

1871 Commune of Paris Prisoners' Mail

Synopsis

Treatment: This exhibit focuses on the three month period following the fall of the Paris Commune on 28 May 1871 as revealed by the postal history and excerpts from contents of letters to and from communard prisoners. Incoming and outgoing mail reveal correspondents both highly articulate and nearly illiterate, from various walks of life -- merchants, artisans, laborers, writers, and foreign nationals. During this transitional period military tribunals were being set up and the anxieties of the prisoners were likely at their highest.

The exhibit is appropriately balanced. For example, the section on the Versailles detention depots has fewer examples than other sections because of the brief period of occupancy and lesser opportunities to generate mail. Similarly, items in the sub-section on Lorient Harbor are fewer in number than in other sub-sections because the fewest number of prisoners were held there.

Philatelic Importance: The postal history of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) and the Commune of Paris that followed have to date been well represented in the frames. However, because mail generated by suspected communards imprisoned after the fall of the Commune remains scarce, few exhibitors have shown this material. This exhibit brings to light both prisoners' mail and excerpts from content revealing the conditions and suffering of those impacted. As a result, this single frame exhibit helps round out the postal history of the War and its aftermath.

Research: The letters in this exhibit have been translated into English. Locations of prisons and numbers and the names of prison ships, often referred to as hulks (*pontons*) were drawn from the official report of the Commune located in *L'Annales de L'Assemble Nationale*, with follow-up details provided in correspondence with *La Musée Postal*, Paris. An expert on 19th century French postal rates, routes, and cachets helped with an analysis of each item.

Rarity: Fiset (2012) documents 93 covers not reported before, bringing the known total to 172. Among the 73 lettersheets and covers reported earlier, some reside in archives and remain unavailable to collectors. This exhibit presents 27 items, none of which have been described in earlier accounts.

A Note on Presentation: The exhibitor's collection of 93 items contains correspondence generated by the military division of the Service de la Justice, a government agency involved in investigations of prisoners awaiting trial. An example from this correspondence would be appropriate to end the exhibit. However, I choose to conclude the story on a more positive note by showing a lettersheet from Landenau Prison documenting the impending release of a communard, in 1872.

Source: Louis Fiset, "1871 Commune of Paris Prisoners' Mail," *France & Colonies Philatelist* 68(3):67-75, July 2012.