

Early international US AR

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Abstract. International pre-UPU return receipt service to and from the US is shown to exist, via examples and official documents.

AR REFERS to the service ([H1]) known as *avis de réception* since 1875 worldwide and since 1859 in France. It goes under many other names, and in the US, it is most frequently referred to as return receipt. When an item is mailed (usually registered, sometimes insured), the sender may request a return receipt; in that case, a form or card is prepared, and when the item is delivered, the recipient signs the form or card, and it is returned to the sender. This provides evidence of delivery, and markings are occasionally seen on the forms indicating that they have been used as evidence in court.

When the UPU treaty of Paris became effective in July 1875, AR service between members of the UPU was required to be offered; this applied to the US as a founding member. On 1 April 1879, this was extended to all current and future members of the UPU (on joining).

Before the treaty of Paris, many postal entities offered AR (possibly under different names), both domestically and internationally (the latter governed by bilateral and multilateral treaties). For example, Austria (and later its empire) offered the service under the name *Retour Recepisse* (from French, *retour réceptionné*, meaning return receipt) beginning in 1806. Later Germany (*Rückschein*), Denmark (*Modtagelsesbevis*) and many other countries offered it. Of particular interest are France from 1859 (*avis de réception*—notice of receipt) and Italy from 1861 (*ricevuto di ritorno*—return receipt).

In 1863, the US introduced return receipt on all domestic registered mail—it was free but compulsory [M]. Until very recently, I was not aware of any evidence that the US offered return receipt service internationally prior to the effective date of the treaty of Paris (July 1875). However, while browsing through an 1875 US postal guide, I came across the following passage (p xxvii).

GERMANY . . . The sender of a registered letter may demand, by a written notice on the address side of the letter (“Return receipt demanded”) a return receipt from the addressee. Such receipt, for which no fee in addition to the usual registration fee is charged, will then be issued by the exchange office that despatches the letter, and will be returned to the sender in due time.

And in the middle of the next page,

Return receipts for registered letters sent to Switzerland may be obtained in the same manner as stated under Germany.

So return receipt service was a free option on registered mail from the US to Germany and Switzerland by January 1875 (postal guides typically apply to the preceding year; in this case, there was no mention of the upcoming Treaty of Paris); this is reiterated on page xxxii, and no other countries are mentioned.

About a year ago, a Google search revealed that an 1871 US AR cover to Switzerland had been sold at auction in the early 2000s:

[*Prestige Philately(Australia) auction*, lot 1155, auction 105, August 2003, sold for Aus\$650.]

Description: 1871 (Oct 11) cover to Switzerland with 3¢ green pair & 10¢ (faults) tied by target cancels & superb COMFORT/TEX cds, fine strike of unusual unframed NEW YORK/REGISTERED cds in red, boxed [C]HARGEE h/s, FRAUBRUNNEN arrival b/s, endorsed at top *Return receipt demanded* making this a very early *avis de réception* item, closed tear at top.

By an amazing coincidence, it came up again, this time on e-Bay, and it is shown in Figure 1 below. A sister cover, again AR, from the same Texas office to Switzerland, dated January 1875, was shown on Richard Frajola’s PhilaMercury board by S Tedesco [T].

A brief literature search found yet another one, this time to Germany, dated 1869, appearing in [M, p 162, figure 257], where the request for return receipt was noted but dismissed by the author. He asserted that international return receipt service was not available at the time. The use of the term *demanded*—which would never have been applied to domestic registered covers in this period (indeed, domestic covers were never even marked return receipt)—renders practically certain that this was sent with the treaty-authorized AR service. No one would pick this term at random.



Figure 1. Texas to Switzerland AR cover (1871)

With manuscript *Return receipt demanded* and *Retour recepisse verlangt*. Postage of 16¢ apparently shortpaying by 2¢ the registration fee (10¢) and the rate to Switzerland (8¢)—there is no evidence that any other stamps were ever applied. Two weeks after posting, it arrived in New York, and a further two weeks later, it arrived at destination. The large boxed **CHARGE** is a Swiss marking indicating registration. On reverse is a large 2 in the same blue crayon as the New York registration number at bottom and the stroke through the original registration number, so it was evidently applied at New York.

Aside from the January 1875 postal guide reference to international AR, a search of the Library of Congress website yielded a treaty between the US and the North German Union, dated 21 October 1867, apparently effective June or July 1868 [LC].

Section II. The sender of a registered letter is authorized to demand, by a notice on the address, that the receipt, undersigned by the receiver, should be delivered to him. In this case, the subscribed receipt shall be returned without delay to the exchange office whence the letter was despatched. There shall be no fee levied for the delivery of a receipt. The receipts shall be printed in German and English language, and shall be annexed to the letters by the despatching exchange office.

Unfortunately, I have not been able to find similar treaty conventions with other German states or the Swiss Confederation (so far, at least). It is possible that Switzerland was automatically included in this treaty. However, it does tell us that international AR was available, at least to the NGU as early as 1868, and gives us some information on the procedures. The US was to prepare a German-English form to be attached to the registered letter, which was to be returned to the exchange office (and presumably, from there to the sender).

None of these forms have turned up (yet)—possibly because no one has been looking. However, it might explain why the standard US AR forms in the UPU period were trilingual (as required shortly after the UPU was formed, French was added) until at least 1898—as a natural extension of the original bilingual forms, presumably initiated in 1868. We will discuss this point in the next section.

However, in September 2009, a German *Rückschein* form turned up on e-Bay. This was dated 1873 and concerned a registered letter to the US from Germany; it is illustrated in Figures 2 & 3. It looks like several other German forms used later to the US (which will be illustrated), with one significant difference: it is bilingual English-German. This is consistent with the treaty, and moreover, it is very doubtful that it could have been intended for any other English-speaking country, since AR was not available in the UK until 1875 (and then only reluctantly adopted) and in other members of the British Empire until later.

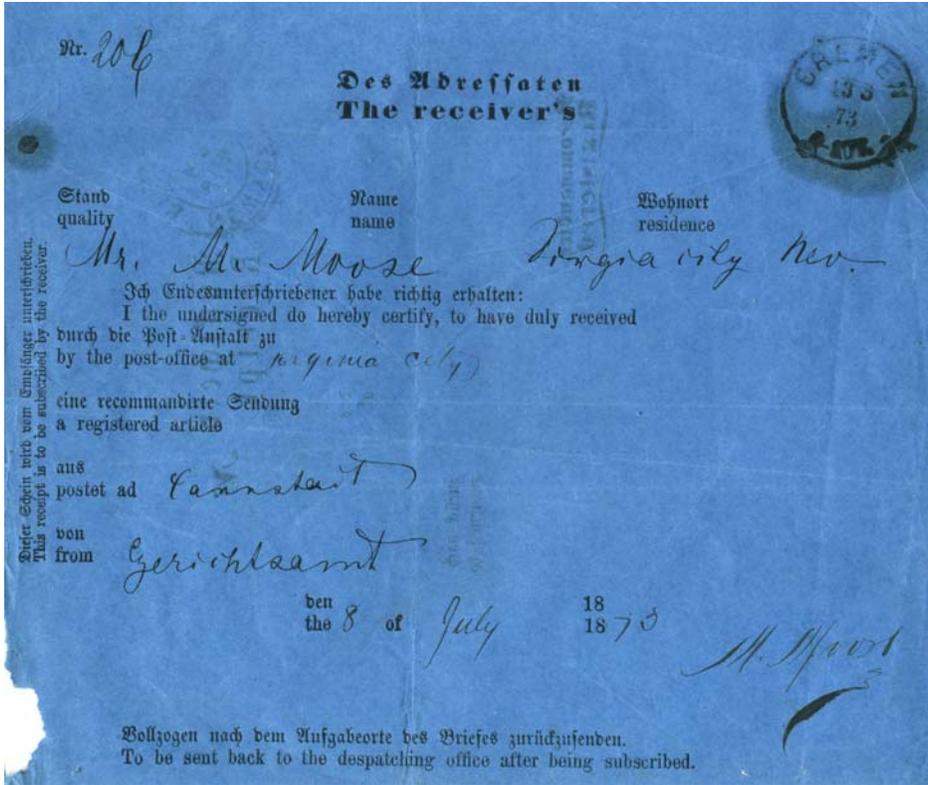


Figure 2. Bilingual (German-English) German Rückschein (AR) form to US (1873)
Cannstatt to Virginia City (Nevada), via Bremen (upper right) and New York. No stamps—indicating payment of AR fee on the registered letter. The registered letter from a court office was seemingly addressed to Mr M Moose, but was signed by M Moost.

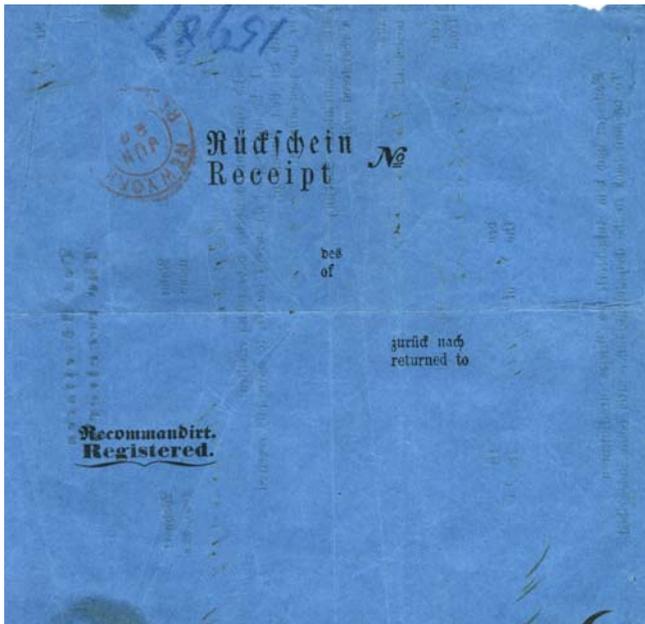


Figure 3. Reverse of 1873 form
With red double circle New York registered datestamp. The form was intended to be returned as a folded letter sheet, but since there is no address, we conclude it was sent under cover.

Subsequent material

The item in Figures 2 & 3 was part of a correspondence between Cannstatt (now part of Stuttgart) in Württemberg, and the US. There was considerable emigration from there, especially to Philadelphia. Shown in Figure 4 is another AR (Rückschein) form from Cannstatt to the US in 1879 (now in the UPU period). This form is also dark blue, but without any English, and was intended for domestic use. This time the AR fee was paid on the form.



Figure 4. German domestic AR form used to US (1879)

Cannstatt to Boyleston (near Boston). With 20Pf, paying the German *Rückschein* fee. Jamaica Plain Station (became part of Boston the next year) duplex # 12 at lower right, and a faint purple Boston double oval registration marking at lower left. The Cannstatt postmark (on the stamp and to its right) spells the town name with one *n*, while the clerk spelled it with the normal two.

I also have a very similar 1878 example (that is, a domestic form used to the US). Figure 5 shows a Württemberg AR form printed in accordance with UPU conventions (with French wording) used in 1882 to the US, with the AR fee prepaid on the form, and Figure 6 shows a similar form, also from Württemberg

to the US in 1884, but without payment in stamps Confusingly, I also have a similar 1889 form (from Cannstatt) with stamps, and an 1891 example *without* stamps (indicating payment of the AR fee on the registered letter). During the period of effectiveness of the treaty of Vienna (1 July 1892–31 December 1898), the AR fees (if any) had to be prepaid on the registered letter, not on the AR form.

14.

Württembergische Postverwaltung.
Administration des Postes du Royaume
de Württemberg (Allemagne)

Aufgabestempel.
Timbre du bureau d'origine

Numéro d'enregistrement

Rückschein.

Avis de réception.

Adresse des Empfängers
Adresse du destinataire *Friedrich Schuchman*
in *Chicago*
à *46 Pilsenerstr.*

Dass ich Endesunterschriebener durch die Postanstalt zu
Le soussigné reconnaît avoir reçu par le bureau de poste à

eine Einschreibsendung

un objet recommandé

aufgegeben in **EBINGEN**
mis à la poste à **REGISTERED**
abgesandt von *Friedrich Schuchman*
envoyé par **CHICAGO, ILL.**

empfangen habe, bescheinigt

den 18

Name des Empfängers *Friedrich Schuchman*
Nom du destinataire

Mit der Unterschrift des Empfängers versehen unter Einschreibung nach dem
Aufgabeorte zurückzusenden.
A renvoyer sous recommandation au bureau d'origine muni de la signature du
destinataire.

III 2.

Figure 5. Württemberg AR form to US (1882)
With 2OPf, paying the AR fee, for a registered letter from Ebingen to Chicago.

Württembergische Postverwaltung.
 Administration des Postes du Royaume
 de Wurtemberg (Allemagne)

Aufgabestempel.
 Timbre du bureau d'origine.

Aufgabenummer
 Numéro d'enregistrement

MAY 17 1884

CREGLINGEN
 30
 APR.
 1884

545

84
 16
 5

Rückschein.
 Avis de réception.

Adresse des Empfängers
 Adresse du destinataire

(Einschreiber)
John Muspiener
John Muspiener & Co
 in *New York*
 à

Dass ich Endesunterschriebener durch die Postanstalt zu
 Le soussigné reconnaît avoir reçu par le bureau de poste à

eine Einschreibsendung
un objet recommandé

aufgegeben in
 mis à la poste à *Creplingen*

abgesandt von
 envoyé par *John Muspiener*

empfangen habe, bescheinigt

den 18
 le

Name des Empfängers
 Nom du destinataire *J. Muspiener*
Creplingen

Mit der Unterschrift des Empfängers versehen unter Einschreibung nach dem
 Aufgaborte zurückzusenden.
 A renvoyer sous recommandation au bureau d'origine muni de la signature du
 destinataire.

A. 25

Figure 6. Württemberg AR form to US (1884)
 Without stamps, for a registered letter from Creglingen to New York.

US AR forms for international mail are more difficult to find until 1892 (a few are known in the late 1880s). Shown in Figure 7 is an 1898 US AR form for a registered letter from Germany (during the Treaty of Vienna period, AR forms were initially prepared in the country of destination of the registered letter).

We note that it (and all earlier US international AR forms that I have seen) is trilingual (English, German, French), but forms of a few years later have dropped German. French was the official language of the UPU, so its presence is expected. Since German had no official status in the US, and was not required on UPU

documents (no other English-speaking country seems to have used German on its AR forms), it is plausible that its presence was an indirect result of the 1868 treaty—German was used initially, and continued by inertia for about 30 years).

115
3870.
A.

NEW YORK, N.Y.
10-8
1898
REG'D N.Y.

Administration of the United States.
Administration des États-Unis.
Verwaltung der Vereinigten Staaten.

RETURN RECEIPT
AVIS DE RÉCEPTION
RÜCKSCHEIN *11233.*

for an insured letter
d'une lettre assurée
für einen versicherten Brief
for a registered article
d'un objet recommandé
für eine Einschreibsendung

entered under No. _____, and addressed to
enregistré sous le No. _____, et adressée à
eingetragen unter No. _____, und adressirt an

M _____, at *Emma Benz*, the _____, 189 .
M _____, à _____, le _____, 189 .
M _____, in *Pierce City Mo*, den _____, 189 .

The undersigned certifies
Le soussigné déclare
Der Endesunterschie-
bene bescheinigt

that an insured letter
qu'une lettre assurée
dass ein versicherter Brief
that a registered article
qu'un objet recommandé
dass eine Einschreibsendung

to the above address
à l'adresse susmentionnée
an die obige Adresse

Stamp of the office
of delivery.
Timbre du bureau
distributeur.
Stempel der ablie-
fernden Postanstalt.

and originating at *Trossingen #440*
et provenant de _____
und aufgegeben in _____
has been duly delivered the *OCT 12 1898*
a été dûment livré le *Sept 29*
vorschriftsmässig ausgeliefert wurde den _____, 189 .

Signature (*)
Signature (*)
Unterschrift (*)

of the addressee: *Miss Emma Benz*
du destinataire: _____
des Empfängers: _____

of the Chief of the office of delivery:
du chef du bureau distributeur
des Chefs der abliefernden Postanstalt:

Miss Emma Benz
Miss Emma Benz

(*) This Return Receipt must be signed by the addressee, or if the regulations of the country of destination allow it, by the Chief of the office of delivery, placed in an envelope, and returned, under registration, by the first mail, to the office of origin of the article to which it relates.
(*) Cet avis doit être signé par le destinataire, ou, si les règlements du pays de destination le permettent, par le chef du bureau distributeur, puis être mis sous enveloppe et envoyé, sous recommandation, par le premier courrier, au bureau d'origine de l'objet qu'il concerne.
(*) Dieser Rückschein muss vom Empfänger unterschrieben werden, oder wenn die Bestimmungen des Empfangslandes es erlauben, von dem Chef der abliefernden Postanstalt, in einen Briefumschlag gelegt, und als Einschreibsendung mit der ersten Gelegenheit an die absendende Postanstalt der in Frage stehenden Sendung zurückgeschickt werden.

5-2944

Figure 6. Trilingual US AR form to Germany (1898)
For a registered letter from Trossingen to Pierce City (Missouri). All US AR forms were returned under cover.

The earliest AR cover from Germany to the US of which I am aware is dated 1883 [H2] (it was addressed to a prisoner at Fort Leavenworth, who had escaped, so had to be returned to sender). The earliest AR cover to Germany (or anywhere else) from the US *in the UPU period* is dated 1880, and shown in Figure 8.



Figure 8. US to Germany AR cover (1880)

From New York to Dresden; endorsed *Return receipt*. Triple rate UPU rate (5 ¢ per half ounce) and 10 ¢ registration fee (began 1875), overpaid 1 ¢. The US did not charge for AR service. Intended to be carried aboard the *Republic*, it arrived *Too Late*, and was sent aboard the next available ship. The sender, Nicholas Seebeck (1857–1899), was a printer and stamp dealer, notorious for the later *Seebecks*, mass-produced date-sensitive stamps of various Latin American countries. ex-Ainsworth

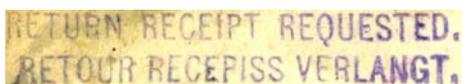
Language

The endorsement on the three pre-UPU AR covers from the US is *return receipt demanded* (RRD). This expression continued to be used into the 1930s, although variations such as ... *requested* became increasingly frequent, and eventually standard. RRD was the recommended term in the 1875 postal guide, and based on the three known pre-UPU covers, must have been officially sanctioned. How did such an impolite expression come to be used?

The word *demand* (meaning to request, *not* to demand) is one of those French terms that sounds like an English word, but has a different meaning (other examples that can lead to misunderstanding—known as false cognates—include *ignorer*, *impliquer*, *décevoir*). This suggests that RRD was a (partial) mistranslation of a French term. The term in France used from the time that domestic AR service was introduced there (1859) was *avis de réception*. However, the forms in use in France during this period and well into the 1880s were worded *demande d'avis de réception de chargement*. Even in French, that's not terribly polite, and this is discussed in [G], whose title includes *un sujet pointu*.

The *return receipt* portion of the term could easily have come from the Austrian *Retour Receptisse* (which, except for the capitals and missing accents, is French, and simply means return receipt), in use since 1806, or from Italian *ricevuto di ritorno* (in use from 1862 in Italy, but much earlier in Italian-speaking parts of the Austrian Empire—presumably it was a direct translation from the Austrian term).

The 1871 cover (Figure 1) was also endorsed *Retour receptisse verlangt*—the last word is German, and means required (approximately). This three-word combination is never seen on Austrian AR covers, and Germany used *Rückschein* almost exclusively; the only covers on which I have seen it are American, for example, a bilingual handstamp used at Pittsburg on a 1902 registered letter to Hungary (Figure 9).



RETURN RECEIPT REQUESTED.
RETOUR RECEPISSE VERLANGT.

Figure 9. Bilingual purple handstamp, Pittsburg (1902)
On an AR cover to Nagy-Bittse (Hungary). Interesting spelling of RECEPISSE.

American authorities were not the only ones with language problems. If we take a closer look at the English text on the 1873 German *Rückschein* form (Figure 2), we see a number of infelicities (Figure 10).

Des Adressaten The receiver's

Dieser Schein wird vom Empfänger unterschrieben.
This receipt is to be subscribed by the receiver.

aus
postet ad

Vollzogen nach dem Aufgabsorte des Briefes zurückzusenden.
To be sent back to the despatching office after being subscribed.

Figure 10. German and English wording on the 1873 form
Most obviously, *unterschrieben* (to sign) has been translated as subscribe, presumably based on *unter* (under, became “sub”) and *schreiben* (to write, but became “scribe”). This mistranslation also occurs in the endorsement on the cover in [H2], along with others. The last line contains “after being subscribed”, whose equivalent does not appear in the original German.

References

- [G] Anon, *DAR: un sujet pointu, La demande d'avis de réception de chargement*, le Monde des philatelistes, 412, Octobre 1987.
- [H1] David Handelman, AR—avis de réception, Postal History Society of Canada (2002) Ottawa.
- [H2] *ibid*, *Escaped!* Collectors Club Philatelist, vol 87 (2008) 248–250.
- [LC] Library of Congress, *Treaties and Postal Conventions, 1869–71*, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=016/llslo16.db&recNum=1018>.
- [M] JW Milgram, *United States registered mail 1845–1870*, Phillips (1998) Florida.
- [T] S Tedesco, front and back posted on Frajola's Board for Philatelists on 19 March 2009 at 20:10 and 22:17 respectively, <http://www.philamercury.com/board.php?ys=0&ob=newest&pg=2&user=stedy> [the page number in the url, currently pg=2, may increase in time].
- [US] US Postal Guide (January 1875).