

Special Delivery Markings of the Boston, Mass. Post Office

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While none of the recorded first day covers of the first special delivery stamp are known from Boston, that post office utilized numerous early markings and continued to have an influence on the special delivery markings of various post offices which copied or followed the directions of the Boston office. Many of the sub-offices of Boston or neighboring offices also followed the main post office lead in its markings. But this initial article will only attempt to focus on the special delivery markings of the main Boston post office.

Boston did figure in the first special delivery letter, however. This letter, now in the William Learned Law Peltz collection at the John Hay Library, Brown University, Providence, R.I. and the subject of the wonderful C. Warner Bates article in the *Stamp Specialist*, Vol. #1:4, pps 79-102 was sent on September 30, 1885 from Ilion, N.Y. to Boston, in a two cent brown first class envelope of the day. There is no hour shown on the Boston postmark but there is a receiving mark on the front showing 6 a.m. on October 1. Boston was surely ready to commence the service. A contemporary newspaper account states it was taken out by the messenger at 7:02 a.m and delivered at 7:15 a.m. See Markovits, *First Days*, Vol. 13#6 #77 11-12/68, p36 et seq. The early regulations appear in Harold B. Billian's first of five part series on "The Special Delivery Service" in the *Bureau Specialist* Vol. XXVII, No. 8, p.212 et seq.

The Davis Boston book begins to show the clock markings but before there were such markings, the postmaster followed the directions and had a three line handstamp made. Under the initial system to delivering special delivery mail, there were severe limitations on service, restricting the delivery to only 555 of the nation's more than 4,000 first class offices. While special delivery stamps were sold to all post offices, usually in quantities as few as 10 stamps, only the post offices listed in the circular dated August 11, 1885 (more than 50 days before the service commenced on October 1, 1885) only those listed cities had messengers available and were required to provide this need and speedy service which the United States formally initiated. The service was limited to offices which had free delivery or serving populations of 4,000 or more with a limit set at one mile from the Post Office.

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I will not get into a fight that such an idea for service originated in this country--Italy had this service back to the 14th Century and Belgium used parcel post six sided stamps in the 1870s to carry specially marked mail--but when the Universal Postal Union in Lisbon, in 1885, provided for such a service, the USA started one domestically well before other countries took the initiative. Of course, no service was available to foreign countries in the initial years.

The Post Office Department provided many guidelines to postmasters concerning this new service since it was to be funded out of the fees of the users. I believe that this funding method may well owe its origin to the carrier delivery service of the mid-century. In any event, boys between 13 and 18 were to be the carriers and they were to deliver the mails for eight of the ten cents charged, with a \$30 per month fee limit. They were required to have each letter numbered, dated and to note the time of receipt; probably, the messengers were handed the letters so marked by the office personnel, paid employees, so that there would be a double check. The mail was also supposed to be marked with the time of receipt. What must be remembered in that special delivery mail did not receive special treatment until it reached the addressee's receiving post office. There were no special rules as there are today with express mail which receives special treatment from start to finish. The speed was in the delivery. The rules further provided (Until January 16, 1889) that even if a letter bore a special delivery stamp, if it was underpaid for first class mail, then it was not to be delivered iother than in the normal course of business, to wit, held for postage.

The initial markings where there was a large volume of this mail came from a cancelling machine slug which read, "received or rec'd" and was generally struck on the back of the covers. If volume was low, usually manuscript markings showing the time received and the number were applied by hand. Numbering continued probably from 1885 to bout 1915 to 1917.

When mail could not be delivered, a few cities, including Boston, printed a label which told the addressee that the mail was returned to the post office and would then be treated as regular mail; the carrier, however, received his

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eight cents for the first delivery. Boston, about 1897, adopted a printed label so stating and Billian notes the label's use in that office until at least 1911.

Billian in Part III, Bureau Specialist, Vol. XXVII, No. 12, p.322 illustrates the simple handstamp dated as early as November 24, 1886 (less than 13 months after the launching of the service) as follows:

Number (ms 1642)

Date (ms 11)

Time (ms 9 a.m.)

Billian points out that Cambridge, Mass. about 1890, added his town name to the top of the handstamp making it four lines but with the next three the same as Boston. Other Boston area towns and cities followed Cambridge's lead and so did some of the Boston sub-stations by adding their names or station names, i.e. Back Bay Station, etc., Lynn in 1891. Exact earliest known dates of use are being studied now by the author and photocopies of early markings are delightfully welcomed by email or snail mail at Box 891, Middletown, NY 10940 and will be acknowledged. On a broader note, all markings prior to December 31, 1899 are an interesting study which needs a collaborator with computer skills to keep the entries.

Billian notes in the fourth part of his article in February 1957, p.44 et seq. that Boston area offices pioneered the use of Special Delivery markings. I disagree. San Francisco and Oakland, California, pre-dated Boston by seven years, starting in November 1885 and early in 1886, respectively, to be machine marking devices; but the Boston area did have a lot of neat and color markings and is to be given credit for setting a fine standard for the new service.