

## Royal Mail Steam Packets through Mobile, Alabama January 1849 – August 1850

**Forerunners.** The Royal Mail Steam Packet (RMSP) Company began carrying mail in the West Indies under contract to the British Government in January 1842. New Orleans was a stop in the first contract, but was dropped after only nine months. All covers known from this contract are from this same voyage.  
**Earliest recorded first contract (1842) use through New Orleans – only recorded Mobile origin**

Mobile February 2, 1842.  
 Departed New Orleans on RMSP *Forth* February 4.  
 Departed Havana on RMSP *Medina* March 2.  
 Arrived London April 4 and  
 rated one shilling postage due (1/).  
 Arrived Stroud April 5.



New Orleans was added back as a stop in the second contract in November 1847. Steamers left Southampton twice monthly, making calls in Bermuda, Nassau, Havana, New Orleans, Vera Cruz and Tampico before retracing the route back to Southampton. About ten covers are recorded from this route.  
**Earliest recorded second contract (1847) use through New Orleans**

February 13, 1848, two shillings (2/) "PAID/AT/CALLAO" Peru.  
 Arrived Kingston, Jamaica March 5, departed on RMSP *Severn* March 18.  
 Arrived Havana, Cuba March 27, departed on RMSP *Avon* the next day.  
 Arrived New Orleans April 3 and rated 12 cents due as a SHIP letter traveling more than 300 miles to Providence, RI.



These forerunners are followed by examples of fifteen of the sixteen different ship rating methods used on RMSP covers. The next two pages include examples of how the required British prepayment was indicated. Privately carried covers with both domestic and international destinations are then shown. The exhibit ends with the only recorded cover carried by RMSP *Tay* and the latest possible recorded use on the last RMSP stop in Mobile and the entire Gulf Coast.

**Only recorded FREE rated RMSP cover – opened to show backstamps**



August 1, 1850 red postmark and red FREE

RMSP Great Western

Originated in Guayaquil, Ecuador, via Panama and Kingston, Jamaica

All covers carried as British mail to Mobile on RMSP steamers have some foreign postal markings, almost all of which were applied at overseas British post offices. Some of these markings were applied as backstamps, such as the originating black GUAYAQUIL double arc postmark and the black KINGSTON-JAMAICA double arc transit marking. Some are applied on the front, such as the black, triple line Panama transit marking. The British rate is always in manuscript and is two shillings in this case, shown as 2/. Sometimes a separate handstamp is used to indicate that British postage to Mobile had been paid, such as the red GUAYAQUIL double arc PAID. This particular cover also has crossed out docketing originally intended for a forwarder in Panama ("Messrs Smith + Lewis, Panama, Please forward + oblige.")

Forty-seven covers have been documented as being carried as British mail by RMSP steamers through Mobile. Vera Cruz is by far the most common origin, representing about half of the covers. There are five additional covers from the rest of Mexico. Other origins, with two or three covers recorded, are British Guiana, Chile, Colombia, England, Jamaica and Peru. Origins with only one recorded cover include Barbados, Cuba, Ecuador, Italy and Panama.

## SHIP 12 and SHIP/12

As most of the letters brought into Mobile were conveyed more than 300 miles, the 12¢ ship rate (10¢ postage plus 2¢ ship fee) is three times as common as the 7¢ ship rate, which was for carriage less than 300 miles.



April 22, 1849

Straight line SHIP and 12

RMSP Thames

Vera Cruz origin



June 21, 1849

Fancy SHIP/12

RMSP Clyde

Vera Cruz origin

## SHIP/22 and SHIP 7 – only recorded use of each marking

Just as the 12¢ ship rate is three times as common as the 7¢ ship rate, the 7¢ ship rate is three times as common as the 22¢ ship rate, which has only one recorded use.



June 30, 1849

Fancy SHIP/22

RMSP *Great Western*

Georgetown, British  
Guiana origin



March 24, 1849

Straight line SHIP and 7

RMSP *Great Western*

Vera Cruz origin

RMSP steamers actually originally landed at barrier islands off the coast of Biloxi, Mississippi to avoid the 120 mile trip up the Mississippi River to New Orleans. Mobile was substituted for Cat and Ship Islands primarily due to the availability of coal at reduced prices. It was estimated that the depot at Mobile Point would supply \$300,000 worth of coal annually. A typical RMSP steamer burned about 30 tons of coal per day.

## SHIP/7 and the significance of postal marking ink color

*These are the only recorded copies of the fancy SHIP/7 marking in red and blue.*

June 21, 1849

Fancy SHIP/7

RMSP Clyde

Tampico origin



September 3, 1849

Fancy SHIP/7

RMSP Severn

Havana origin



About midway through the RMSP period, Mobile began using ink color to differentiate between paid and unpaid letters. Since U. S. postage could not be prepaid on these covers, only the free rated cover is in the paid ink color (red) after September 3, 1849, when the change appears to have been implemented.

Dates of use	Ink color and payment type
Until June 4, 1849	Orange for all
June 20, 1849 – August 11, 1849	Red for all
September 3, 1849 and later	Red for paid, blue for unpaid

## Ship in a circle with 10¢ rate not including a ship fee in red and blue ink

Two covers are recorded from both the August 21, 1849 arrival of the *Trent* and the September 2, 1849 arrival of the *Severn*. Oddly, one cover from each steamer was charged a 2¢ ship fee and one was not. All earlier covers were charged the ship fee and no later covers were charged the fee. An explanation for the removal of the ship fee can be found in the 1849 annual *Report of the Postmaster General*: "There is also conveyance by British packet between New York and Mobile, in the United States, and the West India Islands, 5 cents being United States postage, to be prepaid when sent from said ports, and collected when received in the United States, unless mailed from or to a post office more than 300 miles from port, then 10 cents – English and foreign postage unknown, the service not being embraced in the treaty."

September 3, 1849

SHIP[circle] and 10

RMSP *Severn*

Old Harbour, Jamaica origin

**Earliest recorded use of this SHIP marking in blue ink.**



August 21, 1849

SHIP[circle] and 10

RMSP *Trent*

Chihuahua, Mexico origin

**Earliest recorded use of this SHIP marking and only recorded use in red ink. All other uses are in blue ink to indicate unpaid.**

On the Mexican Gold Trail to California from the well known Crittenden correspondence.

## New style postmark with integral rate in two variations

During this brief RMSP period, a new style postmark was introduced in Mobile which contained the rate. With nine recorded examples, the 10¢ integral rate postmark is the most common postmark on RMSP covers. There were two variations of the time saving device, one with a line below the month and one without. A 5¢ rate was also available, but it was not used on any RMSP mail.



February 27, 1850

Straight line SHIP

RMSP Thames

Vera Cruz origin



May 23, 1850

Straight line SHIP

RMSP Severn

Vera Cruz origin

## Narrow SHIP 20 and SHIP 5 from unusual origin

The narrow straight line SHIP marking on the double rate (20¢) cover was in use for only about two months. All but a handful of the RMSP covers passing through Mobile originated in the West Indies.



May 10, 1850

Straight line SHIP and  
20[circle]

RMSP *Severn*

Santa Martha,  
Colombia origin

**Earliest recorded  
use of narrow SHIP  
marking.**

The evidence of a thread in the two wafer seals indicates a coin may have been tied to the cover to pay the postage. Covers with coins sewn on to pay postage have been recorded, although they are very scarce.



February 13, 1850

Straight line SHIP  
and 5

RMSP *Thames*

Liverpool, England  
origin

**Only recorded use  
of a 5 rate on the  
route.**

## 20¢ and 40¢ manuscript ship rate

These are the only recorded manuscript ship rates used on this route. Mobile did not have a handstamp 40 at this time, but obviously had a handstamp 20. This SHIP in a circle marking was only in use for three months.

October 28, 1849

SHIP[circle] and  
20

RMSP *Teviot*

Vera Cruz origin



September 21, 1849

SHIP[circle] and 40

RMSP *Severn*

Vera Cruz origin



Ten different steamers were used for this portion of the contract, anchoring thirty-seven times at Mobile Point in Mobile Bay. Covers are recorded and shown from each steamer, although not each voyage into Mobile. The steamers were *Avon*, *Clyde*, *Dee*, *Great Western*, *Medway*, *Severn*, *Tay*, *Teviot*, *Thames* and *Trent*.

## British postage paid markings – Crown circle paid

British crown circle paid handstamps were used to indicate British postage had been paid at many of the cities served by RMSP steamers in the West Indies. Crown circle paid stamps have been recorded from seven towns on covers through Mobile: Callao, Havana, Panama, Santa Marta, Tampico, Valparaiso, and Vera Cruz. Examples of all seven are included in the exhibit. Excluding Vera Cruz, no more than three copies are recorded from any location, with only one from Panama, Santa Marta, and Valparaiso.



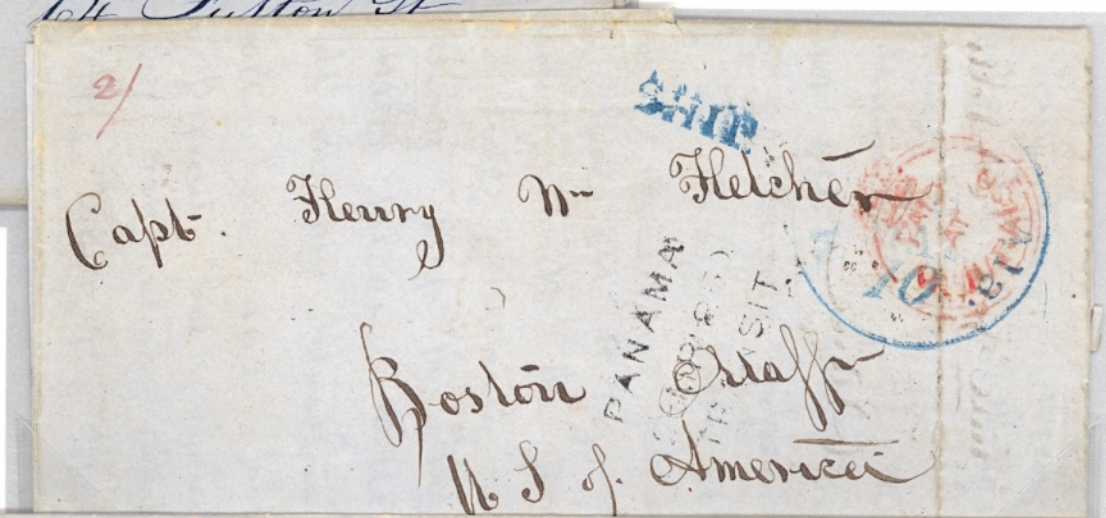
April 5, 1849

Straight line SHIP and 12

RMSP Thames

Panama origin and crown paid

May 23, 1850  
Straight line SHIP  
RMSP Severn  
Talcahuano, Chile  
origin and Valparaiso  
crown paid



June 20, 1849

Fancy SHIP/12

RMSP Clyde

Callao, Peru origin and  
crown paid

Earliest recorded  
use of fancy  
SHIP/12.



## Double arc PAID and manuscript paid

Double arc handstamps have been recorded from several RMSP locations, but only Kingston, Jamaica and Guayaquil, Ecuador (shown earlier on FREE rated cover) used the handstamp to indicate postage had been paid. No crown circle handstamps have been recorded from either Kingston, Guayaquil, or Cartagena on RMSP mail through Mobile.

May 5, 1849

Straight line SHIP and 12

RMSP *Severn*

Spanish Town, Jamaica origin



October 5, 1849

SHIP[circle] and 10

RMSP *Teviot*

Cartagena, Colombia origin

### Privately carried – earliest recorded RMSP use through Mobile

RMS steamers carried mail into Mobile under contract to the British government. These covers always contain British postal markings. The captain, as well as passengers, also brought loose mail into Mobile. By law, the captain was required to deliver his letters to the post office for rating as ship letters. Passengers, however, could simply deposit mail at the post office as any resident or visitor, to be rated as domestic mail originating in Mobile.



March 9, 1849

Straight line SHIP and 12

RMSP *Great Western*

### Vera Cruz origin

*Earliest recorded  
RMSP cover through  
Mobile.*



April 20, 1850

24¢ rate for Mobile to London  
New York marked  
21¢ debit to the UK,  
but changed it to a 5¢  
debit as it was carried  
by British packet

RMSP *Medway*

Vera Cruz origin

## Foreign destinations with Mobile forwarders

Five covers have been recorded which were carried to Mobile on RMSP steamers and routed through New York or Boston to a foreign destination (all London). These two covers both show Mobile forwarders markings and were routed through Boston.

November 23, 1849

24¢ rate for Mobile to London,  
Boston 5¢ debit

RMSP *Dee*

Vera Cruz origin

Mobile forwarder J. Bell Jr. & Co.  
in double line oval on back at top

***These are the only two Mobile forwarders from any time period.***

January 23, 1850

24¢ rate for Mobile to London,  
Boston 5¢ debit

RMSP *Clyde*

Tampico origin

Mobile forwarder LeBaron & Son in manuscript "Received 23 Jany & forwarded same day by LeBaron & Son"

***Only recorded use of LeBaron & Son forwarding.***



## Foreign destinations with manuscript Mobile rates - 24¢ and 96¢

Primarily due to the frequency of North Atlantic crossings, it was generally faster to send a letter to Europe through Mobile and New York or Boston than Havana, Nassau and Bermuda. Mobile never had a handstamp 96 rate, but used a handstamp 24 rate frequently in this time period.



June 20, 1850

24¢ rate for Mobile to  
London, Boston 5¢  
debit

RMSP Thames

Vera Cruz origin

Mobile forwarder J.  
Bell Jr. & Co.



March 23, 1850

96¢ rate for quadruple  
weight, Mobile to  
London, Boston 20¢ (4  
times 5¢) debit

RMSP Avon

Vera Cruz origin

The 24¢ (one shilling) treaty rate postage was divided as follows: 5¢ for United States inland postage, 3¢ for United Kingdom inland postage, and 16¢ sea postage. If unpaid mail was carried by American packet, there was a 21¢ debit (16¢ + 5¢) to the United Kingdom. If unpaid mail was carried by British packet, there was a 5¢ debit for United States inland postage applied.

## Unusual uses – privately carried outbound and inexplicable routing instructions

Only two covers have been recorded that were carried on the outbound voyage from Mobile on RMSP steamers. Many covers carried by these RMSP steamers contain docketing confirming the steamer name. Only one cover has been recorded with incorrect docketing.

Paris origin, May 1, 1849.  
Carried privately to Mobile,  
rated PAID 31¢ on June 4.  
RMSP *Clyde* departed Mobile  
June 5 and arrived in Vera Cruz  
June 10, as docketed.



Letter written by J. M. Pommares, the American Vice-Consul at Vera Cruz. Addressed to a well known Vera Cruz forwarding agent named L. S. Hargous, even though written to Messrs. de la Serna & Escher. No forwarding or additional postal markings. There are several possible explanations for the 31¢ rate, but none very satisfactory. They are 29¢ + 2¢ ship fee (29¢ rate not announced for several weeks); 24¢ + 5¢ + 2¢ (why 5¢ internal rate?); or, 24¢ + 6¢ + 1¢ (incoming ship plus drop).



July 19, 1850

24¢ rate for Mobile to  
Liverpool, Boston 5¢ debit

Unknown origin as part of  
the letter sheet missing

There was no British mail  
steamer in or around  
Mobile on July 17. RMSP  
*Tay* did not depart Vera  
Cruz until July 16, arriving  
and departing Mobile on  
July 21.

## Only recorded RMSP *Tay* cover and latest possible recorded use on last Mobile stop

RMSP *Tay* was added near the end of the contract and only made two stops in Mobile. Similar to the other steamers, the *Tay* was an 1,858 gross ton wooden paddle steamer with side-lever engines.



July 21, 1850

Straight line SHIP

RMSP *Tay*

Vera Cruz origin



August 20, 1850

Straight line SHIP

RMSP *Great Western*

Vera Cruz origin

The *Great Western* was the last RMSP steamer to land at Mobile, as the entire Bermuda contract route was discontinued. As a matter of fact, the *Great Western* was the last British steamer to carry mail under contract to any American port in the Gulf of Mexico. This cover was on that final voyage.