

## PRESTAMP & STAMPLESS PERIOD

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### UNOFFICIAL REGISTRATION OF MAIL IN THE U.S.: 1845-1855

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Registration of mail as a service of the Post Office Department began on 1 July 1855 with a 5¢ cash fee. However, for 10 years prior to official registration, a wide-spread unofficial system of registering valuable letters was increasingly used throughout the United States. Early registration did not provide indemnification of lost valuable contents. But it did provide a promise by the Post Office Department to provide extra security for valuable letters when such letters were brought to the attention of a postmaster.

It was made clear to those sending money through the mails that money and other valuables were sent in the mails at the sender's risk, but the P.O.D. would make serious effort to investigate any loss. A directive dating from the 1845 *Postal Laws and Regulations* is felt to be the basis for the development of unofficial registration:

**Sec. 218. Money, or other valuable things sent in the mail, is at the risk of the owner. But if it be lost the Department will make every effort in its power to discover the cause, and if there has been a theft, to punish the offender.**

**Sec. 219. In every case of loss by mail...the Department should be informed without delay, of all the circumstances connected with it. Particular care should be taken to state the name of the office in which the letter was placed, the day on which, if at all, it was actually mailed, the names of the writer and the person addressed, the amount, and if practicable, a particular description of valuable enclosures, the amount of postage marked on the letter, and whether unpaid or paid, the office to which addressed, and whether mailed direct thereto, or to another office for distribution, and the route by which it was sent, with any further particulars that may aid the Department in its investigation respecting the cause of loss.**

**Sec. 220. No reported loss will be investigated by an agent, unless satisfactory evidence is produced, either by the certificate of the postmaster, or some other disinterested individual, that the money or other thing was deposited in the post office.**

Beginning in 1845 at Philadelphia and spreading first to nearby offices, then throughout the East and finally to other parts of the country, one could send *for no cost* letters which would be registered by postmasters and tracked by the postmasters handling the letter, marking the way bill that accompanied the letter.

There is practically no documentation for these services. An occasional post office log from a small town contains a few notations opposite certain letters: "contains \$6" or similar remarks. The author has before him a two-page partially printed quarterly "Account Current with the United States" from the post office of Gloversville, N.Y., "for the service of the Post Office Department from January 1st to March 31st 1854." This very detailed document discusses all types of letters sent (including way and steamboat letters) with the postmaster's commissions and the balance due to the U.S. But there is no mention of registration. At the time the only documentation for a registered letter was the letterbill sent from one post office to another with the letters. There must have been a manuscript notation about value which informed the receiving post office.



Figure 1. Earliest known United States registered cover: "NEW-YORK 31 OCT" (1845) bearing the large blue "R" marking applied at Philadelphia on November 1, 1845.



Figure 2. Earliest known dated postmark on a registered cover: black "PENSACOLA Flor. OCT 29" (1845) with large blue "R" struck on receipt at Philadelphia.

Philadelphia began to mark such mail with "R" handstamps on November 1, 1845. Figure 1 shows a cover mailed from New York City with the postmark "NEW-YORK 31 OCT" (1845) and a sharp impression of the large blue "R" of Philadelphia. This cover is believed to be the earliest recorded date of a registered cover. It took a day for the train to bring the mails from New York to Philadelphia.

Figure 2 shows the earliest dated postmark on a registered cover, "PENSACOLA Flor. OCT 29" with a manuscript "10" due marking. The cover contains a letter datelined 1845 from an officer at the Pensacola naval base. It also bears the blue "R", but this letter



Figure 3. Three covers bearing the large blue Philadelphia “R” marking along with fancy postmarks: blue “HOLLIDAYSBURG, Pa. NOV 6” (1847) with negative “5”; red “ST. CLAIRSVILLE, O. APR 16” (1849) with negative “10” surrounded by stars; and black “NAUGATUCK Ct. OCT 15” (1846) with negative “5”.

would have taken longer to reach Philadelphia, so the “R” was applied later than the “R” on the cover in Figure 1.

There are many examples of the large blue “R” on mail from late 1845 through 1849 and these covers can show various postal markings. The Nathan Trotter papers, a large correspondence into Philadelphia from this era (evidently about 3,000 covers) contained many covers with “R” markings. Figure 3 shows three Philadelphia “R” covers from the Trotter find, each of which bears a fancy numeral marking from three different towns. About 12 of these fancy numerals are known from different post offices of origin. From top to bottom the covers in Figure 3 are: blue “HOLLIDAYSBURG, Pa. NOV 6” (1847) with negative “5”; red “ST. CLAIRSVILLE, O. APR 16” (1849) with negative “10” surrounded by stars; and “NAUGATUCK Ct. OCT 15” (1846) with negative “5”.

No “R” marking is known on a registered cover *from* Philadelphia; the marking was applied at Philadelphia only on incoming covers. Collectors have noted that the earliest post offices using registered postmarks after Philadelphia are nearby towns and cities, indicating the system spread gradually from Philadelphia.



Figure 4. Registered cover from Philadelphia to Reading, Pa. with manuscript "Register 6" in crayon (1849). The "R" marking is not known on registered covers from Philadelphia; it was used solely as a receiving marking.

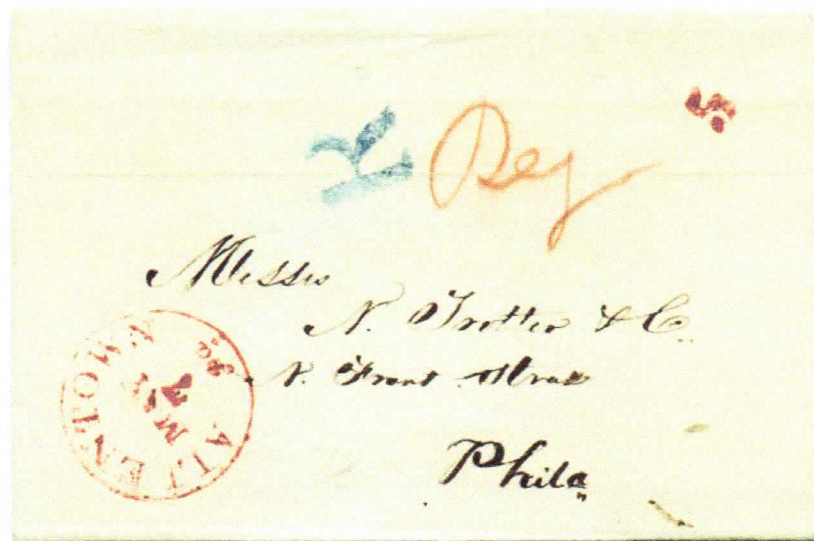


Figure 5. This is the earliest dated origin registered postmark on a United States cover, a red manuscript "Reg" with "ALLEN TOWN, Pa. MAY 7" (1847) and matching "5." This cover also bears a second registration postmark, the blue "R" from Philadelphia.

The earliest outgoing Philadelphia marking seen is illustrated in Figure 4 which shows a crayon manuscript marking on a registered cover from Philadelphia to Reading postmarked at Philadelphia on 2 November (1849). The crayon marking says "Register 6". Other later covers from Philadelphia to New York and other Pennsylvania towns in the early 1850s show "Reg" or "R" in manuscript with a number, which suggests an organized system for registration and recording the letters.

The earliest recorded origin postmark on a registered letter, from 1847, is shown in Figure 5. The cover contained \$40. It shows "ALLEN TOWN Pa. MAY 7" and "5" post-



Figure 6. Early registered cover with a 5¢ 1847 stamp, postmarked "READING Pa. MAY 7" (1849) with origin manuscript "R" indicating registration.

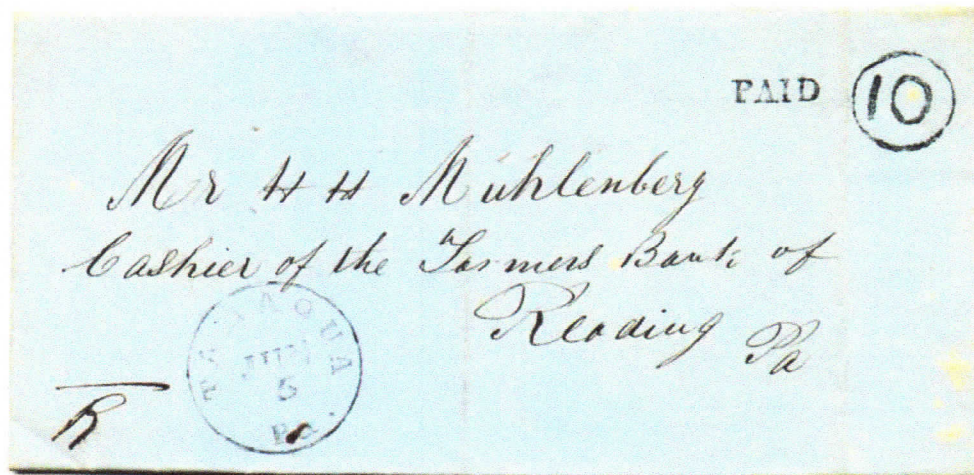


Figure 7. Prepaid at double rate from "TAMAQUA Pa. JUN 5" (1850) to Reading, Pennsylvania. The origin manuscript "R" indicates registration.

marked in red, a crayon "Reg" applied at Allentown and a second registration postmark, the blue "R" from Philadelphia. Covers from the late 1840s showing registration postmarks are very scarce.

The earliest example of a registered cover with origin registration postmark and an 1847 stamp is the 5¢ cover, also from Reading, shown in Figure 6. The townmark reads "READING Pa. MAY 7" (1849) with an origin manuscript "R". The sender had enclosed \$5. Reading continued to use manuscript "R" markings on its covers into the 1850s. Registered covers with the New York provisional stamp date from 1845.

An 1850 cover showing a manuscript "R" registration marking of origin from Tamaqua, Pennsylvania, to Reading is shown in Figure 7. This cover enclosed \$100 in cash. The sender prepaid a double rate (for enclosures) from "TAMAQUA Pa. JUN 5."

The Philadelphia “R” markings are found in two sizes and two colors. With double usages of the large blue and the small red marking, they can be divided into six periods. Data showing the periods of use, taken from the author’s book,<sup>1</sup> is presented as Table 1.

The small blue Philadelphia “R” was used for about two years from 1849 to 1851. Uses of this postmark with stamps of the 1847 series are known from various cities of origin. Figure 8 shows an example on a 10¢ 1847 cover with “NASHVILLE Ten NOV 9” (1850). In addition to the small blue “R,” this cover shows a Philadelphia manuscript “20” at lower left. This is an identification number of some sort, typical of the small manuscript numbers used with the small “R” marking. The folded cover contained a bank draft.

Type	Color	Earliest	Latest
Large	Blue	11/1/45	10/10/49
Small	Blue	10/19/49	9/1/51
Large	Blue	6/24/51	7/12/51
Small	Red	10/22/51	2/27/52
Large	Red	5/6/52	9/14/52
Small	Red	9/14/52	1/8/55

**Table 1. Periods of use of the large and small Philadelphia “R” markings.**



**Figure 8. 10¢ 1847 cover with blue “NASHVILLE Ten. NOV 9” (1850), small blue Philadelphia “R” and manuscript “20” at lower left, an identification number applied at Philadelphia. This folded cover contained a bank draft.**

Figure 9 is a remarkable 5¢ 1847 cover, from the collection of Harvey Mirsky, that shows two handstamped registry markings: “REGISTERED” applied at the town of origin (“WILKES BARRE Pa. MAR 29”) and the small blue “R” (and manuscript “25”) applied at Philadelphia. Although undated, the likely year of this cover is 1850.

Another remarkable cover, all the way from San Francisco, is shown in Figure 10. On this stampless cover the 40¢ coast-to-coast rate was paid in cash by the sender, indicated by the red “SAN FRANCISCO 1 MAY 40” (1850) datestamp and straightline “PAID.” The cover traveled by steamer via Panama to New York and then Philadelphia, which marked it with the small blue “R” and the accounting number “28.” This cover demonstrates that unofficial registration was used for valuable letters even in the far west. The only way the Philadelphia postmaster would have known to mark the letter with the “R” was if the letter

<sup>1</sup> Milgram, James W., M.D.: *United States Registered Mail 1845-1870*, David G. Phillips Publishing Co., North Miami, Florida, 1998, pg. 143.



Figure 9. 5¢ 1847 cover showing two handstamped registered markings, a black “Registered” applied at “WILKES BARRE Pa. MAR 29” (1850) and a small blue Philadelphia “R” and manuscript number “25.”

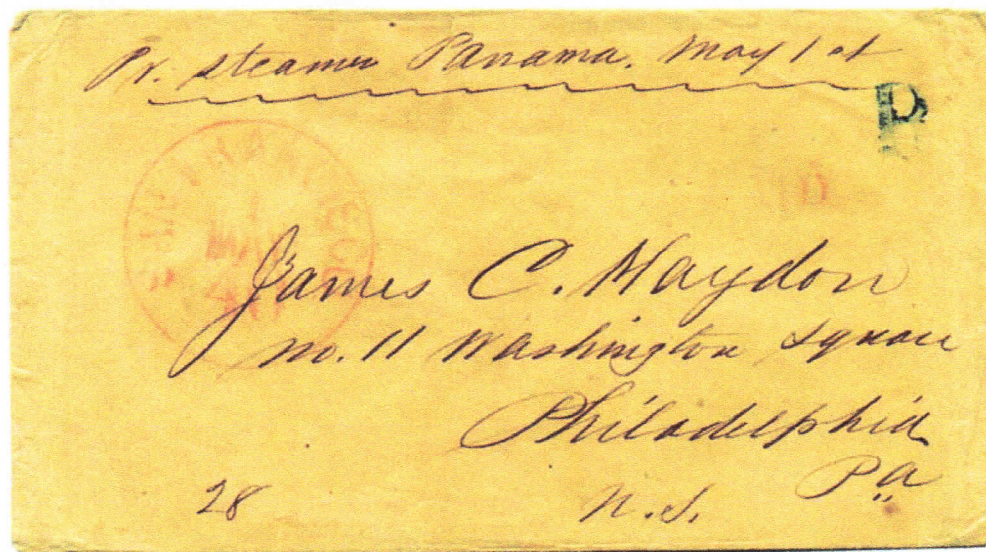


Figure 10. Philadelphia small blue “R” on a cover with “SAN FRANCISCO 1 MAY 40” and “PAID,” sent east via Panama in 1850. Later covers from San Francisco show manuscript registration postmarks of origin.

bill from San Francisco indicated this was a “valuable letter” or “registered letter.” There are other registered covers from San Francisco dated 1852 and 1853. Some of these show manuscript registration postmarks of origin.

By the 1850s different towns were beginning to use handstamps for registration. Figure 11 illustrates a cover with black “LEWISTOWN Pa. MAY 29” (1850). It was rated “5” and then rerated “10” and struck with a black straightline “REGISTERED.” At Philadelphia



Figure 11. This cover shows handstamped registered postmarks of both origin and receipt. At "LEWISTOWN Pa. MAY 29" (1850) the cover was rated "5" and then rerated "10" and struck with the small straightline "REGISTERED." Then at Philadelphia it was postmarked with the small blue "R" and a manuscript "28."



Figure 12. Rare use of the large blue "R" from the short second period of use, on a 5¢ 1847 cover bearing a red "U.S. EXPRESS MAIL BOSTON 26 JUN" (1851) postmark. The cover also shows a Philadelphia number "18" in manuscript.

the cover received two more markings, the small blue "R" and the number "28." Observe that the Philadelphia numbers are usually quite low. Numbering may have reset every day.

For a few weeks in 1851 (see Table 1) the large blue "R" was used for a second time. An example from the collection of Gordon Eubanks is shown in Figure 12. This cover bears a manuscript-canceled 5¢ 1847 stamp and the red postmark: "U.S. EXPRESS MAIL



Figure 13. First day of the new 3¢ rate for prepaid letters (July 1, 1851) with a large blue Philadelphia “R” registration postmark from the second period and manuscript number “14.” The letter enclosed \$77 in banknotes and a \$100 draft.

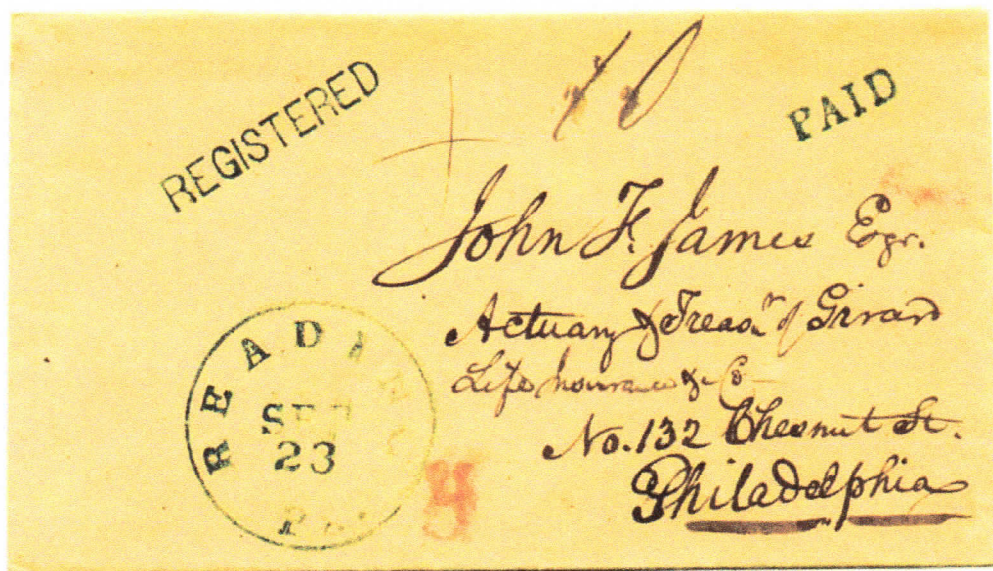


Figure 14. Another cover showing registered markings of both origin and receipt. The origin postmarks are “READING Pa. SEP 23”, “PAID”, and “REGISTERED” all in deep blue. The receiving postmarks are the small red Philadelphia “R” and the manuscript number “10”. The cover is undated but the small red “R” indicates the year is 1852 or later. The cross on the front signifies valuable content.

BOSTON 26 JUN” (1851). Note the Philadelphia manuscript “18”. Manuscript numbering of registered covers was not performed at Philadelphia during the first period of the large blue “R” postmarks.

Figure 13 shows another cover from the second period of use of the large blue “R” registration postmark. This cover is postmarked “BOSTON 6 cts 1 JUL” (1851) with black



Figure 15. Handstamped blue “R” with manuscript number from “HAMILTON Ohio APR 11” (year not known) to Canonsburgh, Pa. This marking could be confused with the Philadelphia “R”, but it is typographically different and its color matches the Hamilton postmark. This cover also shows a cross to indicate valuable content.

“PAID.” 1 July 1851 was the first day of the prepaid 3¢ rate; the 6¢ on this cover represents a double rate. The letter enclosed \$77 in banknotes and a \$100 draft. The cover went to Philadelphia, where it received the large blue “R” and a manuscript registration number “14.” The double charge on this cover was for the additional weight of the contents of the letter.

Figure 14 is another cover demonstrating registered markings of both origin and receipt. The origin postmarks are “READING Pa. SEP 23,” “PAID,” and “REGISTERED” all struck in deep blue. Since the cover is marked “PAID,” the postage rate was three cents. The “10” is not a postal rate; it is the registered number applied at Philadelphia with the small red “R.” While the cover is undated, the small red “R” indicates use from 1852 or later (see Table 1). Another interesting feature of this cover is the manuscript cross at top center. We know from other covers that this was a means of identifying valuable letters.

A few towns used handstamped “R” as origin markings for registration. One example is the blue “R” from Hamilton, Ohio, on the cover in Figure 15. Franked with an imperforate 3¢ 1851 stamp and addressed to Canonsburgh, Pennsylvania, the cover is postmarked “HAMILTON, Ohio APR 11.” Both the handstamped “R” and the manuscript registration number “12” were applied at Hamilton. This handstamp could be confused with the Philadelphia “R,” but the Hamilton marking has different typographical characteristics and the color matches the postmark, making the “R” an origin marking. This is another cover showing a cross signifying to postmasters that this letter carried valuable content.

Both handstamped and manuscript “R” markings of origin exist from a number of towns. A large red “R” was used at Cincinnati during both unofficial and later official registration. A registration number was also applied in Cincinnati.

The Charleston boxed “REGISTERED” marking is one of the more handsome registration postmarks. The pair of covers in Figure 16, both with Charleston, S.C., postmarks, demonstrate the two postage rates that prevailed during the 1851-1855 period: 3¢ prepaid



Figure 16. Two covers from Charleston, S.C., both showing the handsome Charleston boxed "REGISTERED" straightline. These covers demonstrate the rates that prevailed during 1851-1855: 3¢ prepaid and 5¢ unpaid.

and 5¢ due on unpaid letters. The blue "REGISTERED" in box is an origin marking applied at Charleston. The manuscript "Register" on the unpaid cover is a sender's request to register the letter. Such a cover might have been dropped into a letterbox at the post office although that is unlikely with a registered letter.

In Figure 17 is another cover showing the Charleston "REGISTERED" postmark, but this cover also bears a blue straightline "REGISTERED" that is known to have been applied as a receiving mark at Athens, Tennessee. For the most part, one can assume that these later "REGISTERED" handstamps were applied at the point of origin rather than the destination. Without the contents of the letter or some written notation on the cover, identifying the year date can be difficult. The Figure 17 cover does not show a year but is presumed to date from the period of unofficial registration because that is when the Charleston boxed "REGISTERED" marking was used.

Canada's registration system began during the 1820s and such letters were marked "Money" or "Money Letter." During unofficial registration in the United States, several cities along the Canadian border adopted this term to use on registered letters. The most common marking (less than a dozen are known) is an oval "MONEY LETTER" with center decoration, struck in either red or black, on covers from Cleveland. The 1852 example in Figure 18 also bears a manuscript "R". This cover was postmarked in red with an in-



Figure 17. This cover shows the “REGISTERED” in blue rectangle used as an origin postmark at Charleston, and a blue straightline “REGISTERED” receiving mark applied at Athens, Tennessee.



Figure 18. Cleveland’s oval “MONEY LETTER” with center decoration is one of the more unusual registration postmarks. This cover was postmarked in red with an integral rated postmark: “CLEVELAND O. 3 PAID DEC 23” (1852). The cover also bears a manuscript “R” in handwriting that appears to be different from the address.

tegral-rated postmark “CLEVELAND O. 3 PAID DEC 23” (1852). The cover also bears a manuscript “R” in a handwriting that appears to be different from the address. A black handstamped “R” is also known from Cleveland on an undated cover.

Figure 19 illustrates a blue straightline “MONEY LETTER” from Lewiston, N.Y., a border post office on the Niagara River that exchanged Canadian mails. The imperforate 3¢ 1851 stamp and the undated 3¢ entire envelope are canceled with the same blue grid



Figure 19. Undated 3¢ entire envelope with 3¢ 1851 stamp and matching cancels and straightline “MONEY LETTER” from “LEWISTON, N.Y. 19 MAY.”



Figure 20. One of the most interesting handstamped registered postmarks is the “MONEY/REGISTERED/DETROIT” in decorated oval. On this cover it used with an integral rated red “DETROIT MICH. 3 PAID JUL 26” postmark.

with matching “LEWISTON, N.Y. MAY 29.” The year date of this cover is not certain, but because the Canadian terminology changed from “money letter” to “registered letter” in 1855, this is probably a use before official U.S. registration.

A very interesting handstamped registered postmark (only two examples known) is the black oval “MONEY/REGISTERED/DETROIT” marking. The example in Figure 20 is used with an integral-rate postmark reading “DETROIT MICH. 3 PAID JUL 26” in red. The notation at top suggests the cover contained \$100. This marking dates from 1854.

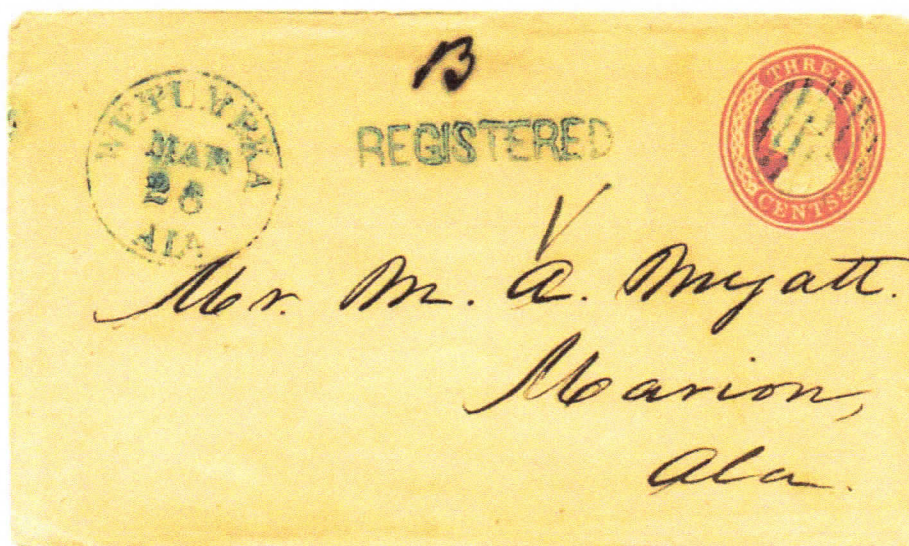


Figure 21. The “REGISTERED” marking on this envelope (with blue manuscript “13” and “WETUMPKA, ALA. MAR 28”) is the only known example.



Figure 22. Montgomery, Alabama used a “REGISTERED” handstamp on letters in transit. These covers show manuscript “Registered” notations of origin.

On July 1, 1855 the Post Office Department began collecting a 5¢ cash fee on all registered mail. Figure 23 depicts a first-day use: “LOUISVILLE KY JUL 1” (1855) with “PAID 24” to Ireland via New York. Note that the sender wrote “Valuable” on the cover and the Louisville post office wrote “Registered #21865,” suggesting a long-standing reg-



23

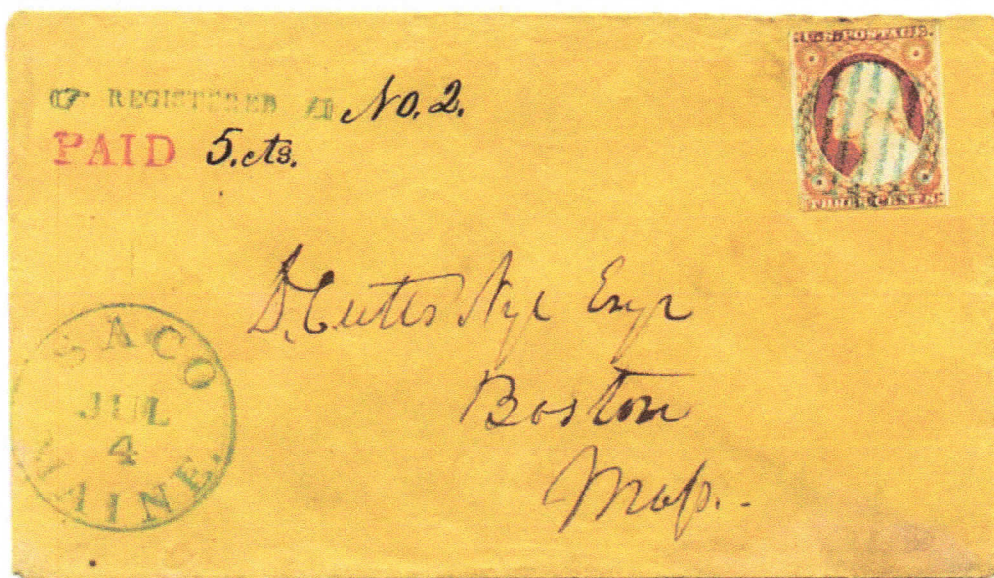


Figure 24. This 3¢ 1851 cover bears a lovely “REGISTERED” handstamp between two pointing hands—with matching “SACO MAINE JUL 4” in blue and manuscript “No. 2” numbering. The red “PAID” and manuscript “5 cts” indicates the cash fee paid for registration, making this cover is an early example of official registration.

istration system used at this post office before official registration. The “PAID 24” is a Louisville marking. The red “19,” representing the British packet fee of 19 cents, was applied at New York. Another registered cover from this same correspondence shows the early magenta New York registered transit markings only three weeks later.

The 3¢ 1851 cover in Figure 24 bears a lovely “REGISTERED” handstamp between two pointing hands with matching “SACO MAINE JUL 4” in blue and a “No. 2” manuscript enumeration. The red “PAID” and manuscript “5 cts” indicates the cash fee for registration, making this cover not an unofficial use, but a very early showing of the official registration that followed. The Saco registered postmark is also known from the unofficial registration era. All known handstamped markings for unofficial registration are illustrated in the author’s book cited earlier.■

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