

NJ STRAIGHT LINE HANDSTAMP POSTMARKS: Lawrenceville, NJ

By Robert G. Rose

The U.S. Philatelic Classics Society is in the process of completing an update of the *American Stampless Cover Catalog*, which was last revised in 1997. That project has been supported by the New Jersey Postal History Society, whose members have researched, collected and compiled data for the catalog's New Jersey listings.¹ The project has provided the author with the opportunity of taking a fresh look at the listings for the straight line postmarks which are among the most avidly sought by collectors of stampless covers. This article's focus is on the straight line postmarks from Lawrenceville, which post office produced the widest variety of such markings.

Between 1829 and 1854, the Lawrenceville post office used six different straight handstamps. All are detailed in the Coles Book.² These handstamps were produced locally from printer's type face giving rise to variations in length as the handstamps wore out and were replaced by those with different settings. In addition, minor variations as much 2 mm in length resulted from the resetting of loose letters in existing handstamps.³

In 1829 and 1830, Lawrenceville used two different handstamps. The first and largest is the black straight line, measuring 50½ x 2½ mm with variations in height to as much as 4 mm, illustrated in *Figure 1*. Coles records fewer than 10 examples of this marking. This folded letter, dated March 6, 1829 to Washington, D.C., was sent paid for 18¾ cents at the single letter rate of from 150 to 400 miles per the Act of March 3, 1825. This rate seems strange based on modern coinage, but came into being because of the prevalence of Spanish coinage in the United States prior to the Civil War, and represents the equivalent of 1½ reales.

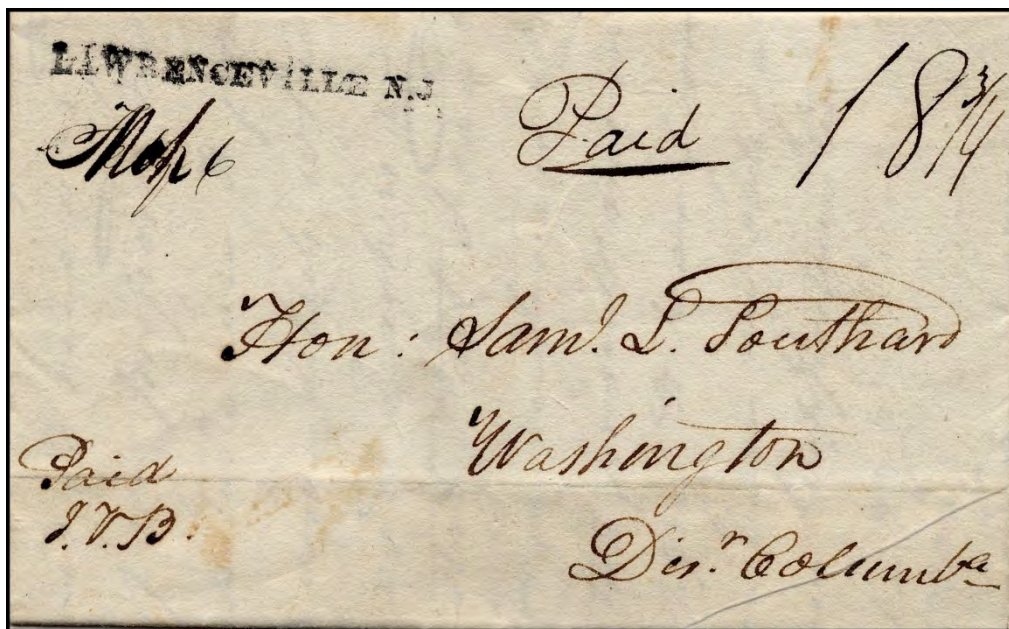


Fig. 1: 50½ x 2½ to 4 mm black straight line, March 6, 1829 to Washington, D.C.

A variety of the first handstamp is illustrated in *Figure 2*. This black straight line measures 50½ mm, but the height of printer's type measures only 2½ to 3 mm. This June 8, 1829 folded letter was sent paid to Trenton, originally at 8 cents, and then correctly rerated at 6 cents, the single letter rate for not over 30 miles per the Act of April 9, 1816.

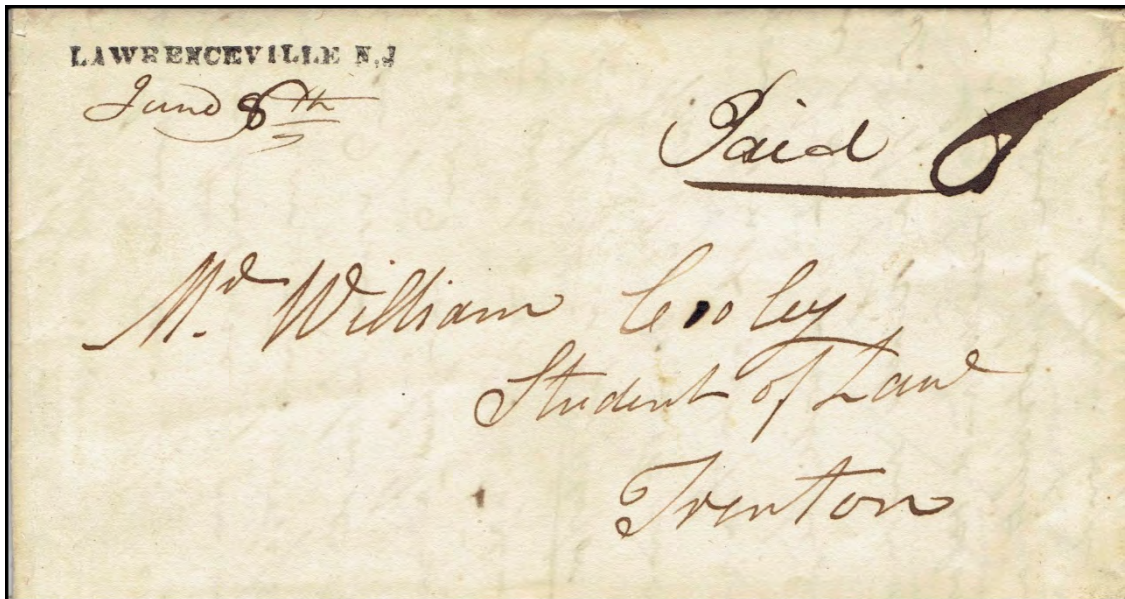


Fig. 2: 50½ x 2½ to 3 mm black straight line, June 8, 1829 to Trenton.

At the same time that the first handstamp and its variation were used in 1829-30, a second slightly smaller handstamp saw service. This black straight line measures 49 x 2½ mm and is illustrated in *Figures 3 & 4*. The 1829 usage was sent unpaid at 6 cents, the single letter rate for not over 30 miles per the Act of April 9, 1816. The 1830 usage was sent unpaid for 18¾ cents at the single letter rate of from 150 to 400 miles per the Act of March 3, 1825.

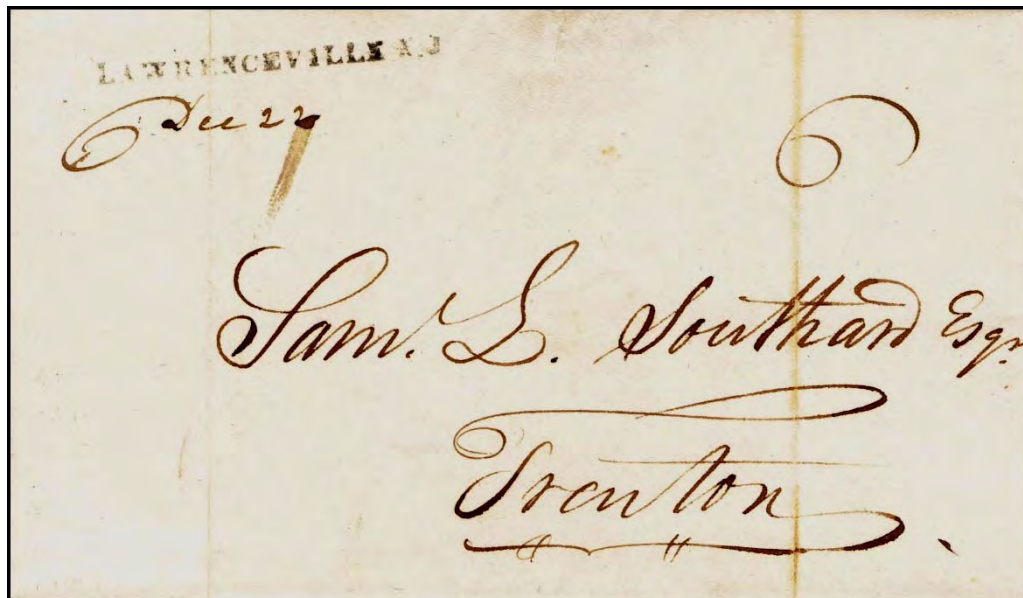


Fig. 3: 49 x 2½ mm black straight, December 22, 1829 to Trenton.

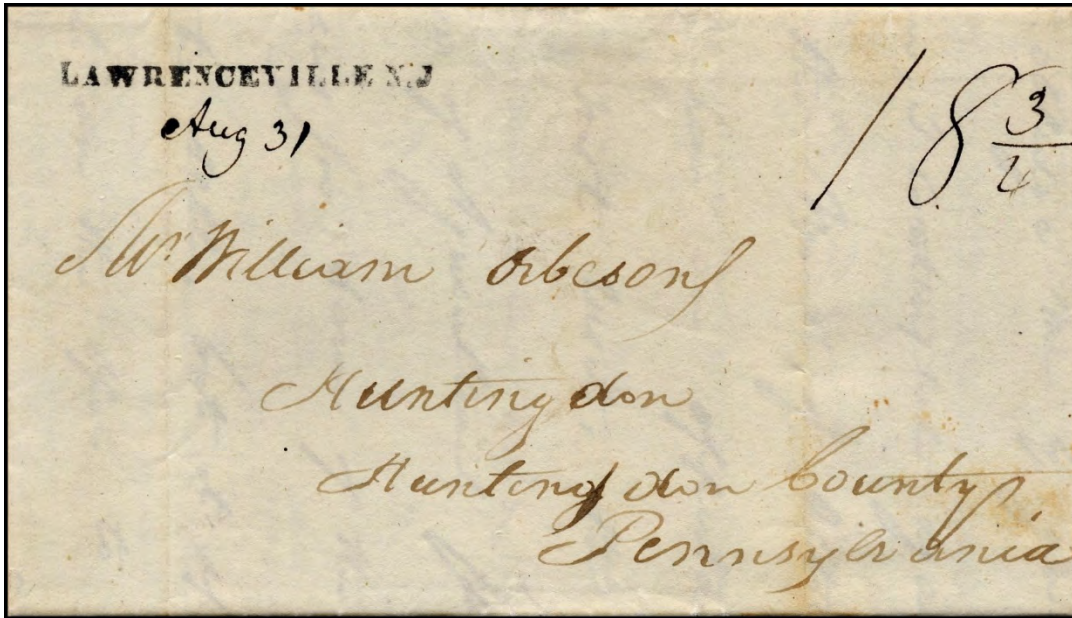


Fig. 4: 49 x 2½ mm black straight line, August 31, 1830 to Huntington, Pennsylvania.

From 1838 to 1841, a third black handstamp was used measuring 34 x 2 mm and is illustrated in *Figures 5 & 6*. The 1838 usage was mailed “FREE” as evidenced by the handstamp, to U.S. Senator Samuel Southard in Jersey City at a time when he was president of the Morris Canal and Banking Company which was then headquartered in that city.⁴ The 1839 usage (see *Figure 6*) shows a variety in the type face as evidenced by the vertical drop of the first three letters “LAW” in the handstamp. It was prepaid as indicated by the “PAID” handstamp at the single letter rate of 10 cents for 30 to 80 miles per the Act of April 9, 1816.

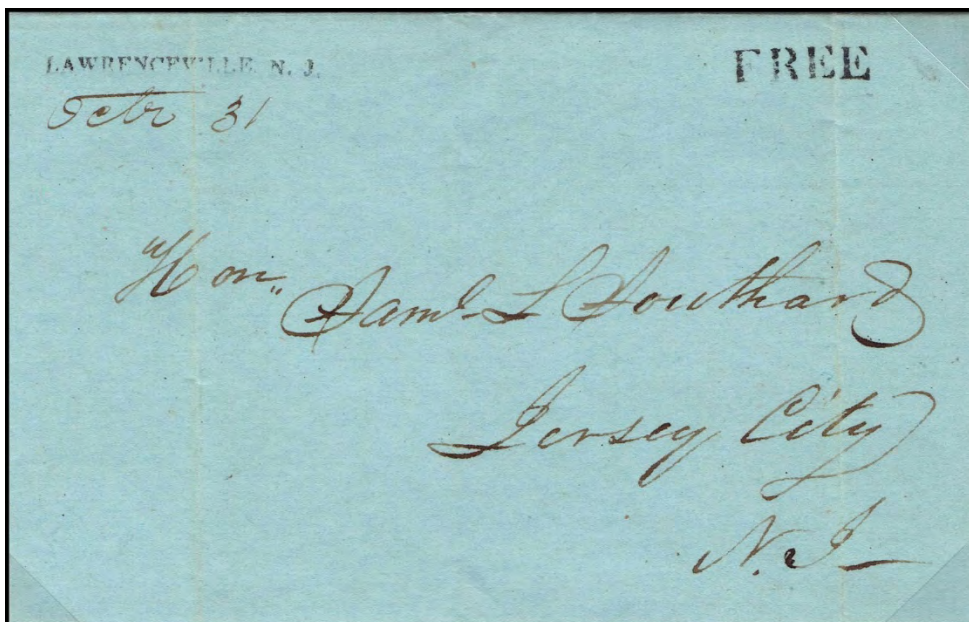


Fig. 5: 34 x 2 mm black straight line, October 31, 1838 to Jersey City.

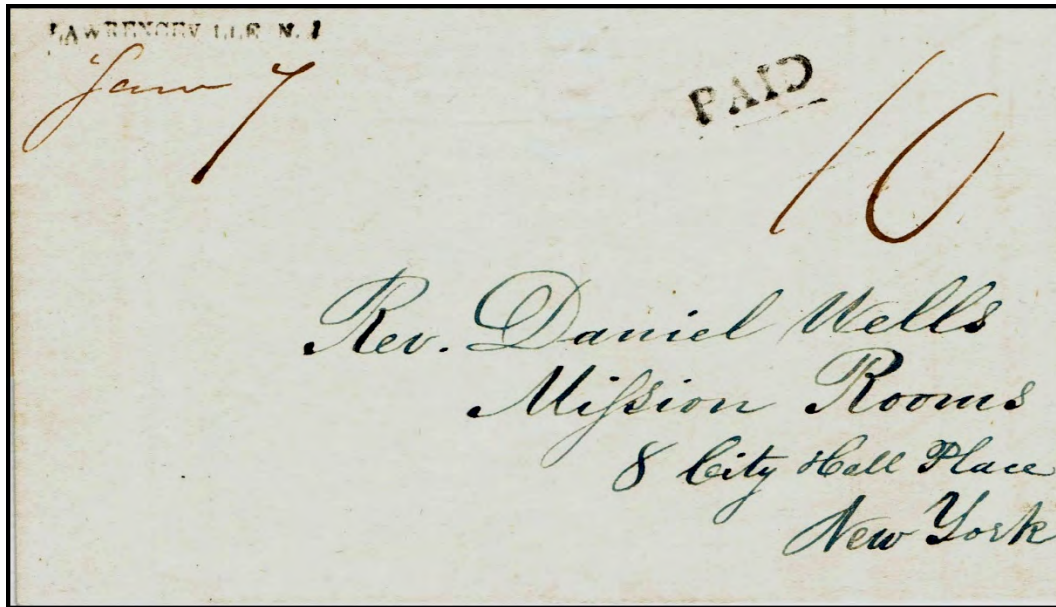


Fig. 6: 34 x 2 mm black straight line, dropped “LAW” variety, January 7, 1839 to New York.

A fourth black handstamp, measuring 36 x 2 mm was used from 1842 to 1843 as shown in *Figure 7*. This 1843 usage was mailed unpaid at the single letter rate of 10 cents for 30 to 80 miles per the Act of April 9, 1816.

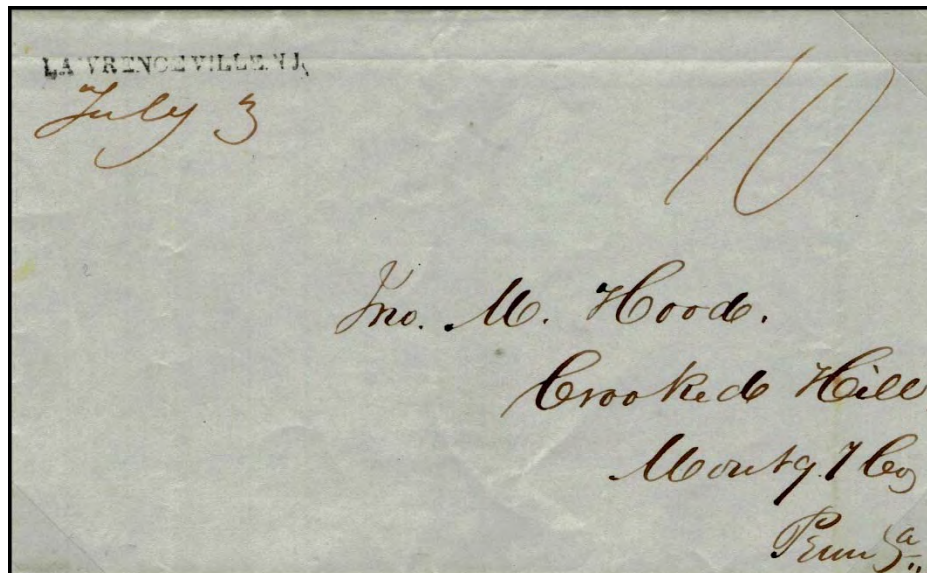


Fig. 7: 36 x 2 mm black straight line, July 3, 1843 to Crooked Hill, Pennsylvania.

Following the brief period of use of a rimless circular handstamp from 1844 to 1847, Lawrenceville again returned to the use of a fifth straight line handstamp. However, a most unusual format was chosen, the use of a *slanted lettered* handstamp. This 41 x 2 mm handstamp was used in black only in 1849 and in blue from 1849 to 1850. *Figure 8* shows the use of the black handstamp on a folded letter sent unpaid at the reduced 5 cents ½ ounce letter rate under 300 miles per the Act of March 3, 1845. Fewer than 10 examples of this black handstamp are reported.

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Figure 9 shows the use of this same handstamp in blue, prepaying the same 5 cents rate as indicated by the matching blue “PAID” and “5” handstamps. Fewer than five examples of this straight line handstamp in blue have been reported. Curiously, both of the handstamps in the illustrated covers are missing the “J.” of “N.J.”

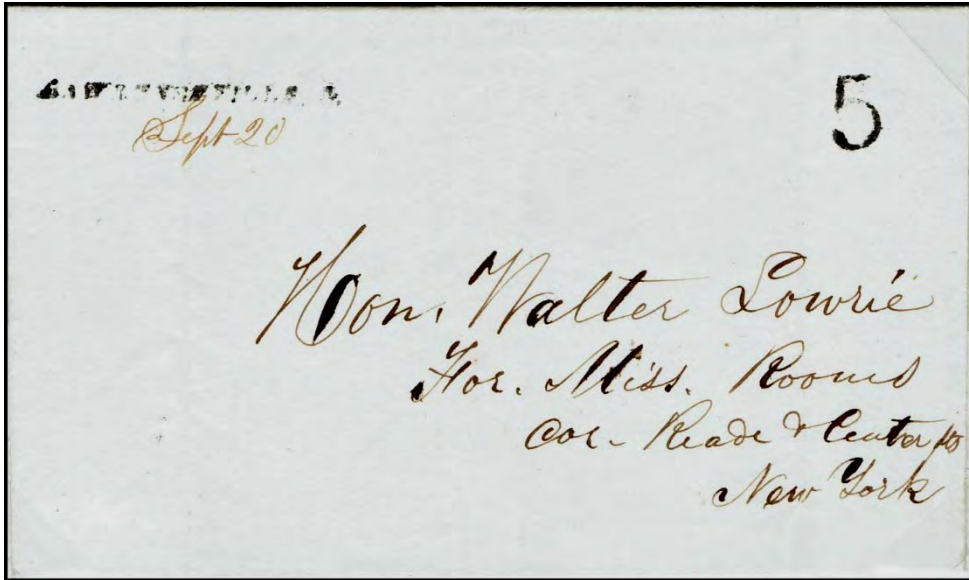


Fig. 8: 41 x 2 mm slanted lettered black straight line, September 20, 1849 to New York.

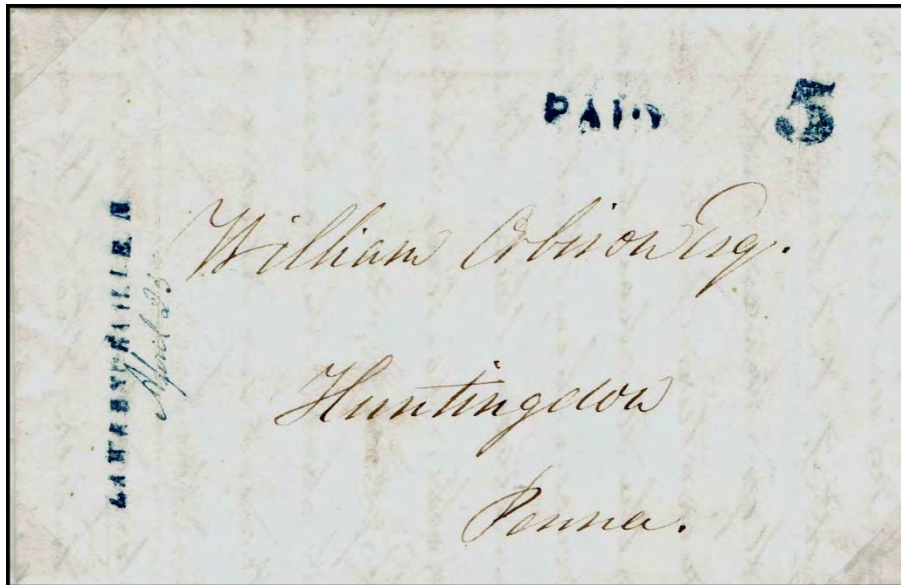


Fig. 9: 41 x 2 mm slanted lettered blue straight line, April 25, 1850 to Huntingdon, Pa.

The sixth and final straight line used by the Lawrenceville post office is a 41 x 6½ mm double line handstamp with date below that is reported from 1853 to 1854, just prior to the end of the stampless period in 1855. *Figure 10* shows the use of this handstamp on an 1854 cover sent prepaid, as indicated by the matching “PAID 3” for the single letter ½ ounce rate of 3 cents not over 3,000 miles per the Act of March 3, 1851, which again reduced postal rates. This double line handstamp is also seen occasionally on covers with the 3 cent 1851 issue, Scott No. 11.

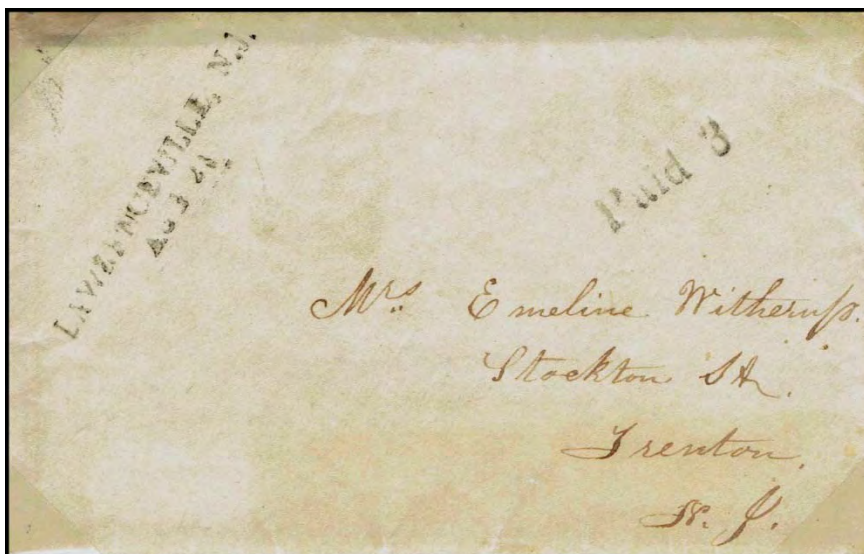


Fig. 10: 41 x 6½ mm double line handstamp, August 23, 1854, to Trenton.

As evidenced by the two to three year usage of these straight line handstamps, markings made from printers’ type face proved not to be durable. Yet alone among New Jersey post offices, Lawrenceville used them to postmark its mail for almost 25 years, to the exclusion of the typical circle handstamps that came into widespread use by the 1830s.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ Ed Siskin has compiled the Colonial postmarks, Steven M. Roth the manuscript postmarks, and this author the handstamp postmarks.
- ² Coles, Jr., William C. *The Postal Markings of New Jersey Stampless Covers*, Collectors Club of Chicago, 1984, pp.198-99.
- ³ *Ibid*, p. 199. Coles suggests that these minor variations “are due probably to inaccurate resetting after hand stamp was dropped.”
- ⁴ Birkner, Michael, *Samuel L. Southard: Jeffersonian Whig*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press 1984, pp. 185-186. For an illustrated history of Southard correspondence from New Jersey, see the series of articles by Jean Walton appearing in *NJPH*, Whole Nos. 110-111, 114-117, 121-123, & 142-147, November 1994 to September 2002.