

# Japanese Seapost Offices

By Mike Dovey

From around 1910 to the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Japanese NYK Line operated a trans-Pacific sea route from the port of Yokohama to the west coast of the USA. Each ship in the fleet operated a sea post which produced a variety of postmarks, cachets and covers over the period. Mike Dovey, a member of the TPO & Seapost Society, explores the postal history legacy the service left behind.

As well as the New Zealand Marine Post Offices, which plied the Pacific from New Zealand and Australia to the west coast of the USA (see *GSM*, November 2016), there was another trans-Pacific sea route which carried streams of passengers during the early to mid-20th century, all wanting to post letters whilst at sea. This was the west coast of the USA service to and from Japan. The vessels making the eastbound journey from Japan to the USA on this route, each licensed to have a post office on board, all belonged to the NYK Line (*Nippon Yusen Kaisha*); while ships hailing from the USA belonged to what eventually became the American President Line. This article will deal with material from the NYK Line only. The service was in use for around 30 years until it was brought to a very abrupt halt when Japan raided Pearl Harbor in 1941. Postcards and covers, featuring paquebot cancellations, circular datestamps and souvenir cachets, are known posted throughout the period.

## Paquebot cancels

Until the year 2000, there were only four known paquebot cancels recorded as used on the various ships that ran on the NYK Line. However, by 2010 a number of extra cancels had been discovered and have since been added to the list, making a total of ten known marks in all (*Fig 1*). These are all now recorded in the 4th edition of the *Paquebot Cancellations of the World* published by the TPO & Seapost Society in 2010 (sadly out of print at this present time). It could well be that at some time in the future other marks will come to light as this area of maritime postal history has not been fully researched.

Once again, there is a distinct 'national' similarity between the postmarks, which had a period of use from roughly 1912 to 1941. The cancels, with their listed numbers, and the vessels they were used aboard are detailed in *Table 1*.

The NYK Line was based in Yokohama and all of their Pacific vessels sailed from there for the USA. The post offices on board the ships were (it is thought) crewed by employees of the post office in Yokohama who were maybe transferred to the ships on contracts. As such, a number of the paquebot marks used on the ships

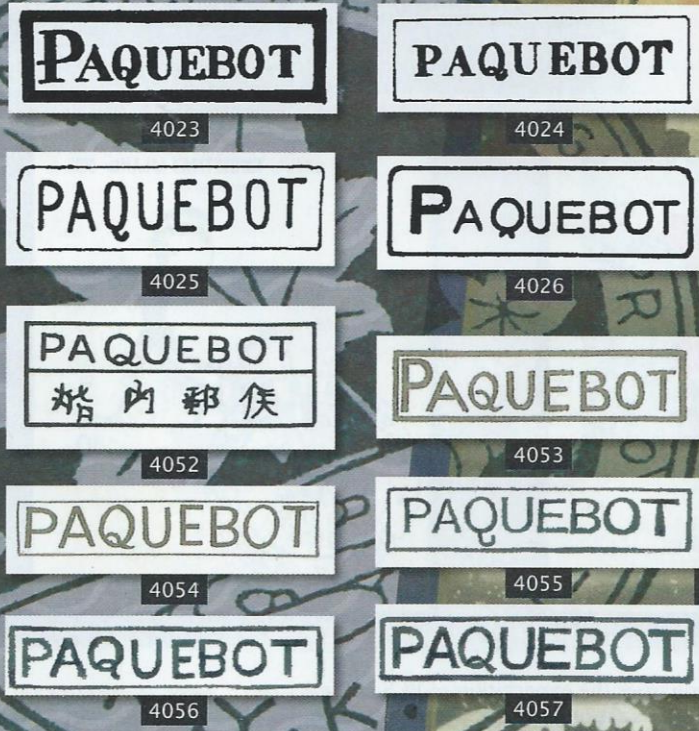


Fig 1 Paquebot marks in use on ships of the Japanese NYK Line from 1912 to 1941

are either similar or the same as the marks held in the main post office. This can cause some problems when trying to work out whether a cover is a 'Seapost' or a 'Post Office' cancel. However, in the main, the majority of covers will also have either a 'SEAPOST - NIPPON' cancel or an 'I.J.SEAPOST' datestamp, although other similar cancels are known, as seen from the display of marks shown at *Fig 2*.

Japanese vessels prior to the 1960s were easily identified as they always had the suffix 'Maru' (meaning circle) at the end of the name.

For observant readers, letters posted outside of Japan would carry a date in line with the rest of the world, but anything posted within Japan (i.e. at the Yokohama post office) the year date would be the length of the reign of the Emperor. As such, mail from Japan postdated '11' would be the 11th year of the reign, whereas on items posted on board a ship, an '11' would stand for the year 1911.

## Souvenir cachets

The majority of the known cancels prior to the 1930s are to be seen on picture

Table 1: Paquebot Cancellations used by the NYK Line

No	Vessel	Date
4023	<i>Asama Maru</i>	1929-40
	<i>Heian Maru</i>	1932-34
	<i>Kaga Maru</i>	1928
	<i>Taiyo Maru</i>	1927
4024	<i>America Maru</i>	1911
	<i>Chigo Maru</i>	1910
	<i>Tatsuta Maru</i>	1930-34
	<i>Tatuta Maru</i>	1939
	<i>Tenyo Maru</i>	1911
4025	<i>Yasakuni Maru</i>	1938
4026	<i>Hikawa Maru</i>	1932-39
	<i>Siberia Maru</i>	1930
4052	<i>Yasakuni Maru</i>	1938
	<i>Yawata Maru</i>	1940-41
4053	<i>Hiye Maru</i>	1936
4054	<i>Yokohama Maru</i>	1931
4055	<i>Nitta Maru</i>	1940-41
4056	<i>Chichiba Maru</i>	1939
	<i>Kamakuba Maru</i>	1939
4057	<i>Titibu Maru</i>	1938
	<i>Hakone Maru</i>	1939

Fig 2 Circular seapost datestamps used on various ships belonging to NYK



Chichiba Maru Seapost Nippon



Chichiba Maru I.J. Seapost



Heian Maru Seapost Nippon



Heian Maru I.J. Seapost



Korea Maru I.J.W.T.O



Tatuta Maru Seapost Nippon



Tenyo Maru Seapost



Tenyo Maru I.J. Seapost

Fig 3 Postcard showing the NYK Line vessel *Taiyo Maru* (Reduced)



Fig 4 Postcard of the *Korea Maru*. Many of the postcards used on these routes would be of an oriental design with the ship shown in a circle. This ship was the ex-USA vessel *Korea* of the Pacific Mail SS Line (Reduced)

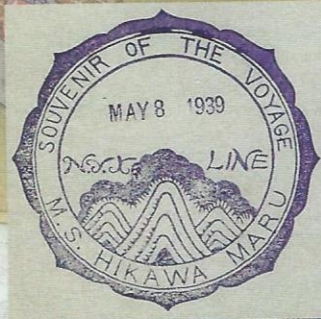
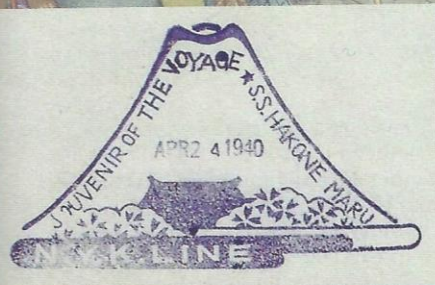


Fig 5 Souvenir cachets produced for the *Hakone Maru* (left), *Hikawa Maru* (centre) and *Tatsuta Maru* (right)

postcards. These would either be a postcard of the ship or a local view, purchased at one of the ports in the voyage (mainly Honolulu) (Fig 3 and Fig 4). In the 1930s all this changed when various USA collectors realised that, as well as the many US Naval cancels they had already collected, they could also obtain merchant shipping cancels. (US Naval cancels are easy to collect as every vessel has a post office on board.)

A variety of covers posted to the NYK ships from North American collectors were cancelled by the post office on board. As Japanese

stamps were difficult to obtain outside of the country, these covers mainly used US and Canadian stamps. The UPU rules state that a ship is its own sovereign territory while on the high seas and, therefore, Japanese stamps would have been the order of the day. However, it seems that the post offices on board NYK ships not only allowed the use of foreign stamps but also decided to produce cachets for use on the ships as 'souvenirs' of the voyage, probably as an advertising ploy – much the same as other lines did at the advent of the picture postcard around 1902 (Fig 5). Many of these covers

were plain, while others featured elaborate designs (Fig 6–Fig 10).

Some collectors frown on the advent of such philatelic covers in whatever guise they may be, but if it wasn't for those collectors who sought out the vessels and obtained the cachets and postmarks then most of what we see today would now all be long gone and so it is to those endeavours that we should be thankful.



Fig 6 Envelope posted on board the SS Heian Maru on 9 September 1934 and landed at Vancouver the following day. It features a type 4023 paquebot mark (Reduced)



Fig 7 Cover from the Tatsuta Maru with a type 4024 paquebot mark and two strikes of the red 'volcano' style JJ seapost cancel (Reduced)



Fig 8 Cover posted from the Tatsuta Maru on 3 May 1930 featuring a type 4024 paquebot (Reduced)



Fig 9 A cover with a type 4052 paquebot and a late usage of a rare Yawata Maru cancel (Reduced)



Fig 10 Souvenir cover posted on 18 May 1940 during the maiden voyage of the Nitta Maru (Reduced)

**Karl Lewis Illustrated covers**

Probably very few people will have heard of the painter and photographer Karl Lewis. He was an American who settled in Japan in the early part of the 20th century, who serviced covers for a number of years. While he covered all aspects of postal history, he was famous for

producing covers for various ships, among them were some of the Japanese vessels that plied their trade between Japan and the US Pacific coast at that time.

Karl Lewis was born in Kentucky on 10 September 1865 and by 1878, aged just 13, he was working in the docks in San Francisco. For the next 23 years, he was at sea and little is known of his exploits, except that he did visit an exceptional number of ports all around the world. In 1901 he settled in Yokohama in Japan and two years later took a common-law wife and worked in a photography business in partnership with his brother-in-law. By the 1930s, one of his biggest trades was in hand-painted covers covering almost any subject. He produced

covers for a number of maritime areas, including US naval vessels and any ship that plied a trade between Yokohama and the Pacific coast of the USA, which included six Japanese ships.

Around 20 covers drawn by the artist have appeared on various internet sites recently, either for sale or up for auction. The one feature of all of the sales is the price. Three covers similar to the one shown have been for sale on an internet site with a price range of between US\$300 and US\$500, while another auction house sold similar covers from US\$330 up to US\$675.

Karl died in May 1942, some six months after Pearl Harbour, probably never knowing of the legacy he has left behind.



One of a number of covers drawn by Karl Lewis posted on board the Japanese vessel Heian Maru

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