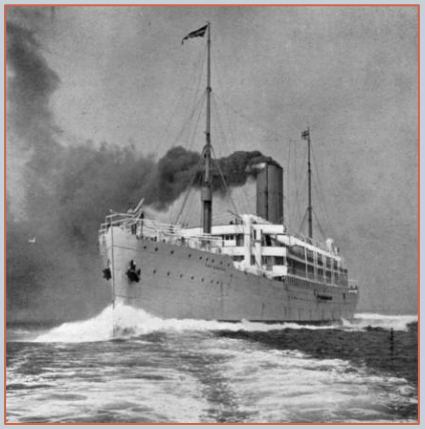
# The S.S. *Tahiti*: Her History, Her Sinking and a "Salvaged" Cover



*BY CHARLES J. DICOMO, PHD*

THE PHILATELIC GATHERING
CHESTER COUNTY HISTORIC CENTER
APRIL 15, 2023

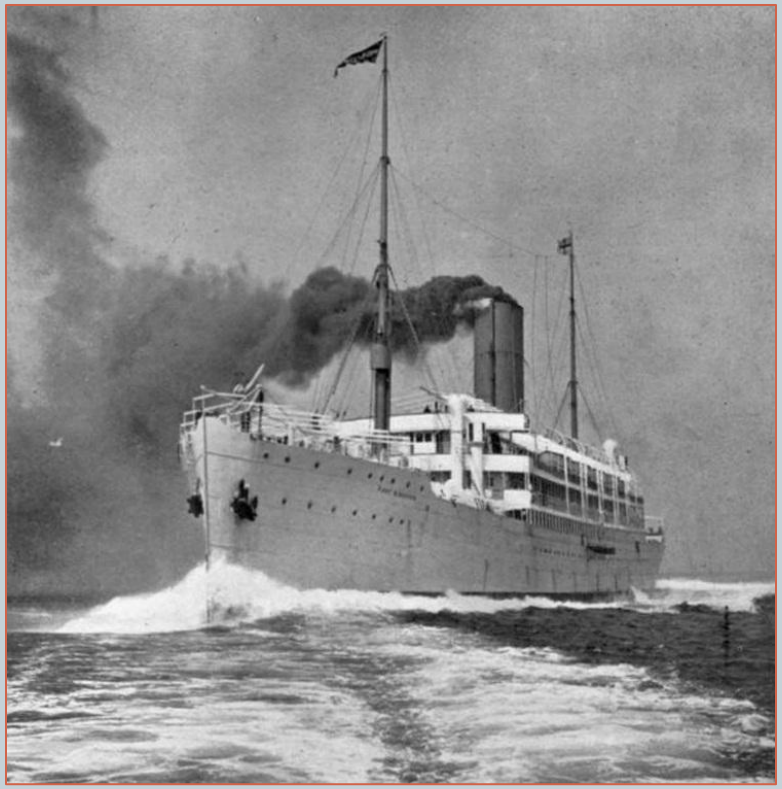
# History of the S.S. *Tahiti*



- A 7585 ton Ocean Liner operated by Union Steamship Company of New Zealand, afloat for 26 years.
  - 1904: built by Alexander Stephen & Sons, named RMS *Port Kingston* until 1911. Carried passengers (515), crew (115), mail and cargo of fruit.
  - 1907: survived Kingston, Jamaica earthquake, beached/refloated.
  - 1914: served as Troop Ship during World War I as *HMNZT*
  - 1918: subject to outbreak of Spanish Influenza after stopping in Sierra Leone – high mortality of troops on board (77/1000).
  - 1919: returned to owners and converted from coal firing to oil.
  - 1927: collided with Ferry *Greycliffe* in Sydney Harbor – crowded ferry split in two, sank in 3 minutes, killing 40 ferry passengers.
  - 1930: sank without loss of life in South Pacific Ocean due to flooding caused by broken propeller.

# RMS *Kingston*, later renamed *S.S. Tahiti*





RMS *Port Kingston* 1904

Partial Hull Wreck
from Ferry *Greycliffe*

*S.S. Tahiti* Intended Route:
Sydney to San Francisco,
via Wellington, Rarotonga and Tahiti;
Made first voyage on Dec. 11, 1911.

# The Flooding & Sinking of the S.S. *Tahiti*

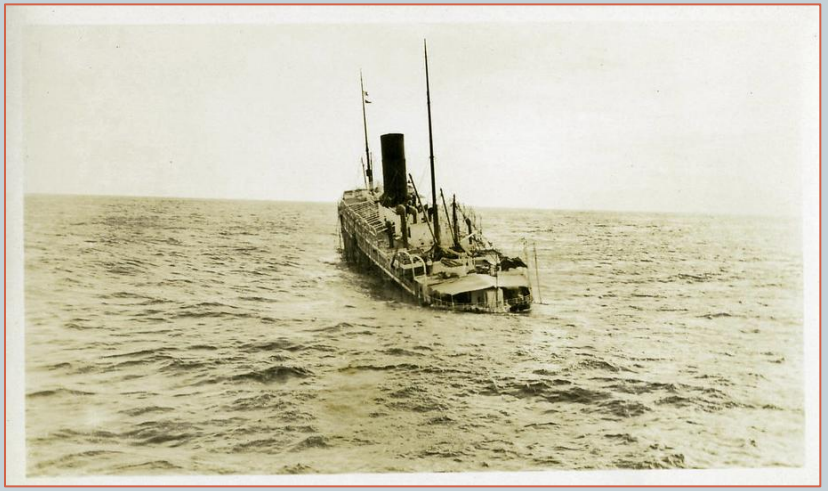


- 12 August 1930: *Tahiti* carrying 103 passengers, 149 crew members, 500 tons of cargo, put to sea from Wellington, NZ, to continue her voyage from Sydney to San Francisco.
- 15 August 1930: ~480 nautical miles SW of Rarotonga, starboard propeller shaft broke, opened large hole in stern, caused rapid flooding. Crew sent out distress call, launched distress signal rockets, prepared passengers for possibility of abandoning ship, and fought flooding in effort to save ship.
- 16 August 1930: Norwegian steamer S.S. *Penybryn* arrived on scene to render assistance. *Penybryn* stood by *Tahiti* throughout night with floodlights illuminating *Tahiti* and her boats ready to go to the assistance of *Tahiti*'s passengers and crew if needed.
- 17 August 1930: *Tahiti*'s passengers and some crew abandoned ship, with all lifeboats away in 13 minutes; some crew remained to continue efforts to slow flooding.
- American steamer *Ventura* arrived on scene, took on passengers and crew soon after they abandoned ship. Members of *Tahiti*'s crew, assisted by a boat from *Penybryn*, returned to *Tahiti* in *Tahiti*'s boats and began efforts to save first class mails and luggage.
- By 1:35 p.m., *Tahiti* settling rapidly, too dangerous for crew to remain aboard, they abandoned ship, having saved the ship's papers and bullion.
- 17 August 1930: *Tahiti* sank, without loss of life, at 4:42 p.m.

# Map of Oceania and Site of Sinking

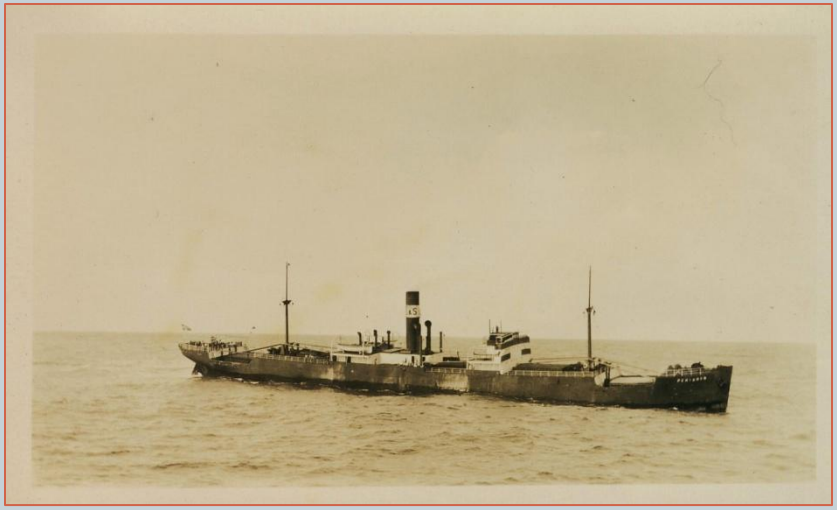
Appleton & Co., N.Y. 1892
Color Atlas, pg. 10, Oceania.

# Photos of Foundering S.S. *Tahiti* and Rescue of Her Passengers and Crew

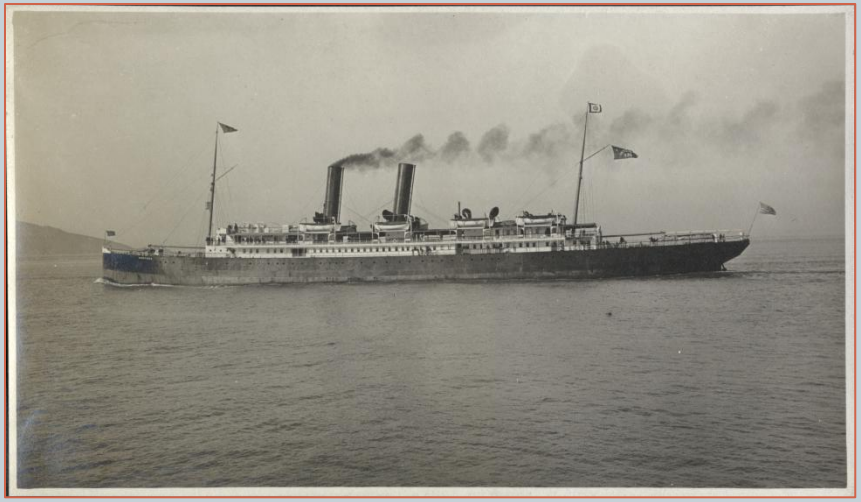


# The S.S. *Penybryn & Ventura* Answered the Call





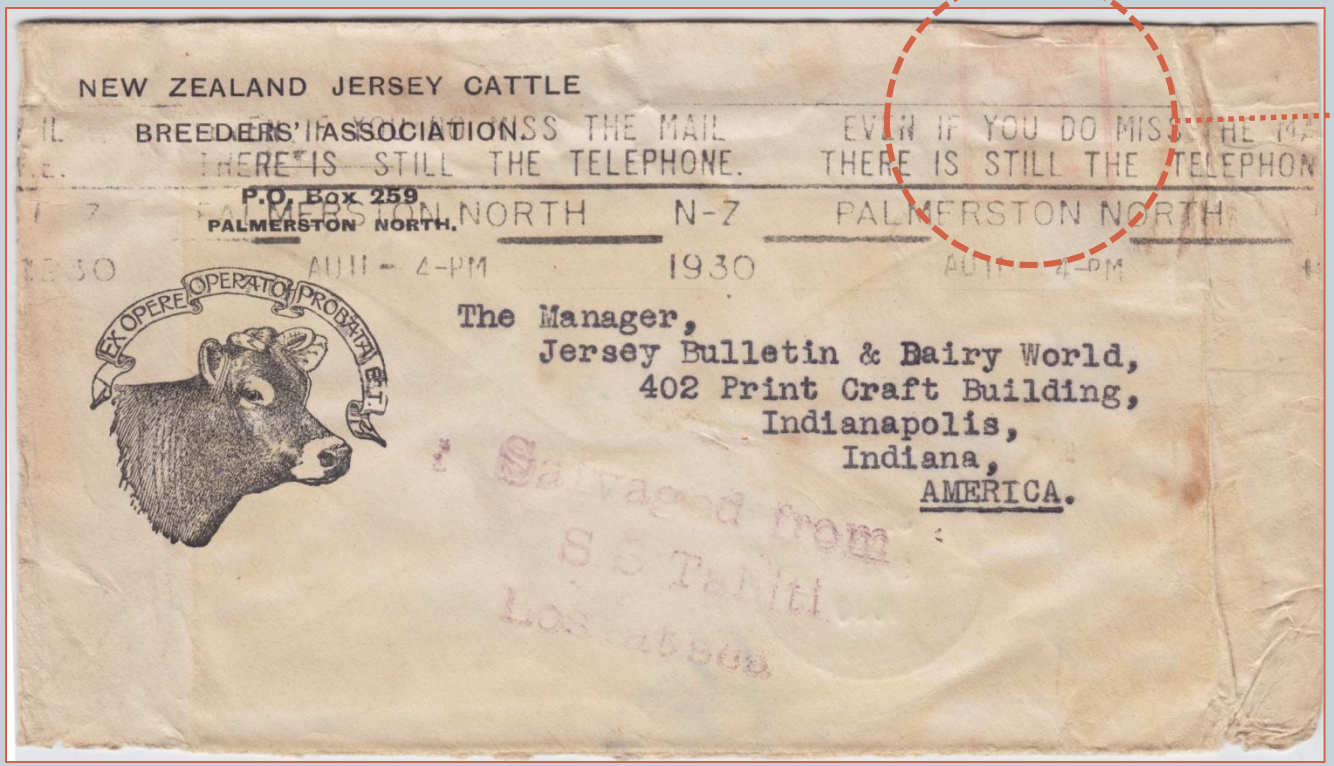
Norwegian steamer S.S. *Penybryn*
First to arrive, salvaged mail & cargo

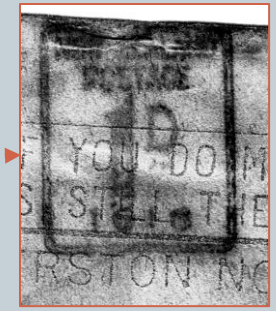


American steamer *Ventura*
Second to arrive, rescued passengers

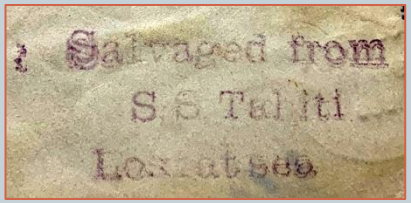
# Salvaged Cover from S.S. *Tahiti*





Faint red Meter Marking
"**NEW ZEALAND POSTAGE 1D 1616**"
using RetroReveal.org

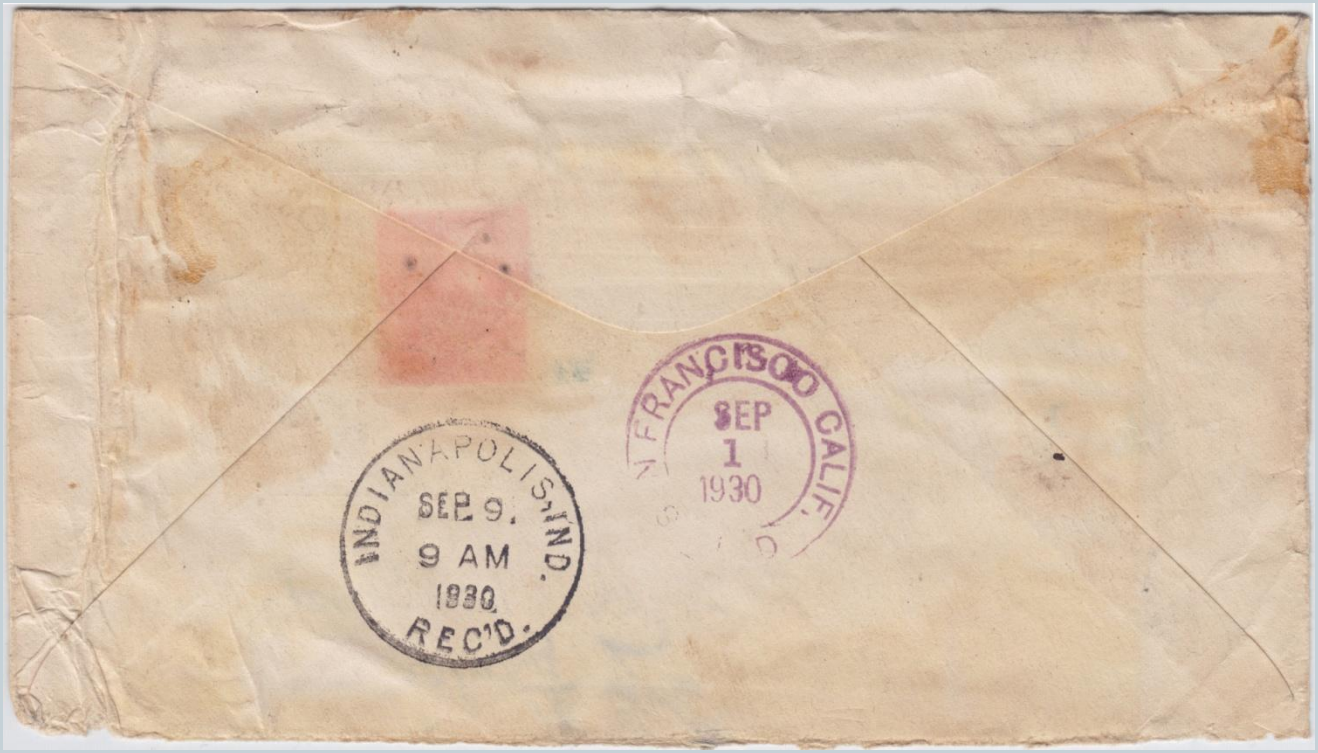



Purple 3-line handstamp
"**Salvaged from S.S. Tahiti Lost as sea**"

Cover mailed August 11, 1930 from the NZ Jersey Cattle Breeders' Association in Palmerston North, NZ to *Jersey Bulletin and Daily World*, Indianapolis, IN.

# Salvaged Cover from S.S. *Tahiti*

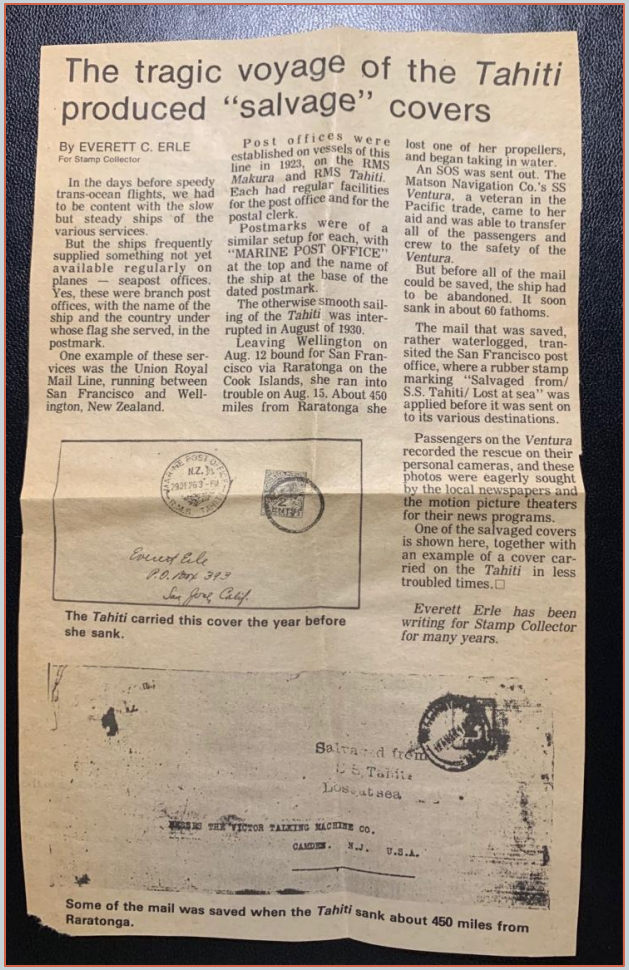





Cover reverse showing 2 backstamps: purple “SAN FRANCISCO CALIF. SEP 1 1930 REC’D” and black “INDIANAPOLIS, IND. SEP. 9, 9 AM 1930 REC’D”

# Accompanying Paperwork on "Salvage" Cover





## The tragic voyage of the *Tahiti* produced "salvage" covers

By EVERETT C. ERLE
For Stamp Collector

In the days before speedy trans-ocean flights, we had to be content with the slow but steady ships of the various services.

But the ships frequently supplied something not yet available regularly on planes — seapost offices. Yes, these were branch post offices, with the name of the ship and the country under whose flag she served, in the postmark.

One example of these services was the Union Royal Mail Line, running between San Francisco and Wellington, New Zealand.

Post offices were established on vessels of this line in 1923, on the RMS *Makura* and RMS *Tahiti*. Each had regular facilities for the post office and for the postal clerk.

Postmarks were of a similar setup for each, with "MARINE POST OFFICE" at the top and the name of the ship at the base of the dated postmark.

The otherwise smooth sailing of the *Tahiti* was interrupted in August of 1930.

Leaving Wellington on Aug. 12 bound for San Francisco via Raratonga on the Cook Islands, she ran into trouble on Aug. 15. About 450 miles from Raratonga she lost one of her propellers, and began taking in water.

An SOS was sent out. The Matson Navigation Co.'s SS *Ventura*, a veteran in the Pacific trade, came to her aid and was able to transfer all of the passengers and crew to the safety of the *Ventura*.

But before all of the mail could be saved, the ship had to be abandoned. It soon sank in about 60 fathoms.

The mail that was saved, rather waterlogged, transited the San Francisco post office, where a rubber stamp marking "Salvaged from/ S.S. Tahiti/ Lost at sea" was applied before it was sent on to its various destinations.

Passengers on the *Ventura* recorded the rescue on their personal cameras, and these photos were eagerly sought by the local newspapers and the motion picture theaters for their news programs.

One of the salvaged covers is shown here, together with an example of a cover carried on the *Tahiti* in less troubled times.□

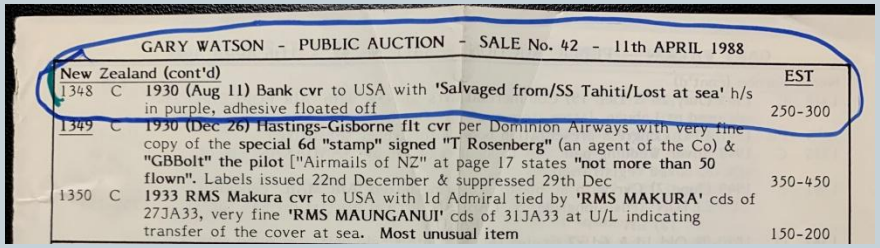
*Everett Erle has been writing for Stamp Collector for many years.*

The *Tahiti* carried this cover the year before she sank.

Salvaged from
S.S. Tahiti
Lost at sea

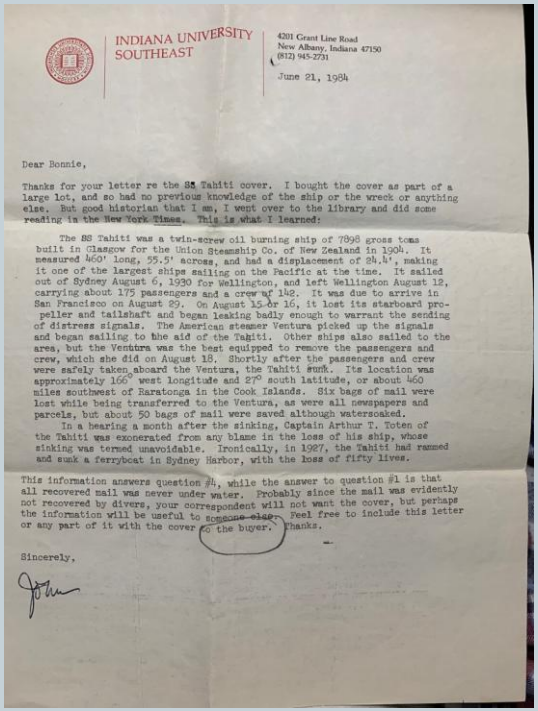
MADE BY THE VICTOR TALKING MACHINE CO.
CAMDEN, N.J. U.S.A.

Some of the mail was saved when the *Tahiti* sank about 450 miles from Raratonga.



GARY WATSON - PUBLIC AUCTION - SALE No. 42 - 11th APRIL 1988

| | | New Zealand (cont'd) | EST |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1348 | C | 1930 (Aug 11) Bank cvr to USA with **'Salvaged from/SS Tahiti/Lost at sea'** h/s in purple, adhesive floated off | 250-300 |
| 1349 | C | 1930 (Dec 26) Hastings-Gisborne flt cvr per Dominion Airways with very fine copy of the **special 6d "stamp" signed "T Rosenberg"** (an agent of the Co) & **"GBBolt" the pilot** ["Airmails of NZ" at page 17 states **"not more than 50 flown"**. Labels issued 22nd December & suppressed 29th Dec | 350-450 |
| 1350 | C | **1933 RMS Makura cvr** to USA with 1d Admiral tied by **'RMS MAKURA'** cds of 27JA33, very fine **'RMS MAUNGANUI'** cds of 31JA33 at U/L indicating transfer of the cover at sea. **Most unusual item** | 150-200 |



INDIANA UNIVERSITY SOUTHEAST
4201 Grant Line Road
New Albany, Indiana 47150
(812) 945-2731

June 21, 1984

Dear Bonnie,

Thanks for your letter re the SS Tahiti cover. I bought the cover as part of a large lot, and so had no previous knowledge of the ship or the wreck or anything else. But good historian that I am, I went over to the library and did some reading in the New York Times. This is what I learned:

The SS Tahiti was a twin-screw oil burning ship of 7896 gross tons built in Glasgow for the Union Steamship Co. of New Zealand in 1904. It measured 460' long, 55.5' across, and had a displacement of 24.4', making it one of the largest ships sailing on the Pacific at the time. It sailed out of Sydney August 6, 1930 for Wellington, and left Wellington August 12, carrying about 175 passengers and a crew of 142. It was due to arrive in San Francisco on August 29. On August 15 Ar 16, it lost its starboard propeller and tailshaft and began leaking badly enough to warrant the sending of distress signals. The American steamer Ventura picked up the signals and began sailing to the aid of the Tahiti. Other ships also sailed to the area, but the Ventura was the best equipped to remove the passengers and crew, which she did on August 18. Shortly after the passengers and crew were safely taken aboard the Ventura, the Tahiti sunk. Its location was approximately 166° west longitude and 27° south latitude, or about 460 miles southwest of Raratonga in the Cook Islands. Six bags of mail were lost while being transferred to the Ventura, as were all newspapers and parcels, but about 50 bags of mail were saved although watersoaked.

In a hearing a month after the sinking, Captain Arthur T. Toten of the Tahiti was exonerated from any blame in the loss of his ship, whose sinking was termed unavoidable. Ironically, in 1927, the Tahiti had rammed and sunk a ferryboat in Sydney Harbor, with the loss of fifty lives.

This information answers question #4, while the answer to question #1 is that all recovered mail was never under water. Probably since the mail was evidently not recovered by divers, your correspondent will not want the cover, but perhaps the information will be useful to someone else. Feel free to include this letter or any part of it with the cover to the buyer. Thanks.

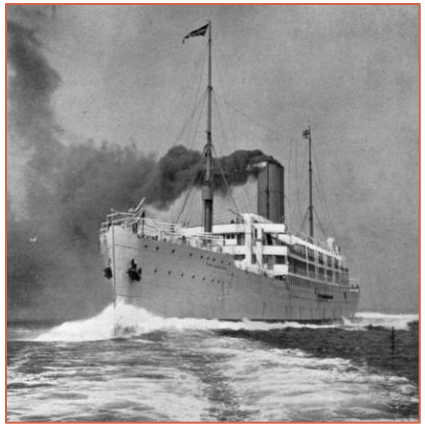
Sincerely,

John

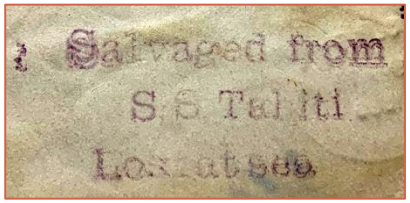
**Left**: Article by Everett C. Erle for the *Stamp Collector*.

**Top**: Gary Watson Public Auction, Sale No. 42, April 1988, Lot 1348. Note: there was no adhesive that floated off.

**Right**: 1984 letter from original owner describing sinking, salvage, etc.



# THANK YOU!

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*PREPARED BY*
*CHARLES J. DICOMO, PHD,*
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***CHARLESDICOMO@GMAIL.COM***