

Titanic Covers that Missed the Boat?

David Jennings-Bramly



Cover found by Tom Fortunato in a dealer's "junk box" in 1986 bearing a PARIS ÉTRANGER backstamp of 4 March 1912 and stated to be one of nine surviving covers with similar markings intended for the *Titanic* but carried on other ships

[Almost all the covers may be viewed on-line at <http://www.wrestlingsbest.com/titanic.pdf>]

During 2008 the journal of the Ship Wreck Study Group, *La Catastrophe*, reprinted an article entitled "Titanic covers that missed the boat" that had first appeared in *The Titanic Commutator*, the journal of the Titanic Historical Society. This article by Tom Fortunato of Rochester, New York, gave details of nine covers with a *TITANIC* hand-stamp dated between 3 and 13 March 1912 from various places in France, some of them bearing a *Paris Étranger* postmark of 4, 7 or 14 March and most bearing a Washington DC transit mark of 18 or 27 March, that had apparently been carried by other ships and received by the M A Winter Company in Washington on 19 or 28 March 1912 [some dates being illegible].

The article begins with the words: "Would you pay \$10 for the cover above (Figure 1)? 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 are puzzled at this piece of postal history..."

I have no knowledge of any comments that Mr Fortunato's article may have attracted, but consider it unlikely that any were adverse because *La Catastrophe* published the article without caveat or comment.

One may assume that the editor of *The Titanic Commutator* welcomed the article, when received, as being from a philatelist or postal historian and as a result did not have it checked by a competent collector; had he done so, I am certain that the unfortunate article would not

have appeared. In what follows I attempt to correct the situation.

As a long time collector and student of the Sower issue of France, my eye was immediately drawn to the cover at the head of Mr. Tom Fortunato's article which was reprinted, in 2 parts, in *La Catastrophe*.

Having checked the 10c Sowers, in the hopes that they might be postal forgeries and finding them to be genuine, I turned to the article to attempt to find out why Mr. Fortunato declared the envelope, numbered 267914, a gem.

After reading through the 2 parts of the article and having viewed the 8 covers which come up on the references he gives and having failed to raise the 9th, which does not really matter, because it is also stated to be an envelope, franked 25c, to the Winter Co, I can answer the question which he poses in his first sentence – and my answer is: NO. I would not give a nickel for any one of the so-called "missed *TITANIC* covers" listed as 9 by him. Why not? Read on...

Let me deal with the "junk box" cover first: despite Mr. Fortunato's assertion, N° 267914 has not been registered by the French State *Postes*. N°s 267909 & 267925 are, also, not registered, because the *Courriers Convoyeurs* (scallop rims) did not offer registration. The other 6 covers are not registered and none of the 9 was ever tendered for registration. Had any been registered, the fronts would have

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LONDON GROUP MEETING OF 6 MAY 2010

John West: France, The Red Cross

This was the third of a trilogy of displays featuring the subject of France & the Red Cross, and members were treated to a feast of the vignettes issued, primarily, to raise funds for the benefit of the organisation.

The display split quite nicely into three sections, the first of which featured the issues of the “*Société de Secours aux Blessés Militaires*”, the “*Association des Dames Françaises*” and the “*Union des Femmes Françaises*”. John took the opportunity to enlarge upon the story of Henri Dunant – which often ends with the signing of the Geneva Convention in 1864 – and provided little known information about his struggle to survive during the following 25 years. He also described the formation of the three societies which comprised the French Red Cross up until the Second World War. He showed a comprehensive cross-section of the various issues of these three organisations, even including evidence of missing values and colours etc.

The second section featured a display of the material printed by M. Gaston Fontanille, better known as “Éditions Delandre”. John added the extremely colourful background of this rogue printer – who invented French committees of the Red Cross from all parts of the globe and then printed vignettes purporting to be issued on their behalf! He also insidiously permeated the genuine market of Red Cross vignettes, first of all by printing material at the request of the genuine societies and, when his printing

company had become synonymous with the issue of this material, on his own behalf.

Fontanille was able – illegally – to import the best paper and inks from Germany and – love him or hate him – he succeeded in producing an avalanche of stunningly designed and printed vignettes. He used multi-coloured printing techniques which were far in advance of those used by the Government Printing Works and left a legacy of the most spectacular material. John’s display included a comprehensive display of the issues, from Alexandria to Yunnan, of the non-existent committees, and he also provided an insight into the printing methods used at the workshop of Éditions Delandre. The section ended with the very visible deterioration in the quality of his issues brought about by the evaporation of his supply of top quality paper and ink and, also, his arrest in 1917 for fraud.

The third section dealt with the vignettes of World War II, of which there were very few, and those issued shortly thereafter – generally to coincide with the regular annual Red Cross exhibitions that were held in France. As a little bonus, the members were treated to a small display featuring the series “*Monuments de Paris*”. This included all the booklets of 10 and the booklets of 20 and illustrated how each booklet contained combinations of these vignettes which were unique to the individual booklets.

Mick Bister gave the vote of thanks.

JCW

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displayed evidence of it and the franking would have been 50 centimes (25c postage + 25c registration); turning the covers over should have revealed handling by the registered mail branch of the US Postal Service – they do not; all there is, are markings for ordinary mail.

The **PARIS R.P. ÉTRANGER** marks are made by the 2 heads of a cancelling machine working with no bars between heads. Cover 267942 shows the bars in situ. Using “registration” in a non-postal sense and taking into account the shape of the digits, I am of the opinion that the six-figure numbers have been applied by a registry in the Winter Co.

By 1912, the UPU had been in existence for over thirty years and few countries had not joined. The benefits were great, especially as tariffs were now standardised between member countries. There were no more varying rates between shipping line and shipping line and even individual ships. The previous tedious and often fruitless searches for the fastest, safest and least expensive route and vessel were over. Prepayment reigned and superscription of Line, of Captain’s favour, of shipping agent or vessel was extinguished.

The Post Office of a country did not designate or impose a particular vessel’s name on an item of mail or a bundle of mail: their remit was to send the mail on the first available packet. Later, sometimes, arrangements might be made

specially for propaganda; the *SS Normandie* is an example, but for anyone to advance such a theory in regard to the PTT and the *Titanic* is ludicrous.

The choice of vessel, to carry one’s mail, has always been the prerogative of the sender; governments have tried to control and have spied on mail from the earliest times. The suggestion that the word **TITANIC** handstamped on the 8 covers viewed was carried out by the Foreign Branch of the PTT in Paris is completely untenable.

Since the *RMS Titanic* was British, there is no likelihood that *La Poste* would have arranged a special handling for mail which senders wanted to travel by the *Titanic*. Should anyone in France have desired ocean travel for their mail by that White Star liner, they could have arranged for it to take place by posting to the liners’ agency at Cherbourg; that patently was not so done.

Mr. Fortunato finds it interesting that after 20 years searching, only 9 covers, all to one firm, have been recorded. I find it suspicious and one more reason why I end up convinced that these covers had the handstamp *TITANIC* added to them with fraudulent intent, at some time shortly before they started to appear. What I am unable to decide is where the fraud originated: whether in America or Britain.