

The Stars of Ohio

Star Fancy Cancels of the Banknote Era



The Banknote Era, identified as 1870-1894, saw a proliferation of hand canceling devices. It was a period when the quest for uniformity had not yet taken root at the United States Post Office Department, allowing postmasters to strive to express their likes or distinguish their community from others in some small way. Dozens of styles of postmarks, known as "fancy cancels" emerged during this period. Among the most common were those incorporating the image of a star.

Purpose

To show some of the various styles of star postmarks, or "killers," that proliferated during the Banknote Era throughout Ohio.

Scope

This exhibit looks at some of the various star fancy cancels that appeared on everyday mail from throughout Ohio during the Banknote Era. The examples date from 1877 and run through 1894. It generally focuses on small town post offices where the postmaster often had to create or buy a postmarking device because revenues were too low for the Post Office Department to justify the expense of providing one.



This postal card bears an example of a common star killer. It is from Palmyra, Portage County, dated July 28, 1879. The star is 20 millimeters across, the typical size during the period.

Organization of the exhibit

1. The Origin of Star Fancy Cancels
2. Plain Stars
 - A. Commercially produced examples
 - B. Hand-carved examples
3. Stars in Circles
4. Negative Stars
5. Stars within Stars
6. Shaded Stars
7. Other examples



This example of a commercially produced postmark with a star killer from Washingtonville, Columbiana County, of Feb. 7, 1887 is more elaborate than most with a triple circle circular date stamp that has two different fonts – one for the town and another for the date.

1. The Origin of Star Fancy Cancels

While star postmarks originated before the Banknote Era, the usage of canceling devices with some sort of star "killer" to cancel the stamp on an envelope or indicia on a piece of postal stationery emerged in full glory in the 1870s.

Early in the period the United States continued to recover from the Civil War. It was a time when the number of post offices tremendously grew. Mail volume followed suit, leading to a growing need for canceling devices.

However, the Post Office Department provided cancels to a limited number of post offices. Writing in "Cancellations and Killers of the Banknote Era, 1870-1894," James M. Cole's standard work on postmarks of the period, postal historian Richard Graham explains that the style of cancels furnished was based on a post office's gross receipts:

Class 1 -- receipts of more than \$1,000 received steel cancels.

Class 2 -- receipts of more than \$500 but less than \$1,000 received iron cancels.

Class 3 -- receipts of more than \$100 but less than \$500 received wooden cancels.

The remaining post offices, identified as Class 4 facilities and far outnumbering post offices in the three higher grossing classes, could buy commercially produced cancels from a private firm or from the Post Office Department. Some postmasters, unable to afford a postmarking device because of low revenues, carved their own cancels in wood or cork. A few continued to use manuscript markings.

In the 1870s, Graham writes, postmasters often used cancels from earlier periods until they wore out. Only then did they look to obtain newer often far more elaborate styles. With 44,798 fourth-class post offices as of January 1, 1883, makers of canceling devices had plenty of places to sell their products.

It was not until the 1880s when post office officials began making available to the smallest post offices what Graham calls "G.I.," or Government Issue, canceling devices.

2. Plain Stars

A. Commercially produced examples

Most postmarks with star killers were privately produced. Styles of such privately produced postmarks will vary in design by manufacturer.

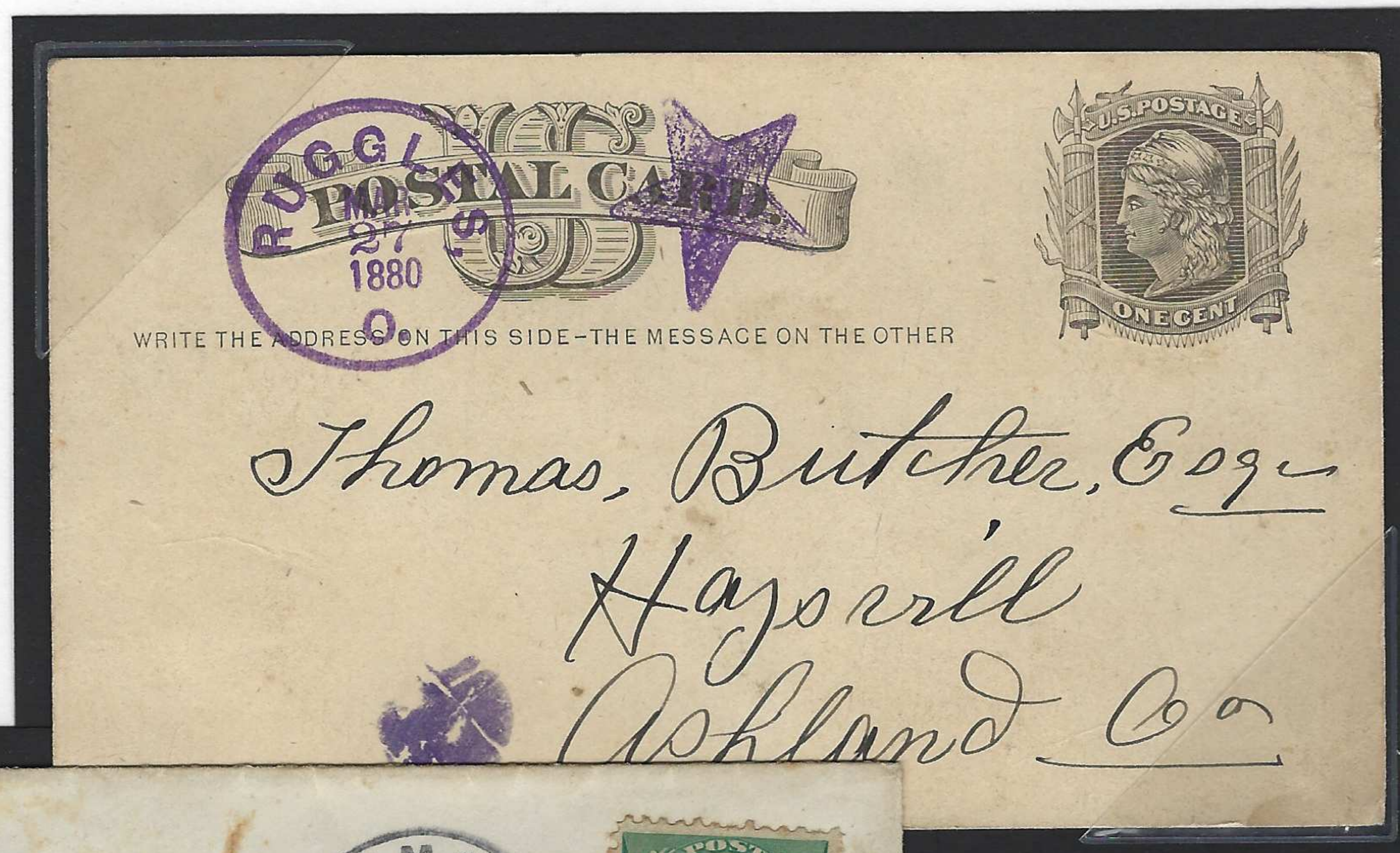


Richmond Centre, Ashtabula County

Identical postmarks except for the color of ink used January 11, 1879 and 13 months later February 15, 1881 and the order of the date slugs. The star killer is 20 millimeters across.

Killers with a star 20 millimeters across seem to be the most common as shown by these examples.

Ruggles,
Ashland County
March 27, 1880



Plymouth,
Richland County
November 30, 1881

Thompson,
Geauga County
September 18,
1884





West Unity, Williams County

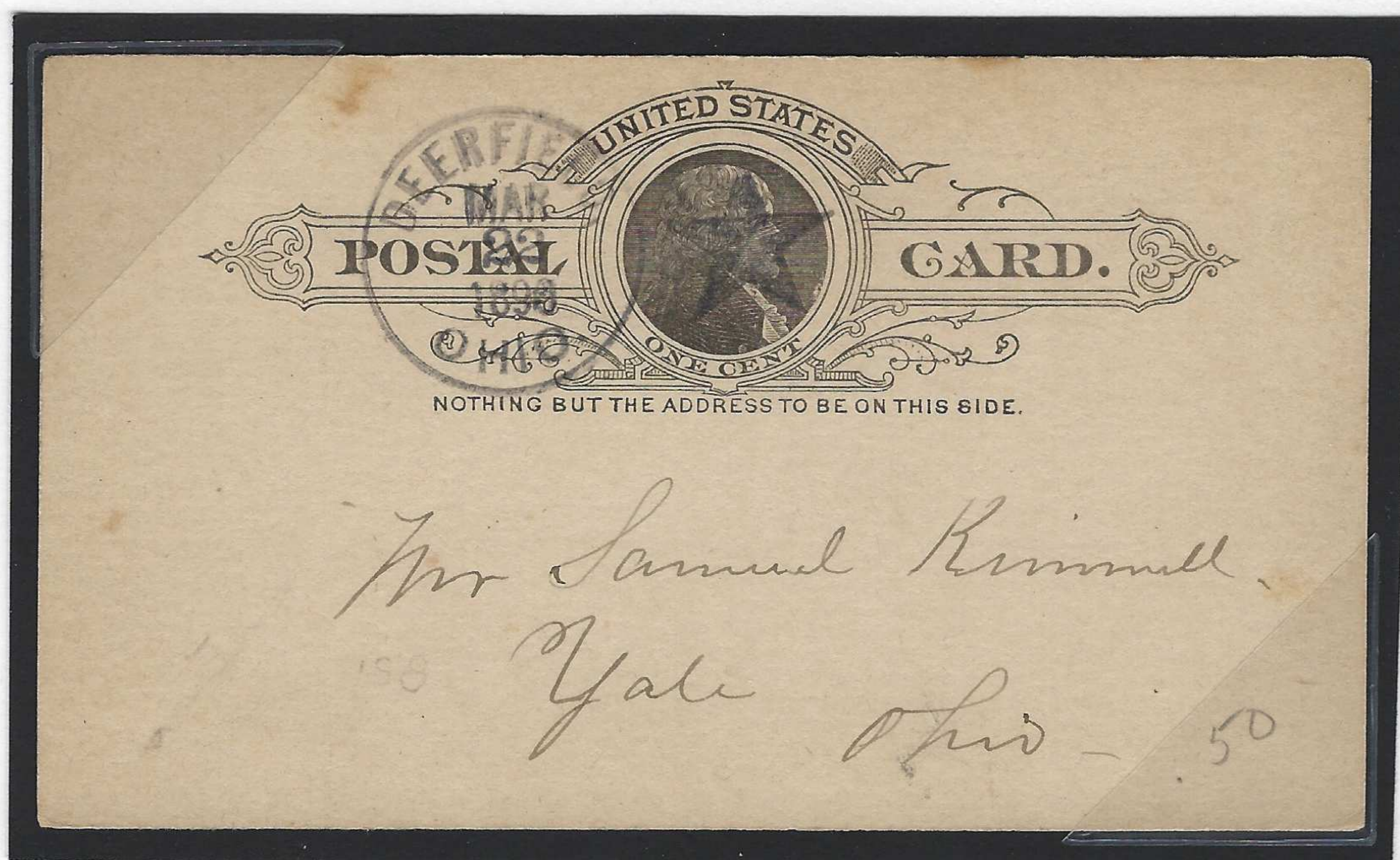
This style used March 8, 1882 is slightly different with pointed tips on the star that also is 20 millimeters across. The font in the circular date stamp is narrow style.



Harbor, Ashtabula County

The star in this killer from Harbor is larger at 21.5 millimeters. It was struck in purple on December 11, 1879 and in black on July 28, 1880. The font in the circular date stamp has block style letters.

Smaller stars also appeared on postmarks. These examples are 17 millimeters across.



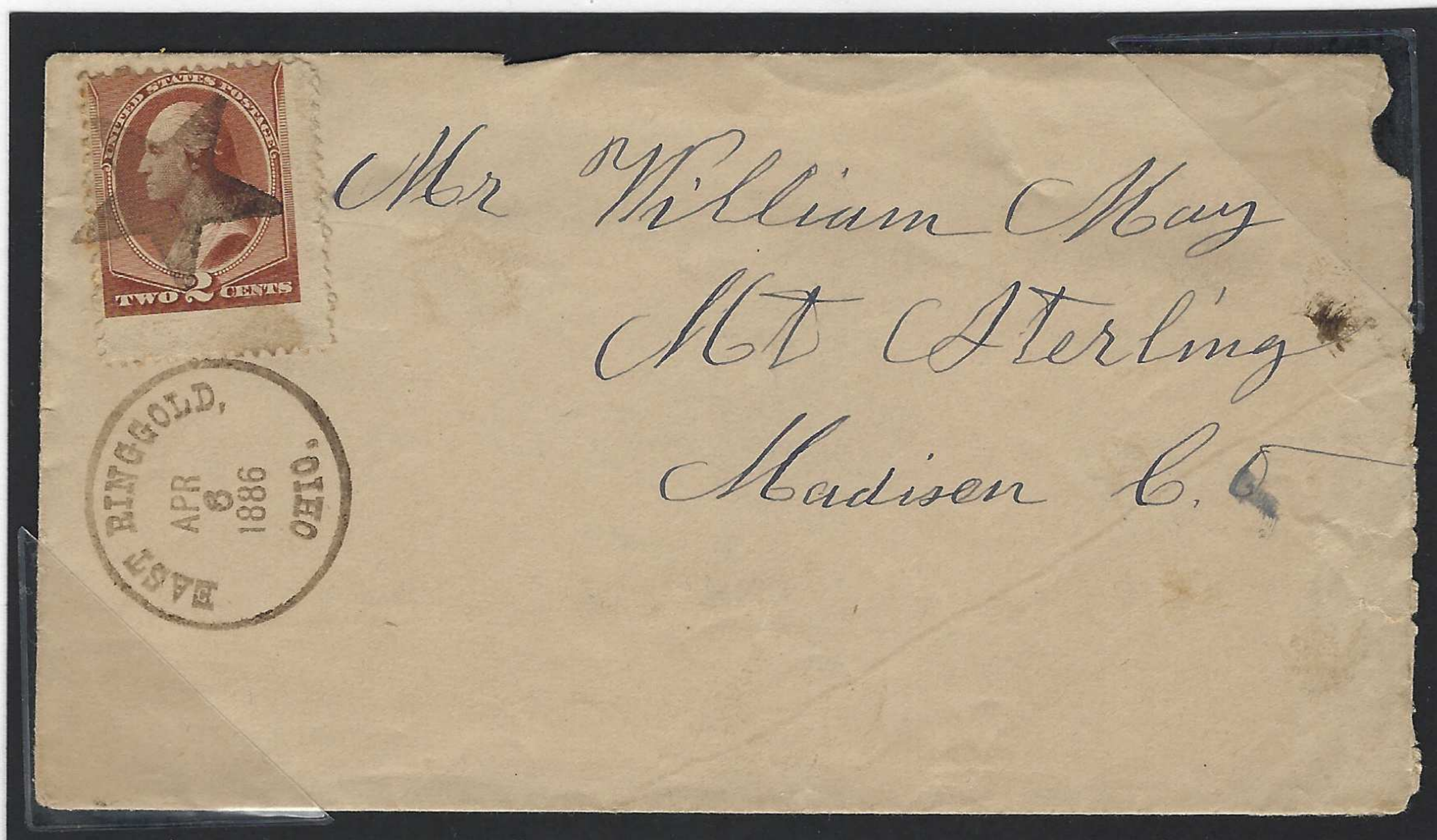
Deerfield, Portage County

The circular date stamp used March 22, 1890 has a wider diameter and has tall, narrow lettering.



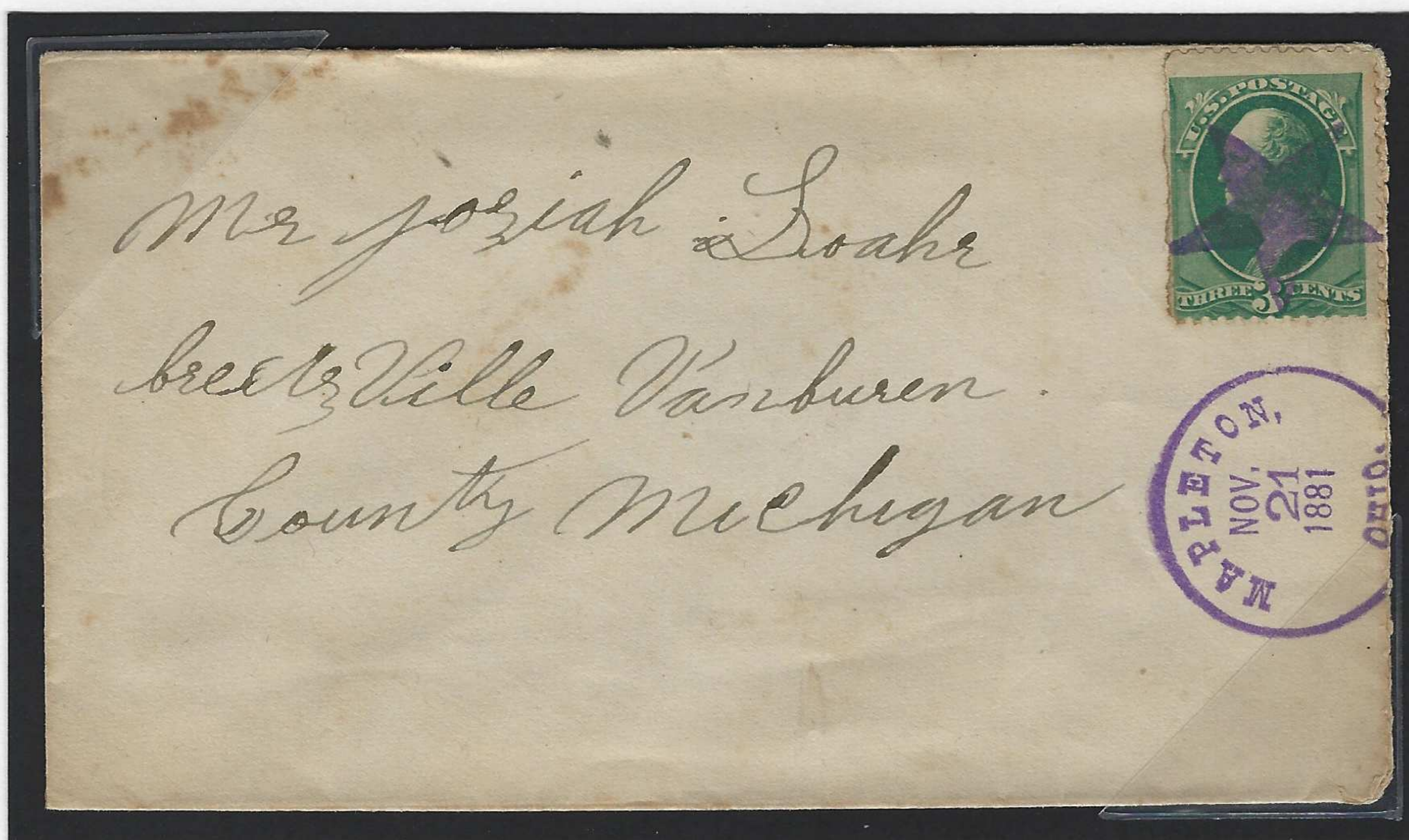
Mallet Creek, Medina County

The circular date stamp used December 17, 1879 has a font with serifs for the town name.



East Ringgold, Pickaway County

While the star killer in this example from April 6, 1886 is 20 millimeters across, the font in the circular date stamp has serifs.



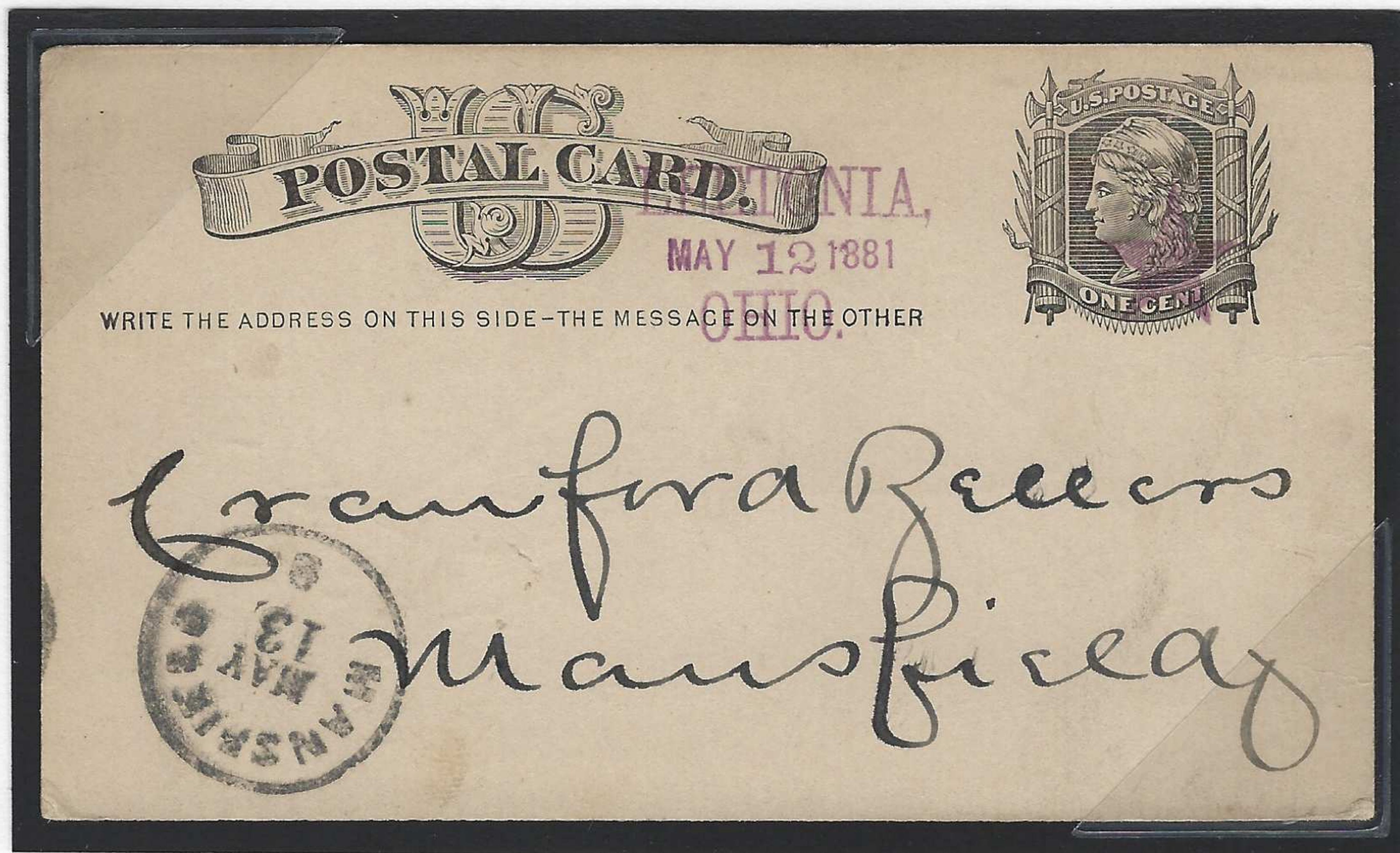
Mapleton, Stark County

In this postmark of November 21, 1881, the star killer is 22 millimeters across.



Henrietta, Erie County

A different style of postmark has a star killer with rays that are slightly upturned. The star is 20 millimeters across. The cancelling device's includes a double circle circular date stamp with a large, heavy font.

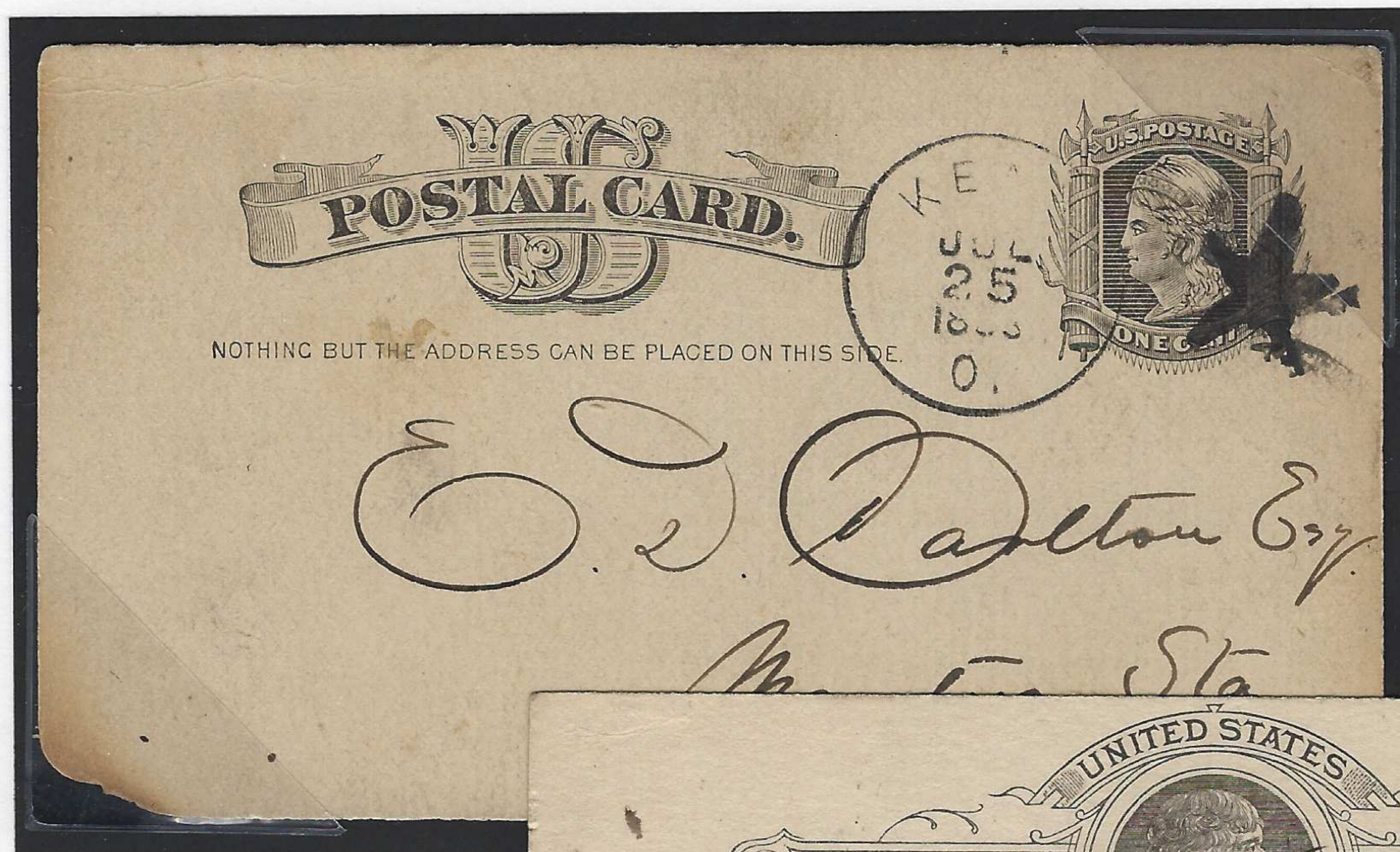


Leetonia, Columbiana County

A purple postmark, dated May 12, 1881 with a star that is 15 millimeters across. The three-line town cancel is not usually seen.

B. Hand-carved examples

Hand-carved killers will have different appearances with varying lengths and shapes of rays.



Kent,
Portage County
July 25, 1883

Van Wert,
Van Wert County
July 13, 1889



Ridgeville
Corners,
Henry County
An example from
January 24, 1887
paired with a double-
circle circular date
stamp.