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Article: A Very Early Use of the 1¢ Circular Rate and Some Observations about eBay

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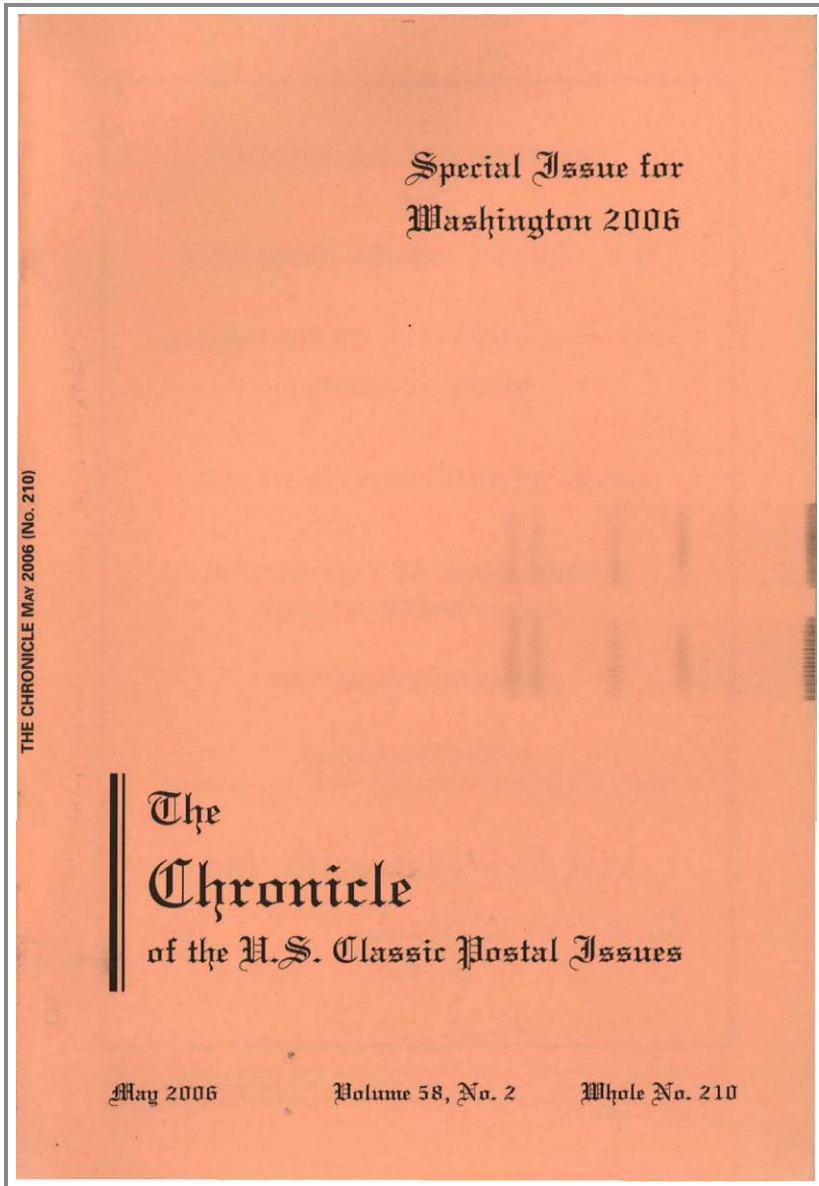


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A VERY EARLY USE OF THE 1¢ CIRCULAR RATE
AND SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT EBAY

HUBERT C. SKINNER

The Postal Act of 3 March 1851 (effective 1 July 1851) reduced the rate for pre-paid circulars, pamphlets, and other printed matter (except newspapers) from 3¢ per sheet (March 1847) to 1¢ per ounce for distances up to 500 miles. Further, this Act provided: "Postage on all printed matter shall be prepaid by stamps or otherwise or shall be charged double rates." Any handwritten notation or message other than the address would result in the piece being charged at regular letter rates. The new act meant that prepaid pamphlets could be mailed at a much lower rate.

Very few intact pamphlets have survived the years, especially mailed in 1851. The pamphlet described here is from the very early months of the reduced circular rate. This is the earliest use this writer has encountered in over 50 years of studying the 1851 issue and its postal history.

This pamphlet was acquired from a listing on the eBay auction site some months ago. It was offered by an antique shop owner in Ellsworth, Maine, and was described as a 1¢ stamp used on a pamphlet front, mended and repaired by cellophane tape. The illustration showed about half of the front of the pamphlet and the tape strips. I assumed from the description that it was a mutilated front cover or a piece of the cover. But, seeing that

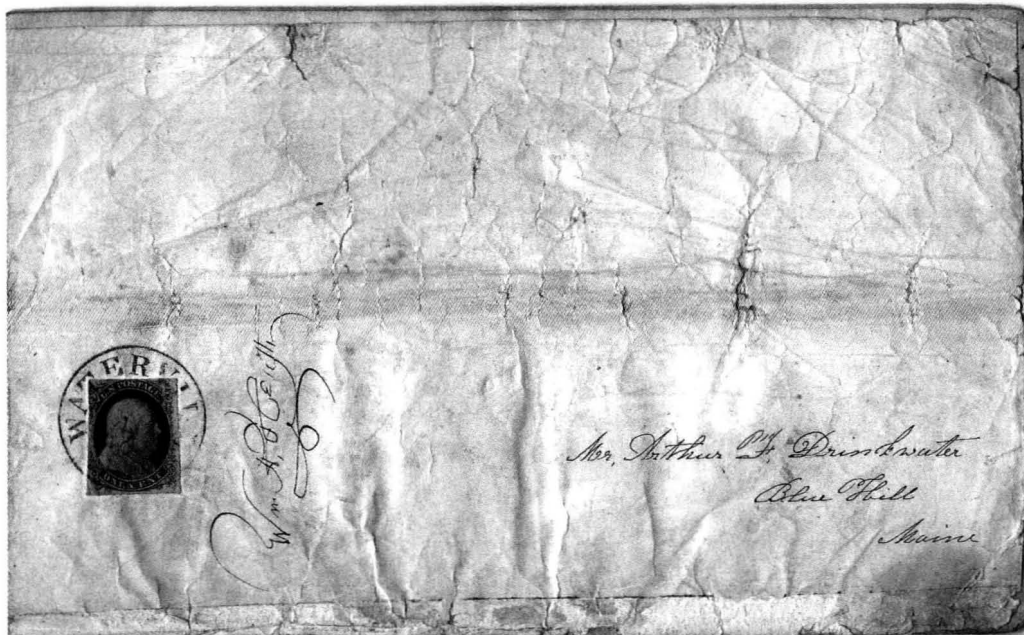


Figure 1. The address side of the pamphlet described here. This is the unprinted back cover, franked with an imperforate 1¢ 1851 Franklin stamp from Plate One Early.

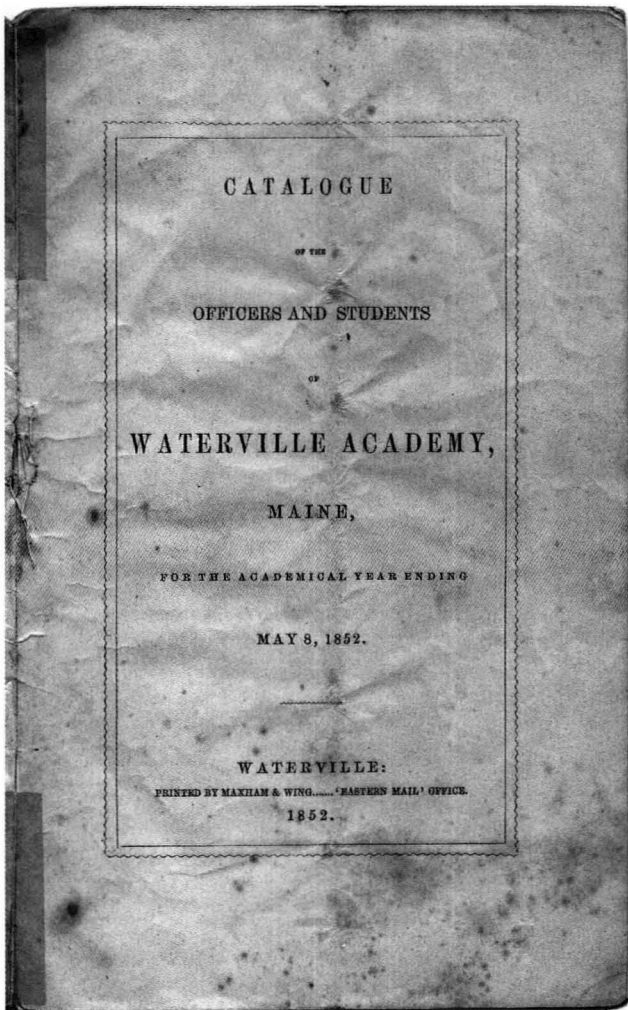


Figure 2. The title page inside the pamphlet declares that this notice is “FOR THE ACADEMICAL YEAR ENDING/MAY 8, 1852.” It bears the imprint of a local printer who operated the post office. Despite the 1852 date, to advertise for the forthcoming school year the pamphlet must have been mailed in 1851.

the stamp was attractively tied by a circular date stamp of Waterville, Maine, and the address was beautifully inscribed in a Spencerian script, I decided to bid on it as an attractive piece for my 1¢ collection. You can imagine my delight when I found that the entire pamphlet was intact and complete. I was able to remove the cellophane tape fairly successfully. Then I began to examine the pamphlet and the stamp used to prepay the postage from Waterville to Blue Hill, Maine.

First, I identified the stamp as a Type II from Plate One Early with full margins at right and bottom. The pamphlet had been folded lengthwise and secured by two tabs of red sealing wax along the left margin of the front cover. Stamp and address were actually placed on the back cover of the pamphlet, shown in Figure 1.

Then, I opened the pamphlet with great care and was electrified to note that it was seeking students “FOR THE ACADEMICAL YEAR ENDING MAY 8, 1852” (see Figure 2). Even though it was dated as printed in 1852, it must have been mailed in 1851 to accommodate students entering for an “academical year.” It was probably mailed in July or August,

1851, an extremely early use for the newly lowered printed matter rate. It weighs almost exactly one ounce, corresponding to the 1¢ rate for distances under 500 miles.

Next, I examined the circular date stamp under magnification. The month is very faintly struck, but the numeral “4” is discernible. See the blow-up in Figure 3. I suppressed the temptation to make it out as “JUL/4”, as it is quite unlikely Waterville would have had the new stamps that early. However, the first letter of the abbreviated month appears to be an “A”. The second letter is of no help as both July and August would have a “U” at center; and, the third letter is too faint to make out. My suggested interpretation of the date is “AUG/4.” This would permit the recipient of the pamphlet to decide whether to enroll his scholar in “Common Studies” at \$3 per term, “High English Department” at \$4 per term, or the “Classical Department” at \$5 per term. If the date is August 4, then this is the earliest

recorded use of the 1¢ circular rate.

This is another example of a serendipitous discovery on eBay. This writer has seen (and purchased) many new and previously unrecorded cancellations on eBay, more than I've been able to acquire lately from stamp auctions or bourse dealers. In addition to new cancels, I've purchased unusual uses of stamps on such things as playing cards, wooden boxes for shipping eyeglasses, post cards and insurance policies inside protective envelopes with a die-cut opening through which the stamp can be postmarked.

One has to ask why so many new and unrecorded items appear on eBay. I believe this is because many of the sellers are not stamp collectors, and are blindly putting material up for sale with no knowledge of its importance or value. Some vendors attempt to defraud unwary buyers, but most are honest and merely ignorant of what the item is, such as the fellow who put up a torn 2¢ Columbian for sale at a \$9.99 starting price. Note that the pamphlet described here, from an antique shop in Maine, came from a vendor who had no idea of its value or how to describe it properly.

I purchased an item from another antique shop that turned out to be a magnificent cover from Yokohama to Yarmouth, Maine. The postmark was not legible in the scan that accompanied the on-line posting. On arrival, the origin was noted and I quickly identified it as an ex-Ishikawa cover illustrated in color in Ishikawa's book, "The Forerunner Foreign Post Offices in Japan: British-U.S.-French." How could such an important cover end up in an antique shop? These rescues of important philatelic material will keep me watching eBay!

Returning to the Waterville pamphlet, I don't claim that my interpretation is necessarily valid. Readers are invited to comment and offer their ideas and expertise in this matter. Perhaps the postmark can be read by Mercer Bristow with his APS expert service equipment. Perhaps Dick Celler can identify the plate position and judge how early the impression from Plate One Early may be. Any expert assistance will be most sincerely appreciated. ■



Figure 3. Blow-up of the stamp franking the pamphlet. The date is unclear, but likely reads "AUG 4."