

Sidebar: Editor's Note

Robert L. Markovits in his article describes the most famous and outstanding machine cancel, the Boston Eagle & Thunderbolt cancel. It is the crown jewel of the hobby, which is aptly compared with the famous Indian diamond in the English Crown Jewels, the Kohinoor.

Although not by design similar to a Flag Cancellation, interestingly enough it is more akin to a Flag Cancel than any other cancellation. For when the American Company experimented with their machines, they were concerned that patriotic citizens might object to using a flag to deface the mail. So another patriotic design was used for the Boston experiment on January 2, 1895. Frederick Langford, FLAG CANCEL ENCYCLOPEDIA (Third Edition 1976) at page 99.

Articles and pieces have graced Machine Cancel Forum II (January 1989 page 310; April 1990 page 553, July 1990 page 589) about the Eagle & Thunderbolt. We can be thankful to Sam Ockun for having gathered and published this information for our use.

More recently, Bob Payne has published his information on this topic, first in his book U.S. CLASSIC MACHINE CANCELS 1871-1991 Volume I at page 65, and then as an introduction to his 2001 exhibit on Flag Cancellations, featured in Machine Cancel Forum II (July 2001 page 2930) and in the book reproducing the exhibit FLAG CANCELLATIONS 1894-1941 at page 17.

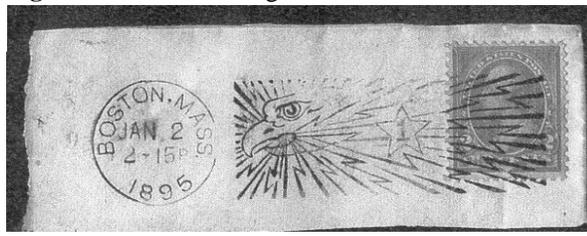
Despite the fact that machine cancel collectors prefer entire covers, even 2x4

BOSTON EAGLE & THUNDERBOLT: THE KOHINOR OF MACHINE CANCELS

By Robert L. Markovits

When Michael Lawrence, Linn's Weekly Stamp News' editor, now the head of Amos Publishing, wrote about machine cancellations in his column in the spring of 1988, he described the kohinor of Machine Cancellations, The Boston Eagle and Thunderbolt cancellation as "The Post Office Mauritius of U.S. machine cancellations." While the Civil War gave rise to many machine canceling devices beginning in the early 1870's, none was more colorful or probably so short-lived than the January 2, 1895 Boston machine cancellation.

Figure 1: Cut of the Eagle and Thunderbolt



George T. Turner, former curator of the National Stamp Collection at the Smithsonian Institution and an outstanding collector, wrote what is the definitive article on this cancellation in the April 1964 issue of The Bureau Specialist, the journal of the Bureau Issues Association now known as the United States Stamp Society. Turner located numerous contemporary articles which indicated that this cancellation was a test of the eagle against the flag cancellation; the flag won out.

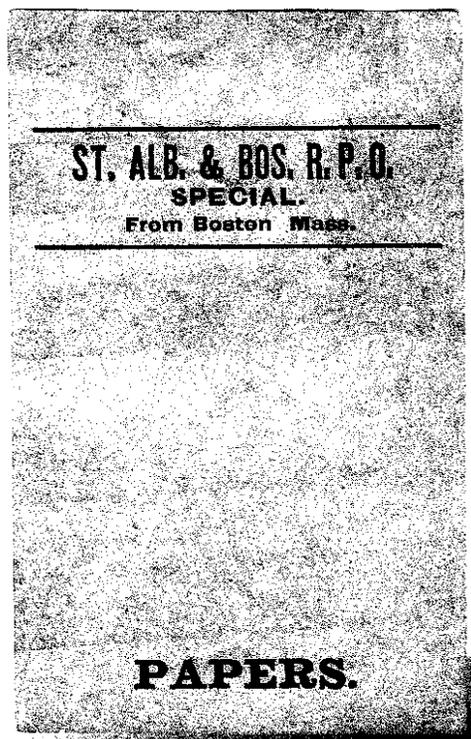
Turner located a letter to Mekeel's, the famous stamp publication (May 23, 1895) from a gentleman who was in contact with the developer of the experimental machine who noted that fewer than 10,000 covers received the eagle cancellation from 2 PM to 5 PM on that January 2, 1895, afternoon.

Recently, the author located a proof of the cancellation, struck at 2:15 PM on the back of a St. Alb. & Bos. R.P.O.

special paper from Boston, Massachusetts, the only known proof of this rare cancellation. See **Figure 2** for the front of this paper, and **Figure 3** for the proof cancellation.

Lawrence reported that a Florida dealer had acquired, for more than \$5000.00 in the Turner auction held by Daniel F. Kelleher & Co. December 2, 1980, appropriate in Boston, his sale #548. Kelleher & Co. held two other Turner sales #546 and #547 also in 1980, July 17-18 and October 7-8, more than 5250 lots in total; Turner was also the leading collector of Philatelic Literature and especially auction catalogues, his library filing to overflowing his five story house in Washington, which I had the privilege of visiting numerous times over the years.

Figure 2: Front of a special paper from Boston, St. Alb. & Bos. R.P.O. See **Figure 3** for the back which has the proof cancel of the Eagle and Thunderbolt.



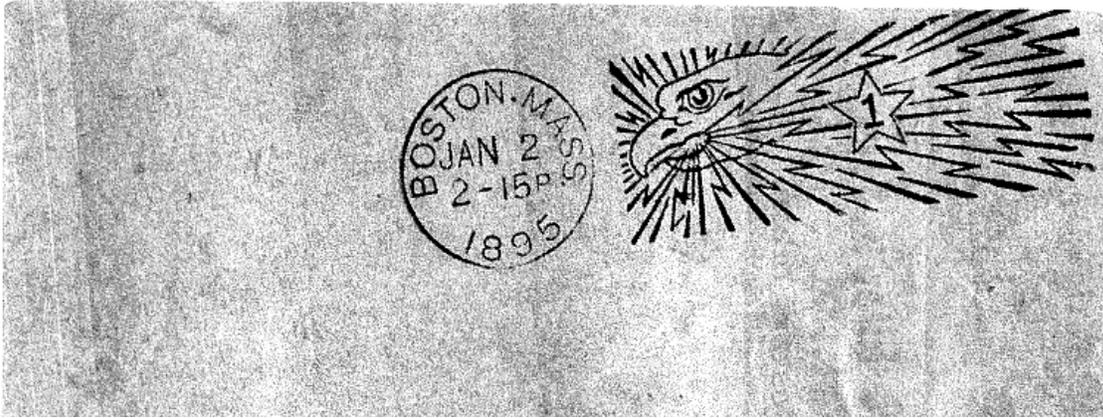
How many covers and other pieces survive? It is believed that there are four and possibly five surviving covers. The Machine Cancel Forum reported four known covers and five 2 x 4s. *Machine Cancel Forum at page 2397 (October 1998)*. As all collectors of machine cancels know, a 2x4 is a piece of cover two inches by four inches but as noted by Lawrence, this 'sends' postal history buffs into convulsions.

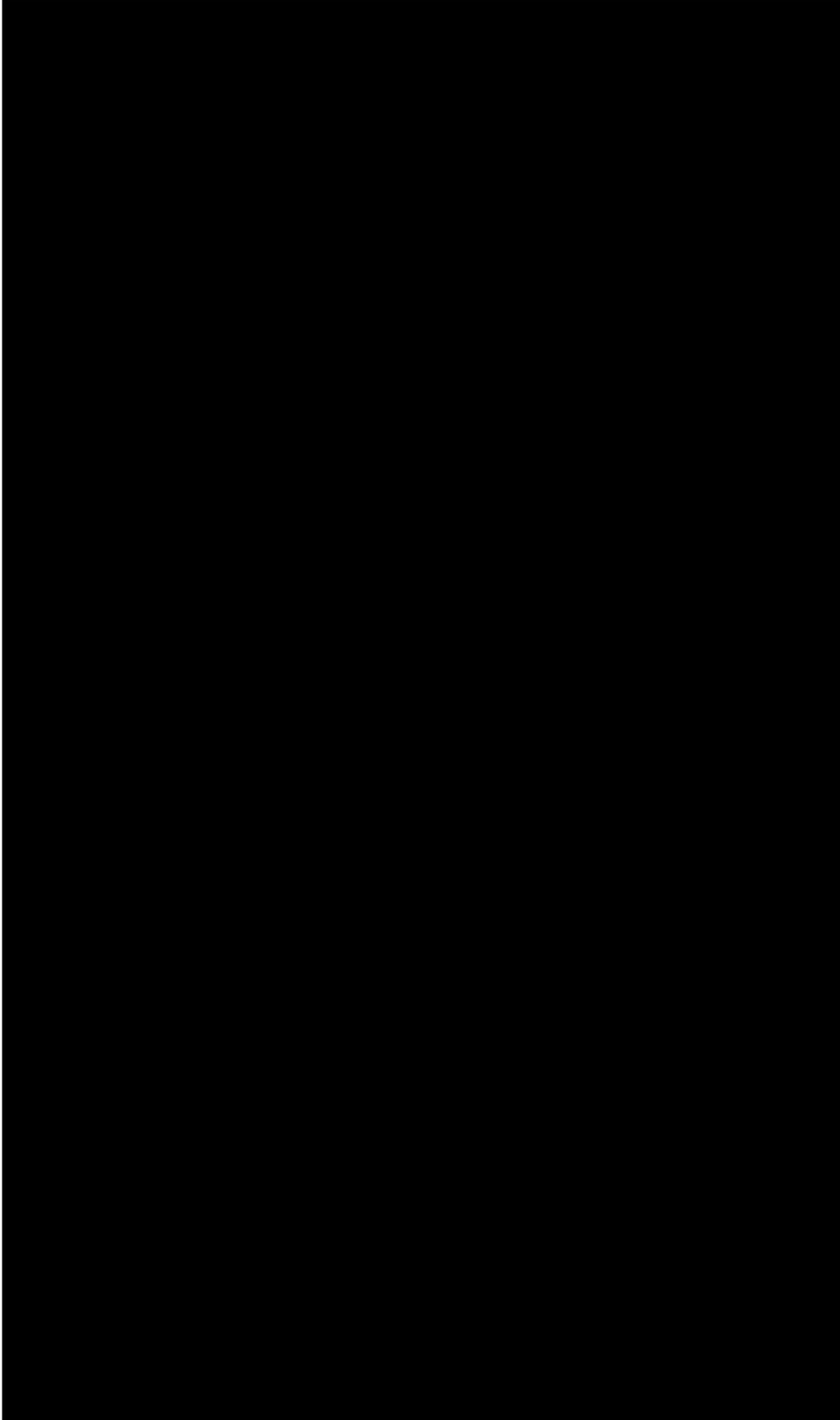
My personal favorite strike of this incredible cancellation appears on an 1894 special delivery stamp, Scott E4, wrongly described by the Robert A. Siegel auction firm when it was sold in the late 1950's to Clyde Jennings of Florida, who outbid me when I was a college student and gas was 19.9-cents a gallon; he paid \$135 at that time, a gigantic sum far beyond my means. I was the underbidder. I recently told the story of my acquisition of that piece in the *Collector's Club Philatelist*, March-April 2001, page 61, (**see next page** for that article) illustrated the stamp with most of the design hidden so that the cancellation could be seen. This illustration is reproduced here courtesy of that publication. This stamp is also illustrated in my 1962 article on the 1894-95 Special Delivery issues

in the *Congress Book*. Clyde Jennings allowed me to purchase it from him after he had acquired one of the known covers and told me 'not to sell it, enjoy it as a fine old treasure.' I have done so and Clyde is a dear

Recorded.

Figure 3: Only reported proof of Eagle and Thunderbolt





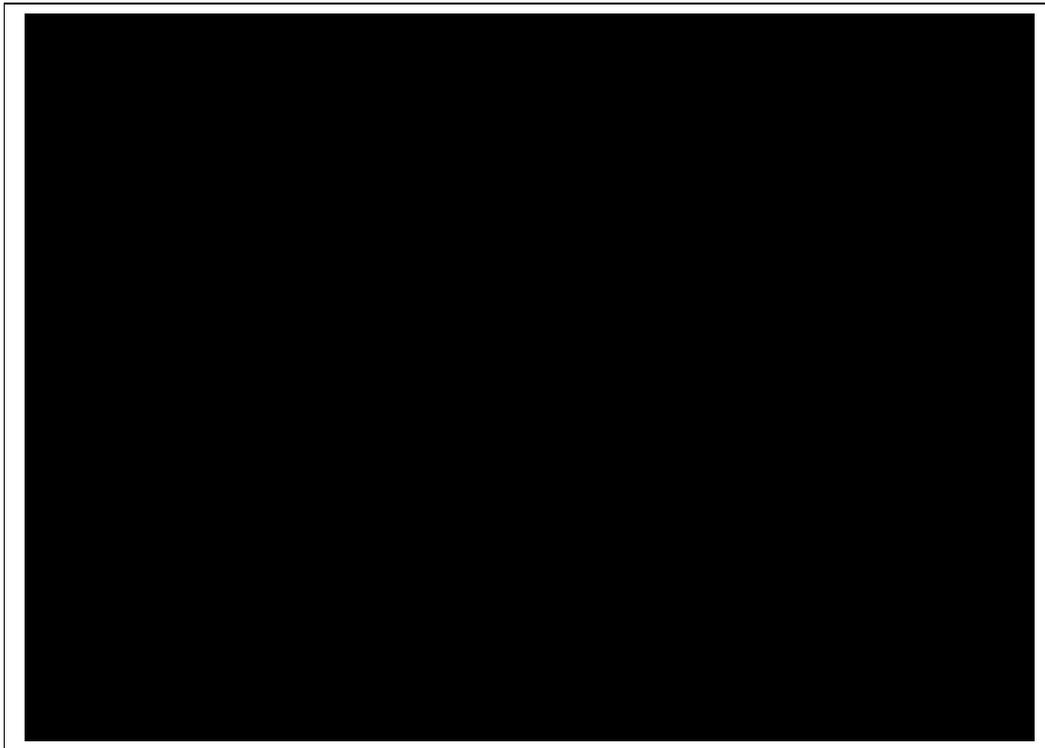
I also own one of the two by fours cancelled January 2 at 2:15 PM striking a two-cent 1894 issue stamp. The star within the eagle's wings notes #1, the same as on the proof and cancelled at the same time.

When the Machine Cancel Society had its annual convention at Cleveland's Garfield-Perry Stamp Show in 1989, the Society reproduced the cancellation within a wavy flag and in the second ribbon of the flag, put in a G.P. and dated the cancel Mar 10, 1988, hardly a substitute for the real thing but still a well thought out memento.

Being a custodian of three of the nine recorded examples (and the only known proof) of this rarity is one of philately's distinct honors and pleasure. Reports of covers and 2x4's and the hour of the cancellation would be appreciated by the author at P O Box 891, Middletown, N.Y. 10940-0891.

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Editor's Note: An example of the Eagle and Thunderbolt Flag from that 1989 Garfield-Perry March Party is featured below. Besides the commemorative hand cancel, it was memorable for the outstanding assembly of machine cancel collectors who were meeting members of the old Flag Cancel Society for the first time. Reg Morris and Bob Payne were busy releasing THE BARRY STORY. Its funny how the Eagle and Thunderbolt appears at the beginning of new eras!



It's been a while, but I believe Reg Morris was responsible for the design of this cancellation.