



“FIRE ON THE WATER” STEAMBOAT MAIL IN NEW YORK STATE: 1808 TO 1855



EXHIBIT FOCUS: The objective of this exhibit is to present a comprehensive analysis of the post office rules and operations applicable to the handling of “loose” letters received into the postal system from steamboats during the period 1808 to 1855. It illustrates the evolution of regulations, accounting procedures and new methods of calculating postal rates for this class of mail.

- Most waterway mail was carried in closed bags under contract, thereby entering the postal system at the port of origin, and therefore lack distinguishing markings coveted by collectors and necessary for study.
- Loose letters, which represent a small percentage of inland waterway mail, were carried privately and were received by the post office at the port of entry and therefore required the adoption of special procedures and regulations.
- This exhibit is the first to present a comprehensive interpretation of the post office operations that governed the handling and rating of early steamboat mail. It presents new information not previously known to collectors and these discoveries reflect intensive study of the original postal artifacts, census mining and extensive use of resources available via the internet.
- The scope is limited to the critical period starting with the earliest known letter carried by steamboat in 1808 and ending in 1855 when the Postmaster General noted in his annual report that mail service by steamboat had decreased by thirty percent in the previous fiscal year, marking the end of the “golden era” of steamboat mail and the emergence of the more reliable and efficient railroads.
- The area of study is confined to the waterways of New York because this geography served as the post office proving grounds.
 - ◊ The new mechanisms first introduced by the Post Office in New York include the first markings applied to designate mail received from steamboats (the manuscript “B”), the first contract mail route by steamboat (in 1815) and the first route agent service (introduced in 1842).

THE POST OFFICE BLUEPRINT: The North River, launched on the Hudson River in 1807, became the first commercially successful steamboat in the United States. The owners were awarded a contract to carry mail in 1815, and by 1842 the number of loose letters carried by steamboat on the Hudson reached a point that route agents were needed. The route agents processed and sorted for onward transmission the loose letters picked up from wharf boxes along the route.

Although there are occasional anomalies and special exceptions that are noted throughout the exhibit, the overall scheme for handling loose steamboat letters on New York waterways was established by the Post Office Acts of 1810 and 1815. The key provisions were:

Postmasters receiving loose letters of domestic origin from steamboats were to pay the boat master two cents per letter. This applied to steamboats without a mail contract as well as for loose letters carried by contract carrier outside locked bags. Postal charges were determined in the same manner as if conveyed by land and did not reflect the boat fee, but rather were based on distance between the point the letter was picked up by the steamboat and the final destination. The port of entry postmaster had to account for the boat fee paid and reconcile his quarterly accounts with certifications filed by the steamboat masters. These practices evolved over time, as illustrated in the exhibit.

EXHIBIT STRUCTURE: The waterways are ordered as shown at right.

- The waterway is listed at the top of each page and each section is organized by port of entry and date. Route Agent service, if applicable, is at the end of each chapter.
- Bold sub-headers at upper left identify the port of entry and the dates. Those at right indicate the type of markings shown.
- Lined boxes of text at the top of certain pages explain the significance of the markings and uses shown.
- Bold italicized statements describe important items, such as the degree of rarity based on the exhibitor’s census records and experience. Items with an expert certificate are denoted by “PFC” at bottom right.
- Italicized text explains key postal laws and instructions issued by local postmasters and the Postmaster General.

**Hudson River
Lake Champlain
Long Island Sound
Lake Erie
Lake Ontario
St. Lawrence River
Oswegatchie River
Seneca Lake
Skaneateles Lake
East River, NYC**



HUDSON RIVER MAIL



New York led the world in the development of commercially viable steamboats and the Hudson River served as the proving ground. The North River (enrolled by Livingston and Fulton as North River Steamboat of Clermont) was launched in 1807. She was partially rebuilt for the 1808 season when she commenced a regular operating schedule between New York and Albany. The commercial success of North River led Livingston and Fulton to commission three additional steamboats in 1809.

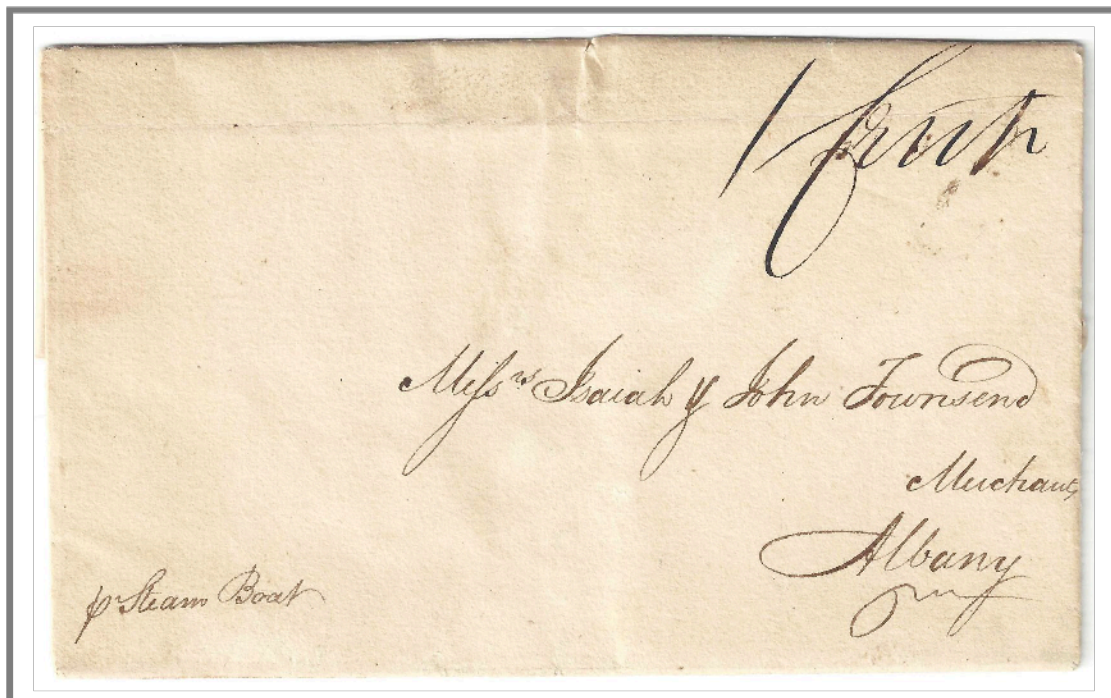
The Post Office Acts of 1810 and 1815 established the overall scheme for handling loose letters (mail not received in closed bags under contract with the Post Office) received from steamboats, and the 1823 Post Office Act was the first to declare inland waterways to be postal routes. The first contract to carry mail by steamboat was awarded to Livingston and Fulton in 1815, and this signaled the beginning of a systematic effort to replace stage coach routes with those using steamboats.

Steamboat Mail

to Albany

Earliest Letter Carried by Steamboat in the United States

New York 1st Oct. 1808



(Saturday) 1 October 1808 New York City to Albany, NY, endorsed "pr Steam Boat" carried on the steamboat North River, the world's first steam-powered, commercial vessel entered mails at Albany as a drop letter with "1 Cent" postage due
the earliest reported letter carried by steamboat on the Hudson River

HUDSON RIVER MAIL

Albany, 1811

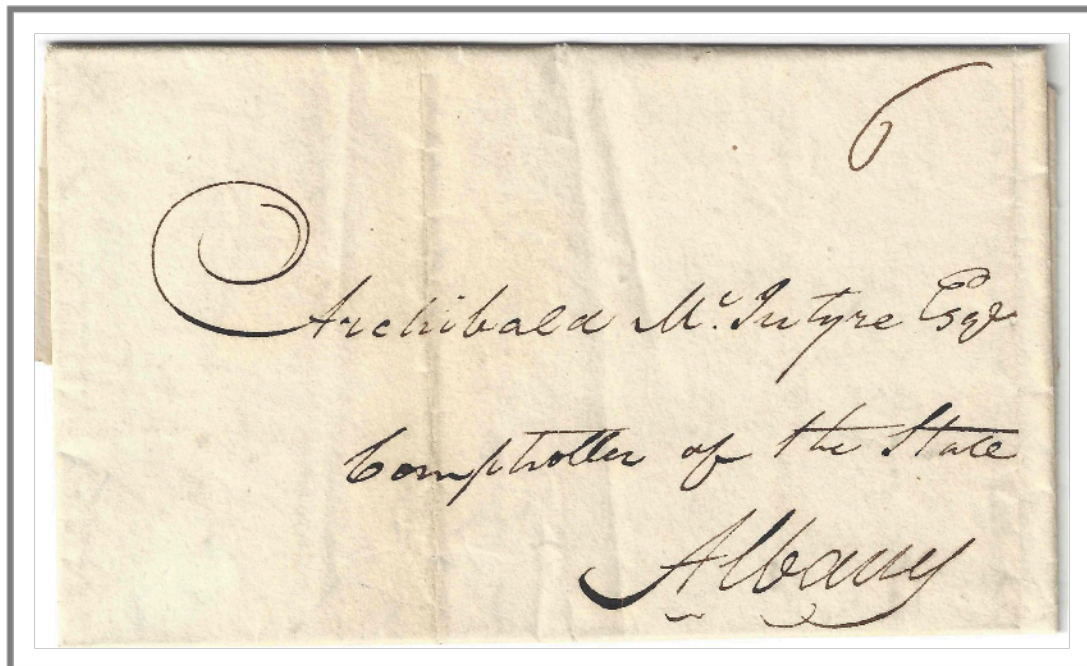
Entry as Ship Letter

Under the Postal Act of 2 March 1799, letters carried by ship to a seaport were to be assessed postage at the rate of 6¢ for local delivery at the port of entry or, if addressed beyond the port, the regular postage from the port of entry to the destination plus a 2¢ ship fee. Both New York City and Albany, by nature of their water being tidal, were seaports. The earliest letters carried by steamboat were therefore subject to the ship letter rules under the 1799 Act.

(Saturday) 27 April 1811 New York City to Albany carried by steamboat Car of Neptune entered mails at Albany with 6¢ due as a ship letter for port of entry delivery

Letter of Benj. De Witt suggests a steamboat jaunt from Albany to New York and includes:

If you come down by next Wednesday's Steam Boat, you may no doubt transact the business before Saturday so as to return to Albany in five days after you leave it. This will not occupy much of your time and it will be a very pleasant jaunt.



STEAM BOAT NOTICE.

THE public are informed that the Steam Boat **CAR OF NEPTUNE**, captain *Roorbach*, will leave New York for Albany on Saturday the 23d instant at 5 o'clock in the afternoon precisely.

Arrangement for the season will be as follows, until a third boat is completed which is now building, viz.

The Car of Neptune will leave New York every Saturday afternoon at 5 o'clock, and Albany every Wednesday morning at half past 8 o'clock.

The North River Steam Boat will leave New York every Tuesday afternoon at 5 o'clock, and Albany every Saturday morning at half past 8 o'clock.

N B A letter box will in future be kept at Mr VANDERVOORT's corner of Courtland & Greenwich streets, for the reception of letters during the absence of the boats

March 1--2w

This 1811 season advertisement identifies the Car of Neptune as the regular Saturday steamer.

The last paragraph notes a letter box:

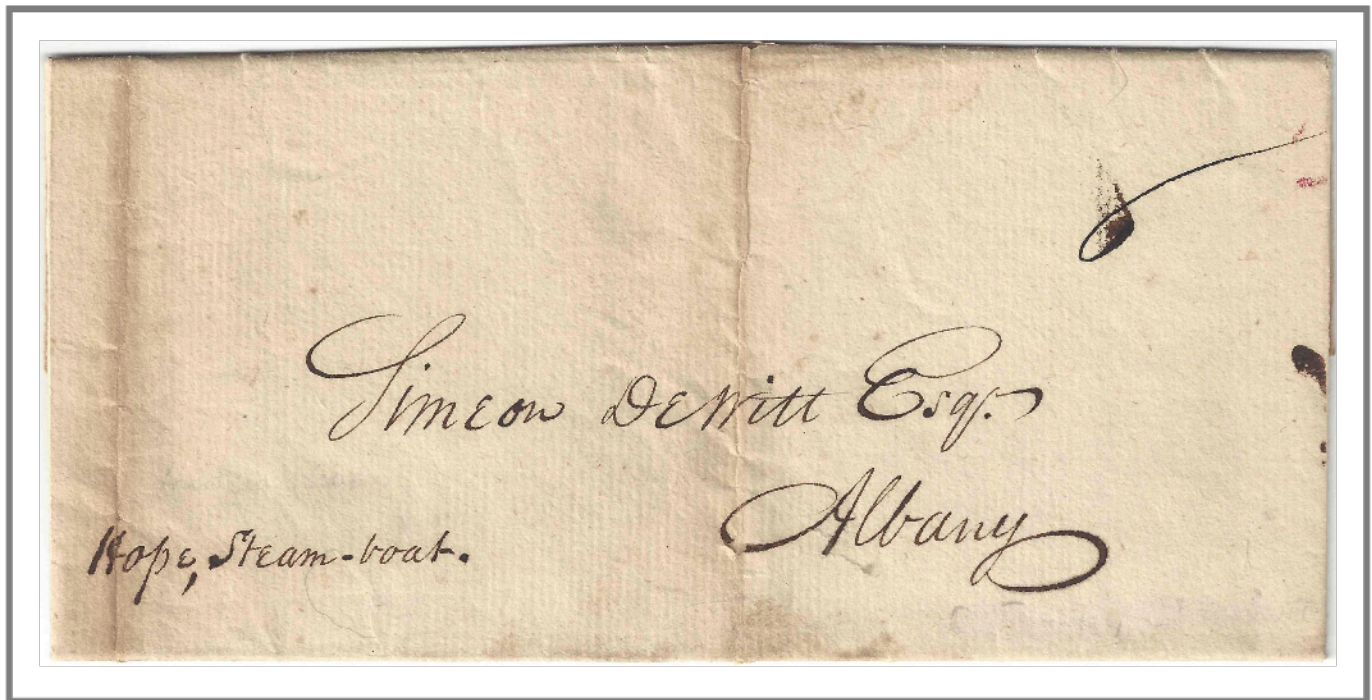
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HUDSON RIVER MAIL

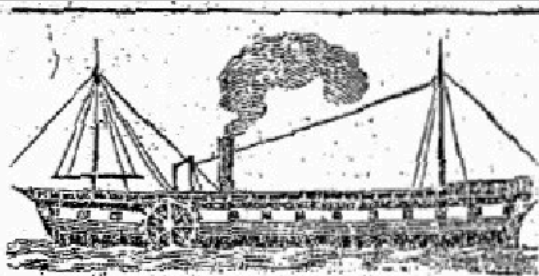
Albany, 1811

Entry as Ship Letter

Opposition Line Steamboat Hope



(Wednesday) 18 September 1811 New York City to Albany, endorsed "Hope, Steam Boat"
carried by Albany Co. steamboat Hope
entered mails at Albany with 6¢ due as a ship letter for port of entry delivery
the only reported example



THE ALBANY STEAMBOATS
Hope and Perseverance.

THE Hope, capt. DUNKER, leaves New-York every Wednesday morning, at 9 o'clock, and Albany every Saturday morning at the same hour.

The Perseverance, capt. SHERMAN, will leave New-York every Saturday morning at 9 o'clock, and Albany every Wednesday morning at the same hour, through the season.

The boats will lie at the foot of Liberty-street in New-York, and in front of the Eagle tavern at Albany.

August 21, 1811. tf

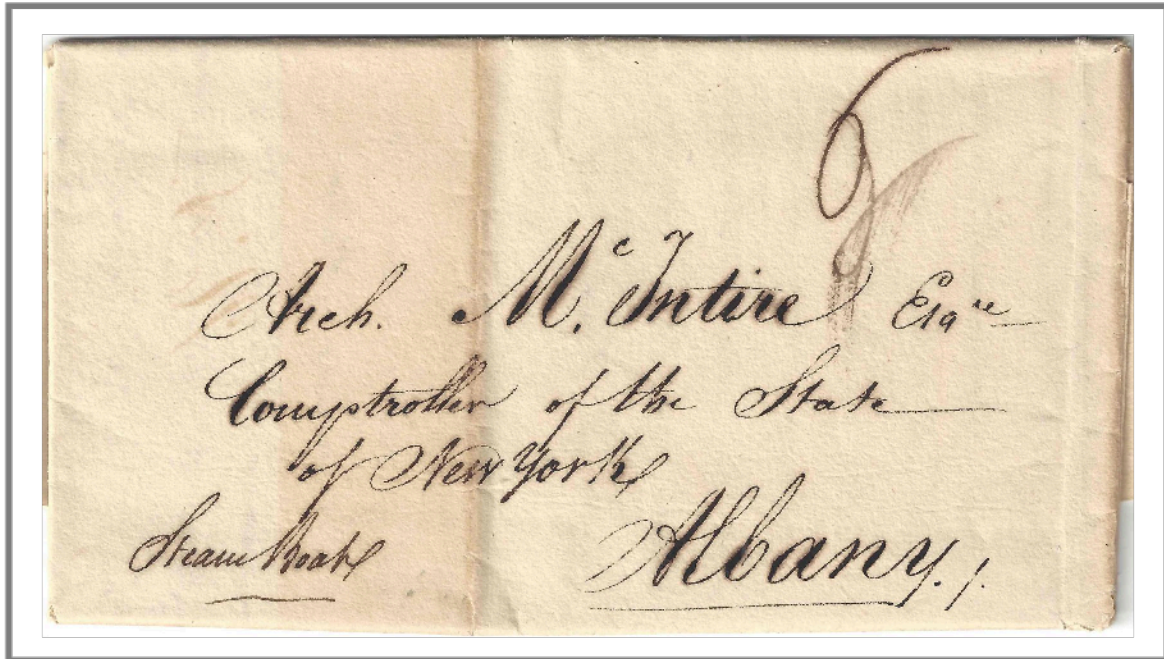
The Albany Company commenced running their opposition line steamboat Hope on the Hudson River in June 1811. This August 1811 advertisement includes both of their new steamboats, Hope and Perseverance. They only operated this one season as Fulton's North River Line quickly brought a successful suit against them.

HUDSON RIVER MAIL

Albany, 1811

Entry as Ship Letter

A letter carried by Fulton's steamboat Car of Neptune.



(Saturday) 28 October 1811 New York City to Albany, endorsed "Steam Boat" by sender
carried by steamboat Car of Neptune
entered mails at Albany with 6¢ due as a ship letter for port of entry delivery

STEAM BOATS.

North River steam boat, lies at Court-landt street wharf.*

Car of Neptune, steam boat lies at Court-landt street wharf.*

Hope, steam boat, lies at the foot of Liberty street.

Perseverance, steam boat lies at the foot of Liberty street.

Raritan steam boat, for Amboy and New Brunswick lies at steam boat wharf Battery.

* These are the Boats of Mr. Fulton, the inventor, and first who introduced the use of Steam in Nautical purposes. Ed. Pp.

This 1811 notice lists the two opposition line steamers, Hope and Perseverance, as well as the North River Line steamers, North River and Car of Neptune (denoted with asterisks).

* These are the Boats of Mr. Fulton, the inventor, and first who introduced the use of Steam in Nautical purposes.

HUDSON RIVER MAIL

Albany, 1812 / 1813

Ship Handstamps



(Monday) 6 July 1812 New York City, via Albany, to Vergennes, VT, endorsed "pr Steam"
9 July entered mails at Albany with "SHIP" and 14½¢ due (12½¢ rate plus 2¢ ship fee)
carried on the steamboat Car of Neptune



(Friday) 26 November 1813 New York City, via Albany, to Cooperstown, NY
30 November entered mails at Albany with "SHIP" and 12¢ due (10¢ rate plus 2¢ ship fee)
carried on the steamboat Paragon

For the 1812 and 1813 seasons, with the North River Line monopoly re-established, the scheduled departures from New York City were: Paragon (Saturdays), Car of Neptune (Tuesdays), and the North River (Thursdays).

HUDSON RIVER MAIL

Albany, 1814

Entry as Ship Letter

Fulton's first commercially successful steamer, The North River, was retired without publicity after the 14 July 1814 trip to Albany.

New York 14 July 1814



(Thursday) 14 July 1814 New York City to Albany, endorsed "Steam Boat" by sender entered mails at Albany with 6¢ due as a ship letter for port of entry delivery **carried on the last trip of the steamboat North River**

TRIP	17 May 5	18 10	No. 14
<u>W. Louis Hunt to North River Steam Boat, Dr.</u>			
To Passage and Provisions,			10 50.
To Freight and Sundries,			
			<u>\$ 10. 50.</u>
Received Payment,		S. Newall	

5 May ticket for passage and provisions for trip #17, in 1810 on the North River steamboat ticket for Mr. Louis Hunt is signed by Captain Samuel Wiswall

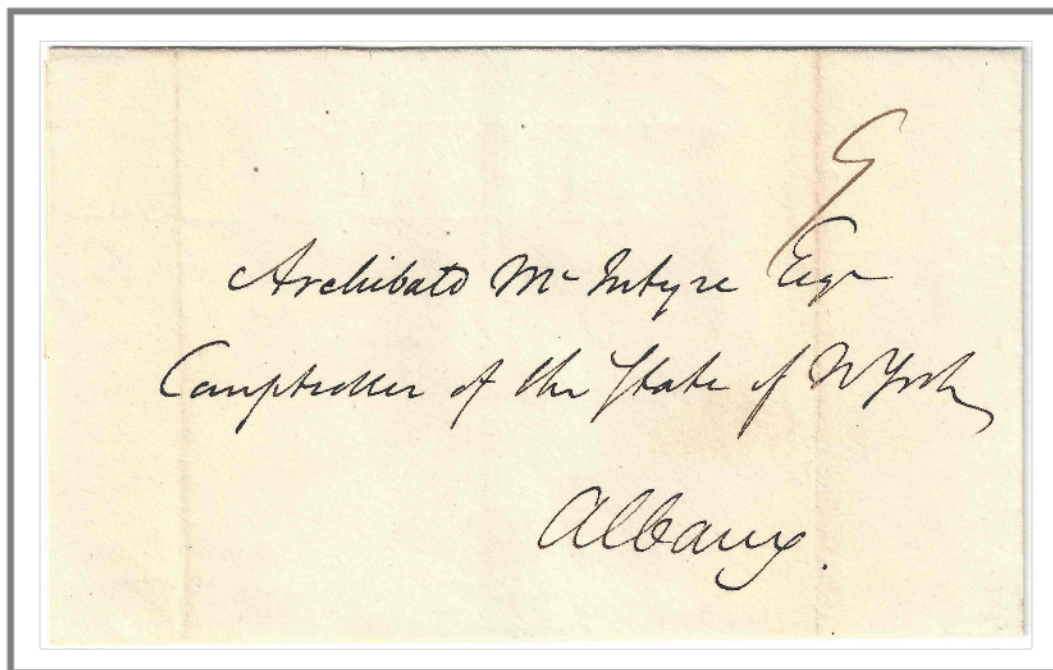
HUDSON RIVER MAIL

Albany, 1815

Last Day Ship Letter

The period of ship mail usages on the Hudson River ended on 15 April 1815. A post office contract was awarded to The North River Steamboat Company (The Fulton Line) and on 15 April 1815 contract mail service by steamers between Albany and New York City commenced.

*Last Day Non-Contract Steamboat Service
Last Day Ship Rate on the Hudson River*



(Friday) 14 April 1815 New York City to Albany
entered mails at Albany with 9¢ War surcharge rate due for port of entry delivery

Messrs. Websters and Skimmers,

A subscriber wishes to be informed, through the medium of your paper, whether the late law laying an additional postage on letters, &c. extends to Ship Letters; if not under what authority the Post Master exacts 50 per ct advance upon all letters brought by the Steam Boat, which come under the denomination of Ship Letters, and are so marked at the Post-Office. C. K.

This 23 March 1815 notice published in the *Albany Gazette* questions why the postmaster is exacting a surcharge on letters received from steamboats that the post office treats the same as ship letters.

HUDSON RIVER MAIL

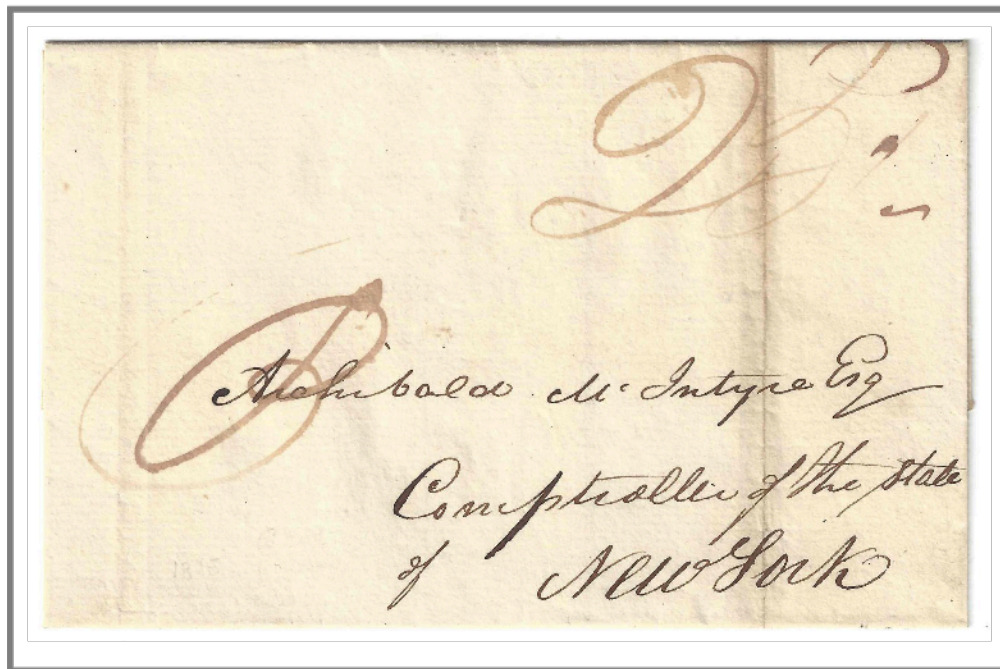
Albany, 1815

Earliest Albany B

The Post Office Act of 30 April 1810 specified how loose letters received from steamboats were to be rated and stated that the postmaster was to pay the master 2¢ for each such letter or packet delivered. It distinguished between letters of domestic and non-domestic origin by specifying that the "commanders of foreign packets," which were covered under laws applicable to ship mail incoming from other countries, were not to be paid the 2¢ fee.

Instructions issued by Postmaster General Granger on 12 July 1810 specified that letters carried on steamboats were "to be rated in the same manner as if conveyed by land." As a result, postal charges on steamboat letters were to reflect the distance from the point the letter was picked up and destination. This "origin to destination" standard was intended to mitigate the losses that the Post Office suffered due to application of more favorable ship rates.

Notwithstanding the 1810 Act, letters received from steamboats continued to be rated as incoming ship letters until 1815. The Post Office Act of 27 February 1815 reiterated the requirements of the 1810 Act, and on 15 April 1815, Fulton and Livingston were awarded the first contract to carry mail by steamboat.



After 15 April 1815, all loose letters delivered from steamboats to the Albany post office received the manuscript "B" notation, which served as the postmaster's mark of accounting and evidence of the "origin to destination" postal rate.

The Earliest Reported Letter with "B" (Boat) Postal Marking and The Earliest Reported Letter Rated Based on Origin to Destination Land Rate

(Wednesday) 24 May 1815 New York City to Albany, carried on the Car of Neptune entered mails at Albany with "B" and correct 25½¢ War surcharge rate based on the full distance rate between New York and Albany, not as a drop rate

For the 1815 season, three of Fulton's steamboats made four weekly trips from New York to Albany. The steamers used were the Paragon, Car of Neptune and the Richmond. Departures from New York were on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday.

HUDSON RIVER MAIL

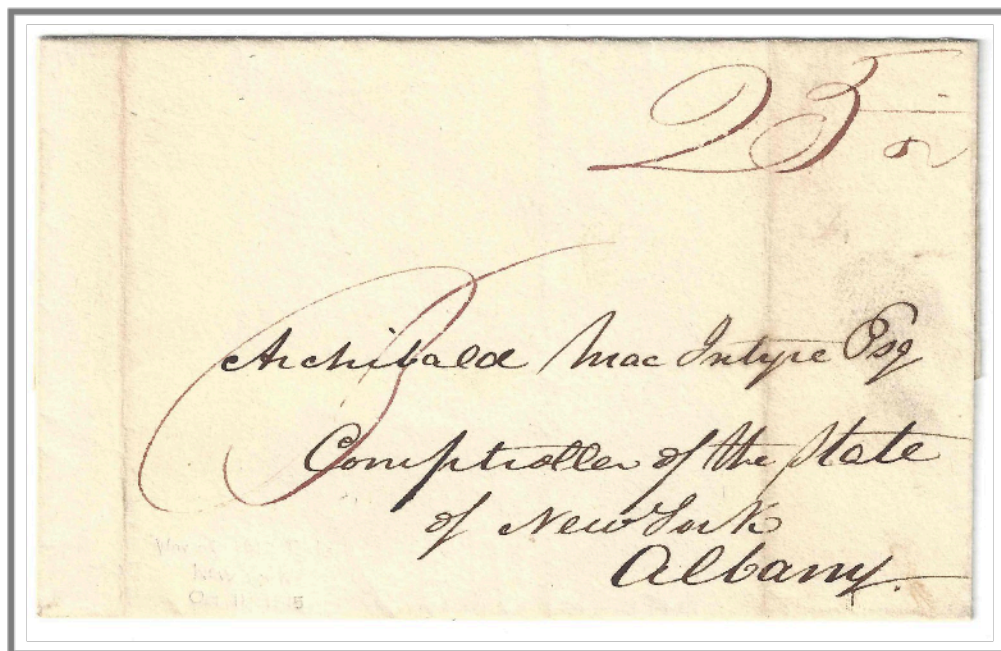
Albany, 1815

Contract Mail / Albany B

Contract mails and loose letters were handled differently. The top letter was delivered into the New York post office with endorsement to be carried by steamboat to Albany. It was postmarked and bagged for carriage as contract mail. The lower cover was delivered directly to the steamboat, probably by a wharf agent, and was carried on a contract steamboat but as a loose letter.



15 October 1815 New York City to Albany, triple letter endorsed for contract steamboat mail entered mails at New York with triple rate 76½¢ due War surcharge rate (150 to 300 miles)



11 October 1815 New York City to Albany, single letter entered mails at Albany with "B" and 25½¢ due War surcharge rate (150 to 300 miles)

HUDSON RIVER MAIL

Albany, 1818

Newburgh Agent

The manuscript "NewBurgh" endorsement was applied by the wharf agent at Newburgh to indicate where the loose letter was given to the master of the steamboat. When letter arrived at Albany, postage was based on land distance from Newburgh.

NewBurgh-



(Saturday) 12 September 1818 Newburgh, NY to Albany, by steamboat *Fire Fly*
manuscript "NewBurgh" applied by wharf agent
entered mails at Albany with "B" and 12½¢ due (80 to 150 miles)
two known examples of Newburgh wharf agent endorsement

postscript to the letter, "The team is drawing up the plank from the dock"



HUDSON RIVER MAIL

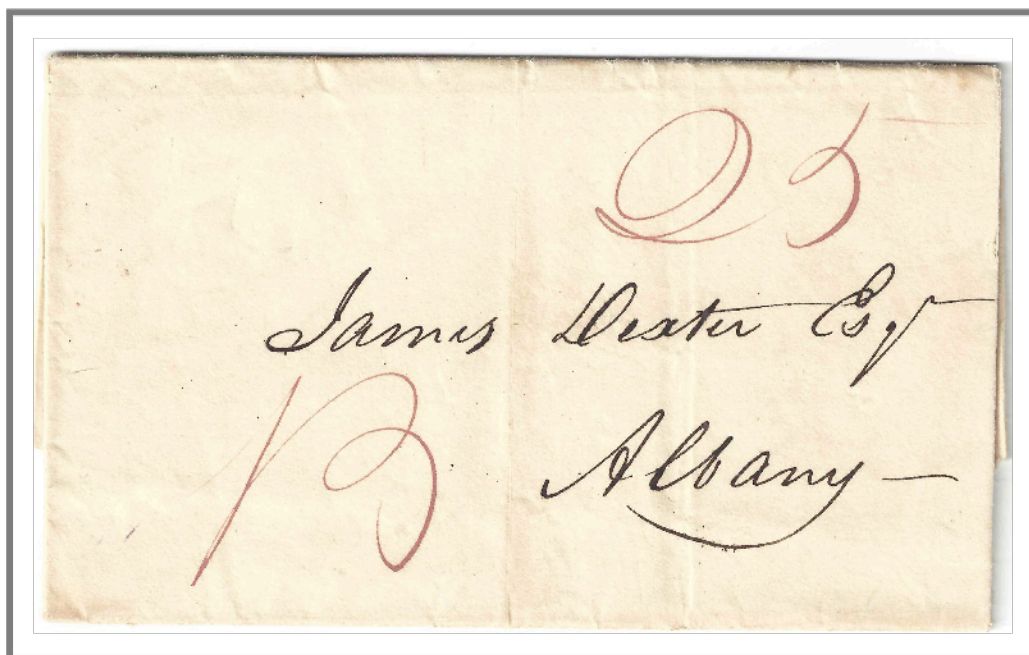
Albany, 1823 / 1824

Albany B

On 22 January 1821 Postmaster General Meigs announced that the mail distance between New York and Albany had been recalculated and found to be under 150 miles and that postage hereinafter be reduced. This resulted in the reduction of the postal rate from 18½ cents to 12½ cents for a single sheet letter.



30 June 1824 New York City, single letter to Albany
entered mails at Albany with "B" and 12½¢ due (80 to 150 miles)



11 September 1823 New York City, letter plus enclosure to Albany
entered mails at Albany with "B" and double rate postage 25¢ due (80 to 150 miles)

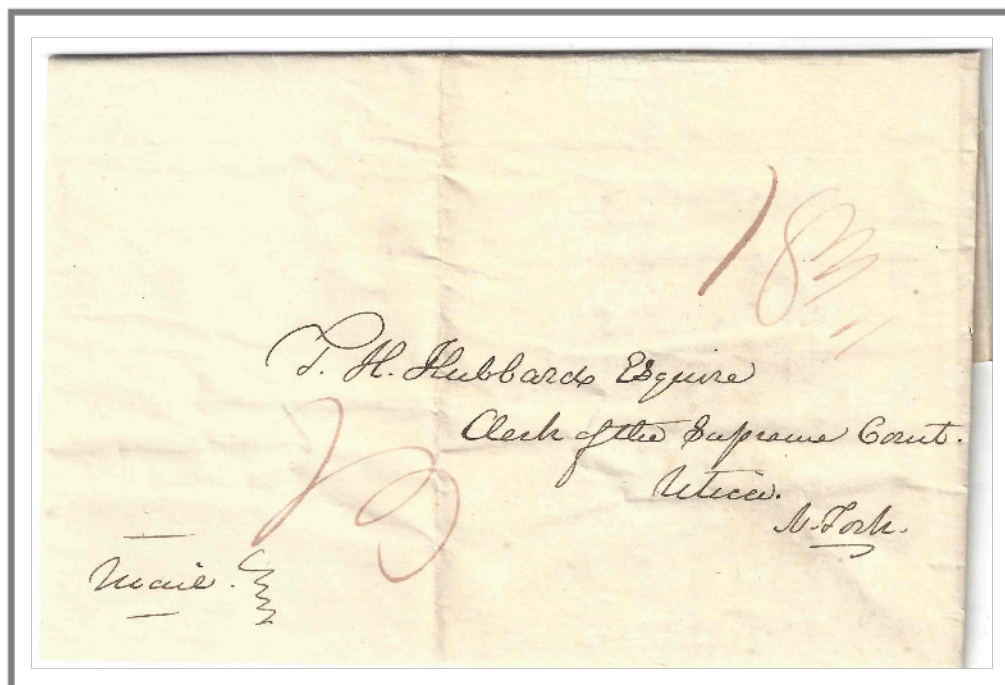
HUDSON RIVER MAIL

Albany, 1827

Albany B



30 November 1827 New York City to the Postmaster at Fallsburgh, NY
entered mails at Albany with "B" and "F" (free of postage for a single letter to a postmaster)



24 May 1827 New York City single letter to Utica, NY
entered mails at Albany with "B" and single rate postage 18¾¢ due (150 to 400 miles)

HUDSON RIVER MAIL

Albany, 1829 / 1832

STEAM BOAT

The "STEAM BOAT" handstamp was introduced in 1829 at Albany to replace the manuscript "B" marking. The earliest reported use is 8 May 1829 and it is known used into the 1860s.

**STEAM
BOAT**



25 July 1829 New York City single letter to Albany
entered mails at Albany with "STEAM BOAT" handstamp and 12½¢ (80 to 150 miles)



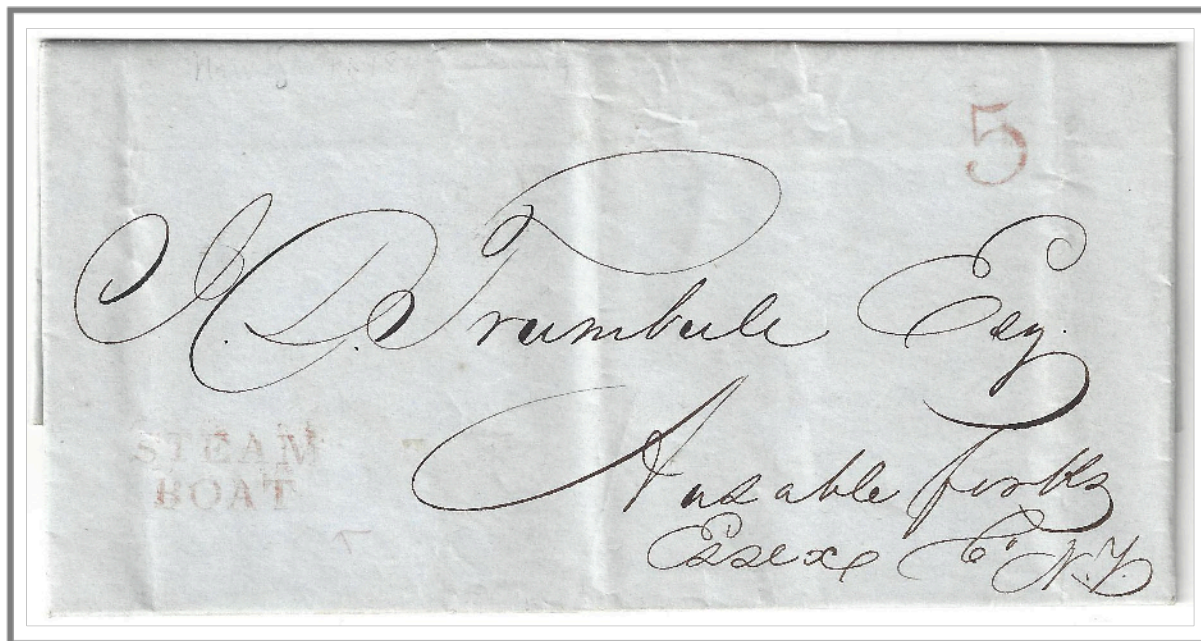
12 October 1832 New York City single letter to Butternutts, NY
entered mails at Albany with "STEAM BOAT" handstamp and 18¾¢ due (150 to 400 miles)

HUDSON RIVER MAIL

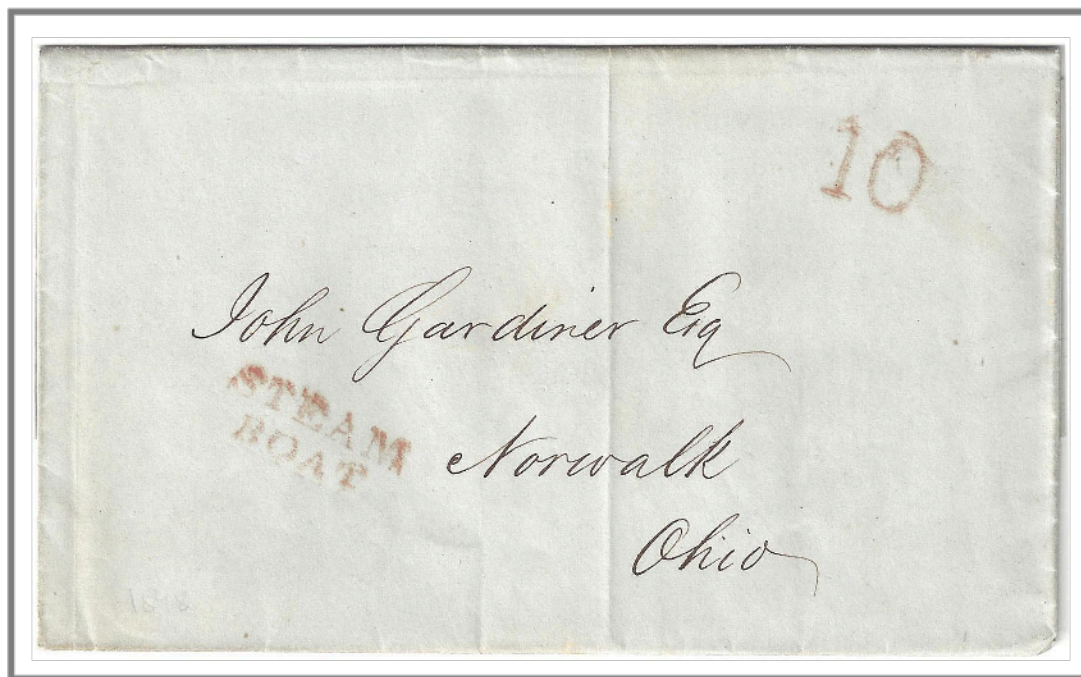
Albany, 1848

STEAM BOAT

From 1 July 1845 the postal rates from single weight letters, to one-half ounce, were reduced to five cents for distance under 300 miles, and to ten cents if over 300 miles.



19 August 1848 New York City, via Albany, to Ausable Forks, NY
entered mails at Albany with "STEAM BOAT" handstamp and 5¢ due rate (under 300 miles)



13 April 1848 New York City, via Albany, to Norwalk, OH
entered mails at Albany with "STEAM BOAT" handstamp and 10¢ due rate (over 300 miles)

HUDSON RIVER MAIL

Albany, 1850s

STEAM BOAT

From 1 July 1851 the postal rates for single weight letters, to one-half ounce, were reduced to three cents for distance under 3,000 miles.



14 August 1851 New York City, via Albany, to Aurora, NY, prepaid 3¢ orange brown 1851 issue entered mails at Albany with "STEAM BOAT" handstamp, prepaid 3¢ rate (under 3,000 miles)



ca. 1853 New York City to Albany, prepaid 3¢ 1851 issue entered mails at Albany with "STEAM BOAT" handstamps in black

embossed corner card of H. M. Cool, Glens Falls Line (&) Cool's Six Day Line Canal Boats