



**EMPIRE STATE
POSTAL HISTORY
SOCIETY**

APS UNIT 28

Meets twice annually

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COLLECTING NEW YORK FLAG CANCELS

By George McGowan

The time between the Civil War and the beginning of the 20th century was a period of rapid area and population growth in America. In big cities and small towns the US Post Office Department soon realized that hand canceling mail was no longer practical and that some form of mechanization was needed.

As necessity is the mother of invention, hundreds of creative people began experimenting with machines to cancel mail. Of these, probably only dozens actually got to demonstrate their devices in actual post office settings. Even fewer received contracts and could begin to make money producing and marketing their inventions.

One of these successful companies was the American Postal Machines Company. In 1883, Martin Ethridge secured financial backing from Henry Waite to begin this venture. Patents were obtained and working models were built. Many of their early machines were used in Boston.

In 1894 the company began manufacturing a machine featuring a waving American flag as the killer part of the cancel. This became very popular almost immediately. Some of these cancels were used well into the 1930s.

Like other desirable obsolete postal markings, many collectors collected and preserved examples of these flag cancels, of which there are more than 7,000 varieties available.

Frederick Langford's *Flag Cancel Encyclopedia* third edition (Pasadena, 1976) lists New York State as having 179 towns that used the American flag cancel, with 535 varieties known; New York City has 194 of these varieties.

What is nice about this collecting area is that it is inexpensive, and will take a long time to approach any form of completion. ■

