

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

Purpose, Scope: To illustrate both basic activities of the Dead Letter Office (DLO) and innovations in its operation from 1860-1985. 1860-1985 is chosen as both 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 shown for the first item below.** Also, little change in function occurred after 1985. Only DLO handling of domestic first-class letters shown as almost no 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 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 there, handling 20,000 letters daily, more than most cities of the time. So the story of the vital DLO function is important.**

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

Exhibit Plan and Comment re Organization

Important - each section divided into four subdivisions (e.g. 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4). Each defined in **blue** at sections' 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
3. **1917-1985:** DLBs, 1974 RTA improved time of DLO disposition

1 1860-66: DLO returns not free

1.1 Basic DLO operation - non-valuable return

1. 1860-66 section organized by subdivisions 1.1 basic DLO operation, 1.2 DLO innovations, 1.3 DLO return envelopes, and 1.4 undeliverable DLO returns (only undeliverable returns known to exhibitor). Basic DLO operations: **valuable returns filed so inquiry possible** - sender name placed on valuable returned DLO item front, from Feb. 27, 1861, non-valuable items also returned from DLO (all now in return envelopes, not returned free), from Jan. 21, 1862, valuable items RTW registered. Only Washington, D.C. DLO. Innovations were introduction of CCs (return addresses)/request envelopes to decrease DLO items. However, as DLO returns not free, DLO load not decreased.



1860-66 non-CC, undeliverable non-valuable DLO RTW cover. July 7, 1862 Stony Brook, Penn. letter to Washington, D.C. where forwarded, 'UNCLAIMED,' not advertised, then sent to DLO (as from 1824-59). Also as from 1824-59, DLO opened it, writer determined, and letter RTW. **New since 1860 was use of return envelope, return of non-valuable letter, and due fee for RTW.**