Postage Due Bisects of the 1890’s

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Stamp shortages at local post offices are relatively unknown today with our ability to rapidly transport stamps and the ubiquitous use of meter mail and computer generated postage. This; however, was not the case during earlier times, especially during the latter part of the 19th century. Random stamp shortages routinely occurred during this period due to a variety of reasons involving stamp ordering, production, and distribution. Usually post masters or postal clerks were able to accommodate the shortage of a particular stamp type or denomination by using multiples of similar lower value stamps. The situation became critical when the shortage occurred in the lower or lowest value stamps, because there was no way to use a higher value stamp to address the lower value need (1¢ when no ½¢ value stamps were available). Postmasters used their ingenuity to work around these shortages by creating local stamps for provisional use. Postage Due stamps were no exception to the shortage problems, and postmasters created a variety of local Postage Due stamps by overprinting regular issue stamps for postage due purposes or by bisecting higher denomination Postage Due stamps to meet their lower value need. This article traces the use of local Postage Due bisects in the United States. In particular, the bisects of Thompson, New York; Jefferson, Iowa; and Clinton, Iowa will be featured.

Introduction

Stamp shortages at local (and sometimes main) post offices have been known throughout the history of stamped mail in the United States. Today, with the ubiquitous use of postal meters and computer generated postage any type of “stamp” shortage is very, very rare, if it exists at all. In most cases, even in earlier years (before meters and computers), these shortages were transparent to the public. The post master or postal clerk would make up any required value by using other denomination stamps. For example, a shortage of 2¢ stamps could be made up by using two 1¢ stamps, a 5¢ stamp shortage could be made up using one 2¢ stamp and one 3¢ stamp and so forth. In the late 19th century (and even into the early 20th century), however, the shortage of 1¢ stamps of any type would be problematic since no ½¢ stamps (either regular issue or Postage Due) existed in the United States before 1925[1].

Postage Due stamps were also subject to spot shortages [2] just like their regular issue counterparts. For the missing Postage Due stamp values, most postmasters simply substituted regular issue stamps as seen in Figure 1. This 1895 cover from Chicago, Illinois to St. Augustine, Florida was rated at 2¢ Postage Due which was paid with a 2¢ regular issue (Scott no. 267).
Figure 1. Postage Due Cover mailed from Chicago, Illinois to St. Augustine, Florida on April 30, 1895. It was rated Due 2 Cents and the Postage Due fee was paid with a 2¢ regular issue stamp (Scott no. 267).

The letter was also mailed with the same stamp. This type of provisional use of a regular issue stamp for a missing Postage Due stamp value was quite common throughout our mail history, and for the most part, such usages remain undocumented in the literature. Some post masters were concerned about just using a plain regular issue stamp as a Postage Due stamp unless it was suitably marked “Postage Due” or “Due 1” or some other variant of “Due” to indicate its intended function. Examples of such an approach were described in a recent article by Charles and Yarbrough [3] on overprinted provisional Postage Dues.

A different but common approach to the shortage problem, adopted by several postmasters, was to bisect a higher value stamp to achieve the desired value. For example, a 2¢ Postage Due stamp could be bisected to make two “1¢” stamps. Since these bisected stamps (vertical, horizontal, or diagonal) were still Postage Due stamps (or fragments thereof) most postmasters did not feel the need to add a “Due” marking to the bisected stamp. The notable exceptions to this were the Jefferson, Iowa bisects (where “Due 1 cent” was printed on each half of a vertically bisected 2¢ Postage Due stamp) and the Clinton, Iowa bisects (2¢ Postage Due stamps, diagonally bisected with “Due 1” hand stamped on each piece). These and other bisects will be described below.

As mentioned above, the bisected Postage Due stamps resulted because the postmaster had a shortage of a commonly used stamp. Apparent shortages of the 1¢ and 2¢ values occurred during the latter part of calendar year 1895 and well into the spring of 1896. The shortages
during this period have been linked to the abrupt switch-over of stamp production from the American Bank Note Company (ABNCo) to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP) on July 1, 1894. Some shortages may have even occurred in 1894 due to the winding down of stamp production (and distribution) by the ABNCo as the July 1, 1894 switch-over date approached [4]. When the BEP started, they only had a 3-day supply of 2¢ Postage Due stamps (old ABNCo Large Numeral Dues-shipped by the ABNCo to the BEP as part of the contract close down). The 1¢ and 5¢ supplies could last about 2 months and the 10¢ supply for about 10 months. So as the BEP ramped up production it was highly likely that spot shortages would occur depending on the demand for various values.

As described above, bisects or bisected Postage Due stamps typically were used when a postmaster had a shortage of a particular stamp denomination and the denomination was small enough that the required value could not be made-up by using lower value stamps. The classic case occurred when the shortage is in the lowest value of the Postage Due stamp series (1¢ before 1925, and ½¢ for 1925 and later). It should be noted that bisected regular postage stamps are forbidden by Postal Regulations and were not to be accepted for the mailing of any article [5, 6]. The Postal Regulations are silent on the subject of bisected Postage Due stamps. Since Postage Due stamps were not to be sold to the public and were invalid for postage, it seems that, while not a recommended or encouraged practice, the use of bisected Postage Due stamps was not illegal (against Postal Regulations). Thus, over the years, several postmasters have used it as a technique to address spot shortages of certain value Postage Due stamps.

**Bisect Types**

Figure 2 presents an illustration of the possible bisect types (diagonal, vertical, and horizontal) and will be used as a frame of reference in the ensuing discussion. Note that there are two versions of the diagonal bisect shown in Figure 2. The Type A diagonal was cut from the upper left to the lower right of a stamp in normal orientation. This probably indicated that the postmaster or clerk who did the bisecting was right handed (i.e. the left hand held the stamp and straight edge while the right hand wielded the knife or razor). The Type B diagonal bisect would have resulted if the clerk was left handed or the stamp was cut by a right handed person with the stamp upside down.
Figure 2. Bisect types: Type A – Diagonal Bisect (Cut from Upper Left to Lower Right); Type B – Diagonal Bisect (Cut from Upper Right to Lower Left); Type C - Vertical Bisect; and Type D - Horizontal Bisect.

Lebanon, KY.

A shortage of 1¢ Postage Due stamps apparently occurred in Lebanon, Kentucky in March of 1894. Such a shortage led to a Postage Due cover with a bisected J23 Postage Due stamp as shown in Figure 3 (Image courtesy Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries, Inc.[7]). This 2¢ entire was mailed from New York on Feb. 28, 1894 as evidenced by the machine cancel. It was received on March 2, 1894 in Lebanon, KY where it was rated “Due 4.” The payment of the...
Postage Due was indicated by affixing a 3¢ J24 and a diagonally bisected (Type A, top right portion) 2¢ J23 Postage Due stamp. Apparently, no 1¢ Postage Due stamps (Scott No. J22) were available. Why the clerk did not use two J23s in this instance is unknown.

**Thompson, NY**

Another shortage of 1¢ Postage Due stamps in Thomson, NY during October of 1895 led to additional covers with bisected J23 Postage Due stamps on cover. According to Bower [8], four covers from Thomson, NY with a tied J23 bisect are known. Of the four covers, two are diagonal bisects (Type A, top right portions), one is a vertical bisect (Type C, left side or half), and one is a horizontal bisect (Type D, bottom half). An example of one of the diagonally bisected covers is shown in Figure 4. It is addressed to Mr. H. W. Tilford, Thompson Mills, Wash. Co., NY. The CDS cancel on the bisected J23 Postage Due is for Thomson, NY, dated Oct. 3, 1895. A 1905 Postal Guide [9] lists a “Thomson” in Washington County, New York, but no “Thompson Mills.” Bower speculated that the town name of Thompson Mills was likely an earlier name that was changed to reduce confusion with the twenty odd other “Thompson…..” places listed in the United States Postal Guide during this period. Bower reported that all four covers were addressed to Mr. Tilford and each bears a 1¢ ultramarine Franklin stamp (Scott No. 246) tied by a Boston, Mass., October 2, 1895 waving flag machine cancel. The bisect Postage Due stamps are tied by a Thomson, NY CDS dated October 3, 1895.

![Figure 4. J23 bisect (Type A, top right portion) on a cover to Thomson, New York. The cover was mailed from Boston, Massachusetts on October 2, 1895 using an ultramarine Scott No. 246 with a flag “A” machine cancel. Upon arrival in Thomson, it was assessed 1¢ Postage Due on October 3, 1895. The 1¢ payment was indicated by affixing a 2¢ J23 diagonal bisect. This top right portion bisect is tied by a Thomson, NY CDS and what appears to be a circular ring cancel. The cover is addressed to Mr. H. W. Tilford in Thompson Mills, NY (See discussion in text on Thomson vs. Thompson Mills in the text).](image-url)
Given that there are two top right bisects (Figure 2, Type A), one vertical left side bisect (Figure 2, Type C), and one bottom horizontal bisect (Figure 2, Type D) as reported by Bower, there could at least another four J23 Thomson, NY bisects waiting to be discovered. Such is the case of the vertical right side J23 (Type C) bisect shown in Figure 5. This cover is addressed to Mr. H. W. Thompson rather than Mr. H. W. Tilford as reported by Bower and shown in Figure 4. Except for the addressee and the different bisect orientation all other features of this cover are the same as the cover shown in Figure 4. Even the handwriting appears identical. On first sight the author thought this was the vertical bisect cover reported by Bower. However, the “H. W.” in this case belongs to Thompson rather than Tilford and the Type C bisect is the right side rather than the left side. Thus, we now have five reported Thomson, NY J23 bisects: 2 top right diagonals (Type A), 1 bottom horizontal (Type D), and 2 verticals (Type C—one left and now one right). The author would appreciate any information on the Thomson, NY, J23 bisects or any other Large Numeral Postage Due bisects known to the readers.

Figure 5. J23 bisect (Type C, right-side) on a cover to Thomson, New York. The cover was mailed from Boston, Massachusetts on October 2, 1895 using an ultramarine Scott No. 246 with a flag “A” machine cancel. Upon arrival in Thomson, it was assessed 1¢ Postage Due on October 3, 1895. The 1¢ payment was indicated by affixing a 2¢ J23 vertical bisect. This right-side bisect is tied by a Thomson, NY CDS and what appears to be a circular ring cancel. The cover is addressed to Mr. H. W. Thompson in Thompson Mills, NY (See discussion in text on Thomson vs. Thompson Mills in the text).

Jefferson, IA

The J39 bisect covers of Jefferson, Iowa are somewhat well known in the philatelic literature including even a footnote mention (after the J39 stamp listing) in Scott’s catalog [10]. The Jefferson, Iowa, J39 bisected Postage Due stamps were created by Postmaster Fred R. McCarthy in response to a shortage of 1¢ Postage Due stamps. He told the story of the bisects in...
an affidavit dated February 12, 1898. McCarthy’s two-page affidavit is mounted on two large album pages in the Miller Collection (New York Public Library) with a Scott No. 301 wrapper containing a Jefferson, Iowa bisect at the bottom of the second album page. A full color copy of the McCarthy affidavit is shown in Trepel’s excellent publication documenting the Miller Collection [11].

A typical example of the J39 bisect on cover is shown in Figure 6. This cover is one of the thirteen examples known to Pauley [12] and reported by him in an excellent series of articles spanning an 18 year timeframe from January 1973 to November 1990. During this period he tried to discover and report details of all known J39 bisects (from Jefferson, Iowa) on cover. All

![Figure 6. Scott J39 Bisect on cover addressed to George Herring with a left side Type C bisect. This is cover No.5 in Pauley’s numbering scheme. The back of the cover shows a partial Jefferson, Iowa CDS and the attached circular bar killer in black ink. A Waucoma, Iowa CDS with a star in circle killer in purple ink also appears on the back.](image)

the known Jefferson, Iowa bisects are vertical with the words “Due 1 cent” printed on each half of the stamp. The overprint measures 17 mm long by 2.5 mm high and was printed with black ink. While clearly the “1” looks like an “I” in the overprint, several philatelic researcher feel that the “I” is really a “1” from a non-lining set of numerals in the Old-style No.7 Monotype or a closely related type face which was available during the 1890’s. Because of his keen interest in bisects, Pauley (being from Jefferson, Iowa) catalogued 13 known usages of this bisect and assigned them numbers in an arbitrary numbering scheme [13]. In fact the J39 bisect cover in Figure 6 is Pauley No. 5 which is addressed to George Herring. A complete description of this cover was given previously by both Pauley [14] and the current author [15]. This cover is typical of the ones sent by E. B. Stillman to himself, his family, and co-workers or friends. Edwin B. Stillman was the owner of the local newspaper, The Jefferson Bee, where it is believed the “Due 1 cent” over printing was done. Stillman apparently recognized the importance of these locally
created bisects and prepared covers which would require McCarthy to use one of his newly created “rarities.” Ten of the original thirteen Pauley covers were believed to have been prepared by Stillman. Only Pauley No. 1, No. 2, and No. 13 covers were distinctly different (i.e. did not look like cover No. 5 with only a change in addressee). Cover No. 1 is a wrapper in the Miller Collection as described above and in Reference 7. Cover No. 2 is addressed to a different town and resides in the Pauley collection and No. 13 is again a wrapper addressed to Benjamin Jacques, the same addressee as Cover No. 1.

Figure 7 illustrates another of the “Stillman” inspired covers (Pauley No. 9 [16]). It is addressed to P. E. Stillman (E. B. Stillman’s son Peter) and has similar front and back markings as cover No. 5 (Figure 6). Figure 8 illustrates another of these typical “Stillman” covers. It is addressed to J. M. Alexander. This cover was unknown to Pauley, having been reported by the author in the fall of 2009 [17]. It has arbitrarily been assigned the Pauley No. 14 designator. Thus, by the end of the year 2009 there were fourteen J39 bisects on cover (or partial cover, see Pauley No. 10 [18]) from Jefferson, Iowa known. All these covers were postmarked on October 11, 1895 and had the bisect applied on October 13, 1895 (about 10 days later than the

Figure 7. Scott J39 Bisect on cover addressed to P. E. Stillman with a left side Type C bisect. This is cover No. 9 in Pauley’s numbering scheme. The back of the cover shows a partial Jefferson, Iowa CDS and the attached circular bar killer in black ink. A Waucoma, Iowa CDS with a star in circle killer in purple ink also appears on the back. (From the collection of Clarke Yarbrough)

Thomson, NY bisects of J23). Eleven of the fourteen covers had very similar format and appearance (differing mainly by addressee). For example see Figures 6, 7, and 8. Even two of the remaining three (Pauley No. 1 and No. 13) were addressed to the same person (Benjamin Jacques) and they were both newspaper wrappers. Pauley presents some convincing arguments why cover No. 13 (and hence No. 1) was not a philatelic creation [19].
Figure 8. Scott J39 Bisect on cover addressed to J. M. Alexander with a right side Type C bisect. This cover was not reported by Pauley and has been arbitrarily assigned No. 14 in his numbering scheme. The back of the cover shows a partial Jefferson, Iowa CDS and the attached circular bar killer in black ink. A Waucoma, Iowa CDS (Oct. 12, 1895) with a star in circle killer in purple ink also appears on the back.

There is also another Jefferson, Iowa J39 bisect used on a partial cover piece as shown in Figure 9. This original cover (from which the piece was cut) was sent from Buffalo, New York to Jefferson, Iowa (“…son” is clearly visible in the partial address on the piece) in May 1896. This piece of cover is distinctly different from the other Jefferson, Iowa J39 bisect usages.

Figure 9. Jefferson, Iowa Scott J39 Type C left side bisect on piece, mailed on May 1, 1896 in Buffalo, New York. The bisected and overprinted 2¢ Postage Due was applied and cancelled on May 18, 1896. Because of the small size of the piece, the destination and addressee are unknown, as well as the reason for the 1¢ Postage Due stamp being needed. The enlargement at the right clearly shows the “Due 1 cent” overprint. The piece on the back is signed by “Geo. B. Sloane.”
in several ways: 1) the mailing stamp is a 2¢ Washington (Type III, Scott No. 267) tied with a machine cancel; 2) the bisect was added on May 18, 1896 about 7 months after the original bisect flurry; 3) the bisect (left side) is tied to the piece by a cut cork cancel, rather than the CDS and associated killer bars used to cancel most of the other Jefferson, Iowa J39 bisect covers; and 4) the piece upon which the bisect is tied is so small that the addressee (only …ster of the name shows) and the reason for the postage due is unknown. As mentioned above Pauley No. 10 was also a partial cover piece with only a last name (Herring) visible.

This cover piece (assigned Pauley No. 15) creates some inconsistencies with McCarty’s statements in his affidavit of February 12, 1898. In his affidavit, McCarthy states that the Postage Due bisects were created in response to a shortage of 1¢ Postage Due stamps and that after receipt of a replacement supply of 1¢ Postage Due stamps from Washington (already on requisition at the time of bisect creation), he discontinued use of the bisects. If his affidavit is correct, why was there a 2¢ J39 bisect available in May of 1896 and more importantly why was it used? Given the elapsed time since they were created, the fact that a mint bisect or “Due 1 cent” overprinted whole stamp has never been reported, and only 15 used examples are known— we will probably never know the answer.

**Clinton, IA**

About 4 months after the original Jefferson, Iowa bisects appeared, the postmaster of Clinton, Iowa followed suite. The three known [20] Clinton, Iowa J39 bisects were all postmarked on February 14, 1896, Valentine’s Day. The known examples are on 1¢ stamped envelopes (Scott No. U301) and are suspected to have contained Valentines since the two pictured below were addressed to children (Master….., see Figures 10 and 11 below). An example of a Clinton, Iowa bisect on cover is shown in Figure 10. As can be seen the 2¢ J39 Postage Due stamp was bisected from the upper right to the lower left (Type B) with the top left portion being used on the cover. “DUE 1” was hand stamped on each portion of the bisected stamp (probably before dividing). The “DUE 1” measures 15.5 mm long by 3.8 mm high and was stamped using black ink. Another Clinton, Iowa bisect cover is shown in Figure 11. It is a lower right diagonal half (Type B) again displaying the “DUE 1” hand stamp. Upon close examination the bisected pair do not match.

**Summary**

This article has traced the provisional use of bisected Postage Due stamps to address shortages in certain values of Postage Due stamps (mainly 1¢ and 2¢ denominations) during the 1890’s. During this period there was a rash of such provisional usage due to believed shortages of certain Postage Due stamp values created by a sudden switch in production from the ABNCo
to the BEP in July of 1894. At no other time in Postage Due stamp history were apparent shortages as pronounced.

Table 1 contains a listing of all the known bisect usages during the 1894-1897 period. The author would appreciate any information on these or other bisects of the period or bisects in general.

Figure 10. J39 Type D bisect (Top Left portion) on cover from Clinton, Iowa. The cover was mailed in Clinton, Iowa on February 14, 1896 (Valentine’s Day) using a 1¢ blue entire. The cover probably contained a Valentine since it was addressed to a child (“Master …”). It was rated 1¢ Postage Due (since it was sealed). The 1¢ payment was indicated by affixing a 2¢ J39 diagonal bisect (Type D, top left portion. DUE 1 was hand stamped on the bisected stamp in black ink.

Figure 11. J39 Type D bisect (Lower Right portion) on cover from Clinton, Iowa. The cover was mailed in Clinton, Iowa on February 14, 1896 (Valentine’s Day) using a 1¢ blue entire. The cover probably contained a Valentine since it was addressed to a child (“Master …”). It was rated 1¢ Postage Due (since it was sealed). The 1¢ payment was indicated by affixing a 2¢ J39 diagonal bisect (Type D, Lower Right portion). DUE 1 was hand stamped on the bisected stamp in black ink. (From the collection of Clarke Yarbrough)
Table 1. Postage Due Bisects on Cover (1894-1897)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stamp (Value)</th>
<th>Town /City</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Date(a)</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>J23(2¢)</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>KY</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3/2/1894</td>
<td>Diagonal Bisect-Top Right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J23(2¢)</td>
<td>Thomson</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10/3/1895</td>
<td>2 Diagonal (Top Right), 1 Vertical (Left Side), 1 Horizontal (Bottom). All Addressed to H. W. Tilford, 1 Vertical (Right Side), Addressed to H. W. Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J39(2¢)</td>
<td>Jefferson</td>
<td>IA</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10/13/1895</td>
<td>8 Vertical (Left Side). Addressees: 3 Stillmans, 3 Herrings, 1 Alexander, and 1 Jacques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J39(2¢)</td>
<td>Jefferson</td>
<td>IA</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10/13/1895</td>
<td>6 Vertical (Right Side). Addressees: 2 Stillmans, 1 Herring, 1 Alexander, 1 Deeples, and 1 Jacques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J39(2¢)</td>
<td>Riverside</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Unknown(b)</td>
<td>Unknown(b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-(2¢&amp;10¢)</td>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12/1895</td>
<td>2¢ &amp; 10¢ Bisected to make 6¢ Postage Due</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-(2¢)</td>
<td>North Branch</td>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6/1895</td>
<td>Diagonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-(2¢)</td>
<td>Warwick</td>
<td>RI</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8/7/1897</td>
<td>Vertical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9/11/1897</td>
<td>Vertical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a) Date Postage Due Stamp Applied
b) Assumed to be during the 1894-1897 period, mentioned by Luff in 1902 [21].

References

1. The ½¢ Nathan Hale stamp (Scott No. 551) was issued on April 4, 1925. The first ½¢ Postage Due stamp (Scott No. J68) was put in use on April 15, 1925. It was distributed to postmasters on April 13, 1925.


4. Reference 2, pp. 96-97.


10. Scott’s Catalog in a note following the J39 listing states: “In October 1895, the Postmaster at Jefferson, Iowa, surcharged a few 2-cent stamps with the words ‘Due 1 cent’ in black on each side, subsequently dividing the stamps vertically and using each half as a 1-cent stamp. Twenty of these stamps were used.”


14. Reference 13, pp. 32-33


17. Reference 6, pp. 411-413.

