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Spotlight On Harnden's Foreign Letter Express

William Harnden is considered to be the "father" of the express business in the United States. His first advertisement appeared on February 23, 1839 and announced express car service four times a week between Boston and New York. The primary function was the handling of small packages, money, and orders for goods. In November, 1840 Dexter Brigham Jr. set up an office in Liverpool to establish a trans-Atlantic express and foreign exchange business. This business thrived when Harndens became the exclusive agent for light freight shipped to England by the Cunard Line steamers.

Prior to 1848, prepaid mails to foreign destinations was possible only by using agents such as Harnden. For example, a letter prepaid to Harnden in Boston could be sent by steamer to the Liverpool office and mailed by the Harnden agent there, using the British postal system, to any destination linked from England.

This presentation will show the mail handling aspects of Harndens Foreign Letter Office. Harndens operated simultaneously as a contract mail carrier and as a private express during two separate time periods. This enabled him to have a virtual monopoly on legal mail destined to be carried on Cunard Line steamers before the treaty mails were instituted in 1848. It was an unusual circumstance for a private express company to also have a mail carrying contract. For the "collection" pages linked, the following color coding is used:

black - United States or foreign post office mail

gray - hybrid of private mail and contract mail with Harnden acting as mail carrying contractor

red - Harnden operating as a private express

blue - other private conveyance

The intact, mounted collection, one frame, is available for sale. It includes usages to Finland, Bremen, Holland, Calcutta, Hamburg, Azores, Switzerland, and Prussia. Price upon request.

HARDEN & CO'S.

ENGLISH, FRENCH, BELGIAN, AND AMERICAN

EXPRESS,

AND

GENERAL FORWARDING AND COMMISSION HOUSE

MESSRS. HARDEN & CO., will receive and forward daily by their Express, Packages, Parcels, Specie, Bank Notes, &c. to the following places, viz:—Boston, New-York, Philadelphia, Providence, Baltimore, Washington and Springfield.

They will also pay particular attention to the execution of Custom House orders, in Boston and New-York. Merchants and others, residing at a distance from the above Cities, who are desirous of obtaining their goods earlier than by any other source, will do well to forward their Entries, Invoices and Orders to us.

COMMISSIONS of all kinds for the purchase of Goods, &c. in England, France, or Belgium, will be attended to by their Agents in those places.

LETTER BAGS, for the ROYAL MAIL STEAMERS from Boston, will be kept at their Offices in New-York, and also for the sailing packets from New-York.

H. & Co. having a branch of their house established in Liverpool, have made arrangements for a

GENERAL FORWARDING, COMMISSION, & SHIPPING BUSINESS.

Every attention will be paid to the prompt forwarding of Merchandise of all kinds by the Sailing Packets to any of the American Ports, as well by the Royal Mail Line of Steamers to Boston, and the Steamers Great Western and Great Britain to New-York. Goods for the interior of the United States will, on arrival, be at once cleared at the Custom House and forwarded as directed by Express.

The Liverpool Establishment will give particular attention to the ENTERING AND CLEARING OF VESSELS, PAYMENT OF CUSTOM HOUSE FEES, SALE OF CARGOES, AND PROCURING OF RETURN FREIGHTS, AS WELL AS THE SALE OF MERCHANDISE GENERALLY, ON COMMISSION.

Their business will comprise the purchase of any articles of British manufacture, promptly as per order, and on reasonable terms.

AGENTS.

MACLEAN, MORRIS & CO. London.

J. GLAENZER, 14 Boulevard Poissonniere, Paris.

HARDEN & CO. 6 Wall-street, New-York.

" 8 Court-street, Boston.

" 43 South-street, Philadelphia.

(1844)

1844 advertisement

Prior to 1848, prepaid mails to foreign destinations was possible only by using agents such as Harnden. For example, a letter prepaid to Harnden in Boston could be sent by steamer to the Liverpool office and mailed by the Harnden agent


there, using the British postal system, to any destination linked from England.

I. First Period - Harnden as a contract mail agent (July 1, 1839 to June 30, 1841) Harnden received a contract as a post office mail carrier on July 1, 1839. This contract allowed Harnden to legally carry mails, in locked bags, between Boston and New York City. He carried mail made up in packets, addressed to himself, upon which he paid postage by total weight. The contract expired on June 30, 1841.



A typical cover from this period, dated from New York City and destined abroad for transmission by the Cunard Line, was taken to the New York Harnden office, stamped with the red oval shown above left, and put in a packet with other letters, addressed to Harnden in Boston. It was then taken by Harnden, as a US contract mail agent, in a locked bag to the Boston post office. There, Harnden opened the packet, paid the Boston post master the amount of packet postage due, and the letters delivered to the purser of the Cunard ship for transmission onward. See also collection pages [one](#) and [two](#).

HARNDEN & CO'S.
Express, Foreign Letter, and General American and Foreign Forwarding Office,
 NO 42 S. THIRD ST., PHILADA.

 MESSRS. HARNDEN & CO. respectfully inform their friends and the public that they will receive and forward daily from Philadelphia to New York and vice versa, in connection with their Boston Express Cars, bundles, packages, samples of goods, bank notes, specie, &c., &c., and forward them by their Express, to the following places, viz:

New York, Albany, Providence, New Bedford, Boston, Lowell, Salem, Portsmouth, Portland; also to Liverpool, London, Manchester and Birmingham, (Eng.) and Paris and Havre (France.)

They will also execute orders; collect and pay drafts, notes and bills; and transact any and all business, that may be entrusted to their charge promptly.

The Express will leave Philadelphia at 5 P. M. Leave New York at 5 P. M.

N. B.—All Packages must be left at the office No 42 south Third st., one hour previous to the above time.

LETTER BAGS for CUNARD'S Royal Mail Steamers; also, for the New York Steamers and Sailing Packets, will be kept at this Office.

J. W. LAWRENCE, Agent,
 42 south Third st. Philad'a.
 Wm WYMAN, Agent,
 2 Wall street, New York.
 B. W. WHEELER,
 Union Buildings, Providence, R. I.
 E. LAMB STONE,
 27 Bucklesbury, London.
 WILLMER & SMITH,
 32 Church street, Liverpool.
 HARNDEN & CO.
 8 Court street, Boston.

N. B.—No Packages can be received at this Office which contains Letters.
References.—Messrs. Carey & Hart; A & G Ralston & Co.; Grant & Stone.

may 18—dtf

May 20
1841.

1841 advertisement from Philadelphia newspaper

II. Second Period - Harnden as a private mail express (July 1, 1841 to February 21, 1842) Without a mail contract, Harnden continued his foreign letter office business in a somewhat modified fashion.

A typical cover from this period bears no evidence of the exact handling except that they bear Harnden's handstamps. It is not clear if he continued to use the government mails for carriage between New York and Boston but I suspect that letters were carried by his messengers outside the mails, thereby depriving the government of revenue. See also collection pages [three](#), [four](#), and [five](#).

III. Third Period - Harnden as a regulated contract mail agent (February 22, 1842 to January 31, 1844) The Post Office renewed the Harnden contract effective from February 22, 1842. It appears that this time, however, Harnden was forced to pay postage on letters handled on an individual basis rather than getting benefit of slightly lower bulk packet postage. The contract also allowed him to carry mail between additional cities, including Philadelphia. This contract expired on January 31, 1844.

Covers from the third period bears post office markings. A typical cover from this period, dated from New York City and destined abroad for transmission by the Cunard Line, was taken to the New York Harnden office, stamped with their marking and taken to the post office to be postmarked. After they were postmarked, they were put into a locked bag and carried by Harnden, as a US contract mail agent, to the Boston post office. There, Harnden opened the packet, paid the Boston post master any postage due, and the letters delivered to the purser of the Cunard ship for transmission onward. See also collection pages [six](#), [seven](#), [eight](#) and [nine](#).

IV. Fourth Period - Harnden as a private mail express (February 1, 1844 to 1851) Without a mail contract, Harnden continued his foreign letter office business in a once again modified fashion. He still delivered mails to the Cunard steamers leaving both Boston and New York. The foreign mail offices were closed in 1851.

Covers from the fourth period no longer bears post office markings. It is not clear how he handled mails between his offices. I suspect that letters were made up into parcels and carried by mail on at least some of the routes. Possibly messengers were used on other routes before July 1, 1845 when the government clamped down on the Independent Mail companies. See also collection pages [ten](#), [eleven](#), [twelve](#), [thirteen](#), [fourteen](#), [fifteen](#), and [sixteen](#).

Richard Frajola (January, 2005)

First Period - Harndens as a Contract Mail Agent

Boston ⇒ **New York** ⇒ Bristol ⇒ London / Cambridge ⇒ Boston ⇒ **New York** ⇒ Havre ⇒ Bremen



6 May 1840 Boston to New York City, carried by Harndens under separate cover as a mail carrier

9 May 1840 New York City, via Great Western Steam Ship Company *Great Western* to Bristol

23 May arrived Bristol with "Bristol Ship Letter" handstamp and manuscript 1sh 4d due double rate
by British mail to London arriving 25 May



1 June 1840 Cambridge, Massachusetts by mail to Boston, due 6c rate and delivered to Harndens
carried by Harndens under separate cover, as a mail carrier, to New York City

17 June 1840 New York City, via Havre sailing packet *Rhone*, to Havre, France

5 July entered French mails in Havre for Bremen, 10 July Bremen arrival backstamp and crayon "39" due

5 July entered French mails in Havre for Bremen, 10 July Bremen arrival backstamp and crayon "39" due

First Period - Harndens as a Contract Mail Agent

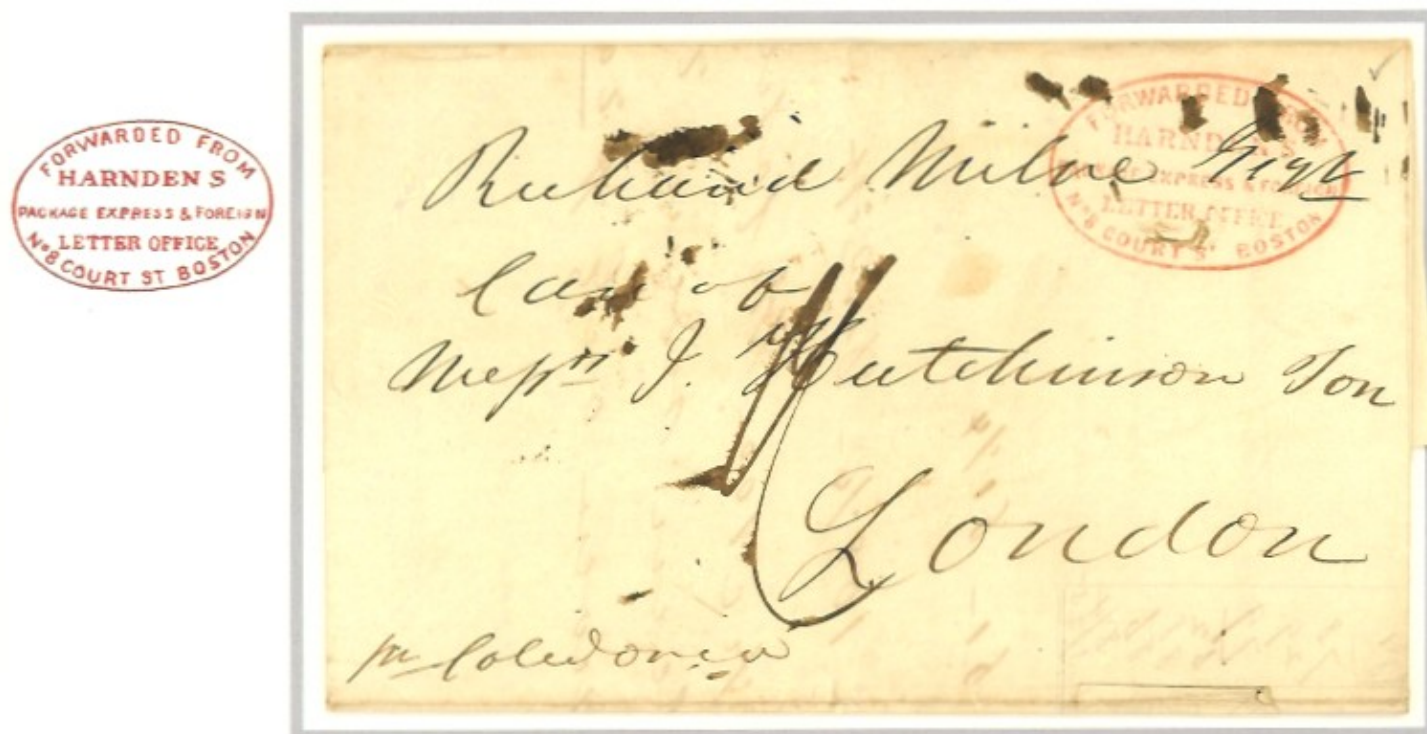
New York ⇒ **Boston** ⇒ Liverpool ⇒ London



30 January 1841 New York City to Boston, Harndens New York office, under separate cover, as a mail carrier

1 February 1841 Boston, via Cunarder *Acadia* to Liverpool arriving 15 February

"America L" handstamp and manuscript 1 sh. due, by British mail to London arriving 16 February



31 May 1841 New York City to Boston, as a late letter to Harndens Boston office

1 June Boston, via Cunarder *Caledonia* to Liverpool arriving 14 June

manuscript 1 sh. due, by British mail to London arriving 15 June

manuscript 1 sh. due, by British mail to London arriving 15 June

Second Period - Harndens as a Private Mail Express

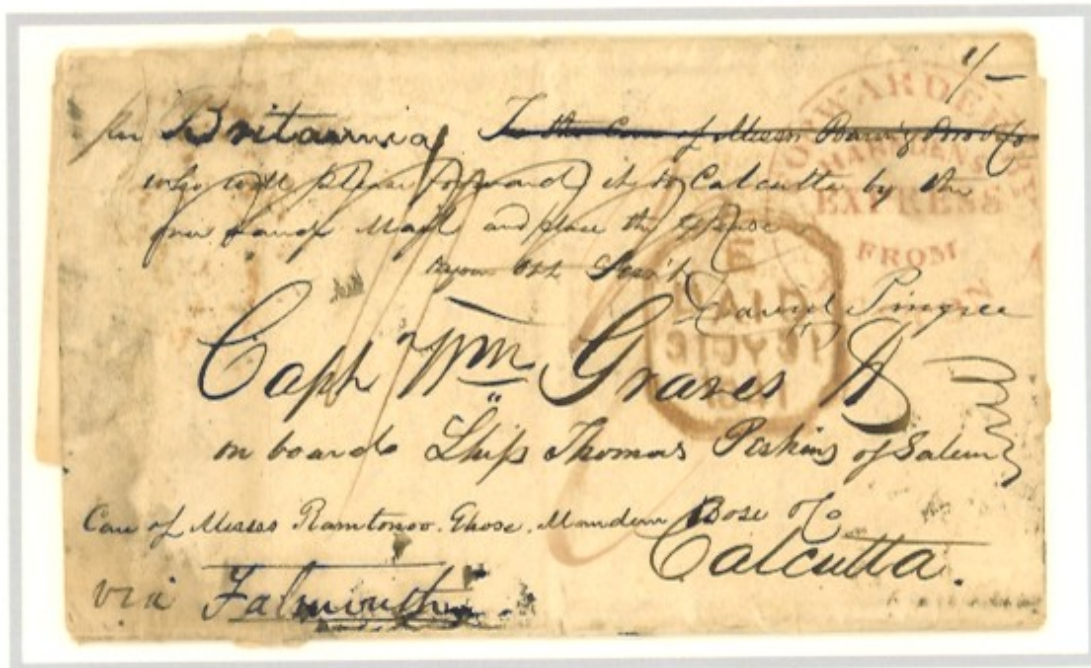
Concord ⇒ **Boston** ⇒ **Liverpool** ⇒ Paris ⇒ Amsterdam



- 28 July 1841 Concord, Massachusetts by mail to Boston, prepaid 6c rate and delivered to Harndens
- 1 August 1841 Boston, via Cunarder *Caledonia* to Liverpool, outside the mails to Harndens Liverpool office
- 14 August "Paid At Liverpool" by mail to Wells & Co. forwarders in Paris, France
- 18 August re-posted in Paris, prepaid by Wells & Co., for Amsterdam, Holland, 20 August arrival

Second Period - Harndens as a Private Mail Express

Salem ⇒ Boston ⇒ Liverpool ⇒ London ⇒ Calcutta



17 July 1841 Salem, Massachusetts to Boston by Harndens

Harndens Boston circular handstamp

17 July Boston, via Cunarder *Britannia* to Liverpool arriving 29 July

31 July by mail to Baring Brothers, London, 1 shilling due

31 July by British mails, prepaid to Calcutta, India

endorsed by sender "To The care of Messrs Baring Bros. & Co. who will please forward it to Calcutta by the first land mail and place (charge) the expense."

Second Period - Harnden as a Private Mail Express

New York ⇒ Liverpool ⇒ London



29 October 1841 New York City to Boston by Harndens

Harndens New York Express oval

1 November Boston, via Cunarder *Columbia* to Liverpool arriving 15 November

"America L" handstamp and manuscript lsh. due
by British mail to London arriving 16 November

Third Period - Harndens as a Regulated Contract Mail Agent

New York ⇒ **Boston** ⇒ **Liverpool** ⇒ Manchester / New York ⇒ **Boston** ⇒ **Liverpool** ⇒ London



30 April 1842 New York City, Harndens office to post office and out again, carried by Harndens to Boston
1 May Boston, via Cunarder *Britannia* to Liverpool arriving 15 May, Manchester arrival backstamp



15 December 1842 New York City, late mail taken out of post office, carried by Harndens to Boston
16 December, via Cunarder *Columbia* to Liverpool arriving 29 December, London arrival backstamp

Third Period - Harndens as a Regulated Contract Mail Agent

Wilmington ⇒ **New York** ⇒ Boston ⇒ **Liverpool** ⇒ Dublin



14 March 1843 Wilmington, Indiana by mails prepaid to agent in New York City
by Harndens to Boston with oval Boston office handstamp
2 April Boston, via Cunarder *Columbia* to Liverpool arriving 15 April
by British mails to Dublin, Ireland, postage due 1 shilling

Third Period - Harndens as a Regulated Contract Mail Agent

Philadelphia ⇒ **Boston** ⇒ Liverpool ⇒ Hamburg ⇒ Ship Badger



29 June 1842 Philadelphia to Boston, Harndens Philadelphia office circular handstamp
postage paid by Harndens at post office as single letter, and carried by him to Boston in a mail bag
2 July Boston, via Cunarder *Britannia* to Liverpool arriving 16 July
by British mail to Hamburg, Germany with 1sh. 6d due rate, arriving 22 July
forwarded to addressee on ship *William Badger* with forwarding notation of J.D. Schirmer on verso

recd 22 July and forwarded
by
Jas. James Lowrie
J. D. Schirmer
J. D. Schirmer

W. D. Sherman

Third Period - Harndens as a Regulated Contract Mail Agent

New York ⇒ **Boston** ⇒ Liverpool ⇒ Lyon



16 September 1842 New York City delivered to Harndens New York Office
postage paid by Harndens at post office as single letter, and carried by him to Boston in a mail bag
17 September Boston, via Cunarder *Caledonia* to Liverpool arriving 2 October
"Packet Letter" by mail to Lyon, France arriving 7 October

Fourth Period - Harndens as a Private Mail Express

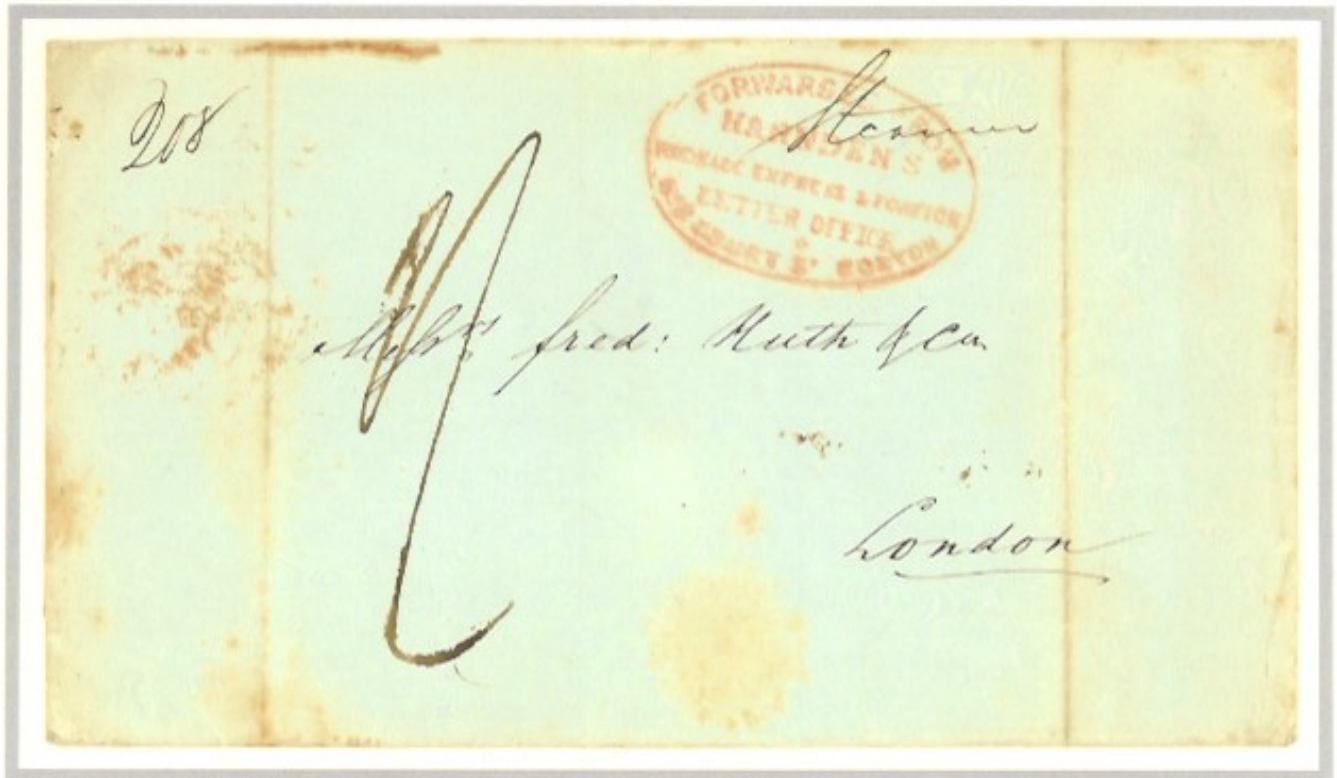
Salem ⇒ Boston ⇒ Liverpool ⇒ London ⇒ Azores



14 October 1844 Salem, Massachusetts by Harndens to Boston, Harndens oval and "Pd H" (paid) handstamps
16 October Boston, via Cunarder *Caledonia* to Liverpool arriving 30 October, Harndens Liverpool backstamp
held at Liverpool for forwarding instructions received with 28 November arrival of the *Hibernia* from Boston
29 November Liverpool by British mails to London with "Liverpool Paid" datestamp and 1d paid handstamp
30 November London arrival, to care of (Captain) Cameroux and sent privately to Fayal, Azores

Fourth Period - Harndens as a Private Mail Express

Tampico ⇒ New Orleans ⇒ New York ⇒ **Boston** ⇒ **Liverpool** ⇒ London



18 February 1845 Tampico, Mexico carried privately to New Orleans
10 March Hagedorn & Cramer New Orleans forwarding agent backstamp
manuscript Oelrichs & Krieger, New York City forwarding endorsement
Harndens Boston oval handstamp
1 April Boston, via Cunarder *Cambria* to Liverpool arriving 13 April
14 April by mail to London, 1 shilling due



Mr. New York.

A Triple Forwarding Agent Usage

Fourth Period - Harndens as a Private Mail Express

Hartford ⇒ **Boston** ⇒ **Liverpool** ⇒ Paris ⇒ Switzerland



29 May 1845 Hartford, Connecticut to Boston, Harndens oval and "Pd H" (paid) handstamps

1 June Boston, via Cunarder *Britannia* to Liverpool arriving 13 June, Harndens Liverpool handstamp

13 June Liverpool by British mails prepaid to agent in Paris

16 June Paris by French mails prepaid to Geneva. Switzerland

15 June Liverpool by British mails prepaid to agent in Paris
16 June Paris by French mails prepaid to Geneva, Switzerland
18 June Geneva arrival backstamp

Fourth Period - Harndens as a Private Mail Express

Plymouth ⇒ **Boston** ⇒ **Liverpool** ⇒ **Berlin**



28 April 1845 Plymouth, Massachusetts, forwarding notation of A.C. Spooner the next day
to Harndens Boston office with oval and "Pd H" (paid) handstamps
1 May Boston, via Cunarder *Hibernia* to Liverpool arriving 14 May
"Paid At Liverpool" boxed handstamp and manuscript 2/10d rate
16 May by British mails, via Hamburg, to consular agent in Berlin, Prussia

*Forwarded by your office letter
who waits for an answer to his
letter of Oct. last. A.C. Spooner*

Letter of Vot. Cast / A. C. Spooner.
Apr 29. 1843.

Fourth Period - Harndens as a Private Mail Express

New York ⇒ Boston ⇒ Liverpool ⇒ Wiborg



5 August 1845 New York City by Harndens to Boston, Harndens Boston oval
16 August Boston, via Cunarder *Cambria* to Liverpool arriving 28 August
29 August by British mails, manuscript 2/8d rate, via Hamburg, to Wiborg, Finland

Fourth Period - Harndens as a Private Mail Express

Charlestown ⇒ **Boston** ⇒ **Liverpool** ⇒ Marseilles ⇒ Port Mahon



1 September 1845 Charlestown, Massachusetts, Harndens oval and "Pd H" (paid) shield handstamps

1 September Boston, via Cunarder *Hibernia* to Liverpool arriving 13 September

Harndens Liverpool handstamp

13 September Liverpool by British mails prepaid to agent in Marseilles

29 September by agent to U.S. Frigate *Cumberland* at Port Mahon, Balearic Islands

Fourth Period - Harndens as a Private Mail Express

Liverpool ⇒ Boston / Liverpool ⇒ New York



ca. 1845 Liverpool to Boston prepaid at Harndens Liverpool office
carried privately by Harndens to New York with pencil 12½c collect, re-rated at 14½c including 2c delivery



4 April 1846 Liverpool to Boston prepaid at Harndens Liverpool office

4 April 1846 Liverpool to Boston prepaid at Harndens Liverpool office

4 April Liverpool via Cunarder *Caledonia* to Boston arriving 20 April