

An 1845 “Ship Letter” from Port-au-Prince, Hispaniola to New York City on the Brig *Hayti*.

By Charles J. DiComo, PhD

I recently acquired a stampless folded letter (SFL) for my research studies on “Ship Letters”; those letters from foreign (or domestic ports) which travelled over water routes (which had not been designated post roads) by ships or other vessels having no mail contracts. The law required the ship’s Captain to deposit such letters in the Post Office where he first made port. For this service, the Captain was entitled to a 2¢ fee per letter provided the ship was not foreign-owned. This fee was added to the postage, whether it was paid to the ship’s Captain or not. The rate for each ship letter received at the port of entry was 6¢ if it was delivered at the port of entry. If it was addressed to a point beyond the port of entry the rate was 2¢ plus the normal inland postage from port of entry to destination or place addressed. The 2¢ and 6¢ charges were regardless of weight.

Figure 1 illustrates the obverse of the SFL written by Thomas Trefry on Sunday 4 May 1845 from Port-au-Prince, Hispaniola (the Caribbean island of the Greater Antilles; today’s Haiti and Dominican Republic). The letter is addressed to his wife in Marblehead, Massachusetts (MA); the contents of which shall be examined and discussed later in this article. Due to the lack of a Port-au-Prince circular date stamp, the letter did not enter the mails in that city, but was placed in a pouch and given to the Captain of a Brig sailing for New York City (NYC).



Figure 1. 1845 “Ship Letter” from Port-au-Prince, Hispaniola to Marblehead, MA. Letter entered mails at NYC, where red “NEW-YORK MAY 15” CDS and matching “SHIP” handstamp were applied.

Thomas was aware of the U.S. inland postage rates and Ship Letter fee, and in the same hand and blue ink as the address, wrote the postage due marking “20½” at upper right; which is equivalent to 18½¢ U.S. inland postage to Marblehead, MA (for >150 miles) plus a 2¢ incoming Ship fee (Figure 2).

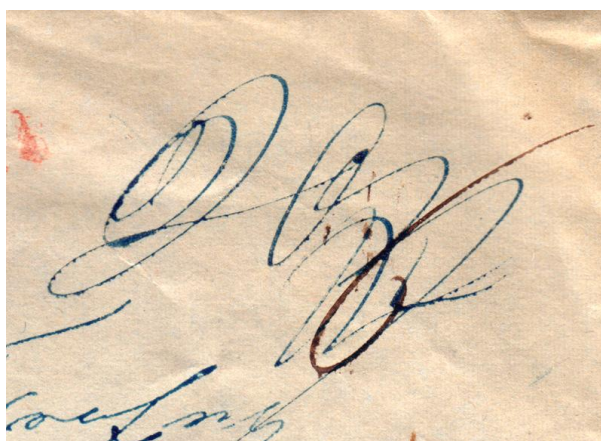


Figure 2. Manuscript Rate Markings: in blue ink, “20½” (18½¢ U.S. inland postage to Marblehead, MA [for >150 miles] + 2¢ incoming Ship fee). In black ink, “6” to the right and overlapping the “20½”.

After an eleven day sailing through the Caribbean Sea and northward along the Atlantic coast, the vessel arrived in New York harbor, where the Captain took any mail he carried to the Post Office as his first action. He was paid 2¢ for each letter carried. A New York postal clerk marked the letter with the red “**NEW-YORK MAY 15**” circular date stamp (CDS) and matching red “**SHIP**” handstamp (Figure 3), indicating an incoming ship letter. Interestingly, there is also a manuscript “6” in black ink at upper right written on top of the blue “20½” (Figure 2). It is likely that the postal clerk thought New York was the final destination and in error rated the SFL “6” as per regulations.



Figure 3. At left, a crisp strike of the red 31 mm “**NEW-YORK MAY 15**” CDS. At right and enlarged, matching red 18x5 mm “**SHIP**” handstamp applied at same time by the postal clerk upon arrival in NYC.

Figure 4 illustrates the original letter, cropped from the much larger single sheet of bluish, unwatermarked paper, measuring 255x400 mm. At the upper left is an embossed paper manufacturer’s seal which reads “*Hubbard’s Norwich*,” with an Eagle and Shield in the center (Figure 5). In 1818, Amos H. Hubbard founded the Hubbard’s Paper Mill below the Yantic Falls in Norwich, Connecticut. Of note, in 1829 he placed and operated the first Fourdrinier machine made in America. This used a moving woven mesh to create a continuous paper web by filtering out the fibers in a paper stock. It produced a continuously moving wet mat of fiber which was dried to produce a strong paper. Previously, paper had been made by hand, one sheet at a time.

Port-au-Prince
Sunday May the 4 1845
Dear wife this is to inform you
that I am well hoping that you
and all the family are the same
who arrived at New-York in twenty
Days and were ordered to Port-au-Prince
and I suppose that you shall be ready
to sail for home by the 30 of next
time will not allow me to write
any more at present for the Brig
master of New-York is just on the
point of sailing this letter
comes by the Brig master of
New-York - your husband
Thomas Taylor

Figure 4. Digital scan of the original letter, dated Sunday May the 4 1845 from Port-au-Prince.



Figure 5. Paper manufacturer Hubbard's of Norwich, CT with Eagle and Shield embossed seal.

Let us next analyze his words to his wife. We find that Thomas had distinctive penmanship and a commonplace writing style. There is also a lack of punctuation, making his communiqué one long run-on sentence. Additionally, he made more than a few spelling errors (“wright” for “write”, “Gist” for “just”; “whe” for “we”, “his” for “is”, etc.). Finally, the letter “p” resembles an “f”; the “r” an “n” or “v”; the letters “y” and “g” are nearly identical, as are the “a” and “u”. This made deciphering the contents of the letter more difficult than usual, but I do like a challenge. What follows is a literal translation:

Port un princ [sic]

- - - - -

Sunday May the 4 1845

- - - - -

Dear wifer [sic] this his [sic] to inform you that i [sic] are [sic] well hoping that you and all the family are the same Whe [sic] arrived at mirragone [sic] in twenty days and were ordered to port u prince and i [sic] suppose that whe [sic] shall be ready to Sail for home by the 20 of May Time will not allow me to wright [sic] any more at present for the Brig [Xxxxx] of new york is Gist [sic] on the point of Sailing this Letter comes by the Brig [Xxxxx] of new york =

your L husbun [sic]

Thomas Trefry---

Thomas’ letter is brief; he is letting his wife know he is well after his voyage to Hispaniola and hopes that she and the family are the same. On line 2 he refers to arriving at “mirragone” in twenty days, which I believe is his attempt to spell the port town of Miragoane, which is 100 km west of Port-au-Prince and was one of the major ports of trade on the island. He later mentions he was ordered to Port-au-Prince, from where he penned and eventually mailed this letter.

So who was Thomas Trefry and why was he in Hispaniola? The Trefry’s of Marblehead, Massachusetts had a long history of being a seafaring family. My research identified a Thomas Trefry born 19 Oct. 1794, the son of William and Mary Thompson Trefry.¹ On 27 Aug. 1824, he married Sarah (Sally) Proctor (Procter) (b. in Marblehead 24 May 1801), the daughter of William Proctor Jr. and Deborah Goss. They had at least two children, Sarah (b. 10 Sept. 1830) and Thomas Jr. (b. 11 Jun. 1825), who was a Civil War soldier.

Captain Trefry was master or mate aboard a number of schooners engaged in the West Indies trade. These included the schooners *Alciope* (92 tons, built Amesbury, MA 1835), *Brilliant* (73 tons, built Newbury, MA 1831), *Combine* (100 tons, built Scituate, MA 1820), *Echo* (70 tons, built Kingston, MA 1819), and *Splendid* (98 tons, built Hollis, ME 1832).² This is most likely our Thomas Trefry who was engaged in trade in Hispaniola writing to his wife Sarah, assuring her that he was well and that he would be sailing home soon. It is not surprising then that he knew the Ship Letter fee and U.S. internal postage rates home and marked up his SFL in his own hand. Moreover, Thomas surely knew the Captains of other vessels making regular trips to and from the West Indies from the United States. But which Captain, and which vessel?

On the letter obverse, in the lower left corner, is an inverted notation or docketing, which is shown right-side up in Figure 6 at top. It is in the same hand and blue ink as the address, postage rate and contents and surely must be Thomas’. It reads “by the Brig [Xxxxx] new york”. While the vessel name cannot be deciphered from this entry, Thomas also mentions in the body of the letter on lines 12 and 14 that the SFL shall be sent by a Brig to New York (Figure 6, bottom). Even with these two other instances, I still found the Brig difficult to decipher; though I was fairly confident the last three letters were “yti” based on analysis of other words and letters. So where to turn next?

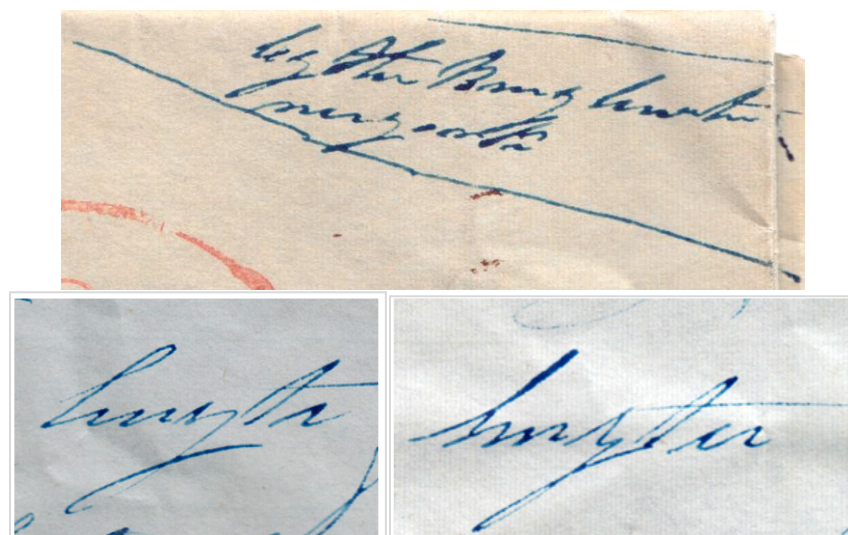


Figure 6. At top: docketing on the obverse of letter at lower left reading “by the Brig [Xxxxx] new york”. At bottom: enlargements of the two mentions in the letter of a Brig [Xxxxx] of New York.

As you recall, after an eleven day journey the vessel arrived in New York Harbor and the Captain took any mail he carried to the Post Office as his first action. The postal clerk then marked the letter with the red “**NEW-YORK MAY 15**” CDS and red “**SHIP**” handstamp (Figure 3) and sent the SFL on its way to Marblehead, MA. Therefore, 15 May 1845 was the most likely date of arrival of our unnamed Brig that sailed from Port-au-Prince to NYC.

I subsequently turned to an invaluable database, the National Archive’s *Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, 1820-1897*.³ This free online archive allows one to easily search through thousands of digitized microfilm records of original manifests designating vessels arriving at the Port of New York. After selecting the micropublication M237, Roll 57 hyperlink covering the period from 2 Jan 1845–31 May 1845, I was able to quickly scan the database and locate the vessels that arrived on 15 May.

DISTRICT OF NEW-YORK—PORT OF NEW-YORK.

I

my name, and now delivered by me to the Collector of the Customs for the District of New-York, contains, to the best of my knowledge and belief, a just and true account of the Passengers received on board the

do solemnly, sincerely, and truly

that the following List or Manifest of Passengers, subscribed with

whereof I am Master, from

So help me God,

Sworn to this

Before me

LIST or MANIFEST of all the PASSENGERS taken on board the

is Master, from

burthen

tons.

NAMES.

AGE.

Years.

Months.

SEX.

OCCUPATION.

The country to which they severally belong.

The country in which they intend to become inhabitants.

Died on the voyage.

J. Colver

35

05

Male

Merchant

Port au Prince

Port au Prince

L. Blumstein

35

a

Major

Port au Prince

Mrs. Dickson

40

w

Labourer

Port au Prince

Figure 7. Digitized microfilm Record 270 of the Brig *Hayti* under Captain Oliver Cutts arriving in the Port of New York on 15 May 1845 from Port-au-Prince.

To my delight, I quickly found the manifest illustrated in Figure 7. This is the original record documenting the arrival of the Brig *Hayti* from Port-au-Prince on 15 May 1845 to New York; carrying three passengers, and under the direction of Captain Oliver Cutts. We can now establish that the Brig *Hayti* carried Thomas’ letter from Port-au-Prince (Figure 8) and that Captain Cutts collected the 2¢ Ship Letter fee in NYC.

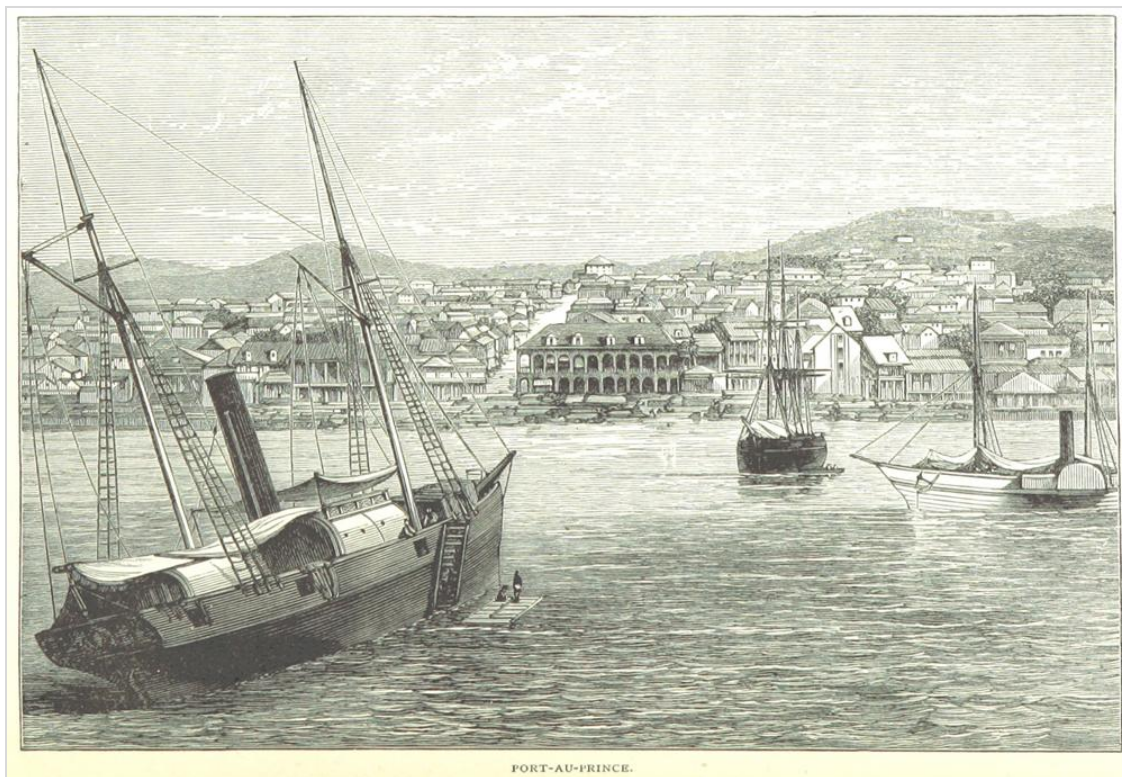


Figure 8. Port-au-Prince, from “*Santo Domingo Past & Present With A Glance at Hayti*,” c. 1870.⁴

It is worth mentioning that Oliver Cutts, Esq. (1815 – 1885) was not only an American Brig Captain, but a gentleman of wealth. He was a merchant and owned Oliver Cutts & Co., which was largely engaged in Haitian trade (Figure 9). He was the co-owner of a thousand acre plantation in Port-au-Prince, lived in Haiti for nearly 14 years, worked to bring an automated sugarcane process to the island, and later in life endowed a professorship in Mathematics to Wesleyan University. He died 16 February, 1885 in Washington, D.C. at age 70.

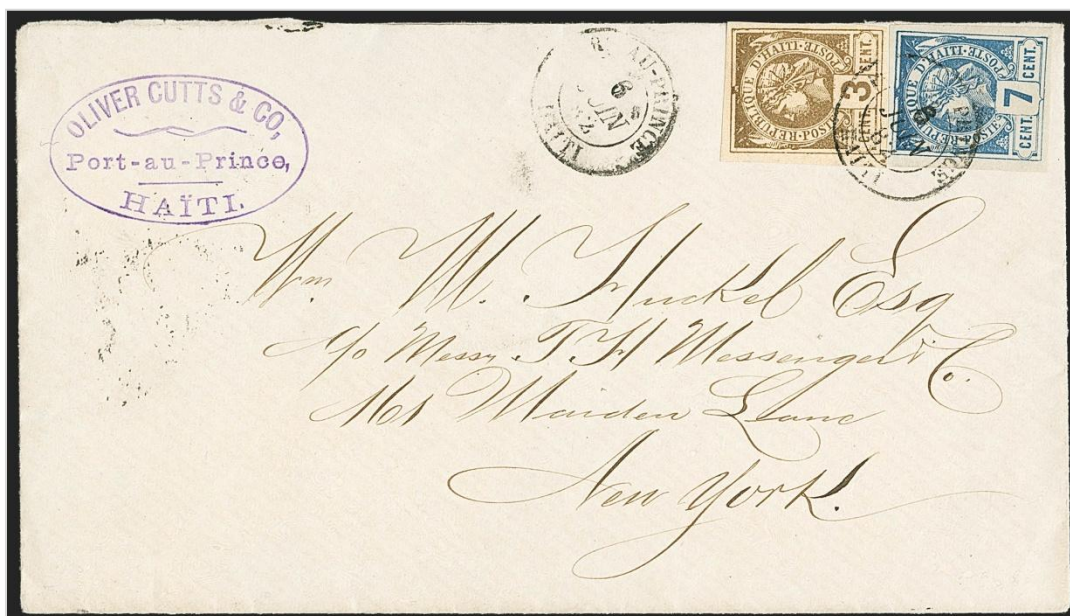


Figure 9. 1881 cover from Port-au-Prince to New York with “**Oliver Cutts & Co, Port-au-Prince, Haiti.**” violet oval handstamp at top left. Care of Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries, Auction 1143, Lot 3785.

With the SFL now at the New York City Post Office, its final inland transit to Marblehead, MA could begin. Figure 10 illustrates the probable route the Brig *Hayti* sailed (blue line) from Port-au-Prince, Hispaniola (yellow dot), to the Port of New York (red dot), then overland via coach or rail (black line) to Marblehead, MA (green dot). While we cannot be absolutely certain that Sarah received this note from Thomas as there is no docketing confirming receipt – I would like to believe that she did – and a few weeks later being able to embrace her seafaring husband after his long journey. We are fortunate that this Ship Letter has survived after 170 years and that we could ascertain the sequence of all those that handled this piece of postal history on its voyage.

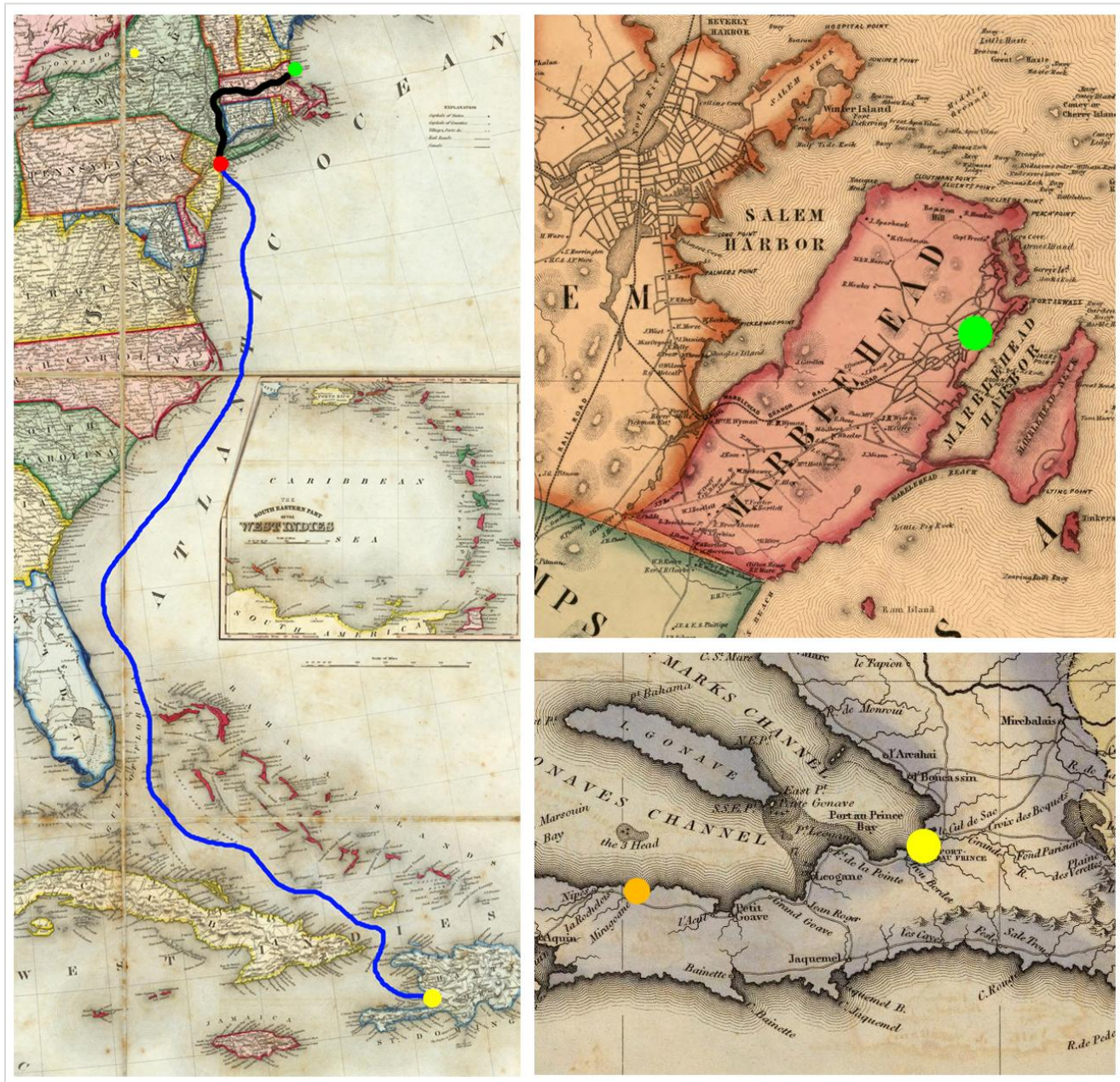


Figure 10. Left Map: Probable route the Brig *Hayti* sailed (blue line) from Port-au-Prince, Hispaniola (yellow dot) through the Caribbean, north along the Atlantic coast to the Port of New York (red dot); then overland via coach or rail (black line) to Marblehead, MA (green dot). Top right: topographical map of Essex County, 1856, showing the Marblehead peninsula and harbor.⁵ Bottom right: topographical map of eastern Hispaniola, showing Port-au-Prince Bay, Port-au-Prince and Miragoane (orange dot), 1823.⁶

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