

Operation and Innovation in the Dead Letter Office from 1860-1985

12/7/18

Purpose, Scope:

- To illustrate both basic activities of the Dead Letter Office (DLO) and innovations in its operation from 1860-1985.
- These years were chosen because important changes in basic DLO operation as well as the development of many important innovations that improved DLO function occurred then.
- **That is, from 1824-1859, the DLO's way of functioning saw little change and can be and is shown for the first item.** Also, little change in function occurred after 1985.
- Only DLO handling of domestic first-class letters is shown since few examples of handling of other items known. To the exhibitor, very few 1860-66 DLO returns are known, and none by the exhibitor before 1862 and thus none from "Southern (civil war) cities" before mid-1861.

Importance: The function of the DLO was to return to writer/return to addressee (RTW/RTA) unmailable/undeliverable, non-valuable/valuable matter with no return address. In spite of constant effort to improve basic functions of and innovations in the DLO operation, each year, millions of items continued to be sent to the DLO and RTW/RTA. **For instance, in 1891, 107 people worked in Washington, D.C., handling 20,000 letters daily, more than most cities of the time. So the story of the vital DLO function is important.**

Rarity Highlighting and Some Abbreviations: Red matting with bold information = rare items. CC = corner card (return address); DLO = dead letter office; DLB = dead letter branch; hs = handstamp; PDS = postage due stamp; PO = post office; RTW = return to writer; RTS = return to sender; RTA = return to addressee; RFP = return for postage; RFBA = return for better address; PMG = Postmaster General; PM = Postmaster.

Exhibit Plan and Comment re Organization

Important - each of three time periods divided into four subdivisions (e.g. 1.1 basic DLO operation, 1.2 DLO innovation (the APPROXIMATE (APPROX.) results of each innovation shown below in dark blue), 1.3 DLO return envelopes and 1.4 unmailable/undeliverable DLO returns. Each also defined in light blue at time periods' start.

- 1. 1860-1866:** CCs and request envelopes introduced but DLO returns not free, so DLO load not significantly decreased - from 1860-1917 only Washington, D.C. DLO.
- 2. 1866-1917:** Many innovations and free DLO returns all decreased DLO use - thus, in 1868, APPROX. 1/126 ended in DLO (4,162,144 DLO items, APPROX. 720,000,000 total domestic items) - in 1891, APPROX. 1/325 items ended in DLO.
- 3. 1917-1985:** DLBs, 1974 RTA improved time of DLO disposition - in 1918, APPROX. 1/1000 items ended in DLO (APPROX. 14,500,000 DLO items, APPROX. 14,000,000,000 total domestic items).
- 4. Epilogue:** Stability of DLO function since 1986 - in 2006, APPROX. 1/2200 items ended in DLO (APPROX. 90,000,000 DLO items, APPROX. 200,000,000,000 total domestic items).