

# THE ROLE OF THE SHIPPING POSTMASTERS OF SOUTH AFRICA

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1910. Registered Letter to Dar-es-Salaam, German East Africa, mailed by a passenger on the RMS 'Norman' of the Union Castle line on 9th March 1910 in Cape Town.

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# THE ROLE OF THE SHIPPING POSTMASTERS OF SOUTH AFRICA

Dr. JOACHIM R. FRANK.

The Shipping Postmaster handstamps are peculiar to South Africa and were used only in Cape Town and Durban. The Postmaster at Alfred Docks Post Office in Cape Town acted as Shipping Postmaster and boarded ships in the harbour, initially only the contracted mail ships, but later also foreign vessels, as they arrived or departed. His duties were to sell postage stamps and postal orders and accept registered letters, cables and telegrams, including Ocean Letters, for onward transmission.

In later years some ordinary mail came to be accepted as well, while mail was also collected from Italian and German liners. The Shipping Postmaster, assisted in Cape Town by an Assistant Shipping Postmaster on busy days, only applied his cancellation to mail with pre-Union or South African stamps while he was on board ship. Such mail as was posted in the ship's box was treated as domestic mail but items bearing foreign stamps received the Paquebot cancellation. At times different Shipping Postmaster's markings were used concurrently. The service lasted in Cape Town from 1906 until 4th September 1973.

The Shipping Postmaster of Durban, operating from Point Post Office, handled a much smaller volume of mail, as the vast majority of telegrams were sent from Cape Town. There was no assistant at Durban and relatively little mail is recorded from this office, which is believed to have been in existence from 1911 until 27th December 1965. In the pre-World War I period it is generally possible to identify the mail ship associated with a particular cover or postcard by reference to the sailing dates.

## Registered Letters.

A registered letter to Dar-es-Salaam, German East Africa, mailed by a passenger on the R.M.S. "Norman" of the Union-Castle Line on 9th March 1910 at Cape Town is shown in Figure 1. The 9d postage is made up by a double 2½d per ½ oz. rate plus the 4d registration fee. The Shipping Postmaster did not use a registration label or handstamp prior to World War II but merely applied



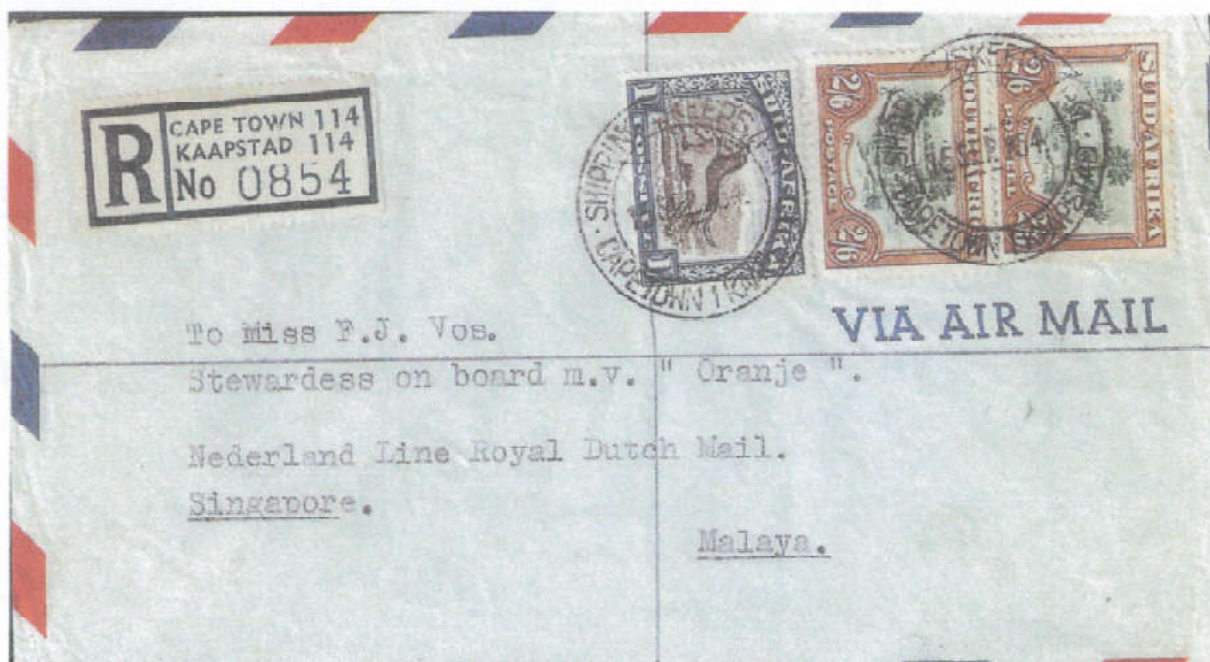


an extra impression of his rubber stamp cancellation over the number written on the envelope in pencil or crayon. This early cover bears backstamps of Cape Town, Johannesburg and Lourenço Marques. Only two covers bearing this postmark (Allen Type 2) have been recorded according to De Jager.

The 1937 registered cover illustrated in *Figure 2* and used locally shows a small, double oval "Assistant Shipping Postmaster / Cape Town" rubber stamp dated 21st May 1937 (Allen Type 11a). The postal rate is made up of 1d postage and 4d registration fee.

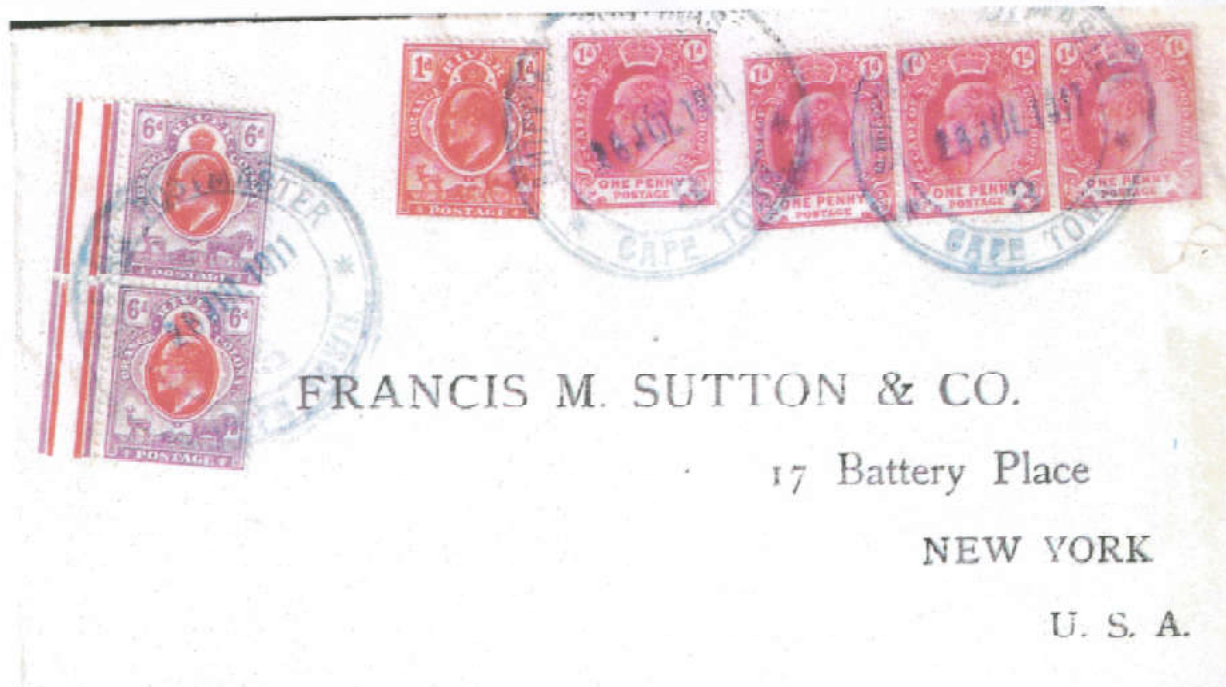


In 1949 the Cape Town rubber handstamps were replaced by bilingual metal, double circle date stamps. The 15th September registered airmail letter to Singapore shown in *Figure 3* is rated six shillings, being 2/9d per 1/2 oz. postage plus 6d registration. A numbered Cape Town registration label has been applied to the cover while the postmark is Allen's Type 15.



**Late Fee Mail.**

Mail posted after the official time of closing of the mails incurred a Late Fee charge, the amount depending on the time of posting. This mail was of necessity handled by the Shipping Postmaster who used stamps of any of the four provinces indiscriminately during the 1910-13 'interprovincial period'. Figure 4 shows an implicit Late Fee cover, meaning that no handstamp or endorsement indicating this was applied. The use of such handstamps was discontinued officially on 1st August



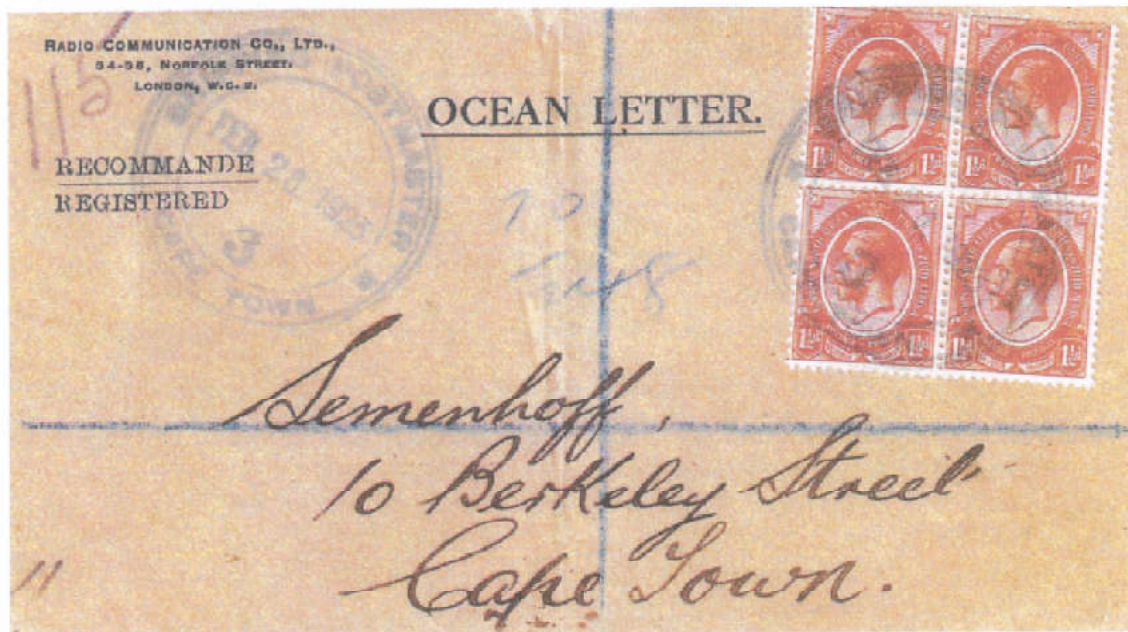
1913. The cover, addressed to New York, is rated 1/5d and prepaid with a mixture of Cape of Good Hope and Orange River Colony stamps cancelled by means of Allen's Type 3 postmark dated 28 July 1911. The rate is made up by the double 2½d U.P.U. rate plus one shilling Late Fee. It has been stated erroneously that the Shipping Postmaster service did not function during World War I but a cover dated 9th October 1915 (Figure 5) indicates otherwise. This mourning cover is rated 1d Imperial Penny postage plus a 6d Late Fee and is cancelled by the rare Allen Type marking, as well as London F.S. 62 and a Paquebot mark on the cover.



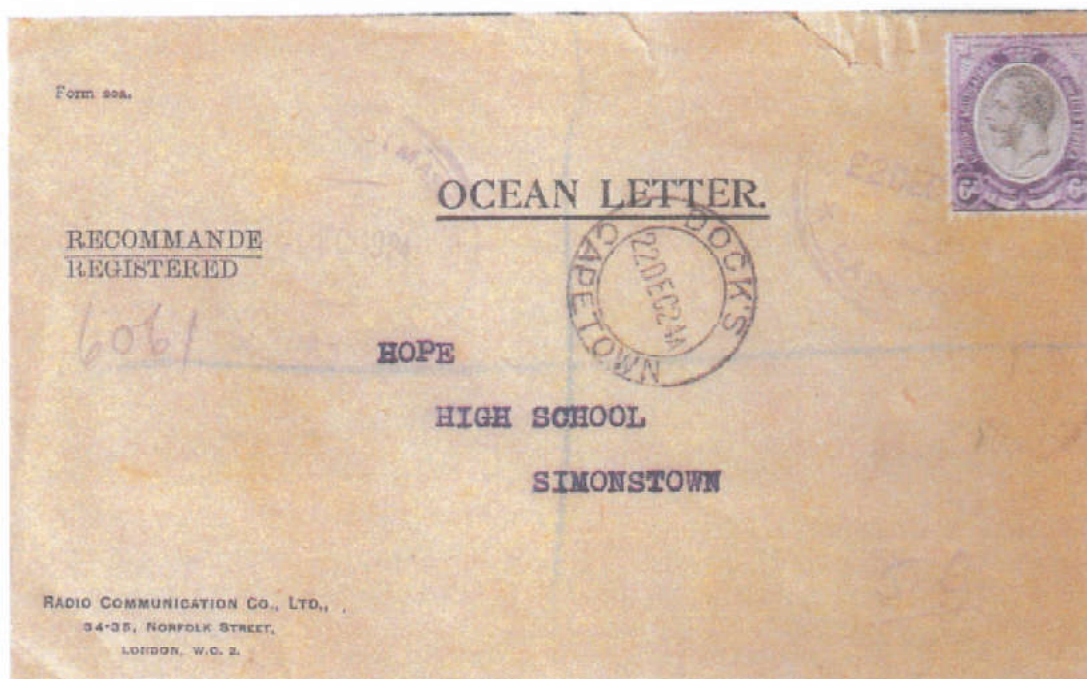


### Ocean Letters.

These are telegrams from a ship at sea passed on to another ship at sea for delivery through the postal service at the port of arrival, in this case Cape Town or Durban. The British Postmaster General imposed the condition that the final mailing had to be by registered letter if possible. Consequently the majority of surviving Shipping Postmaster markings of the 1920s are on Ocean Letters, but these are scarce. Although Hosking in his invaluable 'Ocean Letter' books illustrates several South African covers, he does not mention the Union-Castle Line's contribution, the source of these items. My earliest Ocean Letter bears a Shipping Postmaster / Cape Town strike of 26th February 1923 of Allen Type 6, with a digit '3' in the lower segment (*Figure 6*). The postal charge was 1½d and a registration fee of 4d was added, leading to a convenience over-payment of ½d.



An entire Ocean Letter is shown in *Figure 7*. The impressive message form of this short-lived company indicates that the telegram was handed in on the S.S. "Balranald" of the P. & O. Steam Navigation Line on 10th December 1924 for transmission to the S.S. "Kenilworth Castle" steaming south to Cape Town. It was received by the Shipping Postmaster, Cape Town, on 22nd December 1924 (Allen Type 7) and was passed for mailing at the Docks post office.






# RADIO COMMUNICATION COMPANY, LIMITED.

84-85, NORFOLK STREET, STRAND, W.C.2.

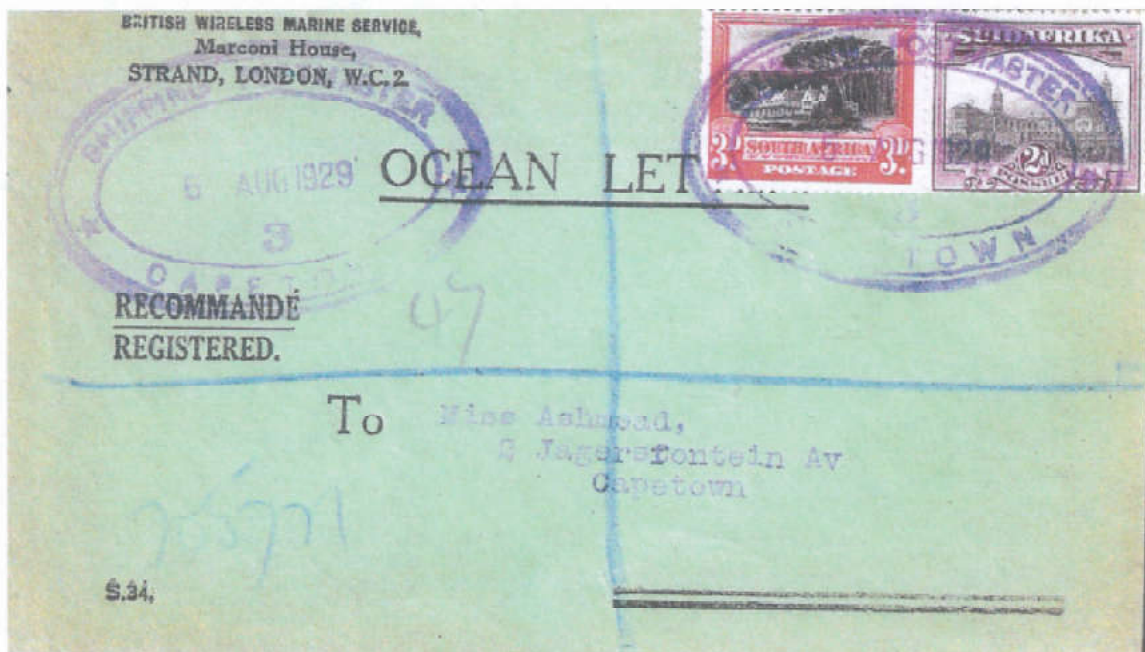
[W. &amp; S. Ltd.]

(685-85)

## OCEAN LETTER.

"KENILWORTH CASTLE"			Station.		Date	10 DEC 1924
Preflx.	Number.		No. of Words.	RECEIVED.		
OL	3	9	30	From	Time	By
				GFEM	1307	A.E.E.
POSTED.				CHARGES.		
Port		Date	By	Due to own Ship	...	
CAPETOWN		DEC 22	A.E.J.	Paid out	...	
Handed in on board the S.S. BALRANALD				on 16th 1924		
for transmission and posting via S.S. "KENILWORTH CASTLE"						
To						
HOPE HIGH SCHOOL SIMONSTOWN						

A large, oval, violet Shipping Postmaster / Cape Town postmark was applied to an Ocean Letter for local delivery dated 5th August 1929 franked 5d, i.e. 1d postage and 4d registration fee (Figure 8). Once again the numeral '3' features in the lower segment of the cancellation (Allen Type 8). The Ocean Letters, flourishing on the South African sea route in the 1920s, seem to disappear abruptly in 1930. I have recorded only two Ocean Letters mailed at and postmarked by the 'Point, Durban' Shipping Postmaster and both were dated 28th November 1927.



### Delivery of Short-Paid Mail.

A unique usage of the Shipping Postmaster / Cape Town mark (Allen Type 13) is shown in Figure 9. The registered postal stationery envelope posted out of course ('P.O.O.C.') i.e. mailed in a postbox without formal registration in Pretoria was compulsorily registered and delivered to the recipient

Sport and General Press Agency, London.

CANADIAN

POST

CORRESPONDENCE



Durban  
Feb 3, 1936

Here's a wonderful trip.  
Warm and not too warm  
Sunny every day. Best blue  
Ses. Pleasant Company.  
Expensive but the telephone  
Feeling very bit. Learn here  
to-day for Bombay. 5 weeks  
in India. It's a long time to  
be away. Hope you are having  
a good winter. Regards to Mrs  
Andrew & Co. - Bombay. For his  
letter forwarded. Too long to write  
Best regards - E. H. de la

THIS IS A REAL PHOTOGRAPH

Lady Meredith

Hotel Huntington



1110 Pine Ave  
Montreal

Durban received a steel, double circle datestamp inscribed 'Shipping / Skeeps / Pos-Point Natal' in 1948 (Allen Type 4). This short-lived cancellation is shown on a 'controlled mail' cover in Figure 12.



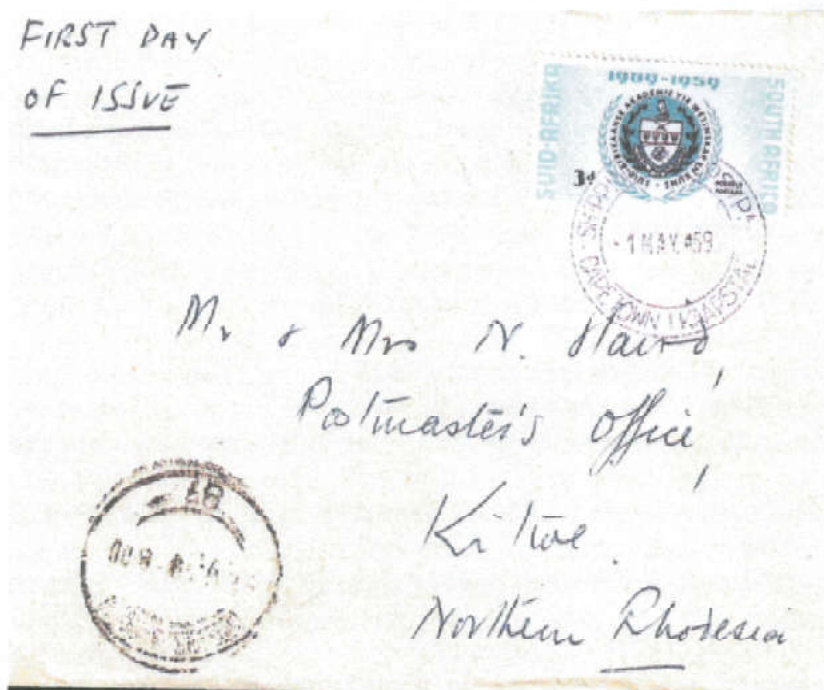
D. J. Hanney, Pirie  
23 Victoria Street  
Auckland  
Johannesburg

Similarly the only coloured steel hammer strike, in violet, is an example of Allen's Type 15 of the Shipping Postmaster / Cape Town postmark used to produce a First Day Cover to Kitwe, Northern Rhodesia, on 1st May 1959 (Figure 13).

This completes an overview of a unique service which produced some rare postal markings. These originally, before World War II, constituted important documentation but subsequently became a tourist attraction. It is best summed up by Putzel as "one of the most difficult sections to complete. Frequently only one or two copies have been seen". In addition, one should note the usage of the item and make allowance for the variable clarity of these postmarks, often poorly struck.



FIRST DAY  
OF ISSUE



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# The End

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**A grateful South African Philately Club thanks**

**Dr. Joachim Frank**

**for sharing his collection with us.**

**10/10/2020**

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