

Varieties of 19<sup>th</sup> Century free franks and related postmarks are many and varied. The most popular area of collecting is related to signatures, as in the franks of the founding fathers and other prominent Americans. During the early Federal period the local postmaster was generally the only government presence in the area. Free franking was a perk of the office that helped insure the growth of the post office and mail routes in rural areas. But, by the mid-1820s the country had several hundred post offices existent, and the time had come to examine the necessity of postmaster free franking. ...

## **Politics and the NY Postmaster Prohibition, 1828-1845**

By Albert Valente

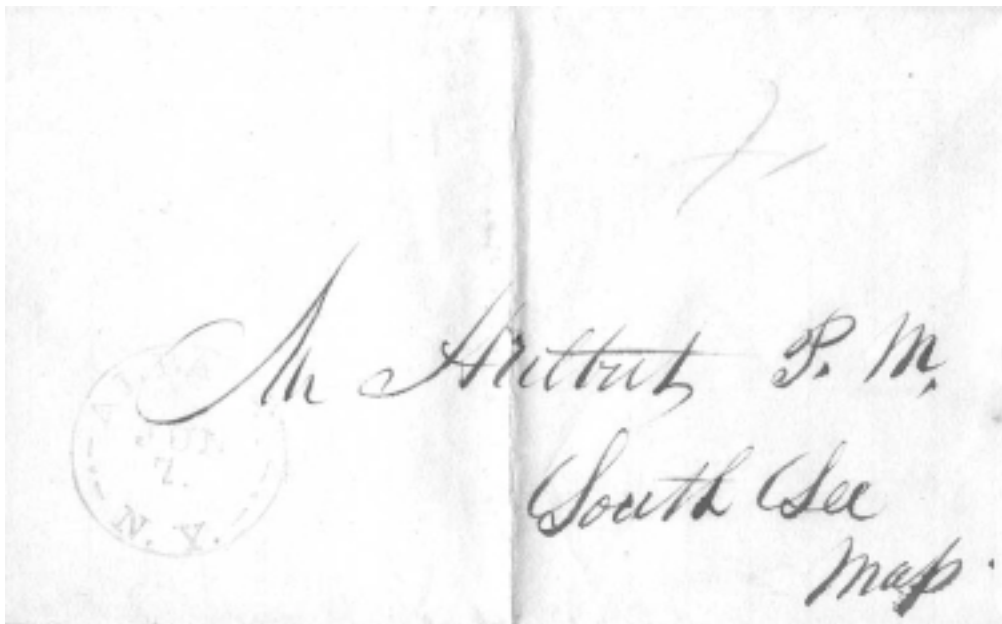
According to the Congressional record Postmaster General McLean went before Congress in 1828 to plead the case for retaining the free franking privilege for postmasters. Certain members of Congress saw the use of the free frank for business purposes as tax evasion, and wanted to close the loophole. McLean was politically minded as well and could call upon his many small town postmaster appointees to deliver votes whenever necessary. However, McLean was also a man of compromise, as when at first he opposed Jackson for president, then remained neutral during the close election of 1828. In the new kitchen cabinet there was no room for McLean, but instead of wasting political capital in removing the popular Postmaster, Jackson choose to elevate him to the Supreme Court instead. This hasty action he would later regret as McLean went on to help to organize his impeachment!

Just what the give-and-take was in 1828 is not completely understood, although Mr. McLean seems to have been outmaneuvered on the issue. Fiscally-minded Congressmen forged a compromise with the President whereby the franking privilege would be suspended in just one city -- at place where the economy was most robust. There were a number of postmasterships appointed by the President and outside the PMG's control, New York being the most prominent. So the compromise seemed the most expedient way to go, and it was really nothing more than a local ordinance, nothing that need go into the official Post Office guide.

The problem for the postal historian is in proving a negative, which is very hard to do. After the ordinance went into effect customers would be dissuaded at the window from even offering any postmaster mail. That appears to be the case within the records of the postmaster of South Lee Massachusetts, Thomas Hurlbut. Mr. Hurlbut along with this partner, Charles Owen, operated a paper mill South Lee as well as offices in New York. Examples of free franked mail to and from South Lee are common for every year between 1827 and 1845. Such examples come from Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and Albany, to name a few. However, free franks from New York are largely absent, with some very notable exceptions.

The prohibition was fairly effective, but enterprising businessmen could still find ways around it. One way was to bootleg letters to Albany aboard the Hudson River steamer.

[Figure 1] Hudson River Mail to Albany.



Dateline New York June 6, 1838. Dropped in open mail bags onboard daily packet (steamer) to Albany and post-marked there on June 7. Rated free (addr. to P.M. South Lee). Enclosure: "... as you are Post Master I do not pay the Postage on this. ...". A fine example of a postmaster mail bootlegged around the New York PO during the prohibition.

River mail also afforded yet another way around the prohibition. In 1837, a system whereby late mail dropped off at Howard's Hotel could still make the Hudson River packet.

[Figure 2] Hudson River Mail via Hudson.



Dateline New York July 7, 1842. Forwarded by Howard's Hotel for Hudson River Mail and posted in New York on July 8. Sent via closed mail bags on daily packet to Hudson, NY. Rated free (addr. to postmaster So.Lee). Rare example of ordinance violation by mail agent.

Once discovered, the NY Postmaster quickly suspended the activities of Howard's Hotel. So, even mails transiting the NY Post Office were subject to the ordinance. Such examples are commonly found on mails of the Pennsylvania Railroad from Baltimore or Philadelphia where no postmaster prohibition existed.

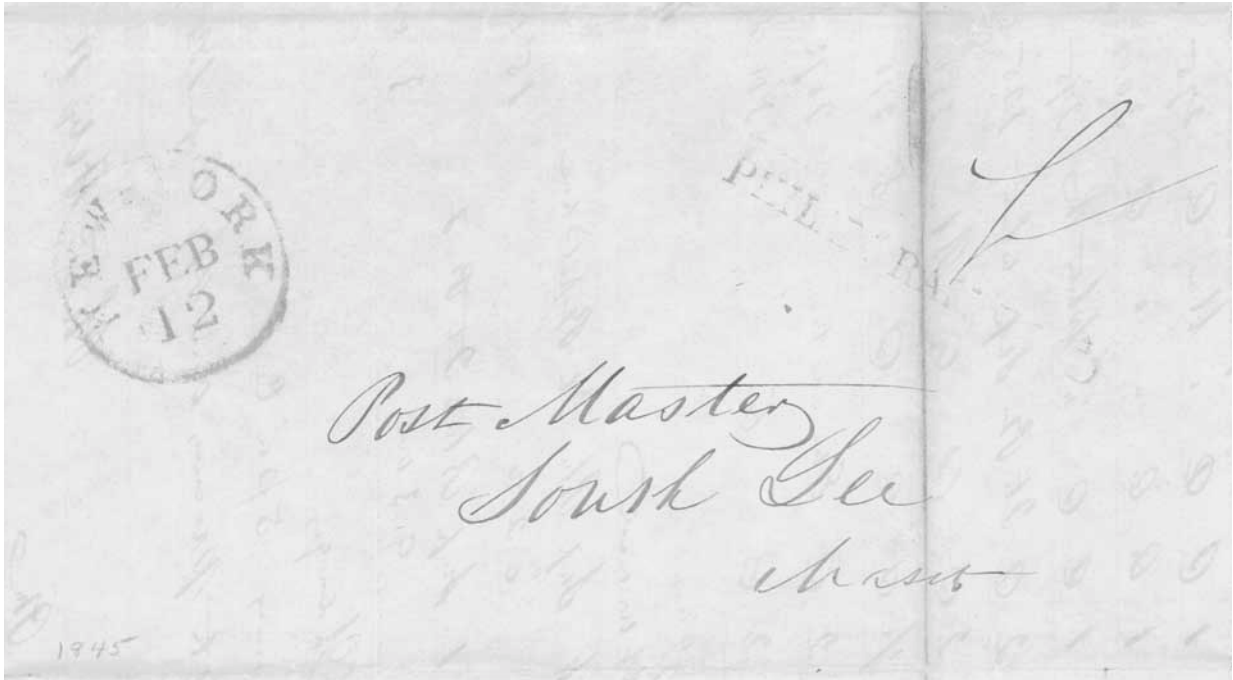
[Figure 3] Pennsylvania Railroad to New York.



Dateline Philadelphia June 30, 1844. Dropped in open mail bags to New York and posted there on July 13. Rated 37 1/2 cents, double rate, for mail traveling 150 to 400 mi. Addressed to postmaster South Lee, but directed "No 1/2 oz. except." Beyond the first 1/2 oz. postal regulations required postmasters to pay full rates. Normally, double rate postmaster letters are rated single + free, which in this case would be 18 3/4 cents. A very fine example of ordinance enforcement on NY transit mail.

The beginning of the 'nickel-dime' postage rates in 1845 also saw the end of the postmaster free frank. Once Congress approved the new measure the compromise was no longer required. The President restored the favor in New York, albeit temporarily, until the new act went into effect on July 1, 1845.

[Figure 4] Philadelphia Railroad to New York.



Dateline Philadelphia Feb. 11, 1845. Dropped in open mail bags to New York and posted there on Feb 12. Rated free (addr. to postmaster South Lee). Earliest known free franking on NY transit mail during the restored rate period.

Rev A. 8/30/6 - Revised rate description of Figure 3. Added reference to Baltimore and Philadelphia mails. Misc.edits. - ajv