

The Washington Post

D.C.'s Identity Lost in the Mail

City Using Md. Postmark After '01 Anthrax Scare

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Wednesday, December 5, 2007; B01

Take 235 letters. Drop them in mailboxes throughout the District.

Send them from iconic places, such as Congress, the Supreme Court, Union Station and The Washington Post.

Then look at the postmarks.

Do they arrive waving a WASHINGTON, D.C., banner? Do they proclaim their origin as the capital of the United States of America?

Try: SUBURBAN MD. Or, in a few cases, SOUTHERN MD.

The Washington, D.C., postmark is fading into oblivion, a casualty of the anthrax attacks of 2001. After two postal workers died at a Northeast facility, the Postal Service began farming mail to the suburbs.

Now the only way to guarantee a D.C. postmark is to take it in person to a post office and ask a clerk to cancel it by hand. Otherwise, it's a spin of the roulette wheel.

In an experiment conducted by The Post, 235 envelopes were mailed from every quadrant in the District — from 22 Zip codes, from post offices and blue boxes, from the mail slots of corporations and apartment buildings.

Twenty-four letters were delivered with a Washington D.C. postmark. A measly 10 percent.

Some shrug at the loss of the postmark, but most in Washington take any slights, real and perceived, acutely. Even those who hadn't noticed the postmark was all but gone expressed fury when informed of the symbolic omission.

"We don't have a postmark?" asked WTOP political commentator Mark Plotkin. "Oh my God! How did I miss this?" He bellowed with a full-decibel rage that almost made him sound sarcastic. But he was serious. Asked whether a Washington, D.C., postmark even matters — he admitted that he had not noticed its absence — and he howled:

"*Everything* matters! We don't have a coin! We're not on the back of a quarter yet! Anytime they can delete, omit or erase or belittle us, they take the opportunity to do it!"

Add it to a long list of affronts, he said. First, it was disenfranchisement. Then, the lack of recognition on the quarter, which all 50 states will have by next year. Also the fact that not a single D.C. person stands in the U.S. Capitol's Statuary Hall. And that's not all:

"The post office is *here*, in *Washington, D.C.* How *dare* they do this to us," Plotkin said.

It's "salt on the injury," said Aviva Kempner, a board member of DC Vote, an advocacy group pressing for the city to have full voting rights in Congress. "I think it's a metaphor for the fact that they consider us an invisible colony."

Ahem, said Deborah A. Yackley, a U.S. Postal Service spokeswoman.

"Do you think people care?" Yackley asked. "I mean, really. It's been this way for . . . years" — six, in fact — "and we haven't gotten a lot of feedback from people."

After the anthrax attacks, the Brentwood post office reopened as the Curseen-Morris center, in honor of Thomas L. Morris Jr. and Joseph P. Curseen Jr., the postal workers who died after processing contaminated mail at the facility.

But all outgoing mail is shuttled to a plant in Gaithersburg and, to a lesser extent, to the Capitol Heights processing center in Prince George's County.

On a recent day, Yackley walks among whirring processing machines in the Gaithersburg facility, a warehouse the size of 4 1/2 football fields, lit by orange fluorescent lights and whooshing with the sounds of envelope-spewing machines — one of which is purple and called, in homage to a certain dinosaur, the Barney system.

Eight machines print postmarks as letters sluice through winding tracks at the rate of 600 envelopes a minute. More than 800 employees work with 650,000 pieces of stamped mail every day — a volume that during holiday season reaches 1.2 million a day.

Three of the eight machines release the Washington, D.C., postmark, and the other five use the suburban Maryland stamp. That corresponds to the proportion of mail that comes from the District and Montgomery County.

Operations specialist Philip Stanley, walking with Yackley, is asked why, in The Post's unscientific experiment, only 10 percent of the D.C. mail got a D.C. postmark, but nearly every other piece was branded as coming from suburban Maryland.

"Did you get it back on time?" he asks.

"We figure," Yackley says, "our customers are more interested in speed than they are in seeing a certain name on the postmark So we go that route."

Those set on a postmark attesting that they mailed something from the capital can go to any D.C. post office and have it handstamped.

Otherwise, Yackley said, it helps to be a VIP like U.S. Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.), whose outgoing Christmas mail gets flagged to ensure that, when it heads for cancellation in Gaithersburg, the postmark says Washington, D.C.

Even a certain George W. Bush, said Robert Spagnolia, manager of maintenance operations at the Gaithersburg center, has been known to obsess about postmarks. Spagnolia just moved to the area from Austin, where "Mr. Bush wants all his holiday Christmas cards [to get] a Crawford postmark" — a mark that even those dropping mail at the Crawford post office cannot obtain. Crawford "is not a mail-canceling facility," meaning that pieces are shipped out to be postmarked, just as in the District.

"The president," Spagnolia said, "wants to be associated with Crawford, Texas. Not Washington, D.C."

"Or Suburban Maryland," Yackley added.

Some envelopes in The Post's experiment did have a happy ending.

A letter dropped into a blue box at 14th and U streets arrived with a Washington, D.C., postmark. As did pieces sent from mailboxes in front of the Environmental Protection Agency, Metro's Farragut West stop and 1st and Q streets SW.

There were cases of serendipity.

Two envelopes were mailed at the same time from the same box at 2nd Street and Maryland Avenue NE. One envelope got a Washington, D.C., postmark; the other was stamped with the suburban Maryland marker.

In another instance, the male half of one couple dropped a letter into a blue box outside their Connecticut Avenue apartment building. His envelope was stamped SUBURBAN MD. The female half mailed from inside the building. Her piece got a D.C. postmark.

"I had no idea about this," said Eleanor Holmes Norton, the city's nonvoting congresswoman. "We don't like being wiped off the map, unless there's a very good reason."

But, she and the Postal Service said, there is a good reason. Other cities have lost their automated postmarks because of post office consolidations.

Places such as Steubenville, Ohio; Greensburg, Penn.; Waterbury, Conn.; Mojave, Calif.; and Olympia, Wash., are no longer memorialized in mail. Some cities have protested, enlisting the help of senators to try to save their postal identity. Congress even threatened hearings.

Washington's situation is different.

The lost postmark is "not a case of wiping D.C. off the map," Norton said. "It's a case of wiping most of the region off the map." Not only Washington shares the suburban Maryland postmark with Olney and Damascus — Bethesda and Chevy Chase do, too.

"Times are changing," Norton said, "and we have to recognize what we can fight about and what we can let change."

She is on Congress's Postal Service subcommittee, and she knows the economic pressures on the agency. "Don't raise the cost of stamps, and don't raise the cost of periodicals and other things that get sent through the mail," Norton said. "We have to watch what other kind of pressure we put on them." The post office, once beleaguered by competition from the fax machine, has suffered even more with the growth of e-mail and online bill-paying.

"The use of the post office has declined precipitously," Norton said, yet "we insist they deliver every place, and they deliver six days a week, and at the same time we flagellate them for efficiency."

It's a no-win situation for one of the nation's great institutions, and a predicament for which she has empathy.

"I'm still trying to get the damn coin," Norton said, laughing. "We get no respect."