

A Stampless Collector

by Robert Fisher

I am a stamp collector, but I am also a stampless collector. Stamp collectors obviously collect those lovely geometrically shaped pieces of paper that certify payment of postage. We know that the Penny Black was the first successful use of a postage stamp in 1840 and that other countries issued their own stamp in the following years. But what did postal systems use before the advent of the postage stamp? This is where we enter the world of stampless collecting.

Stampless collectors face a world without Scotts catalogs. After all, they are STAMP catalogs. Stampless collectors have their own catalogs which are equally, if not more expensive. There is also a plethora of specialized catalogs for maritime mail, official mail, local postmarks and other esoteric subjects.

In general, however, stampless collectors usually arrange collections by postmarks. In many instances the cancels that were used on early stamps were originally used on stampless mail. Postmark hand stamps came into vogue in the 18th century and vary from simple to fanciful. Overland mail typically had the postmark of the sending post office, sometimes the receiving post office postmark and occasionally postmarks from post offices between those two.

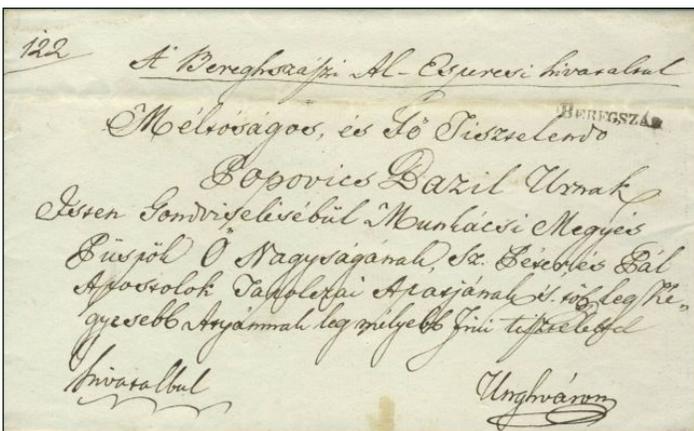
Additional markings may include “Late Mail”, “Paid”, “Postage Due” and anything else that some bored postal authority dreamt up. Some countries indicate that postage has been prepaid by using the term “Franco”, “Paid” or simply using a crayon to mark the letter with a big “X” or cross.

Prior to the use of hand stamp postmarks, some countries simply wrote the name of the sending post office on the letter by hand. Maritime mail usually had the name of the ship that carried the mail. Sometimes a date was included, sometimes not, depending on how the postal clerk felt that day.

The amount of postage paid was usually a complex formula of distance traveled, weight, postal carrier fees and if international mail, the postage charged by each country. The stampless collector has to decipher all of this to make sense of the cover that was just acquired. Then there is the handwriting. Oi vey! Sometimes I wonder how letters ever found intended recipients. Early missives were typically, folded letters or folded paper wrappers containing the letter. Premade envelopes weren’t invented until the 19th century.

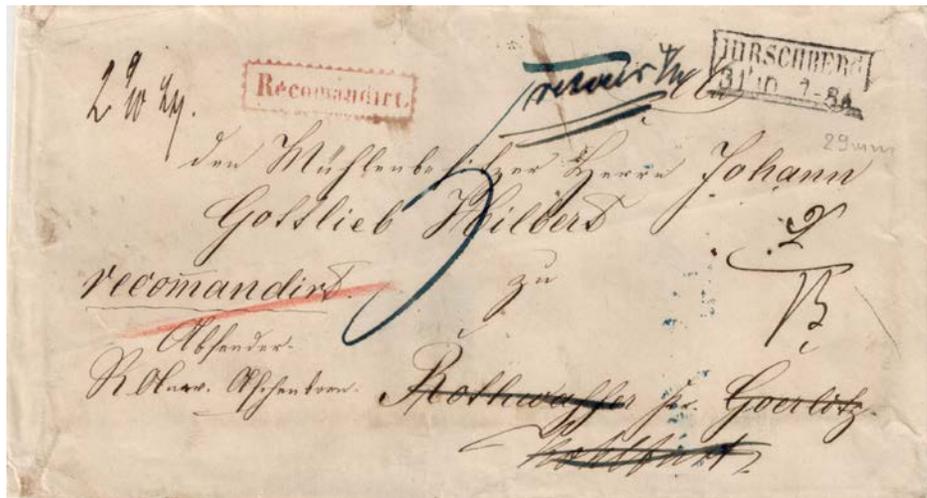
Now that you have an idea of the trials and tribulations of the stampless collector, let me show you a few examples.

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This is an official church letter sent from Beregszasz , Hungary to Bishop Basil Popovics in Unghvar, Hungary sent in 1845.

This gem started out in 1860 as a registered letter from Hirschberg, Thuringia, went totally astray as undeliverable and was returned with postage due.



This is a letter sent from Constantinople to Malta carried by the ship "Persian".

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Isn't this fun?!?! This is much more challenging than fly-specking Washington and Franklin head stamps. So next time you encounter a stampless collector, you can understand what causes the distracted look and the vague mumbling.

Editor's note: I will stick to Washington/Franklins, thank you!



Sorry folks, I just could not help myself.....