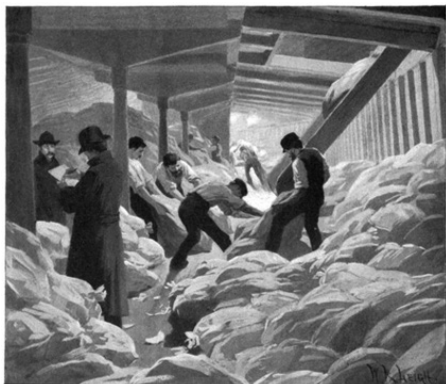


## Yesterday in U.S. Stamp News:

# Uncle Sam's Foreign Mails: How They are Handled in New York City

(From USSN, February 2004 & Mekeel's Weekly February 16, 1904)

(This 1904 'from the scene' interview of the superintendent of the foreign branch of the New York post office and the description of the processing of mail that is now postal history merits repeating here, with color images replacing those we used in the 2004 USSN reprint. The new images can be found on pages 22 and 23. JFD.)



On the Gutenberg Project site, <http://www.gutenberg.org/>, we found this edition July-December 1899 edition of Scribner's Magazine and the article, "The Foreign Mail Service at New York." Left to right the illustrations depict the handling of incoming mail from overseas, as follows:

Left: On Board the Postmaster General, at the End of the Chute—Receiving, Piling, and Checking Off Sacks.

Center: Mail Arriving in Foreign Department. On the left the Chief Clerk is checking off the returns from the clerks, on the right, who have emptied sacks of mail. New loads are coming in in the rear.

Right: Despatching a Mail—Sacks Loaded on Trucks. Despatching clerk, on the left, tallying off mails, sack by sack. Foreign mails are delivered to trucks sent by the Steamship Companies and are receipted for at the door of New York Post Office.

"This is our busiest season," said the superintendent of the foreign branch of the New York post-office, as he surveyed the tables of the assorting room, heaping high with sacks of letters destined for all parts of the world.

Foreign correspondence always takes a jump with the coming of fall and reaches flood tide in December, when the great volume of Christmas mail is despatched, and along through January. At that time a single steamer may carry to Europe 3,000 or 4,000 sacks of mail, which is about, the amount sent out during a week under ordinary circumstances."

At all seasons we manage to keep pretty busy, however, for we handle, stamp and sort more than a hundred million pieces of mail matter in this office in a year, besides the hundreds of millions that pass through here in 'closed mails,' made up in other cities or in foreign countries."

It was on Friday afternoon when the work of "tying out" for the American line steamer of Saturday, which carries the heaviest foreign mail of the week, was under the way. The "North mail" had just come in and its white grist was being run through the mill. Quick moving clerks took up the letters by armfuls and deftly distributed them among the sorting cases with hundreds of pigeonholes

representing foreign cities, countries and mail routes. As soon as one of the little compartments was filled up, its letters were taken out, wrapped up and tagged with the clerk's number and the bundle's destination. These packages were thrown into baskets and trundled away to the pouching cases, there to be distributed in sacks, which were tied, sealed, weighed and thrown upon the small mountain of canvas bags waiting to go to the steamship pier.

The "North mail" was followed by others from the South and West, and the same process of sorting over and over until the heaped accumulation rose nearly to the ceiling and contained some 2,000 sacks. Then came a procession of big trucks that carried it away to the waiting steamer.

As much as possible of the matter that pours day after day into the "foreign branch" from half the world is handled in this way on Fridays as "advance mail," for the very good reason that if it all were left until Saturday morning it would be impossible to get it aboard ship before 9.30, the sailing hour of the American line.

As it is, there are lively times Saturday morning, when the rush work of sending out the supplementary

mails is on. Then the hands of the clerks fairly fly. The men at the pouching cases hold open the mouths of the sacks so they may be closed the instant the last letter is slipped in, and the last mail wagon dashes away down West street a few minutes after 9 and draws up on the pier five or ten minutes before sailing time. At the vessel's side a line of waiting men seizes the sacks and rushes them up the gangplank, the last of the big ship's varied cargo to go on board.

The process is repeated daily on a greater or less scale, for there is no day on which mail is not despatched to some port or other on the other side of the Atlantic. Often there are four or five steamers leaving in a single day for Europe, the West Indies and South America, and there is always the incoming foreign mail, although this involves less work for the clerks of the "foreign branch" than does the outward bound.

Probably few persons know that there is a post-office devoted wholly to the handling of the foreign mails. Indeed, the one in New York is the only one of its kind. It is located in West street, conveniently near the piers of the great Atlantic flyers, and was established a few years ago as a step in the constant march of progress of the United States Post-Office Department.

In whatever part of the country you live, your letters to Europe are pretty certain to pass through this busy station and nine times out of ten they gain several hours—perhaps even days—by doing so. In fact, the foreign branch has become a sort of clearing for international correspondence, where the business and news communications, the friendly exchanges and affectionate missives that each half of the world sends to the other half meet and pass upon their way.

Here are mail sacks from the British post-office marked for Mexico, Jamaica, Argentina, Chili and half a dozen other countries. Another pile is made up of Japanese mail for England. A few years ago the combination of American steamship and railway enterprise won a signal triumph by breaking the time record for the Australian mails to Europe, and now the correspondence of the island continent, too, passes through here. Here also are scattered heaps of French mail for Hayti, Dutch mail for Curacao, German mail for Venezuela, Brazil and the other South American countries with which the Fatherland has extensive trade relations, and even a small bag from St. Kitts for Bermuda, which reaches its destination by way of New York.

The accumulations are constantly shifting in volume and in the variety of countries they represent. As soon as one disappears another takes its place, and so the web of the international exchange of ideas is woven, the threads gathered from half-way round the world spun out again to complete the girdle.

Of course, every variety of stamp is to be seen on the long tables of this great international postal clearing house, and there are many of high denominations. Fifty-cent stamps appear very often, and not infrequently a single letter carries \$6 or \$7 in postage.

The work of the "foreign branch" is very different from that of offices handling only domestic mails, and in most respects is more difficult. Any man with a fair education, a quick eye and a good knowledge of local geography can learn in a few weeks to sort domestic letters rapidly and accurately. In the "foreign branch," however, the clerks must know the location of small towns all over Europe, not to mention Africa, some parts of Asia and South America.

The different separation cases represent different countries, and when one reflects upon the number of states districts, cities and small towns in such a country as Germany, for example, he realizes that it is no easy matter to carry all of these in one's head. According to the superintendent, a man must be in the office three months studying hard all the time, before he can undertake the most elementary branches of the work, and it is only after three years that he becomes really experienced and valuable.

The bane of the clerks in the foreign department is short postage. Although the fact that a foreign letter requires 5 cents in stamps for each half ounce in weight is conspicuously posted in the post-offices throughout the country, an astonishingly large number of people mail their foreign correspondence with the ordinary 2¢ stamp, while equally numerous are those letters of double or triple weight for which no additional stamps are affixed.

Most of the trouble is due to carelessness, no doubt, for some of the offenders are business houses with a large foreign correspondence. The penalty of double-postage is exacted from the recipient of foreign mail matter on which postage is not properly prepaid, the amount due being computed in French currency—for French is the language used in all international postal affairs—and marked on the envelope, together with a tax stamp. Thousands of dollars are collected every month for deficient postage, and Americans seem to be the worse offenders.

There are several features in the work of the foreign department that are not found in the domestic offices. All packages are examined, to see that no matter is sent in violation of the postal laws or in evasion of customs requirements. One clerk sits at a table all day long examining parcels, and as he works a stack of matter detained for one reason or another grows up beside him.

A favorite plan of evading the tariff is to send costly laces or dress fabrics through the mails inside rolled newspapers in the fond belief that the postal clerks will not notice them. But the expert fingers of the examiner ordinarily detect this subterfuge without opening the wrapping, and if the sender's address is on the package he receives a notice informing him that it will be necessary to accompany his parcel with a customs declaration.

The "foreign branch" would be a delightful place for the stamp collector and the handwriting expert if they were allowed to delve at will in its ever changing treasures. The latter, at least, would encounter such problems as he had not dreamed of before.

Hundreds of letters are received every day on which

the addresses seem to the inexperienced visitor absolutely undecipherable. Every conceivable style of hieroglyphics, arranged in every form of disorder that the mathematical possibilities allow, is to be found. A favorite device of the immigrant writing to his native town is to scrawl the address over the entire front of the envelope, placing the stamps on the back. Letters are received every day by the dozen addressed in Russian, Syrian or Greek characters, which, of course, only one familiar with those languages can decipher, while the chirography affected by the Italians, Austro-Hungarians and Poles, of whom there are hundreds of thousands in this country, is seldom easy to interpret.

Very often the skilled clerks of the foreign branch, after heroic efforts, make out no more than the name of the country to which a letter is to go and forward the problem of the rest of the address to the authorities there in the hope that they may be able to solve it. A curious exception is that letters to or from Japan and China are almost invariably inscribed clearly and correctly, the letter usually carrying the address in both English and Chinese.

One package is rejected because it contains some liquid preparation which is leaking and would damage other mail it came in contact with; another is thrown out because it is enclosed in a papier-mache box, which the international regulations do not permit; explosives, injurious drugs and a long category of other harmful articles are similarly barred. The man in charge of this branch of the work is the oldest employee in the service, and one would think that long ago he must have lost all faith in human integrity.

An important department of the office is the registry division, where the immense amount of registered matter is entered in books kept for the purpose. Another is the parcels-post section, in which is handled the matter—mostly large packages containing samples of merchandise—which is sent to certain countries under special treaty arrangements, at low rates of postage.

As might naturally be supposed, Great Britain is our chief foreign correspondent, and the mails despatched to London are the heaviest that leave New York. It is surprising, however, to learn that Italy is a close second and receives nearly as many letters from us in the course of a year as England, and the mails to and from Austria-Hungary, Poland, Russia and Greece have increased tremendously during the last few years by reason of the very large immigration from these countries.

A significant indication is the great growth in the mail business with Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Philippines. Down to the time of the American occupation the weekly or semi-weekly New York mail for Puerto Rico consisted of two or three bags; now every steamer takes out from four to five times that number, an index to the increasing business with this island possession. In the case of the Philippines the growth is even more remarkable, for there was practically no mail going to these islands from the United States before 1898.

The building of foreign mails affords good ground for

a comparison of American and foreign methods of postal administration, which is decidedly favorable to the United States. The American authorities take the very reasonable view that the transmission of foreign mails is a purely business enterprise and invariably send them out by the fastest available ships. The British post-office department, on the other hand, looks upon its mail privileges as an instrument to be used to strengthening purely British shipping lines at the expense of those controlled by foreigners. In pursuance of this policy the British post-office sends only two regular mails a week to New York, while there are five in the opposite direction, and unless English letters for the United States are specially directed for the American or German lines they must await the Wednesday or Saturday sailings of British mail steamers.

Not only is this true, but the Britons persist in sending mails by boats as slow as 17 knots when much faster foreign ships are available. It has happened frequently that swift American liners have discharged in New York and the ship started on her way back to Southampton before the bills of lading, which left England on the same day as the cargo itself, have arrived by the slower Cunard boat. A table published recently in one of the British papers shows that the average time of letters day by day and week by week is more than a day longer on the westward than on the eastward journey.

The American authorities are constantly on the alert to effect still further improvements in the foreign service. At their suggestion the sailing day of the American line steamships from New York has been changed from Wednesday to Saturday, and the mails will be landed at Plymouth, with the result that the Saturday mail will be delivered in London on the following Saturday morning in time for an answer to be despatched the same day, instead of being held over till the Monday after, as heretofore, when it has gone by way of Queenstown. It is now possible, in cases of urgency, to send a letter from New York to London and receive a reply in exactly two weeks, instead of seventeen days, as formerly, and from thirty to thirty-six hours are saved every week in the delivery of a large part of the British mail.

The Wednesday mails do not suffer by the change, because the Post-Office Department has arranged with the White Star line, which has Wednesday sailings, to equip its steamers with sea post-offices—another American idea in which postal clerks on board the ships sort the letters en route and bundle them according to their destination, saving an average of from six to eight hours in the time of delivery.

Sea post-offices are now in operation on the ships of the American, White Star and German lines, but thus far the British Post-Office has declined to cooperate in their establishment. Altogether American enterprise is markedly evident in the handling of the foreign mails and a prominent Anglo-American banker is responsible for the statement that the narrower policy of Great Britain costs the business world hundreds of thousands of dollars yearly.

*Photos, pages 22-23*

Supplementary Mail usage: 12¢, Sc. 162, tied by red New York Foreign Mail Star cancel with matching "New York Supplementary Mail 12" Type D Supplementary Mail c.d.s. on cover to London, England, also with red London "Paid" datestamp. The 12¢ pays the 6¢ treaty rate plus 6¢ fee.



Supplementary Mail usage: 10¢ dark green, First Design (Sc. 62B) with 5¢ and 30¢ (Sc. 67, 71) tied by red "New York Paid Oct. 12" (1861) circular datestamp on blue folded cover to Hong Kong with sender's endorsement "Per Fulton" and "Via Marseilles", with red "Supplementary Mail" Type A handstamp, red crayon "24" credit, red London transit datestamp (Oct. 25), large manuscript "1" for 1p British Colonial rate, also with Hong Kong receiving backstamp (Dec. 13). This cover was offered in a Siegel Galleries auction with this additional description: "...this letter was carried on the New York & Havre Line's Fulton...the 'Supplementary Mail' handstamp indicates that it was placed by the post office into a special mail bag brought on board immediately prior to sailing. A full additional rate was required on supplementary-mail letters, which was payable in stamps or cash; in this case, the stamps prepay the 45¢ British Mail rate via Southampton, and the supplementary-mail fee was paid in cash."



From China to Germany via New York: Cover with First Bureau issues (Sc. 279, 281, 272, 283), each tied by large "CHINA." handstamp on registered cover to Germany, with "Mil. Postal Sta. No. 1, China. Registered Feb. 12, 1901" datestamp and New York registry label, a scarce Military Postal Station usage sent during the Boxer Rebellion.



A cover to a distant land: 1¢ Trans-Mississippi (Sc. 285) used with 3¢ Columbian (Sc. 232), 1¢, 2¢ and 4¢ Pan-Am (Sc. 294-296), cancelled by corks on registered 2¢ entire to Hell Bourg, Reunion (located off the east coast of Africa), with "Thompsonville Conn. Jul. 29 12AM 1902" circular datestamp, New York registry label, London registry transit marking, Marseilles, St. Denis and receiving backstamps.



A cover from Bavaria, Germany to Philadelphia that did not go through the New York post office: sent within the Bavarian parcel post system, forwarded by private ship to the U.S. and then delivered by private express company Adams Express, from 116 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, with an Adams company label affixed.

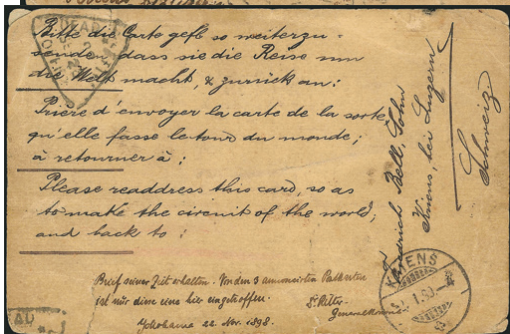
Underpaid cover: 1892 cover to Norway with only a 2¢ carmine (Sc. 220) tied by a New York N.Y. oval grid duplex. 1¢, 3¢ and 10¢ bright claret postage dues (Sc. J22, J24, J26) were affixed, tied by target cancels, and postage due was collected from the addressee on arrival. Norway Dues J1 (four) and J3 (two), were affixed and tied by Christiania double-circle datestamps, and the cover was forwarded to Greencastle, Ind. with "T" and "Centimes 15" duplex due handstamp, also with a blue embossed seal of the Norwegian Consulate on the back flap.





Rare usage of 12¢ and 30¢ Navy Department Officials (Sc. O41, O44) tied by cork cancels, the 12¢ also tied by “Washington D.C. Apr. 6 4PM” (1877) circular datestamp, with “Navy Department, Official Business” imprint, addressed to “Commodore C. H. B. Caldwell, Commanding South Atlantic Station, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil”, also with red “New York Apr. 7” and “London Paid 17 AP 77” transit datestamps and red crayon “160/2” (160 centimes) credit. The 42¢ postage paid the double 21¢ rate to Brazil via Great Britain. As Brazil was not a member of the U.P.U., the U.S. retained 5¢ of the 21¢ postage and credited Great Britain with 16¢ for carrying the letter to Brazil. The double credit (32¢) is expressed in centimes, as required by the U.P.U. regulations.

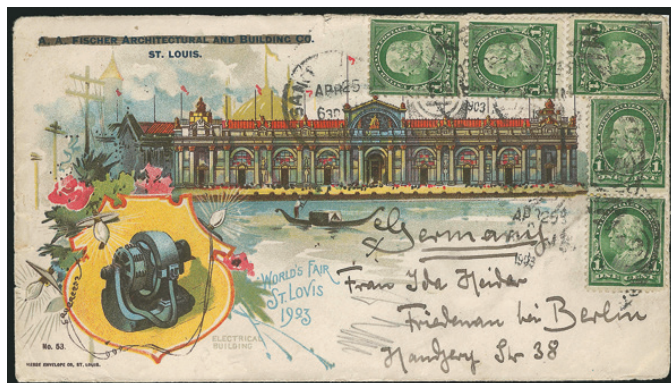
A much travelled cover that went through the New York foreign section. The 2¢ Trans-Mississippi (Sc. 286) is tied by purple cancel on postcard originating in Switzerland, sent to New York, forwarded to San Francisco and forwarded again to



Yokohama, Japan before returning to Switzerland. The originating postage was paid by 2fr and 3fr Swiss stamps, the U.S. 2¢ stamp was applied in New York and cancelled by a “Sep. 12” circular datestamp. The cover also bears a “San Francisco Sep. 17” machine cancel, and the back of card has a San Francisco Dead Letter Office triangular datestamp. A 4s stamp was applied in Yokohama, and the card also is endorsed “Via India” and “Via Suez”. The back of the card reads (in three languages) “Please address this card so as to make the circuit of the world and back”. Postal workers around the world participated in this successful adventure.



This cover was sent around the time this article was published. It bears one each of all 14 values of the 1902-03 1¢-\$5.00 issues (Sc. 300, 302-313, 319), with the 2¢ Shield substituted for the first 2¢ stamp, all used on a legal-size registered 2¢ entire to Lucerne, Switzerland, the stamps tied by strikes of New York registry oval cancels, also with a “New York. U.S.A. Foreign. 9-23 1904” double oval datestamp.



Another usage around the time of this article: A St. Louis Fair illustrated cover to Germany with five 1¢ stamps (Sc. 279) tied by “Saint Louis Mo. Apr. 25, 1903” duplex cancels. The Fair was originally scheduled for 1903, but was delayed and ran from April 30 to December 1, 1904.