

Ladies Delivery Windows

Ladies delivery windows — special counters reserved for women picking up their mail — operated in some U.S. Post Offices from at least the 1830s through the early 1900s.

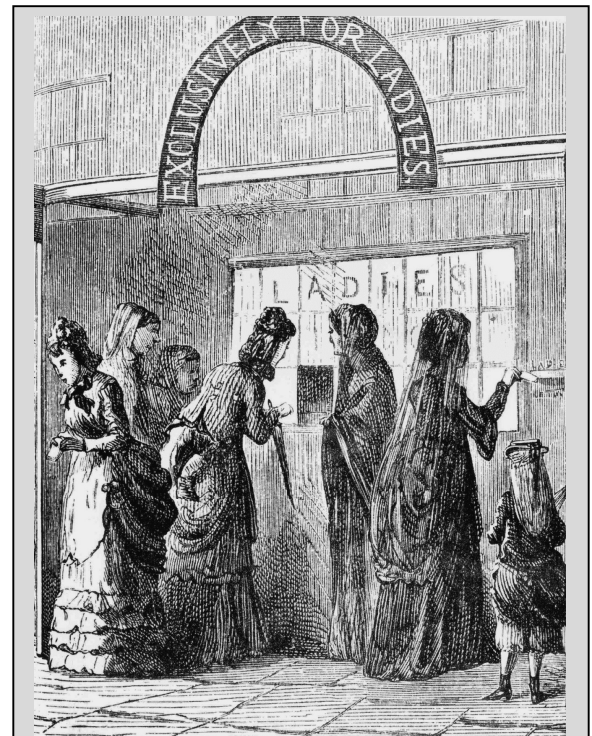
During the nineteenth century, many Americans believed that women were fragile creatures, needing protection from interaction with the rougher elements of society. Prior to the establishment of home delivery of mail, customers had to pick up their mail at the Post Office. In small towns, Post Offices were often in the homes or stores of trusted neighbors, but in large cities, visiting the Post Office required venturing into city streets and encountering men who were strangers. According to historian Richard John, women visiting urban Post Offices entered into an environment that was “a bastion of white male solidarity and an adjunct to the racially and sexually stratified world of politics and commerce.”¹

In an attempt to prevent “timid females” from encountering “detention, rudeness and a thousand vexations” while picking up their mail, Post Offices in some cities had a special ladies delivery window dedicated to their use.² Other businesses also created separate areas for women. Some steamboats, railroad cars and libraries maintained segregated spaces, while special parlors for women and families were common in urban hotels.

The Post Office building designs of Ammi Burnham Young, the first Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department (1852–1862), called for separate men’s and women’s windows and sometimes gender-segregated waiting areas and entrances.³ In several cities, there was even a separate window designated for men picking up letters for women.

Anthony Trollope, the popular novelist and influential British postal official, disapproved of the degree to which the sexes were segregated in the U.S. In 1863, he wrote “I confess that in the States I have sometimes been driven to think that chivalry has been carried too far. . . . There are ladies’ doors at hotels and ladies’ drawing-rooms, ladies’ sides on the ferry boats, ladies’ windows at the post office for the delivery of letters.”⁴ Trollope felt that ladies delivery windows, in particular, were

*an atrocious institution, as anybody may learn who will look at the advertisements called personal in some of the New York papers. Why should not young ladies have their letters sent to their houses, instead of getting them at a private window? The post-office clerks can tell stories about those ladies’ windows.*⁵



Ladies Delivery Window, New York City, 1871

Courtesy of the Smithsonian's
National Postal Museum

The ladies delivery window in the New York City Post Office was pictured in the October 1871 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*.

Ladies delivery windows were established at Post Offices in more than 75 cities coast to coast (see "List of Known Post Offices with a Ladies Delivery Window" beginning on page 4). In 1888, Postmaster George Paul of Milwaukee claimed that “most cities of over 100,000 inhabitants” had special windows for women.⁶ Even Post Offices in some

1. Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: the American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 162.

2. Samuel Gridley Howe, “Postal Reform,” *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, 2, 1848, 99. HathiTrust Digital Library, <https://www.hathitrust.org> (accessed December 15, 2015).

3. The Treasury Department was responsible for the construction of federal buildings until 1939, when the responsibility transferred to the Federal Works Agency. Less than 10 percent of Post Offices were located in federal buildings; most were in privately-owned buildings.

4. Anthony Trollope, *North America* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1863), 261–262.

5. *Ibid.*, 262.

6. *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, July 29, 1888. Gale 19th Century U.S. Newspapers, <http://infotrac.galegroup.com> (accessed January 14, 2016).

smaller towns such as Tombstone, Arizona, and Perth Amboy, New Jersey, with less than 10,000 inhabitants, maintained ladies windows.

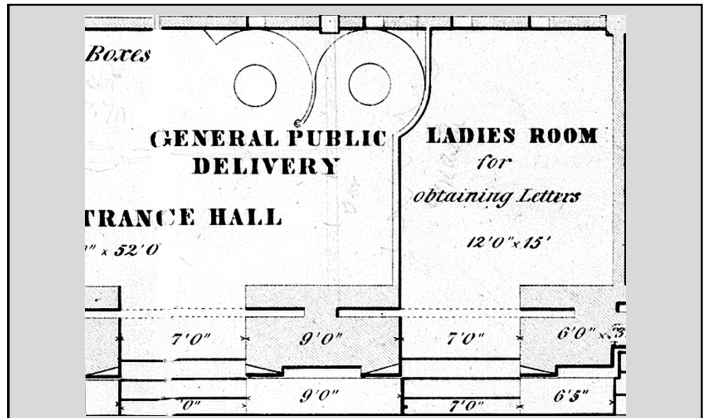
Women were able to have mail addressed to them in care of the ladies window, allowing them to shield their addresses from correspondents. In 1867, an article in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* noted that some American women even enjoyed

*the privilege, if she chooses to exercise it, of her own private box or pigeon-hole at the post office of the town where she resides, where she can have her letters addressed, and whither by a "Ladies' Entrance" where no profane male can intrude, she can resort when she pleases and unlock her box from the outside, and take away her letters without observation.*⁷

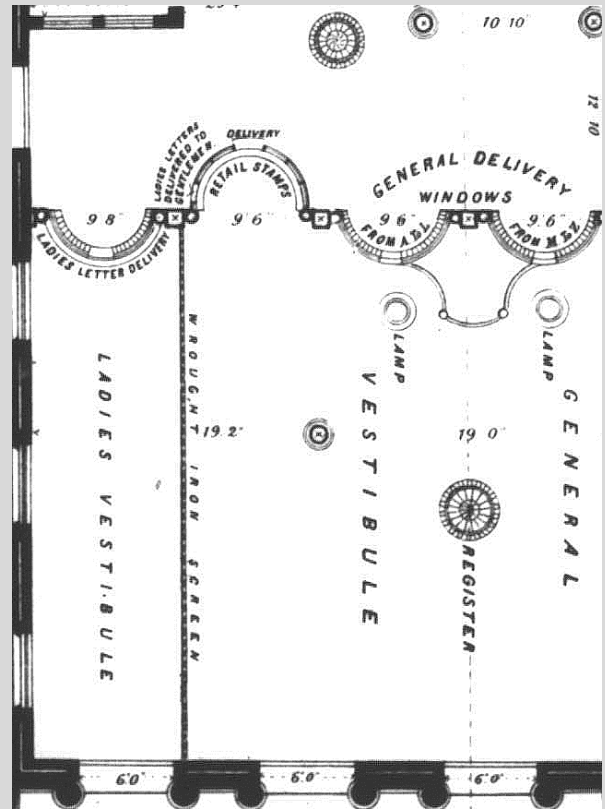
In 1871, a writer for *Harper's Magazine* found "people of every nationality" in line at the ladies window at the New York City Post Office and felt that "the appearance of the sex dressed in gay colors and wreathed in smiles lightens up the otherwise care-worn, pell-mell, rushing, and sombre-looking crowd."⁸

Other New Yorkers feared that trips to the Post Office could provide an opportunity for women to encounter unsavory company. In 1869, author Junius Browne claimed that New York's Post Offices were "the favorites of intriguers of both sexes, and are frequently made rendezvous for interdicted communication and illicit pleasures."⁹ The next year, another New York author alleged that madams preyed upon young women at the Post Office, attempting to lure them into prostitution.¹⁰

Newspaper writers, meanwhile, condemned the ladies delivery window for allowing women to carry on courtships away from the scrutiny of their parents; a New Orleans journalist stated that it "affords opportunities for modern Juliets to carry on clandestine correspondence."¹¹ A newspaper account reprinted across the country claimed that a New York Postmaster decried the ladies delivery window as "that satanic ladies window," upset that he could withhold letters from those underage but "all the women who are of age can keep on misusing the government's service and there is no lawful way to stop them."¹²



Mobile, Alabama



Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Post Office Building Plan Details

These details of building plans for Post Offices designed by Ammi Burnham Young show separate areas for ladies picking up mail in Mobile, Alabama (above, 1852), and Philadelphia (below, 1860).

From *Architectural Drawings for Government Buildings* (U.S. Treasury Department, Office of the Supervising Architect), in *Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress*

7. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, January 1867, 84. HathiTrust Digital Library, <https://www.hathitrust.org> (accessed December 15, 2015).

8. *Harper's Magazine*, October, 1871. HathiTrust Digital Library, <https://www.hathitrust.org> (accessed December 18, 2015).

9. Junius Browne, *The Great Metropolis: A Mirror of New York* (Hartford, CT, American Publishing Company, 1869), 423. HathiTrust Digital Library, <https://www.hathitrust.org> (accessed December 16, 2015).

10. George Ellington, *Women of New York* (New York, NY: New York Book Company, 1870), 477. HathiTrust Digital Library, <https://www.hathitrust.org> (accessed December 14, 2015).

11. *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), December 28, 1887. Gale 19th Century U.S. Newspapers, <http://infotrac.galegroup.com> (accessed January 14, 2016).

12. *Pittsburgh (PA) Daily Post*, December 17, 1887. <https://www.newspapers.com> (accessed January 27, 2016).

In 1887, Rose Elizabeth Cleveland was said to have written to her brother, President Grover Cleveland, and to Postmaster General William Vilas, complaining that ladies delivery windows had become “an agency of demoralization,” charging that they were used to circumvent parental authority and encourage improper relationships.¹³

In San Francisco, the press was more positive. An article in *Hutchings California Magazine* observed that the polite conventions of society were being maintained at the San Francisco Post Office in 1858:

*Further on, too, at the end of the building, and apart from the rest, is the ladies' window; and here stand a row of ladies and gentlemen, waiting as patiently as at the others, the gentlemen, who form part of the line, do so to obtain letters for their wife, or sister or perhaps sweetheart, or other lady friend; and if they are there first, they invariably give precedence to the ladies no matter how many may come, or how long they may be thus detained.*¹⁴

In 1869, the San Francisco Post Office was again commended for providing a ladies delivery window where “women are shielded and will be protected.”¹⁵

In some Post Offices the ladies windows were staffed by female postal clerks. In 1858, it was reported that the Postmaster of New York City “placed on duty a lady, to attend the window at the ladies’ delivery.” The reporter continued “this is a good move and will meet with the hearty approbation of our citizens.”¹⁶ In 1865, Chicago’s ladies delivery window was staffed by women to “stop the flirting with the clerks.”¹⁷ It was not stated if this was to increase employee productivity or safeguard female propriety.

As free mail delivery was introduced in cities, the delivery of letters at gender-segregated Post Office windows gradually ended.¹⁸ Residents of cities having free mail delivery were discouraged from calling at the Post Office for their mail. Section 342 of the 1879 *Postal Laws and Regulations* stated

*mail-matter directed neither to a box-holder nor to a street and number, must be delivered by carrier if its address is known or can be ascertained from the city directory; otherwise, at the general delivery.*¹⁹

The November 18, 1879, issue of the *Sacramento Daily Union* reported

*Owing to a reduction in the number of callers at the Postoffice since the establishment of free delivery, the delivery of ladies' letters at a separate window was yesterday discontinued, and hereafter ladies must apply at the general delivery for their letters.*²⁰

In 1887, postal regulations reiterated that general delivery windows in Post Offices were meant for the use of travelers with no fixed address, not residents:

*Letters must be frequently and promptly delivered by the carriers, so that citizens may have no inducement to call at the post-office; and the local addresses of those receiving mail through the general delivery should be secured, and their mail delivered by carriers to the greatest practicable extent.*²¹

13. Letter quoted in *The Evening World* (New York, NY), December 21, 1887. Library of Congress: Chronicling America, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov> (accessed January 6, 2016).

14. “The History of a Letter,” *Hutchings California Magazine*, January, 1858. Dan Anderson, Yosemite Online Library, <http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library> (accessed December 10, 2015).

15. *California Farmer and Journal of Useful Sciences*, Volume 32, Number 20, December 9, 1869, 156. University of California, Riverside: California Digital Newspaper Collection, <http://cdnc.ucr.edu> (accessed January 21, 2016).

16. *Frank Leslie's Weekly* (New York, NY), June 19, 1858. Accessible Archives, <http://www.accessible-archives.com> (accessed January 14, 2016).

17. *The Wheeling (WV) daily intelligencer*, December 7, 1865. Library of Congress: Chronicling America <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov> (accessed January 6, 2016).

18. Residents of 49 large cities began receiving free home delivery of mail in 1863; by 1880, 104 cities were served, and by 1900, the service had spread to 796 cities.

19. U.S. Post Office Department, *Postal Laws and Regulations*, 1879, 99.

20. *Sacramento Daily Union*, November 18, 1879, California Digital Newspaper Collection <http://cdnc.ucr.edu> (accessed January 22, 2016).

21. U.S. Post Office Department, *Postal Laws and Regulations*, 1887, 260.

In 1912, Postmasters were reminded to comply with this policy and were authorized to require any residents using the general delivery window to "furnish in writing ... their reasons for preferring to be served at the general delivery."²²

The last known reference to a ladies delivery window in a specific Post Office occurred on October 23, 1911, when the *Atlanta Georgian and News* noted that patrons could "get advertised letters at the ladies' general delivery window."²³

Some modern writers have noted that the creation of separate areas for women in public spaces "reinforced the cultural message that, as the weaker sex, women needed special home-like havens when they ventured into the threatening public realm."²⁴ Historian David Henkin has suggested that the gender separation had the effect of marginalizing women using the Post Office; at the same time, he acknowledged that it gave some women a new freedom, since previously, for many, "the mail box was inside the coat pockets of men."²⁵

List of Known Post Offices with a Ladies Delivery Window

Note: Post Offices in the cities listed in italics had a ladies delivery window included in their 1850s building plans by the Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department. It's unclear if the windows were retained in the final designs. The years listed for these cities are the years in which the construction of the planned buildings was completed.

City	State	Ladies Window in Use by (Year)	Source
<i>Mobile</i>	AL	1856	<i>Architectural Drawings for a Government Building, 1853-1855</i> , Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress (P&P, LOC)
Phoenix	AZ	1896	<i>Arizona Republican</i> (Phoenix, AZ), November 22, 1896
Tombstone	AZ	1880	U.S. Congress. House. <i>Report of John P. Clum</i> , 50 th Congress, 1 st session, 1888, Report No. 2187
Los Angeles	CA	1885	<i>Los Angeles Times</i> , April 26, 1885
Sacramento	CA	1851	<i>Watertown (WI) Chronicle</i> , January 1, 1851
San Francisco	CA	1852	<i>Daily Alta California</i> (San Francisco, CA), March 31, 1852
San Jose	CA	1888	<i>The Evening News</i> (San Jose, CA), July 13, 1888
Oakland	CA	1877	<i>Oakland Tribune</i> , December 8, 1877
Aspen	CO	1896	<i>The Aspen Tribune</i> , March 18, 1890
Denver	CO	1873	<i>Daily Rocky Mountain News</i> (Denver CO), October 26, 1863
Longmont	CO	1905	<i>Longmont Ledger</i> , December 8, 1905
Hartford	CT	1856	<i>Connecticut Courant</i> (Hartford, CT), January 26, 1856
New Haven	CT	1874	<i>New Directory of the ... City and Town of New Haven, for 1874-75</i> (New Haven, CT: Greenough, Jones & Co., 1874)
<i>Wilmington</i>	DE	1857	<i>Architectural Drawings for a Government Building, 1853-1855</i> , P&P, LOC
Washington	DC	1858	<i>The Merchants' Magazine & Commercial Review</i> , May 1, 1858
Jacksonville	FL	1895	<i>Sprit of Jefferson</i> (Charles Town, WV), February 22, 1887
Pensacola	FL	1906	<i>The Pensacola Journal</i> , March 11, 1906
Americus	GA	1892	<i>Americus Times-Recorder</i> , November 4, 1892
Athens	GA	1898	<i>The Athens Daily Banner</i> , February 23, 1898
Atlanta	GA	1869	<i>The Atlanta Constitution</i> , August 28, 1869
Columbus	GA	1882	<i>Columbus Daily Enquirer</i> , September 3, 1882
Gainesville	GA	1899	<i>The Georgia Cracker</i> (Gainesville, GA), March 4, 1899
Honolulu	HI	1894	<i>Hawaii Progress</i> (Honolulu, HI), November 1, 1894

22. U.S. Post Office Department, *Postal Bulletin* 9885, July 27, 1912.

23. *Atlanta Georgian and News*, October 23, 1911, Digital Library of Georgia <http://atlnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu> (accessed March 24, 2016).

24. Harvey Molotch and Laura Noren, *Toilet: Public Restrooms and the Politics of Sharing* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010), 152.

25. David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 75-76.

Davenport	IA	1870	<i>The Davenport Daily Gazette</i> , February 3, 1870
Dubuque	IA	1866	<i>Architectural Drawings for a Government Building</i> , 1856, P&P, LOC
Chicago	IL	1860	<i>Chicago Press and Tribune</i> , January 23, 1860
Ottawa	IL	1877	<i>Ottawa Free Trader</i> , January 20, 1877
Rock Island	IL	1899	<i>Rock Island (IL) Argus</i> , December 12, 1899
Springfield	IL	1869	<i>Architectural Drawings for a Government Building</i> , 1856, P&P, LOC
Evansville	IN	1862	<i>Evansville Daily Journal</i> , April 19, 1862
Fort Wayne	IN	1869	<i>Fort Wayne Daily Gazette</i> , September 2, 1869
Greencastle	IN	1877	<i>Greencastle Banner</i> , July 12, 1877
Indianapolis	IN	1861	<i>Architectural Drawings for a Government Building</i> , 1856, P&P, LOC
Atchison	KS	1879	<i>The Globe</i> (Atchison, KS), November 03, 1879
Chanute	KS	1903	<i>The Sun</i> (Chanute, KS), July 31, 1903
Kansas City	KS	1893	<i>The Kansas City Gazette</i> , December 31, 1893
Lawrence	KS	1879	<i>Lawrence Daily Journal</i> , August 29, 1879
Leavenworth	KS	1889	<i>The Leavenworth Times</i> , June 13, 1889
Parsons	KS	1881	<i>The Parsons Daily Sun</i> , April 24, 2881
Salina	KS	1894	<i>Salina Daily Republican-Journal</i> , September 18, 1894
Topeka	KS	1884	<i>The Topeka Daily Capital</i> , March 1, 1884
New Orleans	LA	1870	<i>New Orleans Republican</i> , July 12, 1870
Bangor	ME	1855	<i>Bangor Daily Whig & Courier</i> , January 18, 1855
Belfast	ME	1857	<i>Architectural Drawings for a Government Building</i> , 1855, P&P, LOC
Lewiston	ME	1871	<i>Lewiston Evening Journal</i> , February 18, 1871
Portland	ME	1871	<i>Architectural Drawings for a Government Building</i> , 1855, P&P, LOC
Boston	MA	1858	<i>Ballou's Pictorial</i> (Boston, MA), July 31, 1858
Gloucester	MA	1858	<i>Architectural Drawings for a Government Building</i> , 1856, P&P, LOC
Lowell	MA	1874	<i>Lowell Daily Citizen & News</i> , August 14, 1874
Baltimore	MD	1845	<i>Baltimore Sun</i> , July 9, 1845
Frederick	MD	1883	<i>Catoctin Clarion</i> (Mechanicstown, MD), July 12, 1883
Detroit	MI	1859	<i>Detroit Free Press</i> , May 12, 1859
Minneapolis	MN	1887	<i>The Saint Paul (MN) Globe</i> , February 27, 1887
Sedalia	MO	1890	<i>The Sedalia Weekly Bazaar</i> , January 28, 1890
St. Louis	MO	1867	Walter B. Stevens, <i>Centennial History of Missouri</i> , Volume 4, 518 (St. Louis, MO: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1921)
Vicksburg	MS	1875	<i>Harrisburg (PA) Telegraph</i> , June 7, 1875
Butte	MT	1882	<i>The Montana Standard</i> (Butte, MT), October 10, 1882
Helena	MT	1887	<i>Helena Weekly Herald</i> , January 13, 1887
Lincoln	NE	1891	<i>The Nebraska State Journal</i> (Lincoln, NE), July 2, 1901
Omaha	NE	1881	<i>The Omaha Daily Bee</i> , May 11, 1881
Concord	NH	1862	<i>New Hampshire Patriot & State Gazette</i> (Concord, NH), December 31, 1862
Portsmouth	NH	1860	<i>Architectural Drawings for a Government Building</i> , 1856, at Library of Congress
Perth Amboy	NJ	1892	U.S. Congress. House. <i>Letter From the Postmaster General, Transmitting the Claim of George H. Tice, Postmaster at Perth Amboy, N.J.</i> , 52 nd Congress, 2 nd session, 1893, H. Doc. 215.
Trenton	NJ	1874	<i>Daily State Gazette</i> (Trenton, NJ), March 16, 1874
Buffalo	NY	1858	<i>The American Merchant</i> (Buffalo, NY), May, 1858
New York	NY	1833	<i>National Intelligencer</i> (Washington, DC), June 12, 1833
Oswego	NY	1858	<i>Architectural Drawings for a Government Building</i> , 1855, P&P, LOC
Plattsburgh	NY	1858	<i>Architectural Drawings for a Government Building</i> , 1856, P&P, LOC
Charlotte	NC	1891	<i>The Charlotte News</i> , March 30, 1891
Concord	NC	1897	<i>The Concord Times</i> , April 1, 1897
Raleigh	NC	1890	<i>The Lenoir (NC) Topic</i> , March 19, 1890
Cincinnati	OH	1855	<i>Genius of the West</i> magazine (Cincinnati, OH), August 1855, at digital.cincinnatiilibrary.org (accessed January 19, 2016)
Cleveland	OH	1858	<i>The Daily Cleveland Herald</i> , December 23, 1858
Toledo	OH	1856	<i>Architectural Drawings for a Government Building</i> , 1855, P&P, LOC
Portland	OR	1878	<i>The Daily Oregonian</i> (Portland, OR), February 15, 1878
Harrisburg	PA	1861	<i>Pennsylvania Daily Telegraph</i> (Harrisburg, PA), June 26, 1861
Philadelphia	PA	1845	<i>Public Ledger</i> (Philadelphia, PA), November 18, 1845
Pittsburgh	PA	1854	<i>Pittsburgh Daily Gazette</i> , June 12, 1854
Reading	PA	1889	<i>Reading Times</i> , February 21, 1888
Providence	RI	1857	<i>Architectural Drawings for a Government Building</i> , 1855, P&P, LOC
Charleston	SC	1896	<i>The Weekly News and Courier</i> (Charleston, SC), May 20, 1896
Sumter	SC	1889	<i>The Watchman and Southron</i> (Sumter, SC), October 30, 1889
Memphis	TN	1870	<i>Public Ledger</i> (Memphis, TN), February 22, 1870

Nashville	TN	1874	<i>The Tennessean</i> (Nashville, TN), April 2, 1874
Galveston	TX	1873	<i>Galveston Daily News</i> , April 25, 1873
San Antonio	TX	1882	<i>The San Antonio Light</i> , January 18, 1882
Salt Lake City	UT	1891	<i>The Salt Lake Tribune</i> (Salt Lake City, UT), October 16, 1891
<i>Burlington</i>	VT	1857	<i>Architectural Drawings for a Government Building</i> , 1855, P&P, LOC
<i>Rutland</i>	VT	1859	<i>Architectural Drawings for a Government Building</i> , 1856, P&P, LOC
<i>Windsor</i>	VT	1858	<i>Architectural Drawings for a Government Building</i> , 1856, P&P, LOC
<i>Petersburg</i>	VA	1858	<i>Architectural Drawings for a Government Building</i> , 1855, P&P, LOC
Richmond	VA	1858	Richard K. Perkins, <i>A Brief History of the Lewis F. Powell, Jr. United States Courthouse, 1858–2012</i> (Richmond, VA: Office of the Circuit Executive, United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, 2012), at www.ca4.uscourts.gov/docs/pdfs/BriefHistoryofPowellCourthouse.pdf (accessed January 7, 2016)
Milwaukee	WI	1855	<i>Milwaukee Daily Sentinel</i> , July 2, 1855
Oshkosh	WI	1875	<i>Oshkosh Daily Northwestern</i> , December 14, 1875
Wheeling	WV	1854	<i>Wheeling (VA) Daily Intelligencer</i> , April 8, 1854