

The Civil War Post

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Provenance: Tracing Philatelic Ownership

Provenance in postal history – or any area of collectibles – is a record of ownership from its earliest existence to current owner. In legal parlance, provenance is functionally a chain of custody. It helps establish pedigree and authenticity.

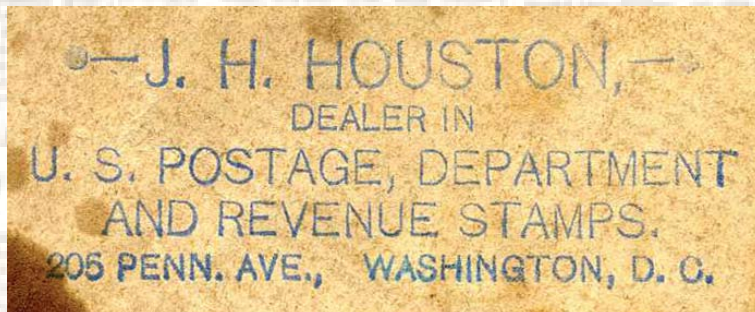
Covers or stamps with demonstrable pedigree are more coveted than their mundane brethren. A cover that was once owned by Caspary, Ferrary or another famous collector tends to get our philatelic juices flowing.

Markings of prior owners, dealers, initials, signatures or signature-guarantees are all something that help trace the lineage of an item. Many such markings are familiar to us, if we are serious students.

If markings are European and our experience has only been within the continental United States, we may not be familiar with them. Collectors may make a mistake if they erase these lightly penciled markings. Some European experts pencil(ed) their initials near a stamp as a guarantee of authenticity. European collectors are virtually insistent on certificates and guarantee signatures. What Americans may see as “defacing” are what Europeans (and others) see as critically important.

Decades ago, handstamped owners’ markings began peppering the backs of covers. That is, until some of the ink began to seep through to the face - or someone placed a garish handstamp near an important marking on the back, greatly reducing the value to future collectors. That destructive practice, thankfully, caused a shift to lightly penciled expert or owner markings. Then the new owner has a choice whether to leave the old in place. I spoke out against owner backstamps in an editorial in the early 1970s when I was editor of the *Confederate Philatelist*.

Knowing who owned an item and being able to track it via auction catalogs or articles is helpful not only in



Backstamp of J.H. Houston, early dealer circa 1870-1920.

establishing lineage, but in determining whether an item has been altered, forged or restored to greater or lesser degree. This continues to get even easier in the age of technology.

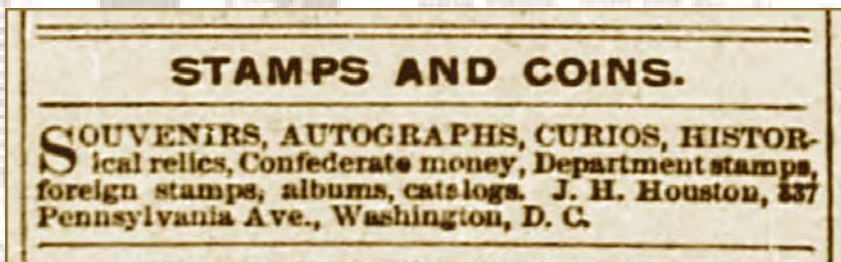
To my website, I recently added a section illustrating provenance markings and signatures of philatelic owners, dealers and experts in the field of Confederates. But these markings are also found on U.S. and worldwide material as few have or had only Confederates in their collections.

Although time consuming, I enjoyed researching, writing and adding brief biographies of those featured on the page. In most cases, volumes could be written on individual philatelic careers. I often learned a lot about collectors, dealers and experts, both past and present.

One perfect example of this was Washington, D.C., dealer J.H. Houston, who backstamped covers with a large blue handstamp. He had an address on Pennsylvania Avenue. As a former auctioneer with offices only two blocks from the White House (1522 K Street N.W.) in the 1970s and 1980s, I had no idea who he was. Yet there was this rather obnoxious backstamp on the back of a Confederate cover in an old-time collection.

The illustrated handstamp shows J. H. Houston was a dealer in U.S. Postage, Department and Revenue stamps during the late 1800s and early 1900s. His address, at that time, was 205 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C., as can be seen in the classified ad he regularly ran in local newspapers near the turn of the century.

Despite my decent knowledge of D.C.-area philatelic denizens, I had no prior knowledge of J.H. Houston. In an 1889 issue of the *American Philatelist* (AP), he is noted at 461 Missouri Avenue N.W., with APA member number 85.



Washington, D.C., stamp dealer J.H. Houston ran regular classifieds in area newspapers. This example is from the *National Tribune* in 1903.

Clearly, he was a pioneer member. APA is the prior name of what is now APS.

The American Philatelic Association (APA) was founded in 1886, but changed the name of the organization briefly to American Philatelic Society (APS) in 1897. It was changed back to APA after only a few months. In 1908, the name was again changed to American Philatelic Society and has remained as such since that time.¹

On the same page in the 1889 *AP* is an ad by APS member 1048, W.W. Barrow of Richmond, Va., who states his specialty is Confederate Stamps on original envelopes. Barrow advertises, “*Located in the former capital of the Confederacy, I have unusual facilities for obtaining rarities.*”

I found another Pennsylvania Avenue address for Houston with street No. 337, which advertised “stamps and autographs” in a 1907 issue of *The Collectors' Union*. In the June 4, 1921, issue of *Mekeel's Weekly Stamp News*, there is an ad by Houston in which he says that he has been selling stamps, Confederate bills and autographs for nearly 50 years, but now he is disposing of his stock. So, clearly, Houston was one of the first dealers to handle Confederate stamps and postal history ... yet I'd never heard of him.

I suspect there may be other Houston handstamps with other addresses and/or specialities, since he did business for decades and from several different addresses.

I found the new information on Houston less than 24 hours after publishing the provenance page on my website. In continued research,² I found his name was James H. Houston (1845/46-1933) and, as a boy, he was selling newspapers on the streets of Washington the night President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated.³

I have already made countless additions, changes, and corrections—many thanks to readers sharing information. Such is the wonderful fluidity of publishing on the web. I hope you, too, will have a chance to enjoy the provenance page at www.trishkaufmann.com/provenance.

The author enjoys hearing from readers and may be reached at trishkauf@comcast.net.

Endnotes:

1. History of the APS, American Philatelic Society, <https://stamps.org/Historical-Information/> Accessed May 24, 2018.
2. Brian J. Birch, Biographies of Philatelists and Dealers, www.fipliterature.org/birch/Biographies%20of%20Philatelists%20and%20Dealers.pdf Accessed May 24, 2018
3. *Mekeel's Weekly Stamp News*, Nov. 17, 1933, Volume 47, Issue 48, p. 572.



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