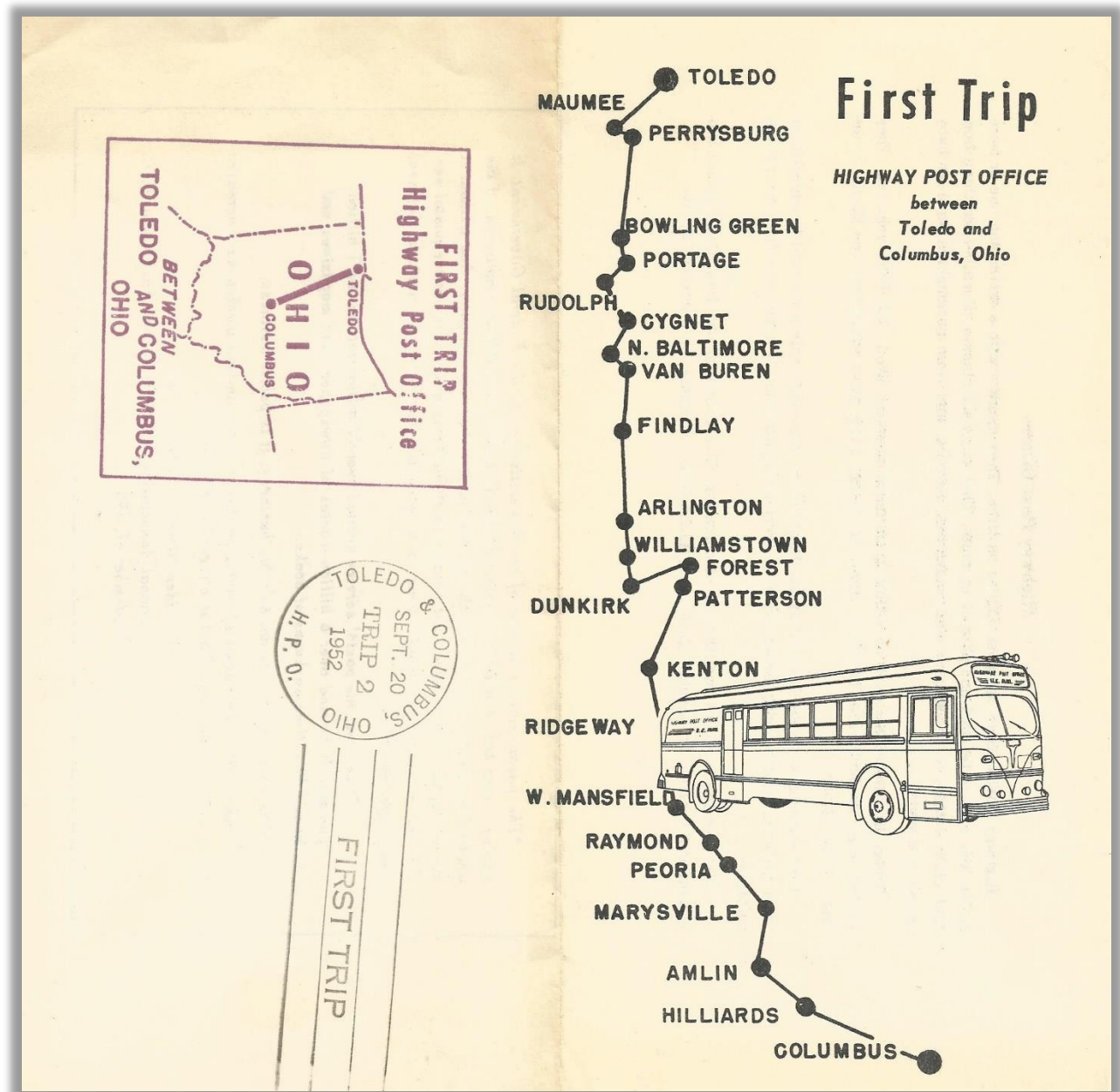


The United States Highway Post Office

By James Steckley

Introduction

In a recent donation to the stamp club, an 8" x 8" sheet of paper was included describing the First Trip of a Highway Post Office route from Toledo, Ohio to Columbus, Ohio on September 20, 1952. I had never heard of it and when I asked the question at the recent club meeting, only three members had ever heard of it. I was curious enough to look up some more information about the subject.



History Before Highway Post Office

The movement of mail throughout the country is a fascinating part of our nation's postal history. Before the invention of automobiles and other horseless vehicles, the early long-distance movement of mail was often done by the railroads. It is interesting to note that railroad route agents often also served as the town postmaster with the daily arrival of the mail train being significant in many small towns across our nation. During the early and mid-1800s, the railroad station was also often the only place in town with an accurate

clock, so the station typically drew many visitors each day. Mail transported by the railroad from this period can often be identified by a 'R.R.' postmark which designates either the railroad or the termination location of the route.

	
1848 R.R. Cancel Image courtesy of PhilaMercury	'Fast Mail' Cancel Image courtesy of PhilaMercury

By 1865, the United States Post office created the Railway Mail Service which combined simply transporting the mail with actual processing and sorting in transit. When the train arrived at either a connection or termination station, the mail was already organized in pouches without the need for further sorting. This era marked the beginning of the use of the 'R.P.O.' cancellations. In 1875 a notable new development evolved, the 'Fast Mail' first class mail service. Mail from these runs used a special marking 'Fast Mail' (or some variant of 'Fast Mail'). The late 1800s were the heyday of mail moving by train and is represented by well over 10,000 different RPO cancels. RPO mail trains continued in operation until 1977 when the last run, between Washington and New York was completed. The 'Mobile Post Office Society' (APS chapter) offers additional information for collectors interested in this part of US postal history.

	
Collection and Distribution Wagon Image courtesy of National Postal Museum	Distribution Wagon Cancel Image courtesy of PhilaMercury

Mail still needed handling between the railroad and the post offices and between post offices themselves; horse drawn wagon were often used. In 1896 the Post Office extended the use of horse drawn wagons in several large cities (New York and Washington) to include a 'Collection and Distribution Wagon'. These

specialized wagons were outfitted to allow two mail clerks to postmark and sort mail. The NY route was 3 miles, and the Washington route was 1.75 miles long. As the wagon plied along their routes, they would stop at collection boxes and smaller post office stations to collect mail. The routes terminated at a railroad station and was sent on to more distant cities. Since the driver of the wagon was not a postal employee, he was not allowed inside the wagon and drove the wagon from the outside.

Highway Post Office Service

By the turn of the century, the invention of the automobile and other self-powered road vehicles began to change the fabric of our society. The automobile facilitated large population movements out of the cities and into more rural areas. As dirt roads gave way to paved highways in the 1930s and 1940s; alternatives to railroad mail services became feasible. In the 1920s, post office officials began receiving offers and quotes for using modified buses as 'moving post offices.' By the mid-1930s, Post Office officials saw the hand writing on the wall with the decline of railroad service. Working in conjunction with Congressional members, postal officials began formulating plans using motor vehicles for transporting and sorting the mail. During this inception period they called the plan the 'Mobile Post Office of the Highway.' Ultimately the plan became reality when Congress passed Public Law 740 and the President signed into law the Highway Post Office Service on July 11, 1940.



The First Highway Post Office Bus, 1941

This law stipulated that motor vehicles and supporting equipment be purchased and operated by the government or by privately owned companies under contract. Due to pressure brought by the railroad special interests, the law also include wording which disallowed Highway Post Office Services in any area which already had adequate railroad facilities. The specifications required that bus-like vehicles be equipped in similar fashion as the previously successful Railroad Post Office cars.

The first route was established on February 10, 1941, with a route between Washington D.C. and Harrisonburg Virginia. Two additional routes were added in 1941 before the war interrupted the addition of new routes. By 1950 the number of routes grew to over 20 routes. During the 1950s, many routes were added, changed, or discontinued. The routes ranged from single daily two-way trips to multiple daily trips depending upon the size of the mail volume. The routes themselves were typically under 150 miles in length to avoid stops for refueling. Highway Post Office schedules and timetables were exacting and an on-time trips were stressed.

By the 1970s the Post Office took advantage of new automation sorting and handling technology and changed the foundational distributional system it was using. They established region-based Sectional

Centers and semi-trucks delivered large volumes of mail between them.; the advantage of sorting and processing mail in-route evaporated. The last Highway Post Office route, Cleveland to Cincinnati, made its final trip on June 30, 1974.

Collecting HPO Covers

Highway Post Office covers are a fascinating part of U.S. postal history but beyond that there are several good reasons to collect them. Due to the low volumes of HPO covers for some routes and trips, some covers are quite challenging to find. Yet because the demand is not high, collecting them is quite affordable. HPO covers were not mass produced and promoted by large companies.

Many collectors begin collecting with First Trip covers. Since First Trips were typically given special attention and fanfare, these covers often carry cachets and First Trip cancellations. Collecting Last Trip covers are a bit more daunting to collect; while some Last Trips received special attention others were more quietly ended. Last Trip covers often do not carry cachets or special cancels; collectors need to be aware of the Last Trip date to recognize the cover. Lastly, some collectors seek out 'normal' or commercial HPO covers. These non-philatelic covers are those which were carried during the normal HPO service.

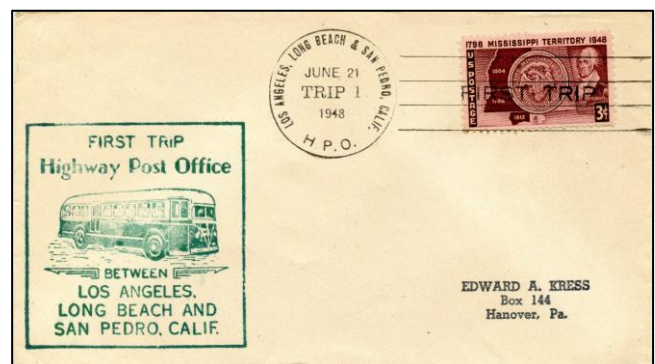
For further information on the HPO covers, see <https://stampsmarter.org>

James Steckley, our current President and Donations Chair. His main collecting interests are Canada, U.S., and Revenues.

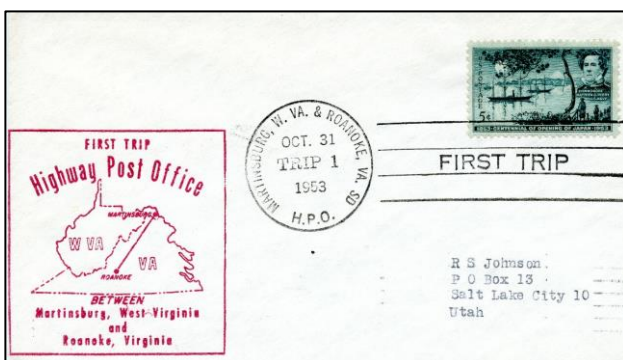
Sample First Trip Highway Post Office Covers from Editor's Collection



Martinsburg, WV and Roanoke, VA northbound.



Los Angeles, Long Beach and San Pedro, CA



Martinsburg, WV and Roanoke, VA southbound.



Columbus and Greenville, MS