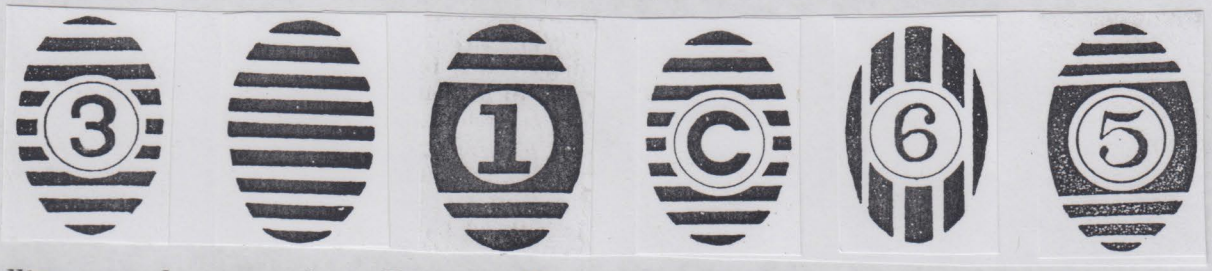
Hand-Carved "Ellipse" Cancels Used in the U.S.

Roger D. Curran

Cancels referred to as "ellipses" by collectors became popular in the U.S. beginning in the mid 1870s. Every large city post office employed them at one time or another as did many of intermediate size. These cancels typically, but by no means always, had a number in the center that identified the clerk who was using the handstamp. The facings of these handstamps were normally constructed of metal for durability. Several design types are illustrated below.



As ellipse cancels appeared, smaller post offices, not in the market for metal cancelers due to cost, would at least occaionally see them on incoming mail. Some post offices were attracted to the ellipse design and created, typically with a carving knife, wood or cork cancelers that would mimic the ellipse appearance. Also, it appears that a few post offices acquired wood cancelers that were professionally carved. Ellipse cancels with vertical bars were considerably less common than those with horizontal bars did constitute a significant portion of the total. However, I have seen no mimics of the vertical bars design.

Although not covered in this presentation, attention is called to ellipse cancels that were produced from rubber-faced cancelers that appeared, but only to a very limited extent, beginning about 1880. The most interesting aspect of these is that they were typically struck in a colored ink because the black printing and writing inks in use at the time had a destructive effect on rubber. Otherwise, ellipse cancels of the period, whether from metal or wood cancelers, were overwhelmingly struck in black ink.

Shown below is a range of U.S. hand-carved ellipse cancels. They were used in the latter portion of the 19th century. Examples on off cover stamps are presented initially followed by examples on cover. No attempt was made to identify the post office of origin of the off cover cancels, but many are so identified on the covers that are subsequently shown.

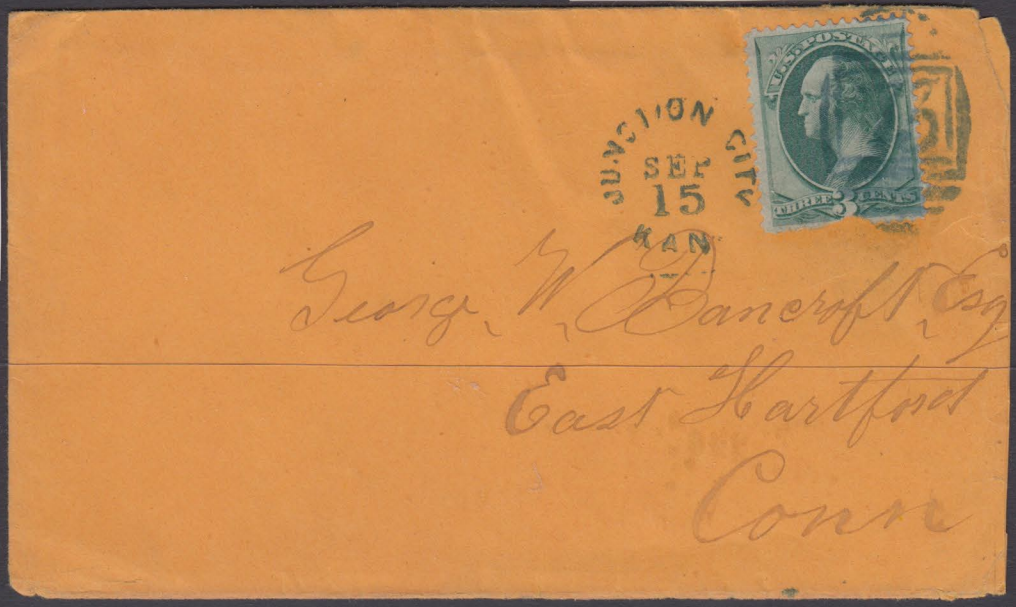


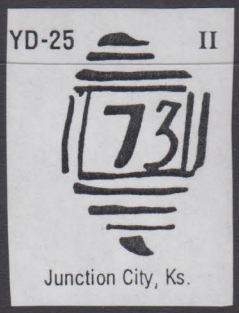
The first "ellipse" cancelers in the U.S. put in regular use were introduced in May 1876. They were employed by the New York Post Office in a series, each with a number in the center, that by the end of 1877, ranged from"1" to "30". Back as early as 1853, ellipse cancelers composed of thin bars with a number in the center began to be used in British post offices. It is assumed that the designs of both cancels shown below were inspired by British cancels seen on incoming mail. The cover illustrated here was struck by the Junction City, Kansas post office, an operating post office in Geary County established in 1858. A tracing of the Junction City markings on this cover accompanies. A tracing of an 1871 British duplex marking also accompanies as does a copy of listing YD-25 from the James Cole book. The "73" in the Junction City ellipse is assumed to refer to the year date of the cover.












U.S. POSTAGE
THREE 3 CENTS


U.S. POSTAGE
THREE 3 CENTS


U.S. POSTAGE
THREE 3 CENTS
RMS


U.S. POSTAGE
THREE 3 CENTS










ALLEGAN
DEC
5
5PM
MICH.
Miss Bertha E. Pritchard
55 East Washington St
Ann Arbor
Mich
87


TWO 2 CENTS


TWO 2 CENTS


TWO 2 CENTS


TWO 2 CENTS


GOUVERNEUR
AUG
16
1887
N.Y.
TWO 2 CENTS


TWO 2 CENTS


U.S. POSTAGE
2
CENTS

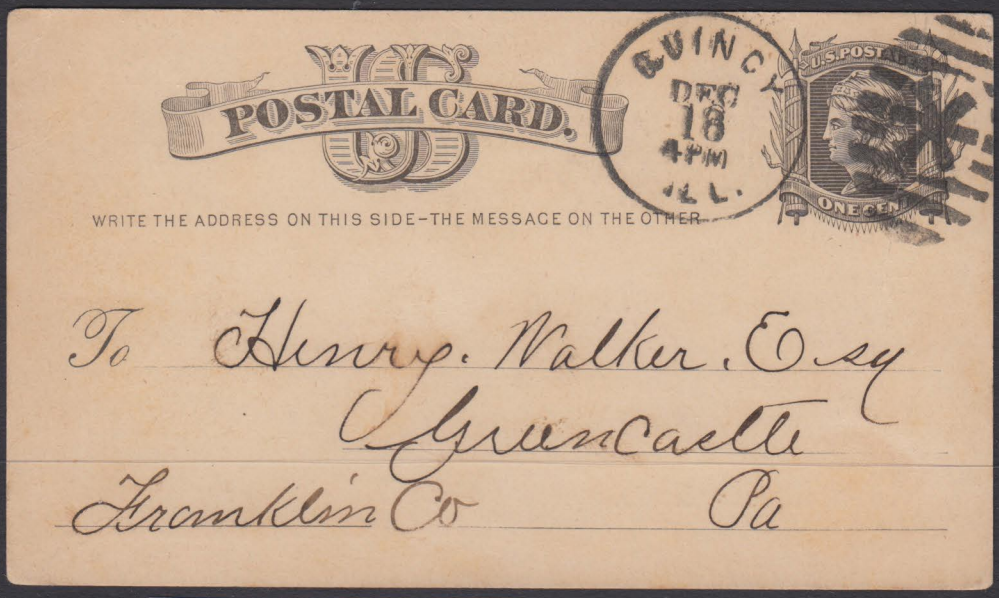

TWO CENTS


APR
3
1888
TWO CENTS


TWO CENTS


1893
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
TWO CENTS
LANDING OF COLUMBUS


TWO CENTS



This bold Quincy, IL ellipse is on card dated 1876.



South Butler is an operating post office established in 1832 in Wayne County NY.

Waterbury, CT

In his seminal book *The Waterbury Cancellations 1865-1890* Paul Rohloff stated the following about the cancel shown below: "This cancel was not made by Hill, but was a purchased cancel used several times when Hill was absent." Rohloff reported a strike dated February 23, 1877. The strike on the 6c stamp is especially clear.





ER-MADE IN ENGLAND — HAGNER-MADE IN ENGLAND — HAGNER-MADE IN ENGLAND —



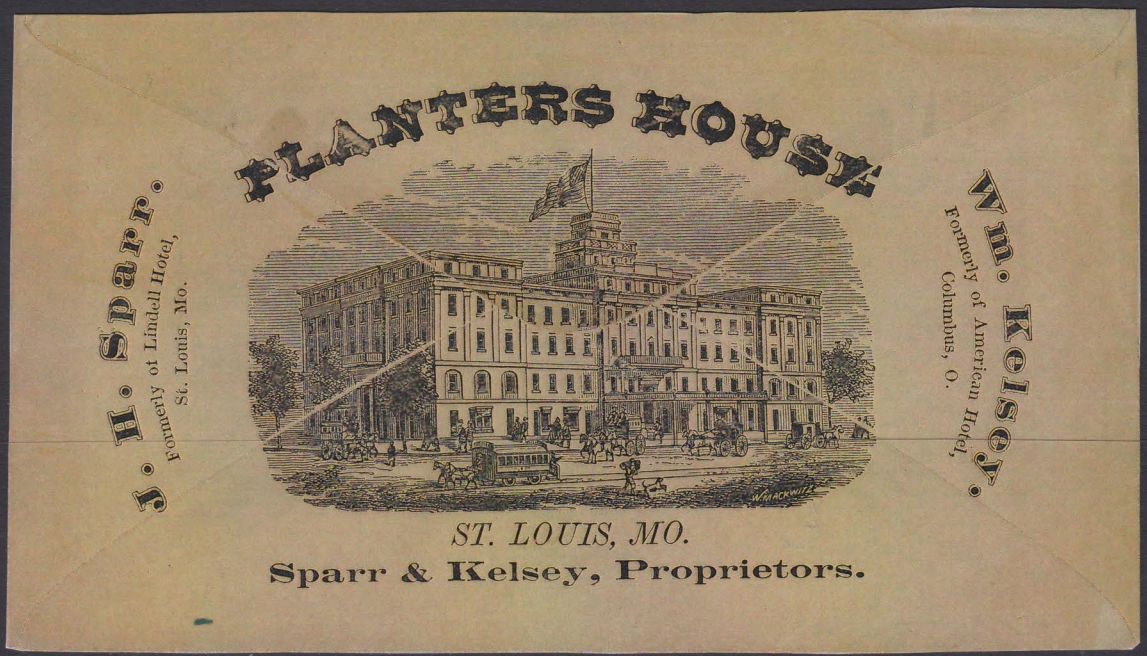
The postmark reads "Rut. Salem & Troy / Agt." The "N" in the ellipse indicates the northern direction of the train.



"M" for Merchantville, NJ on this 1878 cover.

This primitive ellipse is from St. Louis, MO. See photocopy of the elaborate advertisement on the cover's back.





Three items from Rochester, NY. The cover has no year date. The cards are dated 1878. Just what the canceler face was made of is an interesting question. It seems to have been very susceptible to wear.



Miss L. A. Preston
No 4 Benefit St.
Worcester
Massachusette.

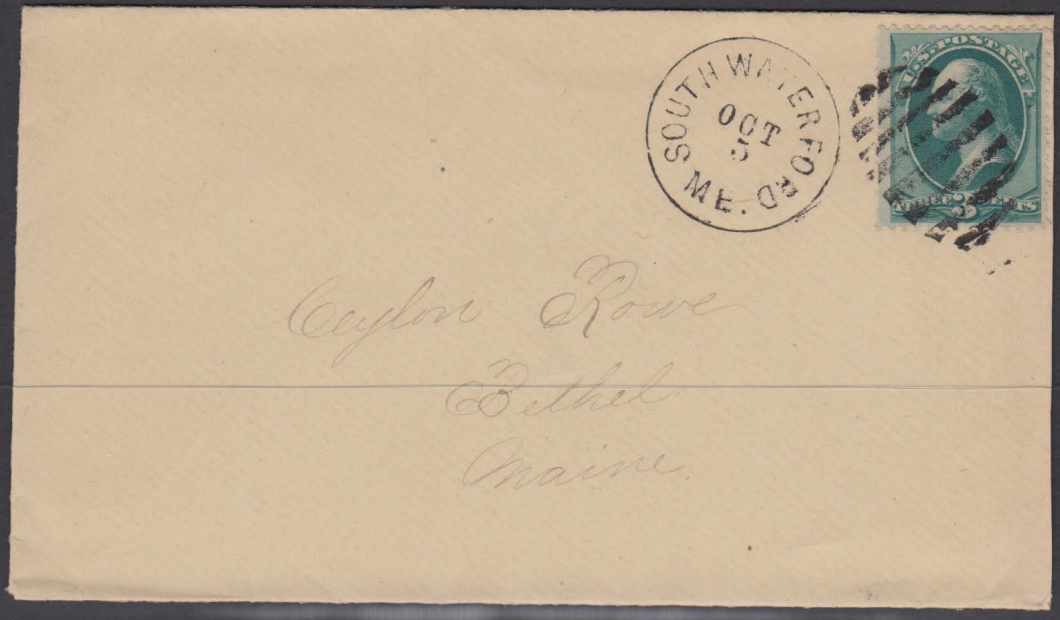


Minerva
No North 21 St.
Philadelphia
Penn.



The Singer Mfg Co
34 Union Square
New York

The top cover is undated from South Waterford, ME. The bottom is from Brandon, VT and dated 1879.

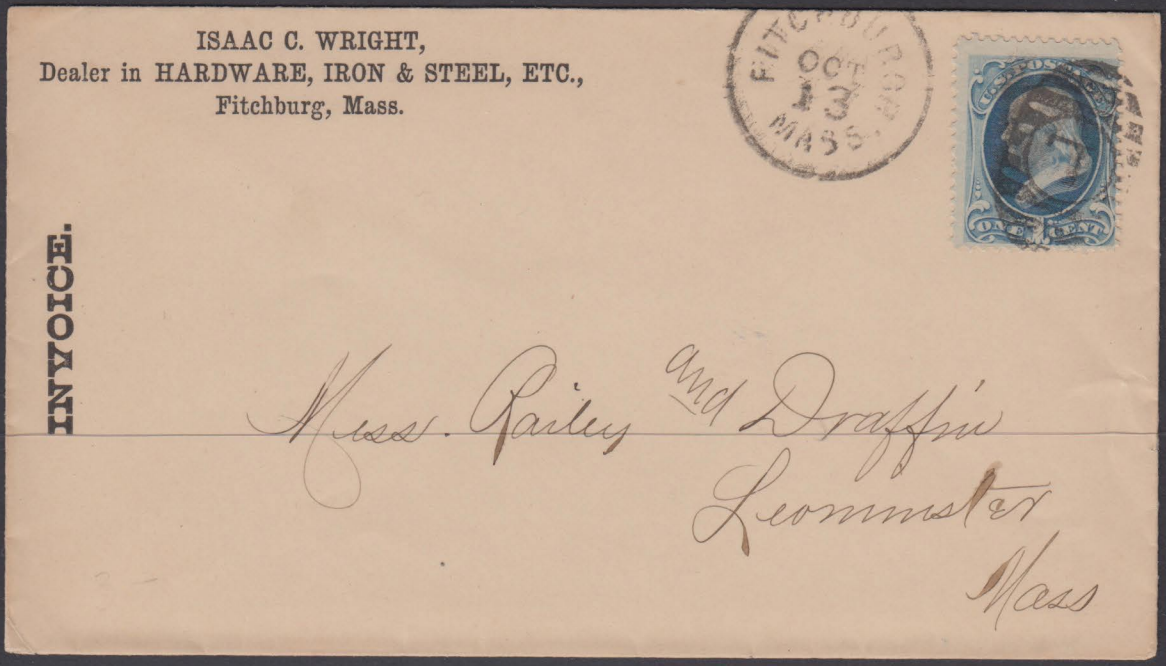




Two covers, both bearing an "L" in the ellipse center, without year dates.

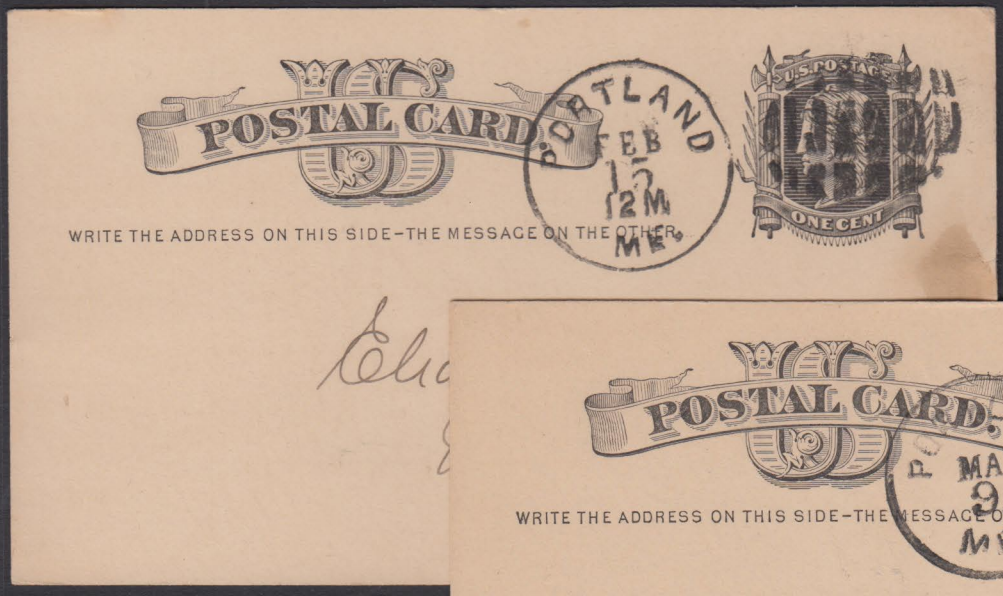


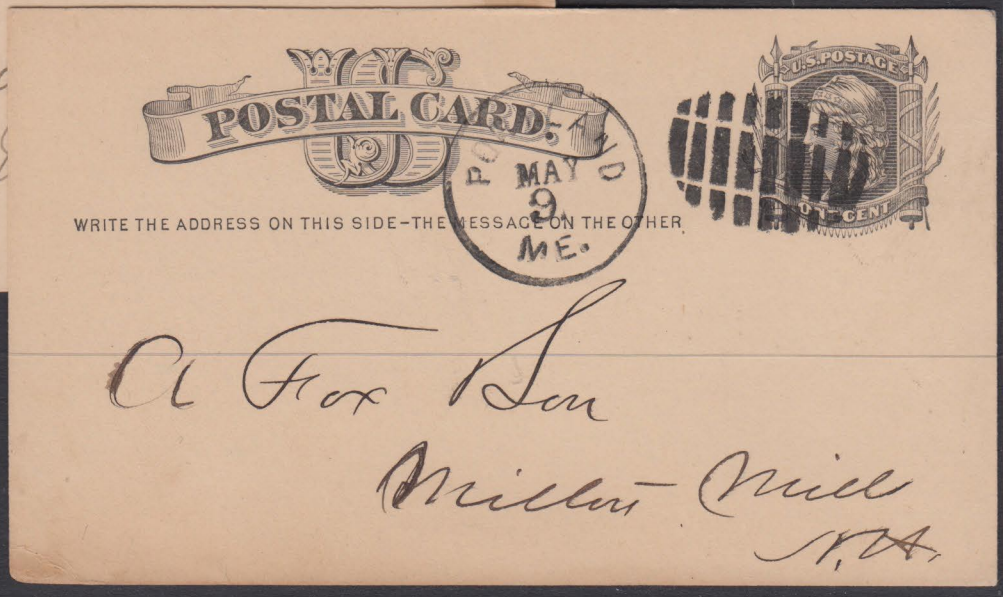
Mrs
Mary Wheaton
Springfield
Mass
care of H K Wheaton



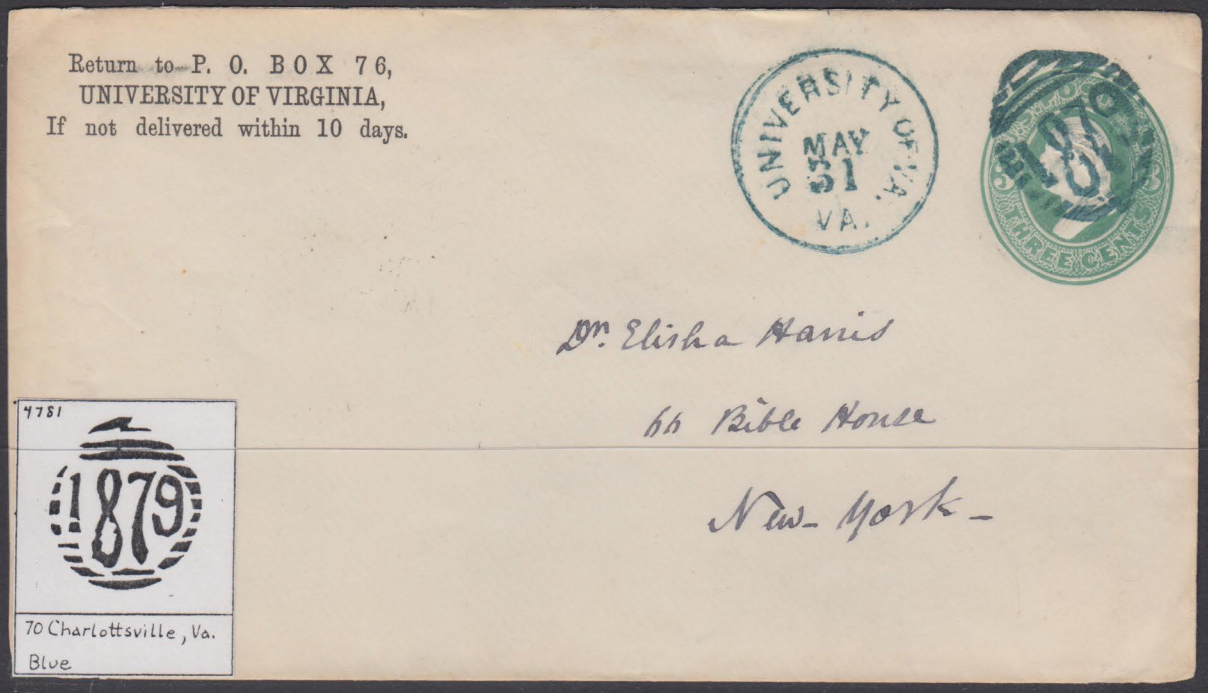
The three bottom cards are dated 1879. The top card is likely 1879. All are from Portland, ME.







"1879" year date in the University of Virginia ellipse. The two Middletown, PA covers show the same cancel with an "M" in in the center. The yellow cover was received in Harrisburg the same day it was mailed.







A cover with the same Brooklyn cancel as these has been reported with date of May 21, 1880.

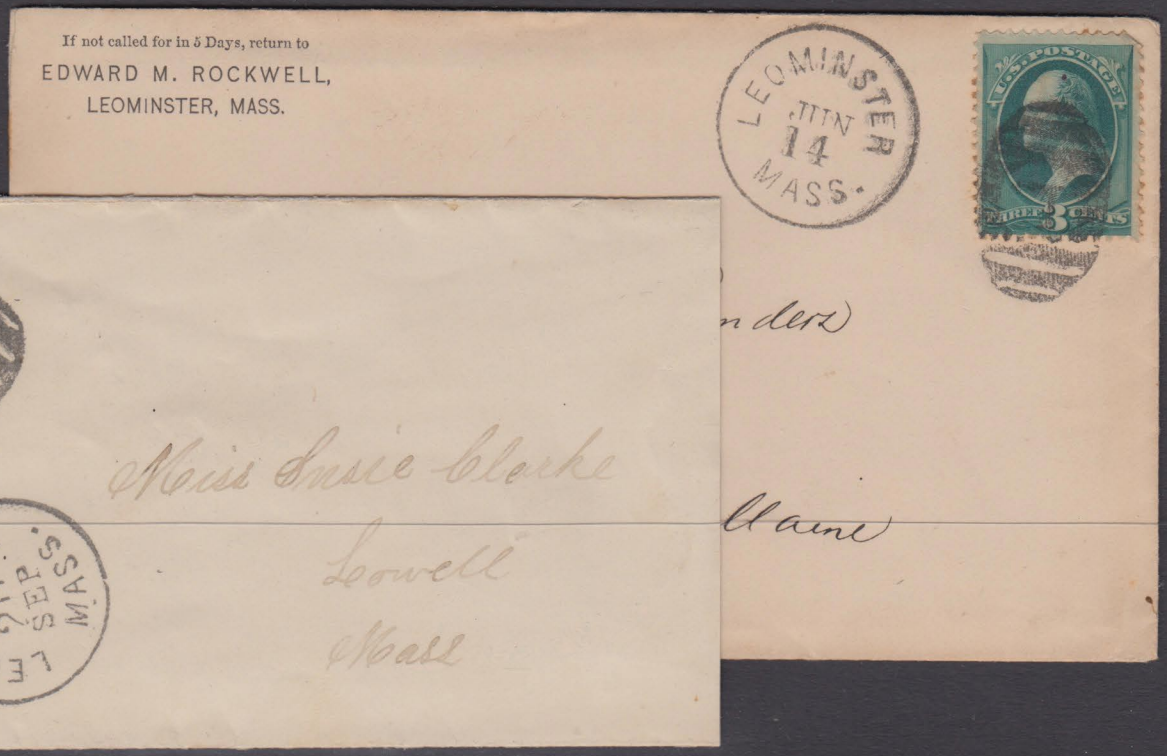


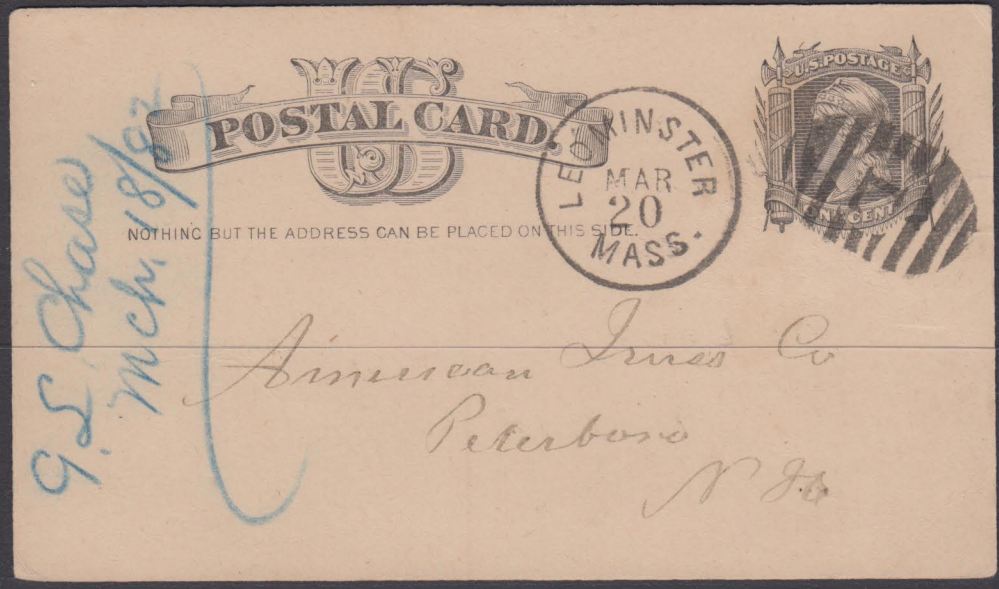
Rev'd Dr Putnam
263 Hicks Street
city



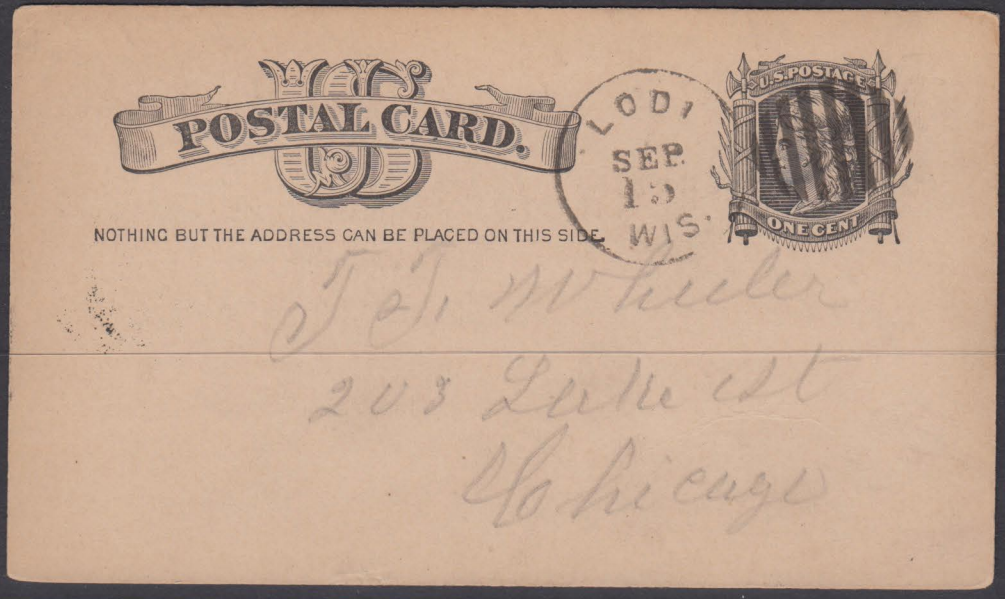
Mrs. Sarah Stevens
Heartland
Vermont

Three Leominster, MA covers. The top cover is dated 1881 as is likely for the cover just below it. A clearly different "L" ellipse was used on bottom 1882 card.

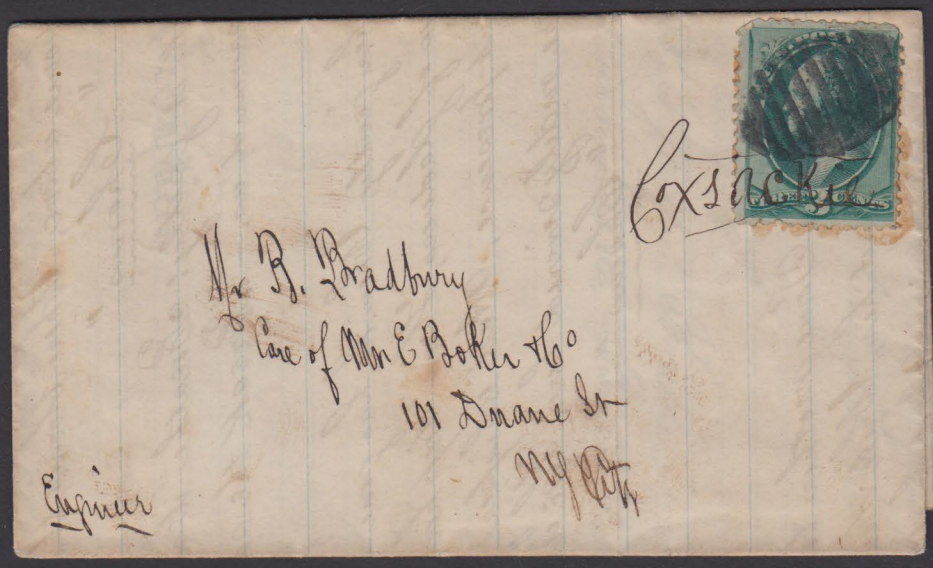




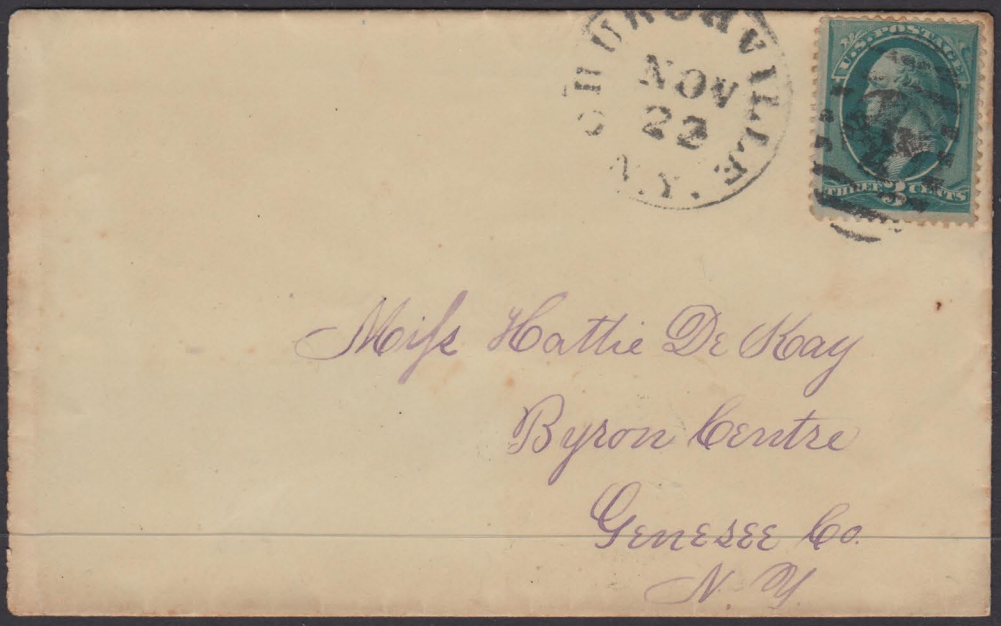
The card and cover are both dated 1882.





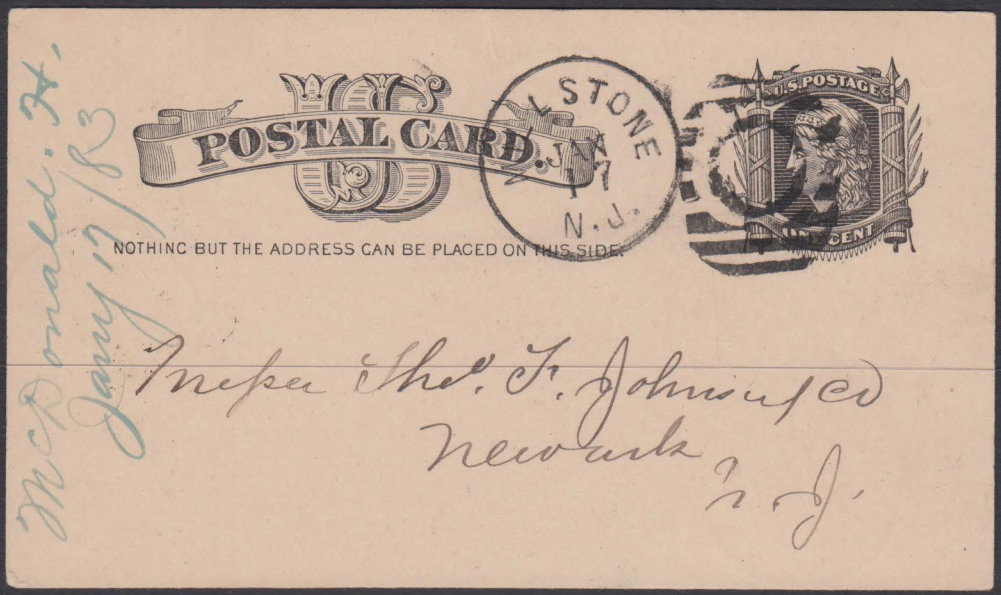


This folded letter has a manuscript "Coxsackie" postmark but no indication of date of mailing. Coxsackie is an operating New York post office in Greene County established in 1805. The letter contains only the manuscript lyrics to a mournful song entitled "Break the Sad News Gently".



This cover is postmarked Churchville, NY. The ellipse has in the center a cross surrounded by a circle. A cover with the same cancel is docketed May 11, 1882. Churchill is an operating post office in Monroe County established in 1829.

Two 1883 covers. The top is from Millstone, NJ and the bottom has an "M" in the ellipse for Milford, Nebraska.





Four covers from Cortland, NY, an operating post office established in Cortland County in 1880. The 8-bar ellipse with "C" in the center is 1883 and the 7-bar "C" is 1882. The bottom two covers have an "8" in the ellipse. The cover with the 3c reengraved stamps is dated 1882.



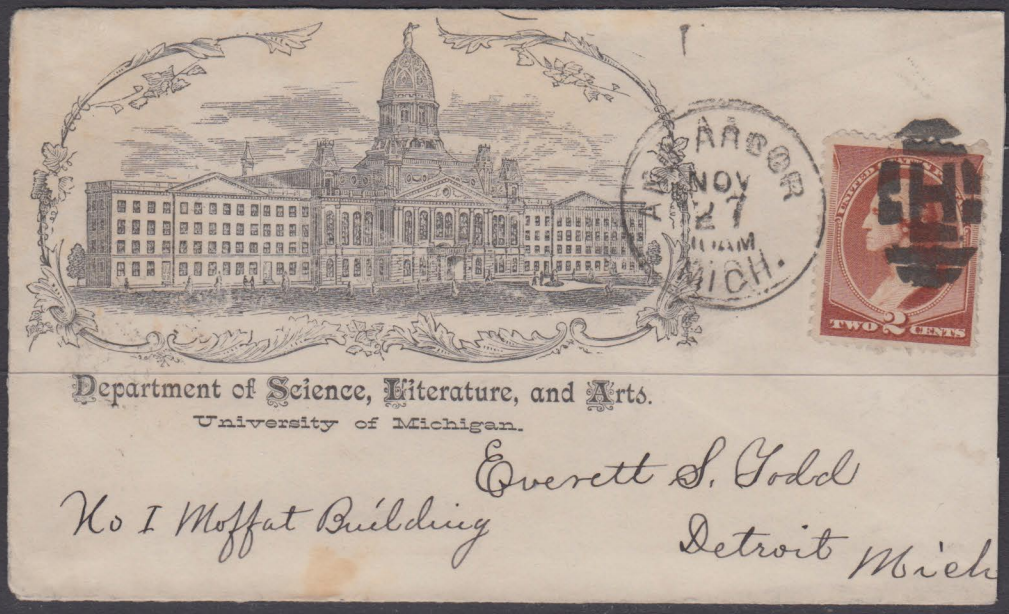


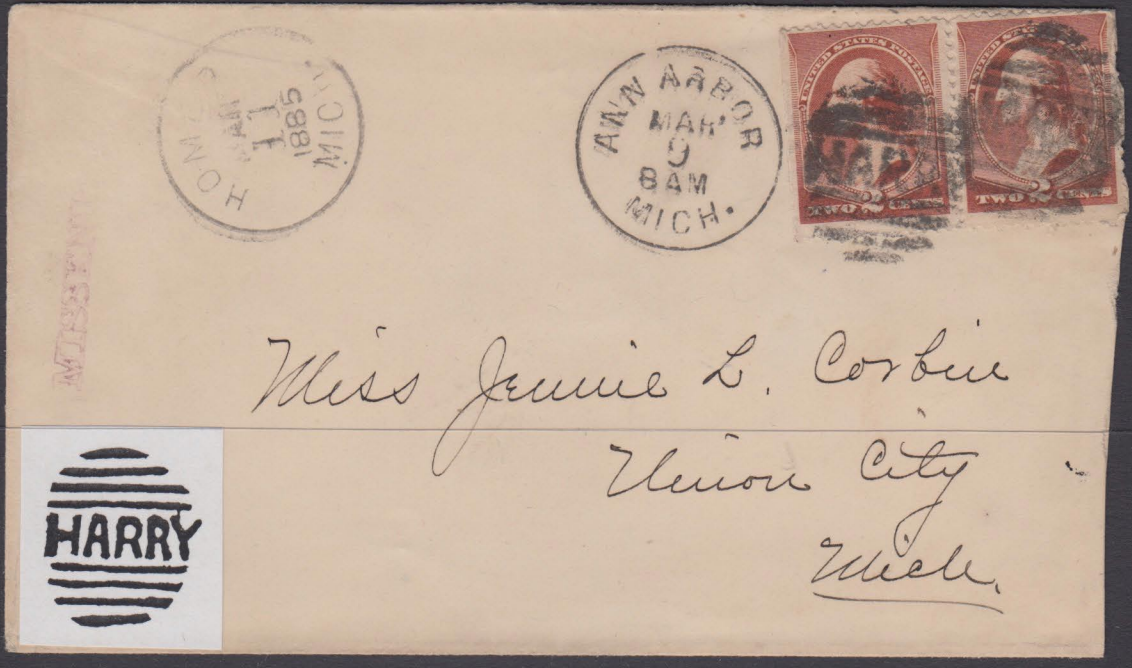


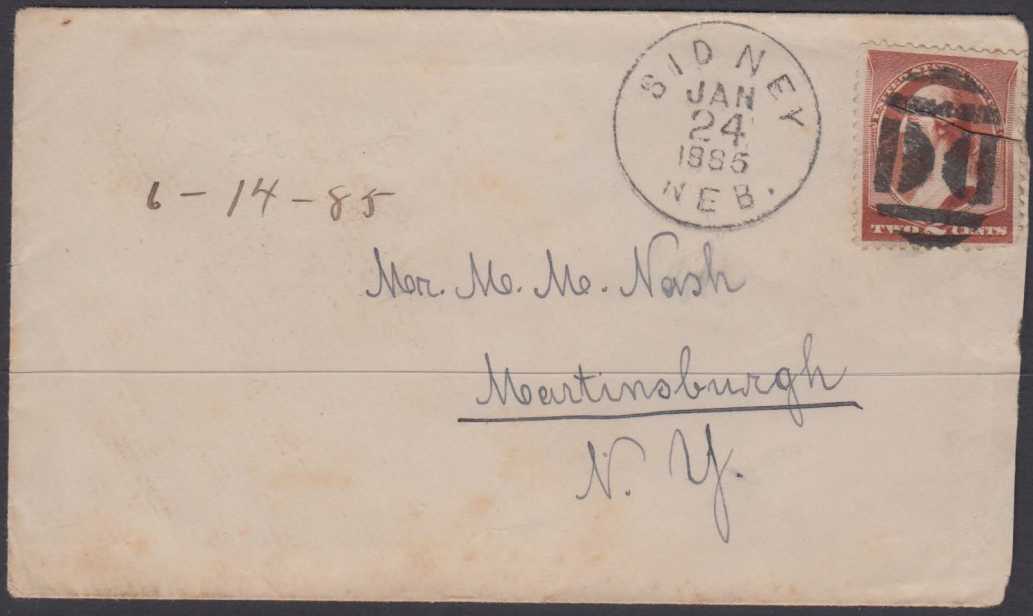


E IN ENGLAND — HAGNER-MADE IN ENGLAND — HAGNER-MADE IN ENGLAND — HA

Harry Cox Nickels was a postal clerk under Jerome C. Knowlton in the Ann Arbor, Michigan post office in 1884 and 1885. In the January 1963 *US Cancellation Club NEWS*, an article by Robert H. Schoen listed twelve different cancels attributed to Nickels including two carvings in the overall form of an ellipse. These are illustrated below. Both were struck in 1884.







6-14-85

Mor. Mc. Mc. Nash

Martinsburgh

N. Y.



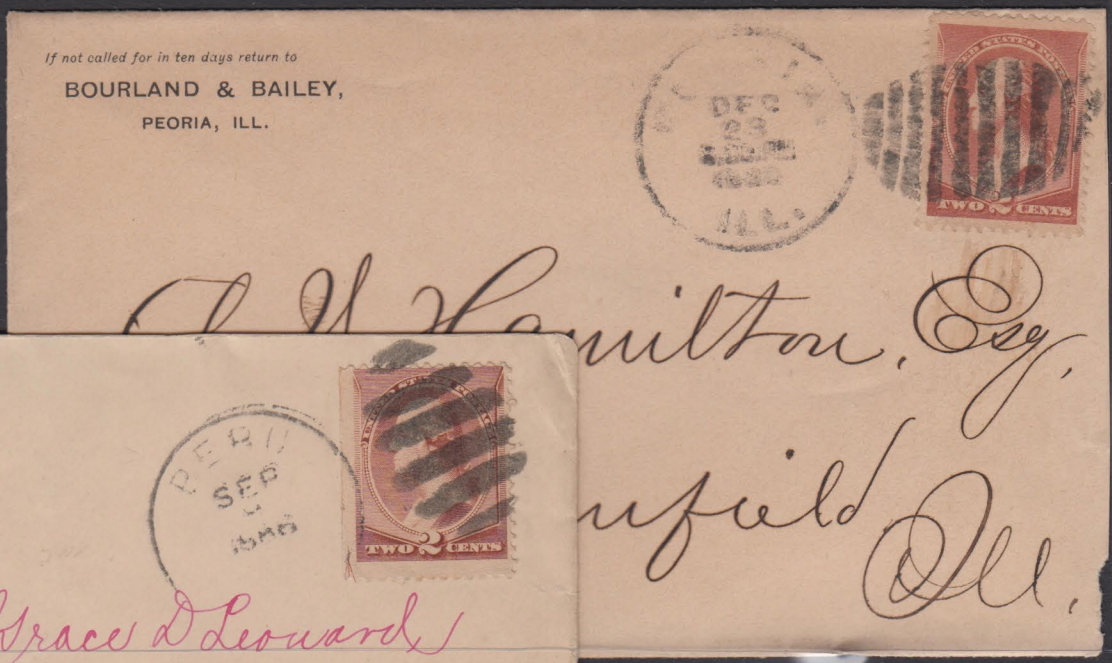
Mr. D. K. Gillespie.

Kirkwood

Ohio

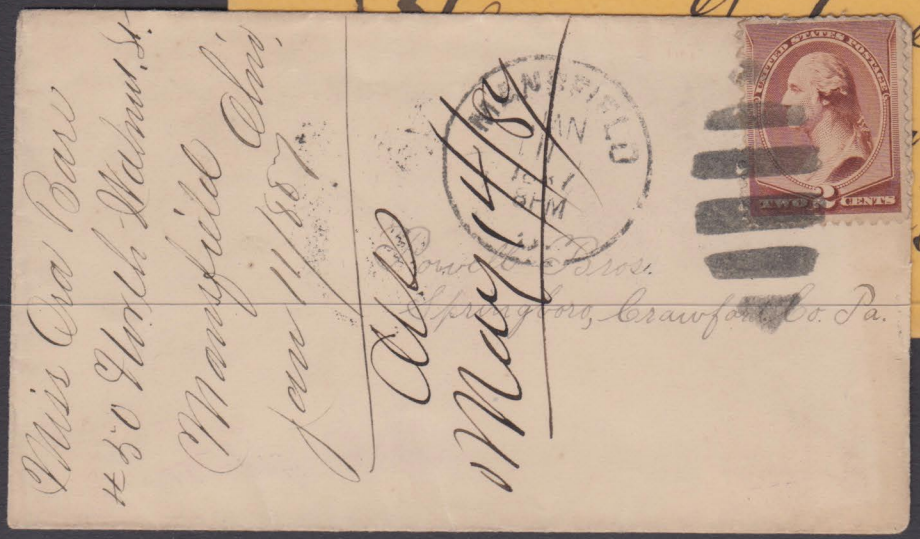
Covers postmarked El Dorado Kansas, Peoria Illinois, and Peru (assumed to be Ohio)















There is no Wild Rye, AZ post office listed in Helbock or the 1883 *Postal Guide*. Presumably there was a community so named that was known to the Globe, AZ post office. See photocopy of the Globe marking struck on the back of the cover.

During the period from 1884 to 1890, the Barre, MA post office employed some noteworthy cancels with a letter or letters in the center that, to this writer, give the impression of having been produced by cancelers with wooden faces, although conceivably metal, that were professionally engraved. Those that had the overall shape of an ellipse are shown herewith. Reader commentary would be welcomed.





Return to FRANK A. RICH,
BARRE, Mass.,
If not delivered within 5 days.

BARRE NOV 22 1886 MASS.

U.S.P.O. R TWO CENTS

Mr. Chas. G. Greely
[illegible]
[illegible]ton.
Mass.

BARRE JUL 2 1886 MASS.

UNITED STATES POSTAGE 5 TWO CENTS

Mrs. Wm. F. Lamed.
Webster
Mass.

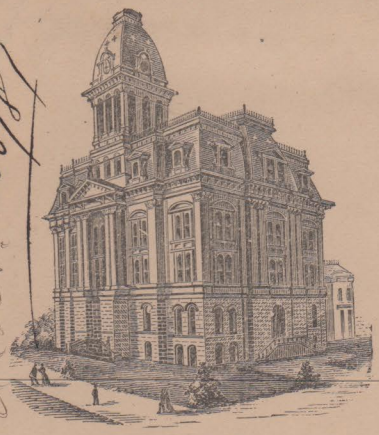
BARRE JUL 8 1887 MASS.

UNITED STATES POSTAGE 3 TWO CENTS

Mr Festus Alden
Greenwich Mass.

WASHINGTON
NOV
2
1886
ILL.

Miss E Kate Evans,
Chesterville
Morrow Co.
Ohio.



RETURN TO
COUNTY SURVEYOR'S OFFICE,
2d Floor Court House, 3d door to right,
STEUBENVILLE, O.

STEUBENVILLE
JAN
28
7 PM

Mr Wm T. E. Curley
Danville
Ills.

Return to COLDWATER NATIONAL BANK,
COLDWATER, Mich.,
If not delivered within 5 days.

COLDWATER JAN 13 11AM MICH.

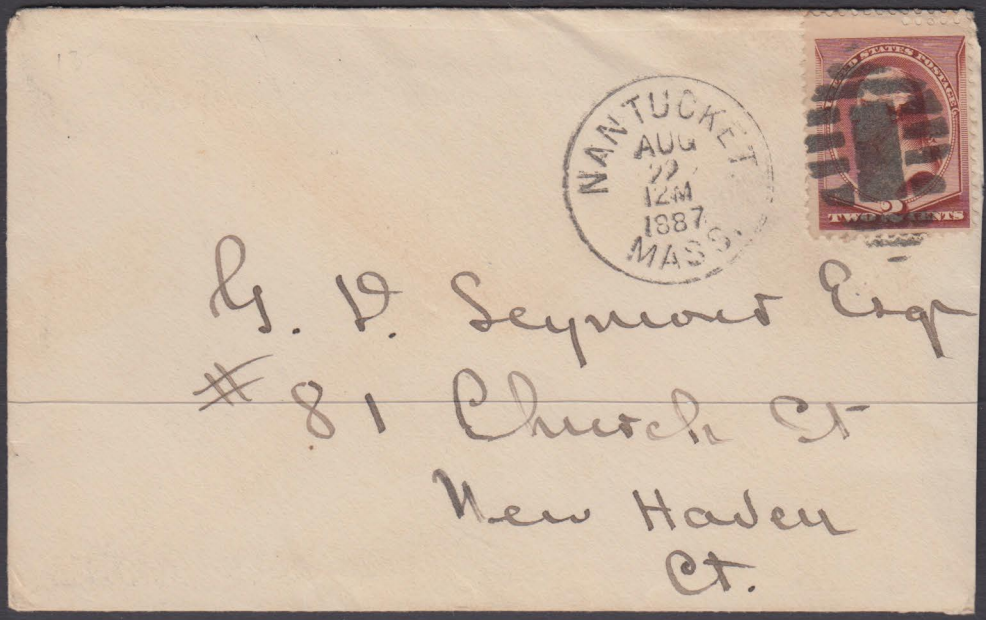
U.S. POSTAGE TWO CENTS

Hon J. C. Black
Commr of Pensions
Washington
D.C.

BEDFORD 25 SEP 1886 IND.

TWO CENTS

Dr. John A. Blackwell
Wellsville
Missouri.



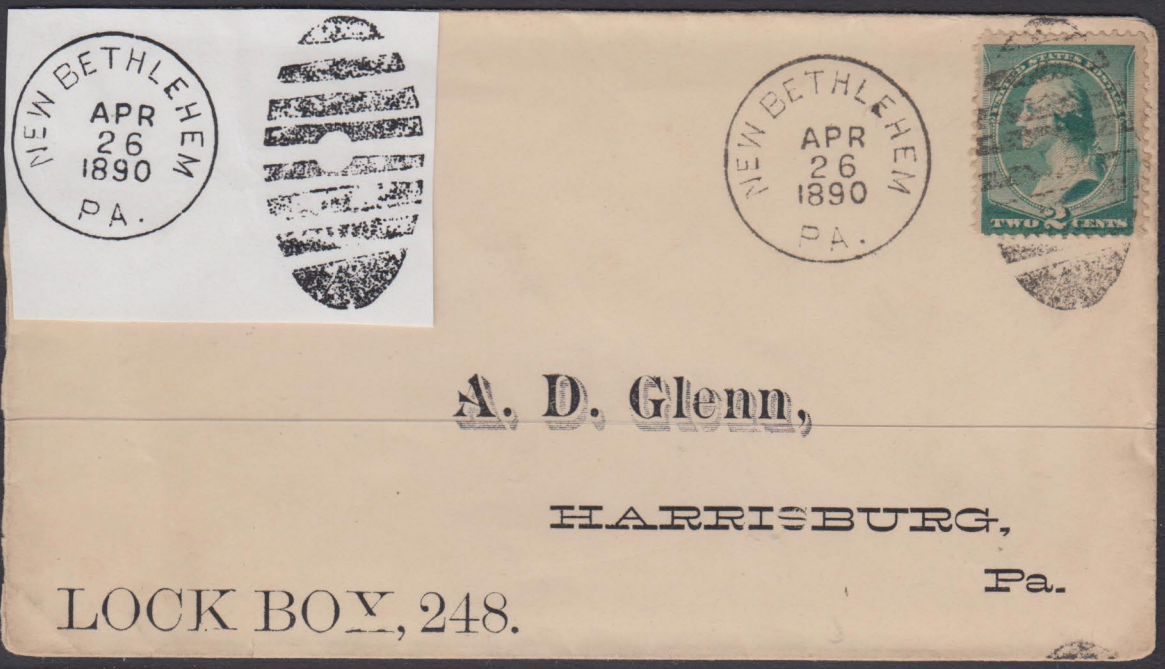
G. D. Seymour Esq
#81 Church St
New Haven
Ct.

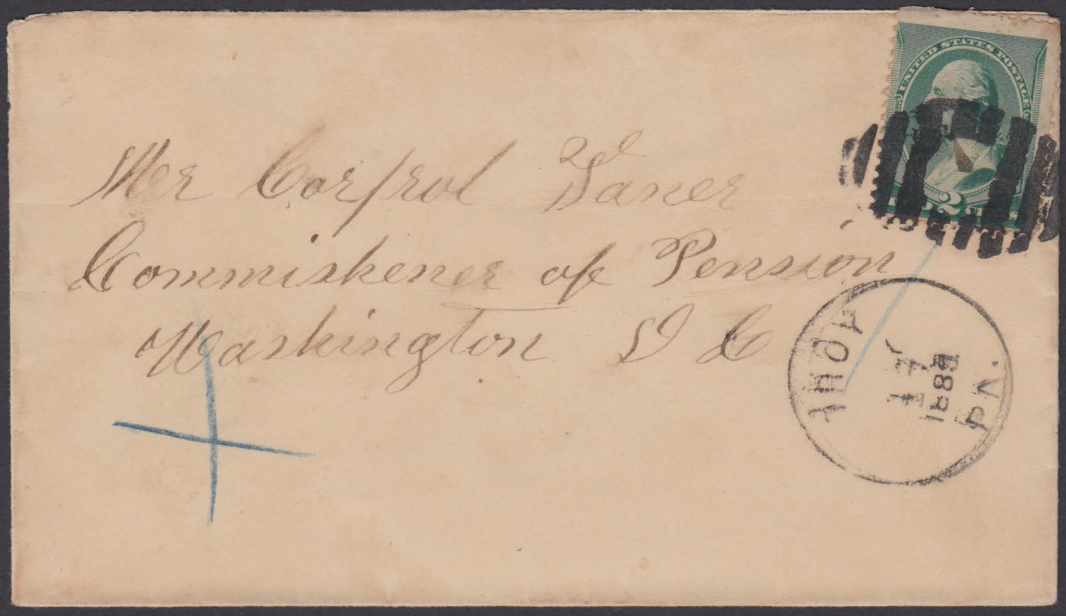




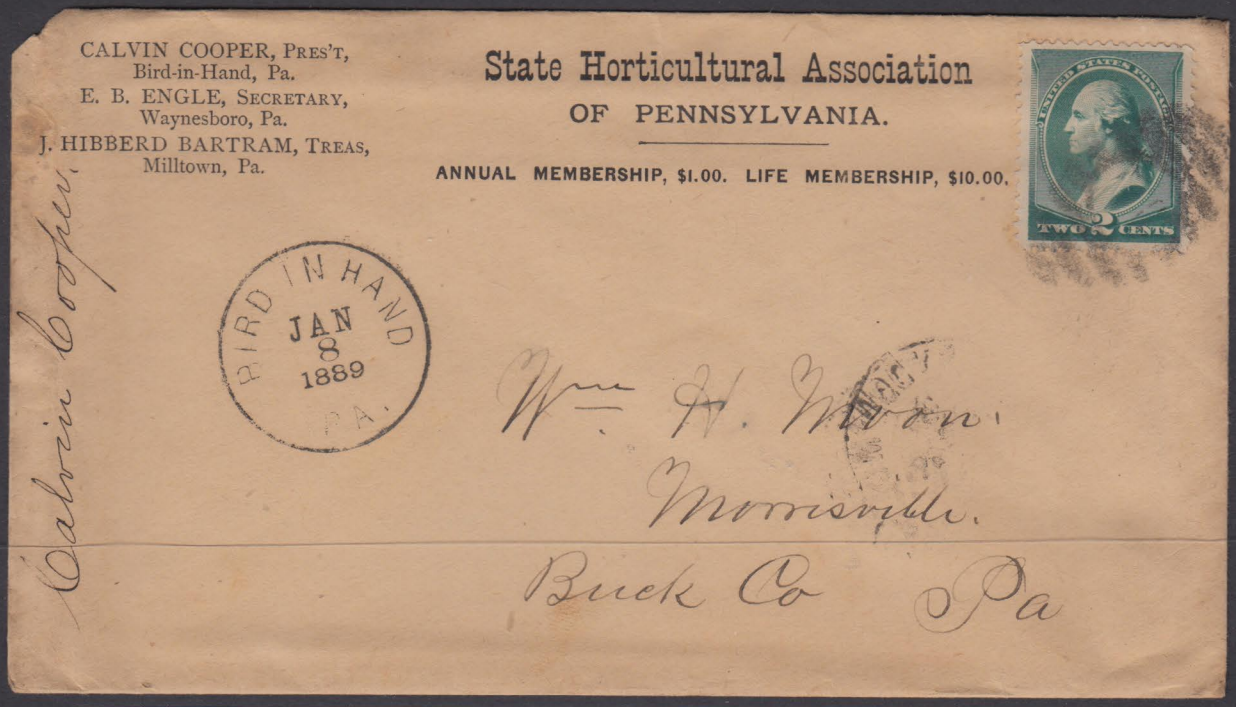
Miss Gracie Harter.
North Manchester.
Ind.


FLUSHING
DEC
6
5 PM
1888
N.Y.
Miss Nellie Slade
Flushing.


NEW BETHLEHEM
APR
26
1890
PA.
NEW BETHLEHEM
APR
26
1890
PA.
TWO CENTS
A. D. Glenn,
HARRISBURG,
Pa.
LOCK BOX, 248.

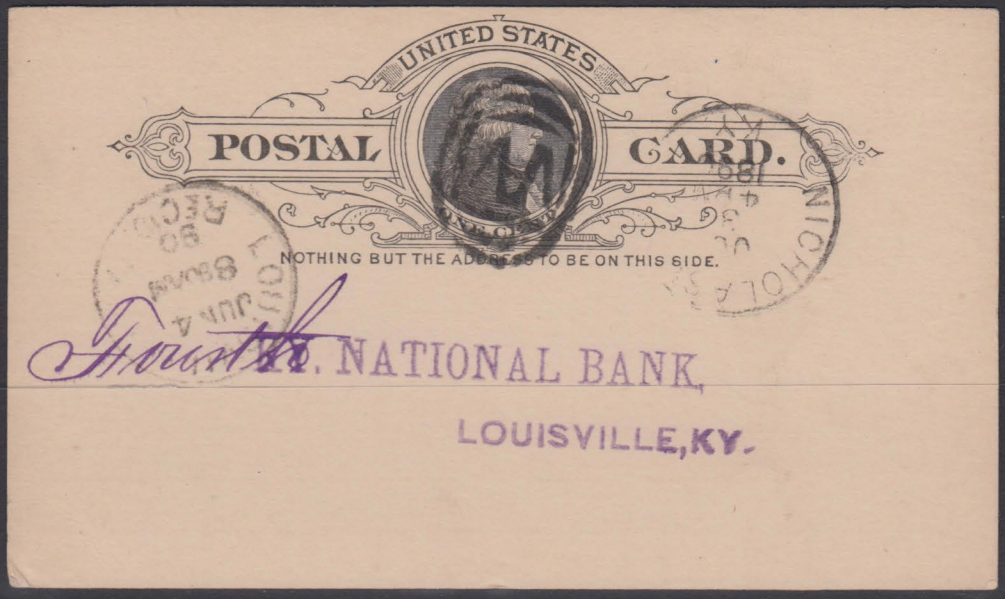


This 1888 cover, assumed to be postmarked Troy PA, has a Washington DC receipt mark dated May 18, 1888.

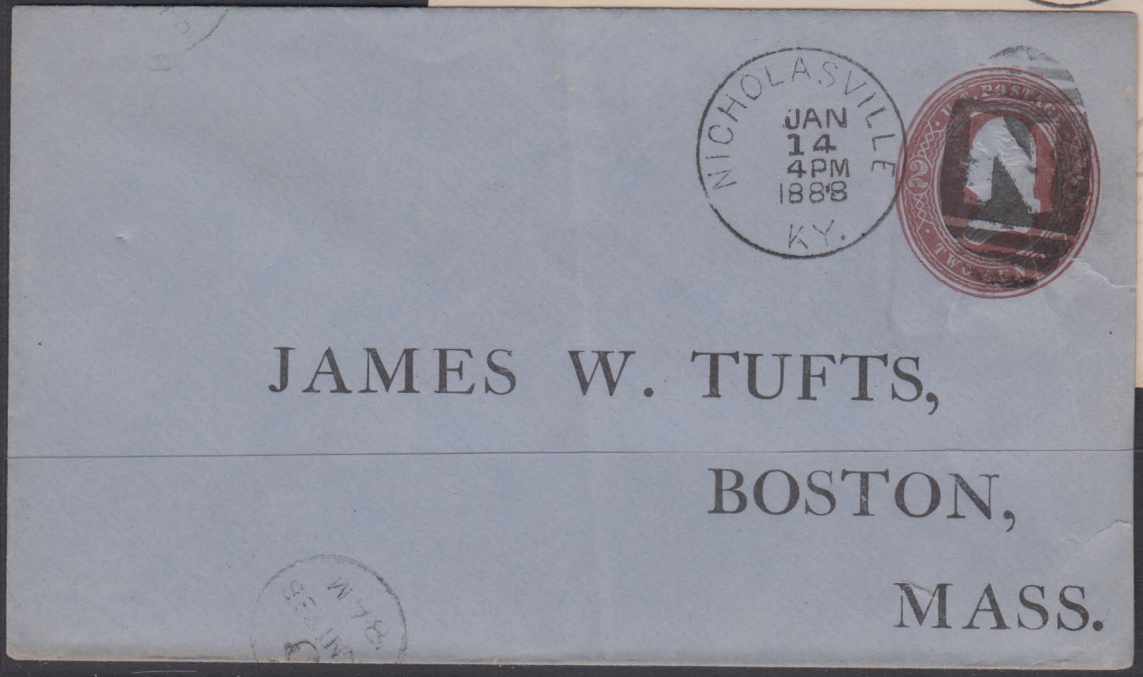


Bird in Hand PA is an operating post office in Lancaster County established in 1873.

All three pieces are postmarked Nicholasville KY, an operating post office established in Jessamine County in 1806.









Post Master

Swanzey

N. H.



Harvey

Ogden Avenue

Chicago Ill.



American Nation Publishing Co.

Boston

Mass

Return to J. L. Murphy.
HICKORY, Catawba County, N. C.,
If not delivered within 10 days.

HICKORY DEC 4 11AM 1891 N.C.

UNITED STATES POSTAGE TWO CENTS

Cal H. A. Forney,
Mustang
N C

---

returned to

DANVILLE MAY 1 11AM 1891 KY.

UNITED STATES POSTAGE TWO CENTS

...LL,
...af Inn,
..., Vermont.

...RN AFTER 10 DAYS TO
DR. A. T. HUXLEY,
MASON CITY, IOWA.

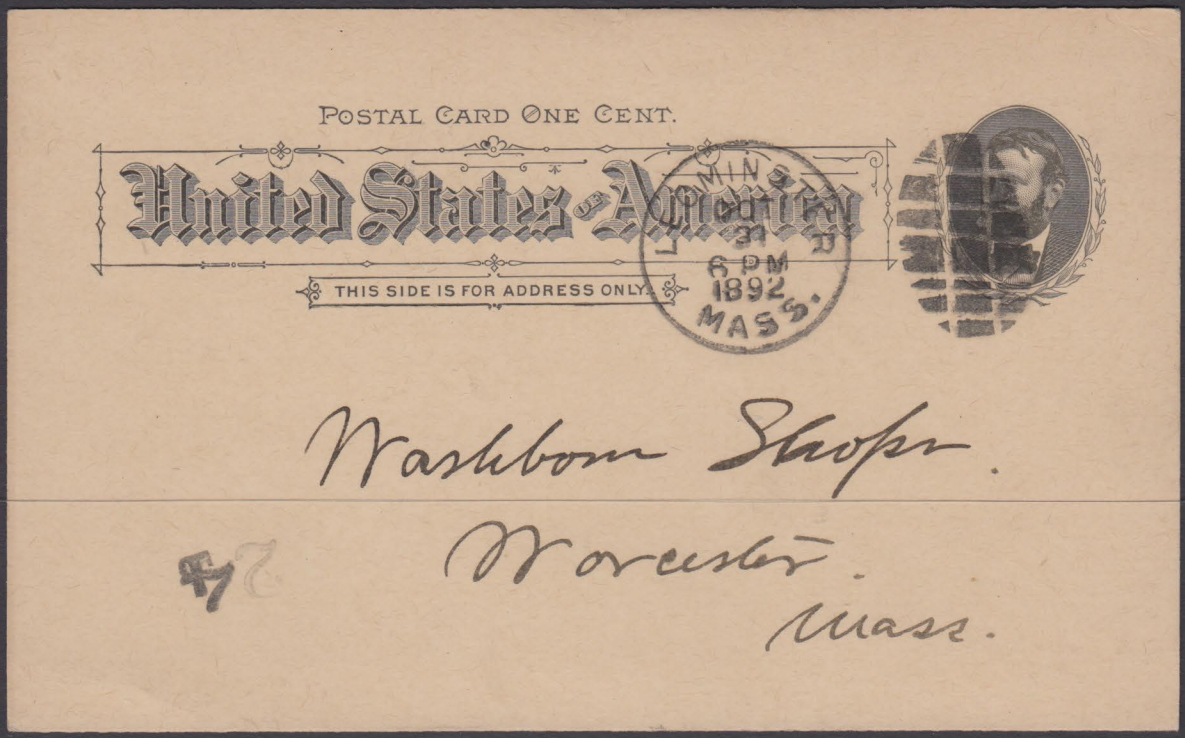
MASON CITY SEP 2 1891 IOWA

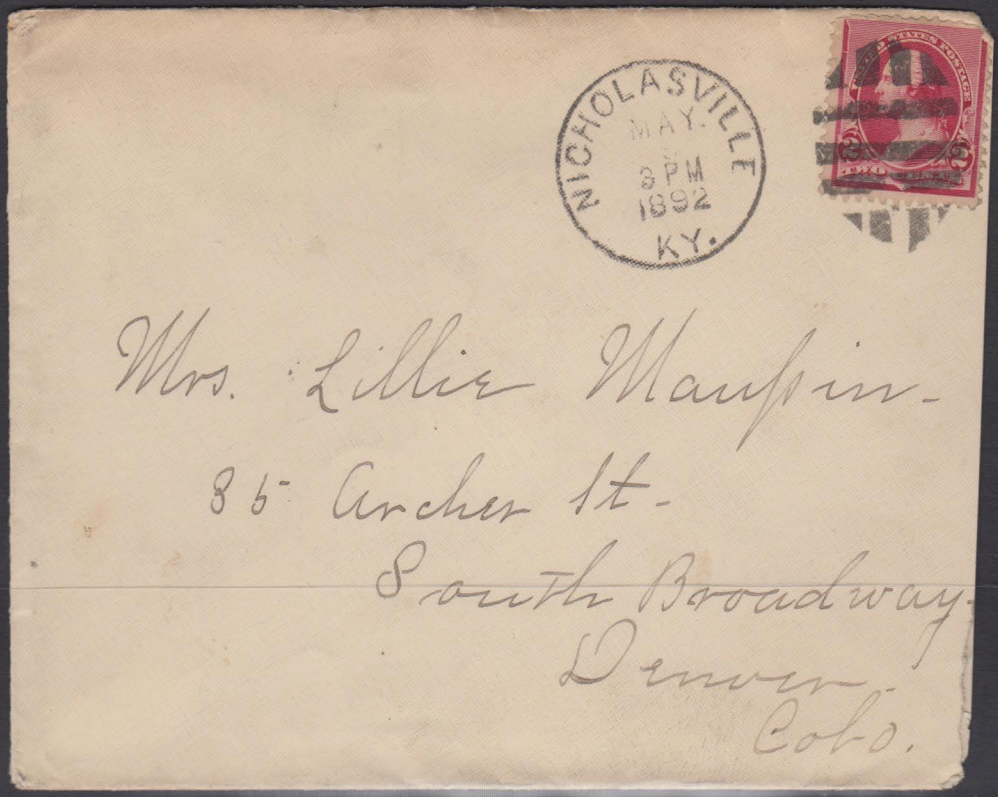
UNITED STATES POSTAGE TWO CENTS

Mrs. A. T. Huxley
1412 New York Block,
Tower Avenue,
West Superior,
Wis.

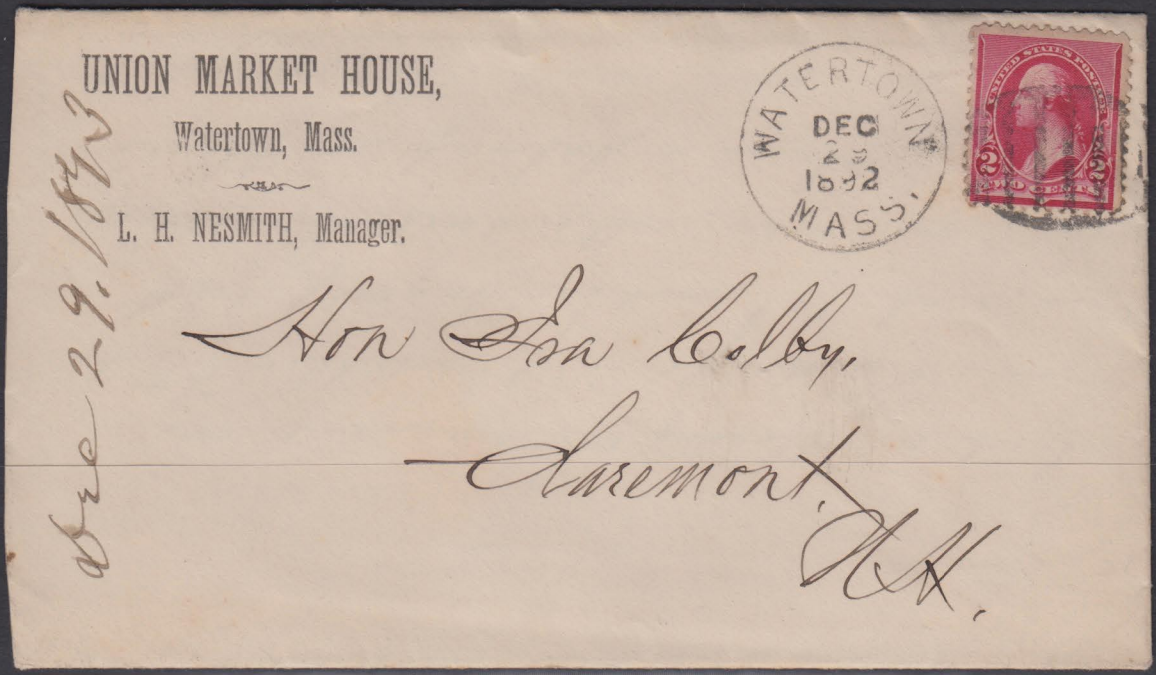
Leominster ellipses with an "L" in the center used in 1881 and 1882 are shown on an earlier page.







Mrs. Lillie Mauspin.
85 Archer St.
South Broadway
Denver
Colo.

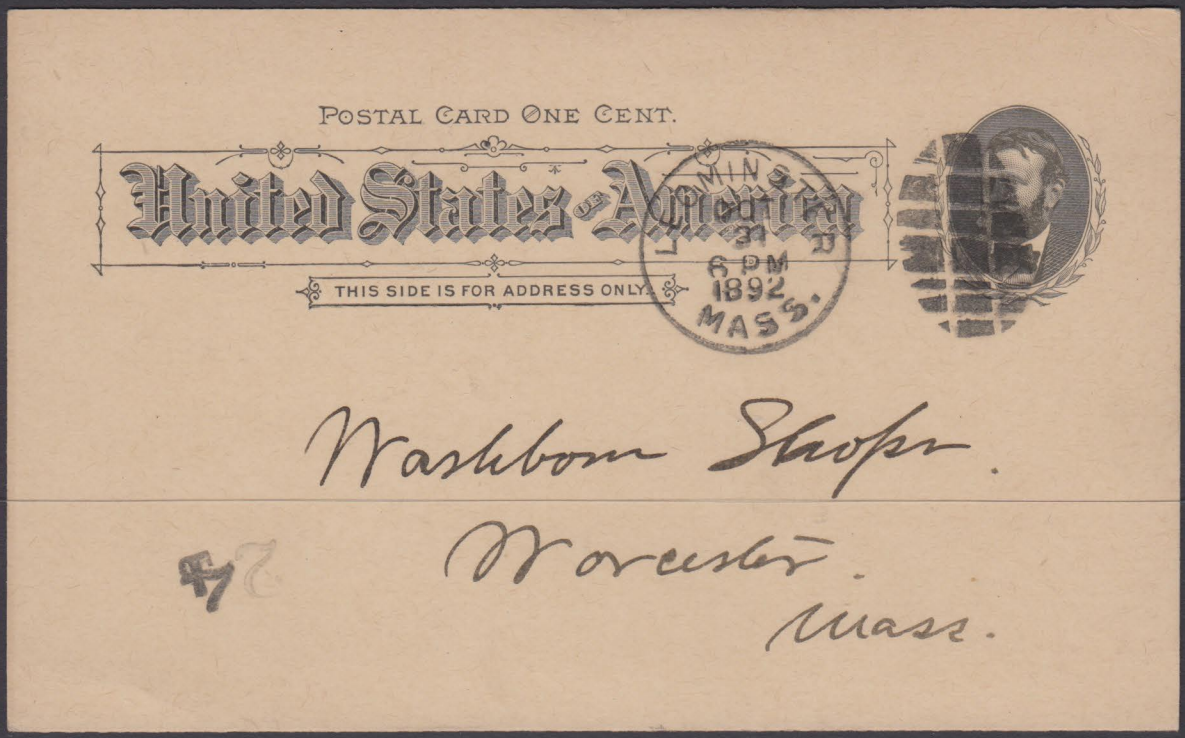


Dec 29. 1892

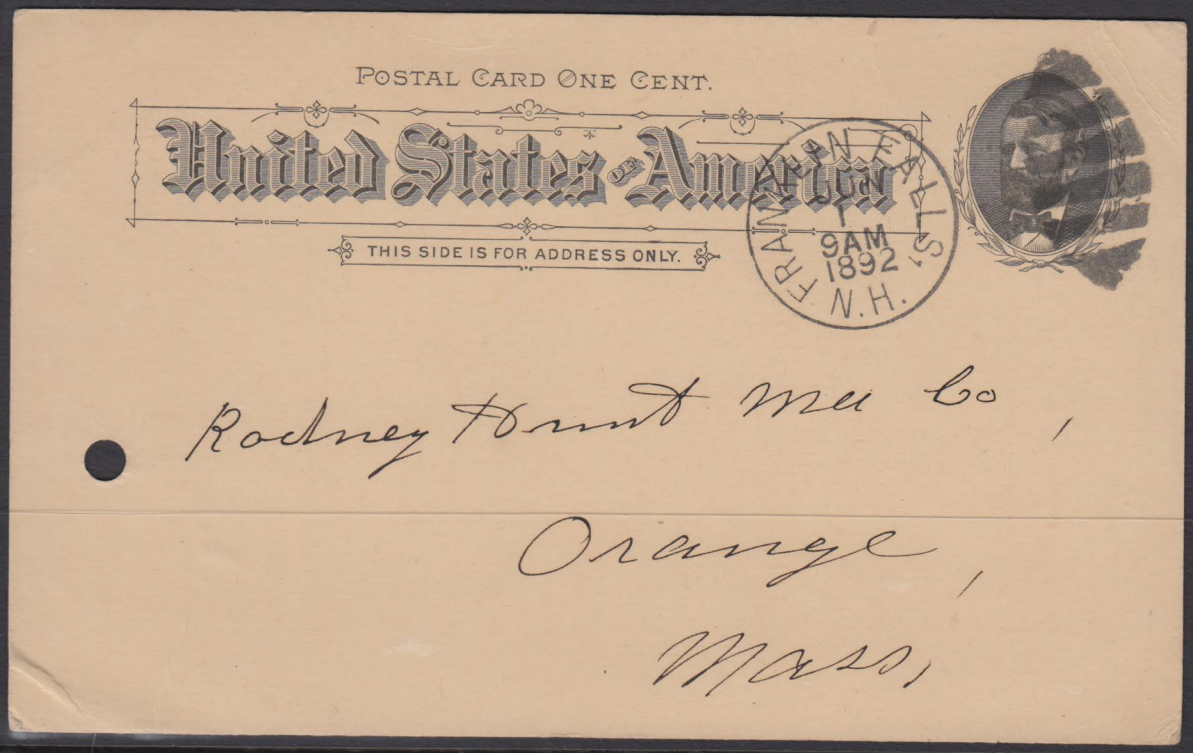
Hon Ira Colby,
Claremont,
N.H.

Leominster ellipses with an "L" in the center used in 1881 and 1882 are shown on an earlier page.





The Franklin Falls post office in Merrimack County, NH was established in 1874 and discontinued in 1906.





If not called for in 10 days, return to

E. N. Burroughs

West Coxsackie N. Y.

WEST COXSACKIE
SEP
18
1893
N.Y.

UNITED STATES POSTAGE
2 CENTS

Big Rail Co.

Frankford & Girard Ave.

Phila. Pa.

1893
10

Return to T. F. STIMPSON,
HANCOCK, Delaware Co., N. Y.,
If not delivered within 10 days.

HANCOCK
AUG
10
8 PM
1893
N. Y.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
1492 1892
U.S. POSTAGE TWO CENTS

Erie City Iron Works

Erie

Pa

The Deposit post office, Broome/Delaware Counties, NY was established in 1812. Both covers are dated 1893.





SHELBURNE FALLS
OCT
21
10 AM
1895
MASS



Lord Stone & Co.
Otter River
Mass



MOODUS
3 PM
AUG
12
1898
CONN.

O. P. Foote aug.

Mr George A. Root,
#133 Orange St.,
New Haven,
Conn.

The Wytheville post office was established in 1839 in Wythe County, Va.

