

# Illustrated Letter Stationery of New York City

by James W. Milgram, M.D.

Stone lithography allowed the reproduction of images to cost much less than letterpress printing from engraved copper or steel plates. In addition, the increasing use of wood pulp in the production of paper and the development of steam-driven machinery brought the cost of paper down dramatically. By the late 1840s double sheets of stationery with illustrations on the first page became possible at a very low production cost.

At the same time, postal reform brought the price for mailing a letter in mid-1845 to only five or ten cents depending on mileage carried in the post. Letters were to be charged by weight rather than the number of sheets of paper. As envelopes became available in the late 1840s and early 1850s, due to other machinery that cut and folded them, there was a gradual change in the type of letters which were sent through the mails.

But letter paper continued to be double sheets until after the Civil War; and illustrated lettersheets, that could be folded as stampless covers and postmarked on the front of the sealed letter, continued to be made even after envelopes became commonplace. And illustrations could be placed on envelopes as well.

Most illustrated stationery was produced for commercial reasons, to advertise a business. But a small number of illustrated letter paper items were produced by stationers and printers for other purposes. Among the earliest type of pictorial stationery was that produced for politics - particularly popular with the Whigs who later became Republicans. Another cause promoted on stationery was abolitionism. But illustrated stationery reached a zenith with the many city views produced by different printers in various cities. Most such views only exist on stationery and were not issued as individual prints. Here I have selected New York City views to celebrate World Stamp Show in that city. Previous articles published in *The American Philatelist* showed lettersheets from other cities including Cincinnati, New Orleans, St. Louis, and Washington.<sup>1</sup> One can comment that the cities which produced the greatest number of views were cities with large German populations.

Almost all the early views were printed in black ink. Hand-coloring with watercolor paints could be added to create colored images. As color printing technology expanded into chromolithography, by the time of the Civil War many images on letter paper could be printed in color, sometimes several colors.

## Panoramic Views

Most of the views of cities seen on lettersheets are depictions of actual scenes that one could see from a fixed location. For instance, one of the views of Chicago taken from within the city and looking east towards Lake Michigan shows the masts of ships anchored off the lakefront. But many of the views of Manhattan are imaginary aerial views such as one would see from an airplane today, so that liberties were taken with reality.

Figure 1 shows the City of New York with a letter in German dated in 1856. This is a lithograph in black with hand-coloring of pink, blue, brown, and green. The battery is positioned far to the west of its actual location. The ships in the harbor are much larger than life and consist of a mix of different sailing and steam vessels. Brooklyn is depicted with no Brooklyn Heights and there is an unnatural collection of ships around the position of the Navy Yard. There is a huge body of water above Manhattan with an imaginary island in the distance. Trinity Church is shown in magnified size as are some

other buildings. This sheet has no imprint, but a similar view dated two years later was produced by Capewell and Kimmel.



Figure 1: No imprint. “City of New York” used 1856.

The city view shown in Figure 2, titled “Birds Eye View of New York and Environs,” was printed by Kimmel and Foster in black with hand-coloring of at least four colors within a fancy frame. But this view is a much more accurate rendition of the city looking north showing the two rivers that separate Manhattan from the mainland. Vessels of all descriptions are anchored along the shorelines and fill the waters. The New Jersey shore is mostly bare land with buildings only on the Hudson River. An example of a slightly different view produced by Charles Magnus was used in 1862, folded into a stampless cover and franked with a 24 cent 1861 stamp to England. (Unless noted, other examples were enclosed in envelopes.) Magnus was a printer of German origin, who became the most important printer of views of New York over the next 30 years, chronicling most of the important landmarks in the city. He also produced the most ornate patriotic envelopes of the Civil War and is well-known for his large number of songsheet stationery images which were continuously produced during the later years of the Civil War.<sup>2</sup>

The Civil War inspired patriotic symbolism in lettersheet imagery as is shown in Figure 3. This sheet has a smaller view, “City of New York” looking from the south, but it is surrounded by a female figure (Liberty) and flags including one to her left with a palmetto tree. She holds a scroll: “Liberty Nebraska Maine Kn.” To the left is General Washington on horseback and to the right is an Indian warrior with a ship in the background. This hand-colored sheet was used for a letter on June 21, 1861, shortly after the war commenced.

One of the more charming later lettersheet views is looking at the city from New Jersey, produced in 1870 by John Weik, “Microscopic View of New York.” Printed on bright yellow paper, Figure 4 shows an imaginary view of Manhattan with many more buildings than the other views. Brooklyn and Queens are also more settled but the rest of the



Figure 2: Kimmel & Foster, copyright 1865, “Birds Eye View of New York and Environs.”



Figure 3: “City of New York” used 1861.

shore is thinly populated. The most interesting feature, at least to this writer, is the depiction of a baseball game along the New Jersey shore in the lower left corner of the sheet.



Figure 4: Herline & Co. lithograph "Microscopic View of New York" John Weik copyright 1870.

### City Sights

Figure 5, "Broadway, from the Park" of 1843, is the earliest lettersheet that focused on particular structures or aspects of the city. Portraits of John Tyler and George Washington flank the city (one of two known views of President Tyler on lettersheets). The only named structure in the illustration is the Astor House, a hotel. (The letter was a proposal of marriage.)



Figure 5: J. H. Rassau lithograph "Broadway, from the Park." Sold by W. Radde. Used 1843.

Figure 6 by Charles Magnus features "Union Park" on Union Square with a large fountain dominating the image, before the famous arch was erected. Magnus also produced (from his Bowery address of 1855) a lettersheet with sixteen Central Park vignettes, and one showing the smaller park, "Bowling Green." All of these are hand-colored on a black lithograph.

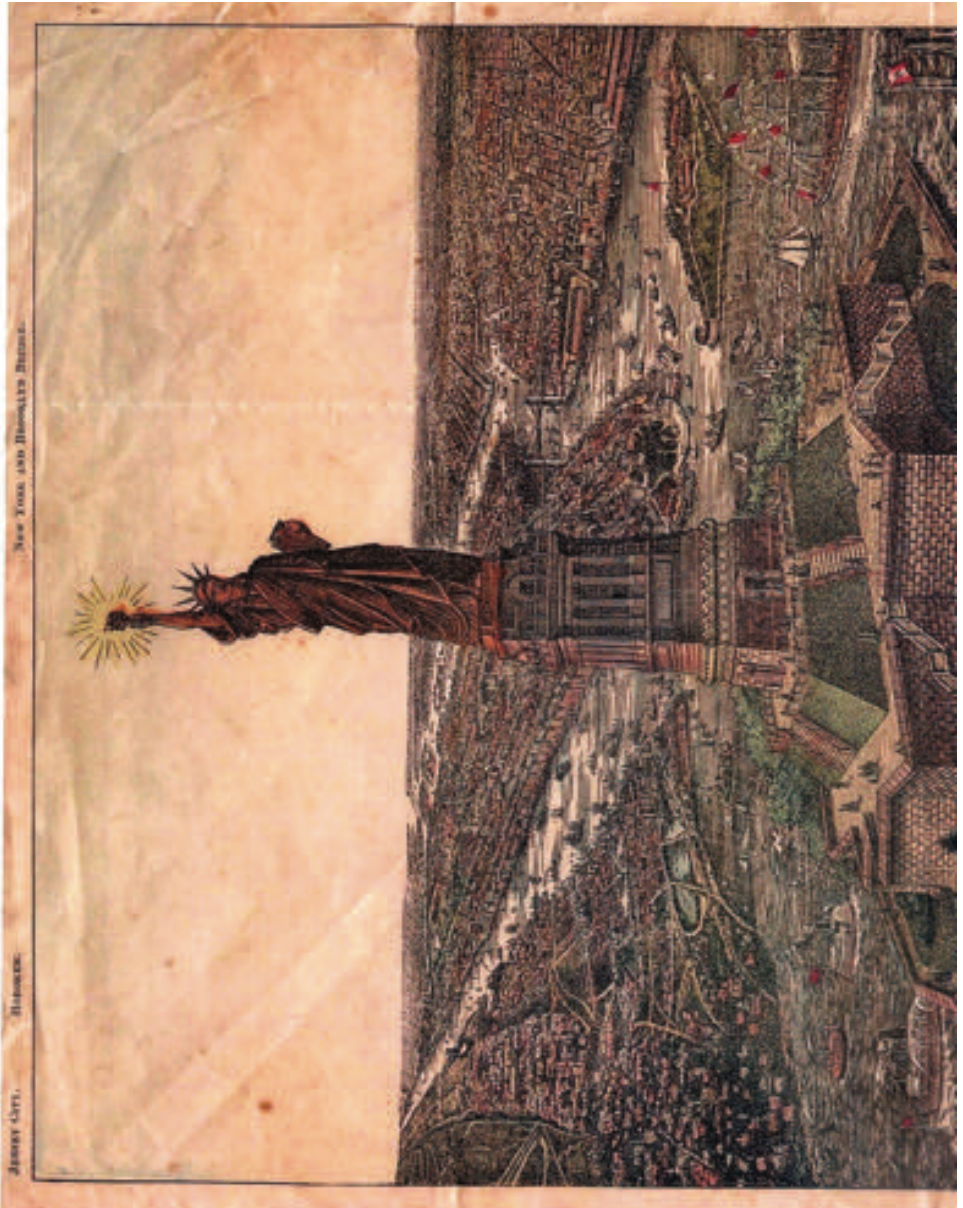


Figure 6: Charles Magnue “Union Park.”

Later, in the 1880s, Magnus began to produce a different type of lettersheet with more text below the image. Before the Brooklyn Bridge was officially opened in 1883, the 1882 lettersheet depicted in Figure 7 showed a double view of the harbor below and the bridge above. This sheet also has an imprint “48 Views of New York and Environs” at the lower left.



Figure 7: Charles Magnus “New York - East River Front” used 1882.



This series was expanded because Figure 8 has an imprint “150 Views of New York and Environs.” The Statue of Liberty, whose formal name was “Goddess of Liberty,” was opened in 1886. Magnus emphasized the 11-pointed Fort Wood that was incorporated into the masonry base for the pedestal of the statue. The statue is depicted in giant size overshadowing the city view in the background - including the Brooklyn Bridge to the right. The statue occupies two pages of the four-page lettersheet, with French and German captions in the text (a version of the same illustration has captions all in German; and Magnus also published the image as a large print with different wording).



Figure 8: Charles Magnus "Goddess of Liberty,' Colossal Statue, in New York Harbor" ca1886.

A number of the 1880s detailed views of the city in Magnus's series of 150 have, to my knowledge, never been cataloged. Figure 9, "Chatham Square Elevated Railroad Crossing," includes details of the location in the caption. In addition to the train in the foreground, there are two horse-drawn carriages on tracks at the lower left probably shown for comparison, and several other carriages of different types are in the streets. This is a very busy picture and many different hues were used in the coloring.

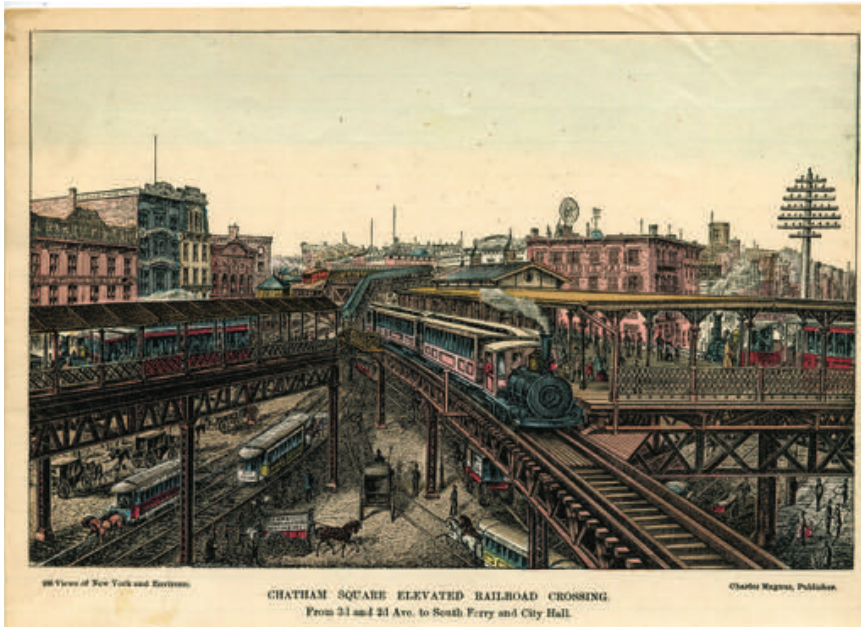


Figure 9: Charles Magnus “Chatham Square - Elevated Railroad Crossing.”

Figure 10 was produced by Magnus near the end of his career. “Broadway, Bowling Green, Battery” is printed, not by lithography but by a dot matrix screen process, in black and appears to be a photographic view of the park and surrounding buildings.



Figure 10: Charles Magnus publisher, printed by Moss Engraving Co.



## Famous Buildings

Prominent buildings on lettersheets include the well-known 1845 example of the New York Post Office when it was still in the Old Dutch Church. Trinity Church appears on an 1849 example published by J. Disturnell at 102 Broadway. The Magnus view, “Brooklyn City Hall” in Figure 11 shows this magnificent structure that still stands, separated from other new buildings by streets on all sides. I admired this building twice each day while walking to the Brooklyn Friends School on Schermerhorn Street from Brooklyn Heights.

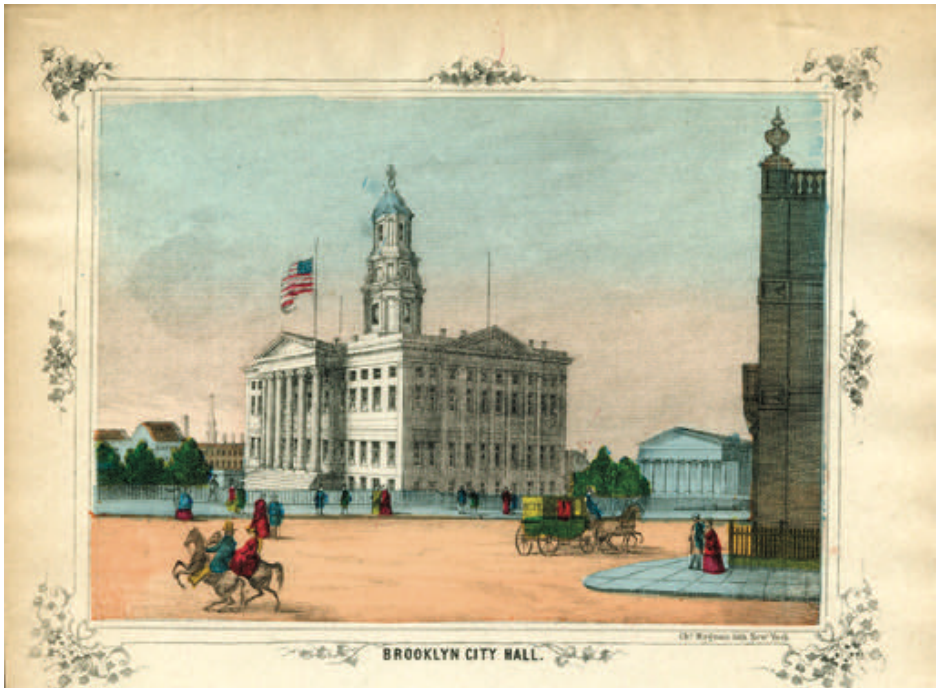


Figure 11: Charles Magnus “Brooklyn City Hall.”

The “Packer Collegiate Institute,” a school for young ladies in Brooklyn Heights (Figure 12) is still operational. When I was growing up, the next door neighbor was president of the school board.

Lettersheets for hotels, like an 1841 engraved example for Howards Hotel on Broadway, kept the illustration fairly small to allow for longer letters. Figure 13 was one of many produced for the Astor House on Broadway. This 1856 example was: “copied from Tallis’ Street Views of N.Y. for letter paper and bill heads.”

The Crystal Palace Exposition building of 1853 (inspired by the Crystal Palace designed by Sir Joseph Paxton for a London exhibition in 1851) appears on several lettersheets and envelopes. Figure 14 shows a small format lettersheet circular produced for the second year of the exhibition in 1854. The envelope was printed with a blue cameo design on the back flap: “Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations, New York.”



### Commerce

Most lettersheets were produced for commercial customers; as with today’s junk mail many were circulars advertising something. The 1850 lettersheet in Figure 15 is unique in my experience. The famous commercial firm of Abraham Bell & Son combined an actual check with a letter which could be sent through the mails. The recipient could just cut the check apart from the rest of the four-page lettersheet.

The fancy frame of the design in Figure 16 makes it appear to be a poster or broadside advertising men’s hats. But it is a four-page lettersheet with a letter on the inside pages.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> James W. Milgram and Philip H. Jones, “New Orleans Illustrated Lettersheets,” *American Philatelist*, 104: 424-34, 1990; Milgram & Jones with Ward Parker, “St. Louis Illustrated Lettersheets,” 108:620-8, 1994; Milgram & Jones, “The Capitol on Stationery,” 110:728-35, 1996; Milgram & Jones, “Cincinnati, Ohio Illustrated Lettersheets,” 116: 506-514, 2002.
- <sup>2</sup> E. Richard McKinstry, *Charles Magnus, Lithographer: Illustrating America’s Past, 1850-1900*, Oak Knoll Press, New Castle, Del., 2013. Also, James W. Milgram, *Federal Civil War Postal History*, Northbrook Publishing Co., Lake Forest, IL, 2007.



Figure 12 (previous page): “Packer Collegiate Institute, Brooklyn Heights, L.I.” used 1863.  
 Figure 13 (above): Tallis & Co. Publishers and Engravers copyright 1856. “Park View. Broadway” used 1856, from the Astor House.

**Dr. James W. Milgram**, an orthopedic surgeon, is active in The Collectors Club of Chicago. He has written several books focusing on 19<sup>th</sup> century postal history. His forthcoming book, *American Illustrated Letter Stationery 1819-1899*, will be reviewed in our next issue. Dr. Milgram would like to acknowledge the help of the late Philip H. Jones, and of Reg Good.

**Editors’ Note:** David M. Henken in *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of Chicago Press 2008) points out that, in addition to reduction in postage as well as advances in paper, printing and envelope technology, the population dispersions at mid-nineteenth century due to, first, the Gold Rush and, then, the Civil War increased personal letter writing among family members. Illustrated lettersheets were another incentive.



Figure 14: Circular "Crystal Palace Re-Opening 1854." Carried by Boyd's City Express Post.



Figure 15: Danforth & Hufty engraved bank draft incorporated in a letter-sheet. Used 1850.

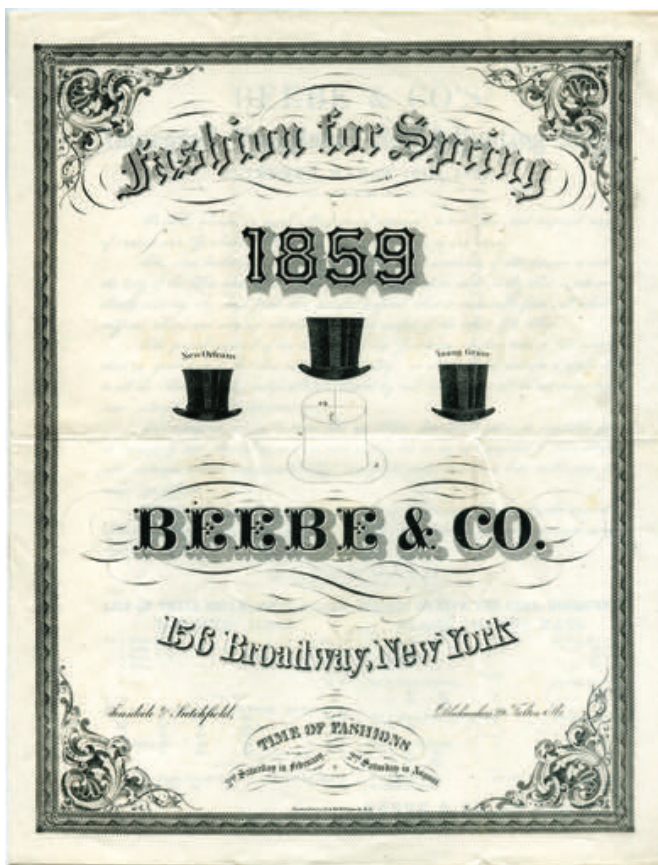


Figure 16: Hosford & Co. engraved lettersheet for a New York hatter, 1859.