

Cancellations on United States Official Stamps, 1873-1884

Alan Campbell

(Continued from Chronicle 156:284)

Cut Cork Cancellations

Given the high percentage of official mail that originated in Washington, D.C. it is fortunate that in the early years the Washington, D.C. whittlers of cut cork obliterations took a certain pride in their work, so that we have something worth collecting instead of uninspired blobs and smears. Figure 3, bottom row. Given that there is a finite number of simple patterns that can be incised on a round cork, inevitably a certain amount of parallel evolution can be expected to result in similar designs from different locations, for example, Washington, D.C. and New Orleans. Because of the similarities in cancels from different towns, it is often difficult to say with certainty where a given crossroads, circle of wedges, or circle of V's must have originated. Figure 4, top and bottom rows. An element of control is introduced, though, when we remember that State Department stamps were used only in Washington, D.C. and New York City and can only be found with killers from these cities. The cancellations on State Department stamps can be compared to cancellations on the more widely dispersed stamps of other departments in order to make positive attributions.

Because of their fresh bold strikes and nearly infinite variety, the geometric cut cork obliterations of New Orleans are highly desirable and will be represented in collections far beyond what the volume of official mail from that port would warrant in an impartial cancellation study blind to aesthetic values. Figure 5, top and bottom rows, identified by personal communication with Hubert C. Skinner, a recognized expert on New Orleans fancy cancels. Even more desirable, and much scarcer, are strikes of New York Foreign Mail (NYFM) cancellations on Departmental stamps, Figure 6. In their 1968 book, Van Vlissingen and Waud recorded only 12 different types of NYFM cancellations on official stamps off-cover. In his 1990 book, William R. Weiss, Jr. established a new numbering system but did not provide a separate listing of known NYFM cancellations on official stamps off-cover.

Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish NYFM cancellations from NY domestic cancellations or cancellations from other cities. In his book on page 409, Weiss illustrates a Type TR-W8 (Van-Vlissingen-Waud Type A28) look-alike on a 900 Treasury Department stamp. Weiss comments that the look-alike cancellation on the 900 Treasury Department stamp is too small and that the stamp was issued (July, 1873) after the latest reported usage of Type TR-W8 on cover.

Weiss does illustrate a 150 Post Office Department stamp with Weiss Type GE-EP3 (Van-Vlissingen-Waud Type G17) on page 109 and a 20 Treasury Department stamp with Weiss Type ST-8PI (Van-Vlissingen-Waud Type A25) on page 156. Weiss also illustrates a 10 Treasury Department stamp with his Type GE-C6 NYFM cancellation (Van-Vlissingen-Waud Type W3) on page 57 of his book with the following comment: Any NYFM on a Departmental stamp is very rare and should be highly prized by the owner. Probably fewer than 15 such examples exist, and none are reported on cover. Such a cover, if ever discovered, would be worth a king's ransom!

Mr. Weiss's "king's ransom" of a NYFM cancellation on a Departmental cover may at last have been found. Robert L. Markovits reports having a Treasury Department cover

with a NYFM cancellation. Hopefully documentation and/or exhibition of this most unusual cover will occur soon.

The scarcity of Departmental covers addressed to any foreign countries, in general, is at least partly accounted for by the limited number of governmental departments having a need for foreign mail correspondence and by the UPU prohibition of official stamps on foreign mail after April 1, 1879. The scarcity of Departmental stamps and covers with NYFM cancellations, in particular, is accounted for by the short period of use, 1873-1878, in which NYFM cancellations could occur during the issuance of Departmental stamps and by the low volume of Departmental foreign correspondence which originated in New York City compared to that which originated in Washington, D.C.

Among abstract geometric shapes, the most popular carved were stars (Figure 7, top row) and Maltese Crosses (Figure 7, bottom row). Among representational shapes, one finds leaves (Figure 8, top row), masks and Jack-o-lanterns (Figure 8, bottom row), and shields and anchors (Figure 9, top row), along with certain other vaguely figural depictions that judges often ascribe to the hyperactive imaginings of a subject undergoing the Rorschach inkblot personality test. Sadly, the truly wonderful carvings of artists like John W. Hill, the Waterbury, Connecticut, Postmaster, almost are never found on Departmental stamps because the smaller towns posted a negligible amount of official mail.

Letters and numerals are readily found, the most familiar and easily identifiable being those of Boston. Figure 9, bottom row. Quite ornate letters are sometimes encountered (Figure 10, top row) as are obsolete rating marks from the 1840s and 1850s, still in use as obliterators in small towns. Figure 10, bottom row. The premiums listed in the Scott Specialized Catalogue of United States Stamps for "numeral" cancellations refer specifically to these obsolete rating marks. Medicine bottle stoppers with molded numbers were often pressed into service at smaller post offices located in general stores (Figure 11, top row, the unreversed image of "T" in the first example is exceptional), and abbreviated year dates from the 1870s can be found as well. Figure 11, bottom row. Also of interest are cancellations showing the postmaster's initials (Figure 12, top row), 11U.S.11 (Figure 12, bottom row), "PAID" (Figure 13, top row), and various other initials and words. Figure 13, bottom row. The initials, JDV (Cole Type EL-166), on the 30 Interior stamp in the top row of Figure 12 corresponds to the initials of John D. Vail, Postmaster of Blairstown, New Jersey.

Commercial Cancellations

Around 1880, the use of commercially-prepared duplex metal canceling devices became widespread. They were purchased chiefly by postmasters in smaller towns which did not qualify for Government-supplied cancelers due to the low volume of mail. The more generic types, showing stars (Figure 14, top row), Maltese Crosses (Figure 14, bottom row), the ubiquitous wheel-of-fortune and pinwheels (Figure 15, top row), and targets and ellipses all sold well. Because these devices were virtually identical, attribution to a specific town is impossible without a portion of the accompanying circular datestamp. The beautiful triple star cancellation (Cole Type STU-3, shown on the 300 Navy Department stamp, Figure 14, top row), can be found on the stamps of several departments, often on high values, but no cover is known and the origin of this device is unclear. The familiar "S in U" cancel (Figure 12, bottom row, item d) struck on most values of the War Department stamps is known on a cover from Michigan but probably also was used

Certainly the most famous of all commercial canceling devices are the "kicking mule" cancels (Cole Type AN- 11, Figure 16, top row) which were used on official mail from Port Townsend, Washington Territory. The "kicking mule" cancellations, always struck in black when found on Departmental stamps, have been thoroughly researched" and are most commonly found on War Department stamps, although they are seen on the Interior Department stamps and rarely on Agriculture Department stamps. Examples on Departmental covers are extremely rare. The "kicking mule" is one of the few cancellations found on Departmental stamps valuable enough to have warranted being forged.

The heavy-handed ellipse cancellations popularized by John Goldsborough of Philadelphia, in which the different numbers or letters correspond to different stations or substations in a given city, have some academic interest but little aesthetic merit and are common enough to deserve a discount, like pen-cancelled stamps, from normal catalogue values. The numeral in target and numeral in circular barred grid (the latter often struck in blue) are much more attractive cancellations. Figure 16, bottom row. Machine cancellations are rarely seen on official stamps since their introduction coincided with the waning of official stamp usage.

Usage by Department

Due to space limitations, no attempt will be made to analyze each of the nine departments in depth"; instead, we will proceed through them alphabetically, surveying what one can hope to find with patience and luck.

AGRICULTURE DEPARTMENT - good variety due to wide dispersal and the absolute optimum background color for showing off strikes of the more delicate cancels. Decent used copies of the top three values are difficult to find and rarely show a worthwhile cancellation. Town cancels are hard to find and red cancels are undervalued. The omnipresent ellipse cancels used in the larger cities are found less often on stamps of this Department.

EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT - extremely limited range of cancellations due to small quantity and short period of localized usage. The key item is the Long Branch, New Jersey, purple star.

INTERIOR DEPARTMENT - again, good variety due to wide dispersal, long period of usage, and a good background color. All ten values on hard paper were used in relatively large quantities and can be found with many diverse cancellations, but only the 20 and 30 values on soft paper are common in used condition.

JUSTICE DEPARTMENT - reasonably broad dispersal, but none of the values were used in large quantities, so patience is required. The top three values are difficult to find used.
NAVY DEPARTMENT - variety limited by usage from naval yards chiefly up and down the Eastern seaboard. The key item is the New York Steamship cancel.

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT - widely dispersed and used in vast quantities, but the yield of interesting cancellations is surprisingly low. Town postmarks are scarce, and strikes of the later metal commercial cancelers are more difficult to find.

STATE DEPARTMENT - usages limited to Washington, D.C. and New York City. Some decent cut cork killers from the 1870s, then numerals in targets or ellipses in the 1880s can be found. Surprisingly, the State Department stamps provide collectors with their best chance for assembling a 10 - 900 set with red cancels. A very few \$2 used

copies are known with colored cancels; \$5 copies are mostly black smears; \$10 and \$20 postally used copies are virtually unheard of. Favor-canceled presentation sets are more common with this Department than with other departments.

TREASURY DEPARTMENT - good variety due to wide dispersal, long period of use, large quantities used of all eleven values. However, the stamps of this Department have a poor background color for reading cancels.

WAR DEPARTMENT - excellent variety due to very wide dispersal, long period of use, and large quantities used of all values on hard or soft paper. The stamps of the War Department have a decent background color for reading cancels. The best variety of town, territorial, and Fort cancels are available on stamps of this Department. The key item is the "kicking mule" but almost anything to be found in departmental cancellations can be found on War Department stamps.

Conclusion

Trying to build a collection showing only meritorious departmental cancellation on cover would be a hopeless dead-end task. My own exhibit collection includes eighty-four covers from all nine departments, and only nineteen of these charitably can be considered to have interesting or fancy cancellations. Fully eleven of these are legal-size covers. Even with unlimited funds and access to every departmental cover in the country, it would be touch and go to assemble a meager display that could stand on its own. Collectors in this field will have to resign themselves to acquiring most examples off-cover and intermingling the occasional usage on piece or cover. But having accepted this condition, the search and attendant study should prove worthwhile. For although the supporting literature is barely out of its infancy, the collecting of official stamps is certainly in its ascendancy, and a spirit of camaraderie and cooperation exists among the active collectors.