

# INTRODUCTION

## **“Official Business” State Departmental Offices Illustrated Covers 1860 - 1960**

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Hosted in the Stamp Smarter Library

<https://stampsmarter.org/learning/StateGovCovers.html>

# Introduction: “Official Business” Illustrated Covers and Corner Cards

## INTRODUCTION

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Although the use of an envelope to securely enclose a letter sent through the mails has been around for many centuries, it was not until the 1840s when several events occurred that brought them into widespread use in the United States. The first was the invention of manufacturing equipment which could mass produce the envelopes inexpensively, and the second was the change in how the United States Post Office Department calculated the way it charged for the postage to carry a letter through the mails. The early rates were based on the number of pieces of paper that made up the letter, and since the envelope was considered a separate sheet, the rate would automatically be doubled for a letter sent in an envelope. This occurred as the result of the Postal Act of March 3, 1845, when rates were changed to consider the weight of the letter rather than the number of sheets comprising the mail piece. This law became effective on July 1, 1845.

By the early 1860s, several state governments had begun to produce decorative envelopes with an all-over background design for use in their “Official Business” correspondence. The typical design included some representation of the official state seal in the upper left corner, together with the name of the individual department or agency, either as part of the design with the seal or in the background of the entire envelope. As these envelopes were often printed in bright colors, they no doubt readily caught the attention of their recipients.

The compiler of this monograph has been a collector of these illustrated all-over “Official Business” envelopes prepared for the state of Texas for several years. These styles of covers were used both by departments and agencies of the state government, located in Austin, Texas, as well as at the seats of many county governments across the state. Those used by the state offices began in the late 1860s, and their use by these offices had declined by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Similar covers used at the county level began to appear by the late 1870s, and some counties continued to use these well into the 1920s and 1930s.

While recently creating the two monographs based on the compiler’s collection of these Texas envelopes, there appeared on eBay a large group (about 250) of these illustrated “Official Business” envelopes which had been used by departments and agencies from several dozen states. Fascinated to see such a large selection of these envelopes at one time, the concept to create a series of monographs to illustrate these types of envelopes for the other states was formed. The group of envelopes from eBay was “harvested”, and eBay and other on-line dealer sources were examined to locate additional envelopes, which were also preserved.

About the same time, a thread was posted on the Stamp Community Family stamp collecting forum in April 2021, in which the original poster asked whether there was any form of reference for these types of envelopes. This thread can be found at:

[https://www.stampcommunity.org/topic.asp?TOPIC\\_ID=76574&whichpage=1&](https://www.stampcommunity.org/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=76574&whichpage=1&)

Since I had now had access to images for several hundred of these types of envelopes, and I had already been working on the construction of a monograph for my Texas materials, I decided to expand

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that effort and create some similar (but very preliminary) monographs for each of the various states for which I had at least a single example.

Because there were many states west of the Mississippi which were initially established as a territory in the years following the Civil War, and then entered the United States at a later time, all representative envelopes have been included regardless of whether they were from a territorial or statehood period.

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## ORGANIZATION

The original monographs were intended to focus only on those “Official Business” envelopes with the full all-over designs in the background, but as I began to examine and organize the envelopes present in my Texas collections, I discovered that there were a number of equally “interesting” envelopes, which had also been used by these departmental offices, either concurrently with, or subsequent to the appearance of the envelopes with the all-over illustrated designs.

These alternate designs can be roughly grouped in the following categories:

- (a) Envelopes with an illustration of the state capitol building or county courthouse,
- (b) Envelopes with an illustration of the state or county seal,
- (c) Envelopes with an ornate printed corner card, and
- (d) Those envelopes with a conventional corner card with the department or agency name.

The original scope was now expanded to include illustrations for all the envelopes encountered from the first three categories which were used before 1920, with a goal was to try and be complete with their inclusion. Because of the larger quantity of official business envelopes with the traditional corner cards in the fourth category, these have been included when the compiler thought they might be useful to show the timing of the transition of the other styles of covers to the plain standard design, or to illustrate unusual department or agency names. Obviously, not all combinations were necessarily present or included in the monographs. In addition, the original period of use to be included in the monographs was expanded from the early years of the twentieth century up into the post-World War II period, and occasionally examples which dated even further into the modern period were encountered and included. Readers not interested in the more modern material may easily skip over it.

The monographs which have been prepared in this series should not be considered to be complete in all respects, such as one might expect in a formal handbook or catalog, but have been prepared to provide the reader with an introduction to a representative sample of the styles and varieties of envelopes that were used during this period, and perhaps educate the collecting community as to the possibilities that could exist in collecting them.

Although my original study of these all-over illustrated “Official Business” departmental envelopes for Texas were compiled into two separate monographs for the state and county office envelopes, it was elected to combine these groups into a single monograph for the other states.

These monographs were further divided into several standard sections. The initial section will include those envelopes used by the agency and departmental offices at the state level, which are typically located at the state capitol. These state envelopes have been organized into an alphabetical order based on the agency or department name. These department names were not always consistent, as they evolved over time, and therefore, these are usually grouped by what the compiler believed was

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the most obvious choice. Within the envelopes from a specific department, they have been grouped in chronological order to the extent possible.

Unfortunately, the “chronological order” goal presented some difficulties. Most mail sent prior to 1890 did not have the year date present in the post office date stamp, and in the absence of any sender or addressee docketing, an “educated” guess had to be made based on the postage stamp present.

The most common departmental names encountered included the following (obviously not a complete list): Adjutant General’s Office, Attorney General’s Office, Department of Agriculture, various Courts: Civil, Criminal, Appeals, Comptroller’s Office, Department of Education (also called Public Instruction), General Assembly, General Land Office, State Library, House of Representatives, Legislature, Senate, Department of State, Supreme Court, and Treasurer’s Office. State colleges and universities were also included.

A second section was prepared to include those envelopes from agencies and departments prepared for and used by the county and other local (city) governments. However, due to the limited scope of the search for covers, not all the states included in this monograph series had many examples of these county offices represented. The organization of this section was arranged in alphabetical order by county, then by county seat, and chronologically by date, with any envelopes from a city office in the county to follow the county offices. When present, these envelopes were generally represented by the following departments: Assessor or Tax Assessor or Tax Collector, Comptroller’s Office, County and District Clerk, Justice of the Peace, Sheriff, and County Treasurer, although others are possible as well.

Schools and colleges presented a small dilemma, and an effort was made to include only those envelopes prepared for public, tax supported, schools. However, most schools identified with “Normal” as part of their name have been included, even though this was a common term used with some private schools during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The compiler apologizes for any confusion this brings to the monographs.

While examining these envelopes from a few states (especially Texas), examples of similar envelopes used by private businesses were encountered that used the same basic design templates. In some instances, these have been included in a separate section.

In the original plan, only a few examples of these all-over illustrated “Official Business” envelopes were observed which had been printed for use by the Congress in Washington, DC, and a separate monograph has been prepared for those. There was no original intention to include envelopes with illustrations or corner cards from other offices of the many federal government’s departments and agencies which had major offices located within the state. However, after encountering a few “interesting” envelopes and corner cards, it was decided to include a few of these, with the criteria that they would have the post office name within the state imprinted on the envelope, and these would typically not include the myriad of common “penalty” envelopes which are present in the thousands for some departments. As a result, the reader will find that the level of representation of these types of official business envelopes will vary considerably from state to state.

The origin or printing source of these envelopes is not well documented. Only a small number of envelopes examined had any form of printer’s or publisher’s imprint, and it is believed that many of

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the envelopes used by state governments were prepared by either a state printing department, or by annual contracts to private printers within the state. A careful examination of many examples of similarly appearing envelopes used over a sequence of years often reveals variations that would indicate that new lithographic plates were probably prepared, which could have been the result of an old plate wearing out or a change in the printing company. A review of the monograph for Ohio will present some preliminary analysis of this sort of thing by the compiler along these lines.

The printing of the county and other local office envelopes appears – at least within Texas – to have been the result of several large office supply or stationery printing firms who sold envelopes with these designs to the local governments. It is suspected that the transition from these more colorful envelope designs to the traditional corner cards seen after 1920 was the result of local printing businesses wanting this sort of business to be made available to their local firms, and not sent to outside firms.

The representation of these envelopes found in the several dozen monographs in this series is quite diverse. A few states: Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas, are now represented by a significant number of examples, often the result of early contributions from collectors who are state “specialists”, and who kindly volunteered to contribute scans of their material for inclusion. Other states, particularly those found in the southern and western areas of the United States, have only few examples recorded and included at the present time. This diversity should not be interpreted as an absence or scarcity of envelopes from those states, but more of an artifact of the method by which the data was collected by the compiler.

Additionally, many states have no covers or very few examples of covers reported from the county offices, and the same consideration applies. Texas has by far the largest number of these county office envelopes included, which may be because there are 254 distinct counties in Texas, or simply an artifact of my having collected these for many years, but it also appears that several printing/publishing firms had aggressive marketing efforts to sell these types of envelopes at the county government level in Texas.

Each envelope illustrated will have a header section like the one shown here.

<b>ID:</b>	<b>State:</b>	<b>County:</b>	<b>City:</b>
<b>Dates:</b>		<b>Color:</b>	<b>Size:</b>
<b>Office:</b>			
<b>Notes:</b>			
<b>Source:</b>			

The fields are generally self-explanatory, but some comments are in order.

- a.) The “**ID:**” field is reserved for future use should it become practical to assign some form of classification to the different types of covers.
- b.) The “**Dates:**” field will generally be limited to the year of use, and when two identical covers are known from different years, a range may be provided. The exact dates for covers used prior to 1890 are often missing from postal markings found on the envelopes, and they are then estimated based on the stamp used. As the base first-class postage rate changed from 3 cents

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to 2 cents on Oct 1, 1883, this date is often entered simply as “Before Oct 1, 1883” or “After Oct 1, 1883” when no precise information is available.

- c.) The “**Size:**” field will be provided in inches, i.e., 6.25” x 3.75”, when the actual cover can be examined and measured, but when acquired from other sources, will usually be noted as “Small”, “Regular” (close to the 6.25” x 3.75” size), or “Large” (equivalent to our current legal size No. 10 envelopes).
- d.) The “**Color:**” field will be approximate, as many colors seen online are not truly representative, and these envelopes are subject to fading with age. Corrections to mis-identified colors would be appreciated.
- e.) The “**Office:**” field will include the name of the departmental or agency office as it appears on the envelope. As the departmental name may change over time, covers with alternative departmental names will generally be included following the earliest version of the department name.
- f.) The “**Notes:**” field will include any unique information about the envelope, and about the printer’s imprint, when present. If not mentioned, there was no imprint, or the reverse of the cover was not available to examine for one.
- g.) The “**Source:**” field will identify the source of the cover illustration, generally either as “Author’s collection”, a contributor’s collection, or an eBay seller’s or dealer’s listing.

Only the illustration of front side of these envelopes has been included, unless there is some significant postal history element present on the reverse. When the envelope illustrated also included contents related to the purpose of the office, the contents, or at least the illustrated portion of the letterhead or billhead, were also included. As the search for relevant envelopes proceeded, other state and county documents with “interesting” billhead type illustrations were encountered, and because I found these interesting in terms of explaining the purpose for the use of these envelopes, I began to include these as well. Readers with no interest in this type of material may skip over these entries.

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## THE FUTURE PLANS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The complete series of these monographs has been hosted on the Stamp Smarter website through the courtesy of Don Denman. These monographs were not intended to be an active project of the original compiler, but the original source documents for each (a simple Microsoft Word file) can be made available to other collectors who would be interested in taking responsibility to add new materials to them.

For the immediate future, the compiler solicits the contribution of additional digitals scans that illustrate envelopes which are not present in these monographs, or those which are present but were mailed with different dates, which will allow for the better identification of when specific envelope designs were in use. Preference will be given to those envelopes with the all-over illustrations, and the state/local buildings and seals, and those used prior to 1920.

Contributions of envelopes from any of the states will be welcome. It is requested that the envelopes submitted should be scanned at 300dpi and provided in the JPG format when possible. Images of envelopes created with a camera or iPhone are not really useful unless they are carefully prepared with no angular distortion. If contributing more than a small number of examples, please contact me to discuss options other than email.

Contributors will be acknowledged in the monograph(s) for which they submit examples unless otherwise instructed. All errors are the responsibility of the compiler, and please bring any errors found to my attention.

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