

The National Letter-Return Association of Chicago

This exhibit demonstrates a method by which postal patrons could mail letters while concealing their identities (i.e., without return addresses) but ensuring timely return of undeliverable mail, bypassing the Dead Letter Office.

In 1885, John Edward Woodhead established the National Letter-Return Association (NLRA) to promote the sale and use of small labels to be used in place of return addresses. These would be of advantage to certain mailers of letters, namely, those who wished to conceal their identities, especially ladies who wished to maintain privacy (see party invitation – page 14), some professional persons who did not use envelopes with printed cornercards (clergymen, physicians, lawyers), and individuals who traveled and had no regular home address (e.g., traveling salesmen and theater performers).

NLRA labels were sold initially in booklets of 1000 (for \$1.00) and then in booklets of 120 (for 30¢), 200 (50¢) and 600 (\$1.00). All known booklets contained panes of 12 labels. Each label had a serial number printed on it, which the user would register with the NLRA, and which the NLRA would use to identify the user, to return any letter received. However, to date, *no letter with an NLRA label returned to NLRA has ever been recorded*. One possible exception is a cover with a label *and a return address* shown on page 13. Woodhead claimed returning 150-200 letters per year. Unique items are matted in red.

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NLRA labels comprise four types, numbered in the order they were issued.



**Type I –
“if not
delivered in
10 days”**



Type II



Type III



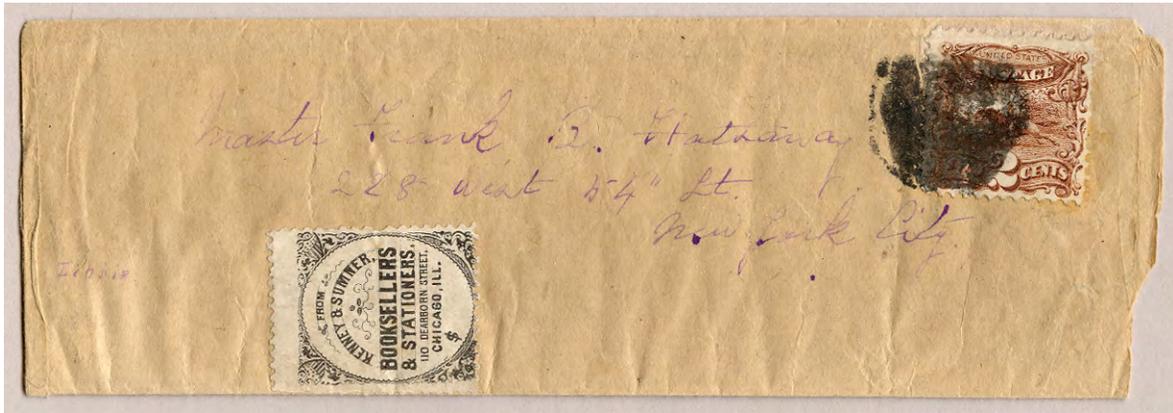
Type IV

————— **“if not delivered in 6 days”** —————

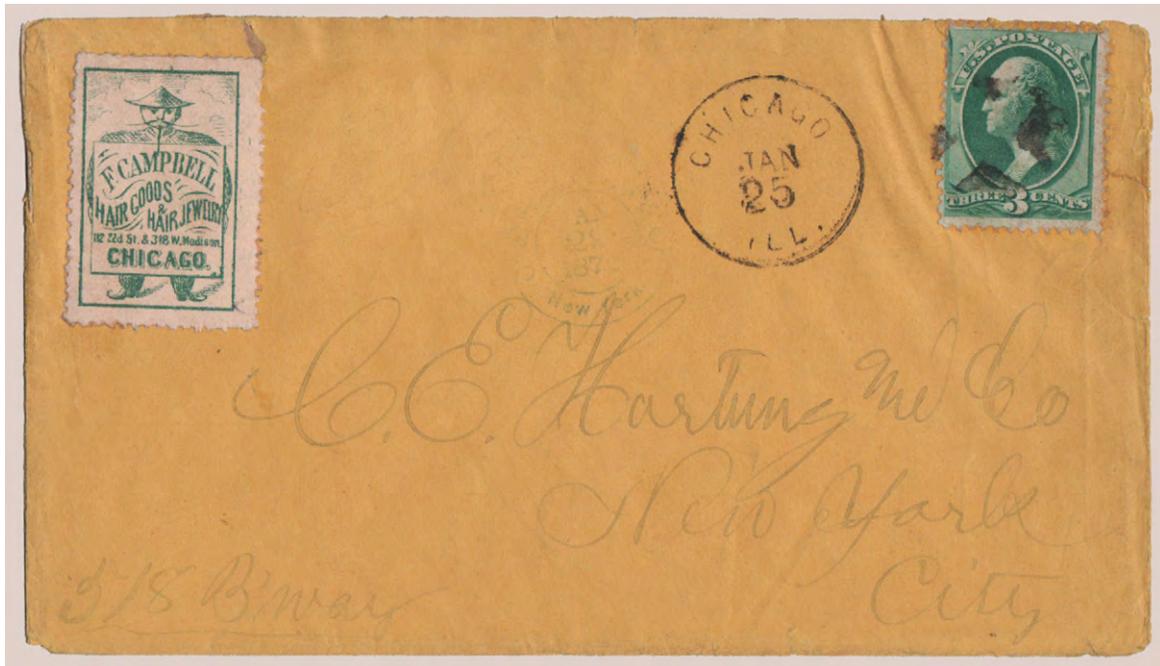
1. Forerunners

Perforated return address labels were used in Chicago before the NLRA

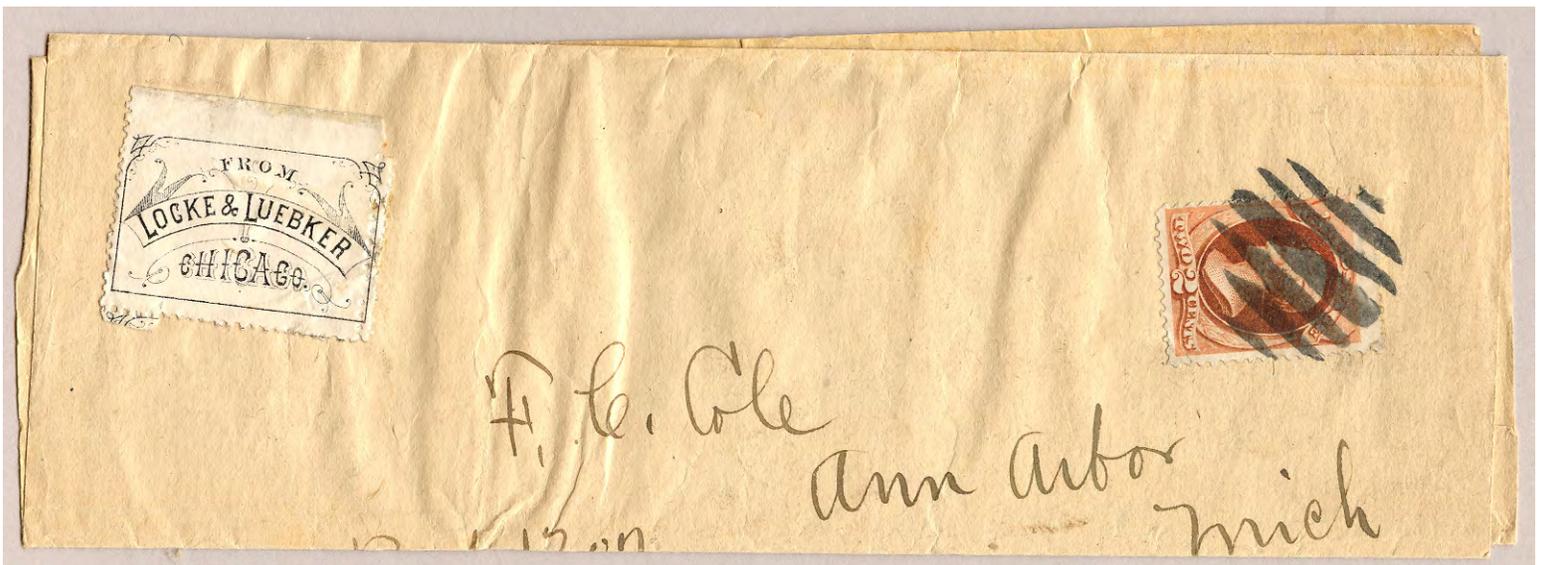
“From Kenney & Sumner, Booksellers & Stationers,” 1869-70



“F Campbell Hair Goods & Hair Jewelry,” 1872

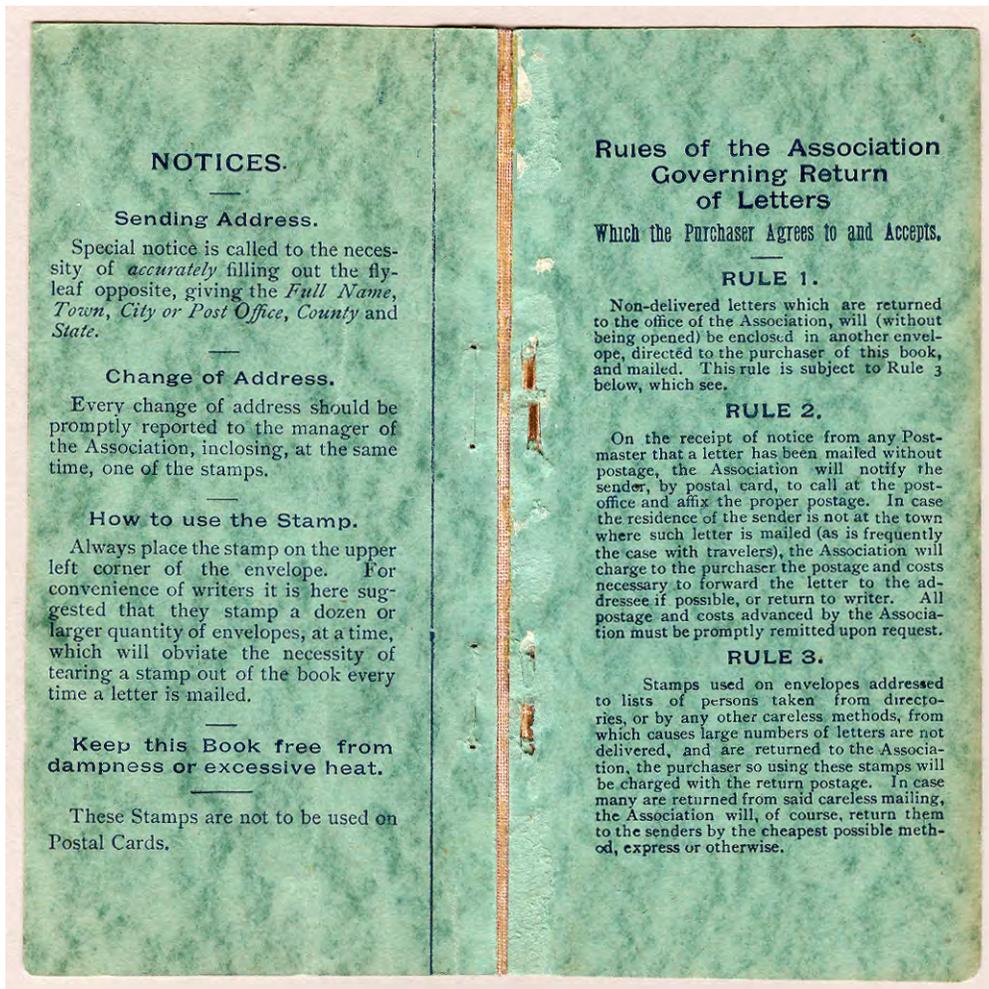


“From Locke & Luebker,” late 1870s



2. How the System Worked

Inside of booklet cover explaining use of NLRA labels



Registration page inside booklet to be mailed to the NLRA

IMPORTANT.

In order that the Association may fulfill all of its agreements to the Purchaser of this book of stamps, the blank below MUST be carefully filled out, and mailed to J. E. WOODHEAD, Manager, 468 West Randolph St., Chicago, Ill.

Attach one Return Stamp here.

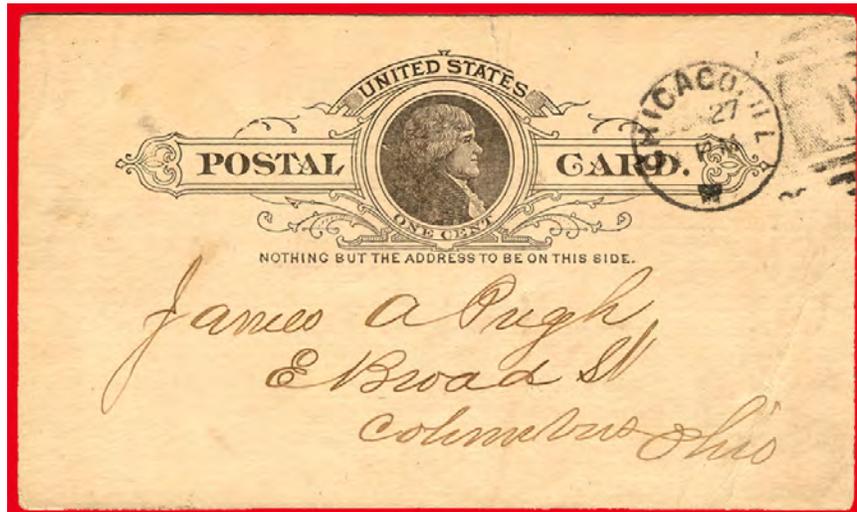
Name of Purchaser J. E. Woodhead
Town, City, or P. O. Chicago
Street and Number 72. Rush St.
County Cook State Illinois

2. How the System Worked

Postal card sent to registrant of label number 4195 addressed in Woodhead's handwriting



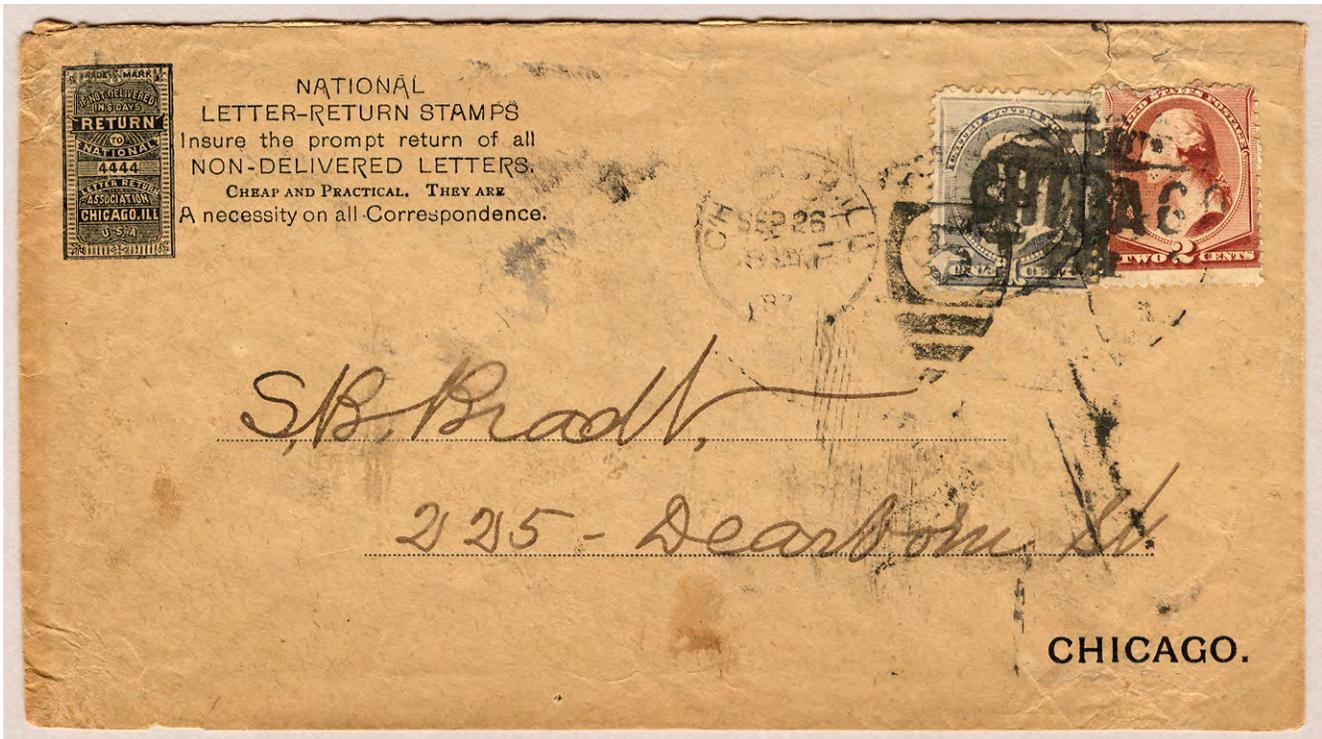
Only known example of NLRA acknowledgement card



(copy of reverse)

2. How the System Worked

NLRA envelope with serial number 4444 used to mail label booklets



NLRA brochure showing label with serial number 4444

—NATIONAL—
LETTER-RETURN
Association.
(INCORPORATED.)

“NOTHING SHOULD BE DEPOSITED IN THE MAILS WITHOUT PROPER MARK FOR ITS RETURN.”



16,000 LETTERS GO TO THE DEAD-LETTER OFFICE EVERY DAY, AND MOST OF THEM ARE DESTROYED BY THE GOVERNMENT.

A Sure, Simple, and Practical Method of Insuring the Safe Return of all MIS-SENT, MIS-DIRECTED AND NON-DELIVERED LETTERS.

ADAPTED TO EVERY CLASS OF PEOPLE, UNDER ALL CIRCUMSTANCES, AT ANY PLACE, AND AT ANY TIME.

ENDORSED BY THE POST-OFFICE OFFICIALS, BY WELL-KNOWN, RESPONSIBLE CHICAGO GENTLEMEN, AND BY ALL WHO ARE USING THE STAMPS,

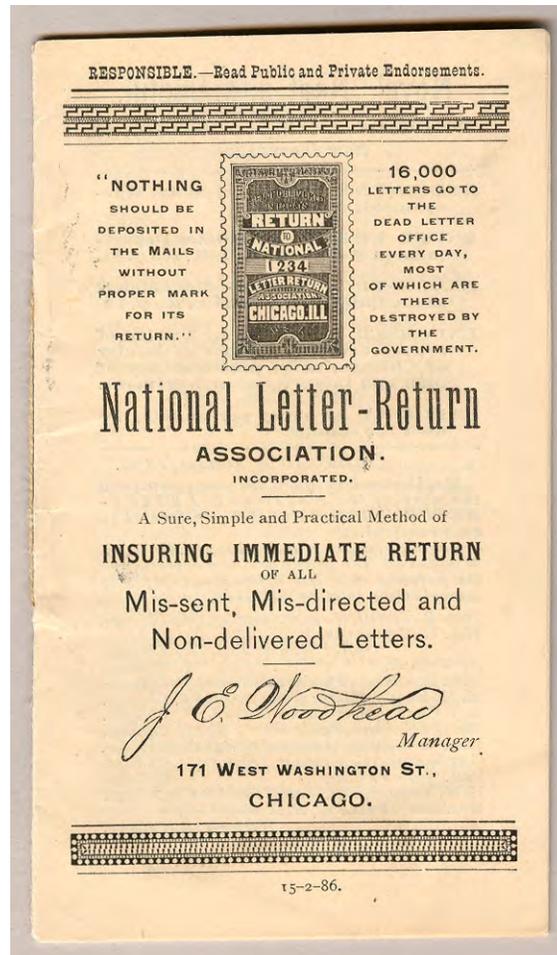
J. C. Woodhead Manager,
171 West Washington St.,
CHICAGO.

Read what Professor Swing says, on page 11.

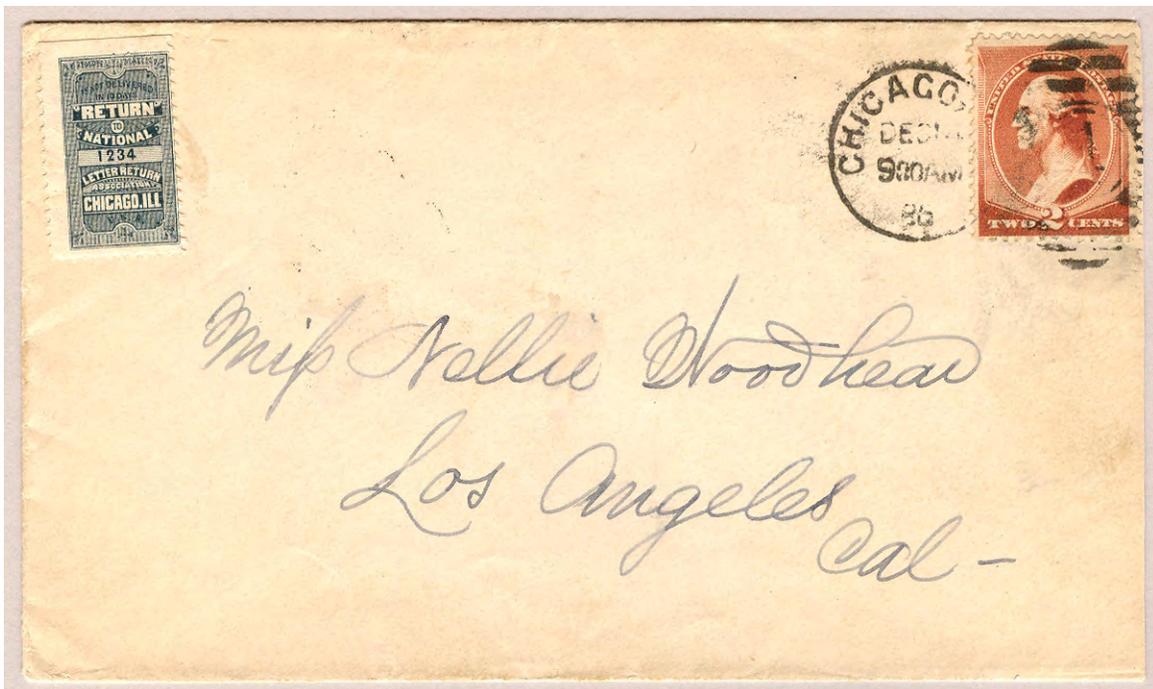
Physicians please read page 10, and Clergymen page 11.

2. How the System Worked

NLRA brochure illustrating label with serial number 1234



Envelope with label number 1234 addressed in J.E. Woodhead's handwriting to Miss Nellie Woodhead



3. Booklet Panes

Type I



Type II



Type III



Type IV



4. Return Labels

The only known examples of labels printed in brown with red serial numbers are these, numbered 226



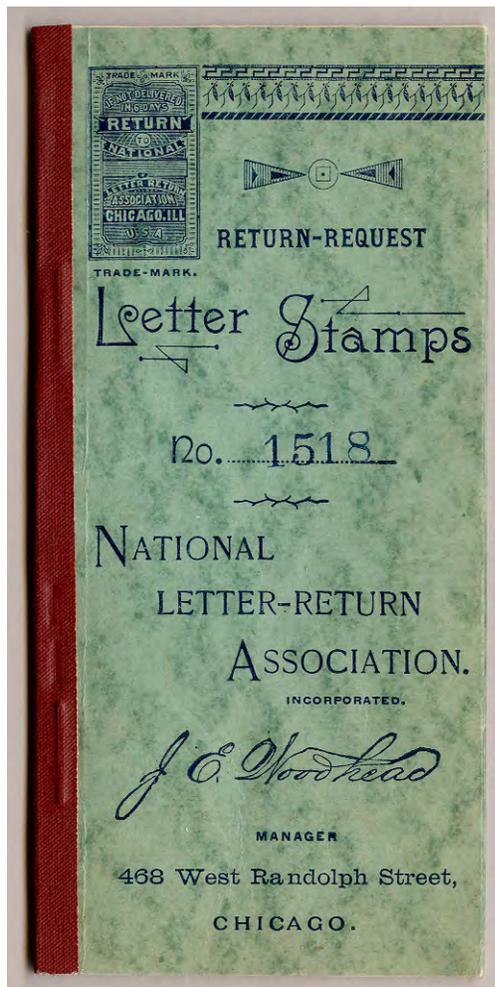
Low serial number: 4

Error number: 3350 in a block of 3356

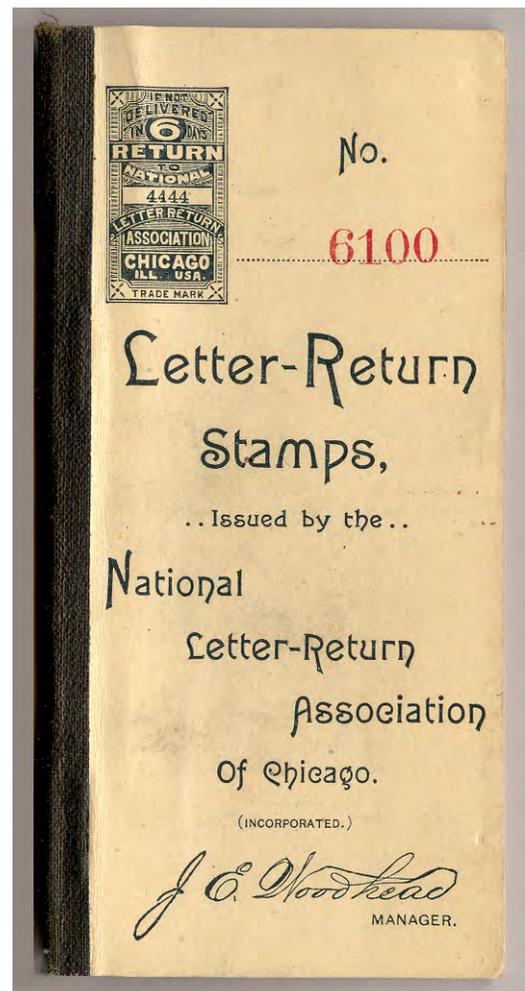
Highest serial number recorded: 6104



Booklet of 120 labels



Booklet of 600 labels



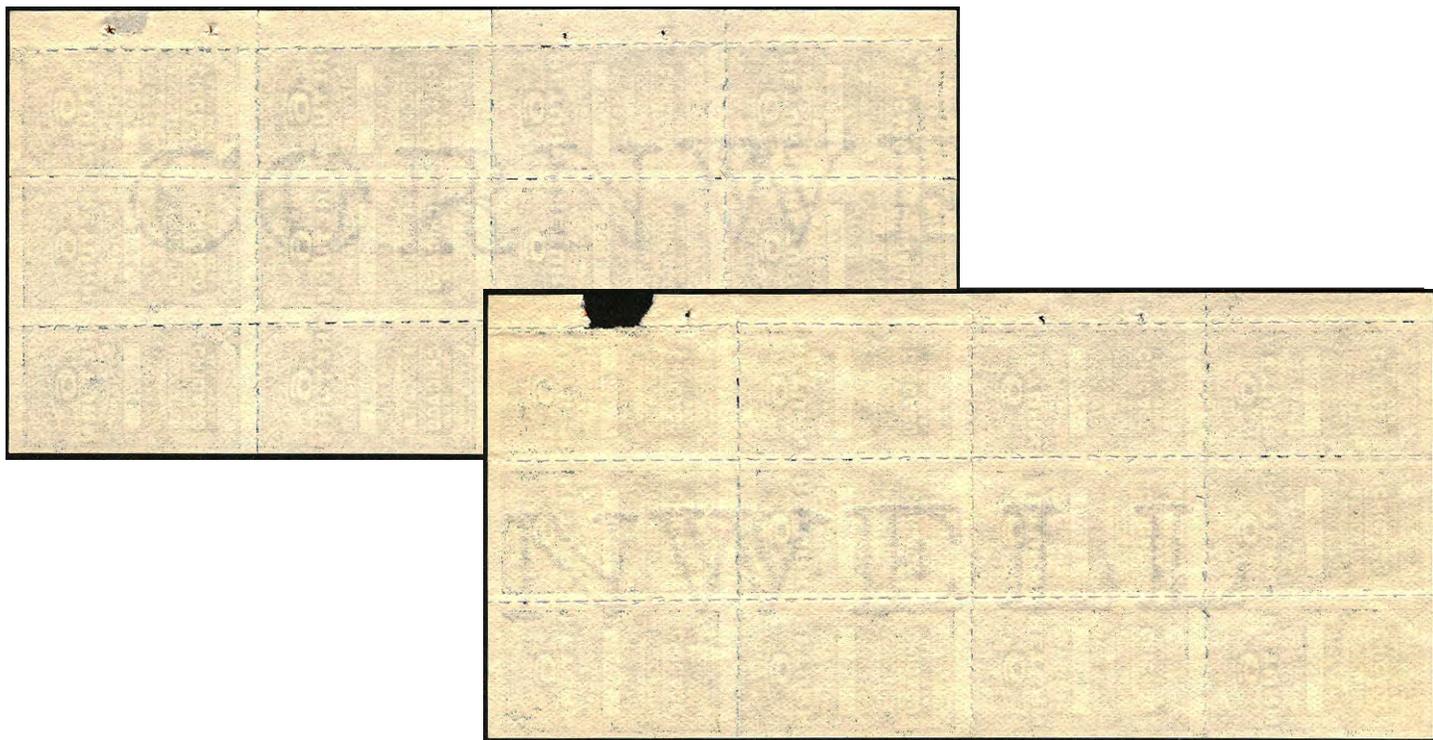
No examples of booklets containing 1000 or 200 labels are known.

4. Return Labels

Pane of label number 2221 with partial inscription at bottom reading “2213 to 2224” indicating that the panes were printed in sheets of 12 panes



CORNWELL watermark on Type IV panes number 5024

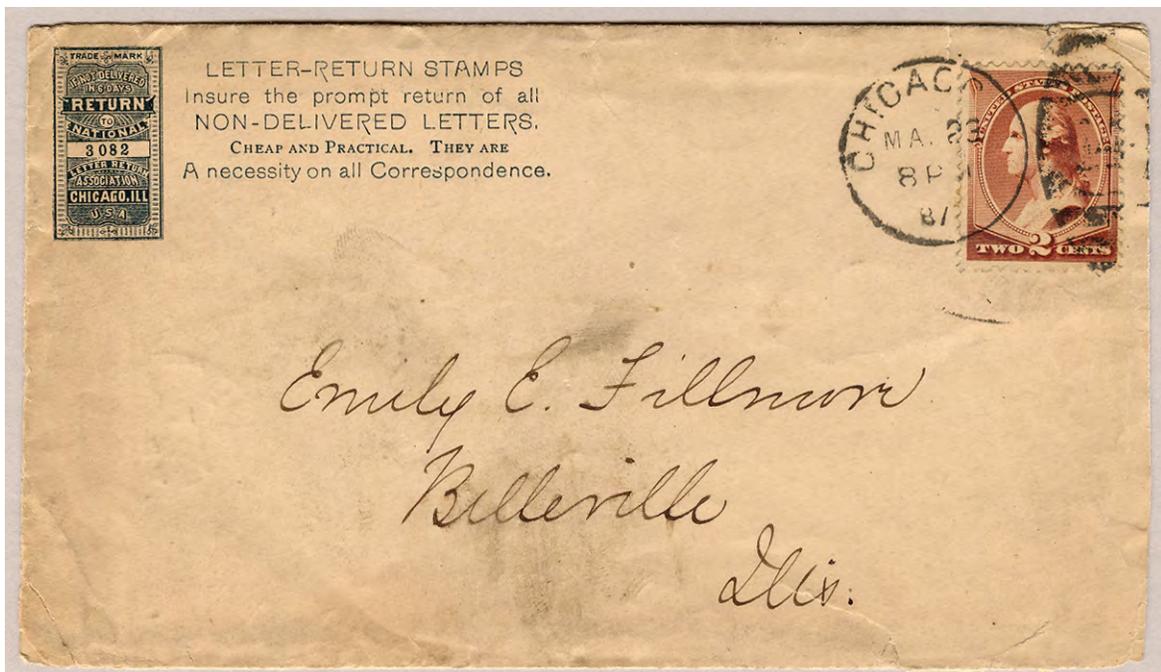
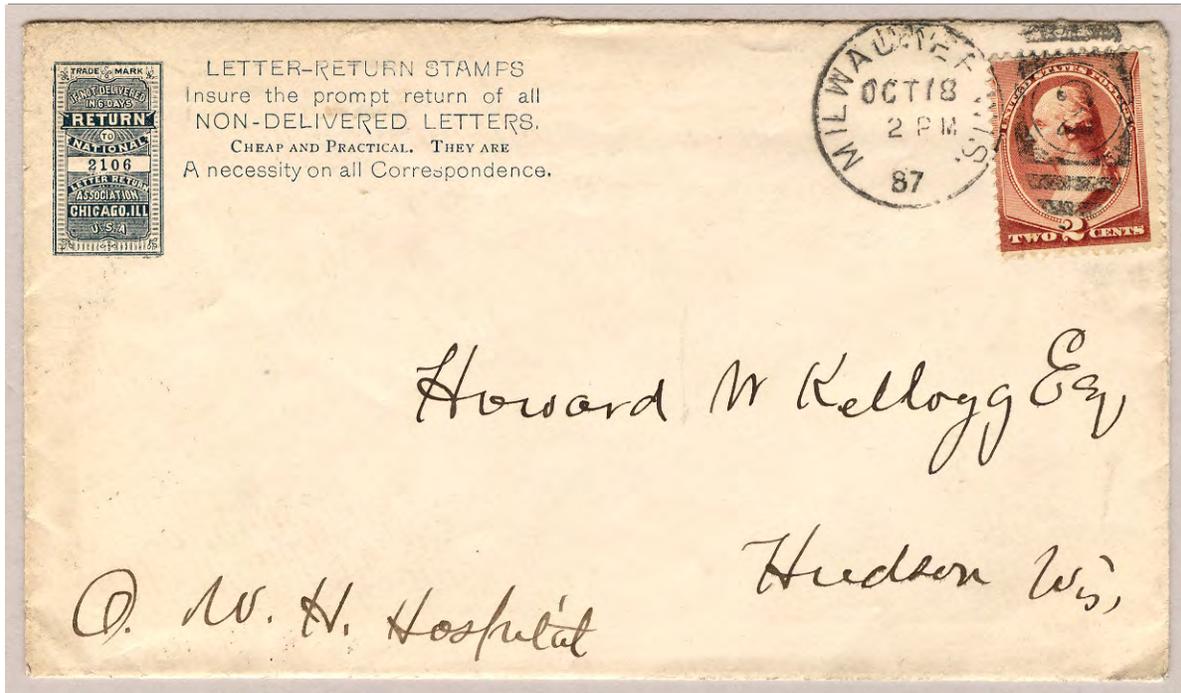


CORNWELL

5. NLRA Cornercards

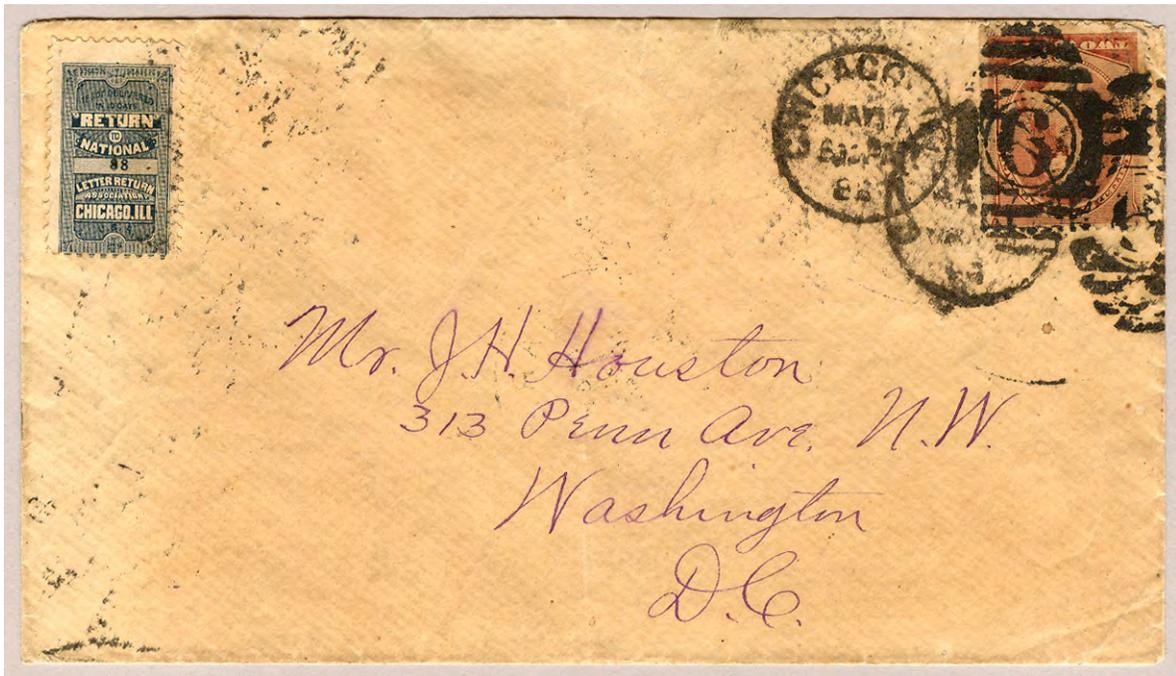
NLRA envelopes used for correspondence showing serial numbers 2106 and 3082

The purpose of these envelopes is not known, and evidence exists to suggest that they may have been produced for selected NLRA patrons who wished to have pre-printed envelopes rather than labels for their correspondence.



6. Labels in the Mail

Early use (1886) of Type I label with number 88



Special Delivery used to expedite delivery of an envelope with Type I label number 1101 addressed to a member of a traveling theater troupe, the "Monte Cristo" Company, possibly by a member of another traveling company.



6. Labels in the Mail

Traveler's cover with Type 1 label number 2051 from guest staying at the Centralopolis Hotel, Kansas City, Mo.



Lady's cover with Type II label number 728



6. Labels in the Mail

Use to Canada of Type II label number 2328



The only known example of a returned cover bearing an NLRA label is this envelope addressed to Italy with Type III label number 4454 by Mrs. Woodhead.

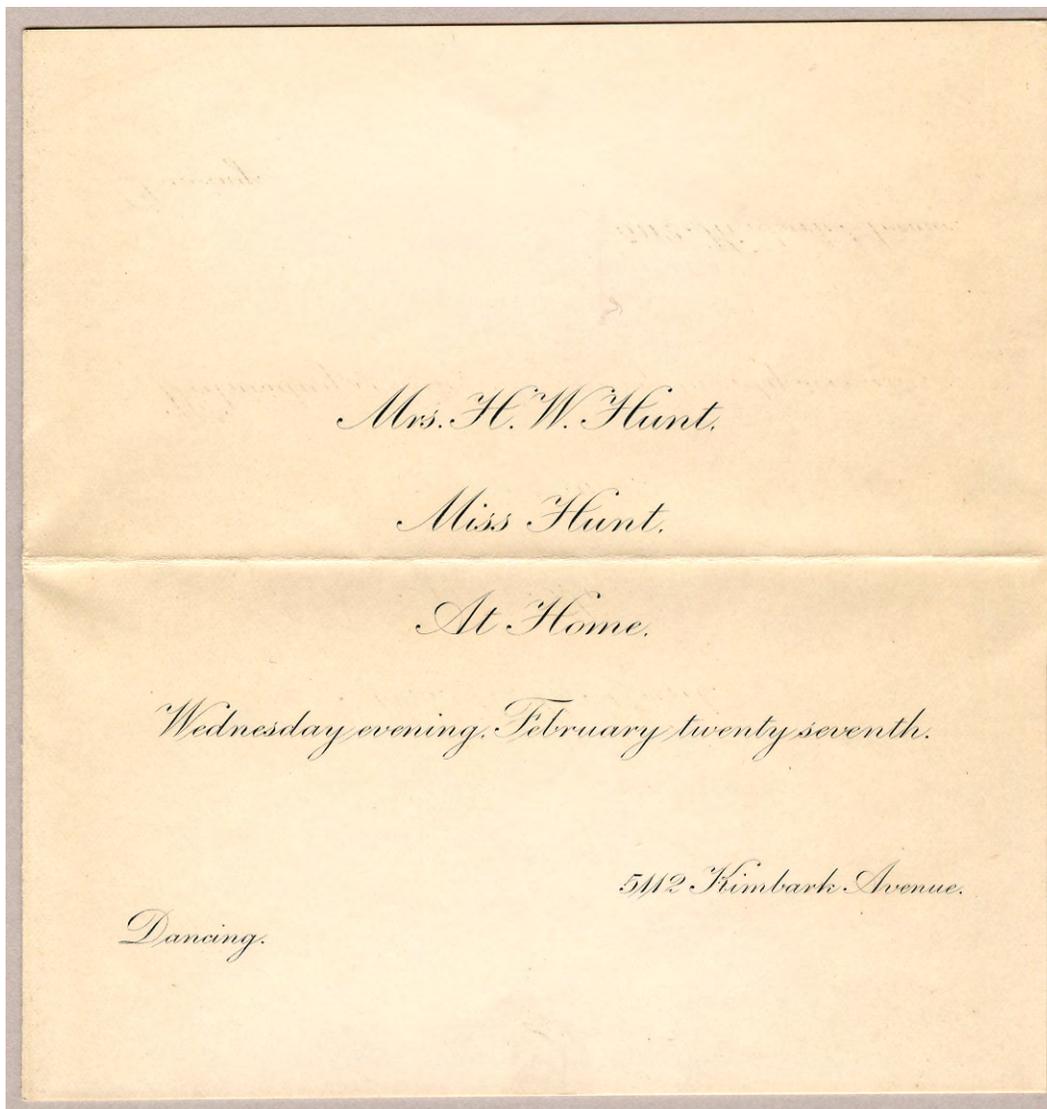
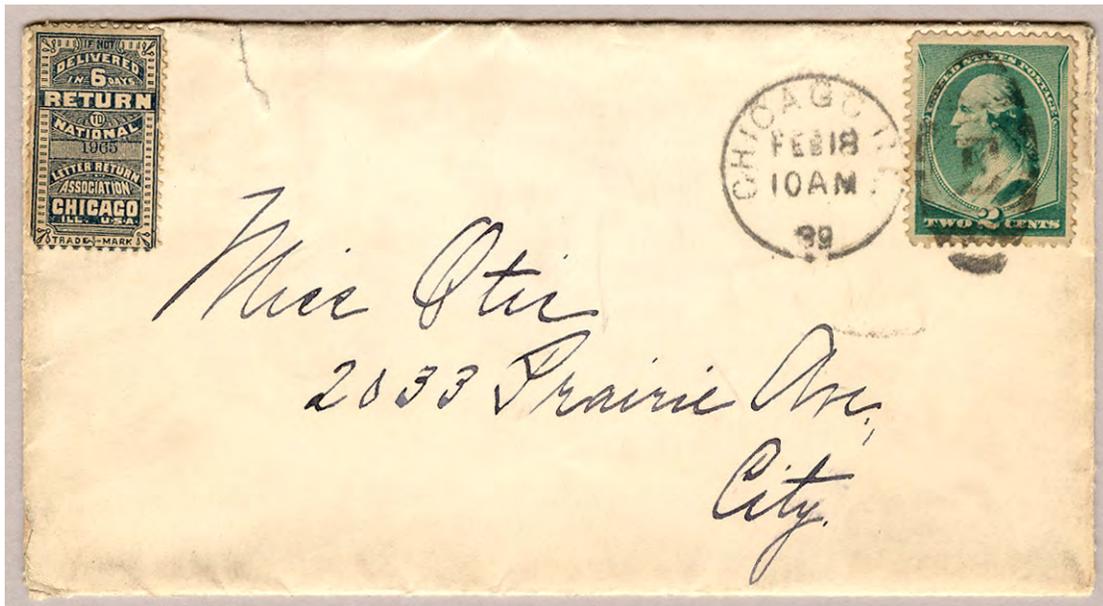
However, a return address on back and use in 1897, about the time NLRA had ceased operation, suggests that this cover was returned by a regular mail carrier to the street address on the back.



(copy of reverse)

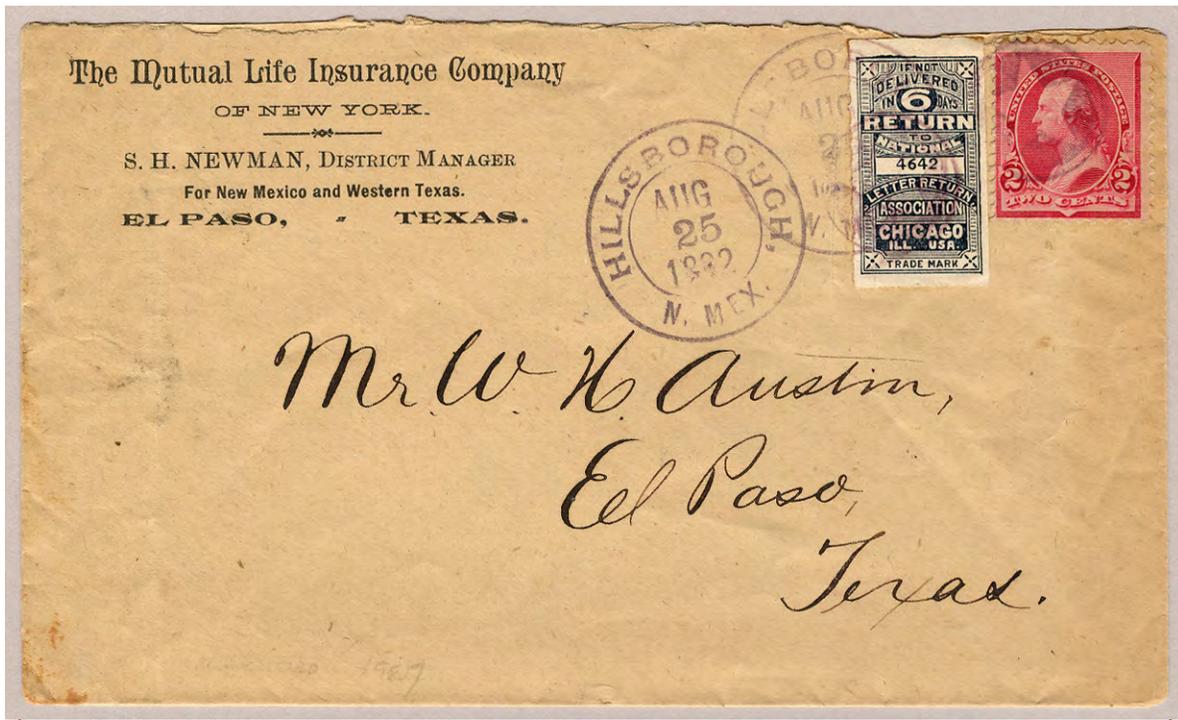
6. Labels in the Mail

Type III label number 1965 used on envelope conveying a party invitation from a mother and daughter to a friend

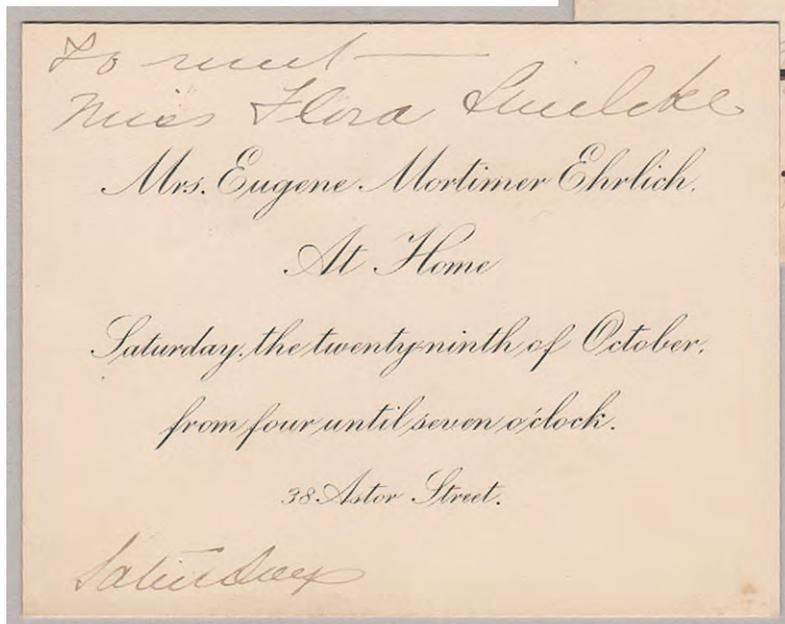


6. Labels in the Mail

Traveler's cover with Type IV label number 4642 from traveling salesman of
The Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York



Lady's cover with Type IV label number 5125 with enclosed engraved invitation, forwarded from Chicago to Boston



7. Late Imitators and “The End”

NLRA imitator —
 “American Return Letter Association”
 of Detroit appeared 1896 and lasted
 less than two years

A blatant imitation



Label used with return address added below



Later imitation
 of the NLRA
 label concept
 for a company's
 own mail —
 Kawin Manfg.
 and Importing
 Co., 1905



The End — Post Office campaign in 1894 to encourage using return addresses spelled the end of the NLRA.

DON'T!

Don't mail your letter or valuable package without having your own address written or printed upon the upper left-hand corner. [Give Street, Number, and Postal Station in large cities.]

This will insure its return to you if not delivered, and will prevent its being sent to and opened at the Dead Letter Office.

POSTMASTER: Post this Card in your office and call the attention of your patrons to it. It is not obligatory upon them to comply with this request, but it is to their interest to do so.