

*The Three  
Collinsville Axes*





# The Three Collinsville Axes



By

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## Background

In 1826, twenty-four year old Samuel W. Collins, his younger brother David, and their cousin William Wells joined in partnership to establish The Collins Company in Canton, Connecticut. Each of them invested \$5,000 in the venture. The sawmill and gristmill site that they purchased offered excellent access to water power as it was along the east bank of the Farmington River near the junction of the Albany and Litchfield Turnpikes. It was originally built by Captain Fred Humphrey in 1805. They began producing high quality axes at a time when they were greatly needed throughout the expanding, yet still predominately rural, United States. Eventually their product line grew to include axes, machetes, hatchets, picks, knives, swords and bayonets. It became one of the legendary early American manufacturing success stories. The return on their original nest egg was in the millions.

They started out with just eight workmen, but that increased to 300 by 1832. The pay was twelve to sixteen dollars a month for a twelve hour day, six days a week. While they clearly preferred hiring blacksmiths, the demand for workers required that they employ and train unskilled local farmhands. Samuel Collins had a policy of not hiring foreigners. This in itself created problems when in the summer the “Yankees” disappeared, preferring to stay home to do their own farm work. To combat this situation the Collins Company increased pay during the summer months.

The manufacturing process was divided into four steps: forging, grinding, tempering, and polishing. Individual workers performed only one operation. It was soon ob-

vious that grinding was the most hazardous station. The particles that the men inhaled led quickly to the progressive lung disease silicosis, and death. Wetting the large stone grinding wheels did not help much; grinders were dying in their twenties and early thirties.

This did not go unnoticed by the Yankees who eventually refused to do the grinding. Management knew, too. In a letter to his brother, Samuel Collins wrote, “Encourage stout men to come on, I want to see our gang improved in muscle — I want to hire 3 stout fellows to grind nights *as long as they live.*” (author’s emphasis) He began reluctantly recruiting the newly arriving poor Irish, who were escaping certain starvation in their homeland, to do the job.

There is a bright spot in all this, however, in an outstanding employee, Elisha K. Root, an intellectually gifted machinist-inventor who became superintendent of the Collins Company. When production fell because even the Irish became wary of the grinding, Root invented an alternate shaving process in about 1845. Samuel Collins wrote, “Mr. Root invented a process for shaving the axes as a substitute for grinding but it was not put into operation in time to aide us much this year.” Most significantly, while at the Collins Company, Root is credited with the invention of the die casting process. Much to Samuel Collins’s chagrin, this prized superintendent was “hired away” by Hartford’s famous firearms manufacturer Samuel Colt in 1849. After Colt’s death, Root became President of Colt’s Arms Company.



## The Post Office

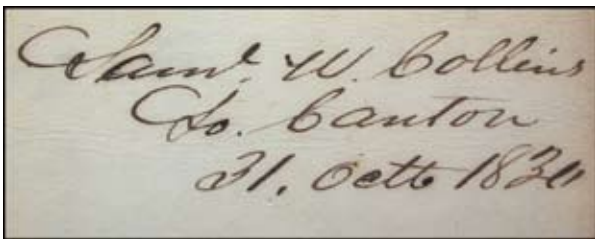
Mail communication was obviously critical to the success of a firm that intended to sell its goods wholesale throughout the country and beyond. In his memoirs, Samuel Collins wrote:

1828 — Contracted with Oliver Couch to take his four-horse stage off the Albany Turnpike and run through Collinsville to Farmington and Hartford, and so got a post office established at Collinsville. There was a great rush to see the stage as there was to see the railroad cars when they first reached here in 1850.

The largest surviving stampless correspondence of Collinsville was between Samuel and brother David in the firm's Hartford office. Any stampless letters written between 1828 and the establishment of the post office without a postmark must have traveled on the Oliver Couch Stage.

This informal mail service continued for three years until the Collins mail volume increased to a point where it was decided to apply for an official post office. The effort was successful, but Samuel Collins was disappointed in the choice of the name.

The Collins Company was located in Canton, in an area in the southern part of that township, to be exact. Samuel Collins had been datelining his letters as 'South Canton' and he had also been receiving letters directed to that non-existing office. He assumed that the new post office would be named as such, even though he preferred, "Collinsford, like Torrington and Ashford, which are good Saxon names." Finding a folded letter with a manuscript 'South Canton' postmark would be a plum acquisition.

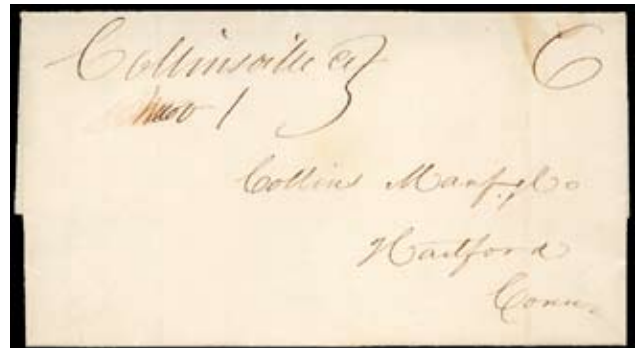


'South Canton' dateline on the back of an October 31, 1830 folded letter written by Samuel W. Collins (Canton Historical Museum)

At the time there was considerable concern voiced, led by a former Canton Postmaster, that naming the new post office 'South Canton' would lead to confusion in the direction of letters with the already existing offices of 'Canton' and 'North Canton'. Collins was left out of the decision. He wrote:

It may be supposed by some that the village was named 'Collinsville' by me or at my suggestion but that is not so. The name has always been distasteful to me and my family. If I had been consulted and consented to have my name used it would not have had any 'ville' attached to it or been Frenchified at all.

With the support of the local leaders, it was decided that the new office would be named 'Collinsville'. It opened on October 8, 1831, with Charles Mygatt as its first postmaster, and was located in the company plough shop because the office building had run out of space.



Collinsville November 1, 1842 manuscript postmark apparently in the hand of Samuel Collins

There was clearly a special relationship between the Collins firm and the new post office. After all, it had been established to serve the axe factory and its workers, who were living in the small village developing around the factory. The choice of location for the post office demonstrates this relationship. Also, many of the stampless folded letters have both manuscript postmarks and addresses apparently written in the hand of Samuel Collins rather than that of the officially appointed postmaster. There appears, however, to have been no attempt at avoiding postage rates.



Collinsville August 12, NYD — Large Axe postmark to New York. (R.A. Siegel Auction Galleries)

### The Early Handstamp

Even more obvious is the first handstamp used by the new post office, well-known 'Collinsville Large Axe'. The postmark has COLLINSVILLE in an arc within the blade of a fancy frame based on the design of a broad axe head which was being manufactured by Collins. The postmark measures 31.5 mm wide and 32.5 mm in height. It is one of the first advertising postmarks used in the United States.

Compiling a census of Collinsville postmark examples yields a few interesting points.

The earliest Collinsville Large Axe postmark recorded by this study is dated March 24, 1832, but certainly was used prior to that. It was struck in black ink on folded letters until late 1840 when red ink began to be used during the tenure of Postmaster Stephen H. Brown. A total of thirty-seven black ink examples have been recorded, but only four examples in red ink were found (1840-1841).



Collinsville December 12, 1840 — Red Large Axe postmark to the Collins Company Hartford office written and signed by Samuel W. Collins.



*Collins Red Seal Broad Head Hatchet Blade  
Design similar to postal markings*



*Collins Axe Factory in Collinsville, Connecticut ~ Published by O.H. Bailey & Co., 1878 (Library of Congress)*



Collinsville October 31, NYD — Latest recorded Large Axe postmark (with month and day in type) and also the only recorded example used with an adhesive (Sc #25)

### A Late Use

There is a considerable gap in the census before we find the next Collinsville Large Axe postmark. It is on an envelope and is the only example currently recorded used in conjunction with an adhesive. The stamp is a 3¢ 1857 Scott # 25 which is cancelled by a 'PAID' in an arc over '3' rate handstamp. Another unusual, and possibly unique, feature is that the well-struck Collinsville postmark has '31 OCT' in type within the upper mortise sections of the device. It is possible that they were added using a separate handstamp. This must be considered a very uncommon late use of the Large Axe since we know that ordinary 28mm, 30mm, or 32mm COLLINSVILLE/CT. circle date handstamps were in use during the 1850s. The cover, addressed to North Guilford, has received a Philatelic Foundation Certificate stating that it is a genuine use.

### Fancy Hatchet Cancellation

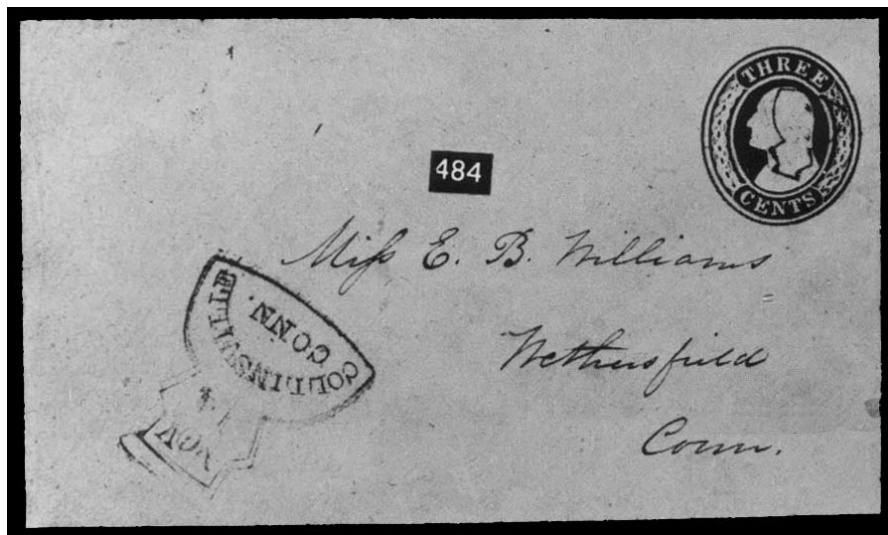
A fancy cancellation usually referred to as the 'Collinsville Small Axe' also makes an appearance. Not many dated examples survive. It was found obliterating the following: Scott 3¢ #11 1851 (1 example), #26 1857 (3), #64b 1861 (1), #65 1861 (8), and U35 Pink on Buff PSE 1861 (2). Based on the issue dates of the stamps, we can at least establish the general period of use as the 1850s-1860s. Virtually all are found used in conjunction with the aforementioned COLLINSVILLE/CT. style cds. The design is again based on the same Collins Company pattern. It is illustrated and listed as a Broad Head "Hatchet" in a Collins catalogue, therefore, we should more properly call the fancy cancel *The Collinsville Hatchet*.



Black 32mm COLLINSVILLE/CT. Apr 2, NYD CDS, with Hatchet fancy cancellation tying Sc #11 (Roger Curran Collection)



Black 32mm COLLINSVILLE/CT. Nov 14, NYD CDS, with Hatchet fancy cancellation tying Sc #65



Collinsville November 14, NYD — 3¢ U10, the only recorded example of the Large Axe II used in the 19th Century (R.A. Siegel Auction Galleries)

### Large Axe II

The Canton Historical Museum, which is located in one of the old Collins Company buildings on Front Street in Collinsville, has an item on display that is purported to be “the original Collinsville Axe Die Hand Stamp used 1833-40 on Stampless Covers.” — At least that is the claim that the Farmington Valley Stamp Club had printed on their cachet for National Stamp Collecting Week of November 13-18, 1950, and again on their FARVEX 1964 25th Anniversary Stamp Show souvenir cover and post card. Unfortunately, this is incorrect. Placed in a side by side comparison the differences between the markings are obvious. You have to wonder why club members didn't take a closer look themselves. Perhaps someone did.

The first axe townmark and the museum handstamp (presently without a handle) have similar designs, but are not identical: the axe framelines and letter alignments are clearly not the same. The early period townmark uses manuscript day and month at the top; the other uses metal type. Although measurements usually depend upon who is wielding the ruler, the difference here is too great to ignore: museum handstamp - height 35.5mm, width 31mm; known first axe townmark - height 32.5mm, width 31mm. Having pointed all of that out, the plot thickens...

The Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries Sale #575, held February 18-20, 1981, included a key item relative to this subject, lot #484. It is important because it bears two different Collinsville axes: The entire is cancelled by a Collinsville Hatchet and the Canton Historical Museum's Large Axe postmark is struck on the left. The lot realized \$800. The description reads:

3¢ Red on Buff Entire, Die 5 (U10). Clear Fancy Axehead cancel (11x13.5mm), matching Fancy “Collinsville, Conn. Nov. 14” Axehead pmk. (32x33) addressed to Wethersfield, Conn., V.F., Only Known Example.

Finding the axes used together helps establish that the Large Axe II might have been used during the 1850s-60s. The issue date for the U10 is 1854, and we know that the Hatchet cancel was used during that time period. Of course, that is assuming that the Large Axe II is a genuine use. It is difficult at best to attempt authenticate an item from an old black and white photograph. Until scrutinized by a panel of philatelic experts, a definitive opinion is not possible. The Philatelic Foundation does not have a record of this item in its files of submissions.

A census of the three 19th Century Collinsville axes has been compiled and is included at the end.



Side by Side Comparison —

The older Collinsville Large Axe Postmark (left); the later Large Axe II Postmark (right)

# Collinsville Large Axe Postmark Census

| Date       | Description  | Source                                   |
|------------|--|--|
| 03-24-1832 | FL; ms date and '6' rate;<br>Large Axe struck twice<br>from Samuel Collins to brother<br>David Collins<br>Hartford, CT   | Conland Collection                       |
| 05-15-1832 | FL; ms date and 'Paid 10' rate;<br>described "Believed to be earliest known"   | RAS #1002, December 13, 2010, Lot #3160  |
| 06-02-1832 | FL; width 31.5 mm, height 32.5 mm<br>(Measure by WJD);<br>ms date and '10' rate ;<br>letter docketed May 31, 1832;<br>to Mrs Sarah Robinson, Windham,<br>Scotland So., CT<br>early use of yellow colored paper | Private Collection                       |
| 08-06-1833 | FL, part printed circular; ms '25' rate<br>to William Golding, Germantown, NC  | RAS #1063, Dec. 19, 2013, Lot #1243      |
| 08-08-1833 | FL, printed circular; ms '25' rate<br>to Burwell's Bay, Virginia<br>ms "Return to Collinsville for better direction"<br>on back side   | Private Collection                       |
| __-__-1834 | FL; ms '18-3/4' rate   | Paige, March 24, 1961, Lot #223          |
| 03-09-1834 | FL; ms date; ms '12-1/2' rate; Light strike  | DGP, January 12, 1990, Lot #322          |
| 03-15-1834 | FL; ms date and '10' rate to Mass.   | RCF #33, August 29, 1987, Lot #86        |
| 04-09-1834 | FL; ms date and 'Free'<br>to Wm. Holabird, Esq, PM, Winsted, CT;<br>Extremely Fine strike; PFC #167140   | Private Collection                       |
| 04-11-1835 | FL; ms date; ms '12-1/2' rate ;<br>to New York City  | SR #3, Nov 18-20, 1997, Lot #106         |
| 02-16-1836 | FL; ms date and '25' rate to Mississippi;<br>Extremely Fine strike   | Conland Collection                       |
| 02-19-1836 | FL; ms date and '6' rate to Hartford, CT;<br>fold through XF strike  | DFK #632, October 11, 2012, Lot #19      |
| 03-31-1836 | FL; ms date and ms '18-3/4' rate;<br>to Huntingdon, PA; Extremely Fine strike  | RAS #803, July 15, 1998, Lot #1055       |
| 05-21-1836 | FL; 31x33 mm; PMFF; ms 'free'<br>Wm Hollabird, PM Winsted  | Private Collection                       |
| 05-28-1836 | FL; PMFF<br>Wm Hollabird, PM Winsted   | DFUSA #502 #43, Nov 18, 2009, Lot #20182 |
| 06-09-1836 | FL; ms date; ms '6' rate<br>to Collins Manufacturing, Hartford   | SR #39, Dec. 6, 2010, Lot #9             |
| 06-30-1836 | FL; ms date; ms '6' rate<br>to Collins Manufacturing, Hartford   | Warmesley Archives                       |



| Date       | Description   | Source                                    |
|------------|---|---|
| 07-02-1836 | FL; ms date and '25' rate to Indiana  | RCF #43, March 10, 1990, Lot #2080        |
| 07-16-1836 | FL; ms date and ms '25' rate;<br>Black, width 31.5 mm, height 32.5 mm<br>to John Ames, Princeton, Indiana   | Private Collection                        |
| 08-16-1836 | FL; ms date; addressed to Indiana   | RGK #60, September 9, 1989, Lot #1144     |
| 09-03-1836 | FL; width 31.5 mm, height 32.5 mm<br>(Measure by WJD);<br>ms date and '6' rate,<br>also 'rec. Sept; at night';<br>signed by and from Samuel Collins<br>to co-founder D.C. Collins (brother)<br>at Collins Manf. Co., Hartford;<br>contents refer to axe orders;<br>personal ms on flap,<br>"Clara is well and happy — S.W.C." | Private Collection                        |
| 09-10-1836 | FL; ms date, ms. '6' rate;<br>addressed to Hartford   | RAS #551, September 17-21, 1979, Lot #61  |
| 10-11-1836 | FL; ms date and '12-1/2' rate to N.Y.;<br>c/o Col. A.P. Humphrey  | RCF #34, December 5, 1987, Lot #137       |
| 01-31-1837 | FL; ms date and ms 'Paid 6' rate;<br>to Anson Bates, East Granby, CT  | Internet                                  |
| 07-10-1837 | FL; ms date; ms PMFF;<br>H. Nash, PM  | RAS #551, September 17-21, 1979, Lot #61A |
| 01-15-1839 | FL; ms date and '6' rate;<br>from Samuel Collins to Alfred Smith,<br>the Collins Company Treasurer in Hartford;<br>PFC #156503  | RGK #58, May 13, 1989, Lot #15            |
| 02-02-1839 | FL; ms date and '6' rate;<br>addressed to the Collins Company in Hartford;<br>weak strike   | Internet                                  |
| 02-14-1839 | FL; ms date and '6' rate;<br>addressed to the Collins Company in Hartford   | RCF #32, May 30, 1987, Lot #57            |
| 11-09-1839 | ms date; ms '6' rate;<br>from G.W. Collins of the Collins Mfg. Co.<br>to Alfred Smith, the company treasurer<br>in Hartford   | SR #3, Nov 18-20, 1997, Lot #107          |
| 11-19-1839 | FL; ms date; ms '6' rate;<br>to Hartford; PFC #156204   | RCF #38, November 26, 1988, Lot #103      |
| 11-21-1839 | FL; ms date and '6' rate;<br>addressed to Hartford;<br>Late example in Black ink  | RAS #783, Oct 29-31, 1996, Lot #416       |
| 12-12-1840 | FL; RED INK;<br>ms date and '6' rate;<br>width 31.5 mm, height 32.5 mm;<br>to the Collins Company Hartford Office<br>from S.W. Collins;<br>ex-Edwin Mayer, ex-Judge Fay   | Private Collection                        |
| 12-22-1840 | FL; RED INK;<br>ms date; ms '6' rate;<br>written by Samuel Collins  | RAS #853 Dec 19-20, 2002, Lot # 2057      |

| Date                                       | Description  | Source   |
|--|--|--|
|  | concerning the making of axes<br>to Collins Co, Hartford;<br>ex-Keffer, ex-Jarrett;<br>Finest example in Red   |  |
| <del>03-18-1841</del><br>03-25-1841        | FL; two RED INK strikes,<br>the first struck through; to Mass.   | RGK #60, September 9, 1989, Lot #1145                        |
| <u>Collinsville Large Axe Examples NYD</u> |  |  |
| 02-16-NYD                                  | FL; ms date and '25' rate;<br>to Samuel Andrews, St. Francisville, MS<br>Extremely Fine strike; ex-Haas  | Frajola Phila Mercury Site                                   |
| 05-15-NYD                                  | FL; ms date, w/o rate marking;<br>to Michael Richmond, Ashford, CT   | Warmesley Archives   |
| 08-12-NYD                                  | FL; ms date and 'Paid 25' rate<br>to Richard S. Ely, New York;<br>Extremely Fine strike<br>PFC #408475   | SR #17, December 10-12, 2003, Lot #890                       |
| 09-10-NYD                                  | FL; ms date and '6' rate<br>with 'recd. 12th' docket;<br>from Samuel Collins;<br>Described as 1830, but this<br>is incorrect because the PO<br>was not est. until 10-08-1831   | RGK #60, September 9, 1989, Lot #1143                        |
| 10-13-NYD                                  | FL; ms date; ms PMFF<br>ms 'H. Nash, PM';<br>to Joseph B. Latham, Ashford, CT;<br>weak strike  | Internet   |
| 10-31-NYD                                  | OKU w/ MONTH AND DAY IN TYPE;<br>Black, width 31.5 mm, height 32.5 mm<br>(Measure by WJD);<br>env w/ PAID/3 hs cancels #25;<br>Very late adhesive period use;<br>to Samuel W. Dudley, North Guilford, CT<br>Extremely Fine strike<br>PFC #296900<br>("stamp w/ sm stain b.r. practically removed") | Private Collection   |
| 02-23-NYD                                  | FL; RED INK; ms date; ms '18-3/4' rate;<br>addressed to Theophilus Humphries,<br>Sheldon, N.Y.; Ex-Lehman, Ex-Haas;<br>Late use  | RCF #32, May 30, 1987, Lot #56<br>Frajola Phila Mercury Site |

# *Collinsville Hatchet Cancel Census*

| Date                                     | Description   | Source                                  |
|--|---|---|
| 06-29-(1857)                             | COLLINSVILLE/CT. CDS;<br>Small Axe cancels 3¢ #26 dull red;<br>“used only in 1857”;<br>to R.S. Lawrence, Hartford, CT<br>PFC #357523                          | Rumsey #9, April 27-29, 2000, Lot #2415 |
| 03-31-(1862)                             | COLLINSVILLE/CT. Black CDS;<br>Small Axe cancels 3¢ Pink PSE;<br>Pencil docketed as ‘1862’<br>to W.W. Andrews, Wethersfield, CT                               | Internet                                |
| <u>Collinsville Hatchet Examples NYD</u> |   |   |
| 01-28-NYD                                | COLLINSVILLE/CT. CDS;<br>Small Axe cancels 3¢ #26;<br>repaired cover;<br>to Miss Maria C. Phelps, Delaware, Wis.<br>PFC #126 470                              | The Philatelic Foundation               |
| 02-20-NYD                                | COLLINSVILLE/CT. CDS;<br>Small Axe cancels 3¢ Rose #65;<br>to Janette Brown, Longmeadow, MA   | Nutmeg #182, March 25, 2009, Lot #3628  |
| 03-04-NYD                                | COLLINSVILLE/CT. CDS;<br>Small Axe cancels 3¢ Rose #65;<br>Very Fine strike   | RAS #790, May 8, 1997, Lot #1946        |
| 03-14-NYD                                | COLLINSVILLE/CT. CDS;<br>Small Axe cancels 3¢ Rose Pink (64b);<br>ex-Judd   | RAS #766, May 4, 1995, Lot #439         |
| 04-02-NYD                                | COLLINSVILLE/CT. CDS;<br>Small Axe ties #11;<br>reduced at right into the address;<br>to A.C. Waterbury, Artist, Patterson, NY<br>PFC #258253                 | SR 78, April 26-29, 2018, Lot #1434     |
| 04-07-NYD                                | COLLINSVILLE/CT. CDS;<br>Small Axe cancels U35 pink on buff;<br>to W.W. Andrews, Wethersfield, CT;<br>PFC #408364   | The Philatelic Foundation               |
| 07-30-NYD                                | COLLINSVILLE/CT. CDS;<br>Small Axe cancels 3¢ #26;<br>to J. Fayette Douglass, Forestville, CT;<br>PFC #361717   | The Philatelic Foundation               |
| 11-14-NYD                                | COLLINSVILLE/CT. 32 mm, Black CDS;<br>Small Axe ties #65 to env<br>width 11.5mm x height 13.5mm cancel<br>(Measure by WJD);<br>to Mrs. J.G. Parsons, Hartford | Private Collection                      |

| Date      | Description  | Source                                 |
|-----------|--|--|
| 11-28-NYD | COLLINSVILLE/CT. CDS;<br>Small axe cancels 3¢ Rose #65;<br>to Mass   | RCF #25, January 25, 1986; Lot228      |
| 12-04-NYD | COLLINSVILLE/CT. CDS;<br>Bold small Axe cancels 3¢ Rose #65;<br>to J.F. Douglass, Forestville, CT;<br>PFC #203062  | RAS #870, December 16, 2003, Lot #964  |
| 12-07-NYD | COLLINSVILLE/CT. CDS;<br>Small Axe cancels 3¢ Rose #65,<br>with straight edge at right;<br>to Wilson Dewey, Granby, CT;<br>PFC #386558   | The Philatelic Foundation              |
| __-__-NYD | Small Axe used as forwarding cancel<br>on ship's letter; 3¢ Rose #65;<br>to Collinsville and forwarded to Lee, MA;<br>ms 'Ship's Letter USST Connecticut at top;<br>'US Ship 3cts' hs; unusual use | RAS #870, December 16, 2003, Lot # 963 |
| __-12-NYD | COLLINSVILLE/CT. 32 mm, Black CDS<br>Small Axe cancels #65;<br>stamp and cover torn at right;<br>ms "What have you chosen for your marks?"<br>to R.D. Spencer, East Haddam, CT                     | Private Collection                     |

## *Collinsville Large Axe II Postmark Census*

| Date      | Description   | Source                               |
|-----------|---|--------------------------------------|
| 11-14-NYD | 11x13-1/2mm Hatchet fancy cancel<br>on a 3¢ Red Buff Entire [Die 5 U10]<br>with the Type II 32x33mm large axe pmk,<br>date in type; addressed to Wethersfield, CT;<br>only combination example currently recorded | RAS Sale 575 Feb. 18, 1981, Lot #484 |