

Philatelic Genealogy

Old Envelopes, Postcards, and Immigrant Origins

by James R. Miller

OLD ENVELOPES AND POSTCARDS IN POSTAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS COULD REVEAL YOUR IMMIGRANT ANCESTOR'S place of origin. Many immigrants corresponded with family members back home, and fortunate genealogists inherit generations of family letters and cards. Sadly, most immigrant correspondence was probably discarded. But some envelopes and postcards were saved, not just by families who sent and received them, but by stamp collectors, or more precisely, postal history collectors.

Old envelopes and postcards survive in postal history collections; they are sold every day, and their images appear in hundreds of printed and online auction catalogs. Covers (entire envelopes) and postcards can provide information on immigrant origins that might be available nowhere else, and I propose making these valuable resources more accessible to genealogists.

The potential for genealogical research can be seen in the following examples sent from Europe to recipients who have been identified in United States censuses:

- **Germany:** Miss Frida Körner of 227 West Adams in Los Angeles, California, received a letter in 1910 from Steinheim-an-der-Murr, Baden-Württemberg, Germany. Frida L. Korner, a twenty-eight-year-old German immigrant, of 217 West Adams Street appears in the 1910 Los Angeles census.^[1] The back of the envelope has a note apparently written by Frida's mother.
- **Ireland:** Daniel O'Sullivan of Barrows Street, North Easton, Massachusetts, received a postcard in 1912 from Banteer, County Cork, Ireland. Daniel Sullivan of Barrows Street, a sixty-year-old widowed Irish immigrant appears in the 1910 Easton census.^[2] The postcard's writer refers to him as "Uncle Dan."
- **Wales:** In 1904, Mrs. K. Lewis of Eldorado, Wisconsin, received a black-bordered mourning cover (indicating news of a death) from Ystrad Meurig, Wales. Jane Lewis, a seventy-year-old widowed Welsh immigrant, appears in the 1900 Eldorado census.^[3]
- **Poland:** Rabbi Jakob Bloom of 2007 Bergen Street, Brooklyn, New York, received a letter in 1920 from Grajewo, Poland. Jacob Bloom of 2007 Bergen Street, a thirty-three-year-old "reverend" who emigrated from Poland in 1908, appears in the 1920 Brooklyn census.^[4]
- **Denmark:** Carl Gronenberg of Oakland, California, received a letter in 1893 from Skjelskor, Denmark. Carl Groennenberg, a forty-year-old Danish immigrant, appears in the 1900 San Francisco census.^[5]



Top: Envelope addressed to Miss Frida Körner, Los Angeles, Calif.
Middle: Reverse of Körner envelope. Bottom: Postcard addressed to Mr. Daniel O'Sullivan, No. Easton, Mass.

- **Netherlands:** John Mulder of 28 Arthur Street in Muskegon, Michigan, received a mourning cover in 1902 from Uithuistermeeden, Netherlands. John Mulder, a sixty-eight-year-old Dutch immigrant of 84 Sanford Street, appears in the 1900 Muskegon census.^[6]

Each envelope and postcard contains information about the recipient's possible place of origin consistent with the person's census listing. Envelopes and postcards alone do not provide proof of an immigrant's place of origin but they may present important clues. This evidence must be verified by consulting other sources, including those in the native country, before reaching any conclusions.

The six items cited here, plus a dozen others, were found in eight hours of searching at Internet auction sites. None of the items are connected to the author's family. At present, genealogists cannot easily locate envelopes and postcards sent or received by relatives. Envelopes and postcards sold online by postal history vendors are classified by stamps, cancellations, and other postal markings. Although the names of the sender and recipient are central to genealogical research, this information is seldom of interest to postal historians. Postmarks, however, are of interest to postal historians and may be included in an item's description. Because postmark locations are often included, an online search can be performed using a place name plus the word cover, as in "Williamstown cover." Realistically, the likelihood of locating a family item by this method is like finding a needle in the proverbial haystack.

Developing the full genealogical potential of old envelopes and postcards will require the efforts of genealogists and postal history collectors. Envelopes and postcards exist in thousands of private and museum collections but only a fraction are for sale at any time. Postal history auction catalogs and publications, as well as collections themselves, contain valuable material but extracting it will be a significant undertaking.^[7] A systematic effort to collect information from available sources will, over time, create a valuable database. A searchable online database of names and addresses of recipients and senders, plus postmark dates and locations, will make relevant data from postal history collections accessible to genealogists. The support of private collectors, museums, and postal history vendors will be important in locating material for the database.

Postal history databases with genealogical value already exist. Colin Buck's Postcard Index (www.practicalresearchindexes.co.uk/4436.html), a fee-based service, allows genealogists to search the names of recipients of more than 100,000 British postcards from the 1890s through the 1960s. For Prince Edward Island, the Island Register's P.E.I. Folded Letter and Cover

Database (www.islandregister.com/letters/datab.html) collects images of letters sent to and from that province.^[8] The genealogical value of old envelopes and postcards is not limited to immigrants' places of origin. Other envelopes and postcards may reveal details of family business affairs; travel; a family's migration within the U.S.; locations of siblings; and military service. And while genealogists have much to gain, postal historians may enjoy learning the family history of a person whose envelope or postcard is in their collection.

The author wants to hear from anyone interested in developing the genealogical potential of postal history collections. A small collection of envelopes and postcards with origin information can be seen at www.philgen.org. The site invites submission of similar items. The author would especially like to hear from genealogists who have used postal history in family history research. ♦

Notes

¹ 1910 U.S. Census, Los Angeles Assembly District 71, Los Angeles County, California, ED 179, p. 4B, NARA series T624, roll 82. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

² 1910 U.S. Census, Easton, Bristol County, Massachusetts, ED 110 p. 24A, NARA series T624, roll 574. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

³ 1900 U.S. Census, Eldorado, Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin, ED 20, p. 3B, NARA series T623, roll 1788. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

⁴ 1920 U.S. Census, Brooklyn Assembly District 23, Kings County, New York, ED 1525, p. 26B, NARA series T625, roll 1183. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

⁵ 1900 U.S. Census, San Francisco, San Francisco County, California, ED 191, p. 9A, NARA series T623, roll 105. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

⁶ 1900 U.S. Census, Muskegon Ward 5, Muskegon County, Michigan, ED 72, p. 9A, NARA series T623, roll 734. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

⁷ See, for example, Ernest A. Mosher, "Mourning Covers: a Scandinavian Perspective." *The Posthorn*, November 2005, 13–19; and Jon Rose, "U.S. Immigrants Writing Home to Europe Created Collectible Covers." *Stamp Collector*, December 5, 1992, 12.

⁸ Michael J. Salmon, "Postal History, Family History, Databases & the Internet." *London Philatelist*, June 2002, 184–188.

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