

E.S. ZEVELY AND THE 1853 NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR

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In 1852 the *Gazetteer of the State of Maryland* announced that Pleasant Grove, in Allegheny County, boasted a population of 80. Scattered along the town's streets were a post office, church, schoolhouse, tavern, and blacksmith shop. In addition, the gazetteer noted "a manufactory of 'Post-office stamps,' wood types, proof presses, etc." This was the establishment of entrepreneur Edmond Samuel Zevely (1818-1884), who was Pleasant Grove's postmaster from 1850-1854 and again in 1855-1856.

A postmaster producing post-office apparatus would draw attention in this isolated mountainous region where illiteracy was common.¹ A school-teacher-turned-wood-crafter and an inventor of postal devices, Zevely undoubtedly derived inspiration to create postal widgets from his brother, Alexander N. Zevely, an ambitious post office employee who eventually rose to the position of Third Assistant Postmaster General.

Many philatelic scholars have written about the Zevely family and its correspondence, as well as the Zevely handstamps cut from single blocks of boxwood and the marketing of these.² It seemed that nothing new could come to light, but when I examined two Zevely covers in the Charles A. Hirzel collection at the Museum of Communication in Bern, Switzerland, I realized that wasn't the case.³ Figure 1 shows a stampless envelope, with Zevely's postmaster free frank and his fancy advertisement for wood handstamps, sent from Pleasant Grove, Maryland, to Zevely's sister, Johanna Sophia Zevely (1821-1863), on Valentine Day, 1852. Johanna still resided in their birthplace, Salem, North Carolina.

Figure 2 shows a stampless envelope with Zevely's postmaster free frank, posted at Pleasant Grove on August 16, 1852 and again sent to Johanna. This envelope contains a two-page letter, dated 14 August 1852, in which the inventive postmaster wrote enthusiastically about promoting his products, and the possibilities for exposure and sales at the upcoming 1853 world's fair.

In 1851 London had hosted the first world's fair to further industrial progress: The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations. Commonly referred to as the "Crystal Palace Exhibition," the 1851 London fair inspired Americans wanting to showcase their own imaginative spirit. Held in New York City (where Bryant Park is now located, across the street from the current location of the Philatelic Foundation), the Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations took place between July 14, 1853, and November 1, 1854. It featured the wares of 4,000 exhibitors. Beginning in May 1851, Horace Greeley promoted the fair in the *New York Tribune*.⁴ American industry, the newspaper touted, would exhibit its inventions alongside the products of other countries, all vying for prizes and recogni-

¹ R.S. Fisher, *Gazetteer of the State of Maryland* (New York City and Baltimore: Coulton and Waters, 1852).

² The philatelic literature on Zevely is extensive. Some key works include: Edwin Mayer, "E.S. Zevely, Postmaster, of Pleasant Grove, Allegheny County, Maryland," *Postal History Journal* 1 (1957) pp. 45-54, 2 (1958) pp. 25-31 and 4 (1960), pp. 48-52; James W. Milgram, "E.S. Zevely Makes Postmasters' Handstamps," *Chronicle* 210 (May 2006), pp. 109-120; and Delf Norona, "Zevely Family Was Active in United States Postal Service," *Postal History Journal* 13 (1969), pp. 2-40.

³ The Charles August Hirzel Collection is on permanent exhibit in pullout frames at the Museum of Communication (*Museum für Kommunikation*) and includes many great rarities of the U.S. classic era, including large multiples, fancy cancels, and postal history.

⁴ Greeley, Horace, *Art and Industry as Represented in the Exhibition at the Crystal Palace, New York 1853-1854. Showing the Progress and State of the Various Useful and Esthetic Pursuits* (New York: Redfield, 1853).



Figure 1. 1852 Pleasant Grove, Maryland, stampless envelope with Zevely's postmaster free frank, free handstamp, and his advertisement for wooden marking devices, sent to his sister, Johanna Sophia Zevely, on Valentine Day, 1852. Scan courtesy of the Charles A. Hirzel Collection, Museum of Communication, Bern, Switzerland.

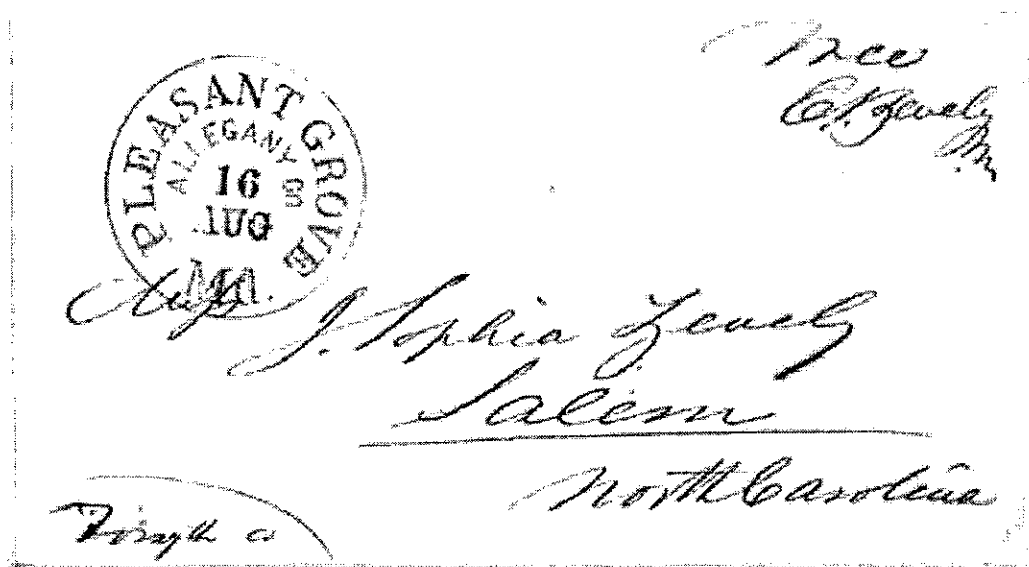


Figure 2. August 16, 1852 Pleasant Grove stampless envelope with county handstamp and Zevely's postmaster free frank, also sent to his sister. This envelope carried the sketch shown in Figure 3. Scan courtesy of the Charles A. Hirzel Collection, Museum of Communication, Bern, Switzerland.

tion in their respective fields. Manufacturing and industrial divisions dominated, with other divisions devoted to the aesthetic arts.

Encouraged by the animated spirit in the air, E. S. Zevely shared some family news with his sister and then wrote: "And now as you seem strangely at a loss to know what it is that I can possibly have on exhibition at the N.Y. Fair (as if you didn't know what I was

Figure 3. Zevely drawing, from a two-page letter to his sister Johanna Sophia Zevely, written on August 14, 1852 and carried in the Figure 2 envelope. The drawing illustrates Zevely's design for a case to exhibit his postal wares at the 1853 Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, the first American world's fair, held in New York City. Scan courtesy of the Charles A. Hirzel Collection, Museum of Communication, Bern, Switzerland.



doing!) I will state that in a very neat upright glass case about 3 x 4 ft. shaped like this sketch I have specimens of my stamps, seals, type, proof press, wood cuts, impressions of stamps, etc." The sketch, presented in Figure 3, shows his case design with Pleasant Grove prominently etched in the wood at the top.

Previous researchers have commented on how many Zevely letters and covers survived. His closing remarks indicate what a prolific writer he was: "Write more - write more - why I manage to write dozens of letters every week & some of them as long as this & have not a minute's time to spare from work - work - work."

Did Zevely actually exhibit at the 1853 world's fair? A search of programs and the awards list did not reveal his name, but those documents list only a fraction of exhibitors. Whether he applied and exhibited in Class 17 (for paper and stationery, types, printing and bookbinding) or even Class 29 (for miscellaneous manufacturers) might never be established. What is clear is that he was motivated to participate and saw himself as the embodiment of America's inventive and entrepreneurial spirit during the early years of America's industrial revolution.

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