

THE POSTAL MARKINGS OF ITHACA, NEW YORK

by

Robert A. Hutchinson

(Part 1)

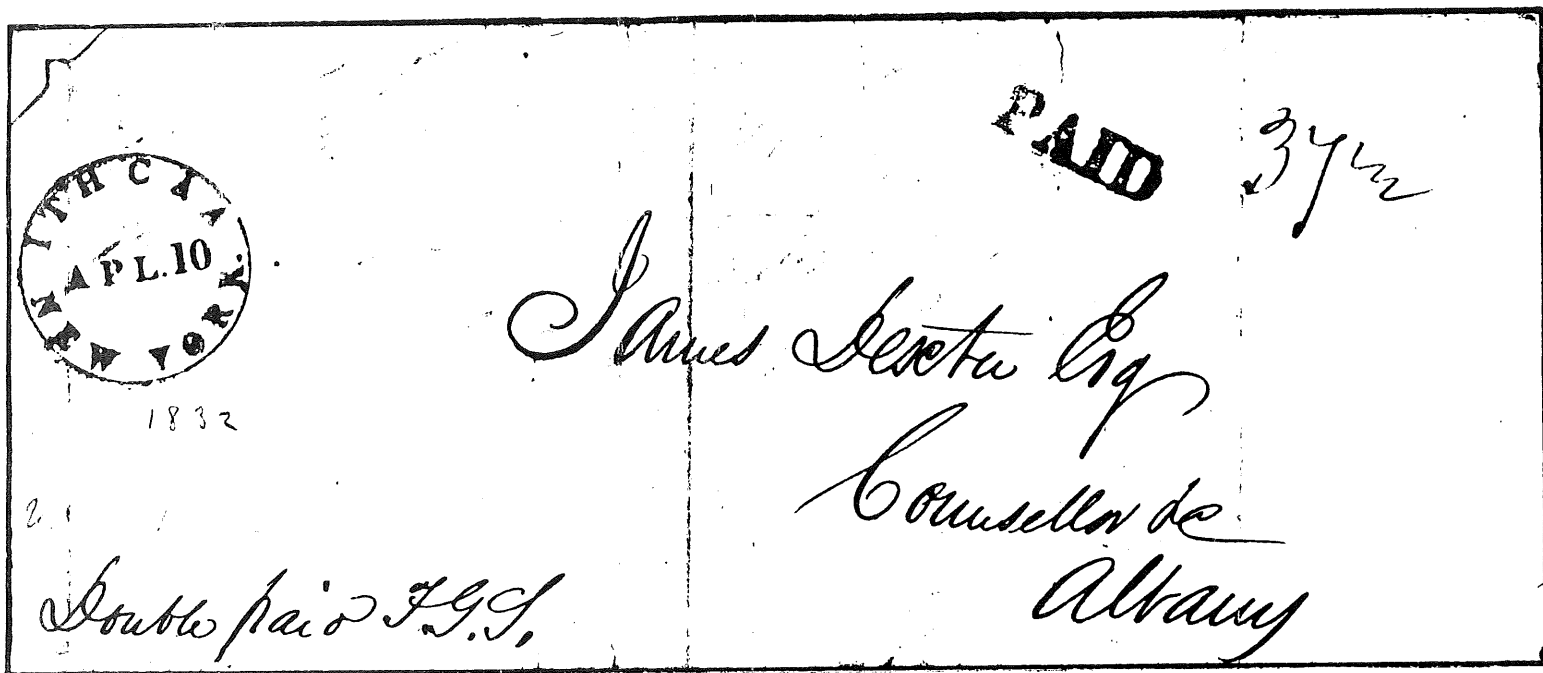


Figure 1: ITHCAA error, April 10, 1832 30mm cds. in red. 23x7mm PAID in matching color. Double rate 37 $\frac{1}{2}$ ¢ to Albany (150-400 mile zone).

Tompkins County, of which Ithaca is the county seat, lies in the south central portion of New York State around the head of Cayuga Lake. It was formed in 1817 from parts of Cayuga and Seneca Counties, with portions of Tioga and Schuyler Counties added in 1822 and 1854 to form its present boundaries.

The act of incorporation called for the courthouse to be built at Ithaca, then in the Township of Ulysses, Cayuga County, with a postal facility already established December 30, 1822 under Richard W. Pelton.

The act stipulated that the location of the courthouse in Ithaca be selected by Simeon DeWitt, New York State Surveyor-General, a position he held for over 50 years. This was no idle whim of the Legislature, for DeWitt was a person of considerable influence. He owned a large amount of land in the area and had himself named the settlement at Ithaca, honoring one of the Greek Ionian Islands, home of the mythical warrior and traveler Ulysses, after whom the township had been named.

The settlement had formerly been known only as "The Flats", first settled about 1789 and which grew rapidly after the completion of a new public road from Oxford in 1791-1793. This road became the principal way for settlers coming into the area and undoubtedly the main post road to the southern regions of the state.

Today, Ithaca is a prosperous city of 28,000 population, with great beauty and charm. It is the seat of one of the nation's leading private educational institutions, Cornell University. Ithaca College, museums, gardens and a fine crafts fair in August make it a prime tourist attraction set in one of the most pleasant sections of the state.

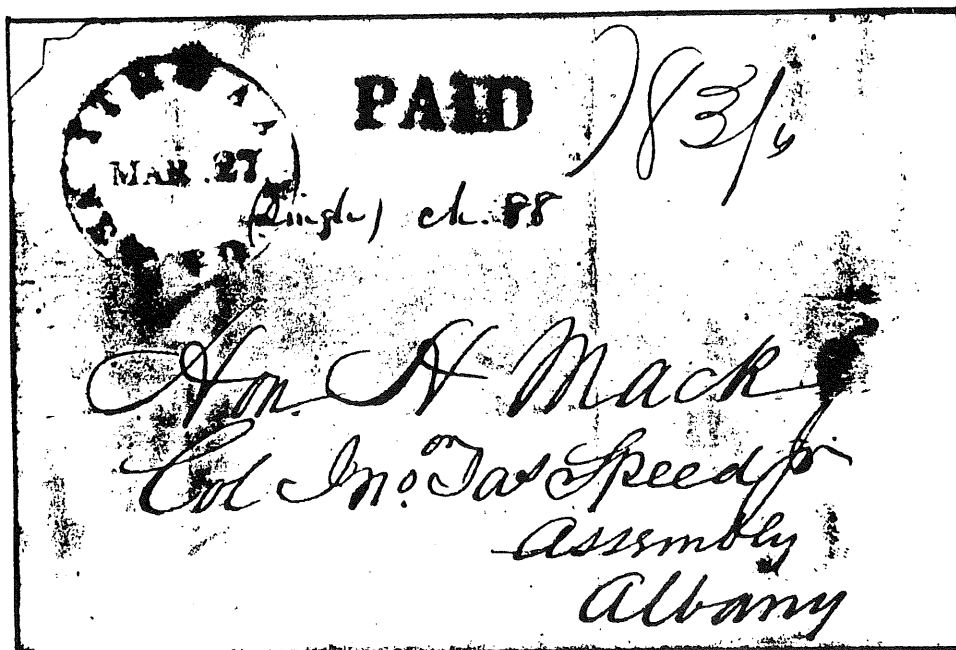


Figure 2: ITHCAA error, March 27, 1832 30mm cds. in red. 23x7mm PAID in matching color. Single rate 18-3/4¢ to Albany.

There were many mistakes made in the postmarks of the early settlements of the State of New York - inverted letters, misplaced numerals, omissions of figures or letters - but perhaps the most glaring of all was the misspelling of ITHACA in the 1832 town markings of that post office.

For a period of at least fifteen days, Postmaster Jedediah Beebe allowed letters to be despatched in the mails carrying a 30mm cds in which Ithaca was misspelled ITHCAA (Figures 1 & 2). Perhaps this mistake occurred in a longer period of time as my collection of Ithaca postmarks does not contain any other than the two errors for a period from January 31 to April 26, 1832. Figures 3 and 4 show these dates, both with proper spelling. I would be interested in learning if there are additional covers bearing the misspelled town name with dates before or after my ITHCAA items.

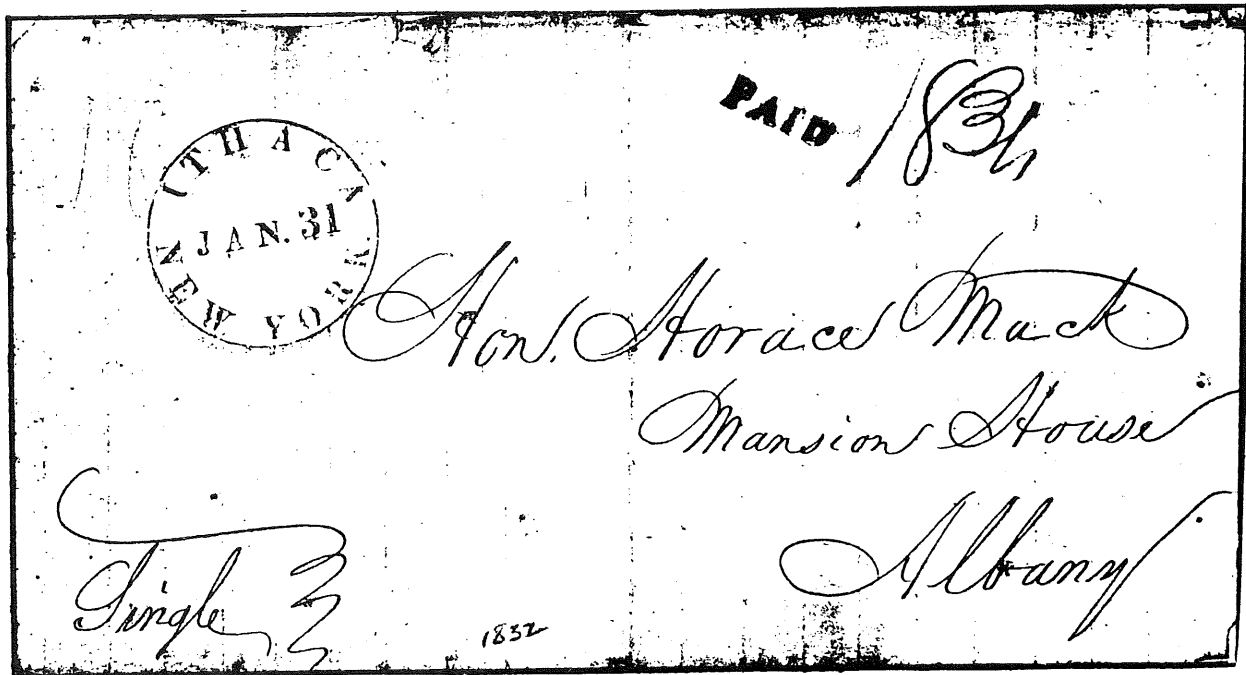


Figure 3: ITHACA, January 31, 1832 30mm cds. in black.
15x4mm PAID in matching color. Single rate to Albany.

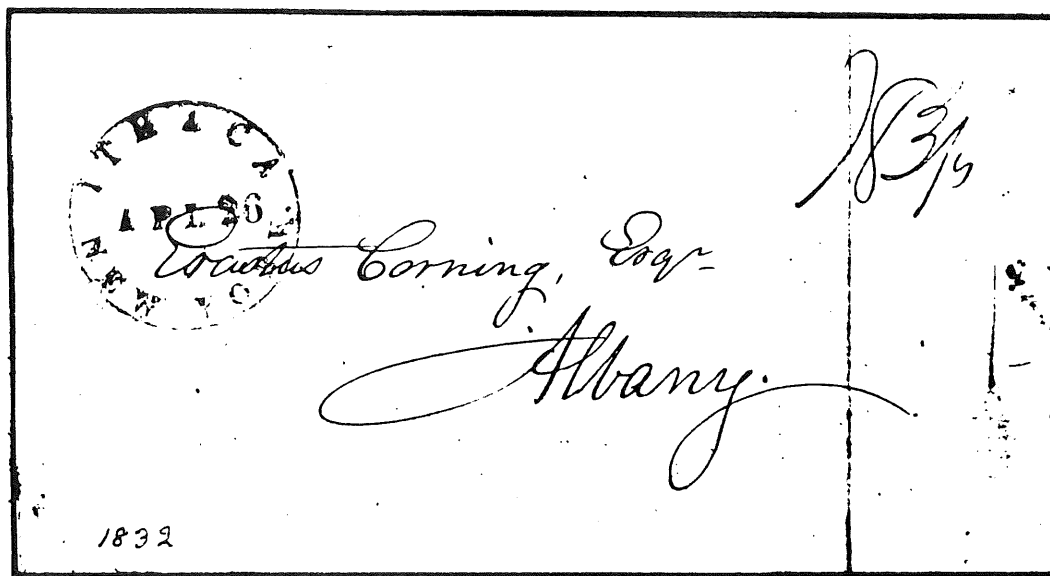


Figure 4: ITHACA, April 26, 1832 30mm cds in red.
Unpaid single rate to Albany.

the first being addressed to James Dexter, well-known Albany attorney, whose correspondence fortunately survived and is found in a number of fine collections. The second is addressed to a Horace Mack, who represented Tompkins County in the State Assembly. It is worth noting that both letters are "charged" to the writer's post office charge account, indicated by the manuscript endorsements.

Incidentally, the stampless cover catalog¹ gives this unusual marking as ITHCA, without the final A and stamped in 1833 instead of 1832. I have seven Ithaca cancels of 1833, running from February to October, none of which is the misspelled name. The catalog also lists NEW YORK as hyphenated - a dash between the W and Y - while my covers show New York as two separated words. I would be interested in corresponding with any collector for the purpose of determining if such a strike actually exists, or that the catalog listing is in error. The hyphenated state name does not regularly occur in the Ithaca markings until late in 1834.

The precise date of the opening of the post office in Ithaca is not known. Reference to the ESPHS listing² shows the first postmaster was Richard W. Pelton, with date of appointment at December 30, 1804. This information was taken from National Archives records of postmasters appointments. Yet, another National Archives reference gives the date as April 1, 1805. Perhaps this latter is the date of Pelton's first post office return.

The first recorded postal marking is in manuscript, in 1806 while the office was in Cayuga County. The first recorded postal marking after becoming the county seat of the new Tompkins County is in 1818, also in manuscript. Although the Ithaca post office was doing a sufficient amount of business to warrant a hand stamping device as early as 1817, none has been reported prior to 1821.

Figure 5 shows this initial marking, a small arc in black. The dimensions are 25x12mm and here we again run into differences with the ASCC. There a listing under arc type town postmarks, for Ithaca, refers one to the circle types indicating this first hand stamp was a circle with no outer rim. I believe the illustration demonstrates it was a true arc.

¹E.N. Sampson, ed. American Stampless Cover Catalog (Albany, OR: Van Dahl Publications, Inc. 1971), p. 112.

²Lee S. DeGraff, ed. Federal Post Offices of New York State 1792-1969 (Fort Johnson, N.Y.: Empire State Postal History Society, 1969), p. 210.

If so, this arc is but one of several Ithaca markings I shall describe in this article which are not listed in the current catalog. (Ed. Note: The new edition of the American Stampless Cover Catalog is due for release early in 1978. We shall watch with interest to see if it contains any of the postal markings called to our attention by Mr. Hutchinson as being unlisted.)

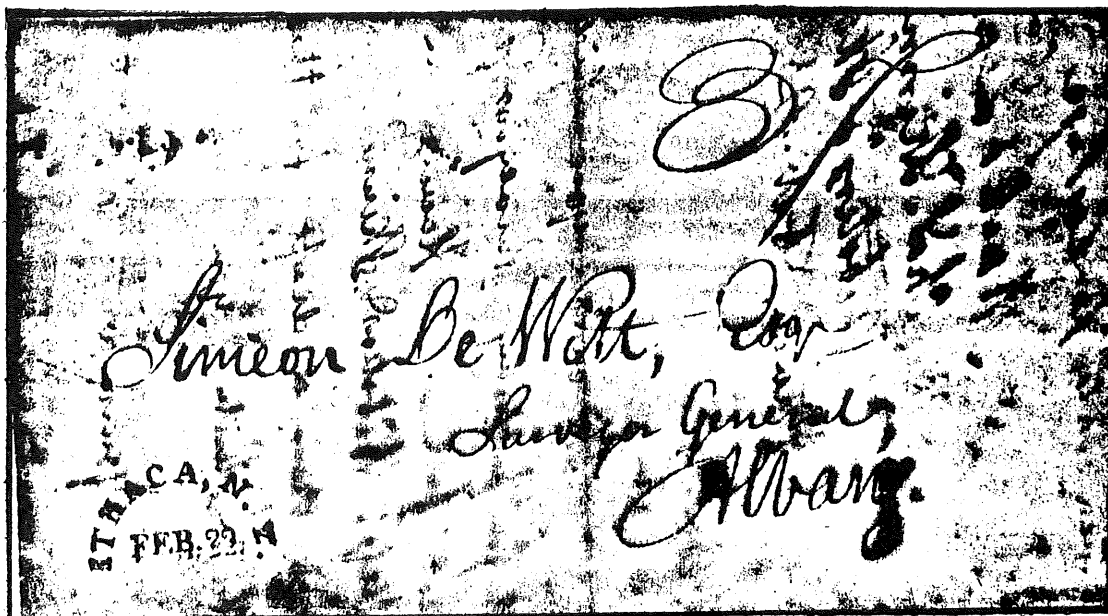


Figure 5: ITHACA, N.Y., February 22, 1821.
Earliest recorded handstamp, 25x12mm, arc
in black. Struck on Washington's Birthday.

In 1822, I have three covers with a peculiar town circle marking, none of them showing all parts of the circle. If the outer ring were to be drawn in it would measure approx. 33-34mm in diameter. Because no strike I have seen is regular, it is likely this handstamp was of the style where the type was raised above the rim and such parts of the ring showing are merely because of the angle it was struck. My dates are May 17, May 24 and October 1, 1822. In Figure 6 the middle date is illustrated, an interesting letter addressed to the Seneca County Clerk in Waterloo, requesting data as to property boundaries established while Ithaca was a part of Seneca County prior to 1817.

It is apparent this particular marking (Figure 6) is the basis for the listing in the catalog, attributed to 1821-1823. It does measure 28mm, is black and the N.Y. is correctly described with two periods.

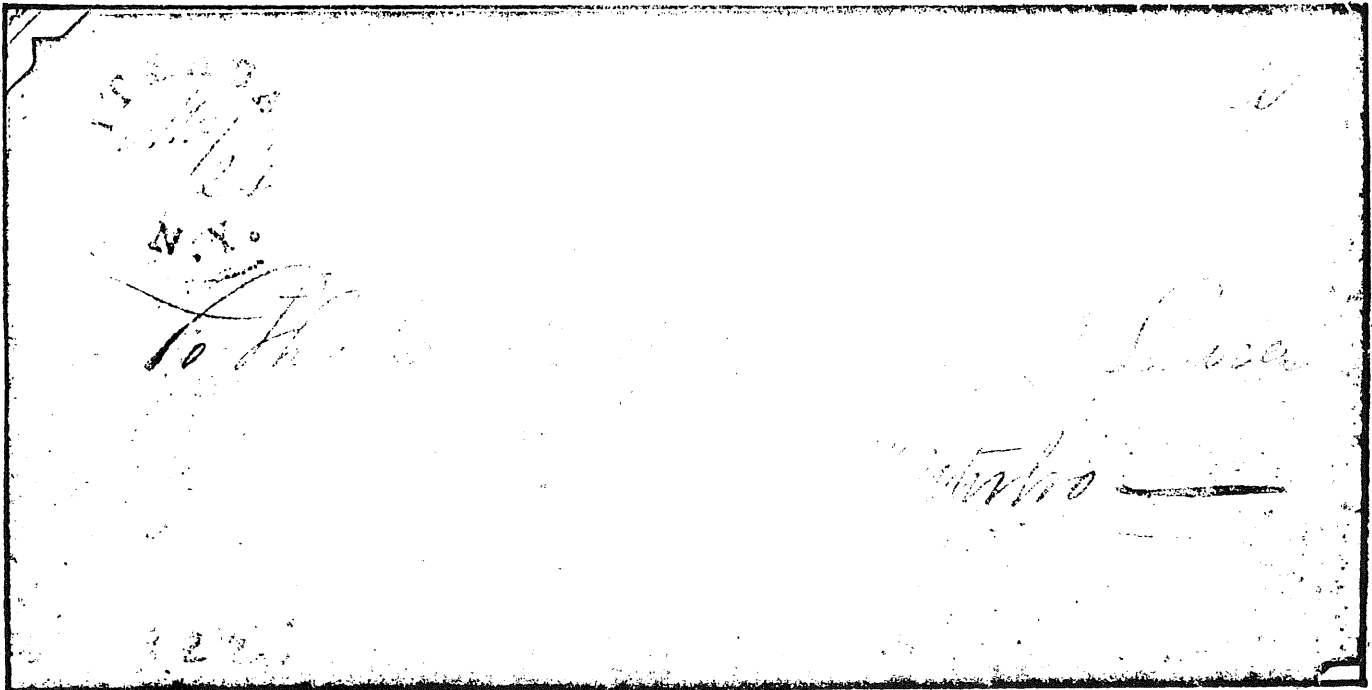


Figure 6: ITHACA, N.Y., May 24, 1822. 28mm cds in black, with portions of outer ring showing. Triple rate letter to Waterloo (30-80 mile zone) with ms. Paid 30. Classed as "no outer ring."

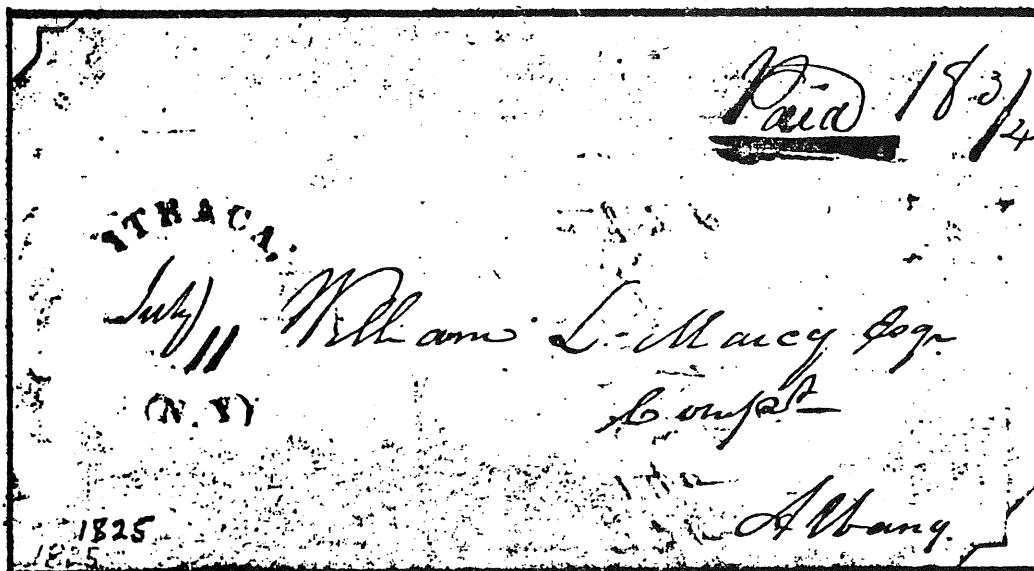


Figure 7: ITHACA, (N.Y.), July 11, 1825. 30mm cds, no outer ring, in black. Ms. Paid 18-3/4, the single rate to Albany.

July 11, 1825 strike on a letter to William L. Marcy, State Comptroller at Albany (Figure 7).³

In this marking the ITHACA has smaller letters, spaced closer together at the top of the 30mm circle and (N.Y.) in parentheses at the bottom. This same marking was used again on July 10, 1826, on a letter sent by Horace Mack to his wife in nearby Spencer, describing in detail the 4th of July celebration featuring a display of about 30 fireworks. Between these two letters I have a pair of covers with Ithaca manuscript markings dated December 6, 1825 and February 27, 1826. For some reason on which we can only speculate the handstamping device was not used in that period. This marking (Figure 7) is listed in the ASCC with the period of use given as 1824-1826, in both black and red.

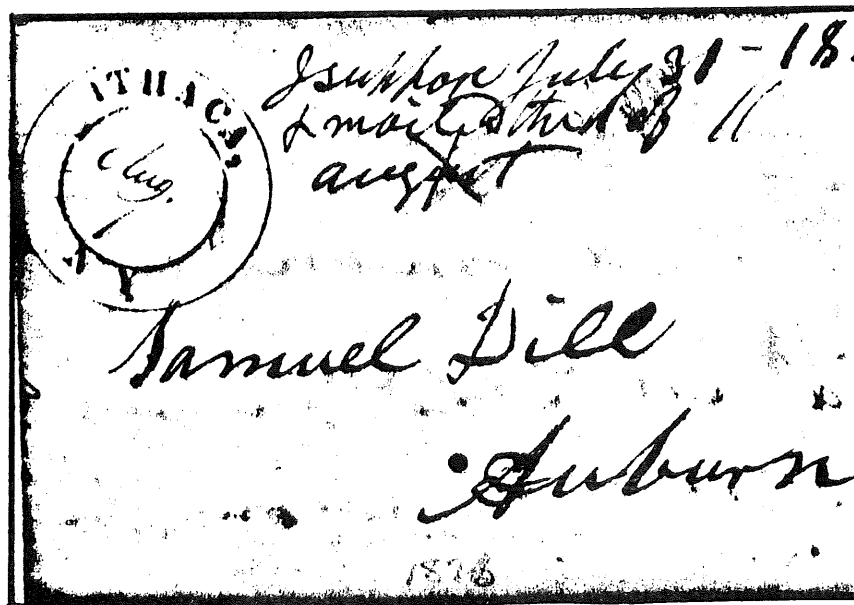


Figure 8: ITHACA, N Y The 34/22mm double circle in black, August 1, 1826. Only example reported. Single rate ms. 10 to Auburn (80-100 mile zone).

An unreported double circle town marking, 34mm in diameter, was used August 1, 1826 (Figure 8). It shows ITHACA, around the upper segment and NY at the bottom, with a comma after Ithaca but no periods in N.Y. It is in black and the only example of the mark I have ever seen. The month and day are in manuscript within the inner 22mm circle. This townstamp is not recorded in the ASCC and was apparently in use for a very short period.

³ William Learned Marcy (1786-1857) although born in New England, was raised in Troy. His first public office was State Comptroller, during 1823. He served briefly 1829-1831 in the NY State Supreme Court and was elected to the U.S. Senate, serving only 1832 when he ran for Governor in which capacity he served three terms (1833-1838). He served as Secty. of War in Polk's cabinet (1845-49) during the War with Mexico and as Secty. of State in Pierce's cabinet (1853-57).

The first cancel I have in red ink is another large circle on February 26, 1827. It is 34mm diameter with a clear outer ring (Figure 9). The ITHACA, across the top of the circle includes a comma. The N.Y. at bottom has two periods. This does not seem to be the same marking listed in the ASCC for the years of 1826-1831 which is described as 35mm without a period after the N of NY. Both strikes have a common associated marking, the 14x4mm PAID. In the illustrated example, the PAID marking is followed by a period, the earliest of this style I have seen from Ithaca.

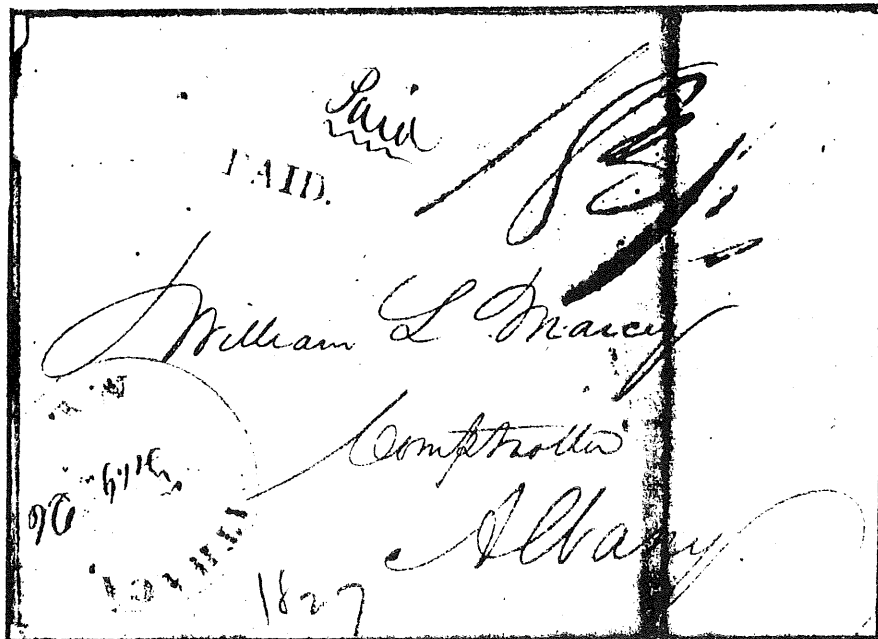


Figure 9: ITHACA, N.Y. February 26, 1827. 35mm cds in red with 14x4mm PAID. in same color. Single rate to Albany. UNLISTED.

The townstamp in Figure 9, similar to those illustrated in Figures 6 through 8 does not seem to have facilities for month and day type to be inserted, all of the covers I have examined are dated in manuscript. I would characterize this last marking as another unlisted strike of the Ithaca office, probably in use for a limited period in 1827.

TO BE CONTINUED

Supplement to the
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by

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(Part 2)

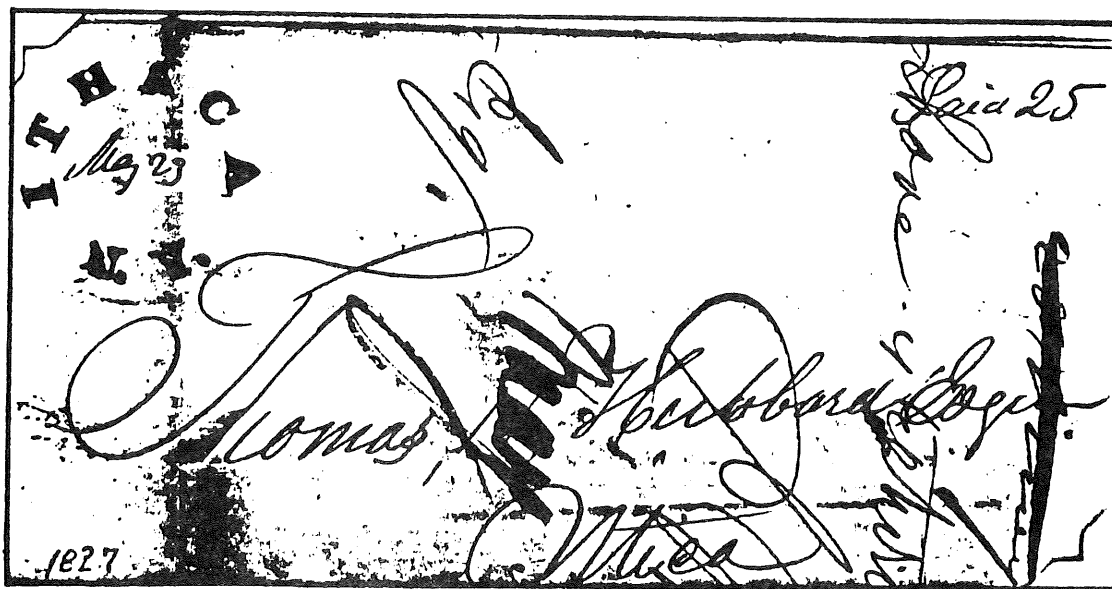


Figure 10: ITHACA N.Y. May 23, 1827: 33mm cds. in red. Manuscript date and Paid 25, - double rate to Utica. Faint ring at bottom may be the edge of the striking device. UNLISTED

Another unrecorded cancellation appears on May 23, 1827. It is a slightly smaller circular date stamp, with heavy thick letters widely spaced around the top and large N.Y. at bottom. How long this marking was in use is an unresolved question, my example is the only one I have seen. I welcome reports of this strike in other collections, to assist in dating.

The strike shown in Figure 10A is not one of mine, I do not have a similar copy until 1829, that shown in Figure 13. Here is an excellent opportunity to point out the danger of relying on or using notations placed on covers by vendors or former owners, unless verified. The arrow points out the date. An examination of the cover reveals it without contents, nor is there any docketing, another fairly reliable indication of the correct dating. I know that between the date of this notation and other covers with similar markings with verified dates there are two other strikes of quite a different pattern. This is the first evidence throwing doubt on the 1828 date, although not the only point, as I will show.

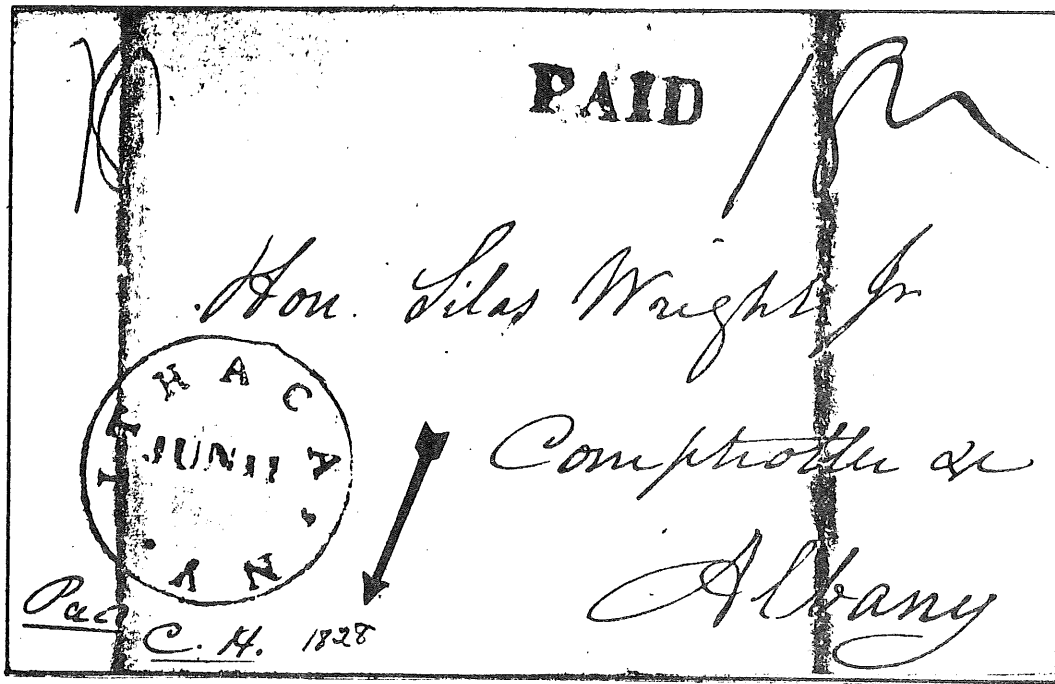


FIGURE 10A: ITHACA, N Y. JUN 11 (1828?) 35mm cds in black. Matching hs PAID 23x7mm. Note N Y. inverted in relation to ITHACA, which is punctuated by large comma. THERE IS NO STOP AFTER N of N Y. Single rate to Albany. Arrow points to pencil notation of date, which is not verified by contents. Text of article discloses evidence indicating this is an 1830 strike. (Illustr. courtesy R.H. Lounsbery)

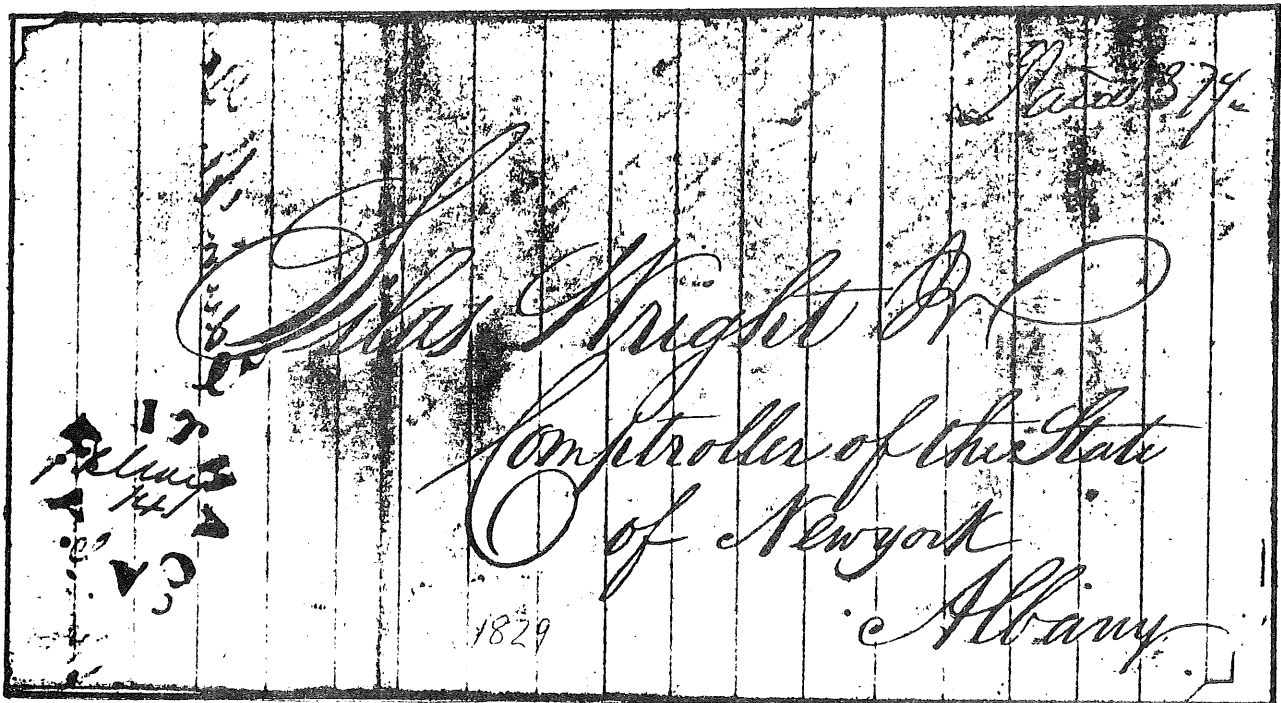


Figure 11: ITHACA N.Y. May 14, 1829: 26x23mm oval NOR in black. Known only in 1829, generally a poor strike, this is the best of my three examples. Date is in manuscript, as is the double rate to Albany.

One of these is the catalog-listed oval of 1829. The single year confirms my own observation. Figure 11 illustrates this oval, of which I have May 10, May 14 and May 20. Another copy is recorded as March 20, making the known range about two months.

The second "in-between" strike is a neat little 28mm cds appearing on an October 11, 1829 letter to the American Home Missionary (Society) in New York City, Figure 12. This strike is quite unusual in that no state designation is included. Perhaps it was a sample sent to the postmaster to demonstrate the maker's wares. It is authentic, the franking leaves no doubt on that point. Jedediah Beebe was the postmaster in office at the time of the ITHCAA error. Figure 12 must be a very scarce mark, I do not have a record of any other. It is not listed ASCC.



Figure 12: ITHACA OCT (11 ms.) 1829: 28mm cds in red. Used for a very short period in late 1829. UNLISTED

The reader must not infer that the strikes to which I am referring as "unlisted" or "only one I have seen" are to be an unique item. When all the collections of the members have been combed, perhaps others will be noted, perhaps even some which I have not recorded in this article. The principal purpose of writing is to record what is known, solicit additional data to add to the record and, hopefully, entertain.

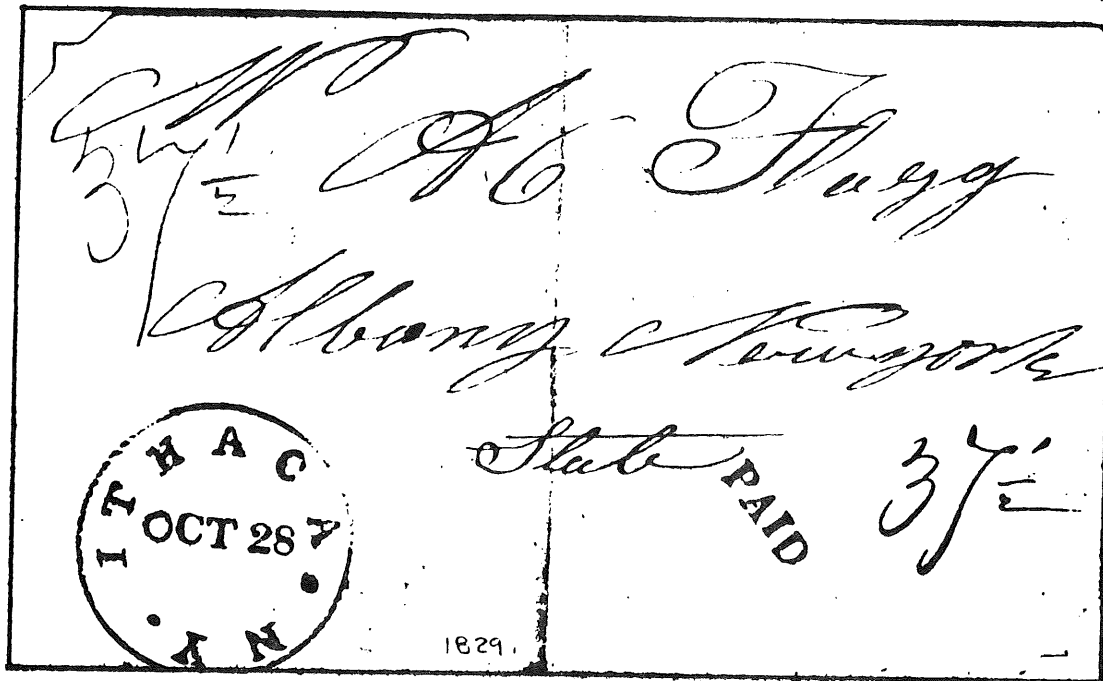


Figure 13: ITHACA, N Y. OCT 28, 1829. Similar to the strike illustrated in Fig. 10A, but with hs. PAID only 15x4mm in size. Strikes in red.

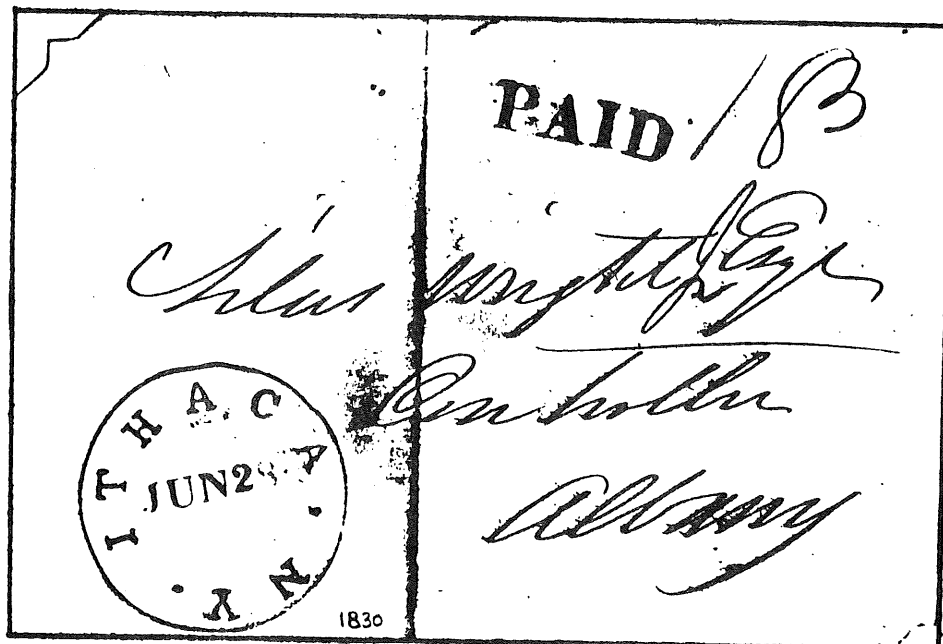


Figure 14: ITHACA, N Y. JUN 28, 1830. Same strike as Fig. 10A and same large PAID and back to black. Note the misalignment of the outer ring, over the first A of ITHACA, as illustrated by the F10A strike but not seen in Fig. 13, leading to the belief that the fls shown in F10A is actually a June 1830 use.

The examples shown in Figures 10A, 13 and 14 are similar in appearance. Larger than normal, the strike is 35mm in diameter with the town name in large caps, occupying more than half the upper part of the circle, followed by a large comma. The state designation N Y. is inverted, at the bottom. The omission of a period after the N is not on account of a poor impression, the lack is constant on all copies I have examined. The use of red and black is noted throughout the period of use, 1829-1831.

As I previously noted, the cover illustrated in Fig. 10A is identified as 1828, but without integral verification. Markings shown in Figs. 11 and 12 occur between June 11, 1828 and Oct. 28, 1829 casting the first doubt that the 1828 date is OK. Another point to consider is the slight damage to the outer rim of the device, evident in Figs. 10A and 14 but not in Figure 13, indicating the strike in Fig. 10A (and the damage) came AFTER Oct. 28, 1829, otherwise we must judge there were two similar striking devices in use, one damaged, one not. That, too, is not impossible but is improbable in an office the size of Ithaca.

The convincer is the address on the Fig. 10A cover to Silas Wright, Comptroller, etc. On June 11, 1828 Wright was NOT Comptroller of the State of New York. Lossing's Empire State pp 474 and 475 relates how Governor Martin Van Buren left office in March of 1829 to become Secretary of State in Jackson's cabinet. LtGov. Throop took over in Albany. Lossing states "It was at this time that Silas Wright..... was now made comptroller the manager of the complicated financial operations of the State." (Ed. Note: New York State records show that Silas Wright was appointed State Comptroller on January 27, 1829.)

Figure 10A therefore cannot be 1828. It could be 1829, but the damaged rim places its use in 1830, or later. I have used this rather complicated example to demonstrate how one can often use good sense, observation and a little from the history books to perk up an otherwise dull discourse on postal matters. I want to thank Dick Lounsbery for his illustration of the cover make the point.

So finally we come to the markings with which this article began. In chronological order, Figure 3 follows Figure 14. We note for the first time the state name NEW YORK spelled out in the town circle. My earliest strike of this 30mm cds. is dated November 19, 1831 and is followed by one on January 22, 1832. The use of red and black is not regular, thus indicating to me more than one clerk, each with a different color stamp pad. Of course, the errors with which this article opened were made by one of these devices. One reason advanced as the cause of these errors is this --- when the type was removed for cleaning, the slugs were replaced out of order. Regardless of the reason, it is a delightful variety to have in one's collection.

The change from NY to New York as the state name was made sometime between July 11 and November 19, 1831, continuing into 1835. The full spelling of the name is illustrated in Fig. 3, black being used for the markings until the 1832 ITHCAA errors, which are in red. Black was used again in 1833 beginning, in my collection, on February 21. In June red occurs and appears regularly until 1837.

During the period of 1831 - 1834 there were no major changes in the town circle excepting when the letters were spaced differently. Figure 15 shows NEWYORK, inscribed as one word.

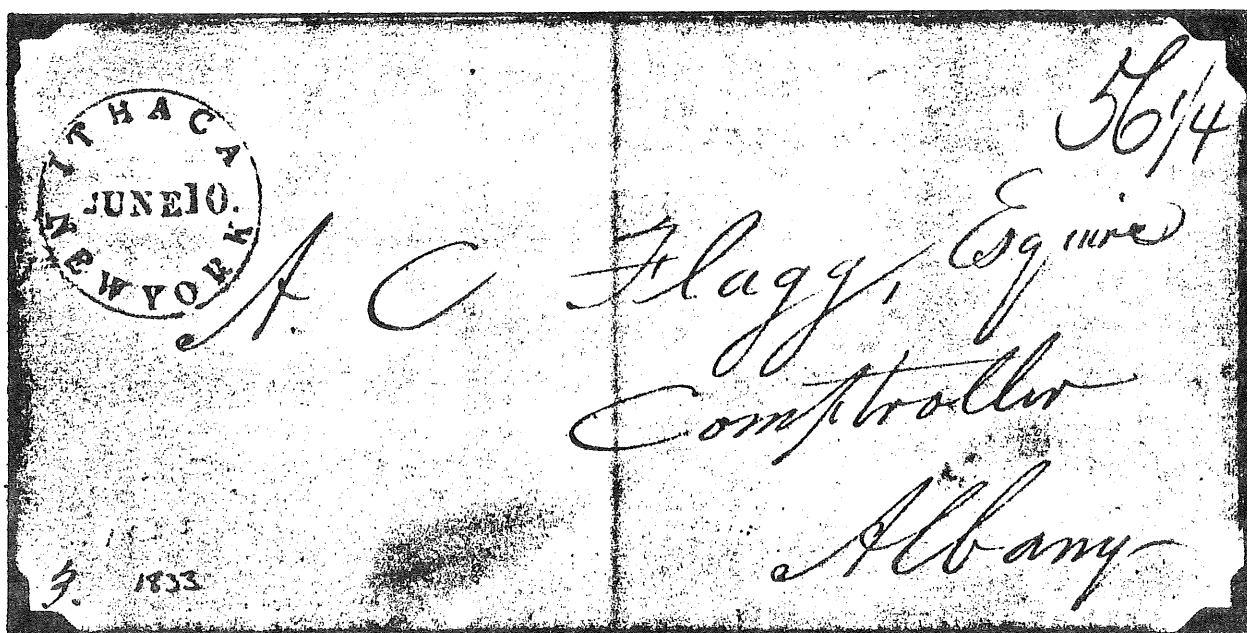


Figure 15: ITHACA NEWYORK JUN 10, 1833: Compare this with Figures 1 - 4. Same size and style but minor variations of type font, setting of the date and close-spaced NEWYORK.

Another peculiarity found in the 1831-1833 markings is a period after YORK used at the bottom of the K to the '33s and then placed at the top, after the date. When a new town cds. appeared in 1834 this "dot" was missing, the letters were spaced further apart and the NEW YORK again separated, as shown in Figure 16. The date, across the middle of the circle, was in smaller type. This marking lasted only a few months.

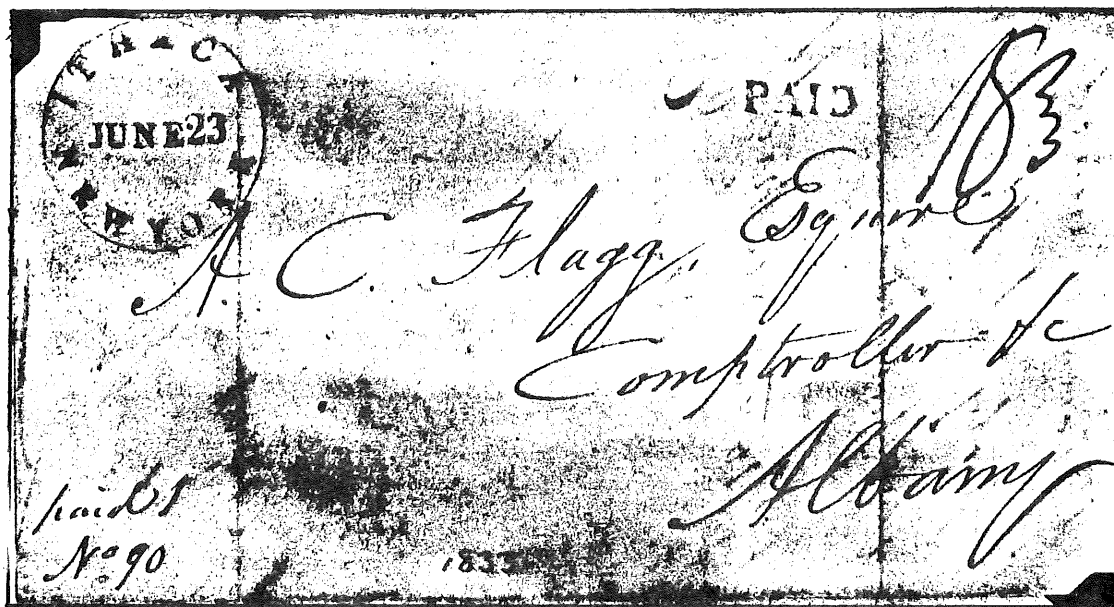


Figure 15A: Same strike as Figure 15, June 23, 1833: Illustrated to demonstrate the "charge account" part of the markings. Figure 15 (lower left) is marked in manuscript by the writer 3 and duly rated triple postage by the Ithaca office, with the rate collect. Figure 15A marked "paid 1/No 90" meaning the writer is instructing the Ithaca office to rate it single rate and charge the cost to Box 90. Note the hs PAID rated 18-3/4¢ to Albany, in compliance with the notation.

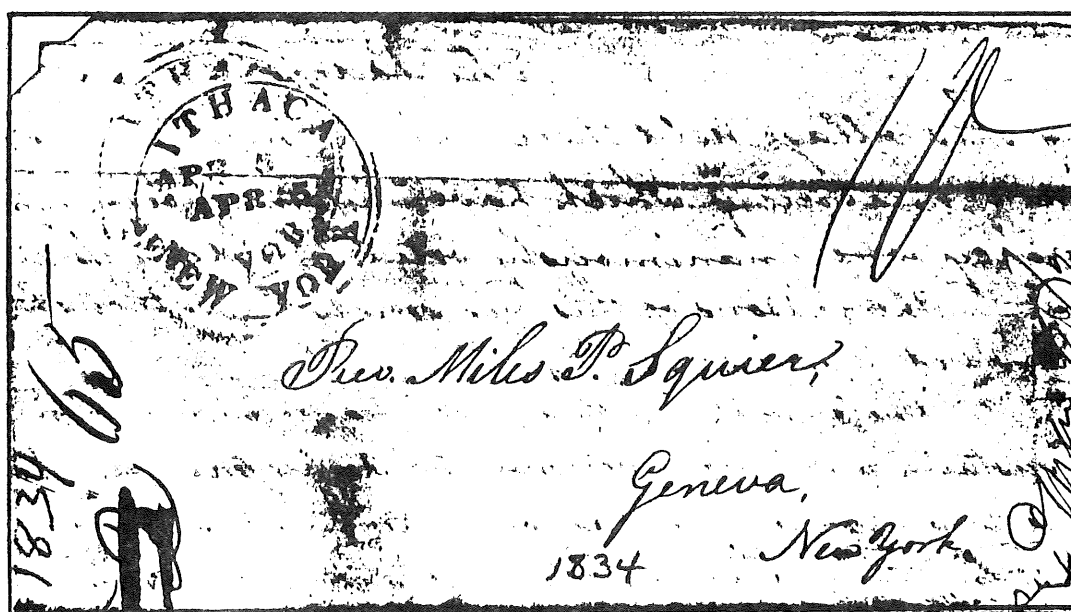


FIGURE 16: ITHACA NEW YORK APR 5, 1834: 30mm cds. in red. Apparently a new striking device, though quite similar to its predecessor. Experienced short life in 1834 only.

Figure 17 shows a cover bearing the first example with NEW-YORK inverted along the bottom of a 31mm cds. and also hyphenated. Struck in red, the letters are smaller and wider spaced than the previous marking, although the date is in larger type. This marking ran into 1835 before a more standardized town mark made an appearance and began a long run, lasting ten years into 1845.

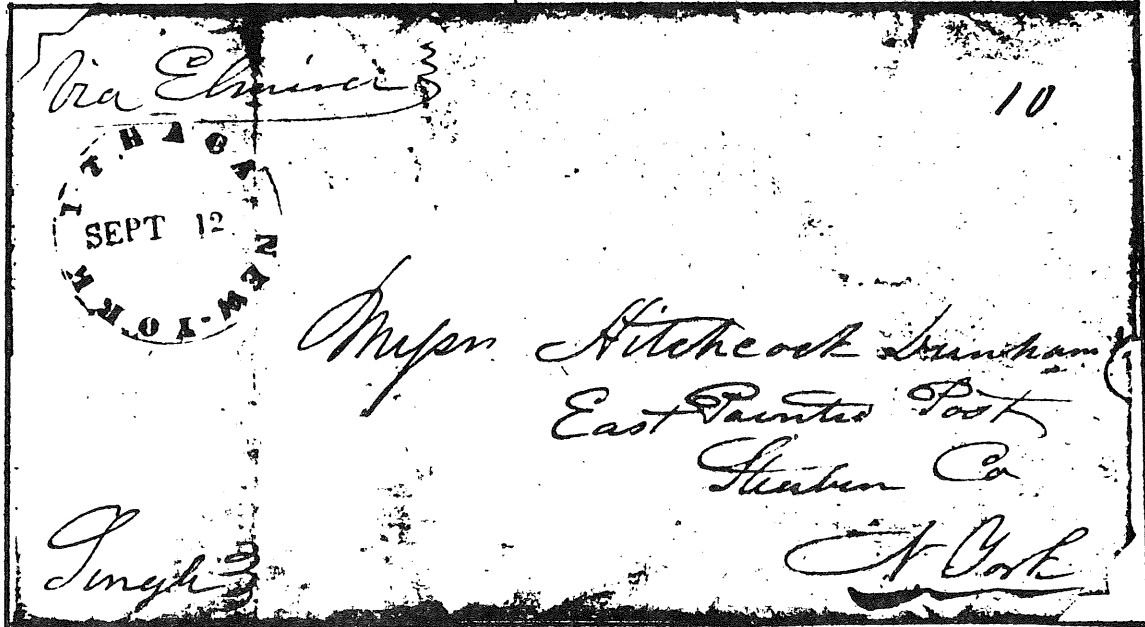


Figure 17: ITHACA NEW-YORK SEPT 12, 1834:
A 31mm cds. in red, with the state designation inverted. Marking found through to 1835 in both red and black.

The new marking, similar in appearance with many others in the state during the late 1830s and early 1840s, will be pictured and discussed in my next installment, which will take us into and through a very prolific period of color, varied rate strikes, the stamped envelopes and many more postal history items.