Until 1845, postage was based on number of sheets in a letter and distance traveling. From 1845 until 1863, postage was based on weight and distance. From 1863 to 1885, price was for the first half ounce. Beginning 1975, price for each additional ounce is less than for the first ounce.

Source of current-cent prices: http://www.usps.com/history/his4_5.htm#DOM