

The Cope Line of Liverpool - Philadelphia Packets

(Richard C. Frajola August 31, 2006)

Thomas P. Cope (1768-1854) was a Quaker merchant who began importing goods to Philadelphia in 1790. By 1807 he was using his own vessel (the *Lancaster*) and in 1821 he established a regularly scheduled packet service between Philadelphia and Liverpool. William and James Brown served as his Liverpool agents.

Although the Cope Line was the only regular packet service between Philadelphia and Liverpool during the era before the Civil War, there has been little notice of the service in the philatelic press. As outbound letters did not receive postmarks and inbound ship letters have not always been easily differentiated from other private ship letters, this important mail system has not been fully understood or appreciated.

There is a very good reason why the outbound packet letters from Philadelphia do not bear postmarks. The postmaster was entitled to collect a fee that was an emolument rather than a postal rate. The 1817 *Postal Office Law and Regulations* stipulate in Instruction XIV, Section 15 that:

Post-masters at sea ports are always to receive letters when offered, for all places without the United States, and are to make them up into a mail and forward such letters by the first vessel which is destined to the place which the letters are directed. For each letter they are entitled to receive one cent.

An example of such a use is shown below.



It is a folded letter, dated July 13, 1824 at Philadelphia, addressed to London, England. The letter was delivered into the Philadelphia Post Office along with one cent fee and given to the purser of the Cope Line ship *Algonquin* for carriage to Liverpool. The purser stamped the cover with a straight line name of ship marking at lower left. At Liverpool it was treated as a ship letter with boxed "Ship Letter Liverpool" backstamp and rated 1sh. 7d. for carriage to London. After arrival it was re-directed to Worthing in Sussex with 8d. due.

Additional ships owned by Cope also used straight line name of ship handstamps. Examples are reported from the *Lancaster* (1819), the *Montezuma* (1824), and the *Tuscarora* (1824). None of these exist in more than two or three examples. Cope Line ships from which no markings are reported include the *Saranac*, *Wyoming*, *Monongahela*, *Susquehanna*, *Thomas P. Cope*, *John H. Jervis*, *Chimera* and the *Pocahontas*.

The Cope Line packets, along with other early sailing ship packet lines of the era, were extremely important precursors to the later steam packet services.