



Mail from Besieged Paris in 1870-1871



Background: The Franco-German War began with a string of German victories and French retreats, culminating in the siege of Paris from September 18, 1870 until January 28, 1871. To maintain communications from Paris to unoccupied France, 67 balloons were launched, 57 of which arrived safely. Two general categories of mail were carried.

- 1) Mail handled by the post office and supplied to 56 of the balloons.
 - a) Mail carried on foot across the lines by postmen during the first two weeks of the siege
 - b) Regular correspondence mailed at Parisian civilian post offices
 - c) Priority-handled mail posted at the Paris (SC) and Paris (RC) bureaus
 - d) Letters mailed at the Parisian army fieldpost bureaus
- 2) Letters and government mail confided to the balloon builder company or to a balloonist, known from 62 of the balloons. These are known as *plis confiés*, and were not handled by the post office until after a balloon's landing. They therefore have no Paris postmarks.
 - a) Mail carried in the official government dispatch bag
 - b) Mail given to a passenger or pilot on a balloon
 - c) Mail given to one of the companies which fabricated the balloons (“*aérostiers*”)

Scope and Study: This exhibit shows all seven types of mail listed above. Considerable original research is reflected in the classification of priority-handled and confided mail.



Posted October 21 at Paris Maison-Blanche - addressed to grand-nephew of manned balloon inventor
Balloon *Garibaldi* left Paris on October 22 - letter arrived in eastern France on November 1

Post Office Mail

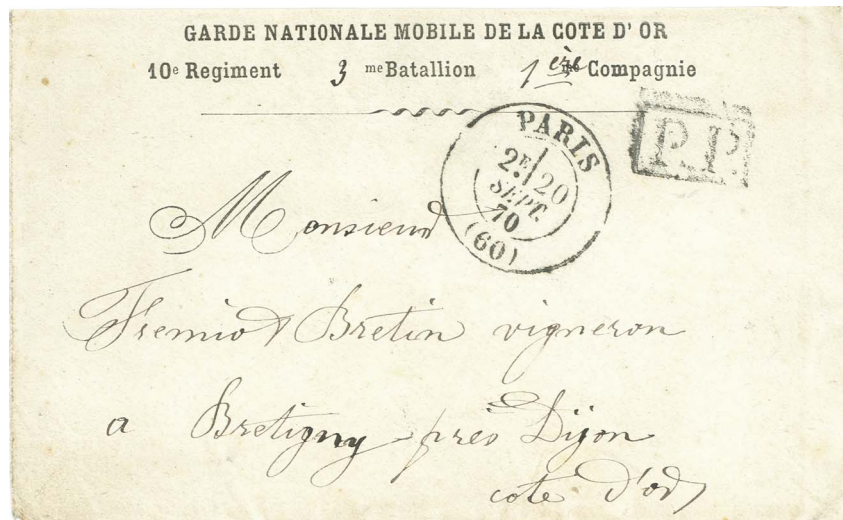
Linecrossers at Start of the Siege



All communications were cut in the afternoon of September 18. Paris postmen made five successful trips through the lines before September 30.



Posted September 18 with military free frank - arrived on September 27
Postmen Brare and Gême's 3rd trip left on September 24 with 3,000 letters



Posted September 20 with military free frank - arrived on September 30
Postmen Brare and Gême's 4th trip left on September 27 - mail taken to Triel

Post Office Mail

Unusual Frankings



Prepayment of domestic balloon postage was required, and 10c or 20c stamps were typically used. Some unusual frankings are known.



Posted December 15 - franked by 10c tête-bêche pair of the 1870 “Siege of Paris” Issue

Parmentier left December 17 - mail processed through Nevers on December 26



Posted October 3 at 13th Corps HQ bureau - 10c postcard rate paid by 1863 Issue 2c stamps

Jean Bart #2 left October 16 - postcards jettisoned as ballast over Soissons but recovered

Post Office Mail

Letters with Privileged Handling

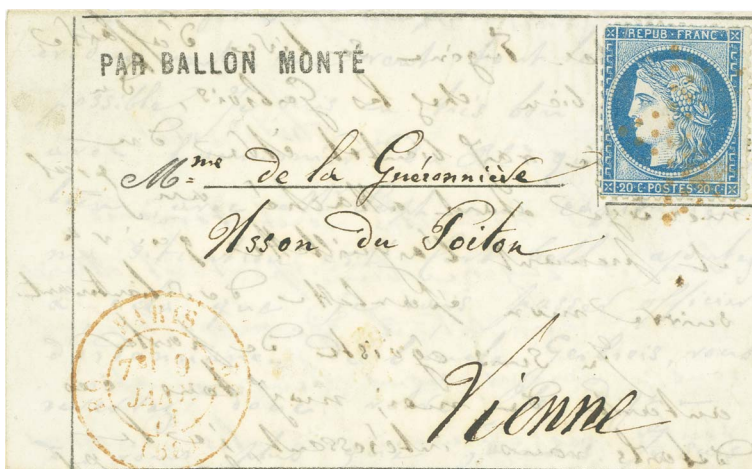


Important people could take their letters to the “Service Centrale” and “Recette Centrale” bureaus in the Paris central post office, and receive expedited departure on the next balloon.



Postmarked October 12 at the Paris (SC) bureau - carried on the *Godefroy Cavaignac*

Paris (SC) postmark is rarely struck twice - letter arrived on October 16



Postmarked January 9 at the Paris (RC) bureau - left January 11 aboard the *Kepler*

Red star used to cancel the 20c stamp - **only two letters are known from this bureau**

Post Office Mail

Postcards on the *Jean Bart* #2 – October 16, 1870

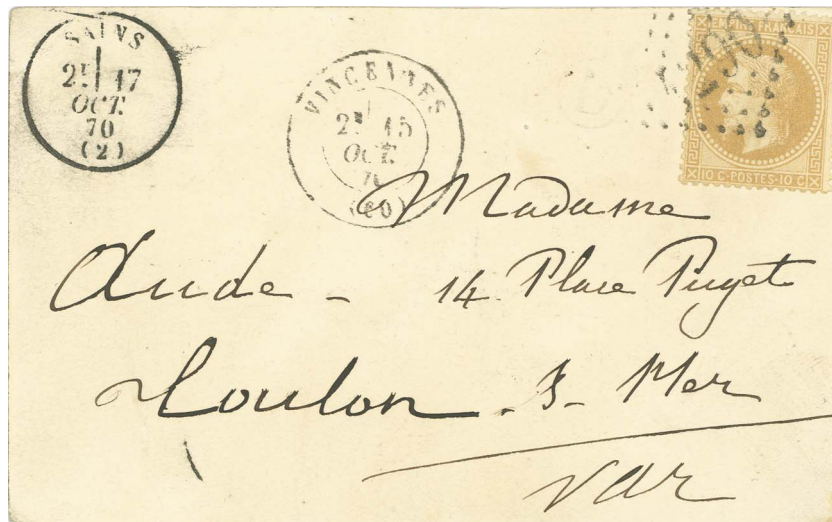


Postcards were charged a 10 centimes rate. A group was jettisoned as ballast from the *Jean Bart* #2 to escape enemy fire. They were recovered and postmarked in small towns near Soissons.



Postmarked October 10 at the St. Mandé-Paris bureau - rare “**petits chiffres**” cancel

Recovered near Crécy-s-Serre on October 17 - received classic transit postmark



Postmarked October 15 at the Paris Vincennes bureau - normal “**gros chiffres**” cancel

Recovered near Sains-Richaumont on October 17 - received rare transit postmark

Post Office Mail

Military Concession Rate to New Caledonia



Balloon mail addressed to naval personnel was charged the domestic rate of 20 centimes. Two letters to New Caledonia are known.



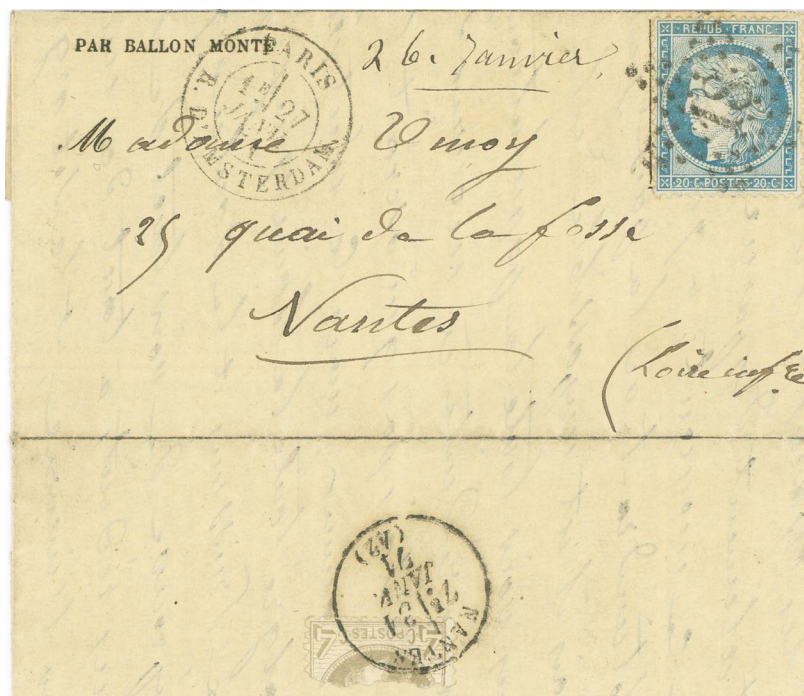
Posted January 12, 1871 at the Paris Finances bureau - left January 13 aboard the *Général Faidherbe*
Postmarked January 14 at Ste. Foy landing point - routed via Marseille to Ligne V steamer *Moeris*
Arrived in Alexandria, Egypt on January 21 - transferred to P&O steamer *Candia* to Sydney, Australia
Steamer *Havilah* left Sydney on March 18 for Nouméa, New Caledonia - **March 26 arrival postmark**
Forwarded back to Toulon, France on June 10 and then to Saigon via Hong Kong on July 15

Post Office Mail

Unusual Balloons



Posted November 24 at the 13th Corps HQ Bureau - *Ville d'Orléans* left on November 26
Mail bag jettisoned in North Sea but recovered later - 20 centimes franking floated off



Posted January 27 at Paris rue d'Amsterdam bureau - *Général Cambronne* left on January 28
Last balloon of the siege carried very little mail - letter arrived on January 31

Post Office Mail

Military Fieldpost Bureaus



Postmarked October 17 at the Armée du Rhin Bureau AM - left October 18 on the *Victor Hugo*
Addressed to Prussia - blue “Auswartiges amt des Norddeutschen Bundes” censor marking



Postmarked January 19 at Armée Française Bureau H - left January 20 on the *Général Bourbaki*
30 centimes franking cancelled “AFH” - letter arrived on January 25 in Belgium

Post Office Mail

Military Fieldpost Bureaus



The Parisian 2nd Army fieldpost organization was provided with postal materials in December. Mail with those postmarks is rare.



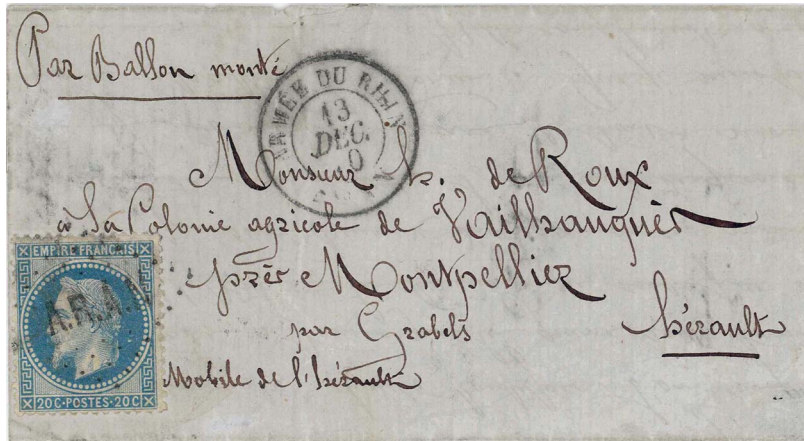
Posted January 24, 1871 at the Armée Française Bureau F - left January 27 on the *Richard Wallace*
Balloon crashed in the ocean and its mail washed up near La Rochelle with frankings floated off
Postmarked February 13 at La Tremblade recovery point - arrived February 25 in Algeria

Post Office Mail

Balloon Letter with Reply by Boule



The *Boules de Moulins* mail service was an attempt to get letters into besieged Paris by means of floating zinc balls in the Seine River. None arrived before the end of the siege.



Postmarked December 13 at the Armée du Rhin Bureau AN - left December 17 on the *Parmentier*



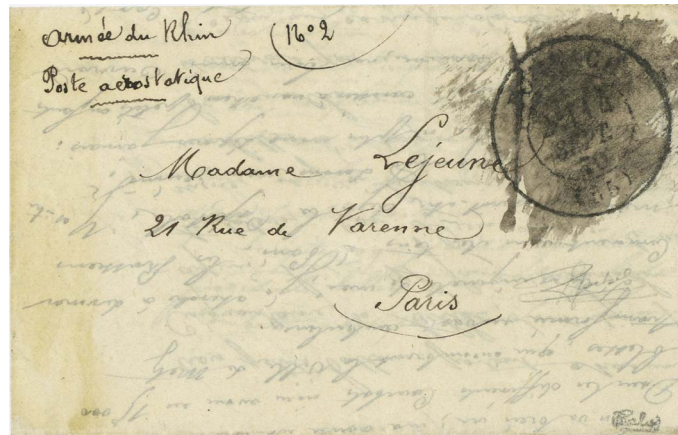
Reply to above letter posted January 2 in Montpellier - premium 1 franc *Boules de Moulins* rate
Rare June 22, 1871 Paris arrival mark - forwarded back to Montpellier on August 27

Post Office Mail

Carried out of Two Sieges



Besieged Metz used unmanned balloons to carry mail from September 5 to October 3. Very few of these *papillons* were postmarked.



Dated September 8 in besieged Metz - left September 11 on the 6th Pharmacists' balloon
Postmarked on September 14 at Forbach landing spot - defaced to conceal French origin



Above papillon placed in re-mailing envelope and posted September 15 in Saarbrucken, Germany
Arrived September 18 in Paris - forwarded September 23 out of Paris on the balloon *Neptune*

Mail Carried in the Official Dispatch Bag

Neptune – Departed September 23, 1870



Each balloon carried a government dispatch bag that received the most expedited handling, both for departure and after landing.



Dated September 22 - marked with **cursive** “**Ministre de la Guerre (1)**”

Balloon landed west of Paris - mail expedited to Tours on September 25

Stamp was cancelled upon the letter's September 25 arrival in Nantes

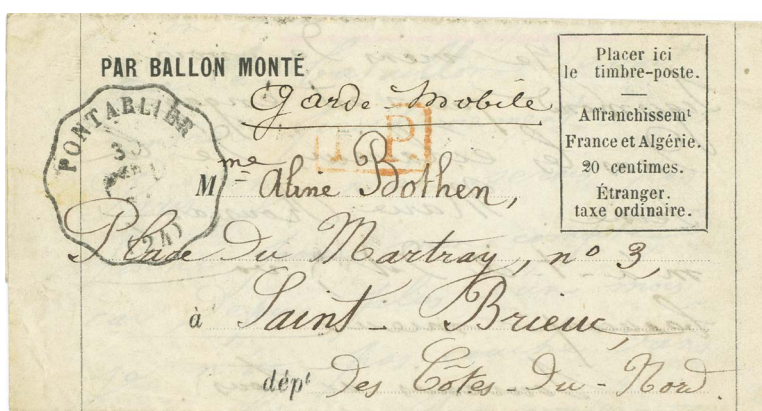
The first successful balloon carried very little mail

Mail Confided to a Balloon Passenger

Montgolfier – October 25, 1870



Letters that were given to passengers or the pilot of a balloon were assured of departure and expedited handling after landing. The *Montgolfier* was captured on landing, so only confided mail was saved.



Dated October 18 - confided to Colonel Le Bouedec, passenger on the *Montgolfier*
Le Bouedec escaped capture - mailed letter with military free frank at Pontarlier on October 30



Dated October 23 - confided to Colonel Delapierre, passenger on the *Montgolfier*
Delapierre applied his private cachet - letter arrived in Brittany on November 5

Mail Confided to a Balloon Passenger

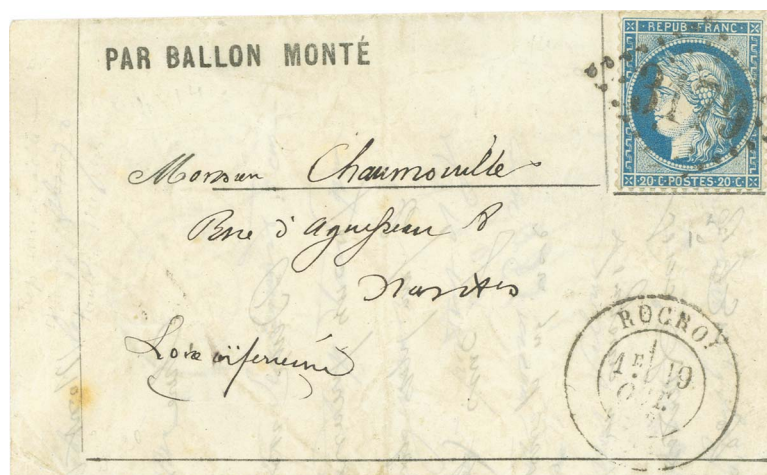
Postmarked Near the Landing Spot



Mail confided to balloon passengers or the pilot was posted as soon after landing as possible. A few were postmarked near the landing point, and can be easily identified from those postmarks.



Dated October 20, 1870 - confided to Jules Leveillé for placement on the *Bretagne*
Postmarked in occupied territory at Fresnes on October 29 - letter arrived on November 10



Dated October 19 - confided to a passenger on the *République Universelle*
Postmarked near landing point at Rocroi on October 19 - letter arrived on October 26

Mail Confided to “Aérostiers” Companies

Garibaldi – Departed October 22, 1870



The two balloon builder companies accepted mail for carriage on their next balloon. The Nadar-Dartois-Yon Company created a special “Aérostiers” cachet for the mail that they accepted.



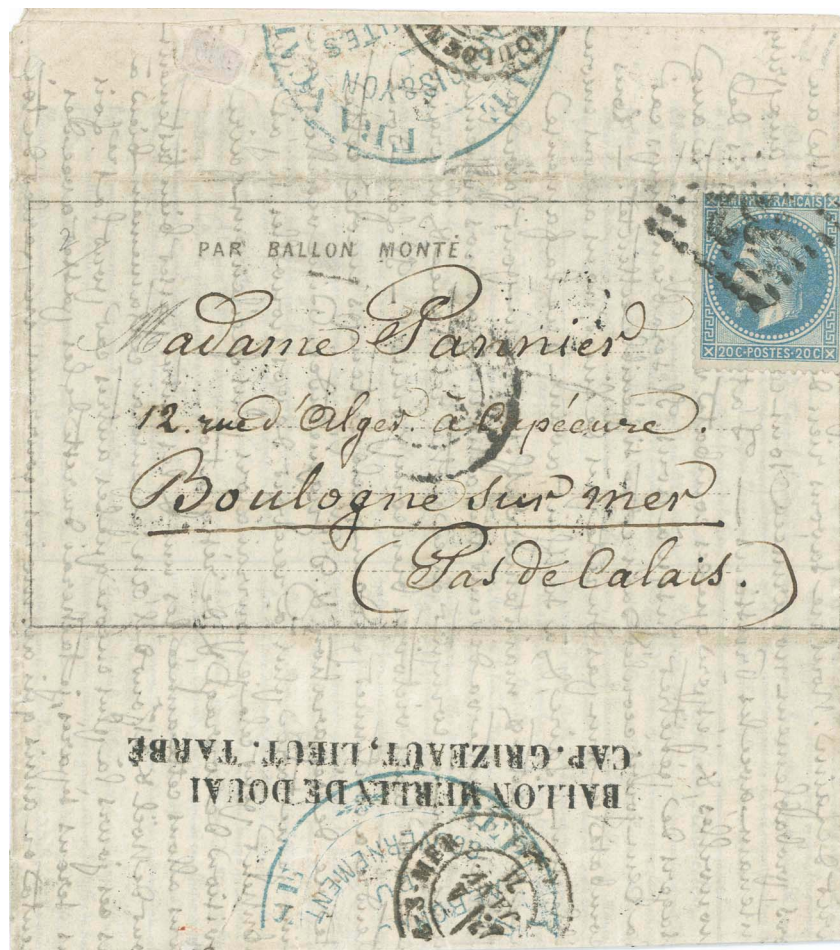
Dated October 18 - confided to the Nadar-Dartois-Yon Aérostiers Company
Balloon landed in occupied territory - some mail smuggled to Havre-Paris railroad bureau
Stamp was cancelled “HP2” on November 1 - letter arrived in Brittany on November 2

Mail Confided to “Aérostiers” Companies

Private *Merlin de Douai* straight-line cachet



Letters given directly to a balloon builder company received expedited handling, and were assured of departure on their next balloon. They were marked with special “Aérostiers” cachets.



Dated December 23 - pilots added a **private cachet with the name of the balloon**
Balloon carried no post office mail - left Paris on December 27 and landed near Vierzon
Mail was processed in Bordeaux on December 30 - letter arrived on January 4

**BALLON MERLIN DE DOUAI
CAP. GRIZEAUT, LIEUT. TARBÉ**