

# THE SHIPPING POSTMASTER CANCELLATIONS 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 'SHIPPING POSTMASTER' Cancellations of South Africa

By Joachim Frank

## Introduction

The Shipping Postmaster and Assistant Shipping Postmaster marks are unique to South Africa. They were applied in Cape Town and Durban only. These officials visited ships, mostly the mail carriers and (later) tourist cruisers, shortly before departure and on arrival, to sell postage stamps and money orders as well as to accept registered letters and telegrams.

They also handled Ocean Letters, which were sent from a Northbound vessel to one proceeding to Cape Town or Durban for onward transmission.

Outgoing letters automatically incurred a 'late fee' charge, believed to have been 2/6 before Union and 1/- afterwards. This was reduced to 6d in 1915 and abolished in the 1920's.

I have noted a single instance of the Shipping Postmaster (SPM) collecting a postage due charge. Cape Town had an Assistant Shipping Postmaster (ASPM) who accompanied the SPM to ships when pressure of business warranted it. Durban only had a SPM.

The Cape Town SPM, active 1906 - 1973, operated out of the Alfred Docks (later Docks) post office, while the Durban one was stationed at Point from 1911 - 1965.

Allen<sup>1</sup> pointed out that in the case of Cape Town each SPM handstamp had a 'mate' for the Assistant SPM.

Prior to 1934 these postal markings were generally only applied to Union-Castle Line mail, except for a notable German group in 1927, but subsequently mail from the Italian and German liners was also accepted. However, only South African stamps were postmarked by the SPM, while mail with foreign franking received 'Paquebot' strikes.

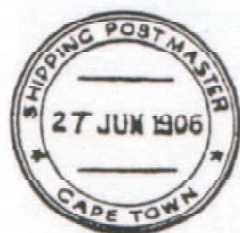
In later years, particularly in Durban, non-Registered mail received the SPM marks on occasion. It is difficult to ascribe periods of currency to these rubber stamps, as different types were often used concurrently. The markings were not used during 1916 - 1918 and World War II.

Registration labels were not used till 1939, before that an additional SPM handstamp was applied to the cover and the registration number written across this.

## Cape Town 'Shipping Postmaster' markings

The earliest recorded *Shipping Postmaster Cape Town* cancel is a rubber stamp with straight lines above and below the date and dated 27 JUN 1906.

Although two strikes 'on piece' are known, one of which was in the Franschhoek Collection sold by Spink on 20.6.2012 as lot 394, I have yet to see a cover bearing this strike.



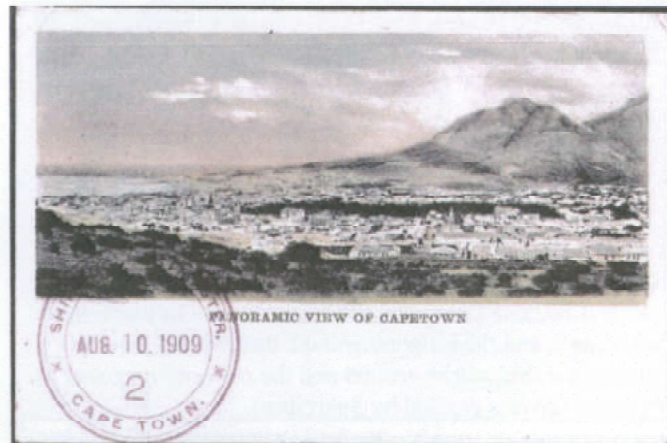
Illustrations  
Reduced  
In size  
M11 - M12



Postmarks of the Cape of Good Hope (1984) by Goldblatt

Shortly afterwards a similar *Assistant Shipping Postmaster Cape Town* rubberstamp, with wavy lines above and below the date, appeared and was in use till 1914. Two covers with this strike have been noted.

The only recorded 'Shipping Postmaster/Cape Town 2' strike is dated AUG 10 1909 this violet cachet was applied to the front of a postcard, addressed to Germany, while the stamps were cancelled at Alfred Docks post office. The date coincides with the arrival of the RMS *Kentworth Castle* at Cape Town.



Shipping Postmaster Cape Town 2 AUG 10 1909

A violet *Assistant Shipping Postmaster/Cape Town* strike dated FEB 28 1907 and applied on the RMS *Kinfauns Castle*.



Kinfauns Castle



RMS Saxon

A block of four Cape Colony 1/- stamps shows an APR 13 1910 in violet applied on RMS *Saxon* - not recorded by Allen<sup>1</sup>



A Registered cover to Dar-es-Salaam mailed from RMS *Norman* on 7 March 1910 bears backstamps of Cape Town, Johannesburg and Lourenco Marques. (See above). It is one of two covers recorded with this violet rubber stamp and is rated a double 2½d UPU rate plus 4d registration fee.

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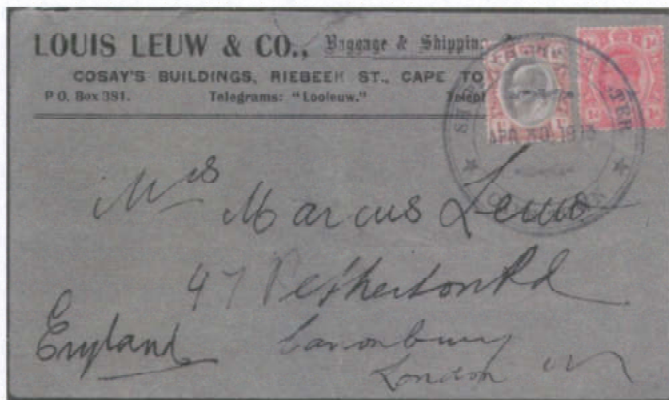


# The 'SHIPPING POSTMASTER' Cancellations of South Africa



Above - A 28 July 1911 commercial cover to the USA from RMS *Armada Castle* shows interprovincial usage of ORC stamps as well as CGH issues, prepaying the double UPU 2½d rate plus 1/- late fee charge. Its 'Shipping Postmaster-3' strike was in use in 1911 - 1913 and applied in blue in this instance. The late fee was for acceptance on board of outgoing European mail steamers up to advertised time of departure.

The cover below illustrates an attractive strike with scrolls above and below the date and no numeral. Applied to a cover from RMS *Kildonan Castle* on Apr 30 1913 to England it was rated 1d postage plus a 1/- late fee, with interprovincial use of Transvaal stamps.



It would appear that two covers and one large piece are the only recorded examples of this blue cancel, although the mark was in use during 1913 - 1915 and 1920.



The registered cover above to France is cancelled with an early blue strike of a marking incorporating a smaller '3', which was used during 1913 - 1925. Dated DEC 8 1913, was sent from RMS *Kenilworth Castle* rated 2½d UPU postage and 4d registration. Early strikes often do not reflect the complete year, but did so later when the handstamp became more worn.



A smaller marking without an inner ring and with a broader '3' at its base was in use in 1924 - 1928. The registered cover above to East London on 13 JUN 1924, rated 2d postage plus 4d registration, cannot be assigned to a ship. Sailing dates are apparently no longer available.



The above Ocean Letter dated to 16 MAY 1927 shows a Shipping Postmaster strike reported but not seen by Allen.<sup>1</sup> It is a faint but legible strike in violet.

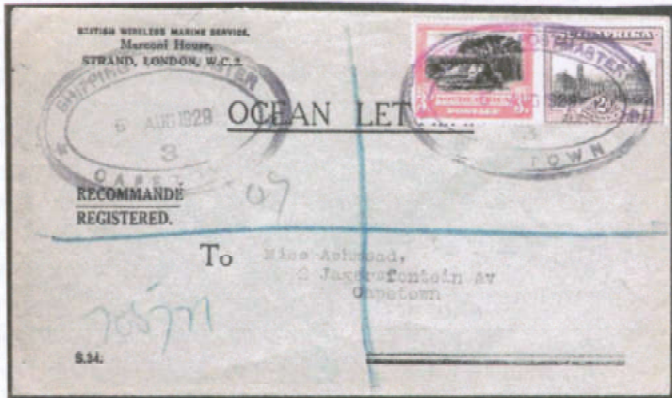


A contemporary Assistant Shipping Postmaster, Cape Town strike is unusual in that it was damaged and became distorted. The example shown above on a registered postcard from the Hapag Lloyds' *D. Toledo* (Steamer *Toledo*), would appear to indicate a 4d late fee or was intentionally overpaid. Dated 19 SEP 1927 it also shows a Docks strike. The damage to the marking was probably caused by the rubber portion detaching from its base. An identical card dated 4 SEP 1927 is known. Ed

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# The 'SHIPPING POSTMASTER' Cancellations of South Africa



The large oval cancel with a '3' at the base is known in black and violet. The cover above illustrates the latter colour on an Ocean Letter of 5 AUG 1929 with mandatory registration. The wording is 'Shipping Postmaster 3/Cape Town' and was in use in the period 1927 - 1930. It was replaced by a smaller oval mark without a numeral.



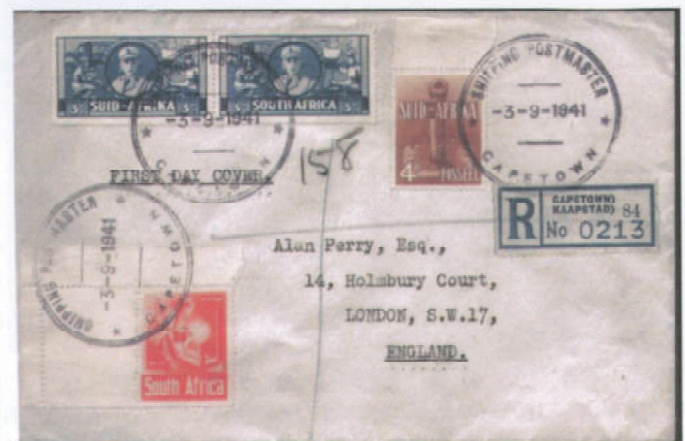
An example is shown above applied to a registered cover postmarked on the *Guilio Cesare* of the *Navigazione Generale Italiana* and handed to the SPM on 6 FEB 1935.

As stated in the 'Introduction' - From 1939 Registration labels were used on SPM covers instead of manuscript numbers. Between 1939 and at least 1950 these labels, probably applied at the Docks post office, invariably bore a PO code No '84'.

During the period 1939 - 1949 a similar violet rubber stamp was used with the month denoted with a numeral (Illustrated below). This philatelic cover includes a 6d 'Large War' cancelled on the first day of issue being 3-9-1941.



Above, a Registered postal stationery envelope to England dated 26 DEC 1931 this datestamp was used from 1930 to 1938.

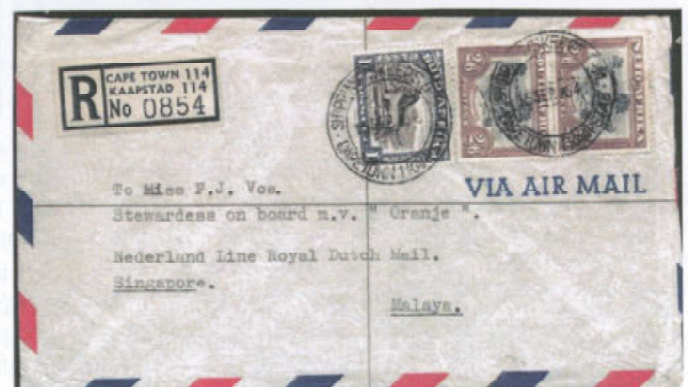


In 1949 a bilingual circular metal datestamp, with the month in words, was introduced. Inscribed *Shipping/Skeeps/PM-Cape Town* (Index 1 or 2) *Kaapstad*. Below a Registered airmail cover to Singapore 15 SEP 1954 with index '1' for the SPM. The rate is 2/9 per ½ oz airmail, plus 6d registration. A ASPM handstamp has a '2' index and is slightly smaller in diameter. During the late 1950's these strikes are also known in purple.



A similar design was produced for the *Assistant Shipping Postmaster/Cape Town* and used from 1933 to 1937. Extensively used by philatelists in 1937 creating souvenir covers using KGV1 Coronation stamps. An example to a local address, dated 21 MAY 1937, is illustrated above.

A new circular *Shipping Postmaster/Cape Town* rubber stamp was introduced in 1933 and remained in use during 1939.



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# The 'SHIPPING POSTMASTER' Cancellations of South Africa

## Cape Town 'Shipping Postmaster' markings (Continued)



As early as 1950 the metal datestamp appeared with the month in Roman numerals, as shown above. This cancel does exist with the dateline inverted, as in this instance. A large bilingual cachet of *Shipping Postmaster, Docks Cape Town* was struck on Registered covers at this time in addition to Registration labels or handstamps.

This metal datestamp remained in use till 1973, although Allen<sup>1</sup> lists the last recorded date as 19 May 1972.

### Durban 'Shipping Postmaster' markings

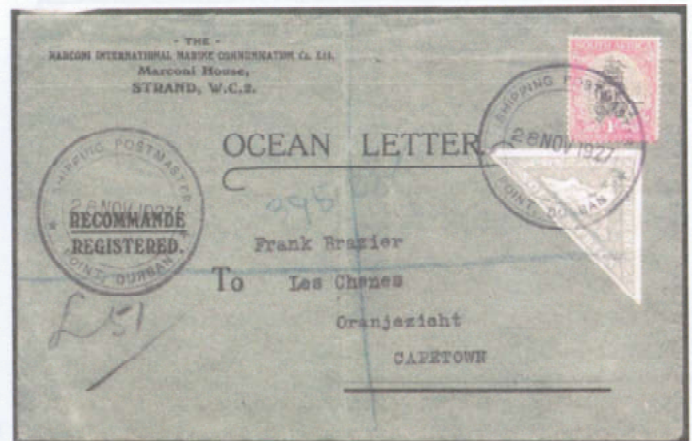
Although the service was introduced in 1911, very few Durban marks are recorded. It appears that most maritime postal activities occurred in Cape Town. Hagger<sup>2</sup> wondered whether the facilities were due to inter-colonial rivalry!

No SPM markings for Durban have been reported prior to November 1927. Allen<sup>1</sup> did produce a 'mock up' in his book, based on Cockrill's<sup>3</sup> observations, but it looks very much like a 'doctored' early Cape Town strike. As far as I am aware, no example is included in any collection of note.

### An early Shipping Postmaster/Point Durban cancellation

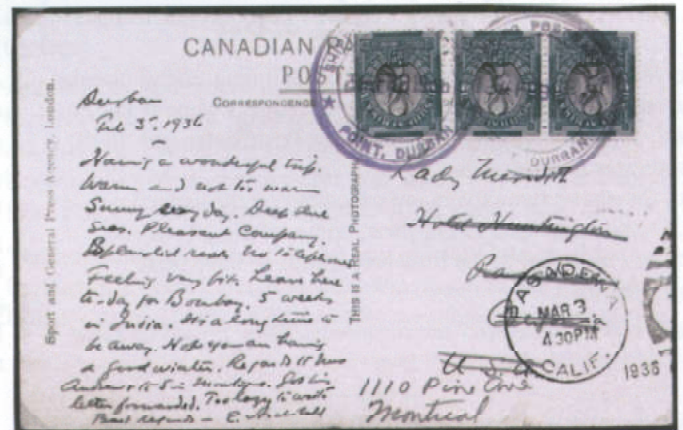
The earliest strike noted by the author is on an Ocean Letter dated 28 NOV 1927 (Illustrated in the top of the next column).

This double ring, violet rubber stamp reads *Shipping Postmaster/Point Durban* with a second strike applied to accommodate the registration number. Only two Ocean Letters, with the above date, are recorded.



Earliest Durban OCEAN LETTER 28 NOV 1927

Illustrated below, a well worn version of the above cancellation appears on a postcard from a cruise ship to USA and dated 3 FEB 1936. The foregoing is indicative of a prolonged use, but as very few examples are known, it indicates an almost non-existent survival rate.



Postcard from a cruise ship 3 FEB 1936

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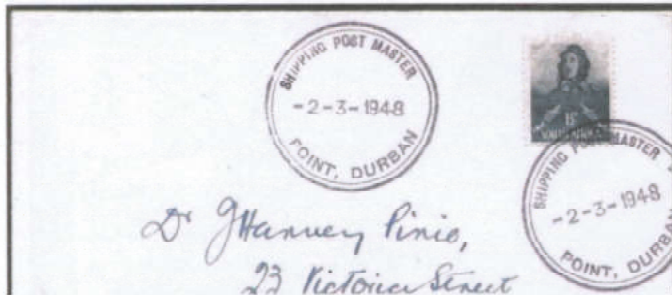
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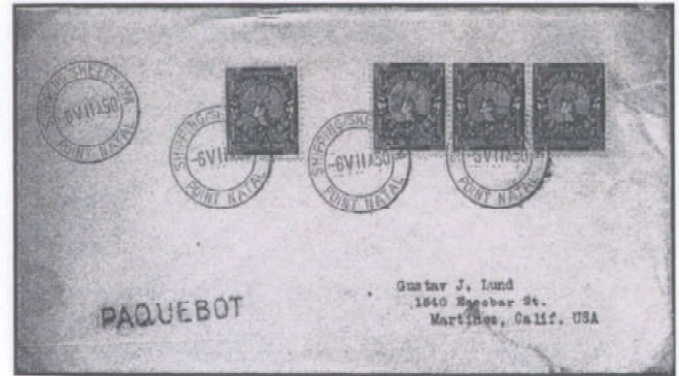
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In the period 1937 - 1948 a violet rubber datestamp was in use (see above) and is inscribed *Point, Durban*.



1950 'Paquebot' cover with a code A in the date 6 VIIA50

The Durban SPM frequently applied a *Paquebot* cachet as well in the 1950's, although this was not really necessary.

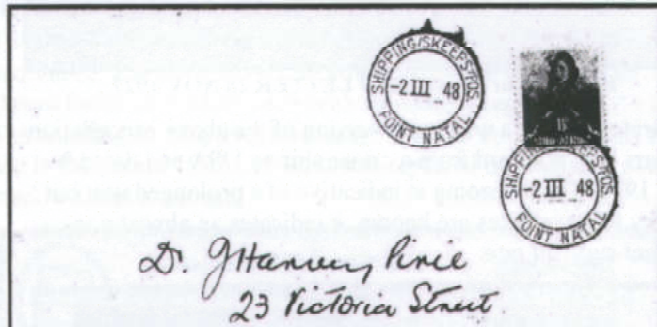
### In conclusion - 'The Challenge Factor'

This interesting section of 20<sup>th</sup> Century South African philately was regarded by Putzel...*as one of the most difficult to complete...* Frequently only a few examples have been seen and allowance must be made for 'condition'.

Durban SPM markings are especially difficult to obtain. Hagger felt that...*such is their rarity that anyone could collect South African maritime material for decades without ever seeing, let alone have the opportunity to acquire a single cover.*

From personal recollection I am aware that many of Hagger's examples were 'on piece'.

Until the mid-1930 these markings generally served a definite postal need, but after their discovery by philatelists they increasingly became 'souvenir mail' items. In the post-1950 period commercially used SPM covers are rarely encountered. Literature on the subject is scanty, but the following sources may be consulted for further information.



The year 1948 saw the introduction of bilingual metal circular date stamps with wording *Shipping/Skeeps/ (PM or POS) Point, Natal*. The abbreviation 'PM' denotes Postmaster and 'POS' is Posmeester in Afrikaans.

Both the above two covers are cancelled on the same date 2.3.47 and addressed to Dr. Pirie, editor of the *The South African Philatelist* at the time and appear to have been controlled mail.

*It suggests a 'philatelic' arrangement...many covers to Pirie have a similar hallmark - Editor*

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**References** <sup>1</sup> R.D. Allen - *Maritime Marks of South Africa* (1975)

<sup>2</sup> S.J. Hagger in R.F. Putzel - *Encyclopaedia of South African Post Offices and Postal Agencies* (1986)

<sup>3</sup> P. Cockrill's observations in *Ocean Mails* (1935) O. De Jager - *Introduction to the late fees of the Union of South Africa* (2007)

M. Dovey - *The 'Shipping Postmaster' Cancellations of South Africa* (2014)

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# The End

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**10/10/2020**

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