

Naval Cover Fakes, Forgeries and Frauds

Part II

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John Gill's "Chapter No. 1" Cancel

John Gill was a USCS charter member, stalwart of the Old Ironsides Chapter #1 in Boston, a skilled artist, and a strong proponent of giving collector-made cancels to ships. He provided many such cancels over a period of perhaps 20 years, but the cancels we are to discuss here were all of the same design and were used during the year 1935. In later years, Gill worked for the Post Office Department as a railway mail clerk, but I believe at this time he was still struggling to find work like many men during the Depression.

The list of cancels we need to examine is not new. It was first published in Joe Hale's 1939 *Handbook of Naval Postmarks*, and is repeated on page XXX in the introduction to the current *Catalog of United States Naval Postmarks* under the discussion of Common Design cancels, illustrated as design CD-2. Incidentally, when transcribing the list, I left out two usages of the cancel. Go to your *Catalog* now and add listings for CORMORANT (Aug. 22) and R-14 (Aug. 13) (both are already listed under the ships themselves).

It all started innocently enough in March of 1935, when Gill arranged with the mail clerk in the destroyer MacDONOUGH, then under construction at the Boston Navy Yard, for a fancy cancel for the ship's commissioning. The original form of the cancel was a metal printing cut, and **Figure 1**, from Gill's own collection, shows the cancel printed from the cut along with Gill's cachet for the event. For most of the covers, however, Gill had a rubber stamp made from the cut, and the cancel was used freely on covers from other sponsors.



Figure 1: Common Design 2 (CD-2) original cut was made of metal and used for USS MACDONOUGH commissioning at Boston Navy Yard.

Gill liked the cancel, and after the ship was commissioned he cut the date and killer bar lettering from the rubber cancel, so it could be used on other dates (**Figure 2**), although I have no confirmed reports of additional usage. Then, remembering the variable-wording cancel that Roy Sherman had been using at the Mare Island Navy Yard in California (Common Design cancel CD-1), Gill cut the name out of the cancel as well and bought a kit of rubber letters which he could use to spell out the name of any ship. He used the cancel that way for the first time on the destroyer MONAGHAN on 5 May, and again in TILLMAN on 12 May.

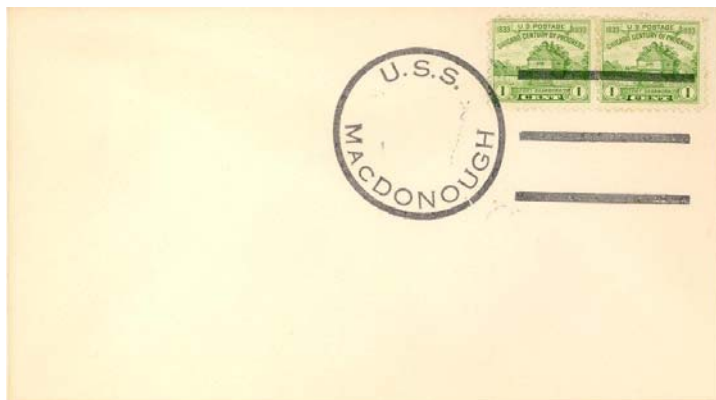


Figure 2: CD-2 rubber cancel with date and killer bar removed. Note the spacing of the killers are farther from the dial.

On 21 May, Gill traveled to Groton, Conn. for the launching of the submarine SHARK. There were covers to be canceled, of course, but Gill, like many other collectors of the day, preferred to have any Navy-related cover postmarked on a ship, not in a civilian post office. Gill therefore drove up to the Submarine Base and found a friendly welcome from the mail clerk in the submarine rescue vessel FALCON, which called the New London Submarine Base her home. FALCON had her own regulation postmark, of course, but Gill prevailed upon the clerk to use his variable-wording cancel on covers as well (**Figure 3**). Gill looked down the waterfront and saw other targets of opportunity -- the sub rescue vessel MALLARD, and the destroyer SEMMES, based in New London as a SONAR training ship. Quick conversations with their mail clerks soon produced more usages of the cancel.

But beyond them were even more attractive vessels, three old S-class submarines that hadn't had post offices in a decade. When a ship didn't have a post office, the commanding officer appointed a crew member as Mail Orderly, thus giving him authority to pick up the ship's mail at the base post office. A Mail Orderly wasn't a Mail Clerk, however, and he certainly didn't cancel mail. Nevertheless, Gill set up his cancel for each of the three boats, perhaps clearing his conscience by asking for permission from the Mail Orderlies. He ran into a problem with S-12, however, because his kit only had one number

"2," so when he used that for the ship's name he couldn't use the current date, May 21. He therefore made the date May 30, traditional Memorial Day, and asked the Mail Orderly to hold the covers and mail them on that date. Apparently, the Mail Orderly couldn't be bothered, and promptly dropped them in the mail box. The local post office noticed the advance date and either overcancelled the covers, or backstamped them with the current date.

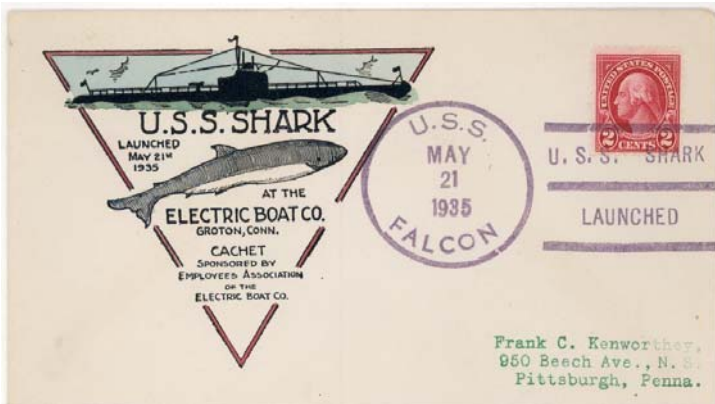


Figure 3: CD-2 USS FALCON strike for USS SHARK launching.

And here's where the first trouble with the usages of the cancel arises. Although reports say there was a problem, I'm uncertain just how the post office treated the covers, because all the S-12 covers I have seen are unaddressed and were not mailed. That was soon to become a problem with this cancel. Gill accepted stamped covers from collectors for his fancy cancel that he presumably mailed back directly, but most of the existing covers, especially those supposedly from ships with no post office, are unaddressed and never went through the mail.

Gill used the cancel on a few more ships in eastern New England in June and July, but in August, probably inspired by his experiences in Groton, set off on a long summer vacation trip down the East Coast, looking for as many opportunities to use his cancel as possible. He really hit pay dirt at the Submarine Base New London: the sub tender BUSHNELL, the submarine S-20, and no less than six old R-class boats. From there he drove to New York where he encountered a few destroyers and an old tug at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, along with the Receiving Ship SEATTLE. Across Manhattan on the Hudson River, he checked in with the Ford patrol boat EAGLE 48. On 16 August, he took the ferry to Staten Island, and there he found the gem of the trip, an old scow named BRIARCLIFF.

BRIARCLIFF was a wooden freighter ordered during World War I but never completed -- she had no engine or boilers. She was never commissioned, but was towed to the Navy anchorage at Tompkinsville and moored there as a floating warehouse and training facility for the New York Naval Militia. She even seems to have been used for a few social functions. As far as I can find, she had no crew. The

reservists who trained aboard her lived at home, and if any permanent maintenance staff were needed, they would have lived in the barracks ashore, where there was some heat in the winter. Gill was not to be deterred, however, and he quickly set her name in his cancel (Figure 4).

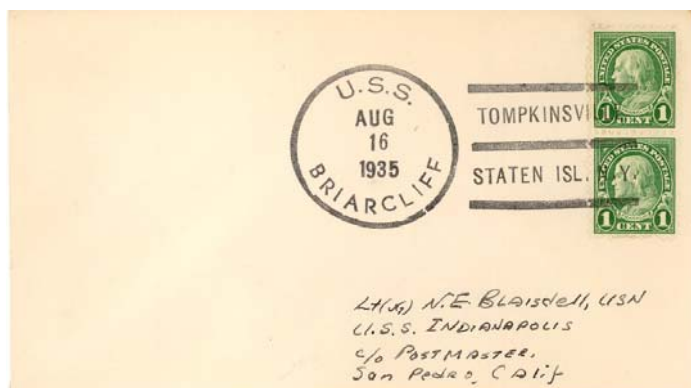


Figure 4: CD-2 USS BRIARCLIFF cancel is illustrative of the troubled usage of this device.

From there Gill continued on south -- it must have been quite a trip in the days before Interstate highways and reliable motels. He found more "rare ships" at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, the Washington Navy Yard, and Norfolk. His visit to Annapolis on the way back home revealed the former battleship WYOMING, now a midshipman training ship. A quick stop again at Philadelphia brought a tour of the old tug ALLEGHENY.

Once Gill returned to Boston, activity with the cancel slowed down. An unusual usage was on 14 September, for the dual launching of the destroyers CASE and CONYNGHAM (Figure 5). A bit of explanation is needed for the 24 September cancel from ARKANSAS (Figure 6). The killer bar wording refers to a "3 alarm fire" at the Boston Navy Yard post office. He returned to the Groton submarine base in October to lend the cancel to the submarines SHARK, whose post office had been authorized but whose commissioning had been delayed, and PORPOISE, whose postmark had not yet arrived. The final use was in December, aboard the cargo ship SIRIUS at Boston (Figure 7).



Figure 5: CD-2 marks dual launching of CASE and CONYNGHAM at Navy Yard - Boston.

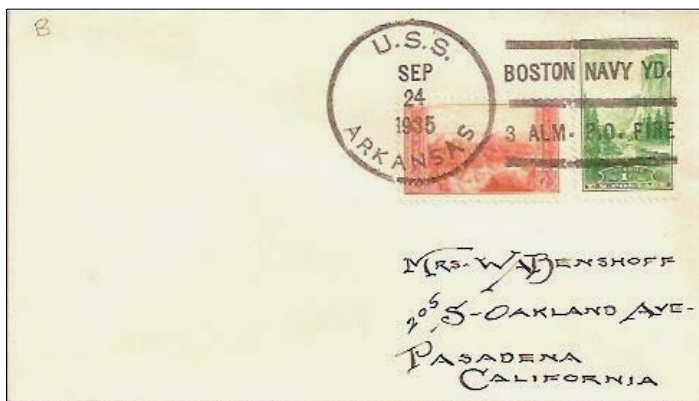


Figure 6: CD-2 USS ARKANSAS at Boston Navy Yard.

So what are we to make of all this? Some of the usages are certainly legitimate -- there was no regulation of the day that forbid the use of a privately-made postmark, and some versions were used on hundreds of covers that clearly went through the mails. Gill was also generous with his cancel, and at major events regularly allowed it to be used on the covers of other cachet makers. But the covers from submarines and other small craft with no post offices certainly weren't true postal cancels, and the majority of them never were actually mailed. Many of the August usages were also done in very small quantity, sometimes less than 50 covers. He did a total of 34 different covers on the trip, so the postage alone must have been substantial.

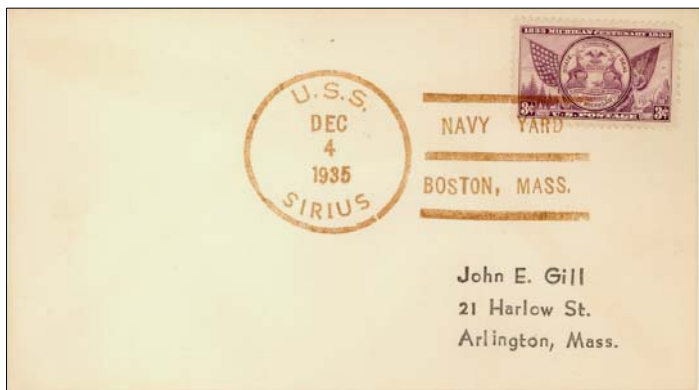


Figure 7: CD-2 USS SIRIUS 4 December 1935 was final usage of this cancel.

The main reason that people produce fakes and forgeries is to make money from them. In 1935, there wasn't much money to be made in the cover business. The standard charge for servicing your stamped cover was a penny, and there was little market for recent uncanceled covers, no matter how rare the ship. Gill did not advertise the covers for sale in the *Log*, although his friend Joe Hale offered a few in his auctions at 35 cents each. In his 1939 *Handbook*, Hale valued the "rare" BRIARCLIFF cancel at a mere 20 cents. Gill's goal seems to have been simply the thrill of creating a rare cancel that no one else had. If he got carried away and went overboard in doing so, perhaps we collectors can understand his motivation better than others.

It's also important to understand that in the 1930s the cancel was everything. If a ship didn't have a cancel, no one wanted a cover from it. Today we are happy with a ship's rubber stamp cachet, or return address corner card, even if the cover has to be postmarked at the base or a civilian post office. Very few collectors would have wanted a cover like that in the 1930s. It had to have a ship's cancel to be collectible. Gill understood this, and that's the market he served.

After the *Postmark Catalog* was published, I got a letter from Glenn Dye, a notorious faker of cancels (the letter wasn't signed but I know it was from him). Dye complained that his fancy cancels are listed as fakes, while John Gill's creations are listed as genuine. Part of the reason for this is intent -- Dye clearly was trying to deceive people to make money, while Gill was just having fun. But another reason is that Gill was one of the editors of the early editions of our *Catalog*. It's something to think about.

A complete set of these cancels is on display on our online Naval Cover Museum--

www.navalcovermuseum.org.

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