

## A fragmented story – forensic philately

Nearby is the picture (Figure 1) of a large fragment from what was probably an envelope that originated with the United States consulate in Algiers. Along the way it has been modified, as I will explain below. Thanks to the historical record, we can piece together a lot of this fragment's history, the recipient and his son.



### Postal markings

This fragment probably has all its stamps and postal markings intact, at least the ones applied to the front. The stamps are canceled with the well-known large numeral "5005," used in Algiers from 1862 through March 31, 1876. Alongside the numeral cancels is an Algiers handstamp, also used for many years, dated April 1, 1873. The final French mark is the boxed red "PD," paid to destination.

The sender noted at the upper left that the envelope should travel via first steamer, then to England. Presumably the letter went to Marseille, then most likely by rail to Paris and Calais, thence to England. The French applied their internal transit markings on the back, and because the back is missing, we don't know with any certainty how the letter traveled from Algiers to London.

In London the British postal service applied a red London Paid handstamp dated April 5 (Figure 2). This was quick passage from Algiers, but within the realm of possibility.



There is also a red crayon "18" added by the British as a credit to the United States (Figure 3).



The best assumption about transatlantic travel is that the letter was on the Cunard Line *Java* when it left Liverpool on April 5, 1873, and arrived in New York on April 15. These dates match the handstamps on the fragment.<sup>1</sup>

The final postal marking is a red New York "PAID ALL" marking dated April 16 (Figure 4). Again, there may have been a New Orleans receipt marking on the reverse, but we will never know.



### Stamps and rate

The stamps present an enigma. First, there is a total of 24f10 in postage. It seems like a truly exceptional piece of mail and fairly heavy.

This envelope was mailed during a period when there was no postal convention in effect between the United States and France. The rate through England, reflecting the rates in the Anglo – French and U.S – England conventions, was 1fr20 per 10 grams. England credited 2 cents per half ounce to the United States. If fully prepaid, no postage was collected from the addressee.<sup>2</sup>

The fragment reflects no special services (registered, chargement, etc.). Therefore, one would expect the total postage to be a multiple of 1fr20. The closest multiple, 200 grams (seven ounces), would be 20 times the basic rate, or 24fr00. There is no way to explain a rate of 24fr10 other than to assert a convenience overpayment or error.

A closer inspection of the fragment shows that on the face or upper portion of the fragment, the three 5 franc Napoleon stamps and two of the 30 centime Ceres stamps are tied to the fragment, even if not by much. The upper left 5 franc stamp isn't directly tied, but it is tied to the lower stamp, which is in turn tied to the fragment by the numeral cancel.

The remaining leftmost 30 centime stamp (above the red "PD" marking) and the five stamps on the lower piece of paper are *not* tied (Figures 5 and 6).



When inspecting the original, the numeral cancels on these stamps also seem to be struck more strongly than on the tied stamps. This is suspicious.

The tied postage stamps total 15fr60, which is divisible by 1fr20 (13 weight steps, or 130 grams, about 4.5 ounces). The remaining stamps total 8fr50, which is not divisible by 1fr20. It now seems even more possible that there are extra stamps. The question is which ones?

Additional helpful evidence is the "18" credit to the United States. At two cents per half ounce, this implies that the original envelope weighed between 4 and 4.5 ounces. Using exact conversion of 28.35 grams per ounce, this converts to a letter weighing between 113.3 and 127.6 grams. However, postal clerks used round numbers, since there were no calculators available in 1873. At 30 grams per ounce, those clerks would consider a 130 gram letter to weigh between 4 and 4.5 ounces. Two cents per half ounce would result in an 18 cent credit to the United States as marked on the fragment.

So the conclusion I have reached is that someone decided to dress up an already wonderful fragment by adding 8fr50 in postage that didn't originate on the envelope. Fortunately, the "18" cent credit and the more heavily canceled stamps not tied to the fragment are enough to credibly establish the original postage and provide support for this conclusion.<sup>3</sup>

For me the next problem is how to exhibit the fragment. I can fold the bottom portion under the face of the fragment to hide most of the added postage (Figure 7).



However, there is no way to lift the extra 30 centimes stamp from the face of the envelope without leaving a stain. Dampening the stamp or envelope enough for the stamp to lift would almost certainly result in wicking of the underlying glue, lignin and / or sizing in the envelope paper. Therefore, in my exhibit I think I will end up having to explain the added stamp and leave it on the fragment. That is disappointing, but still better than further damaging a wonderful postal history item.<sup>4</sup>

#### The addressee

The letter went to Jean Louis Tissot, an attorney in New Orleans, and was likely related to a lawsuit. Written at 90 degrees to the address is "No. 30267 / 4 Dt. Ct. / Opened and filed / at request of / A. L. Tissot Esq. / October 10, 1873." There is an illegible signature below this, although the signature is not



“Tissot” (Figure 8).

It was common to record such information on related papers, since paper was just becoming a commonplace commodity.<sup>5</sup>

Jean Tissot hasn't left much of a presence on the internet. I was able to find some real estate transactions (buying and selling residences), but not a lot more. His main family house was a Greek Revival home that remained in the family until 1905. Unfortunately, that house was destroyed at some point. But it was important enough to be listed in an article about twelve historic American houses that were torn down.<sup>6</sup>

The case that was the subject of the letter's contents was apparently handled by Jean's son, Aristee Louis Tissot. A search of the web provided some interesting information about the younger lawyer Tissot. Born October 1, 1838, in New Orleans, he was admitted to practice on May 7, 1860. During the Civil War Tissot volunteered for the Confederate army, was promoted to captain in 1861 and retired after the battle of Vicksburg. He returned to law school for the remainder of the war, and restarted his law practice in 1866. His first office was at 52 Bienville Street.<sup>7</sup> Looking at a modern map, 52 Bienville is now gone, part of Woldenberg Park. It would have been a few meters from the Mississippi River, closer to Canal Street than Jackson Square.

Tissot was active in Louisiana politics right after the Civil War, working for Horatio Seymour's campaign (the unsuccessful Democrat defeated by Ulysses Grant) in 1868. He served as a judge on the Civil District Court, first appointed in the early 1870s, and was still serving in 1887. The governor later replaced Tissot because the governor wanted a reliable Democrat in that position. Remember that this is the Reconstruction Era and beyond, when the Bourbon Democrats were in control of Louisiana politics. Tissot was associated with the Ring, the New Orleans ally of the Bourbons, but he fought for political and social rights of all races.<sup>8</sup>

Tissot also served in the Louisiana state senate from 1892 to 1896. He died January 2, 1896, at age 57.<sup>9</sup> According to an inventory of Judge Tissot's estate, he owned a house at 1400 Moss St., and his "extensive" library was at his law office at 52 Bienville St.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting mention of Tissot is:

As a legislator, he revealed both a complexity of character and an ambiguous sensibility about race that, along with the Civil War generation, seemed to be quickly retreating into obscurity. We will probably never know where, when, or under what context Tissot first established his working relationship with the Afro-Creole elites who made up the members of the Comite des Citoyens. What is clear, however, is that he had developed a keen appreciation for their plight, particularly as it related to the increasingly Draconian legislation that made its way through the Louisiana statehouse during the first term of Murphy J. Foster.<sup>11</sup>

Foster was the governor who signed off on the state constitution of 1898. The effect of this was to disenfranchise black voters, establishing the Democrats as the only effective party until the 1960s.<sup>12</sup>

Back to the court case. Relying on the docketing "No. 30267," I searched the New Orleans newspapers for 1873 since they often reported legal activity and case numbers. I drew a blank. I also tried searching using Tissot's name, but also found nothing on point. Dwayne Littauer did turn up a scan of some court records that show payments of fees and court costs for the case and a notation referring to A.L. Tissot, but there is no additional information that led to me discovering the nature of the case or its outcome. There is a reference in that court record of a "Return of Commission" on October 10, 1873, which presumably ties to the docketing on the envelope, also dated October 10.<sup>13</sup> Why the docketing is delayed nearly six months from the time the letter arrived in New Orleans is one more unsolved mystery.

We have here an interesting piece of postal history, as well as a document that leads us to an interesting historical figure in New Orleans. Once again our hobby provides us with a glimpse into a small fragment of the past, and unfortunately, it is adulterated.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hubbard, Walter F., and Richard F. Winter, *North Atlantic Mail Sailings 1840-75*, (Canton, OH, 1988), p. 72. The United States Philatelic Classics Society has updated and republished this volume electronically, but the updated version has no date of publication. It is available at [http://d2jf3tgwe889fp.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/North\\_Atlantic\\_Mail\\_Sailings\\_1840-75\\_with\\_Revisions.pdf](http://d2jf3tgwe889fp.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/North_Atlantic_Mail_Sailings_1840-75_with_Revisions.pdf). The *Java* made an intermediate stop in Queensland, England, on April 6 before heading across the Atlantic.

<sup>2</sup> Winter, Richard F., *Understanding Transatlantic Mail, Volume I*, (Bellefonte, PA, 2006), p. 385. The rate was effective in 1871.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Jeff Bohn, an expert on the postal markings and rates of French mail. He gets credit for first noticing that the 30 centime stamp was not tied and for making sense of the accountancy mark and the remaining stamps on the fragment. Email exchange in November 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to William F. Ullom III, Thomas Hirschinger and Thomas Bieniosek for their opinions on lifting the stamp. Their professional backgrounds cause me to have complete faith in their conclusions about the effects of trying to remove the stamp. These were personal conversations in November 2016. Also thanks to Dr. Peter McCann, whose opinion about how to exhibit the piece I value. Email exchange in November 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Kurlansky, Mark, *Paper*, (New York, 2016), Chapter 15, "Invitation from a Wasp," pp. 245-55.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.thisoldhouse.com/ideas/12-historic-american-houses-met-wrecking-ball>, accessed 6 Sep 2017.

The National Park Service assessment, written before the house was demolished, is at

<https://cdn.loc.gov/master/pnp/habshaer/la/la0000/la0062/data/la0062data.pdf>, accessed 6 Sep 2017.

---

The Sisters of the Sacred Heart wanted to build a new high school on the site, which included a second historically important house. The Louisiana Landmarks Society could only save one, and the Tissot house lost.

[https://books.google.com/books?id=4IW7GYJ\\_aa8C&pg=PA223&lpg=PA223&dq=aristee+louis+tissot+new+orleans&source=bl&ots=2evqikWkuX&sig=537WfMtuViPmeHqTDCOcsQpSc\\_c&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewifv\\_TZqpvWAhWh1IMKHbWTA8oQ6AEIRjAK#v=onepage&q=aristee%20louis%20tissot%20new%20orleans&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=4IW7GYJ_aa8C&pg=PA223&lpg=PA223&dq=aristee+louis+tissot+new+orleans&source=bl&ots=2evqikWkuX&sig=537WfMtuViPmeHqTDCOcsQpSc_c&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewifv_TZqpvWAhWh1IMKHbWTA8oQ6AEIRjAK#v=onepage&q=aristee%20louis%20tissot%20new%20orleans&f=false), accessed 10 Sep 2017.

7

[https://books.google.com/books?id=54wzAQAAAMAAJ&pg=PA547&lpg=PA547&dq=aristee+tissot+new+orleans+attorney&source=bl&ots=a3ojvnRoAB&sig=1ESnzDtpRlrMHo\\_hlfkw9Cr0d5U&hl=en&sa=X&sqi=2&ved=0ahUKewjmoZfO4fnPAhWkr1QKHLYiD44Q6AEIHDA#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=54wzAQAAAMAAJ&pg=PA547&lpg=PA547&dq=aristee+tissot+new+orleans+attorney&source=bl&ots=a3ojvnRoAB&sig=1ESnzDtpRlrMHo_hlfkw9Cr0d5U&hl=en&sa=X&sqi=2&ved=0ahUKewjmoZfO4fnPAhWkr1QKHLYiD44Q6AEIHDA#v=onepage&q&f=false). Accessed 6 Sep 2017.

<sup>8</sup> <https://books.google.com/books?id=ZXYUCz-PjCAC&pg=PA211&dq=Aristee+Tissot+new+orleans+attorney&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewjRmr372vnPAhWMSyYKHXguCjoQ6AEIjzAA#v=onepage&q=Aristee%20Tissot%20new%20orleans%20attorney&f=false>,  
<https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/25528138/>, accessed 9 Sep 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Shaw, Albert, ed., *The Review of Reviews: Volume XIII, No. 2*, February 1896, p. 159. Available at books.Google.com.

<sup>10</sup> <https://cdn.loc.gov/master/pnp/habshaer/la/la0000/la0062/data/la0062data.pdf>. Accessed 10 Sep 2017.

<sup>11</sup> I have searched several times for the source of this quotation since I first found it on the internet. I maintain that it exists, but I unfortunately am unable to provide its source.

<sup>12</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murphy\\_J.\\_Foster](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murphy_J._Foster). Accessed 10 Sep 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Email exchange between Mr. Littauer and the author, 15 Feb 2016.