

## Early European Balloon Mails

by Ernst M. Cohn

**The American Philosophical Society has what it claims to be the first airmail letter, carried by John Jeffries on the first channel crossing by balloon on 1785**

Today, some philatelic postal historians confuse "airmail" with "aeroplane mail", forgetting about the various means by which messages were transported at least part way through the air. Many such are still available for collection and study, particularly those from the Franco-German War of 1870/71, sent by unmanned balloons from Metz, Paris, and Belfort, by manned balloons from Paris, and by homing pigeons both from and to Paris. Most pigeons sent to Paris carried their messages on microfilm, invented in 1839 in England, with a first useful application on a small scale in that war, and later on a large scale as V-mail by the U.S. in World War II.

The early history of European balloon mail allows interesting observations on the development of this means of indirect communication. As long as flight direction was uncontrollable, balloon mail, while spectacular, offered no advantage over terrestrial transport except in war, when normal ways were closed by enemies. At any time, however, even non-dirigible balloons can quickly and widely distribute general messages. Old examples of various types of balloon messages still exist. The American Philosophical Society has what it claims to be the first airmail letter. Dated December 16, 1784, it is addressed by Benjamin Franklin's son, William, at London, England, to his son William Temple Franklin, at Passy near Paris, France. It was carried by John Jeffries on the first Channel crossing by balloon, piloted by Jean-Pierre Blanchard, from Dover to Calais on January 7, 1785. This international letter went totally outside official postal channels, arriving safely even if a bit late.

The Austrian War Archives have proof of two unmanned French balloons, one launched from besieged Condé (in June 1793), and the other from besieged Valenciennes. Both fell into Austrian hands; mail from the former having been destroyed, that from the latter still exists in Austria. While it includes a number of private letters, the official, printed report to the

French Government at Paris was the only reason for sending a balloon. One of the private letters is addressed to "Mansle - par un ballon." It never arrived there, of course, but it may carry the earliest balloon (and airmail) endorsement in existence.

The Royal Danish Library and Archives contain evidence of experimental balloon mailings made in 1808 to try breaking the British blockade. The test flights, though not too successful, were followed by the use of unmanned balloons for spreading printed election propaganda, which the Danes sent to neighboring Sweden. It was another first for balloons - international aerial propaganda.

*Resume from article published on The Posthorn, November 2003, by the well-known postal historian and author Ernst M. Cohn that died on December 30, 2004 at the age of 84. He is best known for his research and writing on the postal history of France, Germany, and Scandinavia, and in particular the Franco-German War (balloon mail) of 1870-1871.*

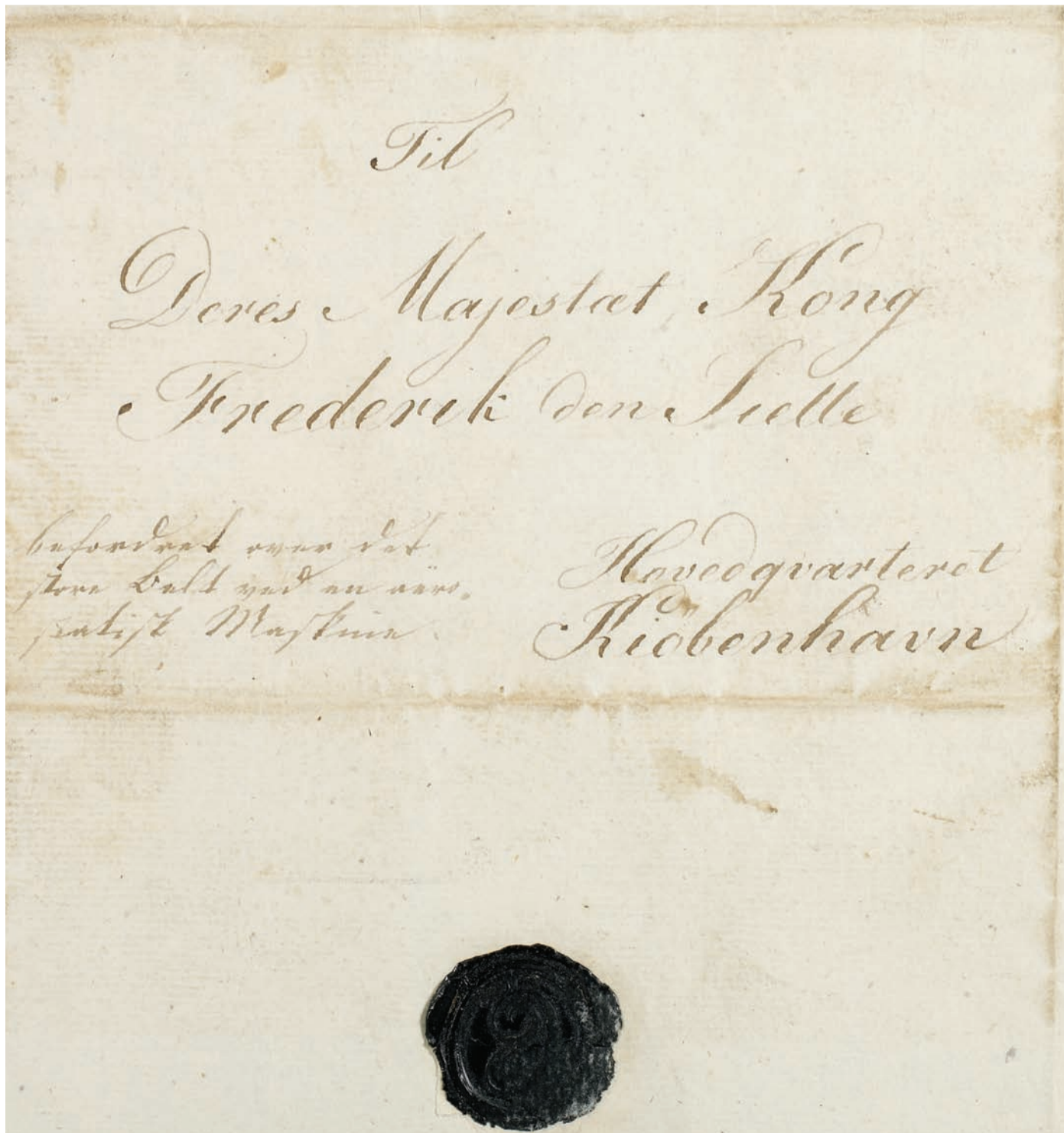
*Cohn was past president of the Washington Philatelic Society, president and editor of the Postal History Society and the APS representative to the FIP Postal History Commission. In 2004 he received the Alfred F. Lichtenstein Award of the Collectors Club for distinguished service to philately. He wrote more than a dozen articles for The Posthorn on Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. One of his many books, The Flight of the Ville d'Orléans (1978), concerns a Paris siege balloon that drifted to Norway before landing.*

*The Posthorn is the official journal of the Scandinavian Collectors Club; information on the SCC is available from the SCC Executive Secretary, PO Box 13196, El Cajon, CA 92022 (USA). Email: dbrent47@sprynet.com - www.scc-online.org*

*Below: 1808 (June 2) - One of Colding's four surviving letters now in the Royal Danish State Archives. This letter was addressed to King Fredrik VI at "Headquarters Copenhagen" with a notation that it was "Carried across the Great Belt by aerostatic machine."*

*Courtesy Kongelige Bibliotek, Københavns, Denmark. ©*

*Right: cover flown with the "Neptune", first balloon to leave the besieged Paris on September 23, 1870, franked with 20c., cancelled by "Bordeaux à Paris I" - 24 sept 70" c.d.s. Alongside the rare handstamp in red "NADAR-DARTOIS DURUOF". © Zanaria, Milano, Italy.*



*Balloons were first popularized by the Montgolfier brother's hot-air machines in the 1780s. Later hydrogen balloons appeared, such as this one, ready for the departure with Louis and*

*Jules Godard at St. Cloud, Paris, in 1866. Since balloon construction was expensive, flights in them were often grand occasions, as here marked by photographer and band.*