

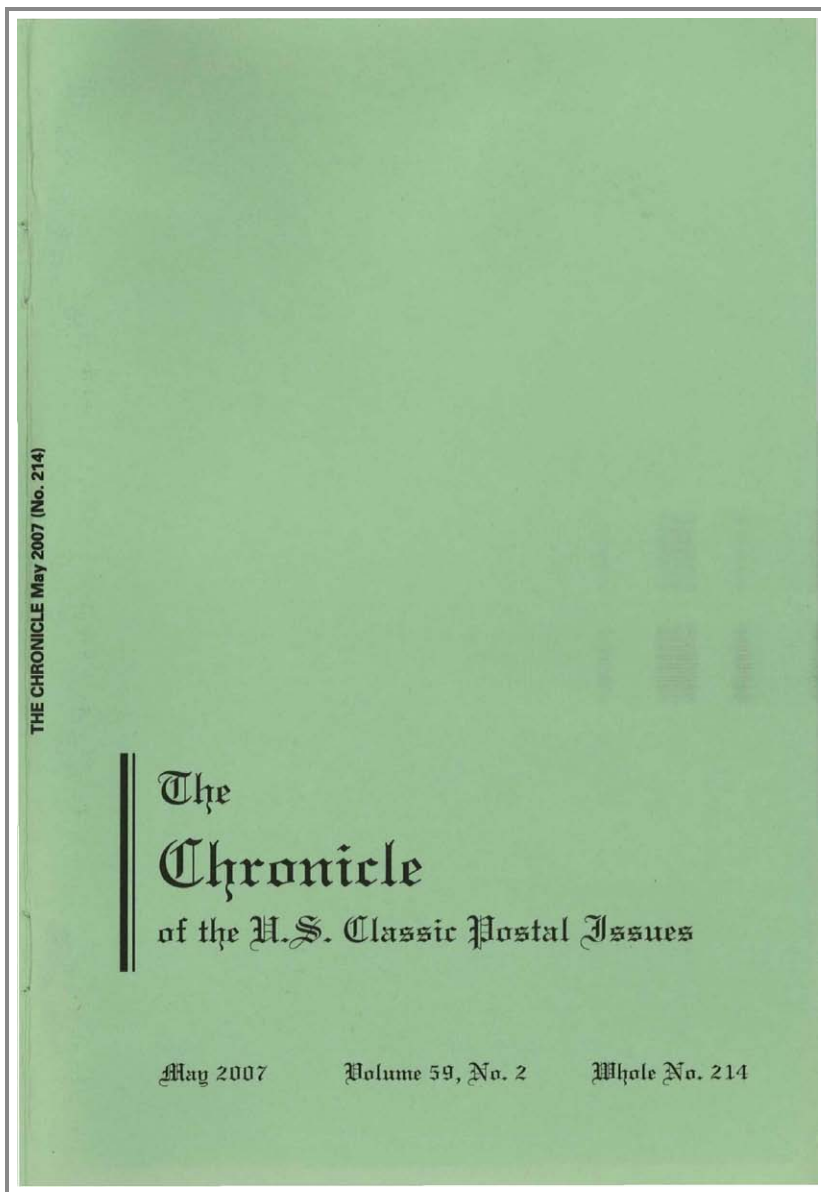


# U.S. Philatelic Classics Society

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Author(s): Joe H. Crosby



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**THE BANK NOTE PERIOD**  
**JOE H. CROSBY, EDITOR**

**AFTER B.F. STEVENS:**  
**THE U.S. DESPATCH AGENT AT LONDON, 1902-1938**

**JOE H. CROSBY**

On June 23, 1866, the U.S. Secretary of State appointed Benjamin Franklin Stevens to serve as United States Despatch Agent in London, England. This position was responsible for handling diplomatic mail pouches and for forwarding both open and pouch mail addressed in care of Stevens or his office to Americans traveling abroad, mostly State Department officials and U.S. Naval personnel.

Stevens continued as Despatch Agent until his death in London on March 5, 1902. During this long tenure, he used at least six different types of elaborate oval forwarding markings, applied to mail that passed through his office. Tracings of these markings were most recently presented in *Chronicle* 209, page 54.

Numerous philatelic articles have documented B.F. Stevens in his role as an antiquarian bookseller in addition to the postal history he helped to create. Stevens articles, both philatelic and non-philatelic, are listed in the "references" section at the conclusion of this article.

Type	Dimensions	Color	Earliest	Latest	Notes
I	37x22.5	Black	Aug 4 1866	Aug 6 1866	Backstamp only
I	37x22.5	Red	Sept 6 1866	Jan 13 1868	
II	37.5x28.5	Red	May 21 1868	July 19 1879	Diamonds
IIA	37.5x28.5	Red	Dec 26 1878		Carets; see <i>Chronicle</i> 209
IIB	37.5x28.5	Red	21 Oct 1879		Diamonds; European date
IIC	37.5x28.5	Red	12 Apr 1880	2 Mar 1881	Carets
III	40.5x30.5	Red	30 Sep 78	7 Jan 79	
III	40.5x30.5	Purple	2 May 81	4 Jan 93	
IV	39x29.5	Purple	24 Mar 94	12 May 97	
IV	39x29.5	Blue	23 Jan 96	29 Mar 96	
V	39.5x29.5	Purple	28 Jan 97	1 Jul 97	
VA	39.5x29.5	Purple	18 Oct 1897	24 Dec 1901	4-digit year date
VA	39.5x29.5	Purple	2 Apr 1902	5 May 1902	No name
Gilder	39x29	Purple	15 Jun 1902	16 Mar 1904	See text
VI	38x29	Red	23 Jan 1871		See <i>Chronicle</i> 209

**Figure 1. Table showing earliest and latest known dates of the various B.F. Stevens markings used in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Tracings of the markings themselves appear in *Chronicle* 209.**

The table in Figure 1 updates the known periods of use of each Stevens marking, with types designated according to the listing originally published by Richard B. Graham in his Oct. 29, 1984 Postal History column in *Linn's Stamp News*. The table adds a new earliest known use of the Type I marking (now known as a black backstamp), and additional types and sub-types created by Stevens' successor, J.B. Gilder, who is discussed below.

In the early years, Stevens did not use any directive to indicate where the piece of mail was to be forwarded. Given his official status, Stevens usually forwarded mail by diplomatic pouch. Typically, no onward transit markings appear on such covers.

The cover in Figure 2 is a good example. This is a very pleasant 12¢ 1869 cover, ex Haas, posted at Cambridge, Mass., in late 1869, just days before the rate was reduced from 12¢ to 6¢. The cover reached London 8 January 1870 (per the London receiver and the Type 2 Stevens oval in red). There are no other onward markings, but the docketing at the upper left shows that the addressee, Commander J.G. Walker, on the U.S. Frigate *Sabine*, received the letter in Genoa on Jan. 13, 1870 just five days after the letter arrived in London.

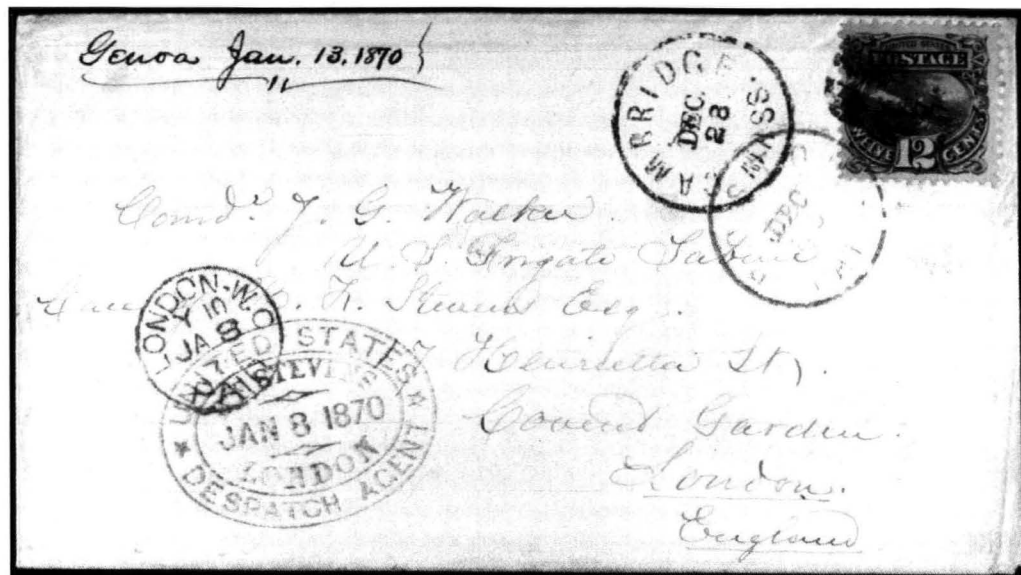


Figure 2. From the Haas collection, 12¢ 1869 stamp on cover to London, postmarked Cambridge, Mass., DEC 28 (1869). Forwarded to Italy (apparently by private pouch) by B.F. Stevens, United States Despatch Agent, Jan. 8, 1870 (Type II red oval marking). Docketed (at upper left) received at Genoa, Jan. 13, 1870.

By the Bank Note period, perhaps because the volume of mail had grown so large and the destinations so diverse, Stevens started marking the envelopes with a forwarding address. Typically he would strike through the original address and add a straight-line marking, usually in three lines, to redirect mail “Care of the / United States Consul / [destination location]. The information on the last line would indicate the place where the addressee was next expected to be able to receive mail. Apparently a number of different three-line hand-stamps existed. The example in Figure 3 reads “CARE OF THE/UNITED STATES CONSUL/ALEXANDRIA EGYPT.” This cover bears a Type III Stevens oval, struck in purple (as was the straight-line handstamp). Posted in 1882, this cover is franked with two Bank Note stamps to pay the 5¢ Universal Postal Union rate from the U.S. to Britain.

This and subsequent articles will explore the evolution of the London U.S. Despatch Agent forwarding markings after B.F. Stevens died. Surprisingly little has been written or illustrated about the period after 1902.

### The No Name Period – 1902

During a brief interim following B.F. Stevens’ death, the Type VA oval forwarding marking using European-style dating and a four-digit year date was modified by removing



Figure 3. Stevens Type III marking, in purple, on an 1882 cover from Connecticut to London. The original address (to Stevens) is stricken out in manuscript, and the cover redirected with a handstamp, "CARE OF THE UNITED STATES CONSUL ALEXANDRIA EGYPT."

the Stevens name. The result I have called "Type VA–No Name." The earliest recorded use of the Stevens Type VA–No Name marking is 2 April 1902. This appears on the post card shown in Figure 4. The card was mailed from Stockholm, Sweden, franked with a pair of Sweden 5 ore yellow-green Oscar Head stamps (Scott 56) and addressed to Herr Allen H. Berlin, U.S.S. *Nashville*, c/o B.F. Stevens, 4 Trafalgar Square, London. The London portions of the manuscript address were stricken out by the Stevens office, and two strikes of a straightline redirective marking (VILLEFANCHE,/SUR MER FRANCE) were added. A tracing of the Type VA–No Name marking from this cover is presented in Figure 5. The latest recorded use of the Type VA–No Name marking is 5 May 1902, on a cover from New York on 14 April 1902, addressed to Mrs. W. Roy Field c/o B.F. Stevens. The marking was applied two days after appointment of Stevens' successor, which brings us to J.B. Gilder.

### Joseph Benson Gilder – 1902-1904

On May 3, 1902, shortly after B.F. Stevens died, Secretary of State John Hay appointed Joseph B. Gilder (Figure 6) as the successor United States Despatch Agent. Hay's letter to Gilder reads: "You are hereby designated as Despatch Agent of the United States at London, England, with compensation at the rate of two thousand dollars per annum, beginning with the date of your entrance upon duty in that capacity. This designation is to continue during the pleasure of the Secretary of State for the time being."

As documented by Ian Paton,<sup>1</sup> in 1874 Stevens had moved his Despatch Agent's office and bookselling business from 17 Henrietta Street to 4 Trafalgar Square. It is interesting to note that Gilder's appointment was mailed to him at that same Trafalgar Square address just two months after Stevens' death.

So, who is the man Secretary of State Hay chose as Stevens' replacement?

Joseph Benson Gilder was born in 1858, the son of Jane Nutt Gilder and William

<sup>1</sup> Paton, *op. cit.* (see References), pg. 426.

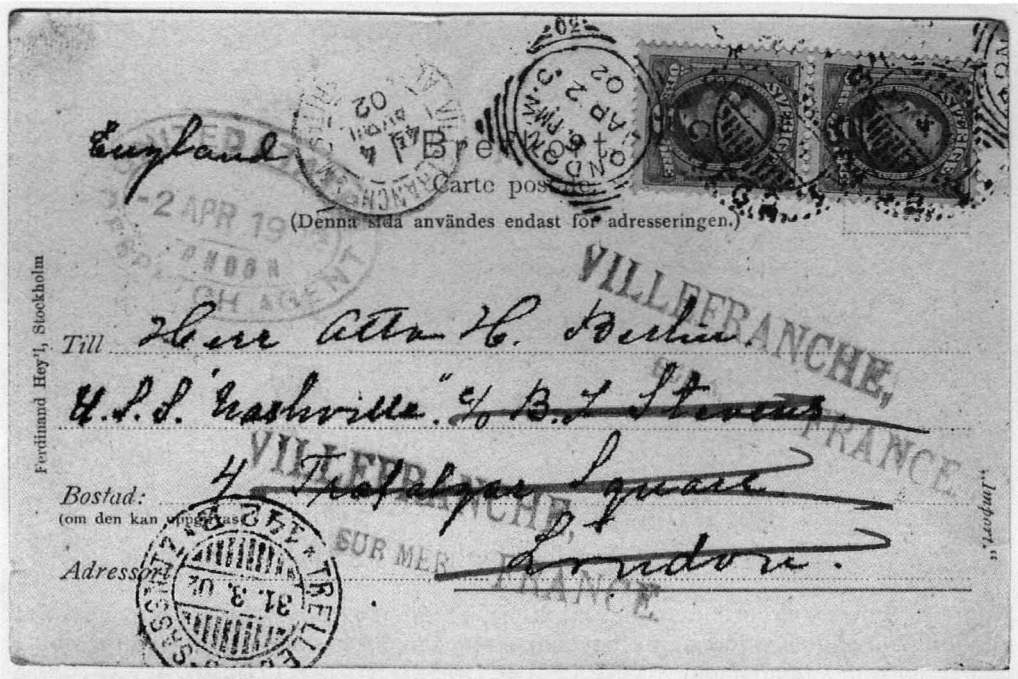


Figure 4. The earliest known use of the Type VA-No Name marking, 2 April 1902, on a card mailed from Stockholm, Sweden, franked with a pair of Sweden 5 ore yellow-green Oscar Head stamps (Scott 56) and addressed to Herr Allen H. Berlin, U.S.S. Nashville, c/o B.F. Stevens, 4 Trafalgar Square, London. The London portions of the manuscript address were stricken out by the Stevens office and two strikes of a two-line straightline redirective marking were added.

Henry Gilder, a Methodist minister and schoolmaster. Joseph attended the U.S. Naval Academy in 1872 but resigned after two years to become a reporter.<sup>2</sup>

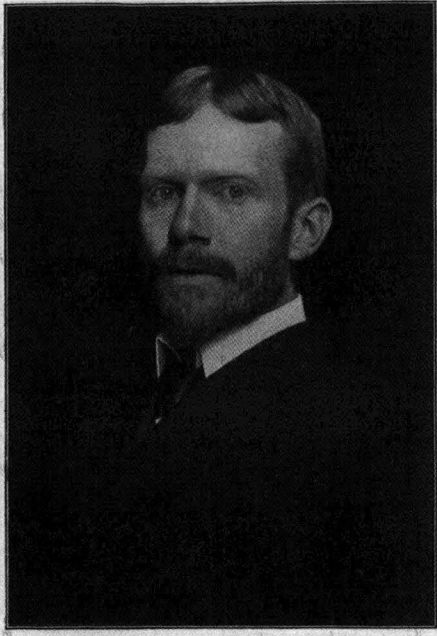
Always a man of letters, Gilder began *The Critic* magazine in a tiny second-story office at Eighth and Broadway in New York City in 1881. He shared editorial duties with his older sister, Jeannette. *The Critic* never had a circulation much above 5,000 but became highly respected for its incisive reviews of literature, music and drama. It published essays, poetry and fiction from some of America's most talented writers, including Walt Whitman and Joel Chandler Harris.

During the 1880s and 90s, Gilder contributed to various magazines including *Scribner's Monthly* and *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. He knew many of the leading authors of the period. In 1888, he and his sister wrote "Walt Whitman at Home" for the "American Authors at Home" series in *The Critic*. Gilder's works include *Bordentown and the Bonapartes* (1880); *Authors at Home: Personal and Biographical Sketches of Well-known*

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Benson Gilder Letters, 1872-1873, New Jersey Historical Society, Newark.



Figure 5. The Stevens name-removed Type VA marking from the cover in Figure 4. Tracing by John Donnes.



**Figure 6. Joseph B. Gilder, U.S. Despatch Agent at London, 1902-04. This 1898 image is from the Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Arts, Prints and Photographs, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. Image #1243058.**

*American Writers* (this 1888 work included a chapter on Col. John Hay, also a man of letters, who would later become Secretary of State). Gilder edited James Russell Lowell's *Impressions of Spain* (1899) and created *The American Idea as Expounded by American Statesmen* (1902, including a chapter "John Hay on our Recent Diplomacy").

Hay had served as the U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain in 1897 before becoming Secretary of State, so he must have been quite familiar with the duties of the U.S. Despatch Agent at London. Obviously, he was also familiar with J.B. Gilder before he chose him as Stevens' successor.<sup>3</sup>

In 1901, Joseph Gilder retired from editing *The Critic* to take a position as a London representative of Dodd, Mead and Company, book publishers. By May 3, 1902, Gilder had established an office at 4 Trafalgar Square in London, the former location of Stevens' Despatch Agent office, since that is where he received his appointment from Hay. Gilder continued to represent his publisher while he served as Despatch Agent.<sup>4</sup> In maintaining several careers while holding down a government job, Gilder could have found no better model than B.F. Stevens.

### **The J.B. Gilder Marking**

Soon after his appointment as Despatch Agent, Joseph Gilder had a new marking, in the same general array but slightly smaller than the predecessor Stevens Type V. The outside dimensions of the Gilder marking are 39 millimeters by 29 mm.<sup>5</sup> It includes small side decorations and Gilder's name rendered "J.B. Gilder." A tracing is shown in Figure 7.

The earliest known use of the Figure 7 marking is 15 JUN 1902 on a post card from India with a one anna stamp, forwarded locally in London. The latest known use is on an oversized cover from the Hermann Freitag correspondence. This contained a "book of views" mailed from Nottingham 16 MAR 1904 addressed "c/o Capt. Whitehouse, c/o B.F. Stevens, Esq." and forwarded to a hotel in Ajaccio, Corsica. To date, I have documented only 11 items forwarded with the J.B. Gilder marking, five of which are from the Freitag correspondence. There are undoubtedly more to be found, even given the relatively short period of use.

J.B. Gilder resigned as U.S. Despatch Agent in early 1904 and thereafter returned to the United States. When *The Critic* was merged with *Putnam's Magazine* in 1906, he and

<sup>3</sup> Hay also had contact with Gilder's more famous older brother, Richard Watson Gilder, the most powerful magazine editor in 19th century America and a towering figure in the world of letters. Richard Watson Gilder had published several books authored by Hay in the mid-1880's, including Hay and Nicolay's 10-volume *Life of Lincoln*.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth L. Banks Correspondence, McFarlin Library, Department of Special Collections, The University of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

<sup>5</sup> Rowe, *op. cit.* (see References), pg. 157, lists the J.B. Gilder marking as 38 x 29 mm, but the marking is actually 39 mm wide.

his wife became editors there. Subsequently, Joseph was editor of the *New York Times Book Review* during 1910-1911. In 1911, he left journalism for banking and insurance. From 1914 to 1928 he was Secretary of the Industrial Finance Corporation. He retired in 1929 and died Dec. 9, 1936.

After Stevens and Gilder, the "Agent" name was changed in subsequent markings to the "United States Government Despatch Agency," London, England. In future articles, I hope to complete the documentation of this long and fascinating sequence of forwarding markings, to tell "the rest of the story." Society members who have covers with markings extending the known periods of use of the six oval types or sub-types presented in Figure 1, or any markings after Stevens' death in 1902, are asked to send photocopies. ■



**Figure 7. The J.B. Gilder marking, 39x29mm in purple, known used 1902-1904. Tracing by John Donnes.**

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Here follows a selective bibliography of references relating to B.F. Stevens and his markings:

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- Stafford, Peter:** "Benjamin Franklin Stevens Despatch Agent Markings," *Chronicle* 209, pp. 56 (adding a Type VI Stevens marking and sub-varieties of other types).

Regarding diplomatic pouch covers handled by Stevens during the Siege of Paris see the copious research of Ernst M. Cohn, including these references:

**Cohn, Ernst M.:** "Diplomatic Digression Provoked By the 1870 Paris Balloon Mail," *Postal History Journal*, No. 37, May 1974, pp. 8-15.

—"The United States Diplomatic Pouch in the Siege of Paris," *46<sup>th</sup> American Philatelic Congress Book*, 1976, pp. 119-145.

—"My Favorite Cover – The American Connection," *The American Philatelist*, December 1976, pg. 1239.

—"Personally Entrusted Mail in the Siege of Paris," *The American Philatelist*, March 1977, pp. 188-194.

—"1870 U.S. Pouch Mail – New Discoveries," *The Collectors Club Philatelist*, March 1977, pp. 84-88; May 1977, pp. 158-176.

—"La valise Diplomatique Des Etats-Unis Pendant Le Siege de Paris (19 septembre 1870 – 28 janvier 1871)," *Bulletin de la societe des amis du Musee Postal*, No. 60, 4<sup>th</sup> Trimestre, 1978.

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– *Ordinary Mail by Diplomatic Means During The Siege of Paris 1870-1871*, Lymassol, Cyprus, James Bendon, 1995.

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