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Author(s): Richard F. Winter

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UNUSUAL ROYAL MAIL STEAM PACKET COMPANY (RMSP Co.) COVER RICHARD F. WINTER

Figure 1, a well-known datestamp applied in black ink, appears on the reverse of a folded letter that I found in a dealer's stock at the Garfield-Perry show a few years ago. It is not an unusual marking; its use on a cover from Genoa, Kingdom of Sardinia, to the United States, however, is most unusual. I could not image how this letter, addressed to "James Gordon Bennet Esq., Editor of New York Herald, New York, U.S. of America," would receive this marking.¹ There had to be some interesting postal history associated with this cover; so, I purchased it. Now, I am very pleased that I did for it is a unique cover.



Figure 1. Kingston, Jamaica datestamp in black ink that appears on the reverse of this article's cover. This type of datestamp was sent to Jamaica in February 1847 and was used until September 1858.

Figure 2 illustrates the front and Figure 3 the reverse of this unusual folded letter. Because some of the markings are difficult to see, I shall describe them all and picture a few. The letter was written by H.K.Thatcher. He was promoting a young opera star, "the celebrated Senora Maberline, a young lady of great promise as a vocalist" who had successfully performed in Germany and Italy and now was planning a trip to the United States. Well aware of the fine reputation of the *Herald*, Thatcher desired that Bennett introduce Maria Maberline to the Western World through his newspaper.

The letter was posted in Genoa on 17 February 1849. Genoa marked the date in the upper right with a red handstamp, **GENOVA/17. FEBB.** To the left, the Genoa post office also struck a red, two-lined marking, **DOPO LA/PARTENZA**, to show that the letter had been posted after the day's mails had departed. On the reverse (see Figure 3) the letter was marked for a prepayment of 32 soldi.² This prepayment was sufficient to cover all transit fees to London for further transit overseas, and certainly enough to Havre, the route en-

¹James Gordon Bennet started the newspaper, *New York Herald*, on 6 May 1835 as a penny paper of four-column pages. His newspaper quickly became a landmark in the history of American journalism. He criticized all political parties in his editorials, favoring none. While initially playing up sensational and cheap news, his newspaper later developed a reputation as a full and accurate newspaper, especially during the Civil War. His innovations included new fields of news such as Wall Street financial news, first use of European correspondents (1838), first use of the telegraph extensively, and first use of illustrations for news article. (*The Columbia Encyclopedia*, Third Edition [New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1963], p. 199.)

²At this time, Genoa still used the older currency, soldi, as well as the French currency, decimes and centimes. One soldi was equivalent to 5 centimes.



Figure 2. 15 February 1849, folded letter from Genoa, Kingdom of Sardinia to New York, carried by RMSP Co. steamships *Teviot* to the Caribbean and *Severn* to Mobile, Alabama.

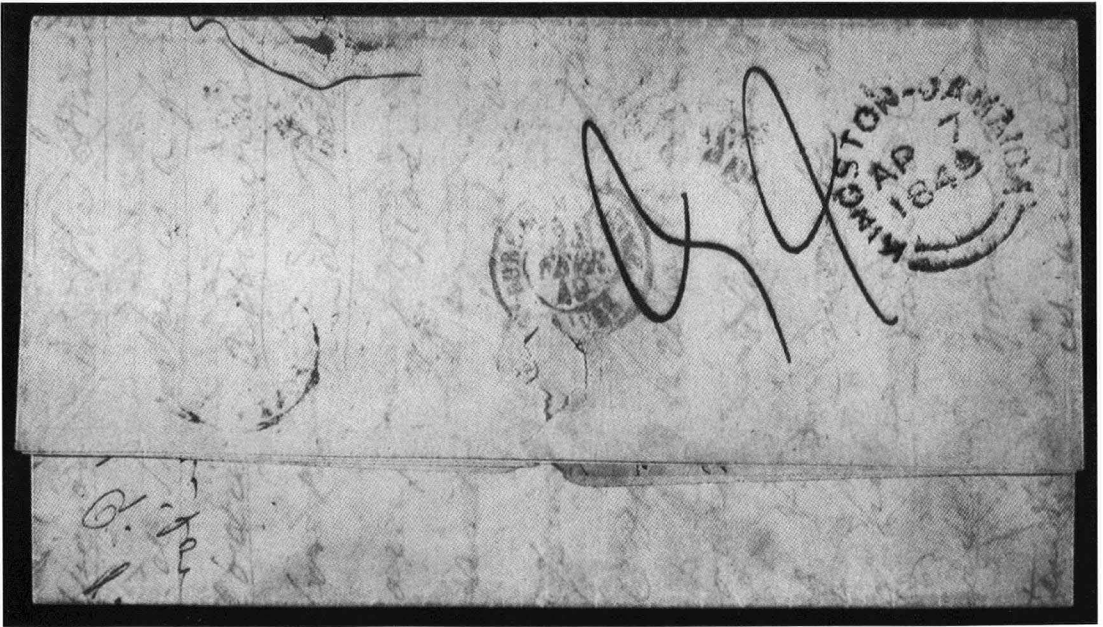


Figure 3. Reverse of cover showing 32 soldi prepayment and arrival marking at Kingston, Jamaica in black ink.

dorsed in the lower left, "via Havre/Packet."³ There is no indication that the letter required more than one rate. It is not clear to me why this amount was paid and why the letter was endorsed for the route via Havre. Apparently, Genoa also marked the red **P.F.** to show the letter was paid to the limit of the French frontier.

The letter traveled the overland route to Paris. Here the arrival was marked with a red, circular datestamp, **SARD. 3 PONT-DE-B. 3**, indicating the letter came from the Kingdom of Sardinia and entered France at the exchange office of Pont de Beauvoisin.⁴ Paris sent the letter to Havre, where, on 24 February 1849, it received the red circular datestamp of the Bureau Maritime on the reverse. For reasons unknown to me, the Bureau Maritime office clerk in Havre elected to send the letter to London instead of placing it on the next sailing packet to New York according to the routing instructions. Perhaps the postal clerk recognized that the letter was paid sufficiently for the British route. Two markings tell us that the letter went to London. To the left of the Genoa datestamp is a **SHIP-LETTER LONDON** circular datestamp in black showing arrival by ship from Havre on 1 March 1849. Postal agreements between the United Kingdom and France permitted each office to send regular mails to the other by private vessels when the regular contract vessels were unavailable. Occasionally, a letter from Havre to London will show the ship letter marking of London, as we see on this cover. A second London marking faintly struck in red ink appears below and to the left of the London ship letter marking. This marking is a 1 March 1849 circular datestamp of the London Foreign Office, which indicated that they considered the letter fully paid to destination under the United States-British convention.

In sorting this letter, the London postal clerks made a colossal error that contributed to the uniqueness of the item. Instead of including the letter with the other United States mails awaiting the next transatlantic steamship to New York, the Cunard steamer *Canada* scheduled to depart Liverpool on 10 March 1849, it was bagged mistakenly with the Jamaican mails. These mails were dispatched to Southampton for the next day sailing of the RMSP Co. packet to the Caribbean. There were provisions under the United States-British convention for sending mails to the United States by the West Indies packet route, but as we shall see, this letter was not among such items.

On 2 March 1849, the RMSP Co. steamship *Teviot* departed Southampton for the scheduled monthly mail voyage to Bermuda and the Caribbean.⁵ *Teviot* reached Bermuda on 21 March, continued on 24 March to Nassau, and arrived at Havana on 1 April 1849.⁶ Had the letter been packaged with other mail for the United States, if there was any more on this voyage, it would have put off at Havana. There it would have been placed on board the RMSP Co. steamer *Thames*, which was to depart that day for Mobile, Alabama. Since this letter was in a closed mail bag intended for Jamaica, it remained on board the *Teviot*, which departed on 3 April for Kingston. The Jamaica mails were put ashore at Kingston on 7 April 1849, where the letter received the **KINGSTON-JAMAICA** datestamp shown

³Under the Franco-Sardinian convention of 1838, France was entitled to 20 decimes per 30 grams for letters to from Sardinia to France and 36 decimes per 30 grams for letters to Great Britain and overseas. To this was added 3 decimes per 7½ grams for Sardinian transit, making the payment to Havre 8 decimes and to Great Britain 12 decimes for a 7½ gram letter. This was equivalent to 16 or 24 soldi for the two routes.

⁴Pont de Beauvoisin was a small town of France, Department of Isere, 35 miles S.E. of Lyon on the border with the Kingdom of Sardinia. It straddles the river Guiers, which divides the town into French and Italian portions.

⁵Phil. J. Kenton & Harry G. Parsons, *Early Routings of The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, 1842-1879* (East Grinstead, England: The Postal History Society, 2000), p. 95.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 96 reported the arrival at Havana on 29 March, but the Havana newspaper, *Diario de la Marina*, reported the arrival date as 1 April.



Figure 4. The three markings applied at Mobile when the letter was processed on 5 May 1849, each in red ink.

in Figure 1. Presumably, it was then noticed that the letter had been missent due to London's error, so the Packet Agency at Kingston was obliged to rectify the situation by forwarding the letter at British expense. Unfortunately, it had to remain at Kingston until the next RMSP Co. steamer called for mails to go back to Havana. On 20 April 1849, the RMSP Co. steamship *Tay* arrived at Kingston and left two days later for Havana. *Tay* arrived in Havana on 26 April, where the letter was put ashore again to await the steamer to Mobile.⁷

The RMSP Co. steamship *Severn*, which had departed Southampton on 2 April 1849 with the next monthly mail for the West Indies, arrived at Havana via Bermuda and Nassau on 29 April 1849.⁸ She departed Havana with mails for Mobile on 2 May, arriving on 4 May 1849 at 5:00 PM.⁹ The letters for the United States were marked in the Mobile post office the next day. This letter has a partial strike in the lower left of the red circular date-stamp, **MOBILE/MAY/5/Ala.** Mobile struck two other markings, both of which are difficult to see on the cover. The first were two strikes of a red handstamp **SHIP** (to the left of and below the **P.F.** handstamp) and the second, a red handstamp **12** (below the Genoa date-stamp). All three Mobile markings are illustrated in Figure 4. The latter handstamp was for the postage due on this letter, 12¢, to be paid by the addressee in New York. The letter was treated as a normal incoming ship letter with the 2¢ ship fee plus 10¢ United States inland fee to New York charged as postage due. Sometime in 1849, the United States reached an agreement with the United Kingdom to drop the 2¢ ship fee on mails brought into Mobile by the British mail steamers. The following statement of the Postmaster General appeared in his annual report for 1849:¹⁰

There is also conveyance by British packet between New York and Mobile, in the United States, and the West India islands, 5 cents being United States postage, to be prepaid when sent from said ports, and collected when received in the United States, unless mailed from or to a post office more than 300 miles from port, then 10 cents—English and foreign postage unknown, the service not being embraced in the treaty.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 98. The RMSP Co. service to Mobile from Havana began in February 1849 and continued until July 1850. The route was dropped when the Third Contract became effective on 2 August 1850.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.

⁹*Mobile Register*, 7 May 1849.

¹⁰*Report of the Postmaster General, 1849*, Wierenga Reprint, p. 839.

This indicated that letters brought in by the RMSP Co. steamers at Mobile would be charged only the regular United States inland rates with no ship letter fee. The earliest cover that I have recorded that shows the absence of the 2¢ ship fee has a Mobile circular datstamp of 21 August 1849.

I estimate that this letter finally arrived in New York about 14 May 1849, three months after it was posted in Genoa. Had the letter crossed the Atlantic in the normal manner by steamship from England to New York, it would have arrived by the Cunard steamer on 25 March 1849. The *Herald* editor would have had his correspondence much sooner; however, I would not have such an interesting and unusual cover to report. To date, this is the only cover that I have recorded carried by an RMSP Co. steamer into Mobile from the European mainland.¹¹ All RMSP Co. covers by way of Mobile are scarce and those carried across the Atlantic, quite scarce. □

¹¹I have recorded almost four dozen covers by RMSP Co. steamships into Mobile, mostly from locations in the Caribbean. Only two covers from Liverpool and this one from the Kingdom of Sardinia crossed the Atlantic on RMSP Co. steamships.

**BOOK REVIEW: EARLY ROUTINGS OF THE ROYAL MAIL
STEAM PACKET COMPANY, 1842-1879
RICHARD F. WINTER**

Early Routings of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company 1842-1879, by Phil J. Kenton and Harry G. Parsons. Published by The Postal History Society (in Great Britain), East Grinstead, England. 471 pages plus 25 pages of introductory text and table of contents. Five chapters, six appendices, and a bibliography. Over 100 illustrations of covers, post office notices and circulars, route maps, and pictures of steamships. Hardbound. UK£40 (about US\$60) not including postage (about \$9.75 by surface mail and about \$21.75 by air mail) from Patrick Frost, 20 Gleave Close, East Grinstead, West Sussex RH19 3XD, England; in the U.S. from Leonard Hartmann, P.O. Box 36006, Louisville, KY 40233 at \$80 postpaid.

This most important and long-awaited reference book has finally been published. It provides much-needed data on the voyages of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company (RMSP Co.) vessels to and throughout the Caribbean. For more than ten years Phil Kenton and Harry Parsons have been assembling data on the very complex operations of the RMSP Co. steamers. These steamships transported mails to and from and called at nearly all British and French West Indies islands as well as Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Danish West Indies, Nicaragua, Columbia, Venezuela, The Bahamas, British Guiana and British Honduras. The Kenton/Parsons team collected data from the microfilm records of at least 46 different newspapers housed in the Public Record Office Kew, the British Library at Colindale, and other locations. Additional sources that they used included the British Post Office archives and the Admiralty log books of Royal Navy Receiving vessels at Jamaica. Sadly, co-author Harry Parsons died just before the finished book left the printers; however, he was alive to see the proof copies and understand that this monumental work was nearing completion.

Organizing the data was a very difficult task. Many vessels went out from England with mails and did not return immediately, but operated as mail vessels on the RMSP Co. branch routes, often for many months before returning to England. The daunting task facing the authors was to figure a way to assemble all the voyage data that they had gathered in a logical and orderly manner. The scheme they chose was to arrange the data by government mail contract, which effectively put the information in chronological order. Within each contract the sailing tables have been organized in an unusual but effective manner.