

# Philatelic Gold in the Archives

by

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## **Philatelic Gold in the Archives**

Recently, as I was searching a collection in the Manuscript Department of a major university, I found a Baltimore colonial cancel on a folded letter dated July 4, 1776. This priceless piece of American postal history was lying among the other letters in the collection, being touched by bare hands. At least it was still there, since it could have easily been folded up and stolen.

Over the last two years, I have been perusing collections in a major university manuscript collection. I was asked to carefully search selected collections and make a report to the director and his staff on my findings. Since the archivist at this university separated the envelopes from the letters when the collections were processed, my primary job was to search for folded letters of extraordinary value. I determined, through my cataloguing and appraising, that the university was "sitting on" very valuable philatelic holdings; I suspect they are worth between eight and ten million dollars. In addition to appraising folded letters, I was asked to help sell the separated envelopes at national auction.

The same circumstances occur in many repositories around the USA and the world; in many instances, these philatelic items are, as in the case of the university holdings I mentioned in the first paragraph, often quite valuable. Much of the material, sadly, is not perceived by the archivist as valuable.

Generally, philatelic material I find in collections is in the form of a folded letter or an envelope out of which a letter comes (called "a cover"). Rare and expensive philatelic items languish in folders and boxes, unrecognized by those who believe only the texts of letters are worthy of study.

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This article attempts to expose the problems an archivist and curator face in identifying, appraising, preserving, and protecting valuable philatelic material. With the assistance of a professional philatelist, the archivist or curator should establish *a philatelic policy* in which these activities are mandated clearly for staffmembers so that this wealth of material may be spared from thieves and from ruin for further study and enjoyment, and possibly for sale.

The biggest problem archivists and curators face initially is they do not realize the potential value of their philatelic material. Certainly, a stamp or coin collection has some intrinsic value; that much everyone knows. In the vast holdings of old letters and documents which lie on shelves, however, philatelic "gold" such as covers or stampless folded letters--abbreviated SFL--is often overlooked.

The archivist/curator should therefore address the following areas:

- ♦ **Identification and Cataloguing** of potentially valuable philatelic items
- ♦ **Preservation** of potentially valuable philatelic items
- ♦ **Security** of philatelic items

I shall briefly describe and illustrate categories which might contain potentially valuable philatelic material, propose solutions to prevent damage to the material, and suggest methods for establishing secure and theft-impervious environments for these items.

Much of the philatelic material I have discovered is on stampless folded letters. From the first postmarks of the Milan Couriers in the mid-fifteenth century to the mid-1850's when envelopes became prevalent worldwide, the SFL was the standard form of mail communication. No adhesive postage stamps were available until the 1840's. The front or address side of the SFL would receive a postmark(s) indicating post office of origin and amount paid. Additional markings would sometimes be used for various forms of routing or postal record keeping.

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These markings were either handwritten or applied with a handstamp. See Illustration 1 for details on the Stampless Folded Letter.

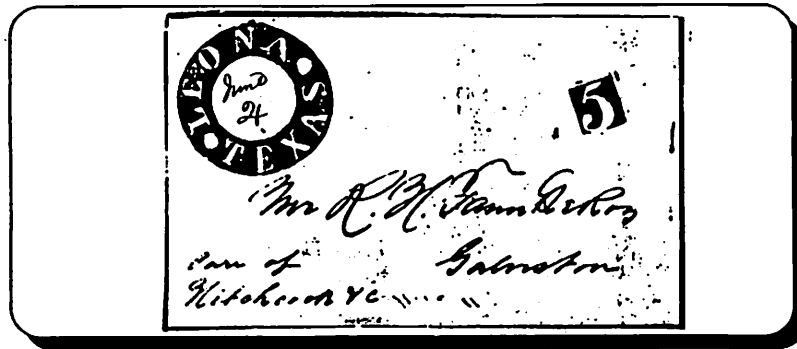


ILLUSTRATION 1: THE STAMPLESS FOLDED LETTER (SFL)

"Putting in a nutshell" what an archivist or curator should look for to assess philatelic value is difficult. A qualified professional philatelist should be consulted to determine precisely what philatelic material is present in a specific collection. Anytime that a postal marking is handwritten, it can run the gamut from being self-evident to absolutely illegible. Only experience in sorting this material can help solve the mystery of "philatelic gold."

Nevertheless, below is a list for basic sorting. Most of the list refers to United States usages. Foreign guidelines, however, would be similar; markings would either appear in the language native to a specific country or in French, the official language of the Universal Postal Union.

- ♦ **Any Colonial Marking**, manuscript or handstamp, may be quite valuable. Many are not at all obvious, as in the example noted below in Illustration 2.

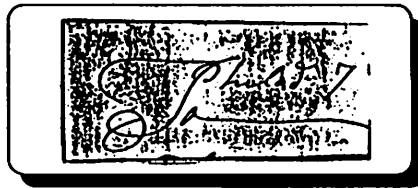


ILLUSTRATION 2: A PHILADELPHIA "7" MARKING FROM THE COLONIAL PERIOD

- ♦ **Any Stampless Folded Letter (SFL) handstamp** that is not circular in shape (e.g. oval, fancy, irregular) can have value. In Illustration 3, a fancy handstamp from Mechanisburg, IN is noted.



ILLUSTRATION 3: A FANCY HANDSTAMP

- ♦ **Any Transoceanic Item** can be valuable. Many will say "SHIP" somewhere in the marking. Some will not indicate an ocean routing, but if the mark is from overseas, it is a transoceanic marking. Illustration 4 is an illustration of a Trans-oceanic stamp, circa 1845, from Brooklyn.



ILLUSTRATION 4: A TRANSOCEANIC STAMP

- ♦ **Any Railroad Marking**, either manuscript or handstamp, can also have considerable value. Most specify a town and railroad line followed with the text "RAILROAD" or "RR." Illustration 5 is a stamp from the Providence and Worcester Railroad.

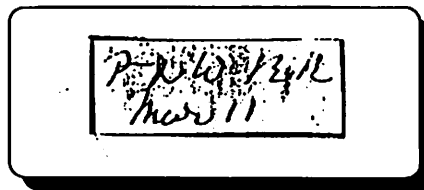


ILLUSTRATION 5: RAILROAD CANCEL

- ♦ **Any Territorial Marking**, either manuscript or handstamp, can be valuable. Some United States areas were territories for a long time, others for a brief period . Indian reservations--for example, the Seminole Agency in Florida whose mark is pictured in Illustration 6--and long-held US possessions abroad--such as Pago Pago in American Samoa-- can also have valuable marks.



ILLUSTRATION 6: A POSTAL MARKING FROM THE SEMINOLE INDIAN RESERVATION

- ♦ **Any Inland Waterway Item**. This would include not only riverboats but any East Coast or Southern routing via the Atlantic Ocean or the Gulf of Mexico. Inland waterway items are indicated in many ways, some of which are "WAY," "STEAM," "MAIL-ROUTE," and any name specific to a particular boat. Illustration 7 is an example of an inland waterway marking from Mobile, Alabama.



ILLUSTRATION 7: AN INLAND WATERWAY MARKING

- ♦ **Any Military or War Marking** are sometimes difficult to determine insofar as origin as illustrated below. The straight-line cancel "VERA CRUZ, MEX" is actually a US handstamp from the

Mexican War. These may also be quite valuable.

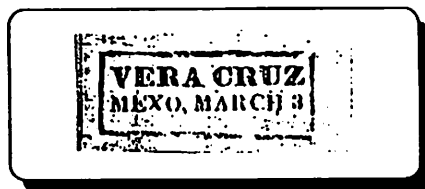


ILLUSTRATION 8: VERA CRUZ MARKING FROM MEXICAN WAR

- ♦ **Any Early Western Routings or Markings.** Some of the places of origin did not have a post office, so the letter itself would be an indicator of origin, with a routing mark on the front of possibly an eastern destination. For example, some early Texas letters were routed through New Orleans and postmarked there. In Illustration 9, an easily recognizable "Pony Express"-type marking is illustrated.



ILLUSTRATION 9: AN EARLY WESTERN MARKING

- ♦ **Any Freefrank**, the signature of an authorized government official in lieu of postage, should be checked for autograph value. Illustration 10 notes the location and typical appearance of this government-utilized form of postage which is still in practice today.

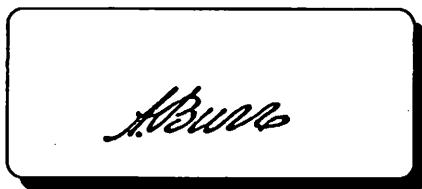


ILLUSTRATION 10: A FREE-FRANK FROM AARON BURR

- ♦ Any item which contains **an adhesive, printed, or embossed stamp**. These stamps appear on legal documents as well as letters. Many other paper ephemera contain stamps:

- Photographs
- Checks
- Stocks
- Bonds
- Prescriptions
- Transportation Tickets
- Licenses
- Permits

All of those listed, plus others, can be quite valuable.

- ♦ **Any Marking indicating something other than a City** can have potential for being valuable. Examples include the following:

#### AUXILIARY MARKINGS

- Forwarding agents  
(e.g. "JONAS GRUNDY, HONOLULU")
- Hotel markings  
(e.g. "BARNUM'S CITY HOTEL")
- Private post markings  
(e.g. "FLOYD'S PENNY POST")
- "TOO LATE"
- "MISSENT"
- "POSTAGE DUE"
- "EXPRESS"
- "NOT PAID"

Illustration 11 is of a "MONEY LETTER" auxiliary mark.



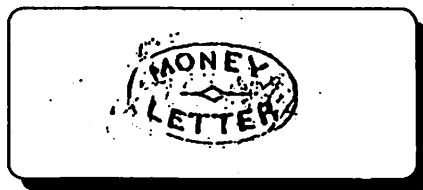


ILLUSTRATION 11: AUXILIARY MARK

- ♦ **Any Official or Government Marking** might have philatelic value. In Illustration 12, a handstamp from the US Department of the Interior is noted.

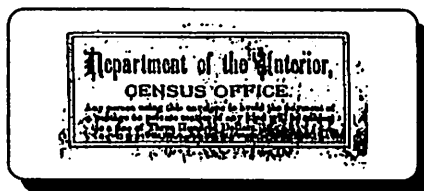


ILLUSTRATION 12: AN OFFICIAL  
GOVERNMENT MARKING

- ♦ **Any Marking which is the Earliest Known Usage of its Kind or of a Post Office.** Identification of these requires accessibility to current reference books.
- ♦ **Any Foreign Destination Routed to the United States**, especially other than European origins, or foreign destinations routed to Europe, especially other than North American origins (exc. The United States Colonial Period). Illustration 13 is of a letter routed from the British port of Islay to New Bedford, Massachusetts.

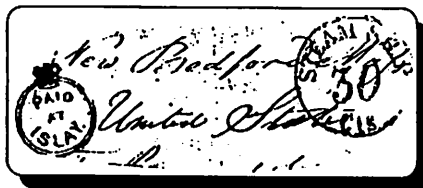


ILLUSTRATION 13: FOREIGN ROUTING TO THE UNITED STATES

Please also note that during the Civil War, the Confederate States were short on paper, so they sometimes used the folded letter method rather than using envelopes. These may have

stampless markings--manuscript or handstamp--or adhesive stamps . In Illustrations 14 and 15, both the stampless and stamped folded letter methods are noted for this period.

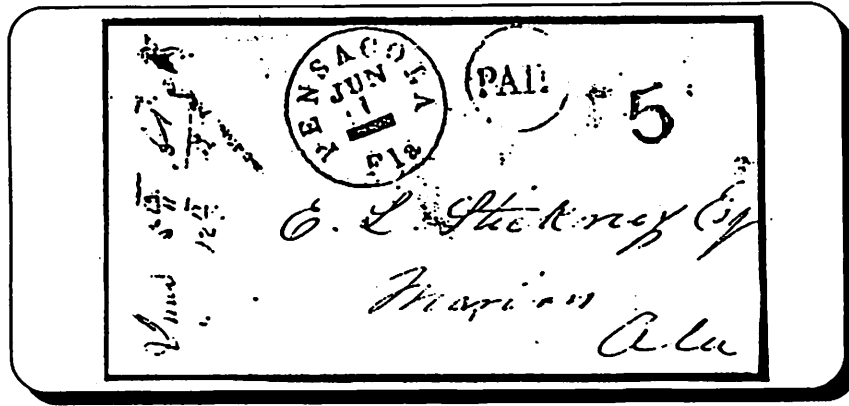


ILLUSTRATION 14: MANUSCRIPT STAMPLESS MARKING ON CIVIL WAR FOLDED LETTER



ILLUSTRATION 15: ADHESIVE STAMP ON CIVIL WAR FOLDED LETTER

Obviously, envelopes that are scattered in collections have value. Most archivists realize the worth of old covers with stamps, but many are not aware that 20th-century material, even "current" envelopes, have potential value. Many of the same guidelines which make SFL's rare also apply to other covers. A general "rule of thumb" should be:

**ANY AND ALL ENVELOPES AND POSTCARDS SHOULD BE CHECKED FOR VALUE.**

**NO ENVELOPE OR POSTCARD SHOULD EVER BE THROWN AWAY.**

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If the collection policy is one where envelopes are not paper-clipped to the contents, then the envelopes should be set aside in containers for evaluation by a professional. This is not a bad policy since paper clips can cause irreversible damage to the paper. The separation policy should include even current material since postal history has no "stopping point."

With this said, a manuscript collection or an archive should establish a *Philatelic Policy*. This policy should stress how valuable and rare some of the items in the collection are and thus should treat these philatelic items like rare books and irreplaceable photographs.

Once the processors or the archivists have done preliminary sorting of philatelic items, a professional philatelist should be called in to determine value and to aid in the disposition of better items based on their research and monetary values. Since professional philatelists require no licenses or accreditations to obtain work, care should be taken in hiring one to appraise whole collections. A philatelic appraiser must have years of experience to catalog, analyze, grade, and categorize the material. This experience requires access to an extensive library and reference collection, regular updates on current market values and conditions, and partnerships with specialized philatelic consultants (e.g. an authority in 19th-century Greek postal history).

Duplicates of items of exceptional value may be sold. A folded letter of considerable value can be photocopied and the copy placed in the collection for use by academics and for enjoyment of other visitors to the repository. The original might then be placed in "a safe area" or it can then be sold; this as an alternative to the expensive task of preservation and protection of the item. "From the museum and archives standpoint, there is another consideration: should the item be preserved in its original form or by some means of surrogate copier, indeed should the latter represent part of the process of preservation of the original (Collings and Schoolley-West 4).

Covers and stamp and coin collections can be sold to raise money for manuscript purchases. Even common covers in bulk will bring a "good" price. A reputable philatelic professional should be contacted.

Another facet of the repository's *Philatelic Policy* is the setting up of guidelines for preservation. Philatelic material requires at least the same minimum preservation requirements as a manuscript. Since this paper is not a scientific study of conservation and preservation techniques, no specific empirical methods (e.g. de-acidification of paper) will be suggested.

Since philatelic material is often left in boxes and folders for use by visitors and scholars, each item runs the risk of being sneezed on, coughed on, touched with bare (sweaty) hands, dropped on the dirty floor, crushed beneath a book, accidentally written on . . . .

An archival plastic holder should be used to prevent many of these environmental hazards from continuing to harm these treasures. In Mary Lynn Ritzenhaller's book *Archives & Manuscripts: Conservation* (Subtitle *A Manual on Physical Care and Management*), she says:

the most common plastic found in archival repositories is polyester, often referred to as Mylar®, its Dupont tradename. Polyester is used to encapsulate brittle paper, to construct protective folders, and also has many uses in mounting exhibits.

Plastic envelopes and sleeves . . . allow immediate visual access and also protect [the subject of study] from fingerprints (39).

I think that the **biggest problem** today is **theft of stamps and covers**; they are small and easily concealed. Even at stamp shows where security is "tight," philatelic material is stolen regularly by knowledgeable thieves.

Archives and manuscript departments are a "pushover" for these same thieves; the repositories have minimal security wherein one-on-one supervision is impractical and fiscally

impossible. In the Summer issue of *The Manuscript Society News*, this epidemic is illustrated in terms of its universality:

. . . the growing number of archival, library, and museum thefts by staffers and visiting scholars with special privileges, as well as thefts by the general public, has prompted severe security measures from Washington, D.C. to Philadelphia to New York City to Portland, Maine to Dublin, Ireland. These thefts have also involved book and manuscript mutilations as perpetrators leave binders without pages or tear off signatures or remove whole letters and documents from collections (Carson 69)

Some institutions have already been penetrated by rings of "philatelic bandits" who have inside knowledge of the value of items; sometimes a valuable item is not even known to the archivist! Many "insiders" steal items they pretend to be studying, as is noted in the example below from the Fall 1992 issue of *The Manuscript Society News*.

The suspect, accused of taking four documents from two rare "extra-illustrated" books at the [Folger Shakespeare] library, did not have the background he claimed [lecturer from Trinity College at Cambridge University] . . . . He also claimed he was a collector who had fallen on hard times. . . . He also stunned observers by then and there confessing [in Federal Court] to two earlier thefts the Folger never knew about (Carson 149).

Once the archivists or curators determined where the more valuable philatelic items will repose, a *User Policy* must be outlined. If, for instance, a folded letter is quite valuable and is removed from the boxed collection, it can be photocopied for the contents of the letter so that the historian researching the collection would not have to handle the original at all.

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The ease with which a philatelic items can be harmed cannot be overstated. Because they are small collectibles, the tiniest of defects can cause significant depreciation in value. Proper measures should be taken to keep the users from physically endangering the item, be it through direct physical contact or by removing the item from the repository altogether. As previously stated, Mylar® affords excellent viewing and helps thwart thieves. As James Walsh declared in the November 25, 1991 issue of *Time* magazine:

The art of the world is being looted. From New York to Phnom Penh, from ancient ruins in Turkey to up-to-date museums in Amsterdam, precious records of human culture are vanishing into the dark as thieves steal with near impunity. . . . cultural treasures of every kind and all ages are being snatched (Walsh 86).

The world's repositories of manuscripts and documents may contain the largest undiscovered treasure of postal history. As the world moves toward FAXing mail, sending messages via PC modems, and transmitting information by satellite, the common stamped envelope may be pushed aside; the stories behind the Atlantic mail sailings, the routing agent, and the Pony Express deserve preservation.

The archivist needs to consult with a professional philatelist for assistance in sorting, cataloguing, evaluating, and appraising (and maybe selling) philatelic items. Decisions need to be made now in order to save postal history from thieves and damage. Millions of dollars are "riding on" the decisions of archivists and curators worldwide.

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## **Biographical Information**

Doug Mattox has been owner of a coin and stamp business since 1966 and has dealt in postal history and paper ephemera for many years through his work as an auction describer, lot researcher, and bidding agent. Mr. Mattox's work experience crosses many avenues, from bank trust departments to universities to private collectors. He is a current member of many numismatic and philatelic societies, including the American Philatelic Association, American Revenue Association, Confederate Stamp Alliance, and the US Philatelic Classics Society.