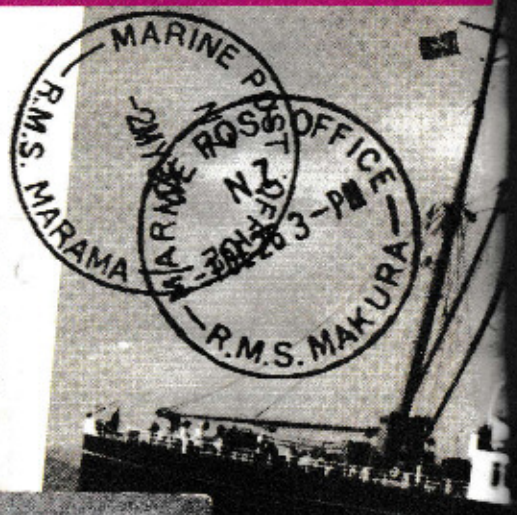


New Zealand Marine Post Offices

By Mike Dovey

From 1885 to the mid-1930s the Union Steam Ship Company operated a transpacific route from New Zealand and Australia to the west coast of the USA. Mike Dovey takes a look at the various Marine Post Office postmarks in use during the heyday of the service, including some very rare material from a short-lived member of the fleet.



In the 1920s-30s the Pacific Ocean had two major routes on which Marine Post Offices or Seapost Offices were used on board vessels while on the high seas. These were covered by three shipping lines:

- The USA Dollar Line vessels that sailed from the USA's west coast to Japan, all of the vessels had the prefix 'President.'
- The Japanese NYK Line vessels, which sailed the same route, all had the suffix 'Maru.'
- The New Zealand shipping line, Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand (not to be confused with the British Union Steamship of the time), sailed from New Zealand and Australia to the USA's west coast (Fig 1). The Marine Post Office marks of this line are considered in this article.

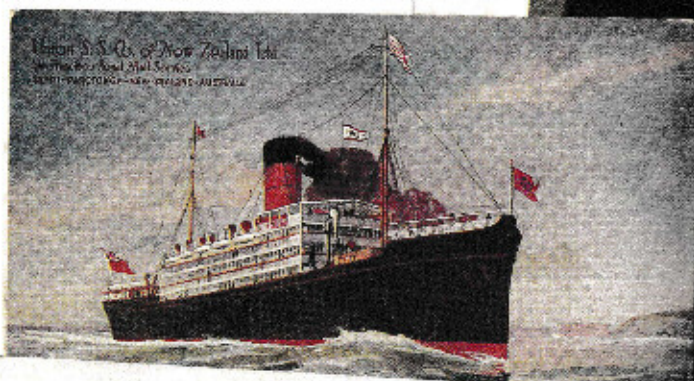


Fig 1 An advertising postcard from 'Union S.S. Co. of New Zealand Ltd' depicting one of their ships in full steam and on the reverse is information regarding the route and cost (Reduced)



Fig 2 The first style of circular cancel used on the Union Steam Ship line from 1885

The postmarks

The Union Steam Ship Line had been originally formed in 1875 in Dunedin for local services around the south island in New Zealand, but this quickly expanded into the Pacific, so that by 1885 a sailing was inaugurated from Sydney to San Francisco via Auckland. It was these vessels which were originally given the first circular cancels (Fig 2). They were for passenger use and for the sorting of mail on route, and each vessel was issued with a cancel showing the ship's name to distinguish the posting and the usage of the on-board facility. As well as the ship cancel in many cases the Marine Post Office would also apply a 'Loose Letter' or a 'Packet Boat' mark over the postage stamps to show that the letter had been posted at sea.

Postmarks shown in Fig 3 to Fig 5 were used in the New Zealand Marine Post Office (transpacific route) during its earlier period of operation from 1894 to 1907. Those in Fig 6 to Fig 12 were used during the second period of operation (1928-38) together with several 'dumb' types of paquebot equivalent. Most of these markings are very similar to, if not identical with types used at New Zealand shore-based post offices.

The original service of an on-board post office seems to have stopped around 1907, however, it was restarted in the 1920s and during that time three different styles of cancels were issued to the ships that were

LOOSE LETTER

Fig 3 A 'LOOSE LETTER' postmark from the early period, 1894 to 1907, used by the New Zealand Marine Post Office

PACKET BOAT.

Fig 4 A 'PACKET BOAT' postmark again from the early period of the transpacific route

PACKET-BOAT.

Fig 5 A 'PACKET-BOAT' postmark in use during the early period featuring a hyphen between the words and a different font

on the transpacific route and only to ships on that route (Figs 13 to 20). The Line operated many ships on other sailings but none were issued with a Marine Post Office.

Rarity value

All of the cancels shown in this article will have different rarity values, and while some are relatively easy to obtain, others are somewhat harder to get hold of. Perhaps the rarest of all the marks used is the one issued to the SS (later RMS) *Marama* (Fig 20). The vessel was usually employed on the route from New Zealand to Tasmania. However, as it had been used on the Pacific route on a few occasions in the past it was deemed to be a 'reserve' vessel and was issued with a Marine Post Office cancel, just in case it was ever needed. When the RMS *Makura* (Figs 21 and 22) broke down and had to be docked for urgent repairs, the

PACKET BOAT.

Fig 6 A 'PACKET BOAT' postmark without a border used during the second period – 1928-38

LOOSE LETTER.

Fig 7 A 'LOOSE LETTER' postmark with double border from the second period of transpacific use

LOOSE LETTER

Fig 8 'LOOSE LETTER' postmark with oval corners in use during the second period

PACKET BOAT

Fig 9 A single-line border 'PACKET BOAT' postmark again from the second period

PACKET BOAT.

Fig 10 A 'PACKET BOAT' postmark with a double-line border from the second period



Fig 11 A second period, circular 'PACKET/BOAT' postmark with large lettering



Fig 12 Another circular 'PACKET/BOAT' postmark of the same period, but this time the lettering is smaller



Fig 13 The Marine Post Office postmark used on board RMMS *Aorangi*



Fig 14 RMS *Makura* postmark used on board during the transpacific route



Fig 15 A Marine Post Office postmark for RMS *Monowai*



Fig 16 The RMS *Maunganui* transpacific route postmark



Fig 17 The RMS *Tahiti* postmark



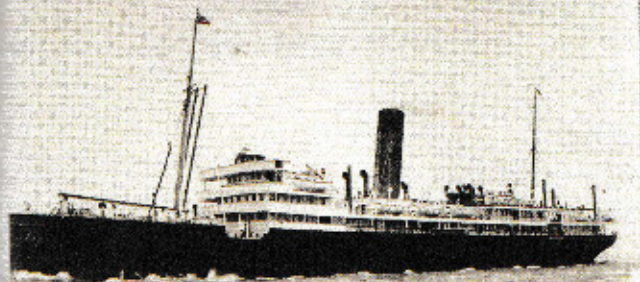
Fig 18 The Marine Post Office postmark for RMS *Niagara* with just 'N.Z.' shown above the date slug



Fig 19 Another RMS *Niagara* postmark but this time showing the full name 'NEW ZEALAND' above the date slug



Fig 20 The rare RMS *Marama* postmark with its different date and time slug



R.M.S. MAKURA
UNION STEAMSHIP CO. OF NEW ZEALAND LTD
San Francisco to New Zealand & Australia via the South Seas.

Fig 21 A postcard depicting RMS *Makura* in full steam. This ship broke down leaving RMS *Marama* to take over the voyage from San Francisco on 18 April 1930 (Reduced)

Fig 22
Cover
posted on
board RMS
Makura 17
July 1934
(Reduced)



now RMS *Marama* (Fig 23) was drafted in to cover for one sole voyage from San Francisco, leaving on 18 April 1930 and arriving in New Zealand on the 1 May 1930. As the ship was immediately transferred back to its old New Zealand to Tasmania route, never to sail to San Francisco again, any items posted from this particular ship are very rare indeed (Figs 24 and 25).

The history of the SS *Marama*

The SS *Marama* was built on the Clyde by Caird & Co of Greenock, Scotland at a cost of £166,000. She was then delivered to her owners, Union Steam Ship of New Zealand, in 1907. At that time she was the biggest vessel ever to be in service with the company and she replaced the SS *Misawa* on the route between New Zealand and Tasmania.

In January 1915 the SS *Marama* was placed on the route well known to most collectors, which covered the voyage from Sydney, Wellington, Karatonga, Tahiti, and San Francisco. However, this new station for the vessel was short-lived, as

in December of the same year she was transferred and became a hospital ship, together with another Union SS vessel, the SS *Maheno*. They both served in that capacity until 1919 when they were transferred back to the Union Steam Ship Company for further duties. After refits, both vessels were back on station by 1920.

In 1920 the SS *Marama* was back on the Sydney to San Francisco route, and she stayed at various times on the route until 1930, although during the period 1922–25 she was taken off completely and used on other duties.

Readers who have any knowledge of the postmarks that came from the transpacific mail service will be familiar with other ships of the fleet who covered the route and came up with a number of different cancellations, as shown in Fig 13 to Fig 20. Vessels such as the *Aorangi* (Fig 26), *Makura*, *Maunganui* (Fig 27), *Manowai*, *Niagara* (Fig 28) and the *Tahiti* are all very well-known and covers posted on these New Zealand vessels all carry an above average price. However, the pair of covers shown for the RMS *Marama* (Fig 24 and Fig 25) really

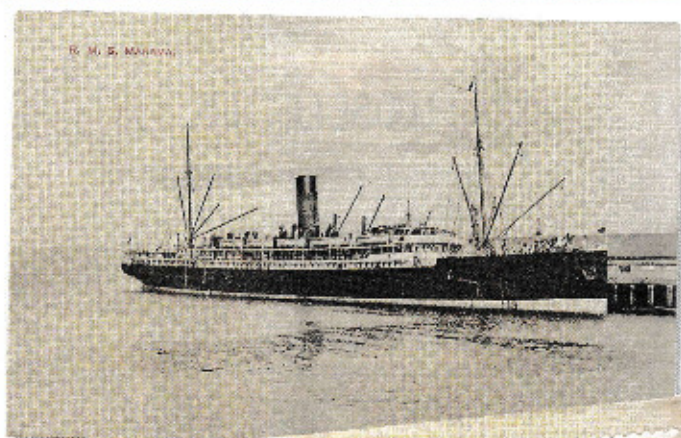


Fig 23 Postcard showing RMS *Marama* (Reduced)

Fig 24 This cover dated April 18th 1930 was mailed on the day RMS *Marama* sailed from San Francisco in the USA. It is very rare and possibly one of only two known surviving examples posted from the ship while on the Pacific service



Fig 25 This cover dated 2nd May 1930 was mailed on RMS *Marama* on the day she arrived at Sydney in Australia and is possibly the only other known example posted from the ship while on the Pacific service

Fig 26 A cover posted on board RMMS *Aorangi* dated 8 July 1932 (Reduced)

Fig 27 An RMS *Maunganui* cover dated 9 May 1934 (Reduced)



do command a rarity value. It could well be that this pair of covers are the only ones ever recorded as being posted from this ship while on the Pacific mail service!

So what happened to the ship once it left the Pacific route? The cover in *Figure 29* helps to explain. The SS *Marama* came off the Pacific route in 1930, but this was not the end of the ship in Union Steam Ship Company service. Right up until 1937 the ship must have sailed between New Zealand and Australia, after that she was sold for scrap to a company in Shanghai. The Purser mark is taken from the reverse of the envelope which was posted 5 January 1936 from SS *Marama*. Like the RMS cancel, it is one of the harder to get cachets in the fleet. On the front is a paquebot and Melbourne cancellation only known used in 1935-36.

This article only glides over the surface of what is a very interesting subject with a mixture of the ship cachets and the paquebot marks all adding to the depth of the subject.

Mike Dovey is a member of the TPO and Seapost Society. For more information on the society please visit www.tpo-seapost.org.uk or contact Keith Morris on 01285 713 075.

Fig 28 A cover posted on board RMS *Niagara* dated 14 June 1934 with a blue oval Purser's office cancel dated 'JUN 13 1934' (Reduced)



Fig 29 Cover (Reduced) posted from the *Marama* dated January 1936 (the year before she was sold for scrap), it has a paquebot cancellation for Melbourne, only known used in 1935-36, as well as the Purser's mark on the reverse dated 5 January 1936



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