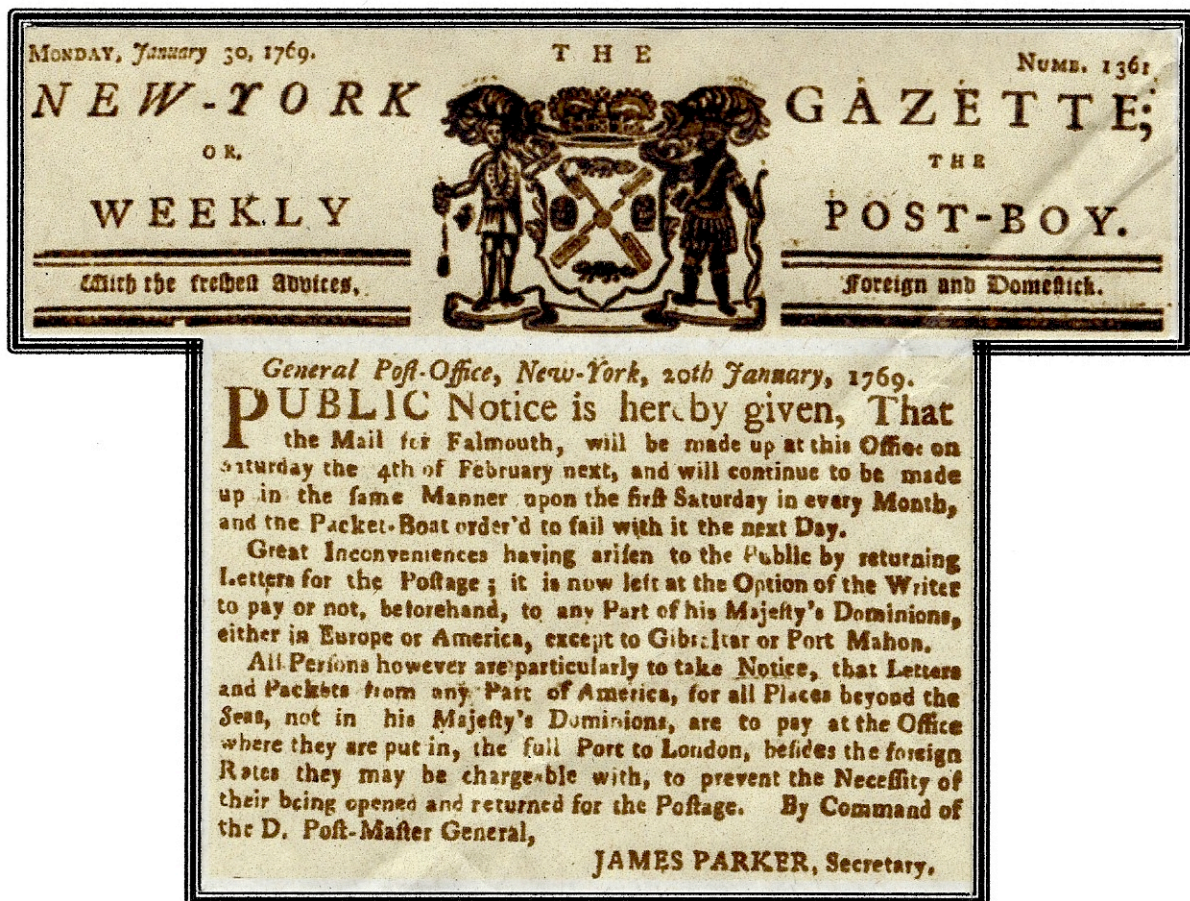


TREATMENT OF UNCLAIMED LETTERS IN THE AMERICAN POSTAL SYSTEM

This is the story of 200 years of procedural change meant to reduce the revenue loss and processing cost incurred by the American postal system for unclaimed mail and "dead" letters.

ORIGIN OF UNCLAIMED LETTERS IN BRITISH NORTH AMERICA



This January 20th 1769 notice recognizes and confirms the practice of entering unpaid letters into the mail for delivery almost anywhere in the British Empire.

REASONS FOR UNCLAIMED LETTERS IN AMERICA [OR ANYWHERE, FOR THAT MATTER]

1. Addressee does not expect mail, therefore does not call at the post office.
2. Addressee calls at the post office, but refuses to pay the postage on an unpaid letter.
3. Addressee has moved and left no forwarding address.
4. Addressee is not known to the postmaster.
5. Addressee is deceased.

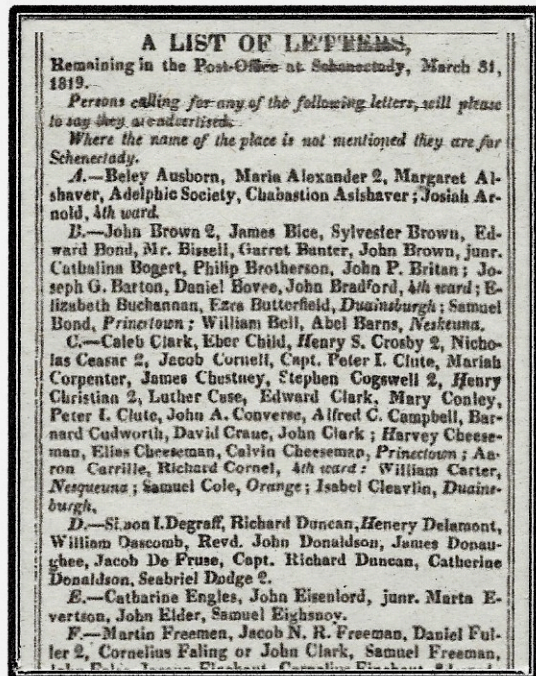
85% OF LETTERS NOT SENT *Free* IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY WERE SENT UNPAID

CONGRESSIONAL PROVISIONS FOR UNCLAIMED LETTERS

The immediate provision (1777) for unclaimed letters was to give Surveyor General Ebenezer Hazard an extra \$100 to open dead letters at the end of each quarter and tell Congress what he found. For the next 80 years, Congresses hoped, prayed and wished that advertising the existence of unclaimed letters would be enough for people to come pay postage plus advertising to claim them all.

OF COURSE, IT DIDN'T WORK OUT THAT WAY

A QUARTER YEAR IN THE LIFE OF THE SCHENECTADY POST OFFICE



Published list of letters remaining in the Schenectady post office March 31, 1819.

245 letters directed to Schenectady and 9 other towns & villages were listed.

\$4.90 was paid to publish the List of Letters for 3 successive weeks.

\$37.43½ postage was paid to redeemed letters during 2nd quarter 1819.

[Advertised paid letters may also have been delivered but warranted no accounting by the Schenectady post office; line 1 records postage on unpaid letters delivered out only]

\$16.27½ postage was forgone on unpaid letters sent as dead letters.

Advertising helped reduce unclaimed letters by about 70%

Dr. The Post-Office at Schenectady		In account current	
		DOLLARS.	Cts.
1 To postage of letters which remained in the office last quarter,		37	15
2 To postage of unpaid letters received from other offices this quarter,		308	73
3 To postage of way letters received at this office ditto,			
4 To postage of letters undercharged from other offices ditto,			
5 To postage of — ship letters at 6 cents each, originally received at this office for this delivery,		55	85
6 To postage of paid letters sent from this office ditto,		462	02
11 To balance as above, being the amount of postage collected on letters this quarter,		401	90

Account Current for the April-June quarter, 1819

In the GENERAL POST-OFFICE from April 1 st to June 30 th 1819.		DOLLARS.	Cts.
7 By postage of letters overcharged and mis-sent this quarter,		9	15
8 By postage of dead letters sent to the General Post-Office ditto,		46	27
9 By postage of letters now remaining in this office,		34	63
10 Balance carried down,		401	90
		462	02
14 By commission on 100 D. . . C. Letter Postage, at thirty per cent.	50		
By ditto on 301 D. 46 C. Letter Postage, at twenty-five per cent.	75		
15 By ditto on 15 D. 74 C. News-paper Postage, at fifty per cent.	7		
16 By 177 free letters delivered out of this office this quarter, at two cents each,	280		
		135	98

85% of office revenue comes from unpaid mail delivered out of the office.

12% comes from paid letters sent into the mails.

3% comes from paid newspapers & pamphlets delivered out.

85% by revenue of mail delivered in the quarter came to the office unpaid

225 letters directed to Schenectady and 13 other places were advertised for letters remaining in the post office June 30th; these letters bore unpaid postage of \$34.63½.

Postmaster Jacob Thurston arose before 4 o'clock a.m. to perform his duties and earned \$135.98 He paid a clerk out of his pocket and managed postal business from a desk in his watch and jewelry shop.

WE KNOW LITTLE OF ADVERTISING UNCLAIMED LETTERS UNTIL 1845 EXCEPT THAT THERE WAS A LOT OF IT

The Post Master General's annual reports to Congress always dealt with topics of concern to the Department and to Congress. By the 1840's, PMG reports describe over a million dead letters being received but only 1 percent of them being successfully "reunited with their rightful owners". In addition, \$50,549 was spent on advertising – enough to pay 2¢ 2.5 million times.

AN UNCLAIMED PAID LETTER ADVERTISED SUCCESSFULLY UNDER THE POSTAL LAWS OF 1845



Cover postmarked Jul 23 NYD from Detroit, Michigan to Perry, New York. Marked PAID 10 in Detroit. The *Advertised* 2 with 12 written under the Detroit rate stamp was added in Perry, N.Y.

WHY ADVERTISING MAY HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFUL IN THIS CASE

While addressed to a Miss Beldin in Perry, New York, the cover was also inscribed *Care of Paul Beldin /Castile*. Castile was a village not too different from Perry in the late 1840's about 10 miles distant. Both villages were south of much older and larger Batavia. Batavia, however, had a 19th century newspaper – the *Republica Advocate* – only from 1811 to 1827, so only a much more distant city would have had a newspaper and it might not have circulated in Perry.

Both Perry and Castile had post offices dating back decades in the late '40s. Being remote from cities with widely circulated newspapers, both the Perry and Castile post offices must have posted hand-written lists of unclaimed letters in accordance with postal regulations. Perhaps a friend in Perry alerted Paul in Castile of the letter.

Wow, I can't believe you read all that.

A STEP TOWARD MANDATORY PREPAYMENT OF POSTAGE

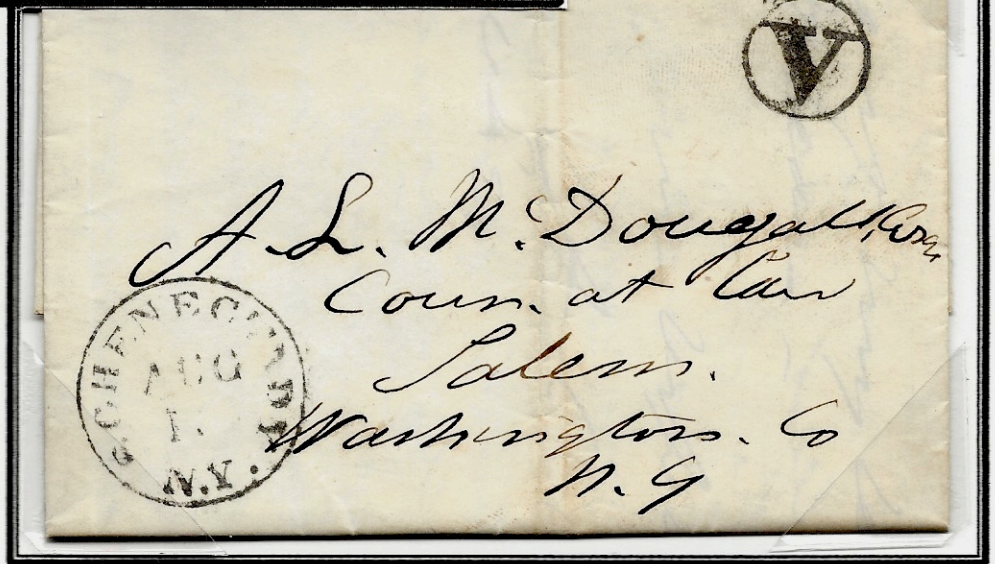
The "Postal Reform" Act of 1845 reduced letter postage. One hope was to reduce unclaimed, and consequently, dead letters. But there was little overall effect, as commercial and personal mail increased. The subsequent Act of 1851 took the bolder step of setting a low 3 cent rate for a postage paid letter going up to 3,000 miles but the higher 5 cent rate if that letter were sent postage unpaid.

PAID LETTER SENT OCT 15 1851 UNDER THE 3¢ RATE EFFECTIVE JULY 1, 1851



UNPAID LETTER SENT
TWO MONTHS EARLIER

The Schenectady post office quickly acquired a PAID 3 mark rather than a supply of stamps, and continued with the "V" mark already in use.



WAS THE 1851 RATE STRUCTURE EFFECTIVE IN REDUCING UNCLAIMED LETTERS?

Sampling the PMGs annual reports of 1850, 1852 and 1854, we find the total cost of advertising unclaimed letters as follows:

Fiscal Year 1850: **\$72,633.50**

Fiscal Year 1852: **\$63,157.12**

Fiscal Year 1854: **\$103,863.57**

In a special report prepared for Fiscal Year 1852, the PMG reported that of 86.2 million letters passing through post offices:

Paid letters were 58.4%

Unpaid letters were 37.9%

Free letters were 3.7%

but that 2.6 million unpaid letters were sent to the Dead Letter Office, while only 444,091 paid letters were sent there.

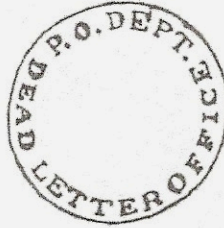
Yes, the Act of 1851 had an immediate, but short-lived, positive impact.

BUT SOME FELL INTO THE PIT

As we saw, in this early era of *stamps*, not many paid letters failed to attract their addressee. Somehow this one did fail. It's an excellent chance to see how a large post office and the General Post Office handled a dead letter.

Richfield Springs, N.Y. Paid 3

Dead Letter Office, Washington

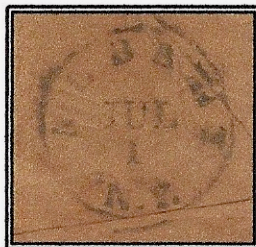


Feb 24 1852 paid from Richfield Springs, N.Y. to James C. Dexter at Albany, N.Y.

Attempting Delivery:

The letter bears no sign of advertising but is backstamped with Albany's postmark on July 1 [1852], indicating four months taken attempting delivery.

Postal regulations required the office name and date of sending on the reverse when sending a dead letter to the General Post Office.



Dead Letter Processing:

Stamped on receipt August 24 '52.
Book, Page and Date applied in blue-green ink;
Large "D" applied to designate an Alpha file;
\$10 applied to indicate money value found.

After 1847, if the addressee could not be found, money would be applied to the use of the Post Office Department until a rightful owner was identified and the money repaid.

DECENTRALIZATION: THE FIRST DEAD LETTER BRANCH

The 1849 Gold Rush brought tens of thousands of people and hundreds of thousands of dead letters to California. Sending them back to Washington made no sense. Sanity won out in 1854. An inspector of dead letters was authorized at the San Francisco post office for all western offices. The letter below was successfully handled by the Dead Letter Branch at San Francisco.



Double rate letter postmarked Feb 20 [1865] from South Windham, Conn. to San Francisco, Cal.



Attempting Delivery:

Addressed to Oliver Allen, the letter was inspected and opened by Oliver P. Allen, an officer of the U.S. Bureau of the Mint, in view of a post officer clerk. That Oliver was not the addressee so he endorsed the letter accordingly. The letter was advertised mid-April but Not Called For. In mid-May the letter was sent down the hall from Delivery to the Dead Letter clerk with the required post office name and date sent.

Dead Letter Processing:

The letter was logged into the Dead Letter Office (blue cds). When opened, content of value must have been found, since the letter was not immediately set aside to be burned. Blue pencil markings may be clerical notations, but there is no indication how the correct Oliver Allen was found. Notice, however, the name *Lydia* penciled below the blue "2". Could that be the writer?

INNOVATION: THE RETURN ADDRESS

In the late 1850s, postmasters were encouraged to urge letter writers to "indorse letters with their name on the front" to give the Dead Letter Office a leg up on its burden. The Act of 1860 made official the incentive of returning unclaimed letters to writers rather than sending them to the Dead Letter Office. The 1863 Act clarified that such returns would be charged with postage. The POD also offered to pre-print stamped envelopes with Return Address and Return to Writer instruction conforming to its guidelines.



Plain envelope with Return to Sender card pre-printed top left allowing the Hudson, N.Y. post office to return this unclaimed letter directly rather than sending it to the Dead Letter Office.

Return to Sender card pre-printed on embossed envelope purchased from the Richfield Springs, N.Y. post office.

In his report on fiscal year 1865, PMG Dennison included this: "The introduction of stamped envelopes bearing a request for the return to the writers of unclaimed letters has considerably increased the sale of envelopes, and is believed to have diminished the returns to the Dead Letter office. To encourage the purchase of *request envelopes*, the law should be changed so as to allow the return of such letters to the writers free of postage. and without reference to the cost of manufacture [as stamps are now]."

THE ALTERNATIVE

Even in the 1880s letters in the millions still went to the Dead Letter Office, many for want of the very useful Return Address. The letter below presents the textbook procedure for handling a piece of pre-printed postal stationery unwittingly posted without providing the expected return address.



March 19 1884 Newark Valley to Owego, N.Y. - 10 miles apart in Tioga County

Unclaimed Letter Processing at a Class 4 Office:

1. Receive the letter about midnight on March 19; wait about a month for the addressee to claim it
2. Advertise the letter; mark the fact and the date (APR 23) on the letter's face; wait another month.
3. Mark the letter UNCLAIMED, the reason for sending it to the Dead Letter Office.
4. Mark the back of the letter with town name and date (MAY 24) remitted to the Dead Letter Office. The letter was included in the May 1884 bundle of Unclaimed, Refused and Unmailable matter sent from Owego to the Dead Letter Office at Washington and duly marked as received early June.

RETURNING MORE STUFF

Approaching 1860, the Dead Letter Office took in about 2 million unclaimed letters a year but found "value" in only 1% of them. The other 99% were burned, so the workload was 1,650 letters per month. In April 1860 Congress "authorized" the Post Master General to begin returning "ordinary" dead letters, including 3rd class matter. That was a game-changer for the Dead Letter Office.



September 13 [1862] letter directed to A. K. Nesbitt at Camp Sprague, aka Finley General Hospital.

Deposited at the Pittsburgh post office unpaid (as soldier mail?). Held For Postage unopened. Sent to the Dead Letter Office after 30 days. When opened the writer was identified and the cover, with content, was sealed in a fresh envelope and directed to the Pittsburgh postmaster for delivery. 6 cents postage was required upon delivery; we can assume it was paid.

THE HAZEN LABEL

By 1866, studies ordered by the PMG determined that the "greatest evil preventing delivery of letters" was the fault of writers. Even "educated people" did not address their letters in legible handwriting to the proper post office. This caused many unclaimed letters at delivery offices, and many failures to deliver dead letters out of the General Post Office. The problem festered until 1884.



Between 1884 and the 1910s, variations of the "Hazen" label were applied to dead letters being delivered by the DLO.

Oct 22 1884 Shamokin to Blackwell, Pa. (not a post-town)

How did this letter get treated?

It is not apparent how this letter was returned to Shamokin, but on Oct. 24th it was sent from there to the Dead Letter Office. Marked MISDIRECTED by the DLO, INSUFFICIENCY OF ADDRESS service was provided and the original envelope, with "Hazen" label (OXA1) and content, was sealed in a Returned Dead Letter envelope and sent out for delivery to the named addressee by a post-office we will never know.

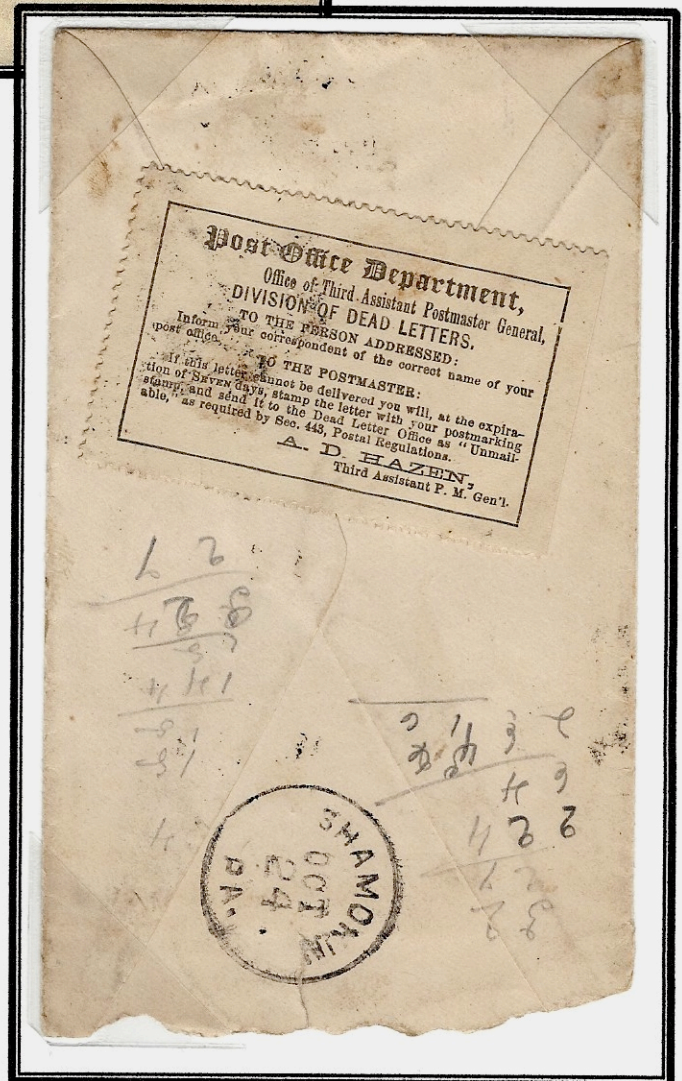
What does the label say?

TO THE PERSON ADDRESSED: Inform your correspondent of the correct name of your post office.

TO THE POSTMASTER: if this letter cannot be delivered you will, at the expiration of seven days, stamp the letter with your postmarking stamp and send it to the Dead Letter Office as "Unmailable", as required by Sec. 443, Postal Regulations.

How effective was this effort?

That the label continued to be used for a generation of writers, I would say "of questionable value". I've not yet found an Analysis among the PMG annual reports to Congress.

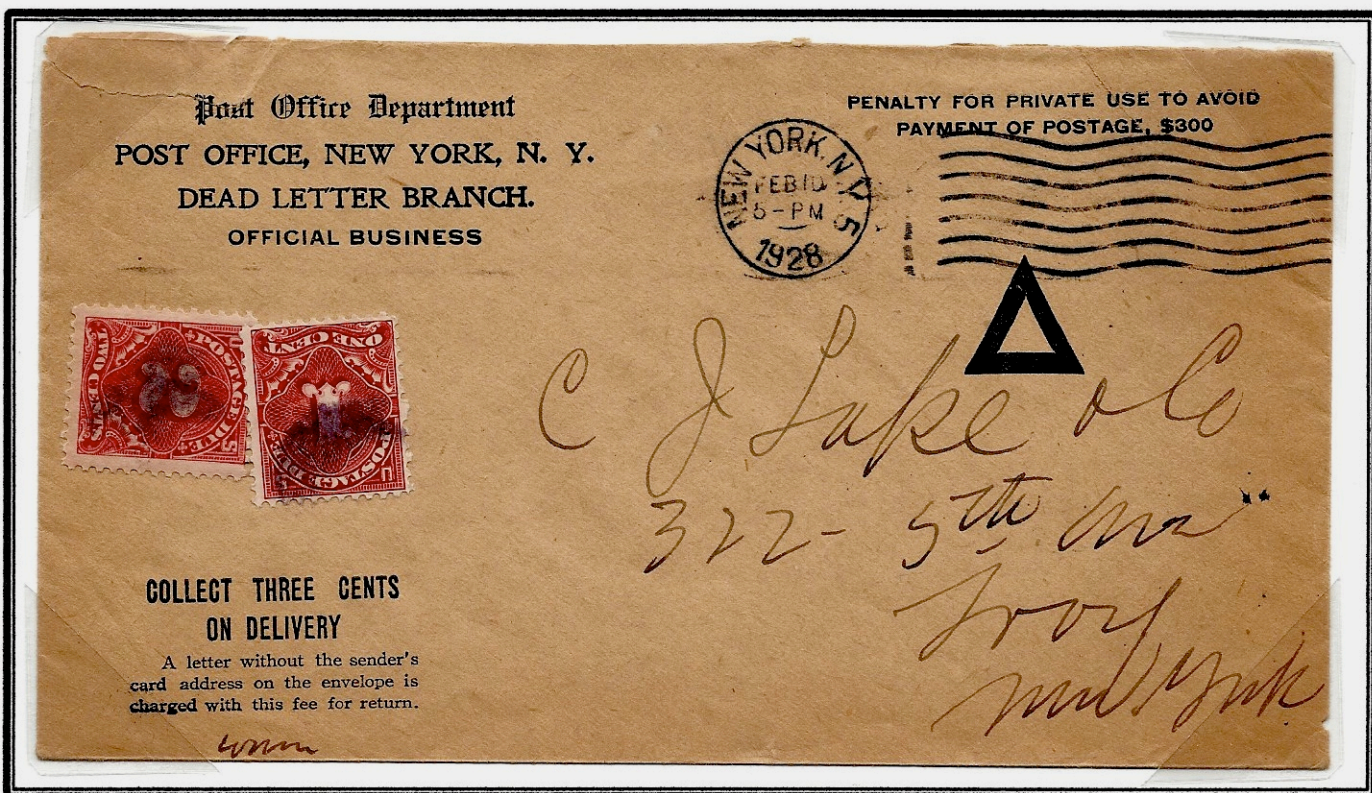


DEAD LETTER ENVELOPES

Beginning 1877, the DLO was provided envelopes and wrappers for its official business. Initially free, fees were required in 1919. Symbols were used to classify contents: a double triangle for matter of small value not registered; a triangle for "ordinary" letters.



Penalty envelope (UO16) attempts delivery from Washington to original addressee in North Easton, Mass. About 20% of these attempts failed and came back to the DLO for a second try (as anticipated by the "Hazen" label). Below, a 3 cents fee was required because Lake & Co. did not provide a *return address* on their stationery.

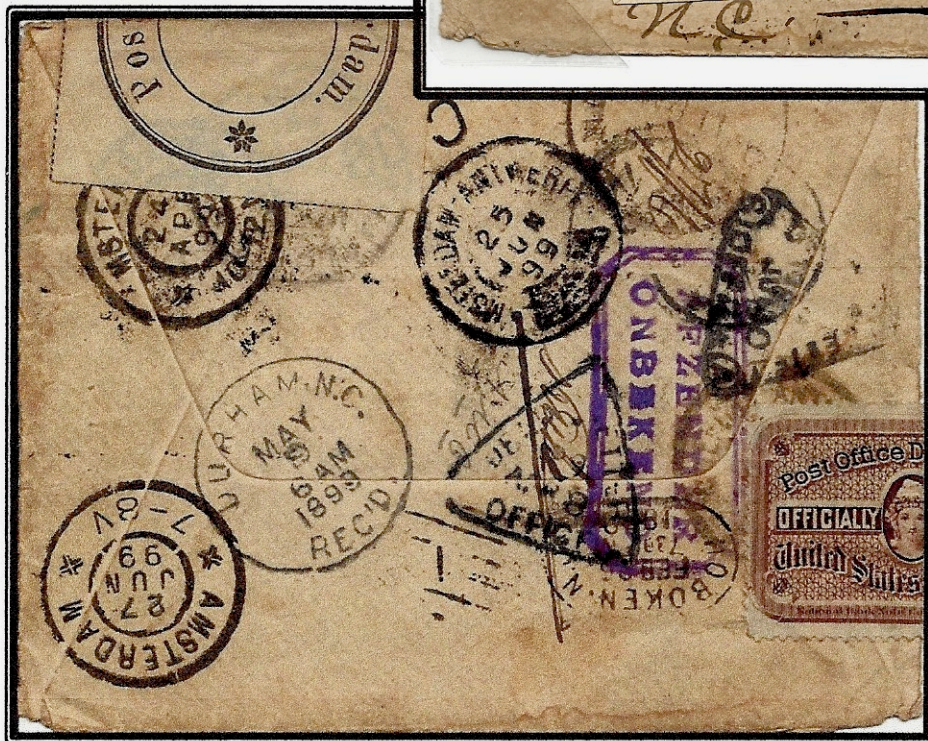


IT CAME FROM ACROSS THE SEA

Most countries with postal systems had Dead Letter Offices. The Foreign Division of the U.S. Dead Letter Office consistently handled about 5% of all dead letters arriving each year. Some had been previously advertised when local newspapers were published in appropriate languages. Any foreign letters received at the DLO were bundled and returned to the country of origin, unopened, under mutual postal exchange agreements. Letters by U.S. writers unclaimed in other countries were returned if possible.

This well-traveled cover left Amsterdam February 1899 for Hoboken, N.J. directed to H. Heye. It was *Opened through mistake* by J. Hale in Hoboken and sent to the Dead Letter Office the first time.

Sent to the Dutch authorities as a dead letter, it was readdressed by them to Durham, N.C. where, again, it could not be delivered and was sent to the DLO a second time and they bounced it back to Holland, where local authorities started looking for the sender



.....It is now June 1899.

Dutch postal authorities, unable to identify the writer, marked the letter AFZENDER / ONBEKEN which should have ended the matter.

But someone pasted on a handwritten note "volgens informatie te gasthuis H. Heye thans te Bennekom". In English "according to hospital information, H. Heye is now in Bennekom".

The fact the piece exists suggests Mr. Heye was indeed found in the small town of Bennekom, Netherlands.

DECLARING MAIL FRAUDULENT

While such misuses of the post had existed for a hundred years or more, 1868 was the first year the Postmaster General declared financial "gift schemes", lotteries, fictitious names and pornography to be illegal uses of the mails. Letters directed to those businesses were intercepted by vigilant postal clerks and sent directly to the Dead Letter Office. These letters were opened, the contents recorded, then returned to senders bearing a stamp declaring the addressee FRAUDULENT.



Intercepted May 5, processed May 7, returned May 9



These letters were never allowed to become unclaimed.

20TH CENTURY REASONS FOR RETURNING MAIL

The Post Office Department was the foundational bureaucracy for our country. Once it created a procedure, it attempted to pull every new technology into its matrix. While that didn't work with the telegraph and not well with the railroads, they lassoed the post card didn't they? "But to what end" you ask? Simple: if it cannot be delivered we, the Department, have to do something with it!

Returned,
Time Consumed



< RETURNED FOR / INSUFFICIENT TIME

After 10 days, return to
THE ROSICRUCIAN FELLOWSHIP,
Mt. Ecclesia,
OCEANSIDE, CALIFORNIA.
Return postage guaranteed.

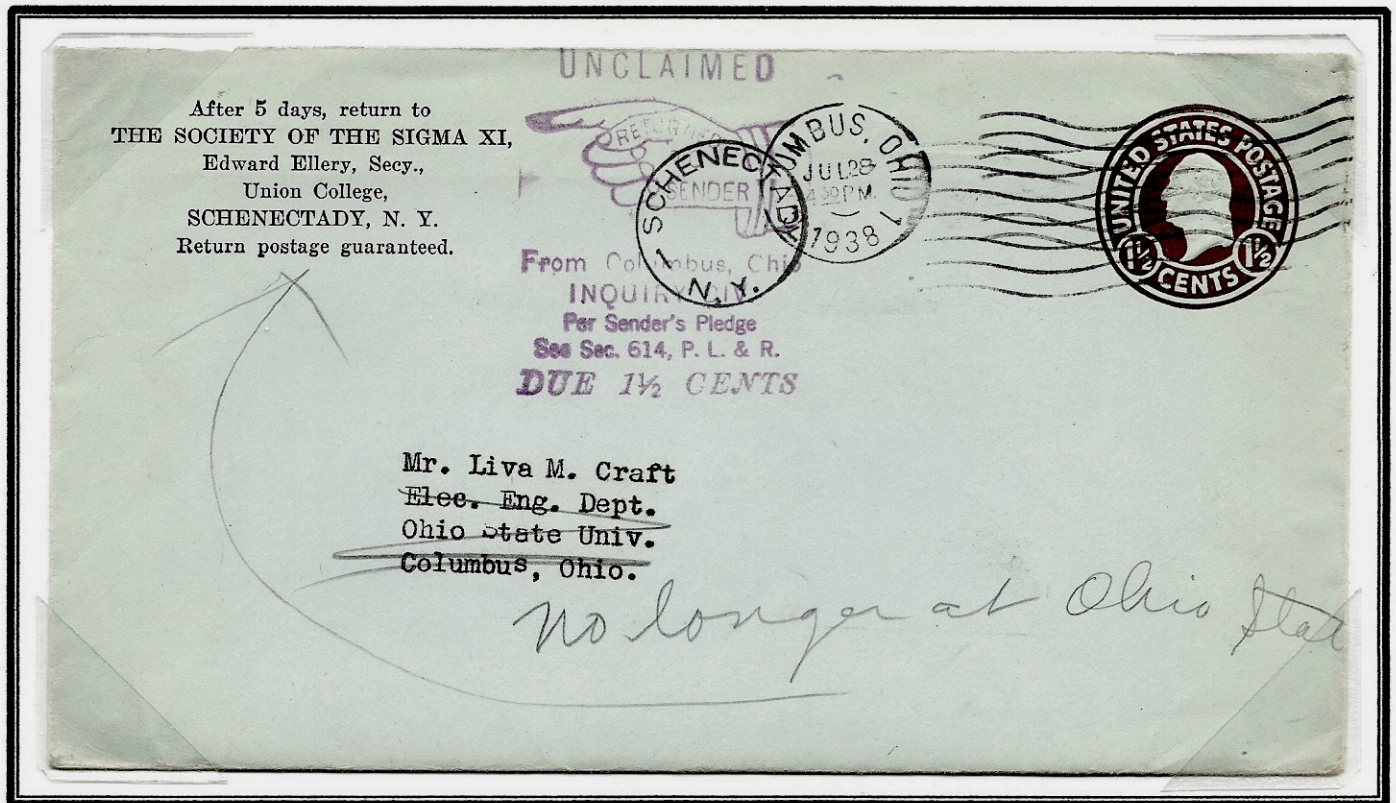
MR EMIL PIEL
SIBYLLEGATAN 83 111
STOCKHOLM SWEDEN

RETURNED TO SENDER ACCOUNT LACK
OF TRANSPORTATION FACILITIES.

And the best of all {drum roll} RETURNED TO SENDER ACCOUNT LACK OF TRANSPORTATION FACILITIES

THE SENDER'S PLEDGE

The Dead Letter Office had been destroying more than a million circulars a year since the 1870s as "worthless". Commercial mailers may have objected to that characterization, so the Post Office Department came up with an approach for discounted third class matter that allowed senders to get unclaimed pieces back - for a price. *The Sender's Pledge* provided that a piece mailed as 3rd class matter would be returned (upped to the letter rate), provided the envelope showed the promise *Return postage guaranteed*, as first provided for in Section 614 of the 1924 P. L. & R.



LET'S NOT KID OURSELVES

This may be an engineering honorary society running a fund-raising campaign at half price, but it was the business interests of America, working hard to lower the cost of their mass mailings, that drove Congress and the Post Office Department to offer more creative and deeper discounts for unsolicited mailings guaranteed to result in more unclaimed mail.

GIVING UP

The 1½¢ bulk rate mailings of the 1950s gradually mutated into the glossy direct mail by the pound of the 1980s. Then direct mail mutated into the junk mail of the 21st century. At some point 50 gallon barrels were put in the post office lobby. Now they must be emptied twice a day into the dumpster out back. The contractor, who charges this post office to pick up trash, was recently discovered to be making more selling the waste paper to a recycler than the post office received to deliver the junk mail.



[exhibitor's photos]