

Letter

Mail and the Island Steamers

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Figure 1



Figure 2

The steamboats operating between Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard and the mainland have been the subject of a number of *Spritsail* articles. No wonder; the boats were of central importance to the island residents, as the only source of transportation of provisions, supplies and mail.

Why the special interest in mail, seemingly the least important of the three? One reason, from the point of view of the student and collector, is that mail still exists from 200 years and more back, so that we can study and compare different parts of the country through their postal needs and methods of postal transportation.

Of course mail to the islands bears a Nantucket or a Martha's Vineyard address and mail from the islands has a corresponding postmark. Since, at least until the establishment of airmail, all mail to or from the islands had to go at least part of the way by steamboat, the matter of identifying such mail would seem to be rather routine, and not much related to the study of the actual vessels.

About fifteen years ago, Massachusetts island mail took on new interest for the steamboat enthusiast, with the discovery of certain "postmarks" applied on board the boats in the 1870s and '80s, each such mark containing the name of the vessel.

Figure 1 shows the earliest such marking seen and, indeed, the first one I found. This oval handstamp of the Steamer Island Home appears on the back of an envelope addressed to Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and

having a postmark of the railroad train at Woods Hole. Figure 2 is also an Island Home marking, also on the reverse of an envelope, this one addressed to Ravenna, Ohio, postmarked New Bedford. Both these letters were handed in by the steamboat clerk to the post office at the end of the steamboat's voyage. They were evidently given to the clerk on board the steamboat by a passenger, or were placed in a special box for last minute letters, just before the departure.

Figure 3 shows *Str. Martha's Vineyard* stamped on the back of an envelope in 1884. On the front it is postmarked New Bedford and one supposes it was picked up on the Vineyard and put off at the western terminus of the route. The name of *John Mayhew, Clerk*, who evidently had charge of the "loose mail" is also a part of the handstamp.

The envelope in Figure 4 was stamped *Str. Monohansett*, Dec. 23, 1886, S.E.A. Ripley, Clerk. This was applied on board the steamboat which shared the Vineyard-New Bedford route with the Martha's Vineyard. On this envelope the clerk's handstamp actually cancels the stamp and there are no post office markings. Evidently Ripley knew the addressees would arrange to have their mail picked up at the dock. Since the letter would never get into the hands of the New Bedford postal authorities, he did their postmarking job for them.

The letter in Figure 4, by the way, is on a post office printed lettersheet of the 1880s. Postal stationery (embossed stamped envelopes, letter sheets, etc.) first

came into existence so that written messages could be privately carried without violating the monopoly of the post office. By requiring that a privately carried letter be contained in a stamped envelope, the post office was assured that they would be paid, even if they did not carry the letter.

Figure 5 shows the letterhead used inside an envelope sent from Nantucket in 1887. Although the envelope was mailed and postmarked in Nantucket, the sender, our Mr. J. R. Bacon, by now Clerk aboard the Martha's Vineyard, used his handstamper as an addition to the printed business address of the Old Colony Line, New Bedford, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket Steamboat Co. This is the only known strike of this particular handstamp. It may well have also been used on the outside of mail, handed in at the dock, such as those envelopes in Figures 1-4.

Postal history, the study of the used envelope, with its address, return address, stamp, postmark, etc., is an arcane specialty, to be sure. Hopefully, a glimpse at the steamboat "postmarks" on Nantucket and New Bedford mail will bring out some of the charm of the subject.

Perhaps that packet of Grandfather's letters in that old sea chest in the attic contains some steamboat mail.

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Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

