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Titanic Covers That "Missed the Boat"

By Tom Fortunato



My "Titanic" cover

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Would you pay \$10 for the cover above? I did. I ran across this gem in a dealer's box marked "Better Junk" back in 1986. If you're like me, you're probably a bit of a history buff and, at first glance would have been puzzled at this piece of postal history. And now, the rest of the story...

The story of RMS *Titanic* is both well known and well documented, sinking on her maiden voyage at 2:20 on the morning of April 15, 1912 in the North Atlantic after striking an iceberg. Over 1,500 passengers and crew lost their lives.

Philatelists realize that the ocean liner was more than a ship carrying passengers, for her RMS initials stand for Royal Mail Steamer. Mail was loaded on the doomed vessel at three ports: 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. All 3,423 bags were lost at sea, a total of some seven million pieces of mail and parcels. The only surviving postal items were a number of letters that left the vessel during her 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.

Titanic was built at the Harland & Wolff shipyard in Belfast, Ireland, with work beginning on March 31, 1909. The White Star Line announced its 1912 sailing schedule on September 25, 1911 with *Titanic* scheduled for a March 20, 1912 departure from Southampton. As time progressed it became apparent that the maiden voyage would have to be delayed. Outfitting the 46,328-ton *Titanic* took longer than expected as her sister, *Olympic*, was undergoing repairs. That ship had a collision with the cruiser HMS *Hawke* on September 20, 1911, and suffered propeller damage and on a subsequent voyage in February 1912. A propeller shaft from *Titanic* was needed for the first incident and a propeller blade was used for the



Below: Figure 3 - the cover's backstamps Above: Figure 2 - Postmark



second to repair *Olympic*. These repairs were made at the Belfast shipyard causing delays to *Titanic's* completion.

This brings us back to the “junk box” cover. Three identical smudged black postmarks date from March 3, 1912, with the scalloped rim designating a train letter cancelled onboard the Chars to Serqueux route that day (Figure 2). 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 at 4:30 (Figure 3).

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

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
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

March 1912 calendar

Here is where the story gets murky in determining what vessel actually transported this letter. Ship schedules from Britain and France around this time were subject to delays due to a coal strike. Crossings also took longer as coal allocations were cut back and ship speeds at sea were reduced to conserve fuel. The March 1912 calendar above may be helpful in the following discussion of dates.

It would not have been unreasonable for French postal officials to hold the cover from March 4 until

Titanic's anticipated March 20 sailing date. But how could they have not known of her postponement to April 10, announced by White Star back on October



Figure 5 - The M. A. Winter Building today

11th? Holding mail in Cherbourg for nearly a month at the docks would have been unthinkable and mail was sent on another ship. Of course it was always 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.

Thankfully my *Titanic* cover was well marked to allow some supposition about its movement. Since the letter arrived in Washington, DC on Monday, March 18 at 2 PM, it is safe to assume that the ship carrying it would have arrived at New York either 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 the *Morton Allen Directory of European Ship Arrivals*. Four boats arrived in New York on Sunday, March 17. North German Lloyd’s steamship, *Main*, traveled the Bremen-Southampton-Cherbourg-New York route making it the most likely candidate. If the mail was rerouted through Le Havre instead, the carrier may have been the French Compagnie Générale Transatlantique (CGT) S.S. *Espagne* via the Le Havre-Bordeaux-New York route. *The New York Times* reported that ship’s arrival on the 17th, but the directory lists it as the 18th. From there the cover 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 twenty-year search for covers bearing a similar “*Titanic*” mark has turned up six others. Interestingly, they all were registered and mailed to the M. A. Winter

Company in DC (Figure 5), a recording graphophone manufacturing business that later became known as the Dictaphone Company. A chemist by the name of Mahlon Alphens Winter was there at the time. In April 1912 the building began renovations and the entire first floor and part of the second eventually became the U.S. Post Office's Station F sub-station. Today the building is a multi-company office park.

The Summary Table below describes each cover's characteristics. All bear 25 centimes postage, a unique light blue registration number, and a purple dated receiving mark on the front.

Mine is the only cover with a brown-colored "TITANIC" mark. The others are all reported as being in violet. They were posted between Monday, March 4 and Wednesday, March 13 from different parts of France.

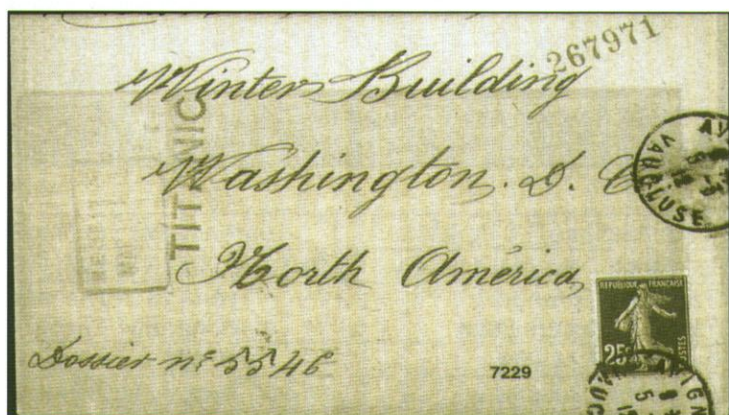
A manuscript "Dossier" number was written by the sender on the face of each, some of which are identical. All seven were received by the company between Monday, March 18 and Thursday, March 28.

Summary Table of known Titanic covers

Summary Table	Owner: Tom Fortunato, Rochester, NY	The Mystery Box	Sandafayre's January 30, 2001 Mail Bid Sale #550	Sandafayre's Hunters Feb 15, 2005 Mail Bid Sale 7105, Lot #7229	Titanic Museum Indian Orchard, Massachusetts	Owner: William R. Simon, Bowie, MD	Early American History Auctions
Postmark Date	March 3 (Sunday)	March 3 (Sunday)	unreadable	March 5 (Tuesday)	March 8 (Friday)	March 13 (Wednesday)	unreadable
City/Town (cancel type)	CHARS A SERQUEUX (Train)	LAGRASSE/AUDE	BORDEAUX/GIRONDE	AVIGNON/VAUCLUSE	PARIS A ORLEANS (Train)	RAUL X/LOIRE-INFRES	x/LOIRE-x
"Paris - R.P. Etranger" Postmark Date	March 4, 4:30 (Monday)	March 4, 4:30 (Monday)	none	unknown	unknown	March 14, 4:30 (Thursday)	March 14 (Thursday)
Registration Number	267914	267957	267942	267971	267909	273938	273937
Manuscript Dossier #	5546	5546	5536	5546	5536	5549	5549
"TITANIC" 6x37mm mark	brown	violet	violet	violet	violet	violet	violet
Possible Crossings	Most likely via Cherbourg: North German Lloyd's "Main," Bremen-Southampton-Cherbourg-New York City, unknown departure date, arrived on March 17 (Sunday)				White Star's "RMS Olympic," Southampton-Cherbourg-Queenstown-New York City, departed March 13 (Wednesday), arrived March 20 (Wednesday)	Most likely via Cherbourg: Hamburg American Line's "Batavia," Hamburg-Cherbourg-Southampton-New York City, unknown departure date, arrived on March 26 (Tuesday)	
Washington, DC Transit Postmark Date	March 18, 2 PM (Monday)	March 18, 2 PM (Monday)	March 18, 7 PM (Monday)	March 18 (Monday)	unknown (cover is sealed in a display case)	March 27, 11:30 AM (Wednesday)	unknown
Purple Winter Company Received Date	March 19 (Tuesday)	March 19 (Tuesday)	March 19 (Tuesday)	March 1x (assume 19)	unreadable	March 28 (Thursday)	March 28? (Thursday)
Misc. Information	Bought in 1986 for \$10 at the STEPEX stamp show in Elmira, NY	Seen online: http://www.themysterybox.com/Features/titanic/index.html . Owned by someone named Emily. Auctioned by Henry Aldridge & Son, lot 298, April 8, 2005, unsold.	Seen online: http://www.sandafayre.com/html/titanic.htm . Supposedly sold for £2600 and was one of three such recorded covers at the time.	Lot estimate £1200-1500. Description claims the cover crossed on the RMS Olympic (impossible per shipping schedules). Unknown if sold at that time.	"REGISTERED MAIL FOR TITANIC" seen online at: http://www.titanichistoricalociety.org/museum/21-reg-letter.asp	Corresponded with Tom F. on 9/2/98, mentions letter from dealer Mark Wessel remembering Tom's cover and offering to buy his for \$25.	From Early American History Auctions, seen online at http://www.prices4antiques.com/itemssummary/34877.htm

Several covers have been offered for sale over the years. The most recent was one through Britain's Sandafavre's Hunters Mail Bid Sale 7105 of February 15, 2005. Lot number 7229 (*below*) featured an envelope postmarked on March 5 in Avignon that 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 Wednesday, March 20. The "RECEIVED" making is faint but appears to have arrived at the M. A. Winter Company on Monday, March 18, again at the same time as mine. It is not known if this cover was sold.

Many questions remain about these covers and the circumstances around them, but I hope this article brings new information to the philatelic world. 🌟



7229 TITANIC COVER - THE CANCELLED MAIDEN VOYAGE. 1912 (5 March) env from Avignon to Washington DC, bearing French 25c blue Sower stamp tied by Avignon cds with violet straight-line "TITANIC" (37 x 6mm) cachet alongside. Reverse bears the Washington receiver pmk of March 18 1912. This cover was expected to be carried on the *Titanic* on her 20th March Maiden voyage, however the great liner was not ready and sailed later. Although specially cacheted, the mail contracts did not allow the White Star office to hold this cover until *Titanic* arrived at Cherbourg, instead it had to be sent onboard the *Olympic*. This is a very elusive item, the last example we offered (2001) sold for £2600.

(Photo) Estimate £1200-1500

Hunters Mail Bid Sale 7105



Tom Fortunato's Cover

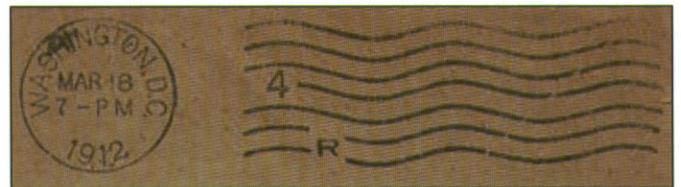
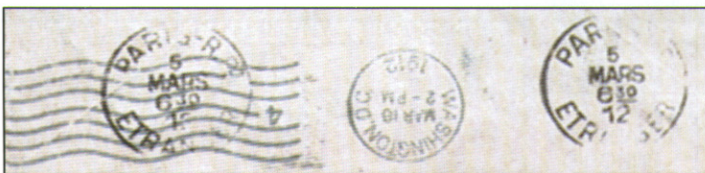
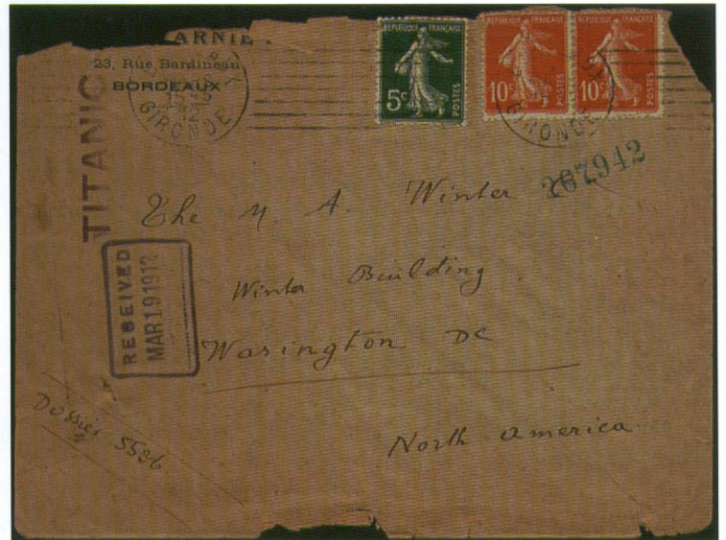
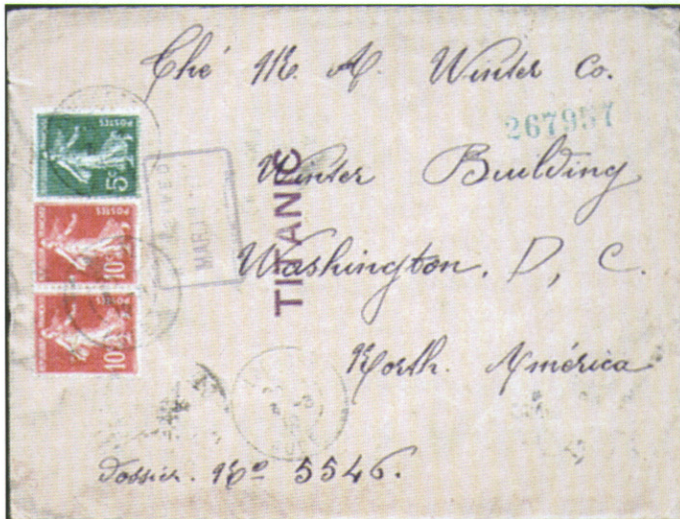
Postmark Date	March 3 (Sunday)
Postmark	CHARS A SERQUEUX (Train)
"Paris-R.P. Etranger"	
Transit Postmark Date	March 4, 4:30 (Monday)
Registration Number	267914
Manuscript Dossier Number	5546
	<p><u>Most likely via Cherbourg:</u> North German Lloyd's "Main," Bremen-Southampton-Cherbourg-New York, unknown departure date, arrived on March 17* (Sunday)</p> <p><u>Less likely via Le Havre:</u> French Compagnie Générale Transatlantique's (CGT) "SS Espagne," Le Havre-Bordeaux-New York, departed March 9 (Saturday), arrived on March 17* (Sunday)</p>
Possible Crossing	
Washington, DC Transit Postmark Date	March 18, 2 PM (Monday)
Purple Winter Company Received Date	March 19 (Tuesday)
Misc. Information	Bought in 1986 for \$10 at the STEPEX show in Elmira, NY

(*) per New York Times Shipping and Mails Incoming Steamship listing, Monday, March 18, 1912, page 13.

(Left bottom) Backstamps on Tom Fortunato's cover.

Mystery Box Cover

Sandafayre's January 30, 2001 Mail Bid #550



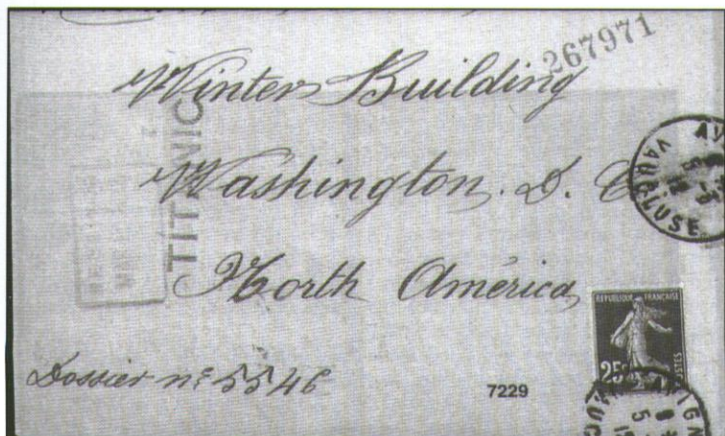
Postmark Date	March 3 (Sunday)
Postmark	LAGRASSE/AUDE
"Paris-R.P. Etranger"	
Transit Postmark Date	March 5, 6:30 (Tuesday)
Registration Number	267957
Manuscript Dossier Number	5546
Probable Crossing	<p><u>Most likely via Cherbourg:</u> North German Lloyd's "Main," Bremen-Southampton-Cherbourg-New York City, unknown departure date, arrived on March 17* (Sunday)</p> <p><u>Less likely via Le Havre:</u> French Compagnie Générale Transatlantique's (CGT) "SS Espagne," Le Havre-Bordeaux-New York City, departed March 9 (Saturday), arrived on March 17* (Sunday)</p>
Washington, DC Transit Postmark Date	March 18, 2 PM (Monday)
Purple Winter Company Received Date	March 19 (Tuesday)
Misc. Information	<p>Found online at: http://www.themysterybox.com/Features/titanic/index.html. Owned by someone named Emily. Auctioned by Henry Aldridge & Son as lot 298 on April 8, 2005, apparently unsold.</p>

Postmark Date	unreadable
Postmark	BORDEAUX/GIRONDE
"Paris-R.P. Etranger"	
Transit Postmark Date	none
Registration Number	267942
Manuscript Dossier Number	5536
Probable Crossing	<p><u>Most likely via Cherbourg:</u> North German Lloyd's "Main," Bremen-Southampton-Cherbourg-New York City, unknown departure date, arrived on March 17* (Sunday)</p> <p><u>Less likely via Le Havre:</u> French Compagnie Générale Transatlantique's (CGT) "SS Espagne," Le Havre-Bordeaux-New York City, departed March 9 (Saturday), arrived on March 17* (Sunday)</p>
Washington, DC Transit Postmark Date	March 18, 7 PM (Monday)
Purple Winter Company Received Date	March 19 (Tuesday)
Misc. Information	<p>Seen online at: http://www.sandafayre.com/html/titanic.htm. Supposedly sold for 2600 pounds, and was one of three such recorded covers at the time.</p>

Sandafayre's Hunters 2005 Mail Bid #7105-
Lot 7229 February 15, 2005

7229 **TITANIC COVER - THE CANCELLED MAIDEN VOYAGE.**
1912 (5 March) env from Avignon to Washington DC, bearing French 25c blue Sower stamp tied by Avignon cds with violet straight-line "TITANIC" (37 x 6mm) cachet alongside. Reverse bears the Washington receiver pmk of March 18 1912. This cover was expected to be carried on the Titanic on her 20th March Maiden voyage, however the great liner was not ready and sailed later. Although specially cacheted, the mail contracts did not allow the White Star office to hold this cover until Titanic arrived at Cherbourg, instead it had to be sent onboard the Olympic. This is a very elusive item, the last example we offered (2001) sold for £2600.

(Photo) Estimate £1200-1500



Titanic Museum's Cover

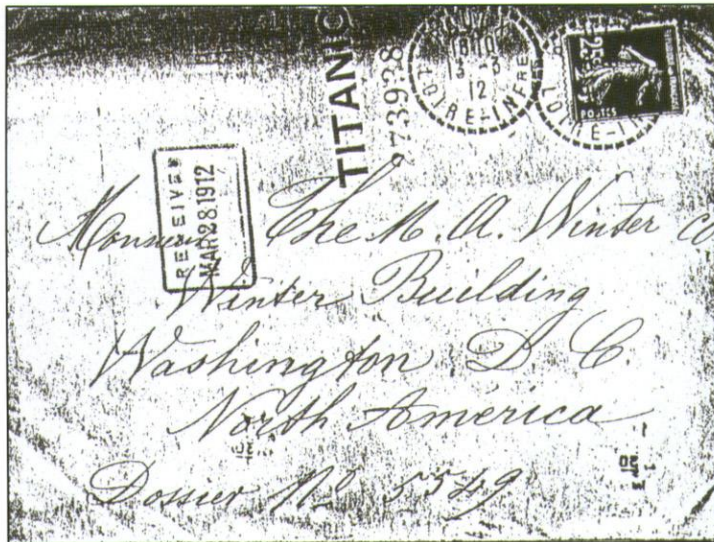


Postmark Date	March 5 (Tuesday)
Postmark	AVIGNON/VAUCLUSE
"Paris-R.P. Etranger"	
Transit Postmark Date	unknown
Registration Number	267971
Manuscript Dossier Number	5546
Probable Crossing	<p><u>Most likely via Cherbourg:</u> North German Lloyd's "Main," Bremen-Southampton-Cherbourg-New York City, unknown departure date, arrived on March 17* (Sunday)</p> <p><u>Less likely via Le Havre:</u> French Compagnie Générale Transatlantique's (CGT) "SS Espagne," Le Havre-Bordeaux-New York City, departed March 9 (Saturday), arrived on March 17* (Sunday)</p>
Washington, DC Transit Postmark Date	March 18 (Monday)
Purple Winter Company Received Date	March 1x (assume 19)
Misc. Information	<p>Lot estimate £1200-1500. Description claims the cover crossed on the RMS Olympic (<i>impossible per shipping schedules</i>). Unknown if sold at that time.</p>

Postmark Date	March 8 (Friday)
Postmark	PARIS A ORLEANS (Train)
"Paris-R.P. Etranger"	
Transit Postmark Date	unknown
Registration Number	267909
Manuscript Dossier Number	5536
Probable Crossing	White Star's "RMS Olympic," Southampton-Cherbourg-Queenstown-New York City, departed March 13 (Wednesday), arrived March 20* (Wednesday)
Washington, DC Transit Postmark Date	unknown (cover is sealed in a display case)
Purple Winter Company Received Date	unreadable
Misc. Information	"REGISTERED MAIL FOR TITANIC" seen online at: http://www.titanichistoricalsociety.org/museum/21-reg-letter.asp

(* per *New York Times* Shipping and Mails Incoming Steamship listing, Thursday, March 21, 1912, page 18. (Applies to asterisk on assorted charts describing covers.)

William R. Simon's Cover



Early American History Auction's Cover



Image courtesy of Early American History Auctions Inc.

An envelope stamped TITANIC. The envelope is postmarked from the Loire region on the front and again on the verso 14 Mars 12 from Paris, with Etranger to indicate that it is going abroad. This envelope is from L. Nouaille, coal importers in Saint-Nazaire sur Loire. Addressed to the M.A. Winter Co., Winter Building, Washington, D.C., North America. Envelope bears 25 centimes in postage.

According to a 1992 letter from the Titanic Historical Society, a copy of which is included in this lot, "...when mailing something overseas the postal service could identify which Royal Mail Steamer was to carry the letter so that it could be assured of an arrival by a certain date... Obviously your envelopes came over from France earlier than the Titanic's maiden voyage, so were not aboard the ship at any time. The envelopes are still collectible... This letter was probably sent to the White Star Lines office in Cherbourg and stamped TITANIC as the ship on which they were intended to be sent to America. They sailed earlier than planned and so missed the ill-fated voyage." The letter from the Titanic Historical Society and the accompanying envelope both bear the seal of the Society, as well as an image of the Titanic.



Postmark Date	March 13 (Wednesday)
Postmark	RAUL X/LOIRE-INFRES
"Paris-R.P. Etranger"	
Transit Postmark Date	March 14, 4:30 (Thursday)
Registration Number	273938
Manuscript Dossier Number	5549
	<p><u>Most likely via Cherbourg:</u> Hamburg American Line's "Batavia," Hamburg-Cherbourg-Southampton-New York City, unknown departure date, arrived on March 26* (Tuesday)</p> <p><u>Less likely via Le Havre:</u> French Compagnie Générale Transatlantique's (CGT) "La Bretagne" or "Rochambeau," Le Havre-Bordeaux-New York City, unknown departure dates, both arrived on March 26* (Tuesday)</p>
Probable Crossing	
Washington, DC Transit Postmark Date	March 27, 11:30 AM (Wednesday)
Purple Winter Company Received Date	March 28 (Thursday)
	<p>William R. Simon, 3843 Irongate Ln, Bowie, MD 20715.</p> <p>Corresponded with Tom F. on 9/2/98, mentions letter from dealer Mark Wessel remembering Tom's cover and offering to buy his for \$25</p>
Misc. Information	

Postmark Date	unreadable
Postmark	x/LOIRE-x
"Paris-R.P. Etranger"	
Transit Postmark Date	March 14 (Thursday)
Registration Number	273937
Manuscript Dossier Number	5549
	<p><u>Most likely via Cherbourg:</u> Hamburg American Line's "Batavia," Hamburg-Cherbourg-Southampton-New York City, unknown departure date, arrived on March 26* (Tuesday)</p> <p><u>Less likely via Le Havre:</u> French CGT's "La Bretagne" or "Rochambeau," Le Havre-Bordeaux-New York City, unknown departure dates, both arrived on March 26* (Tuesday)</p>
Probable Crossing	
Washington, DC Transit Postmark Date	unknown
Purple Winter Company Received Date	March 28? (Thursday)
	<p>From Early American History Auctions, seen online at http://www.prices4antiques.com/itemssummary/34877.htm</p>
Misc. Information	

Other Reports of TITANIC Covers

Auctioneer Henry Aldridge & Son

Titanic & White Star Auction, April 8, 2005

Lot 298, RARE "R.M.S. TITANIC" PURPLE HAND STAMP COVER FROM FRANCE TO THE U.S.A., ADDRESSED TO THE WINTER BUILDING WASHINGTON DC, STAMPED 267957. THE FRENCH POSTAL SERVICE ALLOWED COVERS TO BE STAMPED PRIOR TO DEPARTURE WITH THE NAME OF THE SHIP THEY WERE TO BE SENT ON TO. A SIMILAR EXAMPLE WAS SOLD BY HENRY ALDRIDGE & SON LOT NUMBER 256 ON 14th SEPTEMBER 2002 AUCTION. (This is the Mystery Box cover depicted elsewhere)

Auctioneer Henry Aldridge & Son

Titanic & White Star Auction, September 17, 2005

Lot 216, "R.M.S. TITANIC" MARCH 1912 FRENCH COVER ADDRESSED TO WINTER & Co. WASHINGTON, U.S.A. POSTMARK 18th MARCH 1912, THESE CARDS WERE ALLOCATED TO "TITANIC'S" POSTPONED MARCH SAILING DATE. Mr. George Behe of Mt. Clemens, Michigan exhibited a similarly described cover at the *Titanic Texas Weekend*, October 17-19, 2003, in Salado, Texas.

Ships Carrying the Mails

Top left: North German Lloyd's *Main*

Below: White Star's *Olympic*

Top right: Hamburg American's *Batavia*

Compagnie Generale Transatlantique's *Rochambeau*,
Espagne and *LaBretagne*

