

THE
MAGNOLIA
COLLECTION
UNITED STATES MAIL IN CHINA AND JAPAN

INTRODUCTION

THE HISTORY OF MAIL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA AND Japan may be divided into three distinct periods: i) the Pre-Treaty Period; ii) the Interim Consulate Period; and iii) the Post Office Period. The date ranges of these periods are different for the separate nations of China and Japan, and there are areas of gray between them, but for the purpose of understanding the complexities of postal service in the Far East, as it relates to American interests, these three basic chronological dividing points work well.

The **Pre-Treaty Period** is defined as the period before the United States entered into formal diplomatic relations with the respective governments of China and Japan. Mail was carried through channels created by trade or, more rarely, through diplomatic or military representatives. Early letters between the U.S. and China are typically ship letters to and from Canton, the main port for the China export business. Pre-Treaty mail between the U.S. and Japan is extremely limited and generally confined to the 1853-54 naval expedition by Commodore Perry.

The **Interim Consulate Period** is defined as the period following the signing of treaties and preceding the establishment of an official postal agency. During this period, the U.S. Consulates General took responsibility for much of the mail by acting as forwarding agents. They placed letters on the next outbound ship or received inbound letters and held them for the recipients (or their agents) to pick up. In certain cases the consulate office applied a marking to identify its involvement.

The **Post Office Period** is the period in which official U.S. post offices (also called agencies) were established in the major Treaty Ports. In China this period began on October 14, 1867, with the postal agency in Shanghai. In Japan the first post office was officially established in Yokohama on July 27, 1867. Both followed the commencement of contract mail transportation by the Pacific Mail Steamship Company on January 1, 1867.

China

China's exports to the West in the 18th century were significantly greater than its imports. Together with other economic circumstances, this trade imbalance created a severe shortage of British silver. To remedy the problem, beginning in the late 1700s, British mercantilists escalated opium production in other parts of the colonial empire and sold an increasing quantity of the narcotic to the Chinese. The disruption to Chinese society created by drug addiction, as well as the turmoil of civil rebellion against the Qing dynasty, led the government to take action against the opium smugglers. Over a period of decades, tensions mounted to the point of open military conflict, culminating in the First Opium War of 1839 to 1842.

Superior British naval forces prevailed. The 1842 Treaty of Nanking between Great Britain and China, followed by the separate French treaties of 1843 and 1844, further opened China through the establishment of the Treaty Ports and the concession of Hong Kong to Great Britain. They were the first of what have been called the "Unequal Treaties," and they were the direct consequence of China's attempt to stop illegal drug smuggling into the country. The second Opium War of 1856 to 1860 also resulted in China's capitulation and new treaties with expanded concessions.

Americans, who had traded with the Chinese since the 1700s, also participated in opium smuggling. John Jacob Astor and Franklin Delano Roosevelt's maternal grandfather both made some of their fortunes in opium. Beyond the profits that went to individuals, the opium trade's greater benefit to American interests was the opportunity created by the treaties between China and major European powers in the 1840s and 1850s. The U.S. government was able to negotiate its own treaties, and, through the Most Favored Nation provisions of those agreements, China was compelled to open its ports to Americans on an equal basis with other nations.

The U.S. and China treaties (or *conventions*) paved the way for diplomatic relations between the U.S. and China, business expansion in the Far East, and the entry of Christian missionaries who eagerly spread the gospel among the Chinese. These activities created greater need for postal service. To meet that need the U.S. established a post office in Shanghai in 1867 and entered into a mail contract with the Pacific Mail Steamship Company for regular steamship service between Hong Kong and San Francisco. These developments follow the transition from the Pre-Treaty to Interim Consulate Period, and finally to the Post Office Period.

Japan

The Tokugawa shogunate military government of Japan, in existence since 1603, was extremely wary of any foreign presence or intervention. In particular, they considered Christianity a “superstition” that gravely threatened their society and culture (and power). Except for the occasional shipwrecked crew or unsuccessful attempt at contact, Europeans and Americans rarely entered the world of the Japanese. When China capitulated to the British and French after the First Opium War, the Tokugawa were watching with profound concern. In 1846, after negotiating the first U.S. treaty with China, Commodore James Biddle led a small naval expedition into Japan’s waters, hoping to make contact and begin formal relations. He was turned away.

In 1852, despite his misgivings about the mission, Commodore Matthew C. Perry set sail from Norfolk, Virginia, in the U.S.S. *Mississippi* to lead the East India Squadron from Hong Kong to Japan. In July 1853, after switching to the U.S. Flagship *Susquehanna*, Commodore Perry entered Edo Bay (Tokyo). Following a not-so-thinly veiled threat of force, Commodore Perry succeeded in stepping on Japanese soil and presenting a letter from President Millard Fillmore to Emperor Komei, along with two white flags and instructions on how to use them. This paved the way for the 1854 Convention of Kanagawa, which opened the ports at Shimoda and Hakodate to Americans.

Even after the 1854 treaty was signed, there was very little mail sent between the U.S. and Japan. The Treaty of Amity and Commerce signed July 29, 1858, also known as the Harris Treaty, expanded the number of ports open to American settlement, including Kanagawa (Yokohama), Hiogo (Kobe) and Nagasaki. By the 1860s mail was regularly carried to and from Japan on ships traveling on routes of the British Peninsular & Oriental Line. In 1864 the U.S. Consul in Kanagawa (Yokohama), Colonel George S. Fisher, began advertising his service in forwarding mail, and in 1866 he started marking letters with the distinctive “Forwarded by U.S. Consul, Kanagawa, Japan” oval handstamp.

The collapse of the Tokugawa government and the Meiji Restoration occurred almost concurrently with the start of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company’s contract mail service. Beginning January 1, 1867, steamers on the Pacific mail route ran between San Francisco and Hong Kong, with a stop in Yokohama. Transpacific mail could travel faster than mail carried by transatlantic steamers connecting with European lines, especially after the transcontinental railroad was completed in May 1869. The establishment of U.S. post offices in Japan followed, and mail was carried on branch-line steamers that ran regular routes between the Treaty Ports in Japan and China.

By 1874 the Japanese government was fully engaged in a modernization plan, including the establishment of the Foreign Postal Service on January 1, 1875, organized by an American hired to assist the Japanese. The U.S. post offices in Japan were discontinued on December 31, 1874.

Postal Artifacts in The Magnolia Collection

The covers sent between the United States and China and Japan are as diverse as the correspondents who mailed them, the routes they traveled, the modes of transport that carried them, the postage rates paid, and the stamps and markings used to pay the postage and implement the terms of the postal conventions. Perhaps more than any other area of United States postal history, covers to and from China and Japan challenge the mind and delight the eye.

With the emergence of Japan as an economic power after World War II, United States covers to and from Japan were collected by knowledgeable, determined and wealthy Japanese collectors, such as Ryohei Ishikawa. It was virtually impossible to outbid them. In the 1980s, collectors of China began to fiercely compete for covers involving the U.S. post offices in China. The American collector who formed the Magnolia collection began in earnest about 20 years ago. Over the past two decades, in the face of often brutal competition, he succeeded in building one of the most comprehensive collections of this subject ever formed, capturing numerous major items from famous collections at auction and in privately negotiated sales. The depth and breadth of the Magnolia collection is so great, we are compelled to offer it in a series of sales rather than all at once.

Acknowledgment of Sources

As will be evident from this catalogue, researching and writing descriptions that accurately convey the significance and rarity of the material takes considerable time and attention to detail. In this effort we have been greatly aided by the publication of information and analysis by Richard C. Frajola, Michael Perlman and Lee Scamp in their book, *The United States Post Offices in China and Japan 1867 to 1874* (referred to in this catalogue simply as the Frajola-Perlman-Scamp book). Many of the covers in the Magnolia collection were used to illustrate this valuable reference book. Another significant source of information is Matsumoto Jun Ichi’s updated version of *A History of The French Post Office of Yokohama*. Much of Mr. Matsumoto’s book is relevant to the operations of the U.S. post offices in Japan. He also includes a section on U.S. post offices, with photos of covers in the Magnolia collection.

Finally, items are described with extensive information from online sources, including the *Chronicle* of the U.S. Philatelic Classics Society, the International Society of Japanese Philately, the California Digital Newspaper Collection, GenealogyBank, Wikimedia Commons (for images) and dozens of auction catalogues produced by scholarly professionals, such as Dr. Jeffrey Schneider.