

The Lebanon Oval Hand Stamps, 1821 - 1841 A New Study

By Richard Colberg (# 378)

This all started out innocently enough. As the year 2000 ended, I was putting the finishing touches on the updating for the monograph on Lancaster County Stampless Markings, with Tom Mazza and Jim Boyles. Tom had been given all of the raw data and it was time to sit back and relax. Not so, says Tom, as he asked me to start the same project for Lebanon County.

I enlisted the help of fellow PaPHS member, Glenn Blouch, a collector of Lebanon County postal history. I also enlisted the help of the family of deceased PaPHS member, Erwin Herschkowitz (Herk to his friends). Herk had a nice collection of Lebanon County postal history and it had not been sold after his death. They were kind enough to provide a photocopy of his exhibit of this material.

Armed with Herk's and Glenn's material, Glenn headed for the Lebanon County Historical Society and I put out the call in the *Historian* for any stampless Lebanon County material in the hands of PaPHS members, or known to them. To date, I have received some nice copies from Las Vegas member, Ken Hall. And, Glenn found a treasure trove of material at the historical society. Tom Mazza had provided his census and postmaster data and I was ready to go to work on the up-date.

All went well until I got to the Lebanon markings and the Lebanon oval hand stamp in particular. This is a marking that is probably familiar to most collectors of Pennsylvania postal history. Shown elsewhere in this article, the marking is usually a crudely shaped oval with LEBANON in an arc at the top and PENN. in an arc at the bottom. The month is seen in the middle with the day date in manuscript, either in black or red. The hand stamp is usually in blue-green ink.

To look at the ovals, it is evident that they are not all the same. Herk's write-up had listed them as Sampson Types 1, 2, and 3. Glenn's write-up made no distinction. The *American Stampless Cover Catalog* (ASCC) lists four types of Lebanon oval hand stamp that are based on the size and shape of the oval and whether the letters are upright or slanted. Based on the following chart, I believe the ASCC is closest to being correct.

The Methodology

Twenty-six examples of the Lebanon oval were available as I began this study. Xerox copies were used for my analysis. All of the photocopies are first generation. That is, they are the first copies of the original cover. I then made Xerox transparencies of each photocopy so that any oval could be overlaid onto any other for comparison. This worked remarkably well. Twenty-five of the photocopies were made using only two different photocopy machines. The twenty-sixth copy is a computer scan.

In this manner I believe I have lessened the effect due to paper size fluctuation with humidity and the effect of multiple generations of photocopying. Since starting this study I have seen and measured ten more hand stamps in the hands of dealers and collectors, bringing the total number in the study to thirty-six. Nine of these additional ten hand stamps are from the actual covers and no photocopying is involved. The tenth is a first generation photocopy.

There were obvious differences in the size and shape of the oval and lettering size. But, by overlaying what seemed to be similar hand stamps, I soon found there were other differences. These differences were in the placement of the PENN. beneath the LEBANON.

Based upon several hammer analyses that I've seen regarding the classification of the Canada RPO hand stamps that I collect, I set out to quantify the observed differences in the Lebanon ovals. The following illustrations and chart are the result of this exercise. All measurements are in millimeters.

Conclusions

Virtually all of the Lebanon ovals we've seen are split at about the 10 o'clock position. This most certainly is not the result of wear or damage. The gap is most likely due to the construction of the device, either to aid in removal or replacement of the various components or a peripheral band used to hold the whole device together.

The key elements (town, state, and month) were probably moveable within the device. There are two basic sizes of oval: 29 x 22 and 30 x 23. This is not to say that there were only two devices used between 1821 and 1841, but there were only two basic sizes. Even though there are ½ mm variations from these two sizes, I tend to discount differences this small as being the result of paper expansion or shrinkage and the pressure applied by the postal clerk. I realize that $29\text{mm} + \frac{1}{2}\text{mm} = 30\text{mm} - \frac{1}{2}\text{mm}$, but upon examination of the ovals one sees that the 29 x 22 oval has a nice regular shape and the 30 x 23 ovals have a pronounced bulge below the PENN.

There are two sizes of lettering: 2.0 mm and 2.5-3.0 mm. There are two styles of month designation: the familiar 3-letter abbreviation (AUG = August) and a shortened version of the month (AUGST = August). There are two styles of NN in PENN. : upright (NN) and slanted (NN).

Based on the accompanying chart, one could make a case for there being a dozen or more different hand stamps. I'm not willing to crawl out on that limb. If we're willing to disregard the small shifts of PENN relative to LEBANON, there are clearly three different ovals;

1. 29 x 22 mm oval in use between 4/8/21 and 12/25/23.
2. 30 x 23 mm oval, NNs upright, in use between 3/16/24 and 3/14/31.
3. 30 x 23 mm oval, slanted NNs, in use between 8/ ? /31 and 1/10/41.

If our premise is correct that the various elements were movable within the hand stamp, the above three types would be right.

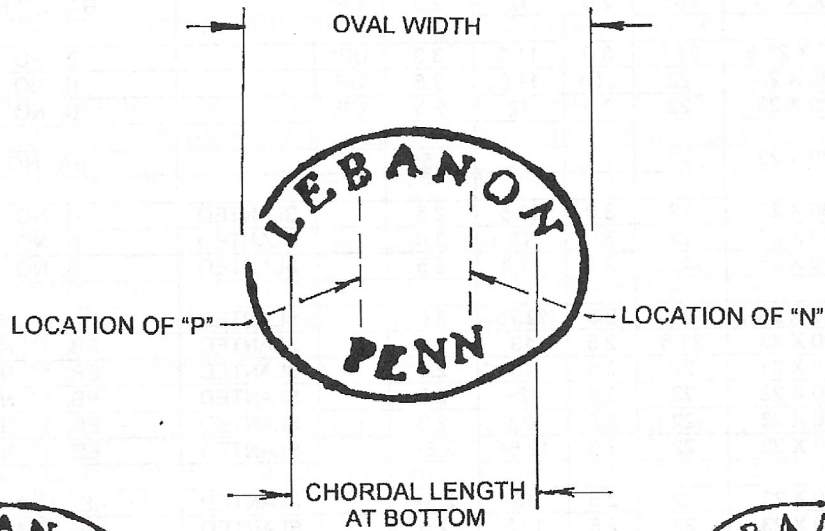
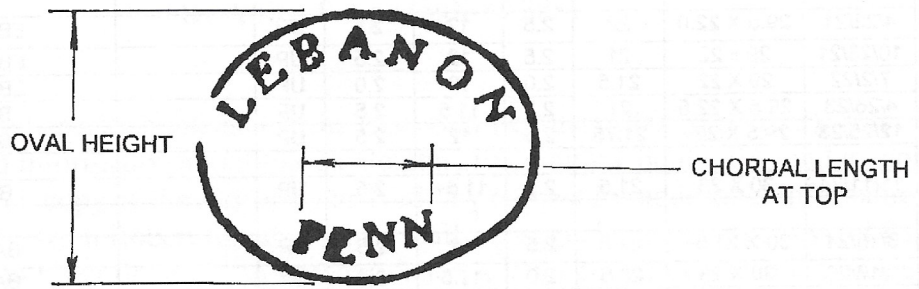
The Lebanon post office was "postmastered" by members of the Karch family for 52 years, from 1793 to 1845. This fact adds to the probability that the same basic hand stamp was in use throughout the 20-year period of the ovals. The hand stamp was probably kept at the Lebanon Post Office, passed from family-member-postmaster to family-member-postmaster, and the configuration only changed out of necessity.

Regarding the two different styles of month. The typical three-letter abbreviation is 3 mm high and was in use from 4/8/21 until 1831 when the change to the slanted NNs in PENN was made. The atypical 4, 5, or 6-letter abbreviation is 2.5 - 2.75 mm high and was in use between August 1831 and January 10, 1841 (or the end of the oval period). Having said this, I have seen four covers where the month does not fit this pattern. The subject covers have 3 mm high MARCH or MAR and all are used in the period of 3/16/24 to 3/14/31. The smaller, 2.5-mm, MARCH is always fully spelled out.

I think this must be treated as a work in progress. Hopefully, this will be the catalyst for you collectors to look at your examples of Lebanon ovals, see where they fit into the attached chart, and most importantly, REPORT THE RESULTS!

Also, based on this research, I would hope the editors of the American Stampless Cover Catalogue would give serious consideration to changing the Lebanon oval hand stamp listings to just three major types, as shown above. I also think they should change their pricing because my research clearly shows the early 29 x 22 mm oval to be at least twice as scarce as the later 30 x 23 mm hand stamp with either upright or slanted NNs.

My other hope is that you will take another look at your own material and see if there are any inconsistencies that warrant further study. Please send photocopies of your Lebanon oval hand stamps to me at P.O. Box 10082, Lancaster, PA 17605.



UPRIGHT "NN"



SLANTED "NN"