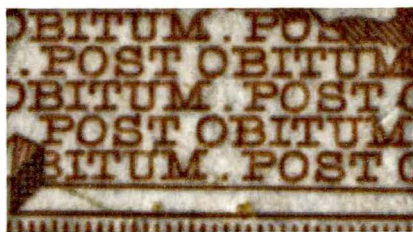


The 'Post Obitum' Official Seal of 1877



This exhibit traces the development of the first United States Official Seal from its precursor in 1861, through design origins, essays and proofs, to its varieties and usages.

The so-called 'Post Obitum' seal, nicknamed for the repeated motto in its background, was ordered for use in 1877 by the Dead Letter Office in Washington, D.C. The number ordered—50,000 seals—would have been wholly inadequate for the nearly one million letters passing through the DLO for re-addressing or re-routing in 1877 alone. In addition, the Office already had a variety of envelopes which were being used for the purpose of returning domestic letters. And the text on these envelopes made it unnecessary to add seals to explain the official nature of the opening of correspondence and packages.

According to a contemporary newspaper report, the original intention was to satisfy postal treaties that required foreign correspondence, undeliverable in the United States, to be returned in bulk and unopened to the Dead Letter Office in the country of origin. Those which had been significantly damaged in transit or unintentionally opened in Washington could have received the seal to explain the problem.

Whether or not this intended usage was ever effected is not known (no letter returned to a foreign country is recorded bearing the 1877 seal), and the seal was sent to some larger post offices for the more common purpose of sealing letters accidentally opened or damaged in handling. Only a fraction of the existing covers are believed to have had the 1877 seal applied in the Dead Letter Office, and only one cover is known that can be tied with certainty to the DLO.

The seal was designed, engraved and printed by the National Bank Note Company, which engraved its name and address on every seal. They appear to have been responsible for the **POST OBITUM** background. Hardly more than a Latin pun, the literal translation would be "after death" rather than "dead letter". Since the seal acquired more universal applications, the phrase disappeared in subsequent orders of seals, but the basic design survived for nearly one hundred years.

Significant items in this exhibit include:

- One of two recorded copies on cover of the precursor to the 'Post Obitum' seal
- Unique original sketch and progressive proofs
- The largest known multiple
- The only known usage with a clear Dead Letter Office origin

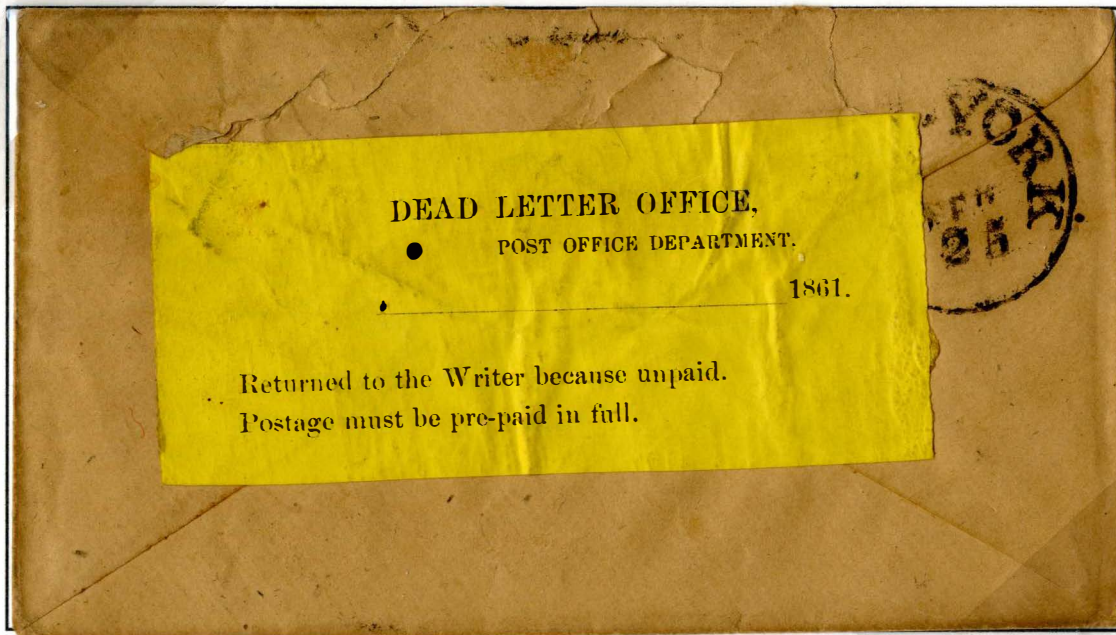
What is an Official Seal?

A Philatelic Incunabulum

What constitutes an official seal is not universally agreed upon. The most recent definition covers a broad, but not all-inclusive, range of philatelic ephemera—

“Any printed seal, label, or tape prepared by the Post Office or its contractors...or prepared under the authority of a local postmaster and used for the repair, re-closing, protection, or direction of the mail.” Jim Kotanchik, *Post Office Seals of the United States and Possessions*, 2006

Under this definition, this 1861 Dead Letter Office label constitutes the precursor of all official seals, predating by a few years the Italian seal generally given priority. No later examples are known to have been prepared by the U.S. Post Office..



Received in New York City, marked “Held for Postage” and sent to the Dead Letter Office on February 25, 1861. Opened there, the writer’s address found, and returned for postage. The stamp was supplied by the writer and cancelled in New York March 20, 1861.

One of two known copies of label on cover

Both of the known seals were used on covers in February, 1861. They probably were made obsolete by the first Dead Letter Office return envelopes produced later in 1861.



Origins, Intentions and Essays

The first Canadian seal is now generally listed as being issued in 1879—two years after the U.S. seal—but it had been listed earlier as 1875. The sketch prepared by the U.S. Post Office and given to the National Bank Note Company for the U.S. seal appears to be a modification of the Canadian seal, and the intended usage for the U.S. seal appears to match that of Canada. This exhibitor believes that the earlier date is correct and that the Canadian seal was the model for the U.S. seal.



Sketch submitted by Post Office February 1877. Inter-twined U.S. in corners the suggestion of the Post Office. Liberty head and 'Post Obitum' background apparently the inspirations of National Bank Note Company
- ex Lord Crawford



First Canadian seal: 1875?
1879? Dead Letter Office cancellation.



Essay on card with incomplete vignette and engraved borders
Only recorded copy

The Intended Usage

A SEAL FOR DEAD LETTERS.

Under the International Postal Union the United States Post Office must return to the countries from which they are sent, and without being opened, all letters received at the Dead Letter Office. Nearly every country abroad uses the flimsiest materials for envelopes, and it is not surprising that after their rough usage in the mails they should present a very dilapidated appearance when they have had the misfortune to turn up at the Dead Letter Office. To add to this annoyance, numerous complaints have been received at the department from the several offices abroad, calling attention to the dilapidation. To remedy this as far as possible, or at least to prevent future complaints, the Post Office has just adopted a design for an official seal to be attached to all dead (foreign) letters before returning them. The design is oblong, nearly two inches in length by one in width, with rounded corners. The face bears in prominent characters the inscription "Post Office Department, U. S. A., Officially Sealed." In the centre of the seal is a head of the Goddess of Liberty. Underneath all is a velvet-brown ground composed of very minute letters which, when examined by a magnifying glass, are found to contain the words "Post Obitum." The back of the seal will be made adhesive, and it will be used to seal up in an official and authentic manner the correspondence referred to.

New York Times, March 12, 1877

This article appeared four days before the seals were received by the Post Office. This reference clarifies the intended usage and has not previously been cited



Essay on India with completed vignette but lacking engraved borders
Only recorded copy

Die Proofs

Large die proofs show the National Bank Note Company die number, 4585, 3.5 mm. above the image of the seal. The die was cut on a block measuring 75 by 45 mm.



On India sunk on card with full die block dimensions
One of six recorded copies in as many colors



On India, pasted into what was apparently part of a salesman's sample or inventory book. With reduced image of reverse showing portions of other National Bank Note Company dies

Plate Proofs

Existing plate proofs are either in the selected color or in an 'experimental' green ink said to smear or dissolve with attempts to remove postmarks. Why this feature would have been important for an official seal which had no franking value and was not often cancelled remains a mystery. The two varieties of the known green plate proofs have led somewhat tortured lives, illustrating the impact of collecting goals on philatelic material.



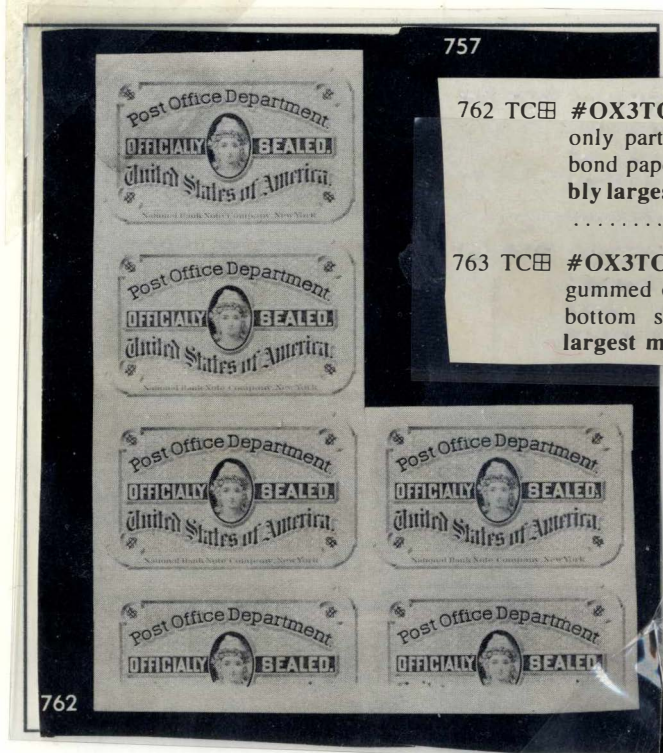
On bond paper, imperforate, bottom pair incomplete.
With the separated vertical pair the only recorded copies

Deconstruction and Recent Reconstruction

At auction in 1977 both of these pieces were blocks of six, the imperforate example having a vertical pair on the left side above the block in this exhibit. Whether by pre-sale design or post-sale negotiation, both pieces were split by removing the top pairs. Those involved were the most active Official Seal collectors at the time: Seymour Kazman and William Gerlach. Gerlach got the imperf block and the perf pair; Kazman got the reverse. Gerlach exhibited his share until selling his collection to this exhibitor in 1996. Shortly after publication of *The Post Office Seals of the United States* written with Adam Perkal in 1983, Kazman sold his collection to Jon Christianson. That collection came to auction in 1988. After a few intervening ownerships, the perforated block of six has been reunited. The vertical pair of the imperf example is still at large.



Restored block of six. On stamp paper, perforated and gummed,
bottom pair incomplete
Only recorded examples



762 TC田 #OX3TC, Green, L shaped imperf block of 6, with only partial impression of bottom row of stamps. On bond paper with M/S "9/27/10 "34" on back. **Probably largest multiple known. Rare.** one stamp stained-.....(Photo) ECV 300-350

763 TC田 #OX3TC, Green, vert. block of 6, perforated & gummed on stamp paper, some perf faults & stain, 2 bottom stamps only partial impression. **Probably largest multiple known, Rare**(Photo) ECV 200-250

The block above as illustrated in Sotheby Parke-Bernet Stamp Auction No. II. July 14, 1977, with the catalogue descriptions for both blocks.



In the selected color, on India paper, imperforate

Varieties

Since there was only one printing of the seal significant varieties should not be expected. Differences in shade have been described, but these are presumably due to slight variations in the quantity of ink applied for an impression. Similarly, gum colors are said to vary from off white to yellowish. In a period when gum was applied by hand with a brush, such variations are common, and, after nearly 140 years, changes in gum color are more likely due to storage environment than to differences in material.



Seal with normal dark shade of reddish brown



Seal with somewhat lighter shade of the same color



More or less colorless gum



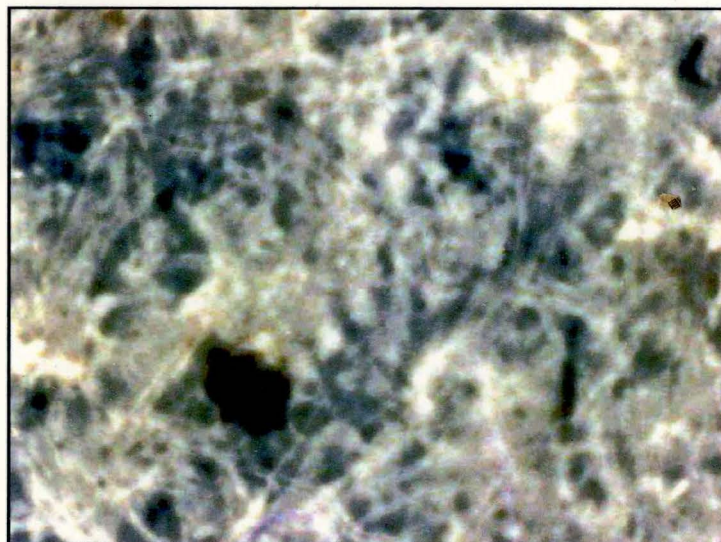
Darker yellowish gum shade



Gum affected by age and environment



The paper used for the seals has been described as being "shot through with fine silk threads," *Perkal & Kazman*, although Kotanchik found only "one or two small fragments of brown or dark red silk threads that are often difficult to identify." High magnification (on the right) shows a small colored thread which may be silk, but also prominent impurities, possibly introduced by the ink used.



Sheet Format and Multiples (Correcting a Century-Old Error)

John Luff stated, without a reference to his source, that the Post Obutum seal was printed in sheets of one hundred (10 x 10) without a plate number. No portion of any marginal imprint has been seen. No full sheets are known to exist, and multiples of any size have always been scarce. Only five multiples larger than a pair are reported. Research by this exhibitor into the National Bank Note Company invoice records has revealed that Luff was in error, and the sheet format was of fifty seals (5 x 10).

National Bank Note Company Order Book, 1877 Page 206

Feb'y 21 U.S. Post Office Department, Washington D.C.
Order of J. W. Barber, Third Asst. P. M. Genl
Engrave 50 Dead Letter Seal Stamps
Brown Print 1,000 Imps. Dead Letter Stamps
Gum do " " "
Perforate do " " "
Paper 1,000 Sheets Stamp Paper 12 x 18½
Cut 10¼ x 12¼

300.—

Each subsequent 1,000 Imps to be \$40—

The word 'Brown' appears to have been a later addition in this entry, presumably reflecting the choice of the Post Office after receiving the trial color proofs.

Reconstruction a Century Earlier

The multiple on the right was in the George Worthington collection sold in 1917, where it was offered as two blocks of four. George Grinnell, more famously remembered for his unhappy involvement with Hawaiian Missionary stamps, recognized they had originally been a block of eight and put them back together. Grinnell was one of the earliest stamp collectors specializing in Official Seals. His collection remained intact until the early 1990s.



Largest recorded multiple; unique with selvage



One of three recorded blocks of four



The size of the cut paper allows for selvage on all four sides
Only copy known with selvage from either side

Large 'Die' Proofs

All of the so-called large die proofs are hybrids. Since the plate margin size does not match the known size of the die block, they are probably plate proofs on India mounted on another piece of India and sunk on a card. At least five of these exist, although the latest published information records only three.



The signatures of those involved in producing the seal is an indication that these proofs are essentially contemporary. D.S. Ronaldson was responsible for the frame; Alfred Jones engraved the vignette; and Edmund Oldham was the firm's chief designer.
Only recorded proof with these signatures



A larger format proof, but the size of the 'block' impression is identical to that of the signed proof, suggesting that these large proofs were created at the same time

Cancellations

Although the seal was originally intended for the exclusive use of the Dead Letter Office in Washington, D.C., no clear cancellations show such a usage. Those seen indicate usage in several larger post offices around the country, although a cancellation may not indicate the city in which the seal was applied.



Boston, April 18, 1879



Brooklyn, July 21, 1879



Cincinnati, July 30, no year date



Detroit, April 15, 1878



San Francisco, no date
Previously unrecorded location



Late apparent date, 1884



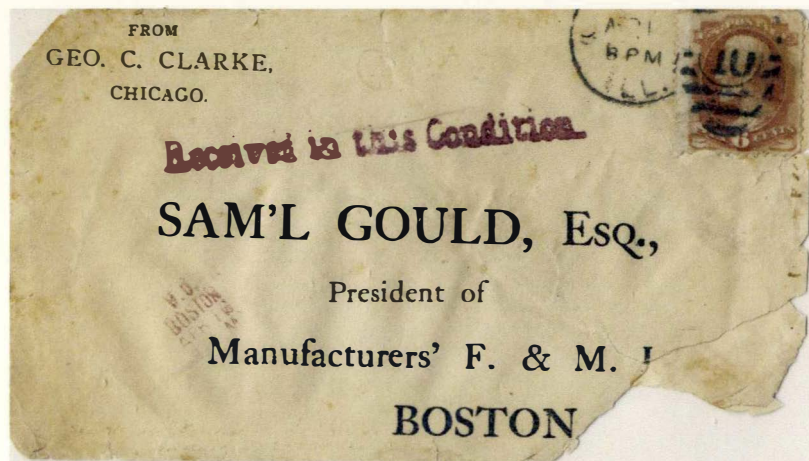
Date and place obscure, but a clear 'D.L.O.' at foot of oval marking. There is no recorded Washington, D.C. Dead Letter Office cancel similar to this, and no branch D.L.O. offices were authorized before 1917. Some large cities, however, had cancelling devices with similar wording for back-stamping items required to be forwarded to Washington.

Usage for Repair of Damaged Mail

This cover is the earliest documented usage on cover of the Post Obitum seal, with a Boston cancellation dated April 17, 1879 tying the seal. [Note that an 1878 cancellation from Detroit is shown on an earlier page of this exhibit.] This cover illustrates one of the principal uses to which the seals were put when sent out to larger post offices by the Dead Letter Office: repair of damage. The stamped "Received in this Condition" on the front of the cover notes the damage found on receipt in Boston, but the placement of the seal would not seem to have improved this severely damaged envelope. This cover was earlier in the pioneering Official Seal collection of Edward Gottlieb.



About a dozen Post Obitum seal covers are known to exist. This is one of three of those where the seal is tied with some form of postal marking



Usage to Report Opened by Mistake

A second principal usage for the seals was to document that a letter had been opened by mistake, either by someone not the intended recipient or, less likely, by a postal employee. This cover was addressed only to an individual at Providence, R.I. The post office there apparently added the instruction to "Try 45 Westminster". Mr. C. F. Wilcox, who admitted to that address, was apparently not the Chas Wilcox Esq who was the intended recipient. The Providence post office then applied the seal to indicate the letter had been officially re-sealed, although not before someone noted the sender was a D. C. Haldeman.



The Philadelphia duplex was used between July 1878 and September 1879, which dates the use of the seal to April or May 1879

One of three recorded covers with the seal tied by a postal marking



Usage for One or Both of the Previous Reasons... or No Reason at All

This well-traveled cover began its journey in February [1879?] in New York City, addressed to Mrs. John H. Willard in Phelps, New York. It was subsequently forwarded to an address in Baltimore, where another address and additional addressee in Washington D.C. was provided. This second forwarding was regarded as a re-mailing, requiring additional postage, paid by "Charity" as indicated by the Baltimore 'Good Samaritan' label. The envelope was "opened by mistake by C. C. W." and resealed with plain paper, apparently in Washington, since the paper covers that forwarding address. The Post Obitum seal may have been applied to emphasize the mistaken opening or the damage, although the pasted paper would have satisfied the regulations. There is no evidence of its going to the Dead Letter Office, and may have been claimed on Capitol Hill, or somehow got back to New York City.



The 'Mystery(?)' of D.L.O. Usage Solved(?) - A New Discovery

There is no question that the first official seal was originally designed for the Dead Letter Office, and the limited intended usage described on the title page is supported by an article in *New York Times* in March 1877. There has been considerable question as to whether the seal was ever applied to covers there, and, if so used, how those covers can be identified. The covers immediately below are two of the three that up to now have been regarded as most likely a D.L.O. product. The cover to the right which recently came to light provides strong evidence that the characteristics of D.L.O. usages had been properly identified.



Held for postage since the writer illegally pasted the indicia from a stamped envelope on the letter. Accompanied by the letter and the D.L.O. forwarding envelope with the addressee's name and address (county supplied). The blue pencil markings on the cover seem identical to the other two covers. The D.L.O. cover with the ○ symbol and the second version of the penalty notice is probably from 1879.

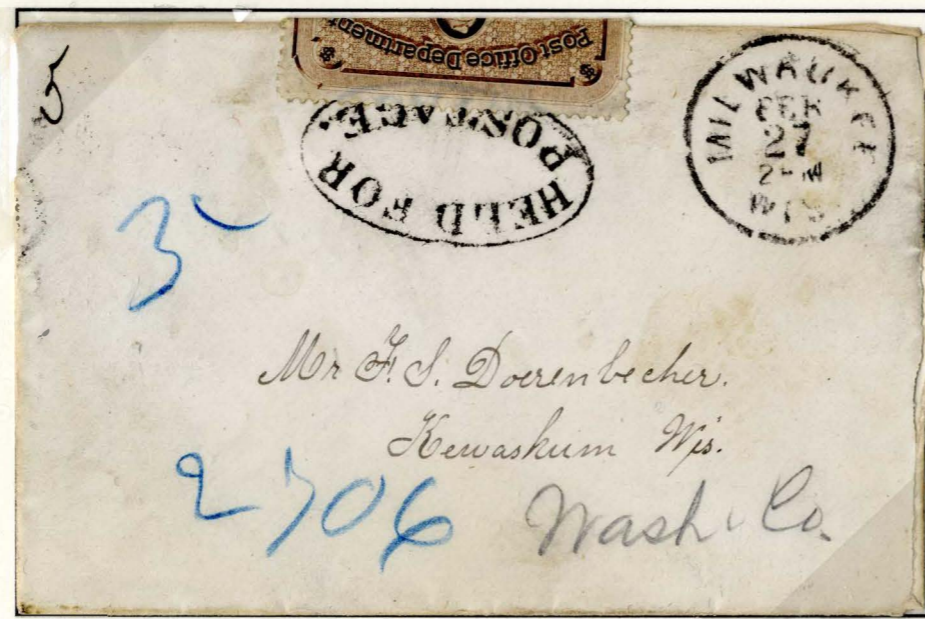
Note that the additional postage apparently collected by the D.L.O. has not been applied to any of these covers, an indication that all would have been returned or forwarded in D.L.O. penalty envelopes

Held for postage, since 2¢ was the local rate and mailed to New Jersey.
New York City back-stamp dated Apr 29. Only year-dated cover, 1879



Alvin April 30th
Miss Ocie Kendall
Dear Ocie
Your long
I came at last
was glad to
again, and
I hasten to
be you will
ugh to answer
if they
importance
I am not much
of a new writer but I will
do the best I can and you
Ocie nothing
more than
from you
at all
ntage

The characteristics of D.L.O. covers which Jim Kotanchik surmised in *Post Office Seals of the United States and Possessions* are that 1) they were held for postage, 2) they have similar blue pencil markings, and 3) they have origin-office markings on the back as required for transmittal to the D.L.O.



Held for postage in Milwaukee.
Milwaukee back-stamp dated Feb 28

