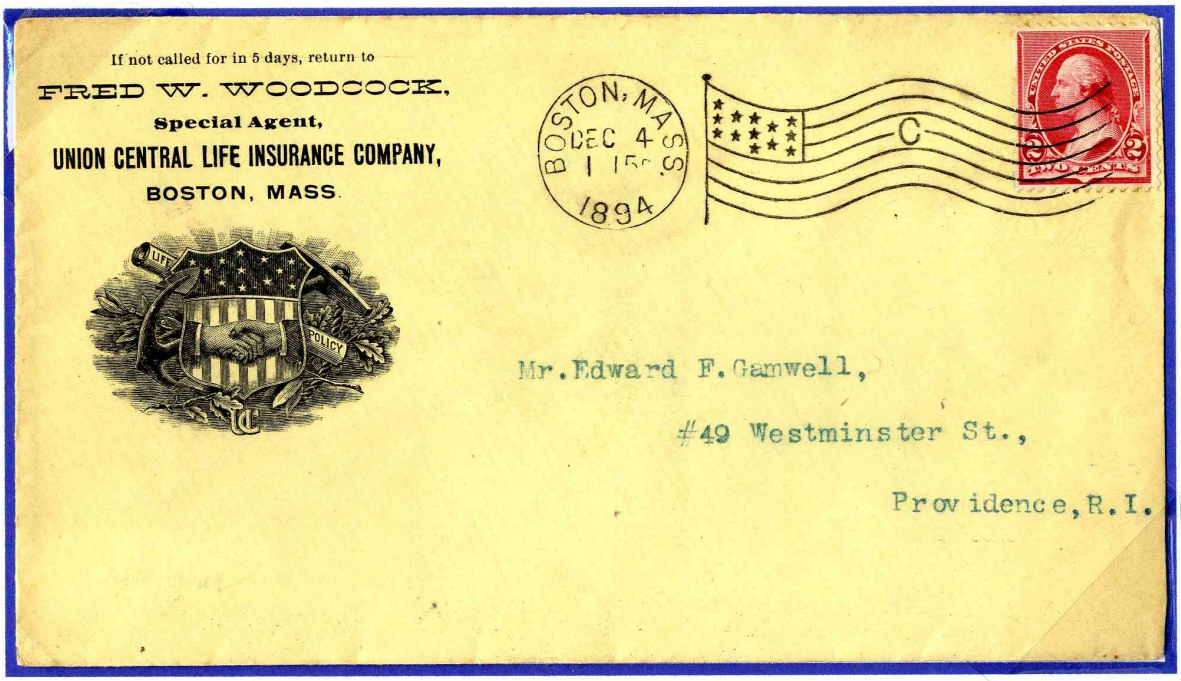
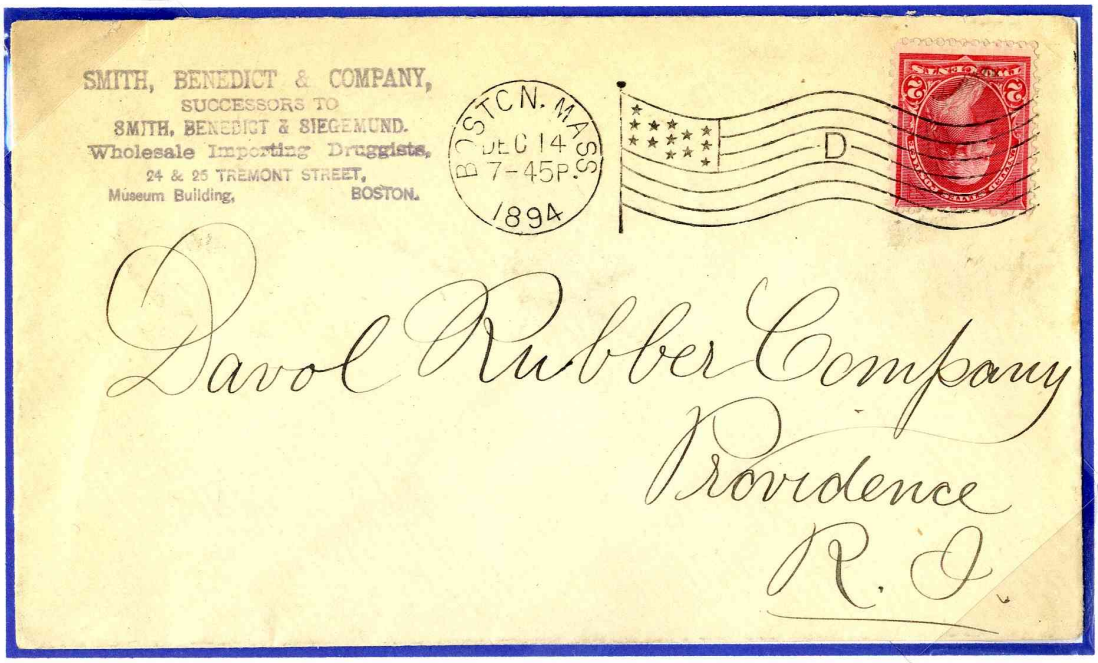
Peregrinations of a Flag Die

The first flag die with a spread field literally led a tortured life. It moved into 1895 with no change beyond a new dial, but early in that year a staff was added to the die while the dial deteriorated by year's end. In 1896 it received another new dial, but in November its G was altered to a sort-of C.. In 1897 the new Type B dial was substituted for the old Type D, and shortly thereafter the die went out of service.

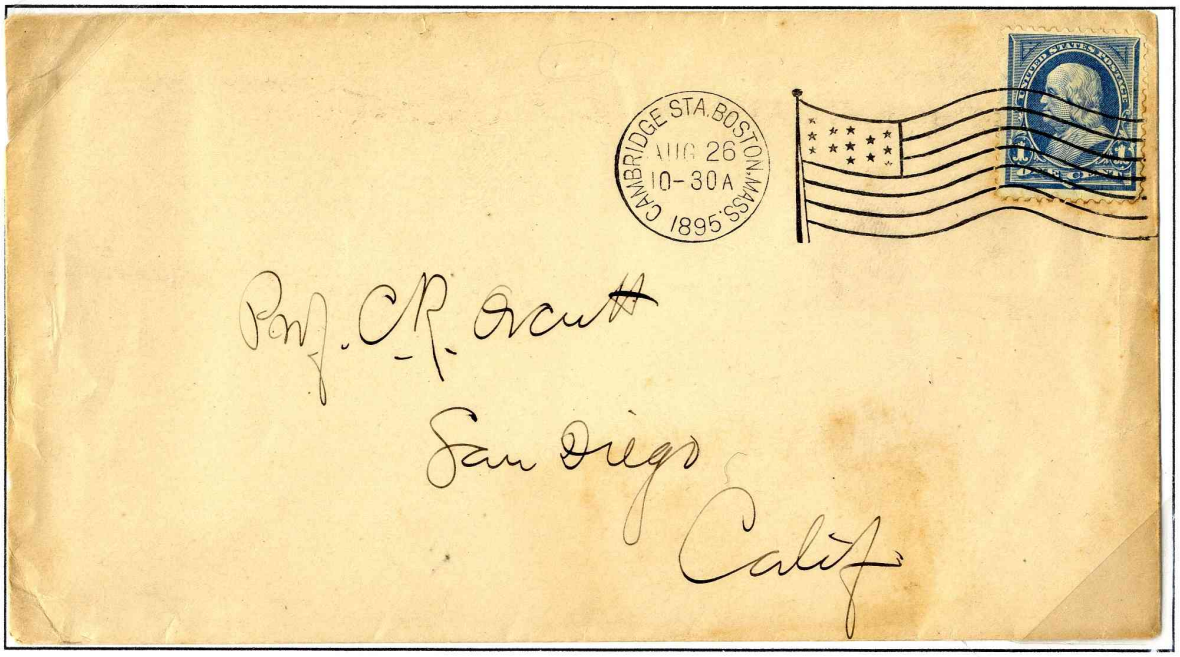
The other two spread-field flags which were used in 1894 were on Machines C and D. Appearing a few days later than the flag on Machine G (November 30 for C, and December 4 for D), both had a full staff with a ball at the top.



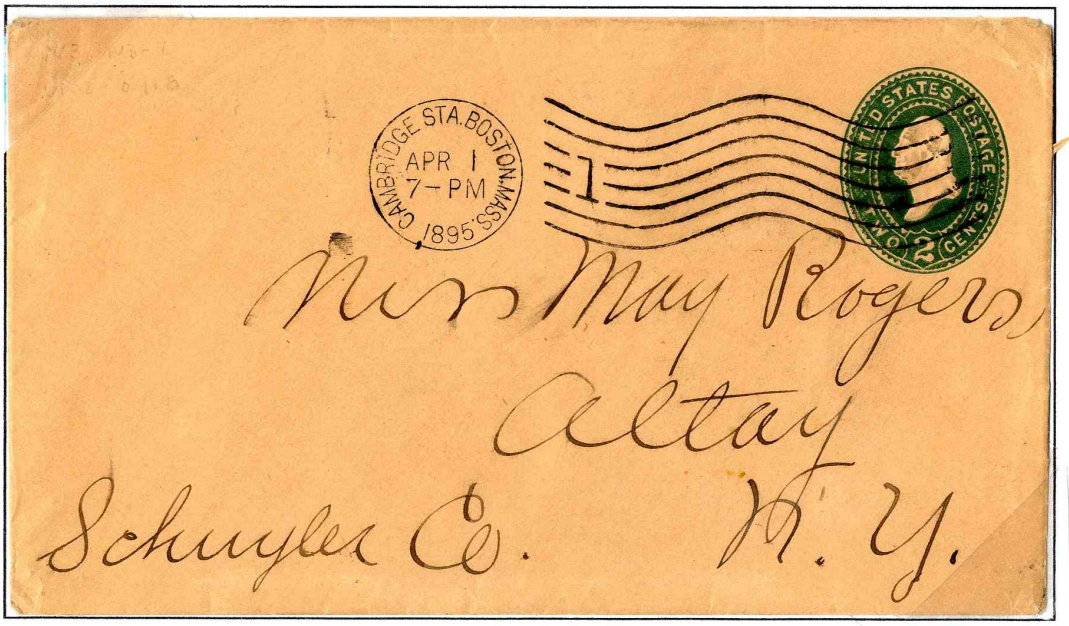


Introduction of the Halyard

The flag which was to become the prevalent one–the spread-field flag with halyard–was first introduced in Boston stations on the American-Barnard hand-operated machines rather than the speedier electric-powered machines used in the main office.

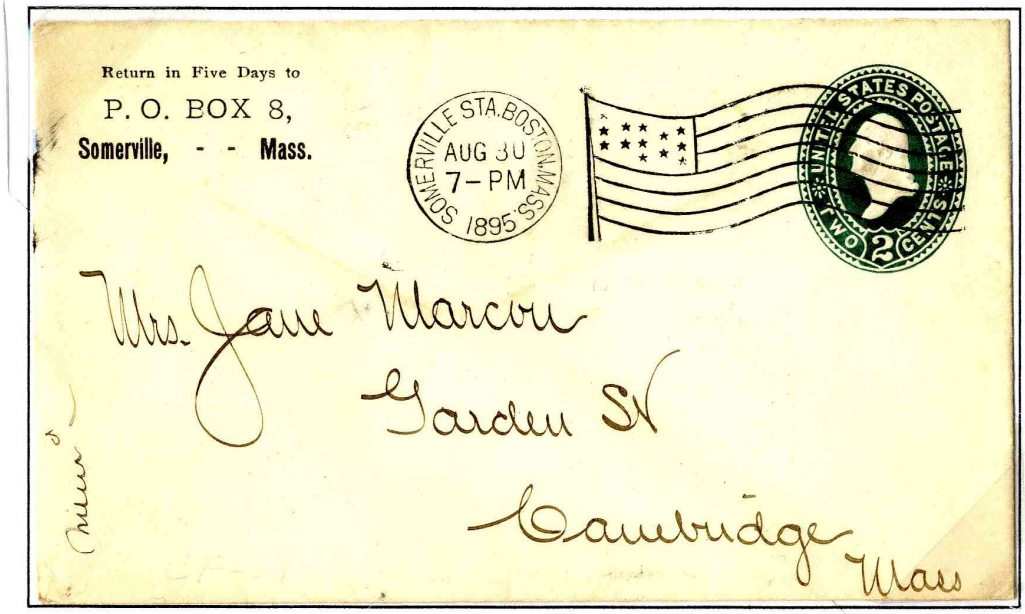


This type came to five Boston stations in mid-1895 with Cambridge first. **Earliest recorded date of use**

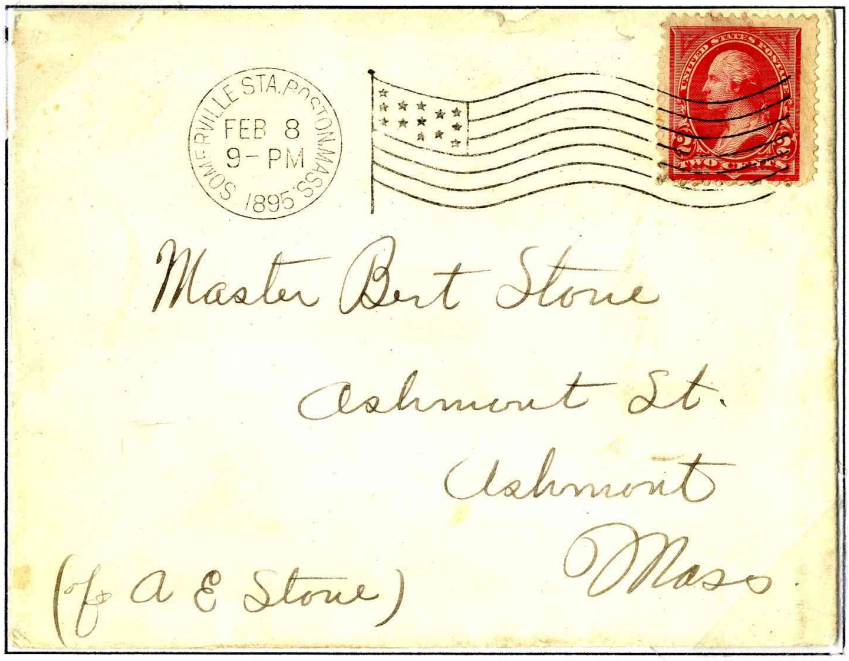


Cambridge's wavy-line cancel known to August 19, 1895. Same dial used with the flag

The Somerville station also received the new flag type in August, 1895, and was the first to change from a no-halyard flag to one with a halyard. The remaining Boston stations used the older type flags into September.



Earliest known date of use, and five days earlier than any previously reported



The antecedent no-halyard flag. Known only to August 15, 1895, a two-week gap which could be filled with a halyard flag earlier than Cambridge

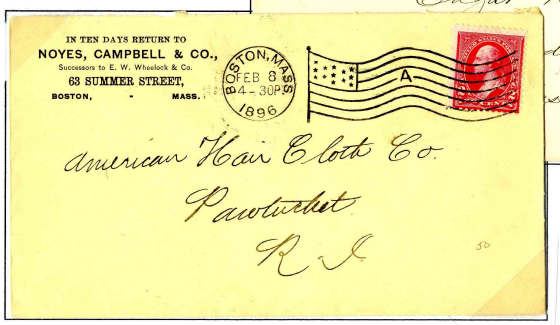
The Flags of 1896

Beginning in 1896 the machines in the Boston Main Office began to receive the new spread-field flag with a halyard. The lettered machines were converted from flags without halyards. The numbered machines previously had American six-bar cancellers. Six machines received the new flags before the end of 1896. Machine A was the first to be changed over, but only briefly. Machine F and the four numbered machines received new dies in the last several weeks of the year.

The newer flag die returns with the letter A in the diespace in December

Old flag resurrected from April to December 1896 [philatelists pay more attention to logical order than postal workers]

Early use of the new flag without identifying letter. Used only a few weeks



Late use of the older flag on Machine A. Exact changeover date unknown

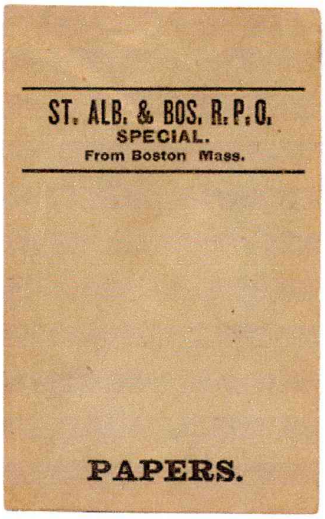
The Eagle & Thunderbolt

A One-day Wonder

Despite the apparent success of the flag dies, there had been objection to the new dies as denigrating the American flag. On January 2, 1895, from about 2:15 to 8:00 PM, a new American Postal Machines die known to philatelists as the Eagle & Thunderbolt was tested. For some reason, the new die was rejected, and the Eagle & Thunderbolt never saw further postal service. About 10,000 letters are reported to have been imprinted with the new die, of which four covers, perhaps a half-dozen cancellations on piece, and a few off-cover stamps with partial impressions are now known.

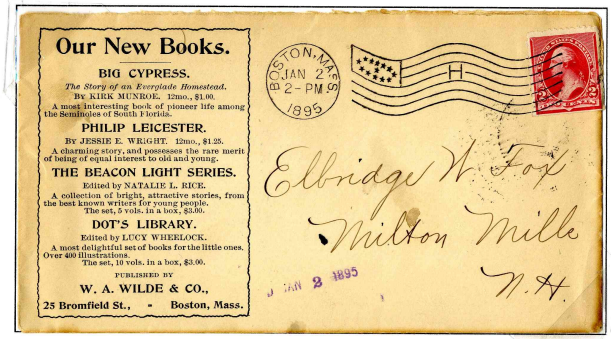
Proof or trial strike of the Eagle & Thunderbolt with the time the test is believed to have started. Printed on a Boston routing slip. **The only example known**

American Philatelic Expertizing Service Certificate 92381 1994

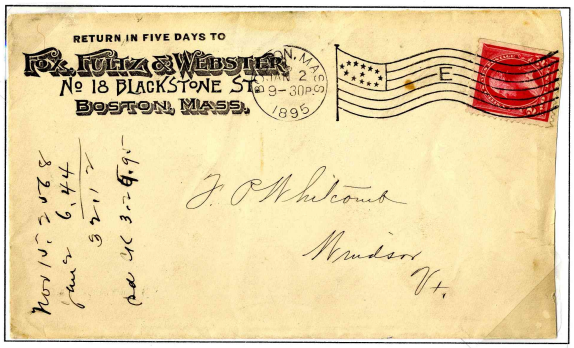


. . . and the winner was?

The test of the Eagle & Thunderbolt was run against another American machine, presumed to have been a flag. Of the six flag machines in use at that time, five are known with January 2, 1895 cancellations. The machines on which the new die was placed and its 'opponent' have yet to be identified. The dial with the Eagle & Thunderbolt has not yet been matched; so it may have been installed on a new machine. January 2 covers may yet yield answers.



Cover from Machine H immediately before the test period

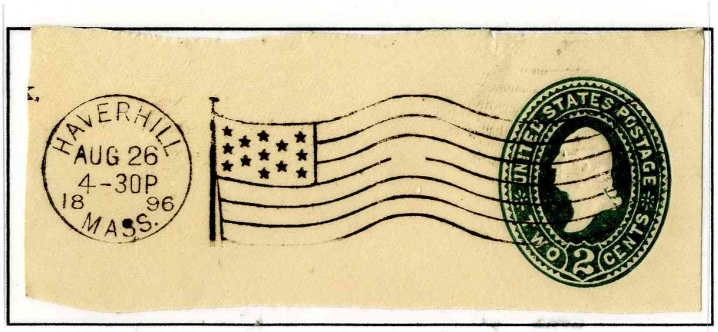


Only recorded example from Machine E on this date. Shortly after the test

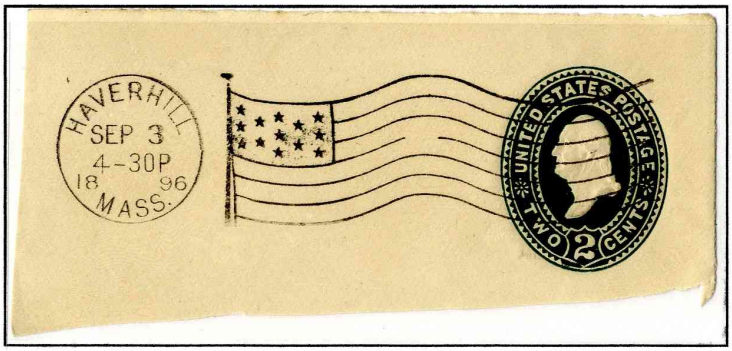
Cover from Machine F, shortly before the test period

The Changing of the Dials

The curved-year dials (Type D) were doomed to extinction; in 1896 a new dial with a split year (Type B) was introduced. These began to be installed in the late summer of 1896 on machines going to new locations. Since American dials in this period had a year date built in, cities with existing machines generally received the new type of dial for use on January 1, 1897. Among the few dozen machines receiving the Type B dials in 1896, Haverhill and Salem, Massachusetts, have the earliest recorded usages: August 24.



Haverhill cancel with Type B dial, used for about a week

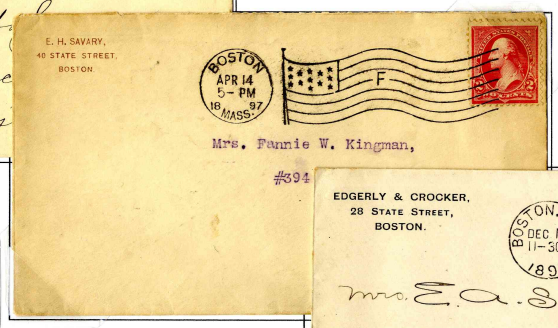


New machine with different flag die installed about September 1
with same Type B dial

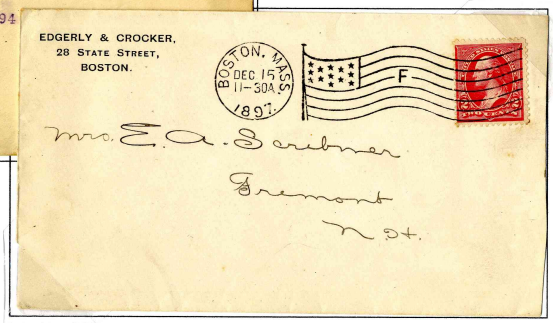
Four covers showing the progression of a single flag die on Machine F during the course of a year, from the Type D dial in 1896 back to a Type D dial in 1897. Since Boston had many machines in use, dials were often moved from one machine to another, possibly during cleaning operations.

Type D dial at the end of 1896

Type B dial January 2, 1897, with blank diespace for a few days



Same dial with its letter inserted



A return to the Type D dial at the end of 1897

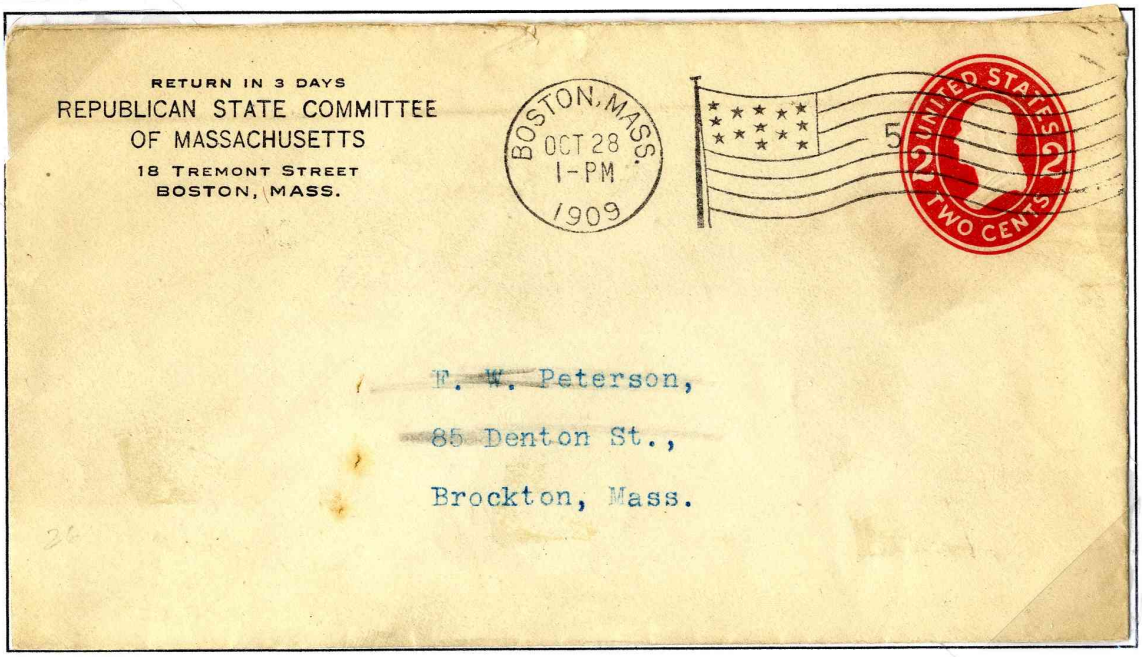
The Dial for the Twentieth Century

Another new dial, with the year date in a single unit (Type A) was similarly introduced. About 60 machines around the country received the new, and ultimately most prevalent, dial in 1908. A few may have been supplied as early as July, but most were installed toward the end of the year. As with the Type B dial, the Boston Main Office machines did not receive any Type A dials until 1909; and only one (Machine 4) was changed from Type B to Type A in 1909.

A 1908 installation of Type A dial in Philadelphia (right); Machine 4 transition (below)

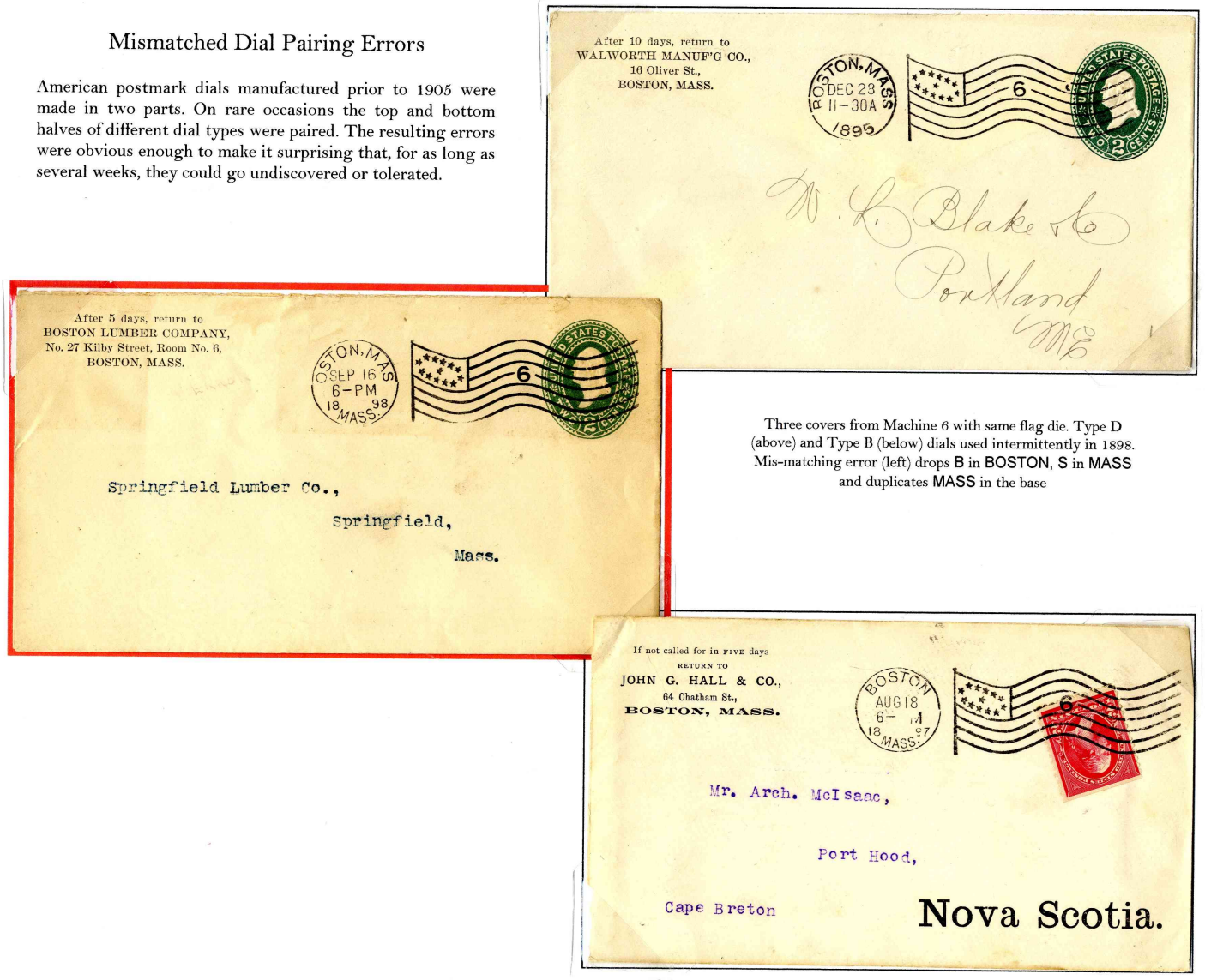
A Throwback

Boston, which had led in the introduction of machines, stayed behind the times in the twentieth century. It retained the locally-produced flag machines longer than any other major city and even used the only Type D dial produced in the twentieth century. It appeared on a no-diespace flag in July 1909 and was later transferred to Machine 5.

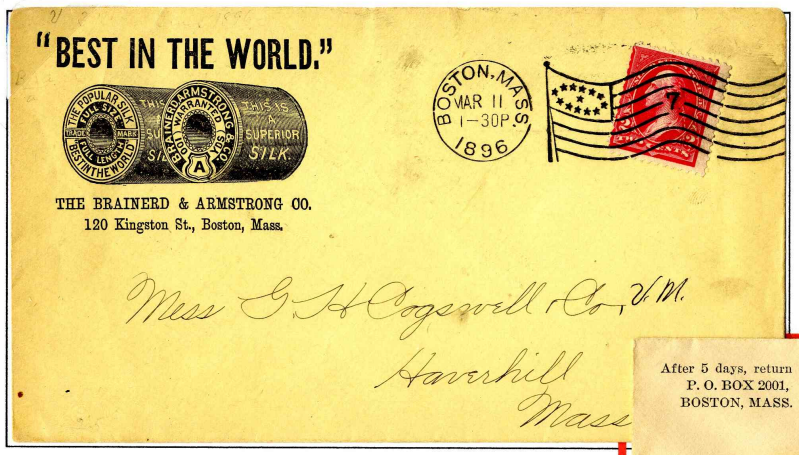


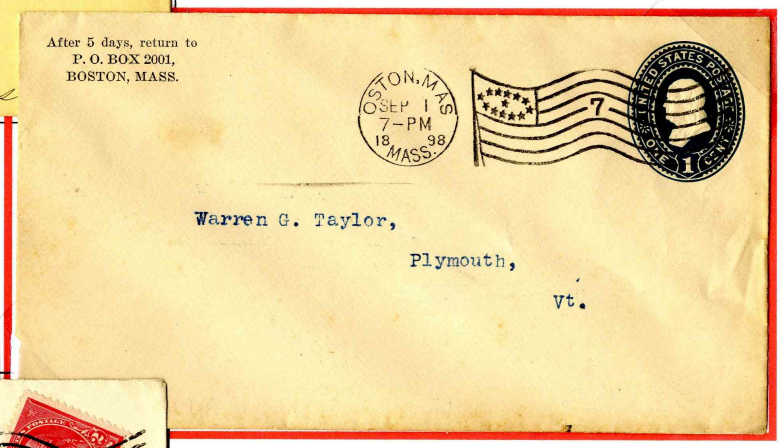
Mismatched Dial Pairing Errors

American postmark dials manufactured prior to 1905 were made in two parts. On rare occasions the top and bottom halves of different dial types were paired. The resulting errors were obvious enough to make it surprising that, for as long as several weeks, they could go undiscovered or tolerated.



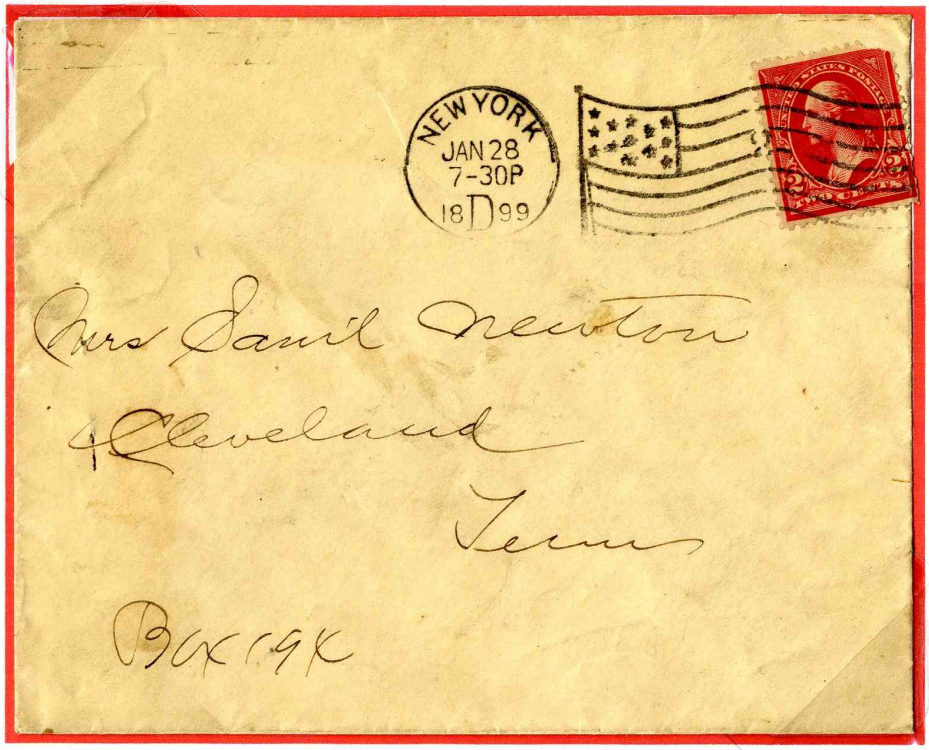
Three covers from Machine 6 with same flag die. Type D (above) and Type B (below) dials used intermittently in 1898. Mis-matching error (left) drops **B** in **BOSTON**, **S** in **MASS** and duplicates **MASS** in the base



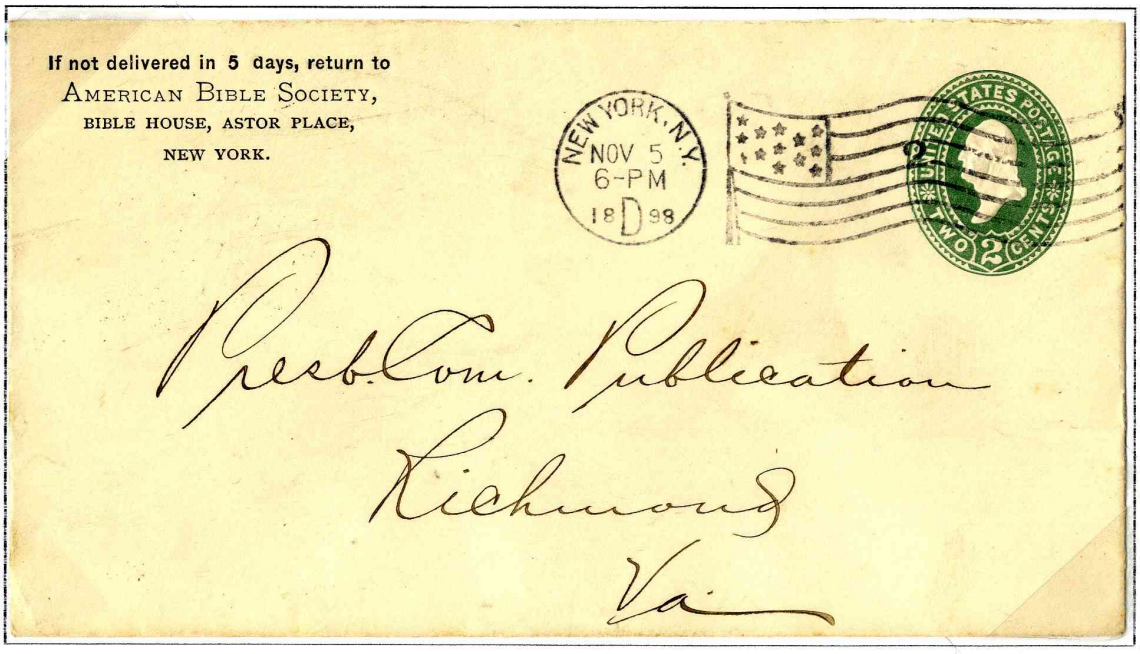


An identical error occurred on Machine 7 a few weeks earlier. The problem was corrected almost immediately; the error is known for only a few days in September 1898. Type D dials had not been used on this machine since 1896.

The only city other than Boston having a mis-matched dial error was New York City at its Station D where the top half of a Type B dial was paired with the bottom half of a Type F station dial. The name of the State is lost in the error.



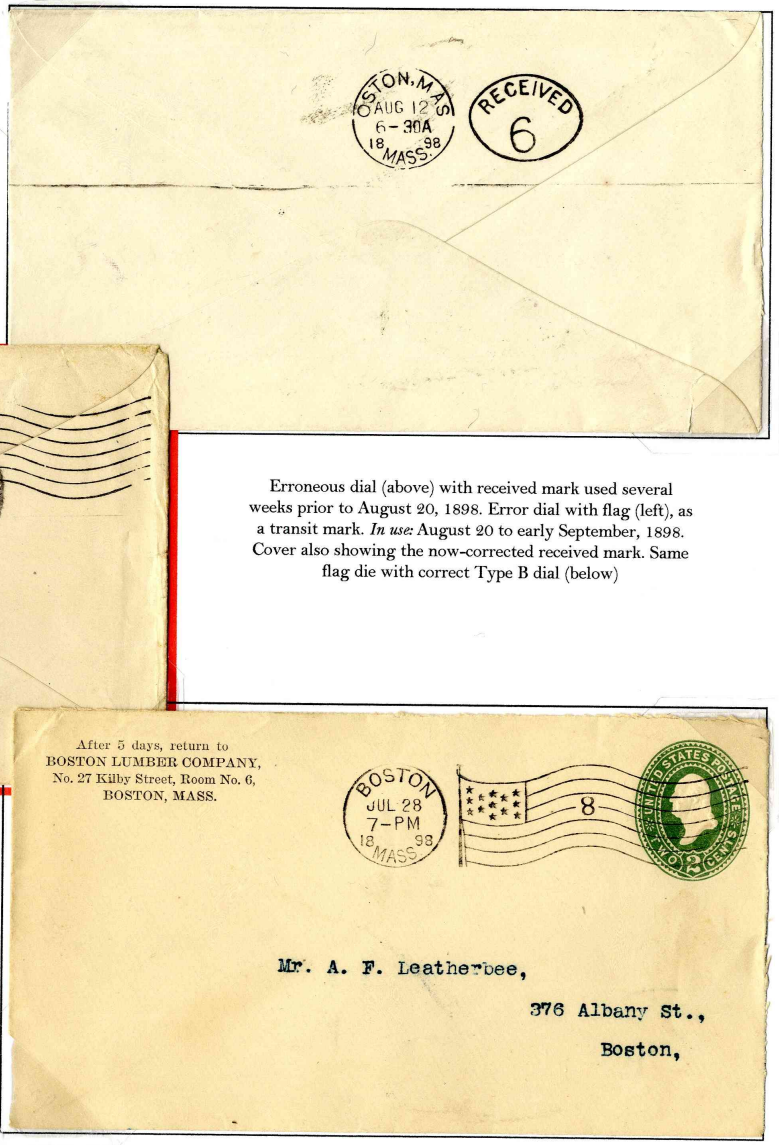
Error dial in use most of January 1899. **Latest recorded date of mis-use**



Dial in use prior to creation of error

Errors in Boston with Spread-Field Flags

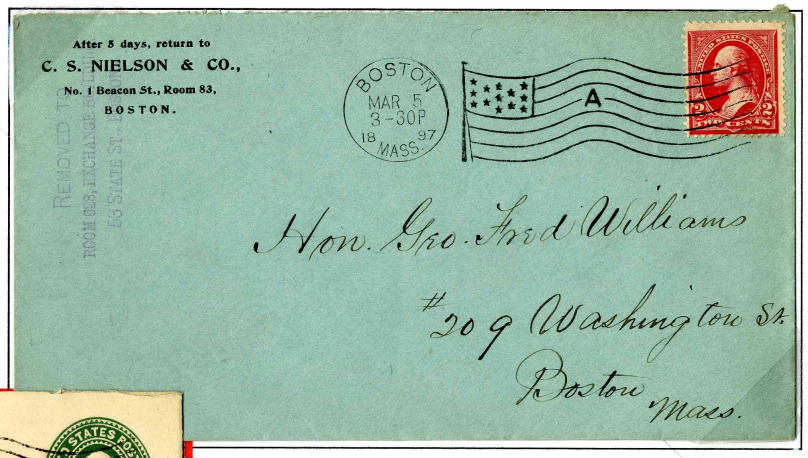
Only one mis-matched dial error was made among the spread-field flags. The error on Machine 8 is identical to those on Machines 6 and 7. In this case the erroneous dial was used with a American receiving mark before installation on Machine 8.

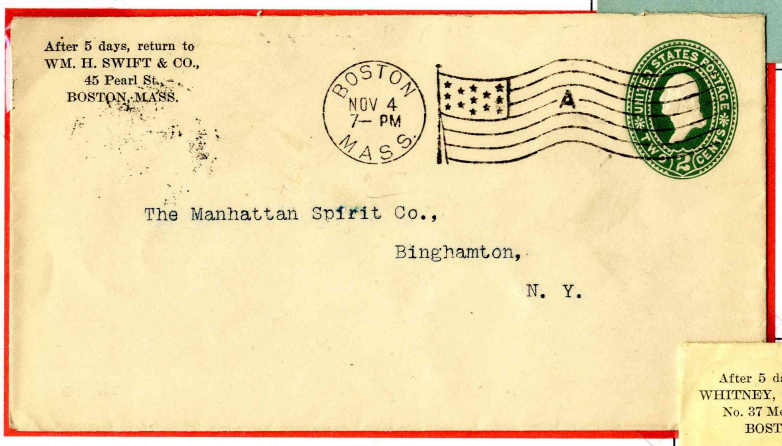


Erroneous dial (above) with received mark used several weeks prior to August 20, 1898. Error dial with flag (left), as a transit mark. *In use:* August 20 to early September, 1898. Cover also showing the now-corrected received mark. Same flag die with correct Type B dial (below)

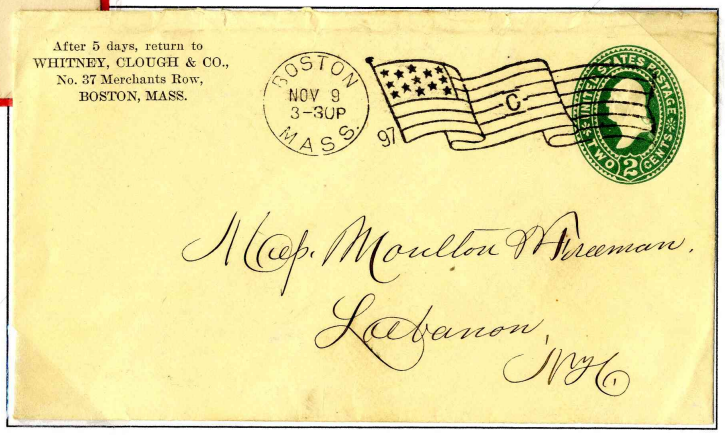
A Misplaced Dial

A different type of error was created here, with a dial intended for use with the involute flags erroneously placed on a spread-field flag die, producing a cancellation without a year date.



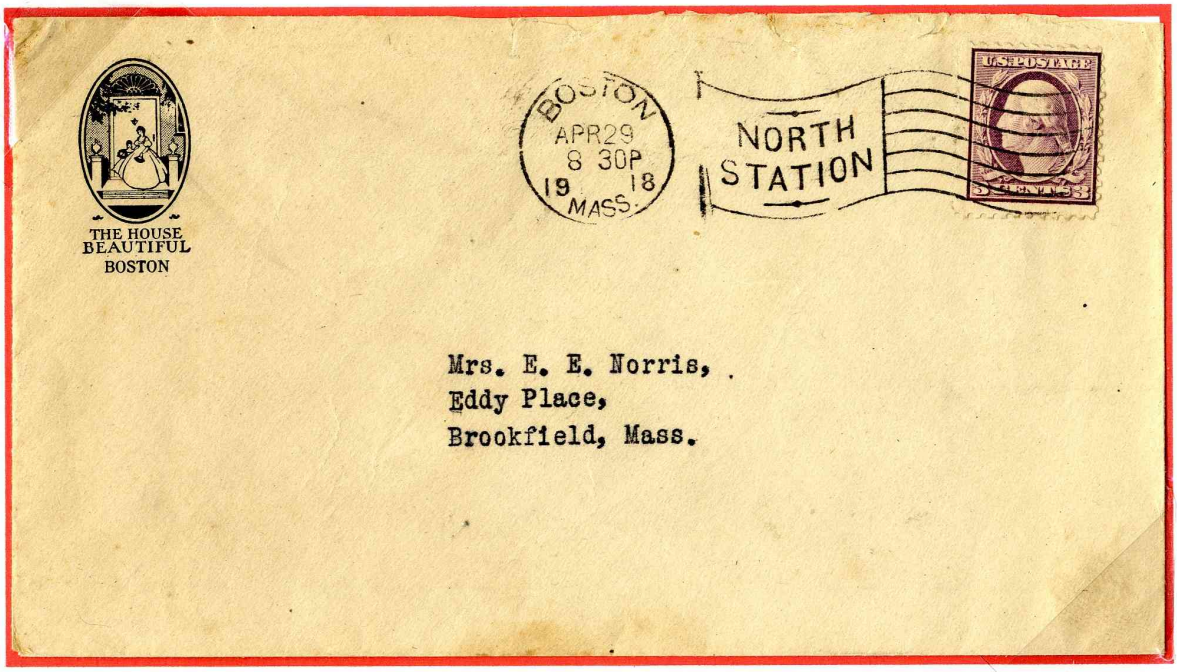


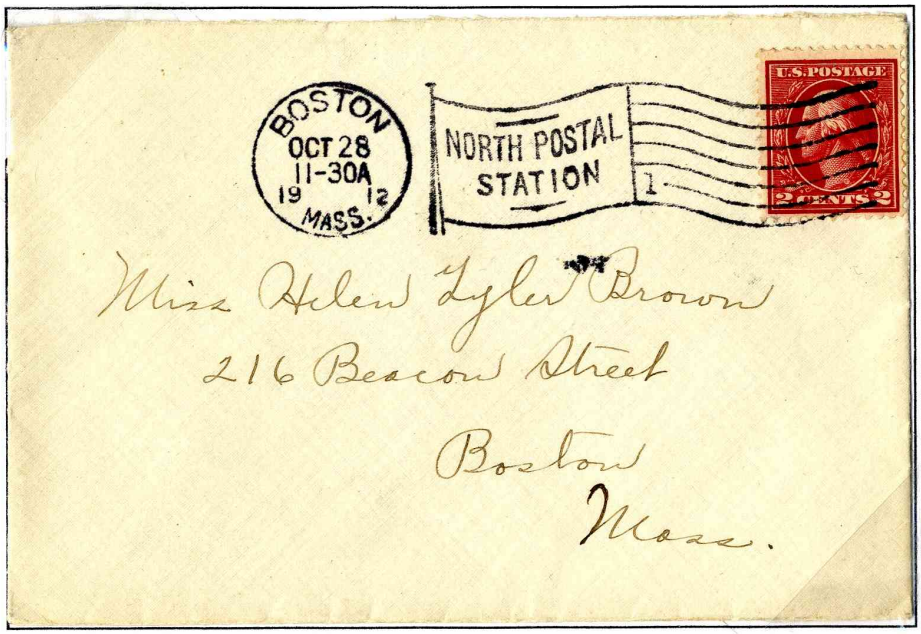
Flag die on Machine A with Type B dial (above) used before and after the error. Error dial (left). *In use:* November 2 to 8, 1897. Same dial (below) the day it was restored to its involute flag



Error or Expedience?

Boston's "North Postal Station" used a flag die labeled "North Station" in late 1917 and early 1918. While classified as an "error," it may have been intentional. The flag die had been at Providence, Rhode Island's North Station until 1913. North Postal Station had several machines operating in 1917, and the retired Providence die was probably a handy replacement for a worn North Postal Station die.

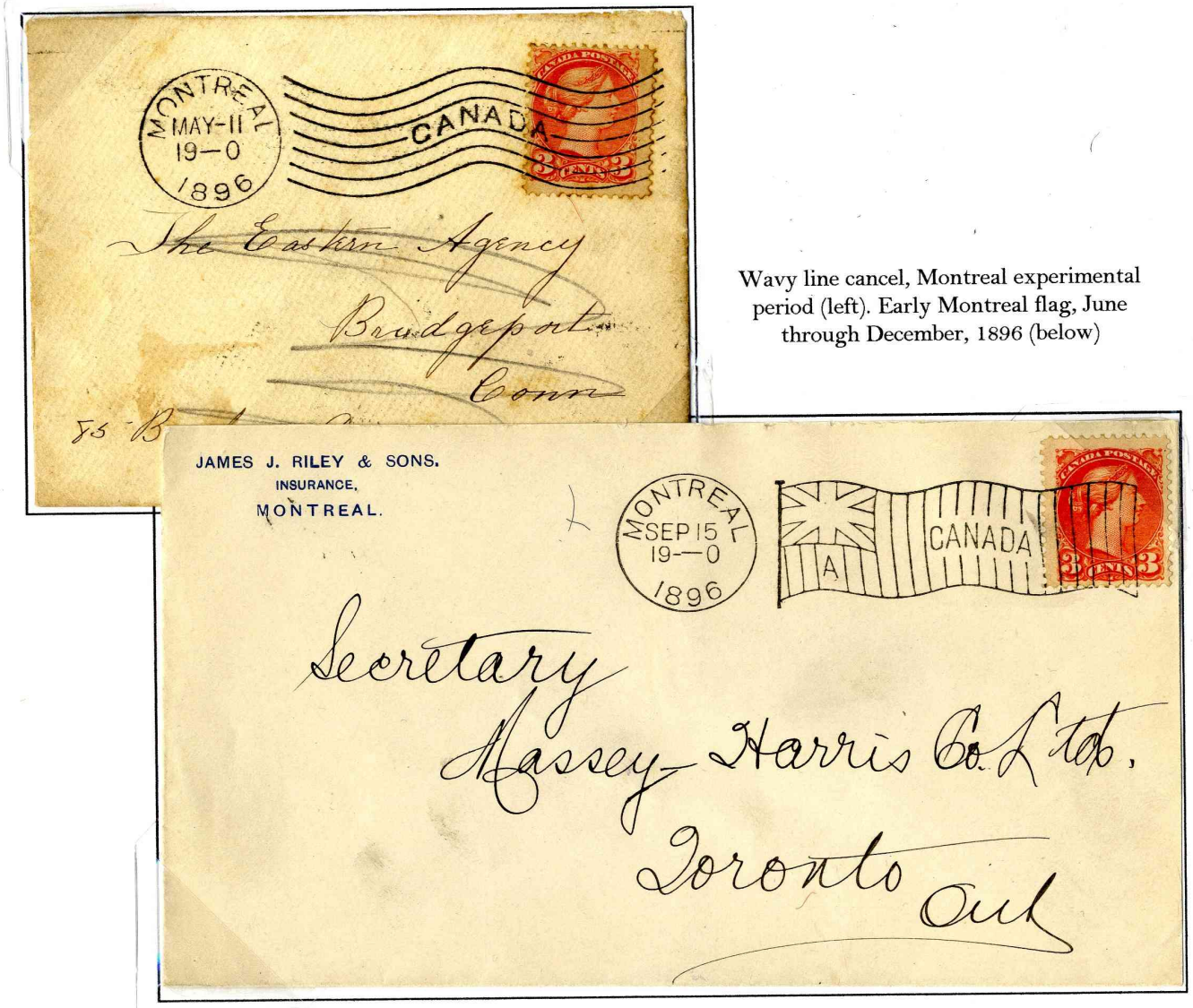




Flag taken out of service in 1917 and probably replaced by the error

IMPERIAL MAIL MARKING MACHINE COMPANY

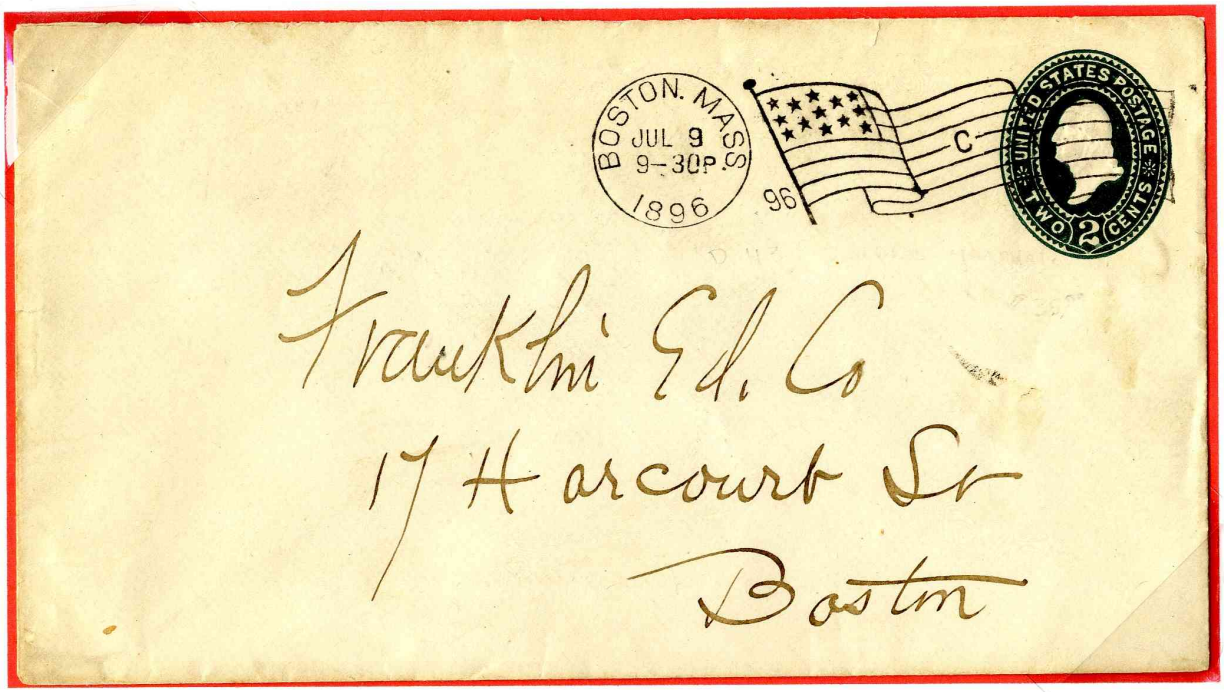
In 1895 or early 1896 Martin Van Buren Ethridge and Henry Waite—respectively the principal inventor and the financial backer of the "American" cancelling machines—formed a new company with separate offices in Boston. The Imperial Mail Marking Machine Company name may have been considered desirable in expanding the cancelling machine business to other countries, and, in fact, the newly-formed company did most of its business in Canada. Initial tests of the machines were carried out simultaneously in Boston and Montreal in early 1896. The only products of the Imperial company in the United States were the ornate flag cancels, known as "involutes." A fairly wide array of cancels were developed for use in Canada from 1896 to 1900.



Wavy line cancel, Montreal experimental period (left). Early Montreal flag, June through December, 1896 (below)

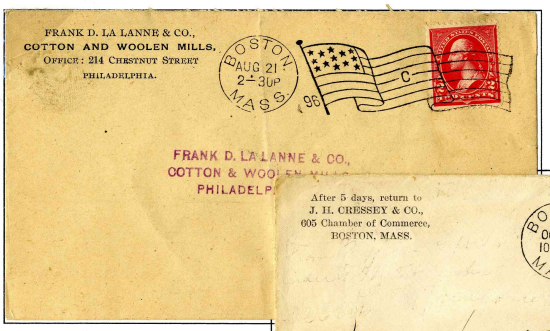
The Boston Involutes

The Boston involutes were produced from just two flag dies: one with a spread field and another with an ovate field. The pairing of these two dies with four different dials produced for Imperial machines and Type B and D dies produced for American machines resulted in sixteen recognized varieties, in use from as little as a week to as much as two years. All sixteen varieties are shown here.



Cover from the **first day of use of an involute flag**, July 9, 1896. Paired with American's Type D dial, producing a double-dated error. *In use:* July 9 to July 14, 1896, when the Imperial dial was installed

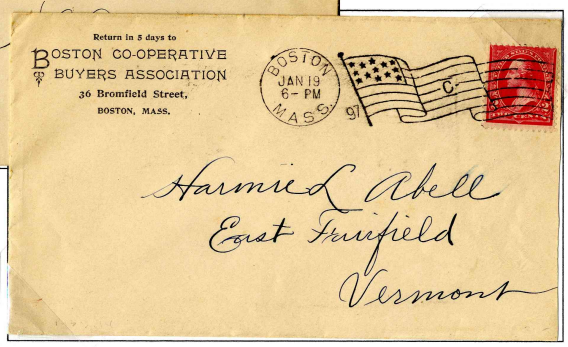
From 1896 into early 1897 the same flag die was used with the intended year-less dial. Four different dials are distinguished by the presence or absence of a comma after the city name and the shape of the letters in 'Boston'.



First dial, comma and similar-size loops in 'B'. *In use:* July 15 to September 2, 1896

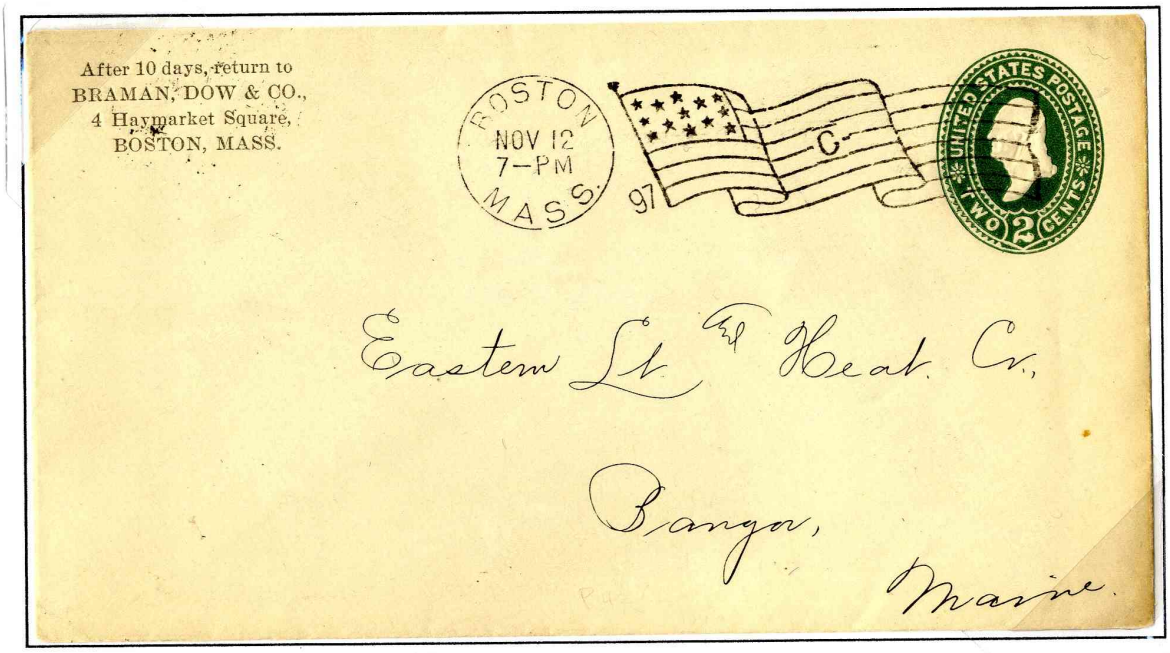
Second dial, comma and smaller top loop in 'B'. *In use:* September 2 to early October, 1896

Third dial, no comma and wide 'B'. *In use:* October 7 to December 22, 1896



Fourth dial, no comma and narrower letters. *In use:* January 1 to February 14, 1897

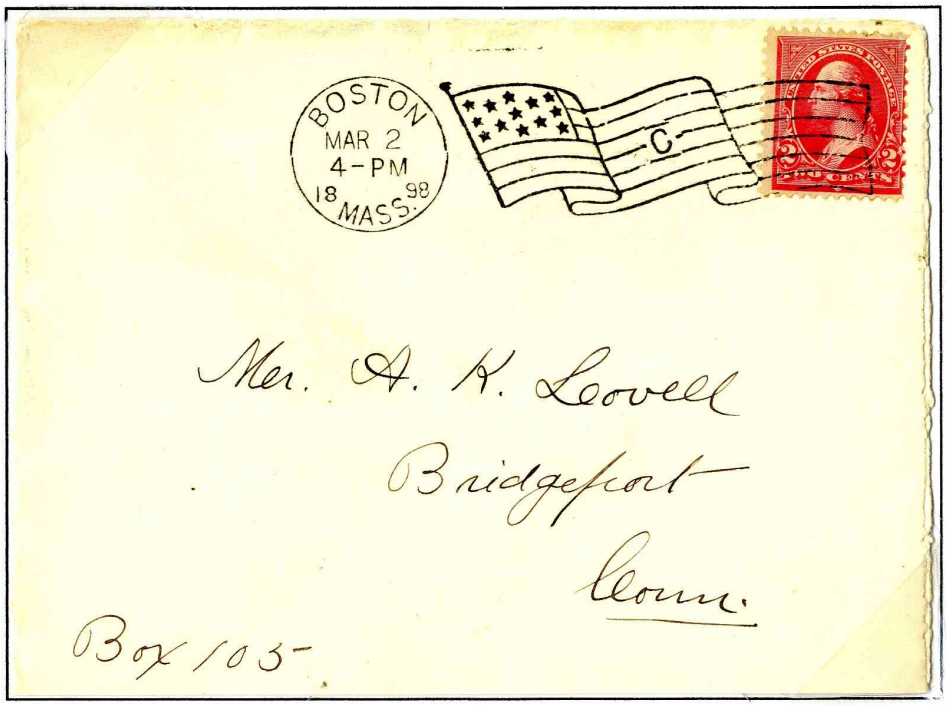
About February 15, 1897, the bottom of the staff was removed, creating a different 'type' of flag die.



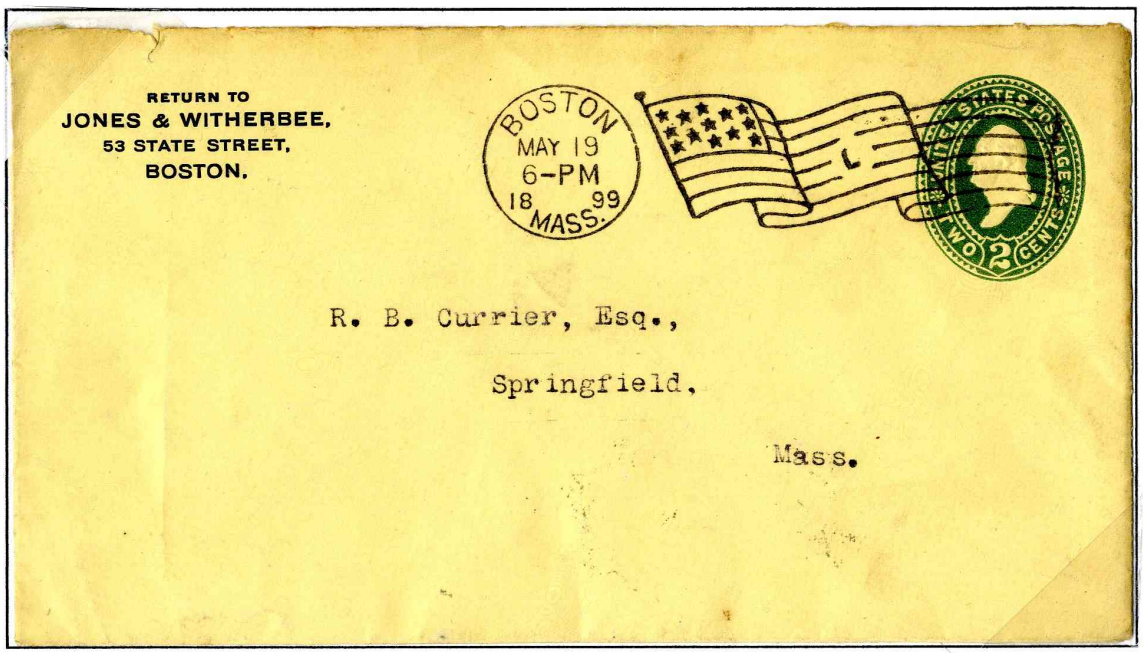
Altered die with fourth Imperial dial. *In use:* c. February 15 to end of 1897

Companion to error on Machine A, yielding double year dates. *In use:* November 2 to 8, 1897

At the beginning of 1898, the year date, which had been an integral part of the flag die, was removed.



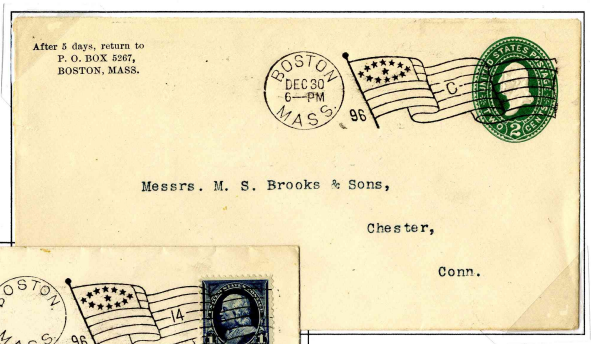
Imperial flag die with an American dial for the year date. *In use:* January 1, 1898 to March 8, 1899



On March 9, 1899 the C was changed to an L by crude re-engraving. *In use:* to September 11, 1900

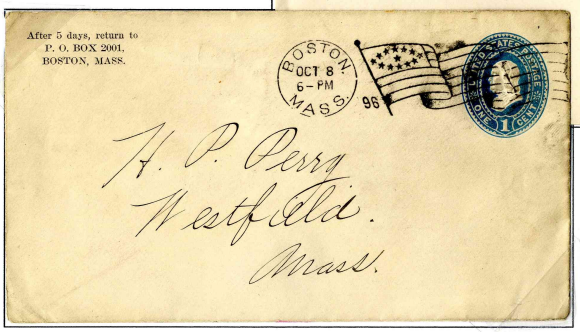
The Ovate-Involute Flag

The second Imperial flag die installed featured a combination of the involute flag and the ovate star arrangement, usually called "ovate-involutes." The first three of the four Imperial dials were used with this die.



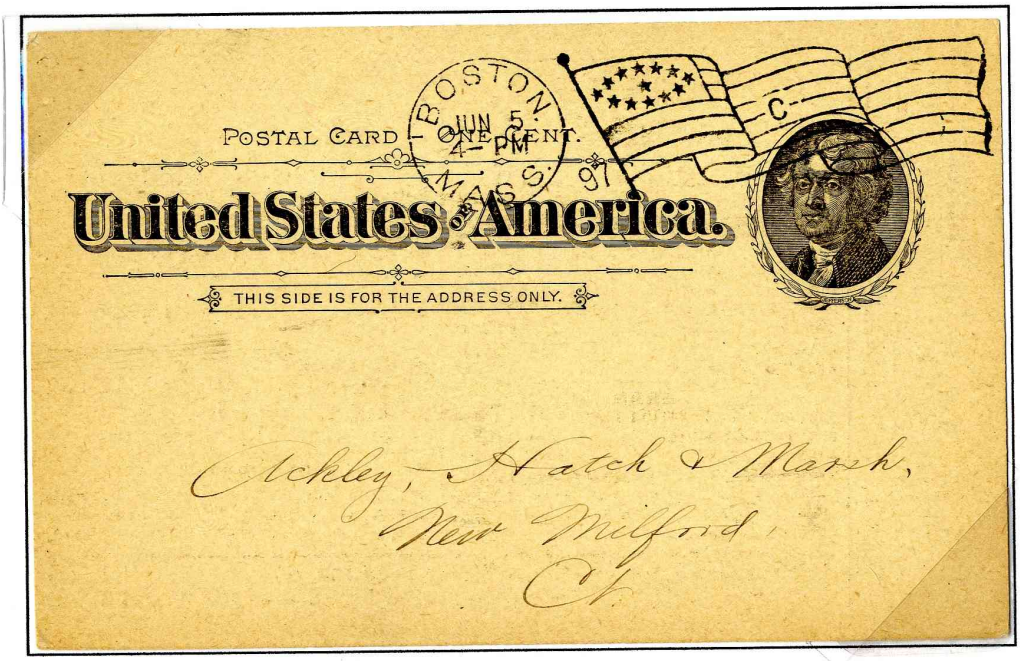
14 replaced with a **C** using third Imperial dial. *In use:* December 26 to 31, 1896

Same die with second Imperial dial. *In use:* October 13 to December 14, 1896



14 in the diespace and paired with the first Imperial dial. *In use:* September 2 to October 8, 1896

The final four varieties of the ovate-involute flag die have a smaller C inserted in the diespace, after which the machine was used almost exclusively for third class mail and bulk postal cards.



Bulk postal card quoting feed prices; first Imperial dial. *In use:* May 24 to July 27, 1897

Third-class usage. 97 removed from flag die; American Type B dial. *In use:* July 27, 1897 to September 1899, except brief periods for the two error dials

Of the few first class usages which exist, the enclosure from the one shown here suggests that this cover was part of a large commercial mailing, even though first class postage was paid.