

The Use of Official Stamps in New York City

1873-1884

In 1873, Congress abolished the franking privilege and authorized official stamps to be prepared for the Executive Office and its eight subordinate departments. Half of all official mail originated in the great departmental headquarters of Washington, D.C., but outside the capital, the most extensive use of official stamps occurred in New York City. This was the nation's commercial center, with a population over 1.2 million at the time of the 1880 census (seven times that of the capital). The Department of State had a dispatch agent at the main NYPO who expedited the handling of all official foreign mail. The Treasury Department had numerous offices in the city, including Internal Revenue, U.S. General Appraiser, Assessor's Office, and Custom House. The War Department had several offices, including an Ordnance Agency and the Headquarters of the Military Division of the Atlantic. Administrative offices for the great Naval Yard in Brooklyn were within New York City proper, as was the U.S. Attorney's Office for the southern district of the state, handling far more cases than any other district in the country. The Department of the Interior had a Pension Office there, and prestamped reply envelopes from the Department of Agriculture were also posted within the city. Only stamps of the Executive Office itself, reserved for use of the President and his staff, were unlikely to be posted there. In Washington D.C., the use of official stamps declined rapidly after penalty franks were authorized in 1877, but in New York City and elsewhere official stamps continued to be used, since penalty franks had been ruled invalid for field office correspondence with private citizens.

Not only did the New York City main post office and its many branch stations handle a vast volume of mail, it was also the most technically innovative post office in the country. In the quest for greater accountability in the handling of mail, this was the first post office to assign numeral cancelers to the clerks at the main post office, and letter cancelers to the various branches. Distinctive styles of cancellations were used for city delivery mail, domestic mail going outside the city, foreign mail, ships' letters, steamship mail, circular mail, and registered mail. In accordance with postal regulations, black printer's ink was

used almost exclusively, although red canceling ink was used by the foreign department on supplementary mail. In the early years of official stamp usage there, the government-issue steel duplex postmarks still required hand-carved obliterator inserts, while the famous simplex NYFM geometric killers were carved of boxwood. But in 1876, the main NYPO became the first city to use John Goldsborough's patented ellipse cancelers on a regular basis. Numerals in ellipses were utilized on domestic mail, "PO" in ellipse was used on city delivery, numerals in vertically-barred ellipses were used on foreign and supplementary mail, and letters in ellipses were used at the various branches. Double oval postmark killers were used on circular mail, foreign mail, and registered mail. The expedience and legibility of these new cancelers were quickly appreciated, and within ten years, all major cities in the country had adopted this system, sounding the death knell for the hand-carved obliterator.

This exhibit illustrates the evolution of canceling practices in New York City during the period, organized chronologically and by type of mail. Due to very poor survival rates for official covers, extensive studies of off-cover stamps with attributable cancellations have been incorporated to prove how widely they were utilized in New York City. That no Executive covers are known posted from New York City is not surprising, but it is discouraging that neither Justice nor Agriculture covers have been reported as well. This exhibit includes covers from five departments, including the only recorded official cover with classic NYFM cancellations, the only recorded official cover with a New York Ship Letter postmark, and the only recorded registered official cover from New York City. Off-cover cancellations include the largest group of NYFM cancellations ever assembled, including the only reported strike on an Executive stamp. Although no official covers have been seen with the distinctive New York Steamship postmarks, strikes on six different Navy values are included, as well as the only recorded strike on a Treasury stamp. Four strikes on official stamps of the short-lived Roman numeral killers are shown, as well as four of the six recorded strikes of the mysterious NYPO in ellipse cancellation.

Ship Letter

6¢ ship letter rate, May (1876), from the U.S.S. Plymouth, entered the mails at New York City and marked "Due 3", to Norfolk, Virginia. The U.S.S. Plymouth, a wooden-hulled screw sloop-of-war, operated along the Atlantic coast from October, 1874 to May, 1879. Rendezvous and receiving ships and vessels of the Navy in port were supplied with official stamps. This style of New York ship letter datestamp was used from January, 1876 to April, 1877. (Cover and stamp restored.)

*The only recorded official cover
with a ship letter postmark.*

