

397

REGISTERED MAIL IN THE UNITED STATES

This exhibit discusses and shows examples of the transmission of cash through the early mails. Sending cash or negotiable paper through the United States mails has always been a risky business. Only with indemnification for a registered letter was there a guarantee of the return of the money if the letter was lost or stolen. And this did not happen until the 20th century in the United States. So in the 18th and 19th centuries either one took a chance and did not identify valuable contents, or the sender did identify money contents and trusted to the postal system to protect a valuable letter.

In the United States a system of unofficial registration grew from late 1845 to the time of official registration in 1855. This will be shown in Frame 2 of this exhibit. Most valuable letters were registered after 1855 unless they were carried by other means out of the mails, i.e. express companies or private agents including steamboats. Postal money orders did not begin until 1862 but has remained a system used only sporadically by private citizens, not businesses.

When registration did commence in the country, its purpose was to identify valuable letters and keep them safe by tracking them. The risk was still with the sender but over time the Post Office Department showed a capability of protecting these special letters so the public confidence grew and registration became the common method for transmitting funds. The fee for this service began at five cents on July 1, 1855 and was paid in cash. A receipt was given to the sender and a registered letter bill accompanied the letter from post office to post office. The addressee had to sign for a letter and this receipt was kept at the delivering post office.

On July 1, 1863 a new postal act that included a number of changes in rates and postal service and required prepayment of almost all letters also included changes in registration. The fee was raised to 20 cents but was still paid in cash. A new provision was for the sender to receive a return receipt by separate mail. There were five pieces of paper for a registered letter: the original receipt for sender, the registered letter bill to accompany the letter, a return registered letter bill to be sent to the originating post office, a receipt for delivery kept at the delivering post office, and a return registered letter receipt to be mailed to the sender.

A new system was introduced on June 1, 1867 which included paying the 20 cents fee with stamps. The registered letters were transmitted in large orange Registered Package Envelopes which were numbered separately from the registered letter. Special bills for these package envelopes were produced progressing to postcards in the 1870s but registered package envelopes were used until the end of the century.

Registration rates changed to 15 cents on January 1, 1869, then 8 cents on January 1, 1874, then 10 cents on July 1, 1875 and finally 8 cents January 1, 1893. The exhibit shows representative usages during this 30 year period. Then there is a frame showing foreign usages of all periods.

TIMELINE

Introduction	Frame 1
Unofficial Registration	Frame 2
Registration 1855-1863	Frame 3
Registration 1863-1867	Frame 4
Registration 1867-1869	Frame 5
Registration during Banknote issues	Frame 6
Registration during 1890-1900	Frame 7
Foreign registration usages	Frame 8