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## Milton, Florida, Earliest Known Letter

By William H. Johnson, D.D.S.



**Figure 1.** Milton May 27 / [18]40 / Flor. manuscript postmark Type V with postmaster Free frank of Stephen Gale P.M. Milton Flor.

The cover in **Figure 1** is a newly surfaced cover with a territorial manuscript postmark from Milton, Florida. It is dated May 17, 1840, and rated Free by the first postmaster of Milton, Stephen Gale. The post office was established only five weeks earlier on April 10, 1840, with Gale commissioned as postmaster<sup>1</sup>, making this likely the earliest known Milton cover. Until now, there were only three recorded territorial usages, all manuscript postmarked, and all located in the Florida Archives in Tallahassee. The new FPHS book *Florida Postal History 1763 -1861* updates the 1999 Milton census listing with this new addition as well as several statehood period listings.<sup>2</sup>

The enclosure is a three-page letter [**Figure 2, page 3**] to his brother, Joseph Gale, at Amesbury, Mass. It is datelined May 24, 1840, and describes the hard times in territorial Florida.

*“Mr. Keyser in whose employ I was when I last wrote, sold out his store and left off trading last September. Since that time, I have been doing business in a small way with him until March last – he found it impossible to do business – he has great sums of money credited out which is impossible to collect.*

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Business of all kinds is nearly to a stand, money scarce and not good. Pensacola money is 25 per cent below par at New Orleans and the balance of the Florida Banks are worse. We have about 800 dollars due us and now he is owing me 150 dollars beside."

Milton May. 24. 1823

Dear Brother It is so long since I wrote that I am almost ashamed to see you - I have been putting it off from day to day and a month to month thinking I might have something favorable to communicate but the longer I delay the worse it is - Mr. Rippey in whose employ I was when I last wrote, sold out his store and left off business last September - since that time I have been doing business in a small way in Cahowla town until March last - but found it was impossible to do business on account of hard times - he has great sums of money created out which is impossible to collect - Business of all kinds is nearly to a stand money scarce and not good. Pensacola money is 25 per cent below par at New Orleans and the balance of the Florida Banks are worse - we have about 800 dollars due us which is impossible to collect now - he is owing me 150 dollars beside. I am now with a man by name of Shepava who bought Mr. Rippey out - but he does no business in the store he had sold - keep the store that there are business at present - we have bought

a small piece of land about two acres in the river which is a good place for the lumber business if it should ever be good again - we have built a house on it 184.30 We think now when it is a very respectable thing for this place - it is the only way we can collect any thing due us - Mr. Rippey must and Mr. Shepava works as well as he will be worth something after awhile for what is due me I mean to take any thing that will keep or sell as for Rippey he is in a very tight place - I hope to make enough to keep me through the winter - hope for little business in the fall - My post office is but little profit at present as I have not had it open a month yet - you see politics are of no consequence in a Territory - There is no sale for lumber here at any price there has been some few cargoes sold at 10 p all which was in the winter - all kinds of provisions high on account of distant ports on money, the land in Florida is too poor to raise any thing of consequence it is generally poor land - I have been here at about for two months past clearing land building wharf hauling rates of lumber and things out of the water ready for sale

Cattle sell very low these times, persons buying papers of large stocks of them and little the value they are sold at - Auction for about 4 to 6 dollars I had, there was a lot of 100 sold a short time since in Alabama for 95 dollars - there is to be a lot of 1000 head sold next Monday near this place - I have heard nothing about the Indian treaty - it is generally believed here that a majority of the U.S. Officers are favorable to them and some encourage them not long since they came into camp at Tampa drove off 80 head of cattle belonging to the Indians - The inhabitants of this part of Louisiana have sent a petition to Congress to be attached to the State of Alabama, if it is granted I think it will be for the better - as will be some form of government then it cannot be worse at any rate and Alabama would like very much to have Pensacola for a harbor - Give my best love & respects to Mother, and all relations & friends (if I hear any) Affectionately Yours J. Gale

I wish I was a basket maker as there is a fair rate going in Pensacola

Figure 2. To Joseph Gale, Amesbury, Mass.

He continues:

"My post office is but little profit at present as I have not had it open a month yet – you see politics are of no consequence in a Territory. .... The inhabitants of this part of Florida have sent a petition to Congress to be attached to the State of Alabama, if it is granted I think it will be for the better – as will be some form of government then, it cannot be worse at any rate and Alabama would like very much to have Pensacola for a harbor."

This letter is also unusual in that it is a two-letter sheet, four-page letter. As such it should have been rated "Excess Free" and charged 25 cents for each ½ ounce overweight per Act of March 3, 1825<sup>3</sup>. This was seldom honored in Florida and to date only one such Excess Free rated cover is known from Florida. That cover is from Pensacola where the postmaster was well aware of the Act and charged it on a letter posted by an Alabama postmaster using his Free franking privilege in Pensacola.

Footnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Deane R. Briggs, M.D., ed. *Florida Stampless Postal History 1763-1861*. (North Miami: David G. Phillips Publishing Co., Inc, 1999), p. 196.
- <sup>2</sup> Deane R. Briggs, M.D., Francis Ferguson, Thomas M. Lera, eds. *Florida Postal History 1763 -1861*, Florida Postal History Society, 2018, p. 245-247.
- <sup>3</sup> *American Stampless Cover Catalog Volume 1*, David G. Phillips Publishing Co, Inc., North Miami, FL., 1997, p. xix.