

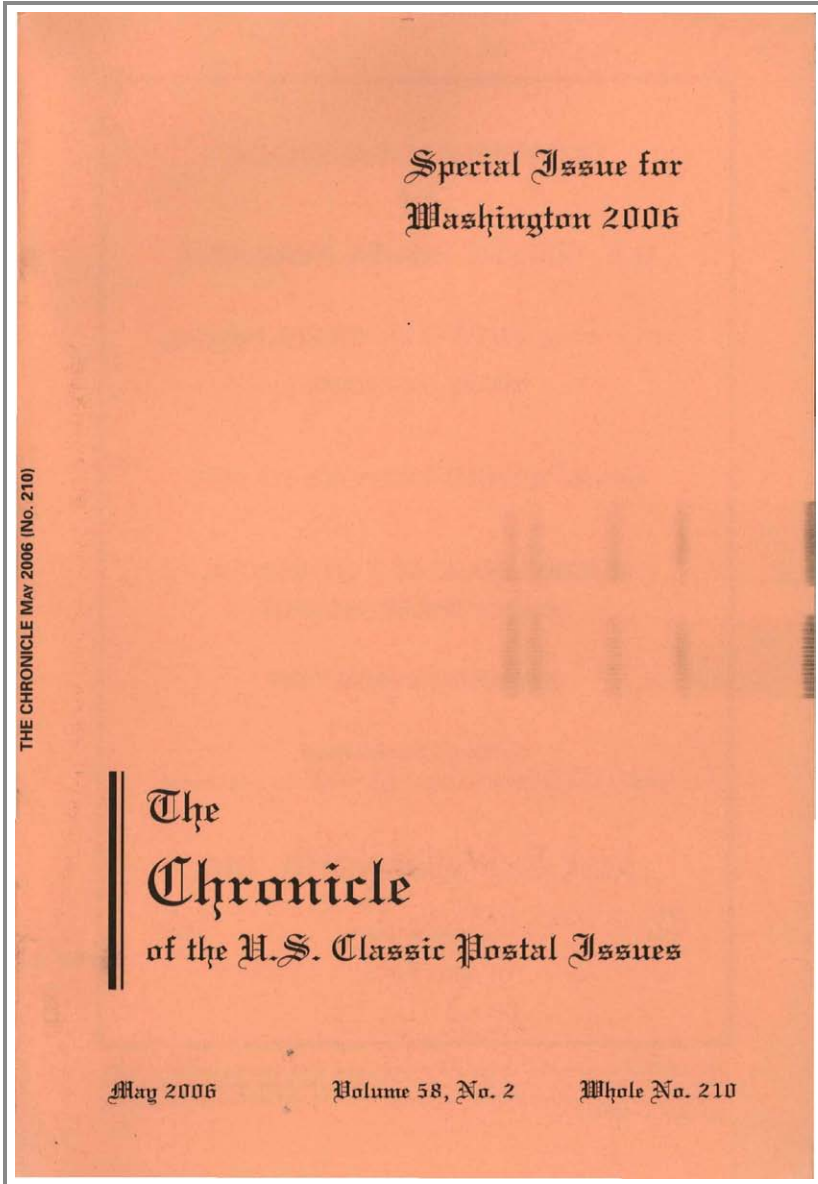


# U.S. Philatelic Classics Society

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## WILEY'S WASHINGTON CITY DESPATCH POST: A SESQUICENTENNIAL COMMEMORATION

GORDON STIMMELL

Exactly 150 years ago, in Washington, D.C., a local post arose, briefly flourished, and then ceased its operations, all in the space of a few months in 1856. To commemorate Wiley's One Cent Despatch, it seems appropriate that we review its existence on the occasion of the Washington 2006 International Stamp Exhibition unfolding in the nation's capital in May, 2006.

The author draws on articles by Elliott Perry in his *Pat Paragraphs*, and Denwood N. Kelly in the *Collectors Club Philatelist* (Volume 50, Number 4) for this brief summary of one local operation. A new major article giving a census of known usages of the stamps is being authored by Clifford Alexander and will appear soon in *The Penny Post*.

The Washington City One Cent Despatch was launched by John Wiley, who billed himself initially as "Agent" on March 25, 1856 in an ad in the *Washington Star*. The post announced its demise on November 3, 1856 in the *Evening Star*, after a run of barely more than seven months.

Who Wiley was remains a mystery to this day. He seems to appear and disappear with his post. Efforts by various scholars have gone astray on other Wileys not connected

**THE CITY DESPATCH, #1**  
**PENNY POST.**  
**D**ELIVERS LETTERS, PAPERS, CIRCULARS, Business and Invitation Cards, Meeting, Funeral, and Masonic Notices, and Messages of every kind, throughout the City, Georgetown, Navy Yard, and Island, and to the Post Office, making Five Deliveries daily:  
At 7, 9½, a. m., 1, and 3 o'clock, p. m., throughout the City, Georgetown, Navy Yard, and the Island.  
At 7, 9½, a. m., 1, 3½, and 7 p. m., to the Post Office.  
Letters to the Post Office and answers to advertisements *must in all cases be pre-paid.*  
Despatch and Government Stamps for sale at the Box Stations and the Principal Office 394 D Street, near Seventh.  
N. B.—The CITY DESPATCH will not deliver Money, Jewelry, or other articles of intrinsic value, and the Proprietors will in no case hold themselves responsible for such articles unless registered at the Principal Office, and a SPECIAL MESSENGER employed.  
A SPECIAL MESSENGER can be obtained at all hours during the day.

Figure 1. March 25, 1856, ad by John Wiley announcing formation and operations of his City Despatch Penny Post.

to the local post. But it is nice that something remains to be discovered by future scholars willing to wade into the archives. However, we can reconstruct the post by reading between the lines of the ads and get a vague glimpse into the mentality of running a 19th century local post.

The first ad (Figure 1) gives us the basics of the post. It delivered letters, papers, circulars, business and invitation cards, meeting, funeral and Masonic notices throughout Washington City, Georgetown, the Navy Yard and Island and to the Post Office, making several deliveries a day.

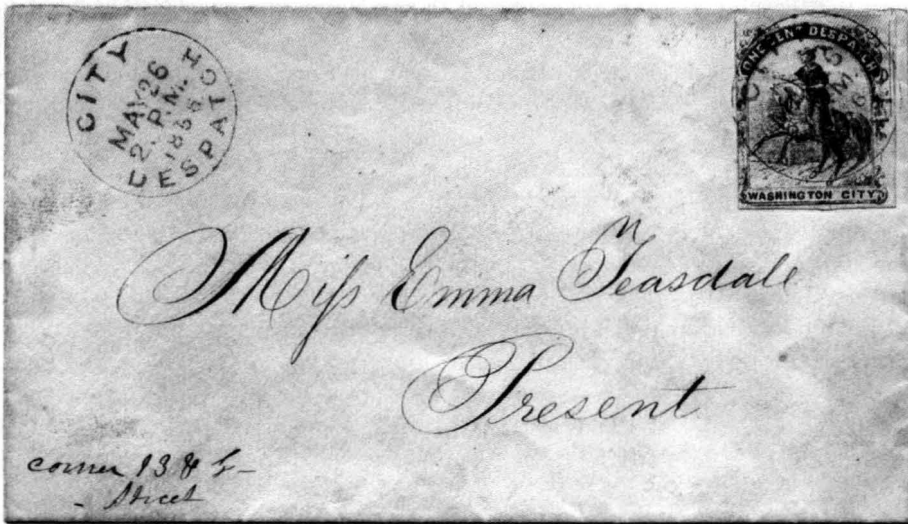
One indispensable ingredient for any local post was to provide better service than existing U.S. postal operations. With four local collections and deliveries, and five deliveries of outgoing

mail to the Post Office each day, a small army of Wiley messengers had to be hired to run the post efficiently.

The first ad was careful to note: "Letters to the Post Office and answers to advertisements must in all cases be pre-paid." Three days later, another ad emphasized: "City Despatch Post. Notice – in consequence of interfering with the Post Office Regulations between this city and Georgetown, all letters must be enclosed in United States stamped envelopes. Stamps placed on envelopes will not answer."

The Post Office regulations of August 1852 allowed letters to be carried by a private carrier over a U.S. post route, but only if they were enclosed in U.S. stamped envelopes. It is interesting that Wiley, within three days of the founding of his post, was compelled to spell this out to his growing list of patrons. Postal inspectors had obviously made their concerns known quickly.

Many covers survive without the U.S. stamp on them, which are mostly local usages within Washington City, from one resident to another (Figure 2). Covers bearing the Wiley



**Figure 2. Local in-city use of Wiley purple stamp, dated May 26, 1856, with delivery instructions at lower left.**

local plus a U.S. stamp on them were "to the mails" uses for letters going to outside cities, which necessitated entering the U.S. postal system (Figure 3). The ad mentioning that Georgetown mail required a U.S. stamp was an obvious indication the feds were getting fidgety, drawing a line in the sand between strictly local use and carriage to nearby Georgetown, then a separate city.

Running a private post in a city full of bureaucrats and their bigwig political bosses was a challenge. The first ad also was careful to set out distinctions: "The City Despatch will not deliver money, Jewelry, or other articles of intrinsic value and the Proprietors will in no case hold themselves responsible for such articles unless registered at the Principal Office, and a Special Messenger employed."

Such a "Special Messenger can be obtained at all hours during the day," Wiley said in the ad. I do not know whether any covers showing such special service survive. Blood's Despatch in Philadelphia also had such messengers, and multiple stamps were required by that post for such special deliveries.

Wiley's stamps were issued at the same time as the launch of the post and sold along with the necessary regular U.S. postage stamps. The first ad notes: "Despatch and Govern-

ment Stamps for sale at the Box Stations and the Principal Office, 39½ D. Street, near Seventh.” The earliest use recorded by Elliott Perry was March 26, and the latest, October 27. However, census research by Clifford Alexander may change that venerable opinion.



**Figure 3. Early to-the-mails use of Wiley purple stamp with a 3¢ imperforate 1851 on a cover that entered the government mails on April 17, 1856.**

It is obvious from ad placements that Wiley was following in the footsteps of such operations as the contemporary Blood’s Penny Post in Philadelphia. Multiple cute snippet messages in the press kept the post in the public consciousness. The content is similar to little advertising labels Blood issued in Philadelphia in the late 1840s and early 1850s. On March 28 alone, four ads ran: “A friend in need is a friend indeed, and so is the City Despatch. Boxes stationed in all the principal places in the city. A word to the wise is sufficient.”

“Time is money. Therefore save as much as possible by depositing your Messages in the City Despatch, the Public Messenger.”

“Do you wish your letters delivered promptly, speedily, and with care? If so, send them by the City Despatch. Remember: Five deliveries daily.”

“Send your letters by the City Despatch, and save Time, Trouble and Shoe Leather.”

John Wiley’s network of boxes and stations rapidly fanned out across the city. By April (Figure 4) over 200 City Despatch boxes had been placed in drug stores, groceries, restaurants, hotels, boarding houses, bookstores, dressing saloons, newspaper offices, and even at the Smithsonian Institute. Convenience was the name of the game, along with market saturation.

But running a local post was not without its frustrations. An ad placed on June 18 showed a hint of the difficulties encountered: “In consequence of the number of misdirected letters, and letters bearing no directions whatever, received at our office, we take this method of informing our patrons that they would greatly oblige the Proprietors of the Despatch, and the parties to whom directed, by being more explicit in their directions, and thereby insuring prompt and efficient deliveries.” Lists of letters remaining in the Despatch, with the names of addressees, ran on at least one occasion, on May 10, under the titles “Ladies List” and “Gentlemens List.” These ads listing unpicked up letters were placed below U.S. post office ads bearing similar lists of letters left at regular post offices.

**PERSONS DESIROUS OF SENDING**  
**Letters per CITY DESPATCH will find**  
**Boxes stationed as follows:**

**FIRST WARD.**—J. B. Moore's Drug Store and  
 Boulanger's Restaurant

**SECOND WARD.**—R. L. Teasdale's Drug Store,  
 James Shekell's Grocery Store, Liberty Hall Res-  
 taurant, Willards' Hotel, Kidwell & Laurence's  
 Drug Store, Flint's Hotel, Lovejoy's Drug Store,  
 H. Kuhl's Restaurant, Dyson's Drug Store, Kirk-  
 wood House, Elliot's Drug Store, and Ford &  
 Bro's Drug Store.

**THIRD WARD.**—Tyron's Drug Store, Dyson &  
 Co.'s Drug Store, J. H. Stone's Drug Store, V  
 Harbaugh's Drug Store, Dexter's Hotel, and Nairn  
 & Palmer's Drug Store.

**FOURTH WARD.**—McIntire's Drug Store, Ad-  
 amson's Bookstore, Union Hall Restaurant, Jos.  
 Heald's Dressing Saloon, Browns' Hotel, H.  
 Mueller's Drug Store, William H. Gilman's Drug  
 Store, C. Stott's Drug Store, Shillington's Book-  
 store, Globe Office, Schwartz & Son's Drug  
 Store, United States Hotel, Washington House,  
 and Martin King's Drug Store.

**FIFTH WARD, Capitol Hill.**—Waverly House,  
 Pavilion House, and McPherson's Drug Store.

**SIXTH WARD, Navy Yard.**—Hilborn's Book-  
 store, Walsh's Drug Store, Bates' Drug Store,  
 Omnibus Hotel, and Guinand's Grocery Store.

**SEVENTH WARD, Island.**—Smithsonian Insti-  
 tute, D. S. Clarke's Drug Store, Steamboat Ho-  
 tel, O. Boswell's Drug Store, P. M. Pearson's  
 Grocery Store, C. Hill's Drug Store, Thornton's  
 Grocery Store, and Sullivan's Grocery Store.

And at the **PRINCIPAL OFFICE, 304 D St.,**  
 near 7th. Open from 7 a. m. until 6 p. m.

sp 8- # 7

Figure 4. April 2 ad in the *Washington Star* detailing the locations of Wiley boxes across the city.

The use of a public monument was also employed on Joseph Grafflin's One Cent Despatch in Baltimore in 1856, showing the Battle Monument in Monument Square. However, where Wiley's plumed postal rider came from remains a mystery. No doubt it was derived from a printed illustration that caught the fancy of Wiley or his printer.

The stamps were issued in a purple color, with Washington City engraved in a bottom tablet below the equestrian and postal rider tableau. Two main types of stamp exist, having been created from transfers of a dual die, with the horseman's hand pointing the envelope

The stamp itself (Scott 112L1) has sparked much philatelic debate. The design features a quite feminine appearing postman holding out a letter, while riding a stallion rearing up on its hind legs. The whole impression is quite romantic, much like images in such contemporary publications as *Godey's Ladies Book*. Without invoking a Brokeback Mountain analogy, it is the plumed hat that gives the biggest impression of femininity. However, the postal rider has one leg on each side of the saddle. The rider could not represent a woman, because sidesaddle was the rage of the day.

Cliff Alexander alludes to a statue of Andrew Jackson which was installed a few blocks away from Wiley's Despatch, in Lafayette Square near the White House, in 1853, also with a horse rearing on its hind legs. Ignoring the urban myth that the number of legs up signifies the rider's exploits or the circumstances of his death, it would have been more propitious for Wiley to have chosen a horse with four legs on the ground. Perhaps then his post might have survived longer.

toward either the "N" or the "O" of "One". Other minor design differences between the two types exist as well.

An ad in the *Washington Star* on Nov. 3 signaled doom for Wiley's post after seven months of struggling with plummeting patronage (Figure 5). "Special Notice—The proprietor begs leave to inform the citizens of Washington that not being patronised sufficient to guarantee the continua-

**CITY DISPATCH.—SPECIAL NO-**  
**TICE.**—The proprietor begs leave to  
 inform the citizens of Washington that not being  
 patronised sufficient to guarantee the continuation  
 of the above, he has been compelled to close, and  
 returns his sincere thanks for their patronage.

Persons having purchased Stamps at the Box  
 Stations will please return the same and have  
 their money refunded, as on and after the 8th of  
 November there will be no redemption.

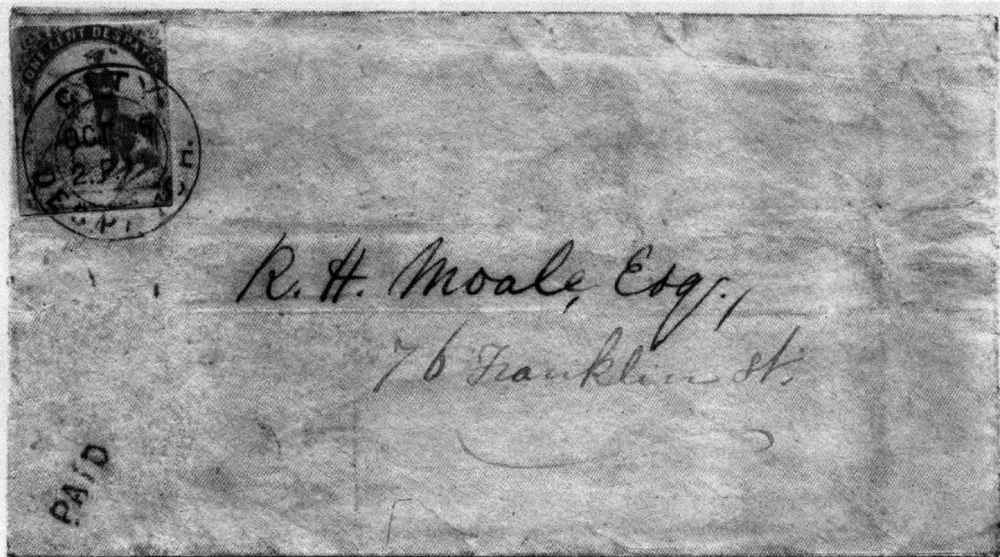
nov 3-31\* **JOHN WILEY.**

Figure 5. Nov. 3, 1856, ad announcing the termination, after 7 months, of Wiley's Washington One Cent Despatch Post.

tion of the above, he has been compelled to close, and returns his sincere thanks for their patronage. Persons having purchased Stamps at the Box Stations will please return the same and have their money refunded, as on and after the 8th of November, there will be no redemption. JOHN WILEY.”

Meanwhile, on September 28th, Wiley had already opened a branch office in nearby Baltimore “to be conducted on the same principles as the one in Washington City and Blood’s Penny Post in Philadelphia”. The postman rider stamp was reissued, in orange instead of purple for Baltimore, with “Washington City” erased from the tablet and left blank (Scott 112L2).

While both posts were still in operation, between September 28 and November 3, Wiley also created a new handstamp, double ringed instead of single (see Figure 6) minus the year date. Once the Washington office closed, he brought his single ring handstamp devices to Baltimore and reverted to the single ring year dated handstamps.



**Figure 6. Baltimore local cover showing Wiley’s Baltimore blank-tablet orange stamp with new double-ring handstamp dated Oct. 5 (1856) and PAID.**

The Baltimore operation was to last barely two months, despite Wiley ambitiously installing 400 post office boxes across that city, a fact he announced in one of his only surviving Baltimore broadsides.

Why did Wiley quit Washington? Surely his reasons go beyond declining patronage of his post, because there was virtually no competition to his services in the nation’s capital. By contrast, in Baltimore, Grafflin’s post was already in operation in November, 1856 and that city had a bustling U.S. carrier service that was far more competitive than in Washington, judging by the many surviving carrier covers.

In Washington, political strings get pulled, and things happen. Did the lobbyists get to Wiley? Was there a quiet under-the-counter payoff? Nothing has so far come to light. This mystery is part of the enigma of John Wiley. ■