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Civil Mail and Censorship in Alaska Territory during the Second World War

“Any approach to censorship in a democratic country is fraught with serious difficulties and grave risks. It is not too much to say that no operation connected with war merits more careful planning or more thoughtful administration.”

“A Report on the Office of Censorship,” November 15, 1945

Purpose: This exhibit will examine the civil censorship of mail during the Second World War in Alaska. It will examine the seals, the censor markings, and the enclosed notices that were used in the examination and censorship of mail. It will also examine mail moving out of Alaska, into Alaska and within Alaska.

Scope: From December 1941 until January 1944 all civilian mail to and from Alaska was subject to examination and censorship. Most Alaska mail was examined at the Seattle censorship station, but there were exceptions. Most philatelic mail was routed to the philatelic control unit at the New York censor station. Except for military mail carried by the civil postal system, the censorship of military mail is outside the scope of this exhibit.

Historical Background: Long before the United States' entry into the Second World War, the Post Office Department was working on procedures for handling and censoring mail from potential war zones. With the declaration of war on December 8, 1941 a provisional Office of Censorship was established by the federal government, emergency regulations were drawn up, and the first censorship stations were activated on December 12, 1941. The first War Powers Act passed on December 18, 1941 made these arrangements official.

Alaska was a potential war zone from the start of the war. As such, the decision was made to examine all civil mail traveling to and from the Territory. The Office of Censorship opened a Postal Censorship Station in Seattle Washington to deal primarily with civilian mail from Alaska and Western Canada. This office officially opened December 12, 1941 and civilian mail to and from the territory was examined from the opening of the office.

At its height, the Seattle censorship station employed close to 500 examiners. By the time general censorship ended the strength of the office was down to just over 200. The office was closed in early 1945.

Exhibit Plan

- I. The Arrival of Censorship
 - a. Pre-war
 - b. Civil Censorship Imposed
- II. The Development of Censorship
 - a. Markings and Seals
 - b. Official Enclosures
- III. The Operation of Censorship
 - a. Mail to Alaska
 - b. Mail from Alaska
 - c. Mail within Alaska
- IV. The End of Censorship
- V. Summary