

Cancellations on U.S. Officials, 1873-1884 / 1

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Since the first edition of 1923, the introduction to the section on official stamps in the Scott Specialized Catalogue of United States Stamps has carried the following warning:

Odd or Town cancellations on Departmental stamps are relatively much scarcer than those appearing on the general issues of the same period.

Since this remark could intimidate the novice collector from venturing into a field where, as they say, "the only thing scarcer than the material are the people who collect it", this article will offer a corrected viewpoint by introducing the scope and variety of material encompassed in the collecting of cancellations on United States official stamps. Examples illustrated are from an exhibit collection assembled over a period of ten years by the author, in whose experience even the humblest of bourses can yield a few decent copies to redeem the cost of gas and parking.

A common misconception about departmental usages is that official mail was somehow handled through different channels than ordinary mail and was therefore subject to receive different cancellations, postmarks, and postal markings. The truth is that, with a few exceptions, official mail of this time was handled at the same post offices under the same postal regulations, with respect to rates and markings, as ordinary mail. Therefore, any student of the large Bank Note regular issues would be familiar with the cancellations to be encountered on the parallel official stamps, even though the bounds of his or her collection may exclude these specific issues. In this article, we will first consider how the distribution of official stamps limited the variety of cancellations to be found, and how the originating town for a given obliterator or killer can be identified. Then, in sequence, we will address postmarks, colored inks, cut cork cancelers, and commercial metal cancelers, and end with some general observations on what one can expect to find in the way of cancellations for any given department.

Distribution

The variety of cancellations to be found on official stamps is limited by where and when they were used. A very large proportion of all official mail, perhaps as much as half, originated in Washington, D.C., and certain departments had a very narrow distribution beyond our Capitol. All Executive Department mail was posted from Washington, D.C., except for a few letters sent from Long Branch, New Jersey, where President Grant had a summer home. Excepting the despatch agent in New York, essentially all State Department mail originated in Washington, D.C. (overseas consular mail came in diplomatic pouches to the Capitol where stamps

were applied to individual envelopes in order for them to enter the regular mail stream). Navy Department stamps were chiefly used at yards along the Eastern seaboard. While the stamps of the Justice Department were more widely dispersed, they were never used in great quantities.

In contrast, the stamps of the Agriculture, Interior, Post Office, Treasury, and War Departments were used all across the country and in large quantities. The Agriculture Department sent out prestamped envelopes to farmers for their annual seed orders and crop reports; the Interior Department had pension agents and land offices in all the frontiers. Wherever there was a post office, the postmaster was furnished Post Office Department stamps for his official correspondence; Customs officers and Collectors of Internal Revenue from the Treasury Department were widely distributed; and Signal Service officers filed weather reports with War Department stamps from across the country.

Although official stamps were valid from July 1873 through parts of July 1884, penalty envelopes were introduced in 1877 and gradually gained widespread acceptance. During the transitional period, official stamps and penalty envelopes were used simultaneously. Some departments, such as Executive and Post Office Departments, converted immediately to use of penalty envelopes nearly exclusively; others, such as Agriculture and State Departments, made little use of penalty envelopes during the transitional period. It was during this transitional period that commercially prepared canceling devices began to be widely used. Thus many of the familiar commercial killers of the 1880s are difficult to find on Post Office, Justice, and Navy Department stamps. The 30 Post Office Department stamp (with over 65,000,000 issued) was used far more often than all the other official stamps combined, yet oddly there is a very limited range of cancellations to be found on that stamp. In general, the more collectible cancellations are found on lower values used on domestic first class mail. Unlike the regular Bank Note issues, where pre-UPU overseas mail yielded many high values with striking cancellations (e.g. New York foreign mail geometrics), nondescript package type cancels are typical for official high value stamps.

Identification

The definitive method of attributing an obliterator to a particular town on the basis of a proving cover with originating postmark does not work well for official stamps because of the simple lack of extant covers. Departmental covers are much scarcer than covers with regular issues because many of them went to other Government offices where the cover might survive for a while, docketed with its contents in a file, until the archives were purged. And mail of a personal nature was more likely to be saved for sentimental reasons down through the generations than official mail addressed to private citizens. For example, we know that a clerk at the Agriculture Department in Washington, D.C. tore off the stamps on incoming mail from farmers all over the country and sold them in quantity to

collectors. So while there are many used copies surviving, it can literally take years to find an Agriculture cover intact at any price in any condition.

Fortunately, the same canceling devices were used on official mail as on regular mail, so parallel attributions can be confidently made on the basis of regular issue large Bank Note covers. Until James M. Cole's book, *Cancellations and Killers of the Banknote Era*, is published, one is forced to refer to various specialized monographs in the hope of positively identifying the town of origin for a particular obliterator. In addition, a study is currently being undertaken of the cancelers; used in Washington, D.C. during the 1873-1884 period. The Washington, D.C. cancellation study naturally will prove an invaluable resource in the identification and dating of Washington, D.C. cancellations on Departmental stamps and covers.

Postmarks

Having established that official mail was handled under prevailing postal regulations, since the obliterator was required to deface the stamp and not the postmark, the same explanations for datestamps being struck on large Bank Note regular issues - ignorance, carelessness, contrariness, multiple strikes of a duplex canceler on a cover with several stamps - must also apply to official stamps. It follows then that while the variety of postmarks occurring on official stamps will have been limited by their distribution, the relative frequency of this occurrence should not differ much from the general issues.

In reality, almost any legible datestamp outside of Washington, D.C. (with the possible exception of New York City) should be deemed highly collectible. What one can find usually but not always corresponds to what one would expect to find from the known distribution of these stamps. For example, postmarks outside of New York City and Washington, D.C. for the State Department, and Long Branch, New Jersey and Washington, D.C. for the Executive Department are great novelties. Much greater diversity is to be found on the stamps of the Interior, Treasury, and War Departments due to their widespread usage. But the most widely dispersed stamps of all, those of the Post Office Department, have yielded very few legible postmarks, presumably because postal clerks took scrupulous care in correctly canceling their own official mail.

The most popular and best-researched area of the departmental postmarks is certainly the Fort cancels. These occur predominately on War Department stamps, although Indian Agents did post mail with Interior Department stamps from the Fort post offices. Active research in this area is ongoing, and the inventory of known Fort postmarks on official stamps is gradually being expanded. Among collectors in this field, it is generally agreed that the premiums in the catalogue rightly apply only to legible Fort postmarks and not to such characteristic obliterations as the Fort Leavenworth honey-comb, even though these are desirable in their own right. Given the size of these military installations and of most Western towns of this era, it would seem that a remarkably large and

disproportionate number of Fort and territorial postmarks have survived. Perhaps Fort mail clerks were less meticulous than their Eastern brethren in how these cancelers were wielded. It also may be that generations of collectors have winnowed out the exotic Fort postmarks and discarded the chaff of less historically intriguing towns, thereby disturbing the historical record and what a random sampling of usages ought to have revealed.

While county and postmaster postmarks and even railroad postmarks occasionally are found, surely the most prestigious postmarks on Departmental stamps are the New York Steamship cancellations found exclusively on Navy Department stamps. U.S. Navy vessels were furnished with Navy Department stamps, and official mail from them overseas was transferred to contract carriers. The "steamship" postmark was applied on the date they docked back in New York. The catalogue does record Express Company markings on several different official stamps but these have not been seen by the author. Also of interest are the oval and double oval cancellations used on third class, fourth class, and registered mail: in accordance with postal regulations, these devices normally did not include the date.

Various types of other miscellaneous mail service markings also can be found on Departmental stamps, including "FORWARDED" handstamps, "CARRIER" and "RECEIVED" backstamps, postage due markings, foreign transit markings, and penalty handstamps. The "FORWARDED" handstamp generally is found on Navy Department stamps and was probably applied when mail was rerouted in Washington, D.C. and forwarded with Navy Department stamps to personnel at sea.

Colored Inks

On the basis of the surviving inventory, the standard colors were employed in the following order of frequency: black, purple, (including violet and magenta), blue, red, pink, green and brown. As different canceling devices required different types of ink, the colors varied accordingly. Many commercial obliterators can be found struck in purple, while blue inks were popular in the Midwest, most notably in Chicago. A quartered-circle killer with vivid purple ink was used in Washington, D.C. in 1878 and can be found on stamps of all departments. Red cancellations are much scarcer than purple or blue and were struck principally in Washington, D.C. with cut cork obliterators. It is much more common to find low values (10, 20, 30 and 60) with red cancels than high values, and the 20 value, a local rate usage, is the most common of all. Red cancels on any value of the Agriculture, Justice, and Executive Departments are fairly rare, yet it is possible to find all values of the State Department stamps up to the 900 with red cancels. A vivid pink target cancel was used at Plattsburgh, New York, and can be found on Treasury and Post Office Department stamps. While many blue-green cancels exist, true green cancels are much scarcer than red and are usually found indistinctly struck on Treasury Department stamps. Brown has been reported as a relatively common colored ink used in the 1880s on the 20 red brown (less common only than black or magenta).

But in the author's experience, a true brown as opposed to a washed-out or faded red is extremely scarce on official stamps.

It would be a worthwhile exercise to inventory the current major collections to determine exactly which shades of canceling ink are known on which values because no attempt has been made to update this information in the Specialized Catalogue since the first edition of 1923. Also, the premiums quoted for unusual cancellation types and colors have remained constant since 1982 when they were first, quoted as surcharges above the base price for used copies. As one can well imagine, the combination of different colored canceling inks used on the stamps of different departments can yield many beautiful permutations that would be pointless to illustrate in a black and white format.

Continued - see part two