Early Registered Meter Franked Mail and Machine Cancels

Part I Background by A J Savakis, Editor

There was a period of well over two decades of meter franking experiments to invent, test, and certify machines before meter mail became 'mainstream'. That period leading up to 1920 could fill a small book. The focus is not the meter machine, but the cancelling machines used with metered franked mail that was registered as well. For that purpose, let us jump to April 24, 1920, when at the request of the Postmaster General Albert Burleson, Congress authorized the Postmaster General to amend the Postal Laws and Regulations to accept first class matter by the general public without postage stamps.[1] Although machines that could frank a variety of postage rates were available, the first machines authorized under the 1920 law were single denomination machines. Imagine if you will a machine that could only frank a single value. That means if you were a bank, and mailing 1-cent postal cards, 2-cent letters, 4-cent double rate letters, 5-cent international mail, and 10-cent double rate international letters, you would need FIVE machines for that purpose!

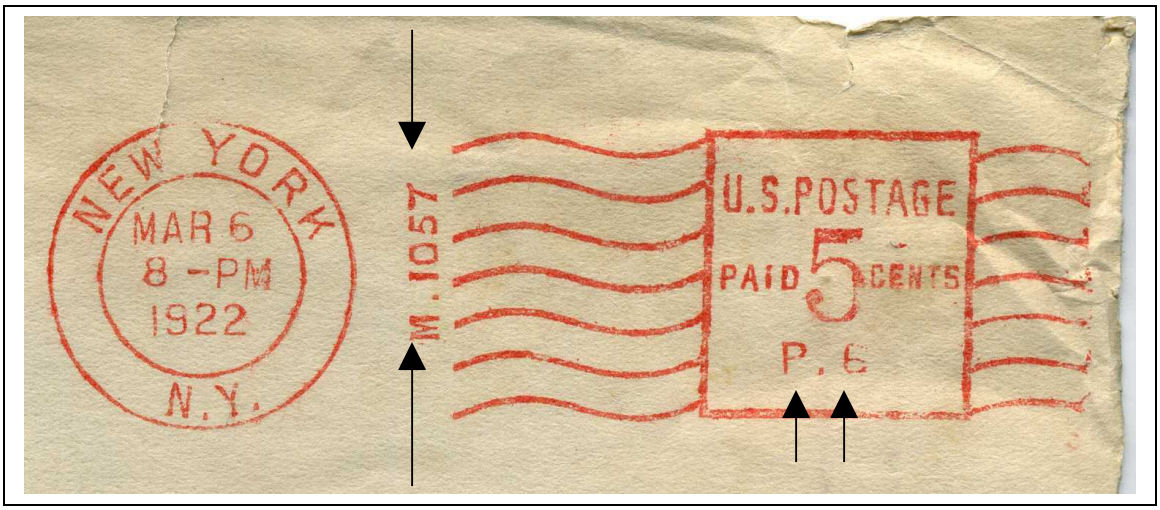

Figure 1, above: NEW YORK / MAR 6 / 8 – PM / 1922 / N.Y. Pitney-Bowes 5-cent meter frank using a square indicia meter design. Vertical, and in between the townmark[2] and frank, is the meter number: M. 1057. Inside the indicia[3], is the permit number: P.6 Arrows point to both the meter number, and the permit number. A Pitney-Bowes meter machine applied the postage.

The square indicia was in use for less than two years, as the design too closely resembled permit mail. The design of the indicia changed from square to oval. The oval meter stamps could ONLY frank ONE VALUE.

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[1] William K. Thomas, HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF METERED POSTAGE (American Philatelic Society 1962), page 9.

[2] What is comparable to the machine cancel "postmark" is referred to in meter collecting as the 'townmark'. The different terms, 'postmark' and 'townmark' have the advantage of being able to discuss both on the same cover, without confusing whether the marking came from a machine cancel or a meter frank.

[3] The term 'indicia' refers to the part of the meter frank that includes the value, and usually the nation of origin.

It would seem an inconvenience that a machine could only frank a single rate, but that did not stop commercial demand for even more machines franking more than the rates previously mentioned. There was a demand for meter machines that could frank registered mail.

Remembering that metered mail had a townmark for the place of origin, what do you do for registered mail? The first oval meter franking machines tried different solutions. Some had no townmark. Some had the townmark blank as to date, but included the city and state of origin. Still others ignored regulations, and included not only the city and state of origin, but the date of mailing.

At right, 17-cent oval meter franks with point of origin New York, New York. A Pitney-Bowes meter machine applied the postage.

Figure 2 A has its townmark removed.

Figure 2 B has its townmark, but the date has been removed.

Figure 2 C has both its townmark, and a full date.

Unfortunately quick scissors removed the postal markings from the back, and the sequence cannot be ascertained from these examples. Just like machine cancels, meter franks need to be kept with their entire envelope or card as much as possible.

Figure 2 A

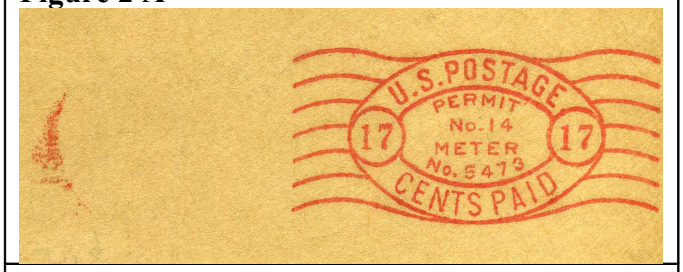
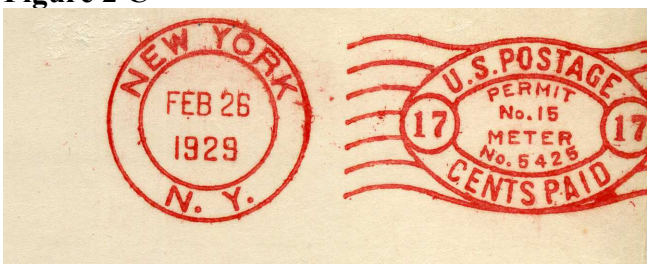


Figure 2 B

Figure 2 C



There were early meter tests of machines that could frank more than one rate. There was certainly commercial demand for these machines. A small, or even medium, business

could certainly not afford to lease postal machines for each and every rate they were using in mailing. Even if the machines were leased for a very low monthly amount, imagine where one would put them all!

Once postal authorities were convinced the process would protect their revenues, multi-denominational machines appeared. These multi-denominational machines first appeared in 1927 and could frank from a pre-determined set of rates selected by the user. The oval meter indicia[4] was replaced by a faux perforated stamp with central value in a small oval. There was a choice of a single denomination machine, or one that could frank with three, five, or six different rates. **See Figure 2 D**.

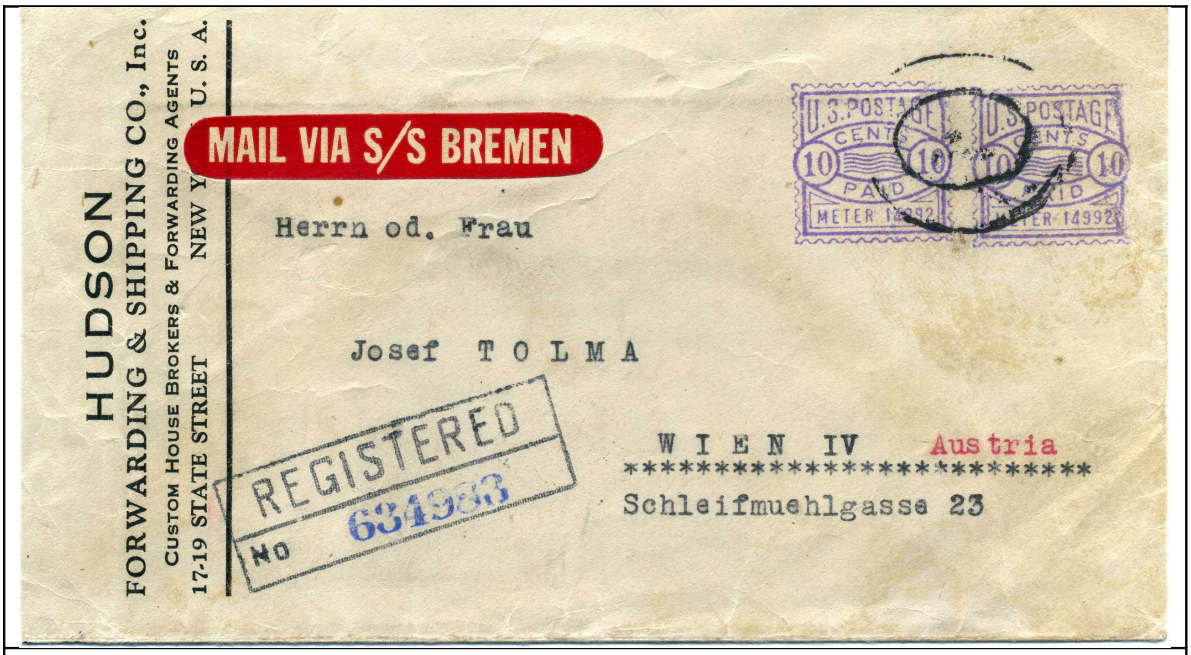


Figure 2 D, above: Registered mail from New York , New York, to Austria. The cover is backstamped with a NY, NY handstamp dated December 6, 1935, and with a NY, NY Foreign handstamp on December 7. There are no transit, registered mail, or other receipt marks. This is an example of a multi-denominational meter frank. The operator's machine did not have a 20-cent rate value, but could apply TWO 10-cent meter franks. Note the mute cancel of the meter frank stamps.

The ideal was omni-denominational machines. These were machines that could print ANY value between a set of ranges. **See Figure 3.** These omni-denominational machines were the most versatile. They first appeared as a rectangular faux postage stamp with townmark and indicia engraved as a single piece. This made transfer of the

[4] What does one do with old meters that are single denominational in ability, in a world that demands multi or omni-denominational abilities to frank mail? We know they reappeared as cancelling devices during the Second World War II. Their use is the material for a book, and are very well covered by Bart Billings in his study of APO markings. One can spot them as being the very large double rimmed (diameters of 26 + 18 mm) APO machine markings and the very large (24 mm) single rimmed machine markings, both electric powered. For information see Billings, U.S. POSTAL MACHINES OF THE ARMY POST OFFICES – WORLD WAR II (privately printed October 2006), Volume I at pages 12-15.

machine to different cities expensive, as a new engraved indicia-townmark would have to be prepared.

In most cases, the local post office felt obligated to mute cancel the front of the meter cover since there was a threat of revenue loss by cutting off or soaking off a meter frank and reusing the meter stamp.

Figure 3, above: Meter No. 90011 Registered mail frank with a 'Flying Eagle'. Note there is no city or state name in the indicia, and there is no townmark. A mute double ringed hand stamp ties the frank to the envelope. A Pitney-Bowes meter machine applied the postage. This is a very early 'Flying Eagle.' Note how the viewer is looking 'head-on' at the bird, and that it more closely resembles a dove.

These early omni-denominational meter machines, intended for registered mail use, had no city or state engraved in their indicia. They are referred to as 'townless' meters.

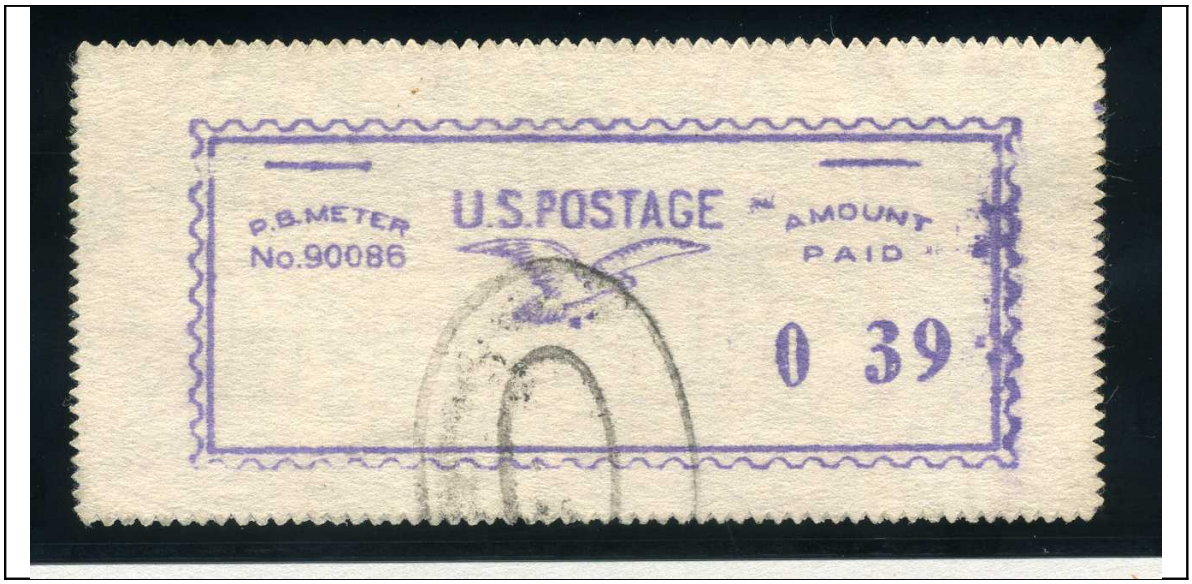


Figure 4, above: Meter No. 90086 Registered mail frank with a 'Flying Eagle'. This is a later meter frank than **Figure 3.** Again, there is no city or state name in the franking, and a mute double ringed hand stamp ties the frank to the envelope.

Why the mute hand cancel? Metered mail was supposed to avoid the cancelling process, and save time by skipping the cancelling process. Besides saving time, this would save money in the processing of mail. BUT Without the townmark and date, it was possible that meter frankings would be cut off or soaked off, and reused IF they were not cancelled As the volume of dateless, townless meter frankings increased, the need to use machines to 'cancel' the meter arose.

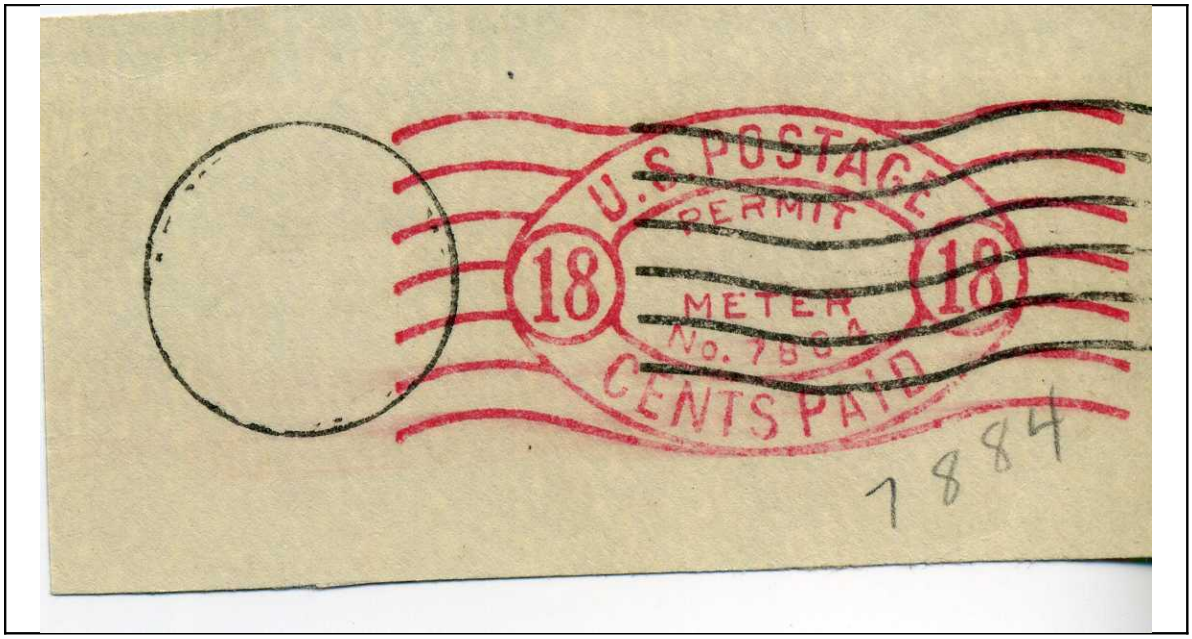
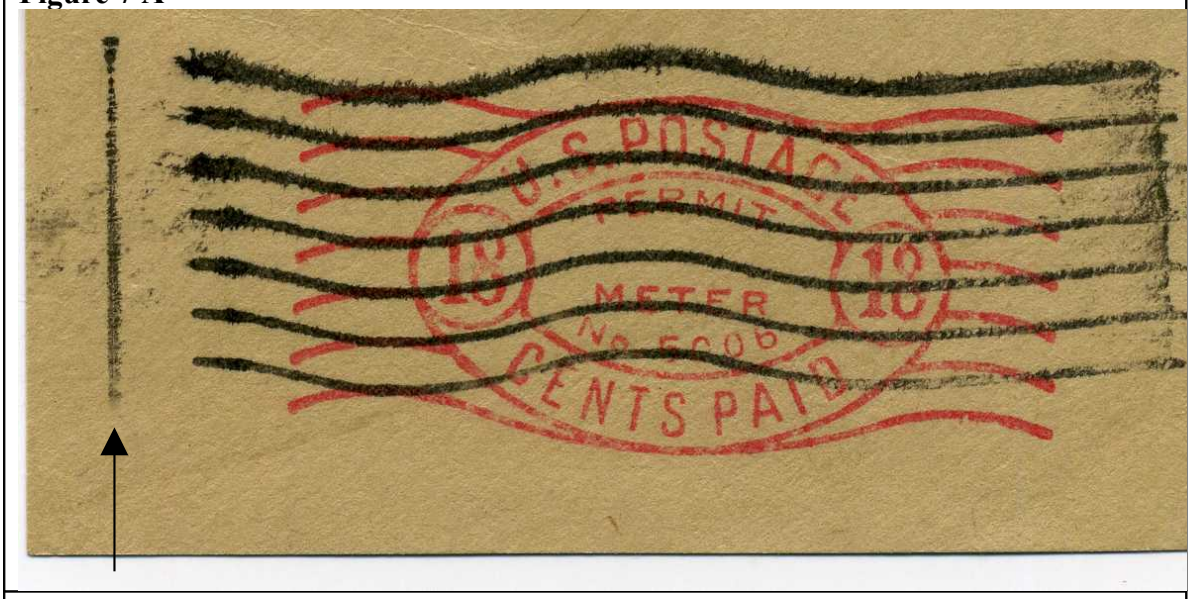


Figure 5, above: Registered mail 18-cent frank, METER No. 7884, applied by Pitney-Bowes meter franking device. A machine cancel with mute dial 'cancel's the meter frank. With what little is showing, this would appear to be a Universal Model D with 6-wavy lines and a single crest in the middle. A fast pair of scissors removed additional information that could have been observed and reported.

Figure 6, above: Registered mail 18-cent frank, METER No. 5006, applied by Pitney-Bowes meter franking device. It appears to be a machine cancel with 6-wavy lines and two crests, which would be a Universal Model G. A fast pair of scissors removed additional information that could have been observed and reported, and the postmark dial which would have been to the left was unfortunately cut off.

Figure 7 A



Both pair of meters in **Figure 7 A and 7 B** are from meter number 5006. Both are overcancelled by a 7-wavy line, single crested, cancellation suggestive of a Universal Model G.

BOTH machine cancels have a vertical line of black ink, which are marked with arrows. These examples of Meter #5006 have been cancelled by the same machine. The mute postmark cancel with city-state information cut out is more evident in **Figure 7 B.** If you

line up the cancels, one can match a bit of the mute dial in **Figure A** with the far right end of the dial in **Figure 7 B**.

Again, a fast pair of scissors have made it difficult to gleam additional information.

Figure 7 B

Certified mail was not yet available, and proof of mailing and receipt was by registered mail – even if no valuables were inside the envelope. Legal notices, tax notices, and summons were being sent by mail in lieu of personal service by sheriff, bailiff, or process server. Not only was the front of the mail requiring attention, but so was the back.

Figure 8 A, below: Front of mail from The Pennsylvania Railroad Company, with first class permit 142. The permit indicia was printed by a printer in red ink. It shows that 17 cents was paid by permit. The rubber stamp is a receipt mark by the addressee, and is JAN 13 11 AM 1930 in violet ink. This cover is ex Reg Morris.

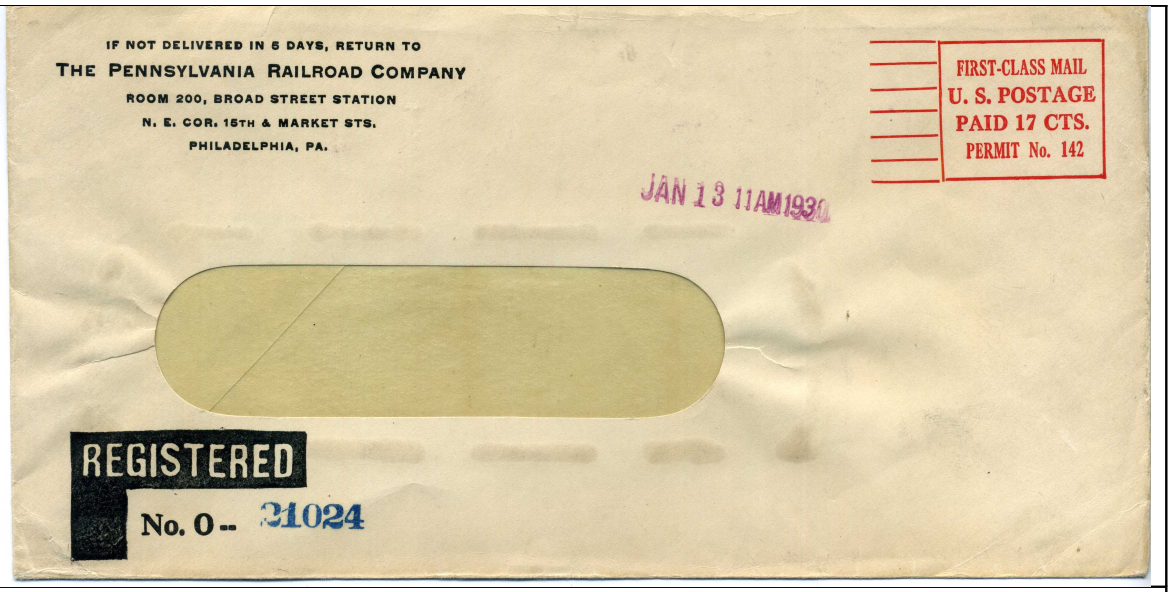


Figure 8 B, below: A repeating Universal Model D applied the back stamp, with two different postmark dials. See **Figure 8 C** for a close-up.

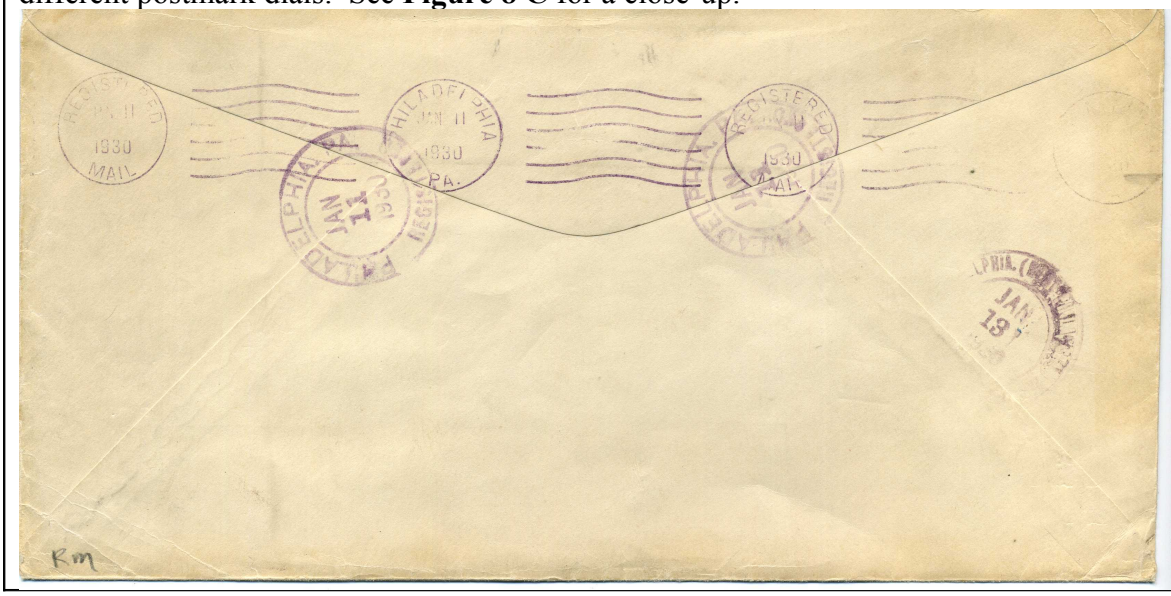


Figure 8 C, below: Close-up of the Universal Model D repeater backstamp, used at the post office of mailing.

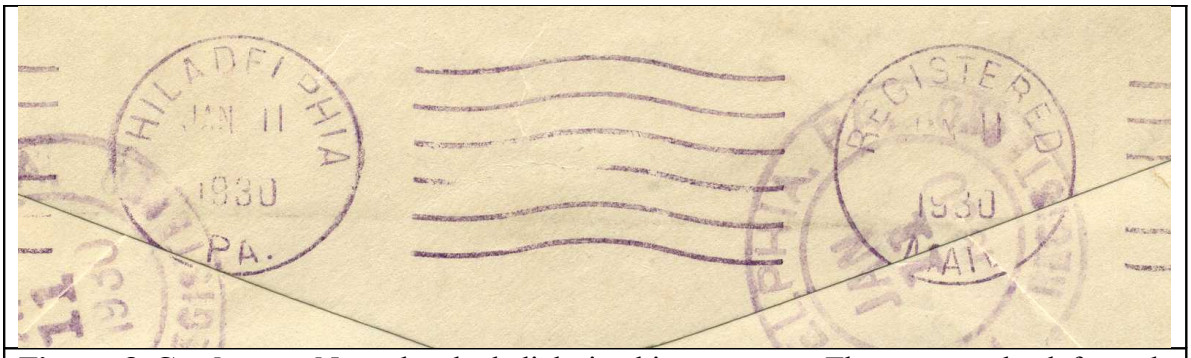


Figure 8 C, above: Note the dual dials in this repeater. The one on the left reads PHILADELPHIA / JAN 11 / 1930 / PA. The one on the right reads REGISTERED / JAN 11 / 1930 / MAIL.

Bob Payne in his epic exhibit and later book, U.S. CLASSIC MACHINE CANCELS 1871-1991, states that two Universal Model D machines with 'released trip' were used at New York City and Philadelphia. When his book was published in 1995, he reported the earliest known use of the REGISTERED marking was New York, New York dated March 24, 1926. The last use was Philadelphia, dated June 30, 1937.[5]

Bob Payne explains that the two Universal Model D machines were used to mark outgoing registered mail in New York City (City Hall Station) and Philadelphia on the reverse side with a repeating cancel indicating REGISTERED / MAIL in violet ink. The cancelling die had TWO DIALS with 6 wavy lines between. One dial indicated the city-state, and the other had the registered mail notation. A single dial and cancel has a length of 60 mm, with an overall length of two dials and two 6-wavy line cancels being 120 mm.[6]

It is admittedly curious that this continuous machine cancel could be a Universal Model D. How do you get two dials into one cancelling die hub or cylinder, and fit it into a Model D? In a later publication, it is noted, "The identity of this machine is in question. In order to imprint a cancel with two different dials impressions, a special die hub or cylinder would be required. However, a letter from the Postmaster indicates the Model D machines were modified for this use."[7]

In 1923, a continuous cancelling Universal with what appeared to be a single dial was tested at Washington, DC. **See Figure 9.** The distance from the left of one postmark to the next is 60 mm.

[5] Bob Payne, U.S. CLASSIC MACHINE CANCLES (Machine Cancel Society 1995), page 313.
[6] Ibd.
[7] Billings, Payne, and Morris, A PRIMER – U S MACHINE POSTAL MARKINGS (Bart Billings publisher 2005), at page 207. More information is provided at page 224 in THE COLUMBIA STORY Volume V by Morris-Payne-Holmes: "A short article in *XX Killers*, August 1950, describes a letter Mr Edwin C. Hopps wrote to Raymond A. Thomas, Postmaster of the Philadelphia Post Office, requesting information on this cancellation. The Postmaster stated the machine used to apply the registered markings was a Universal – Model D with the trip mechanism released to permit continuous marking on large registered mail envelopes."

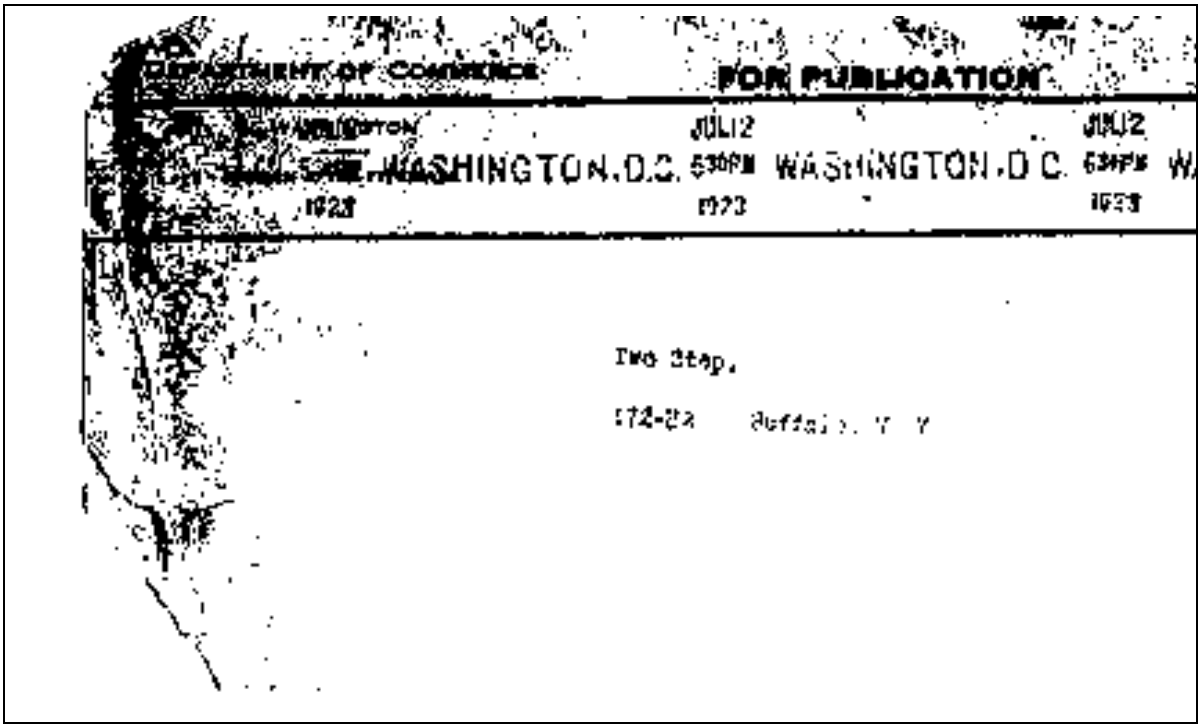


Figure 9, above: Experimental Continous Impression machine cancel, identified as a Model D, Universal. The cancel is applied to a large size brown penalty envelope, and is cropped to show just the left half of the envelope. The pair of horizontal lines are applied without interruption. The postmark is inside, and reads WASHINGTON, D.C. / JUL 12 / 5 30 PM / 1923.

Could the solution to the hub or cylinder mystery on the New York and Philadelphia machines be as simple as modifying the machine to accept a new hub that is twice the size of the former, and with two slots for insertion of the postmark dials?

These cancels were at one time attributed to Columbia, but the authors of THE COLUMBIA STORY conclude otherwise. Obviously for a Universal Model D to apply this cancel, special postmark dials for the service markings were needed. "But more significantly, a specially designed cancelling cylinder was also required. The normal cancelling cylinder had a single dovetailed slot to accept the postmarking dial with the majority of the remaining circumference taken up by the cancelling die. This machine required a specially designed and manufactured cancelling cylinder. The reason for suggesting a special cylinder was provided is that there are no ink offsets on the front of the cover. This suggests that the letter sensing mechanism was active on the machine. A production model machine with a new cylinder modified so that the letter sensing mechanism remained active but allowed for continuous cancelling impressions seems to indicate the factory supported the development of this machine. Such a machine could have been an experimental unit or one that was produced as the result of a special order request."[8]

[8] Morris-Payne-Holmes, THE COLUMBIA STORY Volume 5 (Machine Cancel Society 2000), page 234.

A New York City example of meter franked mail with continuous backstamp can be seen in **Figures 10 and 11.**.

Figure 10 A, below: NEW YORK / N.Y. no date oval meter stamp franked 19-cents by a Pitney-Bowes machine for registered mail. Front of cover.

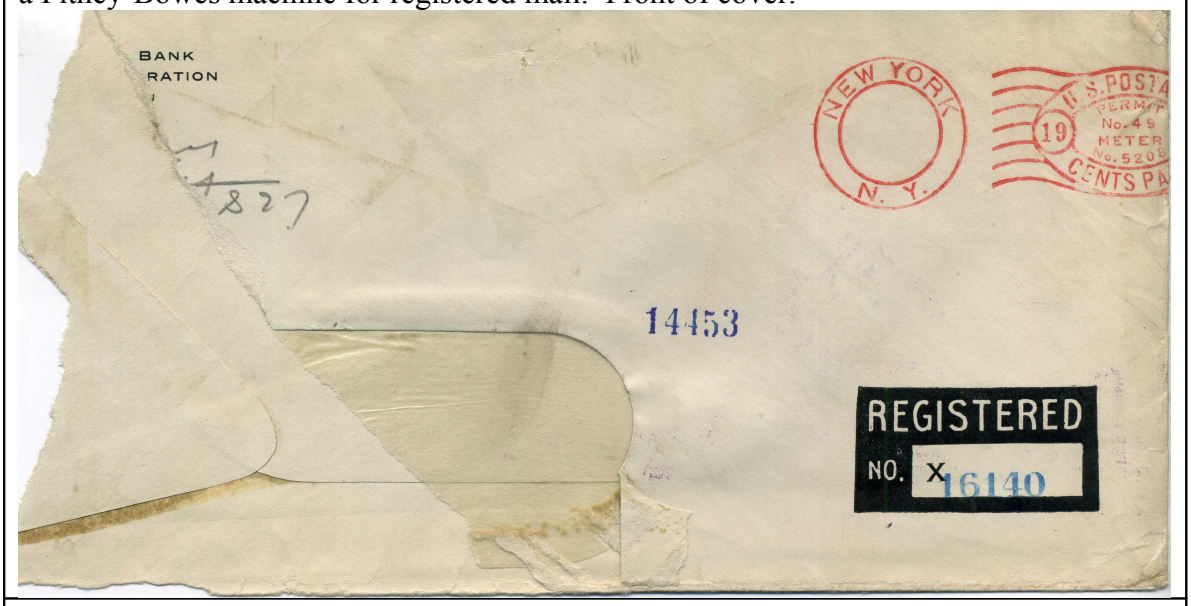
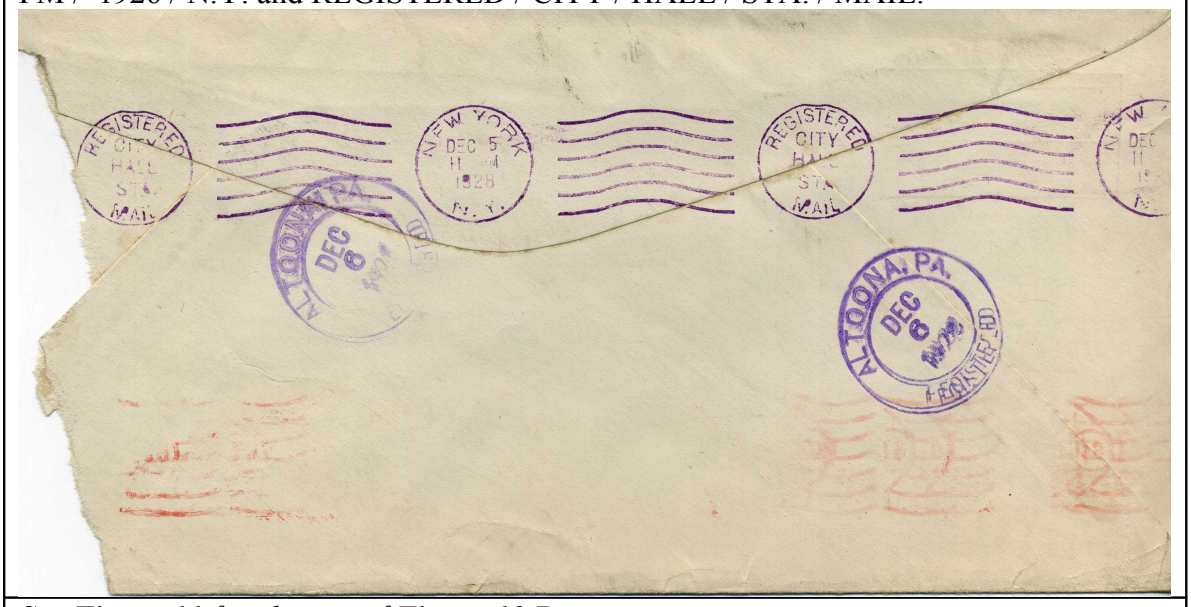


Figure 10 B, below: In violet ink, continuous machine cancel NEW YORK / DEC 5 / 11 PM / 1926 / N.Y. and REGISTERED / CITY / HALL / STA. / MAIL.



*See **Figure 11** for closeup of **Figure 10 B***

Figure 11, below: In violet ink, continuous machine cancel NEW YORK / DEC 5 / 11 PM / 1926 / N.Y. and REGISTERED / CITY / HALL / STA. / MAIL. This is a close-up of the continuous cancel in **Figure 10 B**.

It was obviously more expedient to use a machine to backstamp non-valuable registered mail, than to hand stamp a bunch of legal notices. Not all post offices utilized a modified machine for that purpose. Consider the meter franked registered mail from Wilmington, Delaware in **Figure 12**.

Figure 12 A: 18-cent oval meter frank with no townmark and no cancel applied over it. A Pitney-Bowes meter machine applied the meter franking. With enlarged view of meter frank in lower right corner.

Figure 12 B, below: Universal Model G backstamp applied at post office of mailing.

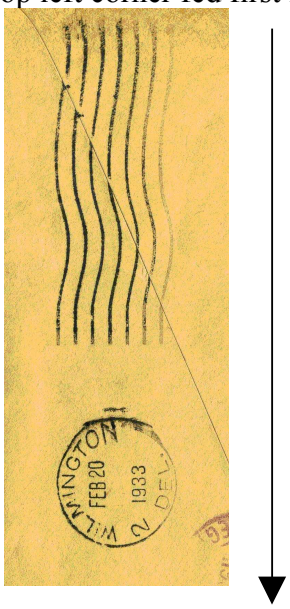
The postmark reads WILMINGTON / FEB 20 / 1933 / 2 DEL. To apply the backstamp, the envelope is fed with its right top corner into the machine first. The arrow points in the direction that envelope passes through the machine cancel. Note the cancellation is applied first, and the dial last.

Figure 12 C, above: Close-up of the backstamp featured in **Figure 12 B.** Universal Model G backstamp applied at post office of mailing. The postmark reads WILMINGTON / FEB 20 / 1933 / 2 DEL.

Before something different from Chicago is shown to you, take a moment to examine the location of the backstamp in ***Figure 12 B***. If we are observing a non-repeating cancel, the end of the envelope that is fed into the machine determines the location of the cancel as well as its orientation. In the case of the 1933 Wilmington backstamp, the top right corner of the envelope was fed first and tripped the mechanism, and the machine applied the cancel horizontal to the viewer and in the top right corner. If however we fed the top left corner of the envelope into the machine, something different would happen. If one were to feed the top left corner into the machine, the envelope would be on its left side, and the cancel would not be horizontal to the line of sight of the viewer, but rather would

be reading up . . . with the cancel at the top and the postmark toward the bottom, dangling. See **Figure 13** for its orientation.

Top left corner fed first into machine



The arrow points in the direction of the flow of the envelope through the machine.

Figure 13: If an envelope's left top corner were fed into a Universal machine cancel, the cancel would appear on its side if the envelope were normally oriented to the eye of the viewer.

If you have a good handle on this background, as well as the explanation of **Figure 13**, you are ready to proceed to Part II. If not, please review Part I again. In Part II, something different from Chicago will be reviewed. You need to understand why the cancel in **Figure 13** is on its side before you appreciate the Chicago backstamp in Part II.