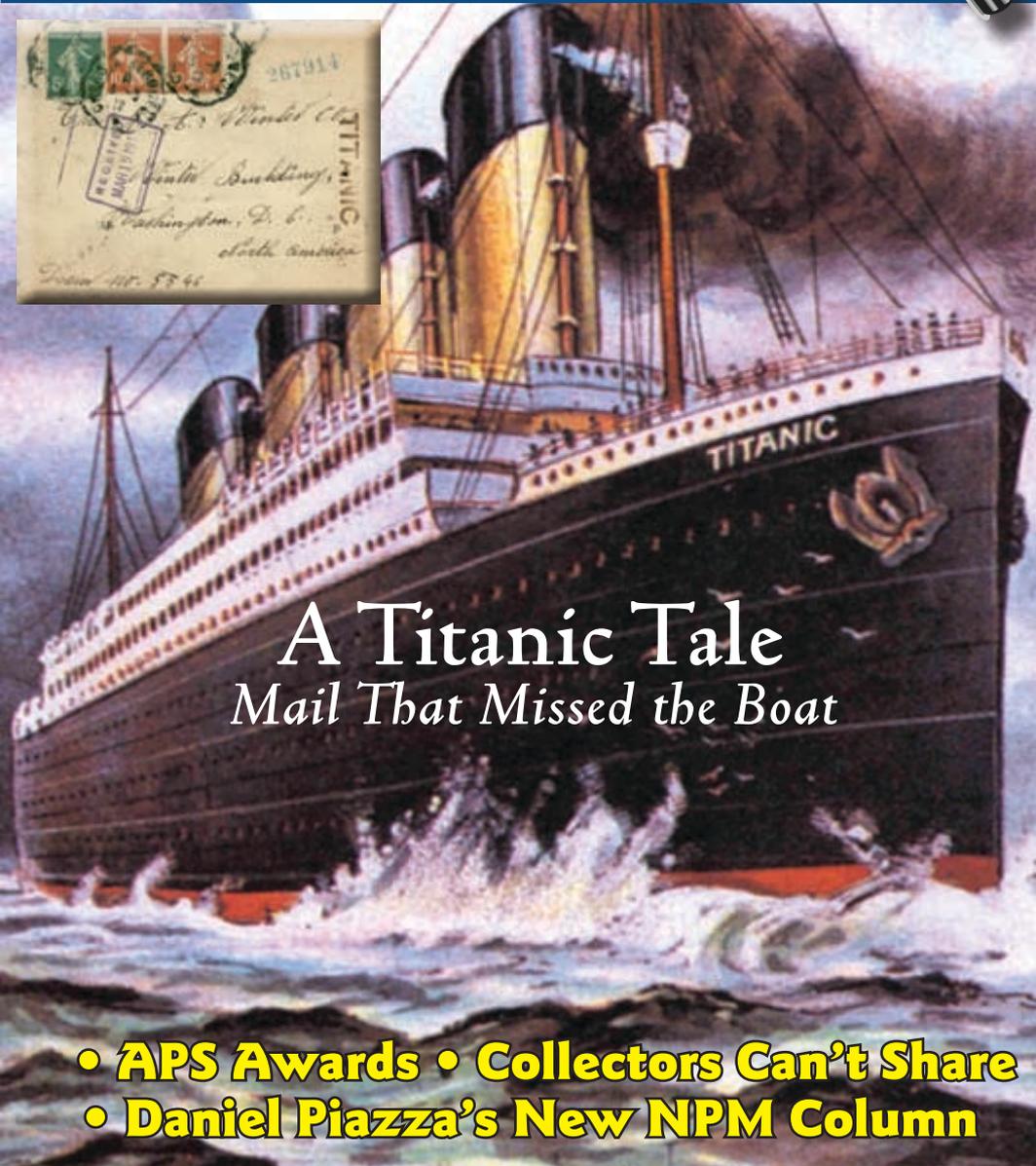


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A Titanic Tale Mail That Missed the Boat

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Journal of the Federation of New York Philatelic Societies

Mail That Missed the 'Unsinkable' Boat

By Thomas M. Fortunato

Would you pay \$10 for the cover shown here? I did when I found it in a dealer's box at Elmira Stamp Club's *STPEX* in 1986. If you're like me, you're probably a bit of a history buff and at first glance are puzzled at this piece of postal history. Here is the tale ...

The story of the White Star Line's RMS *Titanic* is well known and well documented, sinking on its maiden voyage at 2:20 a.m. the morning of April 15, 1912 in the North Atlantic after striking an iceberg. Of the 2,227 passengers and crew, only 705 survived.

Philatelists realize that the *unsinkable* ocean liner was more than a passenger ship, for its RMS initials stand for Royal Mail Steamer. Mail was loaded on the doomed vessel at three points: Southampton, England (1,758 bags), Cherbourg, France (1,412 bags), and Queenstown, Ireland (194 bags). It was the job of the five postal clerks onboard to sort and prepare these for arrival in New York City. All 3,423 bags were lost at sea, a total of about seven million pieces of mail and parcels. The only surviving postal items were a number of letters that left the ship during its stop in Queenstown and a handful of cancelled facing slips used for sorting errors found in a pocket on the body of Oscar Scott Woody, one of the clerks. (See illustration on page 20.)

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Three identical black postmarks on my cover date from March 3, 1912, with the scalloped rim designating a train letter cancelled onboard the Chars to Serqueux route that ran through Paris. (Chars is about 20 miles northwest of Paris; Serqueux is about 200 miles east-southeast of Paris.) The envelope bears registration number 267914 stamped in blue and the appropriate 25-centime postage for this service. Two identical ETRANGER (foreign) backstamps confirms its transit through Paris the following day.

Mail was docketed or stamped with the name of the transatlantic ship that it would have sailed on as per the custom at the time. In this case, it is assumed that the 37 × 6 mm brown TITANIC marking was applied in Paris and the letter then placed in a bag destined for Cherbourg, the *Titanic's* only continental port-of-call originally scheduled 16 days later. Both the White Star Line and North German Lloyd had major facilities at Cherbourg, with ships running the New York route on roughly a weekly basis. The alternative port of Le Havre about 100 miles east served ships of the French Compagnie Générale Transatlantique (CGT) Line, among others. Mail contracts were primarily with the U.S., British, French, and German lines.

The story gets murky in determining what vessel actually transported this letter. Ship sailings from Britain and France at this time were subject to delays due to a coal strike. Crossings took longer as coal allocations were cut back and speeds were reduced to conserve fuel. A March 1912 calendar is useful in discussion of dates.

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
March 1912					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

It would not have been unreasonable for French postal officials to hold letter from March 4 until the *Titanic's* anticipated March 20 sailing date, but how could they have not known of its postponement to April 10 by White Star on October 11, 1911? Holding mail in Cherbourg for nearly a month at the docks would have been unthinkable and mail was sent on another ship. It was possible to transfer mail from the docks at Cherbourg to those in Le Havre, although it is uncertain whether the post office or the contracted shipping line would have done that.

My well marked cover allows some supposition about its movement. Since it was back-stamped in Washington, DC on March 18 at 2 p.m., it is safe to assume that the ship carrying it would have arrived at New York the day before or early that morning. A review of the "Shipping and Mails Incoming Steamship" listings in the *New York Times* was especially useful in the search, as was an Internet site hosting the *Morton Allen Directory of European Ship Arrivals*.

Four ships arrived in New York on March 17. North German Lloyd's (Norddeutscher Lloyd) *Main* traveled the Bremen–Southampton–Cherbourg–New York route, making it the most likely candidate. If the mail was re-routed through the Port of Le Havre instead, the

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carrier may have been the French Compagnie Générale Transatlantique (CGT) SS *Espagne* via its Le Havre–Bordeaux–New York route. The *New York Times* reported that ship's arrival on March 17 while the directory lists it as March 18. From there the letter was loaded onto a mail train to Washington. The purple RECEIVED MAR 19, 1912 mark must have been used by the M. A. Winter Company as a way of noting its arrival.

A 20-year search for covers bearing a similar *Titanic* mark has turned up eight others — all registered and mailed to the M. A. Winter Company in Washington. All bear 25 centimes postage, a unique light blue registration number, and a purple dated receiving mark on the front. Two others and mine have a brown-colored TITANIC mark. The others are reported as being in violet. They were posted between March 4 and 13 from different parts of France. A manuscript dossier number was written by the sender on the face of each, some of which are identical. All were received by the company between March 18 and 28. The recording graphophone manufacturer, which became the Dictaphone Company, apparently was operated by chemist Mahlon Alphens Winter. The building eventually became the U.S. Post Office's Station F substation.

Several covers have been offered for sale over the years. The most recent was one through Britain's Sandafavre's Hunters Mail Bid Sale of February 15, 2005. The cover postmarked on March 5 in Avignon would have traveled with my own. The lot description contains a major error by stating that it was carried on the *Olympic*, as that ship did not arrive in New York until March 20. The RECEIVED marking is faint but appears to have arrived at the M. A. Winter Company on March 18, again at the same time as mine. It is not known if this cover was sold.

The cover census includes another cover posted on March 3, this one from Lagrasse, Aude owned by The Mystery Box. Besides the Avignon cover offered by Sandafavre in 2005, the firm offered a cover also posted from Bordeaux having an unreadable postmark. Jay Baum of Staten Island, a member of the Titanic Historical Society, has a cover postmarked La Croisille sur Briance on March 6 although the date is in question. Das Kleine Little Titanic Museum in Munich, Germany, has a train letter cancelled March 7 onboard the Plouaret to Brest route. Another train letter cancelled March 8 onboard the Paris to Orleans route is owned by the Titanic Museum in Indian Orchard, MA. William R. Simon of Bowie, MD has a March 13 cover from Paulx/Loire-Infres. A cover from Early American History Auctions has a nearly illegible postmark — the date is unreadable and only the word Loire can be read. The sender was a coal importer in Saint Nazaire sur Loire.

A complete chart showing full details of each cover in the census may be viewed online at WWW.NYSTAMPCLUBS.ORG/CNY_DOWNLOADS.HTML.



Recovered Facing Slip