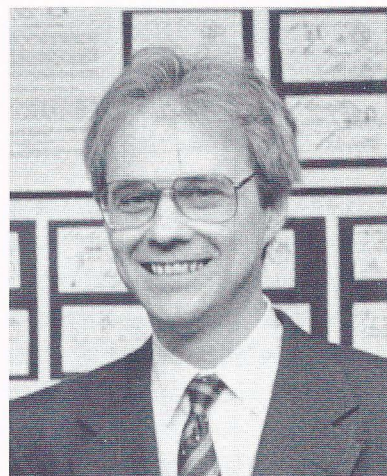


Private Postal Systems in the United States

By Richard C. Frajola



Richard Frajola is the founder of the auction firm in Empire, Colorado, that bears his name and specializes in U.S. postal history. He has been a professional philatelist since 1968 and a consultant to The Philatelic Foundation for many years. He has authored several articles and is a member of the American Philatelic Society's Postal History Committee.

Introduction

This article will focus on some of the non-governmental postal systems that functioned in the United States. To determine whether a cover or folded letter was carried by a private individual or company, it is helpful to retrace the journey of the item from the time of writing to the time of receipt. In fact, this exercise can be extremely useful in examining any cover. If a cover was handled by anyone other than the writer, a government employee, or a person under contract to transport the mails for the government, on any part of its journey to the addressee, one can classify the cover as having been privately carried.

Some of these private posts operated in competition with the government while others provided mail service to areas where there was no government service. Services first rendered by the independent posts and later adopted by the government include home delivery, drop-box pick-up, prepayment by adhesive stamps, embossed stamped envelopes, delivery by special carriers for an additional fee, parcel post, and registered mail. Lower postal rates were also directly related to competition from the private posts. In fact, virtually every innovation in the handling of mail in the United States was tried first by private enterprise. In our generation the independents such as United Parcel Service and Federal Express have broken ground in the delivery of overnight letters, which the postal service has tried to emulate.

The subject of non-governmental postal services is quite large, but all examples exhibit certain traits in common. Besides being operated by private firms or individuals, the independents were invariably the first to utilize the newest developments in transportation. This holds true with sailing ships, steam ships, stage coaches, canals, trains and steamboats. I have broken the subject down into major categories. I will define each category, give a brief historical perspective, present a case study, mention typical markings, and try to comment on the significance of each class. I will attempt to present the major classes of independent mail services in rough chronological order.

I will also mention many times the three main types of mail carriage performed by the independents. The first is the handling of a letter entirely outside of any government mail system.

The second, usually referred to as “to the mails,” means that a letter was first carried privately and at some point turned over to a government office for additional carriage or delivery. The third, referred to as “from the mails,” means that a letter was first carried by a government postal system, then picked up or delivered to a private company for further handling. These three all entail quite different services, and it is important to realize which one, or what combination of services, was being provided by an independent.

Ocean Mail Forwarders

Ocean mail forwarders is the name I use to describe a class of non-government mail handlers. This group includes several different types of private enterprise, the common thread being that mail was handled or expedited by them using ocean-going vessels. Included are the forwarders who received and bagged mail on shore, the ship captains and pursers who carried the mail, and the agents who received mail from the boats for distribution upon arrival. I’m starting with this group because of its historical priority. In the early colonial days prior to 1700, the only way available for a colonist to communicate with England was to have his letter privately carried by a ship’s captain bound for England. The so-called “coffee house” system in England was mirrored in the United States. Letter bags were hung in some of the more popular taverns, inns or coffee houses near the docks. A ship captain would stop by the coffee house shortly before his departure and collect the bag of letters destined for his port of arrival. Compensation would vary, but the figure of a penny (1d.) per letter to the captain was probably the norm. When the captain arrived at port, he would deliver his letters to another coffee house or tavern, and those expecting letters would call there to pick them up. Such letters were carried entirely outside the government mails. The only markings usually seen are “per captain” or “per ship” with the name of the captain and ship, frequently followed by “Q.D.C.” which, loosely translated from the Latin, means “May God Preserve.” These covers are frequently addressed to the care of an inn (Figure 1).

After 1765 in the United States most of the mail arriving from private ships entered the post office as ship mail. The sending system was still the same, but now the service became a “to the mails” service. A captain’s fee, usually 2 cents, would be given to the captain and added to the inland postage. The sending service became more sophisticated as the number of ships departing increased. A business office at the wharf would post sailing notices, and a bag for each different ship might be hung. A sender would have a choice between two or three ships leaving about the same time bound for the same port. These wharf offices became the clearing houses for commercial news.



Fig. 1. Coffee house address on 1739 letter from New York to London.

In the early 1800s, as regular sailing lines were established, distinctive markings were applied to some of these letters. These are usually referred to as ship purser markings since it is believed

they were applied by the purser. This type of marking (Figure 2) usually has the ship name and the name of the master or purser, and some also include a sailing date. The earliest examples date from

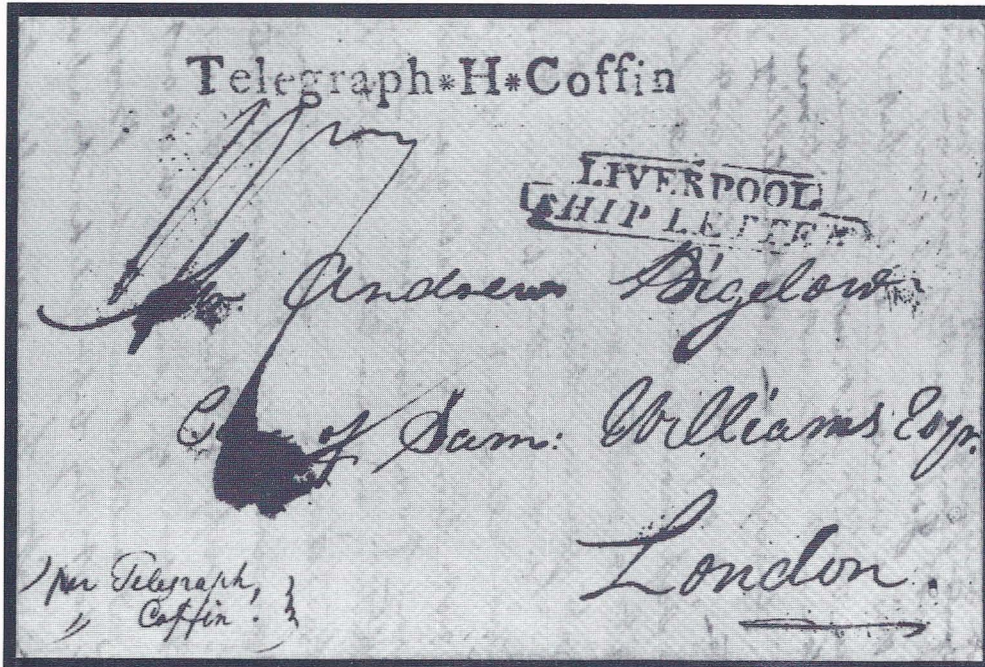


Fig. 2. Telegraph ship purser marking on 1816 letter to London.

the 1810 to 1825 period. The "Forwarded By T.W. Ward" markings of the 1840s (Figure 3) are similar in character. Ward operated an office that shipped by the Cunard line. He received letters to be forwarded by the Cunarders and struck them with his oval "Forwarded By" handstamp and a straight-line handstamp with the name of the ship.

The need for private forwarding of ocean mails diminished as the government made treaties with foreign countries to handle the mails. Although such markings are known into the 1890s, the primary period of importance is during the 1840 to 1850 period. The earliest forwarding markings are manuscript notations, frequently found on the reverse of inbound folded letters (Figure 4). A letter would be directed to an individual in care of the forwarding agent. It would arrive at the post office as a private ship letter and be delivered to the forwarder. The forwarder would endorse the letter and either put it back in the government mails for delivery to another city or make other arrangements for delivery.

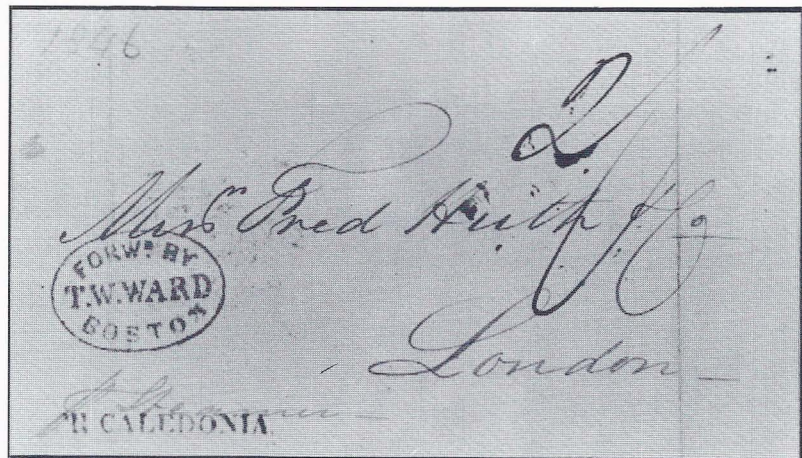


Fig. 3. Ward forwarding oval and "P(er) Caledonia" handstamp of 1841.

Stage Coach Mails

The stage coach mails of the early colonial period were one of the earliest forms of independent mail operations within the United States. Much like the coffee house system for handling ocean mails, inns or taverns that were regular stopping places for the stage coach lines became important communication points. A bag would be placed near the door, and the departing stage coach driver would take the letters along to the destination. A charge would be levied, probably based on distance carried, but little information has survived regarding this.



Fig. 4. Manuscript forwarder marking on 1815 letter from London via Halifax to New York.

mail services. When I use the term here, it will apply only to those companies operating between cities during the 1839-1845 period.

The independent mail companies were flourishing in the Eastern United States by the year 1841. These independents were operating primarily on railway and steamboat routes and were carrying letter mail, money letters and newspapers as well as packages. The Postmaster General's Report of 1841 lists 22 different express routes operating in competition with the government, carrying letters and papers out of the mail. The government soon developed a body of laws and regulations that attempted to curtail these activities, but it wasn't until the previously mentioned act of 1845 was passed that competition was eliminated. The independent mail companies arose in the late 1830s when railroad and steamboat lines began to expand throughout New England. Most began as package expresses specializing in handling currency, newspapers, bank drafts and small bundles. Letter carrying, while not a primary function of most of these companies, soon became a substantial source of revenue for many of them. Almost without

The markings found on privately carried stage coach mail are usually limited to a "per stage" endorsement. An intriguing handstamp that reads "B.S.S." is known on a cover from 1783, and some believe it is a marking of the Baltimore Stage Service (Figure 5). Another marking from 1786 that reads "Bordenton & New York Stage" is known to be an independent stage coach mail marking (Figure 6). The most important stage coach lines received government contracts to handle the mails. Private carriage of mail was then terminated.

Independent Mail Companies (1839-1845)

The "independent mail companies" is a specific name used to designate a group of very similar mail handling companies that existed in the United States from about 1839 until July 1, 1845, when the U.S. Post Office Act prohibited the private carriage of letters, not directly related to cargo, over a designated mail route. There may be confusion regarding the name "independent mail companies" because it is applied by some to all of the non-governmental

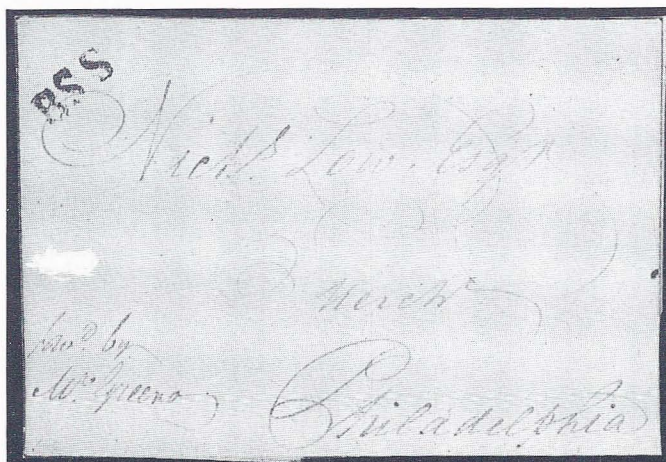


Fig. 5. Baltimore Stage Service of 1783.

exception these companies purchased, or were granted, special rates and/or virtual monopolies for the carriage of packages over a specific railroad or steamboat route.

William Harnden is probably the best known of the early expressmen. In July 1839 he advertised in the *New York Evening Post* that he was running a daily "car" from New York to Boston. The ad stated that "packages sent by this line will go through with the mail, and be delivered early the following morning at any part of the city, free of charge." Packages or letters could be brought to his New York office at 2 Wall Street in the morning and be delivered

the next day in Boston. A Harnden messenger, carrying a valise or express box, would take the steamboat to Providence and then travel by the Providence and Boston Railroad to Boston. After arrival of the mail at the Boston office, the local Harnden messengers would deliver the packages and letters directly to the recipients. Harnden soon expanded his routes in New England and began to concentrate his efforts on establishing an express business operating on the trans-Atlantic steamers (Figure 7).

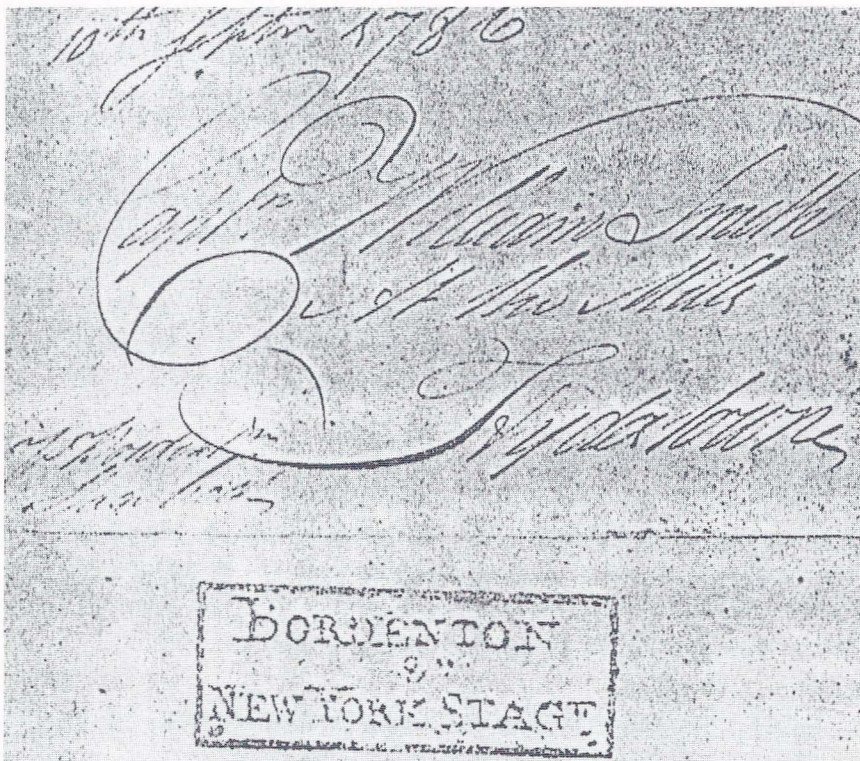


Fig. 6. Bordenton & New York Stage of 1786.

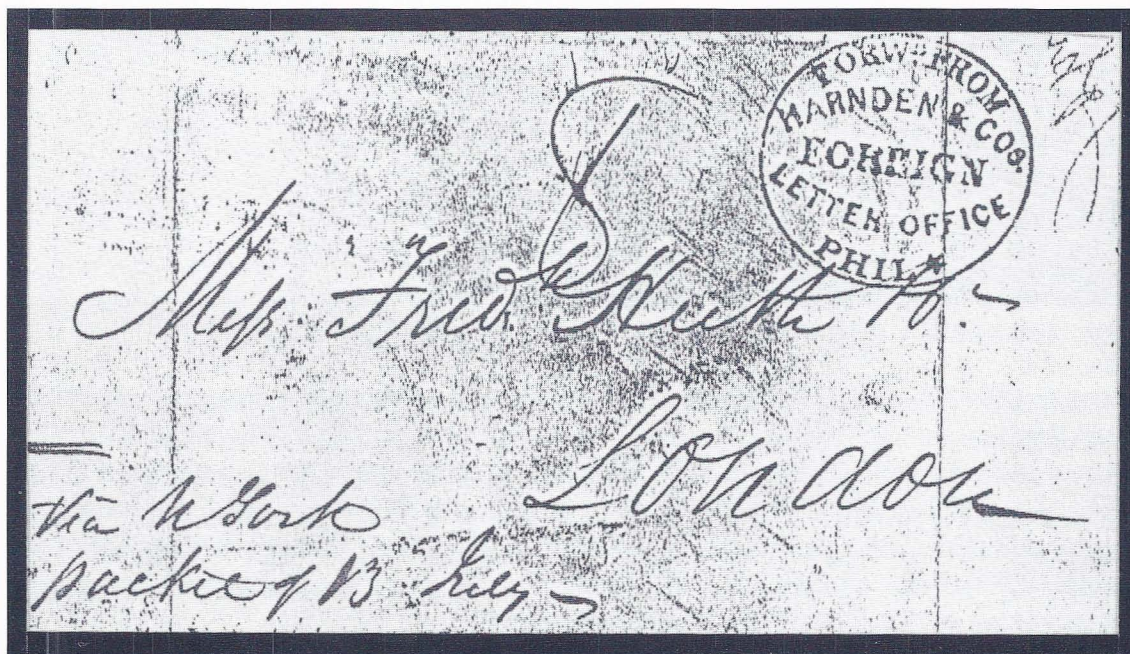


Fig. 7. Harnden Foreign Letter Office forwarding mark on 1841 letter from Philadelphia to London.

Pomeroy and Company is a more typical independent mail company. Its operation had much in common with that of most companies of this class and was significant because of the government's lawsuits against it. George Pomeroy founded the company in 1841. He advertised an express service operating between Buffalo and Albany, New York, to handle small packages, samples and bank notes. Pomeroy expanded his express route to New York City and by August 1842 was operating between New York and Buffalo on a biweekly schedule. He was handling an ever-increasing amount of mail along this route in addition to his express business. By 1844 Pomeroy had established a virtual monopoly on the express business over his route. Favorable contracts had been negotiated with the railroad between Buffalo and Albany and with the steamboat company operating from Albany to New York City. It should be noted that Pomeroy had attempted, without success, to secure a government post office contract to handle the mails.

Pomeroy's Letter Express advertised a rate of 6 1/4 cents per letter between Buffalo and New York City, one third of the government charge for the same service. Stamps were sold at twenty per dollar, and a single stamp could be used to prepay the single rate (Figure 8). Letters could be handed to Pomeroy's agent in Buffalo, located near the train station, shortly before departure of the train, and be carried by his messenger to New York City. A letter posted in the Buffalo post office to catch the same train had to be brought in substantially earlier.

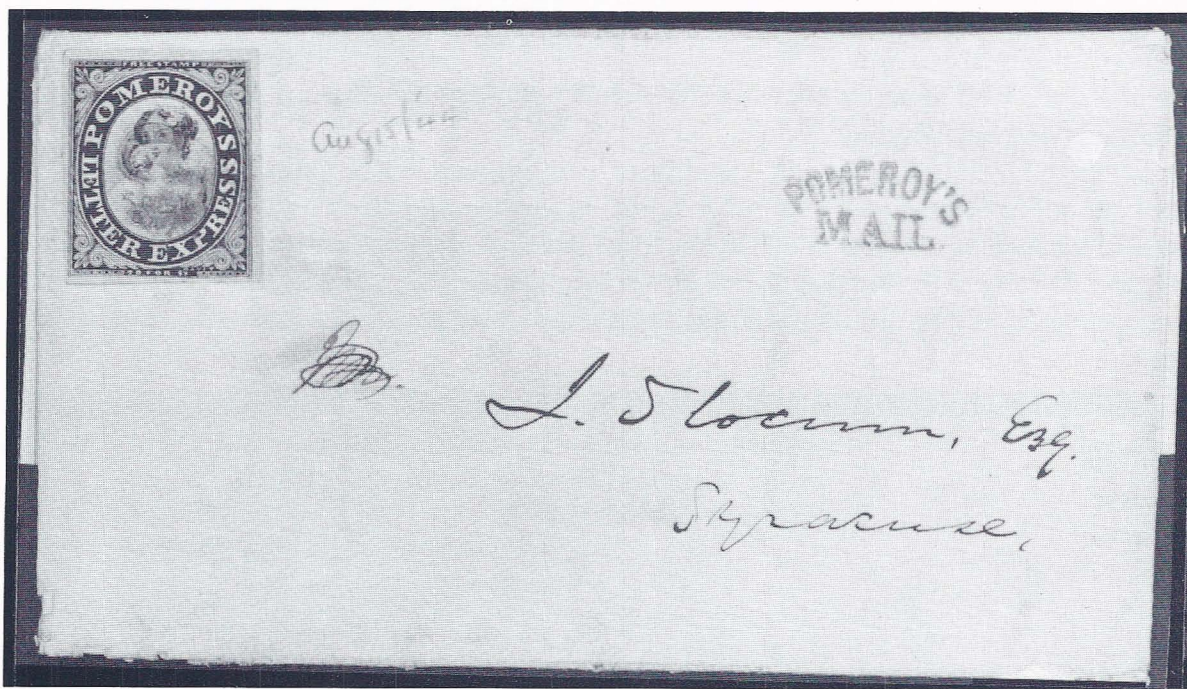


Fig. 8. Pomeroy & Co. Express stamp on 1844 letter from Albany to Syracuse, N.Y.

By mid-1844 Pomeroy's had reached an agreement with Boyd's local post in New York City whereby Boyd's would deliver letters received from Pomeroy directly to a home or business address. Pomeroy also worked out agreements with several other independent mail companies that connected with his routes. For example, Well's and Company Letter Express controlled the route between Chicago and Buffalo. By agreement between them, a letter from Chicago to New York City could be handled by the two companies and entirely prepaid. Letters showing such usages are quite desirable and are called "conjunctive" usages (Figure 9).

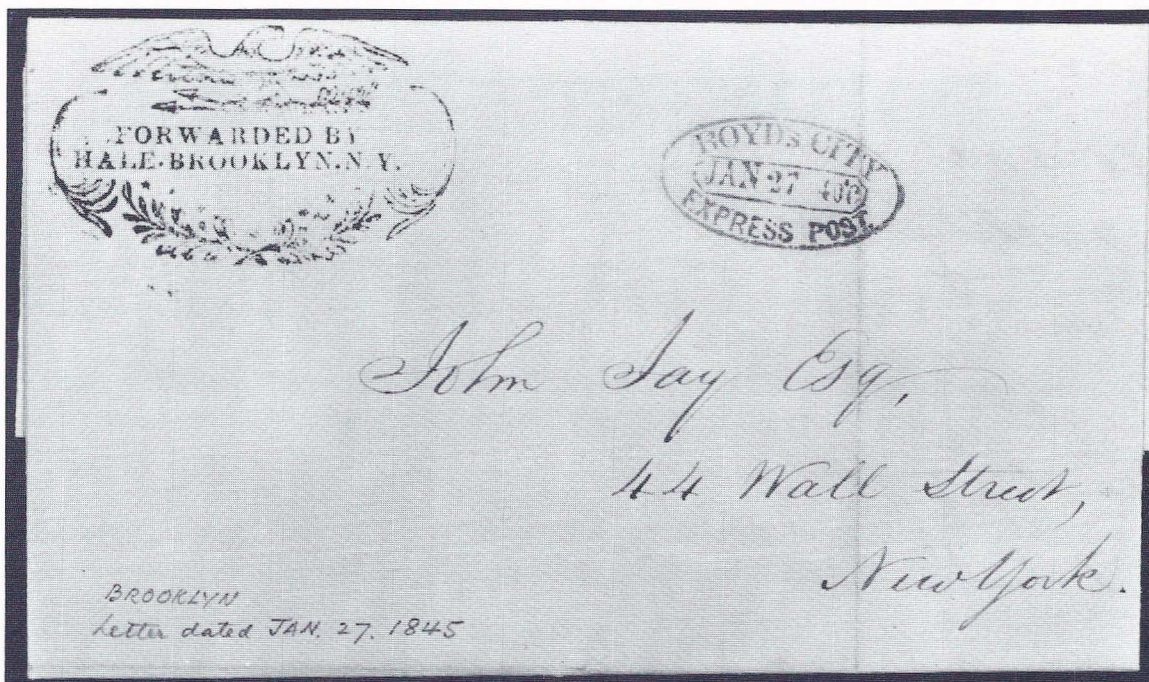


Fig. 9. "Conjunctive usage" of Hale and Boyd's independent mail services for an 1845 letter from Brooklyn to New York City.

The postmaster general of the United States took Pomeroy to court in 1844. Surprisingly, Pomeroy won the case. Finally, by invoking penalty clauses in the mail contracts with the railroads upon which Pomeroy was dependent, the government was able to stop Pomeroy's mail-carrying activities. These clauses levied fines on the railroads for carrying mail privately.

Other independent mail companies managed to survive until the Act of March 3, 1845, effective July 1, 1845, which imposed heavy fines for the private carriage of mail matter over "post roads." This, coupled with the lower postal rates established by the same act, was the end of the independent mail companies.

The independent mail companies used a wide range of markings and adhesive stamps on letters. The earliest letters found from the 1839 to 1842 period usually bear only manuscript directives such as "Per Pomeroy's Express" and possibly a notation of rate. One of the earliest I have seen, carried by an unknown expressman, is an April 1839 letter from Boston to Taunton, Massachusetts, endorsed "Per Cars." On the reverse is written, "The conductor of the Car is requested to hand this to Mr. B. immediately." It would seem that the railway conductor was supplementing his income by handling mail. The majority of the pre-1842 letters are bills of lading that accompanied a shipment or business letters.

By the time the independent mail companies were fully established in 1844, there were large volumes of personal letters carried as well. Some of the operators were individuals that carried only for a short period of time or over a very short route; while several of the larger companies, such as Hale & Co., had numerous offices and routes (Figure 10). The most commonly seen of the independent mail markings are those of Hale & Co., American Letter Mail Company and Pomeroy's Letter Mail. Many of these posts are listed in volume II of the *American Stampless Cover Catalog*. I'm sure there are manuscript markings of several of the smaller companies that have yet to be identified or recognized.

FOREIGN LETTER

OFFICE,

13 Court Street,

In connection with **HALE'S FOREIGN LETTER
OFFICE, NEW YORK.**

LETTERS will be forwarded for the *London, Liverpool, & Havre Packets*; for *South America, W. Indies, & all other Foreign Ports*, for 18 3-4 cts.

Letters for New York,

Will be forwarded by **SPECIAL MESSENGER
DAILY**, for 6 1-4 cents.

☞ Letter Bags will be closed at 20 minutes to 4.
Office, 13 Court St. Boston, } **JAS. W. HALE,**
58 Wall St. N. York. } **W. B. KIMBALL.**
December 5, 1843.

PLEASE TACK THIS UP.

Fig. 10. Hale & Co. circular of 1843.

Hotel Forwarders

Hotel forwarders provided another category of non-governmental mail service. Several hotels, largely in the New England area, carried letters out of the government mails. A tradition of giving letters to stage coach drivers to take to another town for a small fee, or possibly as an added service for customers, probably existed in many hotels dating back to the colonial period. Several early hotels undoubtedly took letters written by their guests to the nearest post office, and picked up letters from the post office addressed to their guests. In the early 1840s we begin to see markings such as "Forwarded from Howards Hotel New York" on letters. These are not just advertising handstamps. Several of the hotels were acting as independent mail companies by sending letter carriers to different cities. Business letters, not just guest mail, are frequently seen. Other hotels were acting as local posts collecting letters for delivery to the post office. The Postmaster General's Report for 1841 mentions, "It is a notorious fact our principal hotels are the common receptacles of letters...., and I am at a loss to devise a remedy for this evil," and later in the report, "I understand that a box

is kept at Howard's for the reception of letters for places on the Hudson." Very little is known regarding these hotel posts because primary source material, such as advertisements, are rarely found.

Howards Hotel in New York used its "Forwarded By" handstamp on letters from 1840 to 1845. It was operating a regular mail messenger between Troy and New York. Letters found with Troy datelines, and blue "Forwarded by Howards Hotel" oval handstamps, entered the government mails for delivery in New York. The charges for this service were probably similar to those by other independent mail companies, but I have never seen any evidence on a letter to indicate what the fee was. Howards Hotel is one of only a few that operated a mail service between cities. Far more numerous were the hotels that acted as local posts by delivering letters between the

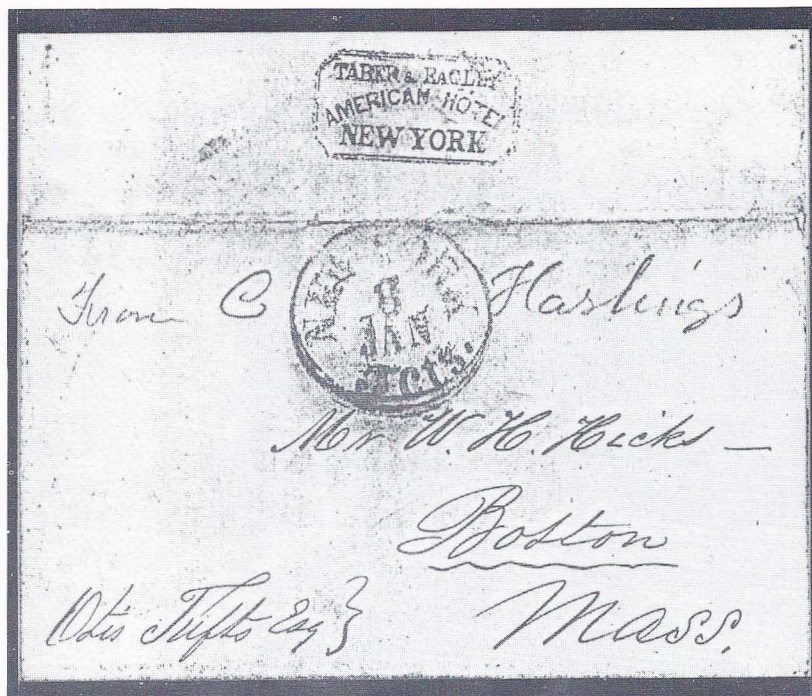


Fig. 11. American Hotel, New York hotel mail forwarder.

hotel and the post office. Drop boxes for letters probably existed in virtually all of the better hotels in the period from 1842 to 1850. It is not known if a fee was charged for taking letters to the post office, but it seems probable that some kind of cash "tip" for the service was usually rendered.



Fig. 12. Dominy's Fire Island Hotel adhesive forwarding label.

Numerous hotel markings are known from the period. Some include such words as "From" or "Forwarded By" while others simply have the name of the hotel handstamped (Figure 11). Although there may have been an advertising component in the usage of these handstamps, it should be emphasized that these hotels did provide mail service. Some hotels, such as The United States Hotel in Boston, collected government postage from the sender and used their own

"Paid" handstamps. One hotel, Dominy's Fire Island Hotel, issued an adhesive stamp. The hotel post carried letters from Fire Island across Long Island Sound to the post office in Babylon, New York (Figure 12).

When the post office began using more letter boxes, the importance of the hotels as mail repositories diminished. Most of the recorded usages are prior to 1860. In my opinion this is an excellent area for a new collector of non-governmental mail markings. The covers are usually in the \$30 to \$125 range and are not fully appreciated.

Local Posts

The scope of the local post companies differed from that of the independent mail companies.



Fig. 13. W. R. Towle letter box of the 1850s in Boston.

While the independent mail companies carried mail privately between cities, the local posts carried mail privately within a single city. Typical services offered by these posts included delivery from post boxes (Figure 13) to a post office, delivery from a post office to a street address, and delivery from a post box directly to a street address completely outside the U.S. mails. The glory days of the local posts were from 1842 to 1863. The services they provided were usually cheaper and more efficient than that of the post office. As a result the post office had a much more difficult time eliminating competition from the local posts. The government improved and extended its carrier service and finally had to declare a monopoly to eliminate the local posts. Although their importance was greatly diminished after 1863, some managed to survive until the 1880s. Most of the local posts operating after 1863 were able to continue because the post office did not provide carrier service to the areas they were serving.

The most important of the early local posts in New York City was the City Despatch Post. This post was established by Alexander Greig in 1842 to succeed the New York Penny Post. Circulars were printed, and service was set to begin on February 1, 1842. These circulars set out the services to be rendered and the fee schedule (Figure 14). These services include a registry scheme and special delivery.

Three-cent adhesives were prepared, the first adhesive stamps used in the United States. A handstamp reading "N. Y. City Despatch Post" included the date and time. New York City Postmaster Brady realized that immediate steps had to be taken to preserve control of the city's local mail. The government purchased the City Despatch Post and appointed Greig a government letter carrier. Service under government control began on August 16, 1842. A similar pattern occurred in other cities with the appointment of local post operators as official government carriers.

Boyd's City Express Post was a fairly representative local post. It was established in June 1844 to serve a large part of New York City. It managed to survive, through three different proprietors,

NEW-YORK CITY DESPATCH POST.

Principal Office, 46 William Street.

THE necessity of a medium of communication by letter from one part of the City to another, being universally admitted, and the Penny Post, lately existing, having been relinquished, the opportunity has been embraced to re-organize it under an entirely new proprietary and management, and upon a much more comprehensive basis, by which DESPATCH, PUNCTUALITY, and SECURITY, — those essential elements of success, — may at once be attained, and the inconvenience now experienced be entirely removed.

The Proprietors of the "City Despatch Post" enter upon the undertaking with an earnest impression of its responsibilities, and with a full determination so to perform the required duties as to merit the confidence and support of their fellow-citizens. They have engaged the most efficient and trustworthy Assistants and Letter Carriers, and no expense will be spared to bring the whole advantage of a well considered system into active operation.

The following is a brief outline of the plan.

BRANCH OFFICES.

Letter Boxes are placed throughout every part of the City in conspicuous places; and all letters deposited therein, not exceeding two ounces in weight, will be punctually delivered three times a day, at 9, 1, and 4 o'clock, at three cents each: option being given, either to free the letter, in the manner shown in the following regulations, or leave the postage to be collected of the party to whom the letter is addressed.

POST-PAID LETTERS.

Letters which the writers desire to send free, must have a free stamp affixed to them. An ornamental stamp has been prepared for this purpose, and may be procured at the Principal Office as above, or at those stores which will be advertised in the daily papers as having authority to sell them. The charge will be 36 cents per dozen, or \$2 50 per hundred: the reduction of price for the larger quantity being made with a view to the accommodation of those parties sending a considerable number of circulars, accounts, &c. Parcels not exceeding 1 lb. in weight will be charged a proportionate rate.

NO MONEY MUST BE PUT INTO THE BOXES.

ALL LETTERS INTENDED TO BE SENT FORWARD TO THE GENERAL POST-OFFICE FOR THE INLAND MAILS, MUST HAVE A FREE STAMP AFFIXED TO THEM.

LETTERS AND NEWSPAPERS ADDRESSED TO THE EDITORS OF THE PUBLIC PRESS, WILL BE DELIVERED FREE.

UNPAID LETTERS.

Letters not having a free stamp, will be charged three cents, payable by the party to whom they are addressed, on delivery.

REGISTRY AND DESPATCH.

A Registry will be kept for Letters which it may be wished to place under special charge. Free stamps must be affixed to such Letters for the ordinary postage, and three cents additional be paid, (or an additional free stamp be affixed,) for the Registration: but all such Letters must be specially deposited at the Principal Office.

A special "Despatch" will be expedited with any Letter or Packet, not exceeding one pound in weight, (to an address within the limits,) at 12½ cents a mile, upon application at the Principal Office.

The advantages offered by this undertaking are,

FIRST. The secure and prompt transmission of all Registered Letters containing any special notice or matter by which means legal evidence may be obtained of the due delivery of the same; and the immediate despatch of any letter or small package requiring instant delivery.

SECONDLY. The certain and expeditious delivery of MERCANTILE LETTERS and CIRCULARS, of INVITATIONS and REPLIES, (either under free stamp or unpaid,) and every description of COMMERCIAL, PROFESSIONAL, and SOCIAL Correspondence; thus bringing the most distant parts of the City in effect near to each other, and providing the means of constant intercourse at a very moderate charge.

STRONGLY RECOMMENDED BY

Messrs. PRIME, WARD & KING,

Provided it does not infringe the Post-Office Act.

J. W. & R. LEAVITT.
MOSES TAYLOR.
J. PRESCOTT HALL.
E. K. COLLINS & Co.
HALL BROTHERS.
W. G. BULL & Co.
AUSTEN, WILMERDING & Co.
BROWN, BROTHERS & Co.

Messrs. GOODHUE & Co.

JAMES Mc CALL & Co.
JNO. J. PALMER,
President Merchants' Bank.
JNO. HAGGERTY & SONS.
CRITTS & Co.
SMITH, THURGAR & Co.
WADSWORTH & SMITH.
ADAMS, PETHIE & Co.
D. C. & W. PELL & Co.
W. C. PICKERSGILL & Co.

ALEXANDER M. GREIG, AGENT.

Messrs. JOHN J. A'DUBON, F. R. S. S.
of London and Edinburgh, &c. &c.
L. M. HOFFMAN & Co.
W. F. & F. C. HAVEMEYER, JR.
BELKNAP & DUFFEE.
WARREN & BRINTNALL.
E. D. MORGAN.
MORRIS EARLE.
YOUNG, RITTER & Co.
JOHN JOHNSON'S SON.
SPOFFORD, TILESTON & Co.

The Limits of the Despatch Post will extend to Twenty-First-street.

Fig. 14. New York City Despatch Post circular of 1842.

until at least 1882. Its original purpose was to serve primarily as a mail delivery service. A large district of the city, from its office at William Street north to 26th Street, was to be covered. It advertised that letters would be delivered directly to any street address within this area for a charge of two cents. Mail dropped off at the Boyd's office at 45 William Street would be handstamped with the date and time and delivered directly (Figure 15). The 2-cent charge would be collected by the messenger or charged to a business account. Boyd soon made arrangements with several of the independent mail companies bringing mail into New York City. For example, a letter from Buffalo, N. Y., could be sent by Pomeroy's express and prepaid with a Pomeroy's adhesive. Pomeroy's would deliver the letter to the Boyd's office in New York, and Boyd's would deliver it directly to the addressee and collect its two cents. The total charges amounted to 7 cents. If the same letter was sent in the government mails, and the letter picked up at the post office rather than delivered, the charge would be 18 3/4 cents.

Boyd's soon expanded its service to include "to the mails" carriage. Letter boxes for the collection of letters were set up. Letters could be posted in these boxes, collected by a Boyd's messenger, and delivered to the government post office for mailing. This required the use of adhesive postage stamps. A 2-cent Boyd's stamp could prepay the fee for the carriage of the letter to the New York Post office. As the carrier service provided by the government

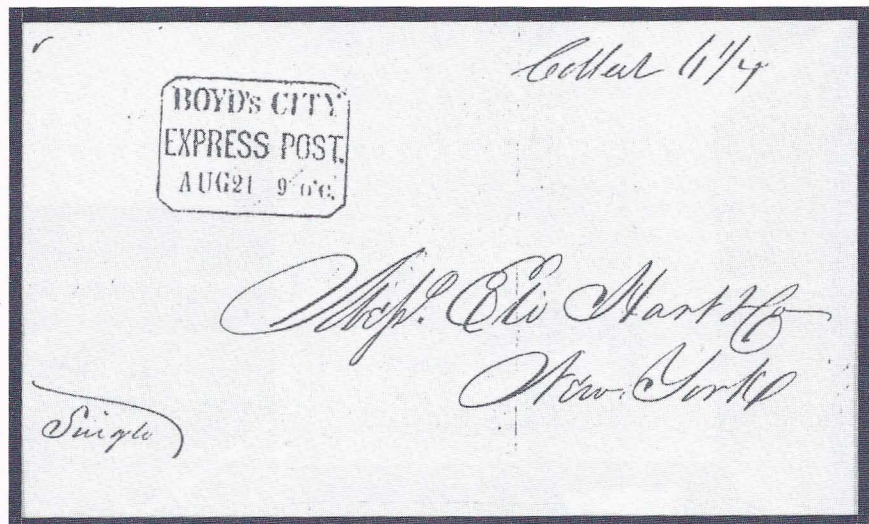


Fig. 15. Boyd's City Express Post letter of 1844.

became more efficient, Boyd's was forced to lower its rate for this service to 1 cent in 1860. The government abolished the "to the mails" carrier fees in 1863, effectively ending that portion of Boyd's service. It managed to survive, however, by expanding its delivery service to include a "special delivery."

There is tremendous variety in the types of markings used by the local posts. These posts were, in many cases, one-man operations. Ownership changed frequently, and some of the posts had extremely brief periods of existence. Some are known to have operated for only a single Valentine's Day. When one examines a cover handled by a local post, the first task is to ascertain whether the letter was taken to the government post office, from the government post office, or entirely by the local post. Rates and charges differed depending on which services were utilized. Many of the local post operators, such as Frazer in Cincinnati, Ohio, served as independent local posts during part of their careers and as official government carriers during part. The same markings and even the same adhesive stamps could be used. It is sometimes impossible to ascertain, especially if a cover is undated, whether a particular usage is during the period when Frazer was employed by the government or while he was independent. The records of the government-appointed city mail carriers are sometimes incomplete. Some of the companies we now classify as local posts may, in fact, have been operating as government carriers.

Competition from the local posts frequently resulted in reduced rates, or service to an area that had previously been neglected, or more frequent box pick-ups, or a combination of the above. Each local post had something new to offer its patrons, and in each city the postmaster reacted differently.

Packet Markings

Most collectors would not think of packet markings as properly belonging in the domain of independent mails. These markings, however, are remnants of a long tradition of shipmasters handling letters between cities completely outside the government mail system. The early steamboats on the Hudson River carried large quantities of mail between Albany and New York City prior to 1815, when the Hudson River was designated a postal route. A letter could be posted at a wharf in New York City to be conveyed by the next steamer bound for Albany. For a nominal charge the letter would then be deposited in the post office at Albany for "office of mailing" delivery. The fee for that service was 1 1/2 cents. Had the same letter been deposited in the government mails in New York, it would have cost 10 3/4 cents.

Steamboat captains maintained the prerogative of handling letters well into the 1860s. On the Mississippi River large quantities of mail were carried outside the government service. The markings associated with these steamboats are called packet markings. In common with other forms of private mail systems, these markings are found on letters that were carried to the government mails, and on letters that were handled completely outside the government mails. Rarely are they found on letters that came out of the government mails. Typically a letter would be delivered to a steamboat wharf agent and carried on a steamer to the port of destination. At the port the steamboat agent would deposit the letter in the government mails where it would receive a postmark and a "Steam" or "Way" handstamp (Figure 16). If the letter was a bill of lading, it could be delivered by the steamboat agent directly to the recipient without ever entering the U.S. mails.

The fees that the steamboats charged are rarely known. I've never seen an example that had a rate expressed on it. The manuscript markings seen on many letters carried by steamboat are the

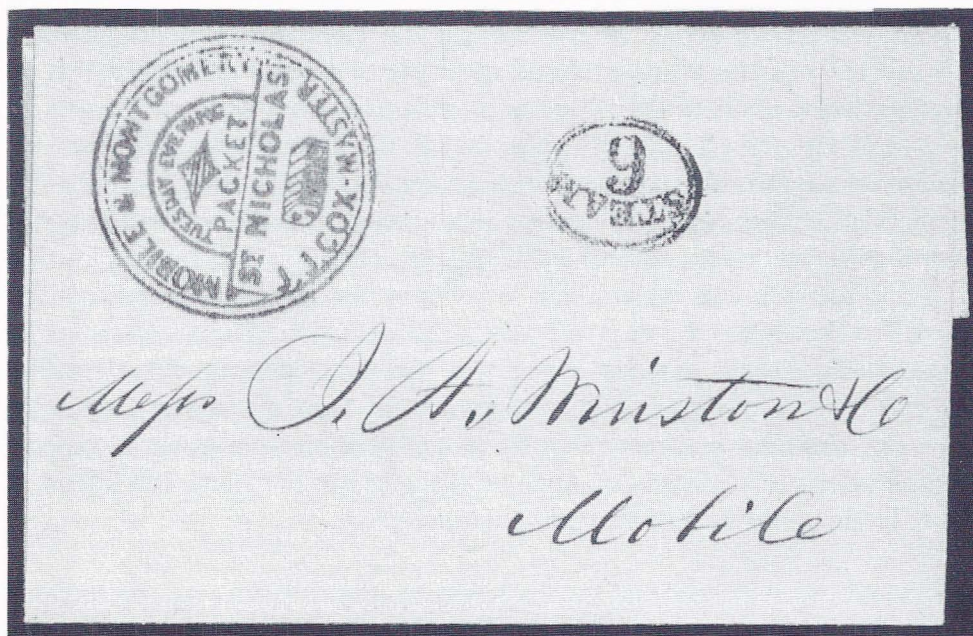


Fig. 16. St. Nicholas packet letter, which entered the mails at Mobile, Alabama.

senders' instructions on which steamers they wanted to carry their letters. Many steamboats used handstamps. These markings served to publicize the particular steamboat and probably indicated that a fee had been paid for the service. These markings are known from more than 800 different steamers and were used well into the 1880s.

Some confusion has arisen regarding the status of government 3-cent envelopes bearing packet handstamps. If a government postmark is not on the entire, it did not enter the government mails; it was carried completely outside the mails (Figure 17).

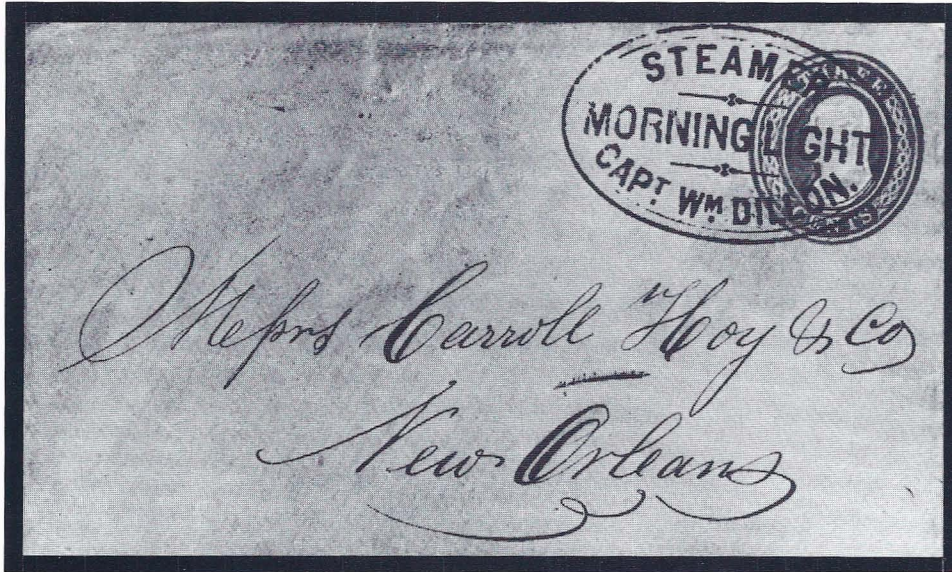


Fig. 17. Morning Light steamer letter carried completely out of the mails.

Western Expresses

The Western expresses, although they carried mail between cities, are very much different from the independent mail companies. The Western expresses provided mail service to areas where no government mail service existed. When, and if, the government got around to providing service, the expresses either went out of business or tried to provide faster service than the government.

The need for the Western expresses was a direct result of the various gold rushes in the West. Mining camps experienced tremendous population growth very suddenly. Mail service was very important to the miners, and the private expresses that handled their mail were well compensated. The California gold rush of 1849 established a pattern for the Western express companies that was repeated during subsequent rushes. Some of the same operators moved on with the miners to new diggings as soon as the post office arrived. Until November 1849 San Francisco had the only post office in California. Mail from the East arrived there twice a month by mail steamer. In July 1849 Alexander Todd established an express company to serve the mines south of San Francisco, such as Sonora and Mokelumne Hill. He toured several of the mining camps and took subscriptions, charging a dollar each, for all the men who wanted him to get their mail at the San Francisco Post Office. He then returned to San Francisco, picked up all the mail addressed to his subscribers, carried the letters back to the camps and collected gold dust in payment. The exact amount of compensation is unknown but was probably \$4 or \$5 per letter. Todd also took letters from the miners to be mailed at San Francisco (Figure 18). His rates decreased rapidly as competition from other expressmen arose. After a miner was enrolled on an express company's subscription list, he would inform his correspondents to endorse letters to the care of that particular company.

These expresses proliferated at an astonishing rate largely because the service was so lucrative. As competition developed, a few larger companies began consolidating the small one-man routes. Companies such as Wells, Fargo & Co. developed large networks of routes, and services expanded to include banking, freighting and gold dust shipments.



Fig. 18. Todd & Bryan's Express letter of 1850 from a mining camp to the San Francisco Post Office.

The Colorado gold rush began in 1859 when several strikes were made in the mountains just west of Denver. The nearest post office was hundreds of miles away. The Leavenworth and Pike's Peak Express Company began handling mail in May 1859. It carried mail for a 25-cent charge by stage coach between Denver and Leavenworth City, Kansas, or St. Joseph, Missouri. Inbound letters for the miners in the mountain camps were endorsed via the express company by the sender. These letters would be turned over to the company and taken to Denver (Figure 19). From the express office in Denver another company might deliver the letters to the mountain camps for an additional fee.



Fig. 19. Central Overland California & Pikes Peak Express letter carried from the mails at St. Joseph, Missouri, via Denver to a mining camp.

As with the local posts, the markings associated with the Western expresses show great diversity. Many of the smaller companies did not use any markings at all. Some used only manuscript ink or pencil notations. As a result, it is sometimes impossible to ascertain who carried a specific cover without a knowledge of what expresses were serving a particular camp at a given time. After 1853, when the government required the use of government postal entires for all mail carried privately, we see a large number of entires with printed “franks.” A miner could purchase an envelope and prepay the express charges. As with the local posts, we also find “to the mail” usages, “from the mail” usages and covers carried completely outside the government mails. Frequently combination covers are found that were carried by more than one express (Figure 20).



Fig. 20. Combination letter with Wood & Co. printed frank, W. F. (?) & Co. cancel, and out-of-the-mails usage.

Several other kinds of non-government mail handlers were operating in California at the same time as the expresses. San Francisco had local posts very similar in operation to their eastern counterparts. Some companies also sent mail-carrying messengers on non-government steamers bound for New York. The well-known “Via Nicaragua In Advance Of The Mails” marking is an example of this class of usage.

Package Express Companies

The package express companies are a little recognized, yet significant, group of private mail handlers. These companies are similar to the independent mail companies of the early 1840s. In fact they are the direct descendants of those companies. After the postal act of March 1845 prohibited the carriage of letters outside the government mails over a post route, those companies that were operating over postal routes shifted away from handling letters. Most of the companies specialized in small packages. However, money letters, letters relating to shipments (such as invoices) and other written communications continued to be handled. Although the government registry system for handling money letters was fully operational in 1855, the package express companies continued to be the dominant carriers of valuable letters through the Civil War and into the 1870s.

The package express companies originally operated over the same routes that the independent mail companies had served. After 1845 the railway and steamboat systems in the United States spread rapidly to the West. The package expresses spread with them. Large companies such as American Express consolidated smaller lines and formed important express networks covering tremendous areas of the United States. American Express was formed in March 1850 by combining Wells, Butterfield & Co. with Livingston, Fargo & Co. In 1852 Henry Wells and William Fargo formed their own company to operate in the West, leaving American Express to operate east of the Mississippi River. By



Fig. 21. American Express 1862 money letter with 2-shilling (50-cent) charge.

1862 the company maintained 890 offices. Business boomed during the Civil War as money was frequently sent to soldiers. For these money packages, American Express used large brown envelopes, some nicely illustrated. These are found with wax seals on the reverse and usually bear one or more of its labels (Figure 21).

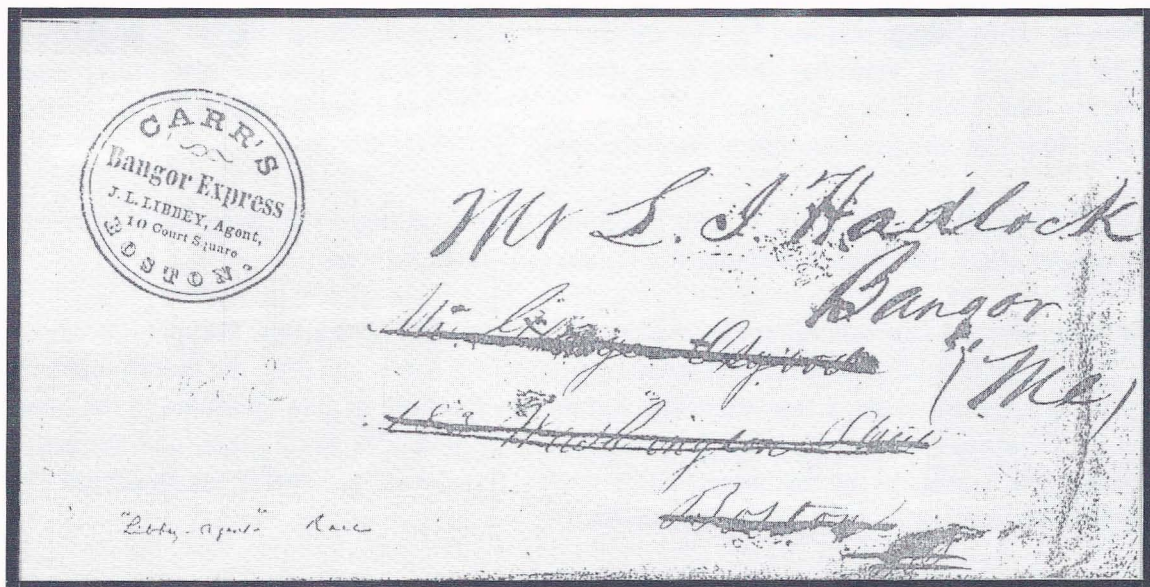


Fig. 22. Carr's Bangor Express label on bill of lading from Boston.

Most of these package express companies used labels on letters and packages handled by them. These labels were not used like adhesive stamps that had to be canceled but were applied to the letters to indicate the point of origin or to specify how replies could be sent (Figure 22). Many of the labels are illustrated with trains or steamboats, and most gave the locations of principle offices.

There was undoubtedly an advertising component in their use. Unfortunately many collectors removed these colorful labels from the covers or letters in the early days. When rates were specified they usually appear as shilling notations like those used by the British. One shilling, commonly called one bit, was equal to 25 cents. Some companies used manuscript or handstamped markings. This is an area that has not been heavily collected. This may be due to the paucity of material, but what there is does not usually command prices commensurate with scarcity. Many collectors specializing in a specific town or state are now beginning to include these covers in their collections. These posts were significant not only because of their pioneering efforts in handling money letters but also as the first parcel post companies.

Questions and Answers

How did the independent mail companies influence the U.S. Post Office rates?

Frajola: The postal act effective July 1, 1845, lowered the basic postal rate to 5 cents. I consider the independent mail companies very important because they put so much pressure on the government to lower the postal rates. The public wasn't going to put up with 18 3/4 cents. It was very hard for the government to justify that kind of rate when some private individuals could give the same service for 5 cents.

What is a telegraph cover?

Frajola: A telegraph cover can be an example of how a telegraph system delivered a message to a street address. I consider this a tremendous field with very little study and, along with the local posts, largely neglected.

Why did the post office charge 18 3/4 cents?

Frajola: The postage rate was 18 1/2 cents for 150 to 400 miles from 1816 to 1825. Then it went from 18 1/2 to 18 3/4. That was because the unit of currency was a Spanish mill dollar, which was broken into bits. One bit was 25 cents, a half bit was 12 1/2, and a quarter bit was 6 1/4. Three times that was 18 3/4, so the government revised the rate.

Regarding coffee house mail, at what point was the ship captain reimbursed if the coffee house receiving the letter was unsure whether the recipient would show up?

Frajola: The captain was most likely paid when he picked up a letter. The person who gave a letter to a tavern would give the tavern master a penny or 2 cents, and then the tavern master would give the captain the 2 cents. Later when the captain was required to give all letters to the post office on his ship's arrival, he was paid by the government. It gave him the 2 cents, and the postmaster then added the 2 cents to the postage to be collected. But during the coffee house period I believe the captain's fee was pre-paid by the letter writer.

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