



Dudley's Fox

W.J. Duffney

You go to the post office and open your lock box. The letters inside attract your attention as you take them out because they all have unusual postal markings on the stamps. There is a Double Anchor from Putnam, a Charter Oak tree from Thomaston, a Devil from West Meriden, and an intriguing Running Fox from Hockanum. It is 1866-67 Connecticut during the halcyon days of the fancy cancellation.

Acting on a long expressed concern over the cleaning and reuse of postage stamps, the U.S. Post Office on July 22, 1860, made it a requirement that stamps be obliterated by a marking separate from the usually thin-lined town datestamp. The directive gave impetus to postmasters designing their own personal handmade cancels. Among the more intriguing of these fancy cancels is the Hockanum Running Fox. Stamp collectors have long known who was responsible for it but nothing about the man or the circumstances surrounding its use.

Dudley Fox was born in Hockanum, a section of East Hartford on the Connecticut River on May 8, 1823, to Solomon and Clarissa (Low) Fox. The word 'Hockanum' is a Podunk Indian word for a hook-shape or crook in a river, which perfectly describes the area. Dudley's ancestry can be traced back through the Massachusetts Bay Colony to 17th Century London. The Fox family, some members of which were living in Concord, was very involved in the Revolutionary War from the start. The Connecticut Foxes answered the Lexington Alarm. Dudley's grandfather Israel was a sailor on the *USS Revenge* under the command of the infamous Benedict Arnold. Participation in the military continued with his uncle Leonard who fought in the War of 1812 with Capt. Reynolds's Company. The family history surely contributed to Dudley being associated with Connecticut state militia.

Philatelic writers seem to have missed the fact that Dudley Fox was a silversmith, a craft which requires the type of skills needed to easily produce a fancy cancel. Col. Thomas Roberts, a well established Hartford ironmonger with a business in a prime location at 28 State Street, trained Dudley. Col. Roberts dealt in all types of metal objects from cutlery to stoves for decades. He was also Commander of Hartford County's First Regiment from 1833-36.

In 1844 when Dudley was 21 years old, he married Clarinda Grant from Wapping (Eastern Windsor). The Grant family can also be traced to 17th Century England and was even larger in number than the Fox clan. Dudley and Clarinda began their married life in Hartford as boarders living near the home of Col. Roberts. Alice Julia Fox, their first daughter, was born on November 22, 1846. The Hartford City Directory describes Dudley as a 'silversmith' or 'tinner', i.e. metal worker. It lists the young couple at different addresses each year until 1848 when they apparently became more settled. In 1850 cousin Henry Fox, a cooper, is mentioned as a partner in the business of H&D Fox. Dudley's younger brother Martin Elbridge Fox, with whom he was very close, also moved to Hartford and was living at the River Hotel, perhaps lending a hand with the new business venture. Subsequently, they all returned to Hockanum.

Dudley built a house and a workshop on a two acre lot just across the road from the home in which he was born. He purchased the land from his father Solomon on December 10, 1852, for \$300. The construction may have begun before the legal purchase. Cousin Henry and brother Martin moved back with their respective parents in the old tightly knit neighborhood which we might call a 'family compound' today. A second daughter, Julia H. Fox, was born there about 1855 to Dudley and Clarinda.

The new house was constructed in the Italianate style with a flat roof and fashionably deep soffit. It has an unusual kitty-corner main entrance on its south side porch. There is also a curious opening with floor to ceiling glass windows beside the entrance. It might sound a bit morbid to current sensitivities, but it has been suggested that this opening is a 'coffin door' which was a feature in vogue at the time. They normally are solid doors. Wakes were



Dudley Fox's Hockanum home at left (built 1853) and Silverware Workshop (built 1852) as they appeared in 2010.

still being held in the home at the time, and coffin doors were intended to make it easier to remove a coffin from a house. It is not clear that the position of this opening would actually help do that, so the whole assumption is in question in this case.

An 1869 Map of Hockanum printed by Baker and Tilden shows the Dudley Fox house and "Silver Plated Ware Mfg." next to it. It is obvious that the extended Fox family was the dominant group in this area, all supporting each other's endeavors. Several of their homes on Naubuc Avenue, including Dudley's, have survived and are now fortunately designated as part of East Hartford's Historic District. The area, with flat rich land, was well suited to tobacco farming, in which several family members, including Dudley, became involved.

The silver shop building still has double doors at the front allowing large items access. The inventory of the full contents of the silver shop found in the East Hartford Land Records dated January 20, 1868, reads, "17 Rolls of Stock about 1,300 lbs. in the front of Store also 15 Rolls of Stock 1000 lbs. in Back Room together with 500 lbs scrapes or cuttings. 5 shelves of wooden chucks. 3 Lathers in Running order, one Large Press & Die, One Small Press & Dies, One Drop Press & Dies, One Large Press Down Seller, Two Squaring Shears, One Small Laze Folding Machine, One Drop Press down below, 2 Melting Kettles, also Sett of Copper or Brass Molds for Castings." Listed elsewhere in the records are at least one steam engine, a steam boiler, and a "gas machine."

The workshop has a basement with two elongated cellar windows on the north side of the building. Several other buildings in the area also have this feature. The purpose was to avoid harsh east-west sunlight which would affect tobacco. Workers used the softer northern light to grade tobacco. There are two sorting tables still present in the basement area today. Dudley apparently just dabbled in tobacco farming, but his half brothers Hiram and Edmund, who exhibited later at the World's Fair, and his very successful son-in-law Horace B. Olmsted were very serious about it.



The kitty-corner entrance and so-called 'coffin door'.

Hockanum established its own post office on February 18, 1850, which stayed in operation until September 30, 1930. Dudley Fox served as its postmaster from May 12, 1865, through November 27, 1867. As mentioned earlier, it was during his two and a half year tenure that the Hockanum Running Fox fancy cancellation was used. There is no doubt that the post office was located in his house and some of the chores of the postmastership were shared with wife Clarinda Fox while Dudley spent his time working in the silver shop. That so-called 'coffin door' might be an accommodation for conducting post office business. Because the volume of mail was small the postmaster compensation was also small, about \$75 for the entire period.

In 1920 collector J. Arthur Ritchie wrote to Hockanum requesting answers to a series of questions that he proposed. It was about this time that the Running Fox fancy cancellation first came to public attention. Isaiah Baker, Jr., sent a short but informative response to the query. He wrote that "Mrs. Baker who was a second cousin of Dudley Fox and who for a time lived in his family" had vivid memories of Fox as Postmaster:

Mr. Fox had a fad of using the head of a fox whenever he could and Mrs. Baker recalls very distinctly his cutting the fox on pieces of cork, striking same on a pad of black ink and cancelling stamps on envelopes. She knows that they quickly wore out, or the eyes of the fox would fill, and he was very fussy about having that clear, so that new ones were frequently made, always on cork, and the old ones would be lying around and finally thrown away...

Philatelists today would love to ask Mrs. Baker questions of their own, but the passage of time unfortunately prevents that.

The Hockanum Running Fox fancy cancellations are rare on or off-cover. They are found on the 3¢ and 10¢ issue of 1861. A newly discovered correspondence offered in the R.A. Siegel 2015 Rarities of the World Sale 1106 increases the total census of known on-cover examples to eleven. There are only two recorded with the Fox facing left. Most of the off-cover stamps are in some way faulty.



Top: The Hockanum Running Fox facing left July 31 pmk to East Hartford
Bottom: The Hockanum Running Fox facing right Dec 10 pmk to Cleveland
(Courtesy of the RA Siegel Auction Galleries)

One type of the fancy has borders situated at the top and bottom that have a zigzag line cut into them, and another type has a border made of two rows of small boxes at the top and bottom. This supports Mrs. Baker's memory of several versions being made by Dudley Fox. We can not, however, assume that we have recorded all of the types that were made because so few examples survive. Her testimony suggests that there were more types.

Henry W. Holmes preceded and succeeded Dudley Fox as postmaster. Holmes ran a grocery store north of Dudley's home and more centrally located. During his second term Holmes began using an initial 'H' killer fancy cancel, either signifying his surname or Hockanum itself. The 'H' is the only other interesting fancy cancel from this post office. It might be more than coincidental that it has a border of boxes reminiscent of the Running Fox. No conclusions should be drawn from this.

The tinware business got its start in America in the nearby town of Berlin, Connecticut, in the middle of the 18th Century. By the time Dudley Fox started manufacturing silver hollowware the competition was fierce: Hartford had the William Rogers Company, Meriden had the Meriden Britannia Company and C. Rogers Brothers, Wallingford had Robert Wallace & Co, and locally East Hartford had the large Pitkin family of silversmiths.

From the very beginning Dudley's business had financial problems, which he met by borrowing from family and friends using his property, shop and contents as collateral. One of the loans was from friend and neighbor Ira Anderson. Town history states that Anderson, who served as a drummer during the Civil War, trained young drummer boys inside the sizable silver shop. Dudley apparently settled this loan by selling Anderson a small piece of property for one dollar on April 17, 1867. There were several other loans with which he had to deal. Eventually, Dudley sold his house and silver workshop to his son-in-law Horace B. Olmsted on January 28, 1868, for \$4,000. A note at the bottom of the land record reads, "\$4.00 U.S. Stamp affixed and cancelled." It must be said that he was very good about paying creditors.

Dudley Fox settled his debts, sold off his land holdings, and set off to start a new jewelry enterprise in Bellows Falls, Vermont, part of the township of Rockingham. It is unclear why he chose to relocate there. Although their stay in Vermont was short, Dudley and Clarinda were there long enough to be enumerated in the US Census of 1870. Bother Martin, who was working nearby in a machine shop, and his wife were also included.

By 1872 the Foxes returned to the city of Hartford where they began and again started a jewelry shop on Main Street. This time things worked out better for them and the business lasted for upwards of twenty years. During this period a great friendship grew between the Foxes and the family of Adjutant General Leonard A. Dickinson. The two couples lived in the same home at No. 1 Bellevue Street for several years. Even though they were not related, they eventually shared a burial plot in Spring Grove Cemetery with a substantial memorial obelisk featuring both surnames.

General Dickinson was from a prominent New Haven family and served in the Civil War. He took part in Sheridan's Shenandoah Valley Campaign. After being discharged from the army, he made



*The Hockanum Fox on the 10¢ issue of 1861.
(Courtesy of Michael Perlman)*



The Hockanum 'H' fancy cancel on 3¢ grilled 1861.



Hartford March 20, 1882 cover with L.A. Dickinson, P.M. Registered postmark.



*Dudley Fox's best friend Hartford PM L.A. Dickinson's Registered postmark.
(Courtesy of Tony Dewey)*

Hartford his home, served on the Connecticut Soldier's Hospital Board, and became a trustee of Fitch's Home for the Soldier. The General was involved in the most quintessential of all Hartford enterprises running a large successful agency for the Aetna Insurance Company.

Dudley Fox and General Dickinson had much in common starting with the fact that Dickinson's ancestors, like Dudley's, served in the Revolutionary War. Both men were active free masons and attended Hartford's St. Thomas Episcopal Church, where they were church wardens together. Perhaps the most striking coincidence is that both men were appointed postmasters. Dickinson was Postmaster of Hartford from May 5, 1881 to May 15, 1885.

There is a weak notion that persists that the Hockanum Running Fox fancy cancel is actually meant to be a wolf. Not many collectors support this idea, and they should not. It seems to have been started by those without the knowledge that Dudley Fox was the postmaster involved.

The late well-known researcher Calvet M. Hahn wrote that the first published mention of the Hockanum Fox was by Cotton C. Doyle in *Mekeel's Weekly Stamp News* of January 25, 1919. Doyle's article titled "McVittles vs. Cancellations" is a farcical satire of a philatelic transaction, written using a comedic stage-Irish accent. The character Casey asks McVittles whether the Hockanum cancel is a goat. McVittles replies, "Goat it isn't and fox it isn't, but wolf it is, and the most famous wolf that ever stole a sheep in all New England, Casey." He was erroneously basing his opinion on the theory that the cancel commemorated the famous pre-Revolutionary War story of young Israel Putnam courageously shooting a pesky wolf inside a small narrow cave in Pomfret. He must have emerged from the cave with a face well darkened with the black powder from his rifle and ears ringing from the loud report. The story is likely factual. Israel Putnam, of course, became one of the legendary figures of the American Revolution. Today the area is Wolf Den State Park and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. But, since the Doyle article was intended as pure entertainment, nothing in it should be taken seriously.

In spite of the fact that the wolf theory lacks credence, there actually is a connection between Dudley Fox and Israel Putnam, tenuous though it might be. Dudley was a member and officer of a popular organization called the Putnam Phalanx.

The Putnam Phalanx was a patriotic pseudo-military marching society that was begun in Hartford in 1858. Named in honor of Israel Putnam, its mission was to honor early Connecticut service men. The group modeled itself after Washington's Continental Army and even attired themselves in a similar uniform. They appeared at parades, statue dedications, and inaugurations marching proudly with their own fife and drum corps and carrying a banner with the

portrait of 'Old Put', as he was called, and under it the motto "He dared to lead where any dared to follow." The membership boasted of many of the movers and shakers of the city, including Samuel Colt and Mark Twain.

Harper's Weekly did a story on the Putnam Phalanx in its July 21, 1860 issue, just after the group gathered at the grave of Israel Putnam on the anniversary of the Battle of Bunker Hill to pay their respects. It was Putnam who famously commanded, "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes," during that fight. *Harper's* estimated that the 'Puts' numbered about two hundred-fifty members. As to their character, they were described as, "intellectually, physically, and pecuniarily 'solid men'..." of Hartford and its vicinity.



Putnam Phalanx uniform
(Library of Congress)

This type of outing was not unusual for the Phalanx as has been pointed out. Thanks to the railroad system the Putnam Phalanx took excursions to: Bunker Hill, Boston, Charlestown and Providence (1859); Philadelphia, Baltimore, and tomb of Washington at Mount Vernon (1860); Montreal (1871); Newburyport and Portland, Maine (1872). Dudley Fox and his friend General Dickinson are listed as having traveled to the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876 with the Putnam Phalanx, among other trips.

As for the theory that the Hockanum fancy cancellation is based on the legendary Israel Putnam wolf story, we have found no evidence that Dudley was even active in the Putnam Phalanx until the 1870s. This weakens the theory because the cancels were made during the decade previous to his involvement. So, any connection between Fox, the Phalanx, and the legendary story is rather unconvincing.

Cotton C. Doyle's "McVittles vs. Cancellations," which gave birth to the wolf theory, is a preposterous burlesque at best. In *Mekeel's* September 27, 1919 issue, just nine months after the article appeared, Hartford collector Ken Bluemeadow was given a small mention in the Correspondence column: "...thank you for informing us the animal in question is undoubtedly a fox. Your energy in discovering that Mr. Dudley Fox was the postmaster at Hockanum, Conn. in 1866, where the cancel was used, is commendable..." Evidently, not everyone read it.

To end the argument, there is a sound reason that demonstrates that the wolf theory is spurious. Most significantly, we have Mrs. Baker's eyewitness account in which she referred to them as fox cancels made from cork. That in itself should settle it.

A man named Fox did not whittle wolf cancels to proclaim his postmastership; it just doesn't make sense. Judge Judy Sheindlin, who has replaced Judge Wapner as tv's leading arbiter of disputes, often forcefully proclaims, "If it doesn't make sense, it isn't true." Hammer the gavel quickly — case closed.

Dudley Fox was 66 years old when he died on August 23, 1889 in Hartford. His funeral was a rather large event. Organizations of which he was a member — the Putnam Phalanx, the Eastern Star Lodge, the Improved Order of Red Men, the Masonic Lodge of East Hartford, and St. Thomas's Church — had representatives serve as bearers. Fellow jewelers of the city closed their shops in his honor and the flag on the Putnam Phalanx Armory flew at half mast. It was said that Dudley would be long remembered, and he has been, not just for his "frank and open hearted" character, but for making the marvelous Running *Fox* fancy cancellations.



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Hockanum Running Fox Census

Dudley Fox, Postmaster
May 12, 1865 to November 27, 1867

11 On-Cover
11 Off-Cover

Type 1



RAS 859, Lot 100
PFC #201377



RAS 758, Lot 332



RAS 528, Lot 89

Type 1
Continued



RAS 869, Lot 3087
PFC #407368



RAS 1167, Lot 2335
PFC #499772



Scott #65
PFC #288704



Rumsey Sale 26, Lot 1013
Scott #65



RAS Sale 353, Lot 444
Scott #65

Type 2



RAS 820, Lot 664; PFC #146885



RAS 1106, Lot 3086; Scott #65



RAS 1106, Lot 3087; Scott #65

Type 2
Continued



RAS 1106, Lot 3088
Scott #65



RAS Sale 1062, Lot 183
Scott #65
PFC #497482



RAS Sale 1075, Lot 1074
Scott #65



Ventura Retail Price List
Scott #68
PFC #242249



RAS Sale 456, Lot 278
Scott #65
PFC #226344 / #118879



Spink Sale 72, Lot 555
Scott #65
PFC #368300



Rumsey Sale 20, Lot 1259
Scott #65
PFC #361395

Type 3



RAS Sale 1063, Lot 1455
Scott #65



Scott #65
PFC #257704

Type 4



RAS 869, Lot 3086
PFC #407369 / #124791



RAS 1106, Lot 3085
Scott #65