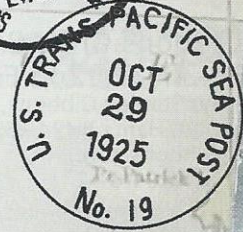


US Pacific Sea Post Offices

By Mike Dovey

Mike Dovey has already covered both New Zealand (GSM September 2016) and Japanese (March 2017) vessels that operated seaposts in the Pacific in the inter-war years, in this third article, he covers probably the biggest area for maritime postal history in the area – the USA Pacific Sea Post Office. As well as a brief history of the service, Mike also reveals the story behind a remarkable cover posted on board one of the ships operating in the Pacific that found itself playing a vital part in a dramatic rescue mission.



In 1924 the Dollar Line had started to take control of both the Admiral Oriental Line and the Pacific Mail SS Co Line (Fig 1 and Fig 2). From the start of 1926, a regular service across the Pacific was implemented with bi-monthly sailings alternately from Seattle and San Francisco. All of the ships involved were named after American Presidents and the regular sailings covered services to Japan, China, and the Philippines via Honolulu.

Each vessel had a post office to service any mail posted on board and each ship was issued with, in most cases, a duplex datestamp. These diagrams in Figure 3 show the seven omnibus cancels in use. However, there were numerous other cancels issued in the 17 years up to the outbreak of the war with Japan in 1941 (Fig 4). In the years of service many of the ships had cancels known only to that ship; this makes the collecting of this area so much more interesting.

Nearly all of these cancellations had a direction shown, so when the ship was going west it would be indicated and once on the reverse leg it would show east. In most cases the east cancel is easier to get hold of, while some of the west cancels are extremely elusive. Figure 5 to Figure 7 show mail posted from vessels operating under the Dollar Line.

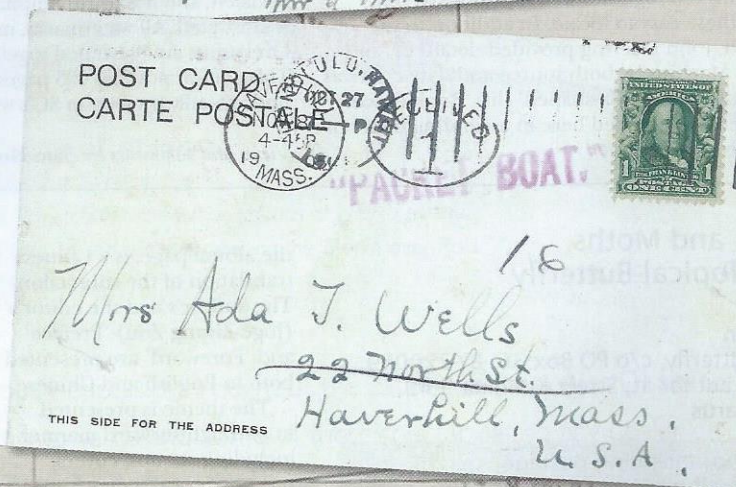


Fig 1 The SS Manchuria, built in 1904 for the Pacific Mail Line, was renamed as the SS President Johnson in 1930. This postcard was posted at Honolulu with a 'PACKET BOAT' cancel (Reduced)

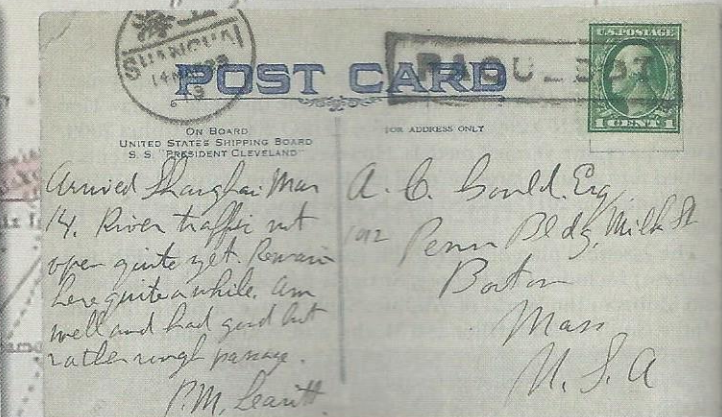


Fig 2 A postcard from the SS President Cleveland of the Pacific Mail SS Co Line prior to being taken over by the Dollar Line. The card was posted at Shanghai in 1923 where it received a paquebot cancel (Reduced)



Fig 3a The basic duplex type datestamp with an un-circled number within the bars of the obliterator

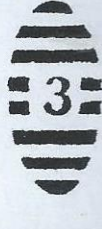


Fig 3b Double-circle type, with lettering reading around the circle



Fig 3c Double-circle type with normal letters in upper and lower segments



Fig 3d Smaller duplex type with circled number within the bars

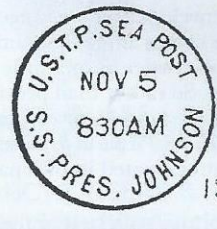


Fig 3e Large single circle type, which can be found with or without obliterating bars to the right



Fig 3f Large or small double circle type, with lettering in the upper and lower segments



Fig 3g Later single circle type with duplex and plain circled number



Fig 4 Besides the omnibus cancels this is just one example of a number of different cancels used

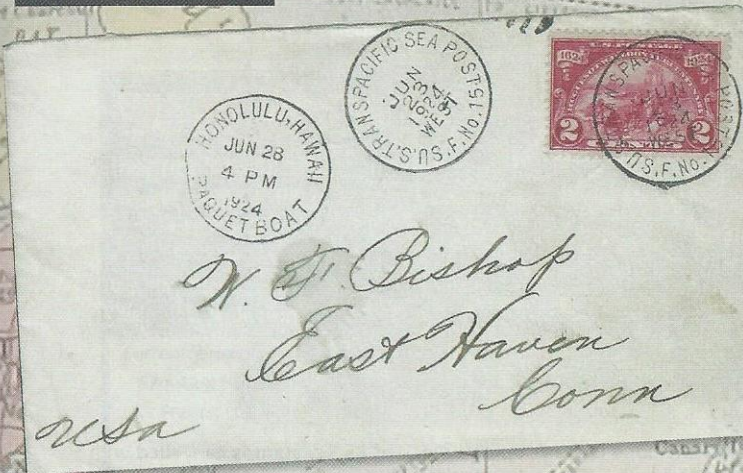


Fig 5 Envelope posted from the SS *President Monroe* on the west-bound leg of its journey from San Francisco in 1924. The 2c. stamp has been cancelled by a US Trans-Pacific Sea Post datestamp and on its arrival at Honolulu it received a 'PAQUET BOAT' datestamp (Reduced)



Fig 6 Registered envelope posted from on board the SS *President Grant* dated 1928 (Reduced)

American President Line

In 1938, the US Government took over the management of the Dollar Steamship Co, which was in financial difficulties. Assets were transferred to a newly formed company – the American President Line – which operated trans-Pacific and round-the-world services. The war in Europe disrupted many services and after the entry of the United States into the conflict, all the company's ships were taken over for war duties with the US Naval fleet, never to return to their old routes for the company. Values for postings in this area are based on the fact that if the envelope is a philatelic collector item it will be worth much less than a true passenger posting.



Fig 7 A postal stationery envelope of the Dollar Line's SS *President Coolidge* sent to an address in London in 1932. It clearly shows the US Sea Post office cancel for the vessel (Reduced)

The SS *President Jefferson*

When collecting envelopes for any subject, every so often one comes along that jumps out of the page and creates its own little snapshot of history. So rather than provide a listing of all postal markings, I have decided to tell the tale of the SS *President Jefferson* and how one simple letter created its own page in time and history.



The SS *President Jefferson* of the Dollar Line

On 13 August 1937 the Chinese National Army, under the leadership of General Chang Kai-Shek, and the Japanese Imperial Army clashed on the outskirts of Shanghai. By 16 August this had exploded into a full-blown battle and the inhabitants of the city had to make arrangements to leave. The SS *President Jefferson* of the Dollar Line was moored some 20 miles away from the city in the estuary in order to take on board American women and children, but only if they could pay passage. Some 411 women and children were taken to the Shanghai Bund where they were placed on board a tender to get them out to the estuary and onto the SS *President Jefferson*.



The Shanghai Bund pictured in 1937

There was supposed to be a two-hour ceasefire to allow various tenders to pass safely but this did not happen and the US tender had to run the gauntlet of shrapnel hitting the sides of the vessel as it made its way out to the estuary. Matters were not made any better when the sea became very choppy. As the tender came alongside the *President Jefferson*, the Captain of the tender refused to action any way of transferring the passengers and so it was left to a marine to take command and get all 411 women and children on board. Once all safely on board, the ship set sail for Manila.

You would be forgiven for thinking that this would be the end of such a traumatic adventure. However, it was not to be. When the ship moored in Manila there was an earthquake, which was the worst one known in the area for some 30 years.

Our envelope, which was posted by one of the refugees on board the SS *President Jefferson*, carries no less than 50c. worth of stamps; which seems a lot, especially when a surface mail letter from Manila to the USA was only 3c. (Fig 8). The letter had been written and posted on board the ship where it received a goodly number of US Seapost



Fig 8 The front of the envelope posted on board the SS *President Jefferson* during the evacuation of American women and children from Shanghai in 1937. It is annotated 'From/PRESIDENT JEFFERSON/Refugee ship/Shanghai to Manila/Aug 17 - 1937'. As the tale of the cover's journey unfolds, another annotation reading 'Clipper Mail/Trans Pacific/Manila to San Francisco' was added, along with a 'VIA AIR MAIL' cachet (Reduced)



Fig 9 The reverse of the envelope is made up of a block of 25 1c. stamps cancelled with seven strikes of the SS *President Jefferson* handstamp (Reduced)

cancels for the ship. This in itself makes the cover a timepiece but it is the annotation 'Clipper Mail' that propelled the envelope to another level in terms of postal history.

The 50c. in stamps was plastered all over the letter, both front and back as the sender had paid for the letter to be sent to the USA by what was a totally new idea - airmail. The Clipper in this case was a flying boat, which were first used on a regular flight across the Pacific in 1936. It seems that the postal clerk on board the ship only had very low denomination stamps as this was all that was needed in normal posting circumstances for what had been the only way to post mail - by surface.

So it seems that the sender of the letter was involved in a battle, an evacuation, an earthquake, probably had to leave her partner behind in Shanghai, and then propelled this letter across the Pacific on what was a brand new service. I am sure that the contents of this letter were significant enough to warrant such expenditure and even risk.

TPO & SEAPOST Society

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If you find the topic of this article interesting, the Society has published a book *Seaposts of the USA* by Roger Hosking. For details of how to obtain a copy, please contact the Society at the above address.