The End of the Thurn and Taxis Post

"We face this anarchy of jealous German princes, hundreds of them scheming, counter scheming, infighting, dissipating all of the Empire's strength in their useless bickering. But whoever could control the lines of communications, among all these princes, would control them."

— Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

THE END came swiftly enough on Tuesday, July 17, 1866 during the seven-week Austro-Prussian war. Bismarck's soldiers marched into the Free City of Frankfurt where Prussian Postmaster, Heinrich von Stephen and a contingent of his soldiers occupied the Thurn and Taxis Post office. Stephan, who is more fondly remembered as the father of the Universal Postal Union, ordered Thurn and Taxis postmaster, Eduard von Schele to resign. And that, but for a year of negotiated indemnities and an honorable legacy, was the end of the 400-year-old family postal fiefdom.

Successive generations of Thurn and Taxis Princes had ruled with imperial authority over hundreds of tumultuous kingdoms that were disappearing into the shadows of rising federal governments. In the end, the Thurn and Taxis family had run afoul of Prussia's ambitious Bismarck, and his postmaster, Heinrich von Stephan, who sought unification of Germany and the creation of a modern post office. This exhibit will explore the legacy of the Thurn and Taxis Post.

AN OLD FEUDAL PRIVILEGE WIPED OUT.— The Ocean Telegraph reports that the Prince of Thurn and Taxis has sold out his postal privileges to Prussia for the round sum of three million thalers. One of the early ancestors of this family, a long way back in the Christian era, established the first postal service in Germany, in the Tyrol, and step by step their privilege of carrying the mails was enlarged as to the extent of territory as well as in other respects, by subsequent Europeans, until their nets of post-roads traversed all the German States, with the City of Frankfort for its administrative centre. Latterly, by special convention, Prussia, we believe, freed itself from this feudal privilege of the Prince, and now, after the constitution of the North German Confederacy, the entire postal service of that region passes into the hands of the leading northern Power. We presume that the present arrangement will not affect the Prince's postal privileges in Bavaria and Wurtemberg.

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The development and maintenance of post roads was a legacy of the Thurn and Taxis Post—though more significant to their success was their practical application of the idea to establish fixed stations at regular intervals along the road where couriers and horses were exchanged. The celerity, certainty and security attributed to the Thurn and Taxis Post in the fifteenth century started with their Brussels to Innsbruck road, which ultimately branched and finally connected the court of Maximilian I in Germany to the residence of the French and Spanish kings.

The agreements between the Taxis family and the House of Hapsburg, were legacy as well, setting out in contract the duties and power of the postmaster and his post—and, for the first time, establishing a state monopoly of the post roads and imperial authority of the mail carrier.

That monopoly assured the Taxis Post that they had the power and the protection of the Emperor to proceed unhindered along the post road to deliver imperial and private letters. Suddenly, a post road is a royal way and the postman was about to become a prince of the realm.
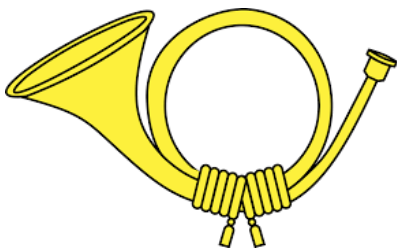

A map of 19th century post roads reveal centralized seats of government, Paris, Madrid and London, and the absence of central government in Germany and Italy. It has been estimated that prior to Napoleonic conquest there were more than 1,700 separate territories and "kingdoms" in the Montana-sized country that would become Germany. The Thurn and Taxis family prospered by establishing postal service to the kingdoms of the Holy Roman Empire. The Thurn and Taxis Post never controlled 100% of Europe. There were always disputes, changes in political allegiance and even jealousies over what looked like easy, profitable postal business. Some "states" cancelled their agreements with Thurn and Taxis Post to build their own postal system. Many returned when their efforts failed to pay the bills.
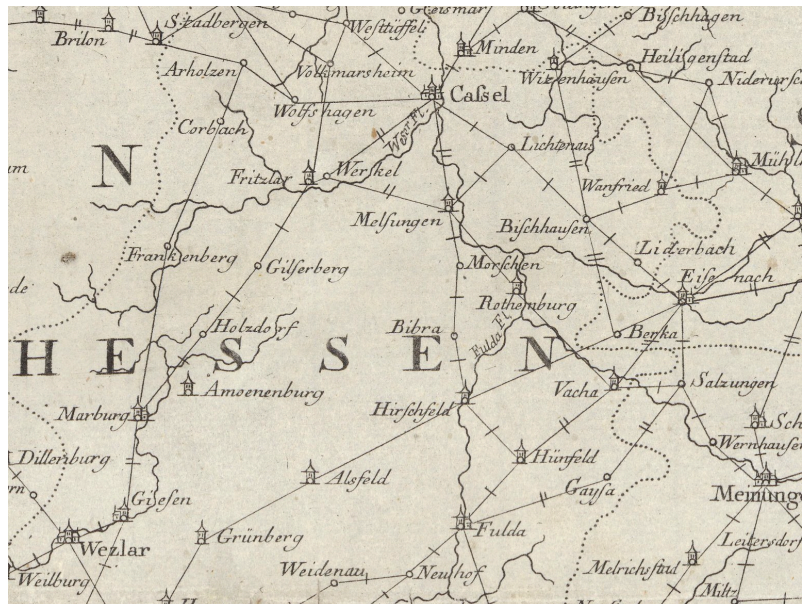
Above: An 18th century version of a post road map reveals the location of stations with icons that signify the level of service available.   Left: A station located on a post road.

Franz IV von Taxis and his brother, Joannes Dax, were made Masters of the Post, at Augsburg and Ghent in 1500; Gabriel von Taxis was named postmaster that same year at Innsbruck; Simon de Tassis acquired the post of Correo Mayor in Spain under Phillip I, and there was Roger, Leonard and David and also their cousins and uncles and even the aunts—they all held high positions in The Post—all over Europe. In 1512 the Emperor Maximilian conferred on Franz von Taxis—and everyone else in the family—titles of hereditary nobility in the Empire and in the Austrian and Burgundian Dominions—and then tossed in the title of Count Palsgrve to boot. Two years later Christopher von Taxis came of age and was knighted by Maximilian at Innsbruck. The whole Taxis family — including the generations yet to be, had become the Princes of the Post.
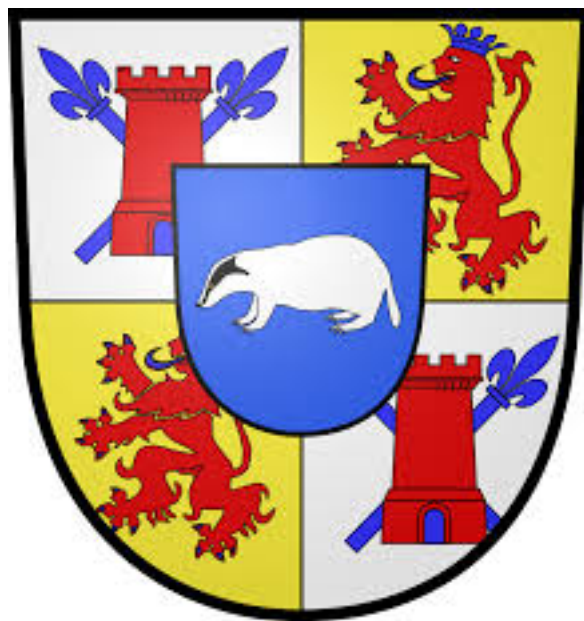
The Taxis family palace was at Sablon, near Brussels, the headquarters of the Taxis Post for nearly 300 years.

The badger, "tasso" in Italian, was the central feature of the Taxis family coat of arms.

The main postal routes mid-sixteenth century were: Brussels to Paris in 36 hours (40 in winter); to Lyon in 3.5 days (4 in winter); Brussels to Burgos, Spain in seven days (eight in winter); through Germany to Innsbruck in five days (six in winter); to Rome via Germany in 10.5 days (12 days in winter).

Roads were generally divided into four classes: Roads for couriers and travelers; roads for diligences and post wagons; roads reserved entirely for post wagons and not provided with relays for couriers, and roads serving only transport of letters.

The principal imperial credential of authority was the post horn. A post horn signal cleared a road of traffic for a courier, another signal notified the watch to raise the gates to a city (most German cities/towns had curfews in the 1500s) and there were signals of the mail's arrival, collection and departure. It was a punishable offense to make use of a post horn without authority.

By the mid-sixteenth century the House of Hapsburg had divided into two lines of contrary policy, which created conflicts and Court intrigues that threatened the stability of the Taxis Post. Additionally, the wars and upheavals of the 16th century challenged the Thurn and Taxis family to develop new routes and additional services in various parts of the Empire. However, there were princes who were satisfied with medieval messenger systems, and would not pay the heavy toll for a Taxis post. There were temporary suspensions of service from the Netherlands in 1556, which induced several states to develop their own posts within their own boundaries, Saxony, Wurtemberg, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg and the Palatinate claimed that Thurn and Taxis lost their imperial privilege when they lost the Netherland mails.

By the early 17th century states were becoming worried about the growing power of Austria. Small kingdoms were jealous of "alien" postmasters, and tired of the idea that the postal service should be a monopoly. Some states attempted to develop their own less expensive posts during the Thirty Year War, a time of many setbacks for the Thurn and Taxis Post. Finally, the Peace of Westphalia strengthened states' rights and in 1701, during the war of Spanish Succession, the House of Taxis moved to Frankfurt.

In 1789 the threat was the French Revolution.

Before the French Revolution in 1789, Thurn and Taxis was the largest postal system in the empire serving 11.3 million people in an area about 86,000 square miles. The princely house had access to the most important transit routes to Italy, France, England, Scandinavia, Poland, Russia and overland to the sultan in Constantinople. Twenty-two post offices, plus those of the Austrian-Dutch postal service were administered by the Postmaster-General in Frankfurt. The imperial post was one of the few truly functioning institutions of the empire. Thurn and Taxis's problems were with German States that wanted their own sovereign postal systems. The family was losing the post and valuable transit rights in the Austrian-Netherlands. But the real threat would come in October 1792 when the French Revolutionary Army occupied the left bank of the Rhine and the city of Mainz became Mayence.
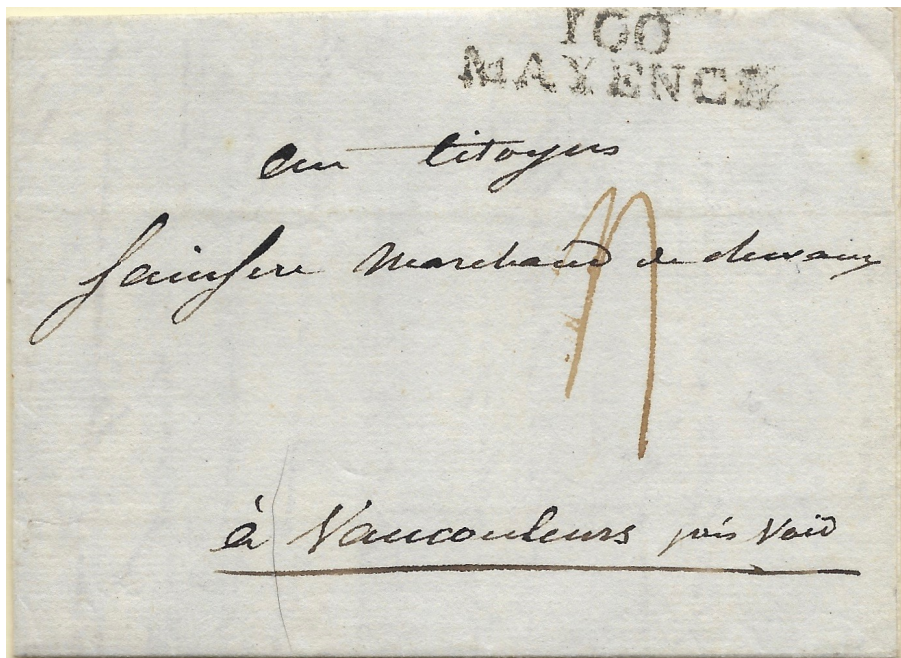
1811 Stampless folded letter from Mayence (Mainz) to Vaucouleurs, France. The origin mark, I00 MAYENCE was a French administrative mark that assigned a number (I00) to a conquered territory (Territoires conquis). The French Revolutionary army first occupied Mainz in October 1792. The Prussians regained the city on 23 July 1793 but lost it in 1797 to Napoleon. The French left Mainz in May of 1814.

French map (with French spellings) of the occupied Rhine left bank, which was ceded to France at the Peace of Basle in 1795. Thurn and Taxis Prince Karl Anselm worked persistently to develop postal service agreements but France had already reorganized the occupation along the lines of the French State Post.

The Holy Roman Empire was no more. Defeated by the French Grand Armee at Austerlitz in 1805, Emperor Francis II dissolved the empire on 6 August 1806. The thousand year monarchy was over and so was the imperial fief held by the House of Thurn and Taxis. The family no longer had the royal imperative to negotiate with the now scattered remnants of kingdoms, Duchies and territories of central Germany. The northern states of Prussia and Hannover and the southern kingdoms of Bavaria, Baden and Wurtemberg had already organized their own state postal systems. The Thurn and Taxis post estimated that their north Germany losses alone exceeded 600,000 francs. In the new states, which were formed by and were dependencies of Napoleon, the forwarding of the letters had been taken over by other companies. By 1810 there were 43 different postal services fighting for the former Taxis posts. Although Thurn and Taxis offered a vastly superior and time-tested service, the general opinion at the close of the Napoleonic period was that state-operated postal systems were the future. Delegating the rights to a private postal service or even leasing a state post was a relic of the past. The rock star popularity that the House of Thurn and Taxis had enjoyed in the 17th and 18th centuries had already begun to wane at the dawn of the 1800s.

After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, the Congress of Vienna and the creation of the German Confederation in 1815 brought a reprieve to the House of Thurn and Taxis by returning the family's former rights and privileges. For a time, at least, the Thurn and Taxis Post appeared to have found a role in the rebuilding of the German postal system. Once again Thurn and Taxis agreements with individual German States were recognized. Many of the small and medium-sized states had developed their own postal systems during the French occupation so were now legally obligated to compensate Thurn and Taxis for the nationalization of the Taxis post. As result, Bavaria, Prussia and Baden paid the the family handsomely, often in landed estates and treasure. Wurttemberg, a bit short of treasure and land, returned the postal privilege that they had taken from Taxis in 1805.
Based in Frankfurt, which was central to the remaining Thurn and Taxis posts on German soil, the family would now have to meet new challenges in the first half of the 19th century: railroads, uniform rates and postage stamps.

8 January 1831 serifed single-line origin mark, on a double folded letter from Stade to Hannover 192 km (119 miles). The K.L.D. monogram, Königlicher Landkreis Deutschland (Royal Land District of Germany) presumably an official letter from the district office in Stade. After the French occupation, Thurn and Taxis lost most of its northern postal business to cities and states that were eventually served by the Prussian post in 1866, the North German Confederation in 1867 and finally Germany in 1871.

Thurn and Taxis held hereditary tenure in Wurttemberg, the Electorate of Hesse; the Grand-Duchies Hesse; Hesse-Nassau and the Principalities of Reuss, Schwarzenburg, Hohenzollern, Lippe-Detmold and Schaumburg-Lippe, plus Taxis post-offices in the Hanseatic league cities of Hamburg, Bremen, Luebeck and the Free city of Frankfurt — just 670 square miles; only 3.5 million inhabitants remained under the Taxis Post. Most of the territory was a fragmented multitude of small states. There was a north and a south currency; postal services had to be organized individually, within the boundaries of a given state. By the 1830s the prospects for a German Railroad were grim considering the obstruction to traffic and trade caused by the system of small feudal states. In 1834 Prussia, Bavaria, Wurttemberg, Saxony, Hesse and Thuringia formed a Customs and Trade Union to develop uniform rates. There was a growing demand to create a national postal service as well.
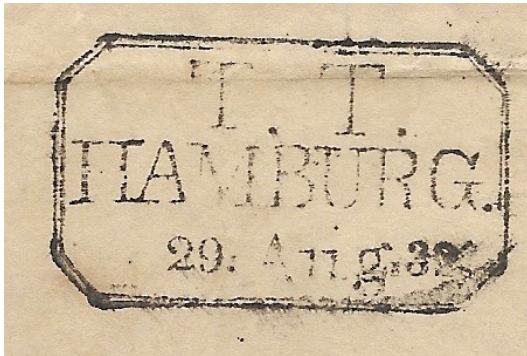
The multitude of small states put Germany at a disadvantage when it came to organizing postal tariffs and postal markings. The earliest Thurn and Taxis markings—place-name marks—appeared in the 1730s, produced by handstamps left over from the French post after the wars of Spanish Succession. In 1832 Thurn and Taxis developed a rectangular handstamp (left) peculiar to Hamburg. In 1840 the mark appears with only a single lined octagonal frame.


29 August 1832 single folded letter from Hamburg to Herrnhut, 350 miles (564 km). In 1840 one German mile equaled about 4.5 statute miles. The rate therefore would be based on approx. 77 German miles in the currency of the North, silbergroschen (sgr.) The rate in the period was about 6.5 sgr. (15¢) for 50-60 miles. 10.5 sgr. was apparently paid. Until the Austro-German Postal Convention in 1847, weights, measures and tariffs varied from state to state, kingdom, territory and dutchy. Generally, the greater number of independent territories that a letter had to cross the more expensive the postage. A letter going southeast from Nuremberg to Regensburg (65 mi) cost twice as much as going northwest from Regensburg to Nuremberg. A letter from Berlin to Rome cost 68¢ through Switzerland, 30¢ via Genoa, 48¢ through Austria. There was growing demand for change, for uniformity.
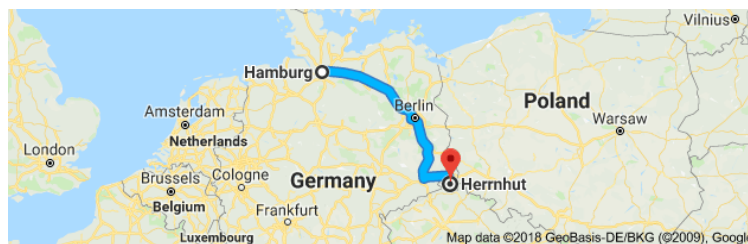
The Thurn and Taxis Post "came of age" in a Europe of many kingdoms, large and small, where recurrent wars and deadly neighborhood spats were routine. The House of Taxis negotiated postal agreements and treaties one-to-one with every city and village. At the formation of the German Confederation in 1815 there were 350 independent territories of which about 40 had any political or economic significance.

The Articles of the Confederation stipulated that the House of Thurn and Taxis would retain its former rights and privileges suspended during the Napoleonic era. It wasn't a popular idea to enable the House, but it was the law: Thurn and Taxis had been the owner of the postal system before it was confiscated by Napoleon—and there was no question that family knew how to deliver the mail with a few hundred years of experience. There was also apprehension among the smaller states about the Confederation's authority. For all the annoyance and expense of treating with Thurn and Taxis, it seemed that the family was less of a threat than the big states.

The decision to return the Thurn and Taxis privilege, however, would delay the development of a modern postal system in Germany for another 50 years.
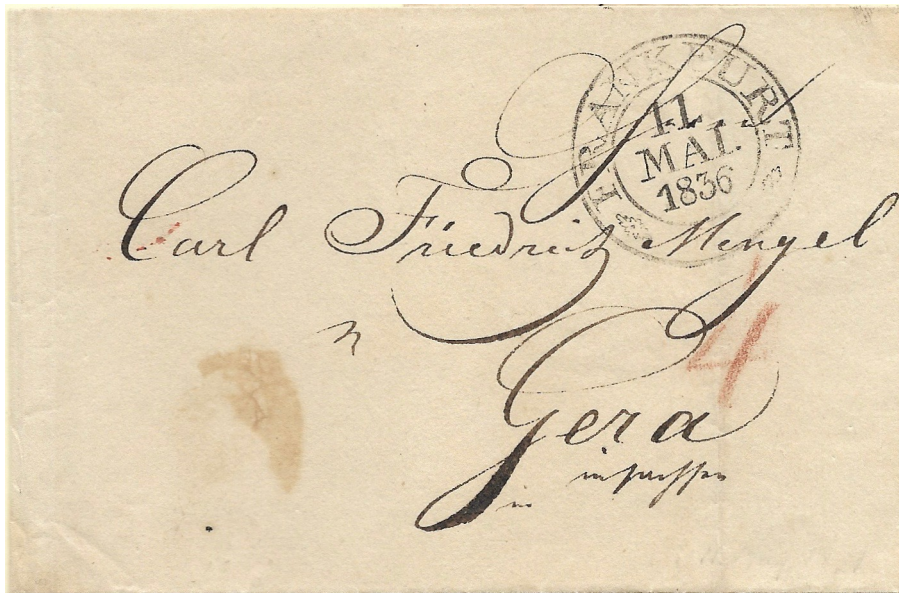
11 May 1836 Frankfurt to Gera, 207 statue miles (334 km) approx. 46 meilen. The single sheet cover was rated at 4 sgr. based on 6.75 sgr. per 50-60 meilen. The large (30mm) double circle dated postmark of Frankfurt was in use through 1860—into the stamp period. After the French occupation the German spelling of FRANKFURT was changed from FRANCFORT and it wasn't until the late 1850s early 60s that the wording FRANKFURT a.M. was used to distinguish Frankfurt on the Main (river) from the eastern Frankfurt am Oder, a city that was well outside of Thurn and Taxis territory.
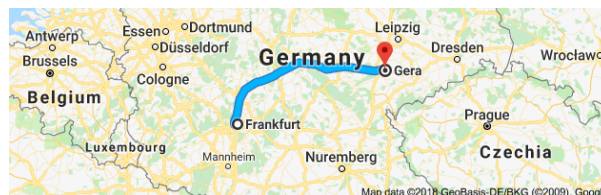
This Google map routing generally follows the Taxis post road of the mid-1800s from Frankfurt to Gera, via Hanau, Fulda and Gotha.

Thurn and Taxis had post offices at Hamburg and Bremen to process the considerable amount of mail in transit from abroad. Mail from the U.S., Scandinavia, England and so on, was en route not only for the Thurn and Taxis districts but also for Southern Europe, Italy, France and elsewhere. There was also a large mail outbound from Italy and France for Northern Germany and Scandinavia. The bulk of the traffic coming into Hamburg and Bremen by sea was from Denmark and Sweden headed for the City of Hamburg where both Denmark and Sweden had their own "extra-territorial" post offices. It was through the Hamburg Thurn and Taxis office that mail from Scandinavian countries addressed to France, for example, passed from the Danish and Swedish post offices (and other post offices in Hamburg) to the Thurn and Taxis office to be forwarded to the French frontier. At the frontier the mail was marked to show that it had been received from Thurn and Taxis (T.T.R4. R. 4.) in the same way that the French marked mail received from Baden or Prussian Posts. These frontier marks were known as "cachets de pénétration" and were accompanied by a corresponding origin mark.

T.T.R.4.

"cachet de pénétration"

DANEMARCK PAR.HAMBOURG

origin mark:
Denmark for Hambourg

1 September 1843 Flensburg (Schleswig-Holstein, Danish in 1843) to Bordeaux. The cover would have passed from the Danish P.O. in Hamburg to the T&T P.O. in Hamburg for forwarding to the frontier (probably Forbach) and on to Bordeaux. Rated at 19 sgr.

On the back . . . .

Letter arrived at **Altona,** the westernmost borough of Hamburg and from 1640 to 1864 Altona was under the administration of the Danish monarchy.

Thurn and Taxis Hamburg transit; sent on to the French frontier, and finally, arrived in Bordeaux on September 8, 1843 (per content.)
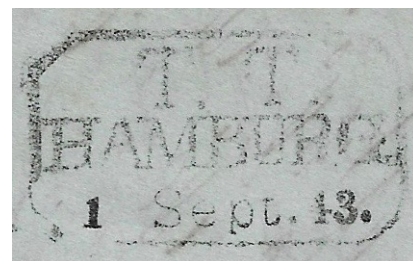
6 November 1853 Hamburg to Paris via Valenciennes (frontier). Rated in Hamburg as 6 sgr. paid through to Paris. Before 1850 postal charges were reckoned from frontier to frontier. By 1850 Thurn and Taxis had 22 district main offices serving more than three million people. The area served by the Taxis Post was from the shores of the Scheldt to the lowlands of the Elbe; from the North Sea and Baltic to the Alps and from the Rhine to the Thuringwald — and with treaties abroad.

Starting about 1838 France used a circular date type of Pénétration marking. At the top of the stamp (very faint) are the letters: "Tour T" and at the bottom the name of the frontier station., in this case: "Valenciennes."

Many letters that arrived at the port of Hamburg passed through the Swedish and Danish post offices before arriving at the Thurn and Taxis office for transit; Thurn and Taxis traffic can be verified by the postmark that includes "TH & T" at the base of the double circle stamp. (very faint).

Until the Austro-German Postal Convention in 1850 the mails within Germany were charged based on the variety of rates that existed in each territory through which the mails would pass. Postal charges were reckoned from frontier to frontier. Determining a rate at the origin was imprecise if not guess work. Without rate uniformity within the country and beyond the frontiers, prepaid mail was less efficient. The Austro-German Postal Union came into being to simplify the exchange of mail between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and various states of Germany—and to create a postal structure for uniform rates. The Union began with an agreement between Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire and by 1 June 1852 all the German states, large and small had joined. Thurn and Taxis was the last to join and they, like everyone else, finally agreed to print postage stamps.

Thurn and Taxis — Transit continued

1856

24 May 1856 Hamburg to Paris, rated at 6 sgr. Thurn and Taxis was well into the production and domestic use of adhesive postage stamps by 1856 but as yet had not produced high value stamps for foreign use (1859) and was still operating under their own policy that restricted the use of stamps: "Only letters to states belonging to the German-Austrian Postal Union or within the German Federation could be franked with postage stamps." (Publication of the Princely Postal General Administration).

Hamburg mark (**above**) distinguishing the Thurn and Taxis post office (TH & T) (**below**) the double circle French pénétration marking from the frontier (Valenciennes).
**Verso (right):**
Paris double circle (20mm) receiving mark, 26 May 1856.

**By 1854 2,073,104 prepaid letters circulated in the Thurn and Taxis districts
— about twice the number of letters that were not prepaid.**

13 October 1856 Bensheim to Marburg 141.7 km (88 miles) paying 7 kreuzer in Thurn and Taxis adhesives, the 1854 rate based on distance: 15 to 30 miles. The letter entered the mails at Bensheim on October 13, 1856, transited Frankfurt and arrived at Marburg on the 14th of October. The adhesives, cancelled with a four ring obliterator, bear the numeral 95, Bensheim. The 1kr. and the 6kr. were two of the four denominations (also 3kr. 9kr.) produced in the first issue of adhesive stamps by Thurn and Taxis in December of 1851. The stamps were available on December 29, but officially issued on January 1, 1852. Users were reminded to apply the correct denomination (silbergroschen (northern) or kreuzer (southern) for their district or the "sending office" will write under such stamps, "Of no value." Shortly before the first issue of stamps were released, the method of cancellation was settled on the four ring obliterator and numbers were assigned to 354 post offices in the Thurn and Taxis district. These so-called "ringnummers" remained in use through December 1864.
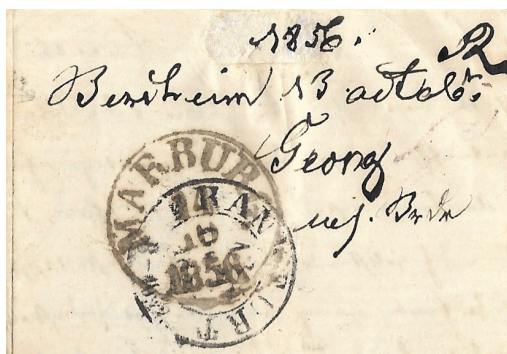
Map: The 1805 French language depiction of Hesse and Nassau was used for its clarity of the Bensheim—Marburg route.

Marburg receiver (single circle) shows arrival on the 14th of October and the double circle transit mark (FRANKFURT) appears to be a 13. By 1856 a German rail traffic was still private and operations consisted of many short segments, even on the line between Bensheim and Marburg, which later became a "fast rail." No trace of "bahnhof" markings are visible on the cover. Delivery was probably by a Thurn and Taxis van or diligence.

13 November 1858 Wiesbaden to Weilburg 42 statue miles (67.9km) 4 kreuzer in Thurn and Taxis adhesives paying the Austro-German Postal Union rate for 3 to 15 mielen. The cover would have been charged for 9 postmeile. (One German mile equaled 4.7 statue miles. The metric system wasn't compulsory in Germany until 1 January 1872)   The 4-ring cancellation includes (very faintly) Wiesbaden's numeral: 215.

Gradually, states that had
been served directly by Thurn and Taxis
exerted sovereign rights in the 1850s to administer
their own postal service and produce their own stamps.
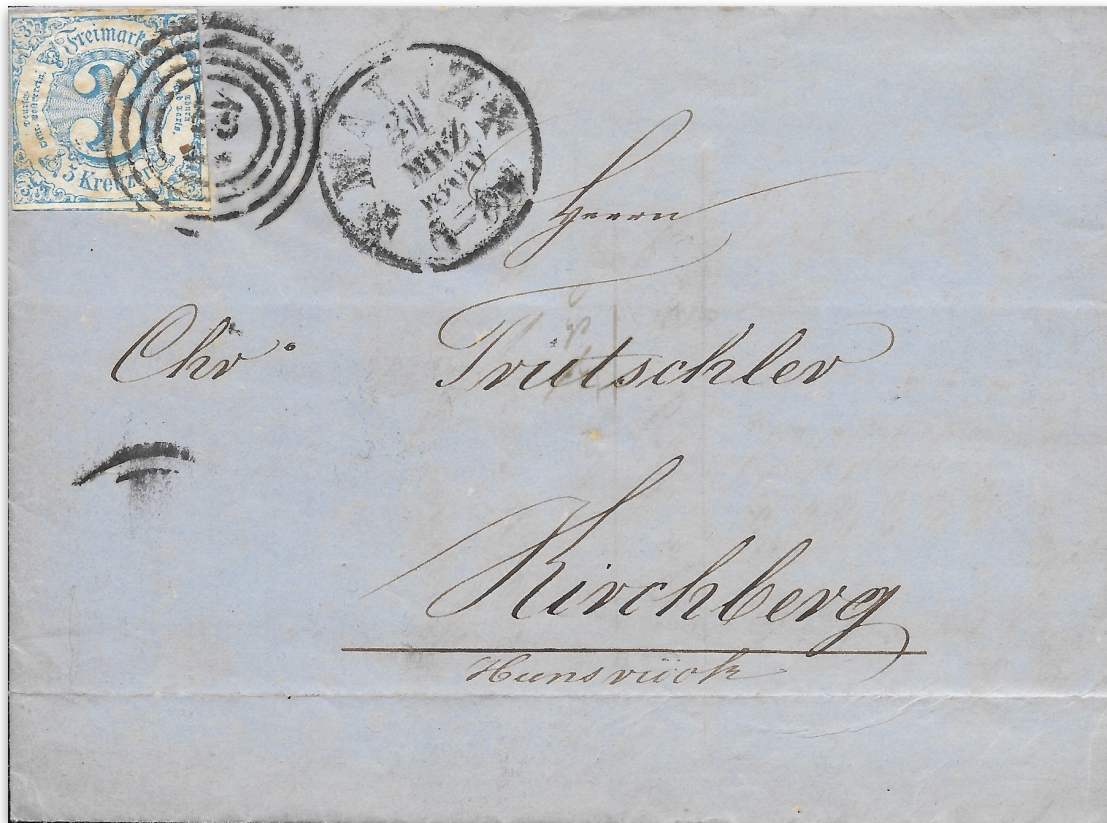
24 March 1860 Mainz to Kirchberg 49 statute miles (79 km). The 3 kreuzer adhesive paid a rate based on 10 miele (German miles). The 4-ring obliterator holds Maintz's numeral (134). The cover contains an invoice for hotel supplies. Business correspondence was a high percentage of the mail stream in mid-19th century Germany, and very profitable. That a postal service was an attractive private business was off no interest to those who would modernize the postal system. Heinrich von Stephan, an architect of what would become the U.P.U., believed that a cardinal rule of a postal system was to promote the general welfare, not cater to special interests (like private posts). Bismarck's plan to create a unified Germany and Stephan's goal to unify the German post faced two obstacles: Austria's persistent struggle for political dominance in Europe and the private posts, especially The Princely House of Thurn and Taxis .
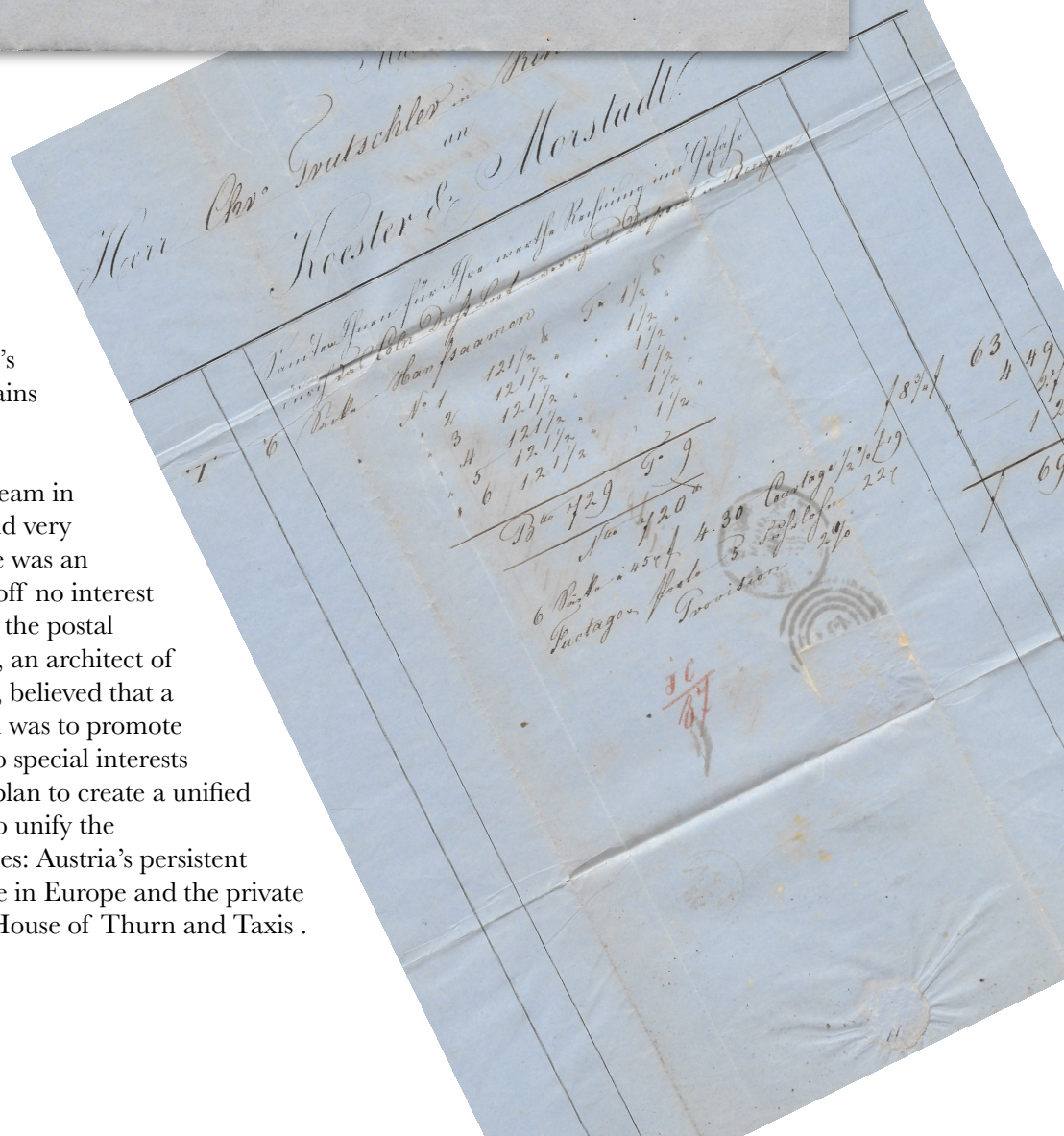
1 April 1862 Cassel to Fulda (105.2 km 65 SM) rated 1 silbergroschen (sgr.) based on 14 miele. Thurn and Taxis issued stamped envelopes on 1 October 1861 in the currency of the north district (1/2, 1, 2, 3 silbergroschen) and in the south district (2, 3, 6, 9 kreuzer). The Thurn and Taxis stamped envelopes were in circulation through July 1867 when they were replaced by Prussian stamped envelopes. The Cassel 4-ring number is 14.
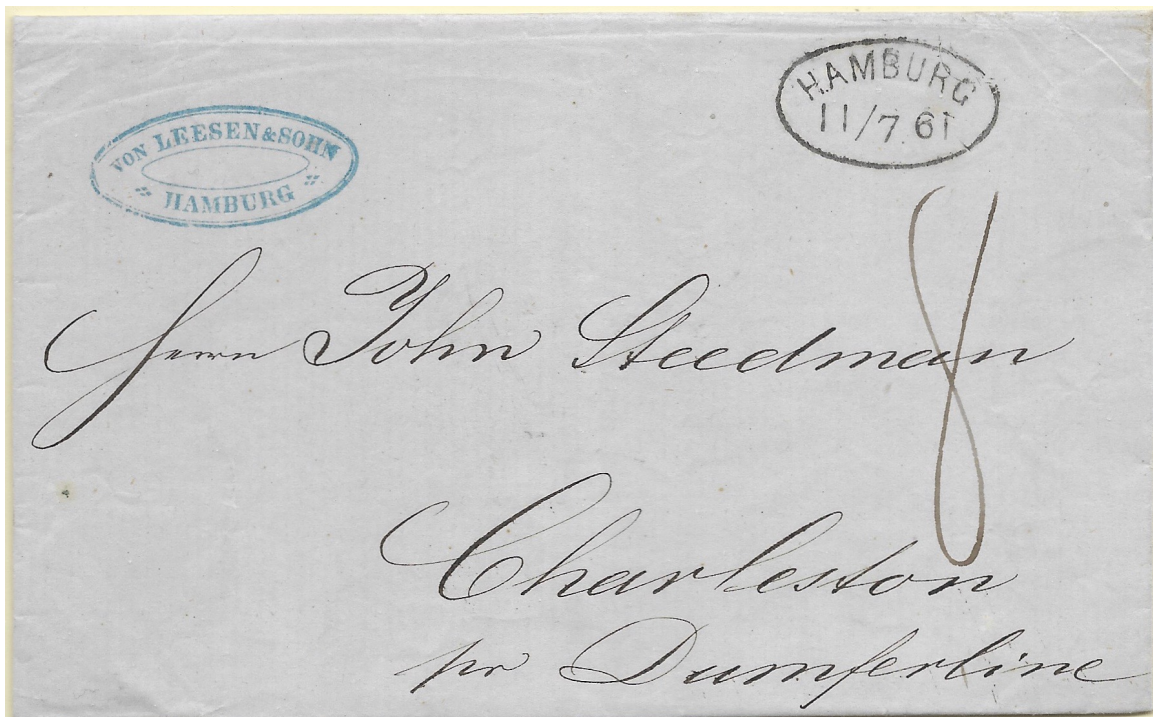
11 July 1861 Hamburg to Charleston, Scotland, 8 silbergroschen. This cover was probably handled by the Hamburg City Post, which, like Thurn and Taxis, was one of several post offices of several administrations in Hamburg in 1861, making use of date stamps from the pre-stamp period. This cover transited London on the 13 July, Stirling, Scotland on the 13th and Dunfermline on 15 July. 1861. The town of Charleston is 60 miles north of Dumfermline.
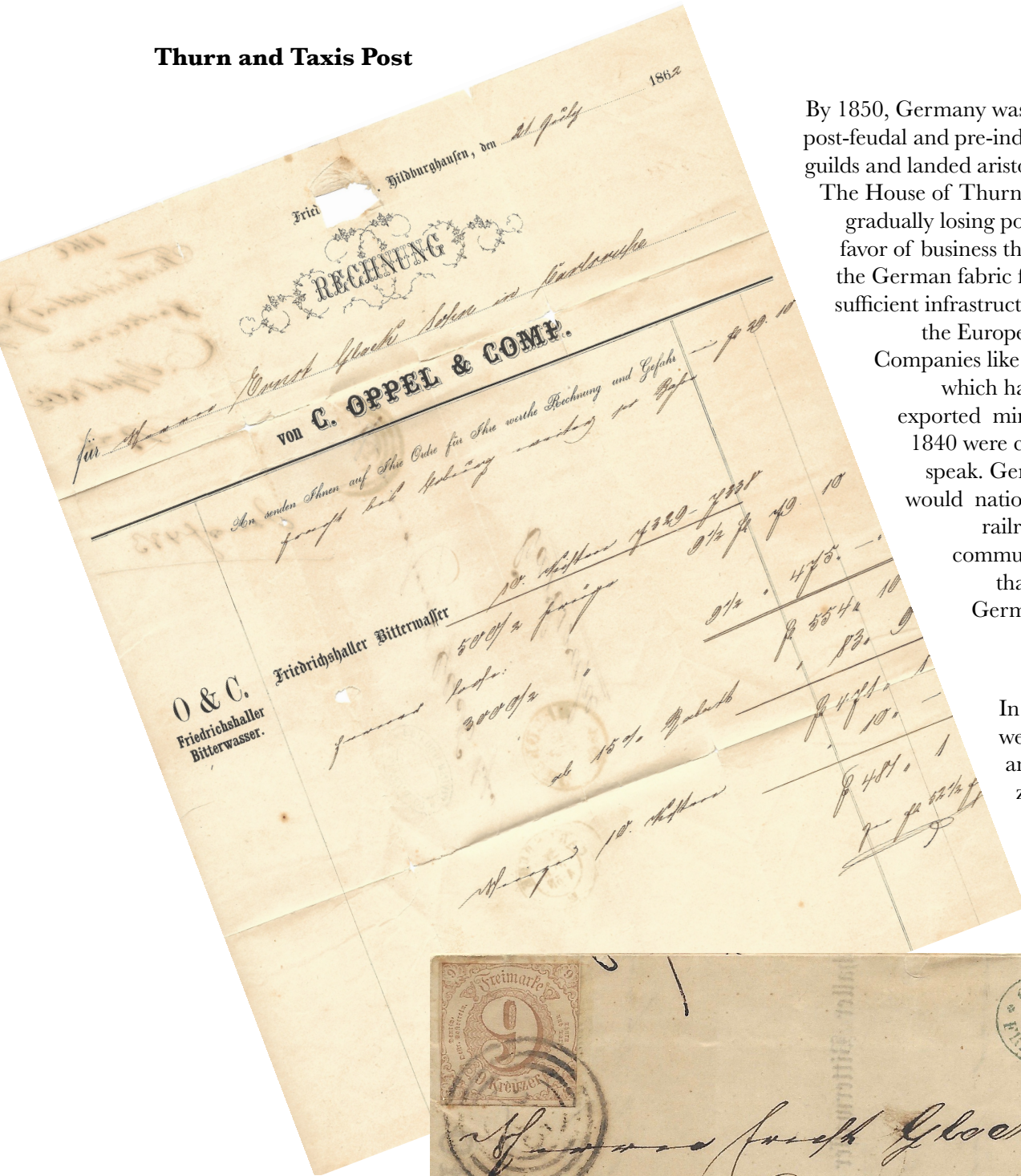
By 1850, Germany was stalled between post-feudal and pre-industrial eras. The guilds and landed aristocracy, including The House of Thurn and Taxis, were gradually losing popular support in favor of business that had existed in the German fabric for years without sufficient infrastructure to emerge in the European marketplace. Companies like C. Oppel & Co, which had produced and exported mineral water since 1840 were coming out, so to speak. German unification would nationalize roads and railroads and build a communications system that would connect German industry and the world.

In 1861 the rates were reduced to 3, 6, and 9 kr. for the zones of 15,30 and over 30 mielen.

Thurn and Taxis
**numerical postmark
#255** (Heldburg)

**S o u t h e r n   D i s t r i c t
Kreuzer currency**
9 kr. blister (imperf)
Issued February 1862. Michel
#3411 Scott #55
(60 Kreuzer =1 Guiden)
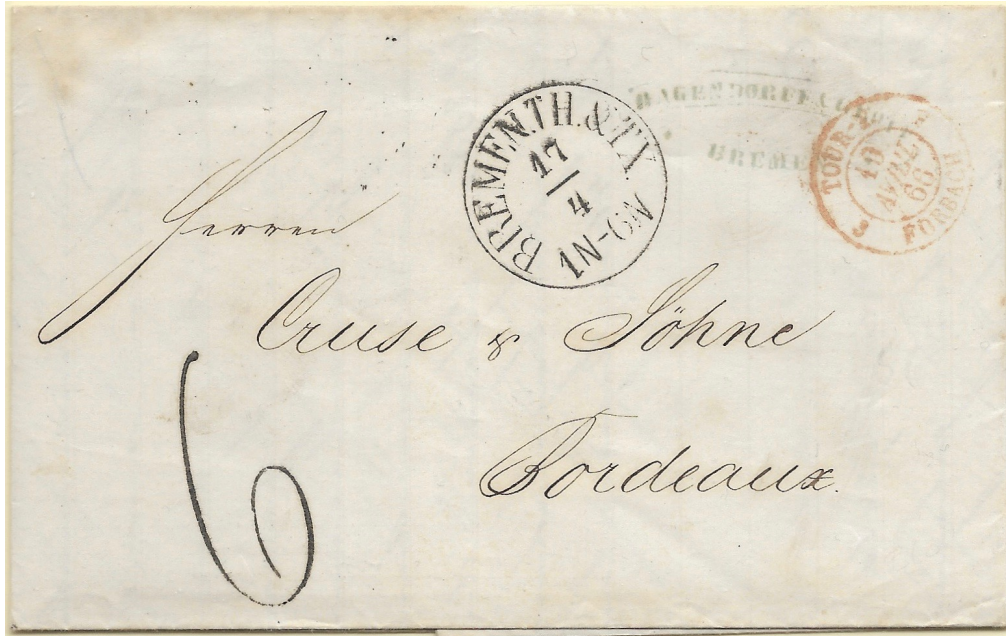
17 April 1866 Bremen to Bordeaux via the Forbach transit where the French applied the red double circle, which reads TOUR T. at the top and the name of the frontier station at the bottom, Forbach. Called *cachets de pénétration* France was apparently the only country, using penetration markings with special indications that the mail had been received from Thurn and Taxis. The cover then cleared Paris on the 19th, and finally Bordeaux on April 20. The cover was rated in the currency of the north district: 6 silbergroschen (sgr.). The Bremen single circle date stamp includes TH&T following the office name. In the free cities of Hamburg, and Bremen, Thurn and Taxis used its mark to distinguish themselves from several other post offices and as many administrations.
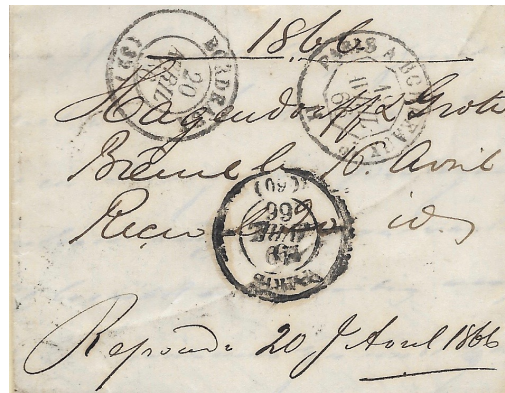
June14, 1866 was the first day of a seven week war between Austria and Prussia after many years of conflict over which of the two powers would dominate the German states and Central Europe. Prussian minister Otto von Bismarck was the driving force behind a plan to unify the scattered kingdoms and duchies and create a powerful economic force in Europe. Austria stood in the way as did old feudal organizations that opposed change, like the House of Thurn and Taxis. Bismarck's Privy Postal Councillor, Heinrich von Stephan referred to the Thurn and Taxis Post as "that 350 year old cancerous sore in Germany," and claimed that the dissolution of the Thurn and Taxis Post was one of his greatest achievements.