



U.S. Philatelic Classics Society

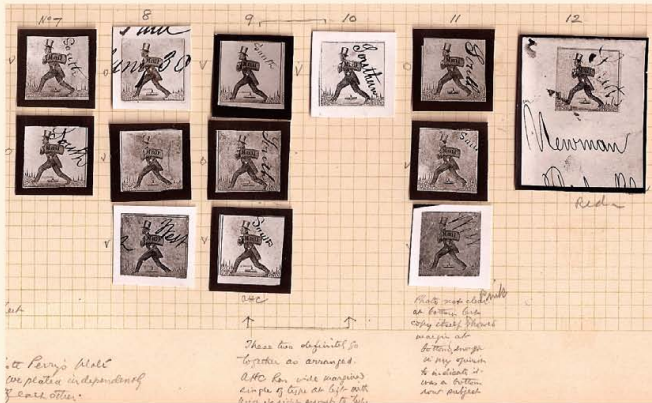
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Detail from George Sloane's photo plating of the scarce and primitive Hartford Mail Route stamp, Scott 80L1 and 80L3, from an article on the uses of this stamp (1844-1845) by Gordon Stimmell and John Bowman in our Carriers and Independent Mails section, page 119.

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**MAKING STRIDES WITH HARTFORD MAIL ROUTE
PIONEER PRECANCELS**

GORDON STIMMELL AND JOHN BOWMAN

The Hartford Mail Route stamps (Scott 80L1 and 80L3) with their depiction of a private mail carrier striding between two cities or continents, with a tiny ocean steamer below, have occasioned passionate study by leading philatelic minds over the decades. The stamps were used briefly in 1844-45. The Scott specialized catalog notes that these stamps are usually cancelled in manuscript with the word “South” or other apparent destination indicators.

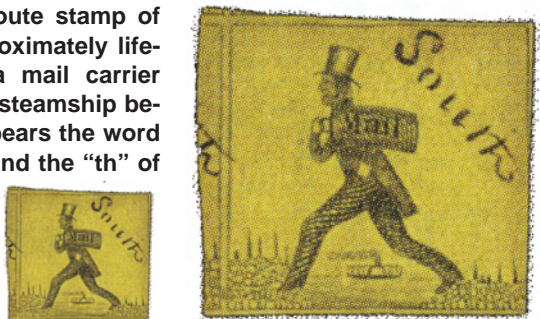
Ventura Stamps net price sale #188 recently offered a black-on-yellow 80L1 with “South” in manuscript. This stamp, which sold for \$2,000, is shown both life-size and enlarged in Figure 1. As the photo should reveal, the stamp shows parts of the “th” from a second “South” on the adjacent stamp portion at left. This remnant “th” is in the same hand. This manuscript array suggests precancellation. Whether the Hartford independent mail stamps are genuinely pioneer precancels is the focus of this article. But first a bit of background for those not familiar with this short-lived private inter-city post.

The Hartford Mail Route service was founded in August 1844 by two men, E.W. Parsons, a bookseller, and a Mr. Fuller (first name unknown), who was a terminal agent for the Thompson & Co. Express line in Hartford. Interviewed a few years before his death by *The Eastern Philatelist* in December 1895 (Vol. XVI, No. 4), Parsons revealed that the idea for the stamp design was of a man with “one foot on the Western Hemisphere and the other on the Eastern half of the world, an ocean steamship centering the device.”

A very similar design had actually been used almost a year earlier, in November 1843, by William F. Harnden on a letterhead sent in a mass mailing to cities all along the eastern seaboard, soliciting business for his transatlantic express. The Harnden design (shown in *Chronicle* 212 on page 255) depicts a striding expressman bearing mailbags, with one foot in North America, one foot in Europe, and a full-masted sailing schooner plying the Atlantic Ocean below his legs.

Nevertheless, Parsons told philatelic author W. H. Bruce that the design was inspired by a line from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Act 1, Scene II, when Cassius says of Caesar

Figure 1: The yellow Hartford Mail Route stamp of 1844-45, Scott 80L1, shown here approximately life-size and greatly enlarged, depicts a mail carrier striding across a body of water with a steamship beneath his legs. The copy shown here bears the word “South” in manuscript at upper right and the “th” of another “South” at left. The markings on these stamps are thought to be pioneer precancels. This example recently sold for \$2000. Image courtesy of Alan Katz, Ventura Stamps.



that “he doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus; and we petty men walk under his huge legs and peep about to find ourselves dishonorable graves.”

The service, which mainly carried mail between Hartford and New York City, went to its own grave with other independent mail companies when the Reduced Postage Act took effect on July 1, 1845. The earliest known Hartford cover reported by Elliott Perry was Aug. 5, 1844. The last known Hartford cover is dated June 30, 1845, a very scarce last-day-of-independent-mail use.

Parsons made a career of being an expressman. Fifteen years after the Hartford Mail passed into history, he was cited in A.L. Stimson’s *1860 Express Office Hand-Book and Directory* (page 74), as the “universally esteemed” superintendent for Adams Express Company’s Eastern Division.

The Hartford Mail Route stamps were printed in a pane of 12 with each position showing plateable variations. There are variations in the city buildings flanking the bottom, in the lettering of MAIL on the mailbags, in the rendering of details on the letter carrier and even in the messenger’s facial features on each of the positions. The little ocean steamship straddled by the messenger’s legs is drawn totally differently on each position. Thus each of the 12 stamps was separately engraved, probably on copper.

This occasioned attempts by a series of collectors and scholars to plate the stamps, since no full pane survives. An early plating attempt was made by famed collector F.W. Hunter in the 1880-90 period, shown in the definitive article on Hartfords by Francis E. Stern (*Collectors Club Philatelist*, May, 1962). Another plating was attempted by Thomas K. Tapling in the 1880s. That now resides in the vaults of the British Library. It was illustrated and written up in *The Penny Post* (January, 1995) after Gordon Stimmell viewed the collection in London.

Elliott Perry of *Pat Paragraphs* fame undertook the positioning task in 1951 and showed that both early plating attempts were wrong. His plating order is now the definitive version. This was independently confirmed by philatelic writer George B. Sloane, who undertook his own study. While the Perry plating corrections were published in *The Penny Post* article, Sloane’s study of the stamps has until now never seen the light of day.

The difficulty with advancing knowledge about the Hartford Mail is that the 60 or so known covers have been passed down for generations privately, with few covers ever appearing in auction sales. A Hartford collector first amassed his holding for 30 or 40 years, from the 1890s onward. A second Hartford collector, the aforementioned Francis E. Stern, purchased these privately in 1930. They are still held by a citizen of that city, so until recently, shedding new light on the Hartford darkness has been a challenge.

Now, thanks to the generosity of Hartford specialist Henry H. Conland, we are able to present with this article five covers bearing stamps that show beyond question that the stamps were used as precancels.

As well, we are able to present here (as Figure 2) the original Sloane plating photographs that were meticulously gathered from records of singles and covers over many years. This marks the first time so many examples of the Hartford stamps have been seen by collectors, and some of the Sloane photos also support the precancellation thesis.

Looking at Sloane’s Hartford stamp study (at least four of the 31 stamps are the rare pink paper, 80L3) most are pen cancelled with “South” or “Southern”—meaning they went from Hartford, most often to New York. Two singles are pen-marked Hartford, presumably because they were inbound from other cities, as the Hartford Mail Route post did not deliver local city mail. Four are marked “West” and one “East.” No “North” stamps have ever been recorded.

While no handstamps of the Hartford mail service have ever surfaced (this includes PAID handstamp markings), covers are known with conjunctive Hale & Co. ovals, and at

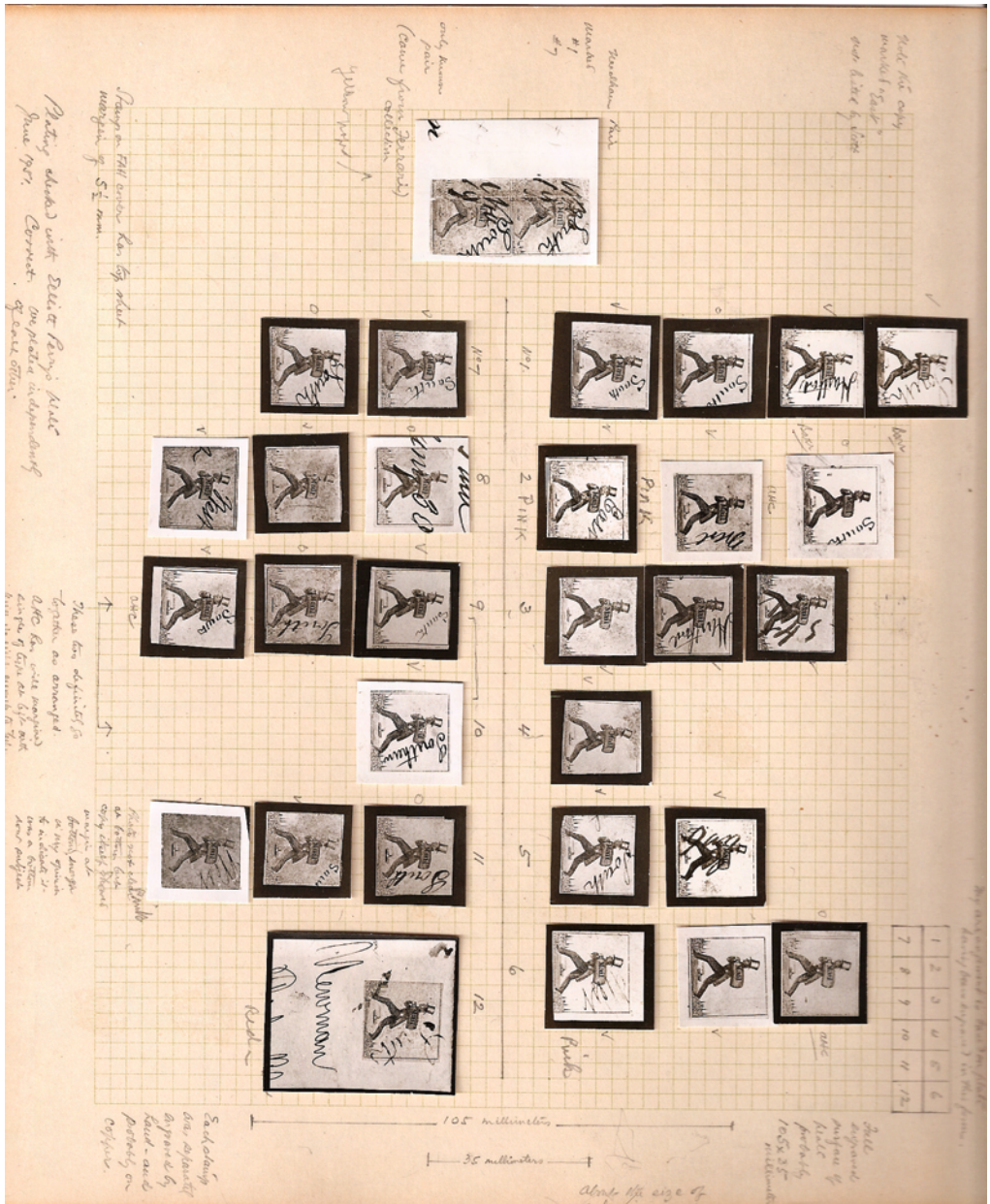


Figure 2: George Sloane's working study showing photos of each position of the Hartford Mail Route strider stamps, which confirmed the new Elliott Perry plating.

least one cover exists with an Adams Express Hartford oval handstamp. One cover in the first month of use, August 22, 1844, bears both an 80L1 and the Hale adhesive, 75L5.

The late Richard Schwartz reported in *The Penny Post* ("The Forgeries of Hartford Mail Route," Vol. 5, No. 1) in 1995: "In a count of 61 recorded and actual covers bearing Hartford stamps, 52 were addressed to New York, 5 to Boston and 4 to Philadelphia." Three covers bear vertical pairs of the 80L1, the only multiples known. In an unpublished study of Hartfords, Elliott Perry noted from a 1950s-era census: "There are 110 stamps in all, on and off cover."

But how many of these are genuine precancels, where the pen marking was applied to the stamp before being affixed to covers? At least four different writing styles are evident, indicating various clerks at work handling the letters over the 11-month lifespan of the post.

Were these, then, the first precancelled stamps in the world? No, that honor likely goes to another independent mail. Michael Gutman, a precancel specialist of some 40 years experience, establishes (in his authoritative tome, *Hale & Co. Independent Mail Company 1843-1845*) that the earliest date of a Hale precancel was June 19, 1844, from Boston. Gutman concludes: "I believe it is the very first use of a precancel."

Gutman's description of a precancel appears on page 151 of his book. "The definition used here for a precancel is a cancel that goes to the edge of the adhesive but does not appear on the letter. This implies that the adhesive was canceled in sheet form before being separated and affixed to the letter." The precancels on Hale & Co. stamps took the form of single lines, crosses, letters (denoting city or initials of agents) and combinations of crosses and letters. The most fascinating are examples from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, with "P" above and "NH" below, in addition to single lines and crosses.

Other possible precancels which are not yet proven as such are Brainard & Co. stamps (Scott 24L1-2) emblazoned with one of two forms of an ornate "B", and American Letter Mail stamps (5L2-3) with various clerk's initials penned on them. These are grist for a future scholarly mill.

Getting back to Hartford, the single Ventura Stamp Company offering of 80L1 also showing the crossbar of the "t" and "h" of "South" on a remnant stamp (Figure 1) is a convincing example of precancellation. There are four different types of handwriting extant on Hartford stamps. Figure 3 shows another example of 80L1 with "South" in a different hand. This also shows vestiges of an earlier precancel running off the former stamp to the left (and a smaller portion of another to the right) in a lightly penned style, with the main full "South" in heavy ink. Did clerks each day precancel a new batch of stamps? Or did this clerk notice this particular stamp lacked the "South" centered on adjacent stamps and simply add it?

Richard Frajola, who has long-time knowledge of Hartford material, reports that virtually all the directional markings known on Hartford covers are precancels. Most are not tied. In fact, he is suspicious of any directional markings that might be tied. Instead, Frajola says the main genuine tying manuscript markings are "X"s and manuscript pen marks showing date of use.

The five Hartford Mail letters shown as Figure 4 through Figure 8 are provided through the courtesy of Henry H. Conland. They present an insightful and representative overview of precancel use of the tiny Hartford strider stamps. They include two with New York as destination, plus two to Philadelphia and one to Boston. Three (or perhaps four) of the covers indicate cooperative usage with Hale & Co. Express. As readers can plainly see, the precancel manuscript markings on the stamps on all five covers do not tie the adhesives to their covers.



Figure 3: An 80L1 with two "South" precancels rendered by two different clerks, the lighter style is visible to left and right on the stamp.

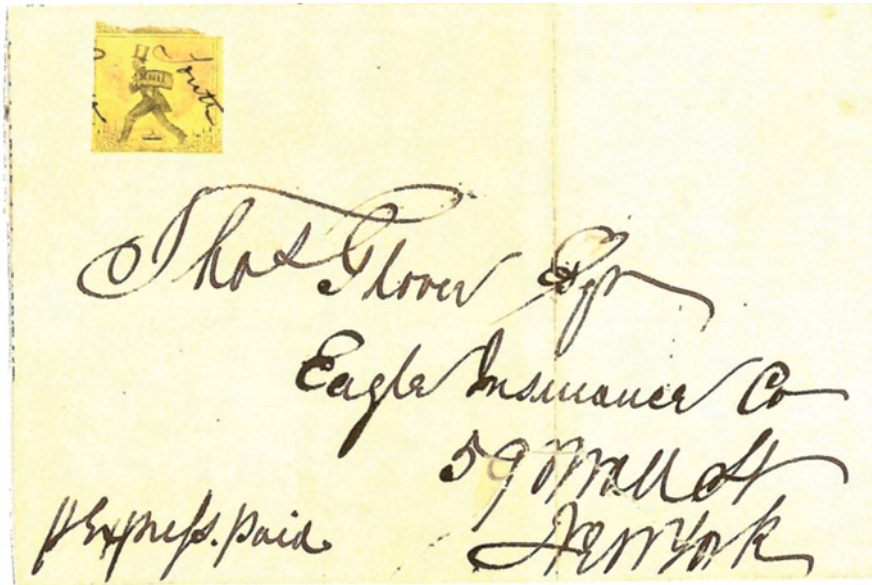


Figure 4: Southbound 80L1 precancelled “South” in fine hand, with vestiges of “South” to left, on undated cover to Wall Street, with “H Express Paid”, presumably sent conjunctively via Hale’s Express.

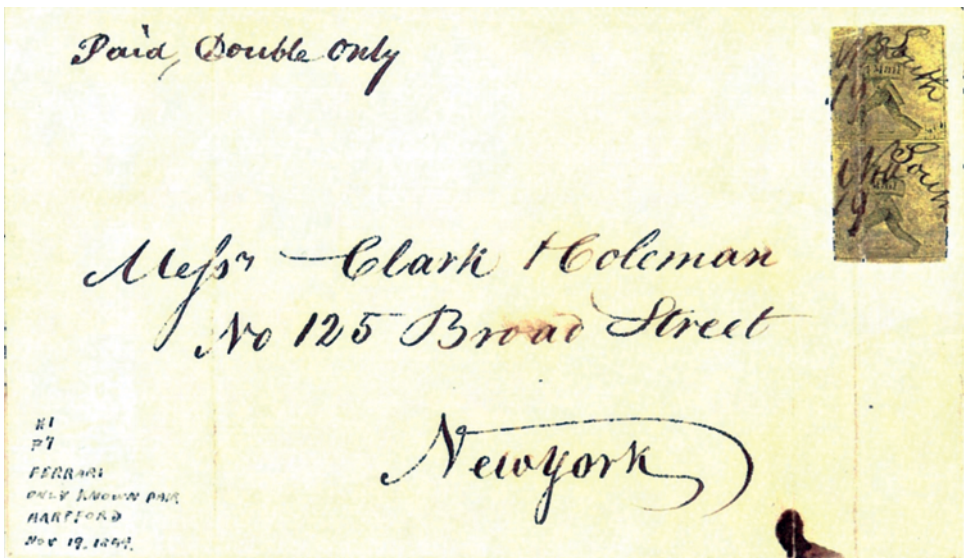


Figure 5: Double weight cover, with one of three known vertical pairs of 80L1 recorded on cover, sent Nov. 19, 1844. “Nov 19” added to the “South” precancelled stamps at time of mailing. Stamps position #1 and #7 in pane of 12. Ex Ferrary.

Figure 4 shows a southbound 80L1 precancelled “South” in fine hand, with vestiges of another “South” at the left, on an undated cover to Wall Street, with “H Express Paid” at lower left. This cover was presumably sent conjunctively via Hale’s Express.

Figure 5 shows a double-weight cover, ex Ferrary, with one of three vertical pairs of 80L1 recorded on cover, sent Nov. 19, 1844. The manuscript “Nov 19” date notation was added to the “South” precancelled stamps at time of mailing and the date partially ties the

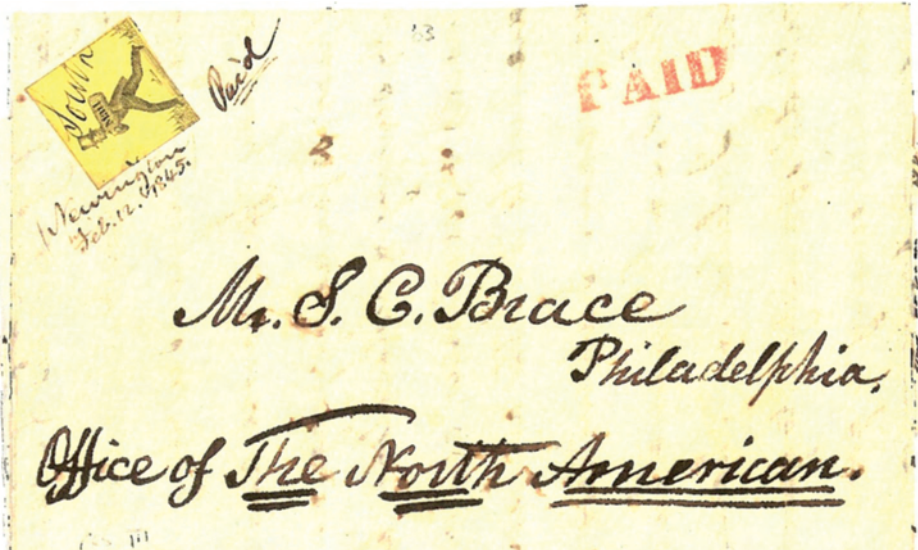


Figure 6: One of at least four known 80L1 covers from Newington, destined to Philadelphia, sent via Hartford Feb. 12, 1845, with manuscript “Paid” (applied by Hartford clerk) and Hale handstamp PAID likely applied at New York City.

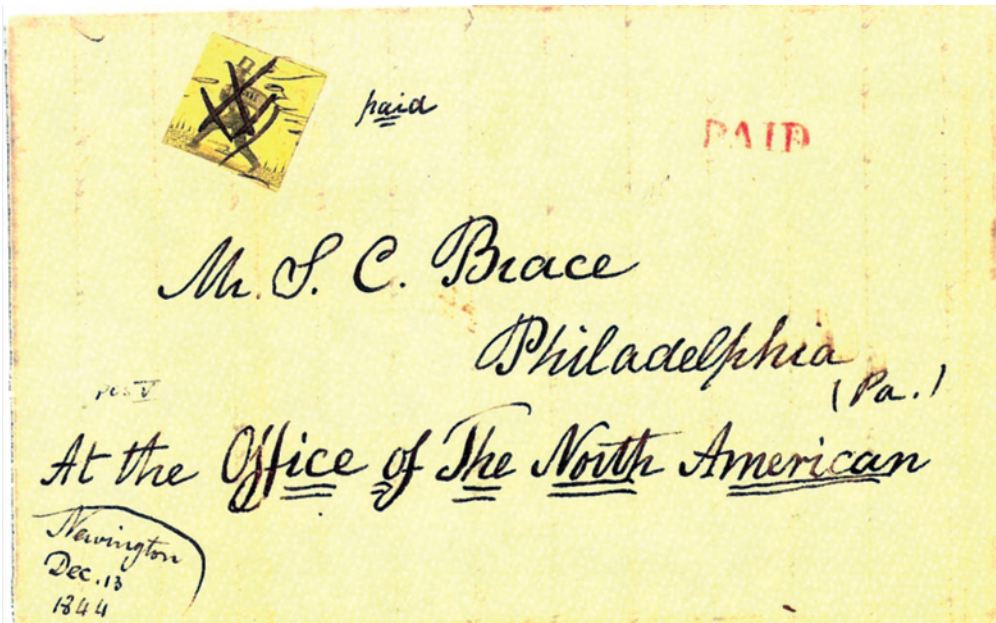


Figure 7: Another Newington-Philadelphia 80L1 cover, with precancel “South” and additional pen crosshatch applied upon mailing (13 December 1844), with Hartford Mail Route manuscript “paid” and a second red handstamped “PAID.”

pair to the cover. The stamps are positions 1 and 7 from the pane of 12.

Figure 6 shows one of at least four 80L1 covers known from Newington sent via Hartford. This one is addressed to Philadelphia and dated “Feb. 12, 1845.” The manuscript “South” was obviously applied before the stamp was affixed to the cover. The manuscript “Paid” notation was applied by a Hartford clerk and the red Hale handstamp PAID was presumably applied after the cover reached New York City.

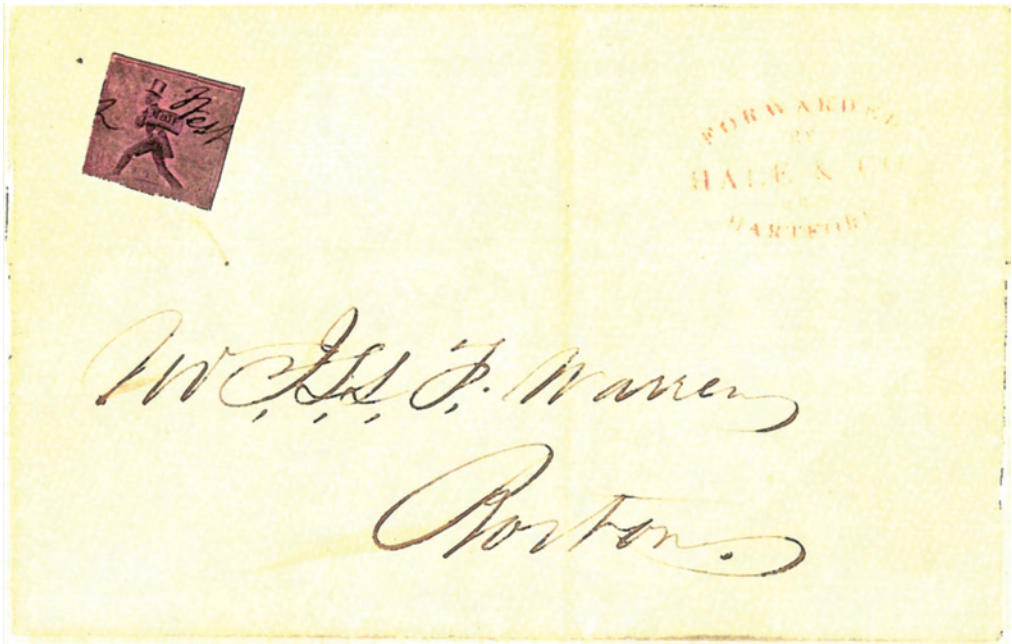


Figure 8: Rare pink-paper Hartford stamp, Scott 80L3, on undated cover to Boston (posted after March 19, 1845) with Hale’s Hartford forwarder handstamp. The stamp shows a manuscript “West” precancel and part of another from adjacent stamp.

Figure 7 shows another Newington-Philadelphia use, with precancel “South” and additional pen crosshatching applied upon mailing, 13 December 1844. The manuscript “paid” was applied by the Hartford Mail Route. The red handstamped “PAID” looks similar to a red Hale “PAID” (Gutman P-7) recorded from New Bedford.

Figure 8 shows the black-on-pink Hartford Mail Route stamp, the very rare 80L3, on an undated cover to Boston. Per the content the use is after March 19, 1845. The stamp is precancelled “West” and shows remnants at left of the pen precancel from the adjacent adhesive. The cover bears the handstamped red Hartford forwarder oval of Hale & Co.

Mystery remains. For instance, why does the 80L3 pink Hartford stamp shown in Figure 8 say “West” on it when Boston lies to the east and north of Hartford? It turns out that all known examples of the pink 80L3 are precancelled with “West” despite the fact that most of them journeyed east. Does this mean the stamps were presold and patrons simply used them on letters to destinations other than what the precancel direction indicated?

Much remains to be learned about the Hartford Mail Route stamps. Were the precancelled stamps sold in full panes to patrons? Were the directional markings of the stamps more than a method of preventing reuse of the stamps? Or did the precancels also act as a method of office inventory and perhaps control, such as a railway conductor punching passenger tickets? Perhaps one day, when the full population of Hartford covers is chronicled, such questions will find more coherent answers. ■