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 may 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.

Lex "Etats-Unis", BM3. This balloon was constructed from two baskets of earlier balloons, "Napoléon" and "Niromelle." 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.

19787 Les "Etats-Unis" complete folded letter, Sept 27, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Binche, Belgium (Oct 4, 1870 backstamps), carried 83 kg of mail. One stamp faulty. (BM3 €775) ..................... $200.00

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

L' "Armand Barbes" BM6. This flight carried Gambetta (real name Gamber(e)), Interior Minister, and his secretary on a harrowing trip being blow of course, being shot at almost continuously by Prussian forces and crash landing in a forest. Gambetta's hand was grazed by a bullet. Gambetta, as the press called him, became part of French lore. (BM6 €375) $180.00

19791. Le "Armand*Barbes" VF+ complete folded letter, Oct 1, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Brussels, Belgium (Oct 8, 1870 backstamp), red boxed "PD" mark and additional backstamps, carried 100 kg of mail. 20w15 Roumet cert that states condition as "TB. +++++ (BM6 €375) $180.00

Henry Gitner Philatelists, Inc. France- Ballon Monte PO Box 3077, Middletown, NY 10940
19792 Le "Armand Barbes" VF complete folded letter, Oct 5, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Dieppe (Oct 18, 1870 backstamp), carried 100 kg of mail. (BM6 €375) .......... $160.00

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 accidently 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.

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

19794 Le "Jules Favre No 1" VF complete folded letter (small piece removed), Oct 14, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to England (sharp Oct 18, 1870 London backstamp), black boxed "PD" mark, carried 195 kg of mail. The second balloon to land outside of France having landed north of Chimay (Belgium). (BM13 €350) ................. $165.00

19795 Le "Godfrey Cavaignac" VF complete folded letter on Ballon Monte stationery, Oct 13, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Trouville (Oct 18, 1870 backstamp), carried 170 kg of mail. Pilot was the famous aeronaut Pierre Godard who was almost 70 years old. (BMI 1 €450) $210.00

19796 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.

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

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

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

19805 Le "Colonel Charras" VF complete folded letter on Ballon Monte stationery, Oct 28, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Liege, Belgium, Nov 2, 1870 France Ouest (West) backstamp, red boxed "PD" mark, carried 460 kg of mail, heaviest load of correspondence carried on any siege balloon. Excellent example. (BM21 €770+ premium for Belgium) ............. $400.00

19801 Le "Victor Hugo" F-VF complete folded letter, Oct 17, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Zurich, Switzerland (sharp struck Oct 24, 1870 backstamp), carried 440 kg of mail, red boxed "PD" mark and light blue commercial handstamp at top right. (BM15 €450) ......................... $150.00

19804 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.
19808 Le "Gironde" Gazette des absents #5, Nov 5, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Charente inferieure (Nov 9, 1870 backstamp), carried 60 kg of mail. Tape repair of separation at left edge. (BM27 €500) $125.00

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 "General Uhrich": BM30. Excessive rain and wind conditions were so bad that after close to 9 hours, the soaked aeronauts came down not far from Paris (only a few leagues away). This is not surprising given that the wind blew them one direction and then another. The landing was rough as there was no control of the balloon. This was because it was so cold that the controls froze in place, even hoarfrost formed on the ropes. Aeronauts suffered no injuries on landing but changed into peasant garments to avoid Prussian capture. It is remarkable that they survived.

19810 Le "General Uhrich" VF complete folded letter on Ballon Monte stationery (on reverse), Nov 16, 1870 Paris cancel, Nov 24, 1870 Pas-en-Artois backstamp, carried 80 kg of mail. (BM30 €400) $180.00

19811 Le "General Uhrich" VF complete folded letter, Nov 14, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Periqueux (Nov 20, 1870 backstamp), carried 80 kg of mail. (BM30 €400) $180.00

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 too much to bear. The landing was nothing short of miraculous, with the aeronauts jumping out of the balloon at 14 hours for the cold and constant threat of death for the two aeronauts who decided to blow up the balloon. Despite the wind, the aeronauts survived the rough landing and returned to France. This flight also witnessed the first documented aerial use of a battery powered lamp.

19812 Le "Ville d'Orleans" Fine complete folded letter, Nov 21, 1870 Paris (Passy) cancel, sent to Plombieres, 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) $750.00

19813 Le "Ville d'Orleans" VF complete folded letter, Nov 22, 1870 Paris cancels, sent to Orleans, carried 230 kg of mail. (BM33 €800) $400.00

19814 Le "Ville d'Orleans" Superb Gazette de absents #9, Nov 22, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Nantes (faint Nantes backstamp, likely dated in early December), carried 230 kg of mail. Excellent quality. (BM33 €1,200) $700.00

19815 Le "Franklin", VF complete folded letter, Dec 1, 1870 Paris cancel, carried 100 kg of mail. (BM38 €500) $230.00

19816 Le "Franklin" Gazette des absents #1, Dec 1, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Norwich, England (Dec 12, 1870 backstamp) black boxed "PD" mark, mixed issue franking, carried 100 kg of mail. (BM38 €890) $475.00
19817 L’Armée de Bretagne” F-VF BM39 ($400) possibly Le “Denis Papin, BM40 ($575), but this is not certain, complete folded letter on Ballon Monte stationery, Dec 6, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Calvados, Dec 19, 1870 La Delivrande (13) backstamp, carried 55 kg of mail. Letter says that “...we should wait for the Prussians to retreat and see what they leave behind in the countryside.” (BM39 $400) ................................................. $180.00

19818 Le "Ville de Paris" VF complete folded letter, Dec 13, 1870 Paris cancel, no arrival mark on this flight. Carried 63 kg of mail. After 5 1/2 harrowing hours trying to avoid Prussian held areas and fierce winds, the aeronauts landed in the trees in a precarious position. They avoided injury only to have the locals interrogate them and send them off to military prison for they landed in Prussia! The rest of the story involves a daring prison break and a difficult return trip to Paris. (BM42 $650)........... $300.00

Le "Tourville", BM50. This balloon arrived in the right location, but when the aeronauts asked where they were, they thought the locals said near Vaxses 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.

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

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

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

19822 Le “Armée de Loire” XF complete folded letter, Dec 30, 1870 Paris cancel, sent to Dieppe (Jan 3, 1871 backstamps), carried 232 kg of mail. Fortunately, the balloon landed in a camp of French troops rather than Prussian troops. (BM53 $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.

19823 Le “Newton” VF folded wrapper, Jan 3, 1871 Paris cancel, sent to Bordeaux (June 12, 1871 backstamp), carried 310 kg of mail. Light cover fold through stamp otherwise (BM54 $475) ...............$130.00

19824 Le “Newton” cover, light Dec 31, 1870 Paris cancel and Jan 12, 1871 Tarre backstamp, carried 310 kg of mail. (BM54 VF $475).......................... $220.00

19825 Le “Newton” complete folded letter, Dec 31, 1870 Paris cancel, Jan 11 1871 Angoulene backstamp, carried 310 kg of mail. (BM54 VF $475)................... $220.00

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.
19826 Le "Duquesne" VF folded wrapper, Jan 4, 1871 Paris cancel, sent to Clermont Ferrand (Jan 18, 1871 backstamp), carried 150 kg of mail. This balloon was fitted with two propellers that could be controlled by the aeronaut. The winds increased and the balloon landed in Prussian held territory. Capture was avoided with the help of local residents and they arrived in French held territory. (BM55 €450) ......................... $210.00

19827 Le "Kepler" cover (neatly trimmed at top and bottom, may have been used as a periodical wrapper), Jan 10, 1871 Paris cancel, Jan 12, 1871 backstamp (town name unclear), carried 160 kg of mail. The aeronauts could hear Prussian artillery aimed at Paris even though they had been airborne in frightful cold for over 5 hours. (BM57 €500) ......................... $160.00

19828 Le "Kepler" complete folded letter, Jan 10, 1871 Paris cancel, sent to Ryes (Jan 13, 1871 backstamp), carried 160 kg of mail. The aeronauts could hear Prussian artillery aimed at Paris even though they had been airborne in frightful cold for over 5 hours. (BM57 €500) ......................... $160.00

19829 Le "General Faidherbe" complete folded letter with interesting content on 1871 bombardment, prompting the use of "The Times" advertisement or American Embassy bag for sending mail, Jan 11, 1871 Paris cancel, sent to Trouville sur Mer (Jan 13, 1871 backstamp), carried 60 kg of mail. This flight arrived closer to intended destination than any other siege balloon and only balloon to carry dogs instead of pigeons for communication as the pigeons did poorly in the cold. It did not work out well for the dogs or the messages they carried on specially designed collars for after landing, upon release, the dogs were never seen again. (BM59 €500) ......................... $275.00

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 €440) $350.00

19831 Le "General Bourbaki" VF complete folded letter, Jan 18, 1871 Paris cancel, sent to Dieppe (Jan 30, 1871 backstamp), carried 150 kg of mail. This balloon was fitted with two propellers that could be controlled by the aeronaut. The winds were strong and the flight was smooth. Upon landing, the dogs were never seen again. Thanks to a local guide, he evaded search parties looking for him and eventually got the mail to safety. (BM65 €600) ......................... $290.00

19833 F-VF Jan 29, 1871 folded letter on Ballon Monte stationery meant to travel by next available balloon, but never flew because the war ended on Jan 28 and the siege was lifted ending the need for the balloons. Probably as close to armistice day balloon mail as one can acquire. Interesting piece of siege history. ......................... $125.00

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