

## Usage of Official Stamps in Washington, D. C., 1873-1874

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Except for the 24¢ Agriculture and 24¢ Treasury (supplemental values placed in service later), all 92 official stamps were available for use in Washington, D. C. as of July 1, 1873.

To date, four first day usages have been reported. The first one confirmed, a cover carried by diplomatic pouch mail from the consulate at Malta, was of singular importance, because its enclosure dated June 10, 1873 suggested that the cover's July 1 Washington, D. C. postmark - without a year date, but of a distinctive 24 mm. diameter - could be used to confirm other July 1, 1873 usages.<sup>1</sup> This salient feature - along with much other corroborative evidence - was mustered by Lester C. Lanphear III to establish here that his 3¢, 6¢ Department of the Interior Patent Office cover was also a first day usage.<sup>2</sup> In the exhibit collection of Robert L. Markovits, there is a 3¢ Treasury Department cover to Canada and another 3¢, 6¢ Department of the Interior cover (this one from the Office of Indian Affairs) which have also been recognized as first day usages. The killer on this second Interior first day cover is identical to the State and the Lanphear Interior covers, while the Treasury killer is different, which is not too surprising, since there would have been up to six postal clerks canceling mail at the main Washington, D. C. Post Office at this time. A second 3¢ Treasury cover in the Fisher collection was purported to be a first day usage, but the postmark size was larger than expected, and although sold at auction, it was not subsequently authenticated by the Philatelic Foundation as a first day usage.<sup>3</sup> More about this cover later.

It comes as no great surprise that covers postmarked prior to the official first day of usage have never been found. In the nation's capital, where the bulk of official mail originated, the stamps were in the possession of a select group of mailroom clerks at the great departmental headquarters. Effective July 1, 1873, the franking privilege was abolished, and henceforth official postage stamps had to be used on official mail. But up until that date, the franking privilege still held, so there was a clear financial disincentive for official stamps - bought and paid for by the departments - to be used prematurely. Also, it seems likely that official stamps were distributed to most field offices before July 1, since if this were not the case, the purchase of regular postage stamps would have been required in order to keep the mail moving.

A year date first appeared in a United States postmark in New York in the summer of 1853, but it quickly disappeared. From 1855 to early in 1865, Washington, D. C. postmarks did contain the year date, and this practice was adopted in many other

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Siegel Sale 577, 10 April 1981, lot 335, illustrated as Figure 2, page 112, in the article cited below.

<sup>2</sup> Lester C. Lanphear III, "Department of Interior First Day Usage", *Chronicle* 170, May 1996, Vol. 48, No. 2, p. 111-117.

<sup>3</sup> Shreve Postal History Sale, May 30, 1996, Lot #220. PFC #3101215 issued February 27, 1997 states that this cover was postmarked in 1874 or later.

cities and towns. But in the later 1860's, the year date gradually disappears. Whether or not to include the year date seems to have been a question of personal preference left to individual postmasters, as I have not been able to locate any postal directives on this question. As vexing as the absence of year dates in classic U. S. postmarks has been to postal historians, I am at a loss to offer a convincing hypothesis as to why they appeared in the first place. Since it was common practice then for businesses, government offices and private individuals to save their mail in the original envelopes, the presence of a year date in the postmark would obviously be helpful in keeping a correspondence in chronological order. Otherwise, docketing on the envelope would always be required. Whatever the reasoning behind the decision in Washington, D. C. to eliminate the year date from postmarks, it was shared by other postmaster across the country, so that by the time the official stamps came into use, no major city or small town across the country typically included a year date in its postmarks. In an 1869 advertisement for E. S. Zevely's boxwood handstamps, adding year blocks to a circular date stamp cost 40¢ extra (\$1.65 instead of \$1.25).<sup>4</sup> In Washington, D. C., the year date did not reappear in the postmark until late 1877, where (except for a brief period in early 1879 ) it remained. Most of the commercial rubber duplex cancelers sold from 1877 on did include the year date in the postmark. In New York city, always in the vanguard of postmarking practices, the year resurfaces in the postmark in 1878, but in many other large cities, it was not restored until years later. The fitful, gradual nature of year date reappearances does not suggest a concerted response to a POD directive based on UPU regulations. As we are all reminded as midnight on April 15 draws nigh, The POD has long been aware that legible postmarking has important legal ramifications.<sup>5</sup>

In the absence of dated contents or docketing, regular issue Banknote covers to foreign destinations from this era can often be precisely dated from European transit markings or forwarders' handstamps, which did always contain the year date. Research into the sailing dates of mail-carrying ships has also been used. But this sort of information is rarely available for surviving official covers, since so few of them are to foreign destinations. Docketing must always be read carefully, as it may indicate not the date of receipt but the date a response was sent, and of course it can also be added fraudulently with relative ease. On rare occasions, the name and government position of the addressee or addressor can be utilized to pin down a year date, by researching their years of service in an official capacity. But by and large, scholars of domestic official mail covers must rely on carefully studying the postmarks themselves in order to establish a definite year date. So far, most of the effort has gone into researching the postmarks of Washington, D. C., since the preponderance of surviving official covers originated there. As of this writing, three covers posted outside of Washington, D. C. qualify as the earliest known usage of

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<sup>4</sup> Reproduced in James M. Cole, *Cancellations and Killers of the Banknote Era, 1870-1894*, page 3.

<sup>5</sup> "Legible postmarking is of the greatest importance to the public as evidence before the courts, in business transactions conducted through the mails, and in fixing the responsibility where mail has been improperly handled by postal officials." *1897 Report of the Postmaster General* cited by Stephen J. Shebatich, "Inks Used for Cancellation and Postmarks at the Turn of the Century", *The United States Specialist*, November 1989, p. 599.

their respective official stamps: Dr. Dennis W. Schmidt's 3¢ Post Office usage from Chapel Hill, North Carolina on July 7, 1873; Rollin C. Huggins Jr.'s 2¢ Post Office from Cincinnati, Ohio on October 29, 1873; and Lester C. Lanphear III's 15¢ Treasury from Philadelphia on June 2, 1874. Mr. Lanphear also has a 1¢, 10¢ Treasury registered cover from Livingston, Tennessee postmarked July 15 (1874), an obsolete free frank Assessor's Office envelope that constitutes the only reported official payment of the short-lived 8¢ registry fee. In years to come, I am confident that for a few more official stamps, the date of earliest usage will prove to be a cover posted outside of Washington, D. C., but at this time our knowledge of the Washington, D. C. postmarks (and the inferences that can be drawn from them) is far more advanced.

In this article, I will set forth a tentative listing for the earliest known on-cover usages of various official stamps from Washington, D. C. during the first fifteen months, from July 1, 1873 to mid-September, 1874. The end cut-off date is when the hour of the day was first incorporated into the Washington, D. C. postmarks. According to the research of Dr. Dennis W. Schmidt, the latest recorded use of a postmark without the hour on official mail is September 27, 1874, while the earliest use of a postmark with the hour on official mail is September 5, 1874. This new style of postmark, incorporating the hour of the day but without the year, was used from the end of 1874 through 1877, and then again in the early months of 1879. Of course, covers from this period do survive with docketing and/or with their original contents, so some can be precisely dated, and if the killer is distinctive enough, other covers with a similar or identical killer can also be confidently dated. Dr. Schmidt has detected minute differences in the letter spacing of postmarks from this period, and is on his way to establishing guidelines which will allow us to identify the year date on many more official covers. But as of this writing, it is not generally possible to confidently date official covers from Washington, D. C. with this style of postmark. Still, tracking earliest known usages over the first fifteen months should be enough, since anything later would be of academic interest only.

Finding the earliest known usage of classic United States postage stamps is currently a popular quest and preoccupies many of our best postal historians. Collectors of official covers certainly share this interest, with the caveat that for many official stamps, identifying a particular cover as the earliest known usage does not necessarily carry any great premium in value. The attrition rate for official covers has been so brutal that for many stamps, the earliest surviving usage will be many months, if not years after they were first placed into service. Moreover, for most higher values, less than ten covers of any given official stamp survive. Factors such as condition, clarity of the postmark and cancellation, and the scarcity of the corner card will carry far more weight than the date of usage.

On July 1, 1873, when the official stamps were first available for use in Washington, D. C., the main post office there was using a 24 mm. diameter postmark that did not include the year date. In Figure 1, we illustrate the upper right corners of two covers from the Office of the Auditor of the Treasury for the Post Office Department, dated August 2 and August 8. The two distinctive cut cork killers might be called respectively "the negative captain's wheel" and "the lobed sand

dollar". This fifteen month period before the hour of the day was incorporated into the Washington, D. C. postmark was a golden era there in the artistic carving of geometric obliterators. In late August, a 26 mm. postmark was put into service, and for several weeks, at least until September 19, postmarks of both sizes were used concurrently. A 3¢ Treasury cover with the larger size of postmark dated August 28 (docketed 1873 on an obsolete free frank cover) was illustrated here previously.<sup>6</sup> The 26 mm. size then became standard, and was used exclusively until early September, 1874, when the new style of postmark incorporating the hour of the day was placed into service. In Figure 2, we illustrate the upper right corner from various early Interior covers, dated respectively Nov. 15 (1873), March 22 (1874), July 21 (1874) and July 26 (1874). The March 22 killer was in use for almost a month and can be found on off-cover stamps of all departments, while intact covers survive from Executive, State, Treasury, Justice and Interior. Any official cover with the smaller diameter of Washington, D. C. postmark can be confidently attributed to 1873. However, not all early 1873 official covers bear this smaller size postmark.

In Figure 3, we illustrate a 3¢ Treasury Department cover with a 26 mm. diameter postmark dated July 25. Previously, we would have instantly declared this cover to be an 1874 usage, strictly on the size of the postmark. But note that the corner card of the Third Auditor's Office is in the upper right, and the stamp has been affixed over the space for the Chief Clerk's signature. This was a leftover free-frank envelope, which most departments frugally used up before starting on the style of envelopes printed specifically for the use of official stamps, with the corner card moved to the upper left so the stamp could be affixed in the traditional upper right without obscuring it. It is quite common to see such envelopes used with official stamps in 1873, but relatively rare to see them still being used in 1874 or 1875.<sup>7</sup> In response to a Congressional resolution inquiring about the costs incurred from the introduction of official stamps, no department mentioned the cost of reprinting their envelopes, suggesting that the older style of envelopes were not thrown away but used up with official stamps.<sup>8</sup> Also, this cover bears pencil docketing on the left side which has been partially erased, but in a raking light can be read as "Rec'd July 28 .73 AM." The clincher is the contents, a detail of which is illustrated in Figure 4: a printed form acknowledging receipt of a letter, signed by the Auditor Allan Rutherford and dated July 25, 1873! A confirming cover is owned by Dr. Dennis W. Schmidt, this one also an obsolete free-frank style envelope from the Second Auditor's Office, postmarked July 24 with the same incised star killer and bearing pen docketing, "Ans. Aug. 4 /73." Now, this larger diameter postmark was still being used in July, 1874, but when found in conjunction with an incised star obliterator, the cover must definitely be attributed to 1873, especially when found on obsolete free-frank envelopes, as is the case with 3¢ Department of the Interior Pension Office cover postmarked July 26, a 6¢ Post Office Department Office of Second Assistant P. M. General cover postmarked July 25, and a 3¢ Navy Department Bureau of Navigation & Office of Detail postmarked (July) 25. Two 3¢ Department of Justice covers

<sup>6</sup> Warren S. Howard, "What Have We Done? Congress Probes the Departmentals, 1873-1884", *Chronicle* 183, August 1999, Vol. 51, No. 3, Figure 1A, p. 210.

<sup>7</sup> See Figures 4A and 4B for 1875 usages from the U. S. Patent Office and the Department of Agriculture. Warren S. Howard, op. cit., p. 212.

<sup>8</sup> Howard, op. cit., p. 213-214.

postmarked July 25 with the same incised star killer have also survived, not on obsolete free frank envelopes but with the characteristic carmine departmental eagle seal in the upper left. Apparently, the Department of Justice used up its obsolete free frank envelopes very quickly, since none have survived either franked or with official postage. Based on the new information presented here, the 3¢ Justice covers we have just described qualify as the earliest known usages of that official stamp. The incised star killer was a popular design carved in many places around the country, and it was revived in Washington, D. C. in February, 1879, in that brief twilight revival of hand-carved killers before the steel ellipses took over. In Figure 5, we illustrate a printed matter parcel label from the Smithsonian Institution.

We have seen that two diameters of postmarks were used in late August and early September, 1873, and that postmarks with and without the hour of the day were used concurrently in mid-September, 1874. This indicates that the main Post Office in Washington, D. C. put into service new styles of cancelers as the old ones wore out in a gradual conversion process. Since, as we have just discovered, 26 mm. diameter postmarks with incised star obliterations were used in late July, 1873, it seems likely that this new device continued in use but with different carved obliterations. We should therefore await the discovery of an official cover with dated contents or docketing which confirms the use of 26 mm. postmarks in Washington, D. C. during early August, 1873. Extending this line of reasoning, it seems possible that the 26 mm. diameter CDS was introduced before July 24, 1873 there, and might even have been in use on July 1, 1873 when the official stamps were first valid for postage.

Could the ex-Fisher 3¢ Treasury cover illustrated in Figure 6 actually be a legitimate first day of usage? Only if the killer can be matched to another cover which through dated contents or docketing can be irrefutably dated to 1873. The killer somewhat resembles the "lobed sand dollar" used in August, 1873. However, the fact that this envelope from the Second Auditor's Office has the corner card in the upper left, instead of being a free-frank style of envelope, argues strongly against an 1873 attribution. Dr. Schmidt's previously mentioned 3¢ Treasury cover, also from the Second Auditor's Office, is an obsolete free frank envelope, so a non-free frank style envelope such as the ex-Fisher cover must presumably have been used later, not earlier. In the case of the Third Auditor's Office, free frank envelopes were still in use on August 27, 1873, but by December the new style of envelopes had been placed in service.<sup>9</sup> The earliest recorded use of the new style of official envelopes are the two July 25, 1873 3¢ Justice covers cited above, with all earlier usages being on obsolete free frank envelopes.

In assembling the information on earliest known on-cover usages of the official stamps in Washington, D. C., I have had access to the cover holdings of Rollin C. Huggins Jr., Lester C. Lanphear III, Dr. David H. Lobdell, Theodore Lockyear, Robert L. Markovits, Dr. Dennis W. Schmidt, and Alfred E. Staubus. I am indebted to my friends for their cooperation. I also consulted catalogs from prominent auction sales of official covers. In some cases, the present owner of certain covers could not be identified. I chose not to include in the survey the early covers from

<sup>9</sup> Howard, op. cit., Figures 1A and 2, p. 210.

the Charles Starnes collection stolen in 1983, not having access to legible photocopies and doubting (at least in own my mind) whether the covers still exist. Approximately 140 covers from this fifteen month period were reviewed. Mr. Lanphear's holding of 36 covers proved to be the largest, while my own group of 26 covers turned out to be second best, an inadvertent consequence of my preference for the more stylish killers used in 1873-1874. In the final listing of earliest known usages, Mr. Markovits placed fifteen covers and Mr. Lanphear had eleven. Mr. Huggins, Mr. Lanphear and Dr. Schmidt in particular have been studying this area for years and I am grateful for having access to their records.

In starting this project, I did not expect to be able to list dates for any of the 1¢ values, since these were typically used on circular mail that did not require a dated postmark. I also did not expect to be able to list dates for any Agriculture stamps, since covers of any value are extremely rare, nor for most of the higher values of the other departments, again owing to scarcity. But in the end, we were able to track down early covers for 43 of the 92 official stamps, far exceeding my wildest expectations.

It is important to emphasize that this census considered only intact covers, cover fronts, or parcel labels. Stamps on piece and off-cover stamps with legible postmarks or datable killers were not included, even though in some instances these represent earlier usages than the covers themselves. Such items may be the subject of a later independent study, as I am given to understand that it is standard practice to also maintain a parallel listing of the earliest known usages on or off-cover. In addition to listing the earliest known on-cover usages of single official stamps, I have also included listings for various combination usages. In following up the results presented here, I would be most eager to receive photocopies from any readers who own official covers with even earlier postmarks.

**Census Results:  
Earliest Known On-Cover Usages of Official Stamps from  
Washington, D. C.**

<b>Official Stamp</b>	<b>Earliest Usage</b>	<b>Postmark Diameter</b>	<b>Current Owner</b>
2¢ Agriculture	May 9, 1874	26 mm.	ACC
6¢ Agriculture	August 11, 1874	26 mm.	RLM
6¢,6¢ Agriculture	July 3, 1874	26 mm.	? (Siegel #577, lot 222)
3¢ Executive	December 24, 1873	26 mm.	LCL <sup>10</sup>
1¢ Interior	August 16, 1873	24 mm.	LCL
2¢ Interior	July 21, 1873	24 mm.	RLM
3¢ Interior	July 10, 1873	24 mm.	ACC
6¢ Interior	July 2, 1873	24 mm.	LCL
3¢,6¢ Interior	July 1, 1873	24 mm.	LCL, RLM
12¢ Interior	March 22, 1874	26 mm.	?
1¢ Justice	August 6, 1873	24 mm.	TL
3¢ Justice	August 25, 1873	26 mm.	TL, RCH
6¢ Justice	February 15, 1874	26 mm.	? (Siegel #616, lot 817)
10¢ Justice	March 31, 1874	26 mm.	TL
12¢ Justice	May 6, 1874	26 mm.	ACC
15¢ Justice	November 10, 1873	26 mm.	TL
6¢,15¢ Justice	August 14, 1873	24 mm.	RLM
2¢ Navy	January 29, 1874	26 mm. (red)?	
3¢ Navy	July 12, 1873	24 mm.	DWS
6¢ Navy	November, 1873	26 mm.	LCL
1¢ Post Office	September 2, 1874	26 mm.	FW
3¢ Post Office	August 4, 1873	24 mm.	LCL
6¢ Post Office	July 8, 1873	26 mm.	DWS
3¢,6¢ Post Office	March, 1874	26 mm.	LCL
12¢ Post Office	September 19, 1873	24 mm.	RLM
15¢ Post Office	November 19, 1873	24 mm.	RLM
2¢ State	October 20, 1873	26 mm.	?
3¢ State	July 1, 1873	24 mm.	(Siegel #577, lot 335)
6¢ State	August 23, 1873	24 mm.	LCL
3¢,6¢ State	August 2, 1873	24 mm.	RV
7¢ State	November 12, 1873	26 mm.	? (Siegel #616, lot 841)
2¢,7¢ State	May 7, 1874	26 mm.	ACC
10¢ State	July 5, 1874	26 mm.	LCL
12¢ State	July 6, 1874	26 mm.	? (Christie's, 12/14/89, lot 795)

<sup>10</sup> An earlier cover, postmarked December 12, 1873 exists in the collection of the National Postal

15¢ State	July 30, 1873	24 mm.	LCL
30¢ State	July 10, 1873	24 mm.	? (Siegel #577, lot 360)
12¢, 30¢ State	April 6, 1874	(no CDS)	?
6¢,30¢,90¢ State	June 17, 1874	26 mm.	RLM
1¢,1¢,1¢ Treasury	May 2, 1874	26 mm.	ACC
1¢, 2¢ Treasury	September 27, 1873	26 mm.	ACC
2¢ Treasury	November 8, 1873	24 mm. (red)	RLM
2¢ Tr., 3¢ B N	December 11, 1873	26 mm.	DWS
3¢ Treasury	July 1, 1873	24 mm.	RLM
6¢ Treasury	July 10, 1873	24 mm.	RLM
3¢,6¢ Treasury	July 29, 1873	24 mm.	RLM
2¢, 7¢ Treasury	August 7, 1874	26 mm.	?
10¢ Treasury	March 26, 1874	26 mm.	RLM
12¢ Treasury	September 23, 1873	26 mm.	AES
3¢,12¢ Treasury	December ?, 1873	26 mm.	RLM
15¢ Treasury	? (illegible)	26 mm.	RLM
1¢,1¢ War	June 25, 1874	26 mm. (red)	AES
1¢,3¢ War	March 7, 1874	26 mm.	DHL
2¢ War	January 30, 1874	26 mm.	RCH
2¢,2¢ War	October 17, 1873	26 mm.	RLM
3¢ War	December 6, 1873	26 mm.	DHL
3¢ War, 3¢ Reay	August 30, 1873	24 mm.	LCL
6¢ War	October 24, 1874	26 mm.	DHL

### Figure Captions

- Figure 1. August 2 and August 8 (1873) postmarks on covers from the Office of the Auditor of the Treasury for the Post Office Department.
- Figure 2. Duplex postmarks and killers from various Department of the Interior covers. UL, November 15 (1873); UR, March 22 (1874); LL, July 21 (1874); LR, July 26 (1874).
- Figure 3. 3¢ Treasury on an obsolete free frank envelope from the Third Auditor's Office, postmarked July 25 (1873).
- Figure 4. Detail of the enclosure of the cover in Figure 3, dated July 25, 1873.
- Figure 5. 1¢ Interior on a parcel label from the Smithsonian Institution, docketed February 3, 1879.
- Figure 6. 3¢ Treasury cover postmarked July 1 (1873-1874?), formerly in the Fisher collection, courtesy of Robert L. Markovits.