

“An 1847 First Day Cover?”

by Michael X. Zelenak

[Editor's Note: As The Philatelic Foundation was in the process of preparing releases for the philatelic press, on September 21, a major wire service obtained the information that The Philatelic Foundation had granted a Certificate to the earliest known use of a US 1847 Issue on cover. By September 25, hundreds of major newspapers around the country, from New York's *Daily News* to papers in Miami and Los Angeles had given prominent coverage to The Philatelic Foundation's expertization of this cover, making it one of the major philatelic news items of the year.]

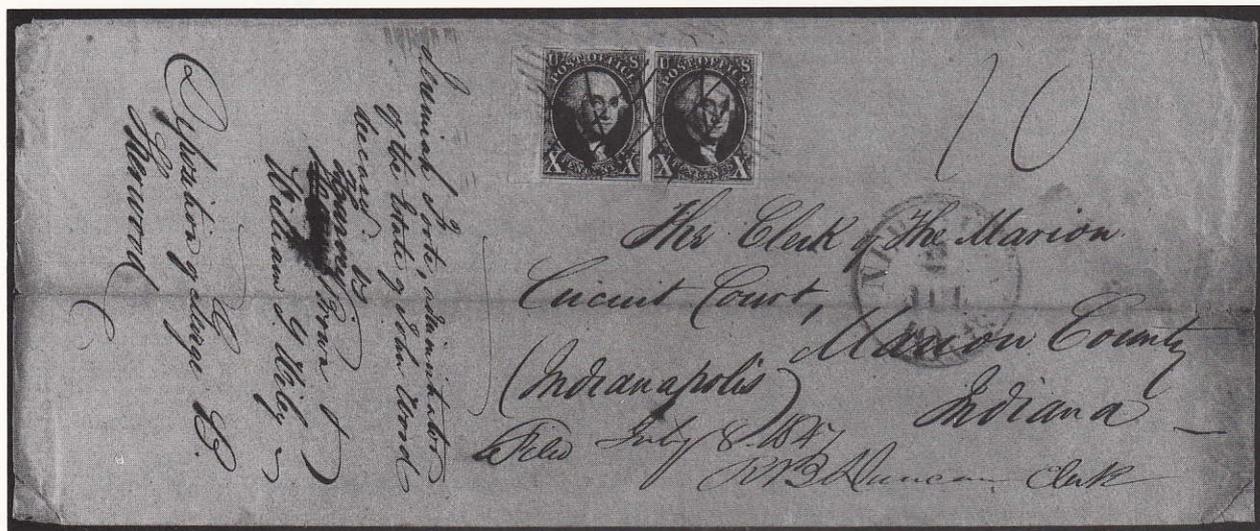


Figure A. PFC # 211,438, earliest known usage of 1847 Issue, July 2, 1847, New York.

The Philatelic Foundation has issued Certificate # 211,438 to the earliest known usage of the U.S. 10 cent of 1847 (Scott #2). The 1847 Issue was the first general issue of postage stamps by the U.S. government. The July 2, 1847 usage, if not a first day cover, is likely to be the closest philatelists will ever get to an actual first day cover of the 1847 issue.

For years philatelic authorities and 1847 specialists have attempted to verify the exact date the 1847 issues (US Scott # 1-2) were placed on sale in New York, the first city that received the new US stamps. In 1902 John Luff had believed August 5, 1847 to be the earliest uses of both the 5 and 10 cent 1847. In 1916 Dr. Carroll Chase announced the existence of a New York to Louisville 1847 cover dated July 10, 1847. In 1952 Stanley Ashbrook established the earliest known use of an 1847 stamp as July 7, 1847. Because of the lack of any earlier covers, most experts questioned the accuracy of a Post Office document stating that the stamps were delivered to New York on July 1.

All of this changed in March of 1972 when the announcement of a cover found in Indianapolis caused a sensation in the philatelic world. Even the discovery of this historic rarity was the stuff philatelic lore is made of and rivalled the greatest finds in the history of stamp collecting.

Harry Mark, an Indiana tax consultant, while researching the laws on Wills and Estates, pulled a dusty tome of 1926 Statutes, purchased years earlier in an estate sale, from the shelves of his reference library. As he leafed through the book it popped open to a page where someone had left a letter as a bookmark. Examining the folded letter sent from a certain Stanley B. Fleetwood of New York to the Marion County Clerk of Courts in Indianapolis, he noticed a horizontal pair of gorgeous 10 cent 1847's, one a margin copy. He also saw the handstamp marking of "New York JUL 2 10cts" (meaning that 10 cents more was due in postage to be paid by the receiver). Unsure of the year of usage, he found, on the left side of the cover, receipt of the letter in Indianapolis verified by the Clerk of Courts' official docketing on July 8, 1847 as well as the notarized document inside dated June 30, 1847 in New York.

For the experts at The Philatelic Foundation, this single cover turned out to be a postal history seminar in itself as it was meticulously studied at the Foundation's headquarters. Every aspect of the cover, its markings and the stamps were examined for authenticity. It is the opinion of the Expert Committee that it is genuine.

The stamps are tied to the cover by the distinctive red square grid cancel of the New York Post Office in use during this period. Interestingly, the stamps have been additionally pen cancelled in blue. The additional pen cancellation was probably the work of an overzealous New York postal clerk. Likewise, the manuscript "10" (meaning 10 cents postage due) duplicates the information of the New York City dated handstamp ("JUL 2 10cts").

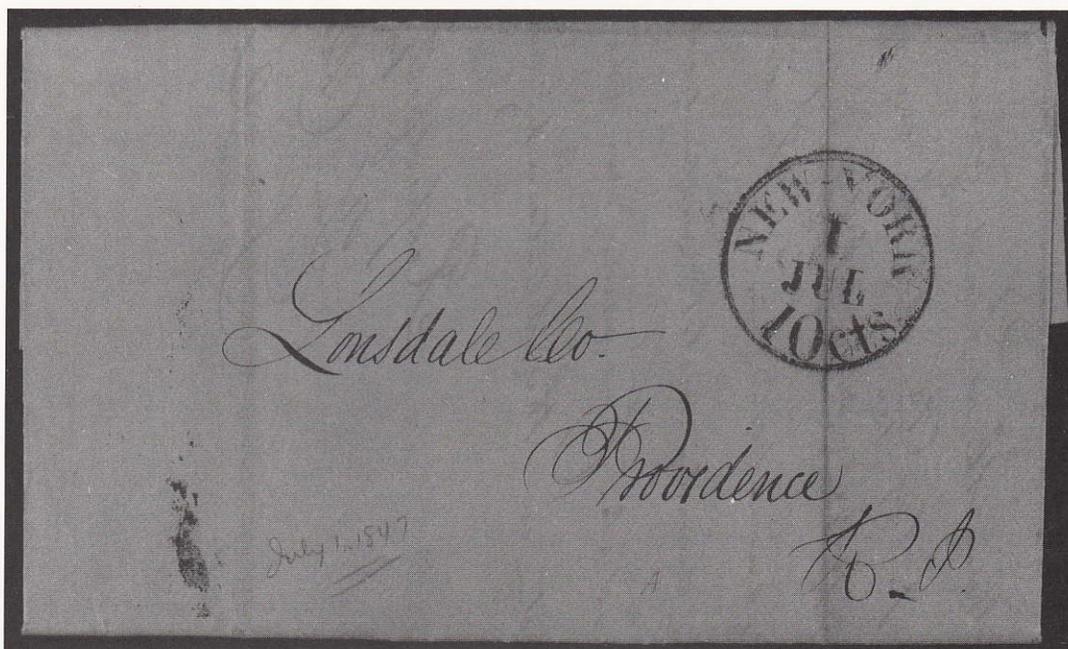


Figure B. Unpaid stampless cover, New York, July 1, 1847.

In explaining and verifying the due markings, it should be noted that, since New York was more than 300 miles from Indianapolis, mail would be charged at the rate of ten cents per half ounce. On a modern computer scale the cover and enclosed document read out at exactly 1.00 ounces. Perhaps a business card or additional note had originally been enclosed. As Philatelic Foundation Professional Consultant William T. Crowe notes: "Our modern computerized scales are much more accurate than anything they had back then. To the postal clerk of 150 years ago this cover, whether or not it had an additional sheet, probably would have appeared to have weighed just over an ounce and was charged for three half ounces, (3 x 10 cents) thirty cents."

Another issue which the Foundation's Expert Committee addressed was the question of how could a cover franked with the new stamps that had just gone on sale be underpaid. Since it is postmarked July 2nd, the stamps on it had to be purchased either the afternoon of Thursday, July 1 or the next day. If stamps were being purchased to mail the letter, wouldn't it have been weighed by the clerk at the same time? Philatelic Foundation Curator Peter A. Robertson explains: "We tend to forget what things were like back in 1847. New York City had only a single Post Office. At that one post office, the people who took your mail and cancelled it were not the same ones who sold the stamps. This would have been done at different locations."

A final question remains: Is this a first-day cover? Figure B shows a cover submitted to the Foundation as collateral material. This 1847 cover shows a New York datestamp of "1 JUL 10 cts" indicating that it was sent at the 10 cent rate to Providence, Rhode Island, without a stamp. Although this might imply that the new 1847 stamps were not yet on sale on July 1, it is the opinion of the Expert Committee that it does not provide conclusive proof that the original cover (Figure A) is a first day cover of the 1847 issue. There are numerous possibilities, the most likely including: a) the Post Office did not

have the stamps on sale on July 1, in which case the July 2 usage would be a first day cover; b) only a limited number were put on sale on July 1, which were sold out; c) the Post Office had the new stamps on sale on July 1, but only sold them or used them on mail when they were specifically requested by the person posting the letter. If customers did not request them, they continued to use the current procedure, which meant that some mail could still go out on stampless covers. Unless new evidence is unearthed, we will not know for sure if the stamps were on sale in New York on July 1.

We do know that the following happened almost a century and a half ago: In 1847 Stanley B. Fleetwood of New York unwittingly entered the annals of philatelic history when on the afternoon of July 1 or on July 2, he purchased at least two of the new ten cent postage stamps and, within 24 hours, applied them to a letter. Most likely Fleetwood, thinking the letter weighed less than an ounce, applied the stamps and deposited them at the post office either the night of July 1 or during the day of July 2, creating this unique item—one of the great rarities of US philately.

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