Early Transatlantic Sea Post Offices

By Julian H Jones

Given the long distances involved and time available to sort the mail ready for onward distribution, it is no surprise that Governments established post office sorting rooms on board ships contracted to carry the mail to far off countries. Julian Jones discusses the early developments of these transatlantic sea post offices and the distinctive postmarks they used.

In 1859 the British Postmaster General reported favourably on sorting contract mail on board P&O ships to Australia which had commenced in 1858. He extended the operation on ships to India and entered dialogue with the Postmasters General of Canada and the USA to do the same. This resulted in GPO sorting offices being introduced on Cunard Line ships between Liverpool and New York and on Allan Line ships between Liverpool and Quebec[1]. Most of the work was sorting mail already cancelled on land before being put on board ship, but provision was made to cancel letters posted on board by passengers. This came in the form of numeral obliterators (Fig 1) issued to the three lines during 1859. As the number of letter-writing passengers was small and the sailings just weekly or twice per month, the number of letters surviving with these cancellations is also quite small.

The Cunard and Allan Line sorting offices were withdrawn within ten years in favour of sorting on the railway travelling post offices between Queenstown and Dublin in Ireland and between London and Holyhead.[2]

French sea post offices

The French Government also recognised the value of sea post offices on board its extensive fleet of shipping lines to the Caribbean, South and Central America and the Far East. French sea posts commenced in earnest in the 1860s with services to the Caribbean and Mexico operated by the Compagnie General Transatlantique (CGT) steamship line of Paris. Precursor services had operated

Above: Fig 1 A letter posted on board Cunard's *Arabia* and cancelled with the 'A92' obliterator. Under the Anglo-US mail treaty of 1849 the 1s. payment allowed a credit of 5c. to the US post office for inland delivery. The Boston exchange office mark 'BOSTON 24 BR PKT PAID' indicates that 24c. had been paid (equivalent to 1s.) (Reduced)

Fig 2 A cover posted on board a French ship addressed to Philadelphia with LIGNE D strikes of the 'BORDEAUX A COLON / L.D.No.3' distinctive French octagonal cancellation dated 18 December 1931 (Reduced)

Fig 3 An 1877 example of a Ligne B cover sent from the Danish Post Office at St Thomas to Vera Cruz with stamps cancelled 'ST. THOMAS / PAQ. FR. B. No. 1' of the *Ville de Bordeaux* (Reduced)

from 1827 between Bordeaux and Mexico via the French Antilles. Naturally, these mail carrying ships were known in French as *paquebots*, long before the phrase entered the UPU lexicon. The maritime mail routes were designated as *ligne* (or 'lines' in English). Letters, posted on board these ships during the course of their voyage, were struck with distinctive octagonal *cachets de ligne* indicating the destination (e.g. outbound from France) or route within the network.[3]

In 1865 there was a major reorganisation of routes giving rise to LIGNE A (line 'A') which operated between Colón (on the Caribbean coast of Panama) and St Nazaire (France) almost without interruption from August 1865 to November 1932. From 1933, the home port changed to Havre giving rise to LIGNE L from Havre to Colon, calling at Plymouth (England) on the return route. LIGNE A alternated with LIGNE D (Fig 2), which operated from Bordeaux to Colon via a different route through the Caribbean from 1875 to 1940, also calling at Plymouth. The other principal French mail route to the Caribbean was LIGNE B operating from St Nazaire to Vera Cruz between 1865 and 1886 (Fig 3). Other 'branch' lines (*lignes annexes*) operated in conjunction with lines A, B, D and L to connect with outposts in the Caribbean and South America. These were designated as lines C, E, F, G and M, all with distinctive *cachets de ligne*.

The French Government also operated packet boats between the USA and France from 1847. These are listed in Hubbard and Winter[4] (which lists the ships and their schedules) as well as Salles. The latter, however, also illustrates the *cachets de ligne*, including those of

LIGNE H operating between Havre and New York from 1864 to 1880 (*Figs 4* and *5*). The French CGT line service to the USA started in June 1864, and used 'name of ship' markings until February 1866. From March 1866 to December 1872, the Ligne H markings were used.

From 1881 until 1908 there were no *cachet de ligne* in use on the Havre to New York route. In July 1908 the French postal authorities introduced the term *Bureau Flottant* (sea post office) for operations on this route, which continued to operate between New York and Havre (or New York and Bordeaux, during the war period 1915 to 1919) until 1939 (*Figs 6* and *7*).

This lengthy and distinguished service evolved again to include a joint sea post operation with the USA, introduced on this route between 1912 and 1917. In the Havre to New York direction the sea post was considered to be of French nationality. On return, New York to Havre (or Bordeaux), it was considered to be American. Instead of New York–Havre postmarks, 'U.S FRENCH SEA P.O.' marks were used with numbers 21 through 26 in the obliterating oval (*Fig 8*).

United States transatlantic sea post offices

The USA operated transatlantic sea post offices between 1891 and 1939. These comprised a purely US service, and also joint services with the German, British, and French post offices, the last two being rather short-lived. Routes were from New York to Hamburg/Bremen, Liverpool/Plymouth/Southampton, and Le Havre/Bordeaux.

Other services operated by the USA were: Transpacific (1922–39) with routes from San Francisco/Seattle to Hong Kong/Manila; Central America, with routes from New York to Porto Rico (1912–42), and from New York to the Canal Zone (1907–32); and South America, with routes from New York to Valparaiso (1928–41), and from New York to Buenos Aires (1926–41) from a number of different vessels.[5]

The US-German sea post office service began in 1891 on ships of the North German Lloyd line and Hamburg-America line sailing between Hamburg or Bremen and New York. These services had a post office on board staffed by postal clerks of the countries involved. Their role was to sort and re-bag mail put on board at the port of embarkation to expedite delivery of mails between Europe and the United States. In the main, such letters were cancelled at their sending post office and the only indication of sorting at sea is by the addition of 'Taxe' or 'MISSENT' marks when errors were found or bags of late mail were handled. However, by now there were quite large numbers of passengers journeying on these liners who would write letters and postcards during the voyage and post them on board. These previously un-cancelled items were also handled by the sea post office using a selection of postmarks that have come to represent the highly collectable sea post office marks of the early 20th century.

Fig 4 French Ligne H mark 'ETATS-UNIS PAQ.FR. H No 3' on a letter sent from New Orleans to Paris via New York 1869 (Reduced)

Fig 5 Ligne H mark 'LIGNE H PAQ. FR. No 2' on letter sent from France to Boston (via New York) in 1867 (Reduced)
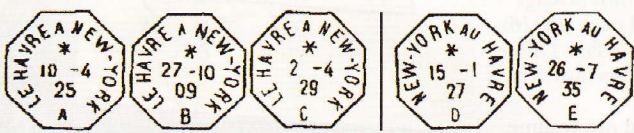
Fig 6 These *cachets de ligne* were used 1908–16 and 1919–39 and are typical of those employed on the Le Havre to New York route. The index letters A through E indicate the postal duty

Fig 7 Letter to the USA posted on board the French CGT liner *Rochambeau* during World War I when Bordeaux was the eastern terminal port (Reduced)

Fig 8 'U.S. FRENCH SEA P.O.' mark used on the Havre to New York leg of the USA/French sea post service

The duplex marking illustrated here (*Fig 9*) was the only type used by the American postal clerks on eastbound German ships in the period 1891 to 1914. Index numbers 1 to 20 have been noted used on as many as 29 ships, with some numbers known to have been used on five different vessels.[6]

The joint US-German sea post office service was resumed in 1924 and continued to 1939, again with US postal employees on the eastbound voyages and German employees on the westbound voyages (*Fig 10*). During this period both German and American line ships carried the service and a variety of different marks were employed.

On westbound voyages the German postal clerks employed an equally distinctive mark, as shown on a postcard mailed on board the Bremen (*Fig 11*).

A variety of types of sea postmarks were used on a large number of German and American ships during this period, some including the names of the ships with index numbers, and some without (*Fig 12*).

The US sea post service to Great Britain operated from 1893 on four American ships sailing between New York and Southampton, England. The postmark for this service remained virtually the same throughout the operating period which ended in 1917. There was a reasonably constant relationship between the four index numbers (sea post number) and the ship on which it was used.

British transatlantic sea post offices

a joint service between the United States and British post offices commenced in 1904 and operated until 1913. It included the four American ships already operating to Southampton and some of the White Star line ships operating between the UK and New York. The American postal clerks on White Star line post offices were issued with handstamps of the same type as those illustrated on the St Louis with index numbers 5 to 9, 18 and 19 (*Fig 13*). From 1905 to 1907 the British sorting clerks on the American ships used a quite distinctive 'TRANSATLANTIC POST OFFICE PLYMOUTH' mark (*Fig 14*).

White Star initially operated from Liverpool but moved its base to Southampton in 1907. In 1908 the cancellation was changed to omit the name of the UK terminating port. This gave rise to three distinct handstamps used by British sorters on the White Star liners (*Fig 15*).

There is an strong opinion that the index numbers allocated to each British datestamp are in fact assigned to the teams of postal sorters and not the vessel they worked on, which would explain the movement of a number from one ship to another. However, it is seen that most teams seemed to stick to one particular vessel for most of the time.

Fig 9 A typical US-German sea post handstamp cancelling a letter posted on board the North German Lloyd ship *Spree* in 1896 (Reduced)

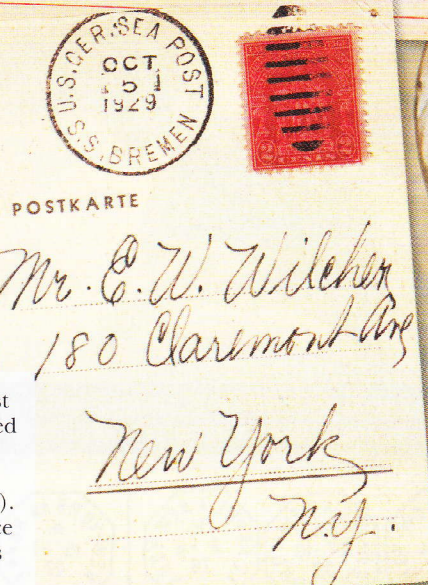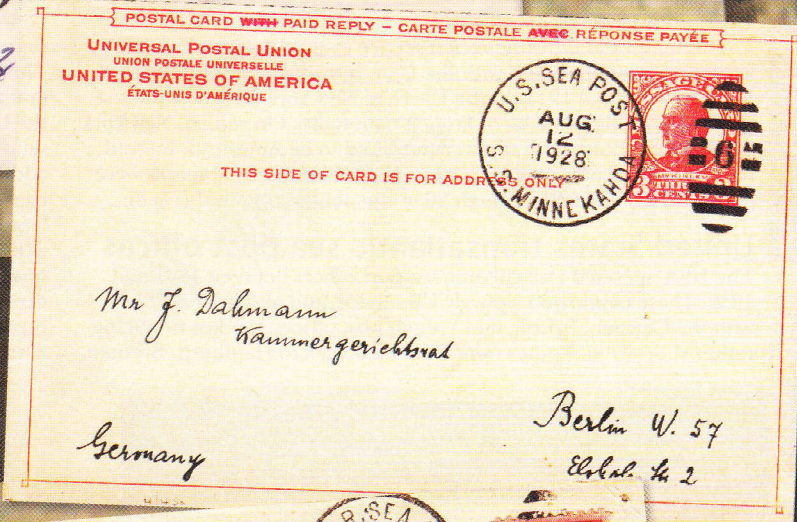Fig 10 An example of a sea post mark used on the American ship SS *Minnekahda* from 1926 (Reduced)

While each team had their own sea post cancellers, the British team were not issued with postage due handstamps so the US team would lend them their own postage due stamp for under-franked mail (*Fig 16*).

From 1908 the Transatlantic Post Office mark was used by British sorters on US as well as British ships (*Fig 17*).

The British Post Office did not resume joint operations with the US Post Office following World War I and neither did it set up its own sea post operations on White Star Line ships (or on Cunard ships).

Perfect for novice collectors

The collecting of letters and cards handled by sea post offices offers a wide field of interest stretching from the countries mentioned here to include New Zealand, Japan and Italy, all with extensive sea post networks. One advantage for the novice collector is the large number of books written about the subject, as illustrated by the longer than usual bibliography shown by the end notes. By referring to these, or the Internet, it is usually possible to match a cover up with the ship that carried it. The study of such mail provides a deep insight into the care the post offices took to speed the mail around the world. The cover images are shown with the kind permission of their owners.

Fig 11 An example of German and US handstamps used on the US-German sea post on the *Bremen* (Reduced)

References
[1] Robertson, AW: *A History of the Ship Letters of the British Isles;* The Author, Ranworth, 1955.
[2] Wilson H: *TPOs of GB & Ireland*, 1996.
[3] *La Poste Maritime Française Historique et Catalogue, Tome IV, Les Paquebots De L'Atlantique Nord*, Edited by Raymond Salles of L'Académie de Philatélie. Published in the early 1960's by the author.
[4] Hubbard, W & Winter, RF: *North Atlantic Mail Sailings 1840-75*, US Philatelic Classics Society, Inc 1988.
[5] Hosking, R: *Seaposts of the USA*, TPO & Seapost Society, 2008.
[6] Cockrill, P: *United States Sea Post cancellations Part I Transatlantic Routes*, Cockrill Series Booklet No 54, The Author.

POST CARD

ADDRESS

Mrs. Frances S. Harris,
26 Magazine St.
Cambridge,
Mass.
U.S.A.

The MANHATTAN of the United States Lines is in regular service to and from New York, Ireland, England, France and Germany. The Manhattan and her sister ship the Washington are the largest liners ever built in the United States. A third sister ship the new 'AMERICA' will join the Manhattan and Washington in transatlantic service in the spring of 1940.
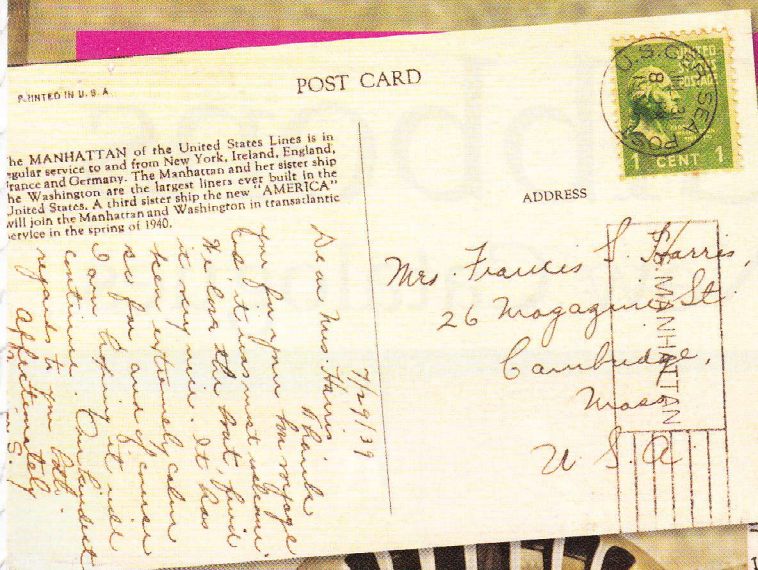
Fig 12 'U.S.GER.SEA POST/S.S. MANHATTAN/JUL 31 1939' machine cancel on a postcard listing the United States Line ships *Manhattan* and *Washington* then operating on the transatlantic run, and looking forward to the addition of the new *America* in 1940! The cancel was applied on the westbound voyage. This cancel was used until the *Manhattan* was taken out of service on 12 October 1939 (Reduced)

Fig 13 Example of the 'UNITED STATES SEA.P.O' sea post mark with index 3 used on the SS *St Louis* in 1903 (Reduced)
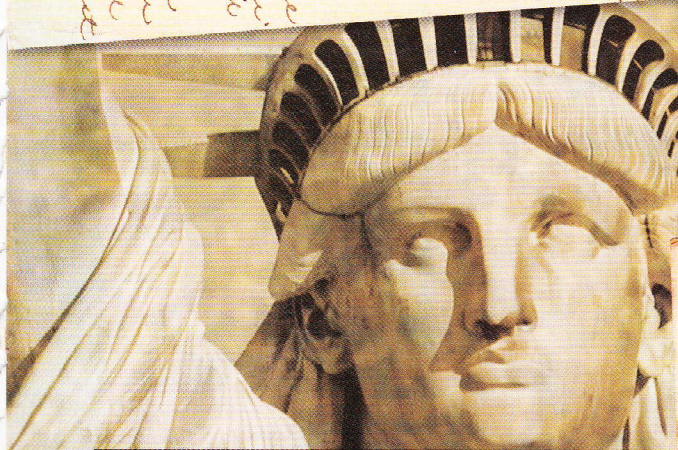
AMERICAN LINE U.S. MAIL STEAMER "ST.LOUIS"

Aug 29th 1903

Dear Edwin I am now on the

Union Postale Universelle.
CARTE POSTALE

Miss Basson
Cedar Lawn

Fig 14 'TRANSATLANTIC POST OFFICE PLYMOUTH/4' handstamp used in May 1906 on the *St Louis* (Reduced)

Fig 15

BRITISH SEA POST OFFICE LIVERPOOL
MY 2 05

BRITISH SEA POST OFFICE
3
14 SP 07
SOUTHAMPTON

TRANSATLANTIC POST OFFICE
SP 9 11
3

British Sea Post Office Liverpool 1905–07

British Sea Post Office Southampton 1907–08

Transatlantic Post Office 1908–14

TPO and Seapost Society

Julian Jones is chairman of the TPO & Seapost Society which celebrates its 75th anniversary this year—175 years after the railway travelling post office first began operation. The Society caters for all collectors of rail and ship mail: TPO/RPO, sea post offices, *paquebots*, naval and packet ships, as either a main interest or an adjunct to their main country collection.

Over 200 members worldwide receive a quarterly colour journal full of news and interesting information about TPO and sea post office matters including the quarterly postal auction with an extensive range of material. It holds periodic regional and London meetings to exchange views and ideas and actively publishes philatelic books.

For a free copy of the journal and a membership application form, please contact:
Keith Morris, TPO & Seapost Society, 1 St Mary's Drive, Fairford, GL7 4LQ. Phone 01285 713 075. For more information visit the Society's website at: www.tpo-seapost.org.uk or email: TPO_Seapost@Hotmail.com

POST CARD

Miss Quilia Symons
Dunoon
Warminster Rd
Norwood
London

Fig 16 'BRITISH SEA POST OFFICE LIVERPOOL/2' handstamp used on an underpaid postcard. The 'SPO/T/5' taxe mark was issued to the US post office sorters and 'borrowed' by the British sorters on board White Star line's *Adriatic* in March 1907. There are two impressions of the sea post mark dated MR 27 07 and AP 3 07. The card arrived in London on 4 April and was charged 1d. postage due (Reduced)

Fig 17 'TRANSATLANTIC POST OFFICE/1' mark dated 22 May 1914 on a postcard mailed on board the American Line *Philadelphia* which left Southampton on 16 May and arrived in New York on 23 May 1914 (Reduced)

POST CARD
ADDRESS ONLY

Miss C.
1 Dunmer Rd