Civil Censorship of U.S. First Day Covers during the Prexie Era

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By the time the 1938 Presidential Series appeared, cacheted first day covers (FDCs) were avidly collected. Total cancellations on first day covers for the Prexies ranged from 16,615 for the 5-dollar to 128,335 for the 1½-cent values. Cachets became popular in the 1920s with an explosion of cachet makers for the “2-cent reds.” The “3-cent purples” of the 1930s added to this base. In the late 1930s, at least 100 to 150 different FDC cachets were known for each issue. Beginning with the Northwest Territory commemorative of 1937, the U.S. Post Office Department machine-cancelled FDCs with a special killer incorporating the words “First Day of Issue.” Hand cancels with the same inscription first appeared with the 1-cent Washington Irving stamp of the 1940 Famous American Series. Introduction of these cancels helped popularize FDC collecting. It also helped that an active stamp and FDC collector occupied the White House during this period. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt suggested, sketched, and recommended colors for many stamps during his time in office.

As one might expect, many cachet makers entered military service during World War II. Hence, their numbers declined to 40 to 60 for each issue during the war. With a few exceptions, this number remained constant through 1949. A few larger cachet makers such as Anderson, ArtCraft, Artmaster, Cachetcraft, and Fleetwood produced from 40,000 to 250,000 FDC cachets for each issue. Most others fell in the 100-5,000 range.

Prior to 1939, about 180,000 to 230,000 FDCs were cancelled for each commemorative issue. This number remained nearly constant throughout the war years. Beginning in 1945, the number increased from 365,000 to 712,000 for each issue. Collectors evidently unleashed a pent up demand after hostilities ceased.

Postal censorship is an old practice, often linked to espionage and intelligence gathering. It usually is conducted by government entities and occurs during wartime and other periods of political unrest. Its objective is to suppress objectionable content emphasizing morale, political, military or other concerns. During wartime, postal censorship focuses on preventing the enemy from acquiring information on outgoing mail about the economy, warfare, security, and intelligence. It also attempts to extract information from incoming mail that might be useful to the war effort. Most censored mail bears markings and/or resealing labels and tapes readily apparent to the addressee and collector.

Censorship of the mail during World War II proved to be a time-consuming process that significantly delayed transmission of the mail. The majority of countries throughout the world participated in some form of censorship on incoming, outgoing, and transit mail.

From the 1930s, through the 1950s, FDCs often went through the mail stream with ordinary mail, both domestic and international. During World War II censors subjected them to the same examination as all other mail. Censors paid particular attention to FDCs owing to their suspicion that, since most had no content, the stamps, cancels, and/or cachets
might contain secret messages of benefit to the enemy. The arrangement of stamps on the cover, micro printing hidden in the cachets, or suspected codes in the addresses were sufficient to maintain extra scrutiny.

This essay illustrates a variety of examples of censored FDCs that passed through the mail stream en route to foreign destinations. Each cover bears some indication of postal censorship. It should be noted that during World War II the U.S. suspended postal relations with many nations. For example, until 1944 mail could only pass to 10 allied and neutral nations in Europe.

Collectors should also note that few Prexie FDCs of any denomination were censored because only a handful of countries were censoring their mail in 1938. Thus, examples are somewhat difficult to find.

Germany began censoring mail unofficially in the 1930s, long before the beginning of World War II. Prior to 1938, customs offices examined the mail to prevent the dispatch of currency to foreign countries. Censorship of the mails continued until August 1953 when the Soviet Union finally agreed to abolish the practice in Austria. Internal Austrian mail censorship already had ended on October 7, 1946.

GERMANY
The inspection of mail for currency control purposes in the 1930s provided an ideal means to legitimize the opening of foreign mail for other purposes. Currency control examination labels were used initially. Most of them conveniently omitted the office name and certifying signature of the customs officer. Figure 12.1 shows an example of a 4-cent Prexie FDC issued 4 July 1938 with a series of perforated, currency control labels attached.

With the outbreak of hostilities on September 1, 1939, the German Armed Forces Command (OKW) openly conducted censorship of foreign mail. Initially, it used the foreign letter offices at
Konigsberg and Berlin (designated “a” and “b.” respectively). In November, 1939, five additional offices were established that operated throughout the war. Most censor markings on incoming mail from North America, including FDCs, was censored at the Frankfurt censor station and therefore bears the (“e”) location designation. The circular censor markings typically included an eagle with a swastika surrounded by “OKW” and the censor office letter. Early resealing tapes bore a “Geprüft” (inspected) marking, whereas “Geöffnet” (opened) markings appear on later resealing tapes. Early resealing tapes bore a “Geprüft” (inspected) marking, whereas “Geöffnet” (opened) markings appear on later resealing tapes.3 Figure 10.2 shows a resealing tape applied at the Frankfurt censor station to the back of a 1940 Famous Americans Issue FDC.

Identical markings were incorporated into circular hand stamps, appearing with and without the censor station letter code. The second hand stamp consisted of a single-ring hand cancel consisting of two letters: an uppercase “A” [Abwehr (intelligence)] followed by a lower case letter identifying the censor office. These were transit marks on mail that went unopened as it passed through censor offices. The Emancipation Proclamation FDC illustrated in Figure 12.3 shows such a hand stamp applied at Frankfurt (Ae).

On many FDCs, a wide range of small numbered and lettered markings may be found, both framed and unframed. The numbers identified individual censors. In Figure 12.4, no fewer than four boxed numbers appear, indicating four separate censors having examined the cover. The manuscript marking at the bottom of the card also represents German censorship.

By the time the censor offices transferred from Wehrmacht (armed forces) to Gestapo (Geheime Staatspolizei) control and the legend on both hand stamps and machine markings changed from “OKW” to “zensurstelle” (censorship location), FDCs to Germany had long since ceased. Postal relations with Germany ended on 11 December 1941, and resumption of letter mail service did not resume until 1 April 1946.

UNITED KINGDOM
Censorship regulations in the United Kingdom first appeared in print on 28 August 1939, days before the beginning of the war. Until the spring of 1940, the
The War Office controlled mail censorship. After that, the Ministry of Information assumed these duties. At first, most mail was censored at Liverpool, and then at London. After 4 March 1940, most terminal airmail was examined at London. Transit mail to most other countries, including FDCs generated in the U.S., was examined in Bermuda and, to a lesser extent, Trinidad.

Octagonal censor hand stamps appeared from the beginning of the war. Each had a crown in the design surrounded by a letter code and “Passed by Censor,” “Passed by,” or “Passed” wording. Later, the so-called “Crown over PASSED” hand stamp replaced this configuration. The Overrun Countries FDC shown in Figure 12.5 illustrates the latter, with a “T” beside the censor’s identification number (186), indicating the Trade Branch of Censorship.

The UK employed a wide variety of resealing labels. More common varieties included “Examined by Censor,” “Opened by/Censor,” “Opened by/Examiner” wording. Figure 12.6 shows a 1940 Famous Americans Issue FDC with an “OPENED BY/EXAMINER” resealing label followed by the number of the censor (4448).

Some FDCs have enclosure slips placed by the British censor to provide information concerning censorship and to deflect blame for evidence of mishandling of the mail. Since FDCs often had no content and traveled unsealed, the most common enclosure slips addressed either of these peculiarities. Figure 12.7 reproduces a typical enclosure slip placed by British censors, this one...
enclosed in a 3 July 1940 Idaho Statehood FDC.

**UNITED STATES**

Censorship of incoming and outgoing mail in the United States began on 12 December 1941, and remained in effect until 15 August 1945. President Roosevelt established the Office of Censorship on 19 December 1941, with censorship regulations formally approved on 13 April 1942. Civil censorship in the U.S. became a vast operation, with 20 censor stations and employing at its peak 10,000 censors.6

U.S. censors used paper resealing labels from the beginning of censorship operations until the end of 1943. At that time, they were replaced with gummed cellophane printed tape with “Examined by,” followed by the censor identifying number.6 Figure 12.8 shows an FDC of the 1943 Four Freedoms issue with a paper resealing label applied at New York (9836). Supplemental postage paid the registry fee and 5-cent UPU letter rate.

Figure 12.9 shows a cellophane resealing tape on an FDC of the Poland Overrun Nations issue censored at New York.

The Office of Censorship established a philatelic unit at the New York censor station on

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**Figure 12.5**

Octagonal British censor marking indicating the cover was passed unopened. “T” refers to “Trade” mail.

**Figure 12.6**

British resealing label showing the censor’s identification number on transit FDC mail through Great Britain to Denmark.
23 November 1942. Although export of postage stamps to most countries without a license was prohibited beginning 15 October 1942, FDCs addressed to overseas destinations had no similar ban imposed. Some FDCs passed through the Philatelic Unit, which can be identified by two blocks of censor identification numbers assigned to it -- 9800 through 9849 and 20002 through 20026. Figure 12.8 shows an FDC examined by a censor assigned to the Philatelic Unit.

U.S. censors employed a variety of hand stamp censor markings during World War II. Typically, they consisted of a circular hand stamp with a hand written examiner number. The examiner’s number and symbols (stars, dashes, and/or “V”) denoted the station location, which are well documented in Broderick and Mayo. Figure 12.10 shows such a hand stamp, applied at the San Francisco censor station. The FDC also received French censorship at the destination in New Caledonia.

Like the UK, the U.S. also employed enclosure slips, either inserted into or pasted on the outside of mail that had been examined. These forms explained either the reason for rejection and return to sender, or that the post office was not at fault for an irregularity. The slips number in the 100s, many of which have been compiled and reproduced for collectors. Figure 12.11 shows an enclosure slip typical for an FDC sent to a country with which postal relations had been severed and therefore returned to the sender.

On 1 April 1946, a year after the war ended, letter mail could be sent from the U.S. to Germany. Censors stationed in the U.S. occupied zone examined both incoming and outgoing mail. A machine censor marking was introduced, consisting of a circular die stamp with a date, and location surrounded by “U.S. Civil Censorship.” These were separated by two wavy lines enclosing four stars. Figure 12.12 illustrates this machine censor marking on an FDC of the 5-cent airmail postal stationery Postage Stamp Centenary issue addressed to the “American Occupation Zone.” FDCs of the majority of stamps issued during this period exist.
with the circular hand stamp or machine marking.

Similarly, mail to occupied Japan starting in 1947, including FDCs, bears transparent resealing tapes accompanied by Allied military Civil Censorship Detachment (C.C.D.) handstamps. An example of this marking, applied at Tokyo, appears in Figure 12.13.

**AUSTRIA**

After World War II, foreign mail to/from Austria resumed throughout the entire country on January 2, 1946. Soviet Zone practices and procedures were adopted for all of Vienna. Civil censorship was used exclusively from 31 March 1946. All foreign mail censorship ended on 15 August 1953.8

The example in Figure 12.14 shows brown gummed paper tape resealing the envelope after its contents (if any) had been inspected. The plain tape, striped lengthwise, resealed the envelope and was tied by a purple circular rubber hand stamp reading “Österreichische Zensurstelle” (Austrian Censorship Location) around the circumference, with a censor number in the center, and a letter and/or number at the bottom. In this case, the “W”
indicated censorship in Vienna (Wien). Although not shown, a separate hand stamped letter and/or number sometimes appeared on FDCs.

NORTH AMERICA/CARIBBEAN REGION
A number of censor markings from locations in the West Indies appear on FDCs. Bermuda employed at least five different markings ranging from a green circle “Passed by Censor-Bermuda” with a censor number in the center applied on terminal mail, to various resealing labels. Figure 12.15 shows a green circle hand stamp on an uncacheted 10-cent Famous Americans Issue stamp paying sufficient postage for domestic airmail as demanded by the airmail envelope, but not for onward airmail service to Bermuda.

Censor markings in the form of circular hand stamps and resealing labels on FDCs may also be

Figure 12.11
Enclosure form inserted at the New York censor station explaining reason for return of the FDC. Also note returned to sender by censor form pasted over the address.

Figure 12.12
Post-war censored FDC sent to the U.S. zone in Germany showing Allied censorship markings.
found on mail addressed to other British outposts as well as Dutch colonies in the Caribbean region. Figure 12.16 shows a 4 July 1942 “Win the War” stamp FDC sent to Curacao. The FDC has both a U.S. paper resealing label applied at New York and a Curacao rubber stamp censor marking.

Haiti refused to cooperate fully with the U.S. in a global network of censorship offices. Figure 12.17 illustrates an FDC censored at New York with a transparent tape and a circular rubber stamp marking. After delivery to Haiti, it received that country’s paper resealing tape, with French text.

**NORTH AMERICA/CANADA**

In Canada, the Censorship Branch of the War Service Department in Ottawa examined the mail. In 1943 it employed 743 censors. The major civil censorship offices were located in Ottawa, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal, and Halifax. Canadian censors employed circular, oval, and boxed hand stamps. Resealing labels included “Examined by/Censor,” and “Passed by/Censor” in English and French.

![Figure 12.13](image1)

Post-war military censorship marking applied to civilian correspondence at Tokyo that also included incoming FDCs.

![Figure 12.14](image2)

1947 FDC censored in Austria with striped, brown resealing tape tied by a censor’s hand stamp.

![Figure 12.15](image3)

1940 FDC censored in Bermuda using a terminal mail censor device.
Canada also employed currency control measures during the war, opening and resealing both incoming and outgoing international mail. Such resealing labels were inscribed “Opened to verify contents in accordance with requirements of Foreign Exchange Control Board and officially sealed by (the examiner’s initials).” Figure 12.18 shows one such example.

SOUTH AMERICA
In Surinam, mail censorship remained under Dutch control throughout the war. Under the jurisdiction of the Chief of Police, mail was censored at Paramaribo and Nickerie. Typically, censors used boxed hand stamps, as shown in Figure 12.19.

EUROPE
In Greece, local police stations or departments
examined the mail in places where no censorship office operated. A variety of circles and double circles with or without a coat of arms were used. All of them show the censor office name. Both hand stamps and resealing labels were employed. The 10 November 1938 registered 20-cent Garfield Prexie FDC to Greece, shown in Figure 12.20, reveals a currency control resealing tape. It was returned to the U.S., not because of a currency violation, but because the addressee could not be found.

The UK attempted to isolate Ireland postally by examining its mail. The censor offices at Aintree and Liverpool screened outgoing mail from Dublin. Both Irish and British censor labels can be found on many FDCs from Ireland, a minority with Irish resealing labels. Irish censor tapes and markings may be found printed in both English and Gaelic (Irish). Many boxed hand stamps exist. Figure 12.21 shows a typical Irish resealing tape placed on the 2-cent Defense Issue FDC, in this case, atop a resealing label affixed at Liverpool.

Spain censored mail throughout the country during the Spanish civil war. At the end, the large variety of censor markings ceased. During World War II only a small number of censor devices were employed. “Censura” appeared with various other words in all Spanish censor markings. An FDC sent during the civil war is shown in Figure 12.22.

Italy censored international mail censored from June, 1940 until October, 1943. After that period, mail was censored by the Italian Social Republic in the northern regions, and by the Royal censorship offices throughout the remainder of the country. U.S. and British censors also examined Italian mail. Thus, mail was subjected to multiple censorship. Figure 12.23 shows an FDC of the Texas Statehood stamp both a circular rubber-stamp marking and a resealing tape with “Verificato per Censura.”.

AFRICA
Censorship of mail in countries of the eastern Mediterranean area was supervised by the Director of Middle East Censorship in Cairo, which was controlled by the Director General of the Imperial Censorship in London. Squares, hexagons, octagons, and circles, including quadrangles and circles as inner structures, were used in Egyptian censor markings. Resealing labels had alternative lines in English and Arabic: “Egyptian Censorship.” Figure 12.24 shows a dramatic example of Egyptian censorship. Double circular censorship department markings often appear on FDCs passed unopened.

A large percentage of foreign mail was examined in the Belgian Congo. Figure 12.25 shows the common marking “Censure Congo Belge” present on both resealing labels and hand stamps.

Shortly after the start of World War II, South Africa introduced postal censorship. South Africa...
Figure 12.19
Typical Surinam censor marking on a 1940 Famous American Issue FDC.

Figure 12.20
Both sides of a 1938 Prexie FDC with Greek currency control tape tied by a hand stamp. Returned to sender because the addressee could not be located.
created its own censor marks and labels. Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg operated the most active censorship centers. Most incoming mail to South Africa was censored. Wording on tapes and labels appeared in both English and Afrikaans. Variations in text and font size distinguished censor station locations. See Figure 12.26.

SOUTH PACIFIC
Postal censorship began in Australia in September 1939. The most active censor stations (with location numbers in parentheses) were at Sydney (2), Melbourne (3), and Brisbane (1). Other locations were Adelaide (4), Perth (5), Hobart (6), Darwin (7), and various islands (8). Number and letter location codes were used by at least 2,940 civilian censors. Small rubber-stamped boxes included the censor numbers and censor office locations. Boxed and diamond-shaped markings were the most common. The FDC shown in Figure 12.27 received Adelaide censorship.

Censor markings from New Caledonia

Figure 12.21
Republic of Ireland resealing tape on top of a British resealing label with 3291 censor identification number.

Figure 12.22
A 1937 FDC posted during the Spanish civil war, with Spanish censor markings. Three cents paid the special PUAS treaty rate to Spain.
Figure 12.23
Italian censorship. Arrived Rome January 25, 1946 and censored there. Registry service to Italy resumed 12 December 1944.

Figure 12.24
Censorship at Cairo prior to the U.S. entry into the war.

Figure 12.25
Terminal mail to the Belgian Congo, censored at Leopoldville.
consisted of a double ring rubber stamp marking “Censure Alliee—Nouvelle Caledonie” (Allied Censorship—New Caledonia) enclosing a censor number, and a resealing tape in French “Ouvert par la Censore—Nouvelle-Caledonie” (Opened by the Censor—New Caledonia). Presence of an Australian diamond shaped rubber stamp in Figure 12.28 suggests the FDC reached Australia in error and later redirected to Noumea.

### ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Censorship of mail in India began on August 26, 1939. India censorship operations became part of the British censorship system that extended throughout the Commonwealth. Numerous censor stations opened and closed at different times in various locations. Northwestern locations were established because of an early worry of an attack by the Soviet Union through Afghanistan. Later attention focused on the Northeast, an area threatened by the advancing Japanese armies.

Three- and four-letter codes designated the censor station locations. Boxes, triangles, and octagons provided designs used on most markings. See Figure 12.29, showing censorship by an examiner at Bombay.

From 1949 until 1956, recurring skirmishes occurred between Israel and Egypt. The threat of war remained ever present. Therefore, Israel censored incoming mail. Tel Aviv was one of three cities in the country with censor stations. Resealing tapes in Hebrew (sometimes with English translations)
were common. Sometimes, a purple boxed rubber stamp marking was employed. Figure 12.30 shows a typical example of an FDC posted to Israel.

Prior to and during World War II, Aden was a British protectorate and strategic Yemeni port. Submarine warfare and escort missions were the British forces primary responsibilities. A diamond shaped rubber stamp inscribed with “Passed/ Censor” at the top and the censor number in the center was used on incoming mail. Figure 10.31 shows an incoming FDC to Aden posted two months after the start of the war. It bears a hand stamp, indicating the FDC was passed unopened by British censorship.

CONCLUSION
Most countries imposed mail censorship on incoming, outgoing, and transit mail during the World War II era, including FDCs. This essay provides examples of typical resealing labels and censor hand stamps found on FDCs. Most markings were applied by rubber stamps with a variety of shapes and forms, as well as resealing tapes ranging from blank varieties to those having some form of “Passed by Censor” imprinted.

Censorship proved to be an important aspect of the war, both to prevent sensitive information from falling into enemy hands and to obtain information from the enemy that might prove useful to the Allied cause. FDCs were especially perplexing to
censors because they often lacked contents and were unsealed, leading them to look for secret codes in cachets, addressees, placement of stamps, or elsewhere on the envelopes.

**ENDNOTES**


