

A Philatelic Glance at Free Franks, Official Mail and Penalty Covers

PAUL M. HOLLAND

“Official mail” has a long philatelic history, predating postage stamps. For example, members of Parliament, those sitting in the House of Lords and other office holders in Great Britain had “free franking” privileges by simply signing their name to a piece of mail. One of these from December 29, 1830, is shown in Figure 1. However, officials sometimes abused this privilege, providing free postage for constituents, friends, relatives and even businesses at a time when postage rates were very high. This situation helped lead to the reforms introduced by Roland

Hill that eliminated these free franks, switching to a uniform prepaid postage rate with the advent of the Penny Black, Two Pence Blue and Mulready stationery in 1840.

Later, during the reign of Queen Victoria, official government mail was typically marked “On Her Britannic Majesty’s Service” as shown by the example on piece from July 11, 1900. This was sent to the Foreign Office in London from Nicaragua, requiring the use of local postage as shown by the stamps in Figure 2. While this seems to be a rather ordinary item, the applied stamps depict a smoking Mount



Figure 1. Free frank from December 29, 1830 (author’s collection).



Figure 2. Official mail marked "On Her Britannic Majesty's Service" (author's collection)



Figure 3. Free franks of Edith Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt (author's collection).

Momotombo, recalling a philatelic episode of historic importance.

Around this same time the United States had been debating the building of a canal across the isthmus, with some favoring a route through Nicaragua and others advocating buying out the earlier French canal interests in Panama. Philippe Bunau-Varilla, who was lobbying for a canal through Panama, visited a local stamp dealer and bought some 500 of these Nicaraguan stamps depicting the smoking Mount Momotombo. He then sent a letter, prominently featuring the stamp, with a note reading "An official witness to volcanic activity in Nicaragua," to every U.S. senator and member of the House of Representatives. When voting took place the next day, a majority of politicians voted for the Panama route; in 1904, U.S.-backed construction work on the canal through Panama began.

In the United States, "free franking" privileges were first established by the Continental Congress in 1774 and are still in use today, mostly for members of Congress sending mail to their constituents. The topic is too complex to cover in detail here so I'll just mention that as part of

my FDR-era collecting specialty I have a strong interest in the correspondence of Eleanor Roosevelt and presidential widow free franks. The requirement for a valid free frank was a signature (or facsimile thereof) plus the word "free." Compare the close-up examples of a manuscript free frank by Edith K. Roosevelt, the wife of Teddy Roosevelt, and a hand-stamped free frank by Anna Eleanor Roosevelt (wife of FDR) in Figure 3.

The signed Eleanor Roosevelt letter, dated September 20, 1951, which was enclosed in the cover with the "free frank" above, is shown in Figure 4. After FDR's death, President Truman appointed Eleanor Roosevelt to be a delegate to the new United Nations General Assembly, where she played a key role in developing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the letter, she thanks a listener of "The Eleanor Roosevelt Program" that was broadcast daily by NBC from her living room at the Park Sheraton Hotel in New York City, from October 1950 until August 1951. She also mentions that she'll be leaving soon to attend meetings of the United Nations General Assembly in Paris. This was before construction on the United Nations building in New

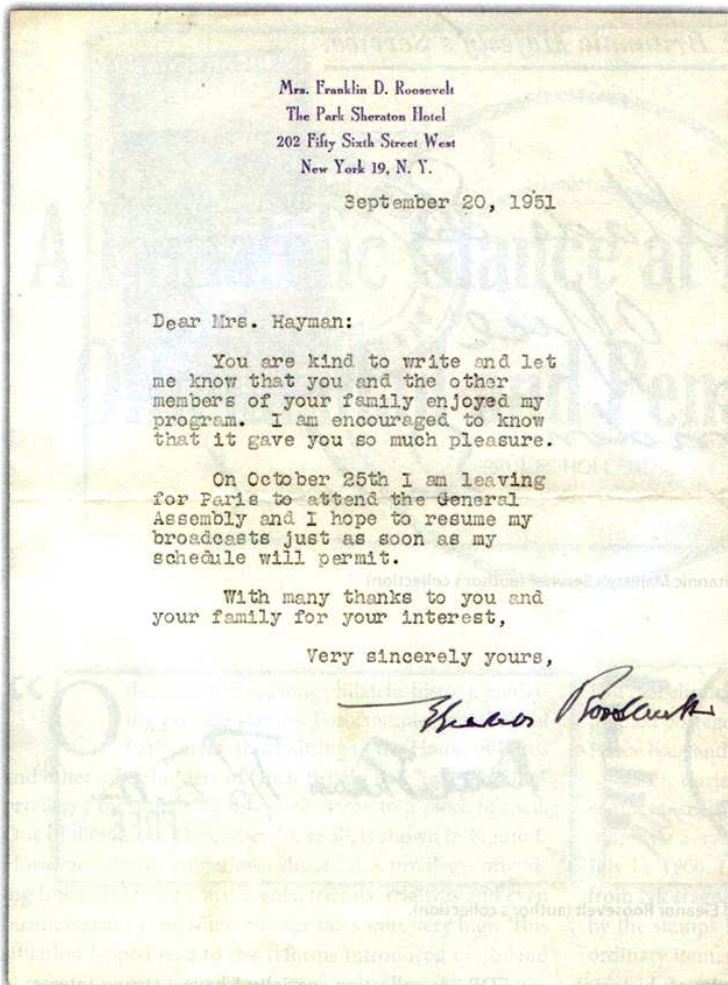


Figure 4. Eleanor Roosevelt letter of September 20, 1951 (author's collection).

York was completed. Since Eleanor Roosevelt was fluent in French and an experienced radio personality, during her time in France she also hosted weekly Voice of America radio broadcasts carried on the French National Network (RDF), urging Europeans to work together for peace. I find that letters such as this one open a revealing glimpse into the remarkable life of Eleanor Roosevelt, helping to show why she came to be regarded by many as "First Lady of the World."

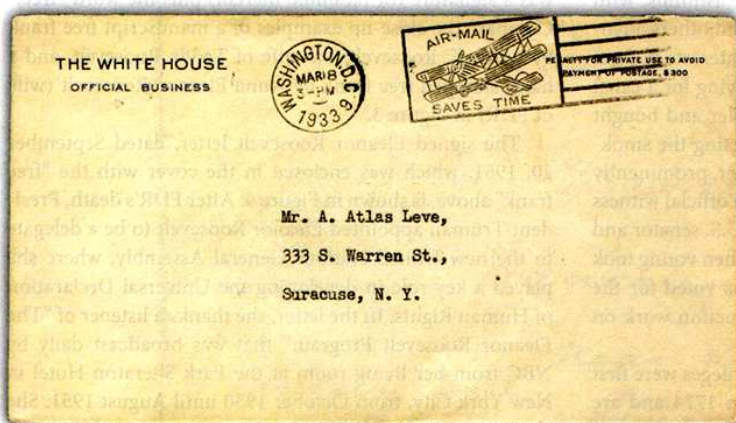


Figure 5. March 8, 1933 penalty cover from the FDR White House (author's collection).

Similar to the free frank, United States penalty mail falls under the free mail umbrella. Penalty mail, like free franks, is a complex topic so I'll simply note here that although the wording of the penalty notice on the envelopes has changed over the years, the amount of the penalty, at \$300, has remained constant since the advent of U.S. penalty covers in the late 1870s. This was a lot of money, even in the FDR era, at 10,000 times the standard postage rate of 3¢. A March 8, 1933, penalty cover from the FDR White House, reading "Penalty for private use to avoid payment of



Figure 6. August 29, 1934 special delivery penalty cover sent to American Philatelic Society President Roscoe B. Martin by Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes (author's collection). Inset: arrival handstamp from reverse has same date as dispatch CDS on front.

postage, \$300," is shown in Figure 5. Note that this cover was mailed just a few days after Franklin D. Roosevelt's inauguration on Saturday, March 4, 1933, and it is the earliest penalty cover from the FDR White House that I've seen.

Although I have many examples of FDR-era penalty covers from the White House, cabinet secretaries and other officials, my favorite and most unusual example is shown in Figure 6. This is an August 30, 1934, cover on official stationery of the Secretary of the Interior, with a 10¢ special delivery stamp (Scott E15) added to expedite handling only, since the regular portion of the postage is accounted for by use of the penalty cover itself. Note that the arrival backstamp shows same day delivery and that the penalty cause is clearly visible above the stamp.

So why a special delivery stamp? The address is the key to understanding this, as the cover was sent to Roscoe B. Martin, then-President of the American Philatelic Society, at the Hotel Madison in Atlantic City, NJ, where he was staying for the 1934

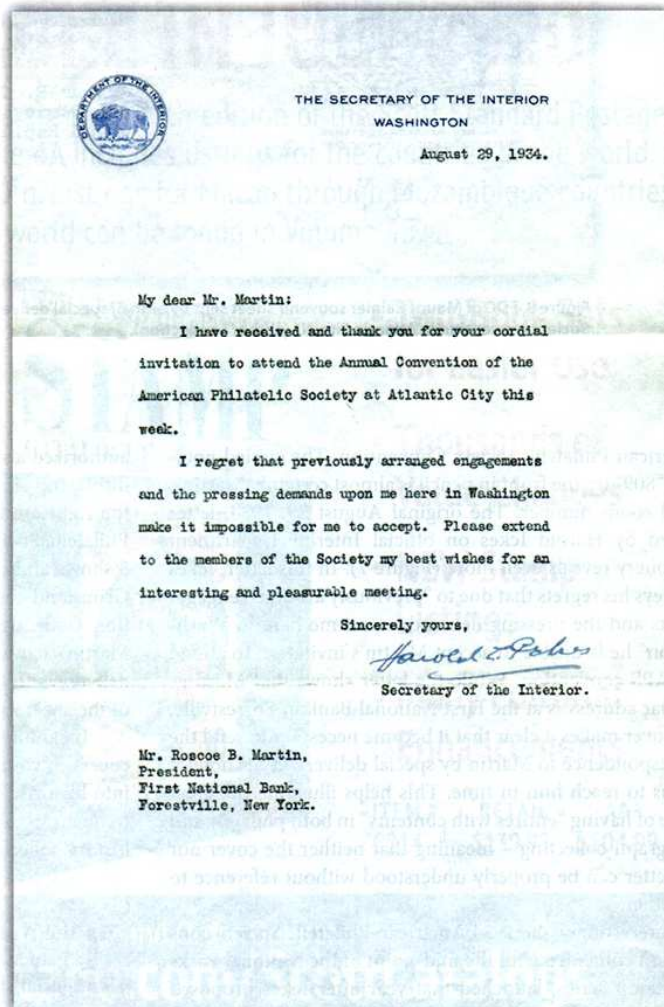


Figure 7. August 29, 1934 letter from Harold Ickes to American Philatelic Society President Roscoe B. Martin at the August 1934 APS convention in Atlantic City, NJ (author's collection).



Figure 8. FDC of Mount Rainier souvenir sheet sent by airmail special delivery from the American Philatelic Society convention in Atlantic City, NJ (author's collection).

American Philatelic Society Convention. The circled notation "809" on the front in pencil is almost certainly Martin's hotel room number. The original August 29, 1934, letter signed by Harold Ickes on official Interior Department stationery reveals even more (Figure 7). In this letter, Ickes conveys his regrets that due to "previously arranged engagements and the pressing demands upon me here in Washington" he is unable to accept Martin's invitation to attend the APS convention. While the letter shows that Martin's regular address is at the First National Bank in Forrestville, the cover makes it clear that it became necessary to send the correspondence to Martin by special delivery at his hotel if it was to reach him in time. This helps illustrate the great value of having "entires with contents" in both philately and autograph collecting – meaning that neither the cover nor the letter can be properly understood without reference to the other.

Interestingly, the 1934 American Philatelic Society convention coincided with the mid-point of the National Parks ten-stamp series, launched that year after Ickes proposed that 1934 be declared "National Parks Year." Like FDR, Ickes was an avid stamp collector, and for the occasion of the APS convention, Postmaster General James A. Farley

authorized a special imperforate souvenir sheet (Scott 750) displaying six of the 3¢ Mount Rainier stamps. Printed at the right are the words "In complement to the American Philatelic Society for its convention and exhibition." Figure 8 shows an example of this souvenir sheet on cover with a Grimsland cachet that was mailed from the APS convention. Coincidentally (recalling Ickes' urgent letter to Roscoe Martin) it was posted to the collector via airmail special delivery with the required postage covered by the face value of the sheet itself.

Including some free franks, official mail and penalty covers in your collection can provide a fascinating glimpse into historically interesting time periods. Because these are frequently "stampless" and outside of mainstream postal history collecting, they are often surprisingly affordable.

The Author

Paul M. Holland from Santa Barbara, California is a specialist collector of the Franklin D. Roosevelt era, broadly defined. He also maintains a representative worldwide stamp collection from 1840-1945 with a special fondness for early classic stamps.