



U.S. Philatelic Classics Society

Volume: 50 Number: 4 Year: 1998 Chronicle: 180

Article: The Ultimate Destination

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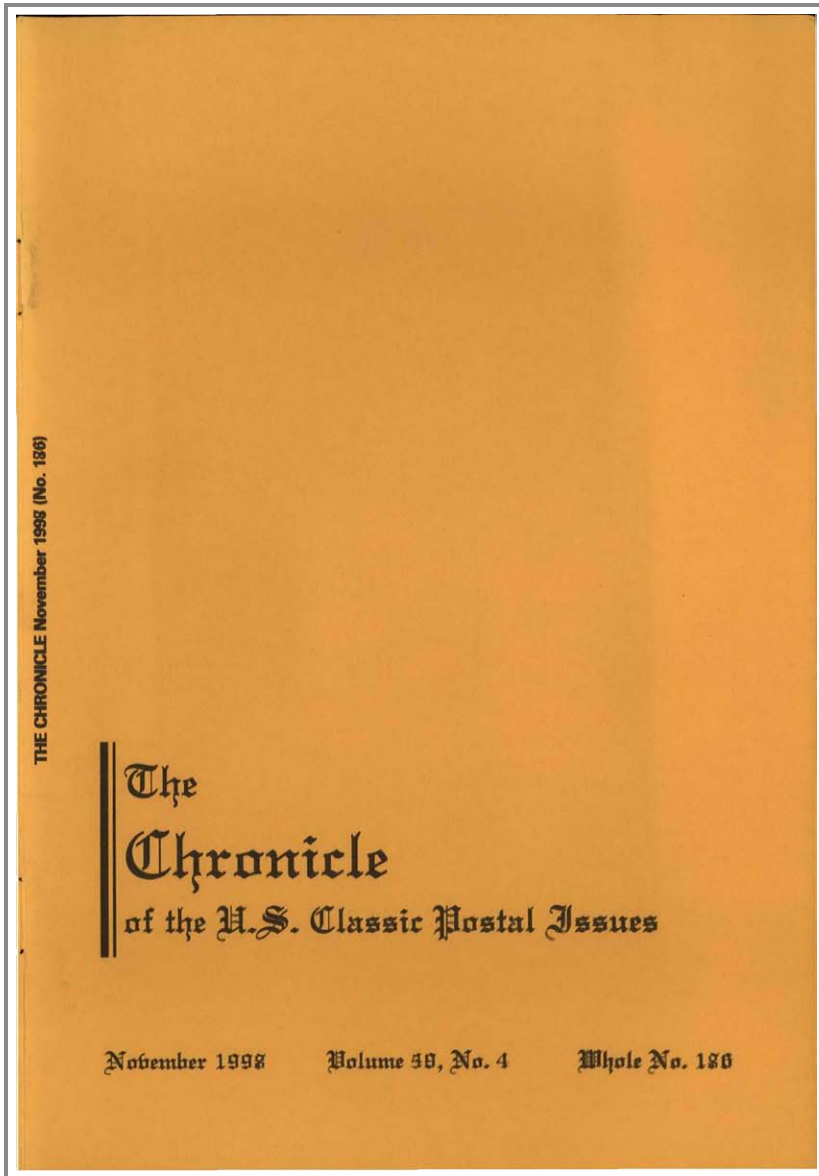


Table Of Contents

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[Click here to view the entire Volume: 50 No: 4 Chronicle: 180](#)

	<u>Starting Page</u>
Front Cover (1 page)	Front Cover
Display Advertisement (1 page) Advertiser: Jack E. Molesworth, Inc.	Inside Front Cover
Display Advertisement (1 page) Advertiser: Shreves Philatelic Galleries, Inc.	241
Display Advertisement (1 page) Advertiser: Spink	242
Masthead (1 page)	243
Display Advertisement (1 page) Advertiser: Victor B. Krievins	244
Table of Contents (1 page)	245
Display Advertisement (1 page) Advertiser: Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries, Inc.	246
Prestamp and Stampless Period	
The Express Mail of 1803-1804 (8 pages) <i>Van Koppersmith</i>	247
Display Advertisement (1 page) Advertiser: Matthew Bennett Inc.	255
Display Advertisement (1 page) Advertiser: Ivy & Mader Philatelic Auctions, Inc.	256
Carriers and Independent Mails	
Are There Really Bogus Locals? (5 pages) <i>Calvet M. Hahn</i>	257
S.C.R.A.P.	
10 Cent 1845 Baltimore Postmaster's Provisional (S.C.R.A.P. Number 81-022-00) (2 pages) <i>Michael J. Brown</i>	262
1851-61 Period	
The United State s-British North America Cross-Border Mails: Their Unique Aspects, Peculiarities and Markings. Including Cancels Designed to Kill Postmarks (5 pages) <i>Hubert C. Skinner</i>	264
Display Advertisement (1 page) Advertiser: U.S. Philatelic Classic Society	268
Display Advertisement (1 page) Advertiser: Guido Craveri	269
The Lithographed General Issues of the Confederate States of America. Stone 2. Fill-ups (10 pages) <i>Leonard H. Hartmann</i>	270
Display Advertisement (1 page) Advertiser: Andrew Levitt, Inc.	280
Display Advertisement (1 page) Advertiser: Charles G. Firby	281
1869 Period	
The Two Cent Line Office Rate between U.S. and Canada (4 pages) <i>Jeffrey M. Forster</i>	282
Bank Note Period	
The Relief Breaks of the Two Cent Washingtons: the American Bank Note Company Issue of 1890. Scott #219D and 220 (4 pages) <i>Richard M. Morris</i>	286
The Ultimate Destination (3 pages) <i>Eliot A. Landau</i>	290
Display Advertisement (1 page) Advertiser: Taylor Made Company	292
Display Advertisement (1 page) Advertiser: Leonard H. Hartmann	292
Display Advertisement (1 page) Advertiser: Brad Sheff	293
Officials	
Color Cancellation on U.S. Official Stamps. 1873- 1874 (13 pages) <i>Alan C. Campbell</i>	294
Display Advertisement (1 page) Advertiser: U.S. Philatelic Classic Society	306
Foreign Mails	
The Chicago Exchange Office and Pre-U.P.U. Mail to Canada (6 pages) <i>Leonard Piskiewicz</i>	307
The Cover Corner	
Additional Answer to Problem Cover in Issue 177 (1 page) <i>Ray W. Carlin</i>	313
Answer to Problem Cover in Issue 178 (3 pages) <i>Ray W. Carlin</i>	313
Answer to Problem Cover in Issue 179 (2 pages) <i>Ray W. Carlin</i>	315
Problem Covers For Issue 180 (3 pages) <i>Ray W. Carlin</i>	317

The Editor's Page

[Postscript to Volume 50](#) (1 page)

Charles J. Peterson

319

[Index to Advertisers](#) (1 page)

320

[Classified](#) (1 page)

320

[Display Advertisement](#) (1 page) Advertiser: Steven Hines

320

[Display Advertisement](#) (1 page) Advertiser: James E. Lee

Inside Back
Cover

[Display Advertisement](#) (1 page) Advertiser: Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries, Inc.

Back Cover

THE ULTIMATE DESTINATION

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Collectors of 19th century U.S. postal history often seek the most remote and uncommon destinations for the stamp, issue or type of mail service they collect. Many destinations which are "scarce" in the 20th century on non-philatelic covers, e.g., Liechtenstein (especially outside of Vaduz), Sarawak, Turks & Caicos Islands, Bahrain, and St. Pierre & Miquelon Islands (all especially before World War II), are "very rare" to find in the 19th century.

Even many European destinations which are only "uncommon" in the pre-World War II portion of the 20th century can be "very scarce" to "rare" at different times in the 19th century. This was because commercial relations were not open between U.S. businesses and those towns and/or because there had been few immigrants to the United States who would be writing back to relatives in their homelands. This is especially true in Eastern Europe, where mass migration to the U.S. did not start until the last quarter of the 19th century. The same is true today for many small towns and villages in the interiors of India, China and South America whose immigrants have only recently arrived due to the new immigration policies of the last 35 years.

I have always searched hard for and specially prized such destinations in my collections of Lincoln 19th century issues and U.S. registry material. After all, how many 6¢ large Bank Notes can there be to Madeira and St. Helena? Do you know of many 4¢ small Bank Notes to Turks & Caicos Islands or Karlshamm, Finland and Roratonga, Cook Islands? How about a nice New Haven negative Star of David cancellation on 15¢ and 30¢ 1861-66 issues to Bangkok, Siam? Will we ever see another 6¢ with late large Bank Note issues paying triple U.P.U. rates to El Biar, Algeria?

All of these destinations are extremely rare and some are unique for the stamp and period. But they all have something in common that my most recent discovery does not: *the destination had a population! Somebody was there to receive the mail!*

Anyone who collects covers from the last two decades of the 19th century knows the name of San Francisco stamp dealer George Carion. He had a large clientele and conducted world-wide correspondence. During the period 1892-94 (it may have been longer, but those three years are all I can document) Carion wrote to many exotic places seeking to buy stamps of outlying colonies, territories and dependencies of the major powers. He also tried to have covers addressed back to him by the local postmasters of those distant places. He would then sell those covers to his clients who were seeking unusual origins for their collections. He would also ask the postmaster to return his original request covers. This is why Carion registered covers in 1880-1900 are not too scarce.

The cover illustrated here (Figure 1) is one of those original requests to a postmaster. However, this one was returned because it was undeliverable.

The Kerguelen Islands were discovered in 1772 by French Navigator Yves Joseph de Kerguelen-Tremarec and are now part of the French Southern & Antarctic Territories. They are the virtually desolate remains of a large multi-caldera and ash field volcanic system, mostly barren but with some scrub vegetation. Indeed, the British explorer Captain James Cook visited it in 1776 and named it "Desolation Island."¹ In 1894, the Kerguelen Islands were , and until 1949 they remained, COMPLETELY UNINHABITED!² Carion was unaware that the islands did not have a postal agent, much less anybody else.

¹"Kerguelen Islands", *Encarta 97 Encyclopedia*, copyright 1993-1996, Microsoft Corporation.

²France established a scientific mission to study meteorology and geophysics on Kerguelen Island in 1949; Marcelin Chappe, "Geography and Posts of the French Southern and Antarctic Territories," *The American Philatelist*, Vol. 80, No. 11 (August 1967), pp. 811-816.

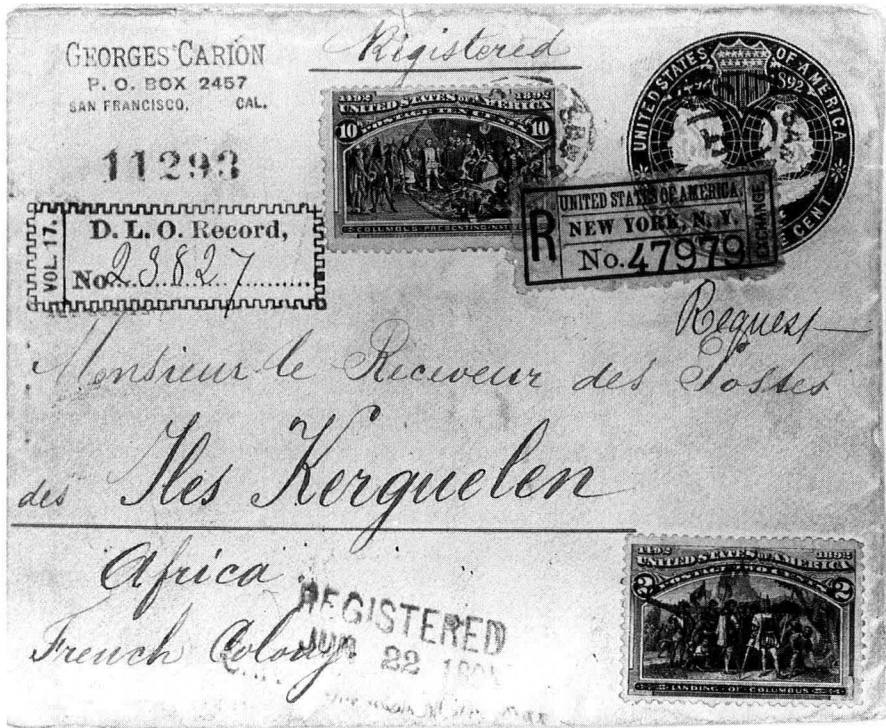


Figure 1. 1894 Cover with 1893 Columbian Issues addressed to the “presumed” postmaster of the Kerguelen Islands.

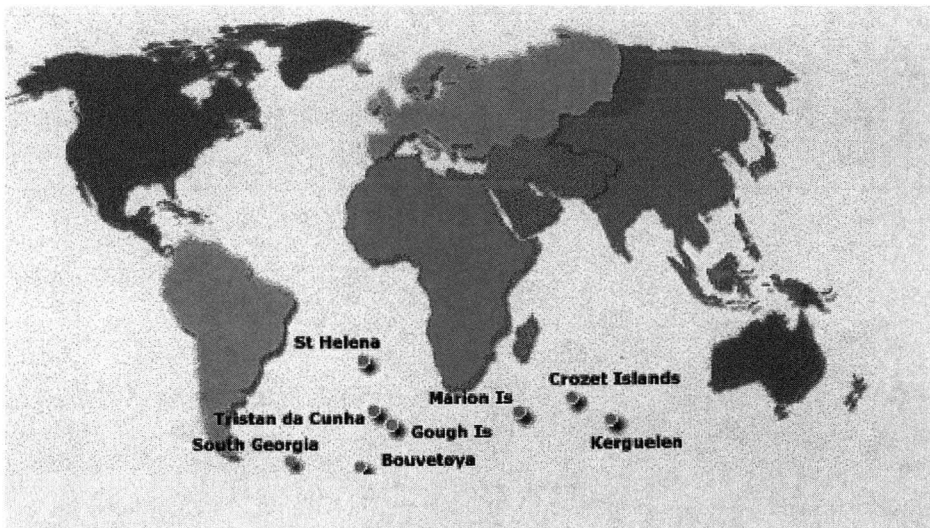


Figure 2. Map showing location of Kerguelen Island in the South Indian Ocean. (Courtesy of Paul Carroll, from his “South Atlantic and Subantarctic Islands Home Page” at <http://www.wndrland.demon.co.uk/>)

The main island is located at 70 degrees longitude east of Greenwich (almost due south of Bombay, India) and 49.5 degrees south latitude and is part of an undersea plateau stretching southeasterly to the Antarctic Circle. (Figure 2). In the 19th century, there were a few shacks for the use of whaling ships to put in during an emergency. According to one source, there were enough rations to support 30 sailors for up to four months as well as medical supplies.

Mail, especially from France, was deposited in a box. Letters addressed to sailors on the whaling ships could be picked up by them if they chanced to put in to Kerguelen. Apparently, enough ships did so that this was not an unexpected practice for European whalers working the far south Indian or north Antarctic Oceans. While French covers to Kerguelen in this period are quite scarce, they are known.

On the other hand, this cover (Figure 1), franked with 2¢ and 10¢ 1893 Columbians on 1¢ Columbian postal stationery, paying the 8¢ registry and 5¢ U.P.U. rate, is the only 19th century cover yet recorded from America. Mailed from San Francisco on June 22, 1894, its other date stamps are New York City 6/28/94, Paris 7/9/94, Marseille 7/10/94 and Washington, D.C. Dead Letter Office, Registry Branch 11/20/94. These mailings show its trip to Kerguelen and its ultimate return as an undeliverable dead letter. There is no Kerguelen marking because there was no one there to postmark it, even if a date stamp had been available.

It is hard to imagine a more desolate, godforsaken and out-of-the-way address. For me, this cover has become the ultimate destination.



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