

ALL THE TOOLS SHOULD BE USED

By Richard B. Graham

In analyzing covers, all possible data and aspects should be examined or at least considered. Certainly, covers should agree with published rates and postal laws and regulations current when or before a cover was mailed. The technical details of a cover are important; were stamps added or substituted, and are the postmarks correct for the period and mode by which the cover was sent?

Covers are often parts of larger finds of many more items of a correspondence. In a business correspondence such as the famous Carroll, Hoy find many duplicate usages had to exist. In a private correspondence duplication will usually be in small groups, as the sender moved or circumstances changed. But laying a cover next to others with bracketing dates in a correspondence is often quite revealing.

Obviously, establishment of dates, rates and postal data from the Postal Laws & Regulations is always the first order of business. Whether they "fit" or not doesn't immediately prove a cover good or bad, but if they don't, further exploration is required.

The historical aspects of a cover are often important. The identities of senders or recipients, established by addresses, content or docketing, should be considered. Are docketings in the hand of the recipient or were they added in later years? Are the contents original enclosures? (In private correspondence, such as a series of letters from a Civil War soldier, contents often became mixed in later years.) Also, when some correspondences entered the stamp world the letters were removed and kept by the source or were discarded by the dealer acquiring the lot, who pencilled dates on the covers. These were not always accurately read or transcribed. They are easily altered or may be downright spurious.

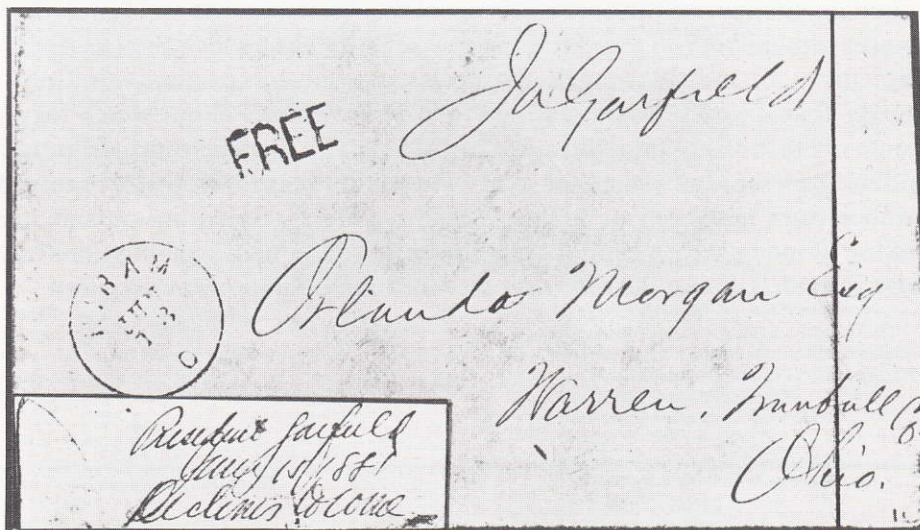


Figure 1

Some years ago the cover shown as Figure 1 appeared in an important eastern sale with the following description:

(Lot number and cover symbol) *J. A. Garfield*, Autograph Free Frank as President, "Hiram, O." pmk., Bold "Free" on envelope to Warren, Ohio, Docketed "*President Garfield, Jun. 15, 1881, Declines to come.*" Franked a bare two weeks before he was shot. Least bit aged. Very fine, this is the first recorded Presidential Frank of Garfield and is very likely unique.
..... Est. \$2000-5000.

The front of the cover was illustrated, the portion to the right of the vertical black line drawn on the illustration being masked by other covers shown in the auction catalog plate. The docketing wasn't shown in the catalog plate, but is included as an inset here.

At the time of the auction, this writer was working with the late Theodore A. Stevens on a proposed book about free franks and frankers and the catalog offering brought a prompt reaction from each of us to the other and to the auction house.

We pointed out what we were sure the auction house already knew — the franking privilege had been abolished for incumbent Presidents effective July 1, 1873. James A. Garfield didn't have the franking privilege as President and furthermore as he was a Member of Congress from 1863 until elected President, he surely knew that.

In addition, the Hiram, Ohio postmark seemed an earlier type than would have been in use in 1881. Also, Garfield, who had lived at Hiram for many years as Congressman, had moved from there to Mentor, Ohio, nearer Lake Erie, in the mid-1870's after the franking privilege was abolished. The chances of his being in Hiram instead of Washington in June, 1881 (during his first three months as President) seemed improbable.

The reply was made by the auction house that the cover was consigned and had been accepted even though it was known Garfield didn't have the franking privilege as President. Covers considered to be free franked are known from nearly all the Presidents after the privilege was abolished. Why not Garfield?

Recognizing that an auction house has a responsibility to both buyers and sellers and that the normal time to reject lots for auction is when the catalog is being prepared, further investigation was made. It was noted that Garfield had resigned his Congressional seat only on November 8th, 1880, four days after he was elected President. (He had been appointed to be U.S. Senator in January 1880, but declined that appointment on November 4th.) Under the laws in force prior to 1873, an ex-Congressman could frank until the first Monday in December following the term for which he had been last elected.

The abolishment of the franking privilege changed all that. While Congress did gradually resume its own franking privilege commencing in 1875, the privilege was not restored to the President or to Cabinet and departmental officers. In 1881 the franking privilege for members of Congress only was extended to printed Congressional documents, mostly speeches. Franked covers containing these are known, but usually bear a printed legend to that effect. Also the privilege didn't apply to enclosed letters directed to individuals, even if official.

In all, the cover in question had a great deal of circumstantial evidence proclaiming it to be a genuine franked cover of Garfield's, but from his Congressional terms prior to July 1, 1873. The docketing upon which was based the claim of its being a Presidential frank was either misunderstood or faked. However, there were just enough possibilities of its being good, or, rather, no positive proof of when the cover was sent, that the auction house hesitated to withdraw it.

Both Stevens and this writer felt the same way: covers of this nature should be possible to prove either bad or good. The proof wasn't long in coming.

We first tried to learn if Garfield was in Washington continuously in the spring and early summer of 1881, his first months as President. The answer was generally that he was, but there were a few loopholes.

A check with the Warren, Ohio, Public Library regarding the addressee, Orlando Morgan of Warren, brought an interesting response. Mr. John H. Burger of that library's Ohioana Room informed us that Orlando Morgan had died on November 13, 1876, over four years before Garfield was elected President. Morgan was easily and positively identified. There was no son of that name, and the possibility of a confusion of names, while not entirely eliminated, was remote. When this data was transmitted to the auction house, the cover was withdrawn.

Franks of James A. Garfield as a member of Congress are relatively common from his years when that body exercised the privilege as they pleased, 1863-1873. Figure 2 shows a typical Garfield frank of that period. It may be noted that the "M.C." designation required of

frankers of the period to show their official position, is simply a squiggle continuous with and added on to Garfield's name. His franking signature when the cover bore the "M.C." imprint is shown as an inset in Figure 2.

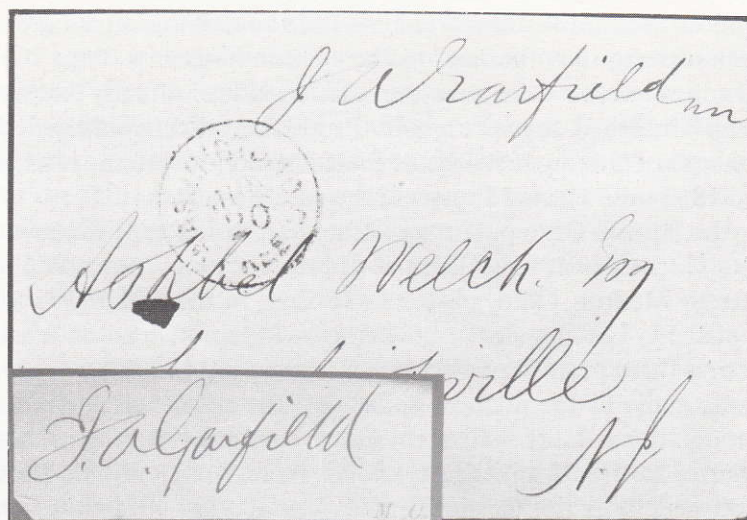


Figure 2

The alleged Presidential frank has no "M.C." squiggle, nor does it have an "M.C." imprint. Although neither T.A. Stevens nor the writer saw the cover in other than picture form, it is assumed that the house offering the cover would have checked for any removal of a printed "M.C." legend. Furthermore, Garfield's signature on the cover is of the style without the squiggled "M.C.".

It is possible that Garfield didn't bother to use the squiggle on covers he franked from his home during his post-Civil War years in Congress when he had his home in Hiram before moving to Mentor, Ohio. As a former President of Hiram College, he was much better known in Hiram than he was in Washington, and the Hiram postmaster would have accepted his franked covers whether or not they bore "M.C.".

The endorsement on the back is another matter. Shown in the inset of Figure 1, it reads "President Garfield/June 15, 1881/Declines to come." This wording is difficult to read in any other manner than if it were written as President.

Had either the date or the notation "Declines to come" been omitted the docketing would be much more acceptable as a "post mortem docketing." It isn't unusual in examining covers of the famous and near-famous to find docketings applied many years after a cover was received, and by someone other than the addressee. They often were applied by family members or others going through the papers of a deceased relative or client. "Post mortem" docketings of this nature can be quite deceptive.

In this writer's opinion, the cover in Figure 1 is genuine in all respects except, possibly, for the docketing. That may be genuine in the sense that it was a "post mortem" docketing written some years after the cover was sent. However, the coinciding dates of docketing and postmark are a little hard to explain in that light.

In analyzing this cover, it should be noted that the franking signature and other details were not in doubt, but the facts of the dates associated with the abolishment of the Presidential franking privilege aroused a question. The type of postmark also aroused a mild question, but the important aspects were the historical/biographical data associated with both sender and addressee.

All the data available should be used in determining the facts about questioned covers. While "gut feeling" or unconsidered opinions of experts are probably correct with a quite high percentage of accuracy — perhaps 95% (?) — factual data can either make opinions more valid — or even unnecessary.