

The Letter Opener

BY CHARLES EPTING

Yes! After 170 Years, There is News

Several months ago in this column we took a look at the various types of private post offices that issued adhesive postage stamps. There were also a large number of private postal services that did not produce stamps, but rather handstamped the mail that they carried. The *Scott Specialized Catalogue* lists some, but not nearly all, of these markings (the *American Stampless Cover Catalogue* (ASCC) is more thorough, yet still not comprehensive).

In this month's installment of "The Letter Opener," we're going to look at one enigmatic cover from the 1850s and see what modern research methods allow us to deduce.

Lot 985 in the November 1999 sale of the David Golden Collection of U.S. Carriers and Locals (Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries Sale 817) consisted of an ornately embossed Valentine's envelope addressed to Miss Catherine Backhouse on Carlton Avenue in Brooklyn, Long Island (Brooklyn would not become a part of New York City until 1898).

The cover bears a watery black handstamp that reads, according to the description, "Coater & Rays Valentine Express 2 Cts." in four lines. This is the only recorded example of this marking, and it has been owned by a number of great postal historians, Frank A. Hollowbush, Donald Malcolm, David L. Jarrett, and David Golden. It is the basis for a listing in the ASCC. It is important to note that all of the sales records and references use the "Coater" spelling. The handstamp certainly looks like it reads Coater, but it is not clear enough to determine definitively.

Time to investigate this cover further. Let's start with the addressee: *Hearnes' Brook-*

lyn City Directory for 1853-1854 lists a Mr. Edward T. Backhouse as a fruit merchant residing at the intersection of Carlton and DeKalb Avenues (notice the cover includes a penciled notation, "Near DeKalb"). Census records show a Catherine Backhouse, born circa 1839, among his children. So far, so good.

A thorough review of Brooklyn directories from the 1850s, the period during which this cover was mailed, did not turn up anyone by the name of "Coater." However, page 14 of the same *Hearnes' Brooklyn City Directory* for 1853-1854 provides the key piece of this puzzle: a full-page advertisement for J.H. Goater and Ebenezer Ray, Booksellers and Stationers, at 99 Myrtle Avenue. The full ad, including an illustration of Goater and Ray's storefront, is shown.

The advertisement includes reference to many of their products: books, magazines, letter paper, pens, sealing wax, and engraving, among others. Although the advertisement does not directly reference the firm's local post service, it requires no stretch of the imagination to see that such an endeavor would fit perfectly into its operation.



This stampless Valentine's cover sent by private postal service dates to 1854. It is the only one known from the service and has been held in several prominent collections. Courtesy Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries.

CIRCULATING LIBRARY.

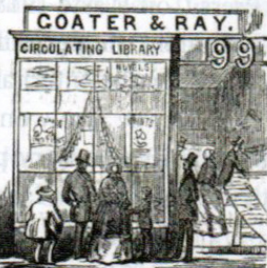
GOATER & RAY,

BOOKSELLERS AND STATIONERS,

99 MYRTLE AVENUE,

BROOKLYN.

Have constantly on hand a good assortment of books of all descriptions, at prices as low as at any other establishment in Brooklyn or N. York; among which may be found, School-books, Bl'k books and Law Blanks Drawing, Writing



Wrapping, Tissue, tracing, note, Letter and other Papers in endless variety, Quills, Steel pens, Black, Blue and Red inks Sealing Wax, wafers, Crayons, Drawing Pencils, Slates, Cards, Motto Verses, cut Tissue Paper &c.

All the Daily, Weeekly, and Monthly

PAPERS & MAGAZINES

CONSTANTLY ON HAND.

ENGRAVING.

Door Plates, Business, Wedding and Visiting Cards, Engraved in the neatest style and at the lowest prices,

99 MYRTLE AVENUE,

Brooklyn.

J. H. GOATER.

EBENEZER RAY.

We can infer from the embossed envelope, as well as the name "Goater and Ray Valentine Express), that the envelope Miss Backhouse received was probably sent sometime in early February (in the 1850s, Valentine's Day was less of a day and more of a season). Many local posts operated exclusively during this time of year to try to get in on a piece of the action. For booksellers such as Goater and Ray, a short-lived Valentine's local post may have been provided for customers for only a couple of weeks. The fact that Goater and Ray only ran its article in the 1853-1854 directory suggests that the Valentine was sent in February 1854.

My quest to uncover more about Ebenezer Ray and J.H. Goater is a rabbit hole that will have to wait for another time to be explored fully. I would like to mention that John H. Goater went on to become a successful and prolific political cartoonist around the time of the American Civil War, as seen by his work in the Little Bo Peep cartoon. Perhaps it was his artistic influence that led to the slightly whimsical design of the Goater and Ray handstamp.

So far as I know, this is the first time in the literature that the proper name of this local post (Goater and Ray Valentine Express) has been given, as well as the first time that its proprietors have been identified. I hope it goes to show that, even after 170 years, there are still mysteries to be solved in the world of postal history.

If anyone else does choose to go down the rabbit hole of Mr. Ebenezer Ray and Mr. John H. Goater, I would love to hear from you.



A full page ad from J.H. Goater and Ebenezer Ray, Booksellers and Stationers appears in the 1853-54 Hearn's Brooklyn City Directory.



LITTLE BO-PEEP AND HER FOOLISH SHEEP.

"Little Bo-peep, she lost her sheep,
And didn't know where to find 'em";
Let 'em alone, and they'll all come home,
With their tails hanging down behind 'em."

A Civil War-era political cartoon by John H. Goater. It was published in 1861 by Thomas W. Strong, of New York City. Courtesy Library of Congress.