Benjamin Franklin Cummins
And His Attempt to Corner the US Machine Cancel Market

By the early 1900's the United States Post Office Department (USPOD) was using machines to postmark mail more efficiently than could be done by hand. Over 25 companies had developed and tested machines in the hopes of being awarded some of that business. After purchasing some machines of questionable value by 1904 the USPOD was leasing machines annually with contracts beginning July 1 of each year.

The Time Marking Machine Co. (TMM Co.) machines included a working clock allowing the postmark to include the exact minute that the mail item was postmarked. This was believed to be of value at a time when it was important to document the handling of the mail.

By 1905 the president of the TMM Co. was Benjamin Franklin Cummins who was also president of the Benjamin Franklin Cummins Co (BFC Co.). The BFC Co. was already well known for their mechanical perforating machines used to cancel legal documents and later provided the machines to produced perfins (perforated initials) in US postage stamps.

B. F. Cummins was an aggressive businessman who also seemed to gain some advantage by being the brother of Senator Albert B. Cummins (two time presidential candidate) from Iowa. Under Benjamin Franklin Cummins leadership the TMM Co received contracts to lease machines to the USPOD starting in 1907 and running into 1913.

Starting in 1911 the BFC Co. focused their attention on developing high speed machines for the new lease period starting July 1, 1913. The USPOD advertised for bids for high, medium and low speed machines to be submitted Oct, 1911 for the upcoming contract. The BFC Co. submitted a bid for all of the business at one low price and accompanied this with a secret letter detailing their individual prices. This unusual bid threw the bidding process into chaos and ultimately resulted in two additional bids, the appointment of a machine cancel committee to evaluate machines, numerous tests in Chicago and Washington and finally a Congressional investigation into the procurement practices of the USPOD.

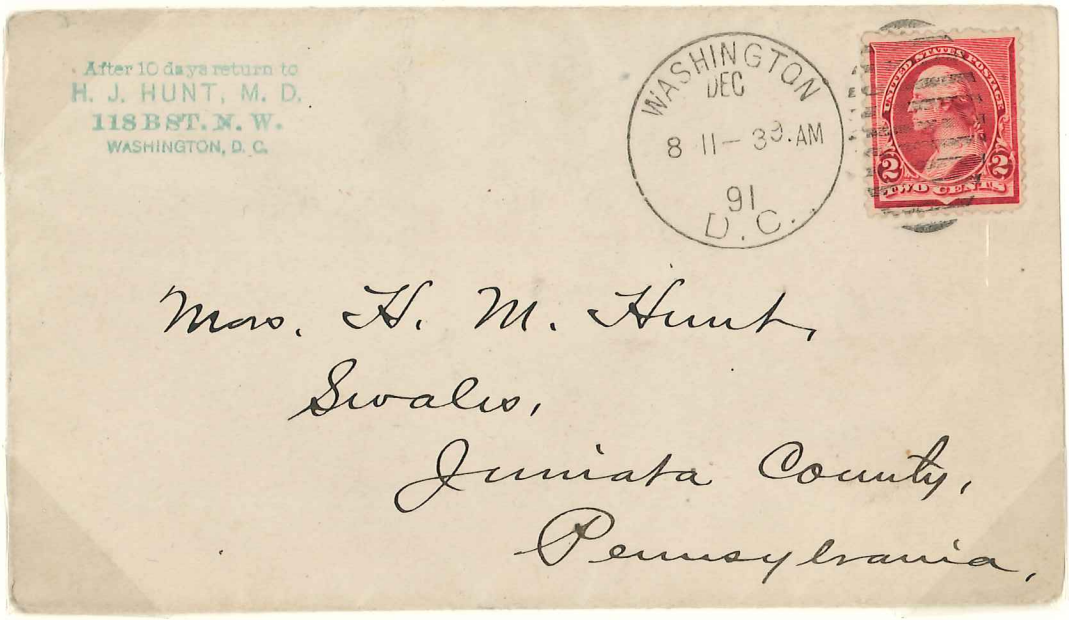
This exhibit will use postmarked covers to show the development and commercial uses of the TMM Co. machines, detail the history of the hand-cranked machines sold to postmasters and explore BFC Co. postmarks during the development and testing of the new high-speed technology designed to compete for the 1913 contract.

Exhibit Outline

Background

During the late 1890's, the USPOD was focused on providing timely service. Several attempts were known to include clock driven mechanisms in postmarking machines to document the exact postmarking time.

The first known postmark to have a working clock was developed by James P. Malonee. He referred to his machine as a "Time Stamp". It was similar to a stapler with a large head and did not have the capability to feed envelopes or to work at high speeds. Hand pressure caused application of the postmark.



1891 Mallonnee postmark, known only from Washington, D.C.
Note that the minute portion of the time was being rotated into position as this envelope was postmarked. (ex-Langford)

What is a working clock? *Removable slugs were typically inserted into postmarking devices to print the time to the nearest hour or half hour. Allowing for the possibility that slugs were available for every quarter hour and perhaps every 10 minutes. This would allow the possibility of times ending in :15, :45 as well as :10, :20, :40 and :50 from a typical postmark. This accounts for 8 of the possible minute markings out of a 60 minute hour. Any of the other 52 minutes would seem to indicate a working clock.*

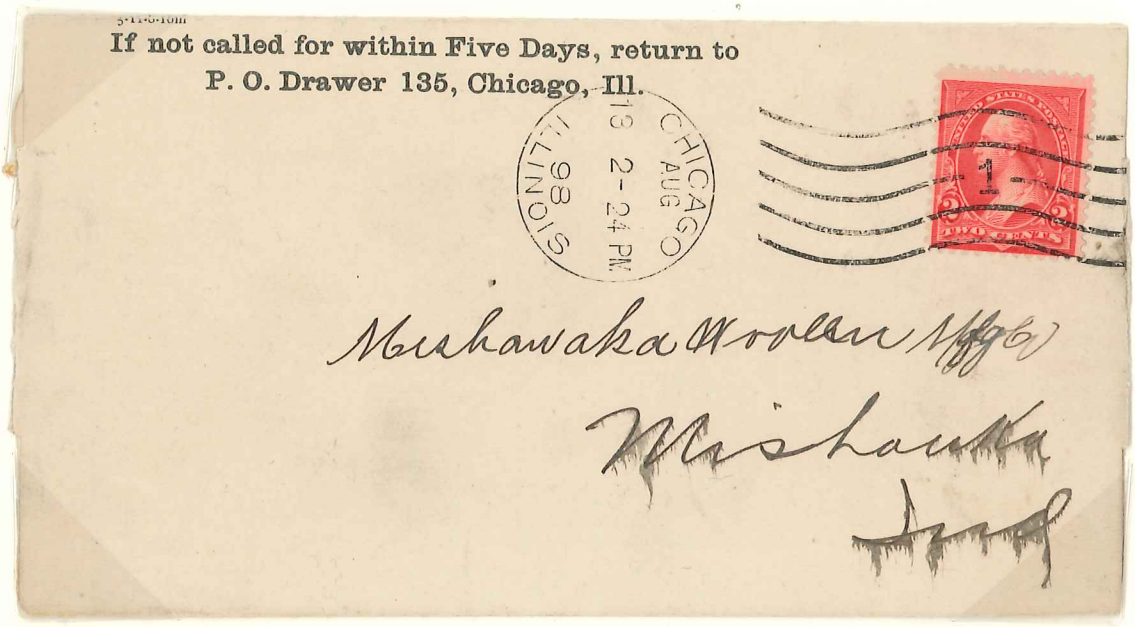
Of course a postmark with a working clock can still give for example a time ending in: 00 if that happened to be the correct time when the postmark occurred. Also a machine with a clock may have it turned off or stuck in a position where it leaves a postmark ending in 1,2,3,4,6,7,8 or 9 and still not be actually working, although the capability of a working clock was present.

In this exhibit I will refer to postmarks with times ending in 1,2,3,4,6,7,8 or 9 as indicating a working clock. Except for very rare postmarks they are also confirmed by a database recording observations of over 2800 Time Marking Machine postmarks.

Background

Ernst R. Malmborg had patented a time stamp device similar to that of James P. Mallonnee on Oct. 14, 1890. On July 31, 1899 Malmborg received US Patent No. 615,031 for a "Postmarking and Canceling Machine" which featured a working clock capable of including the time to the nearest minute in the postmark. This early machine had a unique postmark dial rotated 90 degrees clockwise from the normal orientation. This was to accommodate the working clock and the subsequent revolving wheels of the clock which were on the same axis as the postmark dial. As all subsequent TMM Co. postmarks this had the date and time on the same line.

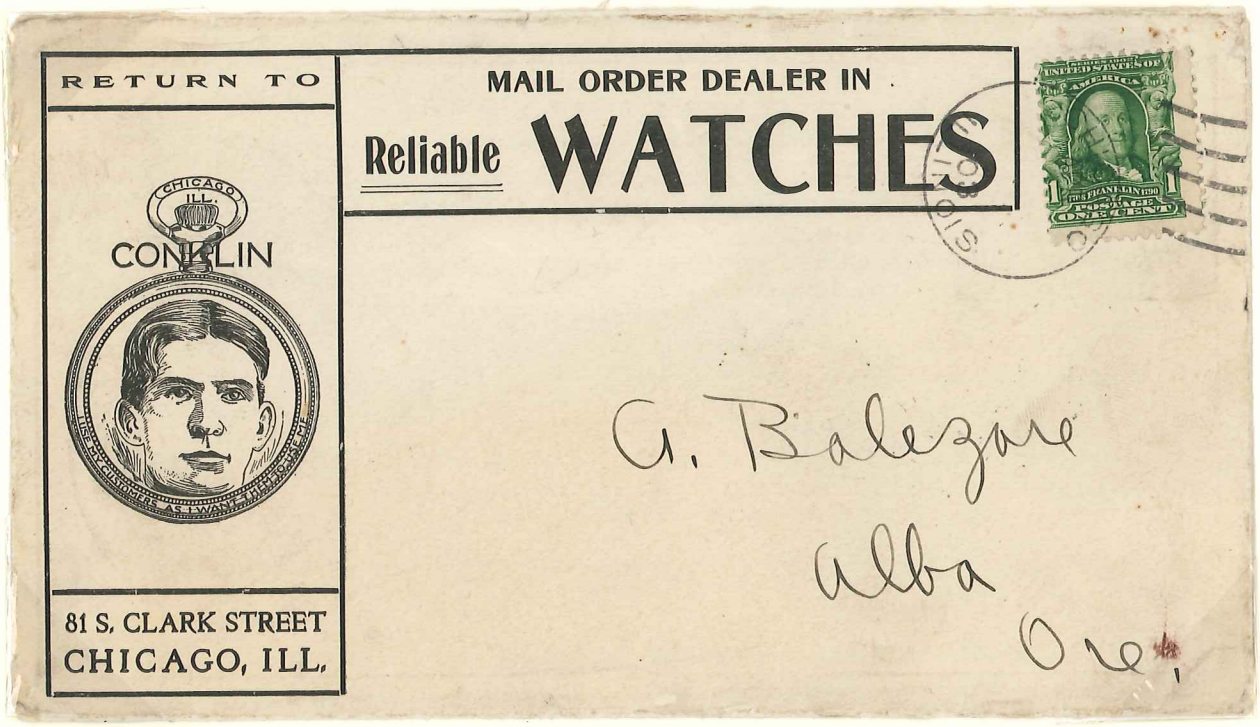
This early machine had a unique postmark dial rotated 180 degrees from the normal orientation. This was to accommodate the working clock and the subsequent revolving wheels of the clock which were on the same axis as the postmark dial.



1898 Test of early Malmborg cancelling machine. Note the time of 2:24 PM.

Background

Malmborg continued to improve his machines. Five additional patents were granted from 1897 through early 1903 and the improved machines were once again tested in Chicago.



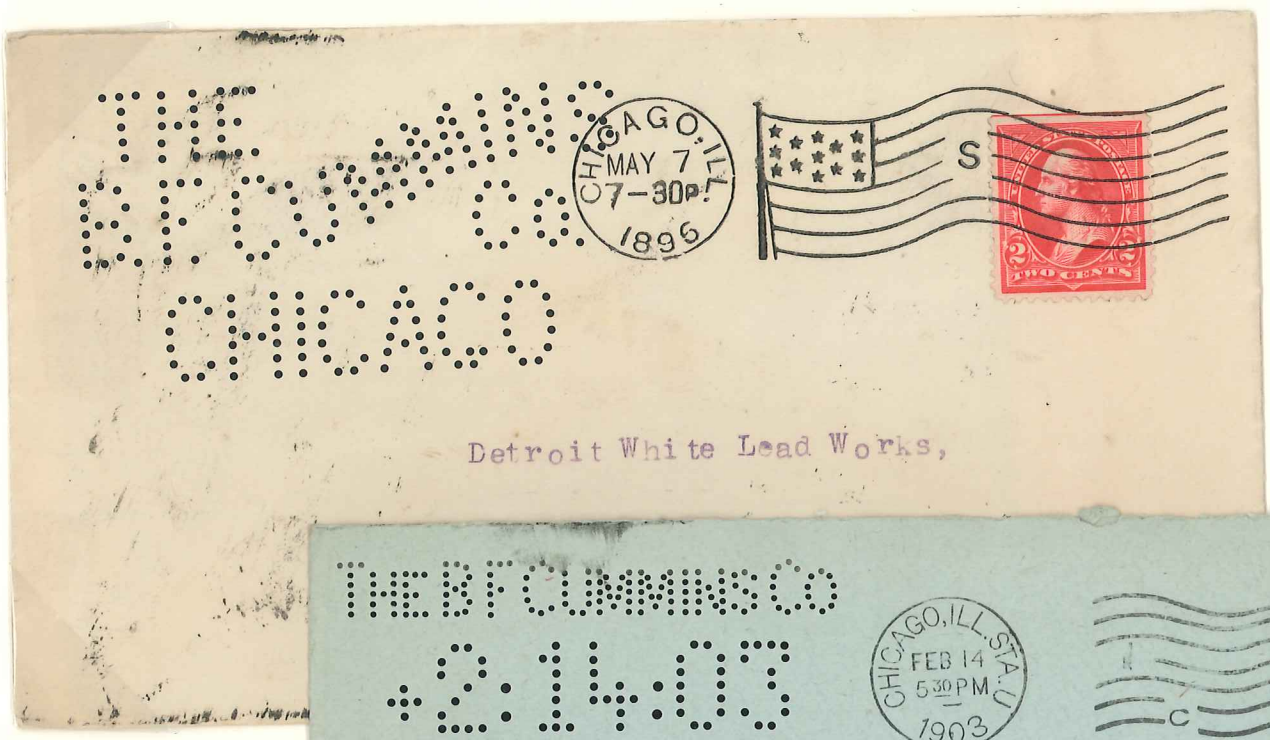
Test of Malmborg machine in 1903 with the clock dials removed to postmark 3rd class mail. (ex-Payne)

It is very unusual to see an experimental postmark used for printed matter. This would seem to be especially the case for a machine which was specifically designed to feature a working clock. Perhaps it was tested on 3rd class mail as they wanted to determine the ability of the clock to be removed when it was not needed.

Background

The BFC Co. started in 1887 with "the introduction of a perforator that revolutionized the banking industry"
(http://www.cumminsallison.com/default.htm, website of Cummins-Allison Co.). .

Their perforating technology was also used to create unusual perforated advertising covers.



In 1907, perforated initials (perfins) were allowed on US postage stamps as a security measure for companies as shown here with the "BFC Co" 2 line perfin. Early mail related business for the BFC Co.

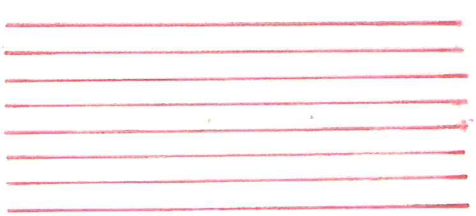
Time Marking Machine Co.

Early Tests

Based on successful tests of the Malmborg technology the Time Marking Machine Co. received a contract to supply up to 30 machines to the USPOD during the period of July 1, 1904 to June 30, 1905. No machines were supplied under this contract. Malmborg continued to improve his machine and his later patents were assigned to the TMM Co. and often had B. F. Cummins signature as witness.

The machines continued to include a working clock but the postmark dial has now been rotated with the town name at the top of the dial. This postmark type is classified as an A-100 in the early studies by Geschwindner, Morris and Koontz published in the Machine Cancel Forum.

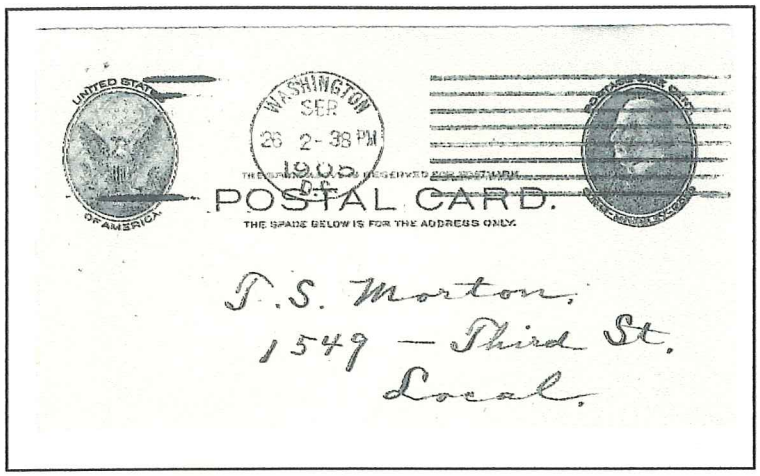
Date and time on same line →



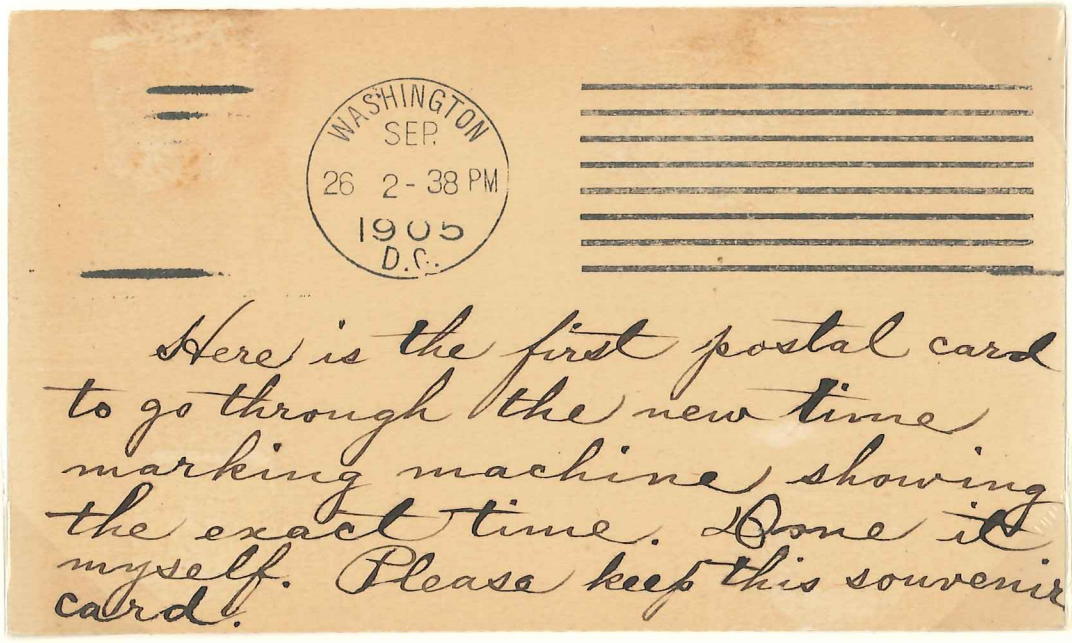
8 Horizontal lines with no diespace.

Test postmark from Washington D.C. of a Time Marking Machine postmark. Note the time of 7:04 PM.

Examples are known from June 28 and 29. Evidently the test was unsuccessful as no contract was awarded for the coming fiscal year.



Photocopy of Front (reduced)



A second test was run with examples again known from only two days. This is the earliest known usage from this test. A postmark was applied to the back of the card along with the message:

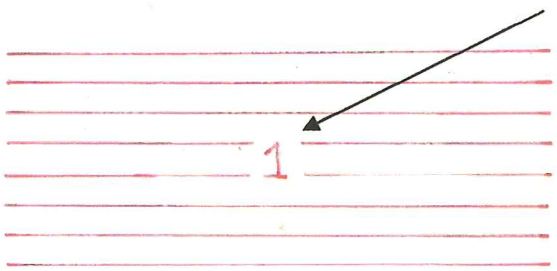
"Here is the first postal card to go through the new time marking machine showing the exact time. Done it myself. Please keep this souvenir card.

The card is unsigned and addressed to T. S. Morton who no known relationship to the TMM Co.

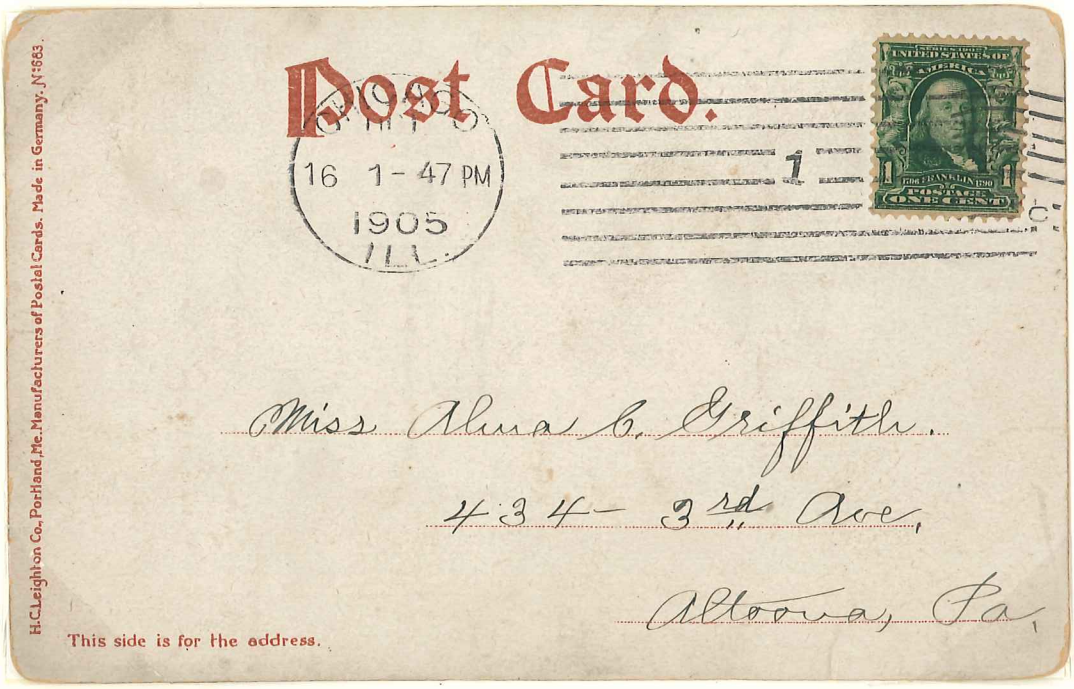
Testing continued in Chicago throughout 1905 and into 1906 using a new A-101 type postmark.

A Dial
Circular with Month, Day, Time and Year within Dial

Machine Number

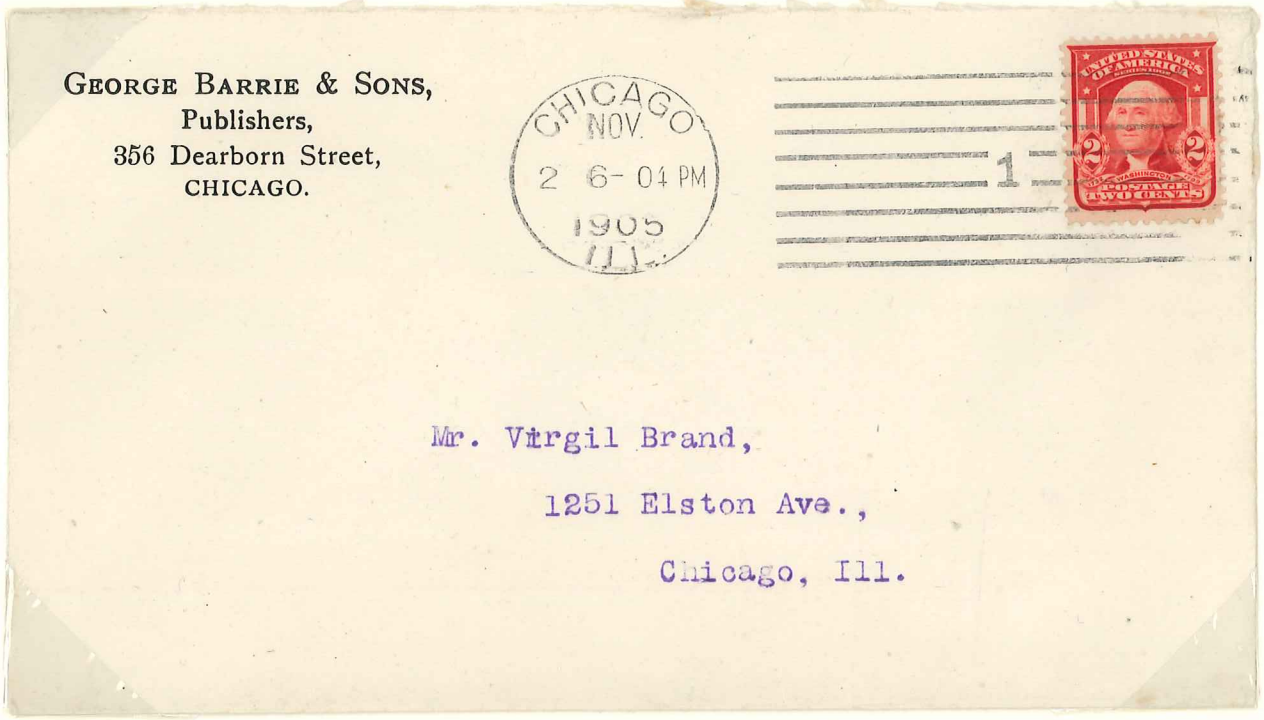


101 Killer
8 Horizontal Bar Killer



In late 1905 the Chicago Post Office was in the process of moving to a new building.
A new machine was tested at a temporary Post Office in October.
This is the earliest reported example (ERU) from this test, which ran for 3 days.

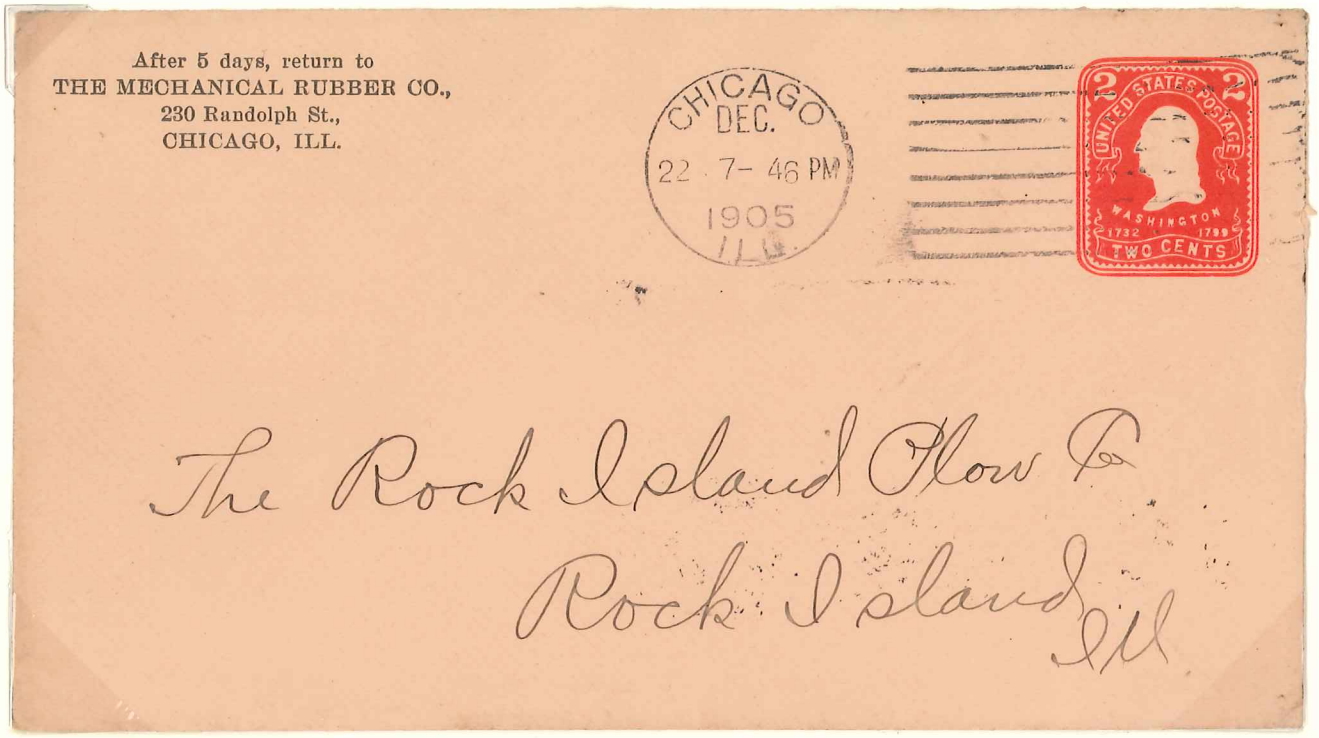
Testing continued at the new Post Office.



Tests continued for nearly one month beginning on Oct. 31. Note the abbreviation of ILL.

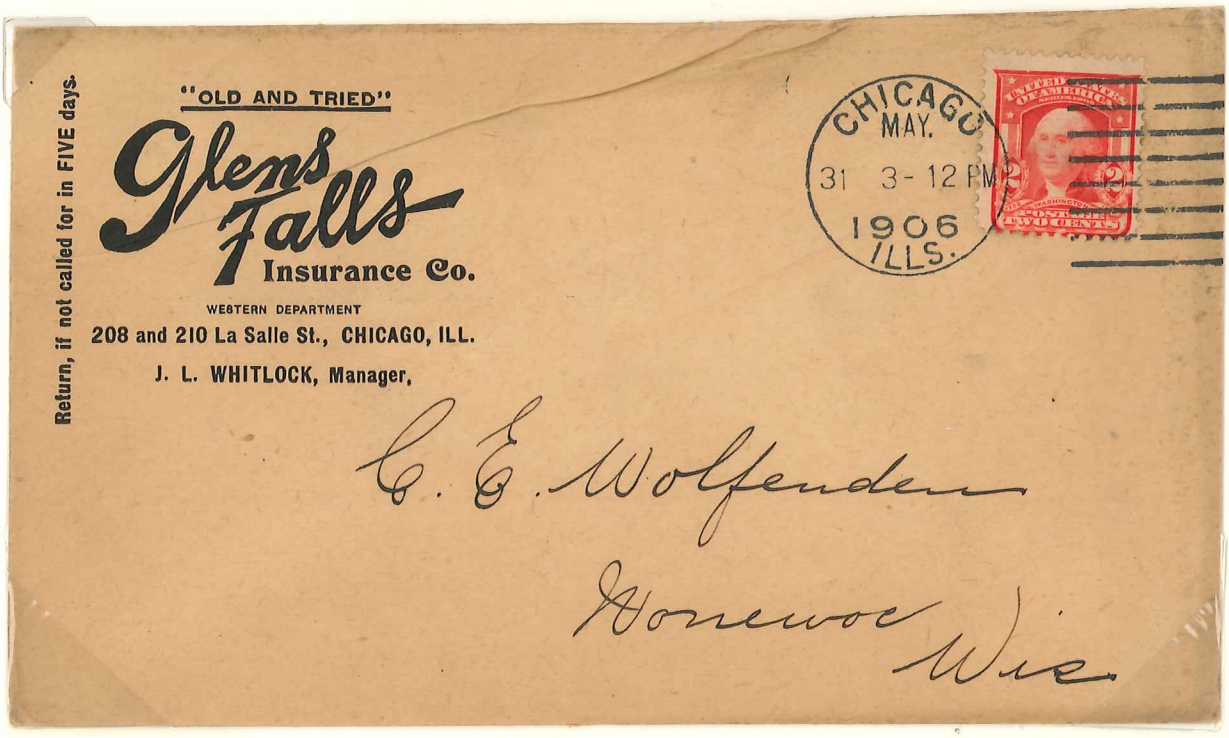
Late in 1905 the dial was changed to one using the abbreviation ILLS.
The 100 type postmark (with no die space) was used in this test.
This may have been the machine tested in Washington at the end of September, 1905.

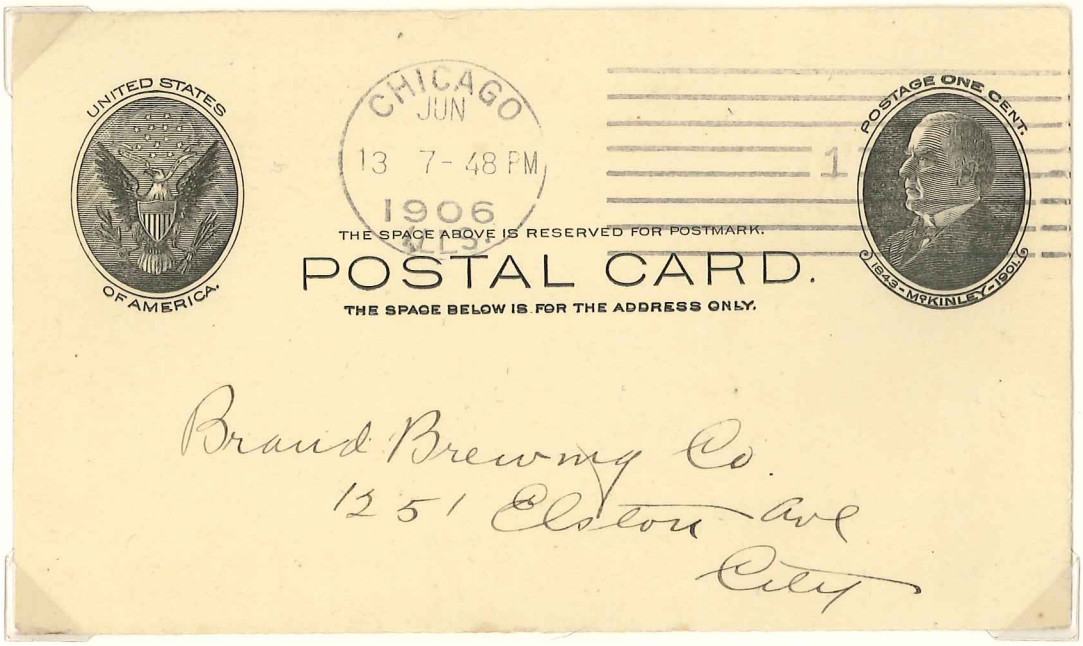
A final test was run late in December 1905.



Latest reported use (LRU) for 1905 Chicago tests.

The TMM Co postmarks used a dial which had a permanent year. This required a new dial at the start of a new year. These are always distinguishable. Some are distinguished by minor changes in the fonts and location of the letters. Others have larger more obvious differences. The dial in 1906 continued to use ILLS. as the abbreviation for Illinois but the O in Chicago is now tall and narrow compared to the rounded O used in 1905.

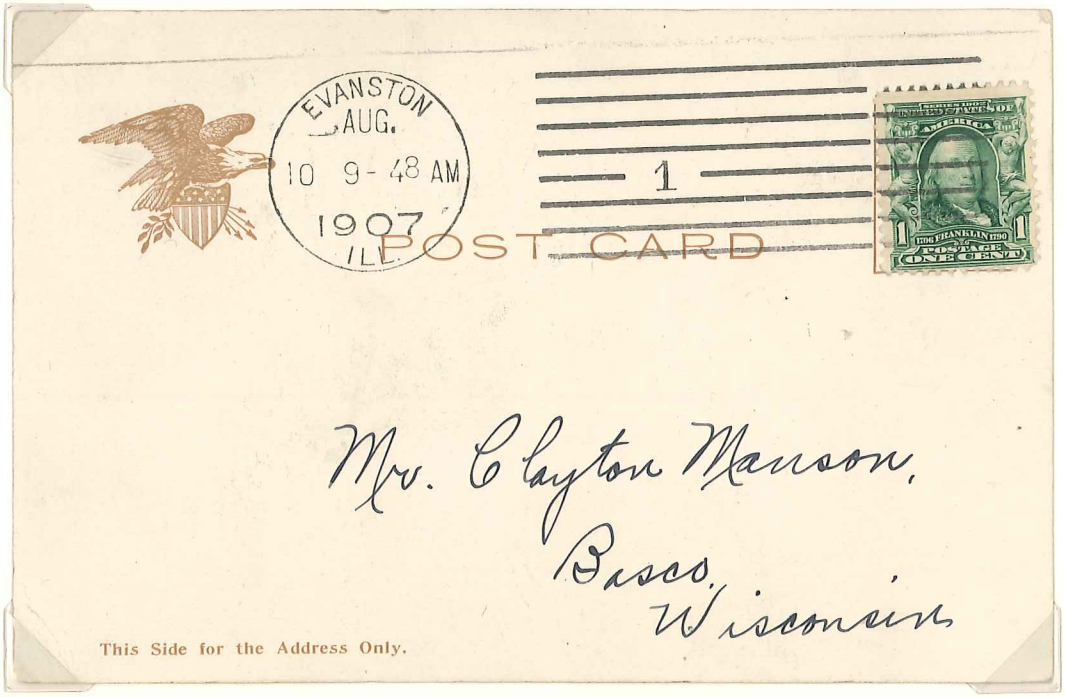




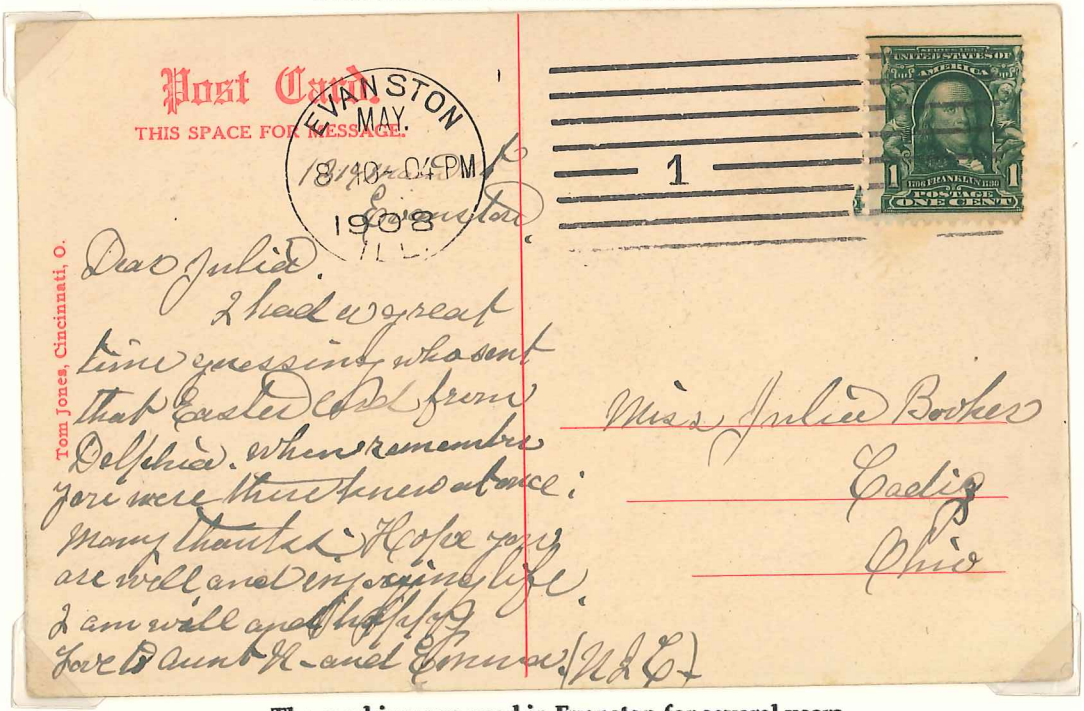
Pair of test postmarks using the same dials. Examples form this final test are known from May 11 through June 14.

The 1905 and 1906 tests led to a lease machines beginning July 1, 1906. Six machines were supplied under this contract. These used the A postmark with a 102 type killer (which was a 101 type modified with the die space moved to the left a little). The die space could be used for either a machine number of service letter.

Service marks were inserted in the postmark to specify where mail originated. Four service markings were use, C, D, R and T: C for "Collected at outlying mailboxes", D for "Deposited at Post Office", R for "Received" and T for "Transit". These were often not changed properly, e.g. R used in an originating postmark.



Evanston received one of the new machines.



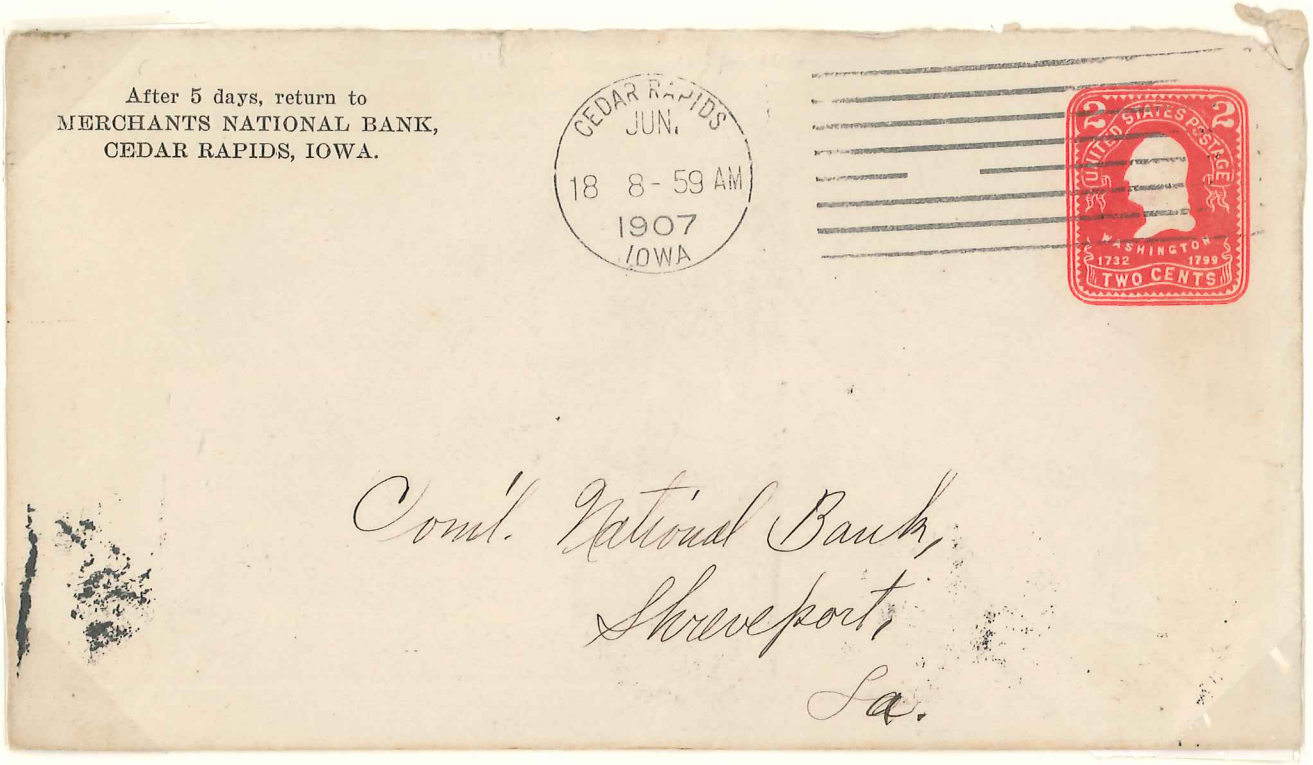
The machine was used in Evanston for several years.

Note the dial change from 1907 to 1908 noticeable in the larger font for EVANSTON.

Ann Arbor received a machine the first year using a service letter in the die space.

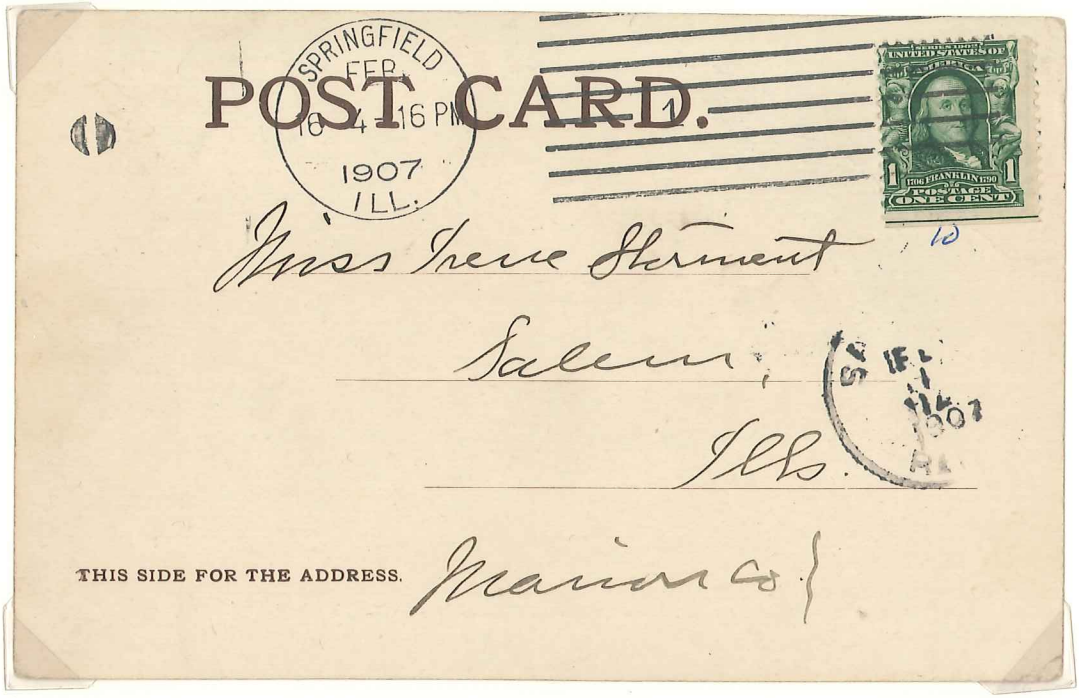
The day and time line of the dial could be removed and used to cancel printed matter which did not require even a date of mailing.

The 1 cent stationery paid the printed matter contract rate to Germany.



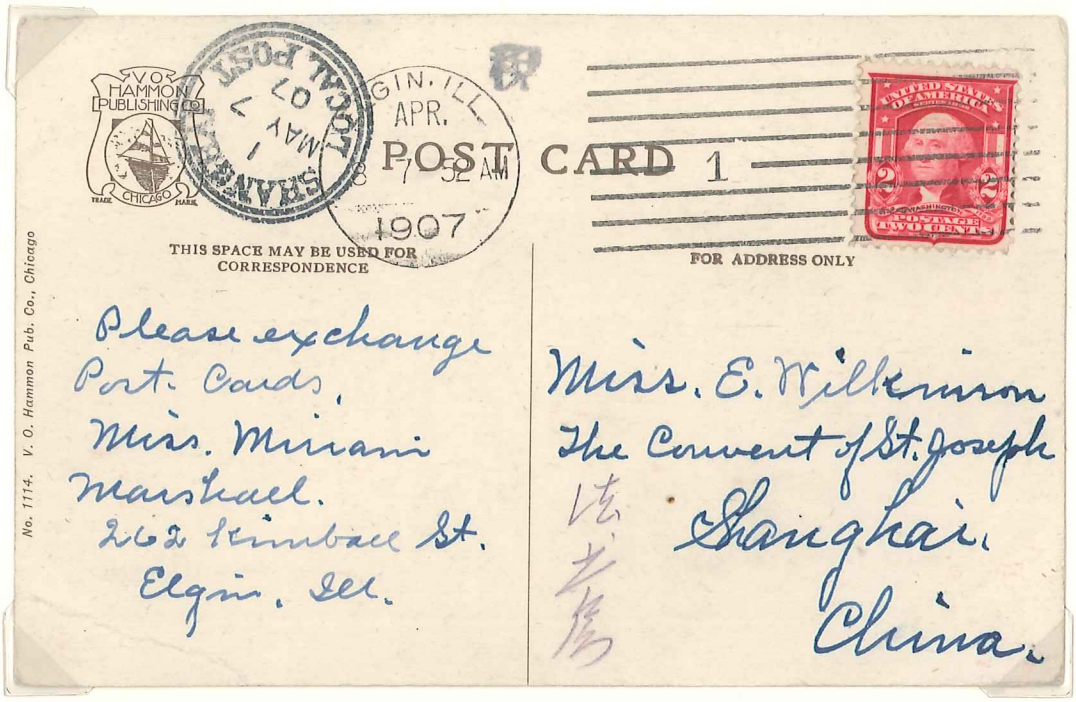
Cedar Rapids received one of the early machines. Initially used with a blank diespace.

Later it was used with machine #1 in the diespace.
There never was a machine #2.

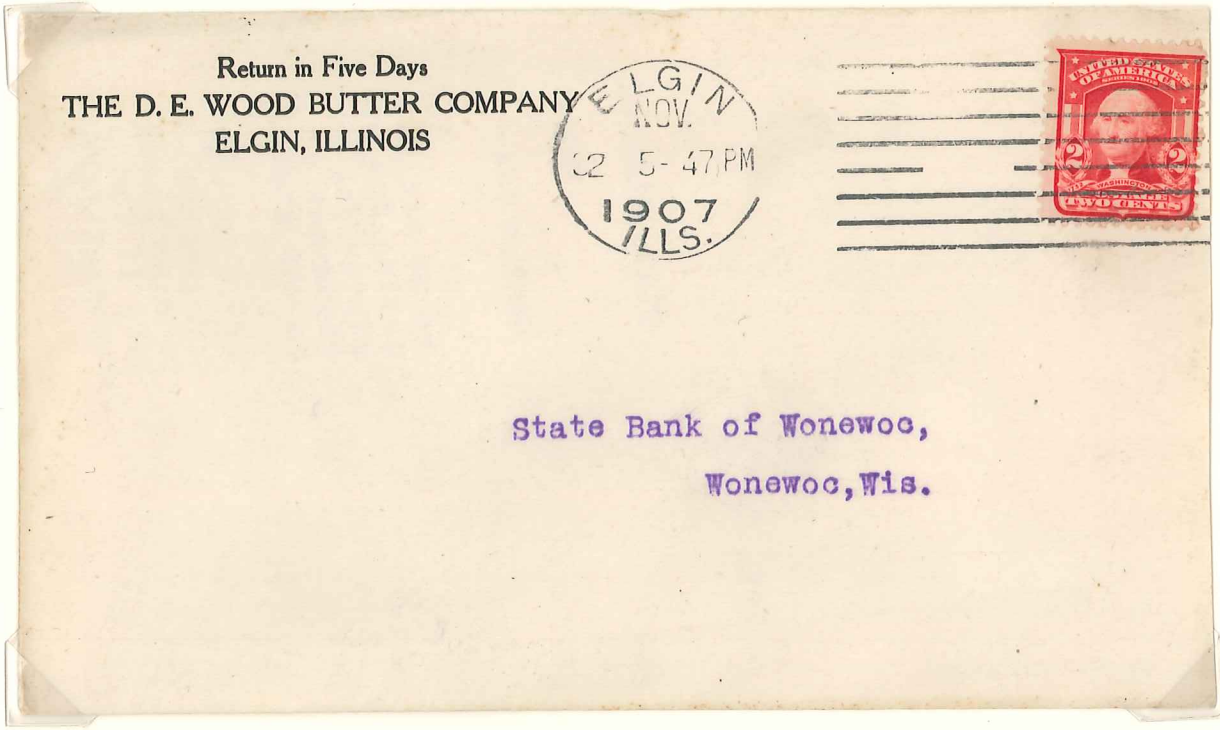


Springfield, IL also received one of the first 6 machines. Note the impression of a screwhead to the left of the dial as well as the inclusion of 1 in the killer diespace.

Later in 1907 the dial was changed as evidenced by the wider 1907. Also the 1 was removed from the diespace.



The first dial used at Elgin, IL had IL abbreviated at the top of the dial and a 1 in the killer die space.



Later in 1907 they used a dial with ILLS. at the bottom of the dial and the 1 removed from the killer leaving a blank diespace .