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With the collaboration of Joseph J. Geraci

**1852**  
**1858**

# The Transatlantic Company

After 150 years the discovery of a cover change the History of the Italian Company that transported emigrants between Genova and Buenos Ayres

## The Transatlantic Company's origins

The progressive and revolutionary wave that shocked Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century pushed several states to revise some positions as far as their social politics were concerned. All citizens were given more freedom to travel abroad and to found new communities using labor and services, together with the possibility of developing commercial trade with new markets.

In 1850, the struggle against slavery was just beginning. California was admitted into the Union as a free state, and in Brazil, pressures by the British Government put an end to the slave trade. The arrival of immigrants then became fundamental for the economy of many countries. In the United States, as a consequence of the California gold rush, the migratory flow towards the west left many job possibilities open on the East Coast, those places being progressively filled by Germans, Italians, Irish and Swiss arrivals, who were among the first protagonists of mass migration toward the New World.

It is likely these considerations caused Raffaele Rubattino and his partners to form the Transatlantic Steam Navigation Company, (legally constituted at Genova on 4 October 1852) whose aim was that of creating a navigation line between Genova and the River Plate (Argentina), and a second line between Genova and New York. The Sardinian Government granted a subsidy of 22.000 ltl. (Italian Lire) per voyage to North America and of 30.000 ltl. per voyage to South America, together with an exemption for anchorage tax at Sardinian ports, for which all merchant ships were subject, however, the Company was required to transport mail at no charge. The fleet was to constitute seven steamships, three of wood construction and four of iron, with a weight of at least 1.500 tons and 250 horsepower each. In case of war, the Government had the right to requisition the Company's ships but would pay a charter cost. This Convention, signed on the April 5, 1853, was the object of long discussions in Parliament and in the Subalpine Senate and was in the end approved by Law No. 1592 of July 11, 1853.

The total estimated cost of the seven steamships was about 10.000.000 ltl., that is to say, this amount would absorb all the corporate assets of the Company, but only 8.000.000 ltl. had been subscribed to. So, on November 25, 1852, an agreement was made with Draper, Pietroni & Company, a London banker, who purchased the majority of the Company's stock and made it possible to order two iron steamships from the shipyards of Chester Graham & Company of Blackwall, and John Mare & Company of London, in the amount of 1.300.000 ltl. each.

The steamers were delivered with considerable delay

due to British preparations for war in the Crimea, whose importance superceded anything else in the shipyards. In addition, there was a general monetary crisis which exerted great influence, not only in supplying credit to the Transatlantic Company, but also on values of other commercial and industrial stocks, as well as to those belonging to the State. The Company was therefore forced to turn to the Sardinian Government in order to obtain a postponement of one year, which was granted with Law No. 523 of February 10, 1855. This released the Company from the obligation of building three wooden steamers, and fixed the subsidy for the South American line to 50.000 ltl. per round trip, while the engagement for the North American line was cancelled. The new situation caused a new election of the Board of Directors, who decided to charter the first two steamships delivered, the *Vittorio Emanuele* and the *Conte di Cavour*, to the Quartermaster of the French Army for troop transportation to the Black Sea. The three million gold French francs obtained from this charter freed Rubattino, his fellow Directors and the banks from their worries.

In September 1855, Rubattino proposed an increase of capital, from 10 to 25 millions ltl., in order to subsidize the purchase of additional steamships, or to charter them following the example of the English Government. On March 31, 1856, an assembly of shareholders approved an increase of capital to 18 million ltl. The increase was to have been entirely subscribed by Draper, Pietroni & Company of London, once the consent of the Subalpine Parliament was received, since these new directives would have necessarily involved some changes in the agreements with the Sardinian Government. The offer was valid for a period of six months, that is to say till September 30, 1856, otherwise the London bank would have recovered part of the financing by selling some stock.

Count Cavour (the Sardinian Prime Minister) aimed at nationalizing the Transatlantic Company, setting it free from any foreign interference and making the Genovese capital underwriters subscribe funds for the new arrangement. Consequently, he did his best to postpone parliamentary authorization of the new structure of the Transatlantic Company. In the meantime, on July 3, 1856, Rubattino and Giovanni Bollo, who were managing financial bankers and politicians, begun an advertising campaign in the main Italian newspapers announcing the impending steamer service for South America. Since the Sardinian government hadn't approved the new convention by September 30, 1856, Draper, Pietroni & Company threatened Rubattino with judicial attachment and the sale of the Torino, which at that time was about to leave for Brazil. In a few words, by October 23, 1856, the Transatlantic Company had to pay

42.000 pounds sterling, that is to say, 1.500.000 million ltl. The Directors of the Company, thanks to the intervention of Director Bollo and of members Antonio Rossi, Alessandro Collano and Giuseppe Guillot, fulfilled the request of Draper, Pietroni & Company on November 5, 1856. In reaction, stock of the Transatlantic Company relentlessly declined at the London Stock Exchange.

In the middle of this critical situation, Rubattino resigned his office as administrative manager and his resignation was followed by the entire group of old Genovese stockholders as well.

## The beginning of the transatlantic service

Regular navigation service between Genova and Rio de Janeiro began on October 20, 1856. In the meantime, the Transatlantic Company had requested full execution of the law of June 1, 1856, from the Sardinian government, in which postponement had been granted till December 31, 1857, the deadline to carry out transatlantic voyages. There was, however, the faculty to start the service in part before the time limit established, in order to obtain the subsidy. The text of the bill was discussed in the Chamber of Deputies and approved on May 23, 1857, but once in the Senate, it met resolute hostility and was rejected with 32 votes against, and only 24 votes for. Rubattino, acting in agreement with Bombrini, the Director of the Banca Nazionale, and with Domenico Balduino of the Credito Mobiliare, then proposed to constitute a large, new joint-stock company, that should have control of all the national navigation lines, shipyards, metallurgical works and dry docks. In the meanwhile, the Transatlantic Company should be released from any interference by Draper, Pietroni & Company by transferring share majority to the Credito Mobiliare and to the Banca Commercio e Industria of Torino. In this way it would have been possible to foil Draper, Pietroni & Company's plan to charter the Transatlantic Company vessels to the British government for the transportation of colonial troops to India, or, even worse, to sell them to that government.

## Carlo Pisacane's expedition

Other events greatly influenced the carrying out of the Company's service and its subsequent termination. On December 5, 1856, Rubattino lost the SS. *Castore* which sank not far from the Bocche di Bonifacio (between Sardinia and Corsica). For several reasons, it was a terrible disaster. First of all, there was strong competition from rival foreign companies. Then there was a rise in the price of coal (from 20 to 45 shillings a ton) due to the war in the Crimea, and finally, there was an increase in wages for the sea staff (Rubattino employed 250 people for his own eight steamers). But the heaviest blow fell on June 25, 1857, when a group of patriots (accor-



ding to the Republicans) or rebels (according to the Neapolitans) took possession of the *Cagliari*, commanded by Carlo Pisacane, another steamer of Rubattino's fleet in service between Genova, the island of Sardinia and Tunis. It was later captured by the Neapolitans and confiscated as "spoils of war". Problems with the Sardinian government affected the Transatlantic Company as well. In fact, in July 1857, the Subalpine Parliament denied any kind of further subsidy for the voyages to South America.

On October 19, 1857, after some stormy sessions within its Board of Directors' meetings, Michele Casaretto was elected as new president and thanks to this, it was possible to find agreement between the Rubattino Company, the Ansaldo metallurgic works and the "Screw Clippers" Company, promoted by Nino Bixio and which was currently being formed. Through the intervention of the Mayor of Genova, it was possible to obtain from the Credito Mobiliare a mortgage loan of 2.000.000 ltl. on personal property.

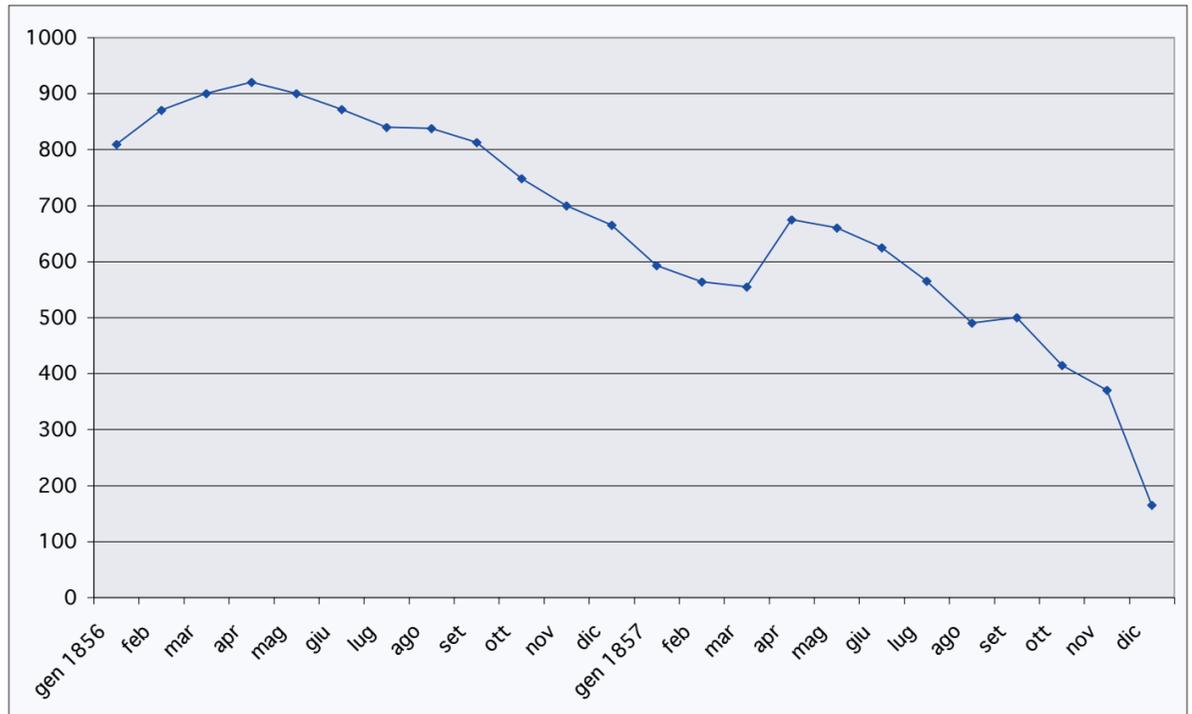
The legal basis of the Company under Sardinian law, whose name should have been Lloyd Genovese, seemed about to become fact when suddenly the Credito Mobiliare suffered a collapse and was forced to reduce its capital from 40.000.000 ltl. to 10.000.000 ltl. The Sardinian Government wasn't able to intervene because in anticipation of the war of 1859, it had requested a loan of 50.000.000 ltl. from the Banca Nazionale. And so, the Banca Sarda, a creditor of the Credito Mobiliare, also found itself in a very critical situation. In order to save the Rubattino and Ansaldo companies, it was necessary to sacrifice the Transatlantic Company, which was forced to wind-up its operations. With a bulletin issued on September 17, 1857, the Company announced the interruption of transatlantic service. The stock continued to decline, while Rubattino did his best to save himself from bankruptcy. All the steamships were detained, except the *Sardegna* which had been lent by Rubattino to the Transatlantic Company, and the *Italia* which was still in South America.

#### The *Italia*'s last journey

Transatlantic Postal history collectors know that the *Italia* made a return voyage which is confirmed by mail postmarked in Genova on December 16, 1857, upon its arrival. The strange and mysterious thing is that "Corriere Mercantile", the Genovese newspaper reporting maritime information, was always precise about dates of departure, transit and arrival of ships, but didn't publish anything regarding the *Italia*'s return voyage. In the newspaper files, archived at the Berio Library in Genova, there is no notice concerning the arrivals of that day. We know that the *Italia* returned only because its mail was backstamped on December 16.

My conjecture, which will be analyzed by other postal history collectors as well, is that the *Italia* arrived at Marseille from South America between the 13th and 15th of December 1857 and that the post bags were sent on to Genova, where they arrived on December 16. However, according to my hypothesis, the captain was ordered not to go back to his Ligurian home port, perhaps because of the possibility of the vessel being subjected to judicial attachment. Then, sailing directly from Marseille, the captain was ordered to return to South America. In fact, we find it mentioned in the Corriere Mercantile's columns of January 1858. From the newspaper we know that on January 24, 1858, the steamer departed from Rio de Janeiro to Italy, touching at Bahia, Brazil, on February 2, Saint Vincent, Cape Verde Islands, on the 19th, Santa Cruz, Canary Islands, on the 28th, arrived in Marseille on March 8 and then left again on the 11th for Genova, where it arrived the next day. As usual, the post bags arrived before the ship, and the only letter known till now has the usual boxed postmark "Vapori Transatl." (backstamped with arrival date at Genova of March 10, 1858).

On May 12, 1859, five steamers were sold at auction for the following prices: 375.000 ltl. each (the *Genova* and the *Torino*); 312.000 ltl. each (the *Conte di Cavour* and the *Vittorio Emanuele*); and 125.000 ltl. (the *Italia*) which was bought back by Rubattino. The previously named four ships remained in the possession of the Credito Mobiliare with total value of 1.406.310 ltl., and from November 1859 to April 1860 they were chartered by the Spanish Government for a military expedition to Morocco.



The progressive decline of the Transatlantic Company's shares at the London Stock Exchange.

## Call for Papers The Second Annual Symposium on Postal History

October 21-22, 2007

American Philatelic Center • Bellefonte, Pennsylvania

Call for Papers Deadline • June 1, 2007

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### Transportation Technology and the Mail

Through the application of new technologies for transporting the mail, the post office and the transportation industries have encouraged, supported, and benefited from each other's growth and development. The Postal History Symposium, the second national conference sponsored by the American Philatelic Society and the Smithsonian National Postal Museum, provides a forum in which philatelists, academic scholars of postal organizations and systems, public historians, and the interested public discuss and present research integrating philately and the history of postal operations within the broader context of American history.

The conference will open Sunday evening October 21, immediately following Aerophilately 2007, the national philatelic exhibition devoted to the study of airmail, with a reception and plenary panel entitled "Further, Farther, Faster: Transporting the Mail." Invited speakers include philatelic and academic scholars discussing a variety of transportation technologies.

Located 15 miles from State College, Pennsylvania, the American Philatelic Center is home to the 44,000 member American Philatelic Society, the largest stamp collecting organization in the nation, and the American Philatelic Research Library (APRL) dedicated to supporting and advancing postal and philatelic scholarship. Bellefonte, site of the Pioneer Air Mail Memorial, was the fueling stop for westbound pilots before flying "Hell's Stretch," the dangerous crossing of the Allegheny Mountains, on the pioneer airmail route from New York to Chicago.

### Papers and Posters

Proposals for symposium papers may be submitted either as individual papers or in panels. Possible themes for papers include the economic impacts of transportation technology, invention and innovation in mail transportation, the growth of transportation businesses, postal policy effecting mail carriers, and biographical studies.

Posters are informal visual public presentations of philatelic and/or historical research; emphasis should be on using visual elements to tell your story. Posters, or single frame philatelic exhibits, may be presented as sixteen 8.5x11-inch pages, or a single sheet of paper not exceeding 34x45 inches. All posters and sets of pages will be mounted in philatelic exhibition frames, which provide secure display for flat original artifacts (i.e. letters, postcards, maps, etc.) Posters will be displayed during the opening reception and throughout the conference. At designated times, presenters will be asked to stand with their posters and discuss them with conference attendees.

### Deadline for proposals — June 1, 2007

Proposals, both for papers and posters, should be no more than one page and be accompanied by a one-page curriculum vita with contact information (e-mail, phone, and address).

Please e-mail complete proposals to [symposium@stamps.org](mailto:symposium@stamps.org).  
 Notification of accepted papers will be issued in mid July.

Conference papers will be posted on the American Philatelic Society website and will be considered for possible publication.

Conference co-chairs are David L. Straight, Virginia L. Horn, and the Blount Head of Research Initiatives.

