

## **CUNARD LINE: The Ships and the Transatlantic Mail 1840-1867, the Monopoly Years**

### *How the transatlantic steam ship mail service started, and;*

*Examples of Mails transited via Cunard Line from/to unusual destinations throughout the world.*

**Historical Background:** Commercialization and introduction of **steamships** to the transatlantic trade by sailing of **SS Sirius** in April 1838 changed the communication between Europe and the Americas forever. Communication became more consistent, by reducing transit time 20-40 days on a roundtrip voyage.

**"SIRIUS"** on her return voyage overtook, 16 May 1839 the sailing packet **"TYRIAN"** drifting in the Atlantic with three influential Haligonians onboard. Mr. Hove, a prominent journalist and politician, Judge Haliburton and Mr. Fairbanks. The Gentlemen crossed over to **"SIRIUS"** with the mail bags and shared a glass of champagne with commander Roberts. ***Upon arrival in London the men petitioned the British Government to commence a scheduled mail service to Halifax. Within a few months the British government called tender for steam communication between England and North America.***

*Samuel Cunard of Nova Scotia, applied to the tender, he had experience with services to the Nova Scotian Government by providing an armed vessel after the war of 1812 for protection of trade and fisheries. In 1827 provided a mail service between Bermuda and Annapolis. With Cunard's partners in ship building, engine making and ship management the Admiralty awarded Cunard the first transatlantic mail contract. The first Article of Agreement was made 4 May 1839 between the Admiralty and Samuel Cunard, the first sailing was "BRITANNIA" 4 July 1840 from Liverpool to the Americas.*

*"SIRIUS" on her maiden return voyage  
Carried the first steamship Mails from the Americas to Europe*



**1 May 1838, New York - 23 May, St. Nicolas, Belgium via 21 May, London 22 days transit**

Postage: -----	forwarded outside the mail to F. Huth, London
1/8 shilling	Paid in London, 8 shilling packet fee
1/- shilling	Inland and transfer fee to St. Nicolas, Belgium
1/4 shilling	Belgium Credit to Great Britain



The British & American Steamship Co. Chartered Sirius.  
Specifications: 703 gross tons, built by Robert Menzies & Sons  
in Leigh, Scotland in 1837 for the St. George Steam Packet Co.  
in. Cork, Length 200 ft.  
Accommodation for 40 passengers and 36 crew.

**Inaugural sailing from Liverpool by Cunard Lines "BRITANNIA", 4 July 1840**

**British Notice to the Public #2, June 1840:**

*"The Packet Mail for North America will in the future be dispatched by Steam Vessels  
Confirming Packet rate of March 1839, Uniform Charge of 1s. Single Letter, 2s. Double"*

Maiden voyage letter carried from Liverpool to Halifax and by Cunard's feeder ship "UNICORN" to Quebec.



1 shilling Sterling  
Debit to Canada

2 shilling 9 ½ Cy  
Halifax - Quebec  
2 ½ pence Cy  
Quebec - Frampton

3 shilling  
Canadian Cy due

(Cy= Canadian Currency)

**24 June 1840 Chelsea, London - 24 July Frampton Township, Lower Canada, 30 days**

First sailing under Contract with British Admiralty to Boston  
from Liverpool 4 July to Boston 18 July 1840



Cancelled the day of  
Sailing at Liverpool  
Inland Post Office.

Cunard's new service  
led to creation of the  
Packet Letter Office,  
with issue of new  
hand stamps  
solely used by packet  
letter mail.



**3 July 1840, Liverpool - 18 July, Boston,**

**15 days**

Postage:

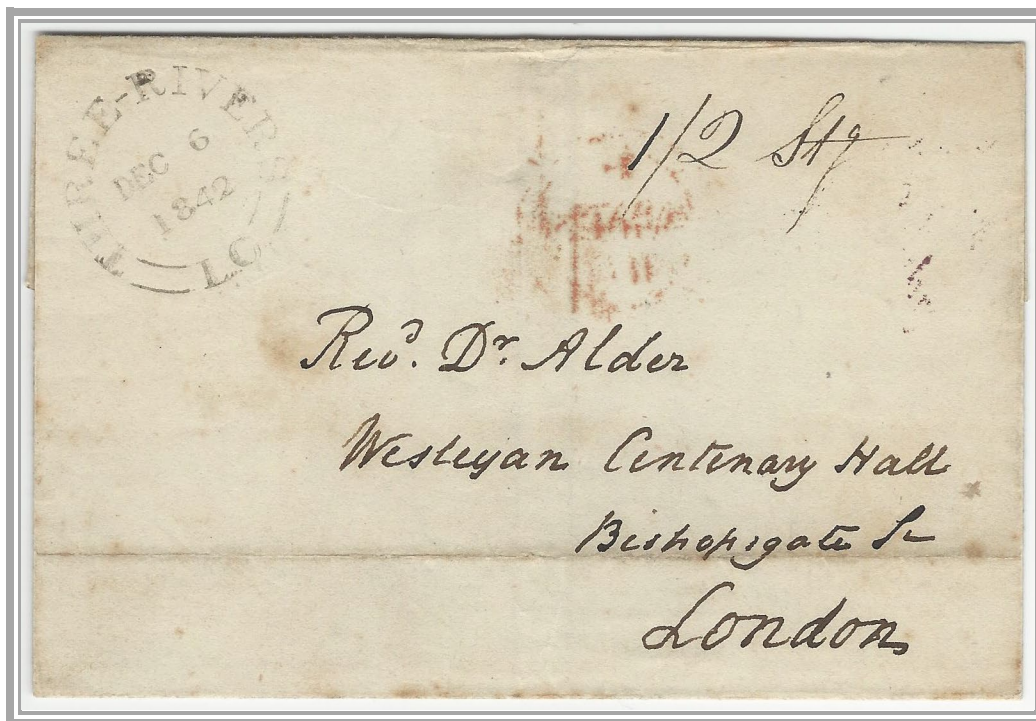
1 shilling  
6 cents

prepaid in London, British packet rate of March 1839  
due at Boston, ship letter fee for letters addressed to the port of arrival

*Iceboat with mail lost on the St. Lawrence River:*

Three Rivers, Lower Canada to London, England: mailbags lost and recovered on drifting ice.

December 1842 mails from Canada to UK via Halifax were transported from Quebec along the St. Lawrence River by iceboats. On 9<sup>th</sup> December an iceboat was crushed by moving ice and the mail was lost but recovered three days later, some seven leagues (about twenty-one miles) downstream.



**24 November 1842**, Three Rivers, Lower Canada - 30 December, London, 36 days.

Carried by Cunard's "**COLUMBIA**" from Boston, 16 December, arrived Liverpool 29 December, 13 days.

Postage: --- letter sent unpaid.  
1s2d Sterling due in London, 1/- packet rate, 2d inland via US.

This letter was recovered from the St. Lawrence River and sent to Boston for the "**COLUMBIA**"; mails from Canada to UK were normally sent via Halifax, a two week journey from Quebec, connecting with Cunard Line steamer out of Boston. The delay caused by this accident left insufficient time for the mails to reach Halifax ahead of the steamer. Unusually, this mail was sent through the US under an arrangement normally reserved for official dispatches, and caught the "**Columbia**". Letter reached Liverpool 29 December 1842, on schedule.

Liverpool to passenger on board "AFRICA" at Queenstown

Registered domestic letter containing important correspondence and contracts, addressed to New Brunswick politician Peter Mitchell on board "AFRICA" sailed from Liverpool to Halifax via Queenstown

*Only two covers/letters recorded sent to passenger onboard Cunard Line vessels*

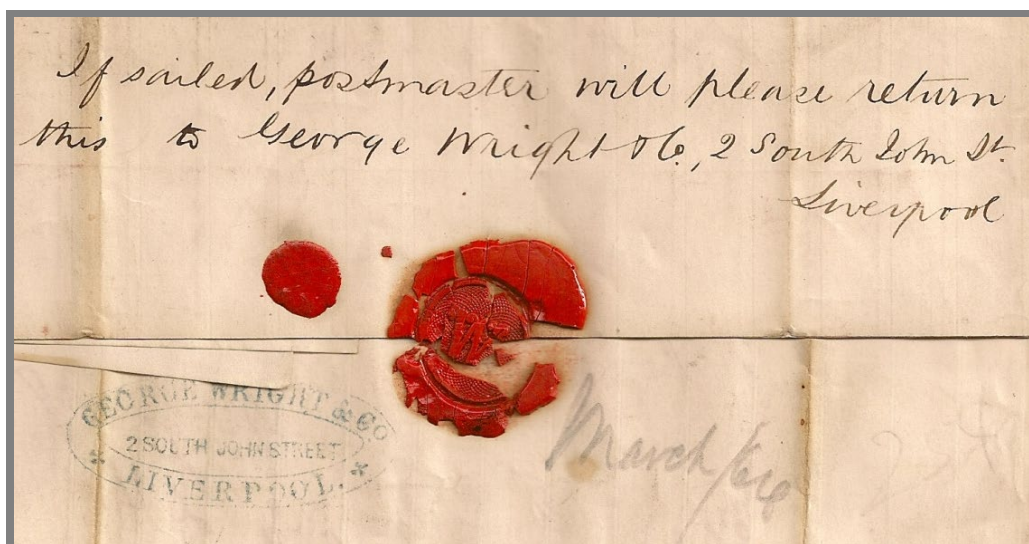


19 March 1864, Liverpool - 20 March, Queenstown - 30 March Halifax

"AFRICA" sailed Liverpool, 19 March and Queenstown, 20 March

Postage: 4 pence quadruple domestic rate, 3<sup>rd</sup> weight group  
4 pence registration fee

Letter marked and sent as per: 62022 British Post Office Circular Instructions No. 8, 1862 (March, 8, 1862)



Note on the back; "If sailed, postmaster will please return this to George Wright & Co. 2 South John St., Liverpool"

Honolulu, Sandwich Island

*Folded letter from Hamburg via Liverpool, Boston, Panama, San Francisco to Honolulu*

  
**HAMBURG**  
 16 DEC 1856  




16 December 1856, Hamburg, Germany - 23 February 1857, Honolulu, Hawaii 75 days

Routing:

Letter carried by Cunard's	<b>"NIAGARA"</b>	from Liverpool 20 December	to Boston 2 January
US Mail Steamship Co	<b>"ILLINOIS"</b>	from New York 5 January	to Aspinwall 15 January
Pacific Mail Steamship Co	<b>"SONORA"</b>	from Panama 16 January	to San Francisco 30 January
Private by bark	<b>"YANKEE"</b>	from San Francisco 7 February	to Honolulu 23 February

Postage:

81 schilling	triple rate prepaid in Hamburg to California,
	"3"x27 schilling, Hamburg-GB Treaty
4/9 schilling	Hamburg credit to GB ("4s9d") for British mail to California

*British mail to the Sandwich Islands via Unites States sent in closed bag, prepaid to San Francisco. Closed mails to be prepaid and never showed credit accounting to US by London.*

To Mexico via Havana and Vera Cruz, overland to Mazatlán

**Secondary route with manuscript "via United States", mail required to be fully prepaid**

Cunard Transatlantic Service to New York

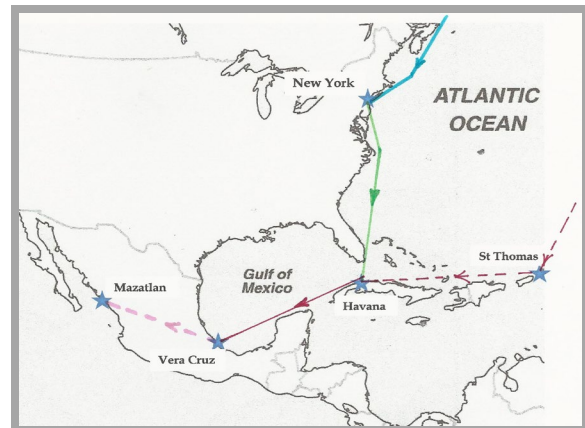
US packet to Cuba

RMS's Havana to Vera Cruz

Mexico Overland to Mazatlan

RMS, Primary Route:

Southampton - St. Thomas - Havana - Vera Cruz



1 October 1858, Glasgow, Scotland, Copy of letter dated 17 September, 2 January 1859, Mazatlan, Mexico, 93 days

Carried by Cunard's "AFRICA" from Liverpool 2 October to New York 14 October, and from New York by US Packet service to Havana and by RMS's "CLYDE" from Havana 26 October to Vera Cruz, 6 November 1858,

Postage: 1/5 shilling prepaid to Mexican border (Scott # 17x2, 18, 28)  
2 reals postage due for Mexican delivery.

**The slow transit time from Vera Cruz, 6 October to Mazatlán, 2 January 1859, of 57 days was probably due to Mexican Civil war of Reform of 1857-1860.**

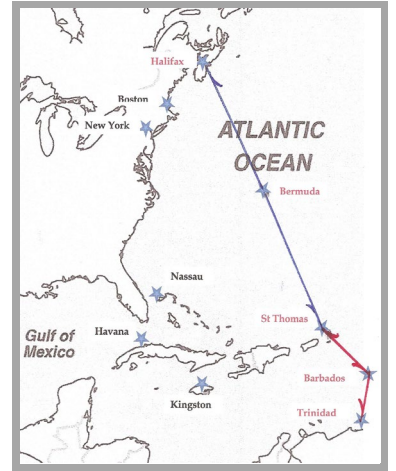
Primary route from Great Britain to Mexico with Royal Mail Steam Packet Company from Southampton via St Thomas to Vera Cruz.

Trinidad from UK via Halifax

&

Barbados to Halifax via St. Thomas

Letter from Ryde, Isle of Wight addressed to Captain John W. Tarleton on the HMS "EURYDICE" at Halifax on tour of the Colonies, vessel had sailed and letter marked blue crayon "Barbados", forwarded by Cunard's "DELTA" to St Thomas and by RMSP "CONWAY" to Barbados had sailed from there and on to Trinidad where letter was delivered



1 November 1856, Ryde, Isle of Wight, UK - 9 December, Trinidad, 39 days

Carried by Cunard's "NIAGARA" to Halifax, forwarded to Trinidad via Bermuda - St Thomas route

Postage: 6 pence prepaid for single rate, Scott # 27, rate period 1854 - 1863  
1 pence credit to Nova Scotia

Letter from Barbados to Nova Scotia via St Thomas - Bermuda - Halifax route



25 April 1867, Barbados - 17 May, Bridgewater, Nova Scotia. 22 days

Carried on RMSP "MERSEY" from Barbados 26 April to St Thomas 29 April  
Transferred to Cunard's "DELTA" from St Thomas 5 May via Bermuda to Halifax 15 May

Postage: 1 pence prepaid Barbados inland single rate, Scott # 16  
8 1/2 cents Cy due ocean rate West Indies - BNA service  
5 cents Cy due Nova Scotia inland

From Jamaica via UK and US to Montreal

Folded letter from Jamaica via St. Thomas - Bermuda -  
Southampton - Liverpool - Boston to Montreal



7 February 1845, St Augusta, Jamaica - 24 April, Montreal, 76 days

Postage: -- letter sent unpaid  
2/- shilling between any of Her Majesty's Colonies through the UK  
2 pence inland postage for packet letters between interior offices in BNA and port of arrival  
2/5 Cy = 2/2 Sterling due in Montreal, (Act of the Duties of Postage, 10th August 1840)

Routing:

1	7 February, 1845	letter written in St. Augusta, Jamaica, date marked from Jamaica, <i>Royal Mail Steam Packet</i> , Established 1841 with 14 steam ships to Caribbean
2	8 February "TRENT"	arrived St Thomas
3	14 February	sailed St. Thomas
4	17 February "AVON"	arrived Bermuda
5	21 February	sailed Bermuda
6	22 February "TAY"	arrived Southampton
7	11 March	letter arrived London and same day in Liverpool
8	12 March	Cunard, sailed Liverpool on monthly schedule
9	4 April "CALEDONIA"	arrived Boston
10	20 April	Manuscript date coincides with arrival Montreal
11	24 April	

Winter schedules between Canada, Northern US and Caribbean were not as frequent and regular as those of the transatlantic steamers. The writer sought to save time by having this letter go "per pkt via England"

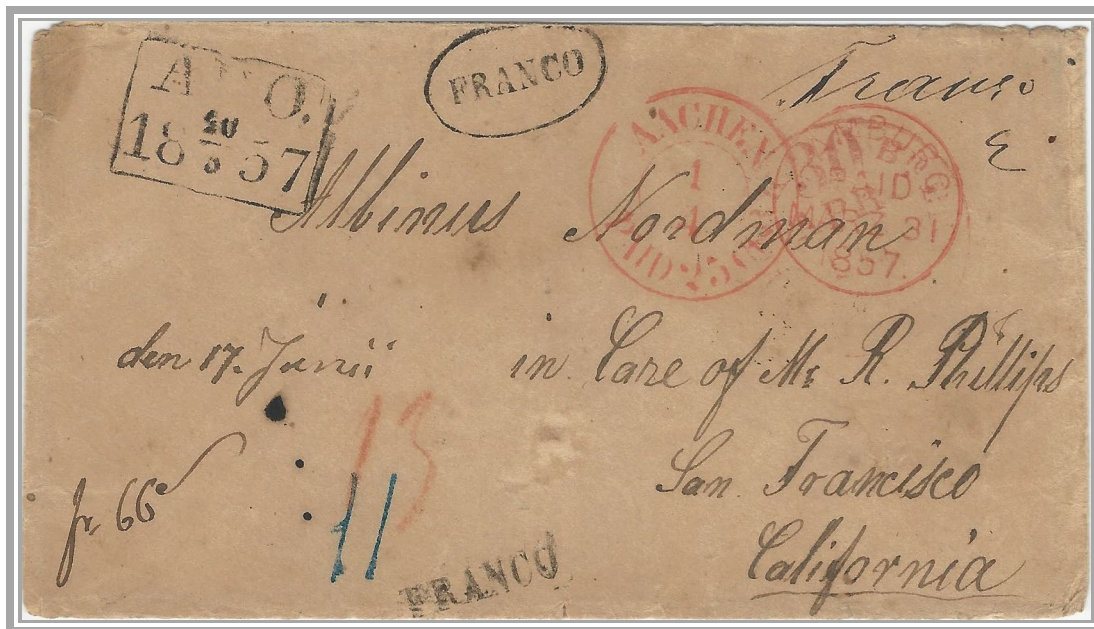


Finland, Gold Rush cover to California via Panama

Letter from Abo via Stockholm, Hamburg, Aachen, Liverpool, New York  
via Panama to San Francisco



Transit markings on reverse



20 March 1857, Abo, Finland (Turku, Grand Duchy of Russia) - 17 June, San Francisco, 89 days

Carried on Cunard's	<b>"ARABIA"</b>	from Liverpool 4 April to New York 16 April, 12 days transit
Panama USMSC's	<b>"GEORGE LAW"</b>	from New York 20 April to Aspinwall 30 April,
PMSC's	<b>"JOHN L STEPENS"</b>	from Panama 2 May to San Francisco 15 May

**Cancellations:** Front "Abo/20/03/1857", reverse "Stockholm/29 Mar 57", "K.S.& N.P.A./31 3/1857/Hamburg", front red "Hamburg/Paid/Marz 31/1857", red "Aachen/1 4/Paid 25 cents", red "New York 30 Br.PKt./Apr 16", "30" US-Prussian CM rate.

<b>Postage:</b>	66 kopeck	prepaid in Abo = 13 sgr = 30 cents
	25 cents	Prussian credit to US (18c Sea and British transit, 2c Belgian transit)
	30 cents	total postage marked in New York

*The Baltic was frozen in March, mails carried by sled from Aabo via Aaland to Stockholm, 9 days transit*

Official Mail to and from UK paid for by the British Government



**"Board of Trade"**

From London via Boston to Providence, RI

Carried by Cunard's

**"CUBA"**

From Queenstown 29/10 To Boston 09/11/1865 11 days

**Postage:**

London marked "Official Paid" And signed by official "J. Emerson Feunsat"

Red "5cents" Credit to US Boston marked red "24 Paid" confirming letter prepaid

27 October 1865, London - 9 November, Boston,

13 days

**"On Her Majesty Service"**

India - London  
Misdirected via New York

P&O Line  
Bombay-Marseilles  
Overland to Liverpool

Inman Line's  
"City of Boston"  
Queenstown, 30/8  
New York, 9/9

Cunard's "ASIA"  
From Boston 12/09  
To Queenstown 22/09/66  
10 days

**Postage:**  
"10" cents debit To UK,  
London marked red  
"Official Paid"

**Very unusual routing**



10 April 1866, Malva, India - 24 September, London,

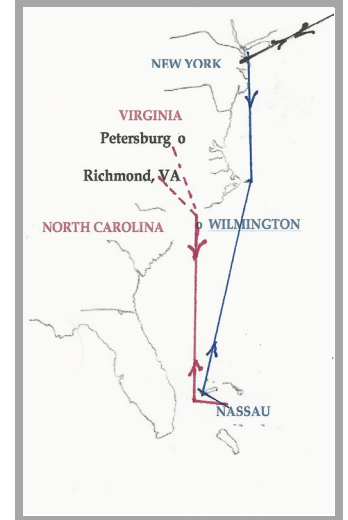
167 days

Letter from Military Department, India Office 10<sup>th</sup> April 1866 and dated Mohw, 21<sup>st</sup> July 1866, Malwa Divn.

Blockade Mail, Atlantic Coast sailing West, 1862 & East, 1864

Carried on Cunard's Havana-Nassau-New York and Transatlantic Services to/from Liverpool

April 18, 1861 President Lincoln proclaimed the blockade of the US southern coast stretching from Virginia to Texas, the blockade lasted until 1865



"e" x2

Incoming blockade-run letter from Liverpool 13 September, 1862 to Richmond Virginia; Privately carried by Cunard's "SCOTIA" to New York arrived 23 September, and by Cunard's "BRITISH QUEEN" to Nassau 10 October, Arrived 14 October. Forwarded by "SAUNDERS & SON", most likely on blockade-runner "KATE" sailed around 13-14 October, arrived Wilmington 18 November. On arrival "KATE" ran aground and lost at Cape Fear River, the mail was saved.



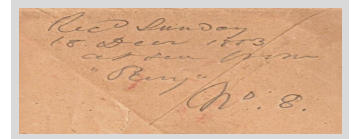
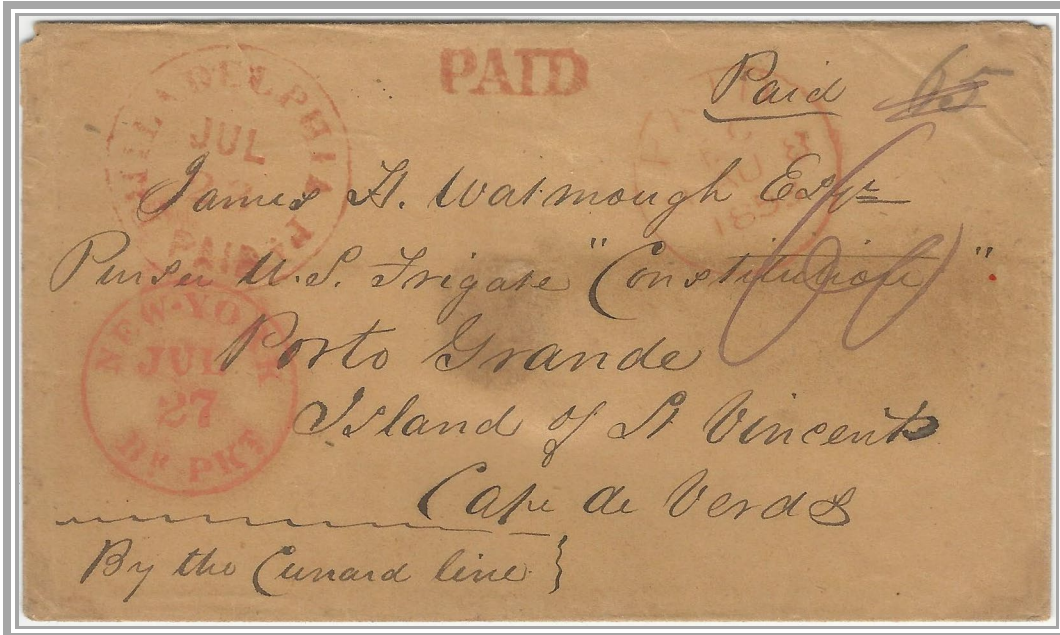
Transit Cancel  
On Reverse



Outgoing blockade-run letter from Petersburg, Virginia 5 February 1864 to London 2 May; Carried from Wilmington, NC, 1 April on blockade-runner "COQUETTE" to Nassau 5 April, on Cunard's "CORSICA" from Nassau 11 April to New York 15 April, Cunard's "PERSIA" from New York 20 April arrived Queenstown 30 April 1864.

Letter sent unpaid: 2/- shilling due in London, 1/- shilling packet, 1/- shilling penalty fee, blue crayon "1/5 +7= 2/-".

Mail to/from US Flagships of the Africa Squadron USS "Constitution" and USS "Jamestown"



Docket # 8 for delivery to "Constitution" 18/12/1853 by Brigg "USS PERRY" 148 days transit

Ref. National Archives Log 17

Carried by Cunard's

"ARABIA"

From New York 27/07/1853 To Liverpool 06/08

RMSP "TAY"

From Southampton 09/08 To St Vincent 23-25/08

23 July 1853, Philadelphia - 18 December, USS Constitution, delivered to recipient, 148 days

Cancels: Red "Philadelphia Pa./Jul 23/Paid", red "New-York/Jul 27/Br.PKT", London, orange "Paid/F.C./8 AU 8/1853"

Carried by RMSP

"AVON"

From St. Vincent 29/04/1857

To Southampton 13/05

By Cunard's

"ARABIA"

From Queenstown 16/05 To New York 28/05

12 days

Cancellations:

"St

VincentQDEV/AP29/1857"

Reverse orange

"1857/13MY/K(crown)L"

Front "New

York/May29/Br.Pkt."



29 April 1857, Porto Grande, St Vincent - Washington, no arrival date, to New York, 31 days

Postage: East	US Credit to UK "60" cents	CONSTITUTION ½ oz	5 cents	"120" JAMESTOWN 1 oz	10 cents
	Br. Pkt. Transatlantic		16 cents		32 cents
	British inland		3 cents		6 cents
	Br. Pkt. Southampton- Cape Verdes		41 cents		82 cents
Postage Paid at Philadelphia;			"65"cents	Due at Washington	"1.30"cents

Ref. National Archives Log 17: USS "Constitution" the flagship of the US African Squadron from March 1853 to March 1855. Captured the suspected American slave trader "H.N. Gambrell", 3 November 1853 which may explain the letter's delay between the GB arrival date 6 August and 18 Dec 1853 docketing receipt.

Mauritius to New York, 1858

Unpaid single rate letter sent from the US Consulate in Port Louis, Mauritius via Aden, Alexandria, Malta, Marseilles overland to London and Cunard to New York.



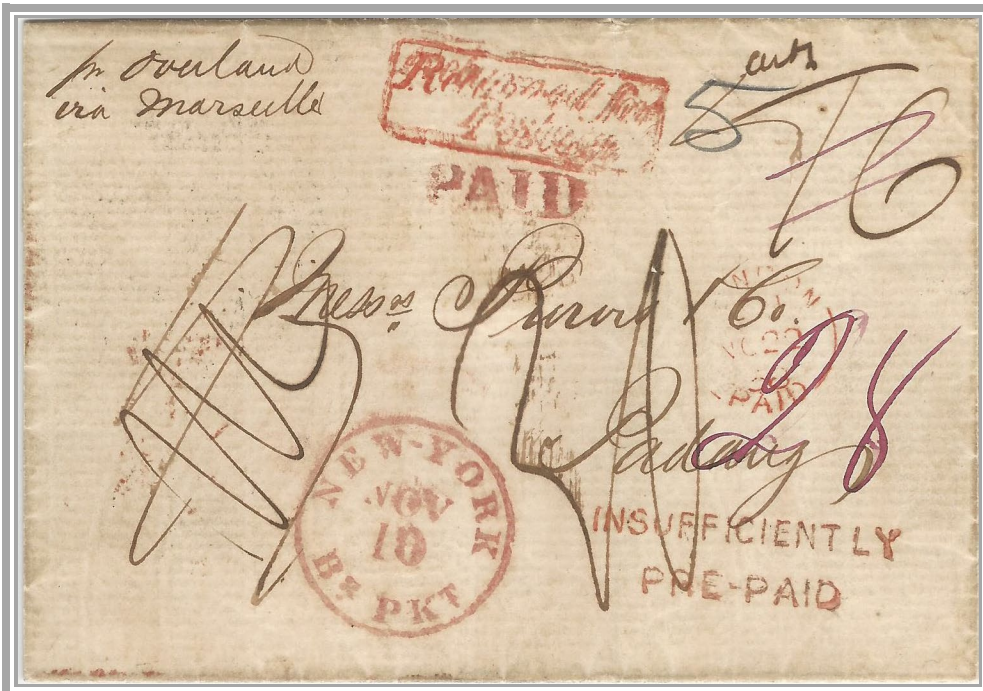
27 August 1858, Port St. Louis, Mauritius - 26 October, New York. 60 days

Routing:			
P&O Steamer	<b>"GRANADA"</b>	from Mauritius 27 August 1858	to Aden
European & Australian	<b>"COLUMBIAN"</b>	from Aden	to Suez 3 October
Overland		from Suez	to Alexandria
E & A, <i>Cunard owned</i>	<b>"CAMBRIA"</b>	from Alexandria, 5 October 1858	to Malta 9 October 1858
E & A	<b>"WYE"</b>	from Malta, 9 October	to Marseilles 12 October
Overland		from Marseilles	to London
Cunard	<b>"PERSIA"</b>	from Liverpool 16 October	to New York 29 October

Postage:	----	sent unpaid
	"2" d Sterling	Mauritius debit to Britain for inland postage
	34 cents	British debit to US, "9" d Sterling (18 c) Mauritius/British postage,
		16 cents transatlantic {US-British Conv. July 1857 via Marseilles}
	5 cents	US inland postage
	"39" cents	due in New York

Note; the letter bears the embossed seal of the US Consulate in Mauritius.

Folded unpaid/paid letter to Padang, 1859 sent three Atlantic crossings on board Cunard's "PERSIA"



Returned for Postage

On board Cunard's "PERSIA"  
 New York - Liverpool 29/09-10/10  
 Liverpool - New York 16/10-26/10  
 New York - Liverpool 10/11-21/11

P&O steamers  
**"CEYLON"**

Southampton - Alexandria  
**"SIMLA"**

Suez - Calle, Ceylon  
 "PEKING" to Singapore

Dutch NISM steamer  
**"KONINGEN der NEDERLAND"**

Transit time/delays: New York/Liverpool/New York/Liverpool  
 53 days.

Letter arrived Padang 10/01/1859  
 Total transit time: 112 days

Originally paid "5"cents for British open mail rate to Penang, Strait Settlement and marked "pr. Overland via Marseilles". London marked "1/7" debit to Penang and realized letter addressed to Padang, Dutch East Indies for which postage had to be prepaid. London debited US "16"cents for transatlantic fee to return letter and sent back to Boston for proper postage. Prepaid 33 cents in Boston for Southampton route to Dutch East Indies, New York credited "28"cents to UK.

Folded paid letter from Batavia, Dutch East Indies, 1861 via Singapore to New York

Carried by Dutch steamer  
**"KONINGEN der NEDERLAND"**  
 Batavia - Singapore

P&O steamer  
**"GANGES"** to Galle  
**"BENGAL"** to Suez  
**"VALETTA"**  
 Alexandria to Marseilles  
 Overland to Queenstown

Cunard's  
**"ASIA"**  
 From Queenstown 29/09  
 To NYC 11/10/1861

12 days



14 August 1861, Batavia, Dutch Indies - 11 October, New York,

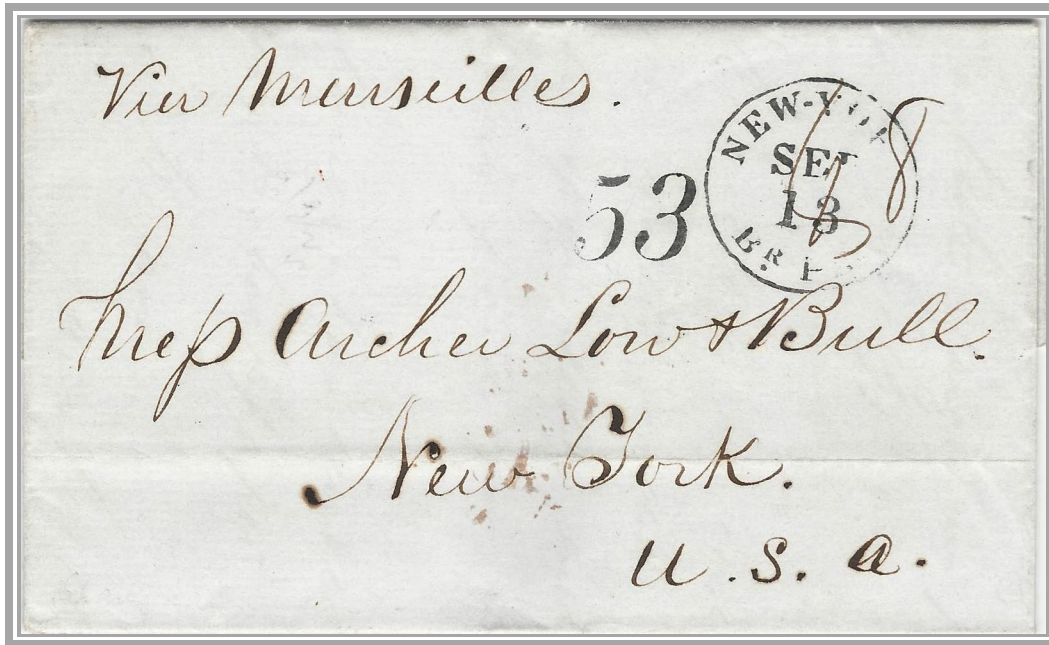
58 days

Postage:

25 Dcents  
 1/4 shilling  
 5 cents

prepaid in Batavia for transit to Singapore marked boxed "INDIA PAID"  
 East Indies credit to UK  
 postage due in New York

Unpaid letter from Shanghai via Marseilles to New York



Carried by P&O's  
**"SHAN GHAE"**  
 From Shanghai 29/06  
 To Hong Kong 5/07 on  
**"GANGES"**  
 From Hong Kong 10/07  
 to Galle  
**"HINDUSTAN"**  
 From Galle 29/07  
 to Suez 18/08  
**"VALETTA"**  
 From Alexandria 21/08  
 To Marseilles 28/08  
 Carried by Cunard's  
**"AFRICA"**  
 From Liverpool 01/09  
 To Boston 12/09  
 11 days

27 June 1855, Shanghai, China via Marseilles - 13 September, New York, 78 days

**Cancellations:** Reverse "Hong Kong/5JU5/1855", red London "B.D/AU30/1855", front "New-York/Sep 30/Br.Pkt."  
**Postage:** --- letter sent unpaid, Chinese Treaty of December 1854  
 48 cents US credit to Britain, 16 cents to Marseilles, 20 cents French, 12 cents British transit  
 53 cents postage due in New York, including 5 cent US inland

Prepaid letter from Hong Kong via Southampton to North Fairhaven, Massachusetts

Carried by P&O's  
**"CHINA"**  
 From Hong Kong 28/09  
 To Galle, Ceylon, 21/10 on  
**"CARNAIC"**  
 From Galle 21/10 to Suez 05/11  
**"RIPON"**  
 From Alexandria 05/11  
 To Southampton 19/11  
 Carried by Cunard's  
**"SCOTIA"**  
 From Queenstown 22/11  
 To New York 04/12  
 12 days



26 September 1863, Hong Kong via Southampton - North Fairhaven, Massachusetts, to New York 69 days

**Cancellations:** Front red "Hong Kong/C/SP 26/63/Paid", reverse blue "Hong Kong/C/SP 26/63", front red "London/EE/NO19/63/Paid", "5/Dec 4/N.York Br.Pkt".  
**Postage:** 1/8 shilling prepaid in Hong Kong for transit to US  
 5 cents due in North Fair Haven for US inland

*Clipper Ship; from Sydney, 1855 via Cape Horn to Liverpool, and Cunard to New York 1856.*

Business letter dated 19 October 1855 carried by *"Champion of the Seas"* from Sydney to Liverpool and forwarded to Richmond, Virginia, discussing different commodities as tobacco, flour and lumber.



19 October 1855, Sydney via 25 January 1856, Liverpool, 9 February 1856, New York, 112 days

Carried by; Black Ball Lines clipper ship *"Champion of the Seas"* from Sydney 20 October 1855, via Cape Horn to Liverpool, 25 January 1856, 97 days  
 Cunard Lines steamer *"PERSIA"* from Liverpool, 26 January to New York, 9 Feb. 14 days

Postage: 33 cents due at Richmond, Virginia  
 28 Cents Credit to England  
 1 d accountancy handstamp, credit to NSW on collect contract sailing



Clipper ship, not the *Champion of the Sea*

. The Clipper route was the traditional route sailed by clipper ships between Europe and the West Indies, (Far East), Australia and New Zealand. To make use of the strong westerly winds over the Roaring Forties the route ran from west to east through the Southern Ocean. Many ships and sailors were lost in the heavy conditions along the route, particularly at Cape Horn, which the clippers had to round on their return to Europe.

A fast transit time would be 100 days both east and west from Portsmouth to Sydney. *"Cutty Shark"* a clipper ship had the fastest outbound run in 72 days and homebound 84 days.