My Titanic Cover that Missed the Boat

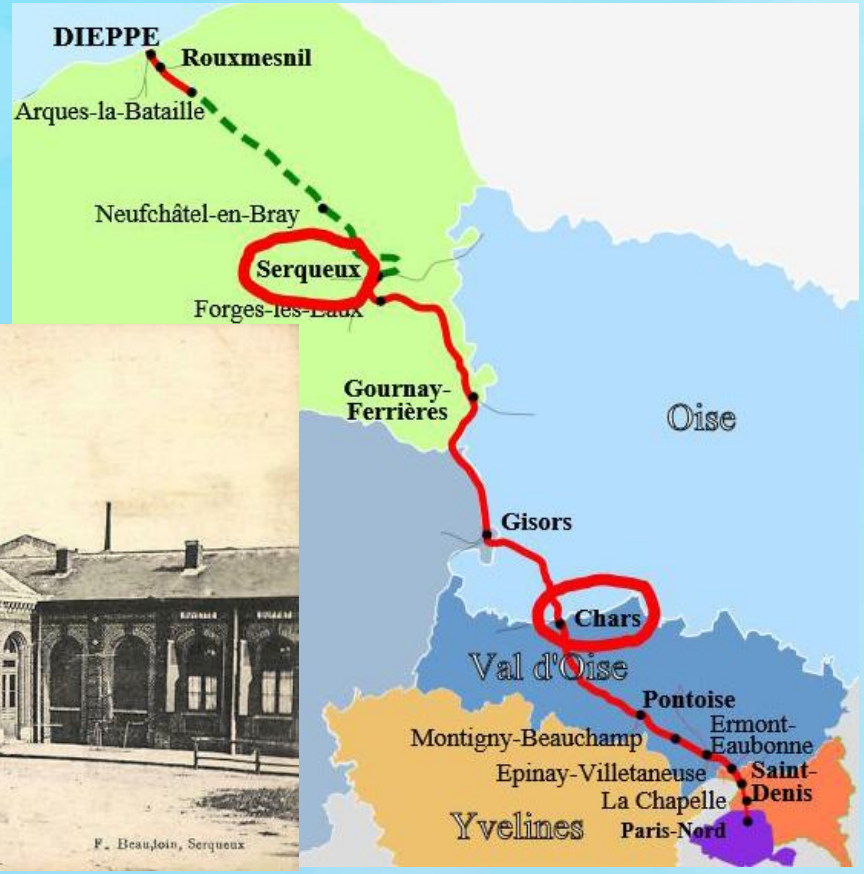
by Tom Fortunato

Updated January, 2025

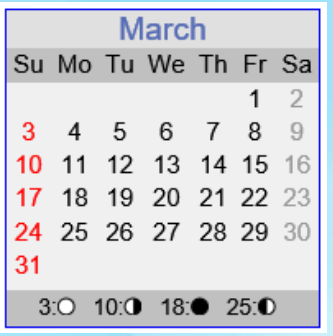
This story began back in 1986 when I attended the annual STEPEX Stamp Show near Elmira, NY. A sign on a dealer's box caught my eye—"Better Junk-$10 Each." I started looking over the covers and the one below definitely got my attention.

It was the "TITANIC" mark that got my attention. But why was this cover postmarked in March of 1912, one month before the ship actually set sail? Yes, RMS (Royal Mail Steamship) Titanic was built primarily to transport mail across the Atlantic, but no mail survived its only voyage. The investigation began once I brought it home!

The cover was rather ratty looking, but surprisingly full of dated post, transit and receiving marks. The French scalloped postmarks dated 3/3/12 were used on TPO "Courrier Convoyeur" train mail of that era, here from the short 40-mile Chars to Serqueux line running northwest of Paris.



The back-stamped receiving marks show that this letter ended up in a Paris post office at 4:30 AM the following day, Monday, 3/4/12, arriving in DC a week later.

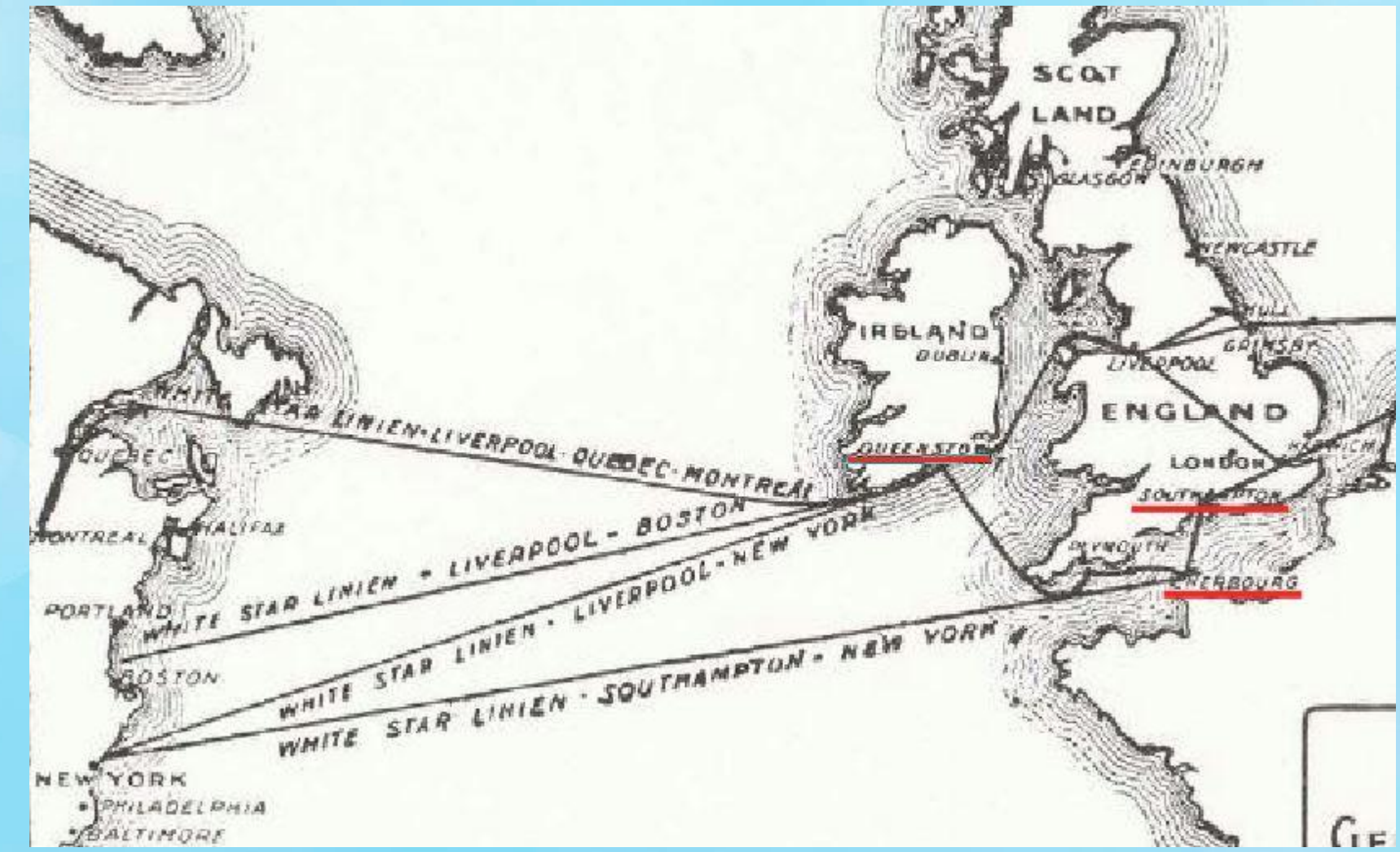


What happened between March 4-18 when it arrived in Washington, DC is supposition, uncovered through 30+ years of detective work!

The letter was franked with 25 centimes, enough for the standard surface letter rate to America. Overseas-bound mail from throughout France was brought to Paris where it was prepared and bagged for transit.

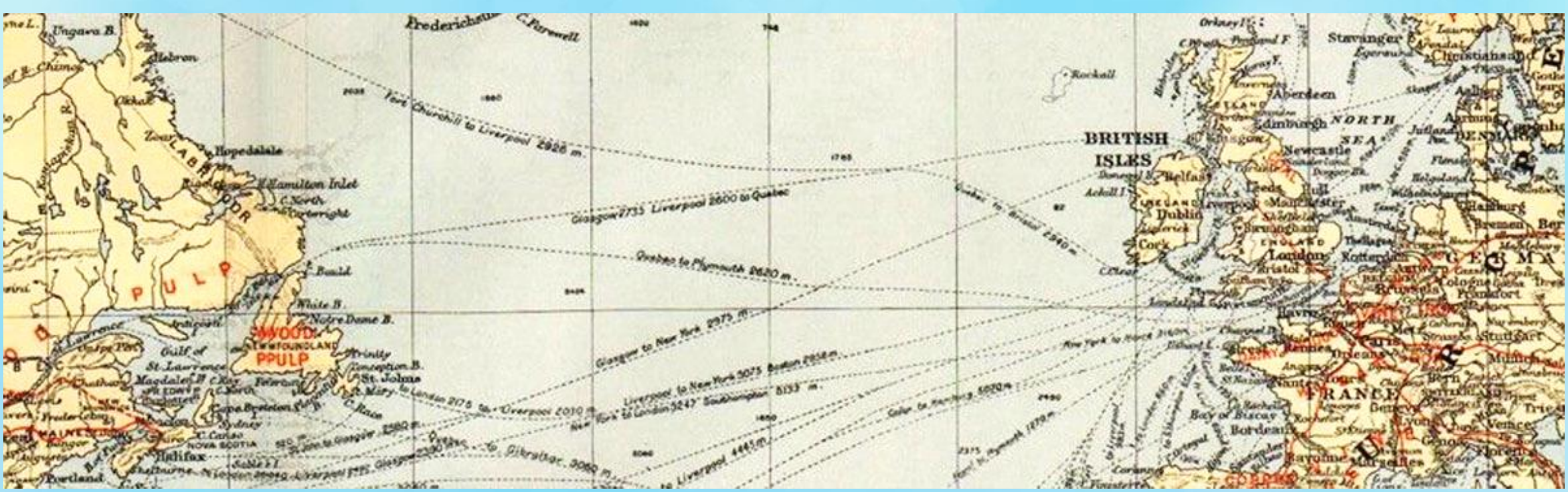
It was common practice to write or stamp the name of the ship on a letter it was to be carried on somewhere on the envelope. The san-serif TITANIC violet marking was proven to be of the same font and size as that used on letters posted on its sister ship, White Star Line's RMS Olympic, by Dutch typographer David van Dalen. It is not certain whether the ship's name was applied to mail at the central Paris collecting station or later at the ship's port of departure.

Various shipping lines had specific ports they docked at. The letter would have left France at Cherbourg if it departed on the White Star Line.



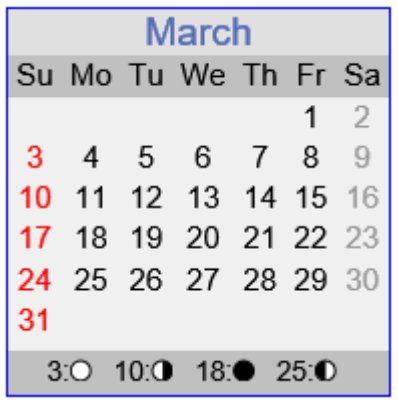
From a Danish travel brochure of 1912 detailing White Star planned routes.

Other trans-Atlantic lines favored other French ports. The North German Lloyd and Hamburg-American Lines preferred Cherbourg; the French CTG line docked at La Havre and Bordeaux.



A typical trans-Atlantic crossing to New York City would have taken 5 days from these major ports, assuming no stopovers, so the cover's DC arrival mark provides a clue. The ship it travelled on probably arrived in New York City on Sunday, March 17, the day before it reached the Washington post office by train per the back-stamp.

From that information we presume the ship should have left its last European port on or before Tuesday, March 12.



Ship arrivals were very well documented in the newspapers of the day. An online search of the "Morton Allan Directory of European Passenger Steamship Arrivals" book covering 1904-1926 resulted in the chart seen here. Most likely the cover departed via Cherbourg: North German Lloyd's "Main," Bremen-Southampton- Cherbourg-New York City.

http://www.cimorelli.com/safe/shipmenu.htm

Return to Menu	Page 1 of 6	Ships Arriving the US During	1912	So

Arrival	Steamer	Line	Area	Port	POD1	POD2	POD3	POD4	POA1
3/15/1912	Ancona	Italia Line	Mediterranean	Mediterranean Ports					New York
3/15/1912	Lusitania	Cunard Line	Britain	Liverpool					New York
3/15/1912	Megantic	White Star Line	Britain	Liverpool					Boston
3/15/1912	Patris	National Greek Line	Greece	Greece					New York
3/15/1912	Prinzess Irene	North German Lloyd	Mediterranean	Mediterranean Ports					New York
3/16/1912	Roma	Fabre Line	Mediterranean	Mediterranean Ports					New York
3/17/1912	Cestrian	Leyland Line	Britain	Liverpool					Boston
3/17/1912	Laconia	Cunard Line	Italy	Italian Ports					New York
3/17/1912	Main	North German Lloyd	Germany	Bremen					New York
3/17/1912	Perugia	Anchor Line	Mediterranean	Mediterranean Ports					New York

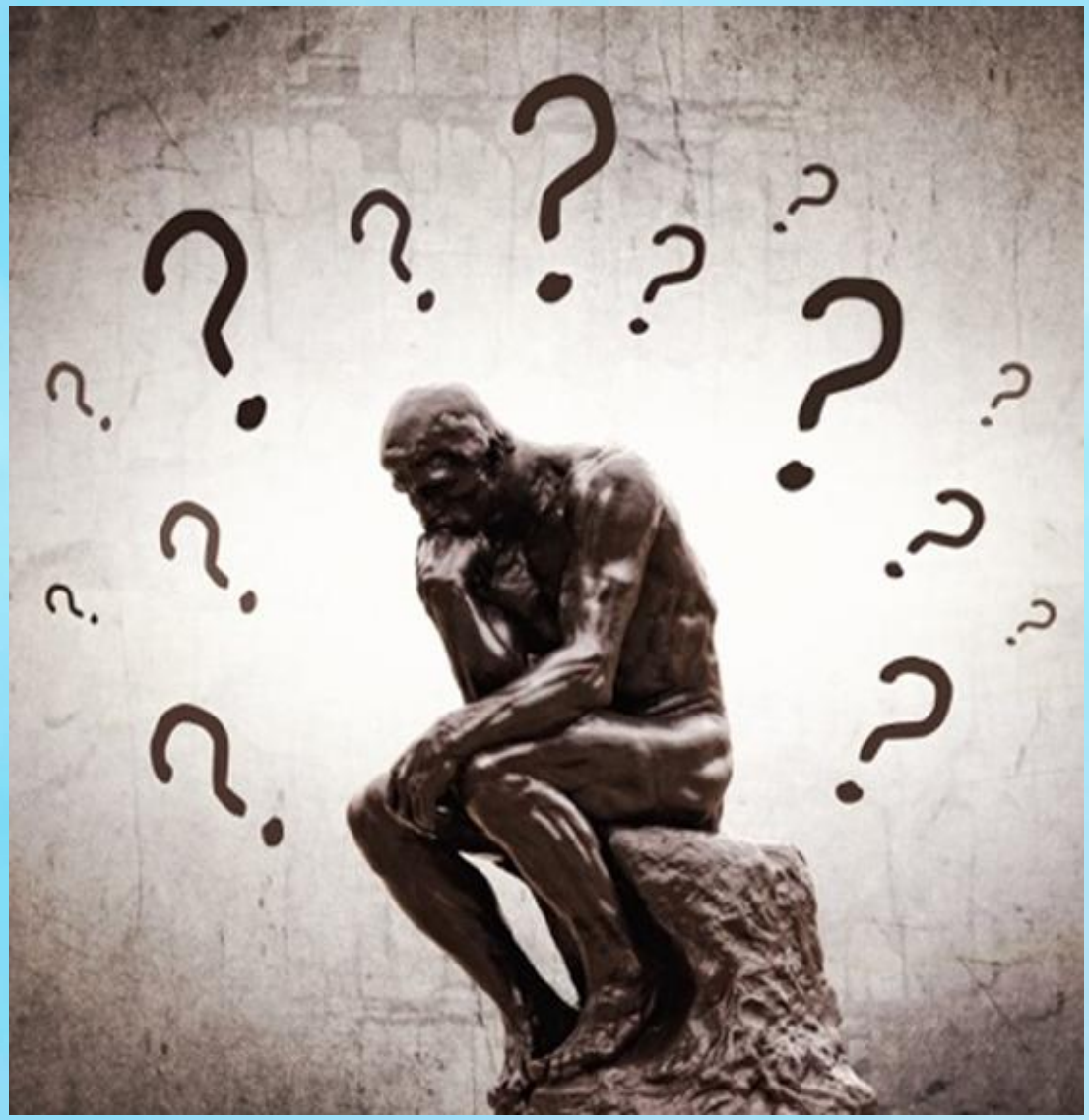
Summarizing the timeline and probable path of this cover…

- **Mailed Sunday, March 3**
- **Arrived Paris, Sunday, March 4 at 4:30 AM**
- **Sent to the port of Cherbourg**
- **Left on North German Lloyd's "Main" (approximately Tuesday, March 12)**
- **Arrival NYC, Sunday, March 17**
- **Arrival Washington, DC, Monday, March 18 at 2 PM**
- **Received Tuesday, March 19**

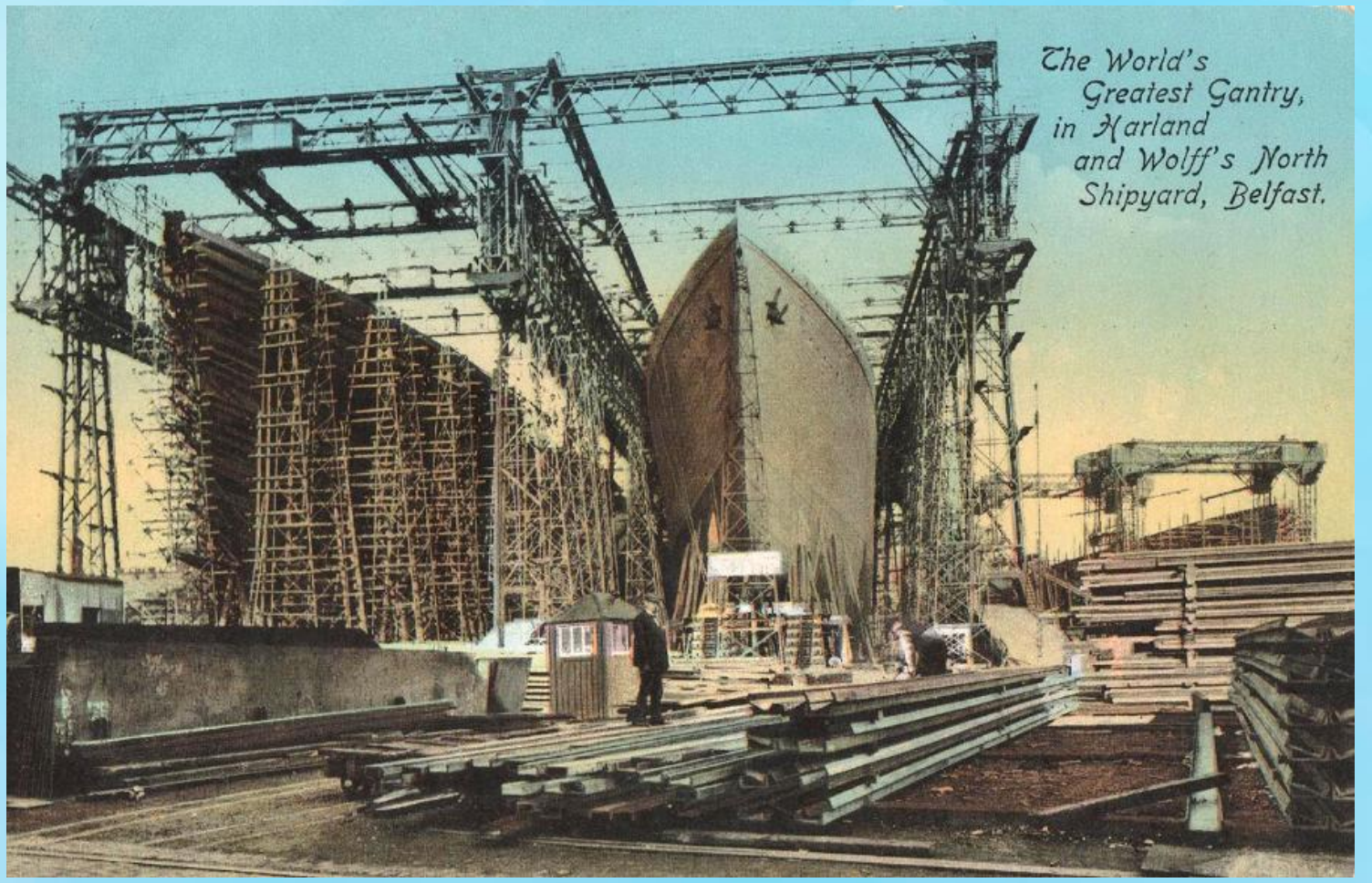
But that's far from the whole story, as questions remained…

- **Why was the Titanic marking on the cover?**
- **Are there similar covers?**
- **What kind of business was this letter sent to?**
- **Why was this TITANIC cover saved?**

Here are some answers!

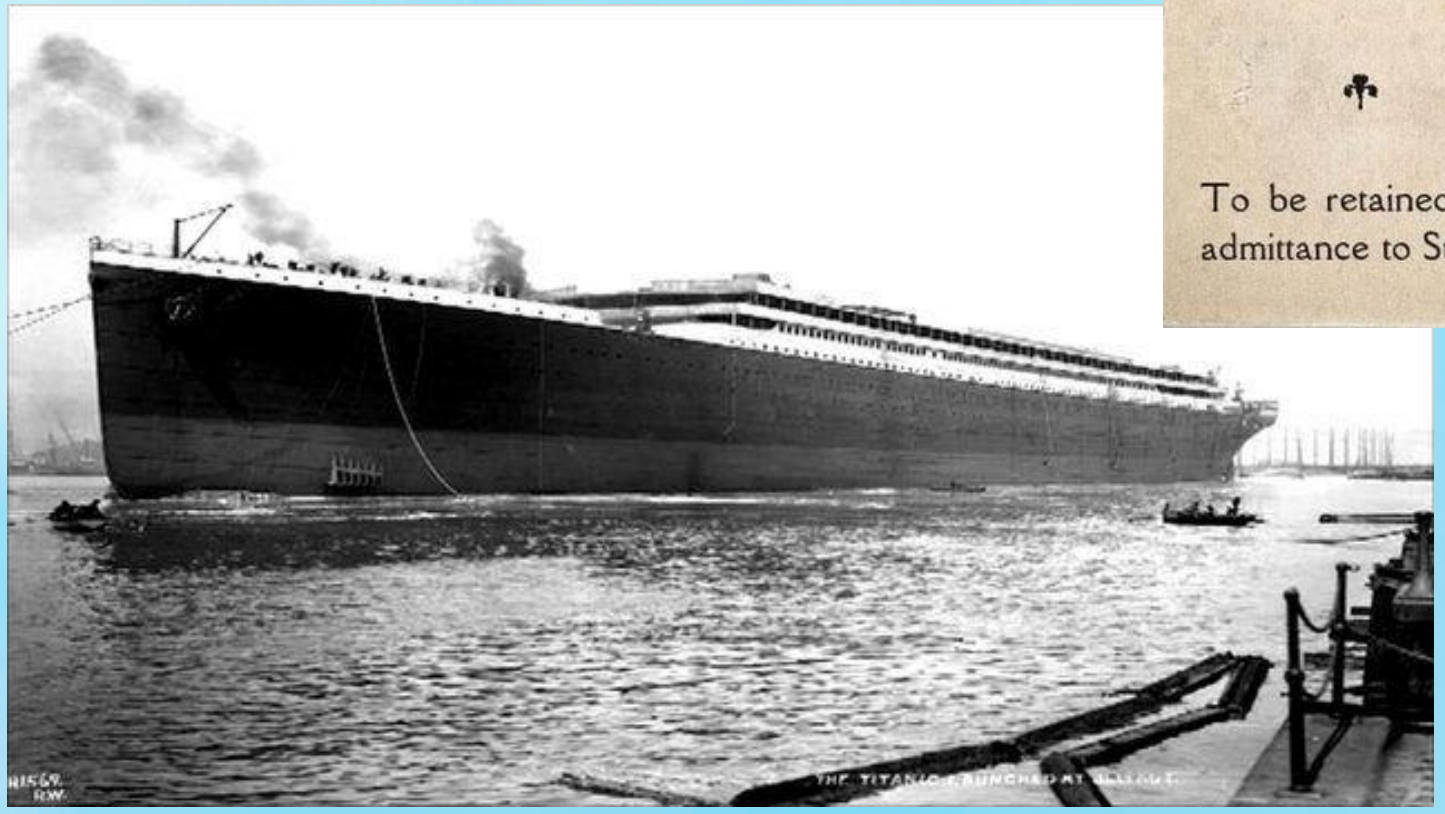


White Star's Olympic and Titanic were built at the Harland and Wolff's North Shipyard in Belfast, Northern Ireland. As no attempt had ever been made to build ships of their size before, it was a learning process.



Titanic's keel was laid on March 31, 1909, three months after that of the slightly smaller Olympic. Over 15,000 men worked on the two three-year side by side. Eight were killed over the three-year process, half the expected total.

Two years later the Titanic was launched, stretching 882.5 feet long and 92.5 feet wide. Official VIP tickets were highly prized as 100,000 people were in attendance.



No. 193

"TITANIC"
Launch.

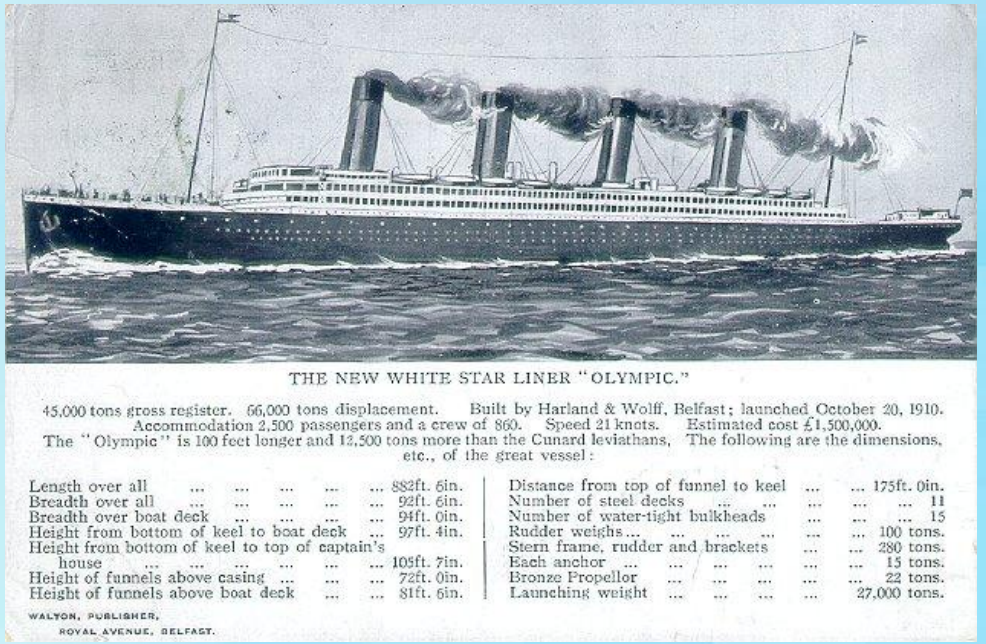
To be retained for admittance to Stand.

No. 193

Launch
OF
White Star Royal Mail Triple-Screw Steamer
"TITANIC"
At BELFAST,
Wednesday, 31st May, 1911, at 12-15 p.m.

TO BE PRESENTED AT GATE.

The 46,328-ton steamship was far from complete, with its internal fittings and famous four smoke stacks yet to be added.



THE NEW WHITE STAR LINER "OLYMPIC."

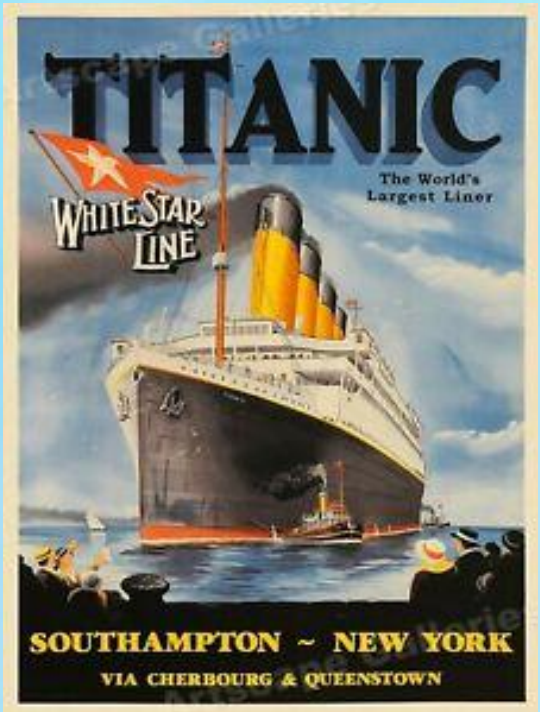
45,000 tons gross register. 66,000 tons displacement. Built by Harland & Wolff, Belfast; launched October 20, 1910. Accommodation 2,500 passengers and a crew of 860. Speed 21 knots. Estimated cost £1,500,000. The "Olympic" is 100 feet longer and 12,500 tons more than the Cunard leviathans. The following are the dimensions, etc., of the great vessel:

Length over all	882ft. 6in.	Distance from top of funnel to keel	175ft. 0in.
Breadth over all	92ft. 6in.	Number of steel decks	11
Breadth over boat deck	94ft. 0in.	Number of water-tight bulkheads	15
Height from bottom of keel to boat deck	97ft. 4in.	Rudder weighs	100 tons.
Height from bottom of keel to top of captain's house	105ft. 7in.	Stern frame, rudder and brackets	280 tons.
Height of funnels above casing	72ft. 0in.	Each anchor	15 tons.
Height of funnels above boat deck	81ft. 6in.	Bronze Propellor	22 tons.
		Launching weight	27,000 tons.

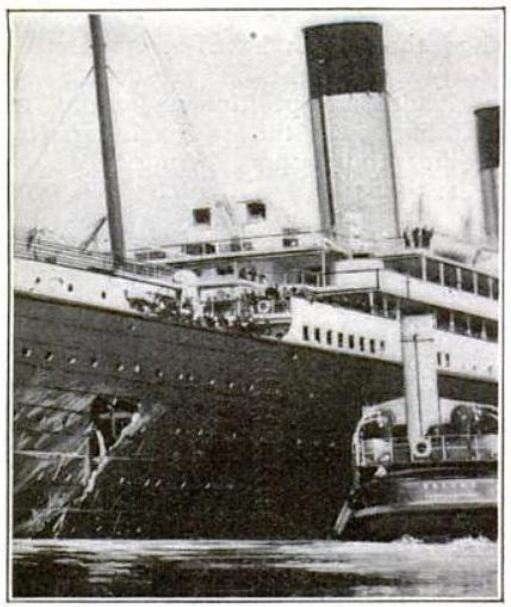
WALTON, PUBLISHER, ROYAL AVENUE, BELFAST.

The Olympic was placed into service shortly after Titanic's launch. Its maiden voyage began June 11, 1911 from Southampton with stops in Cherbourg, France and Queenstown, Ireland before arriving in New York on June 21.

The White Star Line announced its 1912 sailing schedule on September 25 for both the Olympic and Titanic, with its maiden voyage set for March 20, following the same route as its sister ship.



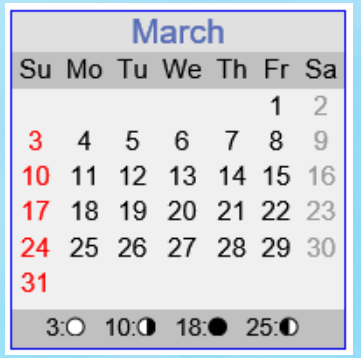
Olympic was about to start its fourth trans-Atlantic crossing to NYC when it collided with HMS Hawke in the Southampton Channel on September 20. The ship returned to the Belfast shipyards for repairs to its propeller shaft, cannibalizing Titanic parts.



The Hole in the "Olympic," the Damage Below the Waterline being Much Greater Than That Above

The Bow of the "Hawke," the Damage being so Great That the Ram Has Been Mashed Flat

A second Olympic collision took place on February 24, 1912 off the coast of Newfoundland. On March 6 Titanic was moved out of dry dock again, seen here, to allow Olympic in. Once again Titanic parts were used.



Titanic's maiden voyage date of March 20 was changed to April 10 presumably because of delays due to the Olympic's troubles.

- **Why was the Titanic marking on the cover?**

One possible explanation is that French postal officials simply missed the date change, assuming it was scheduled to leave March 20. Although marked in error, mail would have been sent on the next available trans-Atlantic ship.

➢ Are there similar covers?

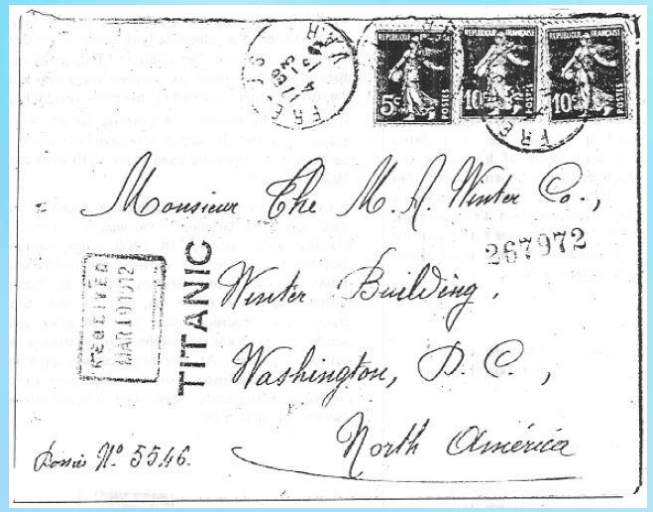
I began to look for other covers with a similar TITANIC mark on them. These were the days before the Internet, so it was slow at first, but a literature search turned up this article by Reg Morris in the 1978 Machine Cancel Society Forum p. 517 titled, "The Sinking of the Titanic."

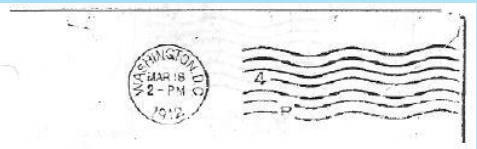
Last Christmas our editor John W. Koontz sent me a present – A French cover illustrated here as Figure 1.

Addressed to Washington, D.C., North America it was sent from Frejus on March 4, 1912 and duly arrived at its destination on March 19. Since the Titanic sank on April 14th/15th the hand stamp Titanic is to say the least, Enigmatic. But it did remind me of the time a few years ago – when I lived in Massachusetts for a brief period. I was a member then of an unusual stamp club – the 906 Stamp Club – which met in the State Penitentiary!

At one of the meetings I was asked whether any Titanic mail was known to have survived. At the next meeting the same enquirer asked, if I could give him details of when such mail – if any existed – would have been postmarked and details of the form of the postmark, date of posting, etc.

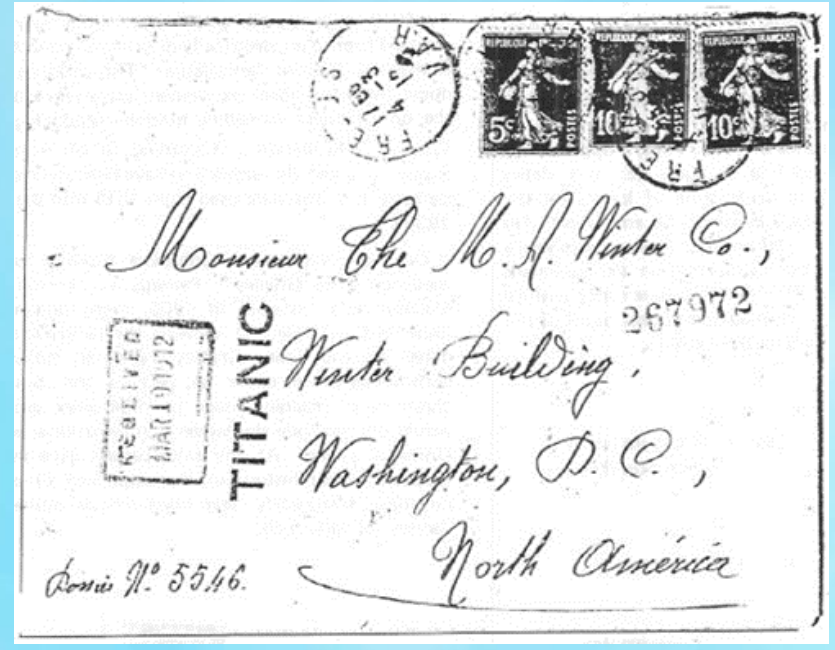
When I subsequently discovered this particular club member in the penitentiary print shop I wondered whether his interest in Titanic mail was purely philatelic! But what has all this got to do with machine cancels? Absolutely nothing! But on the back of the "Titanic" cover is a Washington, D.C. International marking showing a somewhat later date use then that recorded by Art Bond in his "International" handbook. (See Figure 2.)



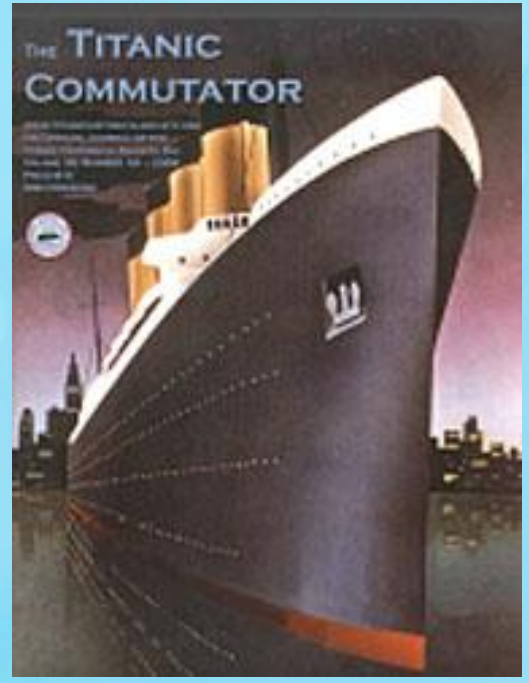


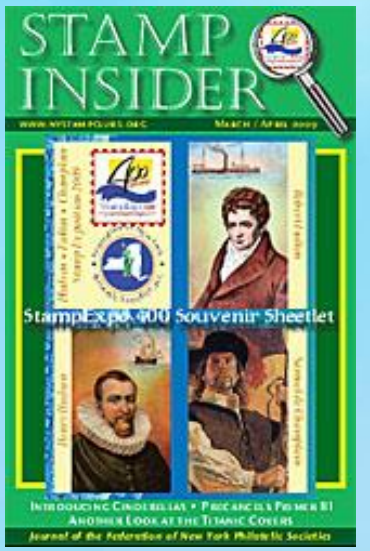
I was floored! There seemed almost *too* much in common with the two covers:

- **Mailed a day apart, March 4 instead of 3, but from Frejus between Cannes and St. Tropez on the southern Mediterranean**
- **Franked with 25 centimes postage**
- **Written to the same business and address**
- **Same Titanic mark in font and size**
- **Handwritten Dossier number on both**
- **Six-digit number stamped on both, same first 4 digits, separated by 58 others**
- **Same Washington, DC receiving mark by type, date and time on the reverse**
- **Same MAR 19 1912 receiving mark**



So there clearly were more covers like mine, but how many? The Internet very much changed everything as it slowly uncovered more information about known covers in publications and auction catalogs. I started writing articles about these in an effort to flush out more. Info was updated or corrected as needed in follow-ups as it became known.



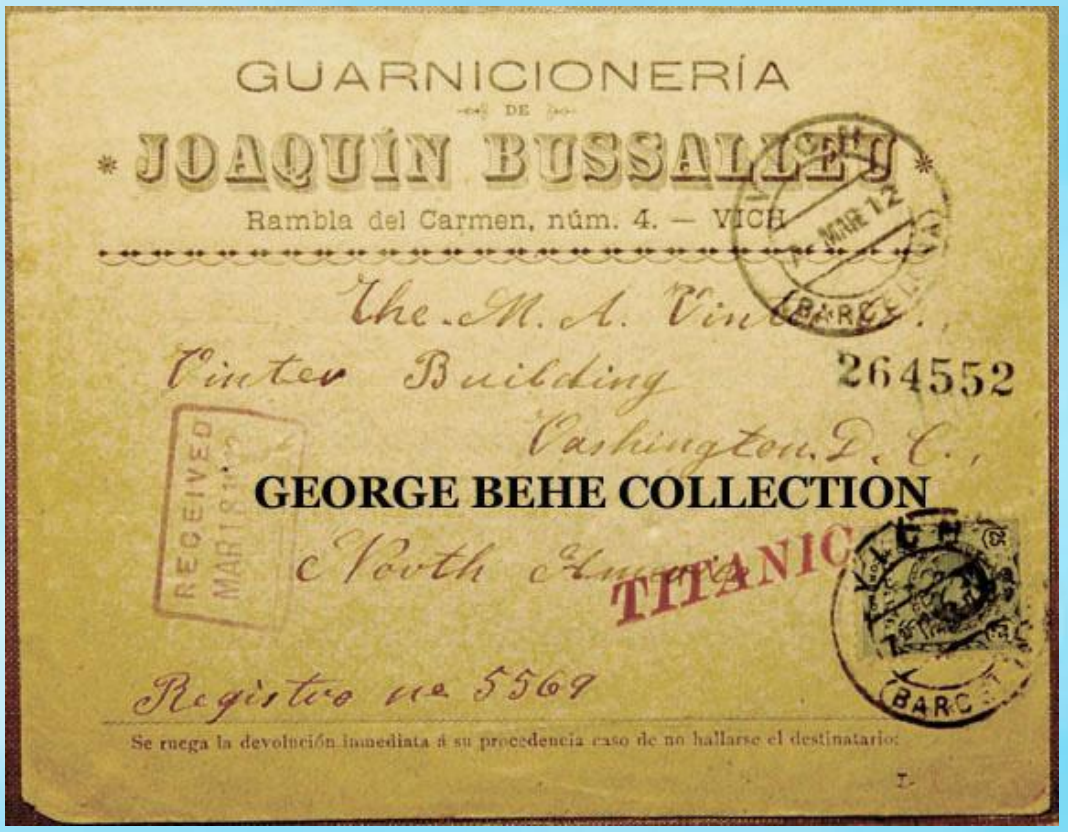


As of January, 2025 twenty-three similar covers have been documented. Here are some of them. All can be viewed online on a website dedicated to them at www.titaniccovers.com. There you'll also find articles, auction lots with prices realized when known, research material and a cover census summary table.

Part of the Summary Table…

Summary Table	Cover #1	#21	#20	#2	#3	#4	#15	#5	#6	#7	#17	#18	#8	#9	#10	#19	#11	#12	#13	#14	#16
Owner/Source	George Behe	Santa Cruz Mi Puerto Web Site	Kelleher 2020	Tom Fortunato, Rochester, NY	The Mystery Box	Spink July 19, 2012 auction The Collector Series 2 Lot #610	Reg Morris	Sandafayre's Hunters Feb 15, 2005 Mail Bid Sale 7105, Lot #7229	Jay Baum, Titanic Hist. Society Mbr, Staten Island, NY	Eric of NJ	Mike Patkin 1	Mike Patkin 2	Das Kleine Little Titanic Museum (Germany)	Sandafayre's January 30, 2001 Mail Bid Sale #550	Eric of NJ (2007 Nutmeg Auction)	Mike Patkin 3	Titanic Museum Indian Orchard, Massachusetts	William R. Simon, Bowie, Maryland	Early American History Auctions	Oliver Langenbach of Quebec	SSTitanic.org
Postmark Date	March 7 (Thursday)	March 3 (Sunday)	March 3 (Sunday)	March 3 (Sunday)	March 3 (Sunday)	March 3 (Sunday)	March 4 (Monday)	March 5 (Tuesday)	March 6 (?) (Wednesday)	March 6 (Wednesday)	March 6 (Wednesday)	March 6 (Wednesday)	March 7 (Thursday)	unreadable	March 8 (Friday)	March 8 (Friday)	March 8 (Friday)	March 13 (Wednesday)	unreadable	March 13 (Wednesday)	March 14 (Thursday)
Country of Origin	Spain	Spain	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	Denmark
City/Town (cancel type)	Vich (Barcelona)	Blanes (Girona)	GARE DES SAINTES (train station)	CHARS A SERQUEUX (Train pmk)	LAGRASSE /AUDE	LANGRES A NANCY (Train pmk)	FREJUS	AVIGNON/ VAUCLUSE	LA CROISILLE [sur Briance]	x/PAS DE CALAIS	AGEN/LOT ET GARONNE	PARIS/ R. DE BENNES	PLOUARET A BREST (Train pmk)	BORDEAU X/ GIRONDE	HERICOURT/HTE SAONE	NEUILLE ST JAMES/SEINE	PARIS A ORLEANS (Train pmk)	PAULX/LOIRE-INFRES	x/LOIRE-x	SATHONAY-CAMP	VESTER SKJERNINGE
Sender/ Return Address	Guarnicioneria de Joaquin Bussalleu, Rambai del Carmen, num. 4, VICH (harness maker)	Dolores de Garriga, Corsetera de Blanes (corset maker)	none	none	none (unless on reverse)	none	none (unless on reverse)	none	BROUILLOU (company's purple oval rubber stamp mark on the back, rest unreadable)	none	none	none	none	...ARNIE, 23 Rue Bardinean, BORDEAU	none	Mons. Joseph Liby, 13 bould. de la Seine, Neuille St James, Seine	none (unless on reverse)	none	L. NOUAILLE SAINT-NAZAIRE SUR LOIRE (coal importers)	none	M.C. Nielsen, Pavegaarden i OLLERUP
"Paris - R.P. Etranger" Postmark Date	March 7 (time unk.) (Thursday)	none	March 4 4:30 (Monday)	March 4 4:30 (Monday)	March 4 4:30 (Monday)	March 4 4:30 (Monday)	unknown	unknown	March 7 6:30 (Thursday)	March 7 6:30 (Thursday)	none	none	unknown	none	none	none	unknown	March 14 4:30 (Thursday)	March 14 (time unk.) (Thursday)	none	N/A
Winter Counter Number	264552	264548	267929	267914	267957	267996	267972	267971	267922	267920	267952	267984	267925	267942	267946	267999	267909	273938	273937	273940	N/A
Manuscript Dossier #	5569	5569	5546	5546	5546	5446	5546	5546	5542	5542	5542	5534	5542	5536	5536	5542	5536	5549	5549	5631	N/A
"TITANIC" san serif 6x37mm mark	italicized serif "TITANIC" in red	italicized serif "TITANIC" in red	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	sans-serif "TITANIC" in violet	serif "TITANIC" v.2 in violet
Possible Crossings	Most likely: Cunard's Lusitania, departed Liverpool on unknown date, unknown stops, arrived Friday, March 15	Most likely: Cunard's Lusitania, departed Liverpool on unknown date, unknown stops, arrived Friday, March 15	Most likely via Cherbourg: North German Lloyd's "Main," Bremen-Southampton-Cherbourg-New York City, unknown departure date, arrived on March 17 (Sunday) Less likely via Le Havre: French CTG's "SS Espagne," Le Havre-Bordeaux-New York City, departed March 9 (Saturday), arrived on March 18 (Monday)														Possible: White Star's "RMS Olympic," Southampton-Cherbourg-Queenstown-New York City, departed March 13 (Wednesday), arrived March 20 (Wednesday)	Most likely via Cherbourg: Hamburg American Line's "Batavia," Hamburg-Cherbourg-Southampton-New York City, unknown departure date, arrived on March 26 (Tuesday) Less likely via Le Havre: French CTG's "La Bretagne" or "Rochambeau," Le Havre-Bordeaux-New York City, unknown departure dates, arrived on March 26 (Tuesday)			Possible by train inside Denmark from Svendborg to Esjberg, then on to Hull or Harwich, England for trans-Atlantic Liverpool or Southampton crossing
Washington, DC Transit Postmark Date	March 16, 10:00 AM (Saturday)	March 16, 11:00 AM (Saturday)	March 18, 1:00 PM (Monday)	March 18, 2:00 PM (Monday)	March 18, 2:00 PM (Monday)	March 18, 2:00 PM (Monday)	March 18, 2:00 PM (Monday)	March 18 (unk. time) (Monday)	March 18, 5:30 PM (Monday)	March 18, 12:30 PM (Monday)	March 18, 2:00 PM (Monday)	March 18, 2:00 PM (Monday)	unknown	March 18, 7:00 PM (Monday)	March 18, 1:00 PM (Monday)	March 18, 2:00 PM (Monday)	unknown (cover is sealed in a display case)	March 27, 11:30 AM (Wednesday)	unknown	March 27, 9:00 AM (Wednesday)	Seattle, Wash., March 27, 9:00 AM (Wednesday)

Two non-French covers bear unique TITANIC serif font handstamps.

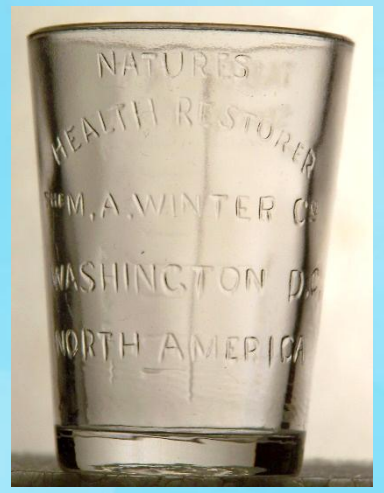


- Mailed from Vich (Barcelona), Spain on Thursday, March 7, 1912
- Sent to the M A Winter Company as the others
- Arrived in Washington, DC on Sat., March 16

- Mailed from Vester Skjerninge, Denmark on Thursday, March 14, 1912
- Sent to a lodging house in Seattle, Washington
- Arrived in Seattle on Wednesday, March 27

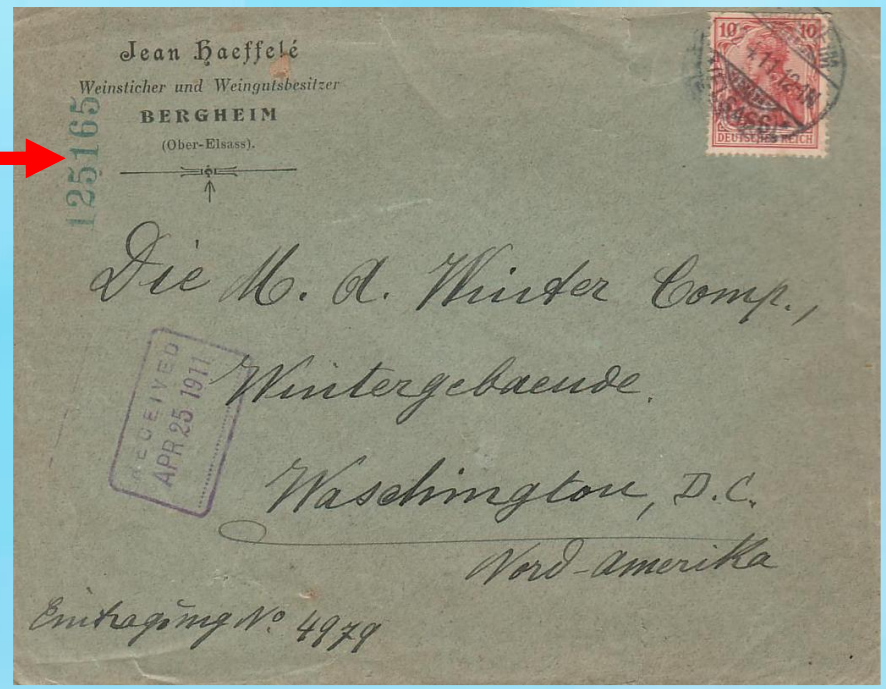
- **What kind of business was this letter sent to?**

All but one cover was mailed to the M. A. Winter Company at what is now 1438 U Street in Washington, DC. It was built in 1908 for $50,000 by Mahlon Adolphus Winter and his partner, George W. Faris, to house Winter's large patent medicine business. The British medical publication "The Lancet" proclaimed, "both the M. A. Winter Co. and its wonderful medicines are unworthy of serious consideration," comparable to snake oil salesmen!



"Nature's Health Restorer"

Earlier mail sent to the company gave clues to the six-digit numbers seen stamped on the Titanic covers. These docket numbers were applied by the company on receipt to identify each correspondence and its contents, apparently kept together should they be needed for later use. This apparently changed from being handwritten to a handstamp between 1910-11. The Winter's purple "RECEIVED" handstamp is also found on every mail piece before, during and after 1912.



➢Why was this TITANIC cover saved?

The novelty of the TITANIC markings on these business mail covers may have saved them from destruction whenever the company disposed of their envelope files. By that time the world knew of the fate of its maiden voyage and passengers. Perhaps they were horded by Winter employees and kept as souvenirs or sold through philatelic channels.

The mystery of the dossier numbers found on all Winter mail was solved by Jerry N. J. Vondeling of the Netherlands in an article that appeared in the Summer 2017 edition of "The Titanic Commutator" that I collaborated on. He found an ad in a 1911 Dutch American paper recruiting sales people for their "remedies."

$$$$$$$$$ $$$$$$$$$ $$$$$$$$$ $$$$$$$$$

Een welbetalende betrekking voor een vertrouwbaar persoon.

GIJ kunt werk bij ons krijgen, dat uwe inkomsten 50c per uur vermeerderen kan en niet uw tegenwoordig werk verhindert en als gij ons uwe geheele tijd geven wilt kunt gij $100 per maand maken. De vermeerderde navraag voor ons welbekend artikel zal de Hollanders interesseeren en maakt het noodzakelijk dadelijk een persoon aan te stellen die ons plaatselijk vertegenwoordigt. Gemakkelijk werk, ondervinding onnoodig.

SCHRIJF VAN DAAG uw vol adres gevend en wij zullen u dadelijk volle uitlegging van ons verblijk en openelt aanbod geven. Adresseer als volgt:

THE M. A WINTER CO., D-2 WINTER BUILDING, WASHINGTON, D. C

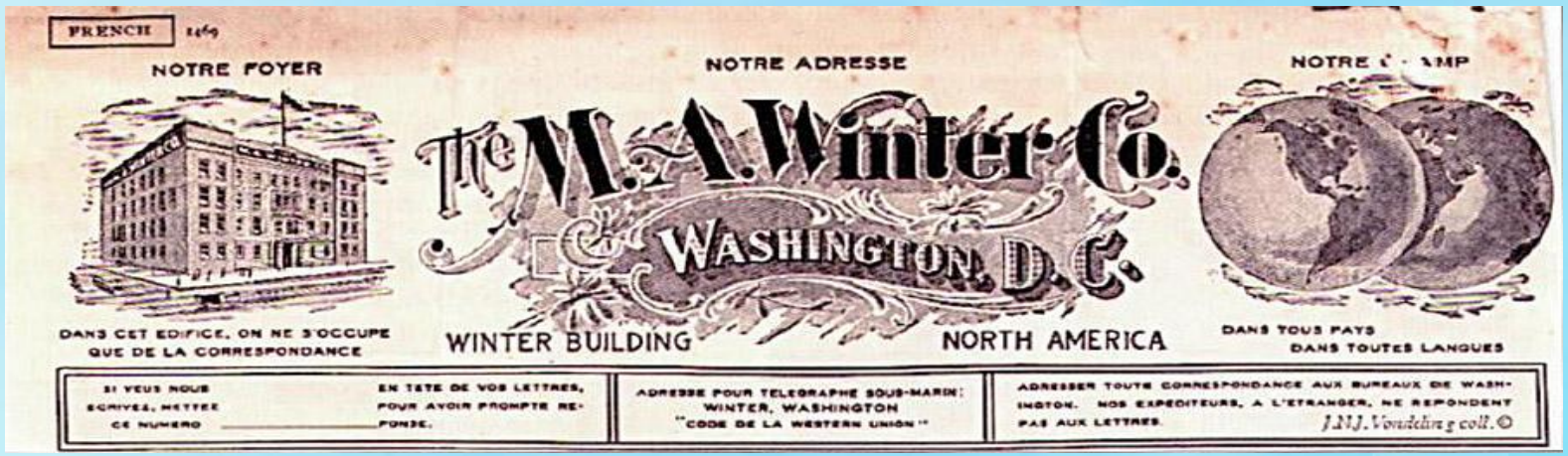
$$$$$$$$$ $$$$$$$$$ $$$$$$$$$ $$$$$$$$$

An advertisement found in the Dutch newspaper archives published in 1911.

The recruitment ad translates as: A well-paying relationship for a reliable person.You can work with us to increase your income by 50 cents per hour without interfering with your current job. If you give us your entire time you could earn $100 per month. Increased inquiries for our well known article will interest the Dutch and make it necessary to appoint a person who represents us locally. Easy work. Experience not necessary. WRITE TODAY giving your full address and we will immediately send a full details of our fair and sincere offer. Address as follows:

THE MA WINTER CO. D2 Winter Building, Washington DC. It appears that the letters mailed by the company back to these future employee prospects included a reference number that was to be written on the envelope so it could be directed to the right person (or department) when it came back. This number may also have been used on additional correspondences as well.A postal card seen here mailed on September 3, 1912 from Chicago and sent to the Winter Building reads as follows: "Dear sirs, yours of 8, 28th '12 is at hand" and "I can put all my time to anything that is suitable for me to do, this is all I can say until I hear from you." The sender marked the card in the lower left corner with "File No. 6055." The Titanic covers were similarly marked with reference numbers

A McKinley postal card received September 4, 1912 - Author's collection



Part the letter sent by the Winter Company May 4th 1910 - Author's collection

Adressez votre enveloppe exactement comme vous la voyez ici. Ne manquez pas de transcrire le Numéro—4407—de votre dossier sur l'enveloppe même, parce que nous avons donné ordre aux commis en charge de notre courrier, de mettre à part votre lettre, qui portera ce numéro personnel. On pourra, ainsi, la faire sortir sans retard du courrier quotidien de plusieurs centaines de lettres, pour que je puisse l'avoir de suite sous la main. Ceci est de première importance.

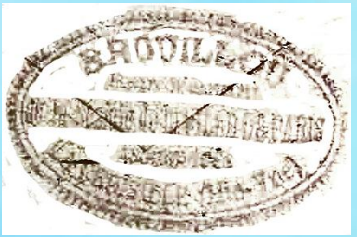
THE M. A. WINTER CO.,
WINTER BUILDING,
WASHINGTON, D. C.,
NORTH AMERICA.
DOSSIER NO.-4407-

The French were especially prone to this recruitment scheme, as found by Vondeling in this letter excerpt clearly showing how to address a response to the company about a job by referencing its dossier number:

"Address your letter exactly as you see here. Be sure to write Number-4407-from your folder on the same envelope, because we instruct the clerk in charge of our mail to look for your number that will carry this personal number. We can, thus, find it without delay from the hundreds of letters received daily so that I can have it at hand."

Most of the 23 covers were mailed in plain envelopes, however a few are on business advertising covers.

Importers of Coal
Briquettes and Anthracite
L. Nouaille – Saint Nazaire sur Loire
(port near Nances in NW France)

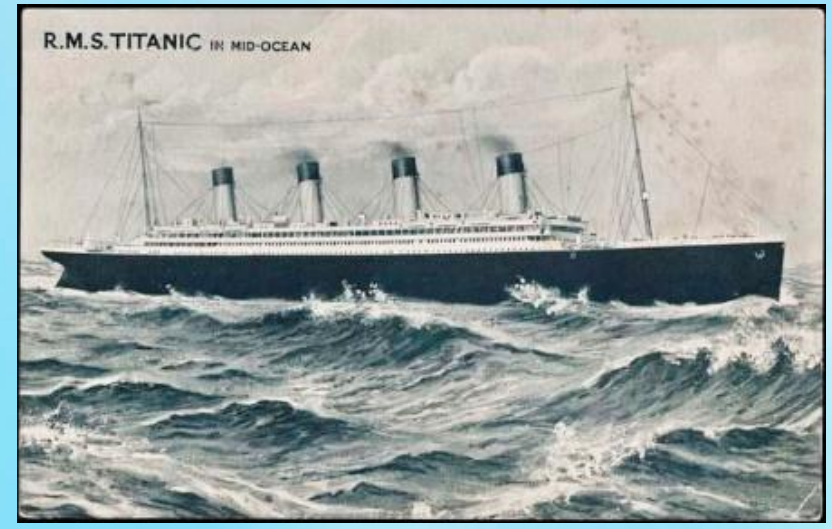


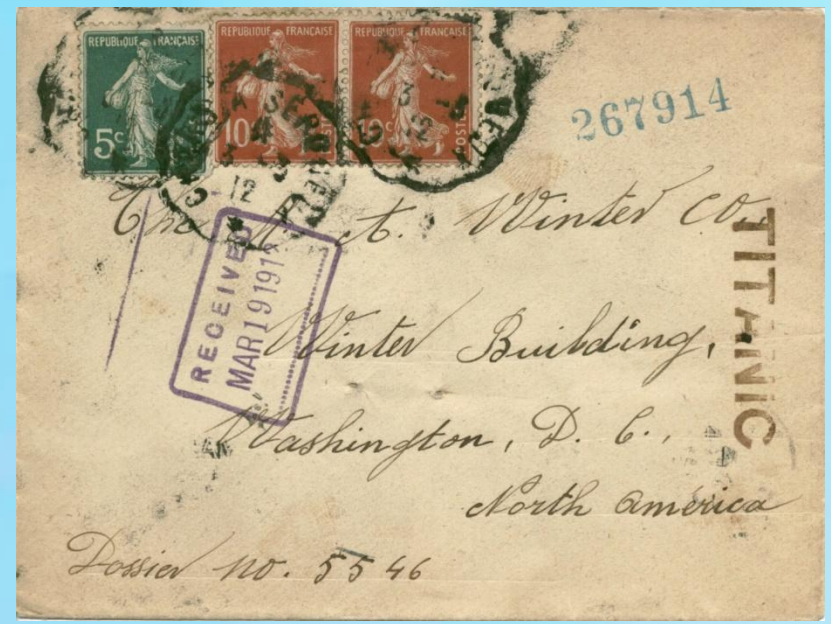
on reverse of cover
(unreadable)

Harness Maker
Joaquin Bussalleu
Rambia del Carmen,
Number 4,
Vich (Spain)

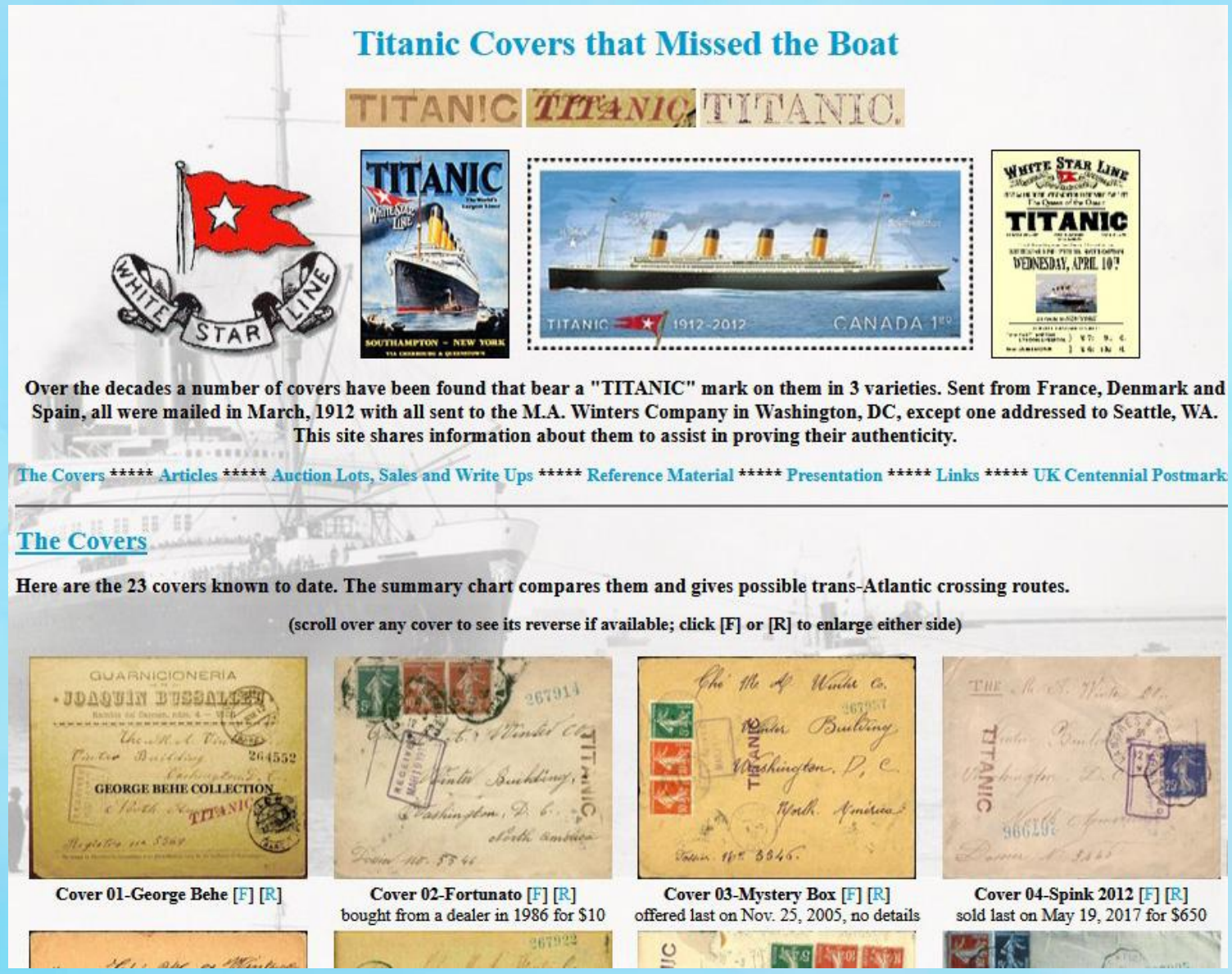
To summarize…

- **Multiple “Titanic” covers have been found, putting initial rebuttals to rest that they were intentionally “manufactured”**
- **A theory exists why the “Titanic” marking was used before the ship actually sailed**
- **Probable ship crossings for all 23 known covers have been researched and documented based on cover markings and New York City trans-Atlantic arrival dates**
- **All Winter Company markings have been explained**
- **There is a plausible reason why so many Winter covers have been found**





I hope you enjoyed this brief look at Titanic covers that “missed the boat.”

For those interested, I would encourage you to visit my web site dedicated to the history and documentation of these interesting covers.
www.titaniccovers.com

There is definitely more to learn about these fascinating pieces of postal history!