

The Killers of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

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Introduction

One of the most romantic and historically fascinating aspects of United States official stamps is the usage of War Department stamps at forts established to protect the Western settlement routes from Indian depredations. The most obvious challenge is to collect used off-cover official stamps with legible postmarks from as many different forts as possible.¹ Many of the forts were located on remote frontiers, sparsely populated and with even fewer inhabitants literate enough to utilize the mails. Postal regulations in this country had long required that a separate obliterator and not the postmark be used to cancel postage stamps, so finding a legible townmark on stamps of the Banknote era presupposes either a fortuitous accident or ignorance of proper postmarking technique. Unlike most other departments that converted quickly to the use of penalty envelopes, the War Department continued using large quantities of official stamps and stamped envelopes through 1884, and from 1878 on, most fort postmasters would have been using the duplex vulcanized rubber handstamps available from commercial vendors. Now on an envelope franked with several stamps, considerable care had to be taken in order not to hit the stamps with the postmark portion of a duplex device. Out West, few postmasters took the trouble, so as a consequence we have something to collect.²

Intact official covers with Fort postmarks are another kettle of fish entirely, a watery gruel with not much in it. Only a few official covers survive from most of the major forts, and for many of the lesser forts, no official covers have ever been reported. The

¹ In the September, 1983 issue of his house organ "Official Chatter", Rollin C. Huggins Jr. was able to list about fifty different fort cancellations on official stamps. In a February, 1993 update, this listing had expanded to about sixty different forts. See also by the same author "U. S. War Department Official Stamps and the Army Forts" in *The Heliograph* #15, Summer 1990, p. 2-9.

² The Scott specialized catalogue lists premiums for town, fort, railroad, and express company cancellations, but does not define what degree of legibility is expected. In the marketplace, these premiums apply only if a specific town or fort can be identified. Although relatively complete strikes are preferred, specialists by a process of elimination can identify many fort postmarks with only a letter or two from the fort name and the state or territory. The catalogue premiums are generic, and cannot account for the relative scarcity and desirability of postmarks from different forts. The listings by Mr. Huggins cited above do include relative rarity factors. The catalogue premiums do *not* apply to the killers associated with the Fort postmarks for two reasons: firstly, since a socked-on-the-nose postmark represents a violation of Post Office procedures, they are always much scarcer than the killers, and secondly, the standard rubber killers duplexed with them are not intrinsic to a specific fort. For example, an Indian head on a War Department stamp probably derives from Fort Keough, Montana Territory, but not necessarily. The only killers that absolutely derive from a specific fort - the Fort Leavenworth "honeycomb" and "E-in-wreath" - command a premium exceeding their value as fort cancellations, even though they are far more common than legible strikes of a Fort Leavenworth postmark.

assistant editor of this section, Lester C. Lanphear III, has long maintained a census of official fort covers, and we intend one day to publish his data here. The David T. Beals III collection of United States military posts, consisting of 846 covers from all over the country, contained only two covers franked with official stamps, and neither of these had a Fort postmark.³ But the scarcity of official Fort covers can be misleading, and my impression is that a very large proportion of the mail posted at Fort post offices was official business. Unfortunately, the killers duplexed into commercial rubber handstamps - stars, Maltese crosses, targets, shields, the entwined initials "POD" or "US" - were stock designs, too generic to allow us to pinpoint the originating post office for most used War Department stamps.

But at the post office at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, certain unusual killers were utilized that hint at the very heavy volume of official business mail which some fort headquarters generated. The so-called Fort Leavenworth "honeycomb" is a very distinctive cancellation that commands a nice premium, but it is by no means rare. This summer, a veteran collector of fancy cancellations on official stamps casually made the claim that he had glassines full of them. In fact, based on the large quantities that have survived, it looks as if more War Department official business mail may have been sent out from the Fort Leavenworth post office than from anywhere else in the country, with the exception of the nation's capital, Washington, D. C. Also, according to Mr. Lanphear's census, eleven covers franked with official stamps have survived from Fort Leavenworth, far exceeding the total known from any other fort post office (e .g. Fort Snelling, 4; Fort Omaha, 3).

Historical Background

Founded as Cantonment Leavenworth in 1827 to protect the Santa Fe Trail, Fort Leavenworth is located on the bank of the Missouri River, twenty-five miles northwest of what is now Kansas City. In 1854, it served as the seat of the first territorial government. The famed 10th U. S. Cavalry, an all-black regiment called the "Buffalo Soldiers", was organized here in 1867 and saw extensive duty on the frontier.⁴ After the Civil War, the Army instituted a new organization of territorial commands. The vast Military Division of the Missouri stretched from Canada to the North, Mexico to the South, east to the Mississippi River, and west to the Rocky Mountains. The Division of the Missouri consisted of five departments: Dakota (headquartered at Saint Paul, Minnesota), the Platte (Omaha, Nebraska), Texas (San Antonio), the Gulf (New Orleans), and the Missouri (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas). The Department of the Missouri embraced the States of Illinois, Missouri, and Kansas, the territories of Colorado, New Mexico and Indian Territory, and the post Fort Elliot, Texas, thus preserving under one command the forts along the old Santa Fe Trail. The map in Figure 1, on which the limits of the Department of the Missouri has been outlined,

³ Daniel F. Kelleher Co., Inc., 578th Sale, June 20, 1988.

⁴ D. Ray Wilson, *Kansas Historical Tour Guide*, 1990, page 50.

shows the extreme concentration of Army troops on the Western frontier in 1878.⁵ In the 1870's, Fort Leavenworth was critical in the overall system of frontier defense, serving as a supply depot for the westernmost forts. Fort Leavenworth Military Prison (later a federal penitentiary) was opened in 1875, and the School of Application for Infantry and Cavalry (forerunner of the Command and General Staff College) was created in 1881. The Fort is still operational, the oldest post established west of the Mississippi still in existence. In Figure 2 we reproduce a plan of the fort, circa 1876.⁶ Unfortunately, the location of the post office is not specified.

Carved Killers

In 1873, when the official stamps were placed into service, the killer portion of most cancelers was a removable slug of carved cork or wood. The most distinctive killer of this type used at Fort Leavenworth was a crude rosette with six irregular prongs and a small negative space at the center. Three examples are illustrated in Figure 3. Presumably these indicate different degrees of wear, with the prongs or lobes becoming softer and blunter. This erosion of the cork was first noticed by Russ Fritz and written up in the March-April 1985 issue of "Official Chatter", where the earlier state was called the "cogwheel" and the later state the Fort Leavenworth "rose". This killer can be attributed to Fort Leavenworth on the basis of partial postmarks evident on some strikes. In Figure 4, courtesy of Robert L. Markovits, we illustrate a 12¢ War cover from the Chief Quartermaster's Office, Headquarters Department of the Missouri to West Las Animas, Colorado. The killer in the duplex canceler is an irregular circle of wedges, a common enough design not immediately attributable to Fort Leavenworth without the accompanying postmark. Note that two strikes were required to cancel the stamp thoroughly to the clerk's satisfaction. In Figure 5, we illustrate two stamps with partial strikes of a script straightline postmark "Fort Leavenworth, Kansas". These are both struck in the violet ink often provided by the vendors of commercial rubber handstamps, so this is probably a later rubber device used on third class or registered mail. None of the Fort Leavenworth postmarks on covers or off-covers stamps include a year date, so it is difficult to establish the exact sequence of use for these different killers. Despite the lack of hard evidence, I suspect that by 1880 at the latest, the Fort Leavenworth post office must have converted over to using some more progressive type of canceler than carved corks.

Bottle Stoppers

Several types of the rubber bottle stoppers expediently used as cancelers in many places were also adapted for this purpose at Fort Leavenworth. In Figure 6, courtesy of Rollin C. Huggins Jr., we illustrate a cover with the ornate corner card of the U. S. Geologic & Geographic Survey of the Territories, posted in Washington, D. C. and franked with a 3¢

⁵ Francis Paul Prucha, *Guide to the Military Posts of the United States*, Milwaukee, 1964, page 31.

⁶ *Outline Descriptions of the Posts in the Military Division of the Missouri*, Chicago, 1876, page 118.

Interior stamp on soft paper (generally attributed to the American Bank Note Company, which consolidated with Continental on February 4, 1879). The Washington, D. C. main post office had reverted to non-year-dated postmarks for a few months early in 1879, so this cover has to date from that period. Addressed to Fort Leavenworth, it was forwarded to Fort Fred Steele, Wyoming Territory with a strike of a duplex canceler incorporating a No. 3 size bottle stopper killer. This is the most common size and type of bottle stopper adapted for use as a canceler. The numbers indicating the size of the medicine bottle usually read in reverse, but in this case the stopper was inverted or rotated relative to the postmark so as to be right-reading. In Figure 7 we show strikes of this bottle stopper killer on various War, Treasury, and Interior official stamps, some or all of which could have originated at Fort Leavenworth. In Figure 8 we illustrate two examples of a hexagonal bottle stopper killer which was also used at Fort Leavenworth. On this type, the hexagonal shape would have been the seal overlapping the rim of the medicine bottle, while the solid circle at the center would have plugged the neck (subsequently cut flush when adapted for use as a canceler).

Honeycombs

Certainly the most famous and easily recognizable of all the killers used at Fort Leavenworth is the so-called "honeycomb". In Figure 9, we illustrate various strikes on all denominations of War Department stamps except for the 7¢. In Figure 10, courtesy of Lester C. Lanphear III, we illustrate a small domestic rate cover with a hand-written corner card, "Headquarters Department of Missouri, Office Chief Engineer". In Figure 11 we illustrate an unsealed circular envelope from the Medical Director's Office, Headquarters Department of the Missouri mailed to the Post Surgeon at Fort Riley, Kansas. These two covers are the only ones recorded with the "honeycomb" cancellation. Note the extreme variation in size of these killers, and the irregular shapes, often more elliptical than round.

At the core of each device is a circular arrangement of six seeded negative triangles, an organic pattern resembling a cross section through some sort of woody fruit. The triangular vessels appear to multiply in an overlapping hexagonal pattern too intricate and disorderly to have been carved. I have long agreed with Rollin C. Huggins Jr.'s theory that this pattern was not man-made but derived from an organic source such as the handle of a gourd (the mature fruit of a cucumber vine), even though the growth pattern suggests something cancerous like a tree burl. Some years back, I resolved to try an experiment and bought a selection of likely looking gourds at a farmer's market, but when I left them to dry in a cupboard they rotted out instead. Then I tried some small ripe squashes and zucchinis from the produce section at Ralph's which proved too juicy to accept ink from my inkpad. In Figure 12 we illustrate "cancellations" produced by slicing at different points through an okra pod. Admitting defeat, I decided to consult an expert and sent photocopies of the Fort Leavenworth "honeycomb" cancellations to Dr. Caleb Morse, a plant taxonomist at the University of Kansas in Lawrence (about forty

miles from Fort Leavenworth) and a specialist in the plants of the Great Plains.

Dr. Morse's careful analysis determined that this was not likely a cross section through the stem of a plant's vascular system because the cells were too large. Some aquatic plants have large air vessels, but such a stem would likely be too mushy to be used as a canceler. The basic pattern of six triangles in a ring might be the cross section of a fruit showing lockules and the developing seeds within them, but the linked ring growth pattern would be exceptionally rare or non-existent for plants indigenous to Kansas. In his opinion, the Fort Leavenworth "honeycomb" pattern might be the result of rolling an inked spherical object across the stamp. He experimented with a bald-cypress cone and considered plants ranging from blackberries to the fruit of the buttonbush inflorescence, but could not find a fruit displaying a pattern of linked rings of triangles. His conclusion agreed with that of Dr. Michael Simpson from the herbarium at San Diego State University, that the pattern of these cancellations looked *unnatural*.

I confess that in the beginning, it had been my dream to come up with a simple and elegant explanation for these unusual cancellations, something along the lines of Scott Trepel's work on the sugar cane canceler used on Hawaiian Missionary stamps in February, 1852.⁷ Although a conclusive attribution has eluded me, I still believe that this honeycomb pattern must have an organic source. As a meat-and-potatoes man myself, I will leave it someone more conversant with vegetables to deliver the final word on this subject.

"E" in Wreath

We turned finally to the so-called "E in wreath" cancellation, several examples of which are illustrated in Figure 13. The term "E in wreath" was first used to describe a finely detailed rubber handstamp used in Ellenville, N. Y. during the Banknote period, with a large serif letter encircled by two overlapping laurel branches of the type that might have crowned one of the first Olympians.⁸ No strike of this beautiful cancellation has ever been reported on an official stamp. The cancellation under discussion here is quite dissimilar, with a smaller serif "E" wrapped by a thick textured band which more accurately resembles a Christmas wreath of plaited yew bows. Calling this design an "E in wreath" is not an inaccurate description, but it has led some to erroneously attribute this cancellation to Ellenville, N. Y. All the strikes I have seen have been on off-cover official stamps. One enterprising collector, rightly presuming that it must have been created by a Fort postmaster, scanned down the list of forts, found that no postmarks were known from the garrison at Fort Elliot, Texas (1875-1890), and so settled upon Fort Ellis, Montana Territory (1867-86), located within the boundaries of what later became Yellowstone National Park. In the 1868-79 period, mail was posted at Bozeman, but a

⁷ Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries, Inc., "The Honolulu Advertiser Collection, Part I", lot #14, page 53.

⁸ Herst-Zareski, *Fancy Cancellations on Nineteenth Century United States Postage Stamps*, Billig's Philatelic Handbook No. 33, 1972, Figure No. 1959, page 274.

post office existed at the fort from 1880-83. This attribution was eagerly seized upon by others, even though no proving cover had come to light, because it seemed logical that the "E" should stand for the name of the post office.

Now in studying this cancellation, it seemed clear to me that the irregular pattern of triangles in the wreath band was so unusual that it had to come from the same organic substrate (whatever that was) as the Fort Leavenworth "honeycomb" cancellations. I was then able to find an example with a partial postmark showing the letters "FORTLE..." and another faintly showing "...WORTH" as illustrated in Figure 14 . The word "FORT" was almost never abbreviated "FT." in postmarks, so spelling out "FORTLEAVENWORTH" took up over 3/4 of the diameter of the postmark, leaving no room for a space between the two words. So the "E in wreath" cancellation found on War Department stamps also comes from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and was probably used to mark letters for railway mail cars eastbound to Chicago. This was also a duplex canceler, based on the evidence of incidental partial strikes of the postmark on some copies. The letter "E" must have been from a molded vulcanized rubber plug that was somehow inserted into the hollowed out flange of the "honeycomb".

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, because none of the surviving Fort Leavenworth postmarks incorporate a year date, it is difficult to place these cancelers in a precise evolutionary sequence. Still, the anonymous postmaster at Fort Leavenworth must have been a resourceful fellow, not content to patiently whittle new cancelers one after another but determined to come up with something durable and distinctive. My sense is that the the cut corks came first, were followed by the bottle stopper cancelers, which were succeeded in turn by the "honeycomb" killers. Mr. Lanphear has a penalty cover with a killer resembling the honeycomb, with the corner card of the U. S. Infantry and Cavalry School (not so named until 1886) and with an indistinct backstamp from Fortress Monroe that must read 1893. This suggests that the "honeycomb" cancellations might have been developed later, and stayed in use for a long time, although Mr. Lanphear also has penalty envelopes from Fort Leavenworth with old-fashioned cut cork killers and backstamps dating into the 1890's. Logic dictates that the "E in wreath" killer was in use simultaneously with the "honeycomb" killer. I regret not having been able to identify the raw material from which the "honeycomb" cancelers were made, and I am unable to even hazard a guess on how the so-called "E in wreath" canceler was produced. Still, given the arcana which fills the little gray cells of so many philatelists, I remain confident that some route agent who reads this will come forward to solve the mystery.

Figure Captions

- Figure 1. Distribution of regular army troops in 1878, with the extent of the Department of the Missouri outlined.
- Figure 2. Plan of Fort Leavenworth, circa 1876.
- Figure 3. "Cogwheel"-to-"rose" killer transformation.
- Figure 4. 12¢ War quadruple domestic rate cover, courtesy of Robert L. Markovits.
- Figure 5. Script straightline postmarks.
- Figure 6. 3¢ Interior forwarded cover with bottle stopper transit marking, courtesy of Rollin C. Huggins, Jr.
- Figure 7. Number 3 bottle stopper killers.
- Figure 8. Hexagonal bottle stopper killers.
- Figure 9. "Honeycomb" killers.
- Figure 10. 3¢ War cover with "honeycomb"killer, courtesy of Lester C. Lanphear, III.
- Figure 11. 1¢ War cover with "honeycomb" killer.
- Figure 12. Okra pod "killers".
- Figure 13. "E-in-wreath" killers.
- Figure 14. "E-in-wreath" killers with partial postmarks.