

STAMPLESS LETTERS AND STAMPLESS COVERS

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The title makes a distinction between **stampless letters** and **stampless covers**. The term stampless covers is well recognized by the American Philatelic Society and by philatelists the world over. However, my use of the stampless letters terminology is gradually being recognized through my advertising in *The American Philatelist*. Stampless letters were used prior to the availability of envelopes when the letter, usually on a single sheet of paper, was folded to make an envelope. Stampless covers began with the use of envelopes. Early envelopes were hand made as the first machines for making envelopes were not patented until 1848.

My primary interest is in stampless letters. Their scarcity is due to some degree in the fact that since there were no stamps involved, there was little interest in the letters from a stamp collector's point of view. As a result, a large portion of the old letters making up what we consider today as stampless letters were destroyed. As a collector, many competitors today are those individuals interested in penmanship.



Figure 1

Stampless Letter Example

Historically, the earliest postal efforts were initiated by the British to provide for mail to be delivered from the major cities within the colonies to England. The British did provide a form of postal service among the colonies. However, the colonists relied on their own resources, arranging for friends or relatives to deliver letters to another friend, relative, or business. Paper was scarce and letters, mostly composed of one sheet, were folded to provide blank space for the address. In addition to the name and address of the addressee, the sender often wrote the name of the person who was to carry the letter to its destination. For example, in the following figure the marking stated "By the hand of Mr. Twichel," a relative of mine, who was to carry the letter from Vergennes, VT to Illinois.

The Second Continental Congress passed a postal act on July 26, 1775 and appointed Benjamin Franklin as the first Postmaster General. During the period from 1753 to 1774, Benjamin Franklin had served as Associate Deputy Postmaster General for the British North American colonies. The developing U.S. Postal Service had 75 post offices by 1789, gradually superseding the British postal service.

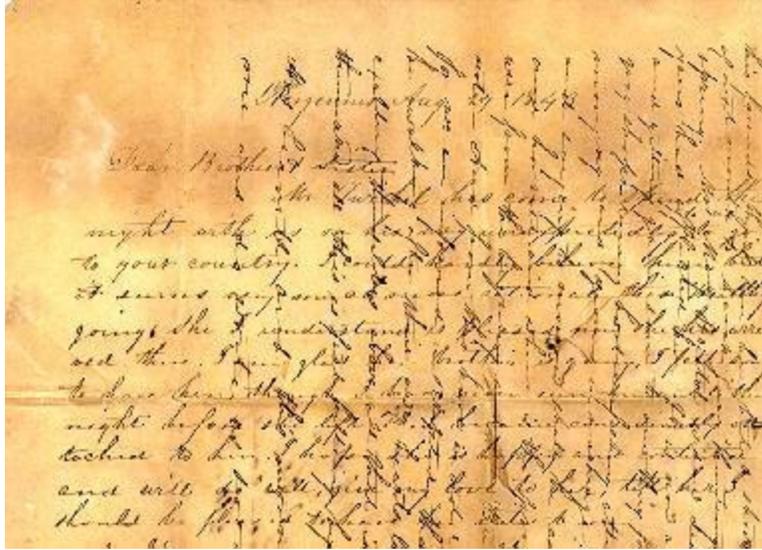


Figure 2

Writing Across a Letter

The following letter was chosen as an example because it demonstrates how saving the early settlers were with paper. In this case, the letter was written as we think of writing a letter today, then the page was turned and additional information was added by writing across what had been written previously. A portion of the letter is shown in the following figure. The date was August 27, 1843.

Since this is being written in Kansas, a bit of Kansas history is included. In Council Grove, KS, "The Post Office Oak" served as an unofficial post office during the period 1825-47. During this period, Council Grove was the most important station and last outfitting point on the Santa Fe Trail. Letters were left in a stone cache at the foot of this oak tree to be picked up by the next wagon train. Not far away is the "Madonna of the Trail" statue, a 16-foot memorial to the courage of pioneer women. The 1857 Hays House, one of the oldest continuously operated restaurants west of the Mississippi River, is still in operation.

As the postal service developed, individuals willing to carry letters for others charged two cents per letter. The addressee paid this cost. This custom of requiring the recipient to pay for the letter received continued until 1856 when prepayment of postage on domestic letter mail was made compulsory; however, if the letter did not have "Paid" or "Free" written on it, the postage was collected from the addressee upon delivery. This example was after post offices became more common and a mail service established.

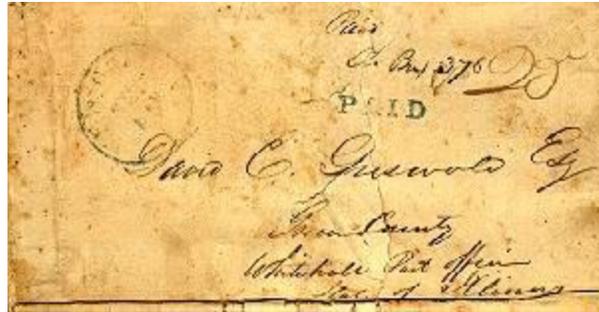


Figure 3

A "Paid" Example

The stampless letter in Figure 3 shows that the sender had paid the twenty-five cent charge for mailing the letter. If the "Paid" marking was not included, the addressee would have had to pay the cost. Typical prices for letter mail was 6 cents for one sheet of paper, 30 miles, and twice that for two sheets. The cost increased with greater distances; 10 cents for 60-100 miles, 12.5 cents (one bit) for 100-150 miles, and 25 cents (two bits) for over 450 miles.

The U.S. Post Office Department began supplying uniform handstamps to postmasters in 1799; however, it took many years before all post offices were so equipped. During the interim, the postmasters would mark the letter with pen and ink. The early handstamps were made of brass, 26 mm in diameter, with the town name engraved within the circle. An 1841 example is shown in the following figure.

The first adhesive postage stamp was used in Great Britain in 1840 and became successful almost immediately. By 1847, postage stamps were used but not yet available in all post offices. Their use gradually eliminated the C.O.D. concept and shifted the responsibility for paying postage from the recipient to the letter writer. The Congressional Act of 1855 required adhesive postage on all letter mail after January 1, 1856. A number of small post offices continued to operate without a supply of stamps resulting in many stampless covers among collectors.

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