

Wreck & Crash Mail: Not a Macabre Collectible

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Philatelic Society of
Lancaster County
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Agenda

- Introduction
 - Interrupted Mail
 - Reasons to Collect and Study
- Train Wrecks
- Shipwrecks
- Overview of Air Crash Mail
- Deep Dive on Three Covers
 - “This Was Airplane! Farmer Saves Flyer; Father Breaks Leg” (*Kelleher’s SCQ*)
 - “The Tragic Flight of an Amusing Cover” (*CCP*)
 - “An Airmail Plane Crash, John N. Luff, and Harry Houdini” (*La Posta*)
- Conclusion

Introduction

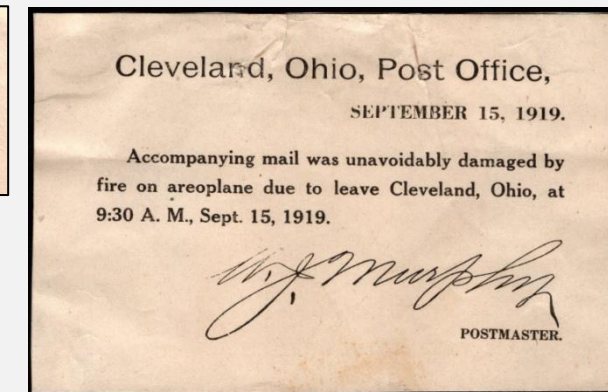


Interrupted Mail

Mail whose normal transmission was **delayed, diverted, damaged, suspended, or otherwise disrupted before delivery** because of an unusual event affecting transportation or postal service

- **Train wrecks**
- **Shipwrecks**
- **Airplane crashes**
- Floods, fires, earthquakes, or storms
- War or military action (e.g., censorship)
- Robbery
- Strikes or transportation embargoes
- Quarantine restrictions
- Interrupted airline or steamship schedules

DAMAGED THROUGH IMMERSION
IN MANAWATU RIVER RAILWAY
ACCIDENT.



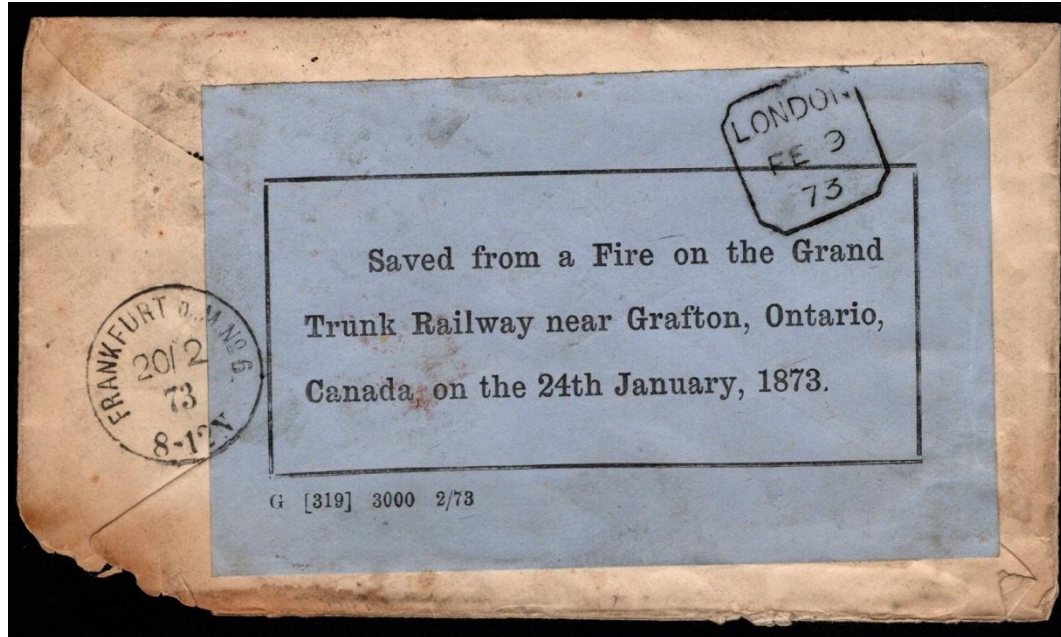
Reasons to Collect and Study

- Routes, means and markings – core aspects of postal history
- Critical importance of mail in the pre-digital age
 - Postal officials expressed concern about injuries & mourned deaths, but it was the mail that mattered
- Stories are fascinating – often sober, but at times with a humorous or unexpected twist
- Preserve the legacy of those who risked who risked life and limb to move the mail, especially airmail pilots and railroad postal clerks

Train Wrecks

A white, torn paper-like border runs along the bottom edge of the page, starting from the left and extending towards the right, with a jagged, irregular edge.

Damaged in Fire on Board the Grand Trunk Railway 24 January 1873 East of Toronto



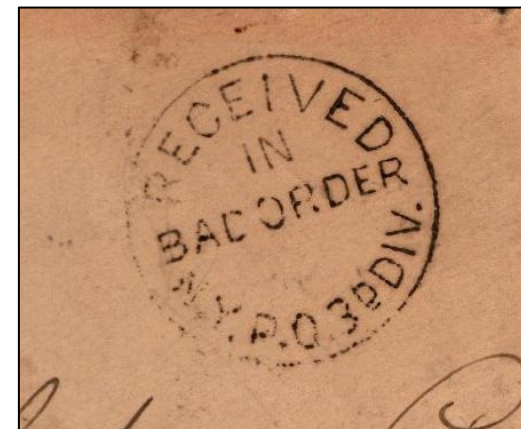
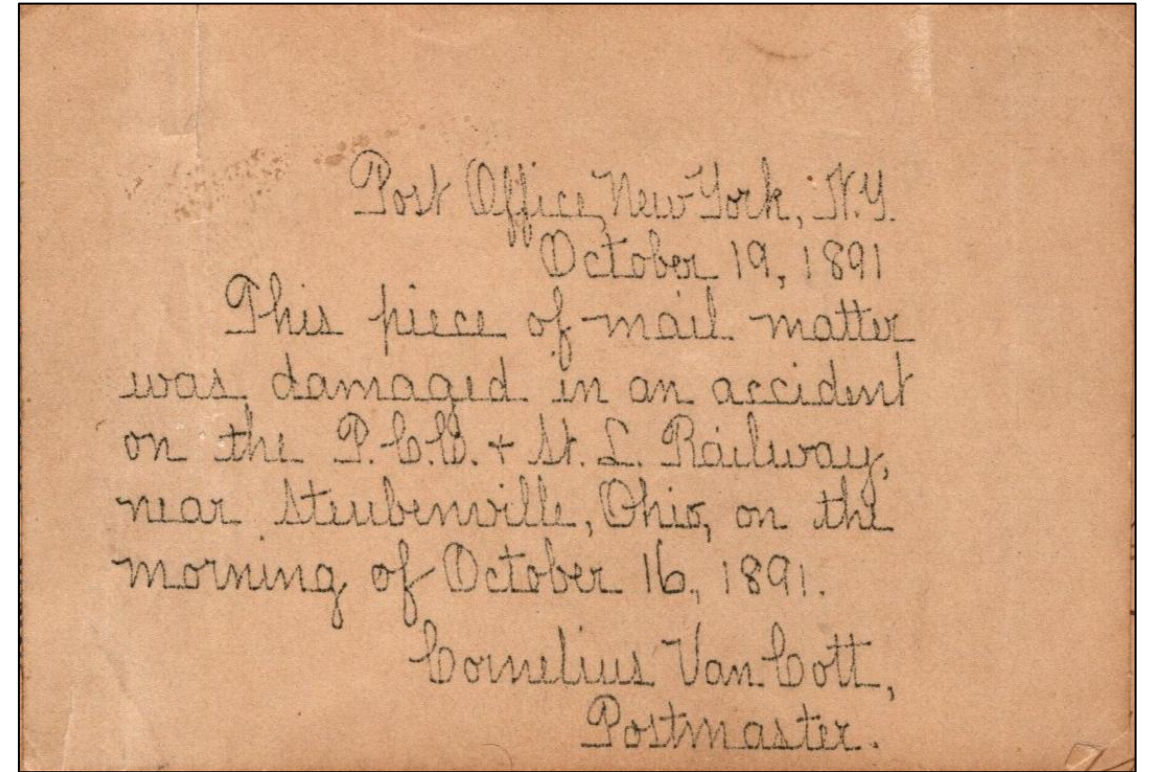
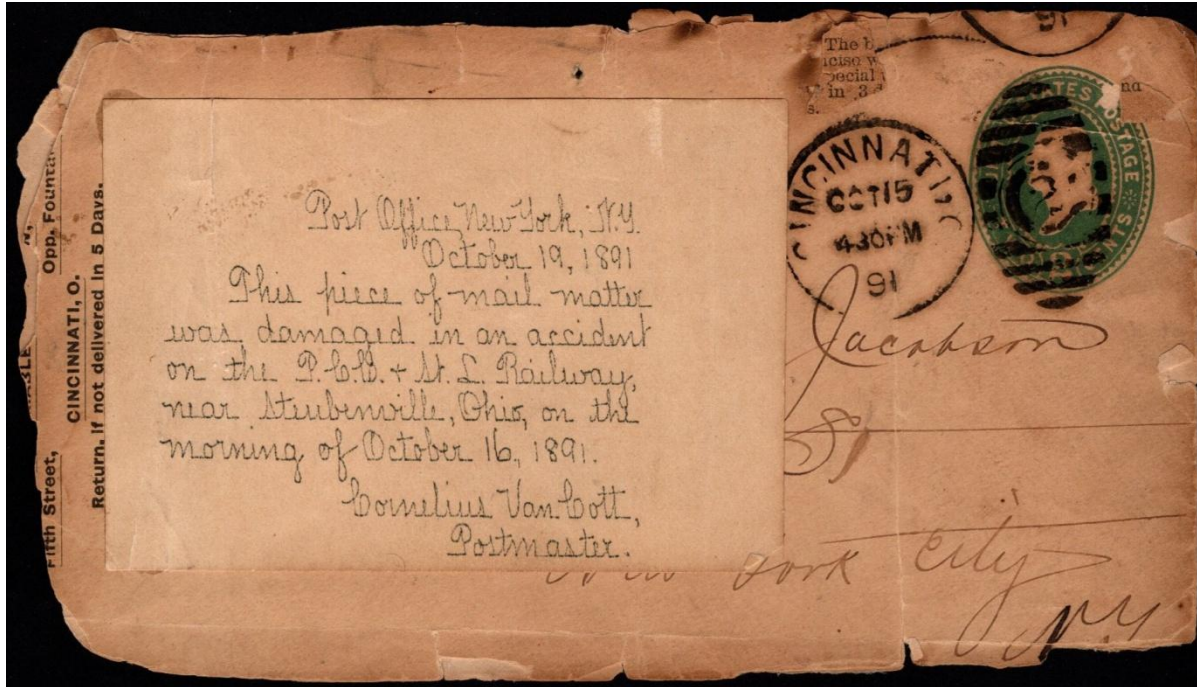
No injuries reported. Cover postmarked Hamilton, Ontario 23 January 1873 franked with 10-cent Canada Small Queens addressed to Frankfurt, Germany. Transited London 9 February & arrived Frankfurt 20 February. Only cover addressed to Europe known to have survived.

The Gazette (Montreal) 31 January 1873

THE BURNED MAILS FOR GREAT BRITAIN.—Toronto Post Office officials publish in the city papers the following statement of the burning of the English mails between Cobourg and Grafton:—The mail train which left Toronto Friday morning had on board thirty-six bags containing letters and newspapers for Great Britain and foreign countries. As there is not room for these mails in the travelling post-office, they were, as usual, placed in the "bonded car,"—a section in the centre of the baggage car. In this car were also a compartment for baggage, and another for express; and the baggage-man and express messenger were in the car. The precise cause of the fire is not known. It would seem that the fire was first observed by the express messenger, and within four or five minutes after it was discovered the car was so filled with

flame and smoke that it was impossible for any person to enter it. After the sides and top of the car had been burned off, the unconsumed mail matter was removed, and the mail clerks (one of whom remained in charge until to-day), assisted by the Company's servants, gathered from the wreck probably two-third's of the entire letter mails. Many of the letters were more or less scorched or burned; but the larger number were whole and in good condition. The newspapers were nearly all destroyed. The letters, including those partially injured, on which the directions may be legible, will be carefully parcelled and forwarded to destination at once. In view of there being a considerable quantity of letters destroyed, parties having correspondence in the mails of Great Britain which were closed at Hamilton and Toronto on Thursday last, are advised to forward duplicates of their exchange, orders, etc.

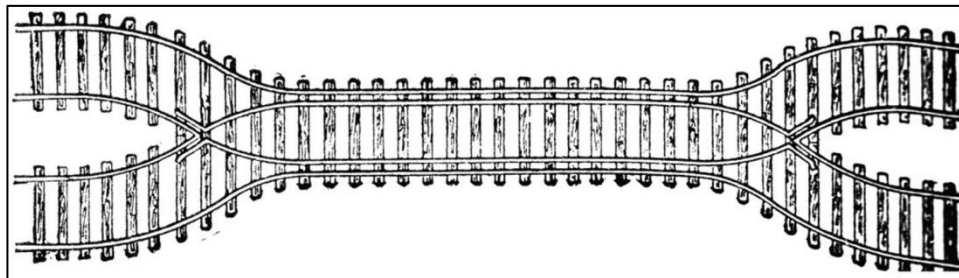
Train Crash, 16 October 1891, Steubenville, Ohio



Brakeman and express messenger killed; 3 postal clerks injured.

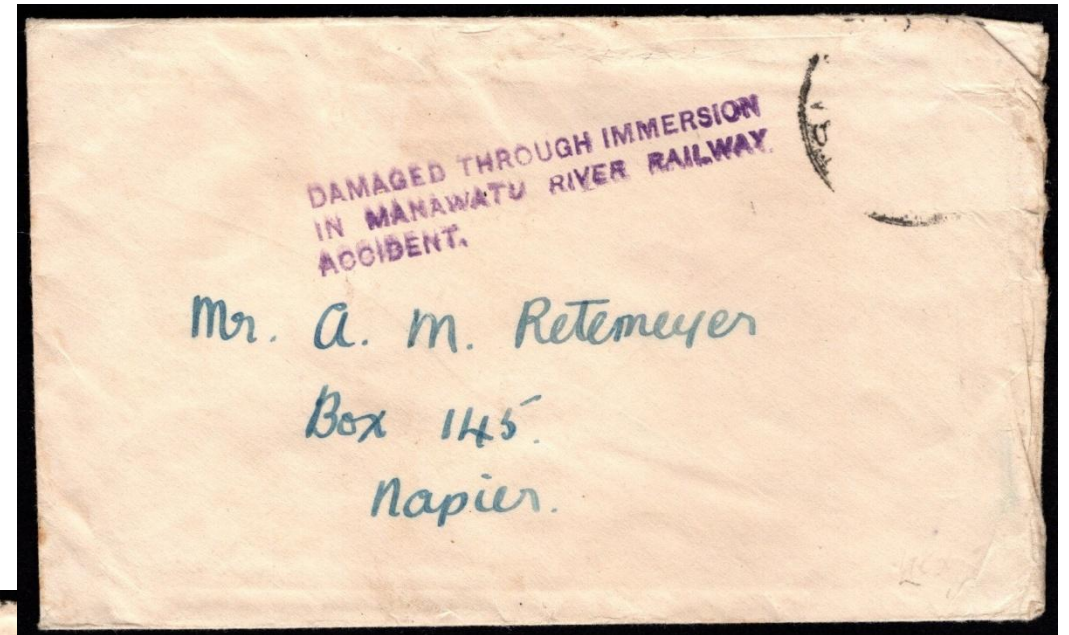
One of two known covers from this crash. Both have explanatory label and "Bad Order" marking.

Gauntlet track



Train Derailment, 20 August 1946, Manawatu Gorge, New Zealand

Engine driver & fireman were killed. Mail was salvaged & delivered before their bodies were found.



Railway through the gorge opened in 1891 despite risk of landslides. This was first crash with fatalities

Shipwrecks

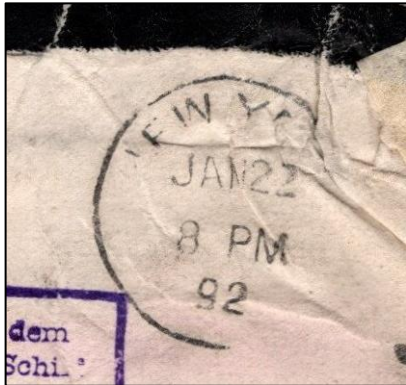
A white, torn paper-like border runs along the bottom edge of the page, starting from the left and extending towards the right, with a jagged, irregular edge.

Mourning Cover Salvaged from the SS *Eider* 31 January 1892

Eider ran aground in thick fog near the Isle of Wight in the English Channel. No loss of life.



Details from the *Eider* Cover



Postmarked New York 22 January 1892 (w/5-cents postage)



Purple handstamp in German translates to "Recovered from the/wrecked ship/Eider"

Some mail was recovered as late as 2 March 1892

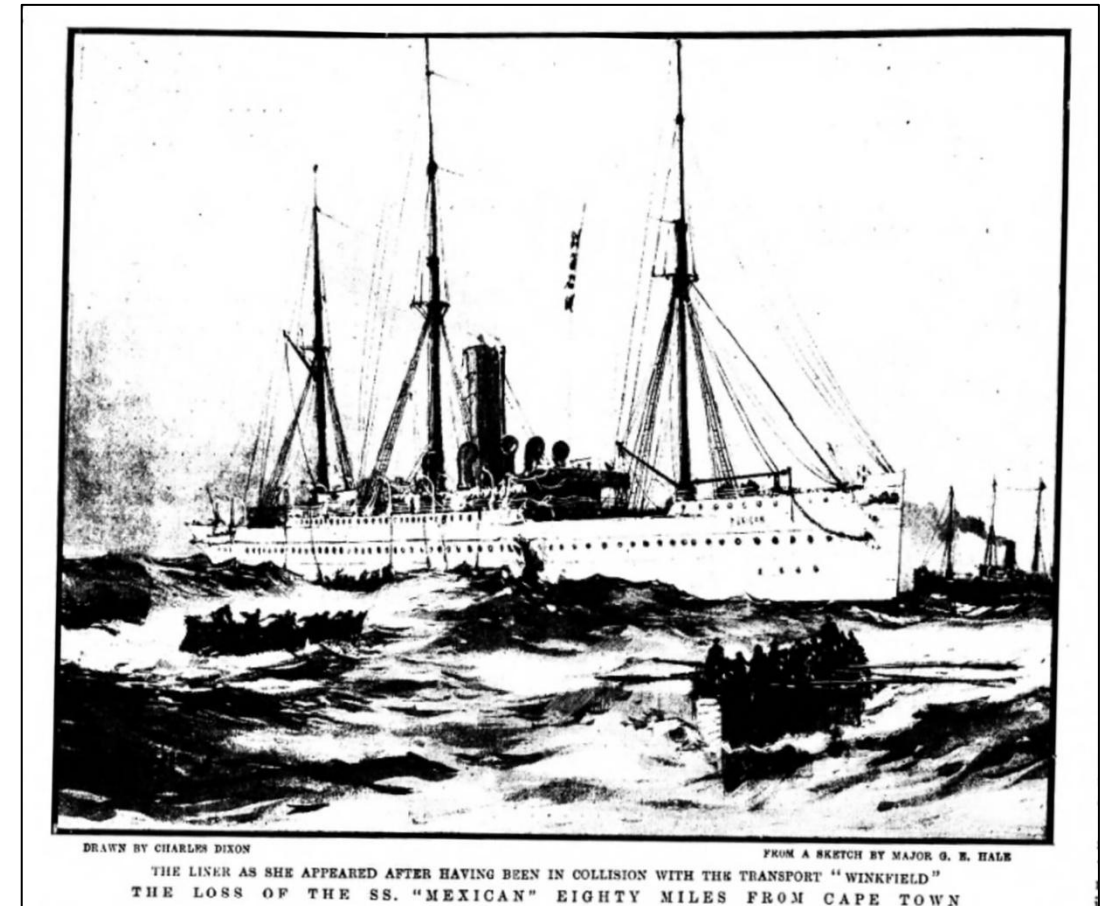


Cover resealed with two official seals from the Imperial Royal Letter Dispatch Office in Vienna



Received in Vienna 3 March 1892

SS *Mexican*, Shipwrecked 5 April 1900



Cachet on back of cover reads "From the / sunken steamer *Mexican* / carrying mail from Cape Town / Railway Post Office No. 15." Less than half of the mail bags were saved. No loss of life.

Cover from the *Mexican* Was Well-Traveled



Mailed Waldenburg, Saxony, Germany mid-February 1900 to Cape Town, South Africa where it arrived ~18 March 1900

Likely franked w/ four 5-pfenning stamps to meet UPU rate Germany-South Africa



Recipient – Theodor Kässner – relocated to London to escape Second Boer War, so cover marked “Not Known”

Re-entered mail stream to be returned to sender and placed aboard the *Mexican*

After *Mexican* sank, cover returned to Cape Town & placed on another ship, the *Tantallon Castle*, that arrived Southampton 28 April 1900

Arrived back in Waldenburg 30 April 1900

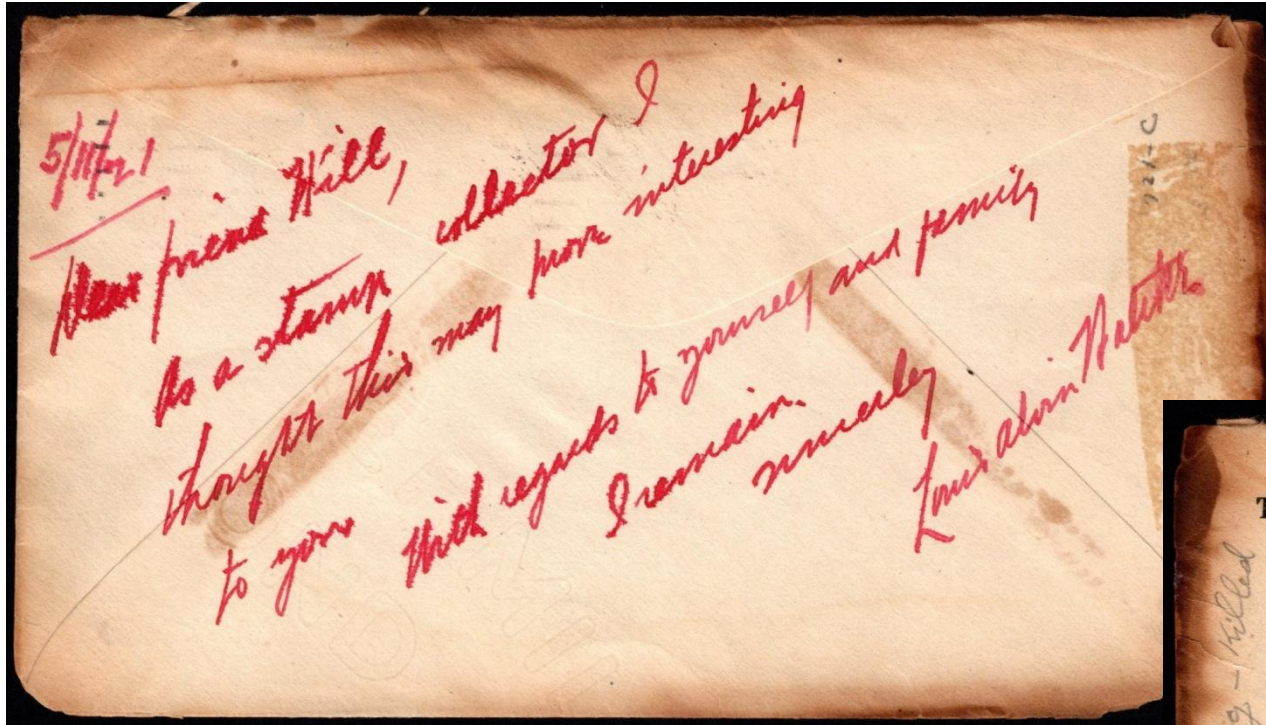
Overview of Air Crash Mail

A white, torn-paper-like border runs along the bottom edge of the slide, starting from the left and extending towards the right, with a jagged, irregular edge.

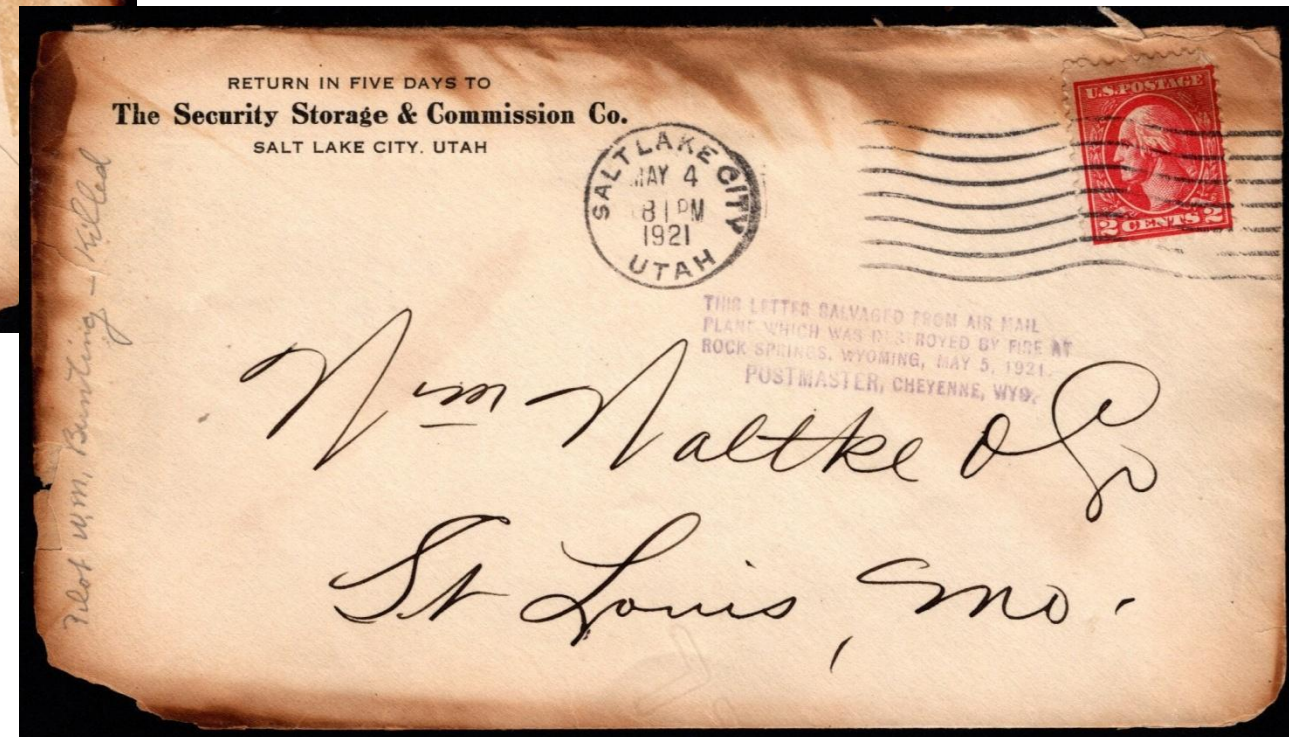
Why the Focus on Air Crash Mail?

-
- Airmail was the pinnacle of moving mail rapidly – the objective of every postal administration
 - Flying mail was not for the fainthearted, especially in the early days
 - Life expectancy of an airmail pilot was as short as 900 hours
 - 35 of some 200 pilots hired by the USPOD between 1918 and 1926 died while flying mail
 - A fatality rate of ~17% far exceeds the most dangerous profession today – logging – with a fatality rate of 0.01%
 - Brave pilots persevered, proving that air transportation of mail, cargo and people was not only feasible but viable - we owe them a debt of gratitude
 - Collecting and preserving air crash mail is one way to preserve and honor their legacy

Collectability of Crash Covers Recognized Early On



On 5 May 1921, a de Havilland DH-4 mail plane nose-dived, crashed and burned at Rock Springs, Wyoming killing pilot William M. Bunting. Of 292 pounds of mail, 227 pounds were salvaged.



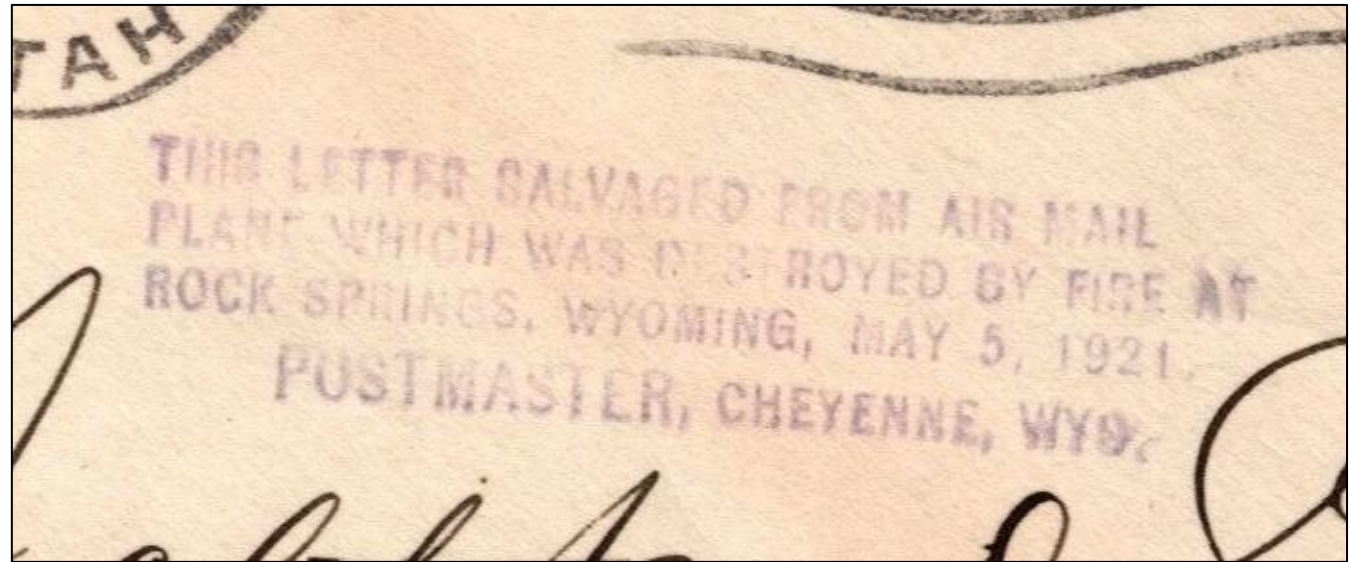
"5/11/21

Dear Friend Hill,

As a stamp collector, I thought this may prove interesting to you.

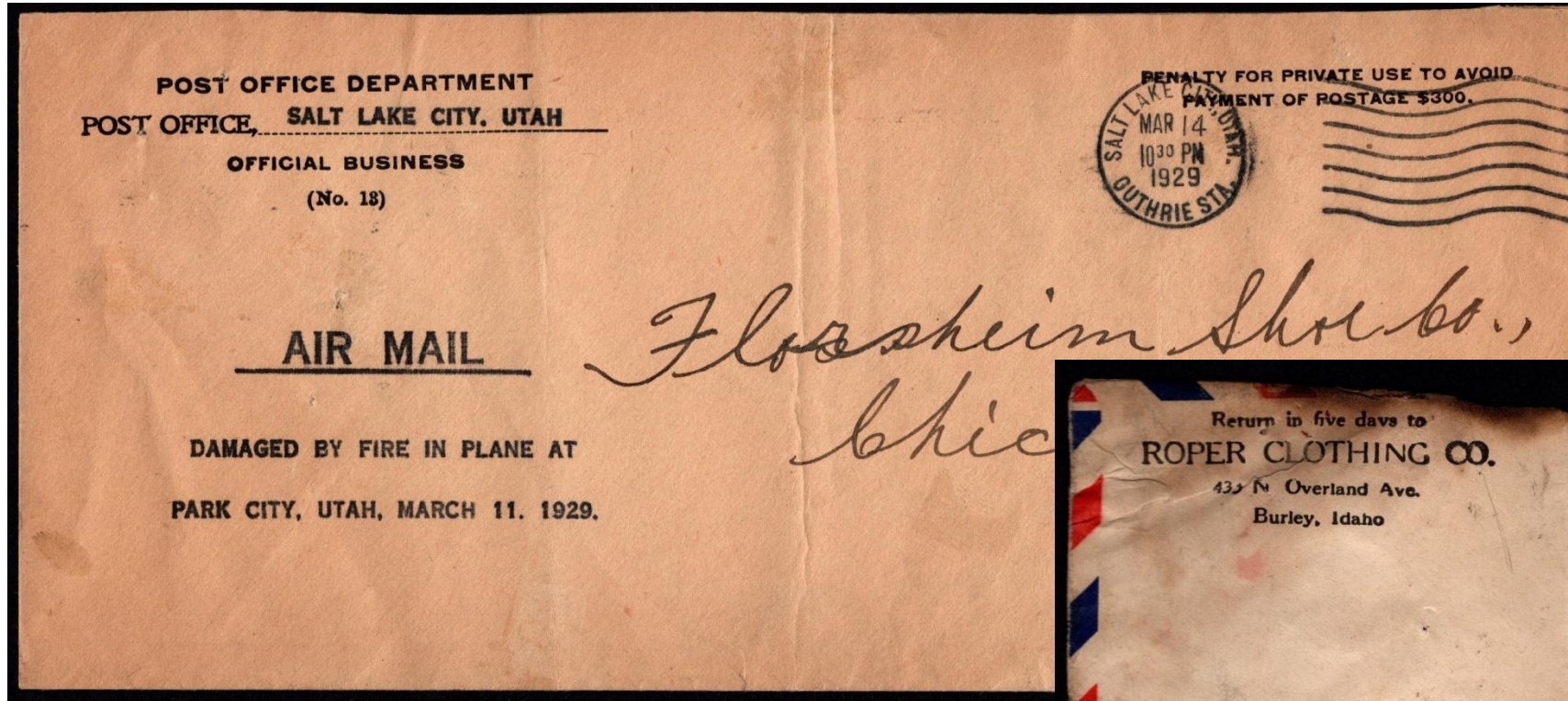
With regards to yourself and family, I remain sincerely,
Louis Alvin Waltke"

W. Bunting & 4-line Cachet On Rock Springs Cover



Bunting first flew air mail on 15 November 1920

Some Mail Forwarded in “Ambulance Covers”



Boeing 40B crashed in a blinding snowstorm near Park City on 11 March 1929. Pilot and passenger were injured. 29 of 30 mail bags were salvaged, 6 badly burned.



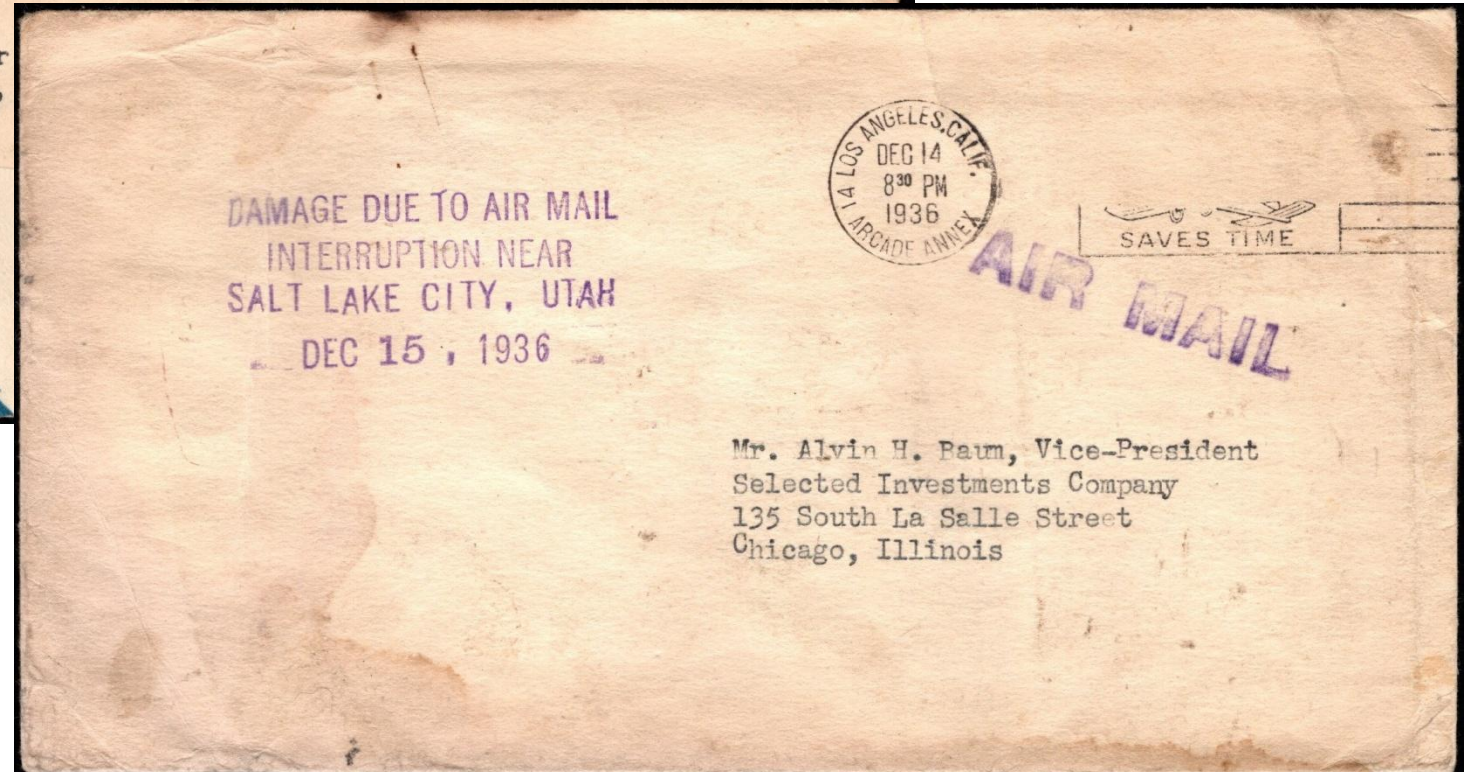
Badly burned covers were forwarded in “ambulance covers” from the Salt Lake City Post Office on 14 March 1929. Cover arrived in Chicago four days later.

Unique Cachets for Each Crash...



A Boeing 40B-4 crashed into a mountain on 22 January 1931, killing the pilot. The wreck was found a week later.

Boeing 247D crashed into mountain 15 December 1936, killing 2 pilots & 5 passengers. Wreck found 6 June 1937

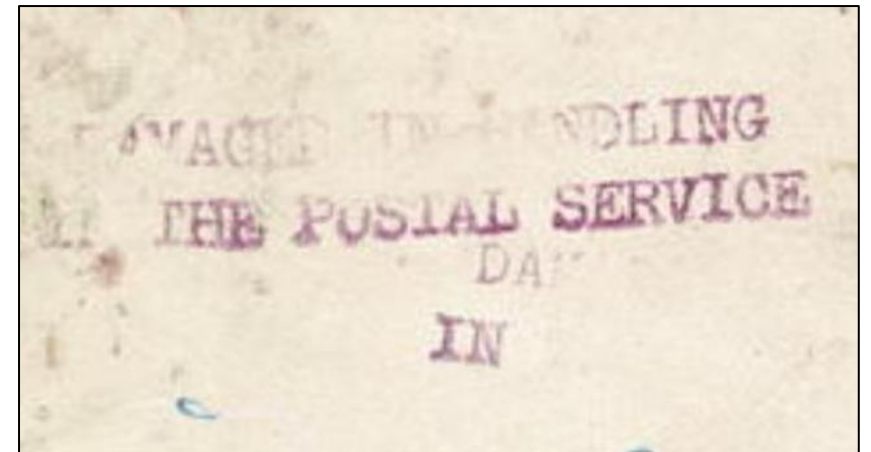


Mr. Alvin H. Baum, Vice-President
Selected Investments Company
135 South La Salle Street
Chicago, Illinois

...Until USPOD Mandated a Standard in 1956

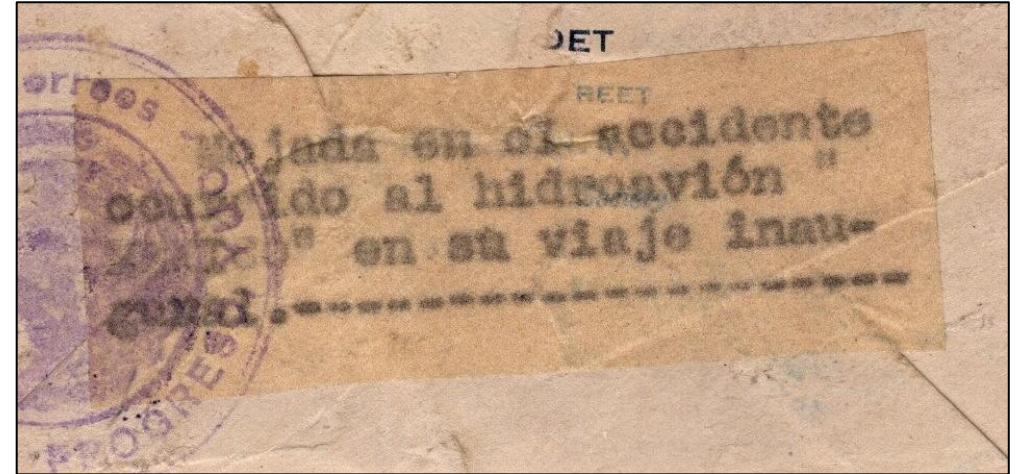


On 1 March 1962, a Boeing 707 with 87 passengers & 8 crew crashed into Jamaica Bay shortly after taking off from Idlewild Airport (now JFK International). All on board perished. All 500 pounds of mail onboard was damaged but salvaged.



“Damaged In Handling / In The Postal Service”

Crashes Occurred Elsewhere...Caribbean...



Label on back reads, "Wet from accident that occurred to the seaplane *Mexico* on its maiden voyage."

Inaugural flight between Mexico City & Havana w/stops in Veracruz & Progreso. Due to engine problems, plane went down in the Gulf of Mexico 2 miles from Progreso on 20 January 1931. All people on board were rescued.

Cover postmarked Veracruz on 19 January 1931 & received in Havana 26 January 1931, after either hitching a ride on a Pan Am or being forwarded by boat.

...And Europe



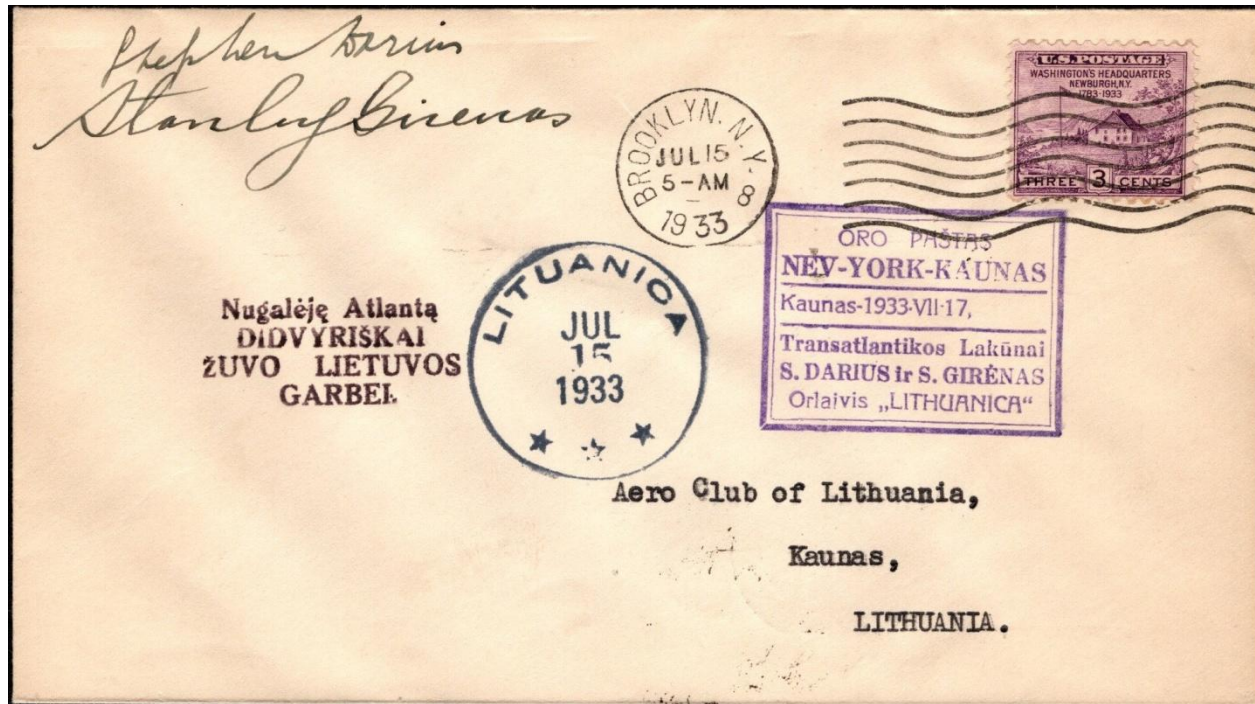
KLM Lockheed Constellation enroute from Amsterdam to New York stopped to refuel at Shannon Airport. A minute after taking off on 5 September 1954, the tail hit the water & the plane crashed killing 25 people, including the pilot, two crew members & 22 passengers. Of the 26 mail bags on board, 20 were recovered. Cachet applied by Irish Post reads "SALVAGED FROM K.L.M. CRASH AT SHANNON."

Some Covers Bear No Markings But Have Signs of Damage...



After departing Daytona Beach on 1 March 1929, plane developed engine problems and the pilot, Charles "Jimmy" Faulkner made a forced landing in the bay. He was unhurt. The mail was retrieved and placed on another westbound flight arriving in Orlando same day. All covers show evidence of submersion.

...Others Show No Signs of Damage But Include a Marking...



Cachet to left of *Lituanica* postmark translates “Having conquered the Atlantic, died in honor of Lithuania.”

One of 983 letters flown by 2 Lithuanian-American pilots (Stephen Darius & Stanley Girenas) on a nonstop flight from New York to Lithuania.

Departed New York on 15 July 1933 & successfully crossed the Atlantic but crashed 17 July 1933 near Soldin, Germany (now Myślibórz, Poland), about 500 miles short of Kaunas, Lithuania, due to bad weather & engine defects.

Both pilots were killed but mail was undamaged & forwarded to Lithuania.

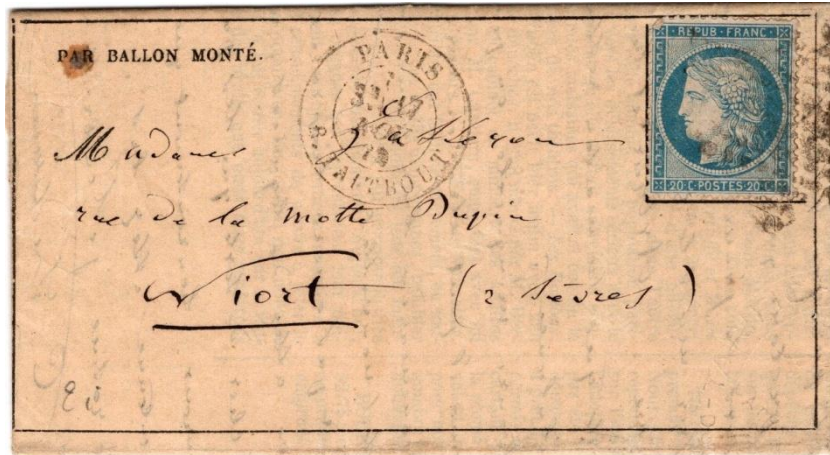
Cover backstamped Kaunas 18 July 1933.

Lithuania Issued a Set of 6 Airmail Stamps in 1934 Memorializing Darius & Girėnas



“In Memory of
Lithuanian
Heroes”

...While Others are Identified by Circumstances Like This *Ballon Monté* Cover



Postmarked "Paris Rue Taitbout" 17 November 1870 & addressed to a "Rosine" (last name illegible) in Niort, France, about 250 miles southwest of Paris.

Explanation at right excerpted from "Air Crash Mail of the World" catalog.

"Balloon *General Urich* departed Gare de Nord on 18 November 1870, at 11:15 p.m. carrying two bags of mail weighing 80 kilos and some carrier pigeons.

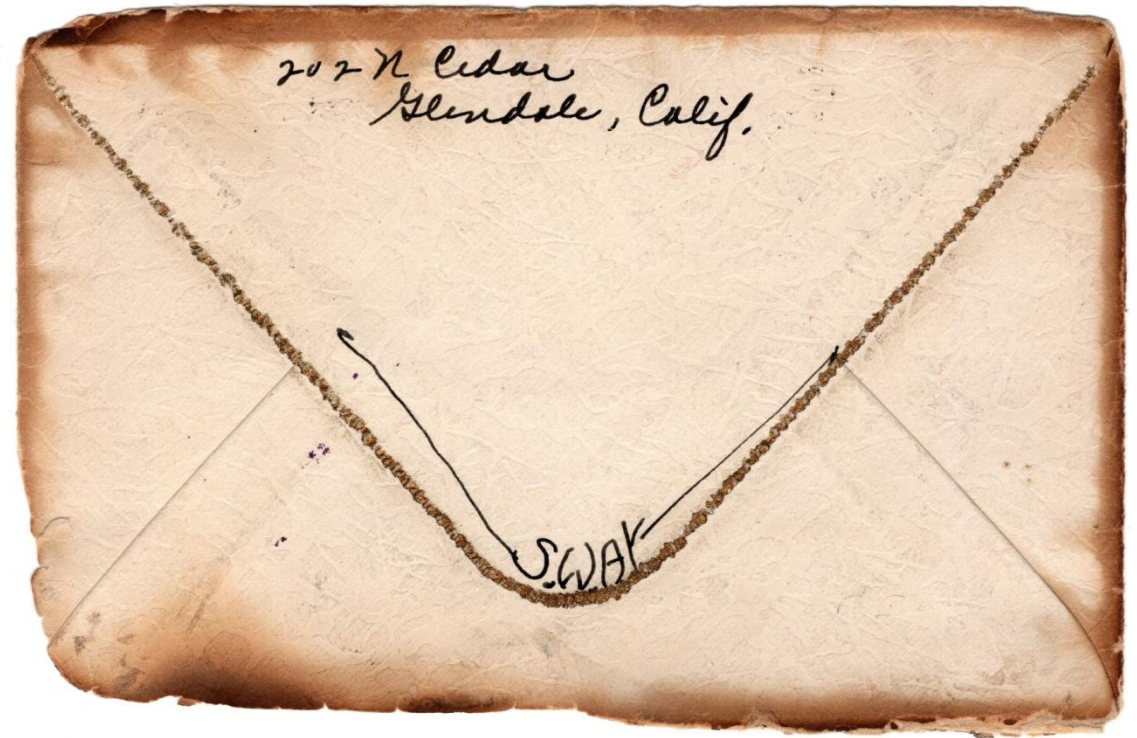
"After nine hours of heavy rain that soaked the aeronaut and passengers, the aeronaut, Louis Lemoine, opened the air valve, but it was frozen. He could not close it, and the balloon made a wild descent, and the basket struck the ground violently. The aeronaut and passengers jumped out of the basket, and the aeronaut cut the balloon with a knife.

"As there was no wind during the night, the balloon did not fly very far from Paris. Frenchmen helped to hide the balloon from the Germans who were in that area. Eventually, one bag of mail was turned over to the postmistress of Luzarches and the other bag was given to the postmistress of Viarmes. The letters were snuck out over some days to other towns, where they could be delivered to the addressees. Covers can be identified by Paris postmarks between November 15 and 18."

Deep Dive on Three Covers



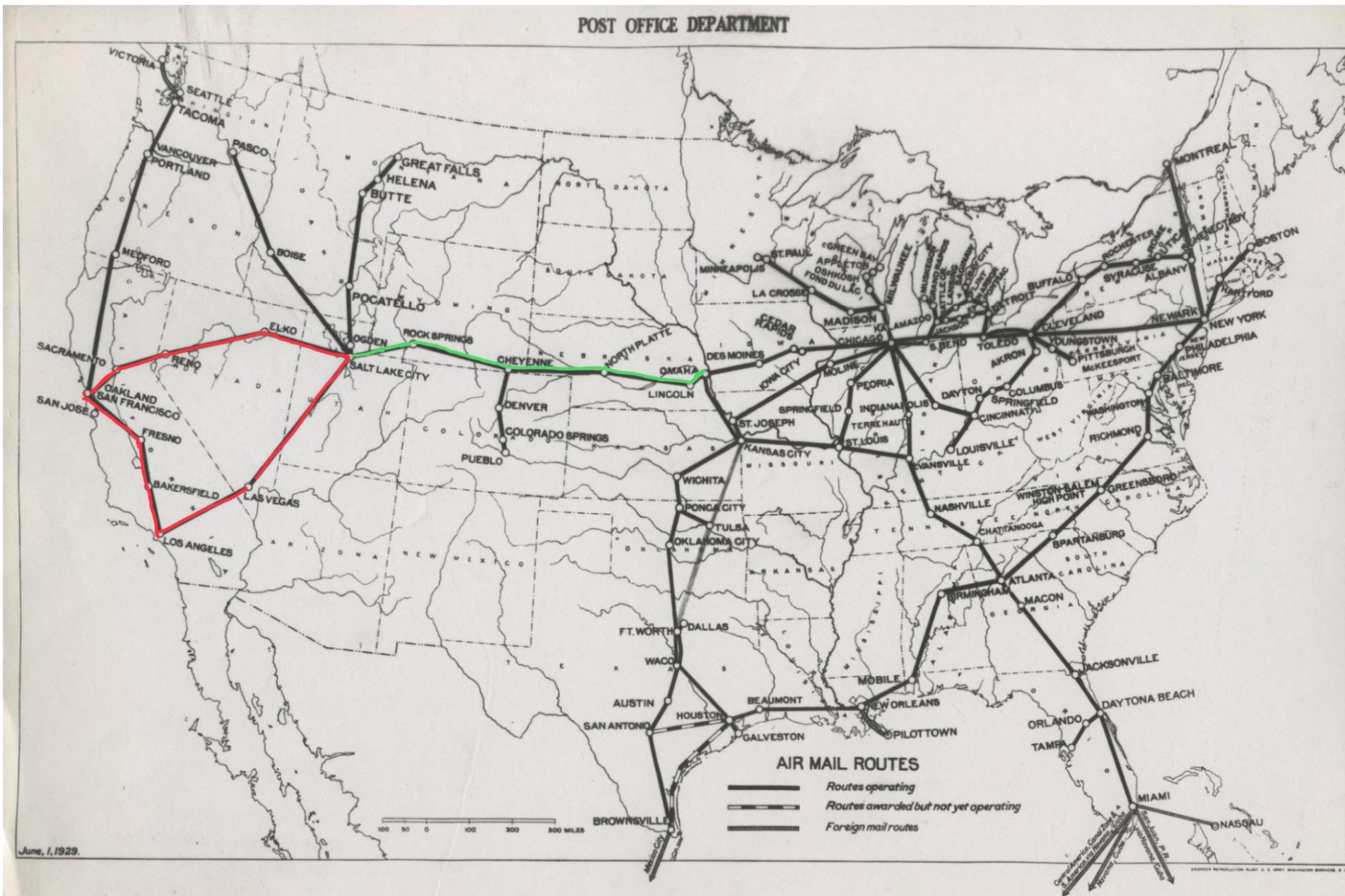
“This Was Airplane! Farmer Saves Flyer; Father Breaks Leg”



Early in the morning of 6 January 1929, a Boeing 40B piloted by Norman Potter struck a tree on landing near Fort Crook in Omaha and was destroyed by fire. About 200 pounds of the 800 pounds of mail on board were salvaged.

Red lines:
Possible route of letter from Los Angeles to Salt Lake City. Most likely: CAM 4 LA-LV-SLC. Other is CAM 8-CAM 18

Green line:
Portion of CAM 18 flown by Potter Jan 4-5, 1929



This Was Airplane! Farmer Saves Flyer; Father Breaks Leg

**The
Omaha
Evening
Bee-
News,
7
January
1929**

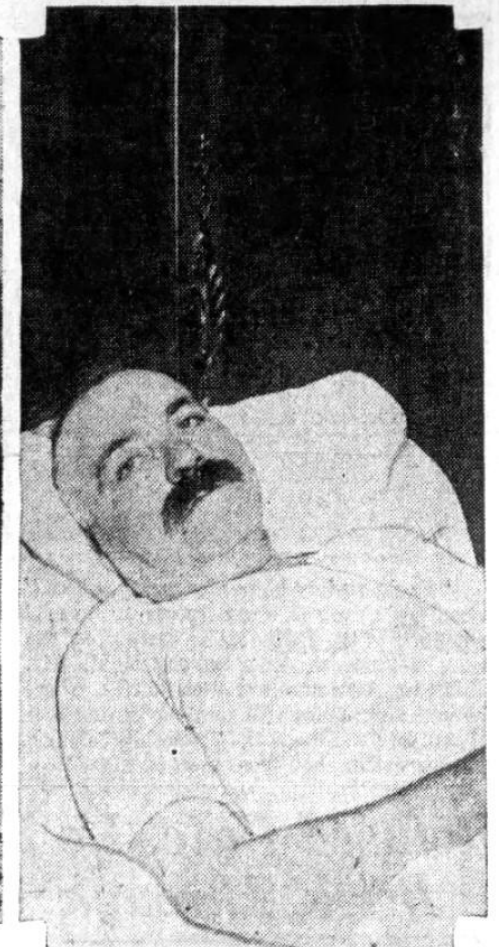


Lee Watson jr., is shown here beside the burned wreckage of an airmail plane which fell on his father's farm Sunday morning. Lee probably saved the life of Normal Potter, 28, the pilot, by dragging Potter away from the burning plane

after he fell dazed from the cockpit. The plane crashed on a cottonwood tree and fell with its tail resting on the Watson house. Lee had run outdoors in his bare feet to rescue the pilot, but said he didn't mind the cold.



Closeup of Lee Watson jr., who saved an airmail pilot after a plane crashed on the Watson farm, near Fort Crook flying field, early Sunday morning.



Victim of an airplane accident, although not in or touched by the plane. Lee Watson sr., shown here, feared a falling mail plane would hit his house, tried to get out of bed, and broke his leg.

Sadly, Potter's Luck Did Not Last



Norman Potter on the day of his marriage to Hazel McDonald, 19 October 1929.

On 23 November 1931, while flying a mail plane from Oakland to Salt Lake City, Potter encountered heavy snow and crashed. He was killed instantly.

He had flown more than 3,000 hours with just two accidents.

As for the mail he carried on his last flight: “The load of airmail was saved and was promptly forwarded today,” per the 24 November 1931, edition of *The Daily Herald* of Salt Lake City.

“The Tragic Flight of an Amusing Cover”

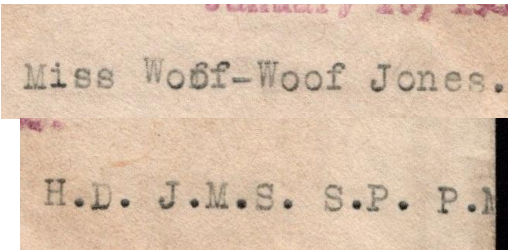


A Boeing 95 enroute from Los Angeles to Salt Lake City (CAM 4) piloted by Maurice Graham crashed about 250 miles south of Salt Lake City on 11 January 1930. His plane was not located until 24 June 1930. Graham died not in the crash but of exposure to extreme weather. All 648 pounds of mail were salvaged undamaged and returned to Los Angeles, where it received a “Return to the Writer / Unclaimed” machine cancel in green ink, dated 28 June 1930, 10:00 a.m. and a crash cachet.

Cover Features



Grace E. Jones, circa 1929, aka



Bullock's Department Store Circa 1930



15-cent postage to cover airmail rate and special delivery



Crash cachet and return postmark

“No more dramatic chapter has been written in the history of the air mail than this sacrifice on the part of a devoted pilot, who faced death in the storm to carry the mail through.” – *San Bernadino County Sun*, 18 July 1930



Kindergarten Class in Las Vegas
Snow, 10 January 1930.



Remains of Maurice
Graham's Crashed Plane

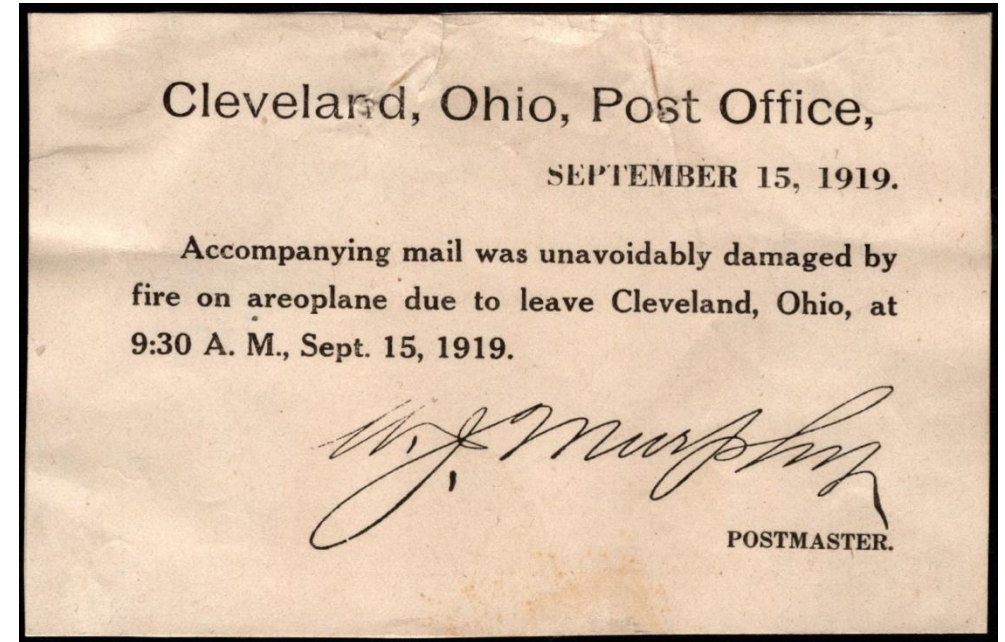
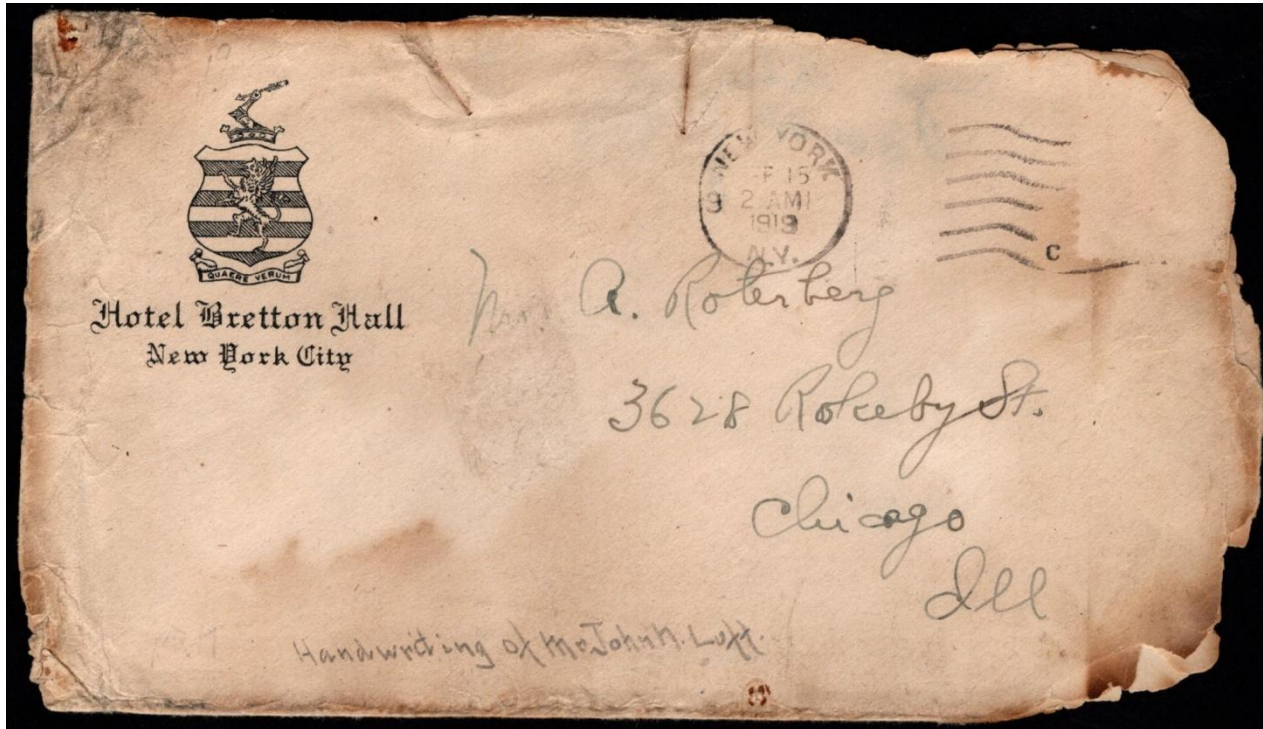


Mail bags from Graham's
plane

Graham's plane was found 24 June 1930, but his body wasn't discovered until 16 July about six miles from the crash site. He had a slight skull fracture, which led to the conclusion that he died from exposure.

His last log entry: "January 11, 1930. 2:35 AM. No destination."

“An Airmail Plane Crash, John N. Luff, and Harry Houdini”



On 15 September 1919, a de Havilland DH-4 flown by Edward V. Gardner crashed shortly after takeoff from Cleveland enroute to Chicago. The plane crashed on the roofs of two homes and burned. A label was attached to the mail, and a relief plane took the salvaged and damaged mail to Chicago. This is one of three known surviving covers.

Edward V. Gardner: 2nd Pilot Hired by USPOD in August 1918



Gardner sitting on engine of a Curtiss Jenny,
August 1918



Aftermath of crash, *The Plain Dealer*, 16 September 1919
Gardner would leave the USPOD and become a barnstormer. He died in a crash in May 1921.

Handwriting of Mr. John H. Luff.

?



Luff's residence in in the late 1910s per NYC Directories

look

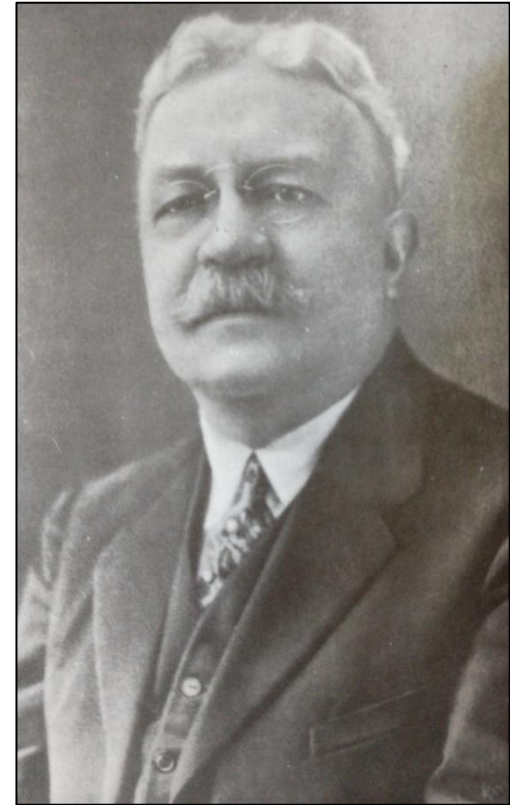
berp

copy

Chu

Left: Luff's handwriting from an attestation on a New Hampshire Postmaster Provisional.

Right: Handwriting from cover



John A. Luff – Founder CCNY, President of APS, Signed Roll of Distinguished Philatelists, APS Hall of Fame. Namesake of the APS "Luff Awards."

Who Was “A. Roterberg”?



August Roterberg (right), Harry Houdini (left), Anna Roterberg (middle)

Manufacturer of magical equipment and author of magic books

Sold business around 1916 and devoted himself to collecting and selling stamps, especially of Mexico and Latin America



1921 Mexico 10 centavos “El Abrazo de Acatempan” with inverted center owned by August Roterberg.

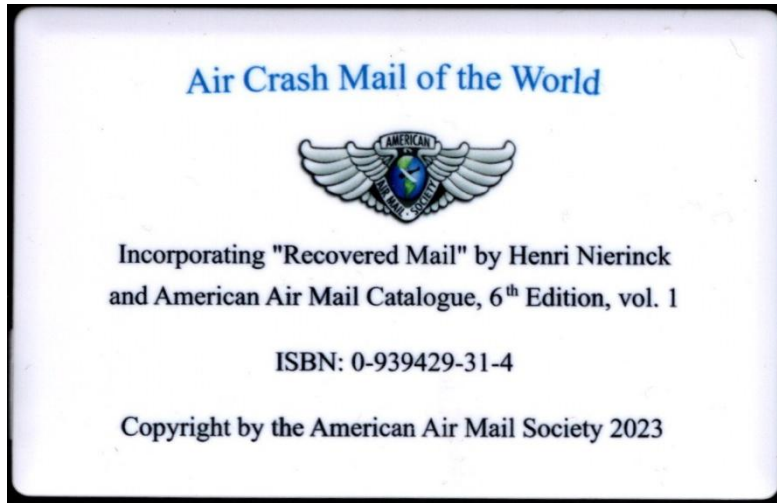
Conclusion

Conclusion



- Wreck and crash mail is not a “macabre collectible,” but a way to preserve postal history and honor those who risked their lives carrying the mail
- Crash mail offers multiple avenues of research for the postal historian (means, routes, markings, etc.) as well as for the social historian
- Like all of philately, prices for interrupted mail vary widely but depend on rarity, not condition

Resources



Maritime Disaster Mail. Robin Gwynn and Norman Hoggarth. Stuart Rossiter Trust. 2003.

Railway Disaster Mail. Robin Gwynn and Norman Hoggarth. Stuart Rossiter Trust. 2010.

Wreck & Crash Mail Society
<http://wreckandcrash.org/>

La Catastrophe

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The British
NEWSPAPER
Archive