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**UNIVERSAL MACHINE POSTMARK DIES OF THE DEVENS
BRANCH OF FITCHBURG, MASSACHUSETTS, 1917-1920**

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Billings (1988) has provided an in-depth analysis and listing of all presently-known Universal Stamping Machine Co. postal markings used between 1909 and 1920. Under his section for Military Branches and Stations during the World War I period he lists the Fitchburg, Mass. - Devens Branch as using two separate dies of a Universal Machine postmark. According to Billings, these two dies were in use from 10 September 1917 through August 1920, with the change from Die #1 to Die #2 occurring sometime between 7 June 1918 (LKU for Die #1 DB-300) and 2 July 1918 (EKU for Die #2 DB-300). Neither die was illustrated by Billings. This article now describes and illustrates the differences between the two dies, establishes new EKU's and LKU's for both dies, records the simultaneous overlapping use of the two dies for a short period of time, and describes differences in the killer portion leading to new type designations for Die #1 (DB-300 #1) and Die #2 (DB-300 #2).





I have analyzed a series of about twenty Devens Branch covers, representing about ten of each die type. The two types of dies used are illustrated in Fig. 1. The two dies differ from each other in seven ways; the first five differences concern the circular date dial portion, the last two differences pertain to the wavy lines killer portion:

DIAL

- 1) Die #1 has a large, distinct comma with a prominent dot between FITCHBURG and MASS, Die #2 has a small, thin comma without a dot.
- 2) Die #1 has narrow spacing between the "F" of FITCHBURG and the "D" of DEVENS, Die #2 has wider spacing.
- 3) Die #1 has narrow spacing between the period after MASS and the "H" of BRANCH, Die #2 has wider spacing.
- 4) Die #1 has narrow spacing between the "S" of DEVENS and the "B" of BRANCH, Die #2 has wider spacing.
- 5) Die #1 has B's with small narrow loops in FITCHBURG and BRANCH, Die #2 has B's with wider loops.

KILLER

- 6) Die #1 has a wider wavy lines killer, measuring 17 mm from the center of the top line to the center of the bottom line measured at the center of the first valley, Die #2 is narrower, measuring 16 mm for the same distance.
- 7) Die #1 has a slightly different shape of the bottom line in the wavy lines killer, measuring 20 mm from the left-hand tip of the bottom line to the center of the first valley for the same line, Die #2 measures 18 mm for the same distance.

<p>Figure 1: Two Universal Machine Model D dies of Fitchburg, Mass. Devens Branch, used 10 Sep 1917 - Aug 1920 *</p>		
		<p>Die #1 DB-300 #1 Used: 10 Sep 1917 - 24 Jun 1918</p>
		<p>Die #2 DB-300 #2 Used: 8 Jun 1918 - Aug 1920</p>

* Total length of wavy killer portion not illustrated, overall killer length measures ca. 51 mm.

In general, the second die has improved spacing of the words so that they read more clearly, with a more distinct separation of the upper FITCHBURG, MASS. from the lower DEVENS BRANCH, and a clearer separation of DEVENS and BRANCH. These changes have been accomplished by exchanging the large, wide comma in Die #1 with a small, thin comma in Die #2, and then compressing the letters of FITCHBURG and DEVENS so that each word takes up less space. The spacing of the letters of MASS and BRANCH remain unchanged, but the two words have been moved slightly further apart. In addition, the B's with small thin loops in Die #1 have been exchanged for better looking B's with wider loops in Die #2. Also, the wavy lines killer has been replaced, with the one in Die #2 being slightly narrower (less high) with a slightly different wavy line pattern from the one in Die #1.

In terms of when the switch occurred between the two dies, I have obtained a cover (postmark seen in Fig. 1) dated 8 June 1918 showing use of Die #2, establishing this date as the earliest known usage (EKU) of Die #2. In addition, I have obtained a cover dated 24 June 1918

showing the use of Die #1, making this the last known usage (LKU) for Die #1. Both covers bear additional confirmatory postmarks and datestamps attesting to the accuracy of the dates involved.

These Earliest and Latest use dates of the two dies overlap (8 June - 24 June) and indicate that the two dies were used simultaneously for a short period of time. Whether two separate machines were used for a while or whether the two dies were used interchangeably on a single machine is not known. Both dies (#1 and #2) were made by a Model D Universal Machine, with a Series 300 wavy lines killer type. How easy it was to exchange dial and killer portions on the Model D machine is not known, though apparently both the dial and killer portions were mounted together on a single impression cylinder (Billings, pers.comm.).

As noted above, the two dies have different killer types, but the differences are minimal. The wider killer (17 mm high, 20 mm wave length) used in Die #1 has been illustrated and catalogued by Billings (1988, p.28) as his cancellation type Series 300. The narrower killer (16 mm high, 18 mm wave length) used in Die #2 has not been catalogued by Billings. Because it is quite similar to the Series 300 killer, this new killer probably does not deserve a separate catalogue listing. However, there is a distinct difference, and Billings has previously dealt with this type of difference by designating die varieties (see Billings 1988, p.91). Therefore, following Billings' classification scheme, I designate these two dies as cancellation types DB-300 #1 and DB-300 #2.

Reference Cited:

Billings, B. 1988. Universal Stamping Machine Co. Machines and Postal Markings 1909 - 1920. Machine Cancel Society, pp.121.