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BROOKLYN STREETCAR R.P.O. MARKINGS

by John M. Price, Jr. M.D.

Streetcar R.P.O. cancellations represent an intriguing group of markings in the field of railroad covers. They are far more rare than the usual railroad covers, having been used in only a few major cities and for only four decades. The Streetcar R.P.O. was used in fourteen major cities in the United States from 1891 to 1929 --the great majority of the covers dating from the first decade of the 20th Century.

Through the years the principal objective of the Streetcar R. P. O. service was to deliver bulk mail to the carrier stations and to collect the mail from the carrier offices and mailboxes along the routes of the streetcars. The initial concept of streetcar mail service apparently dates back to the May 20, 1862 patent of J. B. Murray of New York, which provided for the collection and distribution of mail matter in combination with street railroad cars on stated routes used for local passenger service. However, no record of streetcars carrying mail under this patent have turned up. The initial Streetcar R.P.O. service had to wait another thirty years.

The problems of mail distribution in a large city led Major J. B. Harlowe, who was appointed postmaster at St. Louis on January 3, 1890, to experiment during the following year with sorting and delivery of the mail in a streetcar especially fitted out for this purpose. He tested his ideas on the Lindell Avenue line and the Citizen's Railway in August 1891 and inaugurated the first regular service on the St. Louis and Florissant line on October 14, 1891.

Results in St. Louis were impressive, and the officials of the Railway Mail Service who examined them approved. Thus, by 1894, the Postmaster General recommended an extension of the service in his Annual Report. Congress acted the following year and designated street railways as official postal routes. They were first as-

signed to the Railway Mail Service, but were later placed under the control of the local postmasters, inasmuch as they operated entirely within city boundaries.

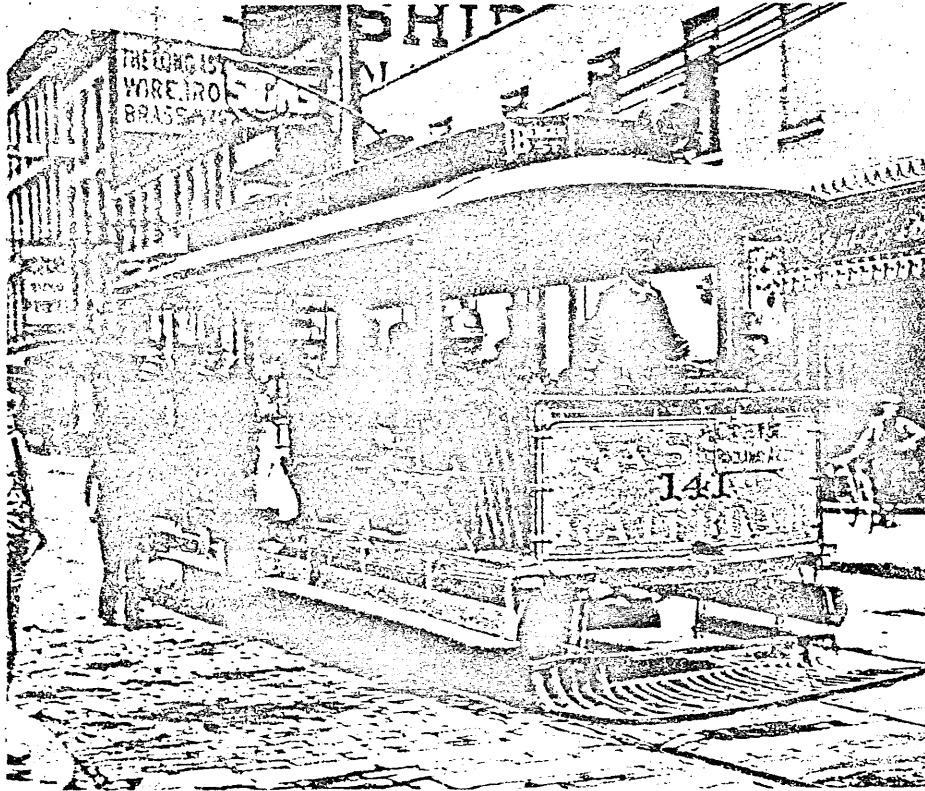


Figure 1. Typical Brooklyn streetcar of 1899.

Brooklyn was the second city in the United States to install a Streetcar R.P.O. mail service. The initial service began on August 8, 1894 on the Brooklyn & Coney Island R.P.O. and was operated under the postal contracts of the Atlantic Avenue Railroad Company. The service was from the General Postoffice in downtown Brooklyn to the Union Depot (at 5th Avenue and 36th street, almost at the city boundary). At the Union Depot the mail was transferred for the Coney Island run.

Legal difficulties initially prevented a through run, although the Atlantic Avenue company held the lease on the Brooklyn, Bath and West

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End R. R. Cars Nos. 1, 5, and others serviced such long-forgotten communities as West Brooklyn, Lessers Park and Unionville, all since absorbed by the city. A combination R.P.O. smoker, No. 101, went via Adams Street to Thirty-Sixth Street on the Atlantic Avenue Railway tracks. 2/ This initial Brooklyn service ended May 2, 1896 when the Atlantic Avenue R.R. was leased to the Nassau Railroad Company.

I have yet to locate a cover from this initial service, although I have been able to assemble some 50 Brooklyn R.P.O. covers ranging from 1899 to 1906 as part of an overall study of early picture post cards and covers of Brooklyn.

Figure 1. illustrates a typical early streetcar in Brooklyn in 1899. It is from the Bryon collection, Museum of the City of New York. A streetcar such as this would have the seats stripped out and sorting trays, etc. installed to turn it into a 'railway mail car'.

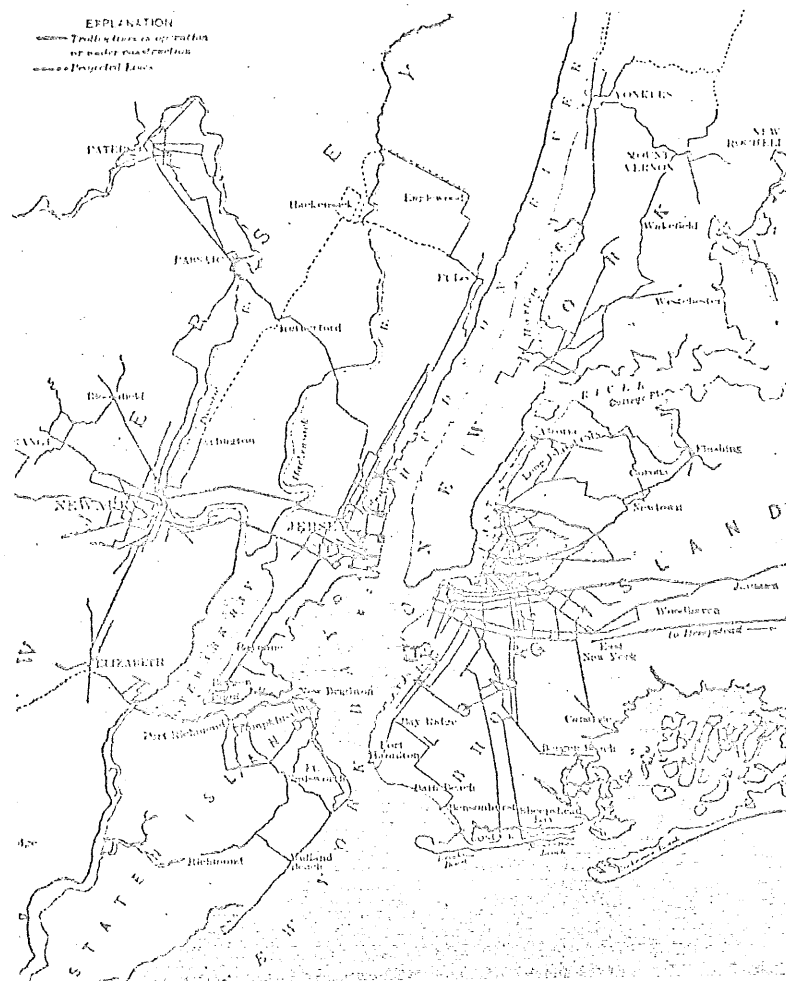


Figure 2. Existing and projected trolley lines in 1896 for the New York area.

It is possible to visualize the potential extent of the Brooklyn streetcar R.P.O. system from the map, Figure 2., which appeared in Harper's Weekly on August 1, 1896. It shows the existing and projected trolley lines around New York. The accompanying text pointed out that the trolleys brought shoppers to the city who had hitherto patronized local 'village' stores, and gave city dwellers access to outlying real estate developments and parks. 3/ As Kouwenhaven's 1953 The Columbia Historical Portrait of New York phrased it 'rather than taking passengers away from the railroads, the trolleys seem to have created a new patronage of their own.' 4/

Even before the demise of the Atlantic Avenue R.P.O. service, two additional Brooklyn services were inaugurated. Operating on the Brooklyn City R.R. lines, official trial trips of the Brooklyn & Long Island City R.P.O. and the Fulton Street R.P.O. took place on December 16, 1895. Regular service began on the following Friday, December 18th. The first of these services, northbound to Long Island City, ceased operation February 20, 1899 and was replaced by closed pouch service.

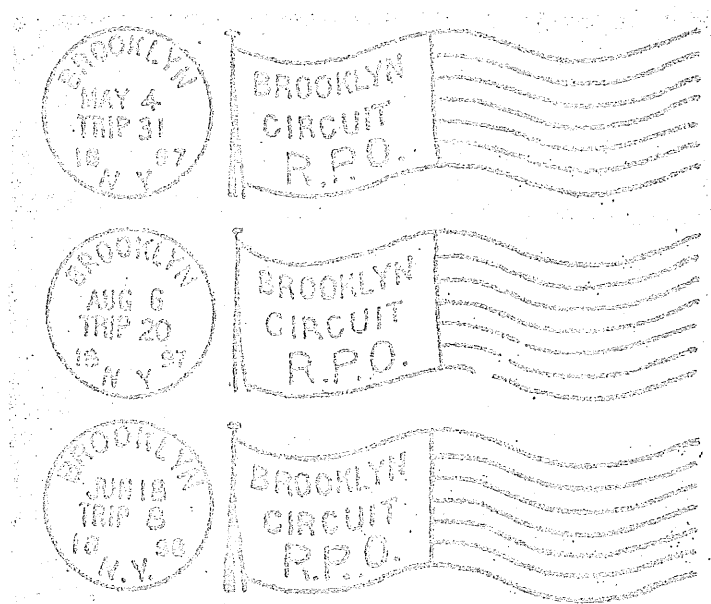


Figure 3. Initial postmarks of the Brooklyn Circuit Route.

The Brooklyn Circuit Route

A fourth service was inaugurated February 3, 1896. This was the Brooklyn & Queens County R.P.O. which operated almost entirely on the lines of the Brooklyn, Queens County & Suburban R. R. Company. Subsequently, this line became part of the Brooklyn Rapid-Transit Company which, after being incorporated in the late 1890's gradually

purchased or leased every other street railroad in Brooklyn. About a month after its inauguration the Brooklyn & Queens County R.P.O. was merged with the Fulton Street R.P.O. The result was the Brooklyn Circuit R.P.O. which began on March 13, 1896 and ran until Monday, August 31, 1914.

Figure 3. shows the type of initial markings used on the Brooklyn Circuit R.P.O. The markings are illustrated in Norman Hill's basic work, Street-Car R.P.O.'s of the U.S.A., published in England in 1965. Figure 4. shows the earliest cancel in my own collection, a Brooklyn Circuit R.P.O. marking of September 10, 1897. As can be seen it overlaps the time of use of the flag cancellations reported by Mr. Hill.

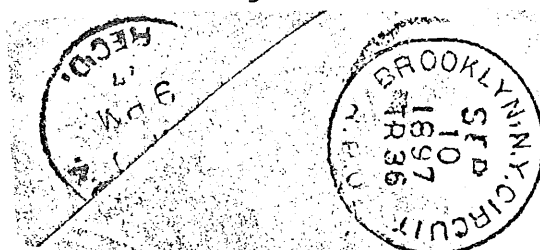


Figure 4. Earliest Brooklyn Circuit circle strike. Mailed at 5 p.m., this trip 36 provided late evening service the same day in Brooklyn.

This letter is from Paterson, N.J. September 10, 1897, postmarked 5 P. M. It is postmarked with a backstamp Brooklyn 9 P.M. REC'D of that day and went out on Train 36 that evening toward Monroe St., where it was addressed. We no longer get such fast service today.

My next earliest circuit cancel is illustrated as Figure 5. Dated May 12, 1899, this is the earliest recorded version with the 'CIRCUIT' abbreviated. Two slightly different versions of this 'CIR.' marking have been reported by Hill on the same date in 1901, Figure 6. Both are from different trips (TR) while the letter placement is different each from the other and each from my 1899 type. I do record a similar example to his TR.5 on June 13, 1901.

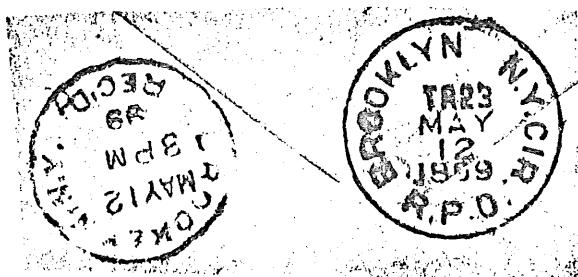


Figure 5. Backstamp on Raubsville, Pa. (DPO) May 12, 1899 letter reaching Brooklyn 3PM that day. 29mm circle.

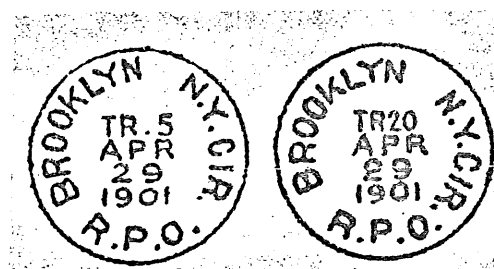


Figure 6. Two 29mm circle varieties reported by Hill with different spacings--both on same day.

The spelled-out 'Circuit' version is the most common of the Brooklyn Circuit markings. There are at least three varieties noted by Mr. Hill--a 28mm circle with 2½mm tall letters of 1903, a 29mm circle with 3½mm letters of 1902, and a 29mm circle with 3mm tall letters of 1906, Figure 7. I do not have a specimen of the small letter variety. The larger varieties I record from April 30, 1902-Sept. 4, 1906 in both a 30mm and 29mm version with no use pattern by date that I have yet been able to ascertain. Two are illustrated here as Figure 8.

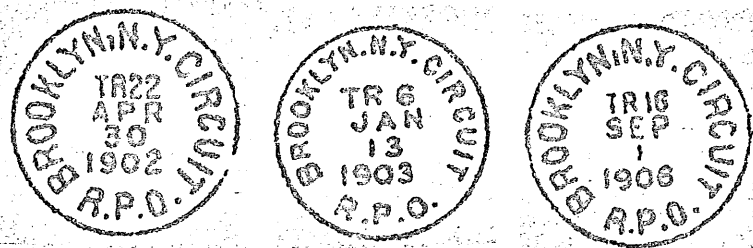


Figure 7. Three varieties of the large Brooklyn Circuit circle--all 29mm.

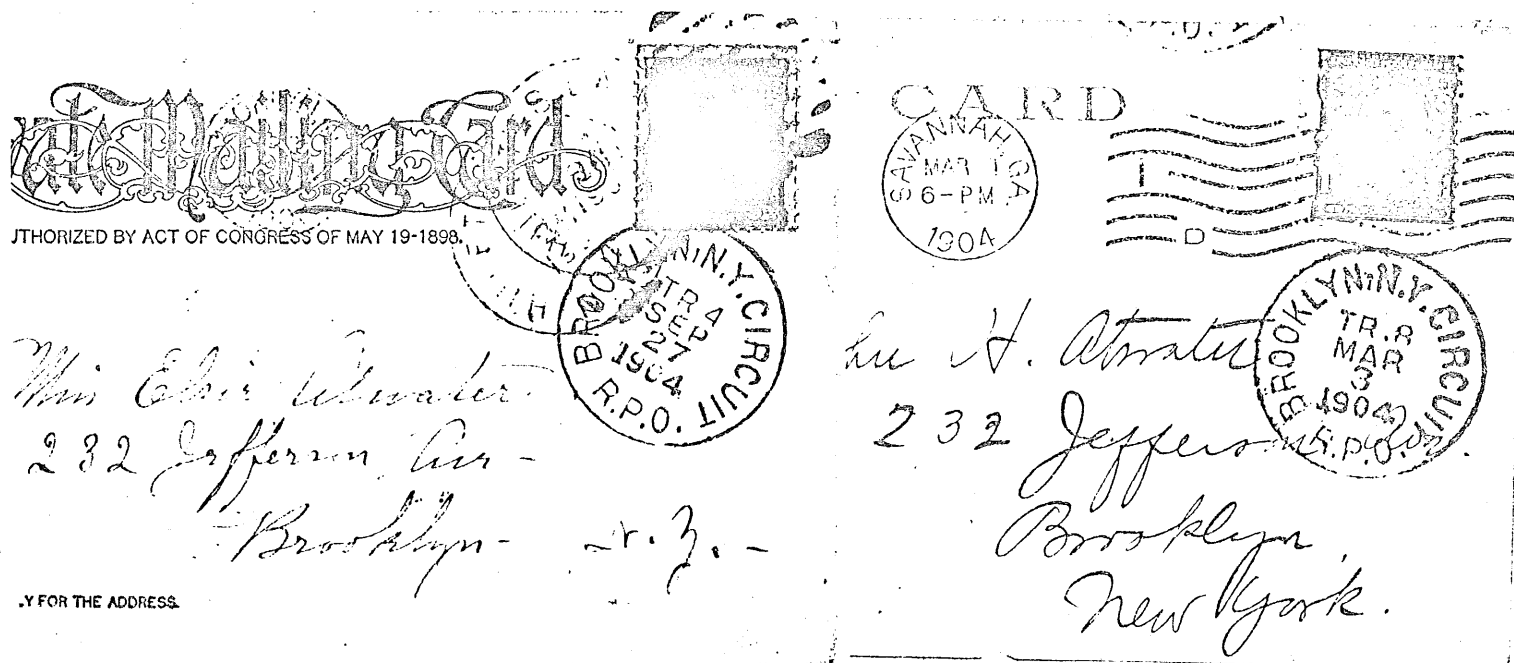


Figure 8. Two examples of the 30mm spelled out 'circuit' handstamp used in 1904 to the same address. This is the most common marking.

Figure 9, shows the 29mm CIRCUIT with 3 mm tall letters in a duplex with a RMS and 6-bar vertical oval. Those in my collection run from May 3, 1905 to September 5, 1906.

Looking at the trip numbers, the highest I have recorded is that of 9 P.M. receipt, Trip 36. We find Trip 16 at 10 a.m. indicating that almost half the trips are in the early morning. With Trip #23 reported at both 2:30 and 3:00 p.m. it would appear that the evening trips run about every half hour while there is a somewhat more relaxed schedule between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m.--approximately 45 minutes between each trip.

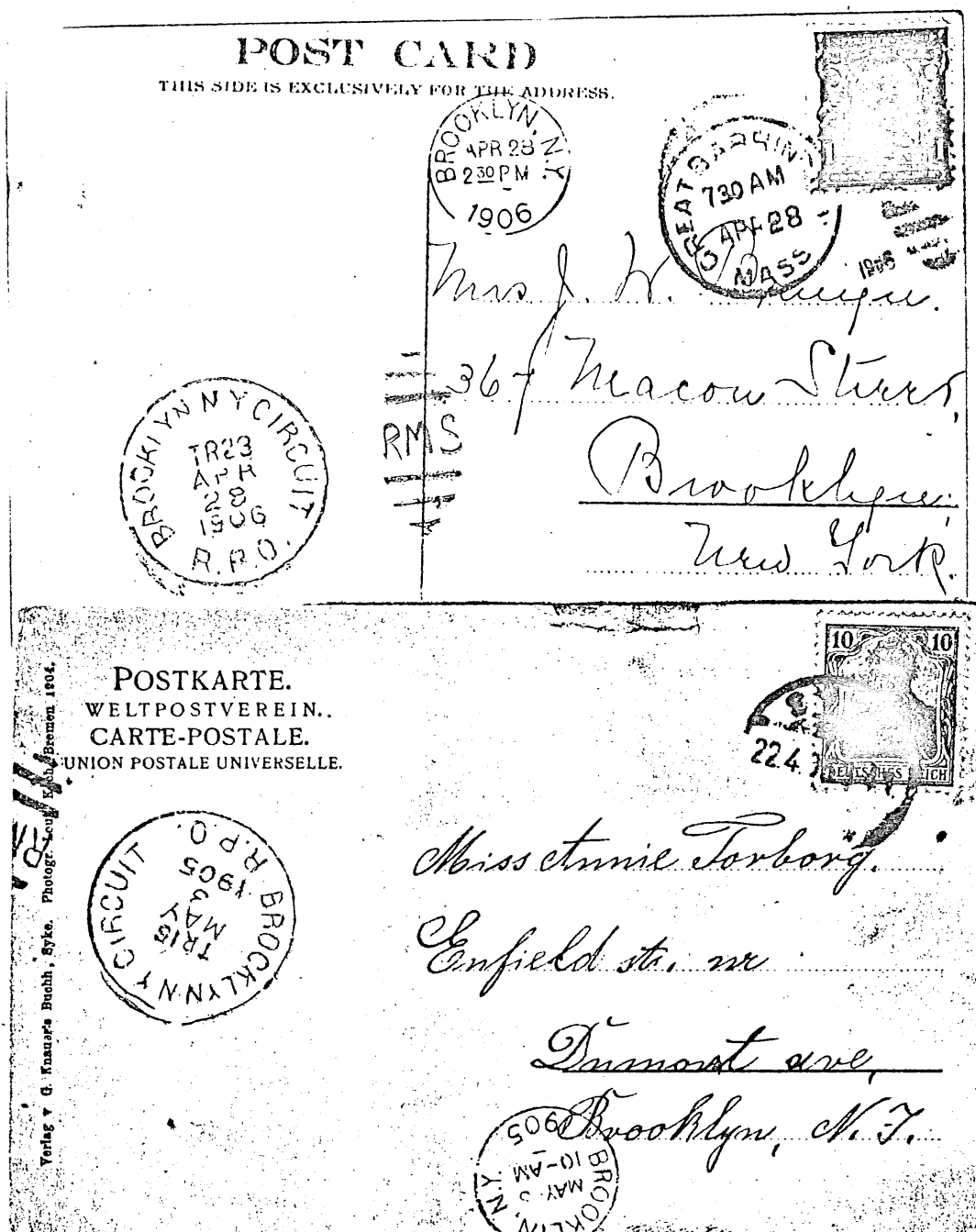


Figure 9. Two examples of the previously unrecorded Brooklyn Circuit duplex. Both slightly strengthened. The earliest recorded--5/3/05--is unusual in being on a postcard from Germany.

The South Shore R.P.O.

The South Shore R.P.O. might be considered a successor to the Coney Island R.P.O. previously discussed. The route was established Monday, Valentine's Day February 12, 1900 over the lines of the Western and Southern Brooklyn. It lasted until December 5, 1906 when it was replaced by the second Brooklyn & Coney Island R.P.O., which used a somewhat different route.

There are four recorded versions of the South Shore R.P.O. strike. The most distinctive of these is a small version, Figure 10, which I record on seven copies from September 24, 1904 through September 27, 1906. This is the only Brooklyn R.P.O. to spell out the word 'trip', giving us some assurance that the TR 3 etc. numbers in the other markings refer to trips and not trolleys. A second type of cancel on this Bath Beach or Bensonhurst

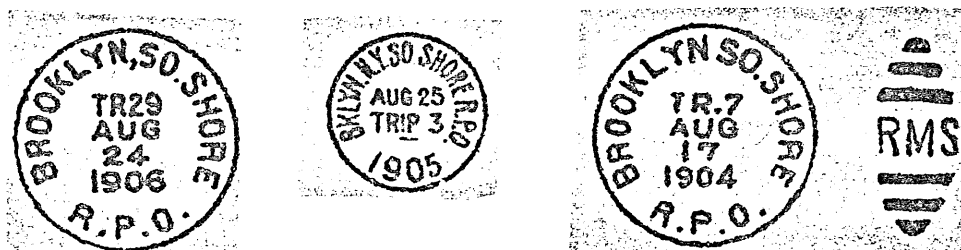


Figure 10. The three types of South Shore R.P.O. markings reported by Hill in his book.

run is illustrated here, Figure 11, on a December 12, 1904 postcard from Sweden. While I have four examples of this marking in my collection, this overseas use is perhaps the most exciting of them. A very similar strike, which I do not have, is reported in Hill's book as having a comma between BROOKLYN and SO. The position of the letters also differs slightly, Figure 10. That illustration also shows the South Shore duplex strike with the 6-bar vertical oval and RMS. The three examples in my collection date from 1906.

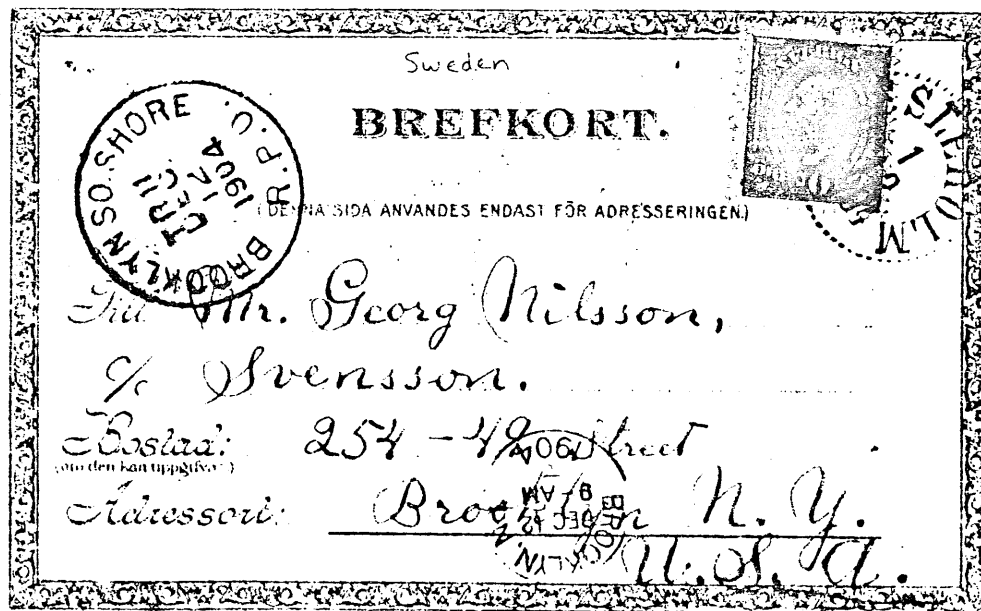


Figure 11. Swedish postcard with recording example of duplex type without duplex, used in 1904.

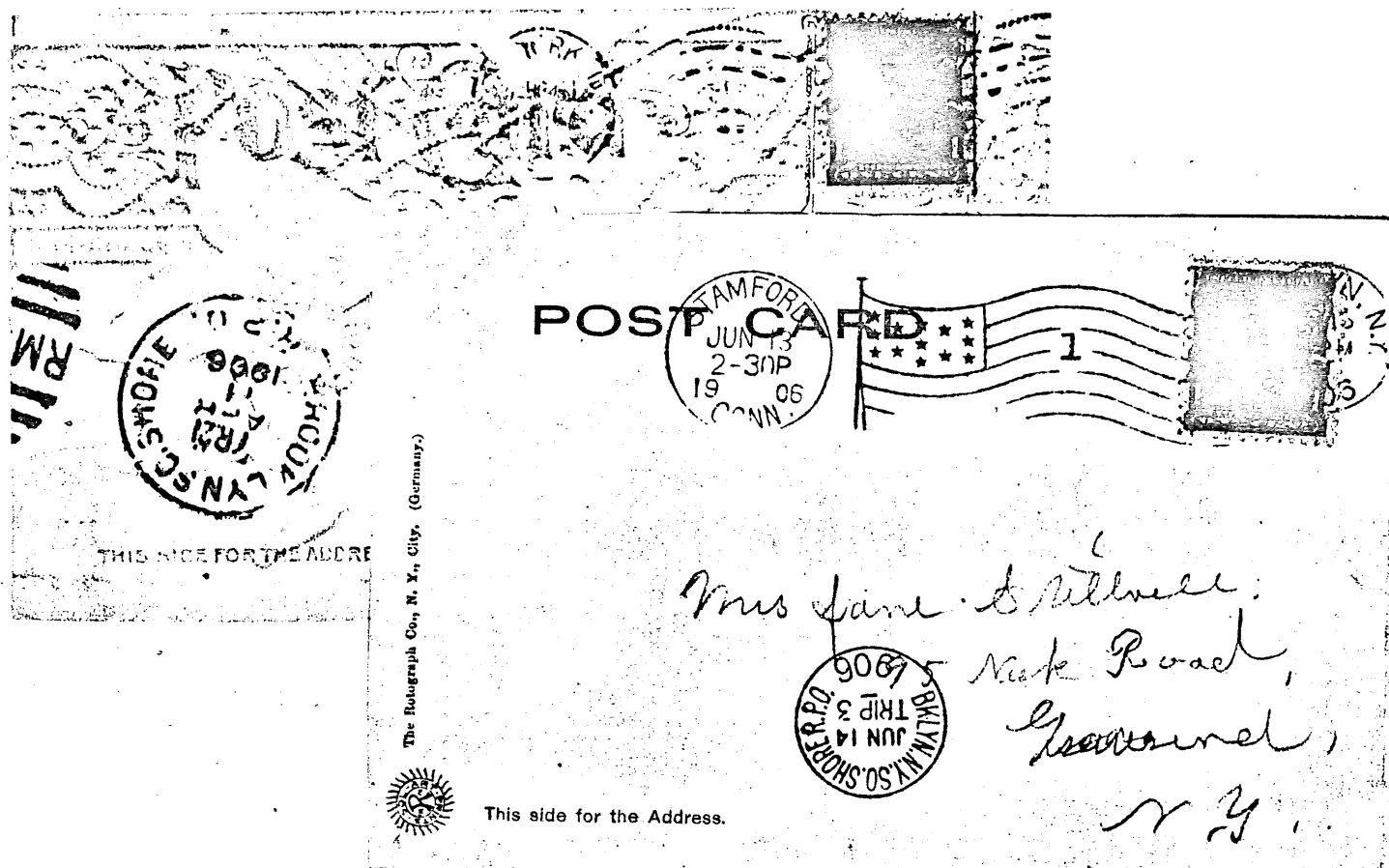
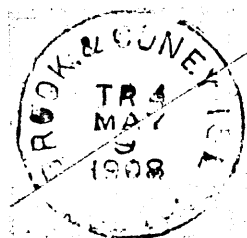


Figure 12. Two examples of South Shore R.P.O. markings from 1906. Note the different shapes of the letters in the 20mm version compared with Hill's tracings.

On September 1, 1904, a separate short trip run of the South Shore R.P.O. was inaugurated between the downtown Brooklyn General Post Office and Station C, located at Fort Hamilton. Thus far I have been unable to identify any separate cancellation associated with this trolley run.

When the South Shore R.P.O. was abolished, on December 5, 1906, this short Brooklyn & Fort Hamilton R.P.O. was introduced as a separate R.P.O. The remainder of the service was relocated from the Bath Beach run over to a more central run down to Coney Island and Sheepshead Bay. There it was established as a second Brooklyn & Coney Island R.P.O. The only example of this strike in my collection is dated May 9, 1908, Figure 13. It is found on the back of an 1908 registered letter from Station L in Brooklyn to Nassau St., New York and bears a red 'Not claimed at office of first address' straightline.

Figure 13. Brooklyn & Coney Island backstamp on letter with a 25mm duplex BROOKLYN/MAY 10/830 AM. STA L.



The End of the Line

Following the abolition of the South Shore R.P.O. there were only three R.P.O. lines left in Brooklyn. These were the Brooklyn Circuit R.P.O., the Brooklyn & Fort Hamilton R.P.O. and the Brooklyn & Coney Island R.P.O. Not a single cancellation has yet been reported from the Fort Hamilton R.P.O., while the only marking that I have been able to record past the shift of December 5, 1906 is the Coney Island strike of Figure 13.

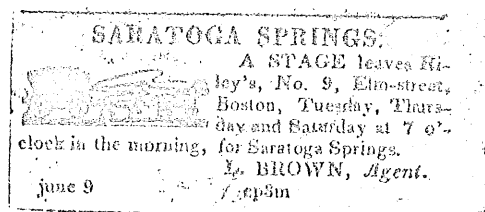
A possible explanation for the paucity of markings after 1906 is that the pickup function, characteristic of the streetcar R.P.O.'s in the earlier years, had been almost completely abandoned in favor of bulk distribution of mail between the Brooklyn G.P.O. and the branch stations.

The Brooklyn streetcar R.P.O. service officially ended on August 31, 1914 having outlasted the service in New York, San Francisco, Rochester, Washington and Seattle. Service did continue in other cities, but by the end of World War I, only Baltimore still provided streetcar R.P.O. service. Even there, by the late 1920's swarming traffic had slowed the little old cars intolerably; speedy motor trucks offered service so fast as to overcome both the advantages of distribution in transit and the lightening collections while travelling.

In light of these changes, on November 5, 1929 Second Assistant Postmaster General Smith Purdum regretfully signed an order terminating the last street railway post office in the United States. On November 9, 1929 the final trip of all was made over the old 'Tows. & Catons.' in Baltimore.

Bibliography:

1. Street-Car Railway Post Offices of the U.S.A., Norman Hill, 1965.
2. Mail by Rail, Long and Dennis, Simmons-Boardman Publishing Corp., N.Y., 1951
3. Harper's Weekly, August 1, 1896
4. The Columbia Historical Portrait of New York, Kouwenhaven, 1953.



Advertisement from the American Traveller of Boston June 23, 1826 supplied by John Gemmill.

DANGEROUS COVERS

by Arthur H. Bond

Some years ago I spotted a cover, Figure 1., with a red 34mm NEW-YORK/PAID/3 cts., where the 3 looks very much like a 5. It wasn't until much later that I decided it had to be a '3' not a '5'. It may have been this cover that was used for the original listing in the 1952 Konwiser, as it is from 1848. For Sampson's 1971 Stampless Cover Catalog, Calvet Hahn submitted another cover, Figure 2, from 1850 which resulted in the extended date range. He also reported another item of May 7, 1850.

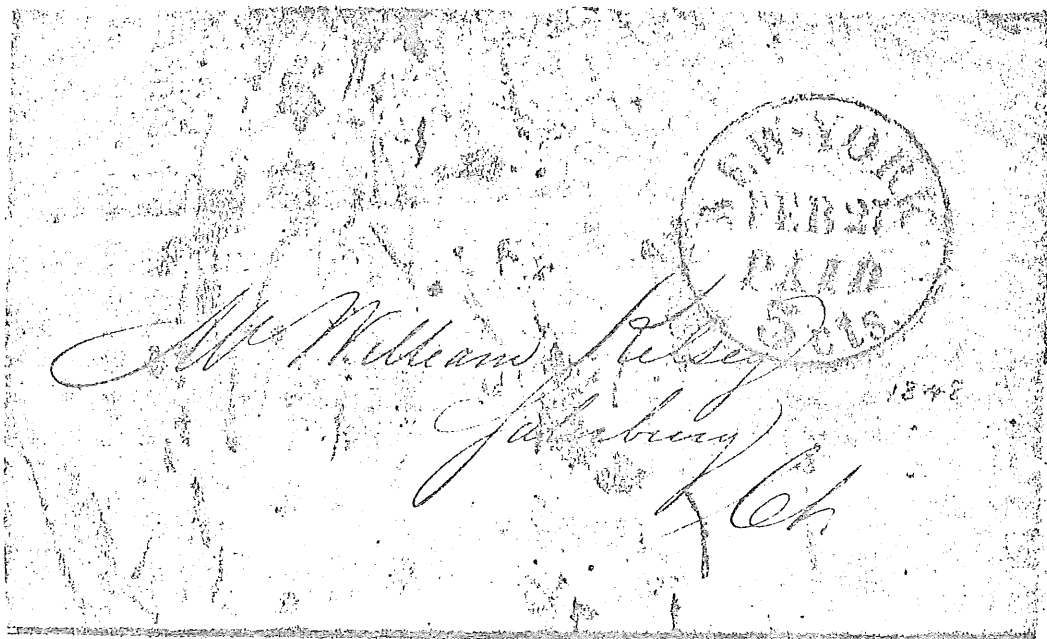


Figure 1. Orange red 34mm strike of NEW-YORK/FEB 27/PAID/5 cts. on 1848 circular of Lee & Fenton's cash dry goods warehouse.

All three reported covers were on printed circulars and were rated 3¢ under Sec. 13 of the Act of March 3, 1847 as reported in the Laws and Regulations dated April 25, 1847. Chapter 18, Sec. 138 of the Regulations provided for prepayment unless sealed, in which case they were handled as letters for 5¢, and prepayment is not required. This 3¢ circular rate lasted until July 1851.

The two covers are slightly different in color, and there is an apparent difference in the handstamps, e.g. the 'Y' and 'ct'. The '3' or '5' also appears somewhat different in the lower curve as well as in the vertical bar. Even close examination leaves a question of which numeral is there---whether a blob of ink, sliver of metal or dirt or what have you has converted a '3' to a '5'---or, perhaps a wrong numeral was inserted. However, there can be no question that the only applicable rate is 3¢.

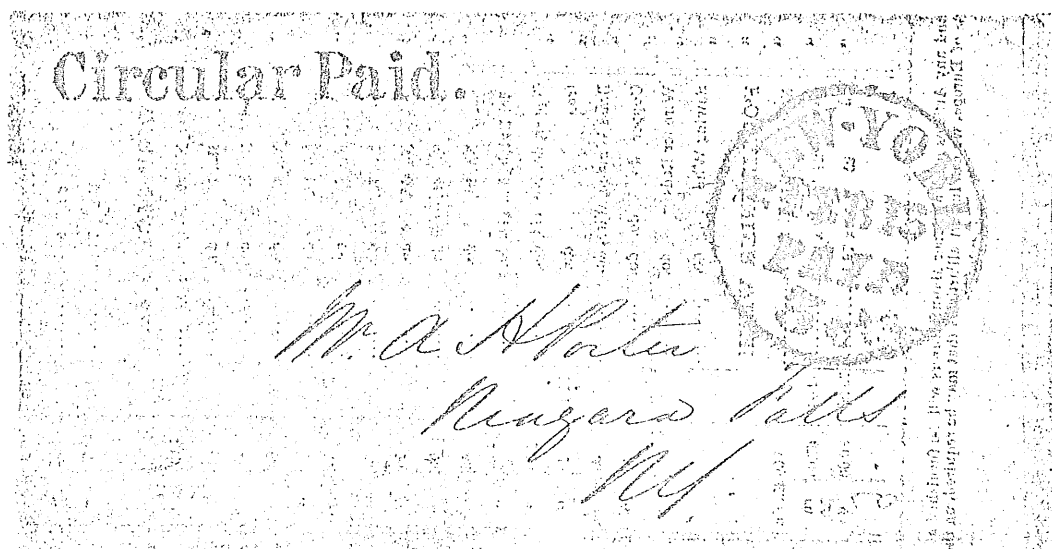


Figure 2. Red. 34mm circle NEW-YORK/FEB 13/PAID/5 cts. and blue 53x6mm Circular Paid. on printed circular of Cyrus W. Field's Paper Warehouse of 1850.

What is important is that covers of this nature are available to have a 5¢ 1847 added. There is reason to believe this may already have occurred in one or two cases. However, every example of a stampless cover with this odd '5' has been a printed circular in the pre-1851 period and therefore a '3¢' rated cover. As a result, collectors should beware of any such covers bearing adhesives as they are unlikely to represent genuine use.

TRIPLE PLAY

by Robert Dalton Harris

Before the war of 1812, Joseph Brainard built a toll bridge over the Kinderhook smack in the middle of Rensselaer County's southern border with Columbia County. He kept a tavern there as well and people clustered about into a village that they called Brainard's Bridge. The postoffice, under Jeremiah Brainard was opened on January 24, 1812 and lasted until the office was renamed Brainard in 1856. On September 20, 1837, postmaster Joseph Turner, who was paid the munificent sum of \$20.69 for the preceeding year, rated a letter from William H. Tobey to Joseph Strong in Albany, Fig. 1.

The single letter rate for the 16 miles from Brainard's Bridge to Albany was 6¢, but lawyer Tobey was sending several documents to Superintendent Strong of the Albany County Clerk's Office for recording and filing so the letter would have to be multiple-rated. Perhaps Tobey was on hand to correct Turner's estimate of the

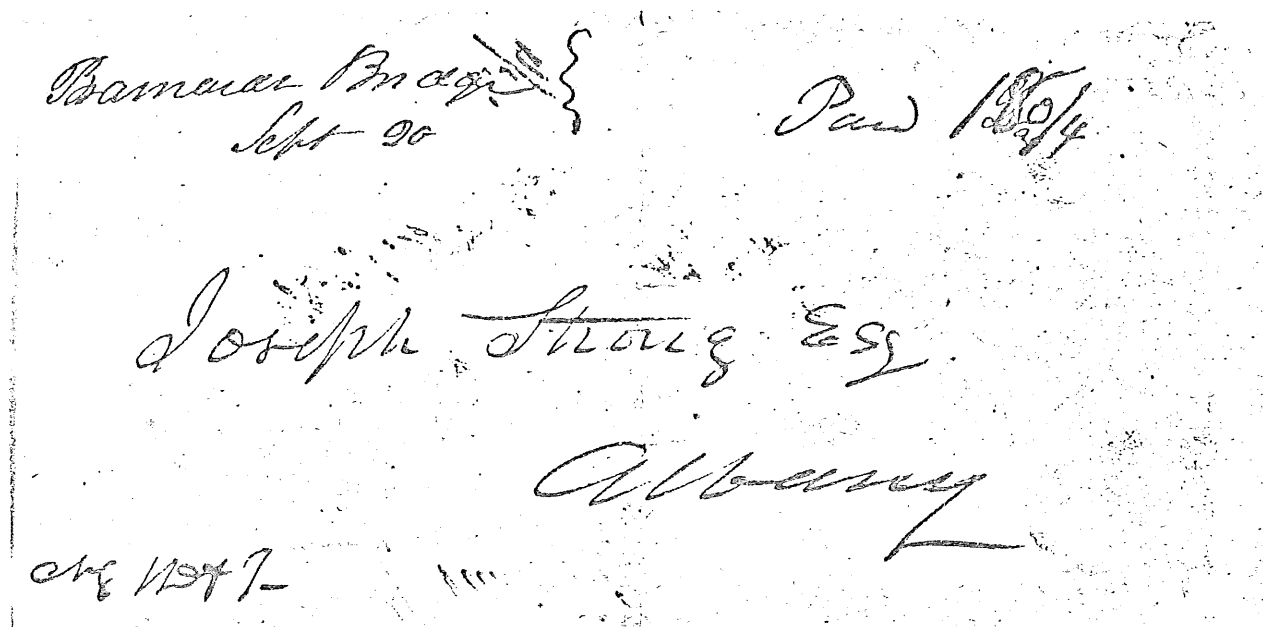


Figure 1. Manuscript Brainard's Bridge Sept. 20, 1837 and Paid 18-0/4¢ charged to p.o. account 'Box 7'.

sheets involved, because the postmaster originally wrote '12-?/2', for a double rate and then rerated it for a triple, '18-0/4'. In writing the 0/4, Turner was being careful to distinguish between the triple under 30-mile rate and the single 150-300 mile rate of 18-3/4¢ letter postage. In any case, Tobey prepaid his letter by directing that the postage be put on his bill, 'Chg Box 7'. 1/

After he recorded and filed Tobey's documents, Superintendent Strong receipted the letter by noting 'Done Sept. 21, 1837'. He then 'turned' and readdressed the outer leaf to Tobey's law partner in Kinderhook, Aaron Vanderpoel. Strong thoughtfully wrote back to Vanderpoel rather than Tobey probably to take advantage of the former's franking privilege as one of the eighth district's Congressional representatives. 2/ Apparently what Strong did not know was that Vanderpoel had been unseated. Aaron Vanderpoel was a member of the 23rd, 24th, and 26th Congresses, but not of the 25th, which sat 1837-1839. 3/

The face of Strong's note to Vanderpoel, Figure 2, bears three postally significant markings: the common red 29mm Albany circle with ornaments dated SEP/21, the 'SB 6¢', and a faint slash in the area of the '6¢'. My guess is that the slash has something to do with some postal clerk along the line falling for Strong's designation of Vanderpoel as 'M. C.', and either haphazardly indicating 'Free' or crossing out the '6¢'. The Albany town marking certainly indicated that the post office got its hands on this letter and the 'SB 6¢' seems to involve a steamboat in getting the letter to Kinderhook, several miles east of the Hudson and some 15-miles down the river from Albany.

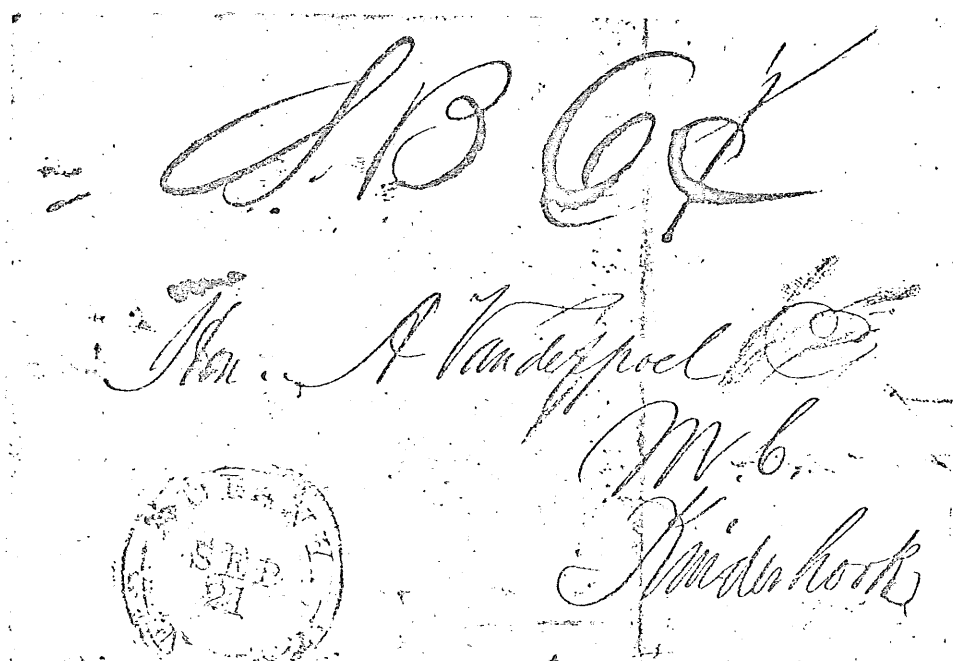


Figure 2. Red 28mm circle ALBANY/SEP/21/N.Y. with ornaments and manuscript S.B. 6¢ with a red slash in ink over the black pen.

To convey a better feeling of what these markings may imply, I quote from pages 18-20 of Ken deLisle's monograph, Hudson River Mail 1804-1858:

"To allow time for sorting, marking and delivering, to the wharf, the mails had to be closed at least one hour before the steamboat sailed. Letters brought in after the closing of the mails did not leave until the next day's sailing or by land coach mail, whichever might be more expeditious.

Throughout the peak years of steamboat service on the Hudson, the principal mail leaving both Albany and New York was the late afternoon or evening mail. In Albany, the closing time at the post office was 5 P.M., sometimes earlier.

Merchants and professional men worked to a late hour, and the afternoon closing found many of them in a desperate race with the clock. Under these circumstances, it was found convenient to provide a box on the boat into which letters could be deposited right up to the last minute before the vessel's departure. Since these letters were not processed (or even seen) at the post-office of the town in which they originated, a new class of "outside the mail" letter was created.

After being taken from the box, these late letters were placed in protective custody with the mail sacks and the whole shipment delivered to postal employees or contractors at the appropriate stop.

Such letters can today be identified by their distinctive markings. In the early days of the service the markings were applied at the receiving office, later they were stamped by the Post Office Department agents riding the boats.⁴/"

Well, from what Ken deLisle says here, I'd say that the Albany town handstamp and the 'SB 6¢' do not belong together normally on the same letter, but that they do both appear indicates that an Albany postal clerk first handled the letter and then relinquished it. Maybe the scene went something like this:

Strong walked into the Albany Post Office late in the day and dropped his letter on the counter in front of the clerk. The clerk automatically handstamped it as Strong was asking,

"Has the boat mail been closed yet?"

"Yessir. But ya can still catch 'er if ya drop yer letter in the box a' board."

"Thank you, I'll do that."

Strong retrieved his letter and deposited it in the box on board the steamboat.

And then the postal clerk at the stop down river closest to Kinderhook took Strong's loose letter in hand and rated it 'S.B. 6¢', for Vanderpoel to pay.

Tobey to Strong to Vanderpoel. How do you like that as a double play?

Notes and Acknowledgements

1. Calvet Hahn on pg. 26 of his Essays on Postal History explores "Uncle Sam's Charge Account Postal System."
2. The Postal Act of March 3, 1825 provided that each Congressman could send and receive free of postage letters not exceeding two ounces during and 60 days before and after Congressional sessions.
3. New York Civil List, page 442 (1880). The last of the sessions

of the 24th Congress in which Vanderpoel served adjourned March 3, 1837. The first of the sessions of the 26th Congress convened on December 2, 1839.

4. Ken deLisle on p. 34 of The Hudson River Mail 1804-1858 indicates that postal employees did not begin riding the boats until the private express challenges of the early 1840's.

SOME EARLY POST ROADS IN NEW YORK

From Almond, by Alfred, to Independence, in Allegany county.

From Wayne, Steuben county, to Trumansburg, in Tompkins county.

From Buffalo, in Erie, to Olean, in the county of Cataraugus, passing through the towns of Hamburg, Boston, Concord, and Ellicottsville.

From Elliott's, by Royalton, to Hartland post-office.

From the village of Greene, in Chenango county, to Cincinnatus, in Cortland county, passing through the Big Flats, in the town of Smithfield, and Livermore's tavern, in Germantown.

From Morgansville, at the mouth of the Tonnewonta Creek, in Niagara county, to Lockport.

From Potsdam, on the turnpike, by Canton, to Ogdenburg, on the mail route from Plattsburg by Malone, to Ogdenburg.

From Albany to Rensselaerville, through the towns of Bethlehem and Burn, to intersect the post-road from Albany to Susquehanna, by the way of the Delaware turnpike to Milfordville.

Passed March 3d, 1823.

From Chitteningo to Fayetteville.

From Oxford, by McDonough, and German, to Cincinnatus.

From Schenectady, by Alexander's bridge, to Ballston.

From the Albany and Schenectady turnpike, by the Ballston turnpike, to Alexander's bridge.

From Mamakating, by Neversink Falls, to Colchester.

From the village of Seneca Falls to the town of Romulus, in the county of Seneca.

From Syracuse to Tully.

From Cooperstown to Richfield Springs.

From Esperance, by Eaton's Corners, Duaneburg, and Mindville, to Amsterdam.

From Eaton's Corners, Duaneburg, Princetown, Rotterdam, to Schenectady.

From the village of Owego, through Newark, Berkshire, and Virgil, to the village of Cortlandt, in Cortlandt county.

From Watertown, by Adams, and Mansville, to Sandy Creek, and from thence to Richland, Union Square, Colosse Central Square, Cicero, and Salina, to Syracuse.

From Pike, by Eagle, to China.

From Hamburg, by Eden, and Collins, to Perrysburg.

From Fredonia, by Gerry, and St. Clairsville, to Jamestown.

From Murray, by Clarendon, and Byron, to Batavia.

From Gaines to Barre.

From Catskill, by Hunter, to Lexington, instead of going from Lexington, to Lexington Heights.

From Naham Daniels, in Russia, up West Canada Creek road, by John Graves's, to Trenton.

Passed March 3d, 1825.

