

Chapter 1

Introduction

In recent years, there have been an increasing number of philatelists who have tired of the never ending stream of brightly colored labels being produced by the myriad postal agencies of the world. Some of these discouraged people have discovered that postmarks can provide much of the historic and geographic collecting appeal, which originally attracted them to stamp collecting, and often at a fraction of the cost. Other collectors have been attracted to postmarks from hobbies with a strong historical orientation such as deltiology (post card collecting), token collecting and paper check collecting.

Regardless of their former avocation, people new to postmark collecting, soon discover that there is a lot to learn about the hobby. This book is intended to assist newcomers in their search to learn more about our fascinating hobby, as well as to provide seasoned collectors with a single handy resource, which can serve as a guide to the many and varied aspects of early 20th century United States postmarks.

This book provides detailed information about United States postmarks which appear on post cards and covers dating from 1900 to 1920. The author assumes no prior knowledge of the subject on the part of the reader, and has therefore made an attempt to define all terms carefully and, where possible, to provide illustrations. The primary objective of this book is to serve as both an introduction to the subject of early 20th century US postmark collecting and a point of departure for those who might wish to learn more about a particular aspect of the hobby.

The text which follows is divided into two major sections:

I. The Postmarks; and,
II. The Collecting Areas.

The Postmark Section defines, illustrates, and discusses each of the types of United States postmarks which appear on postcards and covers dating from 1900 to 1920. Many of these individual postmark types have been the subject of specialized studies, and, where such research has been published, citations are provided to allow readers further investigation. The following chapters appear in this section:

Chapter 2 - Handstamps Versus Machine Made Postmarks

Chapter 3 - Circular Date Stamps

Chapter 4 - Doane Postmarks

Chapter 5 - Four-Bar Postmarks

Chapter 6 - Metal Duplex Handstamps

Chapter 7 - Manuscript and Straight-line Postmarks

Chapter 8 - Anachronism and Mimics

Chapter 9 - Misuse of Special Purpose Handstamps

Chapter 10 - Machine Cancellations

The section on Collecting Areas identifies and discusses those specialty fields within the hobby of postmark collecting which have generated sufficient interest to spawn publications and organizations devoted to them. Here too, additional details are provided for those who might wish to pursue a particular subject. Specialty chapters include:

Chapter 11 - Collecting by Geographic Regions

Chapter 12 - Collecting Rural Free Delivery Markings

Chapter 13 - Collecting Railway Post Office Markings

Chapter 14 - Collecting Naval and Military Postmarks

Chapter 15 - Collecting Auxiliary Markings

Chapter 16 - Collecting Other U.S. Postmark Specialties

A Glossary and an Index follow the two main sections of the book.

In any book introducing a collecting specialty the subject of market value ranks as a considerable interest to most readers. The market for postmarks is quite complicated, but an effort has been made to advise readers of which kinds of postmarks command premium prices and which are common. It is unlikely that anyone reading this book will emerge with sufficient knowledge and confidence to feel they have mastered the market for postmarks, but they should gain a good knowledge of the fundamentals and know how to proceed further.

Postmarks are those impressions made by the post office on a card or envelope to indicate the place and time of mailing. Typically they take the form of a handstamp marking in a circular outline containing the name of the post office, its state, and the date of mailing. Usually a postmark is accompanied by a cancel, or cancellation. This is an impression which the post office applies to the stamp on the card or envelope to insure that it is not used again.

During the post card era, roughly 1900 to 1920, it became common for United States post offices to apply both the postmark and the cancel at the same time, either through the use of a handstamp, or some type of machine. Today, most postmarks and cancels are applied simultaneously by high-speed machines, but, if one requests it, some clerks will still apply a handstamp postmark and cancellation. We will, of course, delve much deeper into this subject in the next section.

Some people began collecting postmarks in the United States as early as the 1870s (*figure 1-1*). These earliest collectors, as well as those who followed through about the 1920s, usually cut the postmarks from the envelopes and cards for easier arrangement in an album. These hobbyists were known as postmark collectors, and their numbers have continued to grow over the years so that today the Postmark Collectors Club boasts nearly 800 members scattered across the nation.

During the 1930s some people began to believe that the proper way to collect postmarks was to preserve the entire envelope or post card intact. At the time, collecting interest was focused on Civil War Patriotic envelopes, mail bearing express company franking, and fancy or unusual 19th century pieces (*figure 1-2*). It was entirely logical to pre-

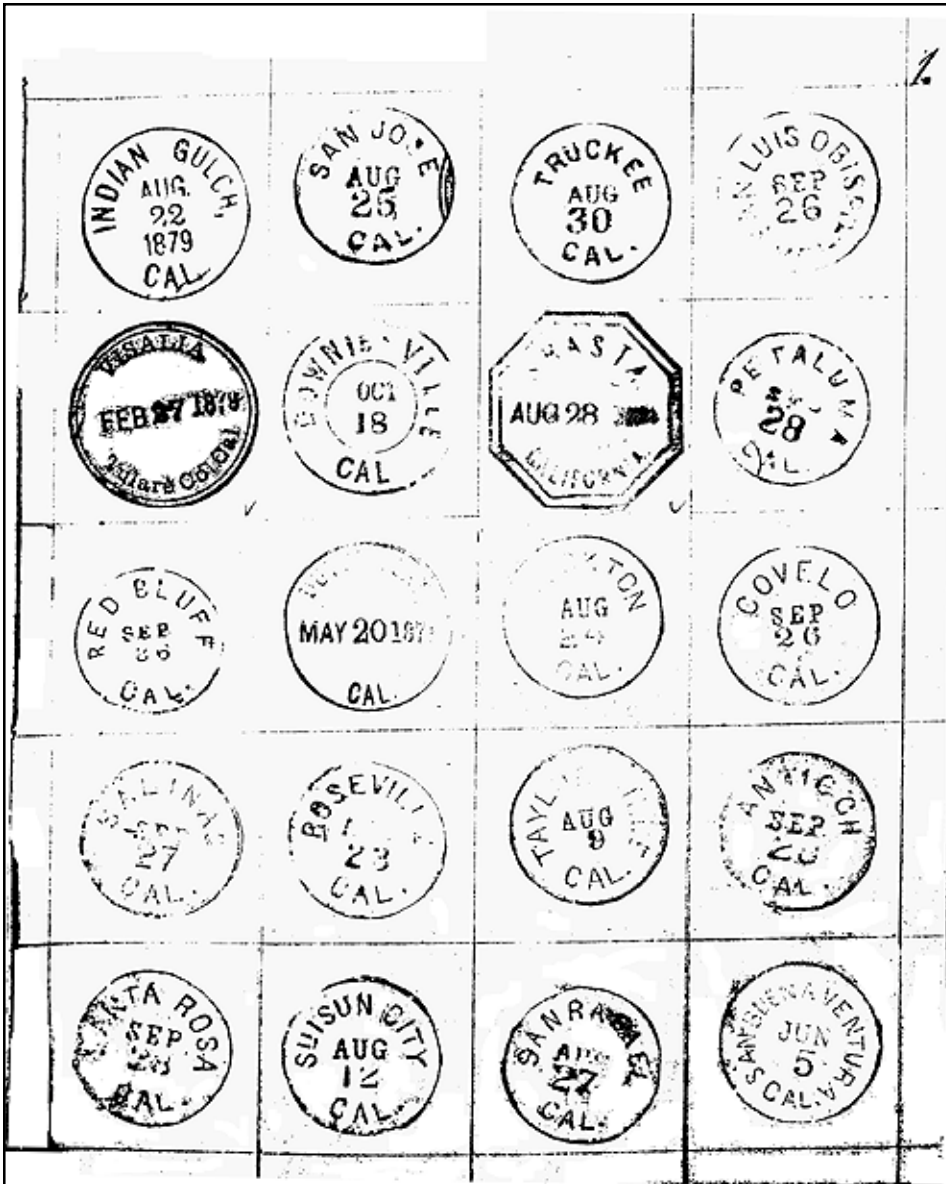


Figure 1-1 The first page of a pioneer postmark collector's album. The album, a simple notebook divided into grid squares, was inscribed "To Joe from Mother on his Birthday July 22nd 1879."

serve the entire piece, for, quite often, the entire piece was necessary to tell the whole story. Some of these early collectors began to write articles describing the items in their collections. The term *cover* came to be used to describe an envelope which had passed through the mails,



Figure 1-2 Fancy cancels, such as the Port Townsend, Washington Territory, “kicking mule” shown here and enlarged in inset, attracted the attention of collectors beginning in the 1930s. This interest led to the preference for collecting the entire envelope instead of just the postmark.

and bore evidence, such as stamps and postmarks, to document when and how it had traveled. People who preferred the entire envelope to the postmark became known as cover collectors, and some, who devoted considerable time to learning about the methods and means of moving the mails adopted the term *postal historians*.

Terms often tend to become somewhat loosely used with the passage of time, and today, while most organizations of collectors call themselves “postal history societies”, their members may refer to themselves as postmark collectors, cover collectors, or postal historians. As a rule though, postmark collectors still emphasize just the postmark and are often not concerned by the fact that it has been cut from the card or envelope; cover collectors are interested in the entire card or cover, but include quite a number of people who prefer made-for-collector items such as modern first-day-of-issue or first flight covers (*figure 1-3*); and, postal historians are cover collectors who seek only cards or covers which bear evidence of valid postal journeys. This is not to say, however, that in the collection of one who considers himself a postal histo-



Figure 1-3 Covers created by and for collectors to mark issuance of new stamps, historic flights, or other significant events became increasingly popular beginning in the 1930s. Since they were initially created to be saved, rather than to transport a message, they have survived in considerable numbers to this day.

rian, you can not find an item of philatelic origin, or even a postmark trimmed from a envelope. Sometimes we must settle for what we can find.

POST CARDS AND POSTAL HISTORY

Before about 1960 most postal historians did not consider post cards to be particularly interesting additions to their collections. Even today, given the choice between a post card and a cover with the same postmark, most collectors will choose the cover, and yet in recent years, a few post cards have been sold at public auctions to postal historians at prices in excess of \$1,000 because of the postmarks they bore. The change of heart was due primarily to supply and demand. Prior to 1960, and for a few year thereafter, it was possible to purchase covers with desirable 19th century postmarks for only a few dollars. To be sure,



Figure 1-4 This post card bears a particularly well-struck example of a popular type of postmark known as a Doane from a very small post office in American Samoa. The post office only operated from 1905 to 1915, and probably generated very little mail. Without examples on post cards, it is unlikely that postmarks would have survived from many small, remote post offices.

there were high-priced items even then, but there were also plenty of inexpensive pieces to be had with which to build a collection. The influx of more and more collectors during the 1960s drove prices for much of the most desirable early material beyond the budget of many collectors, and, as a result, interest in postmarks on postcards began to increase.

Today, postmarks from scarce post offices on post cards are acceptable, and, in fact, eagerly sought by the majority of postal historians (figure 1-4). True, there is still some bias in favor of covers over postcards, but there are so few covers compared to the number of surviving post cards, that most collectors seeking an example of a scarce postmark from the early 20th century will welcome one on a post card. In fact, if presented with a choice between an example on post card and an example on cover, most collectors are not willing to pay a substantial premium for the cover.

Post cards have generally become acceptable to people interested in their postmarks. To better understand this growing interest in post cards by people who collect postmarks, we must turn now to an investigation of the nature of postmarks which are found on post cards. What different types occur? How does one tell a “good” one from a common one? Why are some scarce and others common? These and other questions will be answered in the following sections.