United States Mails: Its First 80 Years Without Stamps

By

Robert G. Rose

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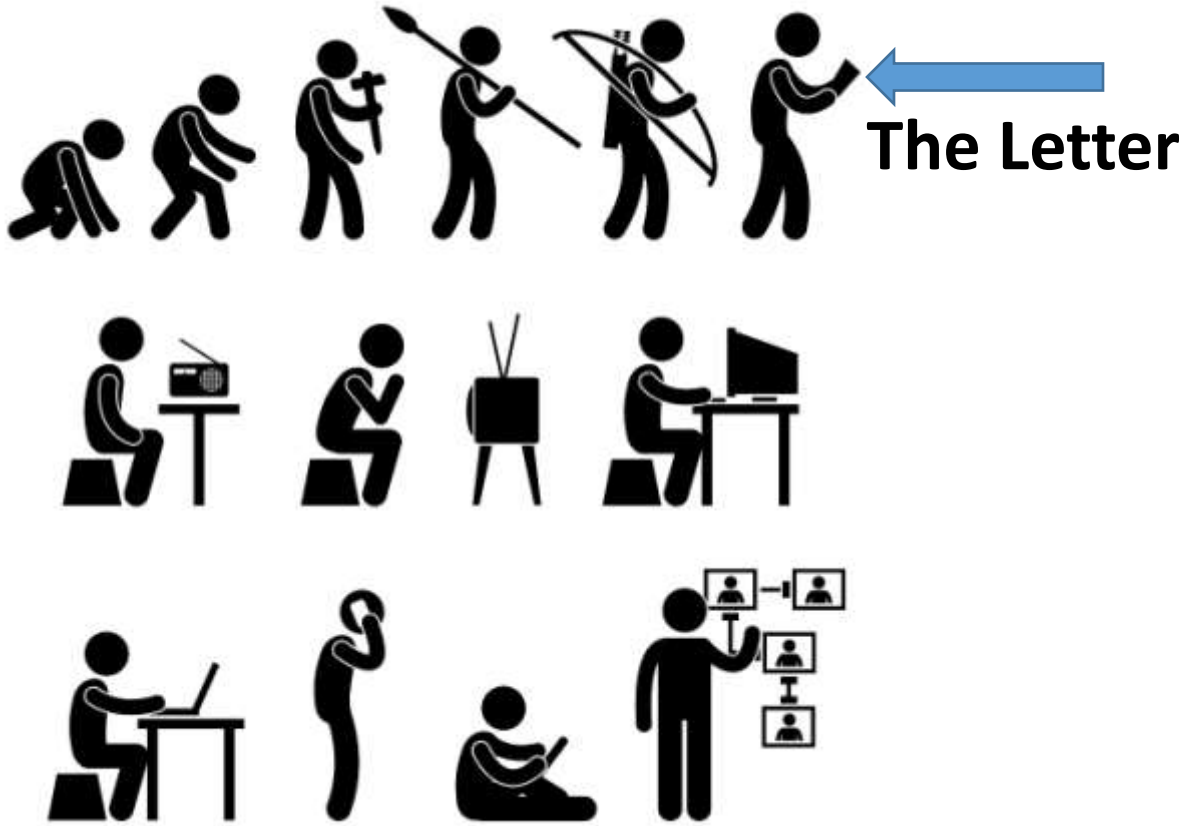
CCHS

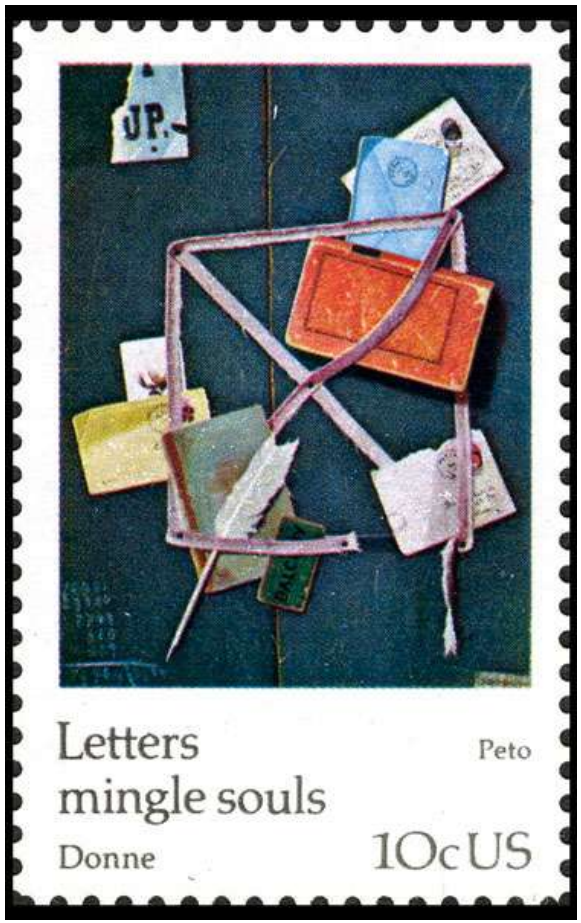
CHESTER COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Letters are a Means of Human Communication. The Evolution of the Mails is a Significant Aspect of our Social History.



Mail Call: Nothing was more important than a letter from home.

Letter writing was the primary means of communication well into the 20th century.



But Today: No More Letters

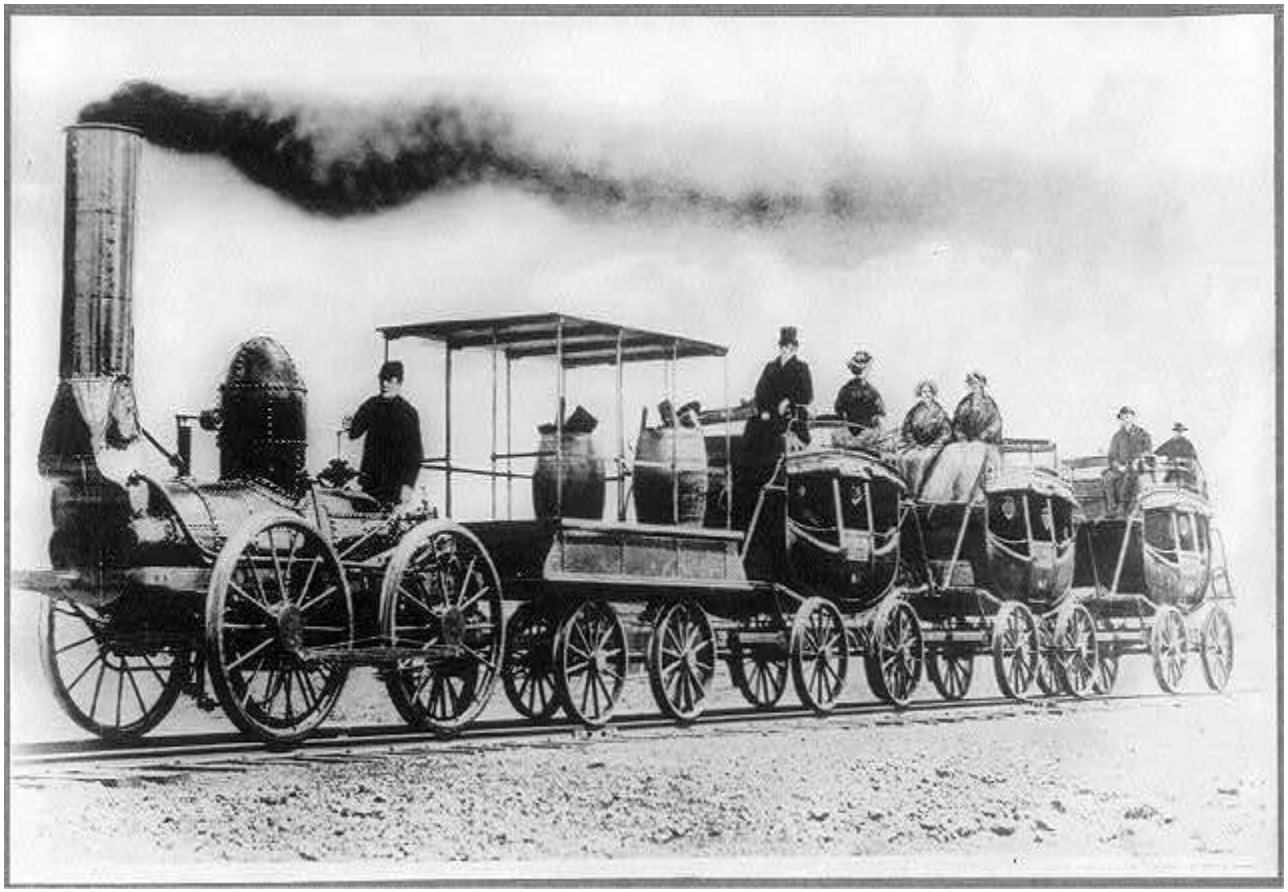
So let's go back in time when the *only* means of communication was by way of letter writing.

How Were Letters Transported?

Up until the 1790's, most mail was carried by horseback.

Beginning in the 1780's mail began to be carried by wagon under government contract.

Beginning in the late 1830's mail began to be carried on trains.



What did the mails look like before the introduction and compulsory use of postage stamps?

From the time of the Revolutionary War in 1775 until the end of 1855, most mail was sent stampless, even after postage stamps were first introduced for use in the United States in 1847.

Most mail was not sent prepaid, but was paid for by the recipient at the time the mail was picked up at the post office. Until the early 1850's, mail was typically written on folded letter sheets secured with a wax seal, to avoid paying a double rate for the use of an envelope. Mailing a letter was very expensive.

Postal Charges were Based on Distance and Weight and were Costly

On July 26, 1775, the Second Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia created the Congressional Post. On Christmas Day 1775, the British Parliamentary Post ceased domestic operations in its North American colonies. Postal rates were established for mailing a single letter sheet not over one ounce in weight as follows:

60 Miles or Under: 1 dwt. (penny weight) & 8 grains of silver.

60 to 100 miles: 2 dwt.

For each additional 100 miles or fraction add 16 grains

1 pennyweight = 24 grains

1 pennyweight = 3 pence Sterling (3p or 3d)

8 grains (8gr) = 1 penny Sterling (1p or 1d)

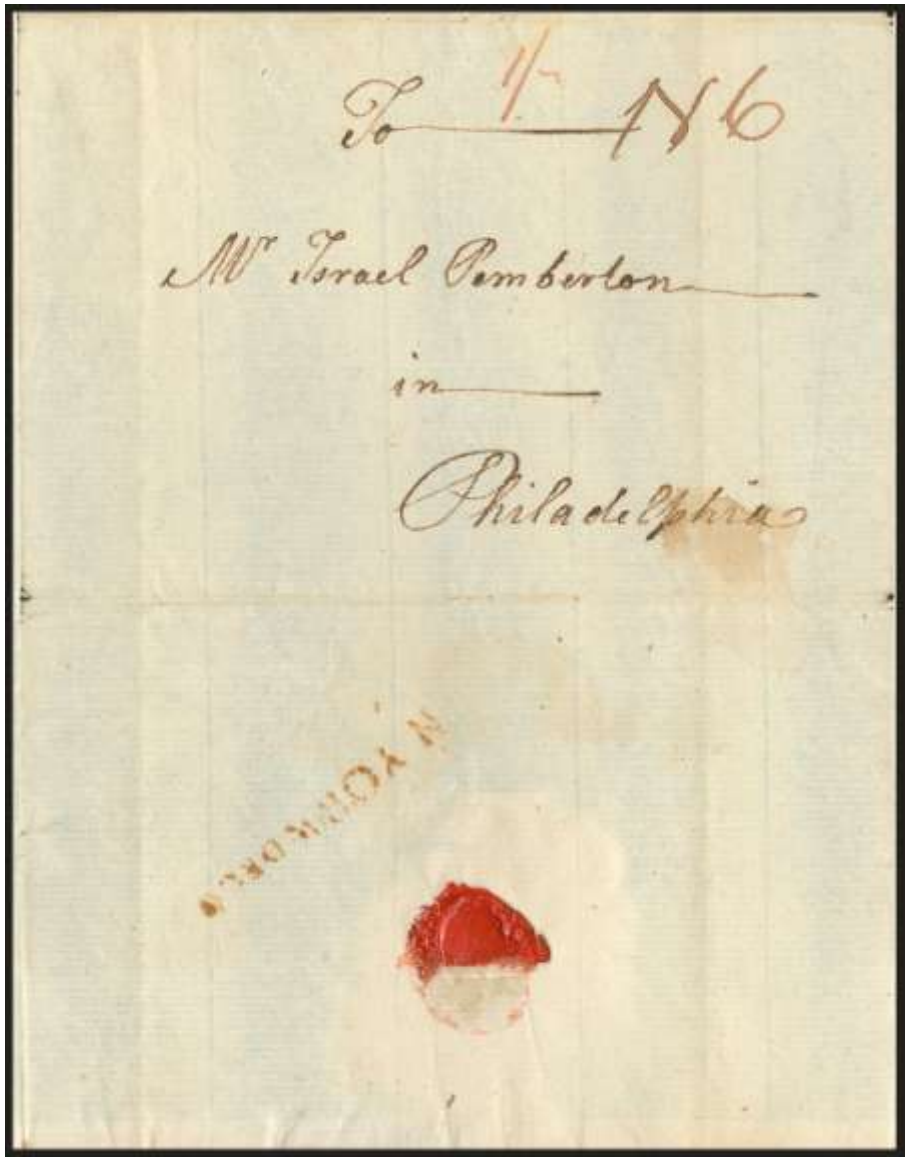
12 pence = 1 Shilling (1/ or IN)

1775 Princeton to Philadelphia

The manuscript "N4" or 4 pence in black is the sterling currency equivalent of the 1 pennyweight & 8 grains single letter rate under 60 miles as established under the Congressional Post.

The depreciated local currency equivalent was calculated correctly at 9 pence when applied in Philadelphia in red manuscript.
4p x 1.67 (inflation factor) = 7p plus 2p carrier fee = 9p)

1775 New York to Philadelphia



The manuscript "N6" or 6 pence in black is the sterling currency equivalent of 2 pennyweight, the single letter rate over 60 miles as established under the Congressional Post.

The depreciated local currency equivalent was calculated correctly at 1 shilling when applied in Philadelphia in red manuscript. 6p x 1.67 (inflation factor) = 10p plus 2p carrier fee = 1 shilling.

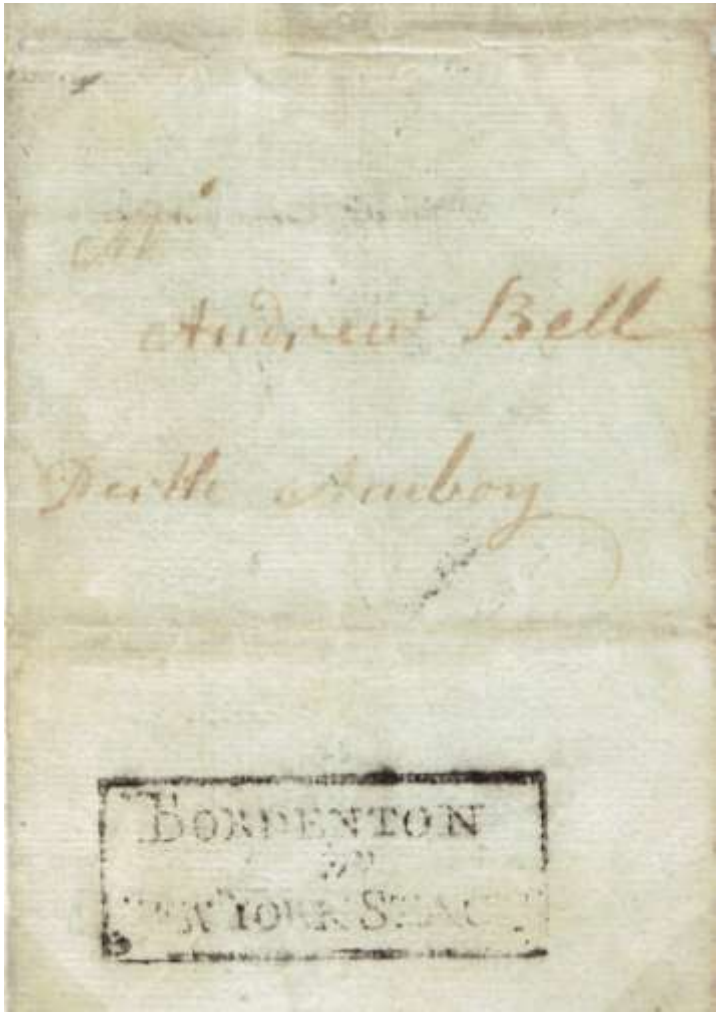
Question for Philadelphia postal historians: The red N. YORK DEC 6 straight line handstamp is a Parliamentary Post marking. By mid-October 1775, the Parliamentary Post Office in Philadelphia is believed to have closed and the Congressional Post Office opened. Which office carried this letter to Philadelphia and which office received it?

Bordenton & New York Stage
1786
This is the earliest reported use of an independent mail handstamp.

The Bordenton & New York Stage was established by Joseph Borden in 1740 and operated until 1792. This stage line carried passengers and freight between Philadelphia and New York.

The route ran north from Philadelphia by "stage boat" on the Delaware River to Bordentown and overland by "stage waggon" to Perth Amboy, then sloop through New York harbor to Whitehall at the lower tip of Manhattan.

Only six covers with this boxed handstamp have been recorded, all north bound. The earliest reported on August 23, 1786 and the latest, shown here, with a Philadelphia date line of November 21, 1786.



1787 Philadelphia to New York

Between 1783 and 1798, only three examples of a Philadelphia handstamp postmark have been recorded.

The manuscript "2" pennyweight, is the single letter rate from 60 to 100 miles as established under the Ordinance by Congress of October 18, 1782 which re-established the Congressional Post rates of September 1775.

Philadelphia's depreciated local currency equivalent was calculated at 1 shilling.
6p = 2 pennyweight X 1.67 (inflation factor) = 10p plus 2p carrier fee = 1 shilling.

Following the adoption of the Constitution, the postal service was strengthened and unified, with the creation of the United States Post Office Department.

STATEHOOD PERIOD

Act of February 20, 1792
Effective June 1, 1792
Zone Rates for Single Letters

Not over 30 miles	6 cents
30 to 60 miles	8 cents
60 to 100 miles	10 cents
100 to 150 miles	12½ cents
150 to 200 miles	15 cents
200 to 250 miles	17 cents
250 to 350 miles	20 cents
350 to 450 miles	22 cents
Over 450 miles	25 cents

Letters weighing 1 ounce, 4 times single rate; for each additional ounce, add 4 times single rate.

Postmarks after Post Office Act of 1792

New Brunswick to Philadelphia

The Act of 1792 established a nine-zone tiered system of rates from six cents for a single letter sheet up to a distance of 30 miles, increasing incrementally to 25 cents for a letter over 450 miles. Postage could be prepaid at the post office when mailed, or paid by the recipient when received.

Rated at 8c rate for single letter sent unpaid from 30 to 60 miles per the Act of February 20, 1792.

This unusual "N.B." straight line postmark using only the town's initials is reported in black from 1795-96.

First Handstamps Provided by the U.S. Post Office Department 1799

In 1799 the United States Post Office Department provided 26 mm circular brass handstamps, with removable type for the date and the month, to 12 of the largest revenue generating post offices throughout the new nation.

Both Newark and Trenton were the only two New Jersey towns to receive the handstamps, which were delivered on June 8, 1799.

Early Circle Handstamps 1800 to 1815

In the first two decades of the 19th century, three of New Jersey's larger towns, New Brunswick, Princeton, and Morristown introduced a variety of circular date handstamps that were likely purchased from local engravers.

<u>New Brunswick 1801</u>. Use of this 27 mm handstamp from New Brunswick is reported from 1801 to 1803.

<u>Princeton 1810</u>. Use of this 28 mm handstamp is reported in Black from 1802 to 1826.

<u>Morristown 1814</u>. This the only reported example of this 26 mm handstamp with the "N.J." not in italics.

OVAL HANDSTAMPS

NEWARK

Oval handstamps were gradually introduced during the 1810's. Eventually 12 New Jersey towns used these oval postmarks in the years from 1813 to almost the end of the stampless era in 1855.

Newark used an oval handstamp from 1813 to 1836 in four sequential colors : Blue, Black, Red and Green.

All four colors are shown. Green is the scarcest color and was used for only one month, July 1823.

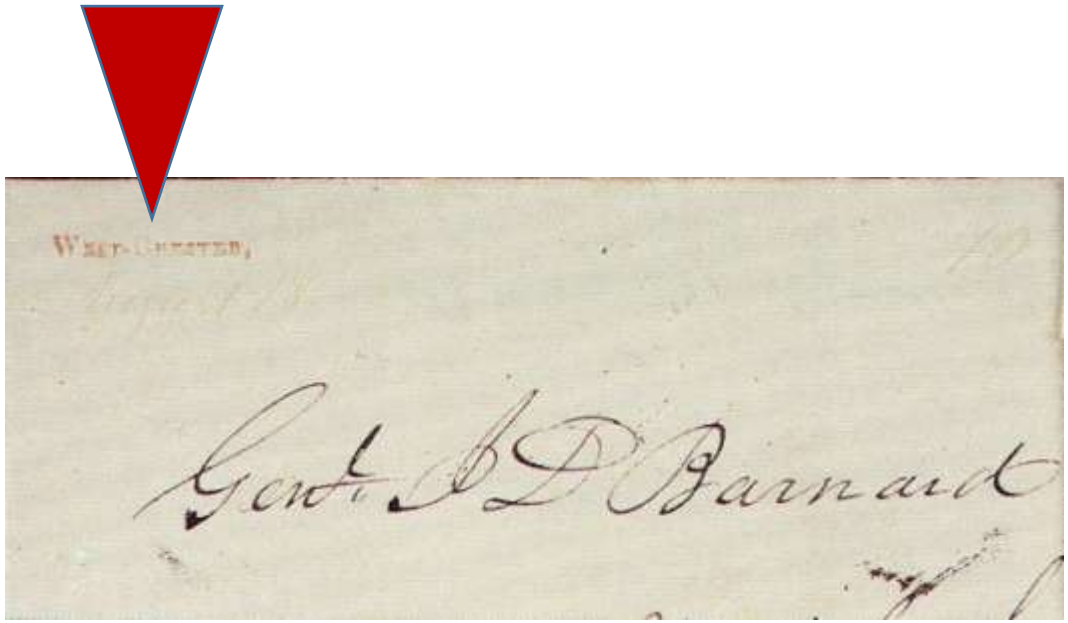
FLEMINGTON OVAL

Flemington used a 35 X 29 mm oval handstamp from 1825 to 1849 in five colors: Blue, Dark Red, Bright Red, Black and Brown.

All five colors are shown.

The scarcest color is Bright Red and was used only briefly in 1839.

West-Chester Straight Line



Tiny lettered straight line handstamp used from 1827-1828 on image of partial cover to Harrisburgh.

Faint manuscript “10” sent upaid for single letter from 30-80 miles under the Act of April 9, 1816.

LAWRENCEVILLE STRAIGHT LINES

Lawrenceville used six different handstamps from 1829 to 1854.

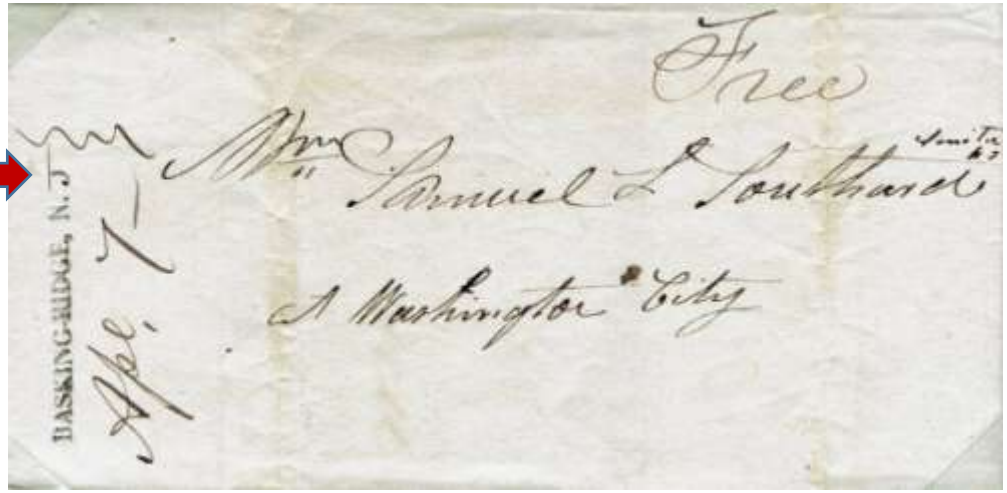
All reported varieties and colors are shown in the exhibit including the scarce slanted letters in both colors and the two-line handstamp.

Many of these locally produced handstamps made from printer's type varied as much as 2 to 3 mm in length as a result of resetting loose letters, the loss of spacers and, the mixing of commas and periods in the handstamp.

BASKING RIDGE STRAIGHT LINES
1833 TO 1835

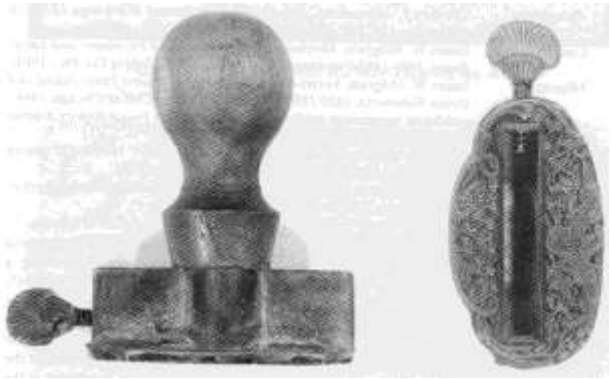
Two varieties of this 45 X 4 mm straight line handstamp have been recorded. The first includes "N.J.", the full abbreviation of the State.

In the second, the printer's type in this locally produced straight line handstamp slipped and, the "J" of "N. J." dropped from the postmark at some point in early 1834, and was substituted with a manuscript letter "J."



Fancy Mortised Handstamps

These fancy straight line handstamps were made from ornamental book markers.

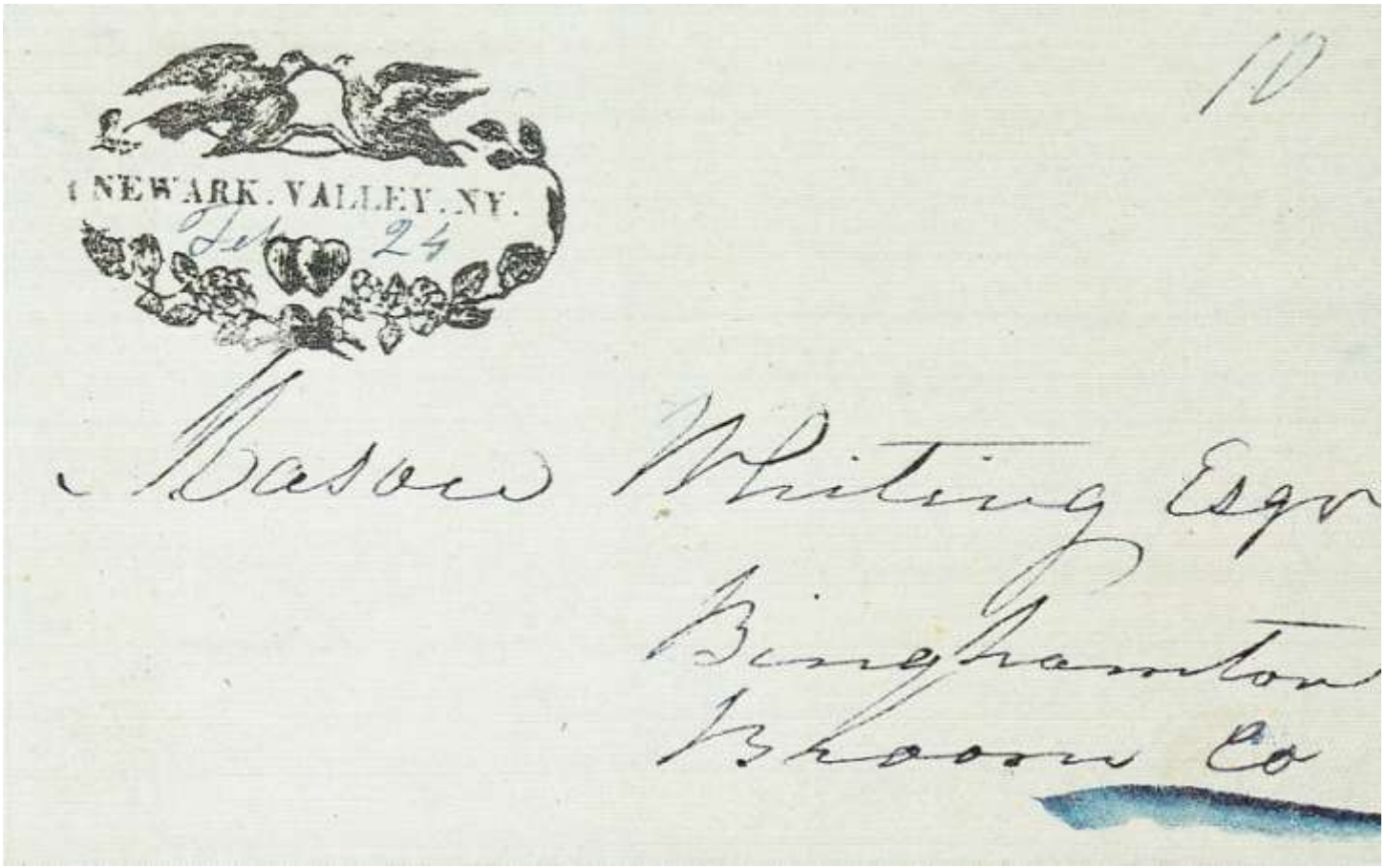


The town name and date were made from printer's type and inserted into the mortised area of the handstamp, secured by a hand screw.

Upper Dublin to Easton, PA. **April 11, 1852**

New Providence, NJ to Nazareth Hall, PA. December 1, 1845

Fancy Mortised Handstamp



This fancy mortised handstamp was used only in 1844. Sent unpaid to Binghampton, NY. The manuscript "10" cents was the postage to be paid by the letter's recipient for a single letter from 30 to 80 miles under the Act of April 9, 1816.

Fancy Handstamps

The Allegorical Figure of Liberty Handstamp was used in 1827-28. Sent unpaid to Columbia, PA.

The "6" cents manuscript rate marking was the postage to be paid by the letter's recipient.

The cost of postage was reduced under the Act of March 2, 1799. Six cents paid the single letter rate not over 30 miles.

The Scrantonia "Rail" Handstamp was used only in 1850. Sent unpaid to Easton, May 1, 1850.

The red "5" cents rate marking was the postage to be paid by the letter's recipient.

The cost of postage was reduced under the Act of March 3, 1845. Five cents paid the rate for a ½ ounce letter under 300 miles.

Negative Lettered Handstamps

The Haddonfield negative handstamp is considered the most outstanding New Jersey postmark from the standpoint of appearance. It was in use from 1840 to 1853.

The Lambertville negative handstamp is reported from 1835 to 1841. It is the scarcer of these two negative handstamp postmarks used in New Jersey.

Leona, Texas Negative Lettered Handstamp

Leona to Galveston, June 21, 1848, sent unpaid and rated 5 cents for ½ ounce letter under 300 miles pursuant to Act of March 1, 1845.

Circle Town Postmarks 1820 to 1855

Circle town postmarks came into common service by 1830 and remained the most often used handstamp until the end of the domestic stampless period in 1855. A wide variety of styles were used including single circles, double circles, double outer line circles, rimless circles and county named town circles.

Circle Town Postmarks 1820 to 1855

Rimless Circle Town Postmarks

Circle town postmarks without an outer rim saw service in many States from the mid-1830's to the early 1850's. Six New Jersey towns are included in this exhibit.

Postal Rates, with only a few minor adjustments, remained unchanged from 1816 until 1845. Agitation for lower rates resulted in significant reductions under the Act of 1845 which became effective on July 1, 1845.

Postmarked in Philadelphia on the first day of the reduced rates. Sent unpaid to Springfield, Massachusetts and mistakenly rated at 10 cents. It was correctly rerated at "5" cents in manuscript, the reduced rate for a half once letter under 300 miles.

The First Issue of U.S. Stamps in 1847 began the gradual elimination of stampless mails.

The 1845 rates remained in force after the introduction of postage stamps:
5 cents under 300 miles
10 cents over 300 miles.

However, most mail continued to be stampless and sent unpaid.

It was not until after the Act of 1851 that mail posted with stamps overtook the volume of stampless mail.

Under the Act of 1851, the 5 & 10 Cent First Issue of 1847 was Demonetized as of June 30, 1851.

Philadelphia to Wilmington on June 30, 1851, the last day of use of the 1847 Issue, paying the 5 cent rate under 300 miles.

Effective on July 1, 1851, prepaid mail was rated at 3c under 3,000 miles and 5c if sent unpaid. The substantial rate reduction for prepaid mail resulted in the beginning of the end of stampless mail.

First day of issue on July 1, 1851 of the 3c 1851 Issue paying reduced rate for prepaid mail not over 3,000 miles. Philadelphia to Elkton, Maryland.

Epilogue— The End of Domestic Stampless Mail

Effective January 1, 1856

Excerpts from official post office notice.

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT.

REGULATIONS CONCERNING POSTAGE STAMPS AND STAMPED ENVELOPES.

1. The following are among the provisions contained in the 1st section of the act of Congress approved March 3, 1855, to wit:

First. The prepayment of the postage upon all letters passing through or in the mail of the United States, after the 1st day of April, 1855, excepting letters to and from foreign countries, and letters and packages addressed to officers of the government "on official business," which must be so marked on the envelope.

Second. That "from and after the 1st day of January, 1856, the Postmaster General may require postmasters to place postage stamps upon all prepaid letters upon which such stamps may not have been placed by the writers."

NOVEMBER 20, 1855.

JAMES CAMPBELL,
Postmaster General