



# U.S. Philatelic Classics Society

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**Article: Pointing Hand Postmarks on U.S. Stampless Covers**

**Author(s): James W. Milgram M.D.**

## The Chronicle of the U.S. Classic Postal Issues



Unlisted in Scott, this 1848 3¢ Boston Parcel Post stamp has been known since the 19th century. Only three copies are recorded and this example (on the sole recorded cover) is the first time any of them has been illustrated in color. In our Carriers and Independent Mails section, Bruce Mosher tells how the Boston Parcel Post operation evolved into the better-known Boston Penny Post.

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## **POINTING HAND POSTMARKS ON U.S. STAMPLESS COVERS**

**JAMES W. MILGRAM, M.D.**

This is the second time I have written about this topic. The first was many years ago in the *Postal History Journal*.<sup>1</sup> The subject there too was pointing hand markings on stampless covers. Since then I have recorded a number of new examples and after 35 years it seems appropriate to revisit the subject.

Humans naturally point when they are talking, using the index finger of the dominant hand. The purpose of the gesture is to add emphasis to what is being said. Finger-pointing is also used in giving orders and providing directions. Still, it comes as something of a surprise that a number of American cities and towns used the pointing hand in their postal markings.

The pointing hand is a form of fancy auxiliary marking. In a recent *Congress Book*, Mark Schwartz described the Salem, Massachusetts, pointing hand with PAID as the earliest American pictorial postmark.<sup>2</sup> In the stampless era the pointing hand is found attached to other auxiliary markings, but it is most often seen with “PAID.”

After the Civil War the pointing hand acquired a second significance—to indicate the return address on undeliverable letters. I will show a representative example at the conclusion of this article, but my focus here is on the earlier uses of the pointing hand, as they are typically found on stampless covers.

My previous article on this subject listed 16 towns that used the pointing hand on stampless covers, mostly as part of a “PAID” handstamp. This list is updated and greatly expanded in Table 1 (page 299), with added citations from Schwartz and other sources. The table lists the towns alphabetically, presents descriptive and chronological information about the pointing hand markings, and indicates a photo reference where appropriate. The covers themselves are discussed alphabetically within several categories in the text that follows.

### **Pointing hand with PAID**

The earliest use of the pointing hand in postal markings was to call attention to the word “PAID.” In the stampless era, when most letters were sent collect, prepayment was unusual enough to justify calling special attention to it.

Figure 1 shows an 1839 folded lettersheet from Brooklyn, Connecticut, to Lyme Plain, New Hampshire, along with enlargements of the pointing hand marking and of the elaborate letterhead on the lettersheet. The letter within is datelined June 22, 1839. This cover was sent prepaid at the rate of 18<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>¢ for a single sheet sent a distance between 150 and 400 miles. The sender noted the prepayment when he addressed the letter (manuscript “Paid” at top) and the Brooklyn postmaster affirmed it with a strike of his pointing hand with PAID postmark, here in a color not listed in the current stampless cover catalog.<sup>3</sup> This is quite an attractive example of a pointing hand and PAID in an arc format.



Figure 1. At top: Small pointing hand and PAID in arc on cover from “BROOKLYN, CON. JUNE 26” (1839) with manuscript “Paid” and “18¾” rate marking. The pointing hand marking is shown enlarged above. At left is the exquisite lithographed cachet from the letterhead within, memorializing abolitionist martyr Elijah P. Lovejoy, the minister-printer who was murdered by a pro-slavery mob at Alton, Illinois, in 1837.

A notable feature of this cover is the lettersheet itself, which bears an exquisite and detailed illustration memorializing Elijah P. Lovejoy, the abolitionist minister-printer who was murdered by a pro-slavery mob in Alton, Illinois, in 1837. Afterwards he was hailed as a martyr to the abolitionist cause. The illustration is headed “LOVEJOY, The first MARTYR to American LIBERTY.”

As noted, the pointing hand was mostly used in conjunction with a handstamped PAID postmark. The cover in Figure 2, posted December 25, 1826, shows one of two types used at Fayette, North Carolina. The cover is addressed to Cheraw, S.C. It was originally rated at 12½¢ prepaid (for a distance of 80-150 miles) and then rerated to 10¢ (30-80 miles). The PAID marking on this cover shows the finger pointing away from the PAID. On the other Fayette type, not shown, the finger points toward the PAID. The “33” at upper left probably indicates the post office box number to which the prepaid postage was charged.

Figure 3 shows a cover from Hamden, Maine, with a double-oval town mark dated “AUG 30” (1831) and a very nice pointing hand and PAID. Addressed to Frankfort, Maine, this may be a prepaid way cover, handed to a mail carrier along his route, with the manuscript notation at the bottom (“Mail Carrier Paid”) indicating that the 1¢ way fee was paid

to the carrier in addition to the 6¢ prepayment for a letter traveling less than 30 miles.

The town that used the pointing hand with PAID for the longest period of time was Hartford, Connecticut. I have seen examples from 1822 to 1851. In addition to appearing on stampless covers, the Hartford pointing hand with PAID marking can be found on covers bearing the early stamps. Over its long lifetime, elements of the marking were changed as they became damaged or worn out. Figure 4 shows an 1822 cover from Hartford to Mid-



Figure 2. PAID with a hand pointing directly at the rate marking. Cover posted at “FAYETTE N.C. DEC 25” (1826) with manuscript “12½” rate marking revalued to “10.” The “33” at upper left probably indicates the post office box number to which the prepaid postage was charged.



Figure 3. Pointing hand with PAID on a cover with a double-oval marking from “HAMDEN MAINE AUG. 30” (1831). Addressed to Frankfort, Maine, this may be a prepaid way cover, handed to a mail carrier along his route.

dletown, Connecticut, with a sharp early impression of the pointing hand highlighting the manuscript “6” rating notation. Inset at lower left in the Figure 4 illustration are markings from two other Hartford covers: a blue type from 1847 (at bottom left) and my personal



Figure 4. Pointing hand and PAID on an 1822 cover from Hartford to Middletown, Connecticut, with the pointing hand highlighting the manuscript “6” rating notation. Inset at lower left are markings from two other Hartford covers: a blue type from 1847 (at bottom left) and a long-fingered version from a cover posted in 1838. Hartford used various pointing hand markings for almost 30 years.

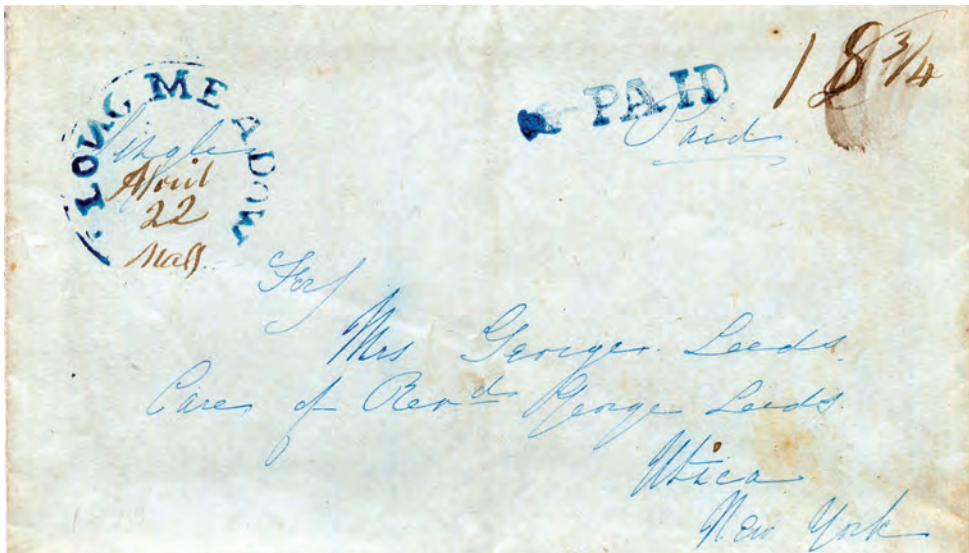


Figure 5. Pointing hand with PAID highlighting the rating marking on a cover from Long Meadow, Massachusetts. Addressed to Utica, New York, this cover was originally rated at  $12\frac{1}{2}\text{¢}$  prepaid (for a distance of 80-150 miles) and then updated to  $18\frac{3}{4}\text{¢}$ .

favorite, which I call “the long finger,” from a cover posted in 1838.

A blue pointing hand with PAID marking from Long Meadow, Massachusetts, is shown in Figure 5. Note the primitive nature of the circular datestamp. The “N” is improperly carved, and neither the date nor the state name are included in the marking; the postmaster had to add this information in manuscript. Addressed to Utica, New York, this cover was originally rated at 12½¢ prepaid (for a distance of 80-150 miles) and then uprated to 18¾¢. The year date for this cover is not known; other covers date these markings from the early 1840s.



Figure 6. Pointing hand with PAID in a large gentle arc, struck in magenta at “NORTHAMPTON MSS.” May 19 [1838] with 6¢ prepaid. Inset at upper left is another strike of the same marking, in red, from a cover posted at Northampton in 1832.

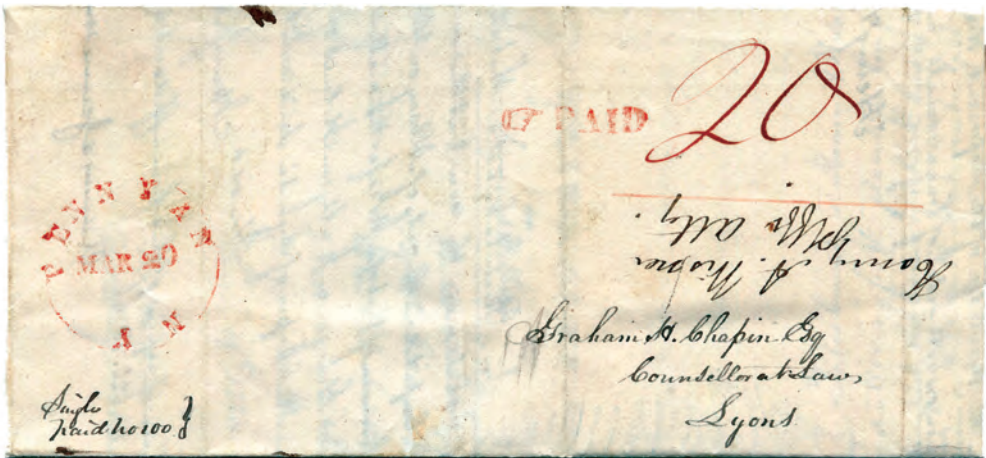


Figure 7. Small pointing hand with PAID on an 1834 cover Penn Yan to Lyons, New York. This cover was prepaid 20¢, for two times the 10¢ rate for a distance between 30 and 80 miles. As with the Long Meadow cover in Figure 5, the Penn Yan circular datestamp is very crude, apparently fabricated from elements of newspaper type.





**Figure 8.** Pointing hand marking used at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, perhaps the most detailed of the markings of this type. This cover was postmarked December 18 (1830) and sent to nearby Economy, Pennsylvania, with 6¢ postage prepaid. The manuscript endorsement at upper left indicates the prepayment was charged to a box account.

Perhaps best known after the Hartford pointing hands are the large bold arc markings from Northampton, Massachusetts. Figure 6 shows a very pretty cover to Springfield, on which both the circular datestamp and the pointing hand with PAID are struck in magenta. This cover is dated May 19 (1838) with 6¢ prepaid. Inset at upper left is another strike of the same marking, this time in red, from a cover posted at Northampton in 1832. Most examples of this marking are not so clearly struck.

In Figure 7 is a small pointing hand with PAID on an 1834 cover from Penn Yan to Lyons, New York. At lower left, the cover is endorsed “single, paid No. 100,” instructing that postage be charged to a post office box account. But it was actually a double-rate cover and so rated, “20”—for two times the 10¢ rate for a distance between 30 and 80 miles. As with the Long Meadow cover in Figure 5, the Penn Yan circular datestamp is very crude, apparently fabricated from individual elements of newspaper type.

The pointing hand marking used at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is perhaps the most elaborately detailed of any of the markings of this type. Figure 8 shows a well-struck example on a cover postmarked December 18 (1830) and sent to nearby Economy, Pennsylvania, with 6¢ postage prepaid. As with the covers in Figures 2 and 7, the prepaid postage was charged to a box account (per the endorsement at upper left).

Rochester, New York, employed a variety of postmarks during the stampless era and among these are several types of ovals seen with several different pointing hand with “paid” markings. The word “paid” was usually enclosed within a rectangular frame and sometimes appears in italics.

Figure 9 shows an 1828 cover from Rochester to Albany, New York, struck with a Rochester oval and prepaid 18¾¢ for a distance between 150 and 400 miles. Two other pointing hand markings used at Rochester during this period are shown inset at left. The marking at top left is a framed marking similar to that on the Figure 9 cover, except here the PAID is italicized. This is taken from an 1826 cover that bears a fancy Rochester oval



Figure 9. Rochester, New York, pointing hand and PAID, enclosed in a rectangle. This 1828 cover from Rochester to Albany was prepaid 18 $\frac{3}{4}$ ¢ for a distance between 150 and 400 miles. Two other pointing hand markings used at Rochester are shown inset at left. At top (from an 1826 cover that bears a fancy oval handstamp) is another framed marking but with PAID italicized. The inset marking beneath it, with PAID italicized but unframed, is taken from an 1824 Rochester cover.



Figure 10. The earliest known pointing hand postmark, on an April 2, 1796 cover from Salem, Massachusetts, to Norwich, Connecticut. The hand and PAID call attention to the fact that 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ ¢ postage was prepaid.

handstamp. The inset marking beneath it, which is unframed, is taken from a Rochester cover with a single dotted oval marking dating from 1824. Clearly there are at least three different Rochester pointing hand with PAID markings.

<b>Pointing hand marking, city and type</b>	<b>Usage</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Brooklyn, Conn., with arc PAID, blue, black	1839-40	Figure 1
Chelsea, Mass., "Forwarded" with two pointing hands, orange	1850s	Figure 13
Concord, N.H., with PAID, red	1832	
Enfield, Mass., with PAID, black	1830	
Essex, Vt., tiny hand in cds points to "E", black, red	1846-48	Figure 12
Fayette, N.C., PAID with hand, two types (different directions), red	1826	Figure 2
Fayetteville, N.C., with PAID, red	1837	
Hallowell, Maine, hand points to FORWARDED, red	1838	Figure 14
Hampden, Maine, with separate but aligned PAID, red	1831	Figure 3
Hartford, Conn., several types of PAID, various colors	1822-51	Figure 4
Long Meadow, Mass., with PAID, magenta, blue	1843-45	Figure 5
Manlius, N.Y., with PAID, blue	1828-30	
New Milford, Conn., MISSENT, hand points to "New", black	1850s	Figure 15
Northampton, Mass., large arc with PAID, red, magenta	1832-38	Figure 6
Penn Yan, N.Y., with PAID, red	1834	Figure 7
Pittsburgh, Penn., with PAID, black	1830	Figure 8
Rochester, N.Y., several types with PAID, red	1824-28	Figure 9
Saco, Maine, two hands point to REGISTERED, black	1855	Figure 16
Salem, Mass., several types with PAID, black, red	1796-1811	Figure 10
South Lee, Mass., with PAID, black	1853	
Stapleton, N.Y., hand with "5", black	1850	
Tuscaloosa, Ala., with PAID, with FREE, red	1832-34	
Vinton, Iowa, hand with "3" used for forwarding, black	1850s	
West Alburgh, Vt., small hand points to "WEST", blue	1845-51	
York, Maine, with PAID, red, black	1840s	
York, Penn., with PAID, with FREE, red	1834-37	Figure 11

**Table 1. Handstamped postmarks with pointing hands as found on U.S. stampless covers. The first column designates the town and describes the pointing hand marking. The second column lists the dates of use. The third column provides reference to covers discussed in the accompanying article.**

The markings from Salem, Massachusetts, are by far the earliest pointing hand with PAID markings. Reference to Table 1 will show that the Salem markings, as a group, pre-date all others by a decade or more. The earliest Salem marking is struck on an April 2, 1796 cover from Salem to Norwich, Connecticut. Now in the Schwartz collection, this is shown in Figure 10. In his *Congress Book* article, Schwartz identified four types, one in black and the rest in red.<sup>4</sup> My previous article presented as the earliest example a drawing of a Salem cover from 1797, but the Figure 10 cover is clearly an earlier example.

The fanciest postmark to accompany a pointing hand is the allegorical female figure from York, Pennsylvania. The cover in Figure 11 shows this marking on a cover from York to nearby Columbia, Pennsylvania, posted June 6, 1827. The pointing hand with PAID calls attention to the prepayment, in this case 12¢, for a double-rated cover carried a distance under 30 miles. I don't have a listing of covers bearing the York fancy marking, but its use with a pointing hand is definitely uncommon. This is the only example I have seen. Additionally, York was one of just two towns that used a pointing hand with FREE marking.



Figure 11. Red pointing hand with PAID applied at York, Pennsylvania, along with the fancy York townmark showing an allegorical female figure, dated June 26, (1827). The inset pointing hand with FREE marking is taken from another York cover (with an ordinary circular datestamp) sent to a Congressman in 1834.



Figure 12. Highly unusual “ESSEX Vt.” townmark with an integral hand pointing to the “E” in “Essex.” There is no other circular datestamp like this in the entire canon of stampless postmarks. Cover posted in 1847, with 5¢ collected from recipient.

An example is shown inset, taken from an 1834 cover sent from York (with a more ordinary circular datestamp) to a Congressman in Washington.

#### Essex, Vermont, pointing hand within circular datestamp

In a category by itself is the circular datestamp used at Essex, Vermont, in the late 1840s. Figure 12 shows a cover with this highly unusual pointing hand marking. The cover

was sent from Essex to Bakersfield, Vermont, on September 25, 1847, a few years after the rate reductions effective 1 July 1845. Essex struck this cover with its handstamped “5”, indicating the postage (for a half-ounce letter sent a distance under 300 miles) to be collected from the recipient. Most unusual is the circular datestamp with a tiny pointing hand, within the circular frame, pointing to the “E” in “Essex.” Throughout the stampless era, there’s no other circular datestamp like this. This is the smallest pointing hand known in a postal marking and this Essex circular datestamp is the only recorded instance in which the pointing hand appears within a circular datestamp.

### Pointing hand as part of an auxiliary marking

In addition to the uses with PAID, some towns used the pointing hand with auxiliary markings such as FORWARDED or REGISTERED. Most of the markings discussed below are from the stampless era. A few overlap into the stamp era.



**Figure 13. “Forwarded” between two pointing hands, along with “MISSENT”, applied sometime in the late 1850s at Chelsea, Massachusetts, to a free-franked cover addressed to Chelsea, Vermont.**

Figure 13 shows a free-franked cover sent from Lewiston, Maine. The year date is not present, but the cover bears the franking signature of Anson Burlingame, who was a Republican congressman from Massachusetts between 1855 and 1861. Addressed to Chelsea, Vermont, the cover was missent to Chelsea, Massachusetts. There it received the red “CHELSEA MASS. AUG 31” circular datestamp, the straightline MISSENT” and the auxiliary marking “Forwarded” with pointing hands on either end.

An earlier forwarded handstamp with pointing hand is the tiny marking from Hallowell, Maine, that appears at upper left in the cover shown in Figure 14. This cover originated in Rio de Janeiro in the fall of 1838. It arrived New York October 27 and was rated for 20¾¢ collection—2¢ ship fee plus 18¾¢ postage (for a distance of 150-400 miles) from New York to Hallowell. There it received the tiny FORWARDED with pointing hand. It was then sent on to Portland with an additional 10¢ postage required (for 30-80 miles). This was summed as 30¾¢ to be collected from the addressee at Portland.

When a cover was missent, there was no additional forwarding charge. The stamped envelope in Figure 15 originated in White Oak, Pennsylvania and was addressed to New

Milford, Pennsylvania. It was missent to New Milford, Connecticut (a small town in Litchfield County) and there received the bold circular “MIS-SENT AND FORWARDED NEW MILFORD CT” marking. Interestingly, the pointing hand in this marking calls attention to the “NEW” in “NEW MILFORD,” to distinguish it from the older and larger Connecticut town of Milford, in New Haven County. The Nesbitt indicium dates this cover from 1853 or later, but this marking is known on stampless covers too.



Figure 14. Tiny pointing hand with **FORWARDED**, applied at Hallowell, Maine, to an 1838 ship letter via New York that originated in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. From Hallowell this cover was forwarded to Portland with the ship fee of 2¢ plus 18¾¢ and 10¢ domestic postage totalled to 30¾¢ to be collected from the addressee.



Figure 15. “MIS-SENT AND FORWARDED NEW-MILFORD CT” with hand pointing to “NEW”—emphasizing that New Milford is not the older and larger Connecticut town of Milford. This 3¢ Nesbitt envelope was posted at White Oak, Pennsylvania, April 16 (1855), addressed to New Milford, Pennsylvania.

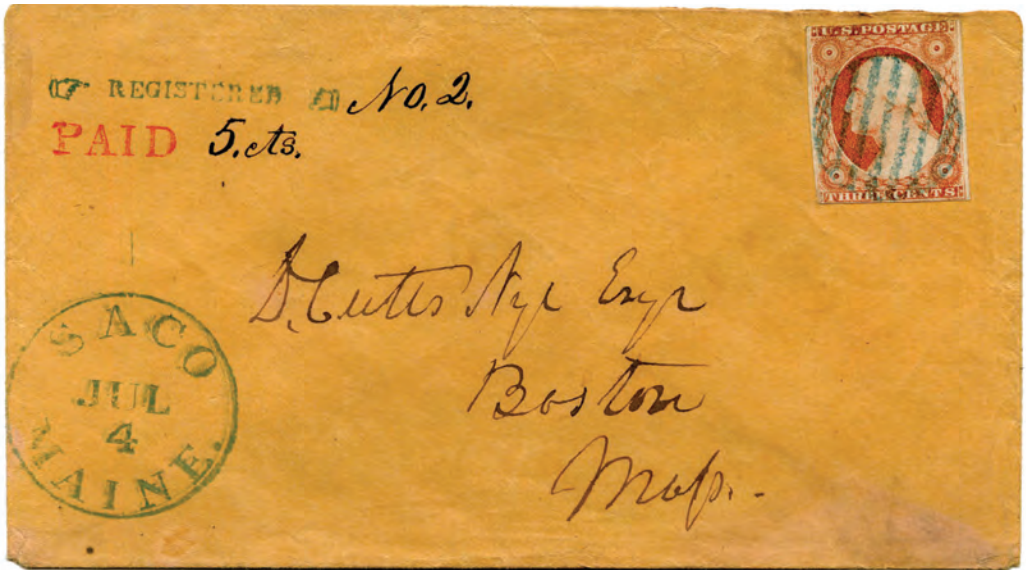


Figure 16. “REGISTERED” between two pointing hands, applied at Saco, Maine, on July 4, 1855, just days after the commencement of official registration with a 5¢ fee. This Saco marking is the only combination of a registered marking with a pointing hand.

Only one registered postmark shows a pointing hand. This is the blue “REGISTERED” straightline marking from Saco, Maine. Figure 16 shows a cover from Saco to Boston, postmarked JUL 4, just days after the commencement (July 1, 1855) of official registration with a 5¢ fee. The new fee is indicated by the “PAID” with “5.cts” noted in manuscript.



Figure 17. Successor to the stampless pointing hands was the large pointing hand used to call attention to the return address on undeliverable letters. These markings and this practice continue to the present day. This 3¢ Reay envelope, from the early 1870s, was found to be undeliverable in New York City and returned to its sender.

Note that the “REGISTERED” marking is highlighted by two pointing hands, one inverted. This is similar to the arrangement of the hands on the Chelsea marking in Figure 13.

### **Conclusion: pointing hand to indicate return to sender**

Stampless covers did not bear return addresses. Even after the development of the envelope in the late 1840s and into the 1850s, return addresses were seldom used. But after the great expansion of letter correspondence during the Civil War, which was accompanied by a huge growth in undeliverable letters, the Post Office Department made an effort to get the public to include a return address. This way, when a letter proved undeliverable for one reason or another, it could be returned to the sender without going through the costly and labor-intensive dead letter process. Return addresses on mailed envelopes became commonplace during the post Civil War era, and the practice continues to the present.

The handstamped postal markings that developed to indicate that a letter was to be returned to its sender were pointing hands, but much larger than their predecessors. The earliest one seems to have been a pictorial pointing hand (with no text) from New York City. New York soon replaced this with the typical “Returned to Writer” pointing hand as seen on the cover in Figure 17. By the 1880s many towns all over the country were using these special pointing hand postmarks to highlight the return address on undeliverable mail. The 3¢ Reay envelope in Figure 17, from the early 1870s, is from the large correspondence of a Newburgh, New York, lawyer, who sent out letters seeking information on behalf of his clients. Many of these were returned to him as undeliverable, and he retained them unopened in his files.

Nowadays the large pointing hand is a commonly used postal marking found on all types of mail.

### **Endnotes**

1. Milgram, James W., “The Pointing Hand,” *Postal History Journal*, Whole Number 46, June 1977, pp. 9-15.
2. Schwartz, Mark, “The Salem ‘Pointing Hand PAID’ handstamps: American’s first pictorial postal markings,” 77th *American Philatelic Congress Book*, 2011, pp. 129-136.
3. Phillips, David G., *American Stampless Cover Catalog*, 1997, Vol.1.
4. Schwartz, *op. cit.* ■

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