

Usages of Official Stamps Washington, D.C., 1877-1884

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The period from March 3, 1877, when the use of penalty envelopes was first authorized, to July 5, 1884, when the use of official stamps was finally discontinued, has been called the transitional period, when penalty envelopes and official stamps were used simultaneously. During this time, official penalty mail out of the nation's capital required supplemental stamps only to pay the registry fee or for foreign postage. One might have forecast that the ease and convenience of using penalty envelopes would have been immediately apparent to all departments, so that after a brief conversion period, in which the remaining supplies of envelopes were used up, official stamps would henceforth be used only on registered or foreign mail. While the new penalty envelopes did cause a dramatic and precipitous decline in the use of official stamps out of Washington, D.C., limited usage there persisted. The purpose of this article is to analyze the different types of mail posted with official stamps in Washington, D.C. during the transitional period, and to explain as best as possible why the departments responded differently in converting over to the exclusive use of penalty envelopes.

Luff cited the report of the Third Assistant Postmaster General for the fiscal year ending 1877 (in which revenues for official stamps dropped from \$1,281,389.43 the previous year to \$370,737.48) as dramatic evidence of the wholesale conversion to the use of penalty envelopes. Yet if we compare the official postage requisitions for 1876 and 1877, we find that only the Department of the Interior ordered less cumulative official postage than the previous year. A more plausible explanation is that the Third Assistant Postmaster General sought a convenient excuse for his deficit, and was being disingenuous in not mentioning that effective August 15, 1876, the departments could requisition their postage directly from the Post Office Department without paying for it, the cost then being credited by the Treasury to the POD's annual appropriation.

It is worth emphasizing that the new penalty envelopes were embraced by the departments not for the savings in postage *per se* but for the mailroom convenience of no longer having to weigh letters and affix the appropriate postage. Warren Howard's recent article brought to light the hidden costs of using official stamps: the salaries of clerks to disburse the stamps, the costs of safes and postage scales, etc. These costs were incrementally negligible but cumulatively significant. In the long run, converting to penalty envelopes would be cost effective, but in the short term, there was the expense of having these new envelopes printed up. Each department had to pay for and arrange to have its own penalty franks printed, and each department made the conversion at its own pace. All departments took the frugal approach of using up their existing stock of envelopes that had been redesigned for use with official stamps (corner card moved to the upper left, so the stamp could be affixed in the traditional upper right), just as they had four years earlier in 1873, when they continued to use up their existing supply of obsolete free frank envelopes.

In using up these envelopes, the effort required to attach an official stamp, paste on a penalty sticker, stamp on a penalty clause by hand, or have the envelope sent back to the printer to have a penalty clause added, were all equivalent, and all four methods were utilized. When the use of penalty envelopes was expanded to include field offices in March 1879, the POD's circular to postmasters was quite explicit on these measures of economy: post office envelopes were to be used with official stamps until the supply of either the stamps or envelopes were exhausted. Presumably, the same logic had prevailed in the mailrooms at the great departmental headquarters in Washington, D.C. in 1877.

As we have seen, the requisitions for official postage in 1877 were no lower than they had been the previous year, suggesting that the orders had not been scaled down in anticipation of the pending legislation authorizing the use of penalty envelopes. As a result, all departments would have had an ample supply of official stamps on hand. Because most departments had field offices that would still require stamps on their mail prior to 1879, the official stamps rendered surplus by the introduction of penalty envelopes in Washington, D.C. could easily be disbursed as needed to the field offices. Of course, all the departmental mailrooms in Washington, D.C. still needed to retain some official stamps to pay foreign postage or the registry fee, or to be used on the remaining stock of envelopes.

In analyzing how official stamps were used in Washington, D.C. during the transitional period, we need to consider four basic sources: covers franked with official stamps, classic penalty franks, off-cover official stamps identifiable as having been used in Washington, D.C. during this period based on their distinctive

cancellations, and the annual record of official postage stamps requisitioned by each of the departments. Our efforts to get a true and comprehensive understanding of official mail has always been hampered by the lack of available covers. Those sent to private individuals often did not warrant being saved due to the unsentimental nature of their contents, and those sent to government officials, which might be docketed and filed with their enclosures for a while, were ultimately destroyed when the archives were purged.

Classic penalty covers are of course relevant, because in theory that they can prove how early and extensively each department converted over. Sadly, classic penalty franks have suffered even worse attrition than official covers, because in the absence of stamps they were passed over and discarded by the first generation of cover collectors. What has survived is not necessarily representative and can easily be misinterpreted. For example, anyone who has ever tried collecting them knows that classic penalty franks from the Executive Office or the Navy, Justice, State and Agriculture departments are scarce. It would be easy to conclude that these departments, perhaps due their much smaller volume of mail, had taken a desultory approach to converting over. But Warren Howard, extrapolating from the official stamp requisitions of prior years calculated that their cumulative total would have represented only 1.5% of all official mail! In short, just because they haven't survived doesn't mean that they didn't once exist.

Conversely, off-cover used official stamps have survived in far greater quantities, and by default in this case are of critical importance in writing postal history. But making allowances for the different survival rates of official covers, classic penalty franks and used official stamps, it is possible to make convincing arguments even on the basis of what doesn't exist. To cite one example, if no Justice official stamps canceled with the characteristic Washington, D.C. numeral obliterations of 1880-1884 have ever been seen, this is compelling evidence that this department was using penalty envelopes exclusively during this period.

For collectors of official stamps, the tables of annual requisitions by each department printed in Luff have always been the Rosetta Stone, a block of statistics capable of unlocking mysteries but in certain aspects undecipherable and inscrutable. Ali, yes, one thinks, seeing the requisitions by the Treasury Department for only 10¢ stamps in 1880 and 1884: these were needed to pay the registry fee on penalty envelopes. But what then to make of Agriculture, after not ordering any 10¢ -30¢ stamps for six years (1876-1881), suddenly out of the blue ordering 50, 65, or 150 of each over the next three years? Could these have been ordered to make up complete sets for the stamp-gatherers who so persistently importuned that some departments had special response forms printed up? For the focus of this article, the use of official stamps in Washington, D.C. from 1877 to 1884, these statistics are of limited use, since they lump together stamps for use in the capital and those to be dispersed to the field offices.

In the four omnibus collections of official stamps being exhibited (Rollin C. Huggins, Jr.; Lester C. Lanphear, III; Robert L. Markovits; and my own), there are 262 official covers from Washington, D.C. of which 187 or 71 % come from the 1873-1877 period, while 75 or 29% come from the 1878-1884 period (1878: 23; 1879: 14; 1880: 7; 1881: 10; 1882: 10; 1883: 4; 1884: 7). In the years 1877-1878, remaining stocks of official stamps were still being used up on the older style of envelopes. From 1879 on, official stamps were primarily used on foreign or registered mail, or as forwarding postage on incoming diplomatic pouch mail from overseas consulates. A few covers are from smaller agencies that appear to have been overlooked during the conversion process. There are also some anomalies, covers that by all rights should have been penalty franks. For information on the classic penalty franks, I was fortunate to be able to consult the definitive exhibit collection of my assistant editor, Lester C. Lanphear, III. As for off-cover official stamps with Washington, D.C. cancellations, I relied on my own collection, recently reorganized as a marcophilately study, with 38 over-sized pages devoted to a chronological study of Washington, D.C. canceling practices, 1873-1884. It was the shock of realizing that after twenty years of collecting, I had no examples of the D.C. numeral cancellations of 1880-1884 on either Agriculture or Justice stamps, which first stimulated me to open this inquiry. The results of this research and analysis will be presented department by department in the order of their importance, with examples of both typical and exceptional usages illustrated.

The Executive Mansion

President Rutherford B. Hayes' inauguration on March 3, 1877 coincided with the authorized use of penalty franks. After the fiscal year 1877, no further stamps were ordered. Penalty envelopes were printed up, with an

"Official Business" designation added under the "Executive Mansion" corner card. Based on surviving covers, penalty handstamps were apparently never utilized. President Hayes, his family and staff used up the remaining supply of official stamps on personal correspondence sent out in the older style of envelopes. A fair number of the original letters survive to confirm this use. Also, a few of these older style envelopes were posted in 1878 with regular Banknote adhesives: these are believed to have contained invitations. The violet cancellations of 1878 can be found on most values, but the indigo cancellations of 1879-1880 are rare. In Figure 1, courtesy of Robert L. Markovits, we illustrate the latest reported usage of Executive stamps, a triple domestic rate cover posted January 19, 1880, from the President's secretary, W.K. Rogers, to Columbus, Ohio. While no one could begrudge the President using official stamps on his private mail, the concept of his secretary sticking three of the last Executive stamps on a plain white envelope addressed to his wife seems almost sacrilegious! Of the later numeral cancellations, only a few strikes of the three ring target have been reported. Penalty envelopes from the Hayes and the brief Garfield administrations are extremely scarce, with less than ten recorded. President Arthur discontinued the use of the undignified penalty clause on official business mail from the Executive Mansion, and it did not reappear until the administration of President Theodore Roosevelt. For the transitional period, 1877-1884, no examples of foreign or registered Executive Mansion mail requiring supplemental postage have ever been seen.

Department of State

No official stamps were requisitioned for the fiscal years 1878-1880, as there were adequate supplies in stock from the heavy 1877 order. From 1881 to 1884, mostly higher values (10042) were ordered, presumably to be used on packages and foreign mail. For domestic official business mail, handstamps were used to convert the existing stock of envelopes to penalty use. No example of a State cover with printed penalty clause from the transitional period has been reported yet. Outgoing foreign mail, of which very few examples have survived, seems also to have been sent with penalty handstamps, with the dispatch agent in New York adding the required supplemental postage per U.P.U. rates. The famous \$2 State parcel front to Stuttgart, Germany is the prime example of this use, but a large number of off-cover used State stamps buttresses this explanation. Most values up to the \$2 can be found with the numerals 1-6 in vertically barred ellipse cancellations used in New York on first class foreign mail from 1877-1886, and also with the dated double ovals thought to have been used on third class foreign mail from 1879-1887. The United States Government Despatch Agency at the Post Office Building in New York stocked the official stamps of various departments (State, Navy and Post Office for sure) to rectify deficiencies when the original sender had forgotten to add the proper foreign postage. The few surviving covers illustrating this type of use are fascinating and deserve a dedicated article, which could hopefully resolve a vexing mystery: why, if official stamps were no longer valid on U.P.U. mail after April 1, 1879, did the dispatch agent in New York consistently flaunt this change in regulations?

No examples of Department of State registered mail have been reported, but off-cover used stamps with double oval registry cancels from New York and Washington, D.C. have both been seen.

The vast majority of State covers from the transitional period with supplemental postage consists of diplomatic pouch mail. Private incoming mail from consulates overseas was brought in locked pouches to the State mailroom in Washington, D.C., where official stamps were added to pay domestic postage rates before the letters were put into the Post Office mailstream. In Figure 2, we show a typical example, from Charles Adams, the Minister of the U.S. Legation to Bolivia, carried in diplomatic pouch from La Paz to Washington, D.C., where the 3¢ State stamp and the "Department of State" blue-black handstamp were added to carry it to the Minister's wife in Manitou, Colorado. A few covers survive from this correspondence without stamps, but with a penalty handstamp in the State mailroom. These were probably struck in error, as this type of mail was deemed private correspondence, not official business, and hence would be subject to the penalty for private use, \$300. The Washington, D.C. violet cancellations of 1878, the indigo of 1879-1880 and the three types of numerals of 1880-1884 can all be found on most values of off-cover State official stamps through the \$2. Presumably, most of these originated on incoming diplomatic pouch mail.

The undated third class double-oval cancellations of 1880-1884 can also be found on most values. These probably came off parcel wrappings for domestic mailings of books and documents, but it is unclear why penalty handstamps weren't used instead.

Treasury Department

Requisitions of official stamps continued at normal levels in 1878 and 1879, as postage was needed for the extensive field office correspondence from U.S. Assessor Offices and Collectors of Internal Revenue. But after penalty envelopes were authorized for field office use in 1879, only 10¢ Treasury stamps were requisitioned in 1880 and 1884 in order to pay the supplemental registry fee. The Treasury Department sent a large amount of registered mail, and a number of examples have survived. This department also scrupulously complied with the change in U.P.U. regulations in 1879, and began stocking regular Banknote issues for use on foreign mail. In Figure 3, we illustrate a famous penalty cover to Berlin, Prussia, courtesy of Robert L. Markovits, in which the 10¢ registry fee is overpaid with a 12¢ official stamp, and the triple rate foreign postage is paid with a 15¢ Banknote.

Treasury Department classic penalty franks are fairly common. Conversely, it is almost impossible to find a Treasury cover from the transitional period franked with official stamps to pay domestic postage. Moreover, it is difficult to find any of the distinctive Washington, D.C. cancellations from 1878-1884 struck on Treasury stamps. On this basis, it is safe to say that the Treasury Department converted over to using penalty envelopes as quickly as possible, and may not have even practiced the economy of using up their older style of envelopes first.

Also, soon after the use of penalty franks was extended to field offices in 1879, the Treasury Department had them printed up by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing in a standardized format. Given this department's otherwise scrupulous compliance with postal regulations, it seems odd that these field office penalty envelopes never included the standard proviso "This envelope, without postage stamps, can only be used for correspondence with the Executive Departments and officers of the United States." Treasury stamps seem never to have been disbursed to the field offices for this purpose, and no covers addressed to private citizens exist, showing scrupulous compliance with this limitation.

War Department

Requisitions of official postage stamps actually went up after 1877, and stayed heavy for all values through 1884. This department's use of official stamps was heavily weighted towards remote field office use, and no concerted, organized effort was put into converting over to the use of penalty envelopes. The absence of a uniform policy extended even to Washington, D.C., where for example the Office of the Chief of Engineers and the Ordnance Department eventually got their acts together and started using penalty envelopes, while other agencies lagged behind.

All the distinctive Washington, D.C. cancellations of 1878-1884 can be found on War Department stamps. A few penalty envelopes from the transitional period have survived with a 10¢ War stamp added to pay the registry fee. War Department foreign mail covers are quite scarce. In Figure 4, we illustrate a beautiful small 1882 cover with a blue Office of the Chief Signal Officer corner card to Vienna, Austria, with a 6¢ War stamp overpaying the 5¢ U.R.U. rate. Once again, the prohibition against using official stamps on foreign mail has been overlooked. Apparently, foreign post offices did not consider this a serious violation, as no cover has survived in which the official stamps were not acknowledged and postage due charged. After July 1884, penalty stickers and handstamps were used to demonetize official stamped envelopes at such places as Bismark, Dakota Territory and Prescott, Arizona Territory.

Navy Department

After 1877, mostly lower values (1¢ -6¢) were requisitioned. These stamps would have been for use chiefly at naval bases along the Eastern seaboard, and also in the nation's capital. As with the War Department, there seems to have been a large stock of the older style of envelopes to use up, and no uniform policy about having penalty envelopes printed. This department sent little registered or foreign mail, so it is not surprising that no penalty envelopes from the transitional period have survived with supplemental official postage to pay either of these rates. Yet all of the distinctive Washington, D.C. cancellations of 1878-1884 can be found on these stamps, including the third class undated oval postmark/obliterators. Surviving covers from Washington, D.C. during the transitional period include Office of the Admiral (1879), Bureau of Equipment and Recruiting

(1880), and to Robert Peary at the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey (1881). Of exceptional interest and worthy of their own separate article are private letters addressed to Navy personnel at sea, where forwarded foreign postage was added in the Navy Department mailroom. From the transitional period, there survive three such covers to Brazil from 1877 and 1878. In Figure 5, courtesy of Lester C. Lanphear; III, we illustrate an 1883 ship letter from the U.S.S. Swatara carried outside the mails to Washington, D.C., where the correct 2¢ domestic rate postage was added.

Department of the Interior

Requisitions of official stamps fell off after 1877, but remained steady for all values through 1884. Most of this would have been for the use of Land Offices, Pension Offices and Indian Agents across the country, because the Attorney General's opinion of 1879 (that penalty franks were not valid for field office & correspondence with private citizens) had been in direct response to the Secretary of the Interior's request for clarification. Still, all of the distinctive cancellations used in Washington, D.C. from 1878 through 1884 can be found on used off-cover Interior stamps. Examples of surviving old style covers with official stamps from the transitional period include the Smithsonian Institution (1878, 1879) and the U.S. Geologic and Geographic Survey of the Territories (1879). The larger agencies, Patent Office, Office of the Secretary, Pension Office, General Land Office, all converted over quickly to the use of penalty envelopes. Although this department did generate a fair amount of foreign mail, there are no recorded examples of penalty envelopes with supplemental foreign postage. In Figure 6, we illustrate a Patent Office penalty envelope from 1884 with a supplemental 10¢ Interior stamp (American printing) to pay the registry fee. Several similar usages have survived. There also exists an unusual Census Office penalty envelope from 1881 with a 3¢ Interior stamp affixed over the penalty clause and the handstamped corner card of Ernest Ingersoll, U.S. Census Expert. In a ludicrous example of hair-splitting, Mr. Ingersoll, as a private individual representing the Census Office, had been furnished penalty envelopes, but was apparently not entitled to use them without first attaching one of the official stamps that had also been provided!

Department of Justice

No official stamps were requisitioned after 1879, except for 1,000 each of the 2¢ and 3¢ values in 1884. This last order may have been for disbursement to U.S. Attorney offices across the country, in belated acknowledgment that their correspondence with private individuals required supplemental postage, although no such covers have survived. Very little, if any, foreign or registered mail was sent by the Department of Justice, as no covers of either type or off-cover stamps appropriately canceled have ever been reported. The Washington, D.C. violet cancellations of 1878 exist in fair quantity on Justice stamps both on and off cover, but the indigo cancellations of 1879-1880 are scarce off-cover, and only two covers, both with the 3¢ soft paper adhesive, have been recorded, both from the Solicitor of the U.S. Treasury. This office had always purchased its stamps from the Department of Justice, and apparently did not take the initiative to have its own penalty envelopes printed. In Figure 7, courtesy of Robert L. Markovits, we illustrate another cover from the Solicitor of the Treasury, with 1¢ and 2¢ Justice stamps making up the 3¢ domestic rate, posted in 1880 and canceled with numeral 1 in three ring target. Not even in Theodore Lockyear's majestic collection, devoted solely to the Department of Justice, is there another example of these stamps, on or off cover, with any of the Washington, D.C. numeral cancellations. Although Justice penalty envelopes from the transitional period are not common, they do exist, and the complete absence of off-cover cancellations from the 1880-1884 interval suggests that as soon as the existing stock of old style envelopes was used up, the Department of Justice converted over to the exclusive use of penalty envelopes.

Department of Agriculture

After 1877, mostly 30 stamps were requisitioned, 40,000-60,000 a year through 1883. These were mostly needed for use on prestamped reply envelopes, sent out to farmers across the land soliciting their seed orders and crop reports. The use of reply penalty envelopes was not authorized until 1884. This department sent virtually no foreign mail, and the only cover recorded, a beautiful penalty cover to Canada posted in 1878 with a 3¢ Agriculture stamp, was stolen with the Starnes collection in 1983 and is believed lost to philately. Also, no examples of registered Agriculture mail have ever been reported. The Washington, D.C. violet cancellations of 1878 are not common on Agriculture stamps, the indigo cancellations of 1879-1880 are extremely rare, and no off-cover examples of the 1880-1884 numerals have been reported. In Figure 8, courtesy of Robert L.

Markovits, we illustrate a beautiful small cover with the Commissioner's Office corner card printed in blue, posted in 1882 and canceled with a fishtail numeral "1" in ellipse. This is the only recorded in-period use of the 3¢ Agriculture stamp on soft paper. Although Agriculture classic penalty franks are not common, they do exist used much earlier than 1882. Apparently the Commissioner's Office still had some of the old style envelopes left over. Despite this notable exception, the Department of Agriculture can be said to have converted quickly to the use of penalty envelopes.

Post Office Department

No official stamps were requisitioned after the fiscal year 1879, reflecting the expanded use of penalty envelopes outside of Washington, D.C. Once again, supplemental postage in theory ought to have been required on postmaster mail to private citizens, but only the Department of the Interior scrupulously complied with the Attorney General's ruling of 1879. On off-cover used Post Office stamps, the distinctive Washington, D.C. cancellations of 1878-1884 are found in chronologically diminishing quantities, consistent with the remaining stocks of official stamps having been used up on old style envelopes before penalty envelopes were put into service.

The Post Office had all along been entitled to free registry of its own official business mail, so we do not find, nor would expect to find, penalty envelopes with the supplemental registry fee paid with stamps. An exception to this would be Postal Service penalty envelopes from the Office of the Third Assistant Postmaster General, Division of Stamps, Stamped Envelopes and Postal Cards containing fulfilled orders of special printings. Provided the collector or dealer had paid for it, regular issue stamps paying postage and the registry fee were added, in thoughtful acknowledgement that the recipient was a collector and would especially appreciate them. That the stamps were essentially decorative and superfluous is proven by the existence of registered Postal Service envelopes carried through the mail without supplemental postage, because the recipient - usually a savvy stamp dealer who had figured out that the Post Office would never jeopardize a philatelic sale for the want of a few cents postage - had neglected to pay for it.

In Figure 7, courtesy of Alfred E. Staubus, we illustrate a spectacular 1876 cover to Berlin, Germany, with the postage and registry fee paid by a combination of official stamps and regular issues. This cover is addressed to Paul Lietzow, a stamp dealer and heavy purchaser of special printings who would later order a complete set of the State dollar value "Specimens" (sold by a German dealer to Robert Lewenthal in 1953). Mr. Lietzow had apparently miscalculated the weight of his order, and had sent only 30¢ for postage: 10¢ for the registry fee and 20¢ for the quadruple U.P.U. rate. To make up the additional 5¢ for quintuple weight, the Post Office added two 3¢ official stamps for a 10¢ overpayment. A receipt for a similar domestic mailing in 1876, kindly furnished by Mr. Staubus, bears the notation "Balance of registry paid by Dep't with off l stamps." Whereas many official mixed frankings elude straightforward analysis, this one - with Washington, D.C. and New York registry markings and a German registry label does not, and affords the specialist today a *frisson* of pleasure, to see extraordinary postal history created inadvertently where, in the case of a letter to, a stamp dealer, one's first instinct might be to suspect a philatelic contrivance. During the transitional period, the penalty clause was accepted by foreign governments for official business mail between postal entities, but correct foreign postage was required for correspondence with private citizens. A cover such as the one above would typically be franked with 5¢ Taylor stamps.

Post Office covers franked with official stamps during the transitional period are not common. Several examples survive of legal-size mourning covers mailed out on March 26, 1883, addressed to postmasters and containing an announcement that Postmaster General Howes had died the day before. Presumably there was no lead time to have special mourning penalty envelopes printed up, so commercial envelopes were bought at a stationer and franked with 3¢ Post Office stamps. There also exists a cover from the Office of Second Assistant P.M. General, franked with a 15¢ stamp and posted in 1880.

Independent government agencies, such as the Smithsonian Institution and Fish and Fisheries, which formerly had been forced to purchase official stamps from the Interior and Treasury departments, converted quickly to using penalty envelopes, since eliminating the cost of postage would obviously help balance their budgets. During the transitional period, penalty covers are also known from the National Board of Health and the Library of Congress, two agencies which had not previously used official stamps.

Conclusion

During the transitional period from 1877 to 1884, all the departments converted to using penalty envelopes in Washington, D.C. For most departments, the supply of older style envelopes and their stock of official stamps were virtually exhausted by 1879. For a few agencies of the War Department, the Navy Department, and the Department of the Interior that generated relatively little official mail, the supply of older style envelopes lasted longer and occasioned some late use of official stamps on domestic mail. The scarcity of classic penalty franks from the Executive Mansion and the State, Navy, Justice and Agriculture departments is due to the comparatively small volume of mail generated and to the sad fact that most of these being stampless were not considered collectible and were destroyed years ago. Actually, it can be argued that classic penalty franks with supplemental postage have survived in disproportionate numbers to those without stamps, further clouding the picture.

It is hoped that this sort of overview will stimulate articles on other aspects of official postal history, such as: use of official stamps by the Government Despatch Agency in New York; official mixed frankings; use of Navy stamps in Washington, D.C. to forward mail abroad; a listing of consulates whose incoming diplomatic pouch mail was forwarded by the Department of State; a listing of the earliest recorded classic penalty franks from each department and agency; and an analysis of how each department handled its field office correspondence with private citizens during the transitional period. Without the unprecedented level of cooperation and sharing that now exists among specialists in this field, tackling any of these topics would be an impossible task, in light of how little material is left to analyze. Those of us who doubt that the official covers stolen from the Starnes collection in 1983 will ever be recovered would like to see photocopies of them finally disseminated, since these would be of immeasurable help in our research.