

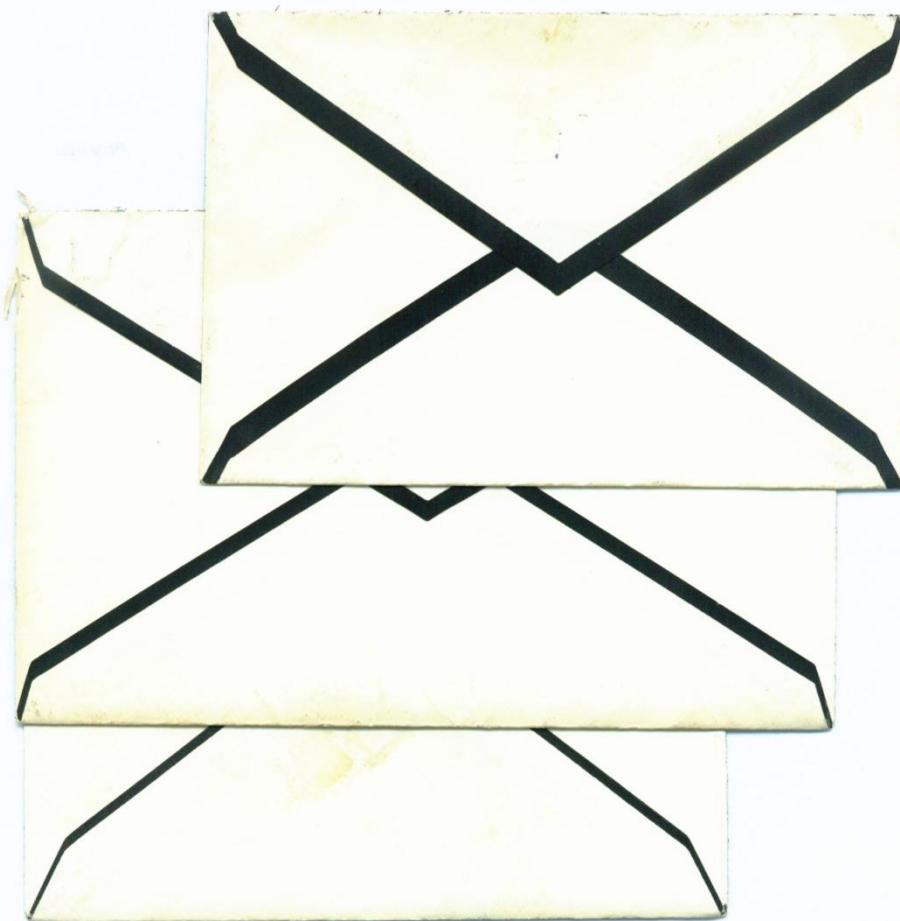
Mourning Covers By Richard Pederson

Mourning covers are those that included a letter or note announcing a person's death or other related announcement. In his "U.S. Notes" column in *Linn's Stamp News*, dated October 22, 2001, John Hotchner quoted from an article, written under the pen name Paul Bearer, regarding the uses of mourning covers. The article, titled "Edged in Black: 20th Century Mourning Covers," which appeared in the Summer 1994 issue of *U.S. Stamps and Postal History*, indicated there were four occasions in which mourning covers were used. These were to announce a death, to notify the recipient of funeral arrangements, to send messages of condolence, and to serve as a remembrance on correspondence for a period of time following a family member's death. They were most commonly used during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although the use of mourning covers has nearly disappeared in the United States after 1960, their use has continued in Europe after that date. Mourning covers can easily be identified by a black border surrounding the envelope on the outside edge of the envelope's front. The size of the border can vary significantly. The following figure, located at the top left of the next page, shows a mourning cover overlaying two others, clearly demonstrating how the size of the borders varies.



Mourning Covers

The rear of the covers typically have the interior borders of the envelope flaps outlined in black, with the black borders being similar in size to those on the front. The figure below shows the rear or reverse side of the same three covers pictured above. In one of her “Refresher Course” articles in *Linn’s Stamp News*, dated February 8, 2010, Janet Klug indicated that some sources believe the size of the border related to one of the following: closeness of the sender’s relationship to the deceased; amount of time that had transpired since the person’s death; or the importance of the person who died.



I have always found mourning covers intriguing because the black border grabs your attention and makes the covers stand out from others. The fact that the covers were sent at a time when it is likely that the sender and/or recipient had lost a loved one, gives mourning covers a very personal and emotional component most other covers do not have. Since most mourning covers were sent during times when the mail was the principal way of communicating to those who did not live close, they were usually the first news the recipient had of a friend or loved one’s death. The black border thus alerted the person opening the cover to the bad news contained within.

If you are fortunate enough to find a cover that still has its contents, it will likely provide

Mourning Covers

additional insight into the event. Who was it that died and what brought about their death? What was the relationship of the sender and/or recipient to the deceased? When did the death occur and under what circumstances? The answers to those and other questions about a very personal moment in the sender's past may be unlocked. The next figure shows a mourning cover that does have its contents and to which I have a personal connection.



Unfortunately, the above cover has had the stamp removed, but the enclosed letter more than makes up for the missing stamp. The first thing I noticed after removing the letter from the envelope was that the first page of the letter (see next figure) was surrounded by a heavy black border similar to the one on the front of the envelope. I don't know if it was a common practice to put the border around the enclosed letter as the only other mourning cover I have with its contents does not have a border on the letter. The letter, which was sent on November 26, 1877, is addressed to Mrs. Lydia Amelia Cheney, my great, great grandmother on my mother's side, and was sent by her sister in law, Mrs. M. Cheney. It tells how her husband spent the last few months of his life and how he died of bladder problems. The letter then goes on to discuss the health of other family members. Unfortunately, the full name of the sister in law and her husband are not given in the letter. That gives me some further future research to do when looking into my family's history.

Newark Nov ^{the} 26 1847
Dear Brother & Sister
It is raining
& I cannot go to Church I am very
lonely & sad I thought I would
pen you a few lines to give
you a brief sketch of Mr. [Name]
sickness & death the Drs say his
sickness was caused by a hurt
he has been troubled with
his water more or less
a good many years at last
it stoped entirely then he
sent for the Doctor he suf-
fered terribly he thought
if he could get to it he would

From my experience, mourning covers vary in size and appearance, although they tend to be smaller in size than typical covers from the same era. Most of the covers I own are unadorned by anything other than the border, sender's and recipient's addresses, and a stamp and postal markings. I have also seen pictures of some quite elaborate mourning covers containing pictures and other graphics related to the deceased.

Although mourning covers have always fascinated me, there certainly is a great deal more that I can learn about them. One very good way of doing this is to join the Mourning Stamps and Covers Club, which was founded in 2006 and is dedicated to the study of stamps and covers pertaining to the subject of mourning. By joining the club,

Mourning Covers

you get the opportunity to learn more about the topic by interacting with others having a similar interest and you also receive the club's quarterly publication, *Mourning Notes*, which is filled with articles discussing mourning stamps and covers. If you are interested in mourning stamps and covers and want to learn more, do as I did and join the Mourning Stamps and Covers Club. You can either contact the club Secretary, Jim Bailey, at P.O. Box 937, Brownwood, Texas 76804 or join on-line at the club's web site, www.mscc.ms.

[Note: This article was first published in the Fourth Quarter 2011 edition of *NSDA News*.]