

France Ballons Montés 1870-1871

History

The Franco-Prussian War, lasting a bit over 6 months, in the 1870-1871 period, is better described as a war between France and the North German Confederation, led by Prussia. Some historians believe that Otto von Bismarck, the Prussian Chancellor, deliberately pushed France into war to draw southern German States into an alliance with the Confederation to halt French aggression. This is quite believable as Bismarck was trying to unite the German States into a single country. Note that the first German Empire stamps were issued in 1872 under the banner of Kaiser Wilhelm I (Prussian King) and of course Bismarck. The history and causes of the war are more complex than can be noted here but are an important read. One of the most interesting aspects of the war was the Siege of Paris by the Prussians and their allies. It was crucial for Paris to maintain both military and civilian communications with the outside world, but there were few options to accomplish this goal. One such option was to place mail inside zinc balls ("Boule de Moulins") and float them down the Seine, but the Prussian artillery used the balls for target practice so success was limited. Another method was via balloon ("Ballon Monte"). While these had more success, these flights were incredibly dangerous for both pilot and passengers.

Upon reading the descriptions and descriptive paragraphs of the "Ballon Monte" offered below, the reader will gain a knowledge of the hardships and dangers that the aeronauts (both pilot and passengers) faced. The mail sacks that were carried were not immune to these dangers and experienced water immersion, hard landings, and other fates.

There are many philatelic artifacts that are historical, but the balloon correspondence is different, for these artifacts are not just historical, they are history. This is what makes them so desirable from a collecting aspect. There are not many philatelic artifacts that are history, Pony Express covers come to mind. Both the Pony Express covers and the "Ballon Monte" both share their trips with brave individuals risking life and limb. This is an exciting collecting area, for when you have one in hand, you find yourself thinking about what the aeronauts went through to see that the correspondence was delivered. It is important to understand that "Ballon Montes" should not be judged by the same condition standards as normal mail. In judging the individual correspondence, knowledge of the events that occurred on the balloon's journey must be taken into consideration. However, it is surprising how many pieces fared quite well.

There are many ways of collecting "Ballon Montes", such as destinations, Paris district cancels, "Ballon Monte" stationery, gazette des absents, postal markings and many others. Offered here are some "Ballon Monte" stationery (Formule Orlandi) and Gazette des absents (Lettre-journal de Paris). The Gazettes are small letter newspapers mainly printed on buff-tinted skin paper. These light weights, 4-page, newspapers carried news of events in Paris on the first two pages while the last two pages were left blank for correspondence. These generally are worth more than normal correspondence. BM numbers are from the Maury catalog and cat values, noted in parentheses after BM number, are also from Maury except for BM33, Le "Ville d'Orleans", where they are taken from Yvert as the listing is more complete.

Prices are determined by a multitude of factors that include catalog value, condition (with the piece's flight history taken into consideration), scarcity and other less influential characteristics.

Les "Etats-Unis", BM3. This balloon was constructed from two baskets of earlier balloons, "Napoleon" and "Nirondelle." This construction led to a rough landing that dragged the balloon causing among other problems the opening of a mail bag with loss of several bundles (3 bundles were later recovered). This is the flight that carried drop copies of Victor Hugo's letter of appeal to German soldiers.



item 19789

19789 Le "Celeste" a completely fabricated folded letter, even the stamps are forged. Scarce reference item. . BM4 \$100.00

19790 Le "Non denomme No.1" F-VF complete folded letter, Sept 29, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Ille-et-Vilaine (Oct 16, 1870 backstamps). The only balloon not directed by a pilot (BM5 €450) \$200.00



item 19790

L' "Armand Barbes" BM6. This flight carried Gambetta (real name Gamber(e)), Interior Minister, and his secretary on a harrowing trip being blow of*ourse, being shot at almost continuously by Prussian forces and crash landing in a forest. Gambetta's hand was grazed him, became part of French lore. by a bullet. Gambetta, as the press called



item 19793

19793 Le "Washington" VF complete folded letter, Oct 10, 1870 cancel, sent to Domfront (Oct 18, 1870 backstamps),

carried 300 kg of mail. The first new balloon to fly took a most dangerous trip for the aeronauts as they were fired upon immediately and continually. To maintain altitude while fierce winds buffeting them, they dumped ballast along with a sack of mail (later recovered). A bad landing did not help including one aeronaut that took a hard fall. (BM9 €400 Euros) \$200.00

Le "Victor Hugo", BM15. Victor Hugo himself gave permission for use of his name. Balloon carried drop copies of a letter Hugo wrote to both French and Prussians alike encouraging them to end the conflict. Mail accumulated for 15 days for this flight which explains the 440 kg weight. The pilot was forced to toss ballast sacks almost immediately for greater altitude to avoid the Prussian barrage of gun fire, but he accidentally tossed out the sack of provisions for the trip. Upon landing, the mail had to be hid because of Prussian forces in the area. It was later delivered successfully to French Post Office officials.



item 19797

19797 Le "Victor Hugo" complete folded letter, Oct 17, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Nantes (Oct 22, 1870 backstamp), carried 440 kg of mail, stamp faulty. (BM15 €450) \$100.00



item 19802

19802 Le "Colonel Charras" VF lengthy complete folded letter, Oct 28, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Havre (two backstamps), carried 460 kg of mail, heaviest load of correspondence carried on any siege balloon. (BM21 €435) \$200.00



item 19803

19803 Le "Colonel Charras" VF, complete folded letter, Oct 27, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Dieppe (Nov 2, 1870 backstamp), carried 460 kg of mail, heaviest load of correspondence carried on any siege balloon. (BM21 €435) \$200.00

Le "Gironde" BM27. The aeronaut's reaction to getting shot at ranged from yelling at the Prussians ("Fire, my friends — your bullets fall back on your noses") to putting messages into bottles and throwing them down at the Prussians.



Item 19809

19809 Le "Gironde" VF complete folded letter, Nov 6, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Negrepelisse, carried 60 kg of mail. (BM27 €500) \$230.00

Le "Ville d'Orleans" BM53. Action movie screen writers could not devise the fate of this flight. Heavy winds blew the balloon of course and out to sea for a harrowing trip of more than 14 hours of cold and constant threat of death for the two aeronauts. It depressed them to the degree that they decided that blowing up the balloon is a better way to die than the fate awaited. It was to no avail as the matches would not light in the dampness. They finally landed in Norway! Even the landing was harrowing as the balloon

descended to quickly forcing the aeronauts to jump out before it crashed, but one of the two got his foot caught in the anchor ropes while jumping and was saved by the other aeronaut who grabbed him just in time before the crash. They then trekked in the bitter cold facing hunger as well as being shadowed by a wolf pack, but they survived and eventually returned to France. This flight also witnessed the first documented aerial use of a battery powered lamp.



item 19812

19812 Le "Ville d'Orleans" Fine complete folded letter, Nov 21, 1870 Paris (Passy) cancel, sent to Plombières, carried 230 kg of mail. This correspondence was in the 60 kg bag of mail that was tossed overboard (later recovered) to keep the balloon from hitting the water (see above paragraph). The stamp was soaked off in the process. 2016 Roumet cert. This is among the most desirable of siege balloon covers. Some light toning (BM33 €1,700)ebay . \$750.00

Le "Tourville", BM50. This balloon arrived in the right location, but when the aeronauts asked where they were, they thought the locals said near Vasztes rather than Limoges. This caused much delay, but they finally took the balloon, 3 sacks of mail, pigeons (for communication) and themselves on a carriage to Lemoges.



item 19819

19819 Le "Tourville" F-VF cover bearing Dec 25, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Aube, carried 160 kg of mail, "General Society of Evangelization of France" handstamp on reverse. Most unusual. (Cover may have been pinned up at left side. (BM50 €450) \$180.00



item 19820

19820 Le "Tourville" VF complete folded letter on Ballon Monte stationery, Dec 24, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to (du) Lot (faint backstamp), carried 160 kg of mail. (BM50 €450).....\$210.00



item 19821

19821 Le "Tourville" VF Gazette des absents, #19, Dec 25, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Pau (Dec 29, 1870 backstamp), carried 160 kg of mail. (BM50 €500)\$230.00

Le "Newton", BM54. The flight was mostly in the fog and landed in Prussian held territory. The aeronauts buried the mail and disguised themselves as locals to avoid capture. The mail was later retrieved.



item 19830

19830 Le "Vaucanson" complete folded letter, Jan, 1871 Paris cancel, sent to Province du Luxembourg, Belgium, Jan 17, 1871 Marbehan (Marbehan today), Belgium, red boxed "PD" mark, carried 75 kg of mail. Balloon landed 3 km west of Armentieres (Belgium) where mail was delivered. Aeronauts and cargo were soaking wet from constant rain during the trip and thus it is no surprise that this correspondence shows signs of dampness as well as a slightly faulty stamp. (BM60 €840)\$350.00



item 19832

19832 Le "Torricelli" folded mourning letter (black border stationery), Jan 23, 1871 Paris cancel, sent to Department of Vienne (faint backstamp), carried 230 kg of mail. Aeronaut flew solo and except for the cold, the flight was smooth. Upon landing. Locals told him the Prussians were close. Thanks to a local guide, he evaded search parties looking for him and eventually got the mail to safety. (BM65 €600) ..\$290.00