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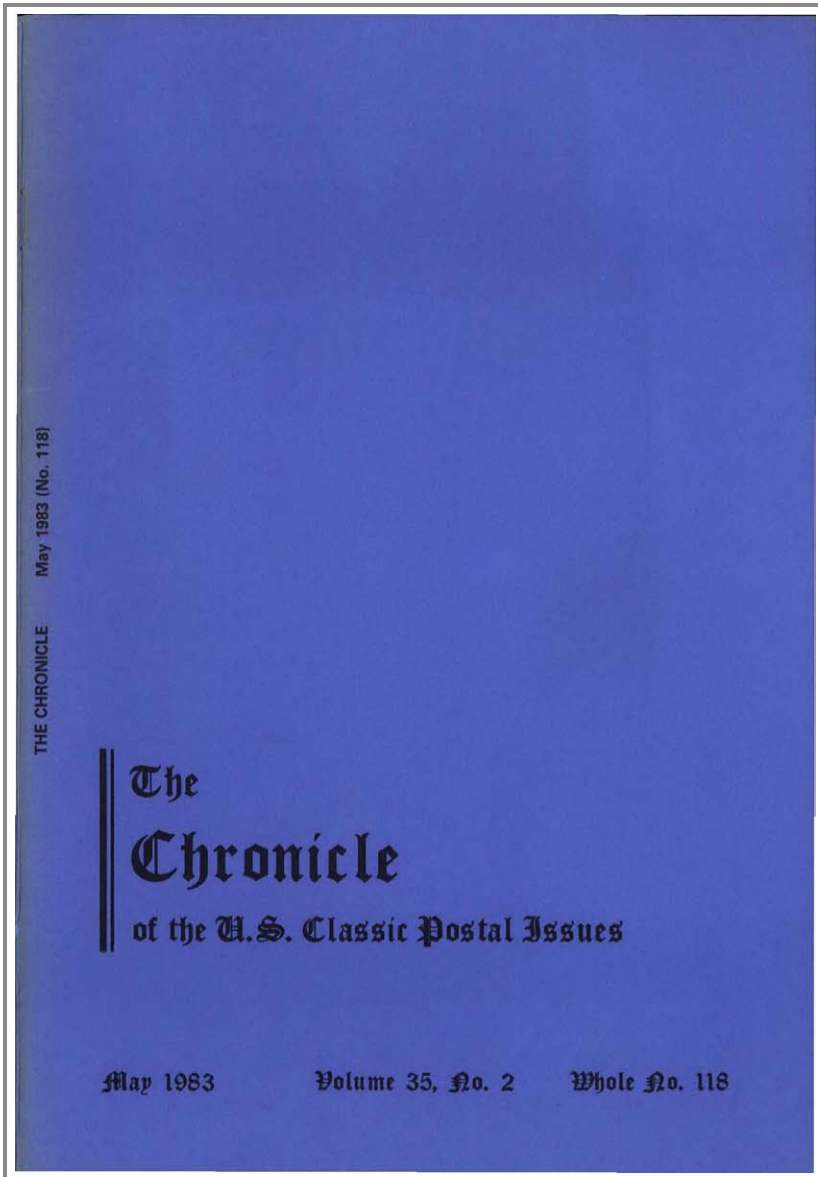


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PRESTAMP & STAMPLESS

SUSAN M. McDONALD, Assoc. Editor

CHARLES I. BALL, Assoc. Editor

FIRST STANDARDIZED POSTMARKS OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

RICHARD B. KRAKAUR and THOMAS E. STANTON

In April of 1799 Postmaster General Joseph Habersham provided postmasters in five cities with circular postmarking stamps, including Thomas Munroe at Washington City. Although the first standardized devices they were not the first contemplated by the General Post Office. In January of 1792, PMG Timothy Pickering wrote the postmaster at Newburyport, Massachusetts, to wit, "I have received your letter of the 16th ulto — with respect to stamps for the post office, they are so useful, I wish every office were furnished with them. As soon as they can be provided, a set shall be sent to you . . ." ¹ Whether the stamps were actually forwarded seems doubtful, the first handstamp recorded by the *American Stampless Cover Catalog* (p. 92) was used in 1799, as Newburyport was among the cities in the April PMG missive. Some six years later Assistant PMG Charles Burrall wrote the Richmond, Virginia, postmaster, "I sometime since ordered a stamp for your office, it is not yet finished; the engraver says that it shall be done the beginning of next week . . ." ² Again what the Assistant PMG is referring to is uncertain, since it is doubtful that the stamp is one of the Richmond straightlines of the era as these appear to be of local origin. More probably the stamp concerned was a supplemental device, as well could have been the Newburyport stamp. In any case, a precedent for the central supply of postmarking stamps had been established.



Figure 1. First standardized District of Columbia postmarks, the Washington device was issued in April of 1799, while the Alexandria and Georgetown devices were issued in June of the same year.

Shortly after the April 1799 distribution, Habersham in June issued similar devices to seven other postmasters, including those at Alexandria and Georgetown. Along with the stamps, the PMG enclosed a letter of instructions for their use. The second letter, being more informative, states the following: ³

I have this day forwarded a set of stamps for your office, which I hope will come duly to hand.

They can be used with printer's ink or common writing ink, the latter is preferable where much business is done, as printer's ink clogs the stamp sooner.

For common ink a square piece of lead, hollowed in the middle and filled with sponge to contain the ink is used, the stamp is dipped on the sponge, which prevents its taking up too much at once.

The loose letters and figures should be kept in a box and proper care taken to prevent their being lost, as they are a dear article and it is troublesome to fit new ones to the stamps.

The issuance of these postmarks represents the first formalized use, however limited, of

1. *PMG Letter Book A*, 1792, p. 367.

2. *Asst. PMG Letter Book*, 1798, p. 11.

3. Arthur H. Bond, "First United States Standardized Postmarks . . .," *Postal History Journal*, June 1962, p. 27.

circular date stamps. The most common postmark of the era was a manuscript marking as had been previously employed at Washington and Alexandria. This was also probably used at Georgetown, although no examples are known. The circular date stamps were not unknown in these years, as Charleston, S.C., utilized one during the Confederation period.⁴ Other early devices can be found by scanning the ASCC, and after the turn of the century, they prevailed.

Physical Description

Figure 1 illustrates the three postmarks issued to the District post offices. Their simplicity and similarity are obvious. Bond describes their characteristics as follows:⁵

- a) Circular frame approximately 26 mm diameter, varying less than 1mm. above or below.
- b) Town name and state at top in letters about 3.5mm tall.
- c) Periods are set high, rather than in normal positions.
- d) Terminal letters in some abbreviated names are small, set high and with dot below.
- e) Month and day are set in two lines about 3.5mm tall.
- f) Workmanship is very fine, with letters well formed and usually evenly spaced. The stamps are made of brass.

The handstamps appear most frequently in a shade of brown, but occasionally in black.

The Washington handstamp is occasionally heavily struck, so much so as to deeply emboss the folded letter. In one such case, a postmaster's appointment from Habersham, the embossing can be seen to penetrate seven thicknesses of paper.

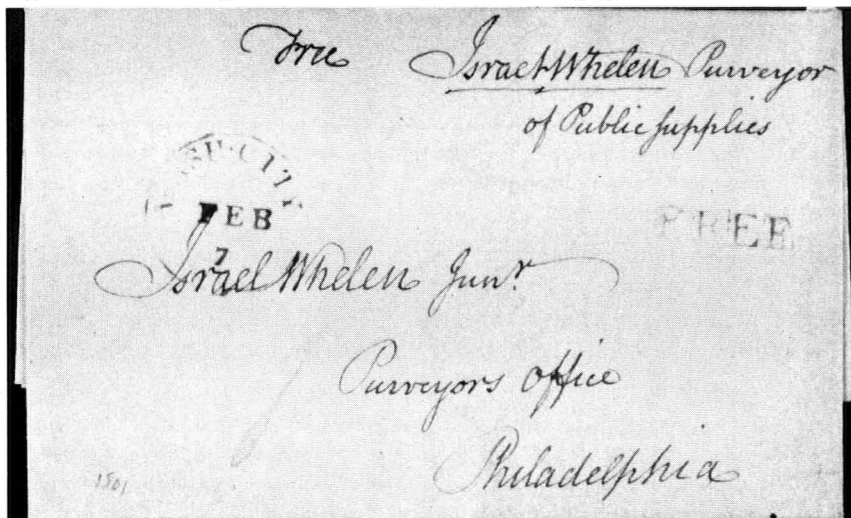


Figure 2. The Washington postmark used in 1801 showing the break at the bottom of the circle. Note the region located at "ra" of "Israel" in the address. (From the Turner Collection.)

The ASCC (p. 29) shows two listings for the Washington stamp, the second being slotted at the bottom and listed as a subtype of the primary. The slot was caused by damage to the circle, possibly the result of the heavy strikes discussed in the previous paragraph. A comparison of early and late markings, encompassing the two types, on a light table, shows a precise agreement in the location and spacing of the letters. Since the postmark was hand engraved, such an agreement seems impossible if there were in fact different handstamps. The break began to appear in late 1800 or early 1801. A December 3, 1800, folded letter⁶ depicts what is probably the beginning of the damage. A February 7, 1801, strike (see Figure

4. Alex ter Braake, *The Posted Letter in Colonial and Revolutionary America, 1628-1790*, p. N16.

5. Bond, *loc. cit.*

6. Thomas J. Alexander, "Washington, D.C., The Early Years," *Forty-seventh Congress Book*, p. 35.

2) illustrates a definite break at the bottom of the circle.

The Alexandria marking contains the abbreviation Va. for Virginia. This is technically correct, since, on the rolls of the day, it was in fact listed as a Virginia post office. Not until after the Federal Government moved to Washington in December of 1800 were any of the three locales listed as District of Columbia post offices. In fact it was not until 1815 that the District of Columbia was designated in an Alexandria postmark.

In the Georgetown postmark the abbreviation PTK represents Potomac, reflecting an early spelling with a terminal "k". This format was necessary to differentiate this office from Georgetown on the Eastern Shore, another Maryland post office.

Postal Usages

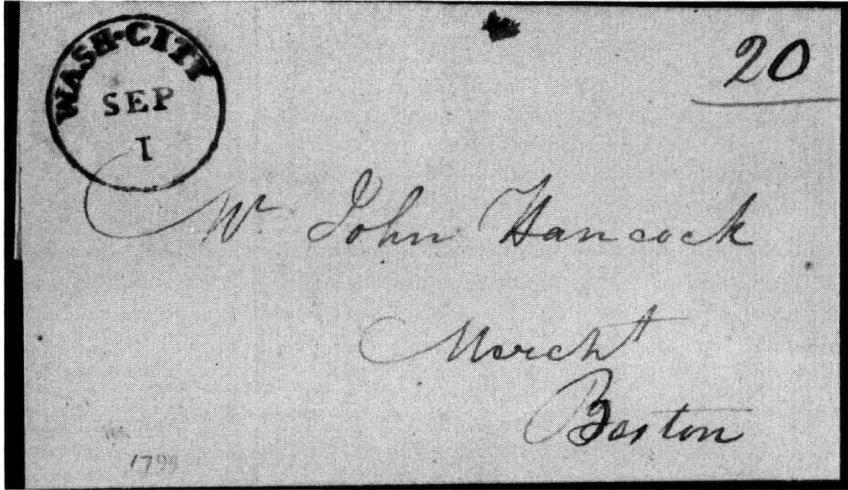


Figure 3. The earliest recorded usage of the Washington postmark, dated September 1, 1799, to Boston. The "20" represents the amount due from the recipient, being the rate for 300 to 500 miles. (From the Turner Collection.)

The earliest Washington use we have recorded is dated September 1 and docketed 1799 (see Figure 3). This was some four and one half months after its distribution. Evidence of earlier use is contained in a letter of June 20, 1799, from PMG Habersham to Thomas Munroe, the Washington deputy Postmaster, obviously an answer to a Munroe query, to quote:⁷

Agreeably to your request a supply of blanks were sent to your office a few days ago.

Be pleased to return one of the stamps for the month of June and I will have you furnished with a set for July and the figure 4 which you say you are wanting — there are no stamps for free or paid sent for your office as such letters do not occur frequently as to make it necessary to have them.

Two items of interest can be gleaned from the letter. First, that the postmark was employed shortly after if not immediately upon receipt. The authors would appreciate seeing uses earlier than recorded (or for that matter any usage). Secondly, that a free stamp was not needed, possibly not in 1799, but by the middle of the next year with the influx of Government offices the situation drastically changed. Of the 29 covers recorded all but the first one were free franked. It was over a year after the issuance of the postmark that a straightline free handstamp was provided as shown on the folded letter of September 13, 1800.⁸ (See also Figure 4.)

The last recorded use is dated December 8, 1801, just 12 days prior to the earliest recorded WASHn CITY postmark, thus the termination of usage is fairly well known. Figure

7. *PMG Letter Book I*, 1799, p. 97.

8. Edward Stern, *History of Free Franking of Mail in the United States*, p. 36.



Figure 4. A June 27, 1801, letter free franked by Abraham Bradley, the Assistant PMG. The straightline "Free" handstamp measures 22mm by 5mm. (From the Turner Collection.)

5 denotes the temporal usage distribution of the handstamp, depicted as the cumulative percentage. The curve portrays the obvious. This is the arrival of the Federal offices in mid-1800. Note the upturn of the distribution after July 1800. Fifty percent of the known strikes occur after January 1801, that is, in the last year of use of the postmark.

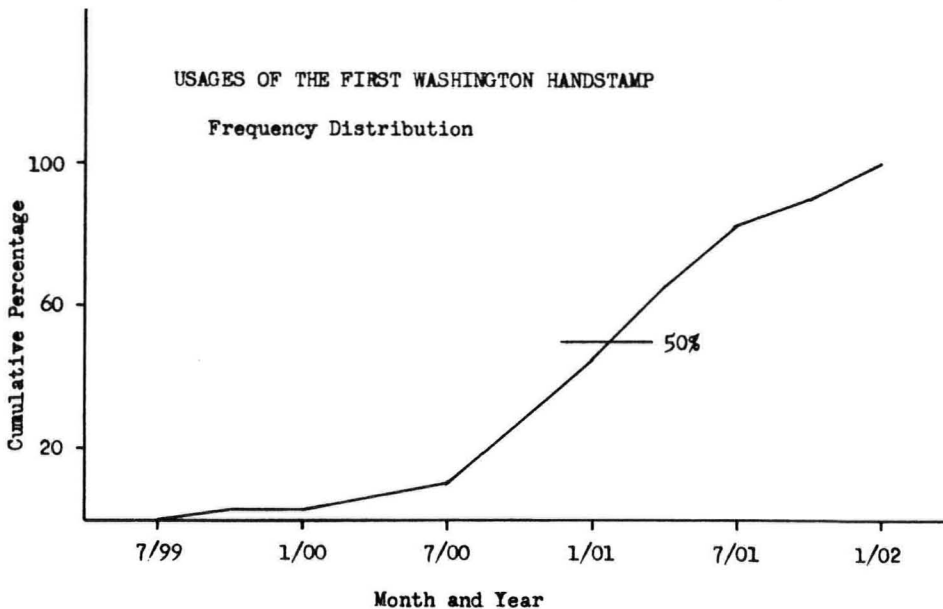


Figure 5. Temporal distribution of Washington postmarks.

To date only seven Alexandria covers have been recorded, the earliest September 23, 1799, and the latest March 3, 1804.⁹ The earliest record of the next postmark is in May 1804, leaving only a two months gap to explain. One interesting feature of this postmark is its recurrence during the 1810 to 1814 period, albeit in a different color, the early strikes being brown, while the later were in black or red.

An interesting cover is shown in Figure 6, it is the only transatlantic use of the first CDS's from the District known to the authors. Addressed to London and postmarked January 24, 1804, it is backstamped March 8th; thus it required a month and a half in transit. This was a

9. Robert Lisbeth, "Catalog of Virginia Postal Markings . . .," *Way Markings*, 1980.

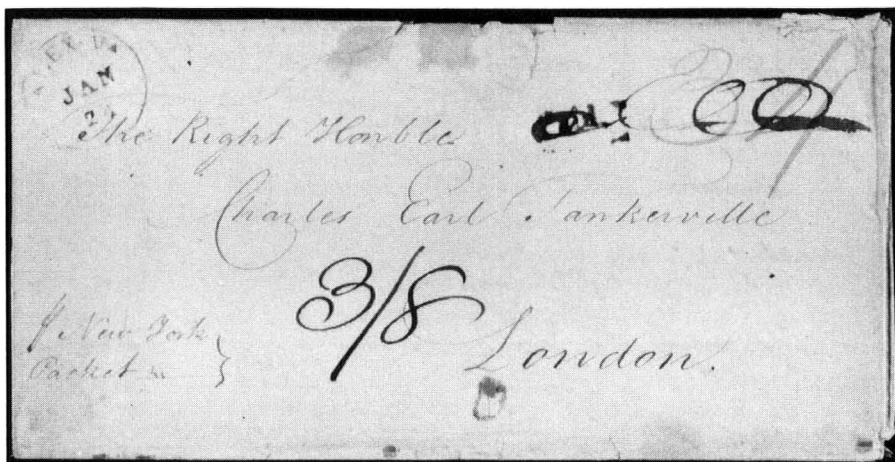


Figure 6. A January 24, 1804, letter from Alexandria to London; the "34" represents double the 17¢ rate for 150 to 300 miles. The 3/8 due was twice the packet rate of 1/10 for a single letter. (From the Turner Collection.)

double rate letter as indicated by the paid 34¢ U.S. postage to New York and the 3/8 British packet rate due. The surviving portion of the letter is a copy of an "Act for calling in and Registering Certificates of the publick Dept of this State."

The earliest Georgetown handstamp we have recorded is dated August 25, 1800, over a year after issuance, however, the *ASCC* (p.31) lists a 1799 use. The latest of the eight covers recorded is March 18, 1802. The succeeding postmark is known used almost a year later, thus leaving a sizeable unaccounted period of time.

This article is but a small segment of the study of District of Columbia postal history conducted by the Washington Philatelic Society. The assistance of others in this endeavor is greatly appreciated, particularly Thomas Taylor, Lowell Newman and Thomas Alexander. Also if any readers have access to any covers with these markings the authors would be most grateful to hear from them, as we are attempting to accumulate as complete a record as possible.

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