

Man goes aloft

The first woman to fly was the English Mrs. L.A. Sage, a statuesque beauty weighing close to two hundred pounds

The Montgolfier Brothers

On a drizzly summer day in 1783, French peasants near Annonay were startled to see a globe sailing through the sky toward them. Many of the frightened people thought it must be the moon, suddenly detached from its place in the firmament. When the sphere finally settled to earth, and news of what it actually was raced across the countryside to Paris, all France and the world hailed the event as a great scientific triumph. Throughout the eighteenth century, wits and satirists had had fun treating aerial navigation as an amusing fantasy and a dream of idiots. But it was an age of reason, also, in which serious students and investigators carefully pondered the phenomena of nature. Science had become a religion, and anyone with an inquisitive mind was enrolled in the cult. In the exciting atmosphere of inquiry, it was not surprising that one at last would conclude that ascending smoke might be able to lift man from the earth. Late in 1782 the notion occurred to Joseph Montgolfier, the forty-two year-old son of a French provincial paper maker. A brilliant and impatient man, Joseph enlisted the interest of his brother Etienne, five years younger and the more methodical of the two. Working without publicity, the brothers succeeded in sending aloft small silk bags filled with hot air. That was in November, 1782. They next experimented with larger vessels, and on June 4, 1783, invited a group of observers to witness their first public demonstration the ascension that frightened the peasants.

Not even the Montgolfiers understood the principle that made their balloon rise. The lifting power of smoke was attributed to electricity - the rage of the day - or to a mysterious gas that science had not yet discovered. But there was no doubt that the Montgolfiers had harnessed the force, whatever it was. Within a month, the scientific community of Paris was agog with excitement. Everyone wanted to meet the brothers from Annonay and witness for himself the newest example of man's progress. The Academy of Sciences invited the Montgolfiers to repeat their demonstration in Paris, and the brothers accepted the summons. But before they could send a second balloon aloft, another man, working from a different principle, had duplicated their success.

Pilâtre de Rozier

Spurred by news of the Montgolfiers' success, Faujas de Saint-Fond, an eminent French geologist, raised a subscription in the summer of 1783 to finance further aeronautical work. His bid to conduct research was immediately accepted by J.A.C.

Charles, whose experiments in various fields of physical sciences had gained him some renown. Charles did not know that the Montgolfiers had used smoke in their balloon, but he was aware of the lifting power of hydrogen, which for the past seventeen years had been known to be lighter than air. Foreseeing the difficulty of containing the gas in a porous envelope, he turned the problem over to two mechanics, Anne-Jean and M.N. Robert. Within a short time, they fashioned a small, rubber-coated, silk balloon, and on August 27, 1783, Charles sent it aloft filled with hydrogen.

There were now two methods for ascensions, and the stage was being readied for man's first aerial trip. By mid-October, 1783, Etienne Montgolfier, having successfully demonstrated his hot-air balloon to the French Academy of Sciences and King Louis XVI, was conducting captive ascents with a passenger - a bold young doctor named Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier. The first free flight in the Montgolfiers' hot-air balloon finally occurred on November 21 when two men went aloft. The daring pioneers, Pilâtre de Rozier and the Marquis d'Arlandes, received the acclaim of Paris. But Charles and his hydrogen-filled balloon were right behind them. On December 1, with M.N. Robert as passenger, Charles too made a successful flight, bettering by far the distance and time in the air set by his competitors.

Up in the Clouds

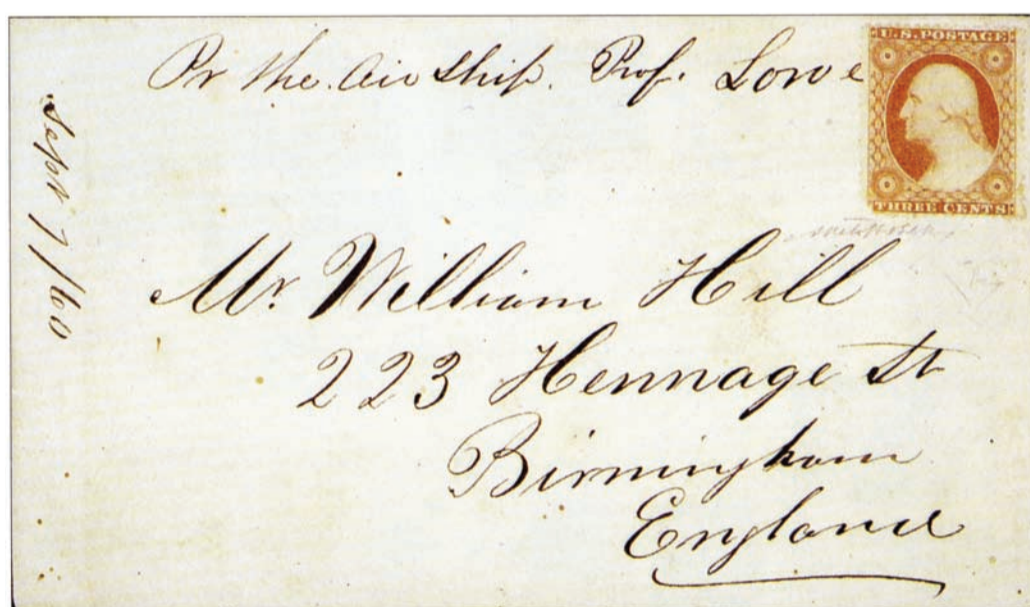
Even before Blanchard's epochal Channel flight, the excitement of ballooning was spreading across Europe. Italy was the first country after France to witness an ascension, when Paolo Andreani went up in a hot-air balloon near Milan on February 25, 1784. The following July, four Austrians unintentionally made the first aerial voyage over Vienna when the cord holding their captive balloon suddenly snapped. Vincent Lunardi, a young Italian adventurer noted for his good looks and dashing charm, made the first ascent in England on September 15, 1784, and seemed genuinely surprised that so many young ladies courageously offered to accompany him on subsequent voyages. Nineteen days later, on October 4, James Sadler, whose aeronautical career was to last until 1815, became the first English balloon pilot. Attempting to cross the Channel on June 15, 1785, Pilâtre de Rozier fell to his death when his ill-conceived combination of the hot-air and hydrogen balloons burst into flames. But even this first aerial fatality did not dampen popular interest in the spectacle of ballooning. The indefatigable Blanchard did most to foster the mania. During the summer and fall of 1785 he made the first ascents in Holland, Germany, and Belgium. Later he was the first aerial voyager in Switzerland, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. When the French Revolution plunged all Europe into turmoil after 1789, Blanchard traveled to the New World with his balloon and introduced the new sport to America.

The Balloon Goes to War

In June, 1793, with most of Europe united against it, the French Republican government took the unprecedented step of adding an air arm to its military forces. The new organization would make use of captive balloons from which "observers, placed as advanced sentries high in the air, could observe the movements of the enemy." On April 2, 1794 the first company of French aerostiers was formed under the command of Colonel Jean-Marie-Joseph Coutelle. Exactly two months later, Coutelle made his first military ascent at Maubeuge, a besieged city some 125 miles northeast of Paris. Impressed by the distress which the balloon caused the enemy - and by the lift in morale it gave to their own forces - the French created a second company of balloonists. During the German campaign of 1796, the first unit was taken prisoner and its balloon sent as a prize to Vienna. But the following year Napoleon employed balloon observers during his siege of Mantua in Italy. When he took a balloon corps to Egypt in 1798, its equipment soon fell into the hands of the enemy, and the balloonists were employed in other fields for the remainder of the campaign. Returning to France early in 1802, they received notice that their corps had been disbanded.

Green and Wise

Two of the nineteenth century's most celebrated aeronauts - Charles Green in England and John Wise in America - shared a desire to make the first transatlantic balloon flight. Encouraged by the success of his record-breaking flight to Germany, Green proposed an aerial journey to America in a balloon equipped with propellers operated by clockwork and with a guide rope to regulate ascent and descent. Green spoke knowledgeably of westerly air currents, yet he never made the attempt. Instead, he devoted his last public years to completing an astonishing number of ascents, before he retired in 1852 at the age of sixty-seven. Despite setbacks like the 1859 crash, Wise never gave up his dream of flying to Europe. Still attempting to set endurance records at seventy-one, the Pennsylvanian disappeared over Lake Michigan in 1879 in a tragic end to his forty-four-year career.



Above: on September 7, 1860 Professor Christopher Lowe with his airship "Great Eastern" made the first brave, though unlucky, attempt to cross the Atlantic with a balloon. Cover from Philadelphia to Birmingham, England, franked with 3c. orange, manuscript "Per the air ship Prof. Lowe". This document represent, as attempt, the first aerial cover from United States to Europe. Bolaffi's Historical Archive.

Below: Cover addressed to Mr. C. Thomas, Shohola Pa., uncanceled 3c, no postal markings, instructions "Please whoever finds this carey it to C. Thomas's Store and oblige W. V. Ross". One of the three recorded covers flown by the Buffalo Balloon on June 18, 1877, and posted with United States Stamps. Professor Samuel Archer King was the first one who sent letters with a special vignette, featuring his airship "Buffalo". Ex Schoendorf, Bolaffi's Historical Archive. The second cover known

addressed to E. F. Gambs, St. Louis, franked with 1c & 2c, Gallatin Tenn. Jun. 18 datestamp and the Buffalo vignette, was sold by Siegel Auction Galleries on April 2004. (The Jeanette C. Rudy Collection of Tennessee Postal History), for \$115,000. The third cover, addressed to Mrs. Leonora Daviess, Harrodsburg Ky., franked with 3c, show instructions: "Any one finding this letter will please put it in the nearest Post Office", is part of the National Postal Museum collection.

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.