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The most dramatic "foreign entry" on a 19th century U.S. postage stamp: Enlargements of key portions of the Type 110¢ 1861 stamp from Position 94L4, showing traces of the underlying 90¢ 1861 design. Chip Gliedman provides all the details in our 1861 section.

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THE BOSTON POST OFFICE FROM 1639 TO 1776

MARK SCHWARTZ

Introduction

The postal history of Boston, Massachusetts, provides a window onto the American postal system. It is thus the story not just of a city, but of a developing country. Boston had the first post office in the original 13 colonies; the first postal markings; and the first paper money in the Western hemisphere. It was the major port in America for most of its first 200 years; a major railroad hub; and a focus for the genesis of the independent mails. Almost everything that happened to the American postal system happened in Boston. This article is the first in a projected series. It spans the time from that first post office in 1639 through the end of the Siege of Boston in March of 1776.

Settlement of Boston

Boston was settled by colonists who had moved from the neighboring town of Charlestown in search of fresh water. It was initially called Trimountaine because of its three mountain groups (which no longer exist). On September 7, 1630 it was named after Boston, the English city in Lincolnshire. At this time, it consisted of only the Shawmut peninsula, surrounded by Massachusetts Bay and the Charles River, and connected to the mainland by a narrow isthmus. This geography would play an important role during the siege of Boston by rebel colonists. Figure 1 shows a map of Boston as it existed in 1635.

First Boston post office

Richard Fairbanks was born in 1588 in Lincolnshire, and came to America with his wife in 1634. He became an influential citizen of Boston, and his house—a tavern—was licensed to sell “strong water” or distilled spirits. By 1639, Massachusetts legislators recognized the need for a post office to serve as the repository of mail brought from or sent overseas. As it was common European practice to use taverns and inns as post offices, the Massachusetts General Court, on November 6 of that year, established Fairbanks’ tavern as the first post office in the original 13 colonies. The annals of the court stated:

For preventing the miscarriage of letters; & it is ordered, that notice be given that Richard Fairbanks his house in Boston is the place appointed for all letters which are brought from beyond the seas, or are to be sent thither, are to be brought into; and he is to take care that they be delivered or sent according to their directions; and he is allowed for every such letter 1 penny, & must answer all miscarriages through his own neglect in this kind; provided that no man shall be compelled to bring his letters thither, except he please.



Figure 1. Boston in 1635, from a map created in 1935. The city was surrounded by water, with land access via one narrow spit of land, the "Boston Neck." Richard Fairbanks' tavern, where the first Boston post office was established in 1639, is circled in red.

Fairbanks' tavern was located between Washington and Devonshire Streets just north of Water Street, as shown by the red circle on the map in Figure 1. At this time, there were perhaps 100 families in Boston and only one church.

Fairbanks was given the title of postmaster in 1643, and his tavern remained Boston's post office until his death. As noted above, the letters dropped off and picked up at Fairbanks' tavern were those sent by sea. Since he received payment directly from those who brought letters to him or picked them up from him, there was no necessity to put any markings on the letters. Correspondence that passed through this first American post office are unmarked and cannot easily be determined.

While we cannot be certain, the letter in Figure 2 may well have been left at Fairbanks tavern. It is datelined April 15, 1651, and is the earliest known letter datelined at Boston and one of the very earliest from anywhere in the original 13 colonies. I choose to believe that it went via the Fairbanks post. The markings at the top center and upper right are the sender's notations: "P" likely meaning "Par" and "No. II" indicating the second letter in the correspondence. Below the addressee's name are two words I cannot decipher, but which may be the name of the residence in St. Lucy's parish where Nathaniel Mavericke lived and worked. Finally, at the bottom, it reads "Mr. F(erncase?), I pray be careful of this letter, if you stay two morrow, I shall bring you some other papers, yours Sam. Mavericke."

The letter within was written by Samuel Maverick to his son Nathaniel, a planter and merchant in St. Lucy's, Barbados. In the early 1620s, Samuel Maverick had settled in a place called Winnissimmet (now Chelsea) by the local Pawtucket Indian tribe. His house is said to have been the first permanent house in Massachusetts. A few years later, he married

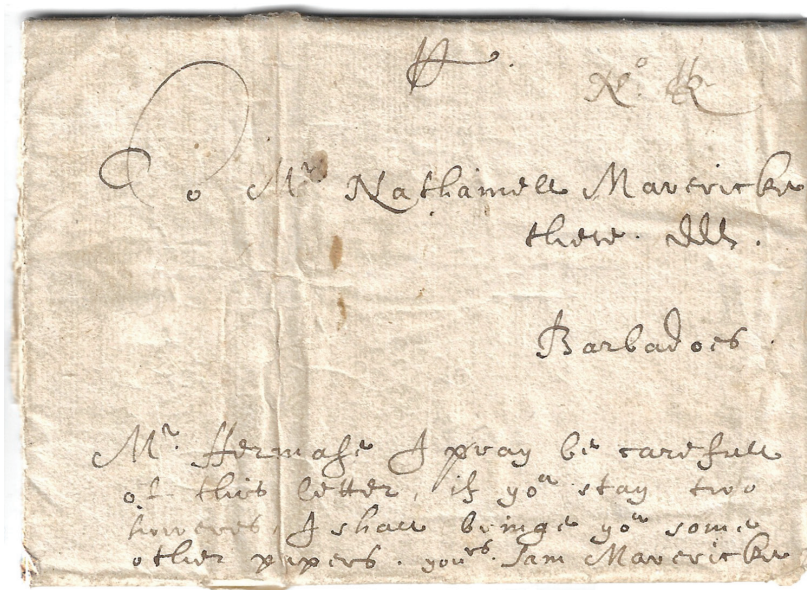


Figure 2. April 15, 1651: letter sent from Samuel Maverick in Boston to his son in Barbados. This the earliest known letter dated in Boston and one of the earliest from any of the original 13 colonies.

the widow Amias Thompson, who had inherited several properties, including Noddle's Island, site of present-day Logan Airport. Maverick became one of Boston's most prominent citizens, and is memorialized in Maverick Square, a neighborhood in East Boston, and Maverick Station, part of Boston's widespread subway system.

It seems likely that Fairbanks operated the post office in his tavern until he died in 1667. While a new Boston postmaster does not appear to have been appointed for about 10 years, there is evidence of efforts to establish a domestic post. On December 10, 1672, the second governor of New York, Francis Lovelace, announced a monthly postal service between New York and Boston. The Boston Post Road (also known as the King's Highway) still mostly exists, memorialized by markers along its length. The first mail left New York on January 22, 1673, taking around two weeks to get to Boston. The route was from New York to New Haven and Hartford, Connecticut, and then to Springfield, Brookfield, Worcester, Cambridge and Boston, Massachusetts. This new postal service was short-lived, due primarily to two factors. First, in July 1673, the Dutch re-occupied New York for about a year and a half, ending Lovelace's term as governor. Second, after the English recaptured New York in November 1674, an Indian named Metacomet (also given the name Philip because of the friendly relations between his father and the Mayflower Pilgrims) launched an attack on towns throughout the region, including many on the Boston Post Road. This war continued in southern New England until August 1676. Moreover, business leaders were not enthusiastic about this new postal route, and any enthusiasm on the part of Massachusetts Governor Winthrop may have been dampened by the death of his wife.

Beyond the Boston Post Road, we have additional evidence of the activity of a domestic post. On January 6, 1673, the proceedings of the Massachusetts General Court included the following statement:

...it is ordered by this Court & the authority thereof, that from henceforth every person so sent upon the publicke service of the country shall be allowed by the Treasurer after the rate of three pence a mile to the place to which he is sent, in money, as full satisfaction for the expence of horse & Man;...

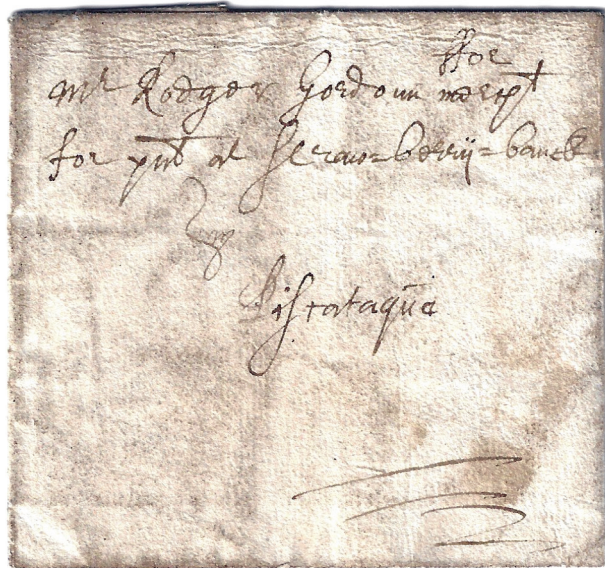
This determination by the Massachusetts General Court of payment for a post rider indicates that a domestic post existed in parts of Massachusetts at this time.

Fairbanks died in 1667 and no one had taken his place. The Massachusetts General Court became concerned that:

...many times the Letters imported are throwne upon the Exchg, so that who will, may take them up; no person (without some satisfaction) being willing to trouble their houses therewith; so that Letters of great moment are frequently Lost.”

John Hayward was named on June 1, 1677 to take over as postmaster for Boston (and for the entire Massachusetts Bay Colony), and to be responsible for both domestic and sea post. Beginning in 1680, all ship captains were required to bring their letters to Hayward, who was to receive 1d for each letter and 2d for each package. Hayward remained postmaster until 1687, having served two terms. The letter in Figure 3 may well have passed through Hayward’s post office, although it would not be the practice to put postal markings on letters for another 15 years or more. The full address reads “For Mr Rodger Gourdon, merc[han]t, for post at Straw-berry-bank, Piscataqua.” Strawberry Bank was (and is) a neighborhood in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Figure 3. Dated 3 November 1685 and sent from Boston to Piscataqua (Portsmouth), New Hampshire. This letter may have passed through the post office of John Hayward, who followed Fairbanks as postmaster in Boston and was responsible for both domestic and ocean letters.



The letter within is datelined Nov. 3, 1685 and sent from John Campbell in Boston to Rodger Gordoun in Piscataqua (now Portsmouth), New Hampshire. Gordoun was a merchant who traveled frequently between New Hampshire, Boston and Barbados. The letter discusses prices for goods at Barbados and which of them would be most profitable to trade. A most interesting aspect of this letter is that the sender, John Campbell, would himself become the Boston postmaster in 1702. I did not recognize this until I acquired the letter shown below in Figure 5 and was able to compare the signatures.

The Neale patent

The earliest attempts to begin a postal service were undertaken either by a single colony (Massachusetts/Boston) or a pair of colonies (the Lovelace Post). The first attempt to create a truly pan-colonial post occurred in 1691, when the British Crown granted a patent to Thomas Neale. In February of that year William and Mary gave him a 21-year license

to erect, settle, and establish within the chief parts of their majesties’ colonies and plantations in America, an office or offices for receiving and dispatching letters and pacquets, and to receive, send, and deliver the same under such rates and sums of money as the planters shall agree to give, and to hold and enjoy the same for the term of twenty-one years.

Thomas Neale (1641-99) was a powerful man in late Stuart England. Prior to becoming, in effect, the Postmaster General of the North American colonies, he had been

a high sheriff and a member of parliament. He was also Master of the Mint, preceding Isaac Newton. Rather than coming to America to establish his post office, Neale appointed Andrew Hamilton, Governor of New Jersey, as his resident Deputy. The chief post office was established in New York City and Hamilton traveled to each colony to urge passage of postal legislation. Over the next few years, the assemblies of New York, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Connecticut all did so. In Boston, Hamilton appointed Duncan Campbell postmaster of Boston and Massachusetts Colony in 1693. Campbell was authorized to convey public letters for free; receive sea letters; transmit letters within and beyond the colony at specific rates; and to mark letters with the date of arrival (the latter requirement apparently not followed).

However, by 1698, this new venture was heavily in debt, and Neale fired Hamilton. Despite marrying England's richest widow, Neale died insolvent in 1699. Under the management of Hamilton and Robert West, the colonial postal system struggled along until 1707, when the Crown took back the patent and began to run Neale's operation. Much additional information about the Neale patent can be found in "Neale Patent Mail, 1693-1707" by Dr. Timothy P. O'Connor in *Chronicle* 237.

The first Boston postmarks

During the period of the Neale Patent, Postmaster John Campbell applied the first postmarks at Boston in 1702. An example is shown in Figure 4, the address panel of a letter datelined June 30, 1702, and sent from Boston to New York with a fancy "B" (at lower left) but no rate notation.

The letter shown in Figure 4 reposes in the archive of the New-York Historical Society and is shown here through the courtesy of O'Connor. Boston continued to use the manuscripts "B" or "Bo" (and "Sh" if a ship letter) until 1768, when the first Boston handstamps were introduced. There are earlier "official" letters datelined at Boston that bear the letter "B", but they do not appear to have been processed by the Boston (or any) post office. Instead, they were likely carried privately. Postmarks were introduced

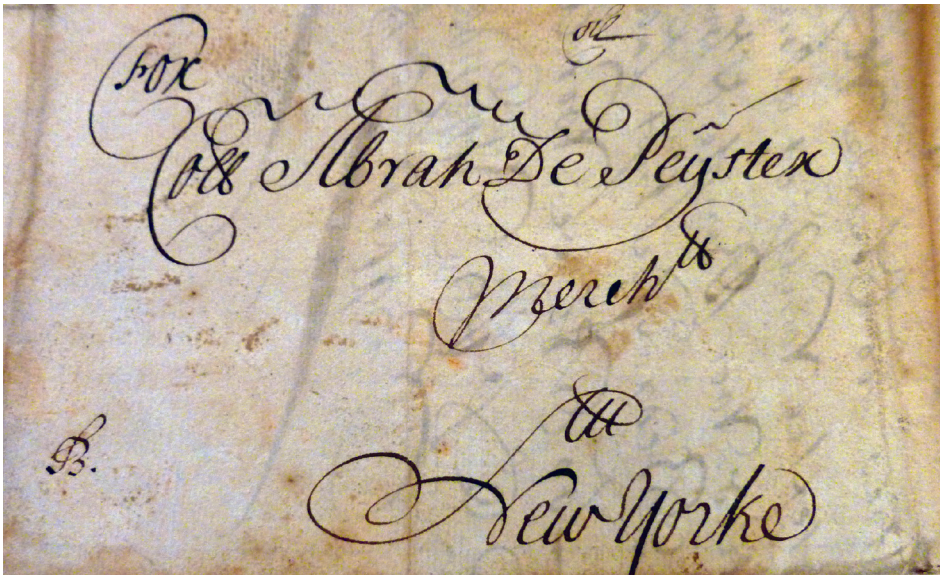


Figure 4. Address panel of a letter datelined June 30, 1702, and sent from Boston to New York with a fancy "B" (at lower left) which may be the earliest Boston postmark. This letter reposes in the archive of the New-York Historical Society and is shown here through the courtesy of Timothy P. O'Connor.

in New York in 1709, Newport in 1714 and Philadelphia around 1728.

O'Connor has diligently searched Massachusetts archives and turned up several examples of the use of a franking privilege in Massachusetts from 1699-1707. Section 9 of the Act of the Massachusetts Privy Council in 1693 allowed for conveyance "free of all charge" of "all letters of public concernment for their Majesty's service."

Figure 5. Dated June 9, 1707 and sent by Boston postmaster John Campbell to Nathaniel Byfield in Bristol, Massachusetts. The manuscript marking at lower left ("ffrank J:C") represents the earliest known example of an American free frank in private hands.

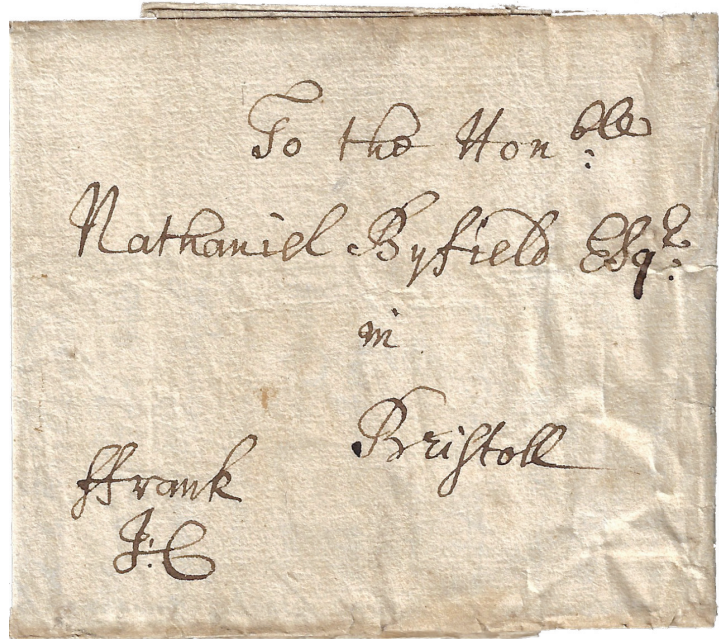


Figure 5 shows the earliest known example of an American free frank in private hands. On June 9, 1707, when this letter was datelined, John Campbell (1653-1728) was the Boston postmaster. He was either the brother or son of Postmaster Duncan Campbell, having succeeded him in 1702. The letter was sent by John Campbell in Boston to Nathaniel Byfield, first judge of the Court of Vice-Admiralty in Bristol, Massachusetts, and endorsed "ffrank J:C". It contained a second letter which had been sent to Campbell. The full story of this interesting correspondence was told in *Chronicle* 232.¹

The British Post Office Act of 1710

In 1710, the British government decided to take direct responsibility "For All of Her Majesty's Dominions" and passed the Post Office Act of 1710. More familiarly known as the Act of Queen Anne, it took effect June 1, 1711, creating a chief letter office at New York and establishing postal rates in lawful British money, based on the distance traveled. While the act specified rates in British shillings and pence, that specie was rarely seen in the colonies, and the rates soon began to be stated in pennyweights and grains of coined silver (most often the Spanish milled dollar).

The left image in Figure 6 shows the cover page of the Queen Anne Act, which as originally printed consisted of 14 pages. The right image in Figure 6 shows a letter, sent from Boston on September 7, 1711 by Joseph Dudley, governor of the Province of Massachusetts Bay, to Charles Storey, secretary of the Royal Council of New England. This letter, which appears to be the earliest letter announcing the Queen Anne Act in America, accompanied a copy of the Act: "...[H]erewith you will receive the Act of parliament for the establishment of the post office." In his letter, Dudley instructs Storey to communicate this to the members of Her Majesty's Council and to publish the act in the Council Book.

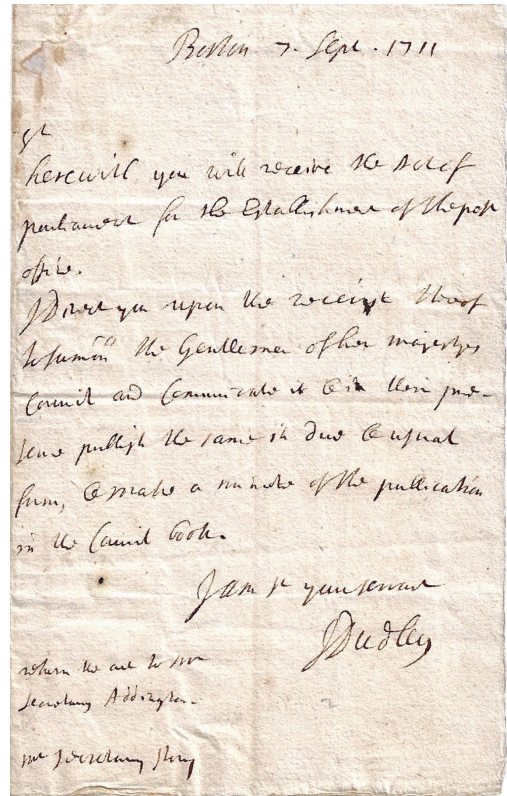
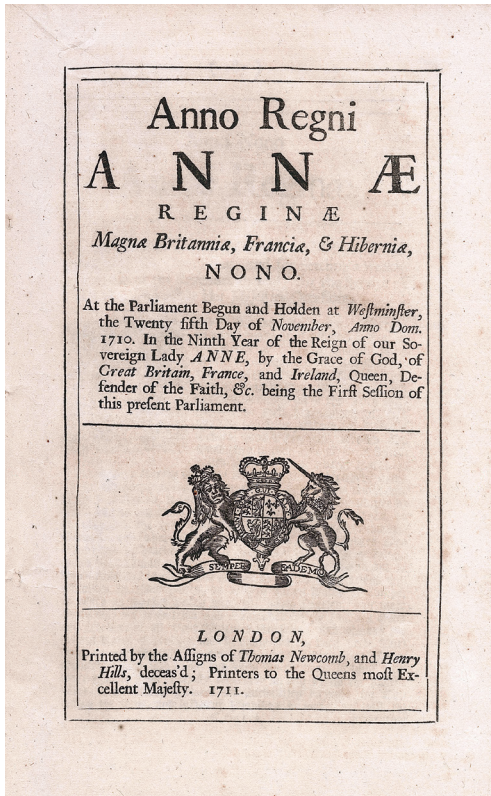


Figure 6. At left, the title page of the the British Post Office Act of 1710, better known as the Act of Queen Anne, which established postal rates within the American colonies. At right, letter from Joseph Dudley, governor of the Province of Massachusetts Bay, transmitting the act to the secretary of the Royal Council of New England.

Distance	Single sheet	Double sheet	Triple Sheet
up to 60 miles	4d (1dwt, 8gn)	8d (2dwt, 16gn)	1sh (4dwt)
60-100 miles	6d (2dwt)	1sh (4dwt)	1sh, 6d (6dwt)
Boston to Conn. or Maine	9d (3dwt)	1sh, 6d (6dwt)	2sh, 3d (9dwt)
Boston to New York	1sh (4dwt)	2sh (8dwt)	3sh (12dwt)
Boston to Philadelphia	1sh, 9d (7dwt)	3sh, 6d (14dwt)	5sh, 3d (21dwt)

Figure 7. Effective 1 June 1711: postage rates from Boston under the Queen Anne Act. The act specified rates in British shillings and pence, but very little British money circulated in the colonies. Covers were typically rated in coined silver, valued in pennyweights (dwt) and grains (gn). Payment was often made in paper currency, whose value was eroded by inflation as the years passed.

Figure 7 shows the rate chart under the Queen Anne Act. The rates are per sheet of paper and while there are rates for letters sent 0-60 and 60-100 miles, for letters beyond 100 miles, rates were determined by the origin and destination cities.

While the postal rates were stated in lawful British money, very little of this was circulating in America, in part a policy of the British government. Coined silver, primarily the Spanish milled dollar, was more commonly seen, but even this was scarce. Instead, what was often seen in Massachusetts and in the other colonies was locally issued paper money.

First paper money in the western world

In fact, Massachusetts issued the first paper money in the western world, as a result of the need to pay expenses for the unsuccessful action against New France (Canada) during King William's War. In December 1690, the General Court authorized the issuing of paper currency. As the years passed and additional paper currency continued to be issued, its value in lawful British money declined. By 1723, it took 2.3 Massachusetts paper shillings to equal one British shilling. From this period we see the earliest letters from Boston rated in this depreciated currency, called "Massachusetts Old Tenor." Similar notes were issued in Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island. They were considered interchangeable.

Only seven letters are known rated at this 2.3 relationship of Old Tenor to British lawful money. One of them is shown as Figure 8. Dated at London on August 16, 1723, the letter is addressed to Hugh Hall, a Boston merchant who was a Harvard graduate and a slave dealer. The letter arrived at Boston on October 23 and was rated as double ship letter sent 0-60 miles. Below "Mr.," we see "BSh 1N9", reflecting a letter which arrived at Boston by ship, with a rate of 1 shilling, 9d. The official rate was 9d British money, or 1 sh, 9d in local currency (including a 1d sterling or 2d local ship fee). The note at bottom left reads "p Capt Dove QDC," abbreviating Quem Deus Conservet, Latin for "Whom God Preserves."

Figure 8. Dated at London on August 16, 1723, this letter reached Boston on October 23 and was rated as a double ship letter sent 0-60 miles. The collection indicated at left center was 9d British money, or 1 sh, 9d in Massachusetts currency (including a 1d sterling or 2d local ship fee).



Over the next few decades, Massachusetts paper currency continued to decline versus British money. By 1735, it had dropped to only 28 percent of British money and by 1748, 14 percent. Figure 9 shows a letter dated Feb. 20, 1748 and sent from Boston to Newport, Rhode Island. It was prepaid 7 shillings in Massachusetts paper currency (equal to 12d British money) as a triple-sheet letter sent up to 60 miles. The townmark and rating (at top center) reads "Bo paid 7".

By 1752, the value of a Massachusetts shilling had dropped further, to just 11 percent of a British shilling. While most of New England accepted depreciated local paper currency at the same rate, other colonies such as New York, Pennsylvania and Virginia, did not. Therefore, when a letter from Boston (or a ship letter via Boston) was sent to one of those colonies, it had to be rated in coined silver.

While different from British shillings and pence, coined silver maintained a stable relationship to British currency. Coined silver was valued in pennyweights (dwt) and grains (gn), with 1 shilling sterling equal to 3dwt, and 1dwt equal to 24gn. A cover sent from London via Boston to Philadelphia is shown in Figure 10. Note that it is rated in pennyweights and grains. Docketed as originating in London on December 17, 1742, it was rated at Boston (April 23, 1743) for a collection in Philadelphia of 21dwt, 16gn as a triple-sheet letter and including a 16gn ship fee.

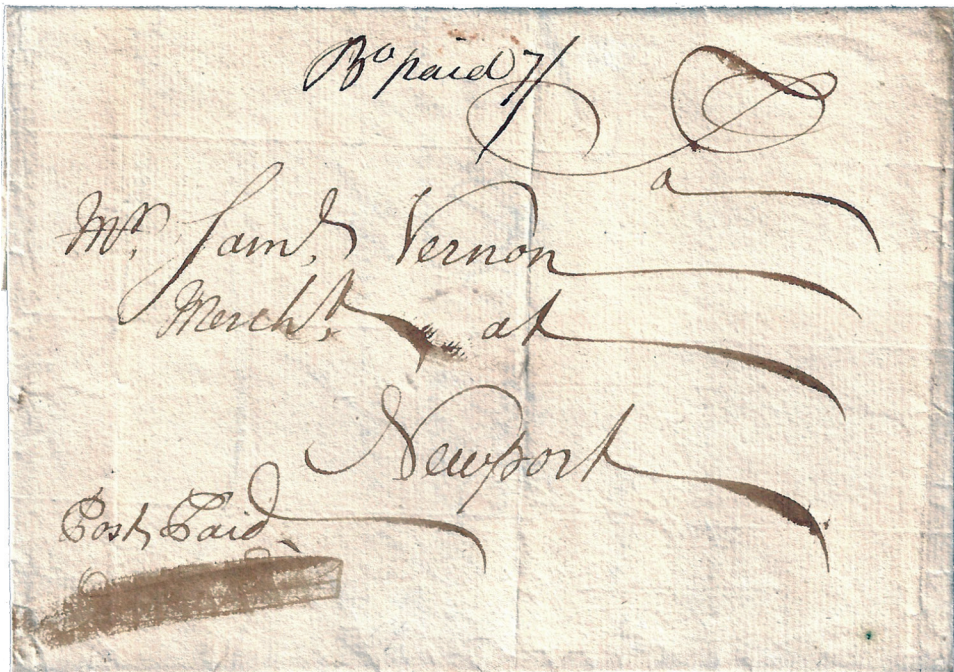


Figure 9. Dated Feb. 20, 1748 and sent from Boston to Newport, Rhode Island, this letter was prepaid 7 shillings in Massachusetts paper currency (equal to 12d British money) as a triple-sheet letter traveling up to 60 miles. The townmark and rating (at top center) reads “Bo paid 7”.

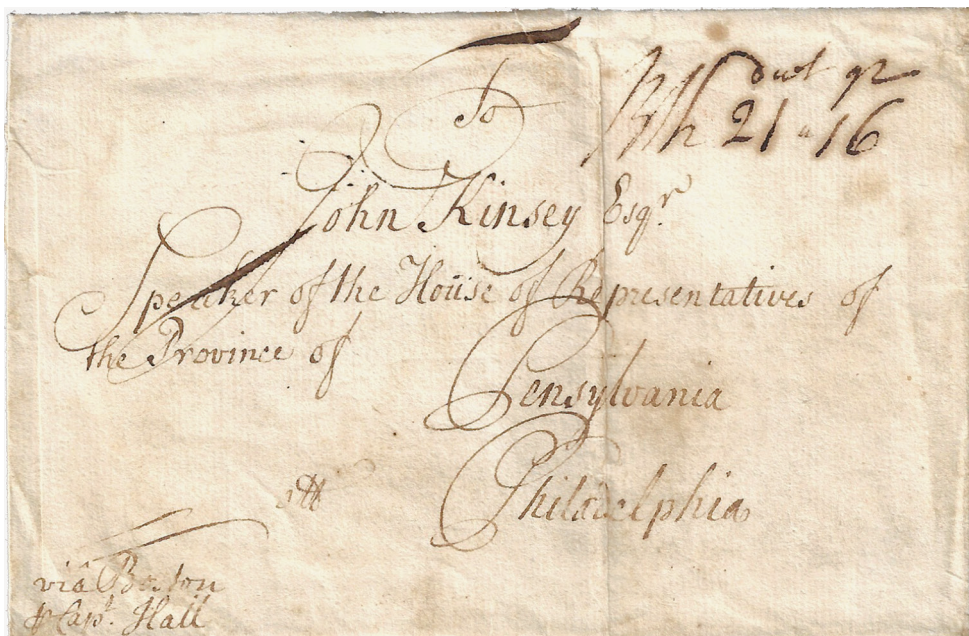


Figure 10. Cover sent from London via Boston in 1742, rated at Philadelphia in pennyweights and grains. Docketed as originating in London on December 17, 1742 and sent from via Boston on April 23, 1743. Rated 21dwt, 16gn as a triple-sheet letter including a 16gn ship fee.

Benjamin Franklin becomes Deputy Postmaster

While Massachusetts's paper currency was being used in New England, other paper currency was being used in New York, Pennsylvania and Virginia. For an intra-colonial postal system, the confusion that this caused, especially in overall accounting, was untenable. In 1753, Benjamin Franklin and William Hunter were appointed deputy postmasters general for the Colonies. They soon decided to eliminate the confusion by instructing postmasters to rate *all* letters in pennyweights and grains. Figure 11 shows a letter sent within New England, in this case from Boston to Providence, docketed March 7, 1763, which would have previously been rated in paper currency. The "Bo: 1..8" marking at upper right indicates the cover was sent from Boston and rated 1dwt, 8gn in coined silver.



Figure 11. Docketed March 7, 1763 and sent from Boston to Providence, this letter was rated 1dwt, 8gn as a single-sheet letter sent up to 60 miles. A few years earlier, Franklin and Hunter had instructed colonial postmasters to rate all letters in pennyweights and grains.

Franklin and Hunter's instruction was generally followed. However, it did not eliminate the basic problem—that many people in the colonies did not have sufficient silver and copper specie to use to pay their postal bills. Thus, we see letters rated in pennyweights and grains, and in the local currency of the addressee. The letter in Figure 12 shows an example of this type of double rating. Dated Sept. 24, 1764 and sent from Boston to New York, it was rated officially 4dwt as a single sheet letter sent between these two cities ("Bo. 4" at upper right). At New York it was also rated 1 shilling, 8d in local currency (magenta "1/8"). This practice of double rating continued until the Act of Congress of 1792 established the United States Post Office and set rates in dollars and cents.

The Act of King George III of 1765

When the Queen Anne Act of 1711 was passed, the high postal rates were intended to help pay for military expenses associated with War of the Spanish Succession. Since it had been expected that these expenses were to be paid by 1743, a new postal law was to be



Figure 12. Dated Sept. 24, 1764 and sent from Boston to New York. Rated officially 4dwt (“Bo. 4” at upper right) as a single-sheet letter sent between these two cities; at New York it was also rated 1 shilling, 8 pence in local currency.

implemented at that time. However, new wars created new debts, and the implementation of a new postal law with reduced rates was delayed until 1765.

The most prominent changes to the Queen Anne Act were the extension of the zoned mileage rates, which had ended at 60-100 miles; and the long-expected reduction in rates (although only significant for letters sent longer distances). For example, the rate for a letter of a single sheet sent from Boston to Philadelphia declined from 7dwt under Queen Anne, to 4dwt under King George III. In addition, a port-to-port rate (within America) of 4d (or 1dwt, 8gn) was established, and the 2d (16gn) ship fee was now made official. A table of these new, zoned rates is shown in Figure 13. The act was noted in a public announcement on June 8, and printed in the *Boston Evening Post* of August 5. Effective October 10, it was not a substantial change from the Queen Anne Act, rather a series of amendments to that act.

Distance	Single sheet	Double sheet	Triple Sheet
up to 60 miles	1dwt, 8gn	2dwt, 16gn	4dwt
60-100 miles	2dwt	4dwt	6dwt
100-200 miles	2dwt, 16gn	5dwt, 8gn	8dwt
200-300 miles	3dwt, 8gn	6dwt, 16gn	10dwt
300-400 miles	4dwt	8dwt	12dwt

Figure 13. Effective 10 October 1765: new zoned rates under the Act of King George III. These were similar to the previous Queen Anne rates for shorter distances, but modestly lower for longer distances.

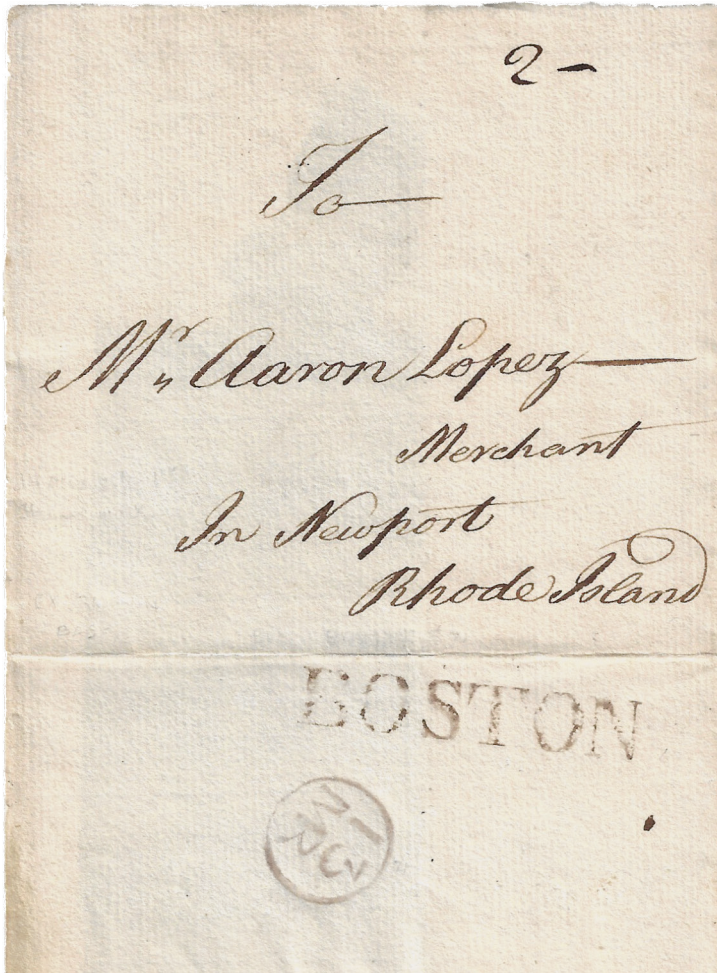


Figure 14. The first handstamp used at the Boston post office, here on a single-rate letter posted 13 March 1769 and rated 2dwt for the 60-100 miles distance between Boston and Newport, Rhode Island.

Boston handstamps

Around the time the King George III rates were enacted, we begin to see new handstamps used in the colonies. New York had used a two line handstamp “NEW YORK” for several years,² but in 1764 we see a two-line 53x16 millimeter “PHILA/DELPHIA”; in 1765, a 51x6 mm straightline “SAVANNA”; and in 1766, a 28x12 mm two-line “HART/FORD”.

An example of the first handstamp used at the Boston post office is shown in Figure 14. This was a single-rate letter posted on March 13, 1769, rated 2dwt for the 60-100 miles distance between Boston and Newport, Rhode Island. This 43½x7½ mm handstamp is first known used in February, 1769. For the first six months, it was struck in a violet shade of ink, as on the cover in Figure 14. From what I have seen, these strikes are often faded or not well struck. Perhaps because the marking did not show up well, this violet ink was changed to red by August or September. By April 1770, both red and magenta inks were being used. Below the straightline “BOSTON”, note the handstamped encircled “13 MR”. This is called a Franklin mark, introduced by Benjamin Franklin as a means to show when a letter

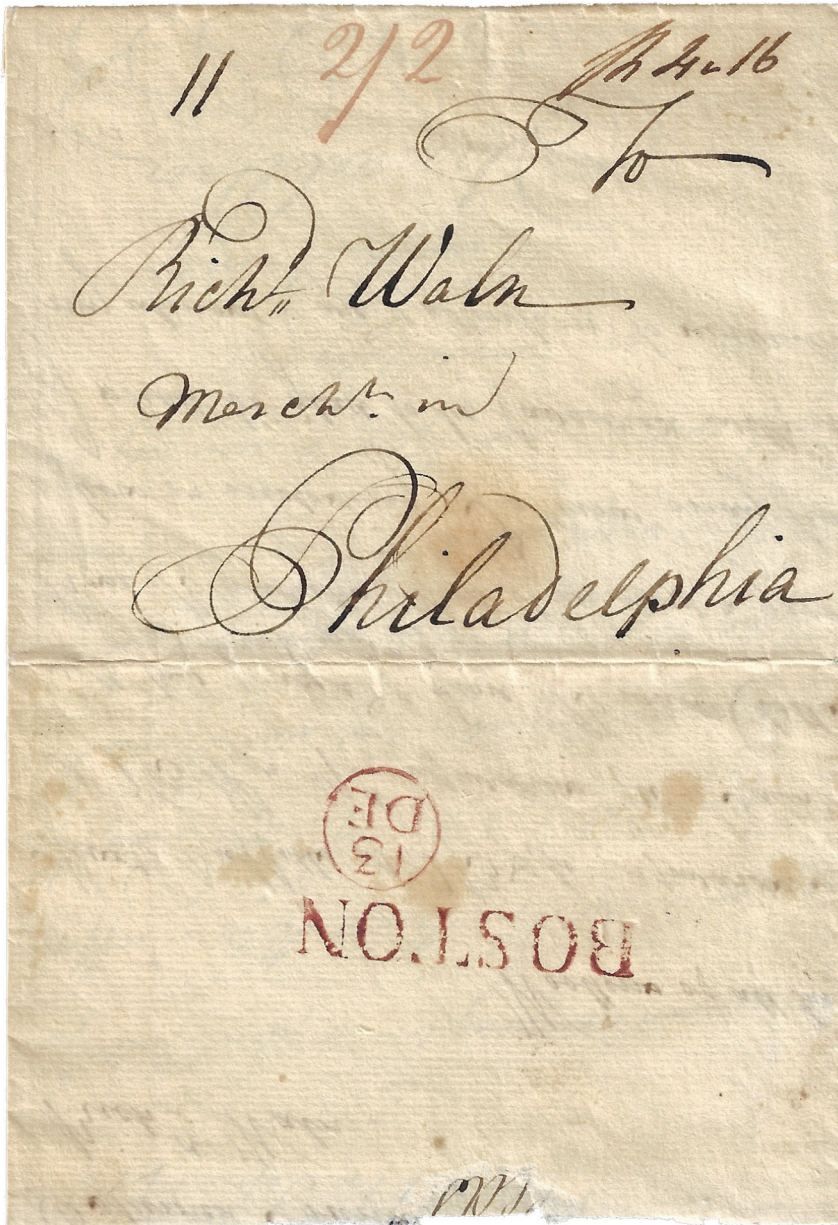
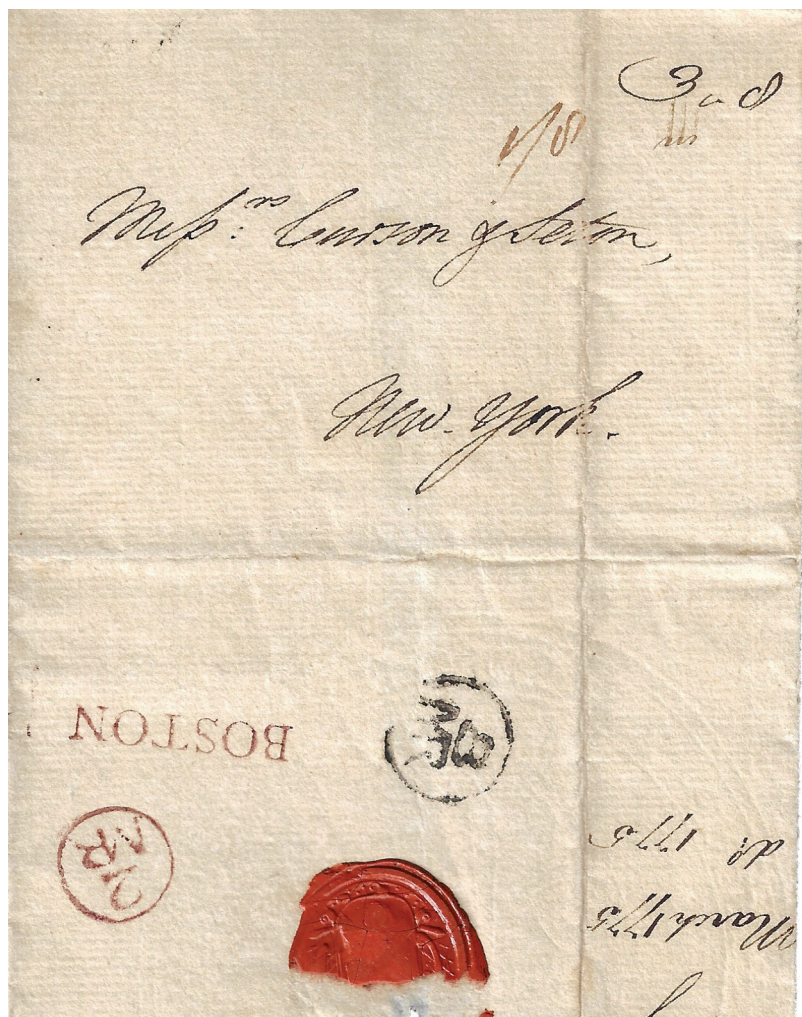


Figure 15. Struck with the first Boston handstamp in magenta, this cover was posted on December 13, 1773 and rated 4dwt, 16gn as a single-sheet ship letter originating in England and upon arrival sent the 300-400 mile distance to Philadelphia.

was posted. Predecessor markings called Bishop marks were devised by Henry Bishop, Postmaster General of England, in 1661; these were the world's first postmarks.

An example of the Boston handstamp in magenta is seen in Figure 15, on a letter posted at Boston on December 13, 1773, rated 4dwt, 16gn as single-sheet ship letter originating in England and upon arrival sent 300-400 miles to Philadelphia. The pen marking at upper right reads "Sh 4-16". When the cover arrived at Philadelphia, the rating in coined silver was restated as 2sh, 2d (magenta "2/2" at top center) in local Pennsylvania currency.

Figure 16. The smaller BOSTON handstamp on this cover was used only 3½ months in 1775. This letter to New York, posted at Boston on March 2, 1775, was rated 3dwt, 8gn as a single-sheet letter sent a distance of 200-300 miles. At New York it was also rated 1sh, 8d in local currency.



The last royal handstamp used at Boston

In 1775, a new, smaller handstamp began being used at Boston and other colonial towns. It was used in Boston for only 3½ months, from February 20 to June 4. An example is shown on the cover in Figure 16, which was posted at Boston on March 2, 1775 and sent to New York as a single-sheet letter traveling a distance of 200-300 miles. The cover was rated at Boston at the official rate of 3dwt 8gn (black manuscript “3..8” at upper right). At New York this was rerated in local currency as 1shilling, 8d (magenta manuscript marking above the address). Note the two different Franklin marks on this letter. The “2 MR” marking in red indicates the date the letter was posted. The “8 MR” in black may indicate when it was received in New York, but we are not certain of that.

The Massachusetts independent post and the Siege of Boston

Beginning in 1774, we see one of the most interesting periods of Boston postal history. That year, the British Parliament passed a series of laws intended to punish the patriots for the Boston Tea Party. Called the Intolerable Acts, they closed the port of Boston until the East India Company was repaid for the tea dumped into the harbor; moved trials of royal officials from Massachusetts if it was felt they would not get a fair trial; forced the quartering of troops; and, most importantly, brought the government of Massachusetts un-

der direct control of the British Government. This last act abrogated the provincial charter and the independence of the provincial government. Governor Thomas Gage dissolved the provincial assembly in October 1774. However, the citizens refused to accept this dissolution, reconvened at Concord as a Provincial Congress and set up the first autonomous government in the colonies. Considered traitors subject to arrest by the British, this Congress moved from town to town to avoid the British troops who were searching for its members.

In April 1775, British soldiers were given orders to capture and destroy rebel supplies stored at Concord, about 20 miles west of Boston. The supplies had already been moved and on April 19, the Massachusetts militia was waiting for the British at Lexington. Outnumbered at Lexington, the rebels fell back. The British regulars proceeded on to Concord, where about 500 rebels defeated three British companies. Additional rebel militia caused further casualties as the British made their way back to Boston. The rebel militias then blockaded the narrow strip of land leading to Charlestown and Boston, beginning the Siege of Boston.

The following month, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress had moved to Watertown, and on May 12 passed an act setting up a Provisional Post. The main post office was established at Cambridge, substituting for the one at Boston still under the control of the British. Thirteen additional post offices were established at places such as Salem, Ipswich, Newburyport and Haverhill, and new rates were created. One manuscript copy of this act survives in private hands; a second copy was reported by ter Braake to be in the Rhode Island Archives.³ It begins "In Provincial Congress, Watertown, May 12, 1775. Resolved, as the Opinion of this Congress that Post Riders be immediately established to go from Cambridge and to ride the following roads, viz...." The document goes on to list the post roads, post offices and postmasters of the independent post, as well as the rates by distance (0-60 miles, 61-100 miles, 101-200 miles, and on in increments of 100 miles). This post lasted only a few months, until November 1775. Thereafter letters were rated according to the Act of the Continental Congress, Sept. 30, 1775.

A rare letter rated under this Provisional Post is shown in Figure 17. Dated October 10, 1775 at Newburyport, it was there rated 1 shilling, 6½ pence in Massachusetts currency (black manuscript "NPort 1/6½" at upper right) as a single letter to travel the 400-500 mile distance to Philadelphia. At Philadelphia, it was rerated 4dwt, 16gn in coined silver (per the Resolution of Congress, September 30, 1775, manuscript marking at upper left) and also 2 shillings, 2 pence in Philadelphia currency (pencil marking above the address).



Figure 17. A rare letter rated under the terms of the Massachusetts Provisional Post. Dated October 10, 1775 at Newburyport and rated 1sh, 6½d per the Act of the Massachusetts Provisional Congress for a single letter sent 400-500 miles. At Philadelphia it was rated 4dwt, 16gn in coined silver, and 2sh, 2d in Pennsylvania currency.

After the Battle of Bunker Hill, where on June 17, 1775 the British took both Breeds' Hill and Bunker Hill but suffered significant casualties, the siege saw little action for several months. This was in part due to the lack of heavy weaponry among the rebel forces. But events were unfolding far away which would have a major effect on the siege and on the developing Revolutionary War.

Fort Ticonderoga was originally built by the French at the south end of Lake Champlain. While only a small British garrison protected the Fort in 1775, it was strategically placed and provided a means for the British to supply New York. On May 10, rebels from Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Connecticut, led by Ethan Allen and Benedict Arnold, surprised the garrison and captured the fort, along with over 60 tons of cannons and other arms.

In November 1775, George Washington, now commander of the rebel troops outside Boston, sent Henry Knox to Fort Ticonderoga to bring the captured cannon back to Boston. The 25-year old Knox had been a Boston bookseller with an academic interest in military matters. He put his academic interests into practice building fortifications around Boston, and was given a commission as a colonel in the artillery.

Knox reached Ticonderoga in early December. He and his men carried the 60 tons of cannon and other arms overland from the fort to the northern end of Lake George, and then by ship to its southern end. On its way, the boat carrying the cannon foundered and sank, but was refloated. From Lake George, the cannon traveled by sled over snow-covered roads towards Albany, but ran into problems at the Hudson River, which was covered by ice too thin to travel over. Knox devised a plan to drill holes in the ice to let water rise over it and refreeze, making it thick enough to bear the weight of the cannon. This was only partly successful, as cannons did break through into the river. However, the cannons were



Figure 18. Map of Boston (greatly reduced) drawn by a British engineer in October 1775 and published in London in 1776. This shows the strategic vulnerability of Boston, surrounded by water (at least at high tide), commanded by Dorchester Heights, and connected to the mainland (at Roxbury) by the narrow spit known as Boston Neck.

recovered and while the details of the remaining trip are sketchy, it was an enormous task to carry, drag and push them the more than 200 miles from Lake George, down to Albany and Kinderhook, west into Massachusetts and across the entire state to Boston. And all of this over terrible roads in the middle of winter, completing what was in one historian's opinion "one of the most stupendous feats of logistics of the war."⁴

Knox' achievement was the beginning of the end of the Siege of Boston. On the night of March 2, Washington used some of the captured cannon to shell the British in Boston from the Cambridge side of the town. The map in Figure 18, drawn by a British engineer in October 1775 and published in London in 1776, shows the relationship between Boston, Cambridge and Dorchester Heights. Readers who are familiar with the geography of modern Boston will appreciate how much landfill has been done since the days of the Revolution. Much of Dorchester Heights was pushed into the harbor to make Back Bay.

On the night of March 4, while the British were distracted by the rebel barrage—which inflicted few casualties—approximately 2,000 American soldiers proceeded to haul the cannon up Dorchester Heights. A first-hand account of the end of the Siege of Boston appears in a letter British Captain George Eliot wrote on the morning of March 18, 1776 aboard one of the transport ships leaving Boston on its way to Halifax. The first page of Eliot's letter, addressed to Bartholomew Chaudry, a friend in Devon, is shown in Figure 19. Its content provides an on-the-scene description of the British astonishment at these events: "To our great surprise...the enemy had thrown up such works on the Dorchester Hill as could not probably have been done...with less than ten thousand men."

Dear Chaudry.
On Board Harlowe and William Town-
send, about 5 miles from Boston
18th March 1776. King's Road.

On this Instant at 1/2 past 11. o'clock at night
the Rebels began a bombardade on the Town from some
new works that they had thrown up on the Cambridge side
and at the same time they opened all Round Battery, and
threw several Shells into the Town, I happened to be
on the Town Guard towards the North end, and at the
same time they began to Cannonade us, and likewise
opened another Round Battery ~~at~~ which they
continued to play upon us all night without doing
us any kind of hurt, except a few Houses on the South
side, which were disfigured by the Shot and Shells, this sort of work
they continued from time to time, but on the Monday
night of the 17th in particular, when a general
Cannonade began on all sides, and shells thrown from
all directions, this continued the whole night, but
to our great surprise on the Tuesday Morning
the enemy had thrown up such works on Dorches-
ter Hill, as could not probably been done by the opinion
of every body, with less than Ten Thousand Men, and
then found our selves so Enfiladed all round, that
a Disposition was made for attacking those Hills
on the Tuesday evening, for they Embarked and
fell down to Castle William in order to land
their, but it blowing so very hard, that one of
the Transports got on shore, the Grandiers
and Light Companies were to have gone over
in the flat Boats and to have been sustained
by some Regiments, the Remainder of the Troop
was at the same time to have gone and attacked the
Works at Proctor'sough, but from the badness of the
weather, and the violent Gale of Wind, it was found
impracticable, and therefore the scheme was
abolished, which consequently determined the General

Figure 19. This letter written March 18, 1776 by a British officer to a friend back home, contains an on-the-scene account of the British expulsion from Boston.

The British continued to underestimate the energy and commitment of Washington's troops. "We then found ourselves so insulated all round, that a disposition was made for attacking those hills." The British sent three regiments to attack the hills by land and by sea, but were unsuccessful in taking Dorchester Heights. "From the badness of the weather... the scheme was abolished [forcing] the General to abandon the town."

Re-opening the Boston post office

The expulsion of the British from Boston allowed the rebels to re-open the Boston post office in April. The earliest letter known from that office is shown in Figure 20. It was sent on May 16, 1776 to Captain John Langdon in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, rated 2dwt as a single-sheet letter going 60-100 miles. Langdon was a New Hampshire politician who served in the Second Continental Congress in 1775-76. He left in June 1776 to become an agent for the rebels and supervised the construction of several warships. The most striking aspect of this letter is the brilliant yellow-gold ink in which the postmark and date (Franklin



Figure 20. Letter datelined May 16, 1776, sent to John Langdon in Portsmouth, N.H., rated 2dwt as a single-sheet letter going 60-100 miles. The Boston postmark and Franklin marks are struck in a brilliant yellow-gold ink.

mark) were struck. The “BOSTON” handstamp appears to be the same one that was used by the British in early 1775 (see Figure 16). This is the earlier of the two examples of the Boston straightline handstamp known in yellow-gold ink.

The color of this Boston handstamp brings to mind a story told of Benjamin Franklin at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia 13 years later, in 1789. During the convention, George Washington sat in a chair which had a carving on its back. The carving showed the top half of the sun, complete with rays. At the close of the convention, James Madison quoted Franklin as saying: “I have often looked at that sun behind the president without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting. But now I know that it is a rising sun.”

I would like to think that the rebels who recaptured Boston were thinking the same thing when they chose that sunny, optimistic color with which to postmark the first letters from the re-opened Boston post office—that the sun was indeed rising on a new nation.

Endnotes

1. Timothy O’Connor and Mark Schwartz, “Use of the Franking Privilege in New England in 1699-1707: The Earliest Proof of a Durable Post,” *Chronicle* 232 (2011), pp. 305-11.
2. The first two-line “NEW YORK” handstamp, the earliest on North American mail, was used on Bristol Packet covers in 1710-12; it remains unclear where this marking was applied. Various other two-line NEW YORK hand stamps are known used in 1756-60; 1758-69; and 1770-1773.
3. A.L. ter Braake, *The Posted Letter in Colonial and Revolutionary America, 1628-1790* (American Philatelic Research Library, 1975).
4. Victor Brooks, *The Boston Campaign* (Conshohocken, Penn., Combined Publishing, 1999). ■

*When you think of United States postal history provenance,
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