

1871 Commune of Paris Prisoners' Mail



Prisoner's ink drawing of his prison ship at Brest harbor. Letter to Paris written 16 August 1871.

Scope of Exhibit: This exhibit presents mail of prisoners generated during the first months of incarceration after the Commune of Paris fell to French troops of the National Assembly on 28 May 1871. Incoming and outgoing letters of those individuals apprehended as suspected communards provide content in regard to attempts to establish innocence and gain release in the months preceding political trials. This mail was posted during prisoners' brief sojourn at Versailles detention depots, as well as during their subsequent confinement at harbor environs on prison ships (hulks) and forts.

Historical Note On the 1871 Commune of Paris: In January 1871, with the Franco-German War ended and an armistice signed, Bismarck insisted a properly constituted French government negotiate the peace. The National Assembly that resulted in March sat at Versailles, a symbol of the monarchy. Paris workers, however, refused to recognize its authority, which led to fighting -- French against French; the new government against the city of Paris and its municipal council, the "Commune." In just 72 days the Commune fell to Versaillaise troops who killed as many as 20,000 and arrested 38,000 suspected communards.

Prisoners were first detained at Versailles, then transported by rail to coastal prisons, where they were permitted to write one letter per month to family members. The ensuing military tribunals over the next several years resulted in release, imprisonment, execution, or deportation.

Organization and Development: The exhibit adheres to a geographic format; Versailles detention depots, followed by four individual harbors with their hulks, and nearby forts. Analysis of postal rates and routings, and brief excerpts in translation from letters illustrating personal circumstances at the time of their incarceration, accompany most items. An epilogue foretells the ultimate fates of communard prisoners.

Significance: Shown is range of extant communard prisoners' mail posted within the first months following the end of the civil war. Moreover, letter content suggests indiscriminant arrests, difficult living conditions, and desperate attempts to seek release. Because such correspondence remains scarce, personal stories revealed through the small number of postal artifacts left behind, have been difficult to document until now.

Significant items are bordered in red and annotated in bold italics

| Cherbourg | | Brest | |
|--------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|-------------|
| <u>Ships</u> | <u>Pop.</u> | <u>Ships</u> | <u>Pop.</u> |
| <i>Le Bayard</i> | 860 | <i>La Ville de Bordeaux</i> | 1,095 |
| <i>Le Tourville</i> | 817 | <i>La Marne</i> | 736 |
| <i>Le Ville de Nante</i> | 876 | <i>Le Tilsitt</i> | 715 |
| <i>Le Tage</i> | 888 | <i>Le Duguay-Trouin</i> | 922 |
| <i>L'Arcole</i> | 870 | <i>Le Breslaw</i> | 929 |
| <i>Le Rhone</i> | 894 | <i>L'Aube</i> | 872 |
| | | <i>L'Hermione</i> | 898 |
| <u>Isles/forts</u> | | <i>La Ville de Lyon</i> | 1,057 |
| Hommet | 425 | <i>Le Fonteroy</i> | 843 |
| Pelée | 414 | <i>Le Napoleon</i> | 1,075 |
| St. Marcouf | 200 | <i>L'Austerlitz</i> | 1,028 |
| Chaussey | 130 | <i>L'Yonne</i> | 780 |
| | | <u>Isles/forts</u> | |
| Rochefort | | Queuern | 1,000 |
| <u>Ships</u> | | Tréberon | 1,000 |
| <i>L'Orne</i> | 818 | | |
| <i>L'Iphigenie</i> | 412 | | |
| <i>La Pandore</i> | 545 | Lorient | |
| <i>La Foudre</i> | 322 | <u>Ships</u> | |
| <u>Isles/forts</u> | | <i>La Pénélope</i> | 449 |
| Bayard | 587 | <i>La Vengeance</i> | 606 |
| Furas | 250 | <i>La Prudence</i> | 443 |
| d'Enet | 150 | <u>Isles/forts</u> | |
| Liedot | 124 | Belle Île-en-Mer | 904 |
| d'Oleron | 1,044 | Noirmoutiers | 105 |
| d'Aix | 1,333 | d'Yeu | 600 |
| Madame | 372 | | |

Ship/prison locations and populations