

Postmarking Records, Cancellations and Postmaster Pay

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Abstract

Fourth class post offices were required to keep a record of the impressions of their postmarks. This paper analyzes postmark records from three fourth class offices of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, paying special attention to loose-leaf sheets recovered from an archaeological investigation of an abandoned post office building in eastern Colorado. These sheets contain a unique and significant record of the value of stamps cancelled at the post office from 1941 to 1945. The paper analyzes these records in the context of the celerity and certainty of mail service and the role that cancellations played in determining postmaster pay.

The U.S. Congress instructed the Post Office to let contracts for carrying the mail in the Star Route Act of 1845. Contracts were to be awarded to the lowest bidder who could guarantee satisfactory performance and provide rapid and secure service. The words “certainty, celerity and security “ were so often repeated in bidding forms for these routes that a symbolic abbreviation of three stars or asterisks was often used in their stead. Assistant Postmaster General Daniel Roper wrote of this in 1917, “The bids, which were considered as offering such guarantee were indicated by three stars to symbolize ‘celerity,’ ‘certainty’ and ‘security’. In this way, the routes came to be known as star routes.”¹ The stars symbolized the concessions that the Post Office Department made to industrial age commerce. “Celerity,” from the Latin *celaritas* for swift or quick, connoted rapidity, swiftness and speed. Business thrives on speed. An economy grows only as fast as money can change hands. “Certainty and security” are necessary for an efficient system of transferable property rights. Businesses needed to contract through the mail. The stars encapsulated the Department’s operational philosophy for over one hundred years.

Making time an input in the production process was fundamental to the quest for celerity, certainty and security. As the railroad business had led the way in the development of time zones in the 1840’s², the Post Office

¹ Roper, Daniel C., The United States Post Office, Funk & Wagnalls Co, 1917, p98.

² Gordon, John Steele, An Empire of Wealth The Epic History of American Economic Power, Harper Collins Publishers, 2004

demarked the business day in terms of the time of the dispatch of mail. Recording the time at which the mail would leave an office fixed the starting point of a letter's timeline. The record of that fix was the dated postmark that was stamped on its cover and which was used simultaneously in the 20th century to cancel its postage stamp or stamps. With postmarks in place, celerity could be measured, certainty could be verified and security could be enforced.

Some small offices dispatched mail two or more times a day, as carriers came in from and left for different distribution offices and railway mail stations. Most of the small, 4th class post offices whose postmasters, by definition, earned less than \$1,000 in a year, received mail in and sent mail out only once a day. Nonetheless, the time of the dispatch of mail was so important to a system committed to commerce that every office was required to keep a record of the impressions of their postmarking stamps. "As a check on the correctness and legibility of the postmarking, the postal regulations require the postmaster to make an impression of the postmark on an office record every time any change is made in the die."³ These records of postmarking impressions were to be kept on file at the office to be made available to authorities in the case of an inspection. The regulations insisted that "a record of postmarks showing every change made in the postmarking stamps shall be kept in chronological order in suitable record books or on loose leaf sheets supplied by postmasters. Immediately following a dispatch the postmarking stamp shall be changed to show the time of the next dispatch."⁴

At the turn of the twentieth century, Star Route carriers delivered mail to and collected mail from over 70,000 offices of the 4th class. These offices compiled records of postmark impressions for each business day for over a century, but because they were repetitive and unremarkable, very few examples have survived. A record book of postmark impressions from the Milford, Iowa covering the business days between July 15, 1909 and March 20, 1912 is archived at the American Philatelic Research Library.⁵ Impressions of postmarks for the days between February 14, 1891 and July 15, 1898 have been found in an outdated, incomplete account book from the Trego, Maryland Post office.⁶ And, over one thousand loose-leaf pages of postmark impressions representing parts of four decades from the 1920's through the 1950's have been recovered from an archaeological dig at the site of an abandoned post office building in Fondis, Colorado.⁷ Other examples may be found in private collections, but there has been no systematic study of such records. Figure 1 displays the Milford record book and a sample of the loose-leaf records from Fondis. These artifacts provide a unique view of postal business in what Historian Wayne Fuller has called the "old system" of rural mail that predated and, in isolated places continued concurrent with Rural Free Delivery until the system was reorganized in 1970.⁸

³ Roper, 1917.

⁴ Instructions to Postmasters of the Fourth Class, U.S. Post office Department, 1948.

⁵ Milford (Iowa) post Office Documents, American Philatelic research Library, Bellefonte, PA. Postmark (Circular Date Stamp) Record Book,

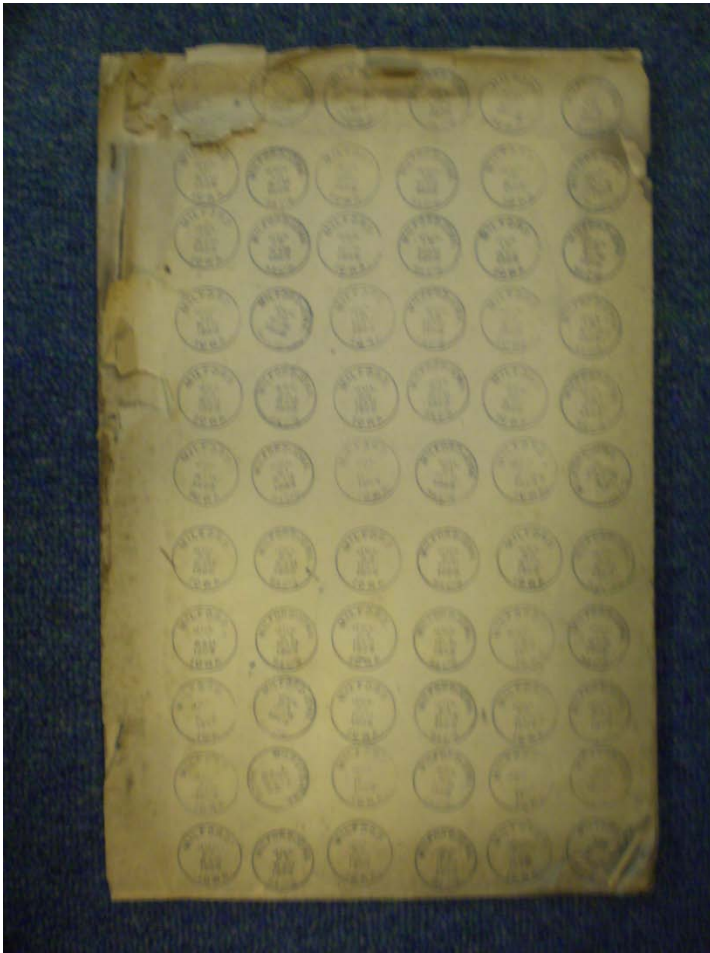
⁶ Private collection of Robert Horn.

⁷ Private collection of Ken Florey.

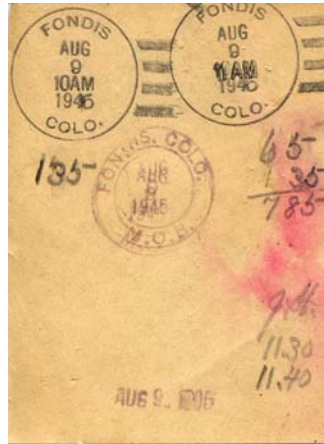
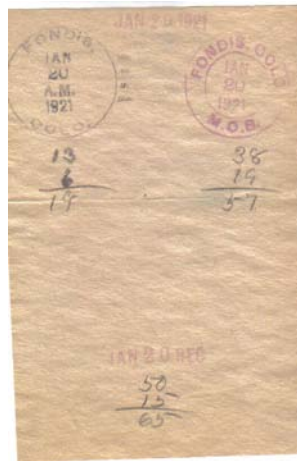
⁸ Fuller, Wayne The Post Office: Enlarger of the Common Life, 1972, p178..

Figure I

Postmarking Records



Milford, Iowa record book



Fondis, Colorado loose leaf records

The Milford, Iowa record book contains 79 pages of impressions generally arranged in ten rows of six circular date stamps with each row representing one day of postal business. Two postmarks were in use at Milford, one for dispatching mail that simply bore the name of the office on the top of the dial above the month, date, time and year plugs in the center of the dial. The name of the state appears the bottom of the dial. The other stamp had both city and state on the top of the dial and the abbreviation "REC'D" on the bottom beneath the month, date, time and year plugs. This was clearly used to mark incoming mail. Mail was dispatched from Milford at least twice each day, probably in the morning and evening. Mail that arrived at the office or which was posted in the morning was stamped with the time set to 6:00 A.M. in the center of the dial. After the morning mail went out, the time plugs were changed to read 11:00 A.M. on both stamps. Once the afternoon mail went out, the time plugs were set to the end of the business day, 6:00 P.M. Thus, each row of six stamp impressions represents one day of business, with impressions of two stamps for each of the three units of time.

Figure 2
Detail of the Milford Postmark Records

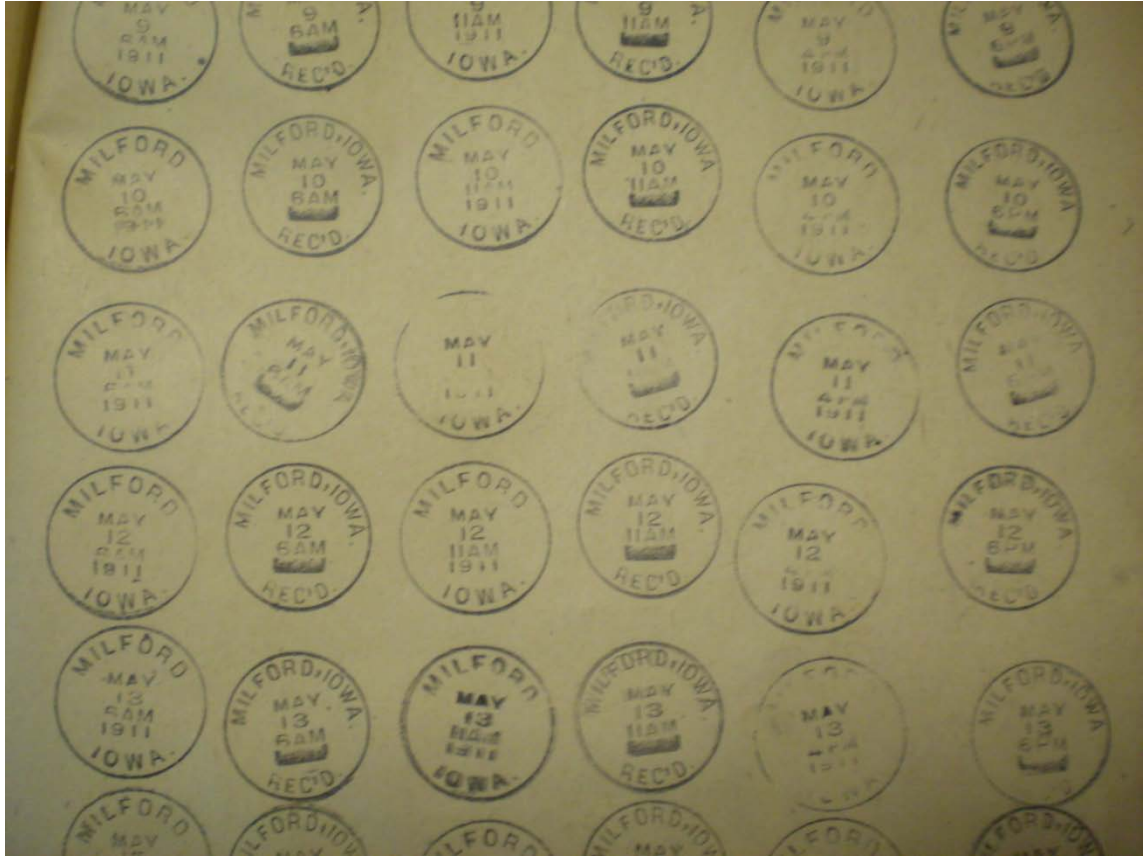


Figure 2 displays a detail from the pages of the Milford postmark record book. The year plug on the receiving post mark has been inserted in such a way as to leave a blurred impression. Though this error must have been obvious to the postmaster, the year plug remained blurred through the first five months of 1911. And, although the year stamp was changed to 1911 from 1910 on the first business day of 1911, the year was set back to 1910 on the posting stamp for the rest of the days in the first week of the new year. These and other errors, only one corrected with a hand strike from a pen, display a cavalier attitude on the part of the postmaster to the accuracy of his postmarking stamps. Almost 20% of the postmarks in the Milford record book are in error. The same is true of the Trego postmark records which were kept in the unused pages of an old “Millers” style account book. The Trego records display many upside-down numbers and incorrectly set date, time and month plugs. And, the marks from many days when the office was in operation are missing. The error rate in the Trego book is about 10%. The abundance of errors in these records support the contention of Richard Helbock that “unlike stamp collecting, where an inverted design causes great excitement, inverted dates, or portions of dates, are rather common in postmarks.”⁹

The loose-leaf postmarking records recovered from an archaeological investigation of the building that once housed the Fondis, Colorado post office are very different in this regard.¹⁰ Only three errors have been found in over 3,366 postmarks impressed on 1,122 sheets of paper, and the postmaster corrected one of these errors (an incorrect date) by hand. This accuracy is surely due to the diligence and care of the

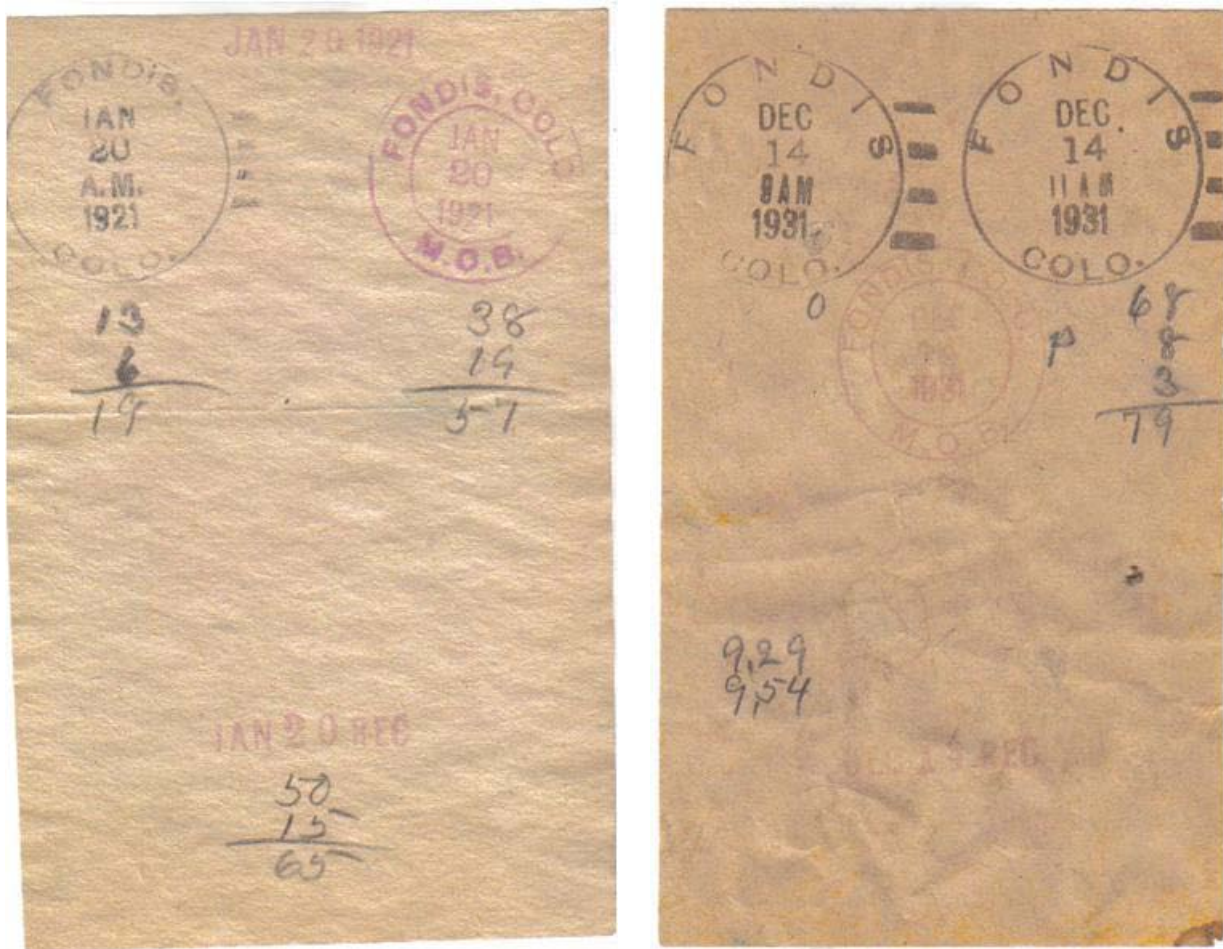
⁹ Helbock, Richard C Postmarks on Postcards, La Posta Publications, 1987, page 14.

¹⁰ Forthcoming

postmaster, but it may also owe much to the way these sheets were used. Besides simply impressing stamps on these sheets, the postmaster used them to record the actual times of the arrival and departure of mail, the identity of the carrier, business conditions and a running tally of amount of stamps cancelled by the office each day. They were not just an artifact to be stored and produced in the case of inspection; they were a vital accounting tool to be used in the preparation of quarterly reports.

Fondis was a small, rural, "Post Office Town" founded in 1897 to serve homesteading dairy farmers. It steadily lost population until the post office was closed in 1954. The building that was used as the 4th class post office was abandoned for over 42 years (1969-2011). Although looters and vandals removed all personal effects and furnishings, the paper trash left behind by its occupants remained in the building and was preserved by arid climate of the high plains of Eastern Colorado. This trash contained is a wide collection of postal documents and forms including money order receipts, registered mail tags, official correspondence and loose-leaf postmarking records. Twenty-eight sheets have been recovered from the years 1920 and 1921 and five from 1931. Twenty-one sheets survive from 1953 and 1954. But fully one thousand and sixty eight sheets have been recovered from the years 1941 through 1945. A representative sample of these sheets produced in the 1920's and 1930's is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Fondis, Colo. Postmarking Records from the 1020's and 1930's



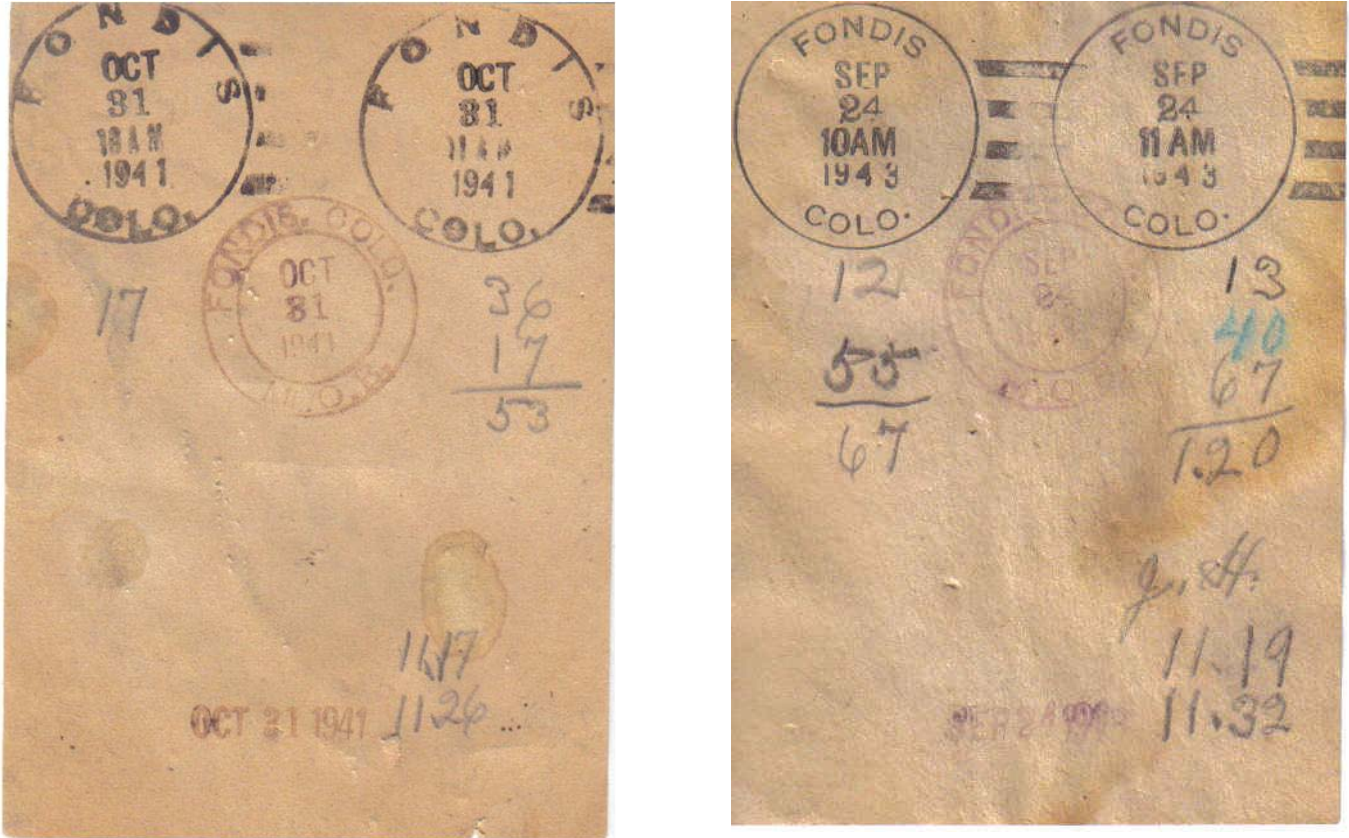
The postmaster at Fondis from 1916 through 1934 was Charles Newton Tripp. The examples shown in Figure 3 reveal that his postmarking records evolved over time to accommodate changes in the mail carrier's route. Those from the 1920's contain one outgoing mail postmark, impressed in the top left corner in black ink. This circular date stamp includes the time designation, "AM" at its center. The contract granted for carrying the mail at that time specified that the carrier should leave from Fondis at 7:00 A.M. and arrive in the town of Elbert by 11:30, a distance of 15 miles. The return trip was scheduled out of Elbert at 1:40 P.M. to arrive back in Fondis by 5:40.¹¹ These times were sufficient to admit travel by horse over poorly maintained dirt roads. Since the carrier was not likely to return until after business hours, there was no need to reset the postmarking stamp during the day, hence only one primary postmark was impressed on the sheet. All mail postmarked on that day was dispatched to Elbert the next morning. The office's Money Order Business postmark is impressed in the top right corner in red ink, and the stamp that was used to date received mail is recorded in the bottom center of the sheet, also in red ink. These sheets include three columns of hand-written numbers, one beneath each stamp impression.

Only six sheets have been recovered from the 1930's, but they show significant differences from those of the 1920's. The primary postmarking stamp has been changed. Its font is different and the spacing wider between letters. These sheets contain two postmarks. The stamp impressed on the top left registers the hour of "9 AM" and that on the right, "11 A.M." The Department had changed the terms of the delivery contract to specify that mail was to be carried by automobile when "road and weather permitted." And, the pattern of carriage now accommodated railroad timetables. The carrier was to leave from Elbert daily after the mail train arrived from Denver at about 10:45 A.M. and arrive in Fondis in 1 ¼ hours where he would drop off the mail to that office and pick up any from it, leaving within a half hour after arriving. Mail that arrived at the Fondis Post Office before the daily dispatch to Elbert bore the "9 AM" postmark. Mail that came in after the carrier left was cancelled with the "11 AM" stamp and was dispatched on the next business day. On these sheets, the Money Order Business mark is impressed in red in the top center beneath the postmarks and the parcel stamp is fixed at the lower center of each. Like those from the 1920's, the sheets from the 1930's include three sets of hand-written numbers, one beneath each cancel and one at the lower right. The numbers beneath each postmark may denote the value of stamps cancelled with each mark. The pair of numbers recorded on the bottom left side of the sheet must represent the actual arrival and departure times of the carrier. In the example shown in Figure 3, the carrier arrived at 9:29 and departed at 9:54 AM. Charles Newton Tripp apparently kept a check on the celerity and certainty of the carrier.

This is confirmed by the large number of sheets recovered from the 1940's. They are separate pages of paper 8 cm wide and 11 cm high (3 ⅞ in by 4 ¼ in). They show no traces of gum along their edges. They were never bound but may have been stored in envelopes or boxes. The paper quality resembles newsprint. It is thin, brown and has yellowed with age. One thousand and sixty eight daily postmarking sheets from the years between 1941 and 1945 have been recovered from the Fondis post office building. No sheets have been found from the first six months of 1941. Sheets are also missing from the entire months of November, 1942, March, 1943 and October, 1943. It may be that the records of these months were removed, disposed or lost. In the 51 months represented in this collection, there were 1324 potential business days. This means that 77% of the records produced over this period of time have been recovered and analyzed. See Figure 4.

¹¹ Advertisement for Carrying the Mails, U.S. Post Office Department, July 1, 1902.

Figure 4
Fondis Colo. Postmarking Records from the 1940's



These records were produced by a different postmaster, Newton's sister, Mary Tripp, who operated the office from 1934 until 1954. Her loose-leaf impressions, though, are similar to those her brother kept in the 1930's. But, a big change had occurred in the manner in which the office was served. The mail contract for this period specified that the carrier was to "leave Elbert on receipt of mail from train at 9:45 but not later than 11:30" and "arrive at Fondis in 1 ¼ hours."¹² That meant that mail would be expected in Fondis at about 11:00. An imprint of the postmark with the date reel set to the current day and the time of dispatch set to 10:00 A.M. is stamped in the top left corner of each form. Another black ink impression of the postmark with the same date but with the time set to 11:00 A.M. is stamped on the top right corner. These sheets also contain an impression of the Money Order cancellation stamp of the office, set to the current date and pressed in red ink onto the middle of the form, below the stamp cancellation impressions. This imprint is made in red ink. This stamp has the month and day (but not a time-of-day mark) in its center and the legend, Fondis. Colo. M.O.B. (Money Order Business) on the dial. This impression has also been found on money order receipts that have been recovered from the trash in the building. A red day, date and year stamp used for received mail is pressed on the lower center of each sheet. There are instances in which this stamp's date or month was initially impressed in error and was later corrected by hand. Several sheets have multiple, identical rubber stamp marks.

In the lower right-hand corner of the obverse side of each sheet are two time notations, one listed above the other. The first time is represents the actual time of the arrival of the daily mail from the post office

¹² Ibbid, July 1, 1938.

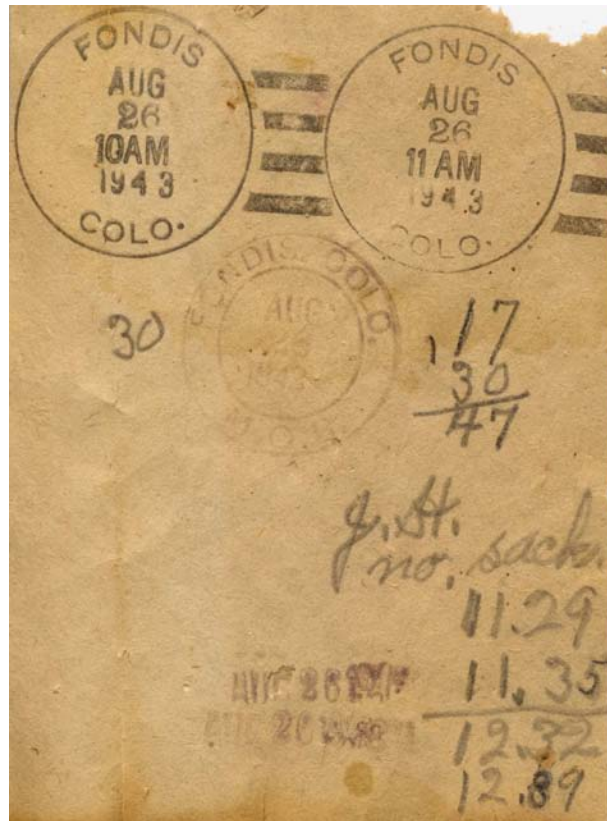
at Elbert, Colorado. The second time is the actual time at which the carrier left Fondis to return to Elbert. The average of the actual arrival time over one thousand and sixty eight days is 11:30 AM. The carrier's departure occurs, on average, 13 minutes later. Occasionally, other notes are added to these sheets near the register of actual arrival and dispatch times. These include initials or names of the mail carrier. Four carriers are identified in the recovered forms: J. H. Ehlers, Paul E, Mrs. J. H and H. A. Eichoff. The last name, H.A. Eichoff appears only once in December of 1945. Although no names were recorded in 1941 and only a few were recorded in 1942, by 1944 and 1945, all sheets identified the mail carrier.

A few sheets betray some uncertainty about the identity of the carrier. One records "Mr. or Mrs. J. H." Another adds a question mark behind the name, "Mrs. J. H.?" It may be the case that, on occasion, the carrier just dropped the mail bag off on the porch and sped away without contacting the postmaster directly, leaving her to guess the identity by the appearance of the carrier's car.

Sometimes notes about road conditions, weather and holidays are written on the forms, but these are infrequent. Only 100 such notes have been found in over 1,000 forms. Nonetheless, they provide compelling proof that the time registers are indeed mail arrival and departure times. When notes of conditions that would likely delay mail delivery are included, the time entries are much later than average. On days when road conditions impeded the delivery of mail, the first time recorded on the forms averages one hour and eleven minutes later than the time recorded under normal conditions. On days when conditions were so bad that the mail could not get through, there is no time entry at all. Conclusive proof that these numbers record the actual time of mail arrival and departure is provided by a unique postmark record sheet shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5

An error in mail delivery.



The form shown in Figure 5 contains typical arrival and departure times, 11:29 and 11:35 in the morning. But, the note “no sack” is added and another pair of times is reported beneath the original register. When letter carrier J. H. Ehlers arrived at 11:29, he discovered that he had left the Elbert post office without the sack of mail destined for Fondis. He must have returned to Elbert, retrieved the misplaced sack and took it whit him back to Fondis. This would have been a one-hour round trip. The second pair of times recorded (12:23 and 12:39) are one hour later than the first. This is the only form in the collection that shows two sets of time, and it is the only one to indicate an error in mail delivery. It verifies the assumption that these numbers are the actual times of mail delivery and departure. And, it also testifies to the celerity and certainty of rural mail service.

One of the most remarkable features of these postmarking record sheets are the columns of handwritten numbers that appear beneath each postmark impression. These sheets provided a convenient and obvious place for a postmaster to record daily business data. One of the most important bits of data to the postmaster was the value of stamps that she cancelled and admitted to the mail, because her salary depended on cancellations. Postmasters of the fourth class were not admitted to the civil service and received no pay check. Instead, the Post Office Department issued postage stamps to them and allowed them to keep a part of the money they earned from the sale of those stamps. The amount they were allowed to keep depended on the amount of stamps they cancelled at their office and increased at a diminishing rate. Postmasters submitted quarterly reports of their cancellations and, in the 1920’s, could keep all of the first \$80 of stamps that they cancelled plus 60% of the next \$100, 50% of the \$200 beyond that and 40% of anything above \$380 of cancellations. This pay scale was capped at a maximum salary of \$250 a quarter, but most postmasters earned far less.

Postal accounting was complicated and inadequate. A contemporary Economics textbook observed in 1939 that “The United States Post Office does not have a system of cost accounting such as is considered essential in any up-to-date private enterprise.”¹³ The Post Office Department was more concerned with the flow of mail than the flow of cash. Department officials consistently resisted efforts to adopt modern methods. As late as 1950, Postmaster General Jesse Donaldson ridiculed a congressional claim that the incentive and productivity features of modern accounting could potentially save the Department more than \$25 million. “If we threw all our books and records into the river and maintained no accounts at all, it would be most optimistic to think that we could save in excess of 25 million. It does not cost us that much now to perform all our accounting functions.” One reason why accounting costs were low was that the Department “outsourced” its fourth-class accounting to the Treasury Department. After all, it was the Treasury who printed and issued stamps and collected revenue from their sale. Instead of sending their quarterly reports to district or central offices, fourth class postmasters submitted their quarterly accounts directly to the Treasury Department’s General Accounting Office. The Treasury issued postmasters a “fixed credit” of stamps, and required them to reimburse the Treasury for the amount of stamps they sold and to re-order to replenish their stock of fixed credit. But, only “surplus” revenues in excess of the postmaster’s quarterly salary allowance were remitted to the General Accounting Office and only then if the surplus exceeded fifty dollars.

¹³ Fairchild, Elementary Economics, Furniss Book, 1939.

This system left the Treasury with an accurate count of stamps sold but did not give the Department good estimates of stamps cancelled. Fortunately, the difference between stamp sales and stamp cancellations was not likely to be very large at most rural offices. Some patrons might buy stamps at one office and mail them at another. Some might buy stamps and use them to pay fees or buy merchandise, never entering them in the mail. "In the ordinary course of business, the sales at fourth class offices should usually exceed the cancellations from 10 to 15 percent."¹⁴ With the margin of error so small, the Post Office Department allowed postmasters the option to either keep an actual account of the amount of stamps they cancelled or to prepare instead a "report made up from the amount of stamps sold."¹⁵ This approximation, which Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield later called "Stamp Accounting",¹⁶ was a cheap, simple and efficient system, but could it be abused. An unscrupulous postmaster could profit by ordering more stamps than his or her office could use and profit by selling the excess at a discount while inflating their reports of cancellations to hide the deception. It was also possible to artificially increase cancellations so as to increase compensation. The Department admitted that excessive cancellations could be due to "the mailing of large quantities of matter, probably circulars, sent in bulk by express or other conveyance from another place with the purpose of giving the postmaster the benefit of commissions authorized by law."¹⁷

By the end of the 19th century, the Post Office Department considered "the fraudulent practices resorted to by many postmasters at fourth-class offices to unduly increase their compensation have become a great evil; they are growing and spreading, and unless effectually checked they will result in serious losses to the postal revenue."¹⁸ As a check against such malfeasance, the Department authorized its Postal Inspectors to investigate postmasters suspected of "having made false returns of the cancellation of postage stamps."¹⁹ Inspectors were to surreptitiously count outgoing cancellations for one month and then compare their actual count with the record kept by the postmaster. The inspector was instructed to "ascertain by careful inquiry whether the record of cancellations kept in the post office is the result of an actual count or whether it has been made up from the amount of stamps sold."²⁰

The threat of inspection created an incentive for fourth-class postmasters to keep actual records of the stamps that they cancelled on file at their offices. Still, the Department but did not require that they keep an actual count until the 1940's and it never required them to submit those records to its central or district offices. Postmasters merely had to keep them on file at the office and could dispose of them after three years. Those postmasters who did keep an actual tally would only submit monthly sums of their cancellations in quarterly reports. Short of an inspector's audit, there would be no way to tell if those sums represented actual accounts or estimates based on stamp sales. And, the quarterly reports that were submitted to the department have since been destroyed. The Department periodically removed micro-scale business records from the National Archives and disposed of them, saving only a few years worth of data compiled from the quarterly reports of individual offices. Modern researchers can only find data on "receipts" of individual 4th class offices for the years 1923-24 and 1943-48. "Receipts" included stamp sales, box rentals and sales of

¹⁴ Instructions to Postmasters, 1899.

¹⁵ Instructions to Postmasters, 1899

¹⁶ Summerfield, US Mail: The Story of The United States Postal Service, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960.

¹⁷ Instructions to Post Office Inspectors, September 1, 1889, page 70.

¹⁸ Ibbid.

¹⁹ Instructions to Post Office Inspectors, September 1, 1889.

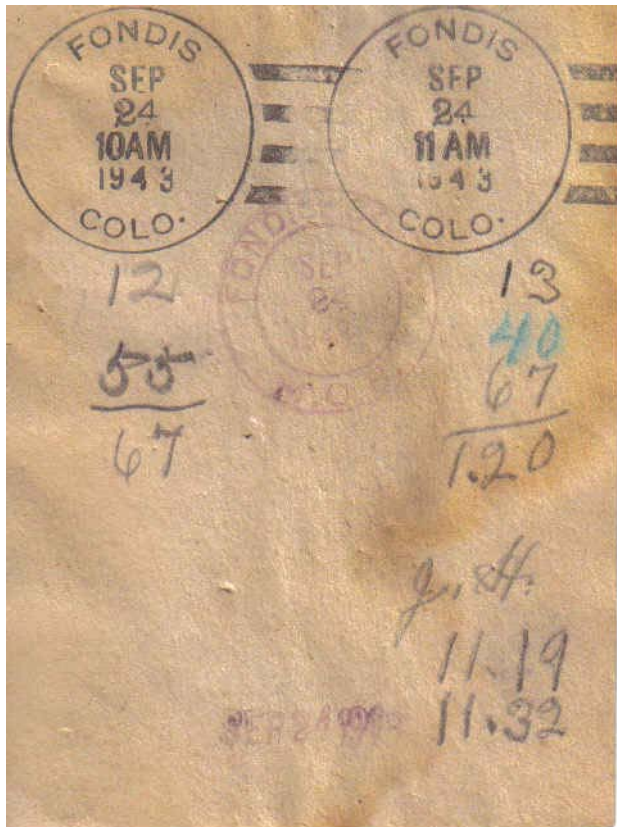
²⁰ Ibbid, pg 69.

twine and paper. Neither the National Archives nor the Library of the Postal Museum of the Smithsonian has an actual record of stamp cancellations in its collection. Historical Archeology has been criticized as “an expensive way to find out what we already know.”²¹ But detailed cancellation records can only be found through historical archaeology.

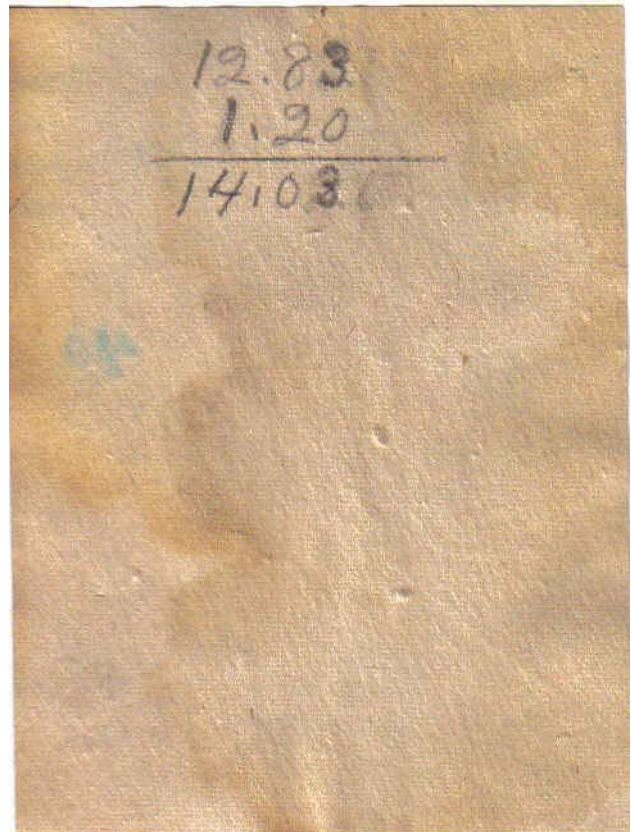
In a letter to the editor of the *Postmaster’s Advocate* in 1929, Postmaster S.C. Watkins advised his colleagues that “the same pad or book in which to take the daily impressions of the postmarking stamp may be used for recording the cancellations of outgoing matter.”²² Newton Tripp may have initiated this practice on his own and passed the system on to his sister, Mary with whom he lived, but regardless of how she came to the practice, she obviously recorded her cancellations on these postmarking records. Figure 6 displays a representative sheet from the Fondis records.

Figure 6

Cancellations tallied on Fondis, Colo. Postmarking Record Sheets



Obverse



Reverse

None of the recovered forms contains a key to the nature of these numbers. And though they are in decimal units and are consistent with dollar values, no dollar or cent sign is recorded next to any number on any sheet. This supports the interpretation of the numbers as records of cancelled postage. Cancellations were not revenue to the office. They were, instead, a measure of the office’s marginal product, the

²¹ Deets, James, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*, Doubleday, 1977.

²² S.C. Watkins in *Postmaster’s Advocate*, Volume 34, No. 7, February 1929, page 247.

contribution of that office to the stream of U.S. mail. It is therefore not surprising to find no indication of currency value. These numbers account for the postmaster's "outgo," not her income.

Beneath the postmarks, starting on either side of the money order stamp and running in columns down each side of the sheet, are series of numbers recorded by hand, usually in pencil. The numbers in the two columns are usually whole numbers, but occasionally a decimal point is introduced. When more than one entry is listed in the column beneath the 10 AM mark on the left-hand side of the form, a sum is struck below the entries. This sum is repeated as the last entry before the addition strike bar in the column beneath the 11 AM mark on the right hand side. A sum total is recorded at the bottom of the right column which represents the total of all stamps cancelled on that day.

On the top of the reverse side of each sheet is another tally of three numbers, the first being the total value of transactions in this month preceding the date of the sheet, the second the sum total of postage sold on that day, which is the total from the bottom of the right-hand column on the front side and the third number, beneath a strike mark is the sum of the two numbers above and represents a running total of monthly postage cancelled by the Fondis Post Office to that date.

Whole numbers are usually entered on the front of these forms, but the running total on the back always includes decimal points. It appears that transactions are typically entered in pennies on the front but are routinely converted to units of one hundred on the reverse. One half of a cent values are often recorded. A document discovered in the trash left behind in the old building verifies that domestic postage rates on second-class mail of books, catalogs, seeds, cuttings, bulbs, roots, scions and plants was 1 ½ cents for each 2 ounces.²³ Since Fondis was a farm community, its residents would have had occasion to mail catalogs, seeds, cuttings, bulbs, roots, scions and plants. (Blevins, 1984) The appearance of ½ cent transactions strongly suggests that the tallies on these forms include records of cancelled postage.

"No mail" is occasionally written beneath a postmark on these sheets. Usually a handwritten note is included to describe inclement weather or bad road conditions. Sometimes, this notation is made beneath both postmarks on a sheet. On these occasions, there is no daily total of business activity and the previous day's total is repeated on the back of the form. On days when the carrier was stopped by bad weather, there are no reports of the arrival and departure times. "No mail" does not mean "no business", for on several "no mail" days, cancellations are recorded beneath one or more postmarks, usually the 11 AM mark. On holidays, the notation "No mail Holiday" is recorded beneath the 10 AM mark. It is a testimony to the certainty of mail service that the Fondis Post Office was open for business on holidays, for cancellations are often recorded on holidays even though no mail was delivered or dispatched. In another instance, "no mail Holiday" is written beneath the 10 AM postmark and "no mail roads blown full" below the 11 AM mark. No cancellations were recorded on that day. Even though the office remained open for business, the bad storm could have kept patrons away.

One sheet from February 18 of 1944 has the word "papers" written before the first entry beneath the 11 AM postmark. Another has "parcel" before the first number. A receipt from the Christmas season mailing rush of 1943 has the legends "airpkg" and "pkg" attached to the first two entries beneath the 10 AM postmark. Only a dozen sheets with "p", "pp" and "pkg" notes have been recovered. These notes support the

²³ Domestic postal rates effective January 1, 1949. Box B2.

case that the numbers represent the value of postage cancelled, for they delineate the type of mail posted; packages and parcel post. The numbers next to the notes must be the value of the stamps cancelled on the packages because they are not avoirdupois units and thus cannot represent the weight of the parcels.

The postmark record sheets recovered from the 1950's differ from those of all the earlier decades in one significant way. They contain no hand-written numbers or notes. Congress changed the rules of postmaster pay in 1945. Acting on a long-standing demand from postmasters, it altered the pay scale so that compensation depended on office revenues instead of cancellations.²⁴ By the 1950's, cancellations no longer mattered to fourth-class postmasters. The lack of any notes on forms from the 1950's supports the interpretation of these notes as records of cancellations. Mary Trip still had to maintain postmarking records in the 1950's, but no longer needed to record her cancellations.

Figure 7

Fondis, Colo. Postmark Records from the 1950's



The daily value of the stamps cancelled by Mary Tripp for the years 1941-1945, as gleaned from her Fondis Postmark records, are displayed in Figure 8. The average amount of stamps she cancelled during these years amounted to about 88 cents per day. There is a clear peak in postal activity in December of each year from Christmas card and gift mailing when the daily volume of mail more than doubled. Cancellations during December averaged \$1.71 per day, while they averaged only about 78 cents per day for the rest of the year. Figure 8 displays these comparisons.

²⁴ Fourth-class Postmasters salaries. Hearings before the committee on the Post Office and Post Roads, 1936, 1940, 1945.

Figure 8

The Daily Value of Stamps Cancelled at Fondis, CO

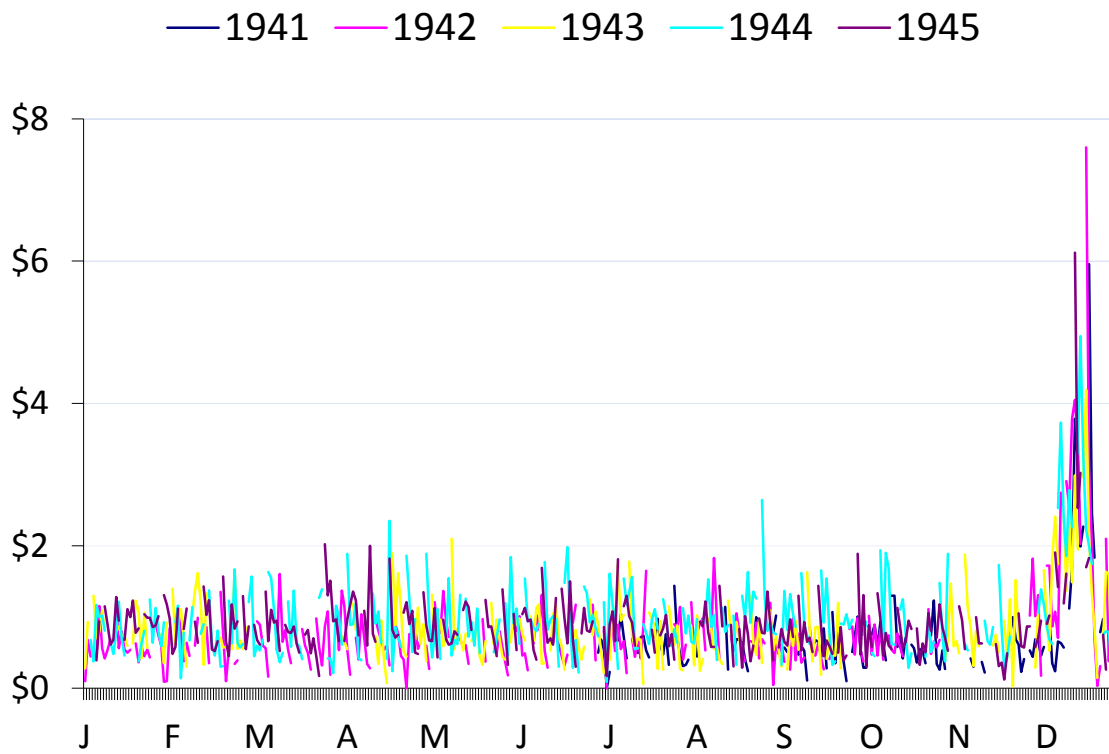


Figure 9

Christmas Cancellations verses the Rest of the Year

| Season | Average Daily Cancellation | Standard Deviation |
|-----------|----------------------------|--------------------|
| All | .879 | .634 |
| December | 1.712 | 1.337 |
| Jan – Nov | .777 | .375 |

Based on this data, total cancellations during this period can be estimated to be about \$267 per year²⁵. Although this business activity was modest, it was very consistent. Outside of Christmastime, there was little variation in daily cancellations, as illustrated in Figure 7 and the standard deviations reported in Figure 8.

²⁵ This is based on 312 business days per year, 27 in December and 285 during the rest of the year. Estimated Annual Cancellations = (27)*(1.712) + (285)*(.777)= 46.244 + 221.45 = 267.669

Note that during the first eleven months of the year, the standard deviation in daily cancellations was less than one-half of the average. Business was remarkably predictable.

The Post Office department did not retain records of fourth class postal accounts. Archivist Arthur Hecht inventoried the postal material deposited in the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in 1959 and reported that “The relatively small volume of extant records ... is accounted for by the fact that the Post Office department has taken advantage of an act of 1881 ... and later acts, which provide for the disposition of useless papers. ... The tendency has been to retain records in summary form and dispose of detailed records regarding individual offices.”²⁶ In the case of the accounts of fourth class post offices, even the summary records are incomplete. Fortunately, the NARA does possess a Postmasters Salary Record that reports “receipts” by quarter for the Fondis Post Office for 1944 and 1945. These records are compared to the data recovered from the Fondis postmark records in Table 9 below.

Table 9
Reported Receipts versus Actual Cancellations at Fondis, Colo.

| Year and quarter | Receipts from NARA records | Cancellations From Postmark Records |
|------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| 1944 I | 36 | 61.63 |
| 1944 II | 35 | 72.03 |
| 1944 III | 48 | 74.965 |
| 1944 IV | 65 | 77.765 |
| 1945 I | 32 | 68.76 |
| 1945 II | 36 | 65.13 |
| 1945 III | 34 | 58.81 |
| 1945 IV | 59 | 67.025 |

The item defined as “revenue” in the NAEA records included income from the sale of stamps, twine, registered mail and scrap paper. It is striking to note that this fourth class post office earned considerably less revenue than the value of the stamps it cancelled. This means that its patrons were buying stamps elsewhere, probably during their trips to larger towns and cities. If this was indeed the case, then the department would have had to remit warrants to supplement Mary Trip’s pay for she could not have sold enough stamps to cover her compensation. She earned \$532 dollars in 1945 on at least \$260 worth of cancellations, box rents, money order commissions, sales and a 15% allowance for rent²⁷. According to NARA records, her “revenues” in 1945 were only \$163.

²⁶ Hecht, Arthur, Preliminary Inventories, Number 114; Records of the bureaus of the Third and Fourth Assistant Postmasters General, 1959, NARA, Washington, pg 2.

²⁷ Post Office Receipts and Salaries of Postmasters, 1945-1956. NARA Records Group 28, A1-354.

The post office at Fondis operated at a loss to the Department during the early 1940's. Of course, fourth class post offices were not expected to generate profits. Nor, for that matter, was U.S. Mail delivery ever expected to cover its costs. The United States Post Office Department operated at a deficit in almost every year of its existence, except during times of war when the military covered the cost of transporting the mail. (Cullinan, 1968, p 156.) Congress had decided to subsidize the mail in order to diffuse knowledge, create a bond of union and serve local constituents. By the time of World War II, it had become clear to politicians that "the people first wanted service from their Post Office and afterward a balanced postal budget, if possible." (Fuller, 1972, p 178.) In 1945, the total deficit of the Post Office Department was \$24 million.

The Fondis postmarking records provide an interesting insight into the certainty and celerity of service provided by a fourth class post office in the early 20th century. Even though business was slight, it was constant. Barely a day went by when patrons did not post some letters or packages. There is only one day on record for which the post office was open and no stamps were cancelled. On every other receipt, even those for holidays and days in which the mail could not be delivered, there are recorded cancellations. On July 17 of 1943, for example, only one sale of 6 cents (perhaps two 1st class letter stamps) was made all day. Even though the earnings of this post office were meager, it provided consistent and prompt daily service to its patrons. And, these cancellations underestimate total activity at the office, for it is likely that people came to check their mail even when they had nothing to post. Mary Trip lived at the beck and call of her patrons.

The need to document certainty and celerity shaped postal business. And the documents shaped the life of postmasters like Mary Tripp. Postmarking records provided her with a physical record of her output and her commitment. One personal letter recovered from the trash of her post office and home reveals that she took special pride in the celerity and certainty of her service. She complained to a relative who was also a fourth class postmaster of what she thought was unfair treatment by the Department. The letter closes with an ironic reference to these loose-leaf records. "Jesse drove extra mileage without extra pay, then when returned to regular, tried deducting pay for same mileage, also he carried long while, months, I believe, before getting check. At another time, Denver carriers' time changed twice from contract, My scraps of paper, huh?"

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