

"Time On Bottom" Cancellations

By Patrick Crosby

The 1880's was a time of transition for postmarking devices. Many postmasters liked their distinctive, privately produced hand-cancelers. Theodore Bozarth in his monograph "Time On Bottom" Duplex Hand Cancelers lamented that these hand-cancelers of old provided the postmasters "...a personal pride in their job that is often lost today." Leavitt machine cancelers were already marking government postal cards and by 1890 the American Postal Machine Company was fast becoming a dominant machine cancel manufacturer with its straight-bars, wavy-bars and, later, American flag killers.

In 1881 Walter D. Wesson of Providence, RI, entered the postmarking device business with his second patent for a duplex "Hand Stamp" – the right side would obliterate the postage stamp (the "killer") and a Circular Date Stamp (CDS) would land to the left of the stamp where it was usually easy to read the city, state, date and time of postmarking. Other duplex hand-cancel devices were already on the market, but the Wesson included some patented features and were in use mostly from 1881 to 1892. The latest known usage is Dec 26, 1908 in Wesson's hometown. They were used in 30 post offices (including two Railway Post Offices) in 11 states. Whereas some of these post offices used only one device, the Boston, MA, post office had 28 varieties. The relatively small number of TOB cities/varieties and Wesson's unique style of putting the time of postmark horizontally at the bottom of the CDS makes these cancels a doable and enjoyable sideline for collectors. Although used on envelopes, the Wesson duplex cancelers were mostly used on government postal cards that today catalogue used for \$.45 to \$1.60. A little practice looking at postal history covers and the time on the bottom will jump out to your eyes.

Fig. 1

These illustrations from the fourth of five Wesson Hand Stamp patents shows an obliterating block (E) and where it is slipped onto a stud (D). The block could be made of cork, wood or metal with two perpendicular holes drilled through four sides, leaving four sides for printing surfaces and thus making it a multipurpose canceler. On the right side of Fig. 1 is the Circular Date Stamp (C) with movable type for the date and time.

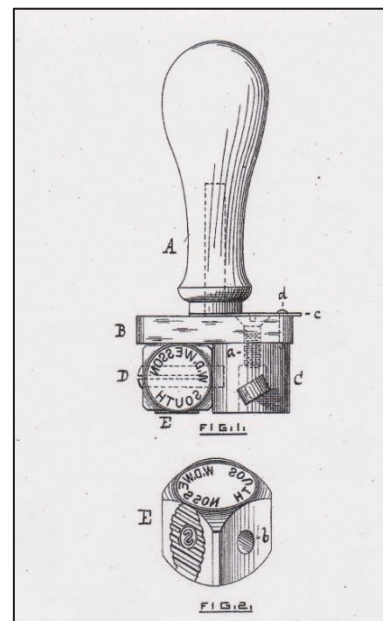


Fig. 2

There were five basic killer types, the earliest being various geometric designs which are called **Type X**. "The earliest known killers were apparently made out of cork and carved almost daily..."



Fig. 3

The **Type C** circular killer with eight horizontal bars was used only in Chicago, IL and Charleston, SC.

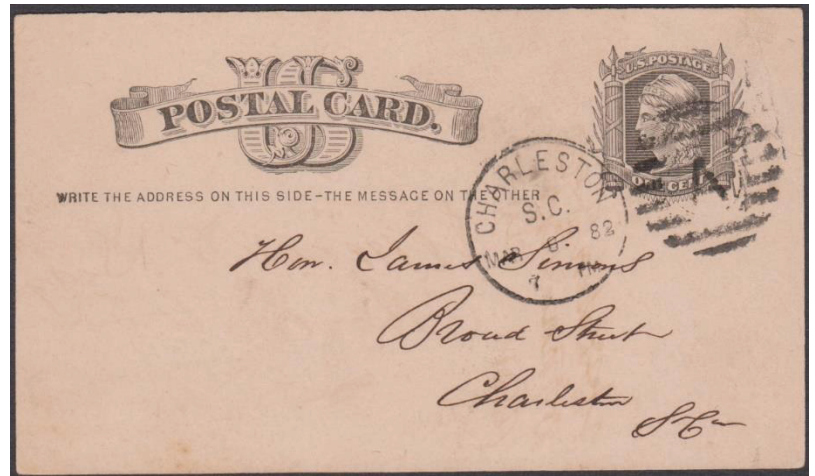


Fig. 4

Used only from Philadelphia, PA, and only with a "2", the **Type G** killer copied a John Goldsborough designed killer known as a "mule".

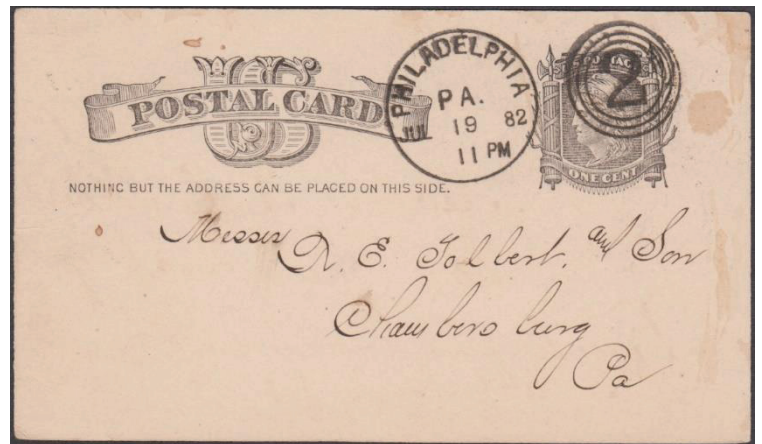


Fig. 5

The **Type H** Wesson killer is an ellipse with nine horizontal bars and was usually used for Collected Mail, which was mail brought to a post office by postal carriers. Although letters and numbers can represent a certain clerk or work station, in this Brooklyn, NY, example the "C" redundantly stands for Collected Mail. On this card to Germany (over-paid 1¢) note how the postal clerk angled the Wesson canceler to use only the needed killer portion on the 2¢ adhesive stamp.

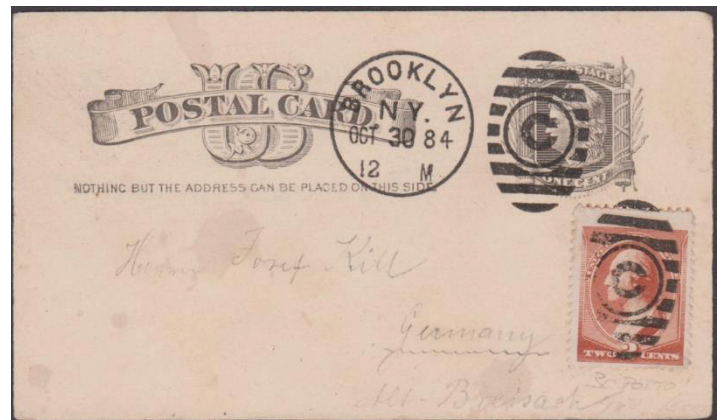


Fig. 6

A different looking CDS with "B" instead of the state abbreviation and a **Type H** killer - made for Philadelphia, PA, Station B (West Philadelphia) - the state, "PA", is in the killer.

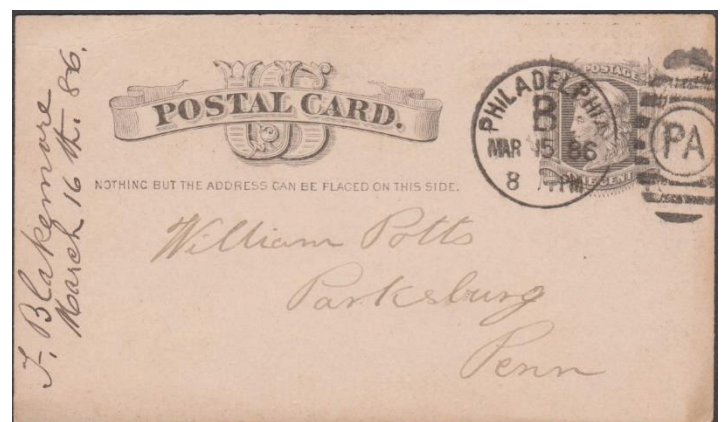




Fig. 7

The **Type V** Wesson killer is an ellipse with six vertical bars usually denoting Deposited Mail, that is, mail brought by patrons to a post office. Sometimes a “D” in the killer also denotes Deposited Mail, as with the shown Central Falls, RI, cancel from 1906. Well into the private postcard era, Central Falls is the only post office known to have used a Wesson canceler on private postcards.

Fig. 8

Lastly is the reason I am writing this article, having just purchased this card for \$13.50. It has a **Type X** killer and an R.P.O. (Boston, Providence and New York City) CDS, but without the time on the bottom. Instead, there is a “T B E” (Train B East). Only two railway post offices used the Wesson duplex canceler, and since both travelled east and west bound there are four R.P.O. varieties. Walter Wesson’s last three patents showed a direction in the illustrated obliterator block, and he may well have been planning to manufacture his devices especially for R.P.O.’s.



References:

- Theodore W. Bozarth, “Time On Bottom” Duplex Hand Cancelers, ed. Russell F. Hanmer (Lake Oswego, OR: La Posta Publications Vol. 5, 1990) [Available at pbbooks.com (Books on Philately website), \$12.00 + postage.
- <https://patentimages.storage.googleapis.com/15/2a/d4/274a121dacd1a3/US263268.pdf>, Patent No. 263,268 dated August 22, 1882.

Patrick Crosby is a member of the Nevada Stamp Study Society and collects U.S. postal stationery, stamps and postcards with an emphasis on postal history.