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STEAMSHIP MARKINGS of the NEW YORK POST OFFICE

by Professor C. S. Thompson, Jr.

For many years before it became a reality, man had a dream of finding a quick and efficient route from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Perils led the searchers to explore every possibility. Many different routes were nominated and in most instances quickly discarded. However, one route through Mexico and another across the Isthmus of Panama appeared to offer the best possibilities for development. Perhaps it was the Mexican terrain or the already burgeoning use by east and west-bound travelers of the Isthmus of Panama that gave the nod to the latter route. In any event, as the map, Figure No. 1 indicates, the Isthmus of Panama had already been proposed as the logical site for a railroad and canal to link

the Atlantic and Pacific. The cartographer even included sketches of the Fort at Chagre and gold seekers crossing the Cordilleras.

The growing interest of easterners in the soon to be state of California was due in part to the aura of mystery that this western land exuded. Add a bountiful land and one can easily see why there was such a clamour to establish a postal communications network between the east and the west. Congress acknowledged this need by the Act of March 3, 1847, in which such postal communications were authorized with the Oregon Country and California. The Act provided for the mail to be transported from New York to Chagre by

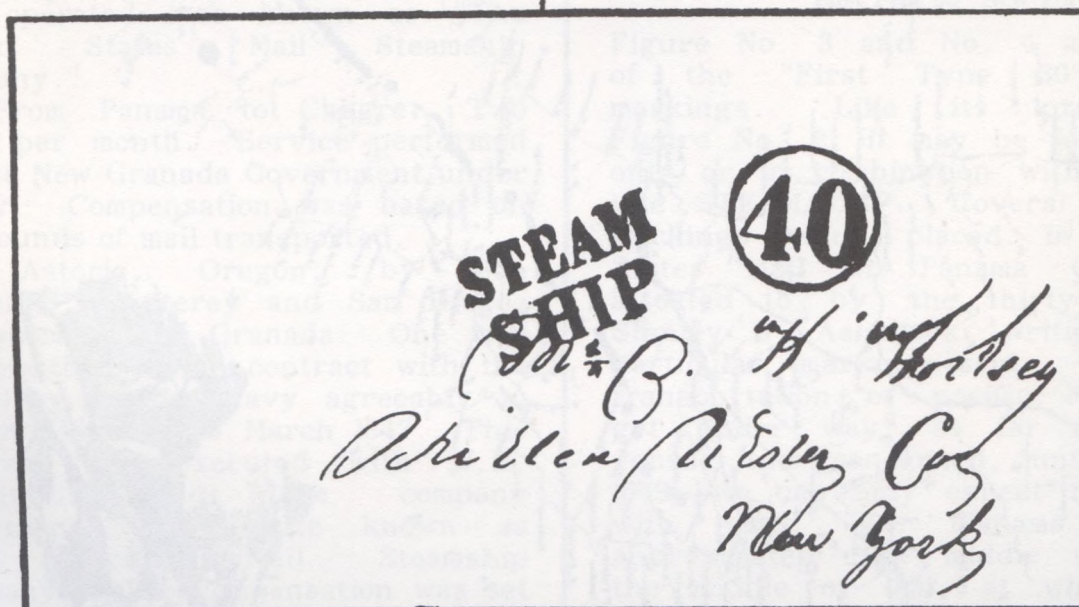
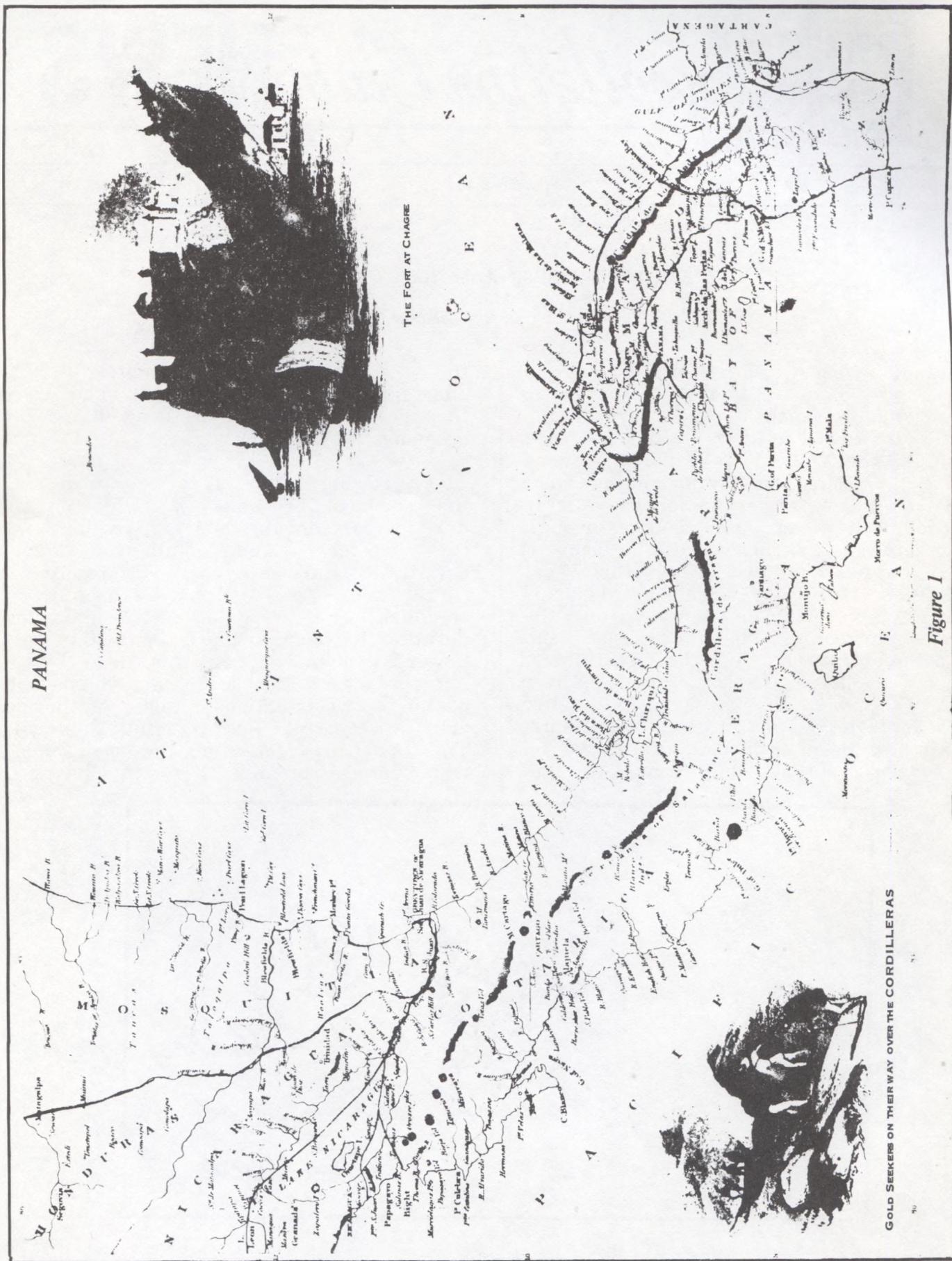


Figure 2



steamships and from Panama City to San Francisco and Astoria, Oregon by steamships. Rates for this mail service were as follows:

Three Contracts

1. To or from the Eastern States and the Pacific Coast, forty cents per one-half ounce.
2. To or from the Eastern States and Panama City, thirty cents per one-half ounce.
3. To or from the Eastern States and Chagre, twenty cents per one-half ounce.

Letters directed to these areas were required to be prepaid while those that originated at these points for delivery in the United States could be sent collect. The transportation of these mails were covered by three separate contracts as follows:

1. New York, by Charleston, Savannah, and Havana. To New Orleans, from Havana to Chagre, New Granada. Two trips per month. Under contract with the Secretary of the Navy agreeably to Act of Congress of 3 March 1847, compensation \$290,000 per annum. This agreement as entered into with G. Law, M.O. Roberts, and B.R. McIlvaine. The company they formed and operated was known as "The United States Mail Steamship Company."
2. From Panama to Chagre. Two trips per month. Service performed by the New Granada Government under treaty. Compensation was based on the pounds of mail transported.
3. Astoria, Oregon, by San Francisco, Monterey and San Diego, to Panama, New Granada. One trip per month. Under contract with the Secretary of the Navy agreeably to Act of Congress 3 March 1847. This contract was executed with W.H. Aspinwall, and the company performing the service known as "The Pacific Mail Steamship Company." The compensation was set at \$199,000 per annum. This original contract provided for only one trip per month but was later

modified to two trips per month with an appropriate compensation increase being paid to the carrier.

"First Type 40" New York

The cover illustrated in Figure No. 2 originated at California in 1850. It bears a handstamped two-line straight line STEAM/SHIP and a circled 40 rate. Both markings are in black. While no previous designation has been given by Stanley B. Ashbrook or others to this marking, in order to maintain his identification system it will henceforth be referred to as "First Type 40" New York. It may be assumed that this letter was transported to Panama City by The Pacific Mail Steamship Company operating under the contract awarded to W.H. Aspinwall. At this point it was

turned over to The New Granada Government who carried it across the Isthmus to Chagre and turned it over to The United States Steamship Company for transmittal to the New York Post Office. Upon receipt at the post office, the clerk handstamped the STEAM/SHIP and rate marking and sent it on to the addressee. The reader should expect to find this "First Type 40" marking without the STEAM/SHIP straight line as the post office clerks were more concerned with the proper rating of the letter than its mode of transportation.

"First Type 30" New York

Figure No. 3 and No. 4 are illustrative of the "First Type 30" New York markings. Like its predecessor in Figure No. 2, it may be found with rate only or in combination with the straight line STEAM/SHIP. Covers bearing these markings were placed in the United States mail at Panama City, a fact attested to by the thirty cent rating. Stanley B. Ashbrook, writing about this particular marking said: "Inasmuch as transportation of pacific Mails did not get under way, so far as any great volume was concerned, until Autumn of 1849, we can only expect to find covers with this 30¢ Panama rate from approximately the middle of 1849 until the middle of 1851, at which time the rate was changed to 20¢ by provisions of the Act of March 3, 1851." The earliest use of this "First Type 30" marking is

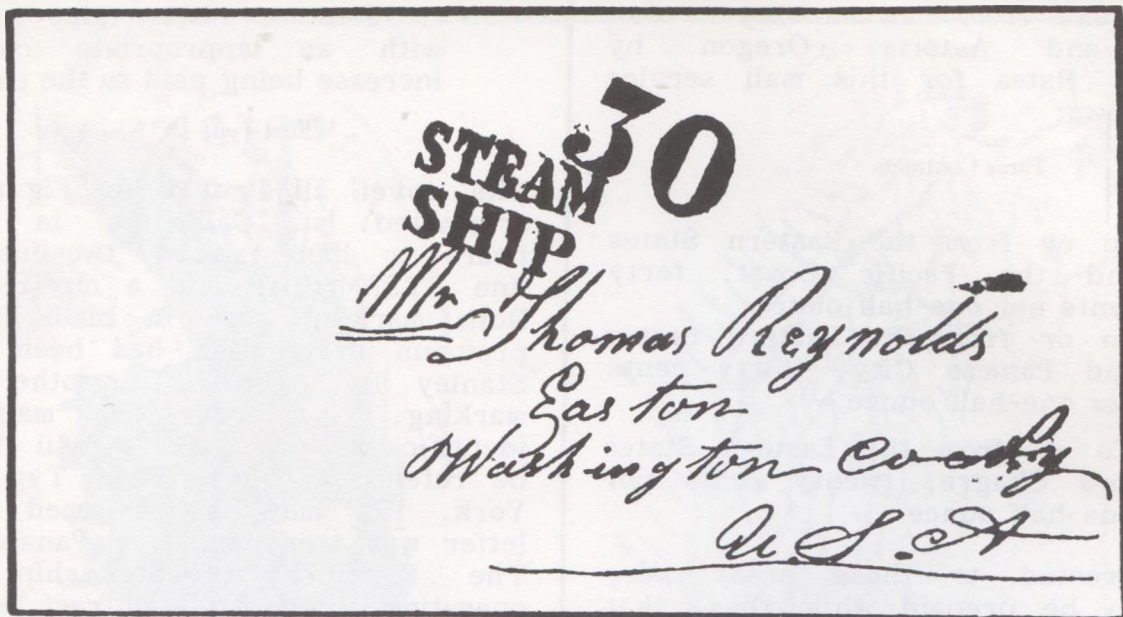


Figure 3

given as December 7, 1849. It is also known to have been used in combination with a black NEW-YORK SHIP CIRCLE. The date of this latter cover is given as October 6, 1849. Perhaps the circular handstamp was used in error by the clerk as no other covers using this combination is known to me.

Rare "Second Type 30" New York

Figure No. 5 illustrates the "Second Type 30" New York. Very little is known about this marking due to its short life span. The period of use seems to have been either late in 1849 or very early

1850 and perhaps deserves to be ranked as the most scarce of all the steamship markings associated with the Panama transit route. Stanley B. Ashbrook, in researching this "Second Type 30" marking, noted a cover then in the Laurence B. Mason collection. This folded letter was a printed circular datelined Valparaiso, 30th Nov. 1849. It is addressed to Messieurs Silas Peirce & Co., Boston. The handstamp is a brownish-red circle dated Jan. 13th. Mr. Ashbrook also noted that this was the only one Ashbrook had seen. Thus, it is of additional interest to note that the

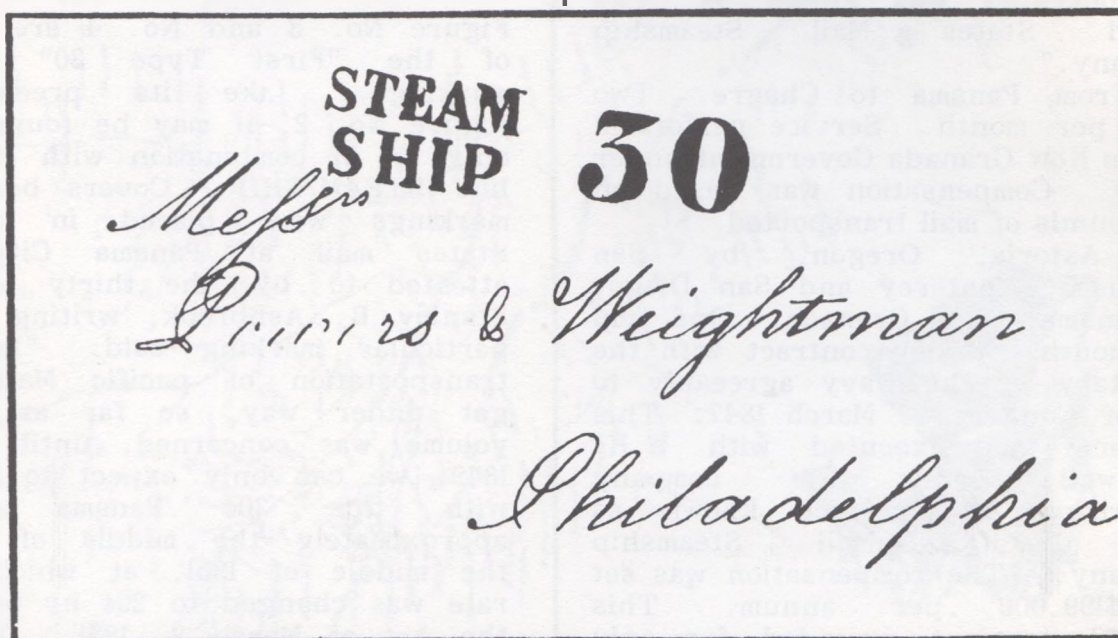


Figure 4

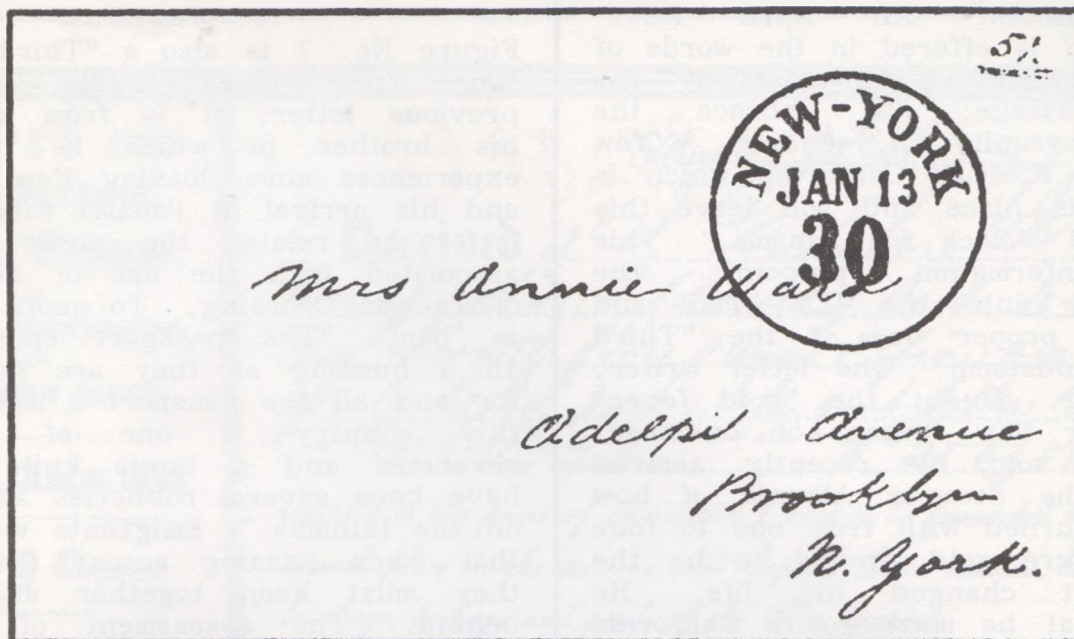


Figure 5

cover in Figure No. 5 is identical in every respect to the Mason cover with the exception of being directed to Mrs. Annie Ward, Adelphi Avenue, Brooklyn, New York. It may only be a coincidence that both covers bear the same month and day, yet they remain the only examples of this type marking. Maybe a reevaluation of its length of use is in order since it is possible that it enjoyed a much shorter life span than had previously been supposed.

"Third Type 30" New York

Figures No. 6 and 7 illustrate the "Third Type 30" New York marking. This handstamp was probably put into use sometime during April 1850. The Stamp Specialist lists May 11, 1850, as the earliest date of use for this strike on a cover whose origin was Valparaiso, Chile. However, the cover designated as Figure No. 6 supercedes this date of use as indicated by its heading which

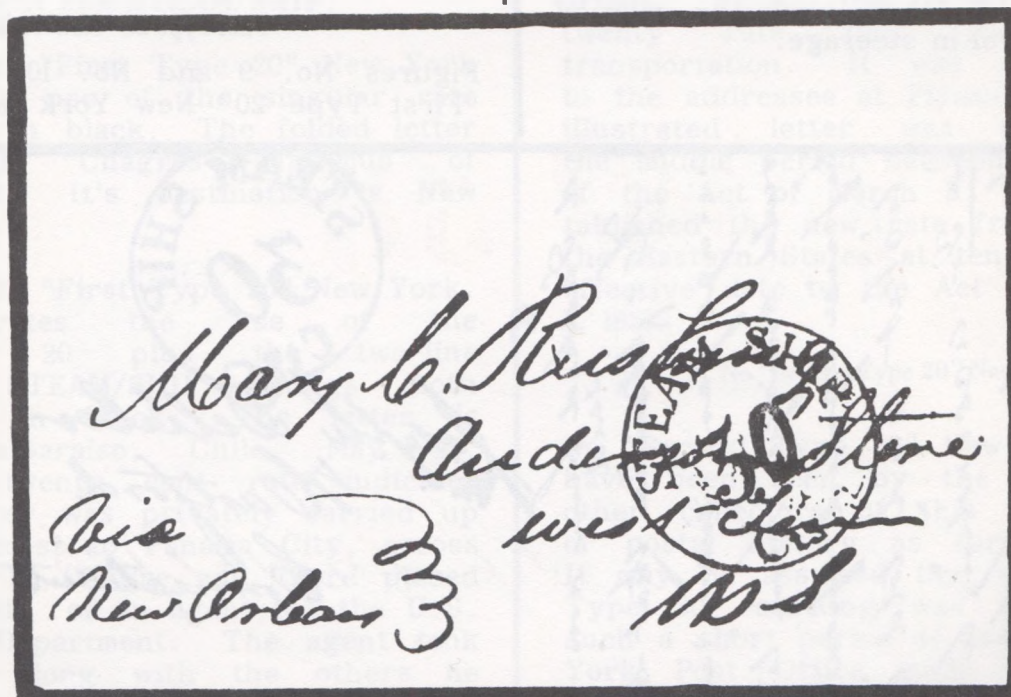


Figure 6

states, "Mazatlan 9th April 1850." Further proof is offered in the words of writer as to its earlier use by the following passage; "I embrace the present opportunity of sending a few lines by the Steamer California which is lying off this place and will leave this evening at 4 o'clock for Panama." This bit of information pinpoints the letter's entry into the U.S. Mail and verifies the proper use of the "Third Type 30" handstamp. The letter writer, J.L. Rushing, caught the "gold fever" while visiting New Orleans on business. The stories told by recently arrived miners on the Steamer Albania of how each had returned with from one to four quarts of pure gold proved to be the catalyst that changed his life. He concluded that he must go to California but found that all ship reservations were sold out for more than a year in advance. Since this precluded sailing around-the-horn or traveling across the Isthmus of Panama, he, with others, formed a travel party and opted for the route through Mexico to the Pacific Coast. His journey on this alternate route, took him to Brownsville, Texas, thence through the Mexican localities of Matamoras and Monterey to the coast city of Mazatlan. While his letter traveled south, he and his party traveled north to the gold field on a small sailing vessel for which they paid the sum of \$60 each to travel in steerage.

"Perils of the Isthmus"

Figure No. 7 is also a "Third Type 30" New York black circle. Like the previous letter, it is from a miner to his brother in which he details his experiences since leaving New York City and his arrival at Panama City. In this letter he relates the perils of Travel associated with the use of the Isthmus of Panama Crossing. To quote the writer in part; "The passport speculation is all a humbug as they are never called for and all the passport a man wants in this country is one of the colts revolvers and a bowie knife as there have been several robberies and murders on the Isthmus." Emigrants were warned that when passing across the Isthmus, they must keep together and not lag behind. The assessment of this rate indicates that the writer did in fact deposit his letter in the U.S. Mail at Panama City.

Figure No. 8 is a receipt from Phillips & Co's Hartford, New Haven & New York Package Express and General Forwarding and Commission House for one package said to contain twenty-five ounces and a half pennyweights of gold dust to be sent to the Philadelphia Mint for coinage. This indicates that Mr. Deliber's trip to the gold fields generated some rewards.

"First Type 20" New York

Figures No. 9 and No. 10 illustrate the "First Type 20" New York markings. As

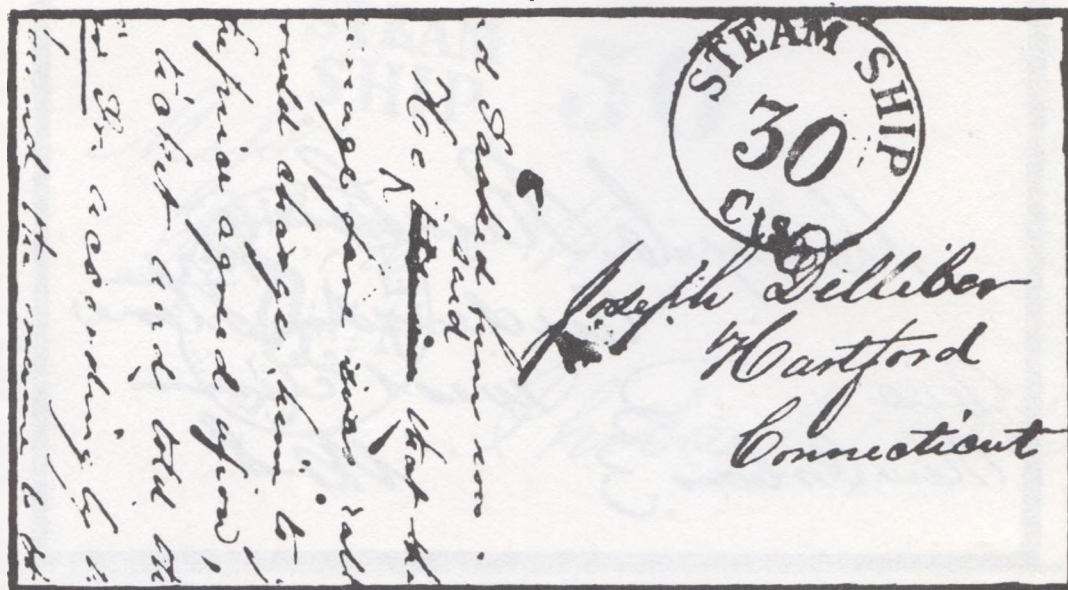


Figure 7

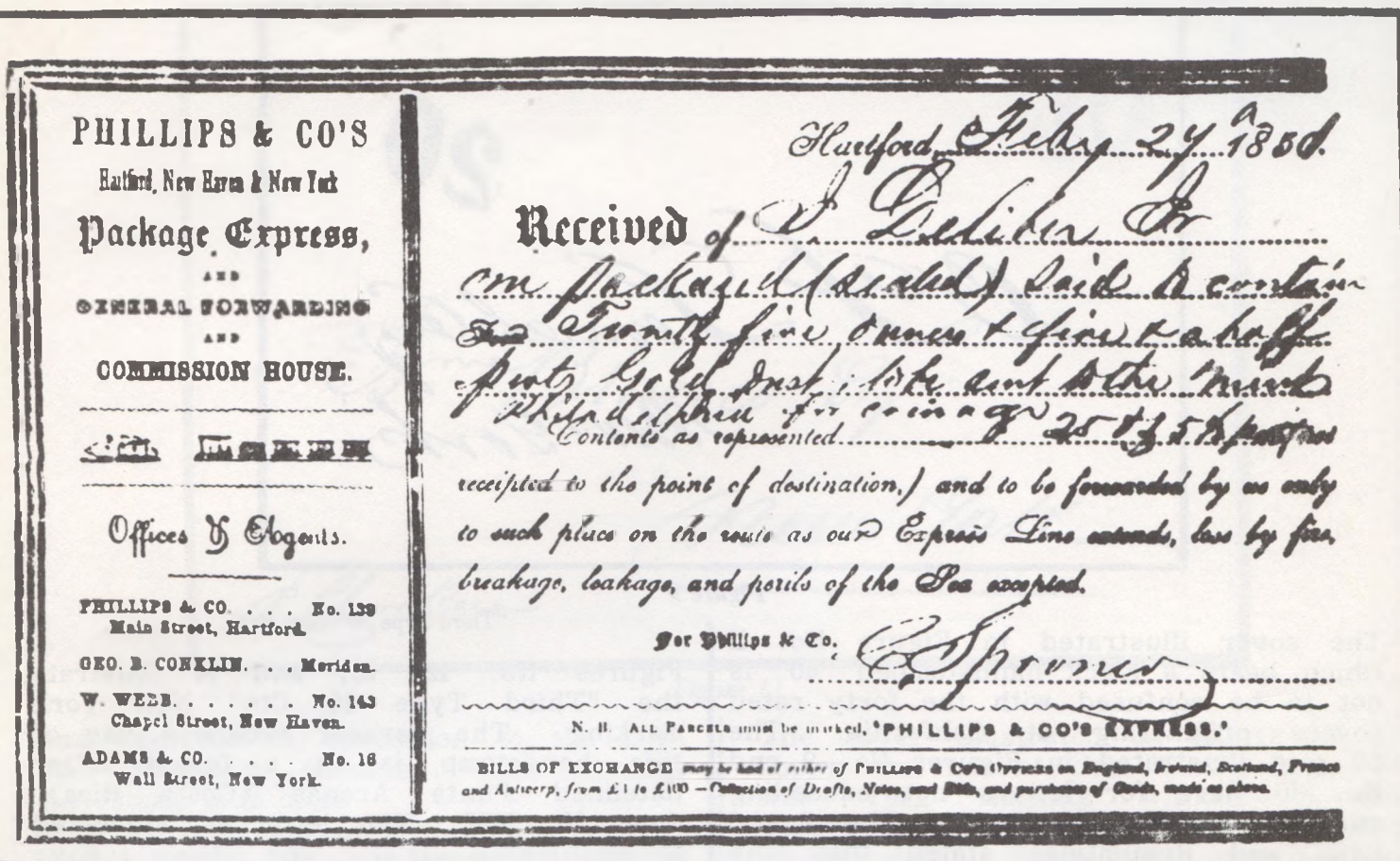


Figure 8

in the "First Type 30" examples, covers are known to collectors with handstamped rate marks only or used in combination with the straight line STEAM/SHIP.

Figure No. 9, "First Type 20" New York illustrates the use of the singular rate mark struck in black. The folded letter is datelined "Chagres (Isthmus of Panama) 1850. It's destination is New York City.

Figure No. 10, "First Type 20" New York. This illustrates the use of the handstamped 20 plus the two-line straight line STEAM/SHIP markings. Both strikes are in black. The letter is datelined Valparaiso, Chile, May 25, 1851. The twenty cent rate indicates that the letter was privately carried up the Pacific coast to Panama City, across the Isthmus to Chagre and there placed in the custody of an agent for the U.S. Post Office Department. The agent took this letter, along with the others he had collected, and placed them on the first northbound U.S. Mail Steamship for

delivery to the New York Office. Upon arrival, the letters were rated by the clerks according to their point of origin. Thus, this letter received the twenty rate plus its method of transportation. It was then forwarded to the addressee at Plymouth, Mass. The illustrated letter was written during the middle period between the enactment of the Act of March 3, 1851, which established the new rate from Chagre and the Eastern States at ten cents and the effective date of the Act which was July 1, 1851.

No "Second Type 20" New York?

No "Second Type 20" New York markings have been seen by the writer or any other collectors of this particular area of postal history as far as is known. It may be assumed that since the "First Type 30" marking was withdrawn after such a short period of use, that the New York Post Office made no attempt to implement a similar handstamp for use on the twenty cent rated mail.

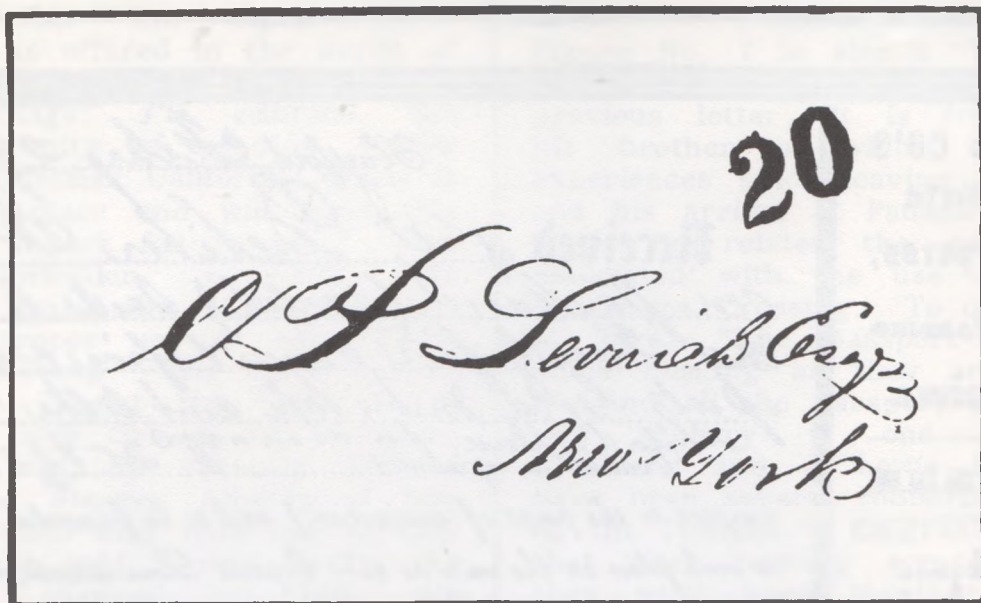


Figure 9

"Third Type 20" New York

The cover illustrated in Figure No. 11 which bears a black handstamped "40" is not to be confused with the forty rated covers originating at California. The 20 rate illustrated in Figures No. 9 and No. 10 were for letters not exceeding one-half ounce in weight. The Postal Laws and Regulations stated that any letters exceeding this restriction were to be charged an increased fee. Thus, this letter weighing between one-half and one full ounce was charged a double rate of forty cents. The notation at the lower left indicates that the letter writer wished to have his letter transported per the steamer "Cherokee."

Figures No. 12, 13, and 14 illustrate the "Third Type 20 Cts" New York marking. The earliest recorded use of this handstamp is on a folded letter datelined Punta Arenas (Costa Rica), June 20, 1851. The letter is addressed to Washington, D.C. The letters I have illustrated here were all mailed during the year 1853 with their origin being Havana, Cuba.

The folded letter illustrated in Figure No. 12 was transported on board the steamer "Crescent City." This vessel was one of several independently owned

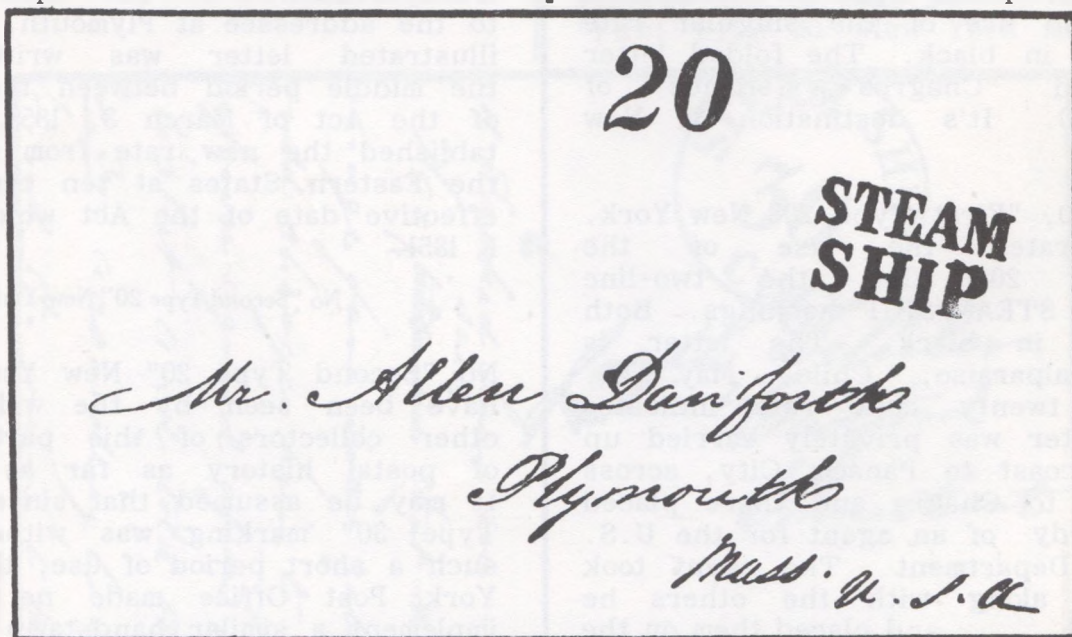


Figure 10

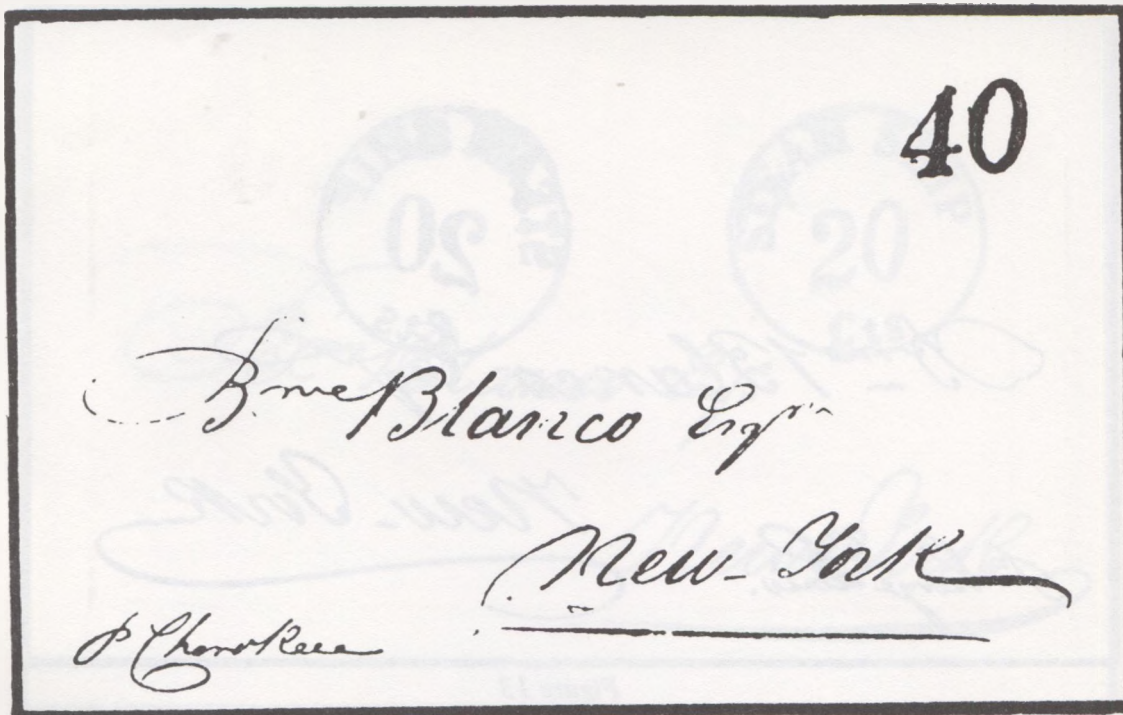


Figure 11

and operated in opposition to the U.S. Mail Steamship Company. The circular handstamp is in black.

Figure No. 13 illustrates a folded letter carried on the steamer "George Law." As you will recall, George Law was one of the partners in the firm operating under federal contract as The United States Mail Steamship Company.

The cover illustrated in Figure No. 14 shows the use of this "Third Type 20" New York marking without a ship designation. This lack of ship identification did not create any particular difficulties for the postal clerks at the New York Post Office since they assessed the rate on the distance the letter had traveled since its point of mailing origin.

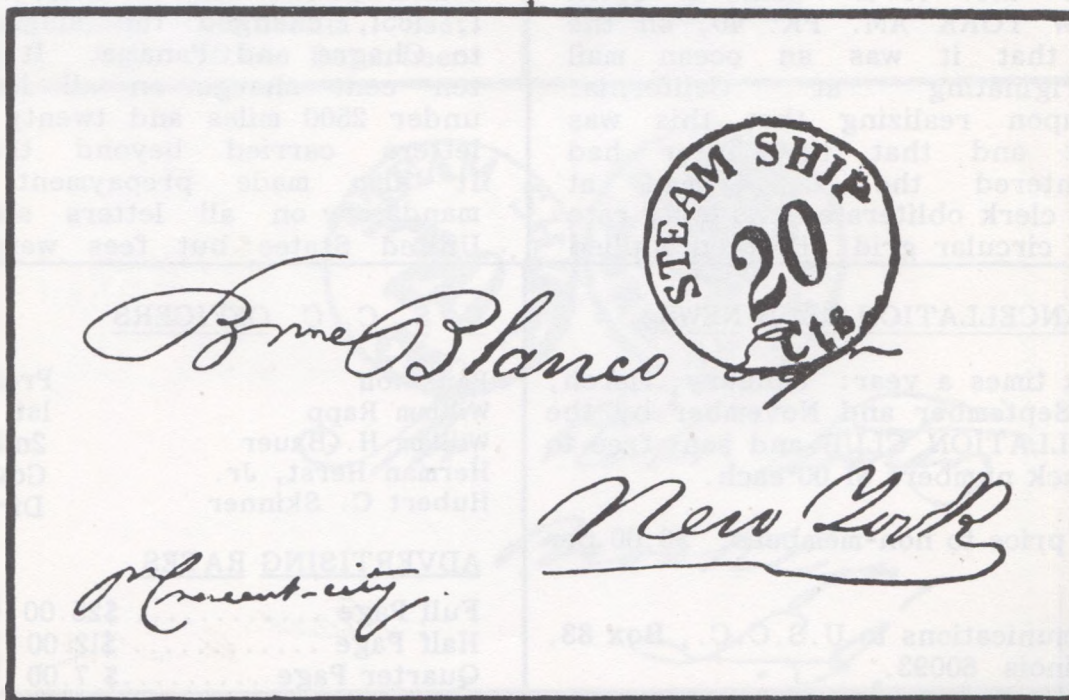


Figure 12

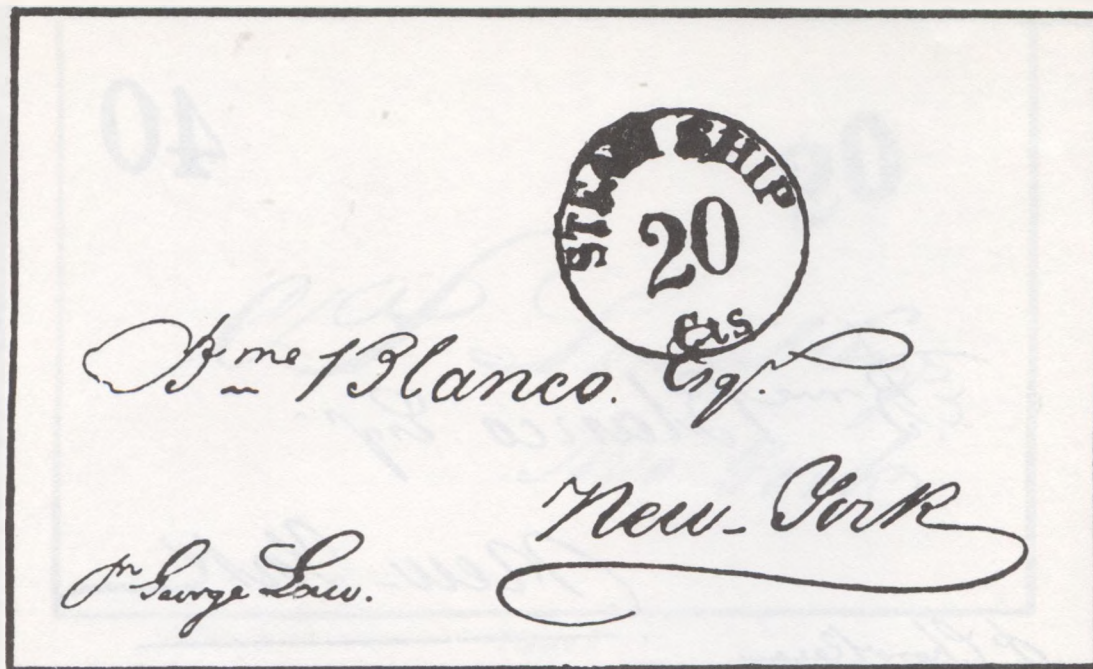


Figure 13

New York Postal Confusion

Much confusion existed at the New York Post Office over the rating of letters received by steamship. Part of the problem was due to the variety of rates based on the point of entry of a letter into the mails. Additional problems arose because of the unfamiliarity of the postal clerks as to the proper rate and designated mode of transportation to apply. Figure No. 15 is just such an example. The New York Post Office first handstamped the cover with a black circular NEW YORK AM. PK! 40, on the assumption that it was an ocean mail letter originating at California. However, upon realizing that this was not correct and that the letter had actually entered the U.S. mail at Chagre, the clerk obliterated the forty rate with a black circular grid. He then applied

the proper black STEAM/SHIP 20 Cts circle. A notation on the reverse of the cover states, "Courier Office, Aspinwall, Mar. 17, 1854." This seems to verify the letter was privately carried from California to Chagre, where it was placed in the U.S. mail for Brooklyn, L. I.

New 1851 Rate

The Act of March 3, 1851, effective July 1, 1851, changed the single letter rate to Chagre and Panama. It established a ten cent charge on all letters carried under 2500 miles and twenty cents on all letters carried beyond that distance. It also made prepayment of postage mandatory on all letters sent from the United States but fees were still to be

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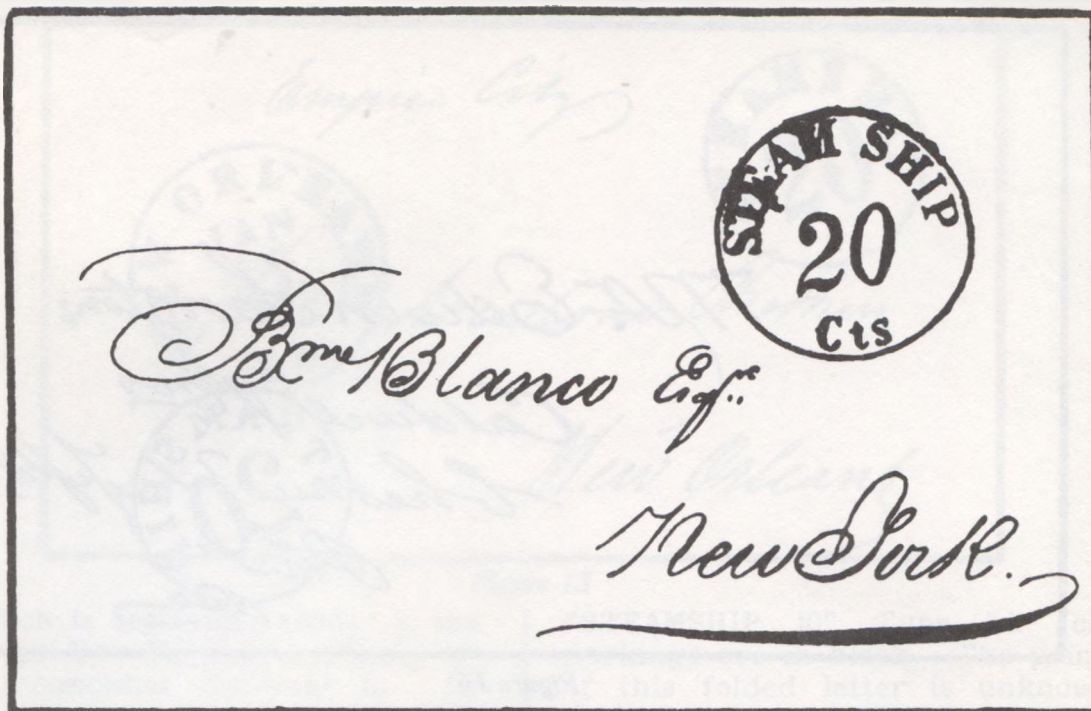


Figure 14

collected on mail received from outside the U.S. This Act superseded the 20¢ Chagre charge and the 30¢ Panama charge.

"Fourth Type 20" New York

Figure No. 16 illustrates the "Fourth Type 20" New York. This letter originated at Callao, Peru, May 11, 1854. The circle is struck in black. This letter was carried to Panama City by sea and placed in the United States mails enroute from California East. Since the U.S. Post Office Department

had nothing to do with the letter's transportation from Peru to Panama City, the New York Post office assessed it at twenty cents based on its point of entry into the U.S. mails. The writer of this letter was serving in the navy and was quite unhappy with his career. He says that if flogging had not been outlawed, he would probably have been dead by now. He feels that continuing in the navy isn't worthwhile considering his pay of \$6.00 per month.

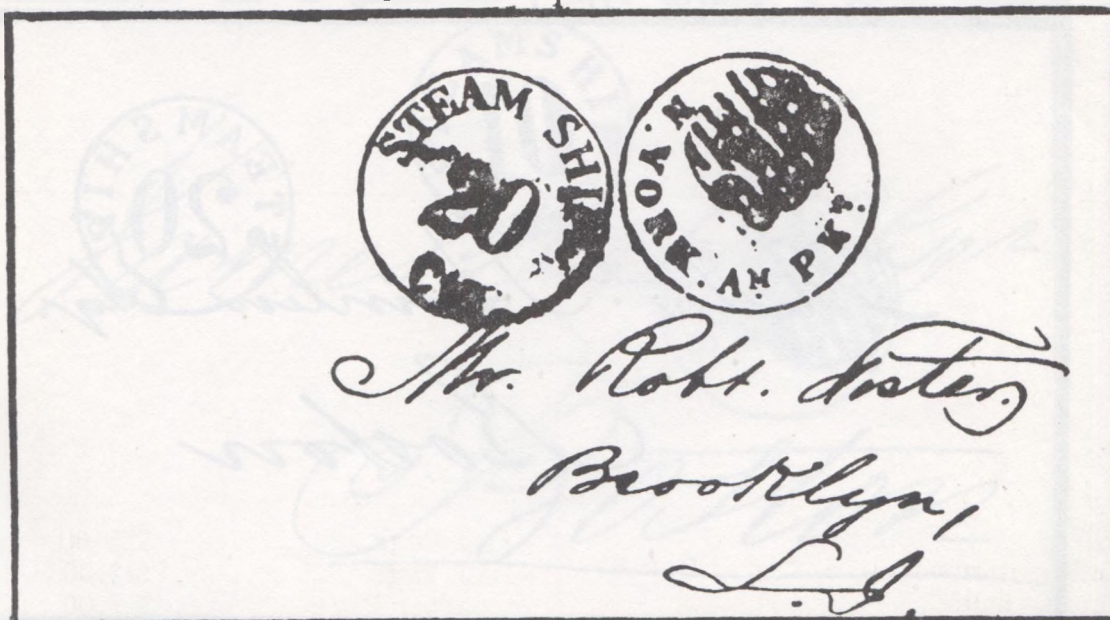


Figure 15

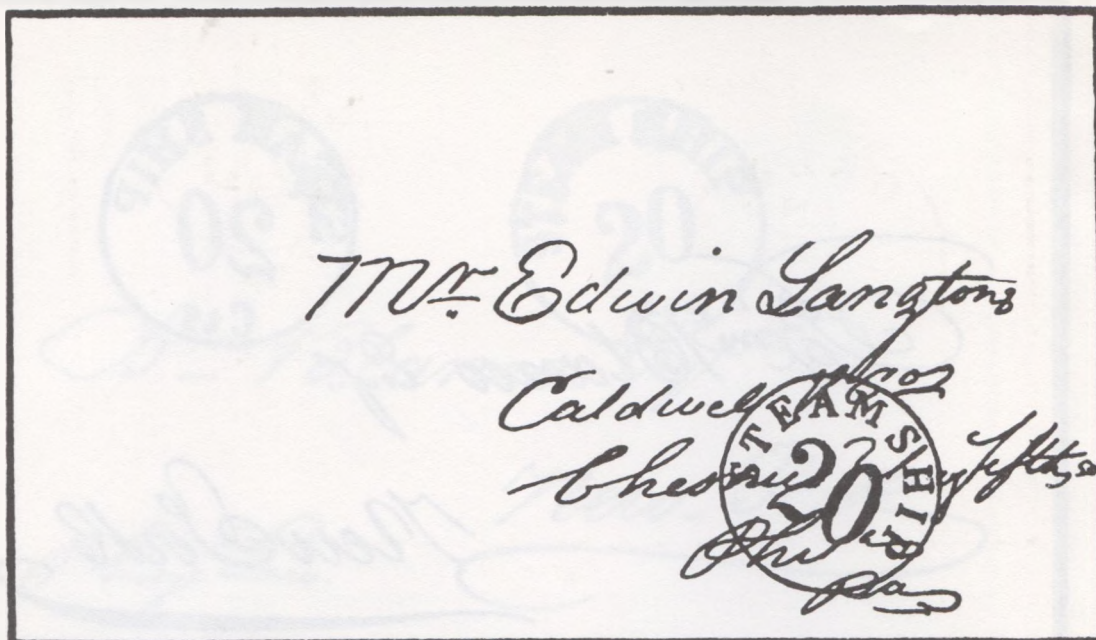


Figure 16

Figure No. 17 "Fourth Type 20" New York shows another usage on a letter directed to Boston. Although its year date and point of origin are both unknown to the writer, it probably entered the mails at Panama City since the rate charged is for letters carried over 2500 miles from origin to destination.

New Orleans Mark

Figure No. 18 illustrates the difficulty sometimes encountered in trying to accurately identify the wide variety of steamship markings. At first glance, this handstamp appears to be a "Fourth Type

20" New York marking. However, such is not the case. This folded letter originated at Havana, Cuba from which locality it was forwarded by a local mercantile company. This is evidenced by the double line blue oval handstamp they placed on the reverse of the cover. The manuscript notation at the top center of the cover, "Empire City," directs that this steamer be used to carry it over its ocean route. One could envision the letter traveling to New York and there turned around and sent south again. However, the letter did not get to its destination by this means. What is slightly confusing is the "STEAMSHIP 20" circle

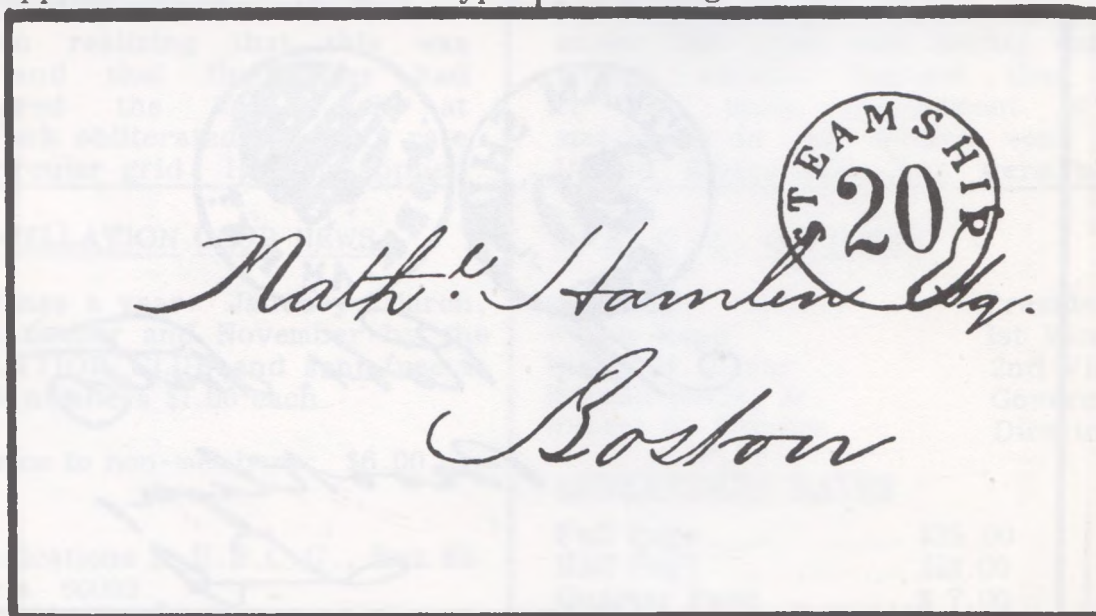


Figure 17

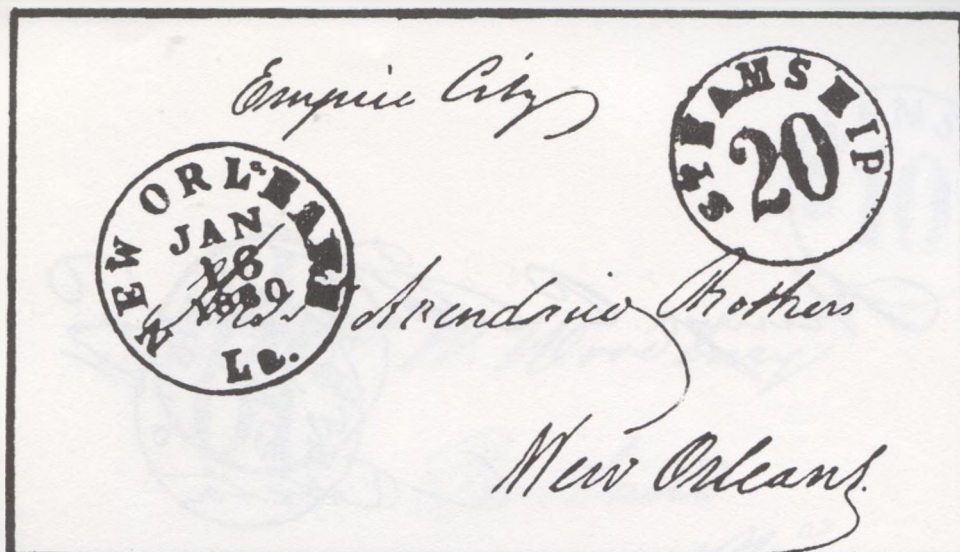


Figure 18

handstamp which is strikingly similar to the one used at the New York Post Office. It is, however, somewhat different in its type setting and size. This letter traveled from Cuba to New Orleans, Louisiana where it received both the "STEAMSHIP 20" and the New Orleans year-dated circle. It is the latter marking that made identification relatively easy in this case but on letters bearing only the "STEAMSHIP 20" greater care should be exercised. Both markings are in black and the year is 1860.

Figure No. 19 shows a "Fourth Type 20" New York circle which has been obliterated by means of a circular grid. This handstamp was then replaced by the

"STEAMSHIP 10" Type "A" circle. All markings are in black. The point of origin of this folded letter is unknown but the docketing year is given as 1851.

Figure No. 20 also shows a "Fourth Type 20" New York circle which has been overstruck with a "STEAM/SHIP 10" New York, Type "C" circle. Both markings are in black. This folded letter originated at Havana, Cuba in 1855.

"First Type 10" New York

Figure No. 21 illustrates a "First Type 10" New York. This cover bears the two-line straight line STEAM/SHIP and a

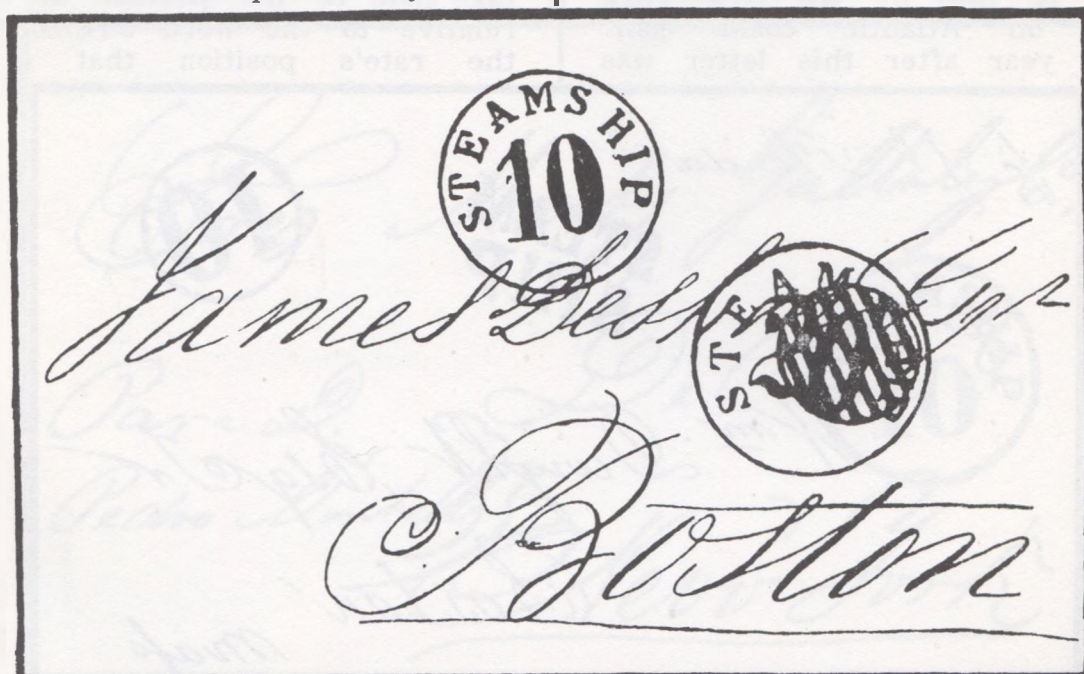


Figure 19

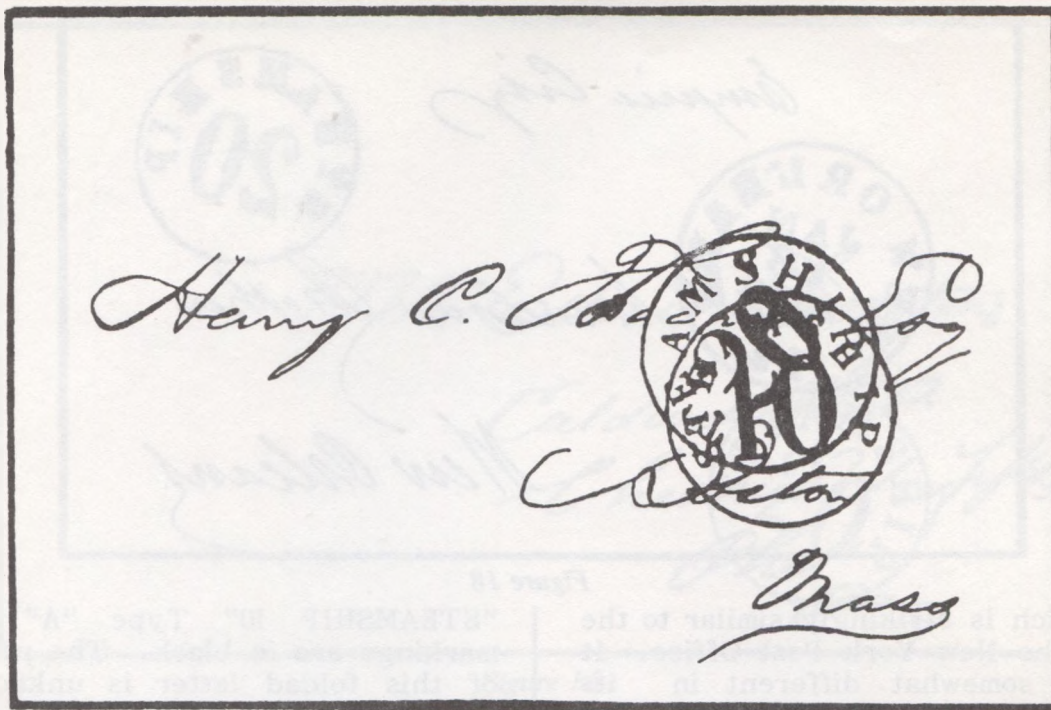


Figure 20

10 rate in a circle. Both handstamps are in black. The manuscript notation at the upper left reads "Pr Str Florida." This letter originated at Savannah, Georgia in 1850. The reader will recall that a similar marking was used on mail that originated at California, Figure No. 2, Panama City, Figures No. 3 and 4 and Chagre, Figure No. 10. This "First Type 10" New York marking was apparently used for only a short period of time by the New York Post Office on Atlantic coast mail. Starting the year after this letter was

posted (1851), the majority of covers show various types of handstamped "STEAMSHIP 10" circles. These markings are typed by the letters A, B, and C.

"Steamship 10" Type "A"

Figure No. 22, "STEAMSHIP 10" New York, illustrates the Type "A" handstamp. The circle is struck in black. The manuscript notation at the lower left reads; "Str E. City." The reader should take note of the position of the 10 rate relative to the word STEAMSHIP. It is the rate's position that is used to

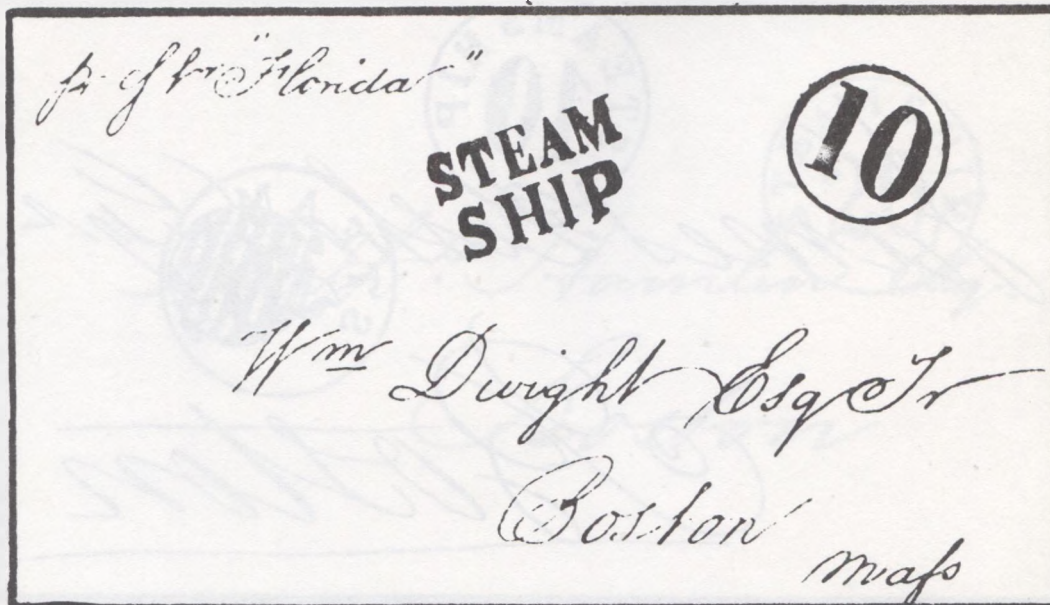


Figure 21

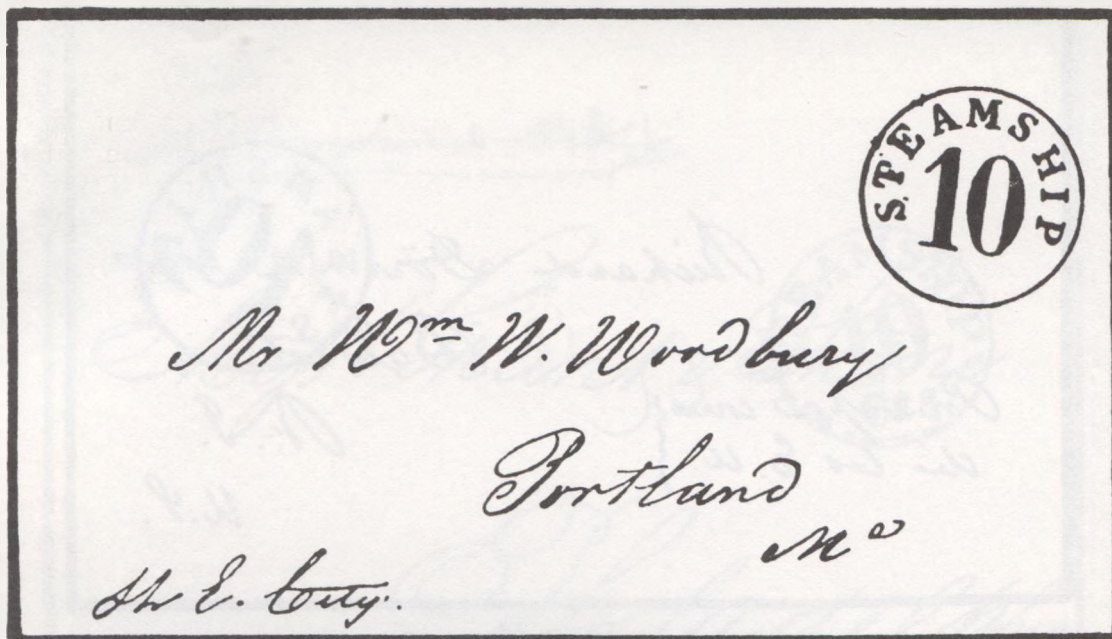


Figure 22

identify the handstamp type. The year of use for this folded letter is 1851.

"Steamship 10" Type "B"

Figure No. 23, "STEAMSHIP 10" New York, illustrates the Type "B" handstamp. The circle is struck in black. As is readily apparent, the 10 rate is of a reduced size and is positioned toward the lower half of the circle. The point of origin for this folded letter is Havana, Cuba, and the year is 1858.

"Steamship 10" Type "C"

Figure No. 24, "STEAMSHIP 10" New York, illustrates the Type "C" handstamp. The circle is struck in black with the 10 being centered with its lower extremities being even with the letters S and P in the word STEAMSHIP. The letter originated at Havana, Cuba in 1854.

"Third Type 10" New York

At some time during the period of use of

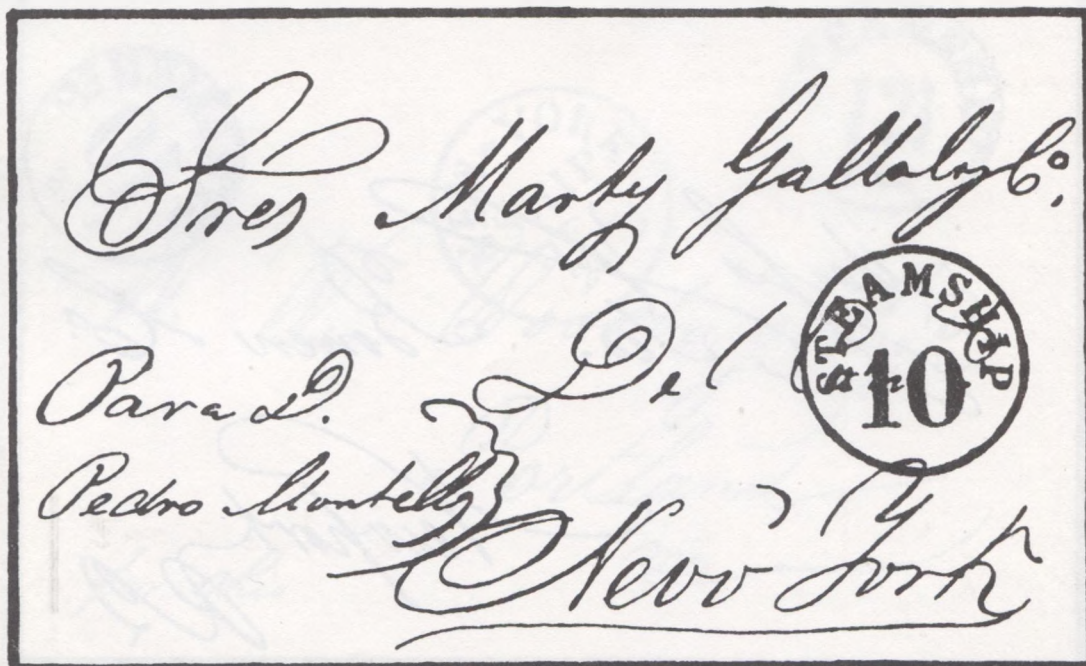


Figure 23

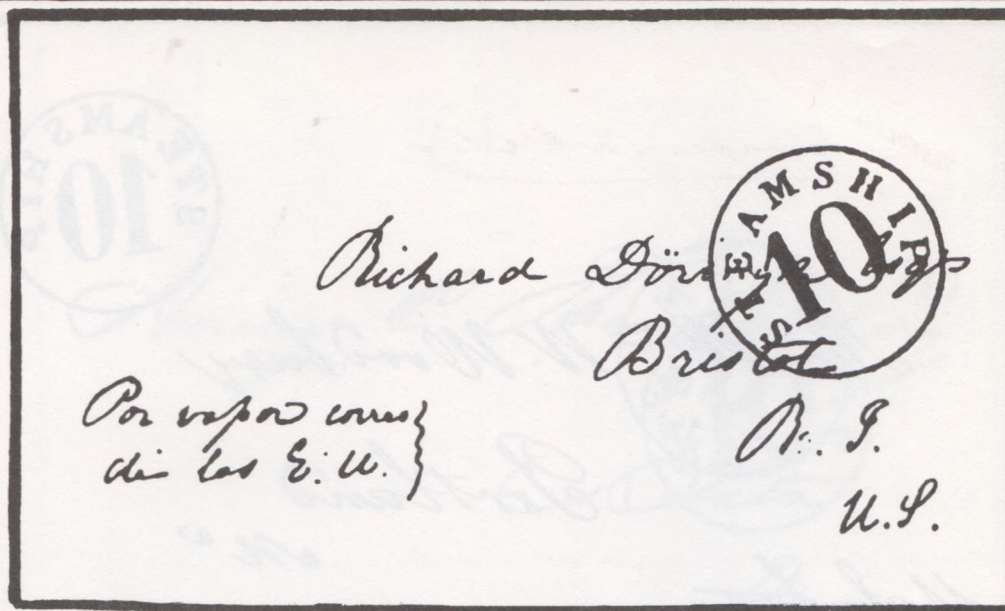


Figure 24

the Type A, B and C, "STEAMSHIP 10" New York markings, a "Third Type 10" New York handstamp came into use. This new marking exhibits an altered and strengthened STEAMSHIP and the addition of "Cts." It is the latter change that makes it easy to identify the new circular handstamp.

Figure No. 25 illustrates the "Third Type 10" New York marking. This letter originated at Havana, Cuba in 1856 and was directed to Newport, Rhode Island. The handstamped circle is in black.

As in previously directed letters, it went from Cuba to the New York Post Office and after rating was sent on to Rhode Island.

"First Type 12½" New York

The Act of March 3, 1847, effective July 1, 1847, which authorized the fees on letters to or from Chagre at 20¢ and to or from Panama City at 30¢, also established a fee of 12 1/2¢ on letters to or from Havana, Cuba. As a result, there were occasional rating

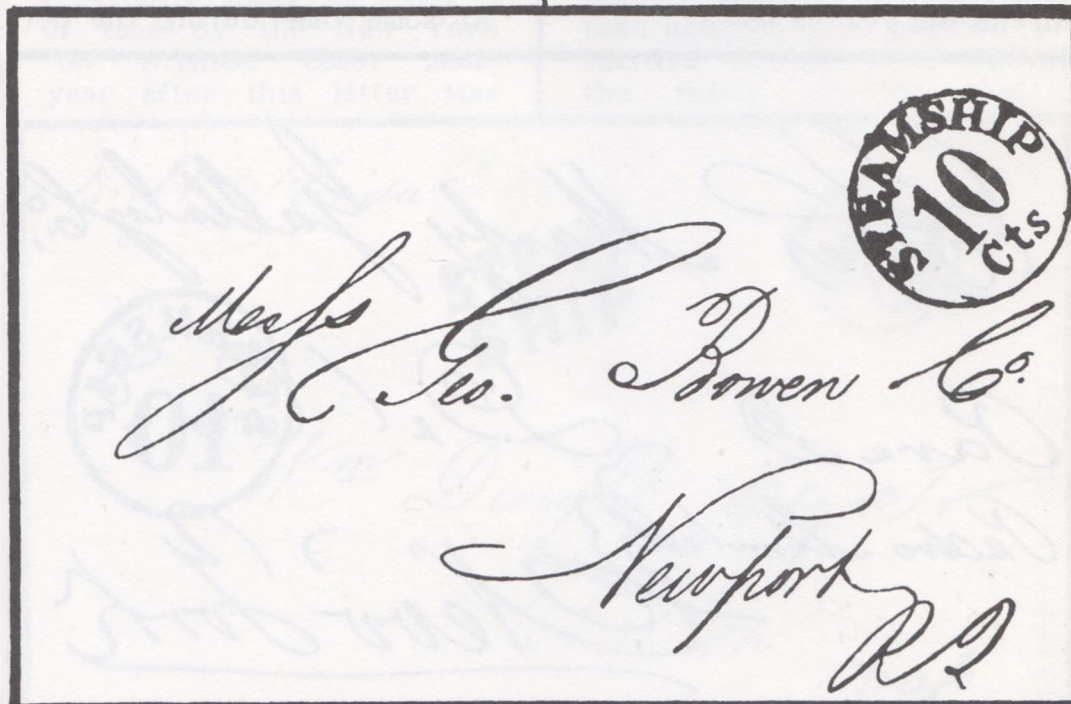


Figure 25

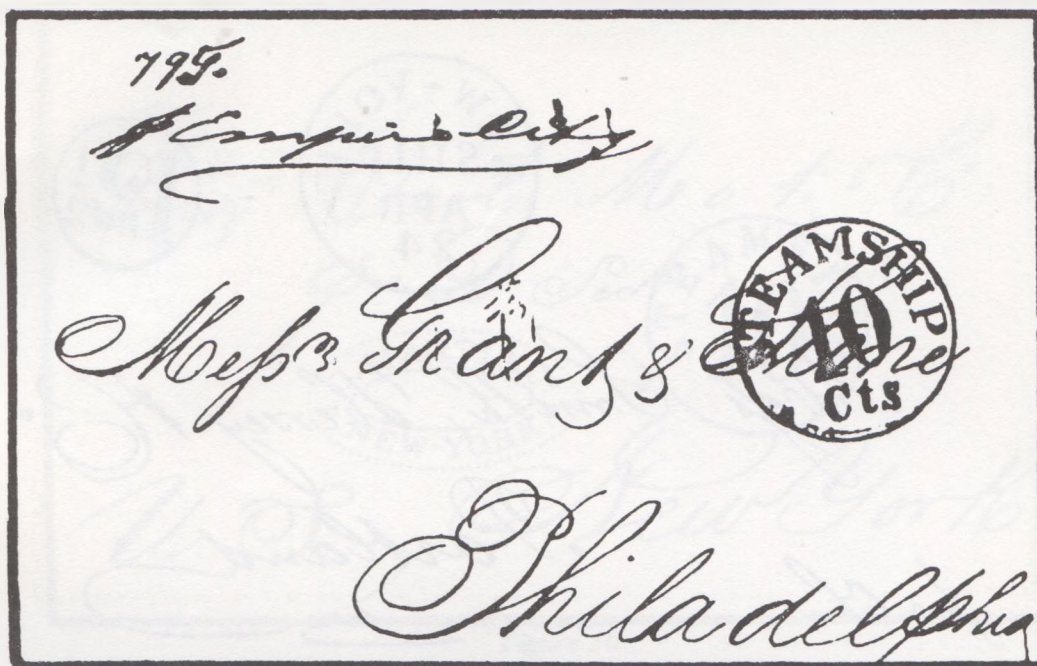


Figure 26

difficulties similar to those already mentioned in this article. Perhaps some of the confusion was due in part to the post office requirement that all mail received from ports in the Caribbean, Panama, British West Indies, and the west coasts of Mexico and South America were to be marked with the word "STEAMSHIP" because of the designation of these water routes as post roads. The writer feels that although they are not a part of the Panama Transit,

nevertheless, a limited number of examples should be included for the purpose of rating identification.

Figure No. 27 illustrates the "First Type 12 1/2 " New York rate marking. This circular handstamp contains the word STEAMSHIP and the 12 1/2 Cts rate designation. In most cases the rating handstamp is accompanied by another circle denoting the post office receiving the letter. This cover

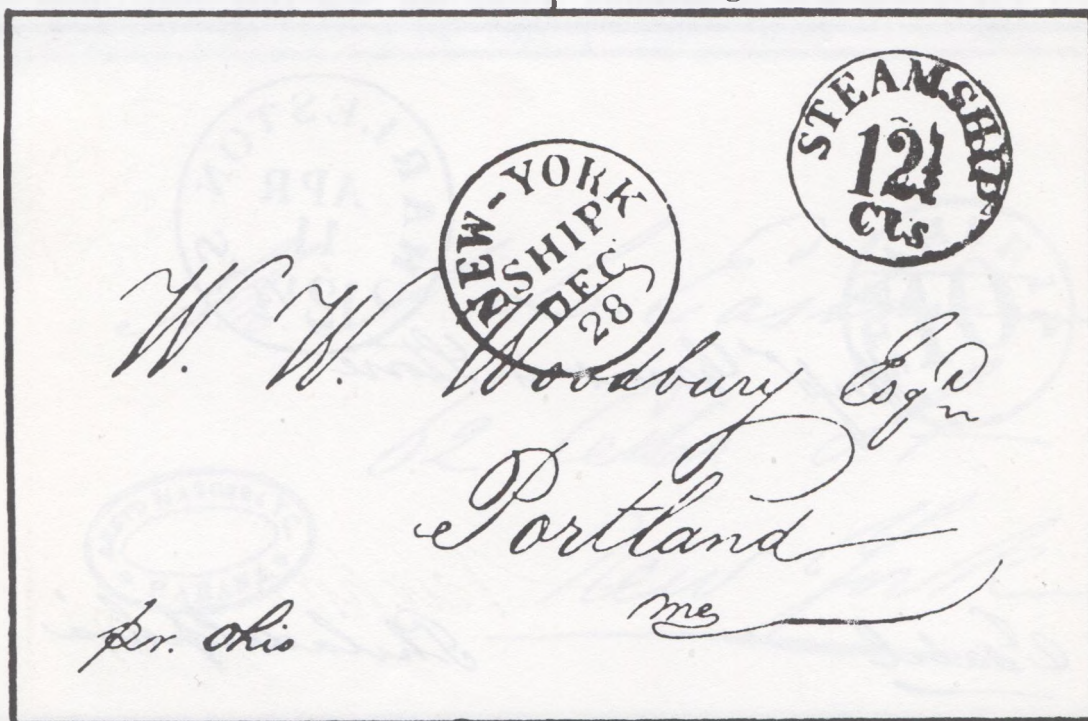


Figure 27

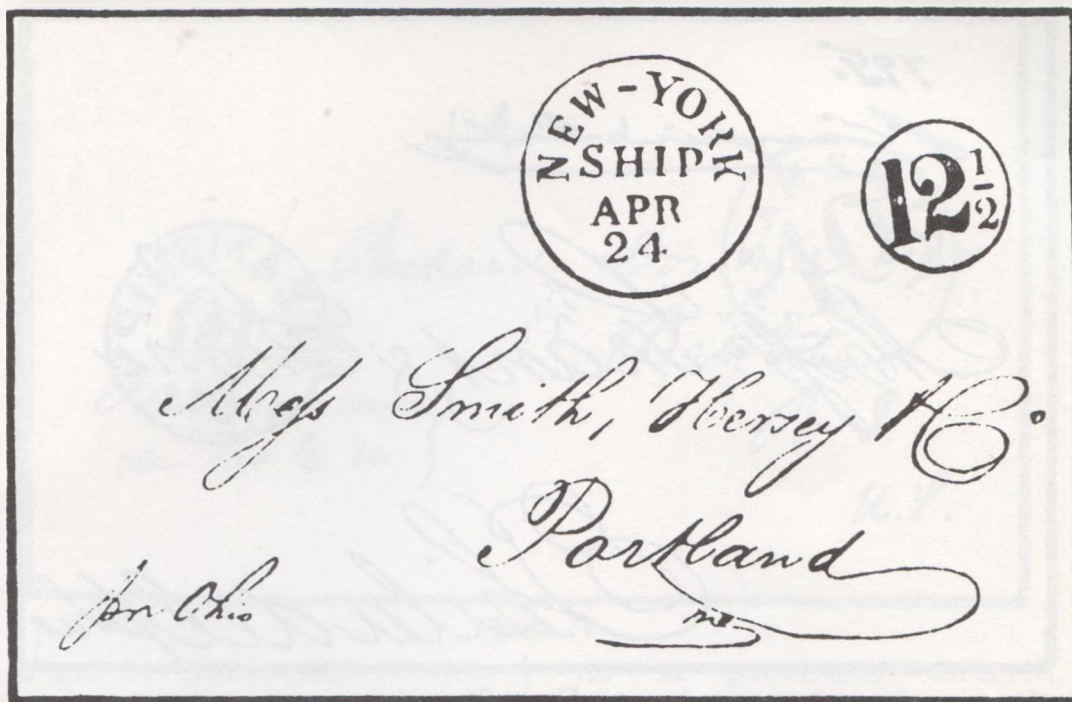


Figure 28

originated at Havana, was carried to New York on the "Ohio" (see manuscript notation at lower left) and upon receipt was rated and handstamped. Both markings are in black, and the year was 1850.

"Second Type 12 1/2" New York

Figure No. 28 illustrates the "Second Type 12 1/2" New York rate marking. The STEAMSHIP 12 Cts circle was supplanted

by a simple 12 1/2 rate mark in a circle. The NEW-YORK SHIP circle continued to be used. Both handstamps are in black. Like the previous example, this cover originated at Havana and was also carried on the "Ohio" by the year was 1851.

Charleston, S. C. 12 1/2

Figure No. 29 is not a steamship marking of the New York Post Office. However, I

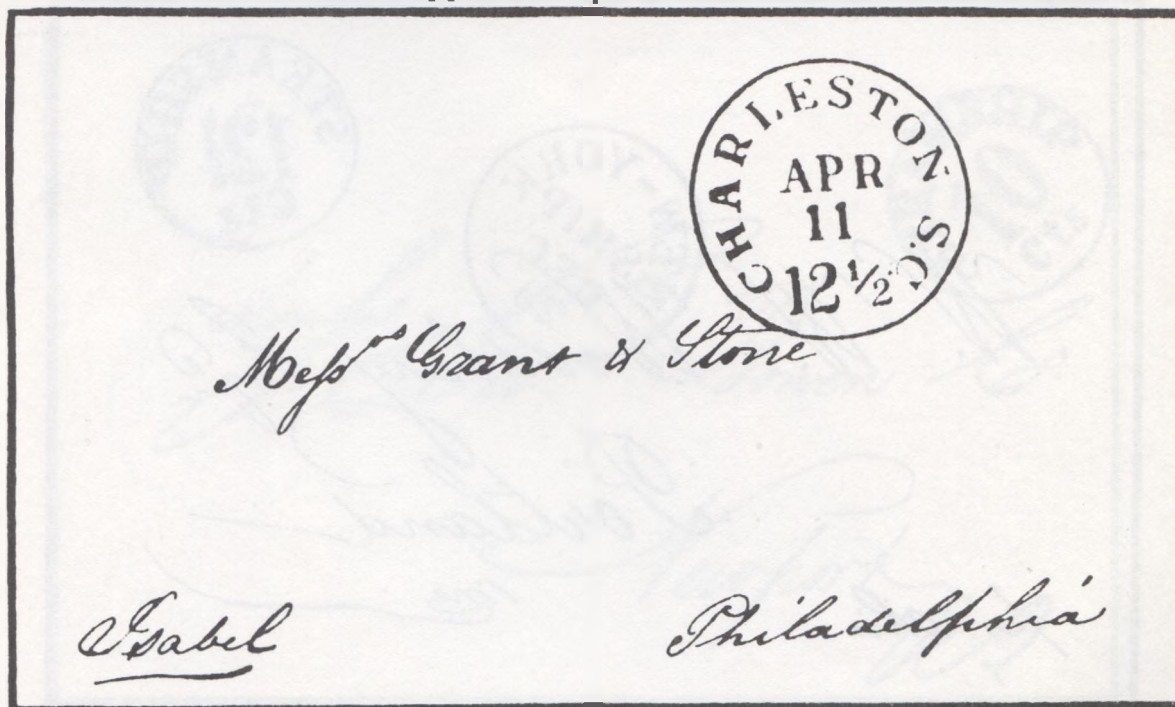


Figure 29

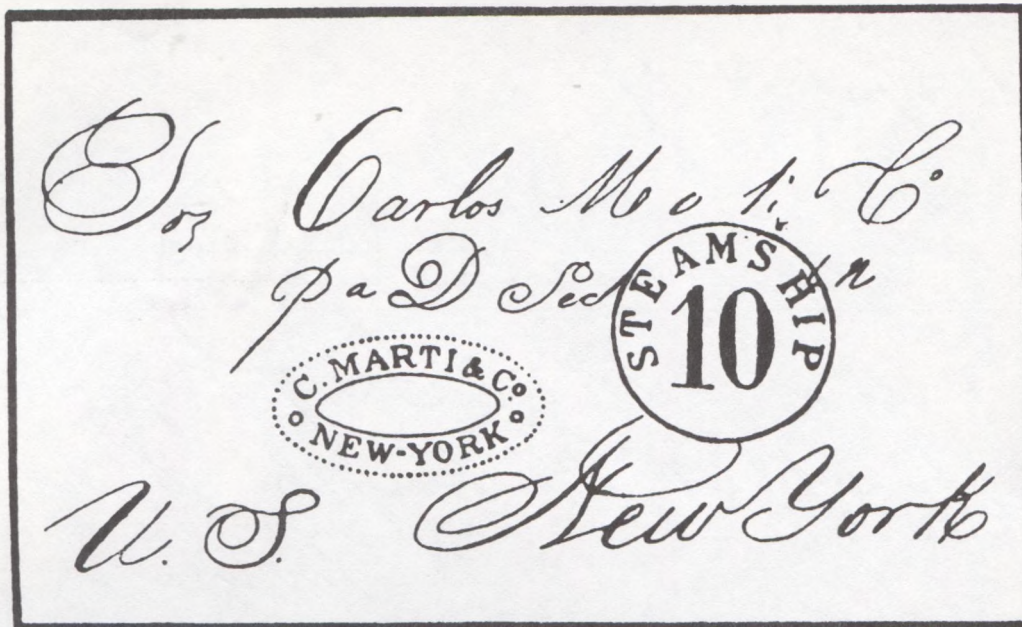


Figure 30

have included it in this article since it is illustrative of the 12 1/2¢ rate assessed on mail originating at Havana. The handstamped red circle contains the legend, CHARLESTON S.C. 12 1/2. The mail service was put into effect on October 18, 1848, by the steamer "Isabel" whose designation is shown at the lower left. The year of this letter is 1851, and its destination is Philadelphia.

Private Mail Forwarders.

One final area associated with the ocean mail operations of the New York Post

Office seems appropriate to these discussions. The area to which I refer is the operations of the "Forwarders." Forwarding of mail was a service provided to customers by many different business firms. The question of whether or not a fee was charged, remains a mystery to this day. The primary purpose seems to have been to provide a firm's customers with a little extra convenience in expediting their mail. In any event, we do know that it was sometimes quite difficult for the letter writer to get his letters on board a particular vessel by the sailing deadline. The typical forwarding service of this

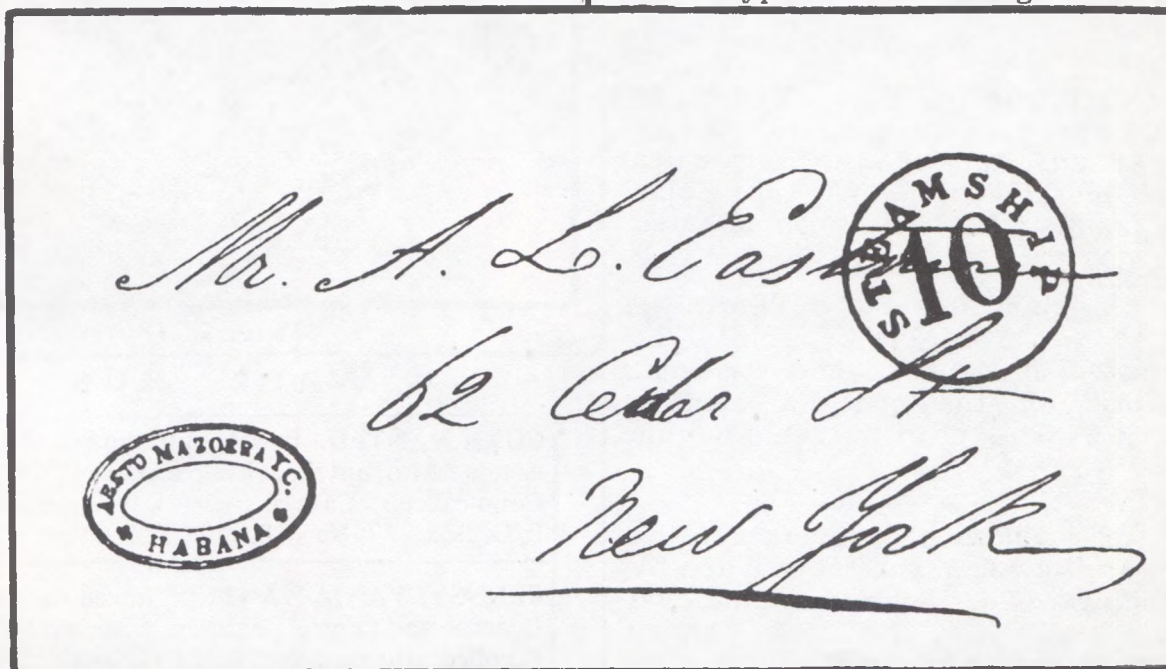


Figure 31

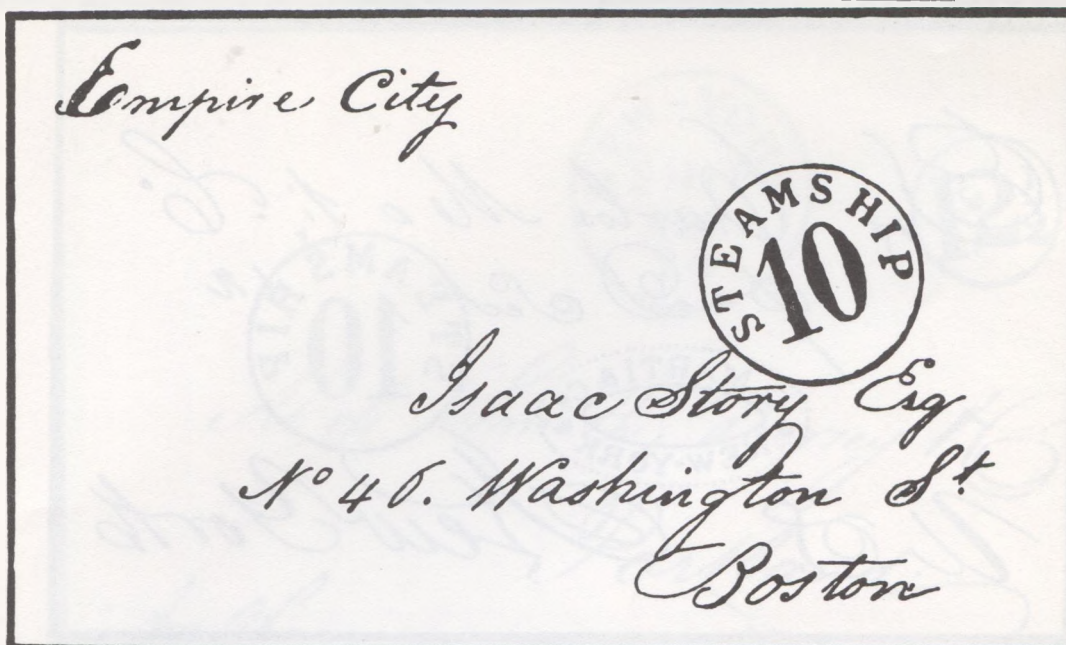


Figure 32

period not only assumed this responsibility but that of depositing letters in the post office as well. It is well documented that some forwarders even provided these services on mail traveling to a foreign country. Many forwarders were located in New York City and the cover illustrated in Figure No. 30 shows the handstamped marking of just such a forwarder.

Figure No. 30 illustrates the STEAMSHIP 10" Type "A" New York black circle. As can be seen, it also exhibits a red double oval with dotted outer line between which is printed the name of the forwarder; C. MARTI & CO. *NEW-YORK*.

Figure No. 31 illustrates the "STEAMSHIP 10" Type "C" New York black circle. It also bears the handstamp of the forwarder AESTO MAZOER YC * HAVANA * in a blue double line double oval. The cover is dated 1858.

Figure No. 32 illustrates the "STEAMSHIP 10" Type "A" New York black circle. The letter originated at Matanzas and was sent to New York on the contract steamer "Empire City." The year of use for this cover is 1856.

Figure No. 32-A shows the reverse of the cover in Figure No. 32. The "Forwarded by Adot. Standing & Co. Havana" double oval is struck in red. The "11 o'clock MAR 29 delivery" handstamp is in red also.

It is not the intent of the writer to imply that the steamship markings depicted in this article represent all that were used by the New York Post Office during its existence. Rather, it is simply an elementary attempt to illustrate the changes in letter communication brought about by the great western migration to the gold fields of California. The writer would appreciate receiving constructive criticism on any facts deemed by the reader to be in error.

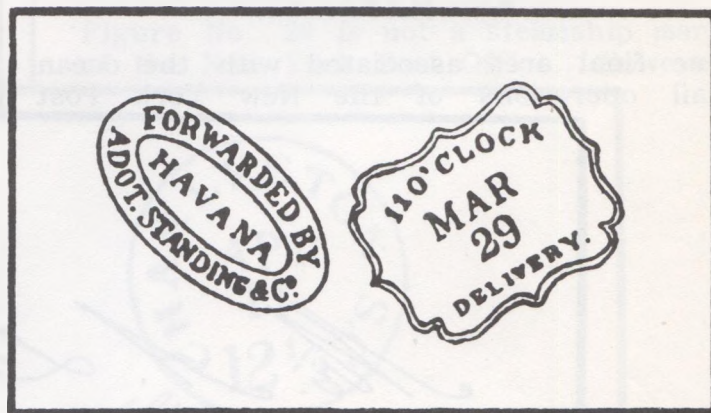


Figure 32-A

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