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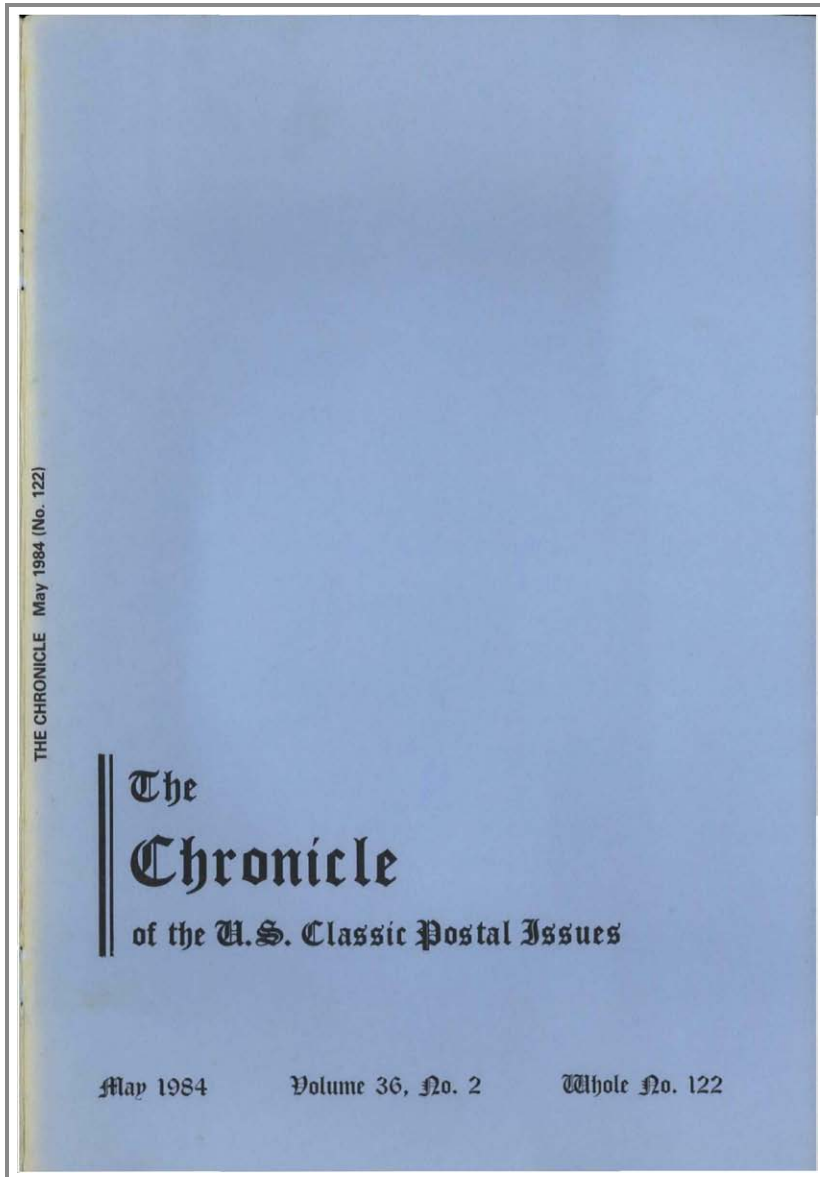


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JOHN F. SEYBOLD: THREE UNSOLVED MYSTERIES

STANLEY M. BIERMAN, M.D.

John F. Seybold may be accorded the title of The Father of Postal History, albeit his designation as the "Original Cover King"¹ may well be too narrow to characterize this distinguished philatelist who also built a major philatelic library and collected autographs and coins. At a time when a youthful Ferrary was soaking rare postage stamps from letters purchased from dealers so as to fit within the constraints of his narrow album pages, the foresighted Seybold saw the virtue of retaining stamps on original covers. Seybold was, in his philatelic career, to amass the greatest collection of world postal history then extant, complemented by a major postage stamp collection which numbered well in excess of 80,000 specimens.

John F. Seybold was born on July 22, 1858, to a substantial Wurttemberger family who resided on Lodi Street in the northern section of Syracuse, New York.² Located in a part of town inhabited by newly immigrated German families, Seybold was to reside here under the parental roof for his entire life. He began a mercantile career as a youth in a local dry goods store. While tending to desk work he was drawn to the attractive and colorful stamps on letters which were regularly mailed to other foreign-born clerks from overseas relatives in Germany, England, and Australia. He was sometimes the fortunate recipient of such covers as gifts from fellow employees. His first stamp purchase was at the age of fourteen when he traded one of his so-called cherished marbles for a 2¢ Newfoundland 1865 "fish" stamp. The "cherished marble" story of first acquisition was also accorded the youthful Seybold's purchase of a 200 reis Brazil 1866 issue. Nevertheless, portions of his meager weekly salary as a clerk were set aside for his regular stamp purchases from local dealers. As his income rose, so did his philatelic sophistication, and in 1881 he turned his attention to the acquisition of stamps on original covers, making many decidedly opportunistic purchases.

Seybold's early purchases were through American dealers such as Joseph Beifeld and E. A. Holton of Chicago, Ferdinand Trifet of Boston, and John W. Scott of New York City. It is recorded that delivery of stamp packets and approvals to the Syracuse store soon exceeded in volume the dry good store's own regular business mailing (certainly an exaggeration). Sometime in 1888 the enterprising young Seybold chose to strike out on his own, and with the financial aid of a close friend built a dry goods and general department store at 902 Butterfield Street in Syracuse. With a keen business sense honed from years as a salaried clerk, Seybold prospered in the store and his financial success became assured. His newly found affluence afforded the young merchant wider latitude in his philatelic purchases, and he soon became enchanted with both multiples and rarities on covers. With passions sufficiently whetted for this essentially overlooked segment of the hobby, correspondence was sent to dealers around the world, and soon examples of postal history came from sources such as Stanley Gibbons of London, Paul Kohl and Ernest Stock of Germany, Edward Sigerest Moser of Switzerland, and approval sheets from Thomas Ridpath of Liverpool. The latter had just received some notoriety through his sale of the one cent black on magenta issue of British Guiana to Philippe von Ferrary.³

1. Anon., "Well Known Philatelist #69. John F. Seybold." *Phil. J. Great Britain* XV (#178) pp. 161-162 (Oct 25) 1905.

2. Anon., "Death of Mr. John F. Seybold: A Famous American Collector of Original Covers." *The Postage Stamp* IV:283-284, 1909.

3. Anon., "Notable Philatelist: John F. Seybold." *Philatelic Record* 26:100-102, 1904.



Seybold in his stamp room.

Seybold maintained a special interest in U.S. issues and was justifiably proud to announce in the philatelic press his purchase of a beautiful Brattleboro on cover in 1903 from the Burger Brothers of Nassau Street.⁴ Seybold was much taken by this treasure which he considered his finest piece, and if Herman Herst, Jr.'s stories regarding the Burgers' steely philatelic enterprises are accepted, a handsome sum must surely have been paid. From Henry Gremmel of Nassau Street came a marvelous Confederate rarity consisting of five examples of the 2¢ Mobile, Alabama, issue on cover which was later to appear in the Alfred Caspary collection. From C. R. Bogart of San Francisco came Hawaiian numerals on ragged bits of envelopes, sent in scores and all priced at a few shillings [sic] each. The plain and clumsily designed items were of little appeal to him and were returned. Constraints on space prohibit a detailing of the many Seybold rarities which were serially pictured between 1902 and 1905 by Abraham Atlas Leve, editor of the *New Perforator*, a monthly Syracuse-based philatelic periodical. Amongst his most remarkable pieces were a 12 pence Canadian 1851 issue on full cover, a pair of Basel Doves on piece as well as great rarities from Switzerland, German States, Hawaii, Ceylon, and British North America.⁵

Seybold was requested on several occasions to exhibit his collection, traveling once to Germany, but generally declined such invitations except once lecturing to the Brooklyn Institute of Art and Sciences.⁶ On another occasion he showed his CSA and Provisionals which were said to be second to none. Seybold had scarcely developed a full fledged collection before taking to subscribing to the numerous, sometimes evanescent philatelic periodicals of the day. The many journals were carefully preserved and runs bound in matching buckram binding numbered in excess of 500 volumes in 1897 alone. Photographs⁷ of Seybold in his stamp den reveal a portrait of enormous interest: it is a turn-of-the-century

4. Leve, A., "The Seybold Collection of Original Covers," *The Perforator* XXII:25, 1903.

5. Anon., "John F. Seybold," *The Philatelic Advertiser* I:41-42, 1905.

6. Carberry, J., "Seybold Exhibit at Brooklyn Institute," *Weekly Philatelic Era* 18 (#551) p. 86 (Dec. 5) 1903.

7. Anon., "John F. Seybold in His Stamp Den," *The Perforator* XXII:109, 1905.

study decorated in a heavy rococo style. The middle-aged philatelist with close cropped Germanic haircut and walrus mustache is seen seated, straight-backed at his desk with neat piles of books and stamp albums. Pages from his collection are propped upon stands before him revealing Cape of Good Hope issues and other examples on envelope. The library shelves are crowded with hundreds of neatly bound periodicals. Prominently displayed on the mantelpiece are numerous photographs believed to be of Seybold's parents and one snapshot apparently of a youthful Seybold dressed in Lord Fauntleroy short pants.



John F. Seybold

A series of curious events transpired in the life of John F. Seybold at the height of his economic prosperity, social, and philatelic prominence. As harbingers of tragic events to follow, the historical significance of these incidents cannot be fully understood when viewed retrospectively, although they hint at a dark mystery. Nevertheless, in January 1909 *The Collectors' Journal*,⁸ a Chicago based philatelic periodical carried a detailed and glowing account of "The Seybold Collection of Original Covers." Written by John B. Howe, a reporter for the *Syracuse Herald*, it was to appear in three succeeding issues of the periodical. Howe may be cited as Seybold's biographer, but was more a personal confidant, whose writings are at once effusive beyond the simple description of Seybold rarities. On May 18, 1909, Seybold made one of his infrequent visits outside Syracuse for the purpose of visiting with A. W. Batchelder of the Boston Philatelic Society. Seybold expressed his admiration for the scholarly society, and used the occasion to bequeath his large and valuable philatelic library to the group.⁹ The explanation for this munificent bequest, and its precise timing is unclear, but does suggest that Seybold had fateful forebodings.

In late July 1909 an emotionally distraught John F. Seybold sought the professional advice of his personal physician, Dr. E. C. Reifenstein. The steady pressures attendant in his business, heretofore apparently well tolerated, were employed as the proximate explanation of the patient's emotional breakdown. For inexplicable reasons the businessman who was described by his biographer as being, "in the prime of life," had undergone a sudden and dramatic change in emotional temperament. The somewhat unctuous biographer states that,

8. Howe, Jno. B., "The Seybold Collection of Original Covers," *The Collectors' Journal* (Chicago) 1:10-14, 51-57, 85-90, 127-133, 1909.

9. Grabfield, G.P., "The Story of a Library," *Stamps* 83-158-160 (May 2) 1953.

"Hot weather and his steady application to business . . ." resulted in a profound change in Seybold's personality. Heretofore of cheerful disposition, Seybold was now moody and dejected, eschewing social encounters for filial entrenchment. Bouts of insomnia beset the philatelist's tortured mind, as if in his troubled sleep he was wrestling with some fearful revelation. When Howe urged his friend to subordinate his business interests, and the two to relax for a several weeks' trip to the Adirondacks, Seybold demurred claiming that he became homesick while away from his residence. He did promise to pursue social outings, and bid his friend goodbye.

On the evening of August 12, 1909, Seybold remained late after work. He retired to a room in the back of the store in contemplation of a fateful deed. With great orderliness and precision which so characterized his life, the room was set for the consummate drama about to be enacted. John F. Seybold fatally shot himself with a single bullet which plowed into his right temple. He was found the next morning, August 13, by his chief clerk, Flora Bauer, sprawled on the floor of his prosperous Chestnut Street emporium. There was no suicide note. Seybold was fifty-one years of age.^{10,11}

To the local news media of the day there was no ready explanation why a prosperous businessman of civility and charm should perpetrate this mad act of self destruction. The mystery of John F. Seybold's tragic suicide can only be addressed from the less than perfect vantage of psychobiography. Psychobiography is a writer's technique which employs psychiatric interpretation of motives based on circumstances and events which are coupled with a personality profile of the individual. While admittedly defective it can be helpful in constructing explanations of otherwise obscure behavior.

There are clues that John F. Seybold was a latent or overt homosexual, and this fact may bear on his fateful act of August 13, 1909. Seybold was a lifelong bachelor engaged in a business in which a wife would have been a decided asset in promoting his career. While obviously sufficiently wealthy to maintain his own household, Seybold chose instead to live under the parental roof. One may infer that his Wurttenberger father, described only as "sturdy and substantial," had a dominant role in Seybold's life, and that Teutonic regimentation which so characterized his own stamp room produced certain rigidity in his developing personality. This relationship of parental dominance is not altogether uncommon in the psychosexual development of gay males.

Seybold was quoted as saying that he was "wedded" to his stamps, and on another occasion noted his preoccupation with philately by commenting that, "[I] felt none of the other temptations to self-indulgence that commonly assail [other] young men." Among the many descriptions of Seybold's personality are to be found adjectives as, "affable," "genial," "cheerful," "accommodating," "shrewd," "modest," "democratic," "industrious," and "habitually courteous." While these personality traits are likewise to be found in a heterosexual population, Seybold's decidedly effeminate posturing in his photograph, his many affectations, his bachelor status and Howe's effusive writings on his friend are suggestive of a homosexual inclination. Given the strong social taboos against this practice which existed in the post Victorian era, Seybold's sudden emotional decline from a cheerful, theater-going bon vivant to a morose, deeply depressed patient seeking medical attention for his sudden bouts of melancholia and insomnia may best be explained. It will, nevertheless, remain a clouded mystery.

With Seybold's untimely and tragic death, dealers from around the world sent inquiries to his Syracuse address to learn of the disposition of his great philatelic treasures. Judge W. G. Cady and Edward Beard of Philadelphia were appointed by the courts as appraisers of the collection which philatelic periodicals of the day estimated as worth between \$50,000 and

10. Anon., "Death of Mr. J.F. Seybold," *London Philatelist* XVIII (#213) p. 218, 1909.

11. Anon., "Death of John F. Seybold," *The Collectors' Journal* (Chicago) I:200-201, 1909.

\$100,000.¹² While the appraisal was in progress, John T. Coit, a prominent New York City banker from Bennington Center, Vermont, wrote to John B. Howe inquiring as to the disposition of the collection. Howe claimed power of attorney for Jacob Seybold, the grieving father of the deceased philatelist. The father was the administrator and sole legatee of his son who died intestate. Both Coit and J. C. Morgenthau, the New York philatelic dealer, arranged to view the collection in Syracuse. After a day's examination and negotiation between the parties, the apparent whole of the Seybold collection of original covers and stamps was sold for \$26,000 in a cash transaction.¹³

In a series of three auctions from March to April 1910 J.C. Morgenthau sold off the legendary Seybold collection; the auction catalogue emphatically states that not a single item had been sold privately. This statement seems most unlikely given the fact that several items described by Howe in January 1909¹⁴ did not appear at auction. For example, in the 1869 series Seybold was known to have a strip of six 10¢ on cover along with two astounding 30¢ covers containing twelve and nine examples, and a block of four 24¢ 1869s on original cover. Likewise used blocks of four of the \$2, \$3 and \$5 Columbians off cover are not to be found though described by Howe as being present.

The first sale of John F. Seybold's U.S. stamps on covers and off, along with his Confederate States, realized \$7,662.55, while at the second session of Hawaii and British North America highlighted by his Canada 1851 12 pence black on cover which realized \$515, saw a cumulative total of \$8,544.20 for the session. My auction records in which are to be found J.C. Morgenthau's pencilled prices realized are housed in a series of 12 bound volumes. They carry Seybold's own bookplates with the insignia of the Boston Philatelic Society and are dated March 4, 1918, some nine years after Seybold's death. Following the first sale which saw a total of \$16,206.75, the second Seybold sale of European stamps on original covers was held on March 29, 1910, and sold for a cumulative \$9,084.70, while the third auction of British Colonials held on April 14, 1910, grossed \$6,962.50. The cumulative total for the three sales was \$32,254.15. Taking into consideration Morgenthau's auction costs, banker Coit came close to breaking even on the deal.

Aside from the two mysteries relating to Seybold's unexplained suicide and the absent 1869 covers, there is a third more palpable mystery. It is unclear as to the fate of many lots described in the accompanying table. Where, for example, is lot 28 consisting of a 5¢ red brown block of six and a pair on envelope. This remarkable cover which is endorsed "Sept 29th, 1850, Island of Tobago," and is addressed to Newark, N.J., sold for a pittance at \$22.50. Is it possible that the buyer felt he could do better by soaking off the block of six 5¢ 1847 issues? And where, for example, are the other unique covers described as "unknown" in the table? But, then, there are many other imponderables in our marvelous hobby. Nevertheless . . .

SEYBOLD DISPERSAL AT MARCH 15, 1910, MORGENTHAU SALE

Lot	Description	Price Realized	Subsequent Sale, Lot #, House and P.R.
1.	Brattleboro 1846 5¢ buff. No. 2 in plate. Dated July 10, cancelled in red to Norwich, Conn.	\$700	Unknown.
10.	N.Y. PMP 1845 5¢ black, 2 hor. pairs on letter postmarked Jan 27 (1847) to Mobile.	\$36	Caspary #1, lot 75, Harmer, 1955 @ \$1,000.

12. Anon., "The Seybold Collection Sold. A Cash Deal for \$26,000," *The Postage Stamp* V:182, 1910.

13. Anon., "Death of Mr. John Seybold," *Philatelic Advertiser* 9:110-111, 1909.

14. Howe, *op. cit.*

11.	N.Y. PMP 1845 5¢ black hor. strip of 4 on letter postmarked Sept. 13 (1845) to Fort Wayne, Ind.	\$122	Gibson Sale, lot 5, Ward, 1944 @ \$900.
12.	N.Y. PMP 1845 5¢ black hor. strip of 4 on letter postmarked Oct 30 (1845) to Cincinnati.	\$157	Counsel Klep Sale, lot 123, Balasse, 1956, no PR available.
27.	5¢ red brown 1847 horizontal strip of 4 on envelope with STEAM SHIP.	\$10.25	Gibson Sale, lot 20, Ward, 1944 @ \$275.
41.	10¢ black 1847 hor. strip of 6 on letter postmarked "Mobile, Sept 23" to New York.	\$81	Unknown.
42.	10¢ black 1847 hor. strip of 6 on letter from Philadelphia to Paris, addressed Richard Rush	\$110	Gibson Sale, lot 34, Ward, 1944 @ \$4,000.
45.	10¢ black 1847 right vertical half postmarked in red New Haven June 7.	\$30	Brown Sale, lot 219, Harmer, Rooke, 1939, @ \$310.
51.	10¢ yellow green 1851, hor. strip of 6 on cover from New Orleans to Bremen.	\$12.25	Caspary #2, lot 507, Harmer, 1956 @ \$825.
52.	10¢ deep blue green 1851, block of 12 on cover from New Orleans to Aarau, Switzerland.	\$21	Unknown.
55.	12¢ black 1851, 15 copies including hor. strip of 5 used on cover from Cincinnati to Carlsruhe.	\$20.50	Unknown.
66.	90¢ blue 1857-60 with 24¢ and pair of 1¢ blue type I, used on cover from New York, May 11, 1861, to Palmas, Canary Islands.	\$28	Gore Collection, lot 364, Harmer, 1961 @ \$5,400.
67.	90¢ blue 1857-60 vert. strip of 3, 30¢ orange hor. pair, 3¢ vert. pair used on large piece.	\$35	Unknown.
81.	90¢ (72) blue 3 copies, 10¢ green 2 copies, 30¢ orange used on cover from Stockton, Cal., to Rockport, Mass.	\$5.25	Perforation Centennial Sale lot 609, John Fox, 1957 @ ?
137.	1¢ light blue Franklin Carrier, 1851 hor. strip of 4 on cover postmarked Philadelphia, to New York.	\$22	Unknown.
156.	3¢ green glazed 1842 New York, 4 copies on cover postmarked New York, Aug. 22 (1843) to Philadelphia. Cover marked PAID SINGLE.	\$51	Unknown.
194.	90¢ blue 1861, block of 25 used on piece of original cover.	\$30	Waterhouse Sale, lot 534, Harmer, 1955 @ \$696.
418.	2¢ Mobile black, five copies on cover postmarked Aug 21, 1861.	\$112	Caspary Sale #3, Lot 262, Harmer, 1956 @ \$1,400.
509.	5¢ on 13¢ (Hawaii) dark red used between US 1855 10¢ green and pair 1¢ 1851 type II at right.	\$66	Caspary Sale #10, Lot 52, Harmer, 1957 @ \$1,300.