

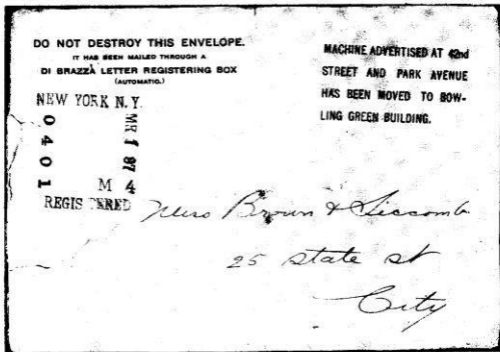
Quarterly 
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Serving Meter Stamp Collectors Since 1948

FALL 1997

New Discovery:



World's first postage meter

See Page 3

New discovery: World's first postage meter

For those of you who did not see Doug Kelsey's "Metered Mail" column in *Linn's Stamp News* last month, a major shift in postal history has taken place. A new postage meter has been discovered, and it is the earliest known used to frank mail on the planet.

Ken Lawrence, philatelic researcher and author, wrote in a May 1996 *American Philatelist* article about experimental stamp-affixing and franking machines of the 19th century. He described a coin-operated self-service machine invented and patented by Count Detalmo di Brazza Savorgnan of Rome, Italy. Di Brazza received two patents for a "coin-freed letter posting or stamping machine" on June 30 and July 28, 1896. An article in the *New York Times* of October 7, 1897 stated that three di Brazza machines were on public trial for six weeks in 1897. The article did not give dates for the test. At the time, no examples of a di Brazza stamp or cover was known.

Doug Kelsey hit the jackpot during the stamp show Pacific 97 earlier this year when he came into possession of the cover illustrated on the front page of this Bulletin. This is the first known Di Brazza cover and is the earliest known meter-franked cover in the world, preceding those stamped by Ucherman and Ucherman/Krag machines of Norway by several years.

The stamp is the square design, in purple, on the left side of the cover. It consists of the town name at top, the date at right, the machine number (M4) and "REGISTERED" at bottom, and the register number at left. The meaning of REGISTERED in this context is not the same as we

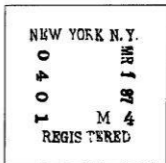
know it today to indicate security mailing. Instead it means what we now call metered. The machine recorded on a mechanical register (or meter) each

purchase of postage. According to the "register" number on this cover, it was the 401st item stamped and mailed by the machine since its last resetting. The stamp is canceled by a faint blue "CANCELED" handstamp which may not be visible in the illustration.

At the cover's top right is a handstamp, also in purple, announcing a change in location of another di Brazza machine.

According to the patents, the customer first deposited coins totalling the desired postage (two pennies for domestic, a nickel for foreign destinations), inserted the letter, and then pulled a lever. The machine was sophisticated enough to determine if a letter was short paid by weight and would eject such letters for additional postage.

The March 1, 1897 date on the cover is months earlier than the *New York Times* article implying there may have been more than one test. The machine number "M4" implies more machines than the three mentioned in the article. The printed corner card "DO NOT DESTROY THIS ENVELOPE. . ." implies the di Brazza machines possibly provided empty envelopes of a uniform size for customers. Besides being a convenience



for passersby, such proffered envelopes might have served to reduce the number of attempted mailings of letters larger or smaller than the machine's tolerances.

Although the di Brazza machines automated the franking and deposit of mail and enabled such service 24 hours a day, postal clerks still had to cancel it and, for a time at least, apply an additional handstamp. The machines probably did not reduce Post Office workload, although they may have been a convenience for the public. Much more research is needed into the di Brazza story.

Who was Count di Brazza, and why did he decide to invent an automatic postage-stamping machine? How may tests and when were they? How many di Brazza machines were there altogether? Why did the experiment end in rejection: were they unreliable; were they ignored by the public? Let us hope other covers and contemporary references remain to be found that will help answer these and other questions about this fascinating and important first chapter in the history of postage meters. □

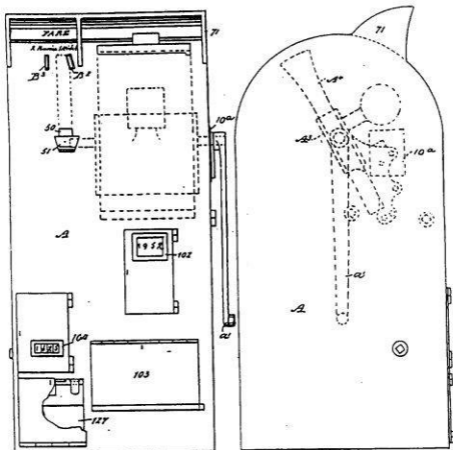


Illustration from the July 28, 1896 patent