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Returned To Sender 2005: No Mail Receptacle by Douglas B. Quine

[Editor's Note: Just for showing so many examples of the "No Mail Receptacle (NMR)" auxiliary marking, this is a remarkable article. But it is more remarkable for the inescapable conclusion that one must draw from it: "In general there are so many sources for handstamps that the total number of 'Return to Sender' handstamps must number over a million!" In my opinion, one will never be able to collect or more importantly catalog them. Instead, we may better expend our efforts in explaining the reasons for auxiliary markings of all types and how various Post Offices obtained them. What do others think?

Also, as the entire article illustrates many more of the NMR auxiliary markings than is feasible to show in this newsletter, and they are all useful to see, the whole article, IN COLOR, is available as a PDF file on our web site - <http://www.postal-markings.org/amc-nmr-dbq.pdf>

Mail that is undeliverable as addressed (UAA) is forwarded, returned to the sender, or treated as dead mail depending upon the class of the mail and the services requested. The United States Postal Service (USPS) lists 24 endorsements for such mail in section F010, exhibit 4.1 of the *Domestic Mail Manual*. Recently I had the opportunity to examine 1,817 mail pieces returned to a Fortune 500 company within a one week period in September, 2005. The subject of this paper is one of the 24 USPS endorsements: "No Mail Receptacle" (NMR) which was observed on 131 envelopes (7%) of the returned mail. This endorsement is applied when the "addressee failed to provide a receptacle for receipt of mail." This may occur because mail is not delivered to street addresses (Vail, Colorado is PO Box delivery only), because the mail box has not yet been installed at a new house, or because the mail box has been destroyed by vandals or wayward snow plows. In the course of this study, an extraordinary diversity of NMR markings was observed. The major markings are illustrated and discussed in turn.

The "no mail receptacle" endorsement typically first appears abbreviated in manuscript as "NMR" by the letter carrier at the post office or on the route. Hastily written endorsements out of context may be nearly illegible or they may be very clear including dates and carrier initials (Figures 1a and 1b).



Figure 1a

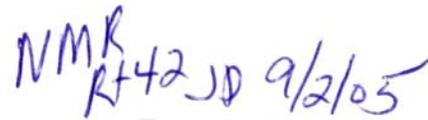


Figure 1b

An official return to sender auxiliary marking is typically applied to direct the mail piece back to the sender. Table 1 (page 3) lists the incidence of each of the major forms of NMR redirection observed in this sample.

Rubber stamp markings (56% of all official return indicators) occur in a remarkable range of variations which are categorized in Table 2 (see end of article). The marking may be a simple "No Receptacle" rubber stamp applied to the letter (Figure 2), a "No Mail Receptacle" message on a single line (Figure 3), or a "No Mail Receptacle" message on two lines (Figure 4).



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

Most commonly, a right hand inscribed "Returned To Sender" with a pointing finger directing attention towards the return address is utilized with an associated endorsement "No mail receptacle" in two lines on the right in a sans serif font (Figure 5).



Figure 5 (93%)

Surprisingly, even within this narrow grouping there are a wide range of varieties. First, the ink color may be red, black, purple, or colors in between. Since the ink pad colors are easily

Table 1: NMR Directives Distribution on Returned UAA Mail

Category	Medium / Color	#	%	Figures
Rubber stamp	Black, Red, Purple rubber stamp	73	56%	2 - 27
Manuscript NMR	Pen (various colors) + generic + yellow RTS (21=16%) + IJP (5 = 6%) + return to sender (2 = 2%)	31	24%	35 - 36 37 38
Yellow Label Nixie	Black thermal / dot matrix	24	18%	30 - 31
White label ~~~ Return To Sender ~~~	Black offset / laser on white label	1	.8%	32
Orange label	Black offset / laser on orange day glo label	1	.8%	33
Box Cancellation	Black machine cancel mark	1	.8%	34
TOTAL		131	100%	

changed when new supplies are ordered (and may also vary as the ink is depleted), they do not appear to have much organizational value. For instance, black imprints are seen with red fringes suggesting that a depleted red ink pad was replaced with a black ink pad at the post office.

The designs themselves also vary within this basic layout. This indicates that a standard rubber stamp has not been produced and distributed to local post offices. The button on the sleeve may be solid or two concentric rings, the cuff line may be thick or may match the other sleeve lines, the NMR text font may be thick or thin, or broad or squat. **Furthermore, the dimensions of the rubber stamp elements vary.** That is, the length from the pointing finger tip to the top right edge of the sleeve varies from 19 to 30 mm on these stamps while the width of the text message varies from 25 to 38 mm. **Since the hand size and text size do not vary together, the variations observed in the mail cannot be attributed to simple differences in magnification of the artwork even when the design elements are otherwise similar.** The images of these rubber stamps have been arranged in order of increasing text width compared with hand width (the Figure 5 rubber stamp text is 93% of the hand width whereas the Figure 10 rubber stamp text is 195% of the hand width). Figures 5 to 10 illustrate some the variations within the described rubber stamp format. Although at most only the two greatest variations are shown (Figures 6 and 8), there are actually six varieties for the Figure 6 type, seven varieties for the Figure 7 type, eight varieties for the Figure 8 type, and four varieties for the Figure 9 type. They are all imaged as a PDF on our web site (see Ed. Note).



Figure 8a (157-158%)



Figure 8b (157-158%)



Figure 9 (162-170%)



Figure 10 (195%)

Even the most basic elements of the design prove to vary from rubber stamp to rubber stamp. Rare instances are observed in which the text within the hand may read "Return To Sender" (Figure 11) rather than the familiar "Returned to Sender".



Figure 6a (104-125%)



Figure 11



Figure 6b (104-125%)

Likewise, the NMR message may be written in a serif font (Figure 12) or the sleeve button may be completely missing (Figure 13).



Figure 7 (137-138%)



Figure 12



Figure 13

On occasion the left hand may be used (Figure 14) with the thumb pointing up and even the sleeve eliminated.



Figure 14

The "No Mail Receptacle" text may also occur beneath the hand (Figures 15 - 17). While the left hand (in this case with broken cuff lines - Figure 15) is rarely used, more commonly the right hand is used (Figures 16, 17).



Figure 15



Figure 16

Some pointing finger markings with the NMR endorsements are even customized to a particular post office (Figure 17).



Figure 17

Such information can be of value with misaddressed mail as it may be that a street name occurs in multiple ZIP codes and the root cause was actually the incorrect ZIP code rather than a missing mail receptacle. While there are potentially as many of these distinct markings as there are ZIP codes, imprints in the same style differing only in the ZIP code digits may be considered equivalent. The ink color of rubber stamps depends upon the ink available to the carrier or markup unit and therefore may vary through time or between offices; this should not be a diagnostic difference.

Not surprisingly, generic pointing finger rubber stamps with checklists are often used and represented 20% of the 131 NMR items. While specific rubber stamps require many stamps to cover the various return conditions, the generic checklist stamp with

the proper reason manually marked serves for many cases. Checklists of acronyms are seen (Figure 18), but more commonly the reasons are written out in a manner more easily understood by the return mail recipient (Figure 19 - 27). These check lists vary extensively in the choices presented. This variety is shown here and described in Table 2.

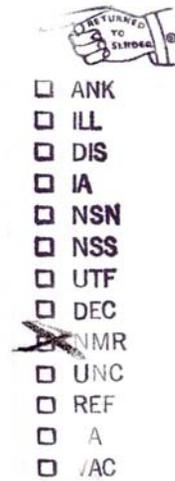


Figure 18

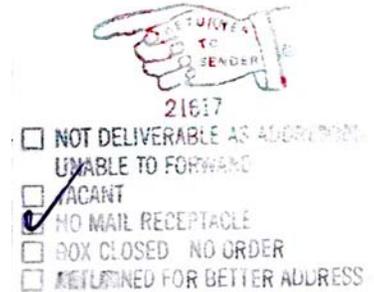


Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21

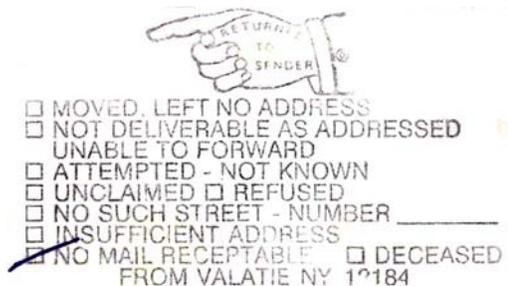


Figure 22

At times the letter carrier and route generating the return to sender action may even be identified (Figure 24).



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26



Figure 27

Note, as in the case of the dedicated NMR return to sender rubber stamps, a wide range of varieties is observed in the checklist rubber stamps. The numbers observed of the various types in this small sample are indicated in Table 2.

While they are the most common means of notification, rubber stamps are not the only auxiliary markings used to indicate that mail must be returned to sender because of the lack of a mail receptacle. As indicated in Table 1, about 24% of the envelopes had a manuscript "NMR" notation (e.g. Figure 1) as the only in-

dications of the specific cause for the return to sender. This cryptic "NMR" cause for return was typically augmented by an auxiliary marking directing "Return To Sender". Since the only NMR indication on these pieces is the handwritten notation, we will discuss the details of these markings at the end of the paper.

Applied labels are often used to direct mail back to the sender and have the advantage that they can cover the POSTNET barcode (typically lower right of the envelope) which directs the letter towards the destination by automation equipment. This is an important consideration; otherwise the USPS automation equipment will read the barcode and continue to redirect the mail to the original addressee, creating "loop mail". Loop mail markings and the sometimes vigorous use of black markers and grease pencils to obscure unwanted barcodes are the subject for another paper. Suffice it to say that the POSTNET barcodes are typically obliterated with a black marker (Figure 28), covered with a thin white return address barcoded letter mail labeling machine (LMLM) label (Figure 29), or covered with a printed on demand black dot "Nixie" (not deliverable) yellow return label (Figure 30). The



Figure 28

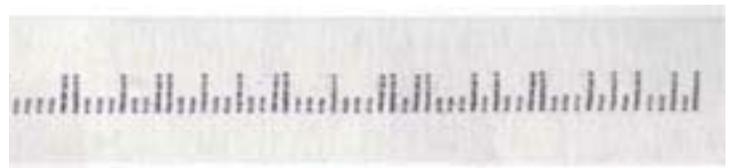


Figure 29

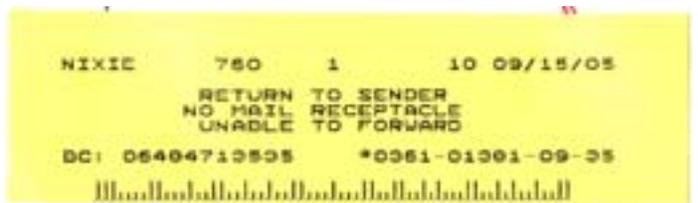


Figure 30

yellow labels have the benefit that they achieve the objectives of both the rubber stamp (explain need and reason for redirection) and the LMLM (block old barcode and provide POSTNET barcode to the return address). As will be explained by an article by Michael M. Ludeman in the April 2006 *Auxiliary Markings*, the "Nixie" label in Figure 30 originates from the new Postal Auto-

mated Redirection System (PARS) while that in Figure 31 originates from the older Computer Forwarding System (CFS). For both examples, there is no forwarding address available.

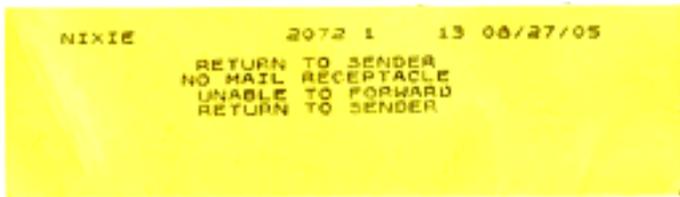


Figure 31

Presumably in these instances the automation equipment was not able to read the return address to barcode it onto the label or the machine operator did not manually enter the address information.

Some rare labels of unknown (although apparently USPS in view of the jargon used) origin have been observed. White (Figure 32) and Day Glo Orange (Figure 33) checklist labels have each been observed once.

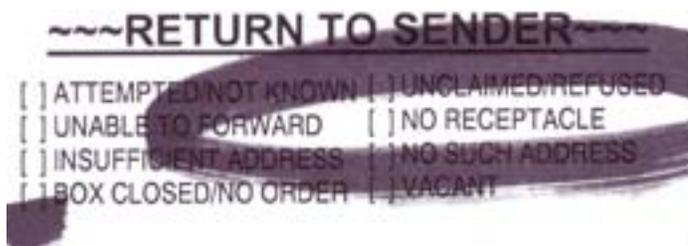


Figure 32



Figure 33

At times a special machine cancellation hub may be used by the post office (Figure 34) to indicate an unavailable mail box. This is most likely used when a volume of mail accumulates for undeliverable mail boxes. In the single instance seen, a mirror image offset imprint was also observed on the back of the envelope.



Figure 34

This completes the discussion of the markings (by frequency) used to report NMR mail and redirect it to the sender (Table 1) as well as the specific varieties observed that are produced with rubber stamps (Table 2). The one remaining order of business is to describe how letters with manuscript or rubber stamped "NMR"

markings which lack "Return To Sender" notations are returned to the sender. While the "NMR" marking indicates to postal workers that an envelope cannot be delivered, typically specific instructions are applied to the envelope directing return to the sender. In the case of envelopes with only an "NMR" notation, generic preprinted "RTS" yellow labels with brown ink are commonly seen (Figures 35 - 36). Instances are illustrated in which manuscript "NMR" (Figure 35) or rubber stamped "No Mail Receptacle" (Figure 36) are on top of the labels; typically they are elsewhere on the envelope. Since the "RTS" labels offer only 5 choices, "OTHER" (Figures 35 - 36) or occasionally "Unable to Forward" is checked when mail is undeliverable because of NMR.

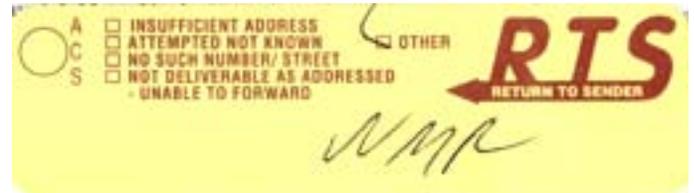


Figure 35

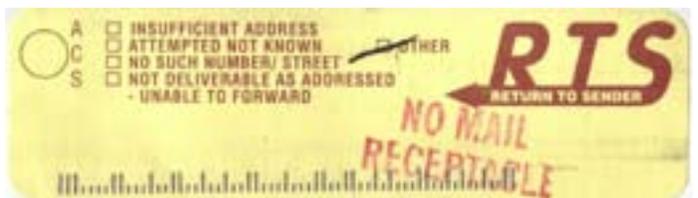


Figure 36

Alternatively, generic Ink Jet Printer (IJP) endorsements (Figure 37) may be used to direct the "Return To Sender" and may reference the "NMR" endorsement as the justification.



Figure 37

This approach does not have the benefit of covering the destination POSTNET barcode nor of providing the return POSTNET barcode. Details of the specific location within the mail stream that the return to sender IJP technology is implemented are not available at this time (perhaps Multi-Line Optical Character Reader, Advanced Facer Canceller, or a special return mail processing unit). To date no IJP endorsements have been observed which specify "NMR" as the cause for return.



Figure 38

Finally, in two instances generic return to sender rubber stamps were used. I determined the NMR root cause by reference to the manuscript notations on the envelope (Figure 38).

The wide range of notations, imprints, and labels used to sig-

nify the inability to delivery mail because there was "No Mail Receptacle" available within a week in September 2005 provide a tantalizing glimpse into the wide variety of auxiliary markings available today.

Table 2: NMR Rubber Stamp Types

<u>Group</u>	<u>Hand</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Finger mm wide</u>	<u>Text mm wide</u>	<u>#</u>	<u>Figures</u>
NR		No receptacle (1 line)	-	31	1	2
NMR		No mail receptacle (1 line)	-	36 - 48	4	3
NMR		No mail receptacle (2 line)	-	28 - 32	2	4
NMR on right	✓	thin-thick text; thin-thick cuff	19 - 30	25 - 38	28	5 - 10
NMR on right	✓	"Return ..." on hand	27	31	1	11
NMR on right	✓	serif font	24	40	1	12
NMR on right	✓	right hand, no button	19	32	1	13
NMR on right	✓	left hand, no sleeve	20	30	1	14
NMR below	✓	left hand; 3 broken cuff lines	35	38	1	15
NMR below	✓	right hand	30 - 35	38 - 58	5	16
NMR below	✓	with ZIP code	27 - 32	22 - 44	2	17
Checklist	✓	acronyms	18	11	1	18
Checklist	✓	last line: "Returned .."	27	45	1	19
Checklist	✓	last line: "RT ..."	19	57	1	20
Checklist	✓	last line: "Box closed.."	28	38	1	21
Checklist	✓	last line: "from Valatie NY.."	22	62	1	22
Checklist	✓	first line: "Not deliverable .." last line: "Postage .."	17 - 28	32 - 36	8	23
Checklist	✓	first line: "RT#__" last line: "Postage .."	14 - 17	31 - 36	5	24
Checklist	✓	last line: "Carr/Initials .."	28 - 33	31 - 32	4	25
Checklist	✓	last line: "Vacant..."	24 - 28	35 - 37	3	26
Checklist	✓	last line: "Lottery law ..."	32	88	1	27
TOTAL					73	

RAMP H.F.P. by Jerry Johnson

A cover for a recent lot sent to me from a Canadian dealer contained a circular date cancel that is unusual. Through John Hotchner, the item was sent to Bernie Moening, a long-time postal

worker in Lima, Ohio.

He in turn contacted the Pittsburgh Post Office and received the following information. Apparently the RAMP H.F.P. is a special location in the Pittsburgh mail processing facility that is a revenue recovery section. The initials stand for Held For Postage.

These words cannot refer to the historical meaning of the phrase since mail has not been held for postage as an official Post Office Department act since 1960. But it does apparently refer to an activity of the Pittsburgh Post Office, where they hold back mail which does not contain any or at least adequate postage.

However, once the item reached the RAMP H.F.P. area, a worker in that location must have finally recognized that the franking material represented real Canadian postage, and the item was placed in the mails as fully prepaid.

