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Article: Mistaken 24¢ Rate to Germany, 1857-61

Author(s): Robert S. Boyd

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Mulready facsimile envelopes were widely used by U.S. stamp dealers in the 19th century. This cover, created by Boston dealer E. A. Holton, was sent registered in 1883 to Modena, Italy. The addressee, Charles (Carlos) Dena, was a brother of the more famous Emilio Dena, who founded the Italian stamp dynasty that still endures. From Steven Belasco's continuing series exploring the postal history of U.S. stamp collecting in the 19th century, page 155.

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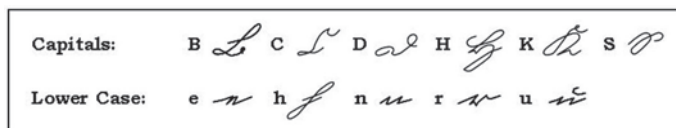
MISTAKEN 24¢ RATE TO GERMANY, 1857-61

ROBERT S. BOYD

During the period of use of the 1851 and 1857 stamps, letters from the United States to the 39 German States could be sent by steamer to Le Havre and under agreements with Bremen, Great Britain, Prussia, Hamburg, and France. The rate structure was correspondingly complex, with only Bremen and Hamburg having much commonality. It was incumbent on the sender of a letter to Germany to select the method based on ships in port at the time the letter was dispatched. As the decade wore on, the rates became simpler as a result of increased uniformity of German-Austrian Postal Union (GAPU) rates among the various states. By 1860, there were two principal rates to the German States: 30¢ per ½ ounce by Prussian closed mail and 15¢ per ½ ounce via Bremen or Hamburg. A published option that was infrequently used was 21¢ per quarter ounce rate by French mail.

Apparently there was a widespread misapprehension in the latter half of the 1850s that a 24¢ rate to Germany existed. In my collection are seven covers showing payment of exactly 24¢. They were sent from New York (2), Ohio (2), Michigan, Indiana, and Louisiana between 1857 and 1861. Another cover paid by two 12¢ stamps in 1857 from Michigan was recently sold in a German auction.¹ When a U.S. exchange office decided to send one of these letters by Bremen, Hamburg, or France, 24¢ sufficed to pay the full rate, so it was merely overpaid. However, such a letter was considered unpaid in Prussian closed mail, since partial payment of the 30¢ rate was not permitted. This was an expensive error, as 24¢ in 1860 was worth about \$5 today.

Figure 1. Selected characters in German script that differ significantly from English cursive.



Most of the 24¢ covers originated from areas populated by German immigrants and show German spelling or handwriting. As shown by the example letters in Figure 1, German script is easy to differentiate from English handwriting. Covers with addresses in German script from areas settled by Germans probably were written by native German speakers. With few exceptions, the examples below associate the mistaken 24¢ rate with correspondence from Americans of German extraction to Germany.

The March 1857 stampless cover in Figure 2, from Brownstown, Michigan, to Haiger, Amt Dillenburg, Nassau, shows payment of 24¢ in cash.² While 24¢ in stamps could represent a convenience overpayment of a lesser rate, payment in cash required use of pennies to make an exact amount. Therefore, it would seem to reflect a belief on the part of the postal clerk that 24¢ was a valid rate. At the upper right, written in a hand and ink different from

¹ *Altdeutschland Spezialauktion am 10 Januar 2009*, Till Neumann, Lot Number 163. This was a letter from Ypsilanti, Michigan, to Würzburg sent via Bremen and paid by two imperforate 12¢ stamps. The “N. York 17 Brem. Pkt.” handstamp date was 7 May, so it probably was carried aboard *Hansa* on the last voyage of W.A. Fritze & Co. on that date in 1857. The address appears to be in English.

² The German states used a variety of words for administrative subdivisions, including “Amt,” “Oberamt,” and “Kreis.” The usual translation of “Amt” is “office,” but in this case it is more comparable to “district” or “county.” These subdivisions were not exclusively postal, but were important in getting mail to addressees. For discussion of the postal role of an Oberamt, see Richard F. Winter, *Understanding Transatlantic Mail Volume 1* (Belleville, Pennsylvania: American Philatelic Society, 2006), pg. 25.



Figure 2. Stampless cover from Brownstown, Michigan, March 1857, to Haiger, Amt Dillenburg, Nassau. Postage of 24¢ was paid in cash.

the address is “Paid 24 cts,” which appears to have been written over the same phrase in pencil.

The March day in the Brownstown postmark is indistinct, but is probably “12.” Postage of 24¢ was sufficient for the 22¢ rate then in effect for southern Germany via Bremen, so the New York exchange office sent the cover by the *Hermann* of the Ocean Line, which departed New York on 21 March 1857, and arrived at Bremerhaven on 6 April. The United States retained 14¢ (5¢ U.S. postage and 9¢ packet fee) under the agreement with Bremen and the 2¢ overpayment. The credit to Bremen was 8¢ (1¢ Bremen postage and 7¢ GAPU transit). The red “1” in the center represents a one kreuzer local delivery charge, which is common on unpaid letters, but rarely imposed on paid letters.

Brownstown is in a part of Michigan that was originally French and is not known to have had a significant German population. The capitals “H” and “D” and lower case letters “e” and “r” on the cover are in English cursive, not German script, but the lower case “u” and routing “New yorch” suggest the sender was of German extraction. The odd “B” of Bremen is neither classic German nor English, but has more in common with German.

The prepaid stampless cover shown in Figure 3 was sent from Newburgh, New York, on 18 May 1860, to Lossburg, Oberamt Freudenstadt, Württemberg. It was initially marked paid “21,” probably for French mail or British open mail, then changed to “24.” The Vanderbilt Line steamer *Illinois* was due to depart New York on 19 May 1860, and the Havre Line steamer *Fulton* on 26 May.³ Both vessels stopped at Southampton and terminated at Le Havre. When the letter was too late to make the *Illinois* sailing, it was held for another vessel. The letter should have been in time for the *Fulton* and been sent by French mail, but the New York foreign-mail office may have preferred to send letters to Germany under one of the three German agreements—or the letter may have been over ¼ ounce, in which case the 24¢ payment would have been insufficient for the French-mail rate. Two Cunard steamers, *Asia* and *Europa*, were scheduled to sail 23 and 30 May 1860, respectively.⁴ By

³ Walter Hubbard and Richard F. Winter, *North Atlantic Mail Sailings 1840-75* (Canton, Ohio: The U.S. Philatelic Classics Society, Inc., 1988), pp. 118 and 165.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 44.



Figure 3. Stampless cover from Newburgh, New York, 18 May 1860, to Lossburg, Oberamt Freudenstadt, Württemberg. Postage of 24¢ paid in cash; original “21” altered to “24.”

1860, the post office was minimizing the use of British open mail. Sending the letter on those vessels by Prussian closed mail would have required that it be treated as unpaid, since partial payment of the 30¢ rate was not permitted.

Accordingly, the New York exchange office ignored the “via Liverpool” routing instruction, accepted the cover as fully paid, and sent it by the steamer *Bavaria*, of the Hamburg American Line (HAPAG), departing New York on 1 June and arriving Hamburg on 16 June 1860.⁵ The U.S. retained its 5¢ share and credited Hamburg 10¢ (4¢ packet fee, 1¢ Hamburg postage and 5¢ GAPS transit).

The “24” annotation likely was not made in the New York exchange office, which was well aware of the actual rates. Instead, it was probably written by the clerk at Newburgh who made the error of accepting the 24¢ overpayment. The Newburgh postmaster at this time was Joseph Casterline, Jr.⁶ That name is probably of English or Norman origin. The German population in Newburgh had declined in the preceding hundred years, so chances are the postal clerk who handled this letter was not German. The sender’s origin is uncertain. The writing appears to be in English, but the spelling “Germani” raises a question.

Figure 4 shows a paid cover, franked with perforated 1857 stamps, from a hotel in Indianapolis, posted on 8 August 1860 to Weissenburg bei Nürnberg, Bavaria. The left 10¢ stamp has a cleaned manuscript cancellation, which initially raised questions about whether it originated on this cover. A close-up of the stamps (Figure 5) shows the “N” and “D” of the Indianapolis datestamp are oriented the same on the three left stamps, suggesting sequential strikes (emphasized by the red line that has been imposed on the Figure 5 photo).

This cover was subjected to forensic analysis that concluded that there was no difference in the ink used to cancel the stamps and that the perforations of the two 10¢ stamps were interleaved, a condition that would only occur if the stamps were placed on the enve-

⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 174.

⁶ According to Edward M. Ruttenber and Charles W. Tice, *History of the Town of Newburgh* (Newburgh, New York: E.M. Ruttenber & Co., 1859), pg. 166, Casterline was appointed in 1853. He was postmaster in the last prewar *List of Post Offices and Postal Laws and Regulations of the United States of America 1859*, (Washington, D.C.: John C. Rives, 1859), pg. 106.



Figure 4. Hotel cover from Indianapolis, 8 August 1860, to Weissenburg bei Nürnberg, Bavaria. Postage of 24¢ paid by stamps. The left 10¢ stamp represents a reuse (to defraud the post office) of a stamp from which a manuscript cancel had been removed. (Philatelic Foundation Certificate #471,604).



Figure 5. Close-up of the stamps on the cover in Figure 4. Note how the “N” and “D” of the Indianapolis date stamp line up (indicated by the superimposed red line), suggesting sequential strikes. The lightened manuscript cancel is visible on the left stamp.

lope before the adhesive had set.⁷

To prepay this letter via Bremen or Hamburg, All the sender had to do was add another 1¢ stamp to the original 10¢, 3¢, and 1¢. Instead, he took the risk of a \$50 penalty for reusing a cleaned stamp.⁸ This is strong evidence that the sender believed 24¢ was neces-

⁷ “The four black ink cancellation marks do not show a difference in comparison by use of the VSC-2000” (an instrument that uses infrared analysis techniques to compare inks).... “The microscopic examination showed that the right [perforations] of the furthest left stamp are both above and below the left [perforations] of the next adjacent stamp to its right. This would only occur if the stamps were placed on the envelope before the adhesive content of the stamp had set.” (Letter, Speckin Forensic Laboratories, Okemos, Michigan, 17 March 2009, to the author.) This analysis was considered by the Philatelic Foundation, which issued Certificate 471604 with an opinion that “It is a genuine usage, the left 10¢ with a lightened manuscript cancel and soiled; the right 10¢ with faults; the 1¢ defective.”

⁸ Act of March 3, 1851, Sec. 4, contained in the *List of Post Offices and Postal Laws and Regulations of the United States of America 1859*, *op cit.*, The Postal Laws, Sec. 147, pg. 36.



Figure 6. November, 1860, cover from Mount Lebanon, Louisiana, to Tiefenbach, Amt Braunfels, Kreis Wetzlar, Prussia. Paid by pair of 12¢ 1857 stamps. The credit “3,” obliterated by a grid, indicates the cover was originally processed as mail to Great Britain.

sary if he wished to prepay the letter.

There was a large German population in Indianapolis. The sender was apparently of German extraction, but bilingual. The title “herrn” is written in German script, but the rest of the address is written in English cursive.

The 24¢ prepayment (of which 10¢ was fraudulent) sufficed to pay the single 15¢ rate by Bremen or Hamburg. The New York exchange office accepted the letter and marked it with its red 10¢ credit handstamp. The original docketing “per Steamer via Bremen,” probably written by the sender, was changed to Hamburg since the next steamer was *Saxonia* of the HAPAG Line, departing New York on 15 August and arriving at Hamburg on 29 August 1860.⁹

The poorly struck datestamp of the cover in Figure 6 is difficult to read on the black stamps, but it is probably Mount Lebanon, Louisiana. It was sent about 26 November 1860 to Tiefenbach, Amt Braunfels, Kreis Wetzlar, Prussia. A New York exchange office sorting clerk saw the pair of 12¢ adhesives. Since that was the usual franking for letters to Great Britain, he assumed the letter was bound there, and sent it to the clerk making up mail for Great Britain. This clerk struck the red “3” credit to Great Britain that would apply on a letter carried by an American packet. The office was making up mail bags for a 1 December departure of the Inman Line steamer *City of Baltimore* (the Inman Line was British, but this sailing was under a contract with the U.S. Post Office, so it would have been considered an American packet for accounting purposes).¹⁰ The clerk realized his mistake, obliterated the “3” with a red grid, and processed it for the sailing of the HAPAG steamer *Teutonia*, also departing New York on 1 December 1860, arriving at Hamburg on 16 December.¹¹

Louisiana is most often associated with the French, but many Germans settled there. Most of the address on this cover is in English, but “herrn” and “Kreis” are in German

⁹ Hubbard and Winter, *op. cit.*, pg. 174.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 201

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 175, shows *Teutonia* arriving at Hamburg on 17 December, but backstamps of the Hamburg City post office and the Prussian post office in Hamburg both have 16 December dates.

script, identifying the writer's origin as German.

In addition to the pair of 12¢ stamps, this cover has the notation "24" at upper right. Bremen and Hamburg mail had 22¢ rates to southern Germany until as late as 1859 (Bremen) and 1860 (Hamburg), but that rate never applied to Prussia, so this franking cannot be explained by intentional overpayment of 2¢.

The overall advertising cover in Figure 7 was sent from New York on 11 December



Figure 7. Overall advertising cover from New York, 11 December 1860, to Breslau, Silesia, Prussia. Because it was paid 24¢ in stamps, the cover was initially processed for Great Britain (credit 19 marking crossed out) before being sent unpaid by Prussian closed mail. Philatelic Foundation Certificate #459,819.

1860 to Breslau, Silesia, Prussia (now Wrocław, Poland). The sender marked it "p. Prussian Closed Mail" and applied 24¢ in stamps. As was the case with the cover in Figure 5, a New York exchange office sorting clerk assumed 24¢ postage meant it was headed for England and sent it to the clerk handling mail for Great Britain, who struck it with the 19¢ credit handstamp for mail by British packet. The clerk was making up mails for the Cunard Line steamer *Arabia*, due to leave Boston the next day.¹² He saw the routing instruction and realized the mistake. He crossed out the credit datestamp, underlined the routing instruction and marked the letter "SHORT PAID." Figure 8 shows markings associated with mail to Great Britain as seen on the covers in Figures 6 and 7.

The "SHORT PAID" handstamp was used to explain the reason for treating the letter as unpaid: partial payment of the basic international rate was not acceptable under either the Anglo-American or U.S.-Prussian postal conventions. The clerk could have corrected the routing instruction and held this letter for the HAPAG steamer *Saxonia*, due to depart 15 December, but the 23¢ debit marking shows he gave the sender what he asked for and sent it unpaid in the Prussian closed mail aboard *Arabia*. The blue "13" at center is postage due of 13 silver-



Figure 8. Markings associated with mail to Great Britain seen on covers in Figures 6 and 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, pg. 45.

is reinforced by the absence of “Germany” written in English cursive so common in German script addresses on letters of this period. Bucks was a small office and may not have known that the 22¢ rate to Württemberg had been discontinued two years earlier. If so, the block of stamps represented a 2¢ overpayment of that rate, but it is more likely that the sender thought he was paying a correct 24¢ rate, rather than wasting 2¢.

The 24¢ stamp on the patriotic cover in Figure 10 was intended to pay the postage from Lima, Ohio, to Oberweisbach, Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt, Thuringia. The letter was mailed on 8 October 1861. An August 1861 Post Office Department circular stated that



Figure 10. Patriotic cover from Lima, Ohio, 8 October 1861, to Oberweisbach, Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt, Thuringia. Since the 24¢ stamp underpaid the 30¢ Prussian closed mail rate, the cover was sent as unpaid. Philatelic Foundation Certificate #459,820.

Ohio letters bearing 1851-57 stamps could be delivered only until 10 September 1861.¹⁶ Stanley B. Ashbrook opined that this cover was treated as unpaid because the 24¢ stamp had been demonetized.¹⁷ By 1938, when his *United States One Cent Stamp of 1851-1857* was published, Ashbrook knew that the demonetization process was complex and often did not go according to plan. His chapter on demonetization remains among the best available. Today he would no doubt agree that demonetization was not the answer to this 24¢ cover.

The Lima post office clerk accepted the stamp, cancelled it, and sent the letter to New York. The New York exchange office sorting clerk put this letter in the correct box, and the clerk assembling the Prussian closed mail, following regulations, did not accept a partial payment and marked the letter with the 23¢ debit handstamp for an unpaid letter. It was sent on the *Fulton*, Havre Line, which departed New York on 12 October 1861, and arrived at Southampton 24 October.¹⁸ The Aachen exchange office received the letter on 26 October and marked it with postage due of 45 kreuzer or 12¾ silbergroschen (usually marked as 13). Both currencies were used in Thuringia and were the equivalent of 30¢. The “45/1” is a local restatement of the postage due with the addition of a 1 kreuzer delivery charge.

¹⁶ Stanley B. Ashbrook, *The United States One Cent Stamp of 1851-1857*, Volume II (New York: H.L. Lindquist, 1938), pp. 28-29.

¹⁷ Pencil notation on back of cover: “OLD STAMP NOT RECOGNIZED/In My Opinion This Cover Is Genuine In All Respects/St Stanley B. Ashbrook.”

¹⁸ Hubbard and Winter, *op. cit.*, pg. 118.

The cover bears no routing instructions. The handwriting is English, but the spelling is German. Since the 22¢ rate by Bremen and Hamburg had been eliminated by 1859 and 1860, respectively, there is no explanation for this cover except that the sender believed there was a valid 24¢ rate to Thuringia.

No basis for a belief in a 24¢ rate is evident in official documents, so the explanation is likely to be found in an unofficial document. In 1855, John Weik of Philadelphia published a book entitled *The United States Letter Writer* (in German *Vereinigten Staaten Briefsteller*), aimed at the German-American audience. It provided formats for legal documents and letters “which occur in the social relations and business life of the United States,” including deeds, contracts and the like, and letters for all occasions, including “a rich young man to a beautiful poor young lady” and a lover breaking off with his intended. Left-hand pages are in German and right-hand pages in English. My copy was first sold in Leipzig, so *The Letter Writer* was available on both ends of the German migration.

Pages 11 and 12 contain a summary of U.S. postage, including this paragraph:

The following are the rates of postage to and from Europe. By the New York, Liverpool and New York, Southampton lines (also by the British lines,) the postage of a single letter, to or from any place in the United States, (except Oregon and California,) as also to or from any part of Great Britain, is 24 cents, no matter whether the letter is prepaid or not. The postage for a single letter from California and Oregon to Great Britain, or vice versa, is 29 cents.

The structure of the paragraph leaves the impression that the 24¢ rate applies to “Europe,” not merely to Great Britain. The German portion is identical. It is easy to see how a writer not well versed in the intricate postage rates of the time could be confused and even how he might show the book to an unsophisticated postal clerk, for example in Brownstown, Michigan, as proof that 24¢ was the correct amount to pay.

The only cover this hypothesis does not explain adequately is the one shown in Figure 7. The address and routing instruction “p. Prussian Closed Mail” appear to be in the same hand. The postage section of *The Letter Writer* does state clearly “By the Prussian Closed Mail...the postage of a single letter to Prussia, Austria, and all other German States, is 30 cents...prepaid or not.” It may be that the writer passed it to a friend or servant for mailing, and that person applied the stamps. The routing instruction and franking on that cover had to be the result of a misunderstanding, whether or not abetted by *The Letter Writer*.

In conclusion, it is unlikely the 24¢ rate covers to German States can be explained by intentional overpayment. Absolute proof would be a mention of *The Letter Writer* in a letter inside a 24¢ cover, but such is unlikely to appear. The number of covers from several states with the consistent erroneous 24¢ rate is strong evidence of a widespread belief in it. Near-exclusive association of this rate with Americans of German extraction makes *The Letter Writer* a plausible explanation.

USPCS members with mistaken 24¢ rate covers are invited to contact the author at bobbyd72@aol.com.

Comment from the Section Editor: This article by a first-time contributor is well-written and carefully presented. It seems unlikely to me, however, that 24¢ was paid on all but one of the letters only because a paragraph in The United States Letter Writer may have suggested this payment. I would expect most postmasters would consult the foreign-mail rate charts before using a possibly confusing paragraph in this book to justify the payment. It is quite possible that some of the letters were overpaid for a variety of reasons: intentional overpayment so enough would be paid for all alternative routes except Prussian closed mail; convenience overpayment; or a mistaken belief that overpaying the rate would somehow increase the likelihood that the letter would reach its destination. Having said that, the author's conclusions cannot be completely dismissed. Perhaps more evidence will surface to support his theory.—R.F.W. ■