

The Mail Ship Race and Rate War

It was a common practice at the time to send duplicate letters of transatlantic business on different ships, as in this case. Ironically, the original of this letter was sent on the maiden voyage of the first U.S. contract mail ship, and its copy was sent on the first British transatlantic mail ship, which as launched in 1840.

The British Cunard Line enjoyed a virtual monopoly on transatlantic mail, which it ran out of Boston up to this time. The British government was more than unhappy when the US planned to inaugurate its first contract mail service with the maiden voyage of the Ocean Line *USMS Washington*. Onboard was VIP passenger the First Assistant US Postmaster General Selah Hobbie, who was on assignment to negotiate a new postal treaty with the British.

The British newspapers hyped a race between the *USMS Washington* and the British ship *RMS Britannia*, albeit an unfair one. Both vessels embarked on June 1, 1847 — the British ship from Boston destined for Liverpool, the American ship from New York to Cowes (Southampton)

and then on to Bremen. The *Britannia* beat the *Washington* by two full days. Reviewing the *Washington's* first arrival the Illustrated London Times correspondent remarked, “In point of size she looked like an elongated three-decker, with only one streak round her; but about as ugly a specimen of steam-ship building as ever went through this anchorage...”

While the ships were en route the British Post Office mandated that all mail carried by their new American competitor would be subject to a Discriminatory Packet Letter Rate of 1/- (24¢), not the Ship Letter Rate of 8d (16¢), and any US prepayments should be ignored. This new policy initiated the twelve month long Discriminatory Rate Period.

The Irish Relief Association of Nashville, Tennessee, had collected \$1,000 for Irish relief. These letters were sent to the CRC by the Quaker firm of Brown Brothers, working with the GRC in New York, converting American dollars into a draft for £ 204.15.9. The contribution was to be eventually divided among six specific Irish towns: Muff, Newcastle, Monaghan, Holestone, Armagh, and Banden.

Original Letter via *USMS Washington*



31 May 1847 — datelined New York, endorsed *pr Washington Str.*

1 June 1847 — red 30mm NEW-YORK/JUN/1 circular datestamp with matching PAID [arc] struck, *Washington* embarks, Frederick Hewitt Commander.

15 June 1847 — *USMS Washington* arrives at Cowes (Southampton), all mailbags ordered to London unopened.

16 June 1847 — U.S. prepayment refused, ms Discriminatory Rate of ‘1/-’ (24¢) applied, not the Ship Letter Rate of 8d (16¢), an orange-red unpaid letters 24mm XC/16 JU 16/1847 morning processing mark placed on reverse; the *Washington* leaves for Bremen.

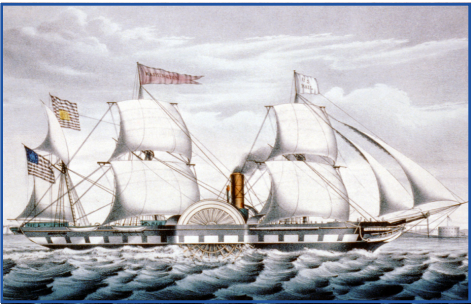
17 June 1847 — crossed the Irish Sea via smaller vessel, an orange-red 27mm 2/JU 17/1847/D arrival backstamp was applied at Dublin.



Backstamps (Left)



Backstamps (Right)



USMS Washington



RMS Britannia

Copy Letter via *RMS Britannia*



22 May 1847 — datelined New York to the Central Relief Committee in Dublin.

28 May 1847 — The letter, endorsed *Britannia Str.*, was posted at New York, a red 30mm NEW-YORK/28 MAY/5cts. was applied paying the 1845 under 300 miles rate from New York to Boston. A red ‘PAID’ in arc handstamp was also struck.

1 June 1847 — The *RMS Britannia* sailed from Boston for Liverpool.

13 June 1847 — The *Britannia* arrived at Liverpool and a black 25mm AMERICA/LIVERPOOL/JU 13/1847 transit backstamp was struck. The letter was rated at one shilling due, the transatlantic Packet Letter rate, shown by the black ‘1/-’ handstamp.

17 June 1847 — crossed the Irish Sea via smaller vessel, an orange-red 27mm 3/JU 17/1847/(C?) arrival backstamp was applied at Dublin.

NB — There are only eleven currently recorded Discriminatory Rate examples from the maiden voyage of the *USMS Washington* directed to Great Britain, among them three of four that were written to Ireland reside within this collection. Dr. James W. Milgram has pointed out in The Chronicle of the USPS, “Covers showing the discriminatory rate and addressed to Great Britain are scarce because the *Washington* and the *Herman* made a limited number of voyages and because correspondents avoided these ships for mails to Britain to escape the discriminatory charge.”