A Specialized Study of the Plimpton Manufacturing Co., Hartford, Connecticut High Value U.S. Postal Stationery

High denomination envelopes start in my sphere with the 6¢ value envelopes and run to 90¢ value, excluding the 1¢ through 5¢ values which were put out for single, both foreign and domestic.

Very few of these envelopes have survived because they either carried bulky letters and documents or were used primarily on packages by express companies as payment for the parcels to which they were either physically attached or connected to with twine or other similar means. Most of these envelopes with higher denominations are in a condition far from the usual standard most philatelists seek.

Although stationary was introduced in the United States in 1853, it was not until 1860 that any stationary was produced. The number of envelopes found used during that 1860-1869 decade which remain intact and which have not been cut down to cut squares, the acceptable way to collect such material in this country, are few and far between.

The magnificent Reay engravings on the higher denominations are exceedingly rare. The Plimpton Company issues, while not common, are more often found; many were used by stationary dealers such as Bogert and or by collectors sending items to friends.

Modern collectors, thinking of letters, find 30 and 90¢ envelopes to be illogical. There were very few items of such weight to justify a high postal rate in a small envelope, particularly after lowering of foreign postal rates coinciding with the General Postal Union (GPU) on July 1, 1875. Given the practical culture of the US Post Office in the 1800s, suspicions of a legitimate purpose only come from a lack of knowledge of postal services of that period.

High value envelopes were not intended for actual letters as correspondence would almost never reach that tariff level based on the limited size of the envelopes. Rather, the 30 and 90¢ envelopes functioned as "parcel" envelopes which traveled with parcels. Like parcel cards and forms commonly used in Europe, envelopes allowed for an easier process of sorting parcels in the distribution systems of the day. The envelope was preferred in the US postal system of that period as it could also carry documents accompanying a parcel.

Before the creation of a parcel post service with lower tariffs, parcels were sent at letter rates, both domestically and overseas. In such cases, it was easy for a parcel to exceed the 90¢ tariff: 9 ounces for foreign mail between 1875-1907 (at 5¢ per half-ounce); 15 ounces for domestic mail from 1861-1883 (at 3¢ per half-ounce) and 45 ounces for domestic mail from October 1, 1883 into the early 20th century (at 2¢ per ounce).

As private parcel services opened for business (the PO monopoly only applied to letter mail), PO sorting systems changed and postage rates fell, eliminating the need for higher value envelopes. This resulted in the last printings of high value envelopes in 1894.

These envelopes, when used for parcels, typically contain two or more sets of numbers on their face: a registration number and a parcel number. The parcel number was an easy identifier for a "bin room" function as the parcels were moved in transit and ultimately called-for by the addressee at the post office of destination.

The few surviving 90¢ covers, went primarily to Europe: Germany, France and Sweden; none are known to South America. Virtually all used examples are legal and extra-large sizes.

'Printed to private order' envelopes were produced in 1888 for a so-called stamp dealer 'consortium'. None were postally used and they are omitted from this exhibit.

Both domestic and international usages in period are rare. Given the variety of colors of embossed stamps as well as different papers and envelope sizes, most examples stand as rarities in American philately.

For more information on this most interesting subject, visit our web site at:

http://www.usspecialdelivery.com

The Plimpton Manufacturing Company

The Plimpton Manufacturing Company was incorporated in Hartford, CT on March 1, 1873. This company was a successor in interest to the previous family firm Prescott, Plimpton, and Co. which had been in business since 1865.

Linus B. Plimpton, from Southridge, MA acted as the outside traveling salesman for this manufacturer of commercial envelopes, writing tablets, school note papers, and other usual printer's goods, according to the 2001 edition of the US Postal Stationary Society Catalog (pp 17 et seq.) It also had a retail store in Hartford where these goods were sold and private orders were taken.

William H. Prescott was the inside technical person but shortly left the company and sold out to Linus in 1866, one year after the company's founding. Plimpton then adopted his own name for the company as its sole surviving stockholder and named the company L.B. Plimpton and Company and then organized an additional company known as the Plimpton Envelope and Paper Company. Oliver Plimpton, LB's brother, was hired in 1869 to be the production person as plant superintendant until he retired in 1894.

The Plimpton Company acquired envelope equipment manufactured and sold by George H. Reay of Brooklyn, New York whose firm Linus succeeded in a controversial bidding process overseen by his fellow Hartford native Postmaster General Marshall Jewell who ruled for the native son in the contract dispute with the government. F.C. Graves, the Reay employee, who installed these machines at Plimpton in 1870, was hired away to work for Plimpton's. These were the machines used by Plimpton in 1874-75 to print the first quantity of government stationary and thereafter to produce the future contract products.

As a fledging government printer, the company realized it needed an alliance with an established printing company. It therefore began to work with a close neighbor in the neighboring state of Massachusetts, the Morgan Envelope Company of Springfield to meet its contract obligations. It received additional Reay machines and qualified personnel to operate them from Morgan.

The 1874 contract to commence October 1 of that year required the production of 33 different government envelopes. The Morgan Company, by the way, had obtained the first government contract to print postcards which were first issued in the middle of May 1873. The company therefore had some experience in dealing not only with the regulations, but also with the government overseers. Plimpton had to produce its own dies, since the spurned George H. Reay refused to turn over his outstanding highest quality envelope dies after losing his contract dispute with the government. The work of the Plimpton Company was far inferior to the Reay product in terms of the engraving of the design but eventually Plimpton was able to produce new dies and meet his contract specifications.

Although the first contract called for the hand gumming of envelopes, Plimpton managed to produce a new style of gumming, the flap of the envelopes. Reay used the hand method where the gum edges were square; Plimpton's master mechanic Horace J. Wickham invented a combination printing and folding envelope machine, drafted a gumming device on the front of the embossing with a folding machine on the rear. Therefore, the blanks were gummed, printed, embossed, folded and counted at the same time. This machine produced a gum on the flap which was rounded which was a key way of distinguishing the Plimpton product. "The Wickham Printer and Folder" was patented on May 2, 1876; it reduced production cost by 25%.

During the 1874 and 1878 contract the Post Office department prepared sets of specimen envelopes to indicate the price and quantity, values, papers, sizes and return request availability.

Plimpton also won other contracts and successfully performed them and had no competition from Mr. Reay who died in 1875. Although the products were inferior to Reay, they met government standards.

While quantities of the lower denomination envelopes were plentiful, the quantities of the high denomination envelopes of the 1874 issue were small. Different papers were used and several watermarks can be found. The probable quantities of most of these early envelopes were as follows:

7 cent	3000
12 cent	7200
15 cent	7150
24 cent	2550
30 cent	7900
90 cent	3150

While the exhibitor cannot give any exact statistics of surviving use envelopes, his 7¢ vermilion article in the Collectors Club Philatelist lists most known Reay envelopes and now the 7¢ Plimpton late use (1887) has been discovered by the exhibitor and is the only known use. It is believed that this exhibit contains the majority of the used stationary of most of the higher values. The information for this article was gleamed from the aforementioned USPSS 19th century stationary catalog 2001 edition.