

## In Search of Professor A. Victor Segno

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While collecting the postal history of the French Colonial Allegorical Group Type over the last 35 years, I accumulated ten items addressed to one Professor A. Victor Segno of Los Angeles, California. I began to wonder — just who was Professor Segno, and what was his field of specialty? In the last five years, several Google hits have revealed that Professor Segno (Figure 1) was a self-proclaimed mentalist, who for the sum of \$10 per year (about \$200-\$250 today) would send his Success Waves (i.e., good vibrations) twice a day in subscribers' directions and their lives would improve in the areas of health, wealth, success, influence, love, ambition, etc.

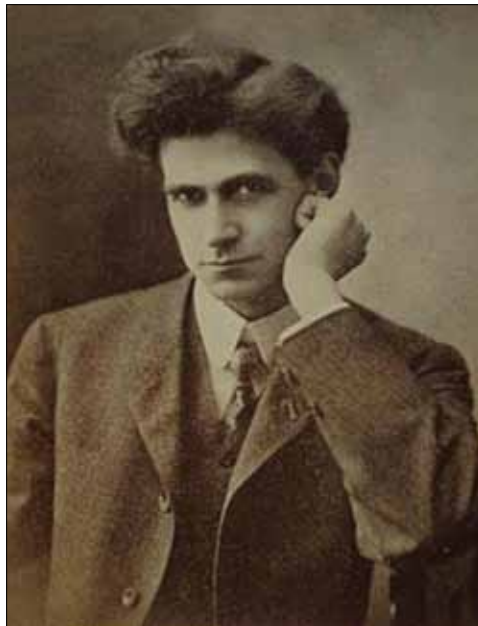


Figure 1. Portrait of Professor A. Victor Segno.

To unite his subscribers, Professor Segno formed the Segno Success Club, and according to the Postmaster of Los Angeles, he had over twelve thousand members of this Club by 1904. The Postmaster noted that Professor Segno was the largest private mailer in Los Angeles at this time, sending between six to seven thousand cards and letters a day to members and potential members (Figure 2). He was also one of the largest private recipients of mail, receiving thousands of letters each day containing inquiries about Success Club membership or dues for the same.



Figure 2. Advertising postcard sent by Professor Segno.

To support his Success Club activities, Professor Segno built two buildings in the Echo Park section of Los Angeles (near today's Dodger Stadium). The first was the American Institute of Mentalism (Figure 3), from which he conducted Success Club activities, and the second was the Segnogram Publishing Company, from which he published Institute books and pamphlets. He personally named the location of the complex "Inspiration Point."

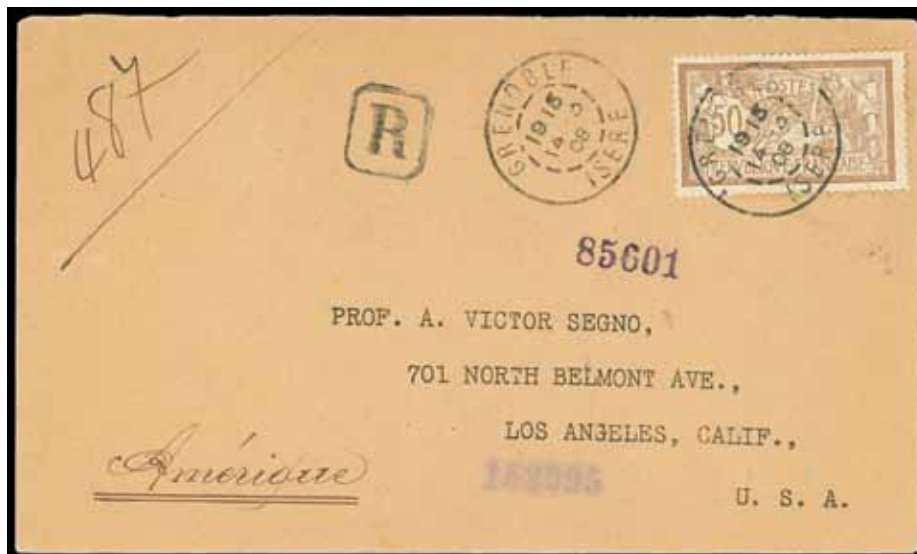
Professor Segno began his nefarious activities in Los Angeles around 1900, when he was 30 years old, and seems to have disappeared from the



**Figure 3. The American Institute of Mentalism in the Echo Park area of Los Angeles.**

L.A. scene around 1940, when he was 70 years old. His primary period of Success Club activity appears to have been between 1900 and 1916. In recent years I have begun to form a world-wide collection of covers addressed to Professor Segno. Incoming foreign mail can be found addressed to him and the Segno Success Club, A. Dell Segno (his wife until 1911, when he ran off with one of his secretaries, and the now former Mrs. Segno took charge of Success Club and American Institute of Mentalism activities), The American Institute of Mentalism, and the Chirollogical College of California (an early money-making endeavor of the Professor that highlighted palm reading and fortune telling). The availability of foreign origin covers suggests that the Segno business enterprises were bundling incoming foreign mail and selling it to the philatelic trade.

Most of the mail received by Segno and his related enterprises is from the period 1900-1916, suggesting that this was the period of his greatest activity and success. Much of it is in the form of preaddressed envelopes, which apparently accompanied advertising packets sent to potential new subscribers or existing members being contacted for membership renewal. A



**Figure 4. Segno cover posted from Grenoble, France in 1908.**



Figure 5. Printed matter rate of two millemes from Cairo in 1912.

typical example is shown in Figure 4. This preaddressed envelope was posted from Grenoble, France in 1908 at a 50 centimes registered rate to the Segno address in California. Undoubtedly, this letter contained the equivalent of ten dollars for Success Club membership.

To date I have Segno-related covers from France, Algeria, Monaco, numerous French Colonies, Spain, Belgium, England and a number of British Colonies. More unusual origins include Riga, Russia (now Latvia), the Austrian Office at Alexandretta and Egypt. The cover from Egypt is most unusual in that it is a postal stationery envelope sent from Cairo at the unsealed printed matter rate (Figure 5). Typically, mail to Segno-related activities is at normal international rates or the registered versions of the same. Why someone from Egypt was sending Professor Segno printed matter and just what it was are intriguing questions.

Mail from Central and South America and the Caribbean area is also available with diligent searching, as the registered letter from San Salvador in 1911 in Figure 6 illustrates. Note the request for a return receipt, something occasionally seen on Segno letters.

With Segno's operations headquartered in the United States, it seems logical to conclude that much of the Success Club membership should have been in the United States. With six to seven thousand letters being sent from the Segno organization each day, and thousands of incoming letters also arriving each day, covers from U.S. members or potential members of the Success Club should be easy to find. Yet after more than about two years of searching, I have found but one incoming U.S. letter to the Segno organization, and that is shown in Figure 7. It is a registered letter from Philadelphia sent in 1913 with 12¢ postage (2¢ postage + 10¢ registration) franked with the then-current Washington-Franklin issues. The year of posting is based on a Philadelphia transit on the reverse of the cover.

Despite searching through thousands of U.S. covers at endless national shows and the online cover accumulations of numerous dealers and auction



Figure 6. Registered letter from San Salvador in 1911 addressed in Spanish.



Figure 7. Only U.S. cover to Segno known to the author.

houses in the U.S. and overseas, I have not been able to locate a second U.S. incoming cover. For this reason, I decided to write this note to the members of the United States Stamp Society to elicit your help in finding additional U.S. Segno material.

What about outgoing mail from the Segno organization? Surprisingly, there is only one item known to me, and that is the Segno advertising postcard belonging to the Echo Park Historical Society (available on their web site for viewing and shown in Figure 2). This doesn't surprise me, for two reasons. It is unlikely that many of Segno's correspondents were stamp collectors who would keep their incoming mail, and that mail was franked at the most common rates of the day with the common stamps of the day, not likely to be saved.

Am I the only one who finds Professor Segno and his activities of interest? In fact, I am working with two "co-conspirators" on this project: Larry Harnisch, who writes feature articles for the *Los Angeles Times* on L.A. and its unusual residents; and Philip Deslippe, an American History graduate student at UC Santa Barbara, who studies the life and times of people like Professor Segno (see Figure 8). One of Larry's most recent contributions on Professor Segno can be read at: <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/oct/02/local/la-me-harnisch-stamp-collectibles-20121002>.

So I am appealing to members of the Society to be on the lookout for U.S. Segno-related covers (addressed to Professor A. Victor Segno, The Segno Success Club, The American Institute of Mentalism, A. Dell Segno or the Chirological College of California). Should you come across one, I can be reached at [edjg@alum.mit.edu](mailto:edjg@alum.mit.edu). Your help will be very much appreciated.



**Figure 8. Segno Success Club – Class of 2012: Philip Deslippe – UC Santa Barbara; Larry Harnisch – *Los Angeles Times*; Ed Grabowski – Collectors Club and author; and Professor A. Victor Segno – Pilot.**

