

Commercial Rubber Cancellations on United States Official Stamps 1877-1884

In 1873, Congress abolished the franking privilege and authorized official stamps to be prepared for the Executive Office and its eight subordinate departments. The new stamps were unpopular, so in 1877 Congress authorized the use of penalty franks, which was expanded to include field offices in 1879. The use of official stamps declined steadily until they were declared obsolete on July 5, 1884.

During the period in which official stamps were valid, hand-carved obliterators fell into disuse. At post offices in large cities with government-issued steel duplex cancelers, the obliterators gradually changed from carved cork or wooden insert plugs to cast steel targets or barred ellipses with a numeral identify a particular postal clerk or a letter to identify a branch station.

In smaller towns, where the postmasters were required to furnish their own cancelers, cut cork or pen cancellation gave way to commercial molded vulcanized rubber cancelers in popular stock designs. This change in canceling devices coincided roughly with the expanded use of penalty envelopes, which drastically curtailed the need for official stamps.

This exhibit focuses on the small town use of commercial vulcanized rubber killers on official stamps during the transitional period, 1877-1884. Strikes are not typically found on Executive, State, Justice or Navy stamps, because these were chiefly used in major cities. Also, while Treasury stamps had been widely dispersed east of the Mississippi Rivers in towns large enough to have an Assessor's Office or a Collector of Internal Revenue, and the Post Office Department had distributed its official stamps to all 33,780 postmasters across the country, both departments quickly converted to the use of penalty envelopes in their field offices.

Therefore, strikes of rubber killers are typically found on official stamps from three departments: Interior, Agriculture, and War. The Department of the Interior had surveyors, land offices, and Indian agents all across the country, and the Census Bureau and Department of Education both used prestamped reply envelopes. Field officers could not use penalty envelopes for correspondence with private citizens without supplemental postage, so fresh supplies of official stamps were continuously sent out.

The Department of Agriculture did not have field offices per se but a network of corresponding agents, and prestamped reply envelopes soliciting crop reports and seed orders were sent in from farmers across the land. The War Department used stamps everywhere, because of the involvement of the Signal Service Corps in filing weather reports. Out West, usages of War stamps predominate, mailed from post offices in the forts established to protect the settlement routes from hostile Indians. The War Department deemed it inefficient to print custom penalty envelopes for all of its far-flung officers, and so continued using official stamps until they were abolished.

Exhibit Organization

The exhibit is organized by design types. Because identical designs were sold to various postmasters, the town of origin can rarely be determined for off-cover strikes. The biggest manufacturers of vulcanized rubber handstamps were F. P. Hammond of Chicago, E. S. Miller of Newark, Ohio, and John Goldsborough of Philadelphia. Because black printer's ink tended to gum up the devices, the vendors offered a range of less viscous colored canceling inks. Violet and blue were the most popular choices, but purple and magenta were also used. Congress appropriated money in 1882 for supplying small-town postmasters with steel cancelers. Although the Postal Guide of 1883 specifically prohibited the continued use of rubber handstamps, it continued for a few years until the changeover to steel was completed.

Strikes of commercial vulcanized rubber handstamps on official covers are surprisingly scarce. Three covers shown here with relatively common designs - the Wheel of Fortune, pinwheel, and the "S" in "U" - are the only recorded examples. On the page of fancy designs, the anchor, Japanese fan, split-rail cross and barred shield are the only recorded strikes on official stamps.

Kicking Mule



This, the most famous of rubber handstamps, was produced by G. A. Klinker of San Francisco. It is known to have been used in three California towns - Goleta, Susanville, and Forbestown - and two towns in Washington Territory - Neah Bay and Port Townsend. The three recorded strikes on covers franked with official stamps are all War Department usages from Port Townsend. Off-covers strikes on War stamps are far more common than on Agriculture and Interior. The cover shown here, the second earliest strike known from Port Townsend and illustrated in Cole, was apparently a private use of a Treasury envelope due to the regular Banknote franking, but it suggests that strikes of the Kicking Mule on a Treasury stamp, while not reported yet, might have once existed.