

Fancy Cancels

By Scott Trepel

(Editor's Note: The following excerpts were taken from Mr. Trepel's talk at the December 4 Roundtable conducted by The Philatelic Foundation and the Collectors Club.)

What you see here (Figure 1) is a page out of a 1977 auction catalogue. Looking over this page, a prospective buyer could become very excited. But of the 36 cancels shown, 27 are fakes. So the subject of fake fancy cancels is an important one.



The first point I want to cover is why a faker bothers with cancellations. You can create a fake for the value of the cancellation, as for example with fancy cancels. But you can also fake to enhance the value of a cover or a used stamp--for example, a bisect neatly tied by a grid cancel. There are many reasons why cancels are faked.

What I brought with me today are some items of interest. Some are reproductions, others are actual pieces. I'm going to pass around some reproductions first.

Referring to the 1977 auction catalogue, those fake cancels emanated from Europe and did circulate. Some have good PF Certificates. There are clear strikes of very rare designs, creating the pitfall that faces the collector -- wondering about how much he's going to have to pay and not whether the items are genuine.

Now, how can a collector protect himself from this sort of thing? How can he go to an auction or even look at a catalogue and say to himself, "Well, I don't want that. I don't want to add it to my collection. It's not genuine." I think some collectors are a little scared of doing this. They feel, well, maybe they're jumping to a wrong conclusion or maybe they're missing an item which they really should have. They say to themselves, "The experts know. I'll send it to the Foundation and let them decide."

I think it would help the hobby a great deal if collectors started to decide for themselves by learning the "secret" methods of expertizing. They really aren't very secret. The first step toward doing this is to put yourself in the faker's shoes. Think of what he's doing, why he's doing it, how he would go about it, what are the sources of the materials available to someone who wants to create a fake, and what method is he going to use to reproduce a cancellation fake.

Then look at a cross section of material. Build up records. Keep a scrapbook and keep together pictures of the same cancel. Study all the different examples to see where there are similarities and where there are differences. After you've spent some time doing this you'll begin to draw your own conclusions as to what's out there, and you'll be able to analyze a particular example to determine whether or not you want to add it to your collection.

Now, once you get into this process you will slowly realize, step by step, how confusing the official records are. Here I've taken a few transparencies of one cancellation and shown all the different interpretations that are found in reference catalogues. In Figure 2, you will see at the top my rendition of the Skull and Crossbones cancellation that was used in Waterbury, Connecticut. This is one cancellation, but the method could apply to any marking that was struck from a postmarking device.



*Genuine Skull
& Crossbones*

In this rendition, I have inserted small arrows pointing to various genuine characteristics. On the same page you will find some fakes. None of them is even close to the genuine example except in their overall design. They lack the characteristics we're looking for in genuine strikes.



Fake Varieties

Then, on the next page, we show the Herst-Sampson (1) illustration and three illustrations from Skinner-Eno (2). I think you'll see the differences among the drawings by various experts who have traced the cancellations. You'll also notice the differences between those drawings and the actual strike.



The same goes for these illustrations (below) of the Waterbury "Shoo Fly." Look at these and see the actual differences in the designs. It's a matter of having the actual genuine reference example to compare with the test strikes.

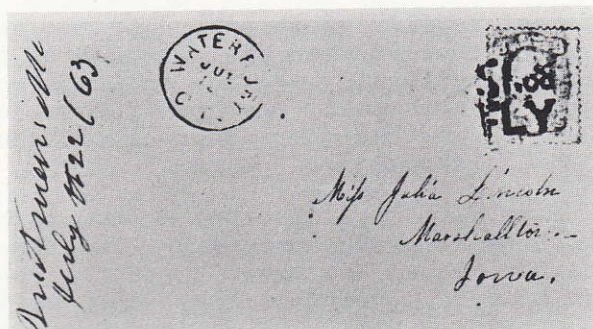


Genuine



Fake

This particular example of the Shoo Fly is interesting, in that we have a tracing here which is in the Skinner-Eno book, made from a cover which is in the Rohloff book (3) properly identified as a fake. Evidently this cover had been through one of the authors' hands and he traced the cancellation believing it to be genuine. We end up with a situation where a fake cancel winds up in a catalogue as a genuine cancellation tracing.



A cover properly identified by Rohloff as bearing a fake cancel. The tracing above was incorrectly identified as genuine in Skinner-Eno.

Look these examples over and just try to get a feel for what a reference collection looks like and what you could do in putting together tracings or cutouts of different strikes for comparison purposes. This could apply to any subject area. Really, we're talking about a process, not the material itself. It's a matter of just creating a reference collection.

After talking about why there are fakes, and what you can do to protect yourself, the next step is to ask, where do fakers go wrong? Where do they slip up? Perhaps they've produced too many of the same thing and people start talking to each other, finding a correlation of material. Or they've used an inaccurate tracing to produce their actual faking device. They might also have created a faking device which is very crude or--at the opposite extreme--one which is a very, very exact photographic reproduction.

Each method used has its problems. With a crude reproduction, comparison with a known-genuine strike will reveal the glaring fake. But what about the photographic method where a faker can walk down to a local rubber stamp shop, give him a tracing or a drawing, or even a photograph which has had the stamp design washed out of it by filters? There are photographic methods which can reproduce cancels down to the finest detail. Those are the tough ones.

Having succeeded in producing an exact reproduction, where else could they go wrong? Well, maybe they've grabbed their Carter's ink pad and started stamping out these fancy cancels on stamps off cover, and this watery ink bled through the stamp. It's a characteristic associated with modern rubber stamp inks and not typical of the earlier carbon or oily inks of the 19th century where you don't see that much bleed.

Knowing the inks, knowing what looks right for a particular town or period or even for a particular cancel is very important. It's not something you're going to learn here. You're only going to learn the process here--what to think about. It's impossible to show every town and every example and say, "Here, this is what it's going to look like. But you can learn on your own, for example, by going to auctions. Even if you have no intention of buying anything, you just view. Sit there, go through the lots, look for what's normal for a particular place or time, get a feel for what genuine things look like.

The perfect faker answers all the questions that I'm raising. He uses photographic reproduction that is exact, he uses the right inks, he is able to execute a fake that gives the experts everything they want. Now you're getting into that gray area where you can have an item that draws great differences of opinion.

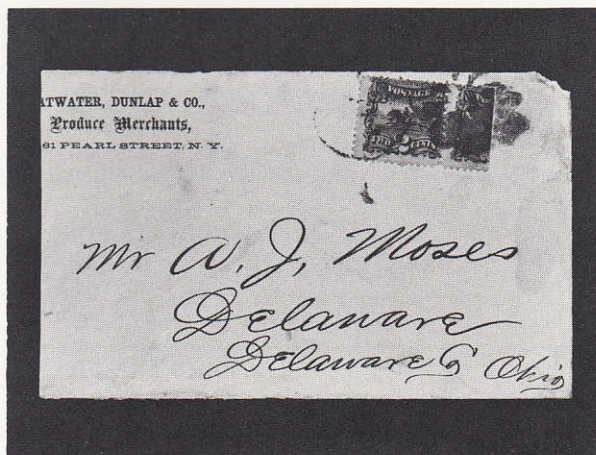
The variables in the analysis of that material are beyond our discussion today. I want to deal with the kinds of fakes you're likely to encounter. The lots with 100 cancels which have been salted with a couple of dozen fakes, usually crude ones. Or the attempted faking of a very rare cancel where they've used the wrong kind of tracing. That's what I think is important to the average collector because I think even the experts disagree on the really advanced fakes. When you get to that level it's difficult to reach a consensus of opinion, as anybody who's at the Foundation will acknowledge.

Next, I have some reference material here, both genuine and faked. The examples of genuine reference material are interesting in that, by collectors' standards, these are about the worst you could want to own. The envelopes have become so brittle, they're crumbling apart. The only good thing about these is that the strikes are clear. They are very useful for comparison and they cost practically nothing.

On the other side of the reference collection are the fakes. I don't put much faith in expert's reference collections of forged material, unless you happen to get a forgery that's an exact duplicate. I think it's more important to have a reference collection of genuine material than of fakes.

Having covered the fancy cancel fakes--fakes that are made because the cancellation is valuable--there's another category of fakes that I think deserves mention here. That's the standard cancellation used to create something more valuable, like a bisect or a rare stamp tied on cover. The 1857-61 90-cent (Scott #39) used with a red grid cancel is one of those cases where 5,000 were used and 10,000 are now in American collections. The #39 with a red grill cancel is so maligned today that I'm sure a number of genuine examples are called bad because there's no way to tell the difference. I think basically the Foundation's policy is that if it's off cover, and it has a red grid cancel, the cancel is probably a fake. Rarely do I see someone hold up a #39 with a red grid cancel and say "It's definitely genuine."

These cancels are very dangerous, because reproducing a grid or a blob or a basic cork design is easy and you do find bisects tied in this fashion. This is an example of one. It's undoubtedly a genuine cover which had a pair of 2-cent 1869's on it. What the faker did is cut off half of one stamp and extend the cancel over the split, making it look as if it was tied. But it is a fake and under UV light, you would see the telltale signs that some faking has been done.



Still on the subject of fakes and reference material, I want to mention three more pieces. These are a little bit off the track. They are postal markings, but still they illustrate something I want to get across, which is the photo-reproduction method for creating postmarks. This material is not crude at all. One example I have seen is an Adam's Express from Brownsville, Texas, which is very rare, on genuine cover. It's embellished on a \$1 cover, making it worth a thousand dollars. It's in a blue ink, which is characteristic of a certain group of fakes.

I can cite other examples of dangerous fake postal markings. One is another patriotic in blue, another is a New York "Mail Suspended" fake. The whole thing is fake on this. The envelope was probably genuinely addressed on the second example, but had nothing on it. They added a New York postmark and a "Mail Suspended" marking.

Now, we've talked about what fakers do to create fakes. The other interesting point is where they come up with their source material. What separates the good fakers from the bad ones is their creativity in coming up with source material. That group of three fakes I just mentioned was primarily from a genuine correspondence--actual letters, folded letters, and addressed envelopes. They're real envelopes from the period, addressed in the right ink. Everything else about them is fake. You can take a genuine envelope with a genuine postmark, let's say from New York state, and cancel it with a fancy cancel that's never been recorded before. There are all sorts of methods of doing this.

The source material would surprise some experts. I plucked one out of a consignment we had--an original correspondence. Much of it was from Kansas territory. It was all genuine. The curious thing was that there was this genuine envelope in the lot, unaddressed with a Leavenworth City postmark dated August 28th, right in the corner. This was the best source material I'd ever seen for a faker. You could take a genuine envelope with a genuine postmark, write out some address on it, and you could put anything you want there. You could even put a #39 on it.

This is the kind of source material that, as you get deeply into postal history, you realize there's plenty out there that the fakers can use. Many times the experts are right when they say, "Well you couldn't find an envelope or a postmark like this to make a fake from." But not always. Material does exist and there are a lot of variables which have to be considered, as in that interesting Leavenworth cover. It scares you a bit to think that sort of thing exists because, from covers like that come very clever fakes.

References:

- (1) "Fancy Cancellations on Nineteenth Century United States Postage Stamps" by Herman Herst; HJMR Reprint.
- (2) "United States Cancellations, 1845-1869" by Hubert C. Skinner and Amos Eno; American Philatelic Society.
- (3) "The Waterbury Cancellations, 1865-1890" by Paul C. Rohloff; The Collectors Club of Chicago.