

20TH CENTURY HISTORICAL POSTAL HISTORY

by Tom Fortunato

A 2025 presentation for the
Rochester Philatelic Association



Introduction

The Fédération Internationale de Philatélie (FIP) defines postal history as, “material carried by, and related to, official, local or private mails,” dealing with the mail routes, rates, and services offered by postal authorities.

But per the FIP, there’s another way to look at such material. Postal history can be examined in a broader sense through “the interaction of commerce and society”, i.e. in the historical context and times that the item was mailed.

Here are a few examples of 20th century material and their place in history from a one-frame exhibit on the subject.

Presented Here in Chronological Order...

- **1906 San Francisco Earthquake**
- **The Titanic**
- **Peace Treaty in Versailles**
- **Lucky Lindy**
- **The Hindenburg Disaster**
- **The U.S. in World War II**
- **Birth of the United Nations**
- **Remnants of the Cold War**
- **Champion of Liberty**
- **Kennedy Dead**
- **Man on the Moon**
- **Vietnam United**
- **The Panama Canal**
- **Las Islas Malvinas**
- **Challenger**
- **Baltic Freedom**

1906 San Francisco Earthquake

The first rumblings came in the early morning hours of April 18, 1906. At its peak, tremors were estimated to range from 7.9 to 8.3 on the yet to be devised Richter scale, shaking San Francisco and environs first for 48 seconds, then continuing the rest of day. Destruction from the quake and resulting fire cost \$350 million and 503 lives, displacing 200,000 residents.



View north east from Nob Hill. Source: F.A. Webster, "View album San Francisco Earthquake and Fire Ruins"

1906 San Francisco Earthquake

The San Francisco Post Office was one of the few buildings, “shaken but not stirred!” Did the cover here postmarked 10 PM on April 17 from the Bank of California receive its scars from the quake? It arrived at its destination of Hamburg 17 days later on May 4 per the backstamp.

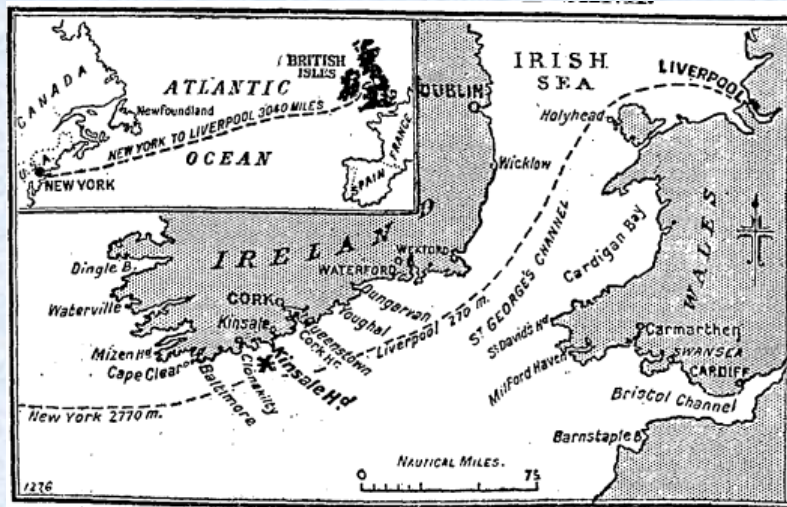


The R.M.S. Titanic sank off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland and into history on the morning of April 15, 1912. The cover to be shown here is truly one that “missed the boat,” and thankfully so. The pride of the White Star Line was to make its initial trans-Atlantic crossing in mid-March. Retrofitting of many of its amenities caused holdups at dry-dock in Belfast, leaving there April 2 and delaying its Southampton departure until April 10.

[illegible]

The Titanic

In anticipation of its original March departure, French postal workers were busy collecting mail scheduled for pick up during the Titanic's stop at Cherbourg. Some of this mail was stamped "TITANIC" and bagged for the expected journey. When news of a delay was known, a decision was made to put the mail on other sailing vessels. Here is one of 23 known covers.



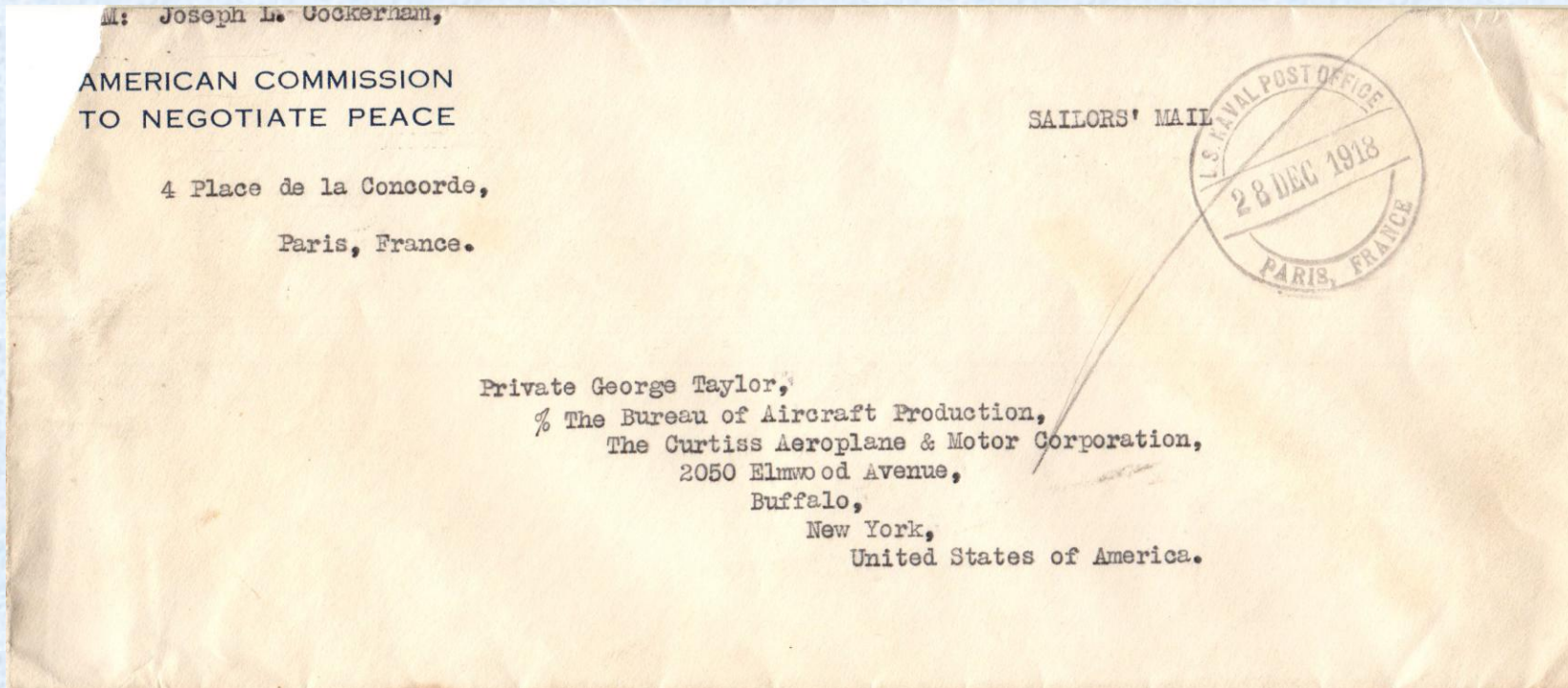
Routing of this cover:

- posted March 3 at an undistinguishable locale
- receiving backstamp in Paris March 4 at 4:30
- probable crossing- RMS Lusitania, Liverpool to New York, Saturday, March 9 to Friday, March 15, with a brief stop in Cherbourg, France
- Washington backstamp Monday, March 18 2 PM
- private receiving mark, Tuesday, March 19



Peace Treaty in Versailles

The “war to end all wars” fighting ended November 11, 1918 with the signing of the armistice. Americans were in the forefront of the peace negotiations to foster a secure and just settlement ending the war. This cover, postmarked Paris, December 28, 1918, was mailed by Joseph L. Cockernam, making plans for the Versailles Peace Conference held shortly thereafter from January 12-June 28, 1919.



Lucky Lindy

Charles Lindbergh and the “Spirit of Saint Louis” proved that uniting the continents by air was possible. His non-stop flight between New York and Paris took place May 20-21, 1927. Lindbergh’s return to the U.S. started with a ticker-tape parade in New York City to triumphant crowds, followed by promotional flights stateside and overseas.

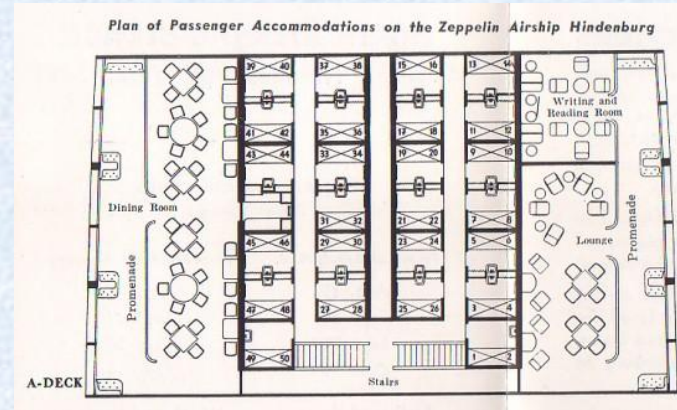


Souvenir covers were prepared for most of them, many bearing the US airmail stamp issued June 18, 1927 in his honor.

August 15, 1927
Lindburgh Day
special flight of CAM 2
St. Louis to Chicago route

The Hindenburg Disaster

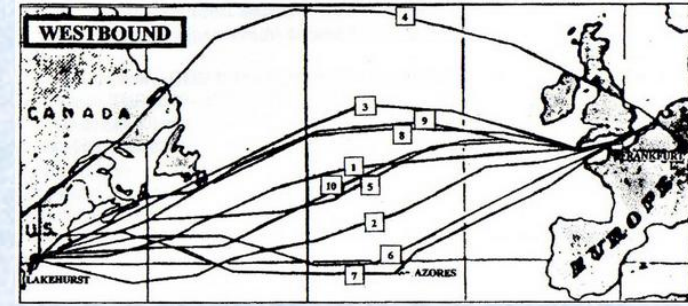
Named after the former German president, the airship “Hindenburg” in 1933 was the largest and most impressive of the dirigibles. It was designed with speed in mind, despite its diameter of 135 feet, length of 804 feet, and multiple 21-foot wooden propellers. At a top speed of 84 miles per hour, it could outrun trans-Atlantic ocean liners with ease. The twenty-five passenger cabins were deluxe in every sense.



Before beginning its trans-Atlantic season for 1937, a shakedown cruise was planned to travel within the German state, starting in Frankfurt May 1. Souvenir covers were prepared in advance for the brief tour around the country. At the last minute, the proving flight was cancelled.

The Hindenburg Disaster

This cover made the trip on the initial leg of its 63rd and final journey. On May 3, 36 paying passengers and the crew of 61 departed Fredrickshaffen, Germany, for New York City. Sacks of the proving flight mail were dropped over the city of Cologne (backstamped accordingly) later that day. The Hindenburg reached New York at 6 AM on May 6, but couldn't land because of headwinds. It was in the process of landing at Lakehurst, NJ, when it suddenly burst into flames, killing 13 passengers and 22 crew, ending its 78-hour and 8-minute flight.



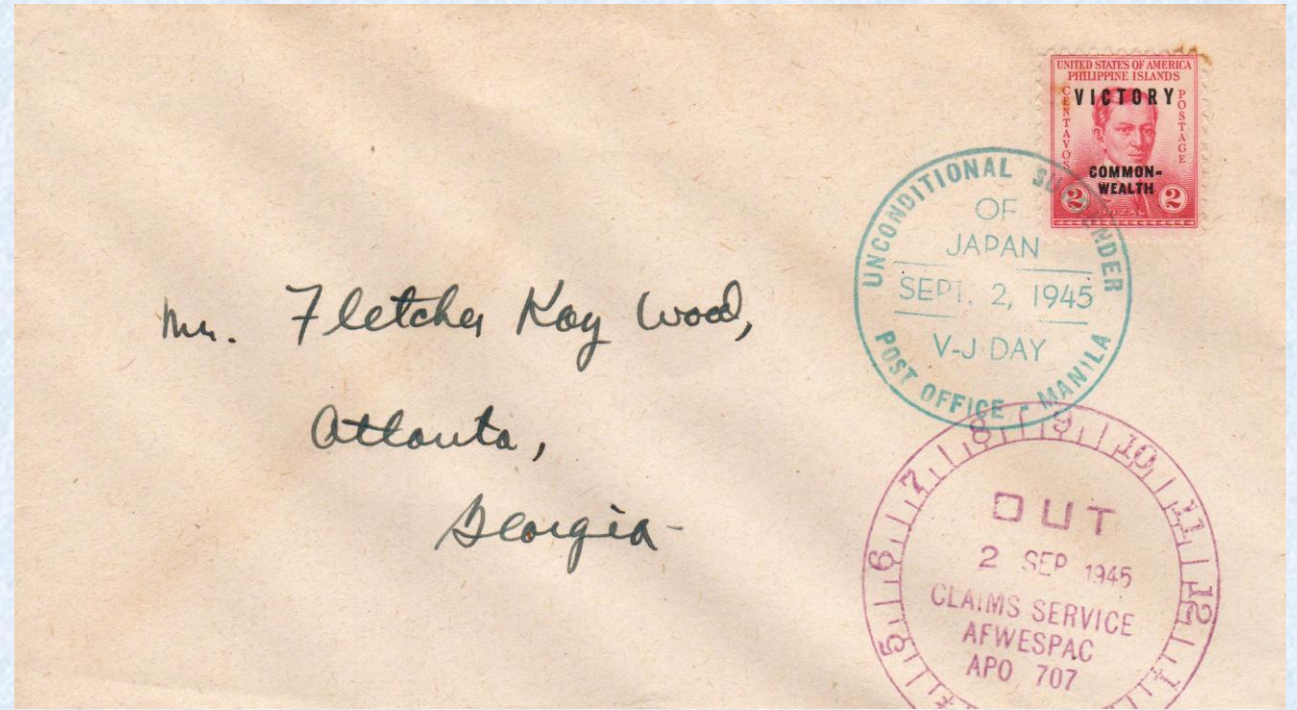
Boxed auxiliary mark: "Due to the cancellation of the Germany trip, mail drop during the North America trip."

The U.S. in World War II

Who doesn't know of the "day that will live in infamy?" December 7, 1941 marked the entry of the U.S. in the Second World War, as the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor near Honolulu, Hawaii. Congress declared war on Japan and its allies the next day, and mail routes quickly disappeared. The war officially ended on VJ-Day, September 2, 1945.



Dec 15, 1941 Honolulu to Peking, service suspended, censored



Sept 2, 1945 Manila to Atlanta, unconditional surrender cancel from Army Forces Western Pacific APO 707 Luzon-Camp Rizal

Birth of the United Nations

The Allied powers laid the groundwork for an international organization for peace as early as the Moscow and Tehran Conferences of 1943. Framed after the concept of the defunct League of Nations, but with greater authority, the United Nations came into being.



Representatives of 50 nations signed the Charter formally establishing the UN on June 26, 1945 at the Veteran's Memorial Opera House in San Francisco. It contained 111 Articles outlining the organization's structure and purposes. Actually, five Charters were signed that day, one of each in the official languages of English, French, Spanish, Russian, and Chinese. When not on special display elsewhere, these documents remain housed in the U.S. National Archives in Washington, DC.

Birth of the United Nations

Headquarters for the UN was to be New York City. While construction was underway, offices were established for the various commissions and subgroups. Facilities were scattered among a dozen sites within a 20-mile radius of the city. The largest temporary complex was in Lake Success, Long Island. Shuttle buses carried staff and mail among these sites.



Remnants of the Cold War

Westernmost “Pacific Barrier Flights” from Midway Island were the first line of warning that a Cold War invasion was beginning. Missions, part of the overall “Airborne Early Warning Barrier Squadron” headquartered at the Barber’s Point Naval Air Station in Hawaii, extended the DEW (Distant Early Warning) Line protecting the North American continent.



the central Pacific will be applied to all outgoing mail in mid-January, according to U.S. Navy reports.

An exact date for issuance of the cachet cannot be given since it is not known precisely on what date the flight will be made.

However, interested collectors may send self-addressed stamped envelopes to: Postal Officer, U.S. Naval Station, Navy No. 3080, c/o Fleet Post Office, San Francisco, Calif. All letters must be received before Jan. 6.

The cachet will honor the 10,000th flight by Airborne Early Warning Barrier Squadron, Pacific, home-based at the Naval Air Station, Barber's Point, Hawaii. The Pacific Barrier is an extension of the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line which protects the continent of North America from surprise enemy attack.

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Remnants of the Cold War

Stateside “protection” came from a variety of inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) bearing nuclear weapons. The deterrent policy known as MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) was openly known. Minuteman missiles were just one of the weapons.



Champion of Liberty

Philately often reflected political differences. Even U.S. stamps played a propaganda role.

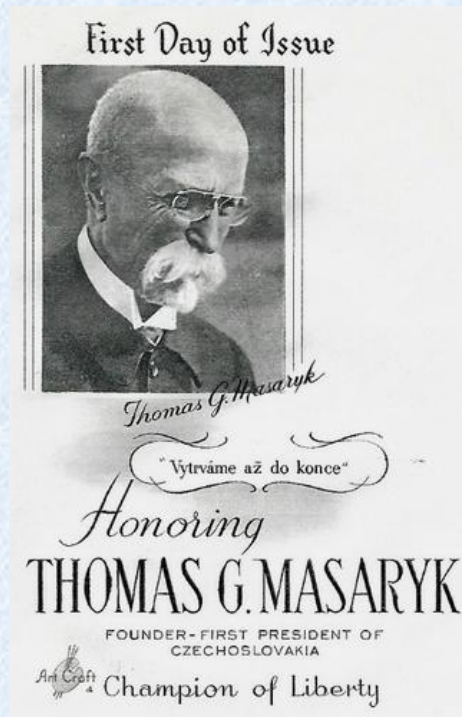
At the outbreak of World War I, Tomas Garrigue Masaryk fled abroad, raising funds in the United States for the Czech cause, and in post-revolutionary Russia organized the Czech Legion, an independent Czech army composed largely of former prisoners of war to fight the Austro-Hungarians. He became the founder and first President of the Republic of Czechoslovakia, serving from 1918 to 1935.

As an Iron Curtain country decades later, the Soviet Union's control over Czechoslovakia was total. They portrayed Masaryk as an enemy of the state and of communism. His writings were banned; his name was removed from streets and monuments in his honor were melted down.



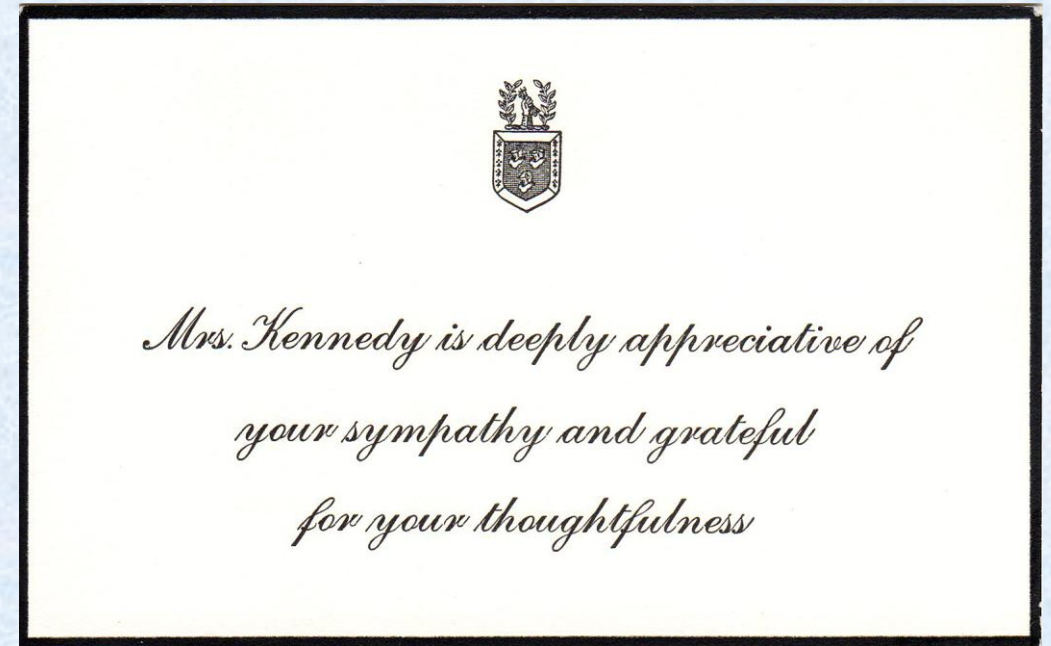
Champion of Liberty

On March 7, 1960, the U.S. postally honored Masaryk issuing 4 cent and 8 cent stamps initiating the "Champion of Liberty" series. In protest, the Czech government refused most mail with the stamp, applying a "non-admis" (not admissible) sticker and "retour" handstamp, returning it back to the sender. Mailed April 21, 1960, the 2 oz. cover below reached Prague on May 6 (per the backstamp) and made its way back to Cleveland, Ohio.



Kennedy Dead

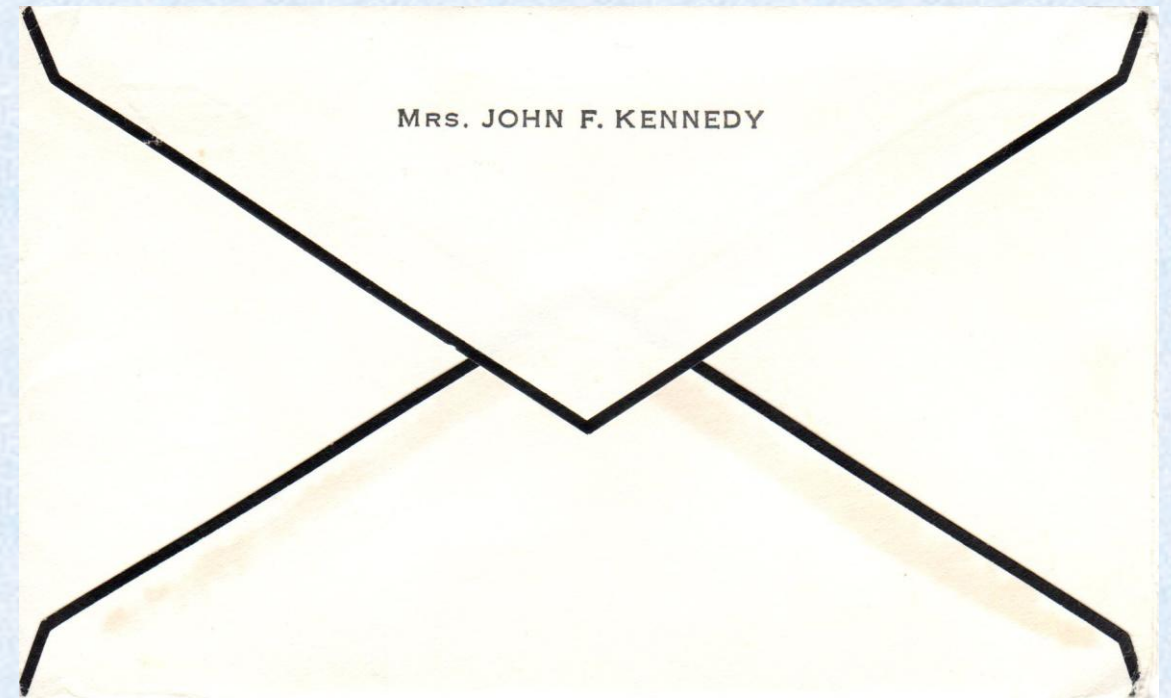
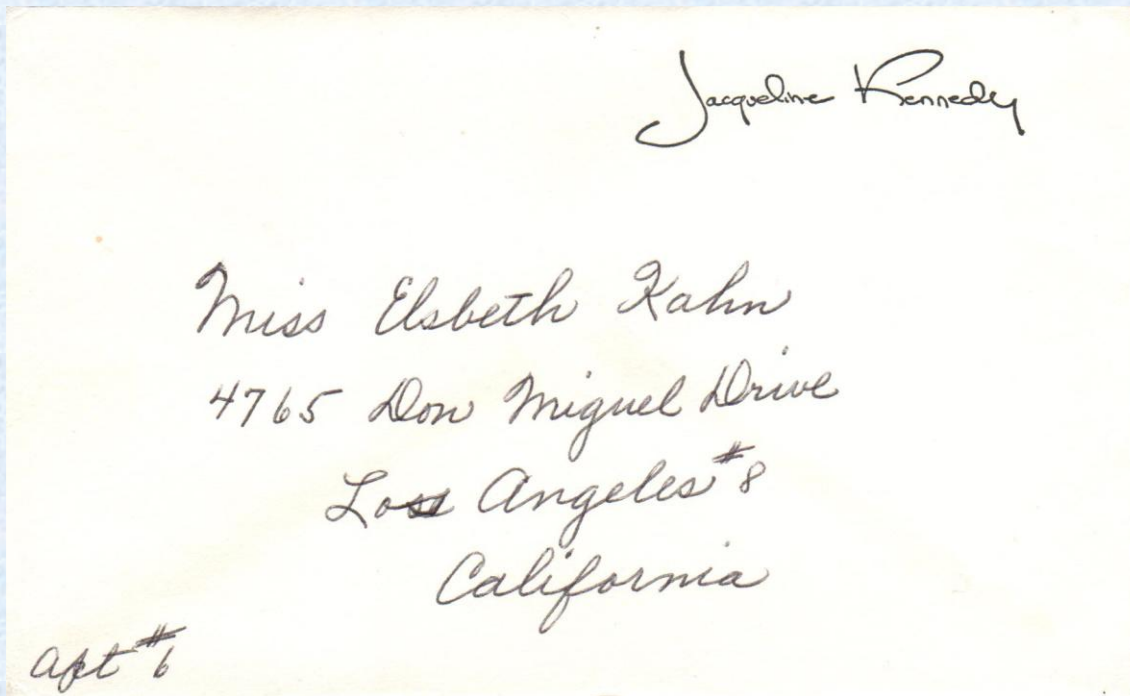
The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas on November 23, 1963 shocked the world and changed the course of history. While in office, the President has free-franking privilege, allowing mail to be sent without postage. This courtesy is extended to widows of presidents as well, which began with an act of Congress on the death of Abraham Lincoln.



enclosure

Kennedy Dead

The signature of the widow must appear on the envelope. Older covers bear actual signatures, while latter day examples are mostly printed. Jacqueline Kennedy sent out thousands of acknowledgements to those who sent her family condolences. Several varieties are known, all with a traditional black border, mailed in mostly hand addressed envelopes by staffers.



Man on the Moon

Those who were around in July 1969 can never forget the excitement the Apollo 11 mission to the moon in the U.S. and around the world.

Apollo 11 climaxed a challenge set forth by President Kennedy years before to send man to the moon and safely return him to Earth. That goal was magnified with his death, and NASA set forth to accomplish it. The decade progressed through Mercury, Gemini and Apollo launches leading to the historic first lunar landing. Neil Armstrong's first extra-terrestrial steps were taken July 20, 1969.



Man on the Moon

All three astronauts, Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins splashed down into the Pacific Ocean near Samoa on July 24. The primary recovery vessel, the U.S.S. Hornet, had many other support ships assisting with the rescue of crew and cargo, including the U.S.S. Goldsboro.



Vietnam United

The history of Vietnam is a long one. Formerly French Indochina, the region was occupied by the Japanese throughout World War II.

Ho Chi Minh declared the “Democratic Republic of Vietnam” on September 2, 1945 from Hanoi. The French government recognized this de-facto free state until fighting erupted in 1946 pro-French and independence forces.

The 1954 defeat of the French forces at Dien Bien Phu led to their final ouster. The country was partitioned near the 17th parallel on July 21 of that year. The North declared themselves as a communist republic, and the South remained a French state until a 1955 referendum vote for independence.



Vietnam United

The Communist dream of a united Vietnam never died, despite the massive involvement of U.S., Australian and other forces in the 1960's and 70's. A 1974 Paris peace treaty negotiated and signed by Henry Kissinger only slowed the North's insurrection against the South, and after a brief respite the fighting resumed.

The Republic of Vietnam's capital, Saigon, fell April 29, 1975. This cover was mailed that day, never reaching its final destination. Few will forget the scenes of the American Embassy evacuation and panic that ensued. The south was fully incorporated into Communist state on July 2, 1975.

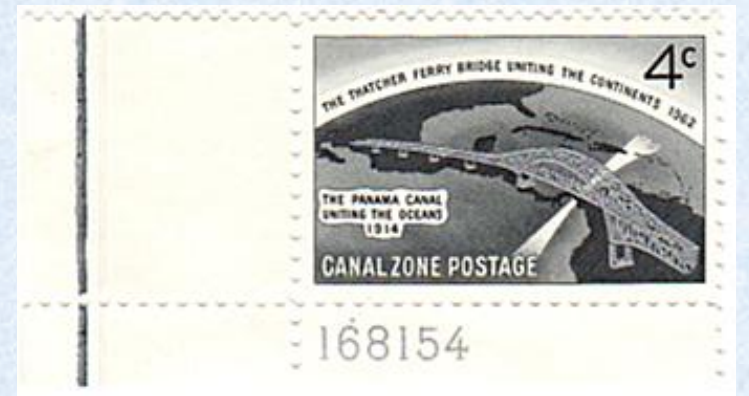


April 29, 1975, Syracuse to Saigon, mailed hours after Saigon's fall.

The Panama Canal

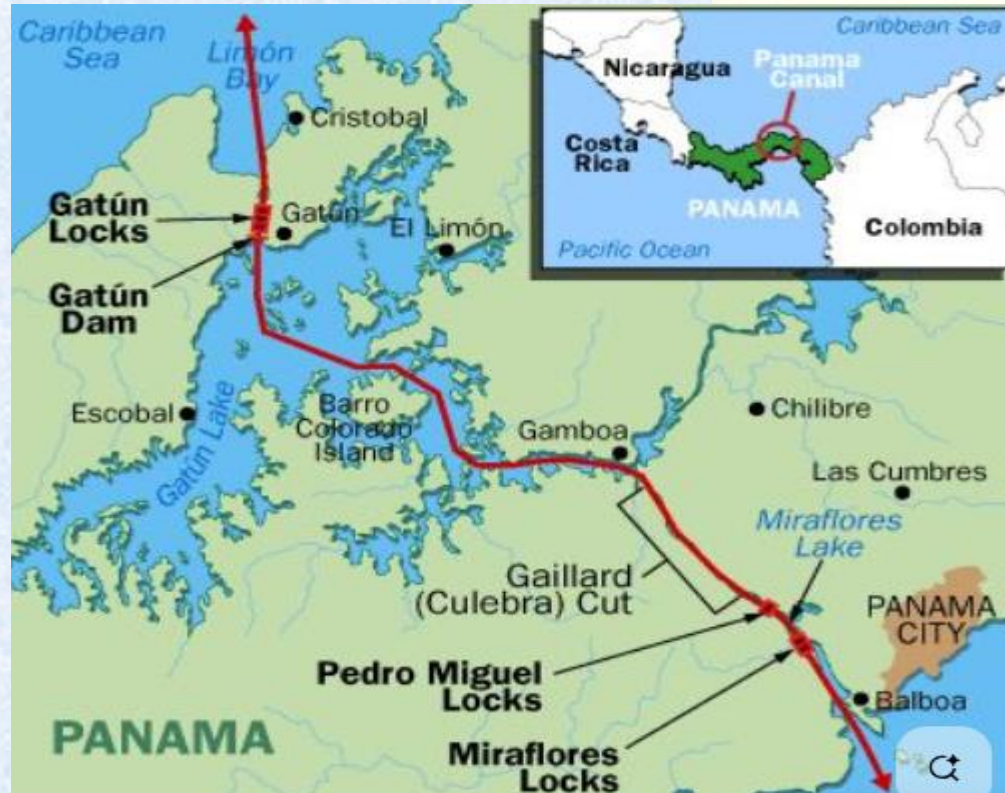
Stretching from Cristobol in the in the northwest to Balboa, some 50 miles to the southeast, the U.S. Canal Zone had a vivid political as well as postal history. Its ten-mile-wide path of land bridged the Caribbean and the Pacific, covering 553 square miles. Some called it the eighth wonder of the world.

The 1903 treaty signed by a young Republic of Panama and the U.S. government gave America full “use, control and occupation” over the region. Canal Zone postal operations began as a way of raising the morale of the thousands of U.S. workers reshaping the land.



The Panama Canal

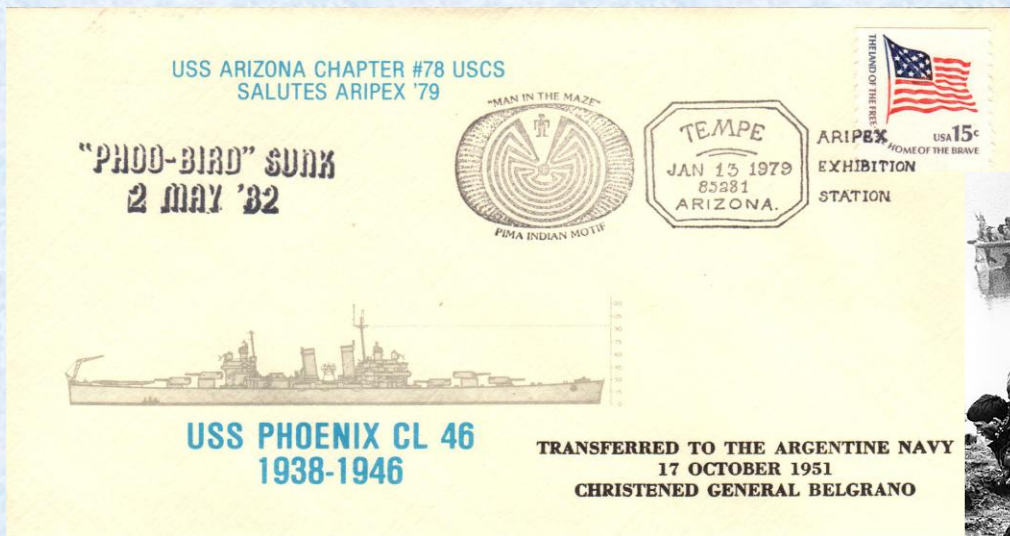
It all came to a close 74 years later when Presidents Jimmy Carter and Omar Torrijos penned a deal in 1977 transferring the land back to the Republic of Panama. Once ratified by both governments, provisions of the treaty were implemented, including the closing down of the Canal Zone Postal Service on September 30, 1979.



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Las Islas Malvinas

Argentineans invaded the Islas Malvinas (Falkland Islands) on April 2, 1982. A nationalistic junta thought the time was right to reclaim their “rights” over the 4,700 square mile area. The British sent an armada of vessels to regain the territory. Casualties included the Argentine Navy’s “General Belgrano,” formerly the U.S.S. Phoenix, sunk by a British torpedo May 2, killing 323 sailors. A British force of 4,000 landed at San Carlos and Ajax Bay on May 21, recapturing the capital of Port Stanley on June 14.



Las Islas Malvinas

This cover posted from BAT's Faraday Base on March 2, 1982 reached Port Stanley the day before the invasion, April 1 (per backstamp). The Post Office came under immediate occupation, and all mail was impounded. The occupation forces postmark was used for the first time on April 6. Falkland postal employees applied the mark, but in defiance inverted the date as shown! This cover reached its destination on April 17.



Challenger

Here's one of the 260,000 covers flown on the space shuttle Challenger on STS-8. The mission launched the night of August 30, 1983 and landed on September 5, 1983, travelling 2.5 million miles. Proceeds from their sale using the new \$9.35 eagle Express Mail next day service stamp partially funded Chicago's Ameripex'86 international philatelic exhibition.



Challenger

Three years later on January 28, 1986, space shuttle mission 51L blasted off from Cape Canaveral only to fall to Earth minutes later. Such launches had become so routine that most television networks never carried it live. Shuttle Challenger crew numbered seven, including veteran commander Dick Scobee and two women, Christa McAuliffe (a teacher) and Judy Resnik. After an exhaustive investigation, the cause of the disaster was blamed on cracked rubber O-rings in the side booster rockets.



Baltic Freedom

The breakup of the former Soviet Union republics caused havoc for the postal authorities of the newly independent nations. Provisional stamps were created to fill the need from whatever materials were available.

Estonia, one of the three Baltic republics, declared freedom from Soviet domination on August 20, 1991. Definitive stamps depicting the nation's coat of arms were issued shortly thereafter. The onset of inflation over the following months lead to higher postage rates and a shortage of stamps.

The head of Tartu's post office, Jaan Ojaste, decided to make provisional stamps from the only material still in abundance-white, light blue and dark blue computer punch tape-200/roll. Plans received the go-ahead from the country's postal director in chief, Ants Litvinof.



Baltic Freedom

Reportedly 16 different denominations were “punched” using the Toravere Observatory’s computer system ranging from 3.60 to 104.70 rubles. All received a red “TARTU 19129100 EESTI” control precancel, referring to December 19, 1997, their first day of validity. They were not sold to the public, but strictly controlled by clerks behind post office windows who affixed them to envelopes and packages directly. When used, an additional black cancel was added noting its mailing date. Valid 12/19/91-06/30/93.



Mailed June 19, 1992 from Tartu to Rochester. Last day of old currency use. Rates last updated on March 16, 1992. Overseas basic letter rate of 39 rubels paid by:
1.50+2.50 definitives of 1991
6.00+9.00 punched strips
P.P.E definitive (20.00 value)

Reference:

<http://estonia.jkaptein.nl/republicnew3.html>



Note the error in the black postmark, reading 82 rather than 92 as the year.

Thanks for watching!
Instead of
“historical postal history”
perhaps these items are
better classified as
“historic philately”!