

NORTH ATLANTIC MAIL 1767-1875

LETTERS BETWEEN EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA 1767-1875. THE CHANGE-OVER FROM SAIL TO STEAM. THE COMPETITION FOR THE SUPREMACY OF CARRYING MAILS ACROSS THE NORTH ATLANTIC

PREFACE

Since the establishment of the first British colonies in North America there has been a growing need for written communications between the Mother Country and the New World. The same need has been characteristic in written messages to and from other European countries. Until the revolution of steam power the letters were very much in hands of fate as to when, if ever, they would reach their destination.

This collection of letters tells the story of the ships and ship lines carrying mails across the North Atlantic. It concentrates to mails between European ports and the ports in the two North American countries, United States and Canada. The most far-away destinations of the letters are California, Mexico and Cuba in the west, Russia and India in the east. The exhibit intends to tell how the steamships overcame sailing ships as faster and more reliable mail carriers, and how the scheduled mail service was developed in the 19th century. The exhibit points out the importance of the non-contract pioneer steamers and the fact, that it was the Cunard Line, which came to be the most remarkable company in developing the scheduled carriage of transatlantic mails by steamers.

The exhibit is not organized to be a study of postal rates. However, all postal information on the letters is discussed to clarify the miscellaneous markings and the varied scale of postages. The most important Postal Conventions are mentioned. The routes of the letters are all cleared.

The exhibit consists of 172 letters from 1767 until U.P.U. 1875. They have been carried across the North Atlantic by over 80 various ships owned by over 20 shipping companies. World-class rarities are the maiden voyage letters of pioneer steamers the SIRIUS, the BRITISH QUEEN and the CALEDONIA. Several other maiden voyage letters are presented. Remarks of importance and philatelic discoveries have been printed in bold and underlined.

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Numbers of ship letter handstamps in the exhibit: Great Britain ports: Tabearf (Robertson), New York: Hubbard & Winter, Boston: Blake & Davis

1. EARLY MAILED CARRIED BY SAILING SHIPS 1767-1817

The transatlantic mail in 18th century was in great part carried by private sailing ships, which carried mainly goods, sometimes passengers, and some letters given to the hand of the ship's captain. The ships were small, 250-400 tons, often rigged as two mast brigs or three mast barques. The sailings were seldom scheduled, a captain would remain in port until he had full hold. Time was of little concern and only a fully loaded ship brought a satisfactory financial result. Hence, a transatlantic letter might take anything from three weeks to three months to reach the addressee.

In the 1760's the British Post Office began to issue individually named ship-letter handstamps to postmasters at ports in all parts of the Kingdom. The purpose was to identify the letter as a ship-letter and also name the specific port of entry, so that the inland postal charges on the mileage basis could be accurately assessed.

1767. Letter from Philadelphia to London - DOVER SHIP LRE

Route: Business letter dated in Philadelphia on 16 March 1767 and addressed to London. Carried to Dover by private sailing ship. The letter was on the way 52 days.

Markings: DOVER SHIP LRE - handstamp. This is one of the earliest recorded handstamps with port name. Handwritten number 4 (4d). Arrival stamp London Bishop Mark 7/MA = 7th May.

Rate: Single letter, captains gratuity 1d plus inland postage Dover-London 3d = total 4d to be collected.

In the 18th century the ship letter charges consisted normally three parts: a) The **ship-letter charge**; b) The small **fee paid to the ship's master** for each letter handed over; c) The **inland postage** according to the number of miles the letter had been conveyed by road from the port of entry to the place of address.

The rates in Britain until 1839 were based on the number of the sheets and weight of the letter:

- one sheet of paper weighing under 1 oz 1 rate
 - two sheets of paper weighing under 1 oz 2 rates
 - three or more sheets weighing under 1 oz 3 rates
 - 1 - 1¼ oz 4 rates,
- plus one rate per additional quarter oz.

British inland rates 1711-1796

	Single	Double	Treble	>1 oz
80 miles and under	3d	6d	9d	12d
Over 80 miles	4d	8d	12d	16d

**DOVER
SHIP LRE**

DOVER 27 mm, SHIP LRE
34 mm, no hyphen,
Robertson type S1a. In use
1765-86



Four penny marking in black

London datestamp Bishop
Mark 7 MA (May)

2. SAILING PACKETS 1788-1839

A monthly line of packet boats between Falmouth and New York was opened by the British General Post Office (G.P.O.) in 1755.

In the early days any ship departing on a journey overseas had no real certainty of its reaching the destination. It was customary to inscribe a "talisman" on the letter - Q.D.C. This was an abbreviation for *Quem Deus Conserveat* (May God Guide).

1788. Prepaid letter from London to New York via Falmouth with endorsement "p. Packet - Q.D.C."



POST PAID handstamp
of London



One shilling marking



London Post Office
datestamp 1 October
1788

Route: Entire business letter dated in London on October 1st 1788. Carried transatlantic by Falmouth packet SPEEDY, which departed Falmouth on 8 October for New York via Bermuda and Halifax. There are no markings of the final delivery date of the letter, but it was probably about early January 1789.

Markings: Endorsement "p. Packet" and "Q.D.C." (*Quem Deus Conserveat*). London datestamp 1 October 88. Prepaid marking 1/- in red ink. Round POST PAID handstamp of London.

Rate: Prepaid one shilling as a single sheet letter. This covered the postage all the way from London to New York.

1784, 22 May. GPO Notice

"Notice was given by an advertisement from this office of 18 November last, that the packet postage of 1/- between London and New York, might or not be paid beforehand; but difficulties having arisen in the collection of the packet postage in North America... both inland and packet postage... must absolutely be paid to New York, and also to Halifax, without which they must be opened and returned to the writers."

3. PIONEER STEAMSHIPS 1838-

While sail had dominated the North Atlantic during the early decades of the 19th century, steam was being developed as a source of marine power in the same period. Robert Fulton had the CLERMONT operating in New York in 1807 and the SAVANNAH crossed the Atlantic in 1819 mostly by sail however. The GREAT WESTERN was built to be the first mail steamer in the spring 1838. To prevent this, the British and American Steam Navigation Company chartered a small wooden paddle-steamer of 700 tons from Irish Sea. The SIRIUS left Cork for New York on April 4th and reached New York on April 23rd - few hours before her competitor and got the honour of being the first mail steamer over the Atlantic.



The SIRIUS

1838. Maiden voyage letter of the SIRIUS



Route: New York-Falmouth-London. Unpaid wrapper dated in New York 27 April 1838 (docketing). Addressed to the world-renowned bankers Rothschild & Son. Forwarded to the ship in New York. Carried transatlantic by the SIRIUS sailing for her return maiden voyage from New York on 1 May 1838 and arriving at Falmouth on 18 May.

Twelve maiden voyage letters of the SIRIUS have been recorded.

Markings: Endorsed: "Per Sirius". On the back a boxed red "AMERICAN & FOREIGN AGENCY" handstamp (Rowe: Rarity 4) showing the forwarder who put the letter to the ship. Framed "SHIP LETTER FALMOUTH" type S.7 (1834-40) shows where the mails were taken ashore. Arrival stamp of London "E" on 21 May 1838. Manuscript 5/-.

Rate: Charged as triple weight letter 3 x 8d ship fee + 3 x 1/- inland postage Falmouth-London = total 5/- to collect.

4. THE CUNARD LINE - PIONEER STEAMERS 1840-

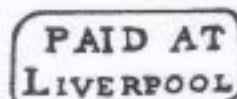
On 4th May 1839 Samuel Cunard, a Nova Scotian shipowner, after long negotiations, signed a contract with the British Government. The contract called for "A sufficient number, not less than three, of good substantial and efficient steam vessels of not less than threehundred horsepower each" to carry the mails twice a month between Liverpool and Boston on a year-round basis. Cunard received a subsidy of £ 55.000 per annum. The contract was to run for seven years.

The service started in May 1840 with four steamers: The ACADIA, BRITANNIA, CALEDONIA and COLUMBIA. The managing shipowner company was **The British and North American Royal Mail Steam Packet Company** better known as the **CUNARD LINE**.

1840. Early Cunard mail - third voyage of the BRITANNIA

BOSTON SHIP handstamp
no.293, in use 1840-44

Boston manuscript marking
20 3/4 cents



PAID AT LIVERPOOL type
M3a, in use 1834-43

Liverpool manuscript one
shilling

Route: Liverpool-Boston-Philadelphia. Entire business letter dated in Liverpool on 20 Oct. 1840. The BRITANNIA departed Liverpool for her third voyage on 20 Oct. and arrived at Boston on 3 Nov. A westbound voyage of 14 days.

Markings: Endorsed to "Britannia Steamer". Red 1/- manuscript and framed "PAID AT LIVERPOOL" handstamp are on the front. Liverpool datestamp 20 Oct. on the backflap. "BOSTON SHIP" arrival stamp on 3 Nov. The addressee has marked the final receiving date "11/4/40" (= 4 Nov.) in the upper edge of the cover.

Rate: Prepaid in Liverpool 1 shilling packet letter rate. U.S. charged 2c ship fee + 18 3/4c inland fee Boston - Philadelphia (315 miles) = 20 3/4 cents postage due.

5. SAILING PACKETS AGAINST STEAMERS 1840-

1844. Letter from Truro, Cornwall to New York by Private Ship



TRURO
JY 15
1844

Datestamp of TRURO 15 July 1844.

This handstamp is scarce, because it was made up as required for use and broken down again.

Route: Truro-Liverpool-New York. Entire private letter dated in Truro, Cornwall on 15 July 1844. Carried by a sailing packet departing Liverpool 17 July and arriving at New York on 22 August. A westbound sailing of 36 days.

Markings: Endorsed to "Private Ship". A loose type TRURO datestamp on July 15th on the front. Backstamped with "SHIP-LETTER-LIVERPOOL" on July 17th, type S15. Manuscript "8" in red and "6" in black ink. Arrival marking on August 22nd in the lower left corner.

Rate: Prepaid 8d ship letter fee, U.S. charged 6 cents postage due as an incoming ship letter addressed to the port of arrival.

Sailing packets against steamers

Occasionally the sailing packets made even faster crossings than the steamships. The great **advantage to the steamships was the quicker time they made the westward run**, which varied very little from the eastward, whereas the sailing packets had to content with the stiff westerly winds, which often lengthened their crossing to over forty days as the table of comparisons shows (from "The Transatlantic Mail" by Frank Staff).

Sailing ships	Longest days	Westward		Longest days	Eastward	
		Shortest days	Average days		Shortest days	Average days
Black Ball Line	48	22	33,17	36	18	22,12
Dramatic Line	38	23	30,12	25	17	20,12
Red Star Line	45	27	38	28	21	24
Swallowtail Line	45	28	35	31	17	22,12
Steamships						
Great Western	21	13	16,12	15	12,5	13,9
British Queen	20	14	17,8	21	13	16,12
Liverpool	18	16	17,4	24	13	15,16

6. GROWING CUNARD LINE 1845-

6.1. CUNARD EXTENDS TO NEW YORK

Samuel Cunard succeeded in obtaining a renewal of the mail contract with the British Admiralty on 1 July 1846, good until January 1858. The new contract retained the Boston service via Halifax and required a new service to New York to commence in January 1848. This contract sealed the fate of the Great Western Steamship Company which had been trying to get a mail contract with the British Government for years. The company had been privately carrying mails to New York since 1838 but had insufficient funding to continue.

1848. The first visit at New York of a Cunard steamer

Paddle steamer CAMBRIA had the honour of beginning Cunard line's service to New York in January 1848. Ever since, with the exception of the Crimean War and the two world wars, the Cunarders have maintained a regular service to New York from Britain.



Copy of the Liverpool backstamp

Route: Entire business letter (invoice of steelware) dated in Sheffield on 4 Dec. 1847. Carried by the CAMBRIA dep. Liverpool on 1 Jan., arr. at New York as the first Cunarder on 18 Jan. 1848.

Markings: Endorsed "p. Cambria". Datestamp Sheffield on 31 Dec. Manuscript "1/-" in red. Oval transitstamp of Liverpool on the back. New York round framed numeral handstamp "6".

Rate: Prepaid in U.K. 1/- single packet letter, U.S. charged 6c postage due for a single ship letter addressed to the port of arrival.

6.GROWING CUNARD LINE 1845- 6.2. THE RETALIATORY PERIOD 1848

Due to the British discrimination of the American contract steamers in U.K. ports, the US Congress on June 1848 passed legislation beginning on July 1st 1848, empowering the U.S. Postmaster to collect a 24 cent ship letter fee of all letters carried on foreign packets. In practice this meant the British packets and the Cunard Line.

1848. The first voyage westbound during the Retaliatory Period



Route: London-Liverpool-New York-Philadelphia. Entire private single letter dated in London on 23 June 1848. The letter was put onboard of Cunard's CALEDONIA in Liverpool on 24 June. The steamer reached New York on 8 July, which was the first arrival of a British packet during the Retaliatory Rate period.

Retaliatory letters are not common; a "first voyage letter" is a rarity.

Markings: London datestamp "AP JU 23 1848" on the backflap. A faint red "NEW YORK SHIP JUL 9 29 cts" handstamp on the front.

Rate: Single U.K. packet letter fee prepaid by 1/- adhesive stamp. U.S. charged 24c retaliatory postage + 5c inland fee to Philadelphia = 29c to be collected.



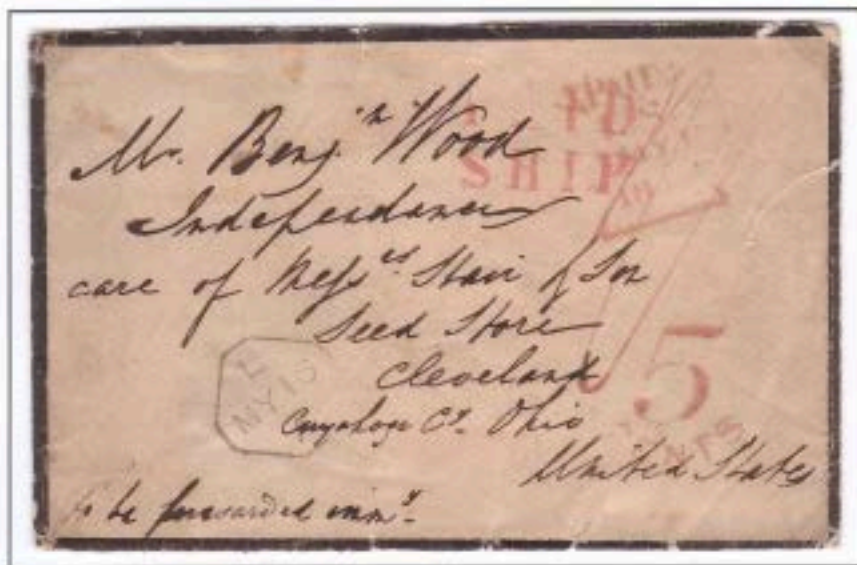
Red NEW YORK SHIP JUL 9 29 cts handstamp, usage Jul 9th 1848-Jan 1st 1849. **Earliest recorded use of this handstamp.**

6. GROWING CUNARD LINE 1845-

6.3. "FOUR SISTERS" TO CUNARD - TREATY RATE PERIOD BEGINS 1848-

The new Cunarders AMERICA, NIAGARA, EUROPA and CANADA were wooden paddle-steamers measuring 1830 tons, 251 feet in length and fitted with two side level engines of 670 horsepowers each, paddlewheels being 32 feet in diameter. Like earlier Cunard Line ships, they proved to be reliable and economical. They served the line long to the 1860's. The EUROPA, for instance, made 105 round voyages before being sold out of service 1867.

1849. Treaty rate mourning cover - 8th voyage of the NIAGARA - new handstamps of Liverpool and N.Y.



Route: London-Liverpool-New York-Cleveland. Carried over by the NIAGARA, dep. Liverpool on 19 May, arr. New York on 2 June 1849.

Markings: Faint London LS handstamp on 15 May, red 1/- rate manuscript marking of London. Black lozenge handstamp on 16 May and red "5 cents" handstamp (both Liverpool), red New York "PAID SHIP" handstamp.

Rate: Treaty rate one shilling prepaid, Credit to U.S. 5c inland. British retained 16c sea (British packet) + 3c inland = 19c.



London LS (Lombard Street Post Office) handstamp 15 May 1849

London manuscript marking "1/-" = one shilling

Liverpool 8-sided handstamp, type M28, in use 1848-61

Liverpool "5 cents" handstamp, type M33, in use 1849-59, first use 19 March 1849

Early use of New York "PAID SHIP", no. 333, in use Apr 1849 - Mar 1856.

6. GROWING CUNARD LINE

6.4. NEW CUNARDERS 1850-

With the completion of the ASIA and AFRICA, the CALEDONIA and HIBERNIA were sold to Spanish Government for service in the Spanish Navy. The new ships proved to be fast enough to compete with the American Collins Line luxury ships beginning the mail sailings between New York and Liverpool in the same year 1850. On her third voyage the ASIA set a new record eastbound crossing in 10 days 7 hours.

1850. Prepaid letter eastbound carried on the record voyage of the ASIA



Route: New Orleans-New York-Liverpool-London. Business cover datestamped in New Orleans on 14 Sep. Carried by coastal steamer to New York. Carried transatlantic by the ASIA, dep. New York on 25 Sep., arr. at Liverpool on 5 Oct. 1850.

Markings: Endorsed "p. first Steamer via Liverpool". New Orleans datestamp on 14 Sep. and handstamp "24" both in red ink. New York P.O. struck "PAID" and "19" in red colour. London tombstone arrival datestamp 6 Oct.

Rate: Total prepaid 24c Treaty Rate, U.K. was credited 19c (16c sea + 3c inland), U.S. retained 5c (inland fee).

1850. Unpaid letter westbound carried on 2nd voyage of the AFRICA



New York handstamp no. 80 on 22 Dec 1850. **This is the latest recorded use of this handstamp. Winter reports the usage not later than 18 Dec 1849.**

Route: Liverpool-New York-Petersburg, Virginia. Printed lettersheet headlined "Prices Current of American Produce at Liverpool, December 6th, 1850". Carried by the second voyage of the Cunard Line's new steamer AFRICA, dep. Liverpool on 7 Dec., arr. at New York on 21 December.

Markings: Endorsed "pr. Africa". Liverpool datestamp on 7 Dec. and "19 CENTS" accountancy handstamp type M42 in use 1849-58. Liverpool oval transitstamp "L DE 7 A" on reverse. New York receiver "BR. PACKET DEC 22 24".

Rate: Total 24c due, whereof 19c credit to U.K. (16c ocean fee + 3c inland), U.S. retained 5c inland postage.

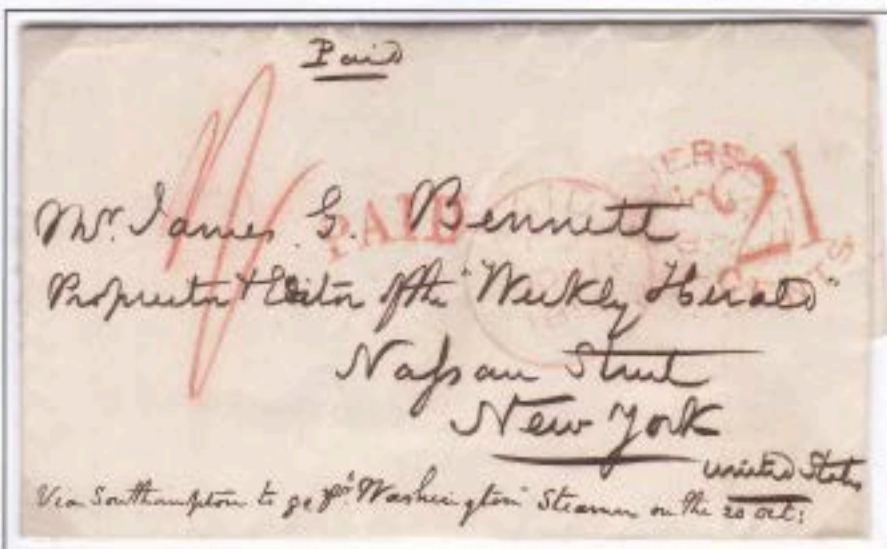


7. AMERICAN STEAMSHIP COMPETITION

7.1. THE OCEAN LINE

The first American attempt to break the supremacy of Cunard was the Ocean Steam Navigation Company, known as **Ocean Line**. The company had a mail contract with U.S. Postmaster General and had two steamers in service on route New York-Southampton-Bremen for eleven years 1847-57. They were named WASHINGTON and HERMANN.

1850. Letter from Channel Islands to New York via Southampton by American steamer



Route: Island of Jersey-London-Southampton-New York. Entire private letter dated in Jersey on 18 Oct. Carried by the WASHINGTON (16th voyage) dep. Bremen on 15 Oct., calling at Southampton on 20 Oct. and reaching New York on 3 Nov. 1850.

Markings: Endorsed "Via Southampton to go pr. Washington Steamer on the 20 Oct." For some reason datestamped in Jersey Post Office one day earlier, on 17 Oct. Transit stamp of London on 19 Oct. Manuscript 1/- in red. Accountancy handstamps: London "21 CENTS" and New York arched "PAID".

Rate: Treaty Rate 1/- prepaid. U.S. was credited 16c sea (American steamer) + 5c inland = 21c, U.K. retained 3c inland fee.

1851. Double weight letter from London to New York via Southampton by the WASHINGTON



Route: London-Southampton-New York. Entire prepaid business letter dated on 9 Sep. from bankers Hambros & Son, London to Hendricks & Brothers, New York. Carried by Ocean Line's mail steamer WASHINGTON (20th voyage) sailing from Bremen on 5 Sep., calling at Southampton on 10 Sep. and arriving at New York on 23 Sep. 1851.

Markings: Endorsed "p. Washington". Datestamped at Lombard Street Post Office on 9 Sep. Manuscript markings "2/-" and "42" (cents). New York arched "PAID".

Rate: Prepaid 2/- (equivalent to 48c) as Treaty Rate double weight letter. U.S. debited U.K. double ocean postage 2 x 16c + double inland 2 x 5c = 42 cents. U.K. retained 2 x 3c inland = 6 cents.

7. AMERICAN STEAMSHIP COMPETITION

7.2. THE COLLINS LINE

The Americans wanted to regain the supremacy of the Atlantic that their sailing packets had held for over a generation before the arrival of Cunard steamers. U.S. Postmaster General made a contract with E.K. Collins and agreed an annual subsidy of \$385,000 in order to build a steamer service to compete with Cunard. The New York and Liverpool United States Mail Steamship Company known as **Collins Line** ordered four ships and began the transatlantic service in April 1850. The fast, well equipped steamers of 2860 tons each, were named ATLANTIC, PACIFIC, ARCTIC and BALTIC.

1851. Unpaid double weight letter westbound carried by United States mail steamer PACIFIC



Route: Southampton-Liverpool-New York. Entire private letter from U.S. Consulate to James Gordon Bennet, the editor of the New York Herald. Dated in Southampton on 26 May 1851. Carried transatlantic by Collins Line's PACIFIC (7th voyage) dep. Liverpool on 28 May, arr. at New York on 7 June.

Markings: Endorsed "Pr. first Steamer from Liverpool". Southampton datestamp on 26 May, London on the same day and Liverpool transitstamp on 27 May. Accountancy markings "6CENTS" (Liverpool) and "48" (New York).

Rate: Charged as double weight letter (1/2-1 oz.) under the Treaty Rate. United Kingdom debited United States the inland postage 2 x 3c = 6c. Total postage was 2 x 24c = 48c to be collected.



Southampton blue datestamp 26 May 1851



London crowned datestamp 26 May 1851 (Difficult to read under the two other handstamps)



Liverpool 6 cents accountancy handstamp type M35 in use 1850-67



Liverpool lozenge handstamp type M28 in use 1848-61

48

New York 48 cents accountancy handstamp no. 322 Winter reports the use Jul 51-Mar 52.

Earliest recorded use of this handstamp (7 Jun 51)

7. AMERICAN STEAMSHIP COMPETITION

7.3. THE HAVRE LINE

The New York & Havre Steam Navigation Company, known as **Havre Line** was established by American shipping men to compete against Cunard Line. The company had an agreement with U.S. Postmaster General combined with the subsidy from the Government. Monthly sailings started in October 1850 from New York to Havre calling at Southampton on each voyage. The first ships of the company were wooden paddle-steamers the **FRANKLIN** (2184 tons) and the **HUMBOLDT** (2350 tons).

1852. Unpaid letter from Baltimore to Germany via New York and Southampton carried by the HUMBOLDT

20

Baltimore round circled handstamp "20" in upper right corner of the letter

$\frac{32}{9}$ R AMERICA
ÜBER
BREMEN

Black accounting handstamp of Hannover Post Office in Bremen showing letter was from the United States. 32 kreuzer due for transit to Bremen and 9 kr. for transit to Mittelfranken.



Route: Baltimore-New York-Southampton-Bremen-Nürnberg-Lenzendorf. Entire letter originating in Baltimore and written in old German language. The letter is addressed to "Lenzendorf, Landgericht Luchtershausen, Mittelfranken". Taken to New York, because no ship was sailing from Baltimore in coming few days. Carried in Bremen closed mail by Ocean Line's steamer **HUMBOLDT**, dep. New York on 31 July, arr. at Southampton on 12 Aug. 1852. The mailbags were carried to Bremen, where they arrived on 16 Aug. The letter was then taken by the Magdeburg-Leipzig Railway Post to Nürnberg.

Markings: Baltimore handstamp (struck twice on the upper left corner) is not legible. Black circled "20" handstamp and red datestamp New York on 30 July. "32/9 AMERICA über Bremen" black handstamp. Two railway handstamps on 17 Aug. on reverse. Blue manuscript rate marking "41".

Rate: Baltimore post office debited Bremen 20c. The transit from U.S. was 32 kreuzer (equivalent to 20c) and German inland postage to the destination was 9 kr. Total to be collected 41 kreuzer.