

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

Purpose, Scope:

- To illustrate both basic activities of the Dead Letter Office (DLO)/Dead Letter Branches (DLB) and innovations in their operation from 1860-1985.
- These years were chosen because important changes in basic DLO/DLB operation as well as the development of many important innovations that improved DLO/DLB function occurred then.
- **That is, from 1824-1859, the DLO's way of functioning saw little change and can be and is shown for the first item.** Also, little change in function occurred after 1985.
- Only DLO/DLB handling of domestic first-class letters is shown since few 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/DLB was to return to writer/return to addressee unmailable/undeliverable, non-valuable/valuable matter with no return address (no CC). In spite of constant effort to improve basic functions of and innovations in the DLO/DLB operation, each year, millions of items continued to be sent to the DLO/DLB and return to writer/return to addressee. **For instance, in 1891, 107 people worked in Washington, D.C., handling 20,000 letters daily, more than most cities of the time. So the story of the vital DLO/DLB function is important.**

Rarity Highlighting and Major Abbreviations: Red matting with bold information = rare items. CC = corner card (return address); DLO = dead letter office; DLB = dead letter branch.

Exhibit Plan and Comment re Organization

Important - each of three time periods divided into four subdivisions (e.g. 1.1 basic DLO/DLB operation, 1.2 DLO/DLB innovation (the APPROXIMATE (APPROX.) results of each innovation shown below in dark blue), 1.3 DLO/DLB return envelopes and 1.4 unmailable/undeliverable DLO/DLB returns. Each also defined in light blue at time periods' 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 - thus, in 1868, APPROX. 1/126 ended in DLO (4,162,144 DLO items, APPROX. 720,000,000 total domestic items) - in 1891, APPROX. 1/325 items ended in DLO.
- 3. 1917-1985:** DLB introduction improved overall function of Division of Dead letters, 1974 return to addressee improved time of DLB disposition - in 1918, APPROX. 1/1000 items ended in DLB (APPROX. 14,500,000 DLB items, APPROX. 14,000,000,000 total domestic items).
- 4. Epilogue:** Stability of DLB function since 1986 - in 2006, APPROX. 1/2200 items ended in DLB (APPROX. 90,000,000 DLB items, APPROX. 200,000,000,000 total domestic items).