



**EMPIRE STATE  
POSTAL HISTORY  
SOCIETY**

**APS UNIT 28**

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**MAIL ORDER OPIUM**

*By Maris Tirums*

The post office at Sawkill, New York, in Ulster County near Kingston was open for thirty years, from January 16, 1885, until June 15, 1915. Sawkill was, and still is, a small rural community of no real distinction.

The cover shown here was mailed from Sawkill on February 4, 1907, and addressed to Kingston. It was postmarked with a standard circular date stamp of the period with a target killer canceling the stamp — a two-cent Washington regular issue of 1903 (Scott 319).

This cover is of special interest because of its enclosure rather than any philatelic aspects. Inside was a handwritten note which reads, “please send me 25. C. of opium by return mail and oblige.” The bottom portion of the note is folded in such a way as to hold a coin, very likely a quarter, so that it does not move

around inside the envelope. There is a faint outline of a coin in the center of the folded section.

We’ll never know the back story on this transaction, but we do know that in 1907 opium was widely sold and freely available to anyone. The Pure Food and Drug Act was passed in 1906, but for many years thereafter, the law did not prohibit the use or sale of many potentially harmful ingredients, but rather required truthful labeling of so-called patent medicines and banned unsubstantiated claims of the many medicines available during that period.

Opium and other opiates were sold widely in patent medicines. Public perceptions of opium were generally negative largely because it was favored by Chinese immigrants who came to America as laborers, and some of whom used opium as an intoxicant. In 1909, the Opium Exclusion Act was passed which banned smoking opium, a measure that targeted the Chinese. That same law permitted opium based medications.

Ironically, opium was one of the few patent medicine ingredients that provided some of the benefits that the medicine men claimed. It is possible that the opium ordered from the recipient of the note was to relieve pain and not to get high! ■

