

The New Haven Postmaster's Provisional Revisited

By Dr. Roberto M. Rosende

When you consider that only 45 items have been submitted to The Philatelic Foundation's Expert Committee as New Haven Postmaster's Provisional stamps since the Foundation started rendering opinions on stamps and covers in 1945, and that only eight of these--four covers and four cut squares--were found to be genuine, it is obvious that these provisionals are rare philatelic pieces.

Consider also that reliable records indicate there are NO other cut squares besides the four authenticated by PF certificates Nos. 1,154, 6,294, 16,228 and 189,156, and only one other example on cover besides the four authenticated by PF certificates Nos. 6,295, 25,083, 216,471 and 231,872. This makes a grand total of only NINE found and documented in the 145 years since they were first offered as an additional service to the citizens of this most important city in the state of Connecticut.

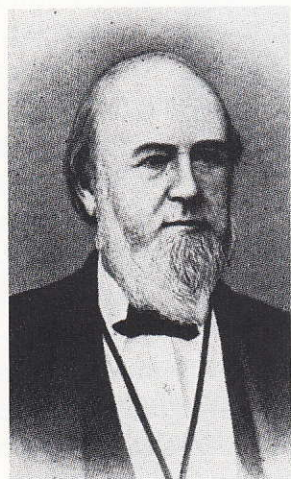


Fig. 1. Edward A. Mitchell, producer of the New Haven Postmaster's Provisional.

The history of the New Haven Post Office and Edward A. Mitchell, the postmaster who introduced this provisional (Figure 1), has been well documented. First was an article entitled "The New Haven Envelope" by Gordon Ireland, published in the January 1927 issue of *The American Philatelist* (Vol. 40, No. 4, pp. 231-243). Later came a special booklet, "The New Haven Provisional Envelope,"

which included one example of the 260-limited-edition final restrike made from the original die bought by the New Haven Philatelic Society in 1932. The society subsequently defaced and presented this die to the New Haven Colony Historical Society.

The recent submission of an example on cover has prompted us to review the literature, our records and reference material. As a result, we have started to question Mr. Mitchell's estimate that he produced 2,000 covers. The survival rate of covers and cut squares seems statistically too low for the number reportedly produced during the almost two years that usage of this provisional was legal.

Postmasters' provisionals came into existence on July 1, 1845, after Governmental Acts of March 3, 1845. One of these acts reduced to 5 cents or 10 cents the rate for the existing distance and weight limits for a single letter, depending on whether the letter traveled up to or more than 300 miles. New York Postmaster Robert Morris had the honor of being the first to issue a postmaster's provisional on July 12, 1845. However, 30-year-old New Haven Postmaster Mitchell (June 7, 1815-September 14, 1876) was apparently the second.

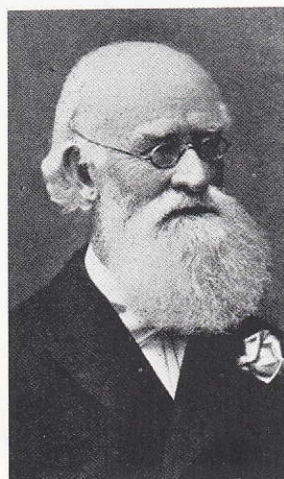


Fig. 2. Augustus E. Lines, designer of the New Haven Postmaster's Provisional.

On the same day New York announced the issuance of its stamp, Mitchell accepted a sketch drawn by Augustus E. Lines (Figure 2). This pencil sketch measured 106 mm. high and 92 mm. wide and was inscribed at the foot "To be reduced to its proper size" and "Drawn July 12th, 1845 by A. W. Lines." Postmaster Mitchell paid Mr. Lines \$6.00 for the sketch. It was presented in 1908 to the New Haven Colony Historical Society.

Unlike many other provisionals, which were adhesives, the New Haven was a handstamp. The design, in brass, measures 31 mm. x 26 mm. Only a 5-cent denomination was made. Mr. Mitchell later

wrote a letter published in the *American Journal of Philately* on May 15, 1871, from which we quote:

"My object in getting up this stamp was simply to accommodate the public, as I charged no profit...As no letters could be paid after business hours or Sundays, these were convenient for that purpose as well as others. Many bought their own envelopes, and I only charged 5¢ for the postage. The business of the office was so limited that to prevent objection by the Post Office Department, or forgery, I signed each one...The amount sold were few and probably not over 2000 altogether. They being done by hand and with no motive of profit, they were generally offered for sale...The impression was always on envelope...As all originals had my own signature, of course, I cannot furnish lots to dealers, even if I wanted."

People took advantage of the convenience by bringing envelopes, or authorizing the postmaster to buy at their expense regular-size envelopes, usually white. The handstamp was applied

to the upper right-hand corner of the envelope in red or blue ink, and Mr. Mitchell's signature appears in blue, red or black ink.

The first report of a New Haven Provisional appeared in print in May 1871, when William P. Brown, one of the pioneer stamp dealers in the United States and a member of the New Haven Philatelic Society, noted an example in the publication "Curiosity Cabinet." It was a cut square that had been in the collection of a New Haven attorney

some years prior to 1863. Mr. Brown subsequently acquired the stamp.

The first New Haven Provisional on cover (Figure 3) was discovered by Richard Fagan, a Middletown, Connecticut, collector, in a group of family papers. It was badly faded with a blue strike on a white envelope, addressed to his grandfather, Horace Clark, with a red "paid" and circular cancel. Mitchell's signature is quite clear.

This cover found its way in almost worthless condition to St. Louis where C. H. Mekeel, who bought it, felt he could restore it with 5 cents worth of sulphate of iron. While he was dissolving the sulphate, the well-known philatelist John K. Tiffany, then president of the APS, arrived. Tiffany watched as Mekeel applied the sulphate solution to the lines of the provisional with a camel-hair brush.

Mekeel then noted:

"The envelope quickly dried and seemed to show no improvement or change in anyway, but as the hours and days advanced the iron assumed a

rusty appearance and nothing of the original blue impression remained, only the carelessly drawn lines of the brush. On the right side, which was wholly illegible, the line is out of place, and the P.M. after the signature being also illegible was not touched by the brush."

Mekeel put the cover in his St. Louis auction where it was bought by Hiram Deats, who then sold it to Count Ferrari for a reported price of £500 or \$2,500.



Fig. 3. The first New Haven Postmaster's Provisional discovered on cover.

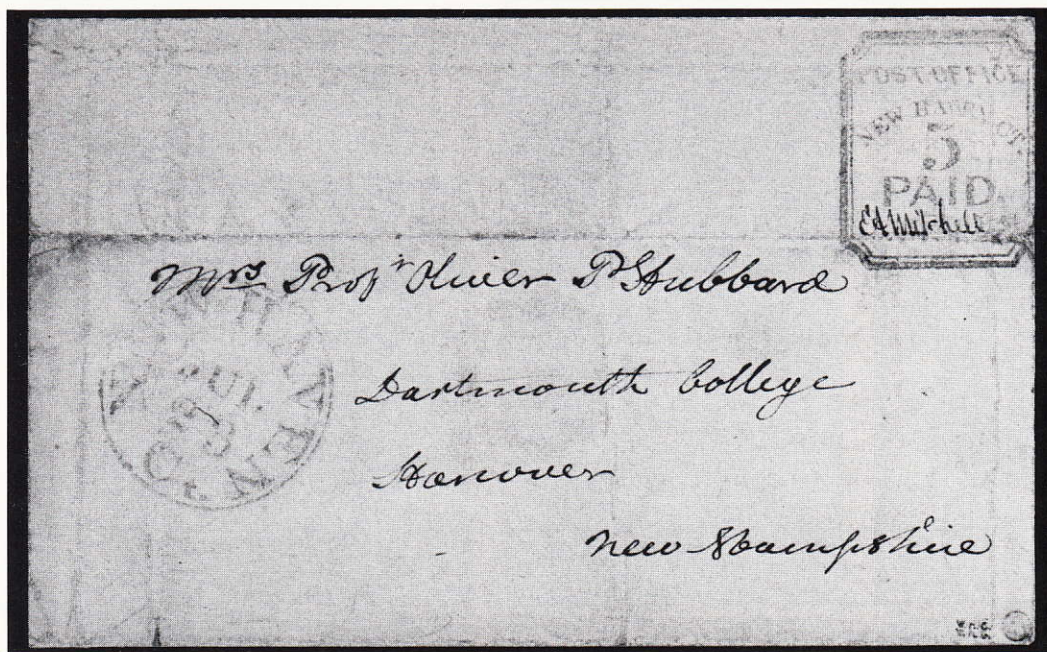


Fig. 4. The New Haven Postmaster's Provisional on cover from Yale College to Dartmouth College.

Another well-known cover is the 5-cent New Haven Provisional in red on a white envelope addressed in the handwriting of Benjamin Silliman, professor of chemistry at Yale College, to Mrs. Professor Oliver Hubbard of Dartmouth College in New Hampshire (Figure 4), a clear indication that this postmaster provisional was accepted as payment of postage at least in the Ivy League circle.

The condition of the four cut squares is extremely poor. Only one of the known covers is in fine condition, all the others having defects, repairs or restoration. Nevertheless, they command five-figure prices.

A study based on postal revenue, as well as numbers reported to have been printed (Table 1 on page 6), show that the New Haven Provisional falls short in comparison with other postmasters' provisionals in the Northeast United States.

In comparison with the surviving Providence items, there should be 20 to 25 surviving New Haven covers, providing that 2,000 were made. If the figure was 200 rather than 2,000, the surviving quantity would appear more appropriate.

The Scott Catalogue lists five types of this postmaster's provisional:

8XU1 5¢ red on white paper (signed in blue or red).

8XU2 5¢ red on light bluish paper (black).

8XU3 5¢ dull blue on buff paper (blue).

8XU4 5¢ dull blue on white paper (black).

8XU5 5¢ dull blue on buff paper (red).

We have expertized one example on cover of each type except 8XU5, and there are serious doubts this type exists. Supposedly a sixth cover disappeared in the late 1920s. Among the four expertized cut squares, three are examples of 8XU1, the other being an example of 8XU3.

If only eight of the 45 submitted items were found to be genuine, you may ask what were the others? Well, there were 14 counterfeits, including one traced on a cover. The 23 others were identified as several types of reprints. Twenty reprints were made in 1871 for William P. Brown, the dealer. Thirty more were produced in 1874 for Cyrus B. Peets, chief clerk for Postmaster Mitchell. More were printed in 1876, 1923 and finally 1932. Even though they were all produced with the original die, only those of 1871 and 1874 have the original signature. The others either do not have the signature or they were struck with a rubber stamp. It is comforting to know that our reference collection has copies of all types, including those allegedly prepared for Nicholas Seebeck. ❖

Table 1
Survival of Postmasters' Provisionals

City	Postal Revenue ¹	Stamps Printed	Surviving Covers
New York, NY	\$209,590	142,240	1,200 ²
Providence, RI	16,084	6,000 ²	60 ²
New Haven, CT	10,134	2,000 ²	5
Brattleboro, VT	1,750	500 ²	24 ²

1. Year ending June 30, 1847

2. Estimated

