

Chronicle of a Dangerous Time:

William J. Batura's Event Covers, September–November 1941

by Lawrence Sherman

The earliest and longest running series of United States patriotic envelopes of World War II was the series of seventy-seven event covers published by William J. Batura of New York.¹ His covers apparently were made for his personal collection and were not commercially produced. They were typed or inked by hand, with drawings done in ink. Type-addressed to Batura himself, most were postmarked in Washington, DC, with a few from New York City.

Other than basic vital statistics (b. August 24, 1890; d. May 2, 1977) little is known of Batura's life. He lived in New York City during the war years and worked as an electrician and "street railway" conductor before then. These prosaic facts contrast with the drama of events he chronicled, beginning the day German troops invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. The pace of Batura's cover production quickened as the United States lurched towards war.

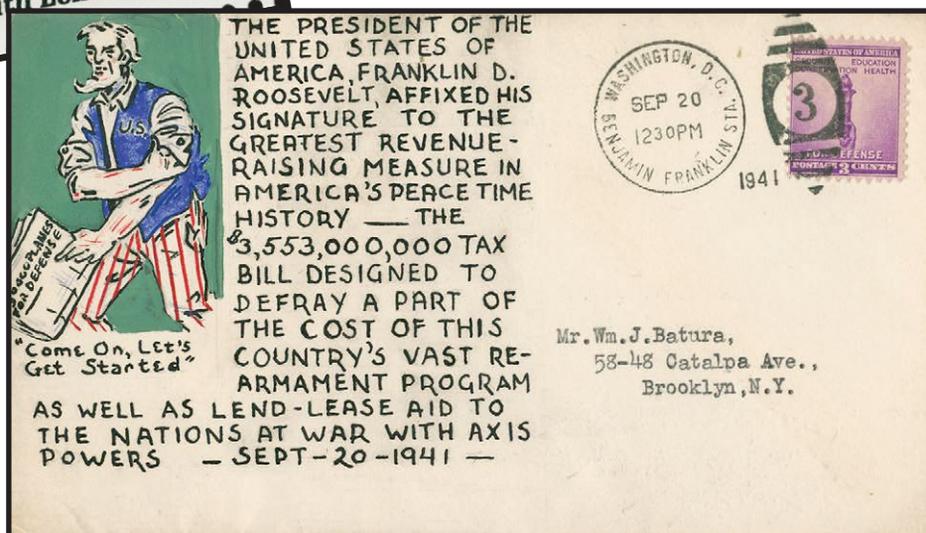
By 1941, after Hitler's forces had swept across western Europe and Great Britain faced possible invasion, most Americans viewed the vast Atlantic Ocean distances less as a barrier and more as a highway connecting the arsenal of democracy to a beleaguered ally.

The Lend-Lease program authorized by Congress in March 1941 allowed the United States to remain neutral while aiding cash-strapped Great Britain to obtain desperately needed war matériel. "Surplus" U.S.-manufactured munitions, aircraft, and ships (including PT-boats, submarine chasers, and destroyers) made their way across the Atlantic. Meanwhile, from the shores of the Potomac came massive appropriations to sustain that program



Scott 2559c

Raising revenue for rearmament and Lend-Lease.



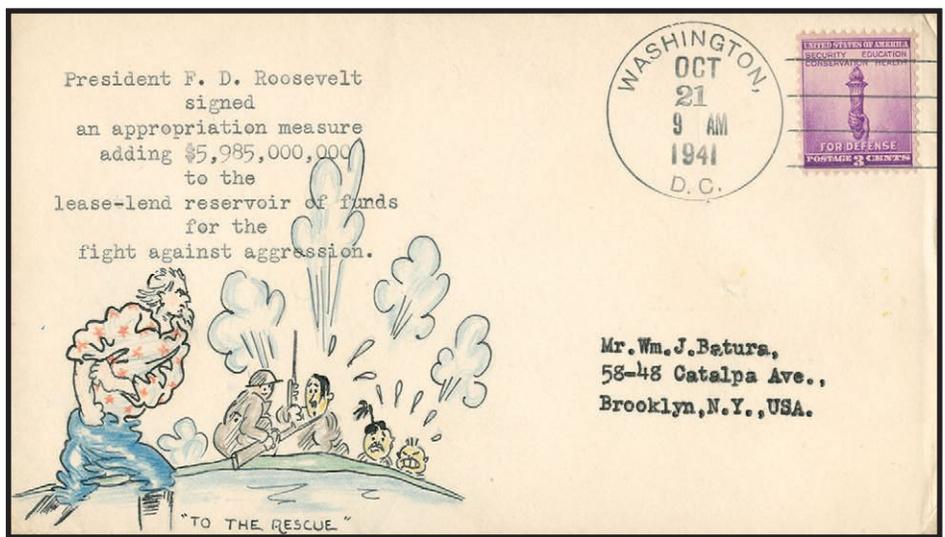
Mr. Wm. J. Batura,
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and fund America's rearmament. Passage of this legislation after intense debate "signaled the American public's belief that the threat posed by Germany was great enough to merit drastic American support of Germany's enemies."² Eventually, with American entry into the war, Lend-Lease aid would total more than \$50 billion and be extended to forty-four Allied nations.

These mid-1941 events were recorded by Batura in illustrated envelopes postmarked September 20 and October 21. The first cover, linking America's rearmament to the Lend-Lease program, showed Uncle Sam rolling up his sleeves and saying, "Come on, let's get started," while the inked text reported the President's signing "the greatest revenue-raising measure in America's peacetime history." The second showed a determined Uncle Sam striding "to the rescue" of a British Tommy facing Axis characters, with a typed text reporting another Presidential signature on another (and larger) appropriation measure. Both covers were franked with the 3-cent Defense stamp issued in 1940 (Scott 901).

On September 4 the destroyer USS *Greer*, steaming independently toward Iceland, was involved in a close encounter of the unfriendly kind with a German submarine, *U-652*. A British plane alerted the destroyer to the presence of the U-boat some miles ahead, then dropped its depth charges at random when it needed to return to its base. The *U-652* thought *Greer* had attacked. It fired a torpedo at the destroyer. The torpedo missed. *Greer* laid a pattern of depth charges, becoming the first American ship in World War II to attack a German vessel. The depth charges did no damage. The submarine fired a second torpedo. It, too, missed its target. *Greer* again laid down a pattern of depth charges without discernible damage. The ships then broke off the encounter.

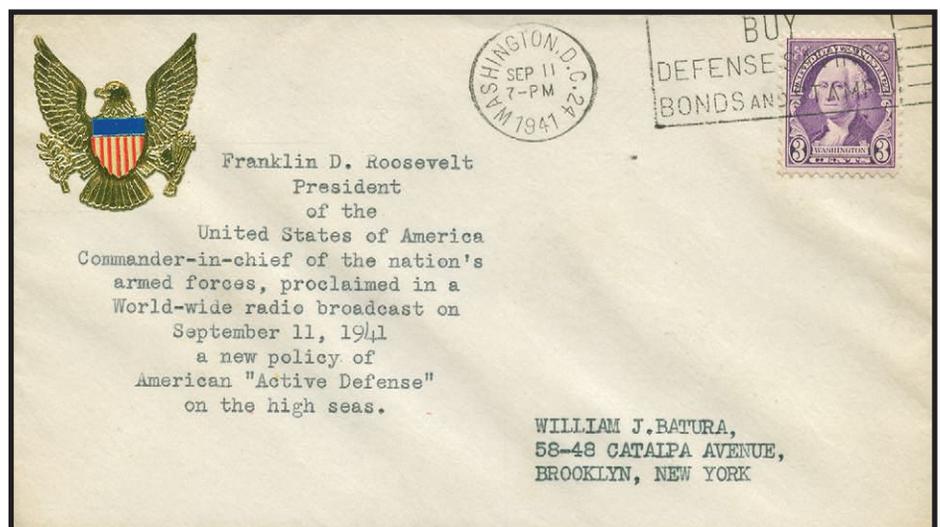
The *Greer incident* highlighted an "anomalous situation, neither peace nor war," for the United States in the Atlantic Ocean. The encounter enabled President Roosevelt to order U.S. warships to "shoot on sight" in waters "the protection of which is necessary for American defense." From this date, noted one historian, "the United States was engaged in a *de facto* naval war with Germany



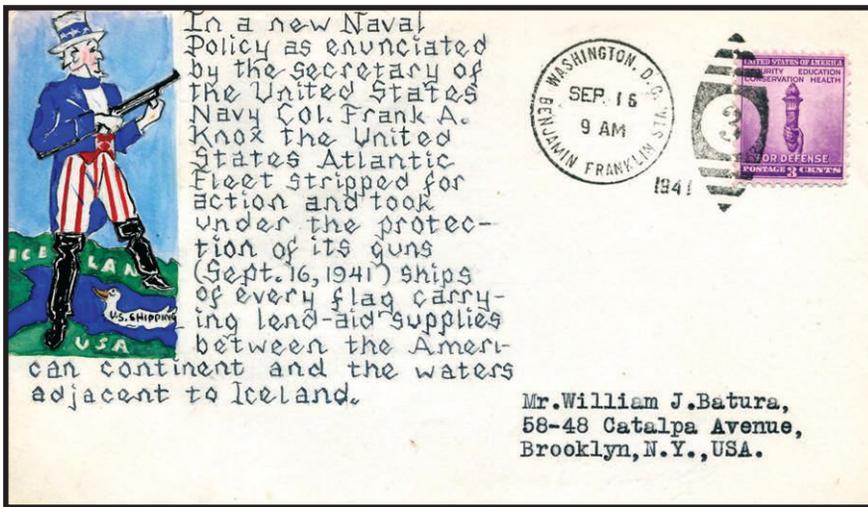
Uncle Sam to the rescue with more appropriations.

on the Atlantic Ocean. It was still an anomalous situation, for each antagonist was fighting with one hand tied; ours by the neutrality legislation, theirs by Hitler's restriction of the area of U-boat operations."³ The Navy now increased its commitment to escort Atlantic convoys, taking responsibility for much of the surface traffic to Iceland and assisting convoys between Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Great Britain.

On September 11 Batura produced a typed cachet that recorded the President's "new policy of American 'active defense' on the high seas." A small colored paste-on of the Great Seal of the United States was added at the upper left corner of the envelope. Five days later, another Batura cachet appeared. An armed Uncle Sam, protecting "U.S. shipping," stood astride the ocean between the United States and Iceland. The text asserted that the Atlantic Fleet "took under the protection of its guns (Sept. 16, 1941) ships of every flag carrying lend-aid supplies between the American continent and the waters adjacent to Iceland."

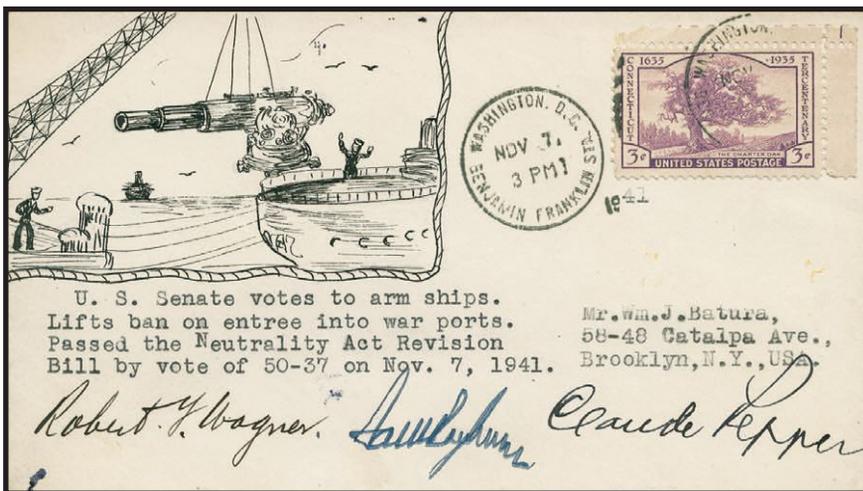


Fallout from the *Greer* incident of September 4.

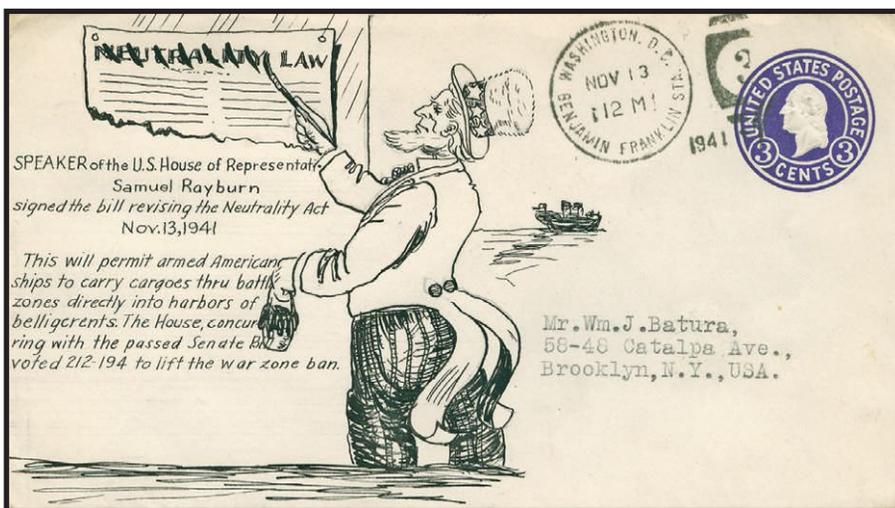


Uncle Sam protects ships carrying "lend-aid supplies."

The danger in the Atlantic Ocean became acute. On the night of October 17 a torpedo struck the USS *Kearny*, a destroyer escorting a convoy of merchantmen.



Revision of the Neutrality Acts: Senate passage.



Revision of the Neutrality Acts: House passage.

The danger in the Atlantic Ocean became acute. On the night of October 17 a torpedo struck the USS *Kearny*, a destroyer escorting a convoy of merchantmen. Eleven crew members lost their lives, the first of nearly 300,000 American service members to die in World War II. Then, on October 31, the destroyer *Reuben James*, while escorting a convoy bound for Great Britain, became the first U.S. navy ship to be sunk by enemy action in the war. Holed by a torpedo fired by *U-562*, *Reuben James* went down with loss of 115 members of her 160-man crew. Congress now untied the administration's hands by quickly authorizing the arming of merchant ships for self-defense and allowing the ships to enter war zones. The United States was now embarked on helping Britain "by all means short of war."

Batura produced two illustrated envelopes marking these revisions of the Neutrality Acts of 1935 and 1937, which had been designed to avoid American entanglement in a future European war. The first cover contained an inked picture of a naval gun being lowered onto a ship's deck and a typed cachet, "U.S. Senate votes to arm ships. Lifts ban on entree into war ports." It was postmarked November 7, the date of passage by the Senate. The cover was autographed by three Democratic leaders of Congress: Senators Robert F. Wagner (NY) and Claude Pepper (FL), and Speaker of the House of Representatives Sam Rayburn (TX).

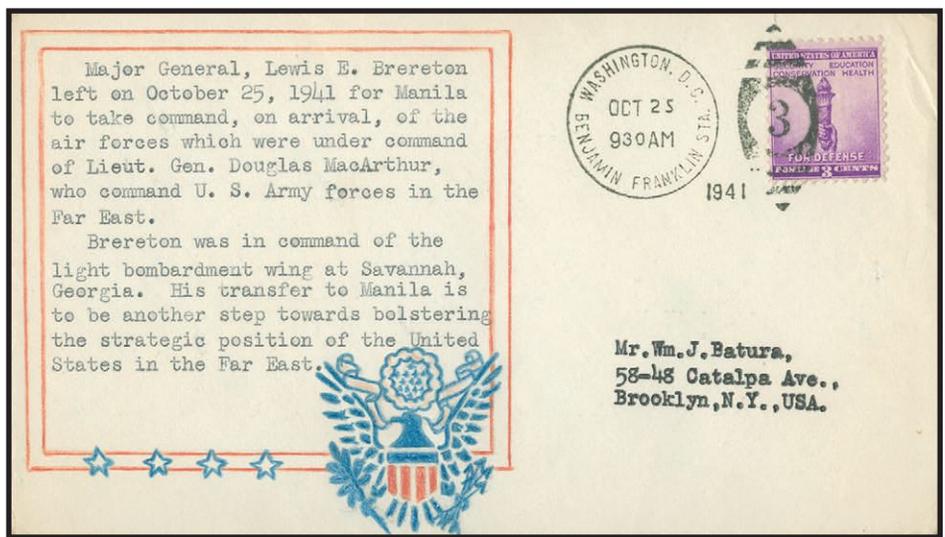
A few days later the bill revising the Neutrality Act was passed by the House of Representatives. Batura commemorated the occasion with another inked drawing and typed cachet. This time Uncle Sam stood with paint pot in hand, brushing out the words, "Neutrality Law" on a wall sign. The cover was postmarked November 13, the date the bill was passed by the House of Representatives.

Across the Pacific Ocean, the United States faced the danger of a

Japan itching to dominate the Far East by armed force. The United States, in contrast to its belligerent actions countering German power, continually tried to negotiate a diplomatic settlement. But Japan's final decision "to shift from concentrating on war with China to war against the Western Powers came in early June 1941. The hinge of decision was the shift from occupying *northern* French Indo-China, which was part of the war against China ..., to occupying *southern* Indo-China, which pointed in the opposite direction"⁴ to war against the British, Dutch, and Americans. The Japanese government's Liaison Conference in June confirmed this diplomatic and military move in the "clear recognition" that it "was looking toward war not only with the British and Netherlands but also with the United States."⁴ Neither carrot (economic commitments to a "neutralized" Indo-China) nor stick (freezing Japanese assets) worked for the Roosevelt administration: even as Japan pursued conversations with the United States, it occupied South Indo-China.

In August President Roosevelt announced that the United States would take active measures to protect her interests in the region against continued Japanese attempts at Asian hegemony. One of these was the transfer to the Philippines of thirty-five B17 bombers, the new four-engine "Flying Fortresses." This move came with an exaggerated expectation that the small number of these airplanes, and last-minute troop deployments to the Philippines, "would make it possible to deter a Japanese attack southward — by the implied threat of fire-bombing the cities of Japan — or, if worse came to worse, to defend those islands effectively."⁵

On a hand-canceled cover postmarked Washington, DC, October 25, Batura recorded the departure of Major General Lewis E. [sic] Brereton for Manila, to take command of the U.S. Far East Air Forces under General Douglas MacArthur. The typed text explained that his transfer was "another step towards bolstering the strategic position of the United States in the Far East." All for naught: in its dynastic pride, Japan considered acts of

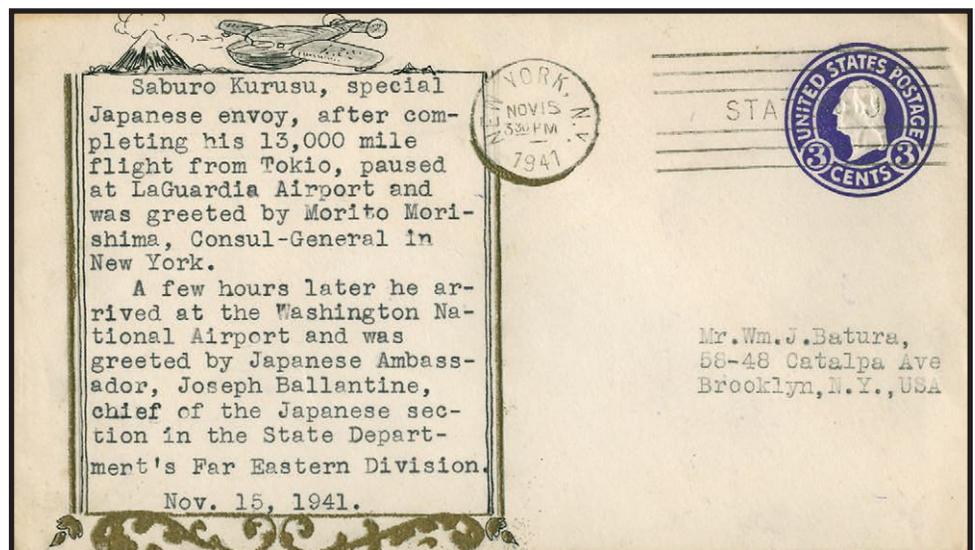


Attempting to bolster the U.S. Far East Air Forces.

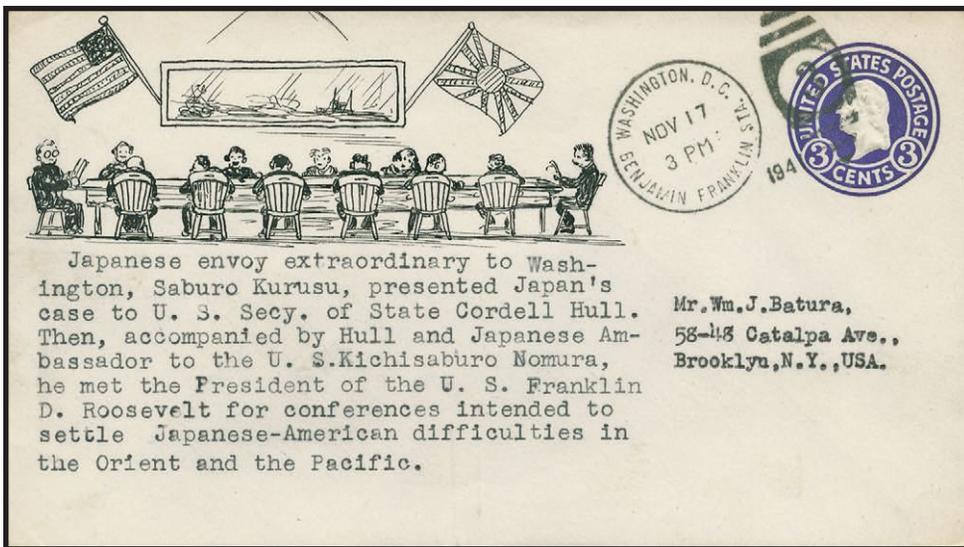
Negotiations continued throughout the days before Pearl Harbor, with Japan sending Saburo Kuruusu to Washington as special envoy to assist long-suffering Admiral Kichisaburo Nomura in their personal Mission Impossible.

deterrence as insulting provocations.

Negotiations continued throughout the days before Pearl Harbor, with Japan sending Saburo Kuruusu to Washington as special envoy to assist long-suffering Admiral Kichisaburo Nomura in their personal Mission Impossible — perhaps Japan would agree to move her troops from South to North Indo-China; perhaps it would recognize the government of



Japan's "Special Envoy" comes to Washington.



Japanese envoy extraordinary to Washington, Saburo Kurusu, presented Japan's case to U. S. Secy. of State Cordell Hull. Then, accompanied by Hull and Japanese Ambassador to the U. S. Kichisaburo Nomura, he met the President of the U. S. Franklin D. Roosevelt for conferences intended to settle Japanese-American difficulties in the Orient and the Pacific.

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Presenting Japan's case.

Chiang Kai-Shek; perhaps in return the United States would supply Japan with a million tons of aviation fuel each year and ensure a supply of raw materials from the Dutch East Indies.

Batura produced two typed and pictorial event covers to mark these final days of talks. The first, machine-canceled November 15 in New York City, featured the arrival of spe-

cial envoy Kurusu "after completing his 13,000 mile flight from Tokio." The second, hand-canceled November 17 in Washington, DC, featured an inked drawing of negotiators at a long conference table ("Kurusu ... presented Japan's case to U.S. Secy. of State Cordell Hull"), with flags of the two nations on the wall behind them. The typed text explained that the intention of the conference was "to settle Japanese-American difficulties in the Orient and Pacific."

No settlement was possible: Admiral Nagumo's First Air Fleet sailed east on November 25 (Washington dateline) on its mission

to Pearl Harbor. The rest is history and history's excellent accompanist, event covers.

Acknowledgments

My thanks go to Ted Bahry for the loan of his collection of Batura covers, and to Alan Warren, Sally Levit, and David Zubatsky for their help in finding Batura vital statistics.

Endnotes

1. Lawrence Sherman, *United States Patriotic Covers of World War II* (Chicago: Chicago Collectors Club, 1999), pp. 35-36; Sherman, *United States Patriotic Envelopes of World War II* (Cary, IL: James E. Lee Publishing, 2006), p. 63..
2. Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 241.
3. Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II. Volume I, The Battle of the Atlantic, 1939-1943* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1947), pp. 80-81.
4. Weinberg, p. 252.
5. Weinberg, p. 246.

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. He is a life member of APS, APRL, and MPHS.

An extensive chronological table describing Batura's seventy-seven known covers can be found online in the Bonus Content for the April issue at www.stamps.org/AP-Album.

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