

From the Stamp Specialist:

Steamboat Mail Transportation on the Great Lakes — The Ward Steamship Lines* By W.L. Babcock, M.D.

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In addition to the images that appear on these original pages, additional images will be found at the end of the article, some as better examples, others to supplement the text. Where possible, I will reference those images to the relevant pages. JFD.

The transportation of mail on the Great Lakes in the period prior to and during the Civil War, does not appear in the meager Government records of the period. It is surmised that steamboat transportation from point to point was a matter of local arrangements by postmasters on the route or by the distributing office. The five principal shipping centers of the period, Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago and Superior, Wis., are known to have participated in steamboat mail transportation. From 1827 to the completion of the Michigan Central R. R., eastern mail routed through Buffalo for Detroit, northwestern points, and later for Cleveland, was carried by steamboats from Buffalo and Erie. The first lake steamer *Walk-in-the-Water*, built in 1827, was a side-wheeler operating between Buffalo and Detroit. Until 1850 side-wheelers were in general use. In the boat parlance of the period they were called "steamboats" and their screw propelled successors were designated "propellers." Since 1850 both have been in use, the former as large passenger vessels and the latter, chiefly freight boats. It is probable that commencing in 1827 the boats carried limited amount of mail routed up or down the lakes without fee or government contract for their services.

A few known covers and entires give evidence of government postage having been paid at the regular rate without any indication of a supplementary rate to cover the boat transportation.

They also indicated that in many instances they were mailed stampless, the Steamship Company providing the necessary government stamp at the office of destination. While some boat lines used the word *STEAMBOAT* or *STEAMER* as a marking, few lines used special boat cancellations with name of boat and captain as was common on Mississippi River packets. Sealed mail bags were probably used for most of the mail and boat cancellations were applied only on late, first-class mail delivered at the dock just prior to sailing. As the rate after 1851 was 3 ct. per one-half ounce for first-class mail, it is possible that the postage due surcharges on these entires was a supplementary rate for late mailing similar to the well-known New York Supplementary rate of the same period. Over-weight would be the only other explanation for the P. D. surcharges. The two covers illustrated here are examples of the supplementary Due rate, one of 2 ct. and the other of 6 ct. The oval *DUE* markings are in the color of the Detroit circular pmk. The two envelopes, presumably, were mailed at

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Port Huron or Marine City, and stamped with greenish-black *STEAMER REINDEER* marking on the boat and thus delivered at the Detroit P. O. where they received the "*STEAMBOAT DUE*" and the Detroit double-line pmk.



Covers showing the "Steamer Reindeer" and the "Steamboat Due" stamps.

In 1837, seventeen steamers operated out of, or were owned, in Detroit. Twenty additional steamboats, owned elsewhere, operated on Lakes Erie and Huron at that time.* It is, of course, obvious that steamboat mail transportation was limited to the late spring, summer and autumn. Ice conditions in the lakes rendered water transportation impossible during the winter months. The following note appeared in the Detroit Free Press of December 5, 1837:

"The steamboats upon the lakes having principally laid up for the season, our mails now are drawn round the lake to Perrysburg or Toledo by land, which occasions a delay of a week or more from our usual time in receipt of news from New York and Washington. The stopping of steamboat navigation also has the immediate effect of depriving us for about a week, or until the first land mail from Buffalo arrives, of any eastern mail whatever."

This article is not concerned with other than the Ward Steamship Company and their markings. There were two of these Steamship Lines, the earlier founded and owned by Eber Brock Ward in the late 40's and through the early 60's. The second Line was started later by his cousin, Eber Ward. Though

competing lines, they had, in operation, much in common. Throughout three decades their offices were in Detroit and Ludington and their ship yards in Algonac and Marine City, though some of their boats were built in Cleveland and lower lake ports. The steamer lines served the rapidly developing lumber interests of the towns on the west shore of Lake Huron. Their principal ports of call prior to the opening of the Canal in St. Mary's River in 1855 were Algonac, Marine City, Port Huron, Saginaw, Ludington and Chicago. Stops were also made when necessary at St. Ignace and what is now Mackinaw City. Prior to the completion of the locks at Sault Ste. Marie in the St. Mary's River, freight was transported over-land by portage to the waters of Lake Superior. After the opening of the Canal, Superior, Wis., was made the western terminus on Lake Superior.

The marking showing the name *PORTAGE* indicates a destination that was neither a P. O., city, town nor village. Here we have a French verb used as a noun to indicate a landing for the purpose of portage around the rapids of St. Mary's River at Sault Ste. Marie. This early town, named by Father Jacques Marquette in 1668, Le Saut de Sainte Marie, has philatelic interest owing to the fact that it was re-named by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Sault Ste. Marie, now familiarly called "The Soo." Schoolcraft was the postmaster of old Fort Brady in the middle 20's of the Nineteenth Century and he gave the city its present name about 1825. It is of historical interest to note that the Ojibway Indian village on the river was called by the Indians, "Bowating," and so referred to in Longfellow's "Hiawatha." Freight, mail and passengers were originally landed at the portage from small boats as it was many years before docks were built. Steamship records reveal that in 1851, 38,760 barrels of bulk freight, including provisions, fish, and 212 tons of hay and shingles were carted or carried over the portage by Indians, horses, dogs and "Coureurs' de Bois." About this period the portage had become organized and expeditiously carried out. The route had been used by the early French voyagers from their first penetration into northern Michigan. During the years immediately preceding the building of the Soo locks and canals, the route through the moranic coteau had been greatly improved to facilitate travel and traffic.

Stanley Dean Newton, Chairman of the Committee on Historical Affairs of the Sault Ste. Marie Chamber of Commerce states in a letter dated Dec. 21, 1939:

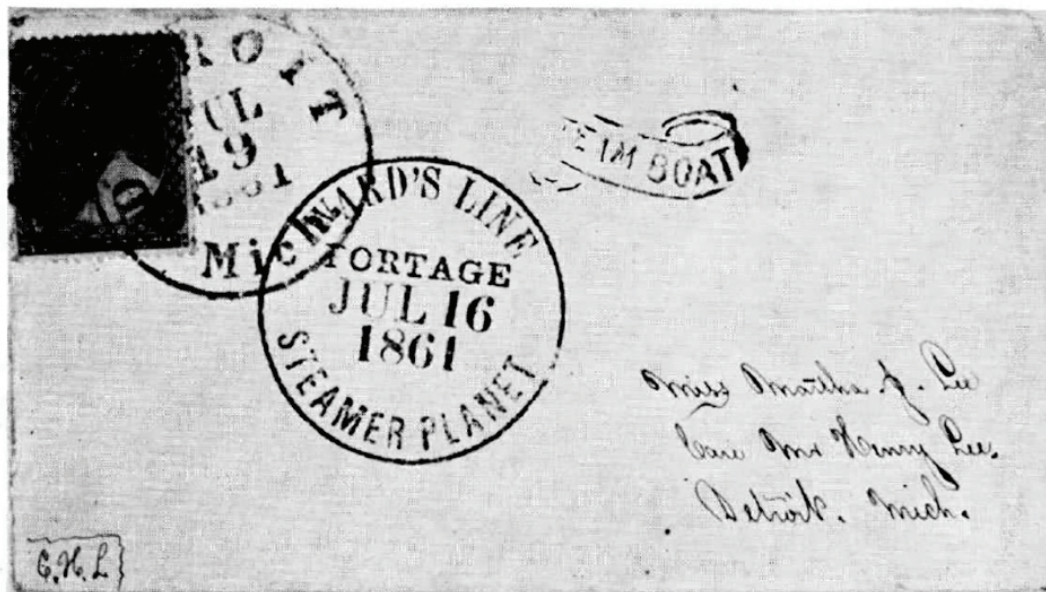
"The portage proper began at the old Nolin dock, plainly shown on the early maps of the village, continuing up the south shore of the river past where the Ojibway Hotel stands, and ended on the river bank a short distance west of where the Union Station now stands."

Detroit at the opening of the Soo locks was a great steamboat town. Many steamboat lines radiated north, east and south. The steamboat men did not visualize that the opening of the locks would ultimately produce a through freight traffic, with Detroit, a way station. The local lines, however, did a good business until the depression of 1873 when they were all annihilated. Few of the Detroit lines recovered and through traffic—Buffalo to Superior, Wis., and Chicago—was the order of the day. Brief sketches of the founders of the Ward Lines best tell the story.

Eber Brock Ward with an uncle and brother organized the first Ward Steamship Line. His interests were not confined to boating, but included lumber tracts and mills, coal and iron mines, and banking. He established the Eureka Iron and Steel Works and the Wyandotte Rolling Mills in towns on the river south of Detroit. The first steel rails made in this country were rolled at these mills.

Eber B. Ward & Co., as first organized, operated lines for passenger and light freight service between Detroit and Cleveland. The boats used were the *St. Louis* (built in 1851) and the *Sam Ward* (built in 1849) and first operated between these cities in 1852. In 1852 the *City of Cleveland*, and in 1853 the *May Queen*, were built and operated on that line. In 1855 the *Ocean* was added for night service, and in 1862 the *Morning Star* was built and operated by the Ward Line. Between 1843-1855 the *S. S. Champion* (1843), *S. S. Pacific* (1849), *S. S. Caspian* (1857), *Ocean* (1851), were operated between Detroit and Buffalo by the Ward Lines.

However, the Cleveland and Buffalo Lines were not the first boat interests of Eber B. Ward. His lumber and coal were in the *Thumb* peninsula of Michigan and as early as 1840, the *S. S. Huron* was operating between Port Huron and Detroit. Stampless *S. S. Huron* covers are known.



Cover showing "Steamer Planet" and "Steamboat" cancellations.

The following Eber B. Ward boats are listed in order that covers without other than boat markings may be identified. They were operated under the company names of Eber B. Ward & Co. and Ward Steamship Lines. The year date is given as when built or required. Many were fitted for both passenger and freight service. A few were freighters only.

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|---------------------------------------|---|
| <i>S. S. Arrow</i> (1848) | <i>S. S. North Star</i> (1853) |
| <i>S. S. Sciola</i> (1848) | <i>S. S. Detroit</i> (?) |
| <i>S. S. Niagara</i> (1849) | <i>S. S. Pearl</i> (?) |
| <i>Propeller Buffalo</i> (1851) | <i>S. S. Forester</i> (1854) |
| <i>S. S. Ocean</i> (1851) | <i>S. S. Western World</i> (1854) |
| <i>S. S. Arctic</i> (1851) | <i>S. S. Plymouth Rock</i> (1854) |
| <i>S. S. Atlantic</i> (1851) | <i>S. S. Forest Queen</i> (1854) |
| <i>S. S. Telegraph</i> (1851) | <i>Propeller Chicago</i> (1855) |
| <i>S. S. Canada</i> (1851) | <i>S. S. Western Metropolis</i> (1856) |
| <i>S. S. J. D. Morton</i> (1851) | <i>Propeller Alleghany</i> (1856) |
| <i>S. S. Traveler</i> (1852) | <i>Propeller Spaulding</i> (1857) |
| <i>Propeller Edith</i> (1852) | <i>S. S. City of Buffalo</i> (1857) |
| <i>S. S. London</i> (1852) | <i>Propeller City of Madison</i> (1857) |
| <i>S. S. Southern Michigan</i> (1852) | <i>Propeller Burlington</i> (1857) |

Propeller Dubuque (1857)
Propeller Quincy (1857)
S. S. Gozelle (1858)

S. S. Sea Bird (1859)
Propeller Montgomery (1859)
S. S. Planet (1860)

(See illustrations for covers of the **Planet**, **Sea Bird**, and **Forester**.)

A complete list of later Ward boats is lacking as company records after 1860 are not available.



Covers showing stamps of "Steamer Forrester" with "Steamboat Due" and "Steamer Planet"

Eber B. Ward died in 1865 in the midst of his many activities, aged 63. He was the leading spirit among a group of lumber, steel, copper, coal and lake transportation pioneers who enriched their towns and families and whose millions vanished in the panic of 1873. E. B. Ward was the father of the famous Princess Chimay.

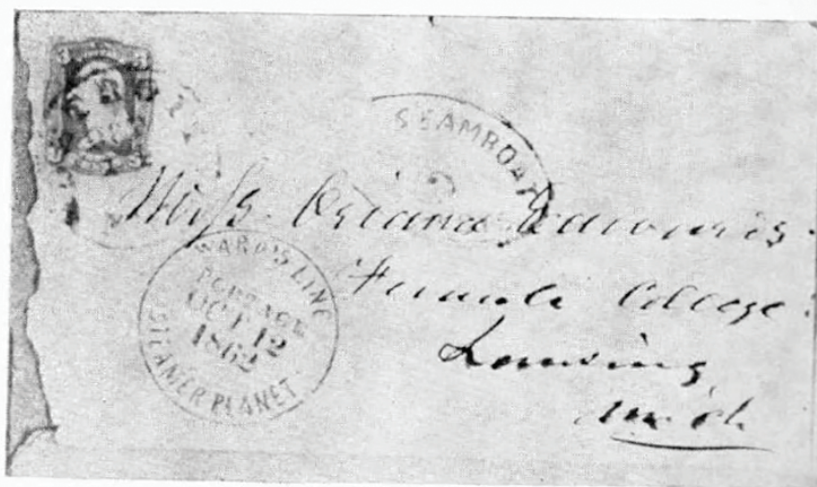
Eber Ward, the younger of this name, was a cousin of E. B. and was born in Essex Co., N. Y., in 1823. He was brought to Michigan with his family in 1837. They came to Marine City from Erie, Pa., on the *North America*, a small side-wheeler. In 1843 he was employed by his cousin, E. B. Ward, as clerk and purser on the *S. S. Huron* at \$10.00 a month and board. In 1846 he left the Ward boats and after a year in the Lake Superior country, he returned and bought the *S. S. Huron* from his cousin. In 1848 he built the *Franklin Moose*. In 1852 he built the *S. S. Ruby* and later bought the *S. S. Forest Queen*, *S. S. Saginaw* (1866, and *S. S. Keweenaw* (1866), (illustrated). Later he built or acquired the *Susan Ward* (1863), *Hodge*, *Osceola*, *Eber Ward*, *S. S. W. H. Stevens*, *Moran*, *J. M. Nicol*, *Wild May Flower*, *City of Cleveland* (1856) (second of this name) *R. G. Coburn* (1870), lost in a severe storm in northern Lake Huron with loss of seventeen lives in 1872; *Craig*, *Fremont*, *St. Paul* (1868), *Northerner*, and *Minneapolis* (1872). His transportation enterprises were less



Covers from the Ward's Line "Steamer Planet" and the Ward's Lake Superior Line "Steamer Sea Bird" with steamer stamps.

remunerative than those of his cousin and his boat business was lost in the panic of 1873. He spent his later years in the insurance business and died April 30, 1908, aged 84 years.

After 1870 the extension of railroads to the northern part of the State was proceeding rapidly and the freight and passenger business was divided. Lake mail north from Detroit was handled as late as the latter sixties. Date of cessation of lake mail north of Detroit is not known to the writer, although pas-



"Steamboat Due" and Ward's Line "Steamer Planet" stamps.

senger steamers have carried mail to the St. Clair flats in recent years. The package freight declined, passengers left the boats for the railroads and the ship transportation lines developed the carrying of coal, ore, grain, lumber and copper.

On the north and south bound Ward boats, the letter markings read "Ward's Lake Superior Line," "Ward's Line," and "Ward's Line Steamers," as may be seen in the illustrations.

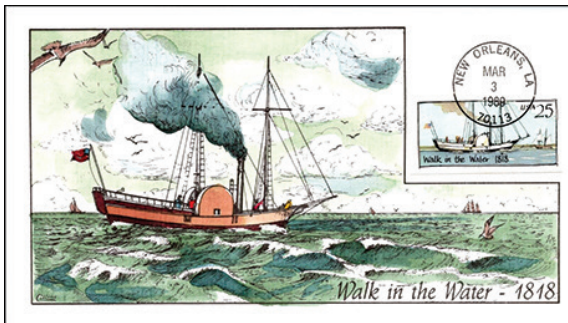
Fred R. Schmalzriedt of Detroit has exhibited a cover with the steamboat markings, "Ward's Line Steamers, May 19, 1862, Steamer Forester," and the words "with freight" in ms., evidently a non-postal cover used for a freight manifest or invoice. I am indebted to W. T. Livingstone of Detroit, since deceased; Wm. R. Stewart of Chicago; H. M. Konwiser of New York; R. L. Black of Des Moines, and Stanley Dean Newton of Sault Ste. Marie, for material used in this study.



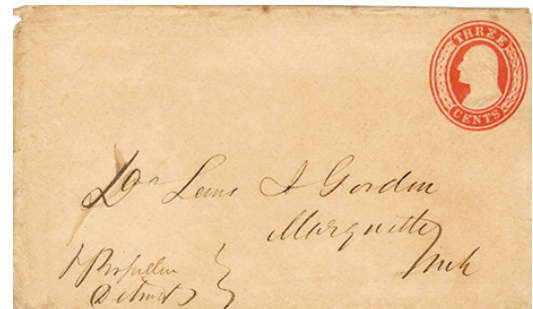
Stamps of the Ward's Line "Steamer Planet."



Page 1. Walk-in-the-Water at Detroit, 1820. This contemporaneous sketch by George H. Whistler appears to depict many details of the vessel accurately, such as the transom stern, raised quarterdeck and twin (black) stripes along the hull.



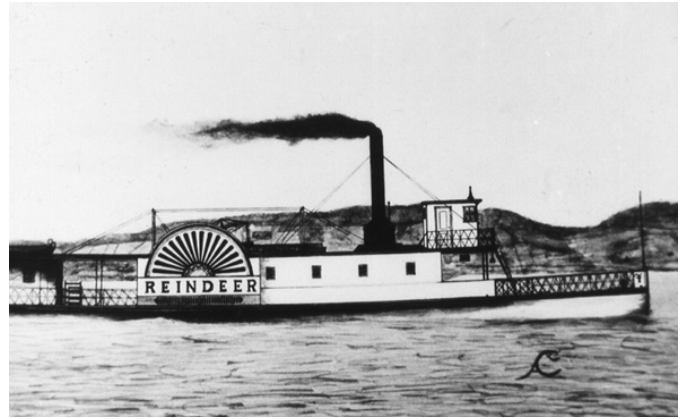
P. 1. Walk in the Water, Sc. 2409, from Steamboats booklet pane of five, on March 3, 1989 Collins FDC



PP. 1&3. Sc. U10 Entire, uncancelled, 1857 docketing, to Marquette, Mich., with "pr Propeller, Detroit" manuscript directive lower left.



Page 2. 1861 3¢ (Sc. 65) on Cover With Steamboat Cancel tied by black target cancel, with Detroit, Mich. Jul 16 c.d.s. and oval Steamboat Due 2 cts. in black, to Office of Internal Revenue, Detroit.



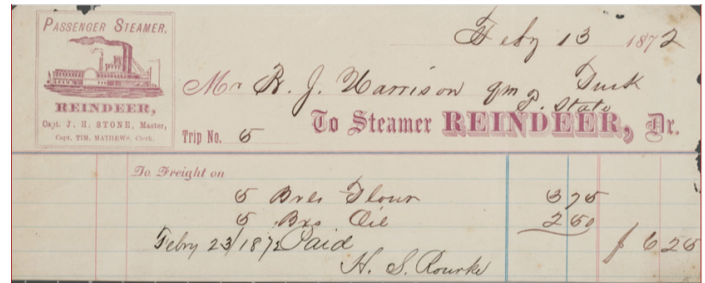
Page 2. Steamer Reindeer



Page 2. 1861, 3¢ (Sc. 65) tied by black target cancel, and Detroit, Mich. Jul 2 (1866) c.d.s., also with oval Steamboat Due 6 cts. in black, to Pittsford, N.Y.



Page 2. 1¢ Blue Type V (24), three, used with 3¢ Dull Red Type III (26) all tied by neat strikes of "3" in circle handstamps on legal-size cover to Fort Adams Miss., also with light strike of red "Steamer Reindeer" oval handstamp at upper left, scarce double-rate use, the Reindeer plied the waters of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, ex Neinken.



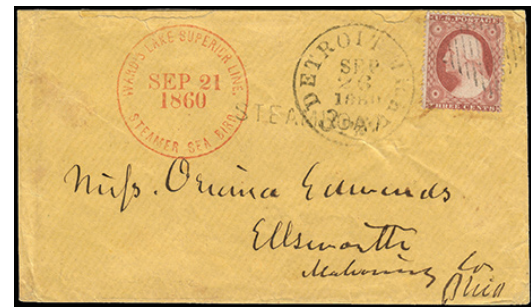
Page 2. Receipt recording a shipment of flour and oils on the passengr steamer, Reindeer, with generic illustration of a steamboat in the left corner, listing Capt. J.H. Stone, master, and Capt. Tim Mathews, clerk.



P. 3. 3¢ (26) tied by Detroit, Michigan July 16, 1861 c.d.s., also with "Steamer Planet, Ward's Line, Portage, July 16, 1861 datestamp on cover to Detroit, entered the mails with their fancy "Steam Boat" scroll handstamp.



P. 3, bottom. Eber B. Ward



Page 5. Cover to Ohio with 3¢ (Sc. 26) tied by grid cancel alongside Detroit Set 26 1860 c.d.s., also with "Ward's Lake Superior Line Steamer Sea Bird" handstamp.



Page 4. Cover to Hudson, Mich., with 3¢ U.S. indistinct c.d.s., with Wards Corner Card, no indication it was carried on a steam boat.



Page 4. Front and reverse (turned 90°) advertising Rail and "U.S. Mail Steamers" services and map of the region covered by those services.



Page 5. Steamer Sea Bird

Additional images not directly mentioned in the text



3¢ Entire (U10) to Newark, N.J., canceled by "Cleveland O Aug 20 c.d.s." with "Steam-Boat" handstamp and steamer "Iron City" manuscript upper left.



Cover to Ashlands, Ohio with 3¢ (26) tied by Steam-Boat handstamp, also with "Cleveland O. Jun 30 1859 c.d.s. and oval "Steamer Iron City Hussey..Agents" handstamp