 30 to August 3 of that year, the 3rd Biennial Conference on Chemical Education was held at Penn State and over 500 chemists traveled from State College to Northumberland to celebrate “Oxygen Day,” which is commemorated on the cover in Fig. 3. The special symbol depicts the original Wedgwood Medallion profile of Priestley circumscribed by the chemical symbol of oxygen, O<sub>2</sub>. The stamps commemorate the 1951 3-cent ACS Diamond Jubilee stamp, the 1955 3-cent stamp honoring Penn State (along with Michigan State), mentor, and close friend, Benjamin Franklin, shown in this 3-cent 1956 stamp and the 1-cent Thomas Jefferson stamp issued in 1965.

### The 1976 Centennial Meetings of the ACS

In 1976 the ACS celebrated its centennial year with three major meetings – NYC, San Francisco, and Northumberland, and the U.S. Postal Service issued a 13-cent stamp honoring the science of chemistry. In recognition of Priestley’s contributions, the Society made restoration of Priestley’s laboratory one of the principal projects of its Centennial celebration. Through the cooperation of several companies, universities and the Smithsonian Institution, more than 100 pieces of Priestley’s laboratory equipment were reproduced, and presented to the Penn. Historical and Museum Commission. To commemorate Northumberland’s role in the history of the ACS the Postal Service authorized a temporary postal station and a special pictorial cancellation for use that day, as shown in

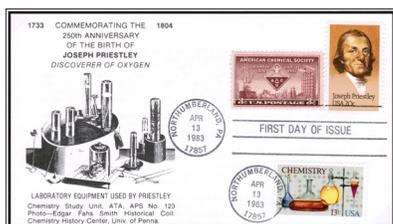
Fig. 4. (Courtesy of Professor Roy Olofson)



### Joseph Priestley Honored by the USPS on April 13, 1983

As far back as 1967, Lester Kieft, Professor of Chemistry at Bucknell University, began his self-assigned mission to bring about the issuance of a commemorative postage stamp honoring Dr. Joseph Priestley. His dream was realized on April 1, 1983, the 250th anniversary of Priestley’s birth. Fig. 5 shows only several of the numerous first day postal cover that were prepared for the event.

[5] Chemistry Study Unit Cover Shows Three Chemistry Stamps



### The 125th Anniversary of the American Chemical Society, 2001

This 2001 cachet (Fig. 6) commemorates the 125th anniversary of the American Chemical Society as well as the 75th anniversary of the 1926 ACS meeting in Philadelphia. Joseph Priestley, who inspired the formation of the ACS is honored not only by the 1983 stamp but also by the date of cancellation – August 1st, the day he discovered oxygen.

If you are reading this newsletter, you will note that the Northumberland postmark, which was used for more than 200 years, has been replaced by the Harrisburg postmark of the regional sorting facility in Harrisburg PA.

