

Incoming Mail from the USA: Sorting Prior to Arrival in the UK, and the Application of Postage Due Markings

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POSTAL HISTORIANS HAVE SOMETIMES WONDERED why postage due marks on incoming transatlantic mails were applied in some strange cities, for example Glasgow, Plymouth, Bristol and Birmingham, on letters addressed to places remote from those sorting offices. It has been hypothesised that this was due to how the mails were sorted prior to despatch from the USA, or how it was resorted to on board the packet ships bringing the mail to UK shores. However, evidence to support this has been lacking until Ian Baker kindly let me have sight of papers he had located in The Postal Museum & Archive (TPMA). These papers provide a view of sorting operations at the US Exchange offices around 1904-05 through the activities at the Birmingham and Bristol sorting offices regarding mails from the USA.

Background

Mails for the United Kingdom were made up at the following US Offices of Exchange: New York, Philadelphia, Boston, San Francisco, Chicago and Baltimore, as well as from six exchange offices in Canada. The US exchange offices forwarded their made-up bags to New York, where they were scheduled onto the most appropriate liners with which the US Post Office held mail contracts. To these bags could be added mail bags for transit across England to destinations in Europe.

Mails for the UK were carried from New York by various lines including particularly Cunard, White Star, American, the German lines HAPAG and NDL and the French CGT line. Those going to Liverpool would offload mails at Queenstown and/or Liverpool depending on tidal conditions. Those lines with destinations in or via the English Channel would drop eastbound mails at Southampton or Plymouth.



Figure 1. Short paid 3c postal stationery cover sent from Vineyard Grove, Massachusetts, via Liverpool to London on board Cunard's Russia in September 1875. 'T', '15' [i.e. 15 centimes = 3c paid], and '3½D' due (Mackay, 1984, type 836 for Liverpool). On reverse black 'NEW YORK / SEP 8 / X' and red London Quartered Circle 'N 20 9 1875'. GPU/UPU rate from USA to GB was 5c.



Figure 2. Short paid letter sent from New York (14 November 1877) via Plymouth to York on board HAPAG's Frisia. New York tax mark 'T' plus 'CENTIMES / 15' and '3 1/2' [Mackay type 950 of Plymouth]. On reverse 'NEW YORK / NOV 15 / F.D.' and 'B / YORK / NO 24 / 77' [2x2 1/2d rate, less 3c paid (=1 1/2d) => 3 1/2d postage due (Snelson, pp2-5)].

Figure 3. Short paid postal stationery sent from Swarthmore, Pennsylvania (21 May 1897), via New York and Queenstown on board Cunard's Servia. US circular 'T' plus circular '15' and '3D double bar' of Dublin applied on the Cork to Dublin TPO (Jones & Snelson). [15 centimes deficiency = 3c = 1 1/2d. 2x deficiency = 3d due (Snelson, p21)].



Joint German-United States sea post offices began in 1891 on the voyages for New York to Bremen and New York to Hamburg. A US sea post office began in 1893 on the American Line ships between New York and Southampton. Instructions, in both English and German, were drawn up in Washington for the conduct of postal clerks operating these sea post offices and refer to 'distribution schemes' which governed how mails were to be made up.



Figure 4. Double rate letter sent from Norwood, Virginia (21 June 1897), via New York and Plymouth to Budleigh-Salterton on board NGL's Trave. New York 'T/2/CENTIMES / 25' for 5c shortage, '5^D / 620.' tax hand stamp of Plymouth.

The *List of Mails to be made up by the Sea Post Offices: New York-Bremen and New York-Hamburg* provides an example of the Distribution List to be used on eastbound voyages where a significant quantity of mail bags was scheduled to be put off at Plymouth, England. The list also details which bags are to be made up for which European TPO services to take mails onwards to destinations on the Continent.

In 1893 the Distribution List for Plymouth was quite succinct (Government Printing Office, 1904):

Mails to be made up for—	This mail to comprise correspondence for the following Post Offices, Routes, Countries, and Provinces.	Remarks.
British Post Office, Plymouth.	<p style="text-align: center;">I. Mails to be delivered at Plymouth.</p> Plymouth and Cornwall -----	
British Post Office, London.	England (except Plymouth and Cornwall), America, Africa (except Northern Africa), Belgium, Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway.	Principally for letters mailed in the letter boxes on board the steamers, and for letters of U. S. origin erroneously delivered to the Sea Post Offices.

The American Line ships had previously left New York mid-week but changed to a Saturday departure on 7 November 1903 (*New York Times*) with a greater part of the heavy mail for England formerly carried by Cunard steamers [TPMA, File I]. From 1 January 1904, they began unloading their mails at Plymouth rather than at Southampton. The Post Office arranged for Great Western Railways to run a special boat train from Plymouth to London connecting with the steamers.

Paragraph 96 of an instruction drawn up in Washington in 1904 for the American Line operation is more informative:

<p>Separation of sacks, for delivery at Plymouth.</p>	<p>Sec. 96. Prior to the arrival of the sea post-office at Plymouth, England, and in the placing of the mail sacks on the deck of the steamer preparatory to delivery to the tender, the sea post clerks will arrange for a separation of the mail sacks into the following-named classes, and see that each class is placed separately upon the deck in order that the mail may be delivered to the tender so separated, viz:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Closed mails in transit. 2. Letters for London. 3. Printed matter for London. 4. Letters for England. 5. Printed matter for England. 6. Mails for particular English towns. 7. Mails for particular Scotch towns. 8. Mails for particular Irish towns. 9. Mails for South Africa.
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So it can be seen that mail bags put ashore at Plymouth would contain a large mix of destinations that required further sorting. Mails landed at Plymouth were put on board the railway for Bristol and London. At Bristol non-London bags were offloaded and London bags sent swiftly on their way.



Figure 5. Underpaid letter sent from Seattle, Washington 26 December 1903), via New York and Plymouth to Kirkwall, Orkney, on board American Line's Philadelphia. New York tax mark 'T + CENTIMES / 15 / N.Y.' and Edinburgh '3d. / EH.' [Mackay type 1056 Edinburgh]; on reverse: 'KIRKWALL / 8 30 PM / JA 12 / 04'.

What is new from the TPMA documents?

Importantly, TPMA, File IV documents (specifically 573808/03) show how each US Exchange Office makes up bags of mail for the UK. New York had the longest list of destinations for which mail was made up: London, England, Liverpool, Manchester, Bradford, Southampton, Plymouth, Glasgow, Scotland, Dublin, Cork, Queenstown, Edinburgh, Dundee, Birmingham, Newcastle-on-Tyne, Bristol, Sheffield and Nottingham. By contrast most of the other US Offices were instructed to make up mail bags destined for London, England, Liverpool, Glasgow, Scotland and Dublin. To this shorter list Boston added Manchester, Bradford and Plymouth.

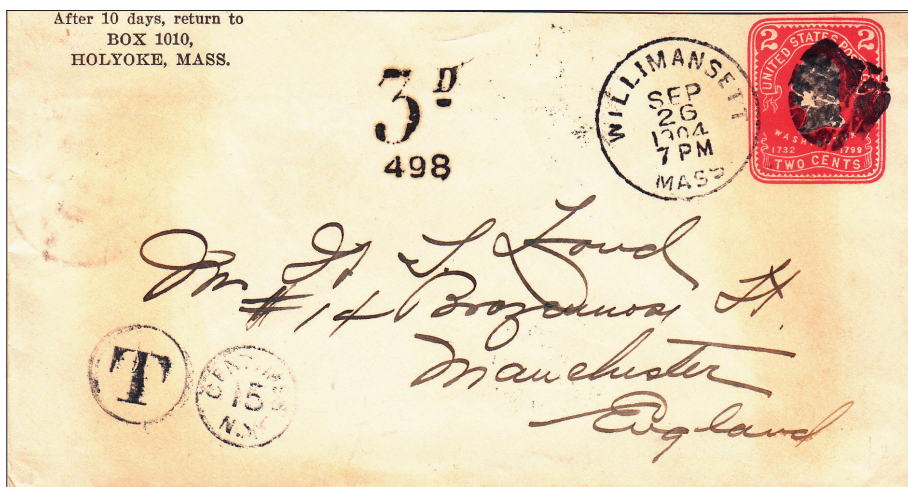


Figure 6. US domestic rate postal stationery sent from Willmasset, Massachusetts (26 September 1904), via New York and Queenstown to Manchester on board White Star's Teutonic. 'T' + CENTIMES / 15 / N.Y.' and Manchester '3^d/498' due mark; on reverse 'Springfield', 'New York, NY For B'ch' (i.e. 'Foreign Branch') and 'Manchester' backstamps.

A letter to the Postmaster General, dated 30 June 1904 (TPMA, File I) summarises the arrangements for handling the mails landed at Plymouth from the American Line packets over the preceding six months. 'English' letters were sorted at Bristol and 'English Newspapers' at Birmingham as being the best balance of work. The letter explains why there is no advantage to sorting on the railway because of the volume of mail and additional costs. London letter bags were sent directly by rail with the best time from Plymouth to London being 4½ hours for the 246 miles, including the short stop at Bristol.

As the 'English' letter bags may contain letters for the provincial towns in the counties adjacent to London and thus delayed at Bristol 'it is suggested that correspondence to these places should be forwarded to this country from the various American exchange offices in bags labelled 'London Forward' and brought to London with the other London bags'. This was promptly implemented by the US and Canadian exchanges.

An American sea post office commenced operation on White Star line ships to Queenstown and Liverpool with the departure of the sailing of the SS *Oceanic* from New York on 10 February 1904 (Cockrill, p41). British clerks joined in the joint operation with the departure of the SS *Baltic* from New York on 10 May (*The Times*). A 'taxe' handstamp was issued by the US Post Office and used jointly by sorters of both countries. Note that Cunard ships also carried mails from New York to Queenstown or Liverpool but did not carry a sea post operation to open and sort the US bags.

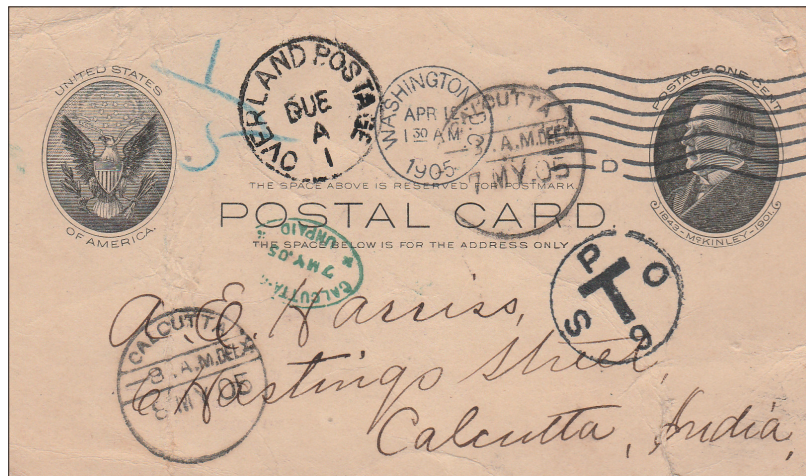


Figure 7. US domestic rate postal card sent from Washington, DC (12 April 1905), via New York and Liverpool for Calcutta on board White Star's *Oceanic*. Sorted and taxed on board with the US clerk's 'S P O / T / 9' handstamp prior to the official beginning of the joint sea post service. London made up mails for despatch via Brindisi per P&O *Britannia* on 22 April. The *Britannia* reached Aden on 30 April where mails passed to the *Peninsular* which reached Bombay on 5 May. Calcutta mails sent on by rail, arriving 7 May. 'OVERLAND POSTAGE / DUE / A / 1' applied on board the *Aden-Bombay* sea post office. One Anna postage due on arrival.

Another group of papers, dated 9-11 February 1905, stem from a flurry of activity in anticipation of adding British Post Office clerks into the joint US-GB sea post offices sorting mails on the American Line packets landing mails at Plymouth. [TPMA POST/29-853 Files IV, V and VII]. The relevant Government Secretary asked the postmasters at Bristol and Birmingham what additional sorting should be undertaken by the British sorters on the American Line packets coming eastbound to alleviate workloads at those two sorting offices. These illustrate further how correspondence should be sorted and bagged up in the sea post offices.

Instructions had already been drawn up for postal clerks operating on White Star Liners between New York and Queenstown and Liverpool. A draft of this document modified for landing mails at Plymouth exists among the papers in TPMA POST/29-853 File XV, within which one finds *Instructions to British Officers employed on the Sea Post Office - Transatlantic Packets*, which is illuminating.

The first section deals with the New York-Liverpool voyage via Queenstown from which we learn:

1. Mails for South Africa to be set aside and landed at Liverpool with the first batch of mails to be forwarded via Southampton by the 8 am train from Lime Street.

2. Mails for 'Scotland' should next be opened and sorted into 'divisions' as listed: Aberdeen, Ayr, Dumfries, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Greenock, Kilmarnock, Paisley, East of Scotland (to Edinburgh so labelled), and West of Scotland (to Glasgow so labelled). Direct bags from the USA for Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow or any other towns to be forwarded to their destination without opening.
3. Correspondence marked 'T' should be sent to Edinburgh for disposal excepting that for Glasgow 'City' and the 'West of Scotland' to be sent to Glasgow.
4. Mails for Scotland to be landed at Queenstown or Liverpool as the case may be.
5. Mails for 'England' should be sorted after those for Scotland have been prepared for despatch. A list of 48 divisions into which mails should be sorted is then given.
6. The mails from the USA for London (City) should be opened and disposed of concurrently with the 'England' mails.
7. If direct bags for English Provincial Offices are landed at Queenstown those for London (City) should also be landed along with London (City) bags from the USA not yet opened. It is desirable that the whole of the London Mails should reach Euston at the same time.

The draft continues with a section for Plymouth which is scored through with a pencil comment to refer to amended instructions dated 29 April 1905.

So far then it is clear that mail on the White Star liners into Queenstown or Liverpool was to be sorted with a large degree of granularity and that direct bags made up in the USA should go through unopened. Oddly, 'T' correspondence is only overtly mentioned in regard to Scotland.



Figure 8. Postal stationery cover underpaying the 5c UPU rate, sent from Boston (26 October 1892) via New York and Queenstown to Dunfermline: Boston 'T / 15' and '3d.' [Mackay type 945] of Glasgow.

With regard to mails to be sorted for landing at Plymouth, the Bristol postmaster was asked: what direct mails are at present received in the Plymouth and Bristol Sorting Carriage and at Bristol from the transatlantic packets, and what mails might be made up in the Sea Post Offices during the voyage between New York and this country? What saving would arise at Bristol and in the Sorting Carriage if the current mails received were made up in the way suggested?



Figure 9. PPC paid 2c (but glitter on picture side), sent from Boston via New York and Queenstown to Rossett, Wrexham, Wales, on board White Star's Baltic in March 1906; 'BOSTON, MASS / MAR 13 / 6-PM / 1906', crayon ms. '1/15' and Bristol '3^D / 134'. 'ROSSETT / 2. 30. / MR 22 / 06' arrival mark.



Figure 10. PPC (decorated with tinsel) sent from Philadelphia (28 August 1906) via New York and Liverpool to Nottingham on board White Star's Baltic: sorted in the sea post office and taxed 'S P O / T / 9' (Jones, 2020); in Liverpool (arrival cds for 6 September). 'Liable to Letter Rate / 466' and '3^D / 466' added.

Bristol responded on 9 February 1905 as follows:

The only mail received at Bristol is that conveyed by the American Packet Line landed at Plymouth on Saturdays. The England letter bags are opened here and the letters - ordinary, registered and unpaid - are despatched in accordance with the ordinary Bristol circulation which embraces direct bags to 137 Post Towns and 23 Travelling Post Offices. England newspapers are sent to Birmingham for disposal. The Plymouth and Bristol Sorting Carriage is under the control of the Postmaster at Plymouth.

The Bristol postmaster's letter explicitly notes that 'England' letter mails are received by American liners from New York, Philadelphia, Boston, San Francisco, Chicago, Baltimore, and St Louis, and from six Offices of Exchange in Canada. He goes on to suggest a list of towns for which Direct Bags could be made up in the Sea Post Office as follows: Bristol, Liverpool, Manchester, Bradford, Southampton, Plymouth, Glasgow, Dublin, Cork, Belfast, Queenstown, Edinburgh, Dundee, Birmingham, Newcastle-on-Tyne, Sheffield, Nottingham, Carlisle, Preston, York, Leicester, Leeds, Chester, Birkenhead, Crewe, Hull, Stoke-on-Trent, Derby and any other towns and Travelling Post Offices where there are more than 400 letters newspapers and circulars.

The Birmingham postmaster's reply, on 10 February, notes the bags received from Bristol and offers a greater list of towns for which mails could be made up in the Sea Post Office – reflecting the fact that Birmingham is situated in the centre of England and thus despatches mails towards the south and west as well as northwards.

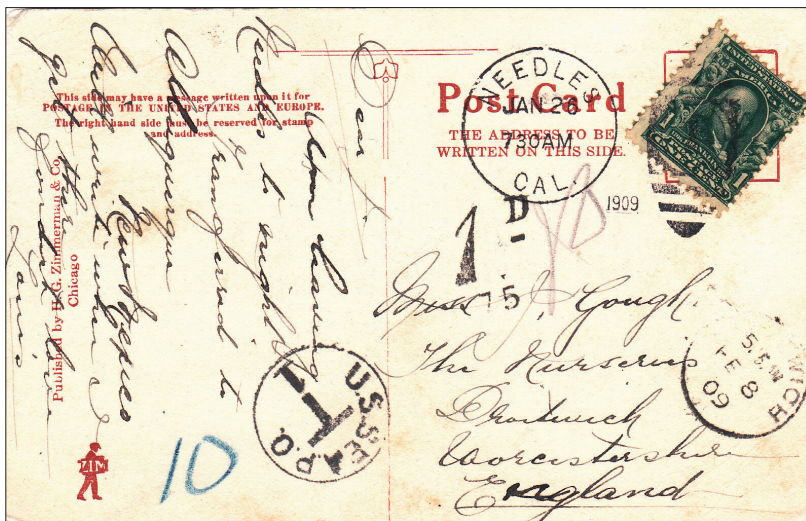


Figure 11. PPC paid at the US domestic rate, sent from Needles, California (26 January 1909), to Droitwich via New York and Plymouth on board American Line's SS New York. Taxed in the Sea Post Office while sorting with 'U.S.SEA.P.O / T 1' (Jones, 2020). At Plymouth the card was forwarded to Birmingham where '1^D / 75' was applied. 'DROITWICH / FE 8 / 09' receiver.

On 11 February the Plymouth postmaster produced his own list of bags being sent to Bristol by Special Train. The list includes some detail of interest. The made-up bags from the USA that are sent direct by Special Train from Plymouth to Bristol are for: Bristol, Liverpool, Manchester, Bradford, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Belfast, Queenstown, Dundee, Birmingham, Newcastle-on Tyne, Sheffield and Nottingham as well as 'England (Letters)'. It notes that 'Transits' are forwarded to London in all cases by Special Train with the exception of those for 'Bergen Newcastle', which are forwarded to Newcastle-on-Tyne via Bristol, and mail for South Africa which is sent to Southampton. Dublin (Letters) and Cork (Letters) are sorted either at Plymouth or in the Plymouth and Bristol Sorting Carriage.



Figure 12. Domestic postal card sent from Baltimore, Maryland (23 July 1909) via New York and Plymouth to Stratford-on-Avon on board American Line's St Louis. Baltimore 'T' and ms. '1/10' with Bristol '1^D / 134' tax mark applied for the 1d postage due.

The documents available to this author do not provide the final sorting list given to British sorters on the American Line ships dated 29 April 1905, but it would be a selection of the recommendations from the Plymouth, Bristol and Birmingham postmasters.

Summary

The US Exchange Offices sorted mail into broad categories of destination made up in bags as previously noted above. These were loaded on to the relevant packet steamers. From 1904 the on board White Star and American Line sea post offices tackled these bags to a defined scheme sorting as much as they could before reaching the UK where the resulting bags were unloaded. If there was insufficient time then US bags of mail were sent on unopened and potentially sorted in any of London, Bristol, Birmingham, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dublin.

The 'local' bags were sorted in each of the landing ports, Plymouth, Cork, Queenstown and Liverpool (each with quite a wide area, e.g. 'Plymouth and Cornwall' bag at Plymouth). Postage due 'Taxe' marks could be employed in the sea post office when needed and postage due items for Scottish addresses were to be handled in Glasgow and Edinburgh (and presumably, Dublin). When postage due letters were encountered at any of these major offices then a local 'Taxe' hand stamp would necessarily be employed.

Acknowledgement

I offer my thanks to Ian Baker FRPSL for giving me sight of his copies of the Postal Museum & Archive POST/29 documents available, and for commenting on my early drafts of this article.

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Letter to the Editor

Re: 'Madame Joseph': New Implements and Imprints', (September, pp454-461)

From: Sidney McHarg

I NOTICED IN THE SEPTEMBER 2024 issue on page 459 the frequency of Madame Joseph forged cancelations is given as 0.0009% (approximately 1 per 1,000) stamps.

If the 1 per 1,000 figure is correct, the percentage should be 0.09%, as the percentage already reflects division by 100.