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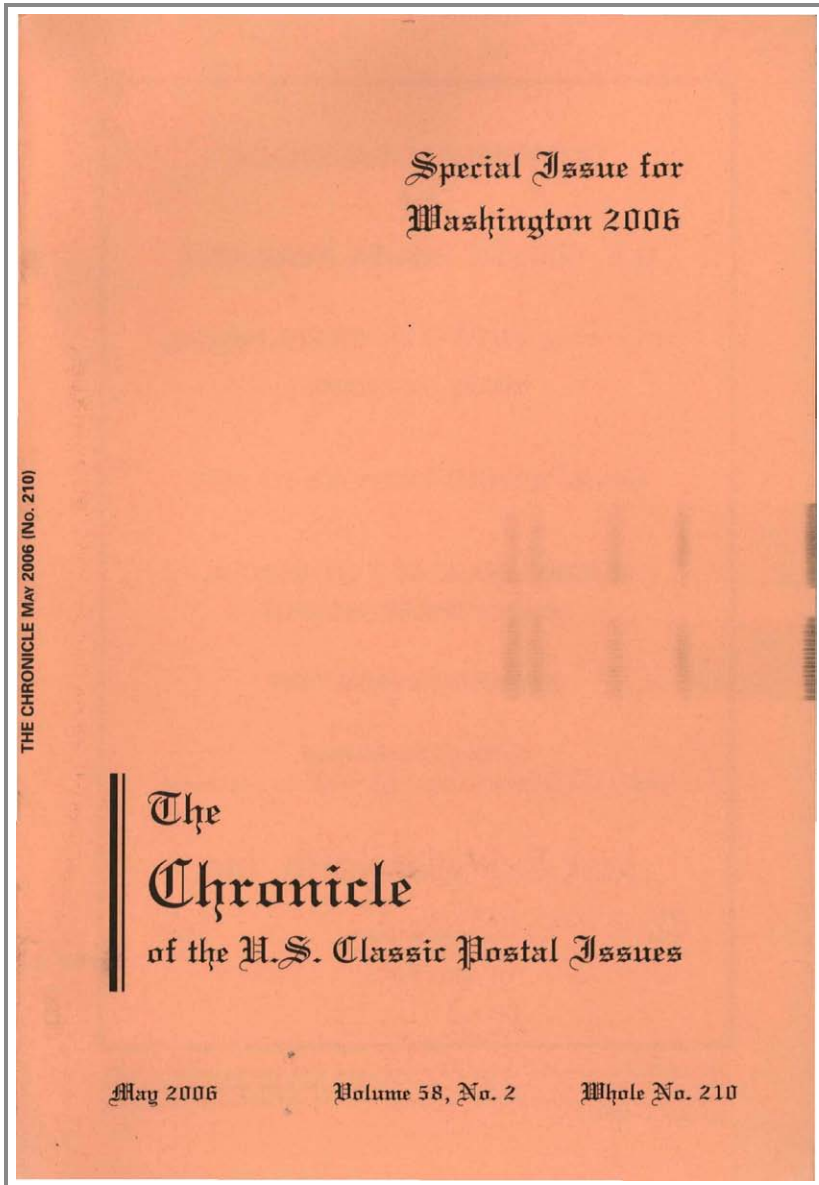


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THE EXPERIMENTAL WASHINGTON POSTMARKS OF 1862-63

RICHARD B. GRAHAM

Like many other aspects of life in the United States, our postal markings have strong roots in British practice. This particularly applies to the duplex-style handstamp used to postmark mail and cancel stamps with one stroke. Figure 1 shows an example of the British “spoon” style duplex cancel on a one shilling stamp on a cover sent from Liverpool to New Orleans in 1854. The “spoon” and other similar duplex markings were in use in Britain from about 1853. Many were used on covers addressed to the United States where they were noticed by postmasters. This is particularly true of the Liverpool postmarks, as that port was the main terminal for steamer lines between the United States and Britain.

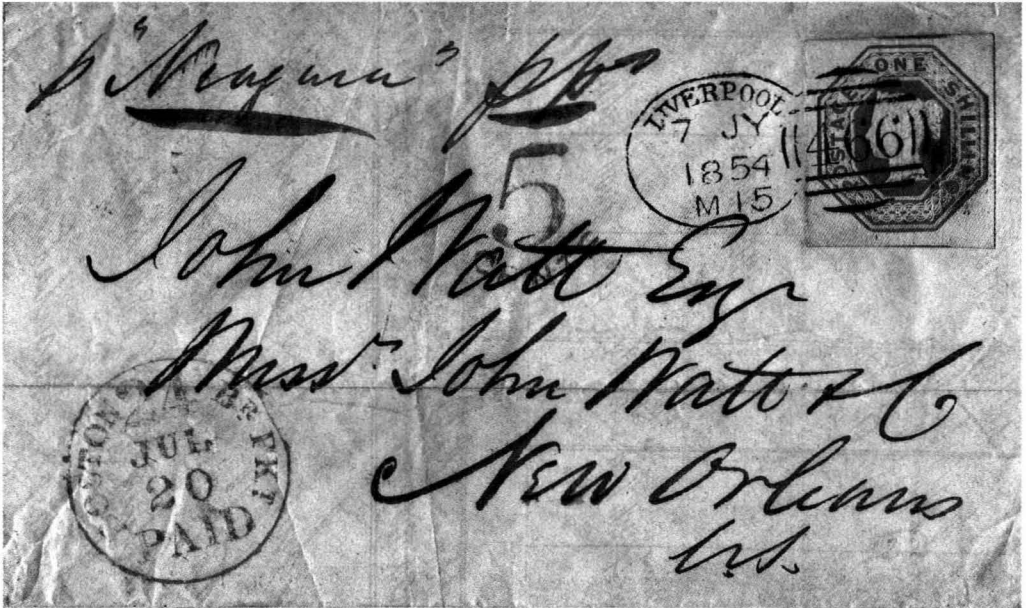


Figure 1. A cover sent to the United States in 1854, with a Liverpool “spoon” cancellation, ancestor of the duplex-style postmarks subsequently used in the U.S.

Imitation is in many respects the father of invention, as I more or less indicated in a series of articles about the development of duplex postmarks in the United States, starting in *Chronicle* 126 (May, 1985) and running into the 1990s.

Pearson Hill’s development of the mechanical stamper, such as his “parallel motion” canceling device, also took place in England in the 1850s, and thus is the ancestor of the monsters that process mail today. While one of these machines was acquired by the U.S. for testing *circa* 1861, and British-style Washington postmarks such as A in Figure 2 are recorded in the official impression/proof books in London, no cover with such a Washington postmark has ever been recorded.

What may be the first mechanical stamper marking on post-office dispatched mail in the United States was discussed in *Chronicle* 205 (February, 2005). This marking was so designated by the late Robert J. Payne, probably the best and certainly the most active researcher on U.S. machine cancels. The *Chronicle* article identified, per Payne's positive evidence, a New York duplex postmark (traced as B in Figure 2) on a cover sent January 27, 1863. The machine, which machine-cancel experts call a mechanical stamper, duplicated the stamping action of postal clerks. It was foot-treadle operated and required two men to work it, but it could not match the efficiency of postmarking "stamper" clerks. The machine was developed by one John McAdams, but as no patents for the machine have been found, no details of its design are known.

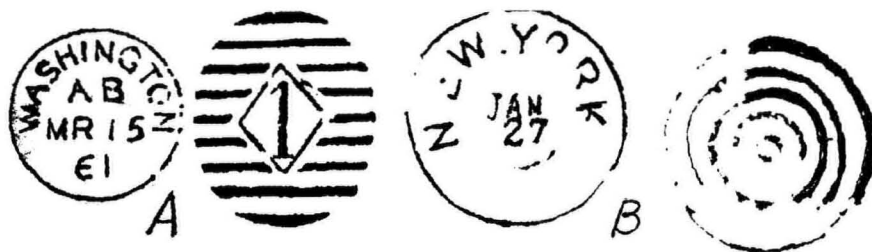


Figure 2. Tracings of duplex-style postmarks applied by mechanical stampers furnished for tests at Washington and New York.

The knowledge that the U.S. Post Office Department had acquired a Pearson Hill machine to test (presumably) at Washington excited collectors. Finding no examples of the British-style Washington postmarks on covers of the era, they began looking at other markings used at Washington during that period, with the idea that they might have been applied by the Pearson Hill machine. The excitement grew when it was recognized that the annual report of U.S. Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, dated Dec. 1, 1862, alluded to the device. Under the heading 'FRAUDULENT USE OF CANCELLED STAMPS—AN AMENDMENT' appeared the following sentence: "Various new instruments and devices for cancelling postage stamps have been examined and submitted to a trial, and two machines are now in process of construction which are designed to replace cancelling by hand at the larger offices."

Presumably, one of the machines under construction was the McAdams machine, soon tested in New York, as reported in the *U.S. Mail and Post Office Assistant* for February 1863, as quoted in the article on the McAdams test examples in *Chronicle* 205.

But what was the other machine under construction? While the Washington post office or the Department presumably still had the Pearson Hill machine, that was a finished product and not under construction. Thus, while the McAdams machine was tested at New York, presumably, two machines were possibly tested at Washington, the Pearson Hill and still another machine. In any event, tests of mechanical stampers and duplex postmarks were going on in Washington from December 1862 through March 1863.

Bob Payne and I had a project going on, to attempt to identify the markings and assign them to different machines. At the time of Bob's death, Thanksgiving weekend of 2005, he had prepared a monograph on Washington machine cancels and later machines, but the work was not ready to publish.

He and I had been considering just which Washington postmarks of the period might be test markings. While we had no real evidence other than Blair's comment and a nice fit of dates, we agreed that two unusual Washington markings of December 1862 and a March 1863 marking, all duplex postmarks, could be mechanical stamper markings.

All were in use about 10 days. All were duplexed (while few if any previous Washington markings were such). And most examples were rather clearly struck. This is not always the case with large markings such as duplex postmarks, particularly when applied by hurried clerks unused to large handstamps.

The two December 1862 examples were in use virtually simultaneously, as if they were placed in competition with one another. Figures 3 and 4 show covers with examples of the larger and more unusual of these two markings. Duplexed with a five-ring target killer, the circular datestamp measures 36 millimeters, with 6 mm high letters reading "Washington City/D.C." The postmark has an integral year date which is incomplete, reading "186_" with the last digit missing. Another oddity of the marking is that the circle of wording is slightly eccentric within the rim. The strike on the cover in Figure 3 is faint, but complete, except that the large marking, dated Dec. 5, overlaps the top of its rather small cover. Payne listed a Dec. 4 cover that I have not seen. My latest date is Dec. 11. The latest date Payne recorded is also Dec. 11, but I have a recollection of seeing a Dec. 12, 1862 use.



Figure 3. Large, 36 millimeter Washington duplex with incomplete year date, used December 5, 1862. The marking is somewhat underinked. This is possibly a first day of use.

Figure 4 shows a cover with a Dec. 8, 186? marking on a patriotic envelope. This is the most common date of perhaps two dozen recorded examples of this marking. Use in 1862 is confirmed by a few enclosures or docketing notations.

At this time, the contractor furnishing metal handstamps to the Post Office Department was Edmund Hoole of New York, who was also the manufacturer. But the marking on the covers in Figures 3 and 4 does not show characteristics of Hoole products, which at that time were small double-circle markings or larger single-circle types, such as the circular datestamps on the covers in Figures 5 and 6. None of the Hoole types previously used at Washington were duplexed with attached killers, though New York and other cities were using duplexed types, many with serified letters. This suggests the large eccentric marking was made by Chambers of Washington (later the prime contractor for steel markings) but neither Payne nor myself had explored this premise.

The covers in Figures 5 and 6 show the other possible mechanical stamper marking in use in early December 1862. This marking has a postmark of a type previously used at Washington, of which more than one near-duplicate devices existed, as such markings were



Figure 4. Use of the large balloon marking on what was probably its heaviest day of use, December 8, 1862.

usually furnished to large post offices in multiples. The duplex was probably made locally by attaching a killer section to an existing handstamp. The postmark is a 29½ mm single circle reading “Washington City” with no “D.C.” The attached cancel is a round “waffle iron” grid.

The Dec. 5 [1862] date of the cover shown in Figure 5 may be the earliest date of use, unless, as Payne suggested, the cover in Figure 6 is dated Dec. 4. My feeling is that the day date in the marking is actually Dec. 14, with spacing indicating a “1” that did not print.

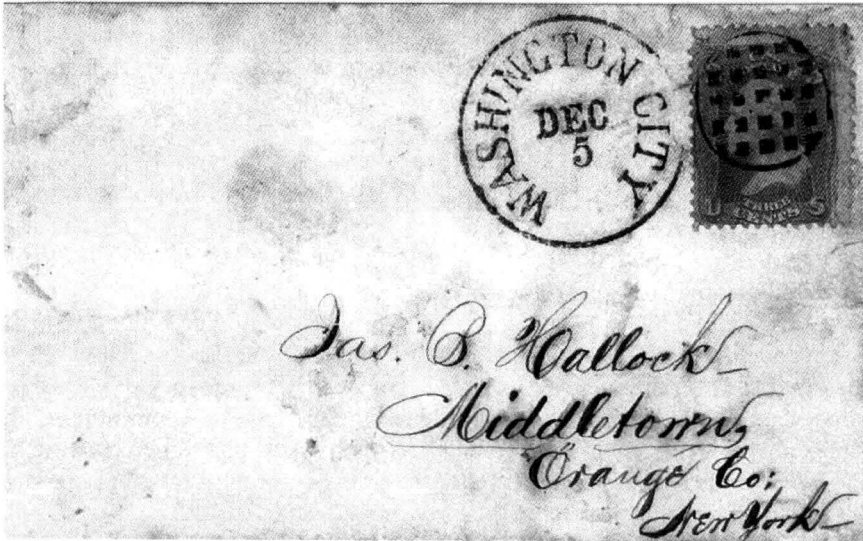


Figure 5. A December 5, 1862 use of the Washington City postmark with attached “waffle iron” grid cancel. This may be the earliest known use of this marking.



Figure 6. Use of the Washington City “waffle iron” duplex on December 4 or 14, 1862.

While the basic markings of both December types show quite well on most examples, this isn't always true of the dates. Possibly the date type slugs were not originally intended for postmark handstamps. In any case, Figure 6 is either the earliest or the latest example we had seen of this marking.

Both Payne and I had originally considered these two markings as experiments with duplex handstamps, then new to the Washington post office. However, we agreed that the base of such duplex markings, without the handle, could have easily been attached to the plunger of a mechanical stamper device by any capable mechanic. The dates of these markings, and the fact both soon disappeared after use for 10 days or less, indicates an experimental nature. And, if machine markings, they disappeared still attached to their machines.

I mentioned Edmund Hoole above, as having the contract to furnish the metal post-marking devices to the U.S. Post Office Department. This was during 1859-65, according to his statements in a letter to the Department of 11 January 1865, which was passed on to the Post Office committees of Congress. In it, Hoole stated he was also the manufacturer of the devices and had been so as a subcontractor for Wheelan & Co. during the Fillmore administration and for Gilbert C. Cornwell under the Pierce administration. He had the contract himself under the Buchanan administration and continued to manufacture the devices as a subcontractor for Fairbanks & Co., under their contract of 1863.

Hoole evidently retired in 1865 after which Chambers became the sub-contractor for Fairbanks and later (in 1867) secured the prime contract. Thus, it appears that Hoole manufactured the metal government handstamps from the 1850s until 1865.

As noted, Washington had not used duplex-style handstamps to postmark mail until the experiments of December, 1862, even though duplexes were in daily use at New York and several other large post offices at that time. Thus, the cover in Figure 7, which shows an example of a 25½ x 13½ mm double circle duplexed with a six-ring target killer, used for about five days in March, 1863, was something of an anomaly for Washington. Although the killer on the Figure 7 cover doesn't show a sixth (inner) ring, other examples do show it, faintly.

Both Payne and I considered this postmark an experimental device, even though the serified letters indicated it was possibly a Hoole product, being somewhat similar to duplex

postmarks then in use at Cleveland and Chicago, where the killer portions had probably been added locally.

This wasn't long after Hoole, who had lost the prime government contract to Fairbanks, evidently had arranged to be Fairbanks' sub-contractor. Thus he was to continue the manufacture of the government's metal handstamps. In fact, the decision had been taken to make duplexes for the government-supplied canceling devices that would be furnished to the larger post offices.

As a sub-contractor to Fairbanks, Hoole later testified to Congress that he had furnished over 500 duplex devices to the Post Office Department. The postmarks produced by most of these devices have outer circles ranging from 28-30 mm and inner circles about half that size. The attached killers were four-ring targets.

The experimental Washington cancels shown here, and others, usually appear on letters from Union soldiers in the field, mostly with the Army of the Potomac. Such mail attained huge volume during the Civil War, as Washington was the main office in the east where mail was exchanged with the Union armies, not just the Army of the Postomac but also Butler's Army of the James and some of the Union forces occupying Confederate ports on the Atlantic coast.

Washington Postmaster Sayles J. Bowen, in a letter to author Benson J. Lossing dated 22 July 1865, commented that the Washington post office sent and received an average of 250,000 military letters per day during the war. Obviously, efficient postmarking devices were needed in the hands of several "stamper" clerks. Many letters from the Armies were unpaid soldiers' letters, which could by law be sent collect at domestic rates. For a time in 1863, Washington used duplex postmarks with rate markings of 3¢ or 6¢ attached. But that's a story for another time.

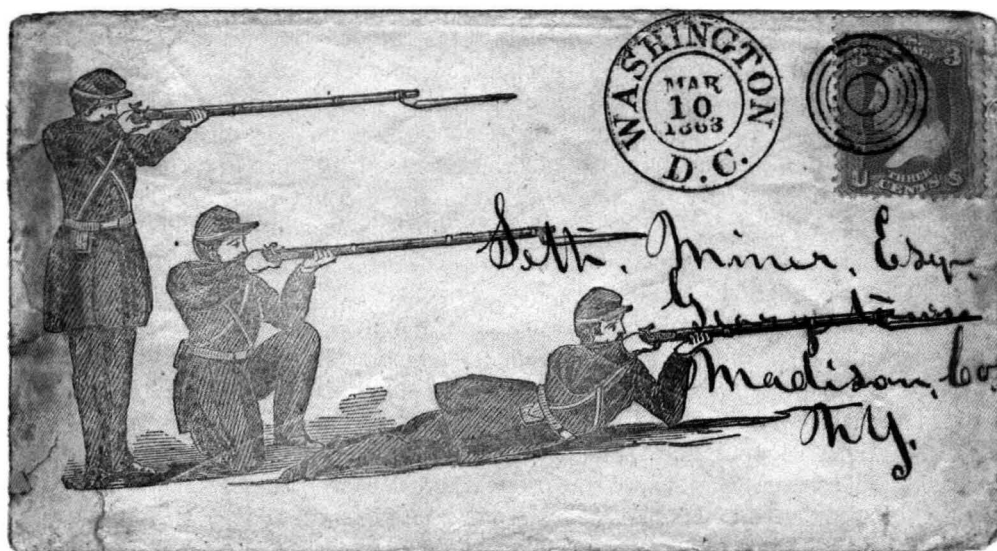


Figure 7. A Hoole-type duplex with 5-ring target killer, apparently from a test run of the postmark style that soon became the type issued to large city post offices.

The cover shown in Figure 7, with its "Hoole style" duplex postmark, is somewhat like the postmarks used at New York, Chicago, Cleveland and other cities in the early 1860s. But the Washington marking on the Figure 7 cover has only been recorded by us over a five-day period, March 7-11, 1863.

Payne and I agreed that the body of the Hoole-style handstamp could have easily been attached to the plunger of a mechanical stamping device. When the machine was removed from service, the handstamp body stayed with it.

Obviously, much of this is conjecture, based on a few facts. Better data is needed. Aside from the Pearson Hill device, which had a self-inking feature (and for which we have pictures and details of construction), little is known of whatever machines were tested per PMG Blair's pronouncement that devices were under construction in early December, 1862. We do know that the McAdams mechanical stamper was tested at New York in January 1863, and that its operation was by foot treadle with two men required to run it. A few other leads exist, and are being followed up.

In summary, the short spans of operation, the timing with Blair's comments, and the odd appearance of some of the markings of 1862, indicate tests were being conducted of experimental marking machines at Washington as well as at New York.

The possibility that some of the Washington markings were applied by a mechanical stamper was recognized not only by Payne and this writer, but by Thomas O. "Tuck" Taylor, whose large collection of Washington covers included page write-ups suggesting that mechanical stampers applied these markings. A few of the covers shown here were in Taylor's collection, which was recently sold.

Bob Payne, in the years before his death, had compiled a great deal of data on Washington machine cancels. This was an outgrowth of the many monographs and catalogs of U.S. machine cancels compiled by Payne, Reg Morris and Bart Billings, plus others. Yet Payne's work indicates that much remains to be learned about mechanical stampers of the 1860s and later, and other machines from the classic era, such as the Pittsburg devices of the 1870s.

The best tribute that could be made to Payne would be to carry on his projects. ■

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