

U.S. Event Covers, *December 1941*

by Lawrence Sherman

Seventy years ago America was stunned, grieving, and angry. The Pearl Harbor attack on December 7, 1941 killed more than 2,400 men, crippled the United States Pacific Fleet, and opened the way for Japanese conquests ranging to the borders of India, the Aleutian Islands, and the threshold of Australia. The spur of the attack never lost its sharp edge throughout the nearly four years of war that followed the date that has indeed lived on in infamy. This was reflected in the large number of illustrated envelopes that commemorated the event and memorialized those who had died. In the last weeks of 1941 U.S. event covers served as snapshots of the suddenly changed war picture.

Hand-lettered cachet by William J. Batura on previously printed Special Delivery cachet. December 8 receiving marks on back of Batura cover.



A few covers were legitimately canceled on the day of the attack. However, it was a Sunday, post offices were closed to patrons, and there was little opportunity to have envelopes properly postmarked.

A few enterprising individuals responded immediately to the challenge. One was William J. Batura of Brooklyn, New York, who had been tracking wartime events during the time of U.S. neutrality.¹ Batura prepared a cover containing a printed special delivery cachet, franked the mail with a blue 16-cent air mail special delivery stamp of 1934 (Scott CE1), and sent the envelope “Via Air Mail / Special Delivery” to himself. He succeeded in having it machine-canceled in Washington, DC, the evening of December 7. Receiving marks on the back indicate the envelope arrived at the Ridgewood Station, Brooklyn, at 10 the next morning. Presumably, Batura added his hand-lettered announcement of the Pearl Harbor attack once the speedy missive was delivered.

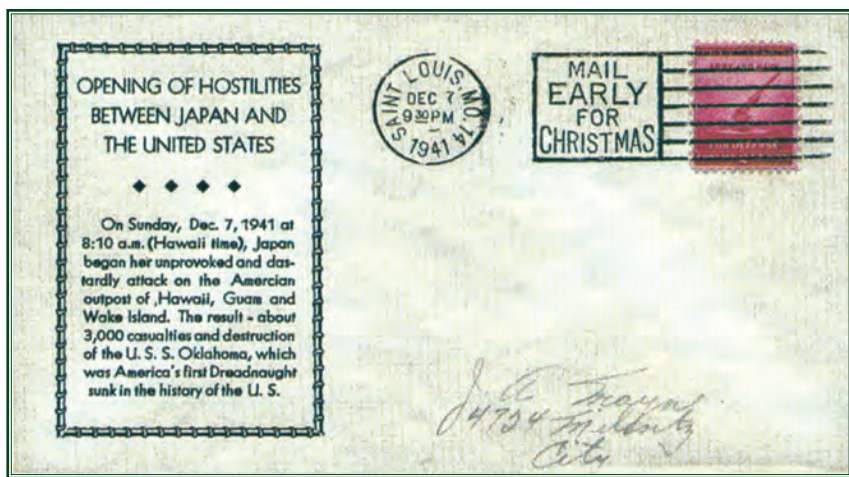
John A. Mayne of St. Louis managed to have stamped envelopes machine-canceled and mailed to himself the evening of December 7, then created a thermographed cachet that summarized the “opening of hostilities between Japan and the United States.” (Remarkably, within a month a small advertisement box placed by Mayne on page 1 of the January 1942 issue of *Cover News* serves to authenticate these covers: “They were mailed on December 7th and have a beautiful embossed historic cachet thereon....”)

On the afternoon of December 7, Fidelity Stamp Company printed a bicolored cachet on the only stock it had on hand — “cheap gray cardboard stock,” a contemporaneous source recounted² — and had the cards postmarked at the Washington, DC, post office.

On Monday, December 8, shortly after noon, President Roosevelt told Congress and the nation: “Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory, and our interests are in grave danger.” The United States formally declared war on Japan. A few more philatelic presses rolled and new event covers were fashioned for this day.

Among the covers created were four printed in patriotic red and blue, using stamps of the 1940 Defense issue (Scott 899–901) machine-canceled on December 8. The publishers were Fidelity Stamp Company, again using its available cardboard stock; an unknown designer in Washington, DC; F.N. Newton, Jr., Sharon, Pennsylvania; and Fleetwood Cover Service, Pleasantville, New York. An enclosure in the Fleetwood cover commented on the moment that “electrified and UNITED our nation.”

In his December 8 address, President Roosevelt



Thermographed cachet by John A. Mayne.

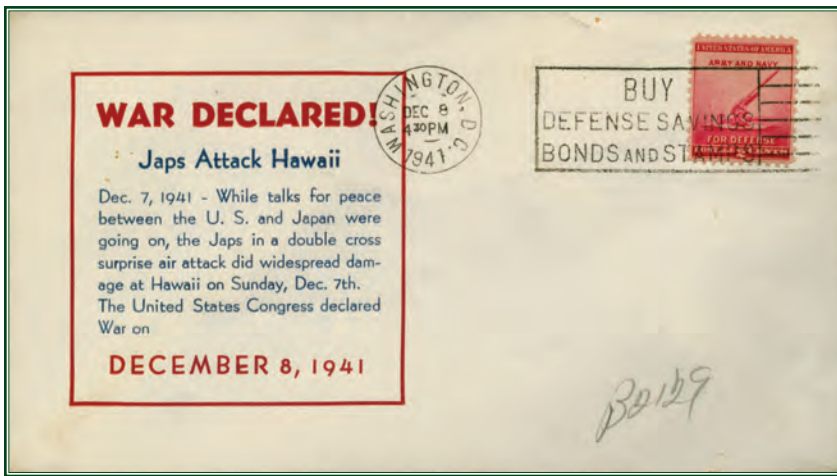
.....
A few covers were legitimately canceled on the day of the attack. However, it was a Sunday, post offices were closed to patrons, and there was little opportunity to have envelopes properly postmarked.



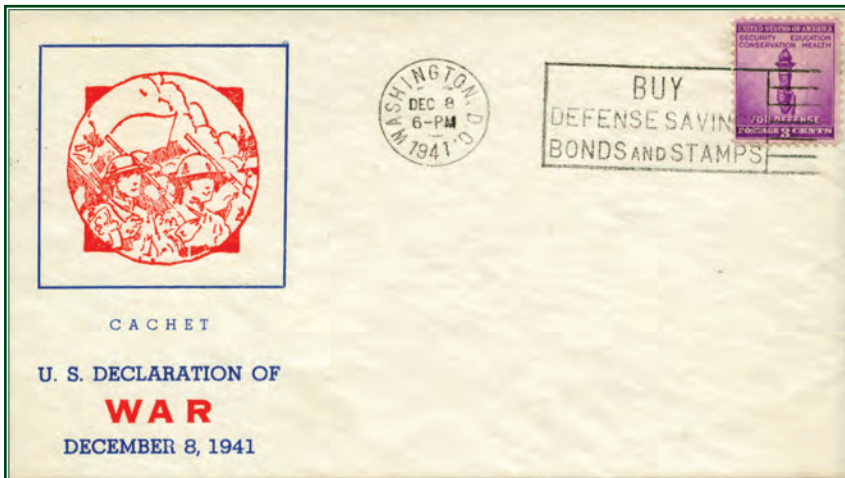
Fidelity December 7 cachet on card.



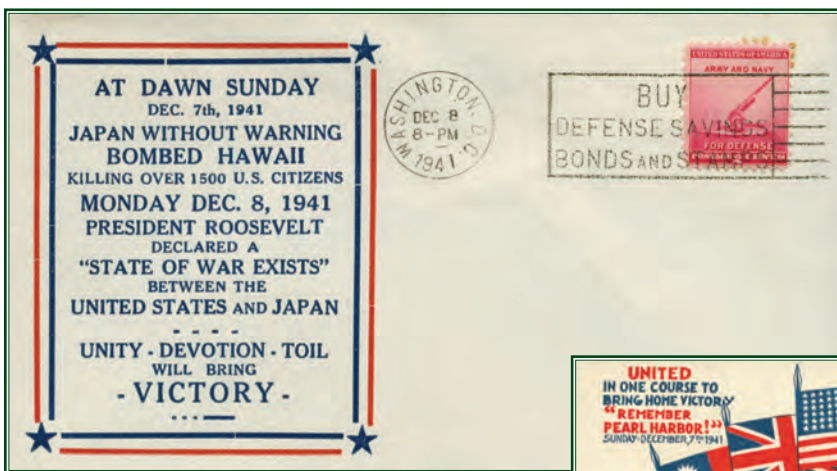
Fidelity December 8 cachet on card.



Cachet by unknown designer marking start of war with Japan.



F.N. Newton, Jr. cachet.



Above: Cachet by Fleetwood Cover Service.

Right: Enclosure to Fleetwood cover — America UNITED.



made no mention of Germany or Italy: there was no political support at the moment for declaring war on these two Axis powers, Japan's partners in the Tripartite Pact of September 1940. Meant in part to forestall U.S. intervention in the war, the Tripartite Pact pledged the Axis powers to provide mutual aid if one of them was attacked by another power. There was no obligation by Germany or Italy to aid the aggressor, Japan. Yet Adolf Hitler seized the opportunity to fight the United States. To be successful, Germany needed a "big blue-water navy." Japan provided that navy: "Now there would be a navy of battleships and aircraft carriers to deal with the Americans. His own navy had been straining at the leash for years and could now sink ships in the North Atlantic to its heart's content."³

In a speech to the Reichstag on the afternoon of December 11, Hitler declared war on the United States. (Mussolini enthusiastically joined in the same day.)

The enormity of Hitler's precipitate action has been weighed ever since. For one historian, "Hitler's great error — perhaps the second worst of his many blunders of the war next to invading Russia prematurely — was not to appreciate the potential capacity of American industrial production."⁴ For another, Hitler's action was "perhaps the greatest error, and certainly the most decisive act of the Second World War. The United States, still neutral in Europe, had just been drawn into a struggle in the Pacific against enormous odds.... Hitler, by his declaration of war, brought the United States back to Europe as a belligerent; first America's warships, then her airplanes, and finally her armies, would, whatever their

Pacific duties, ensure the overthrow of Hitler and his system.”⁵

That same afternoon in Washington, DC, President Roosevelt asked Congress to declare war on both Germany and Italy. The United States, its Pacific fleet in ruins, was now committed to a multi-front war that would involve every continent except Antarctica.

Three new American event covers were created, printed in patriotic red and blue, and franked with stamps of the 1940 Defense issue machine-canceled on December 11. The publishers were again Fidelity Stamp Company, once more using cardboard stock; the same unknown designer in Washington, DC; and Fleetwood Cover Service. An enclosure in the Fleetwood cover commented on the war messages of that day.

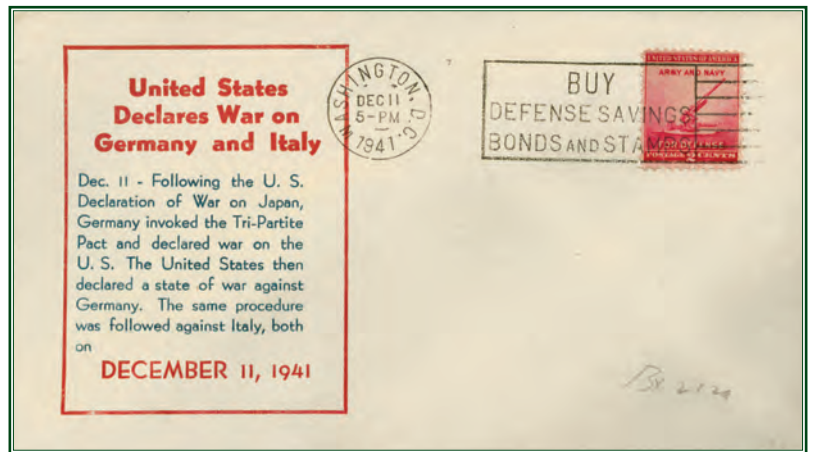
Two days later, following the lead of Germany (though there had not yet been any direct military confrontation between Germany and the United States), Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary declared war on the United States. President Roosevelt said that these governments were not acting “in response to the wishes of their own people, but as instruments of Hitler.” He attempted to persuade them to withdraw their declarations. “Perhaps the people of those countries could live quite happily without having a war with the United States,” one historian acidly noted, adding that “the effort to persuade them of this truth failed.”⁶ Congress soon reciprocated with its own war declarations.

Fidelity Stamp Company again printed a “headline news” textual cachet, this time on a postal card. The pencil self-addressed card

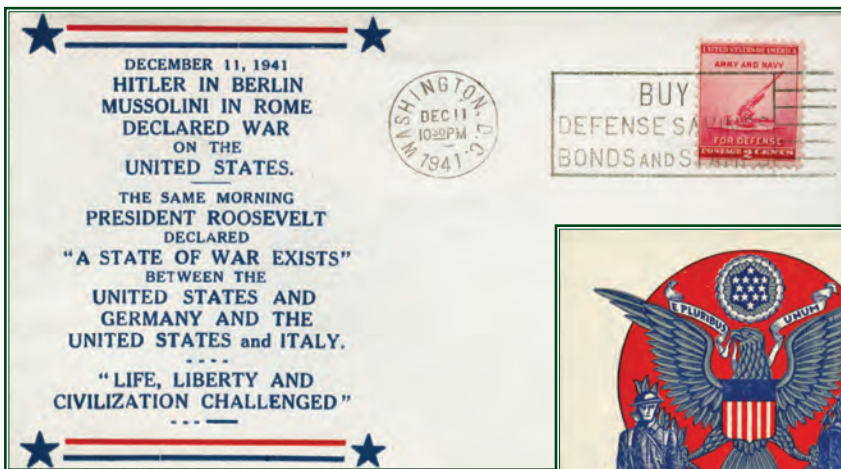


Fidelity December 11 cachet on card.

.....
The United States, its Pacific fleet in ruins, was now committed to a multi-front war that would involve every continent except Antarctica.



Cachet by unknown designer marking war with Germany and Italy.



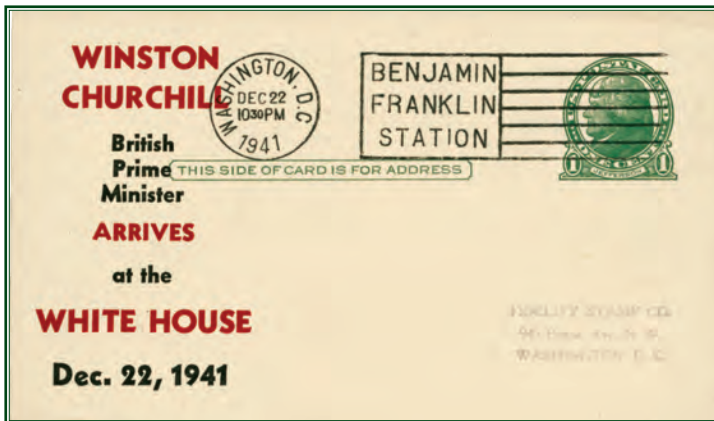
Above: Fleetwood cachet marks war with Germany and Italy.

Right: Enclosure to Fleetwood cover — The Long-Expected.





Fidelity December 13 cachet on card.

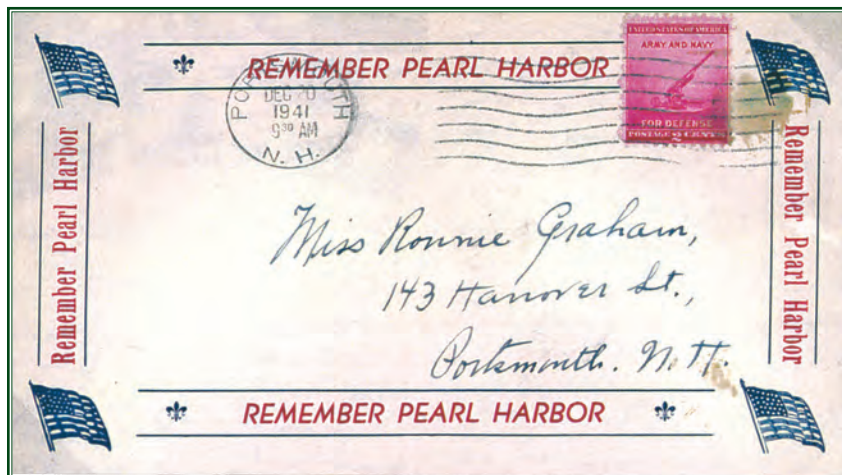


Fidelity records start of Churchill's lengthy visit to White House.

shown contained a Washington, DC machine cancel dated December 13.

On December 22 Fidelity Stamp Company recorded the arrival at the White House of the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. On this occasion the textual cachet was printed in red and black on a rubber-stamped self-addressed postal card.

"Arcadia" was the code name for the conference at which



Early use of "Remember Pearl Harbor" slogan as cachet.

the President, the Prime Minister, their chiefs of staff, and other leaders of their two countries hammered out future war plans. The meetings, which ended weeks later on January 14, 1942, set the agenda for the Western Allies' war effort. Of the major decisions arrived at the Arcadia Conference, most important was reiteration and early implementation of the "Germany First" policy — hammer Germany while trying to hold back the surging Japanese. Action would begin with U.S. troops arriving in Northern Ireland, later invading North Africa. Of great importance also was the creation of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, headquartered in Washington, DC, which brought together in fractious unity the British Chiefs of Staff and the (newly created) American Joint Chiefs of Staff to advise Churchill and Roosevelt on military policy.

Other areas had been attacked on December 7–8, including Thailand and Malay, as well as the Philippines and Wake Island. But the devastation of the Pacific Fleet was the overwhelming military fact. A memorable phrase President Roosevelt used in his message to Congress — "a date which will live in infamy" — could not be rendered into a fighting slogan. Within two weeks "Remember Pearl Harbor" leaped into the public domain and remained a fighting slogan and commentary on the memorable events of December 1941.

Mailed on December 20 within Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the cover with repeated "Remember Pearl Harbor" text represents an early use of the slogan as a cachet. It is a reminder that, seventy years ago, when the second and final wave of Admiral Nagumo's naval bombers returned to their carriers they left behind an America that was indeed stunned, grieving, and angry — but resolved.

Endnotes

1. Lawrence Sherman, "U.S. Patriotic Covers of World War II," *The American Philatelist*, Vol. 110, No. 8 (August 1996): 708–716.
2. T. Crane, "War Cachets: I Saw Them Begin Pearl Harbor Sunday!" *Stamps*, Vol. 44, No. 11 (September 11, 1943): 370, 389.
3. Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 250, 262.
4. Andrew Roberts, *The Storm of War: A New History of the Second World War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), p. 195.
5. Martin Gilbert, *The Second World War: A Complete History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989), p. 277.
6. Weinberg, p. 263.

The Author

Lawrence Sherman, M.D., has combined his interests in American history and U.S. stamps and mail by collecting and studying American patriotic envelopes and postal history of World War II.