

## Annals of the 3¢ Pictorial: “Dear Mr. Stewart....”

America’s richest man always gets lots of mail, and in 1869 that man was supposed by many to be Alexander Turney Stewart (1803 –1876),<sup>1</sup> shown (perhaps, but more of that later) in Figure 1. In 1848 he built the world’s largest retail store, the “Marble Palace,” at 280 Broadway in lower Manhattan and in 1862, the “Iron Palace,” six stories with fireproof cast-iron exterior, at Broadway and Tenth Street: it employed up to 2,000 workers in nineteen departments featuring silks, dress goods, carpets and toys. By 1869 he had an estimated annual income exceeding \$2,000,000, a fifty-five room marble-faced mansion on Fifth Avenue,<sup>2</sup> and a nomination from President Grant to be Secretary of the Treasury. He wasn’t confirmed by the Senate. The 1789 Act establishing the Treasury Department prohibited a “merchant or importer in active business” from being its head, though there was also the unhappy fact that Stewart’s long-time personal attorney was Judge Henry Hilton, an active member of the Tweed Ring.<sup>3</sup> As a result of Stewart’s fortune, \$90 billion in today’s dollars,<sup>4</sup> he received requests for autographs, a relatively new wrinkle which owed its existence to the Postal system whose connective web by 1869 included a transcontinental railway. But primarily, Stewart received requests for money. How we know this is interesting in itself.



**Figure 1:** Stewart, his “Iron Palace,” and his Fifth Avenue mansion.

As of March, 1869, domestic postage was paid with the 3¢ Pictorial, and as shown in Figure 2, no street address was necessary for mail to Mr. Stewart (no, Stewart didn’t have a law degree.)

**Figure 2:** East Hampton, Mass., Feb. 1 [1870] / New York

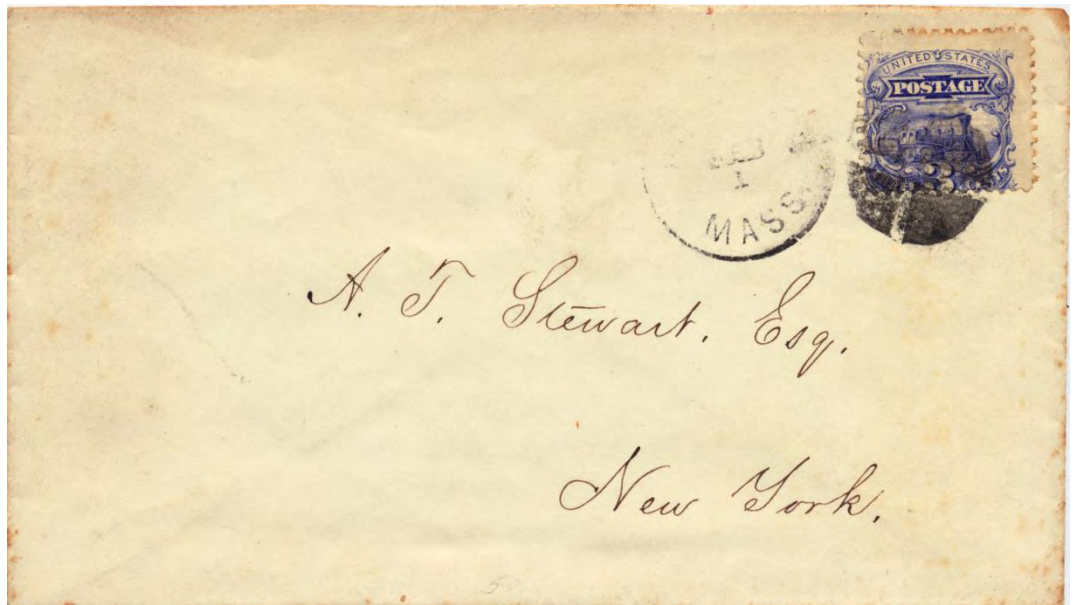
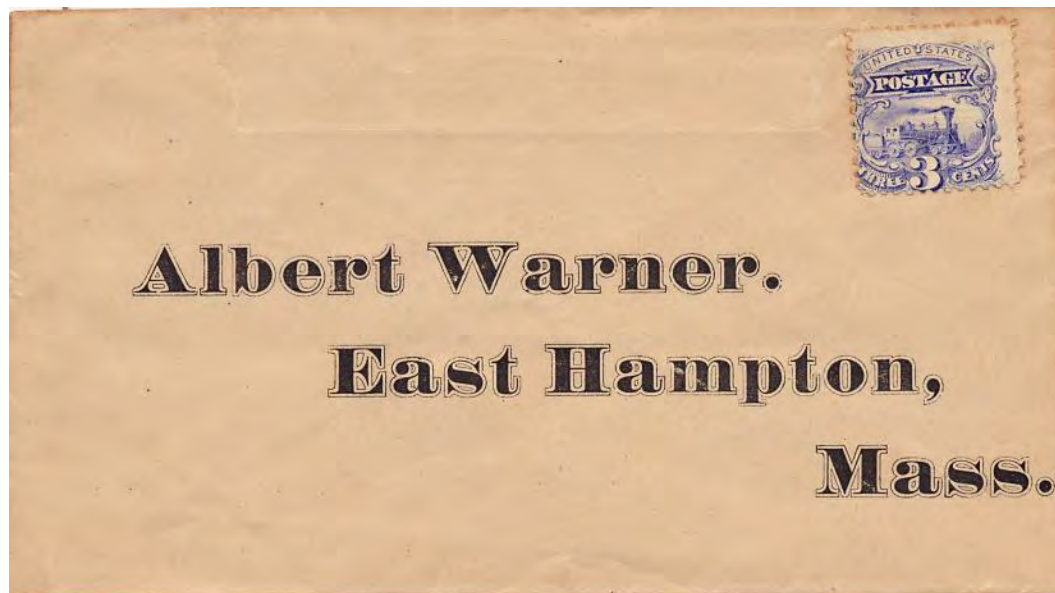
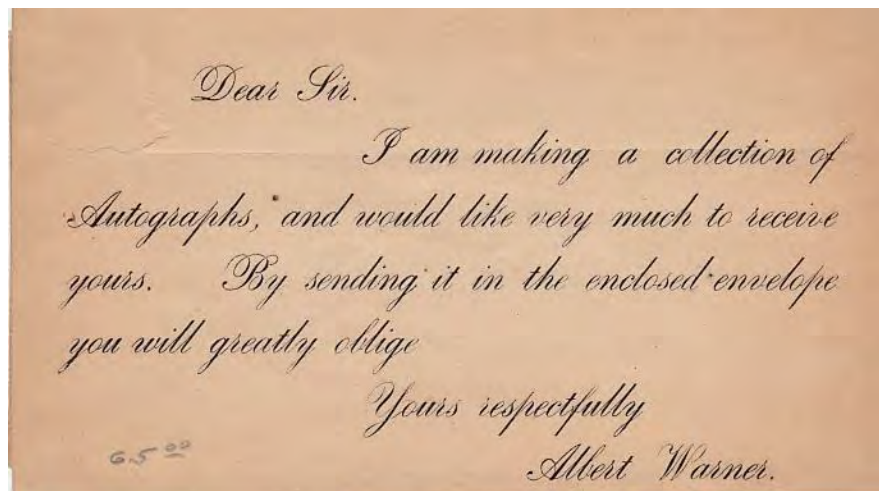


Figure 2's contents, shown in Figure 3, give us a peek into the life of the rich and famous as well as the upper-middle-collector-class in 1869: The sender is "*making a collection of Autographs, and would like very much to secure yours. By sending it in the enclosed envelope you will greatly oblige Yours respectfully, Albert Warner*" (not Warner Brothers' Albert Warner, a Polish Jewish immigrant born in 1884.) Interestingly, Stewart neither returned the SASE with his autograph, nor threw the request away; the material was apparently disbursed with the rest of his estate.



**Figure 3:** Figure 2's enclosures: Albert Warner's autograph request with return envelope

Sadly, a more typical letter to Stewart is shown in Figure 4, where a man relates his family traumas—recently dead child, wife sick, daughter with scarlet fever, boy possibly sick too, no job, behind in the rent. Stewart was known for a number of things, but not necessarily for sending money to strangers who weren't Irish.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 4:** Louisville Ky June 1<sup>st</sup> 1869 /Mr. A.T. Steward [sic] NYC

“Dear Sir haveing heard of your kindness and liberality to the poor I thought I would venture to lay my case before you and ask you to help me out of my troubles [.] I am a man of family haveing a wife and too children and for the last eighteen months there has been sickness in my family [.] too weeks ago we lost an infant child and my wife is sick and week yet and my little daughter is down with the scarlet fever and I fear that my little boy is takeing it also and I have not got but too dollars in the world [.] I am no mechanic of any kind and was sick nearly all winter [p.2] and have got away behind with my rent and I know that the lady needs the money badly and has been kind to me in waiting so long for it [.] if you will be kind enough to help me some I will return it if I ever get ~~it~~ able to and if I never do may god in heaven reward you for your kindness to us. hoping that you will favor us with an answer to this I ~~am~~ await your answer. yours respectfully

James L. Orrill  
No. 471 West Chestnut Street  
Louisville Ky”



Figure 5 shows another letter asking for charity, this time from a 15-year old girl:



Figure 5: Pierpont, OH, June 1, 1869 / NY

May 17 / 68

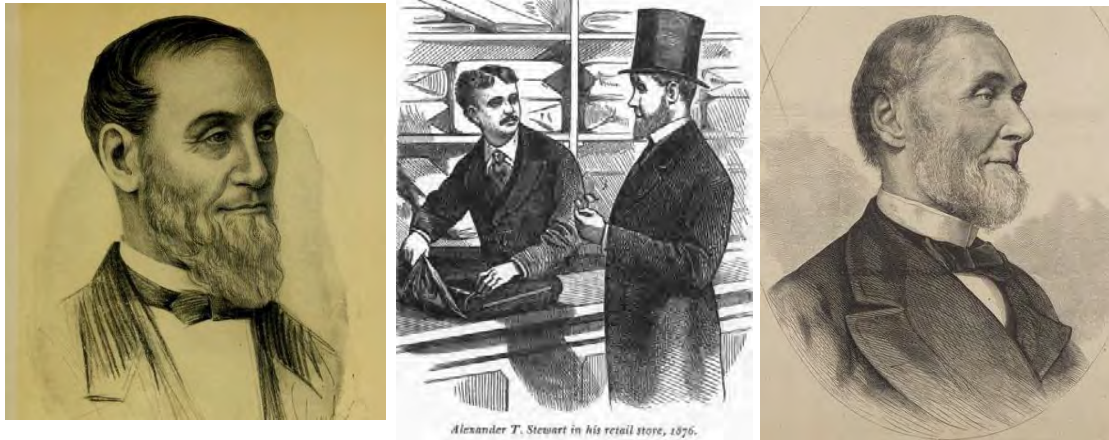
Pierpont Ohio

Mr. Stewart

Dear Sir: I have been reading the book. Title the great Metropolis and it spoke very kindly of your wealth and charity and I thought after pondering long that I should apply to you for help. I live with a widowed mother and we are very poor I am very anxious to go to school and get so I can earn an [??] living but have not the means to go with I am 15 and have not very good Health.... Believe me I am not an imposter but a truly needy Girl...."

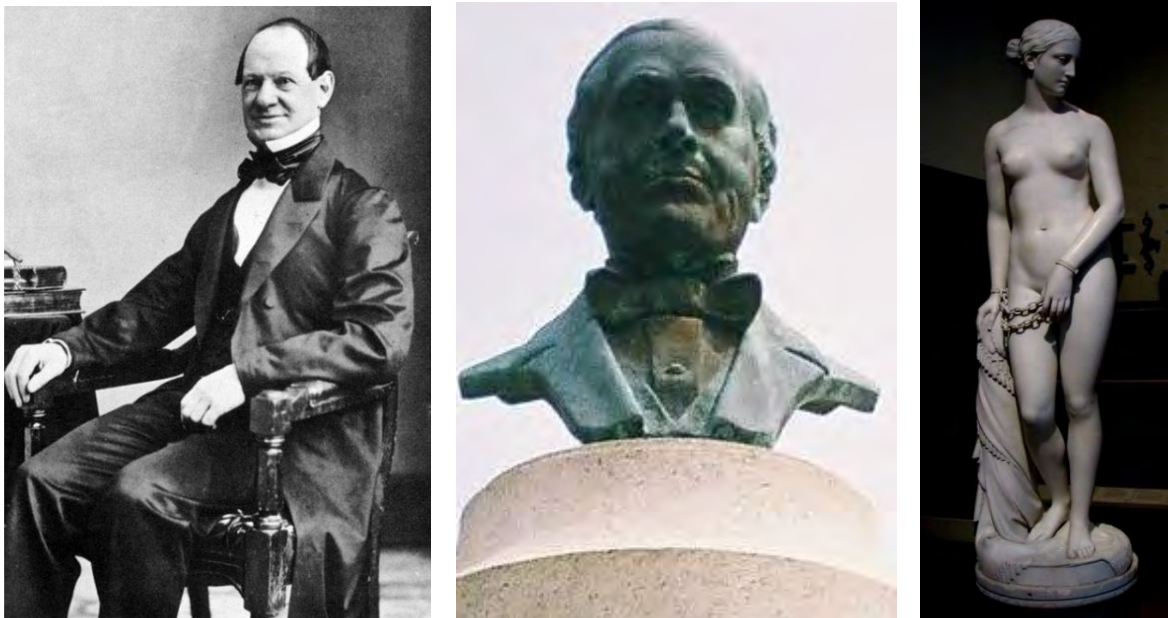
## Stewart mysteries

First what did he really look like? On the one hand, there seems to be an “official portrait” whose Wikipedia version was shown in Figure 1 and in the examples in Figure 6, though it is hard to square 6b and 6c as being the same person in 1876:



**Figure 6:** a) (unknown artist); b) “*Alexander T. Stewart in his retail store, 1876;*” c) Obituary portrait, *Harpers Weekly*, April 19, 1876.

And what about the daguerreotype by Matthew Brady, shown in Figure 7a, or Stewart’s 1876 bust by Granville Carter, located in what’s now a Long Island parking lot, shown in 7b?



**Figure 7:** a) 1856 portrait by Matthew Brady; b) 1876 bust by Granville Carter; c) Hiram Powers, “*The Greek Slave.*”

Second, as suggested by Figure 7c, a piece of Stewart’s home décor, was he a philanthropist, philanderer, sybarite, saint, or all the above? Take, for example, his “clergy discount.”



“He gave to all churches...The ten per cent off to clergymen and schoolteachers was his innovation. This ten per cent was supposed to be his profit, but forty per cent would have been nearer it,” Elbert Hubbard’s way of disapproving.<sup>6</sup> Was the man who bought this 4 ½ by 8 feet wide Meissonier (direct from the artist, cutting out the middle man) in whose trampled grass Dali found the inspiration for French impressionism,<sup>7</sup> a frugal pious man?



**Figure 8:** Meissonier, “1807, *Friedland*,” now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC; below, the grass that so enchanted Dali.



As noted, Stewart kept a copy of Hiram Powers’ statue “*The Greek Slave*” in his Fifth Avenue mansion. Enlightened people claimed this statue supported abolitionism and also that it was very pure and modest, see how she’s hiding the X-rated bits with her hand. This could be



possibly be said of the other naked lady statues Stewart assembled in his hallway, shown in Figure 9, below. Others had a different opinion.



**Figure 9:** The central hallway of Stewart's Fifth Avenue mansion.

On April 30, 1890, Joseph Pulitzer and several associates were indicted for "posthumous criminal libel" against Stewart because of a series of articles in the *New York World* accusing Stewart of "a dark and secret crime," as a man who "invited guests to meet his mistresses at his table," and as "a pirate." However, that suit was instigated by our friend, the Sachem Henry Hilton,<sup>8</sup> who as Stewart's executor bought all Stewart's assets (worth \$80,000,000 at the time) from the grieving widow for \$1,000,000, which assets he proceeded to dissipate in epic fashion.<sup>9</sup> Figure 10 below shows Stewart's ghost pulling out his hair as Henry Hilton posts "For Sale" notices on Stewart's "Grand Union," "Windsor," "Woman's Park" and "Chicago House" hotels, his "Garden City" and his main building at 10th St. & Broadway. Joseph Pulitzer pokes Hilton with an umbrella and an empty monument labeled "Sacred to the Memory of A.T. Stew[art]" with a sign that states "To Let" appears in the right foreground.<sup>10</sup>

Hilton's own bankruptcy put an end to the libel lawsuit.

Finally, what are we to make of the fact that these letters still exist? The obvious comparison is to Harriet Shaw (1842-1933) who built America's largest mail order business under the moniker "H.B.Shaw." Her method was to keep all correspondence with enclosures intact and make that her filing system. In fifteen years of active practice she accumulated some 30,000 covers, which were later discovered by chance: "It would not be an overstatement to say the Shaw



**Figure 10:** Stewart's ghost tears his hair out.

correspondence provides as many as five to ten percent of the 1869 Issue covers known today.”<sup>11</sup> This could explain a part of Mr. Stewart: that he, too, kept correspondence as primary records for his own mail order business:

“Beginning in 1868, Stewart began receiving letters from women in rural parts of the United States requesting his merchandise. Stewart promptly replied to these letters and orders by sending out the requests and even paying the postage. Once received, women would send back the money needed to pay for their orders. Seeing potential for the **mail order** business, by 1876 Stewart had hired twenty clerks to read, respond and mail out the entailed orders. That year he profited by over \$500,000 from the mailing business alone.”<sup>12</sup>



But this doesn't explain his keeping letters from paupers, or from the bumptious Mr. Warner: if you aren't going to answer his petty request, why, as America's richest man, keep Mr. Warner's SASE in a bin somewhere for your heirs to deal with? Note that *none* of the HB Shaw correspondence includes requests for charity; it's all about mail orders. But *most* of Stewart's mail, certainly prior to 1868, wasn't about mail order, it was about wanting his money. Why did he keep them, since he probably didn't read them and he certainly didn't answer them?<sup>13</sup>

And he kept a lot of them. The University of Michigan has "around 300 letters that Stewart received from strangers requesting financial assistance, employment, and other means of support. Many commented on the Civil War's negative economic impact on their lives, particularly in the South."<sup>14</sup> The Huntington Library in California has 162 letters:

"Correspondents include Civil War veterans, immigrants, charities, disabled persons (including children) seeking assistance with medical expenses, etc. There are letters from Civil War veterans; Western farmers devastated by the Grasshopper Plague of 1874; loans requests from men and women trying to set up their own businesses or to finance their inventions; young men and women asking for financial assistance to receive an education or training and clergymen soliciting funds for building or maintenance of their churches, missions, or assistance with disabled or impoverished congregants. A few letters express the authors' disappointment because their previous letters had not been answered.

A large portion of the authors are women – widows, including women who had lost their husbands in the Civil War, spinsters, wives of ill or alcoholic husbands, or young women seeking employment; a few correspondents propose a tryst or other "situation." There are also letters from various individuals claiming to be Stewart's long lost relatives, some admirers requesting an autograph, and even a prank letter written by two schoolgirls."<sup>15</sup>

A substantial number were sold to dealers. Abraham Siegel bought several hundred,<sup>16</sup> and Schuyler Rumsey bought at least a dozen "asking for loans, gifts, etc., many widows, one offering hand in marriage or having Stewart send her \$1,000."<sup>17</sup> Here's a sample from the baker's dozen I recently acquired:

Jan. 10, 1869, Newport MN: "*My husband...is a lame soldier....*"

April 20, 1869, Cambridge OH, marked "*private:*" [they're bankrupt.]

April 23, 1869, Baltimore MD: "*I am a widow in deep distress....*"

May 17, 1869, Bennettsville SC: husband's arm "*shattered by a Yankee bullet....*"

May 22, 1869, Newburgh, OH: "*I am going to tell you of my misfortune...*"

May 24, 1869, Richmond VA: "*I am a poor widow...who needs money greatly....*"

See Figure 11 on the following page.



**Figure 11:** a potpourri of daily requests for money.

Whether saint or sinner, and whatever his motives for hoarding his mail, Stewart hasn't received the recognition from philatelists that they've given Harriett Shaw. Stephen Elias thinks



Stewart's reputation dwindled because he left no children; also, like the Shaw correspondence, Stewart's mail is franked with 3¢ stamps of the 1861, 1867 and 1869 issues, no exotic high values, as you'd expect in correspondence from paupers. But why Stewart kept it, and how it arrived on the philatelic market, are questions worth pursuing.

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<sup>1</sup> Stewart was actually second in wealth to Cornelius Vanderbilt, but much more present in the public mind: Stewart became famous by selling to the lower and middle classes, and was known for helping (mostly Irish) immigrants. A pauper might not feel as hopeful seeking charity from Commodore Vanderbilt, whose public side was railroads and yachts. Stewart's biographers are Stephen Elias, *Alexander T. Stewart: The Forgotten Merchant Prince*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1992, and Elbert Hubbard, *Little Journeys to the Homes of the Great*, NY, 1916

<sup>2</sup> The spot is now occupied by the Empire State building.

<sup>3</sup> Stewart even offered to put his business in a blind trust and give the annual proceeds to charity: "had this noble proposition been carried into effect, upward of six millions of dollars could have been distributed to charitable purposes within the next four years." *Scientific American* vol. 20 (13), March 27, 1869. All the more reason to suspect Stewart's relationship with Hilton, as the opposition to Stewart was spearheaded by Senator Charles Sumner, leader of the "Radical" Republicans who considered even President Grant to be corrupt, let alone the Tammany Hall Democrats.

<sup>4</sup> "The Wealthiest Americans Ever," *New York Times*, July 15, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> It's well documented that Stewart sent shiploads of food to Ireland during the famine of '47, and offered job placements for Irish immigrants. Charity to out-of-state Baptists, not so much.

<sup>6</sup> *Little Journeys to the Homes of the Great*, op. cit. pp 348-349.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Salvador Dali, *Manifeste En Hommage a Meissonier*, Paris, 1967.

<sup>8</sup> "Sachem" is to Algonquin as "Capo" is to Sicilian, and was a term accepted with pride by Tammany chiefs, and later used as the name of a secret society at Columbia College.

<sup>9</sup> "To the public, the career of Henry Hilton seems founded upon the ruins of the vast and splendid fortune accumulated by his patron, A.T. Stewart. As the millions which the recognized king of modern merchants had hoarded...shrunk or were scattered to the winds after his death, the slender fortune of the almost obscure lawyer grew apace...and the public thought of them as cause and effect. "Henry Hilton is Dead," *New York Times*, Aug. 24, 1899.

<sup>10</sup> *Puck*, April 26, 1882, Library of Congress control no. 2012645646.

<sup>11</sup> Jon W. Rose, "The Postal History Legacy of Miss Harriet Butler Shaw," *USPCS Chronicle* 157 (1993) at p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> Elias, *Alexander T. Stewart: The Forgotten Merchant Prince*, supra.

<sup>13</sup> This was a man who corresponded with Lincoln, employed over 2,000 just in the Marble Palace, served on numerous Chamber of Commerce committees, founded (1871) the Long Island Railroad, created Garden City, Long Island, built and operated resorts, negotiated with artists and art dealers, created working man's hotels in Manhattan, and on and on. With that schedule, there's not enough time to personally review and respond to dozens of letters a day, many of them four pages long, seeking charity. See, for example, Nov. 26, 1868, from Macon Station VA: "I dislike troubling you again as I have written you before but as I have not heard from you [about extending a \$15,000 unsecured loan.]"

<sup>14</sup> William L. Clements Library, Manuscripts Division, Alexander T. Stewart collection. God knows many Americans needed charity following the Civil War. 750,000 soldiers had been killed and an additional 550,000 wounded. Multiply that by the surviving widows and orphans to result in two million or more destitute Americans from that cause alone. See "New Estimate Raises Civil War Death Toll," *New York Times*, Apr. 2, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> *Online Archive of California*, Huntington Library, Alexander T. Stewart Collection, at [www.oac.cdlib.org](http://www.oac.cdlib.org).

<sup>16</sup> Correspondence from Abraham Siegel, Nov. 11, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Schuyler Rumsey sale 25 (2006), lot 469.