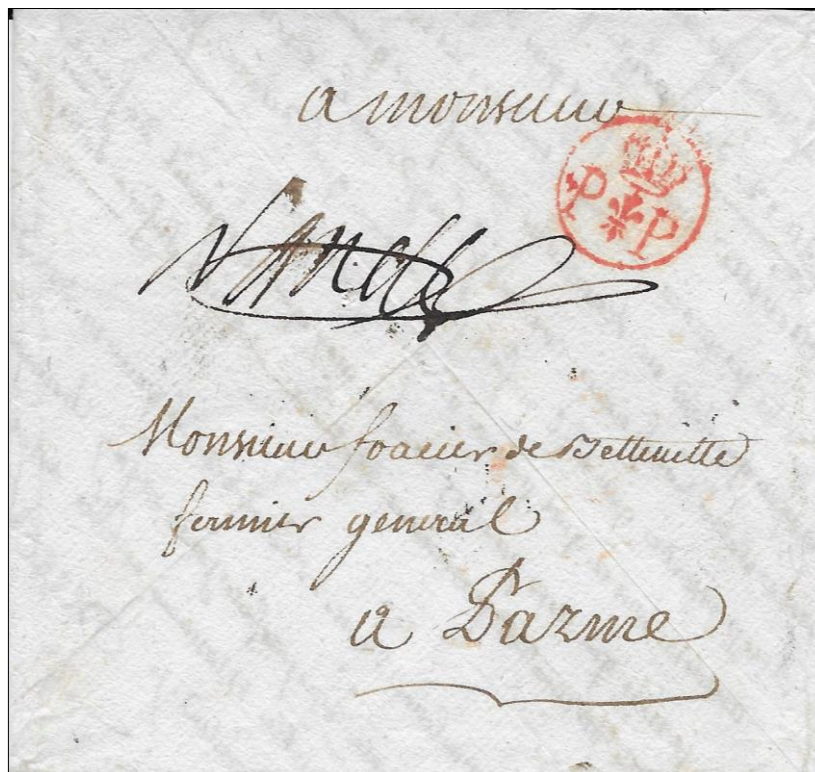


The post in Paris from the *ancien régime* to the revolution



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La Grande Poste (General Post) Frames 1 to 4

La Petite Poste (Local post) frames 5 to 9

Special offices and the franchise frames 10 to 12

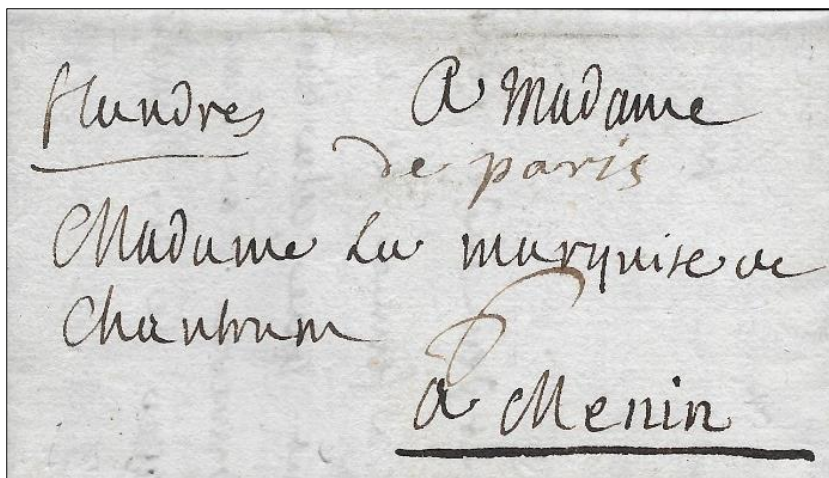
The early development of the post in France

In medieval times there was little in the way of personal correspondence. Written communication was needed by some however and such organisations and bodies had their own courier systems for such purposes – the monarch, universities, international merchants and the church being the main ones. To employ one's own messengers was expensive and the Royal post slowly began to allow others to use its couriers and so to contribute to its costs. This was the beginning of a national postal service and in France existed alongside private courier services well into the seventeenth century.

A post office existed in the capital from 1576 in the rue Saint Jacques on the left bank and later on the right bank near where it is today. At the same date a Royal edict authorised the public to use *La Poste* when the Court was in correspondence with provincial *Parlements*. The first tariff to cover the whole country dates from 1627 and simply listed four destinations and five towns – Bordeaux, Lyon, Toulouse and Dijon and Macon – with specific rates to each from Paris. By 1644 the growth of the postal service required more officials to run it and with that an increase in rates. The organisation was based on a network of routes usually from Paris but a few from Lyon and 27 towns were now listed with the rate to each.

In 1672 Louis XIV's Minister of War the Marquis de Louvois became *Surintendant Général des Postes*. It was his energetic work that saw the real beginning of *la Poste aux Lettres*. The *maîtres des courriers* who had controlled the post in various parts of the country were abolished and the national post farmed out that is to say it was given to a private contractor to run who paid an agreed amount to the state from the revenues collected. From this time the principle of postal monopoly for the state run post was also established and private couriers and messengers forbidden to carry letters. The practice of marking the origin of letters and the rate to pay became steadily more standard. A more detailed tariff was issued in 1676 with some 59 towns mentioned with appropriate rates and 4 classes of correspondence: a single sheet, a single sheet with envelope, a double letter (2 sheets) and by

weight for packets above an ounce in weight.



A letter from Paris dated 30 December 1734 to Menin then part of the Austrian Netherlands. The manuscript de Paris was probably applied on arrival to show where it came from. It has been marked for postage due of 6 patars.

Distance for calculating postage was only used on cross post letters not going via Paris. The tariff of 1704 confirmed a number of towns as *bureau de passe*, postage was calculated in two parts. The rate from the town where the letter was posted to the *bureau de passe* and then from there to the town of destination were added together to give the total due from the recipient. A number of routes from Paris to regions of France or major large towns were set out and the rate to each place on these routes from Paris stipulated. Foreign destinations now received a mention, rates usually quoted to and from the French frontier at the point where mails were exchanged with the postal services of other countries.

The last tariff before the revolution was that of 1 August 1759. It followed the same pattern as that of 1704 and now listed rates to some 924 towns. Three innovations were the inclusion of maritime rates, those for a local post in Paris and registration was specifically referred to although it had existed from the earliest times.

Weights and measures

Currency until the revolution was pounds, shillings and pence:

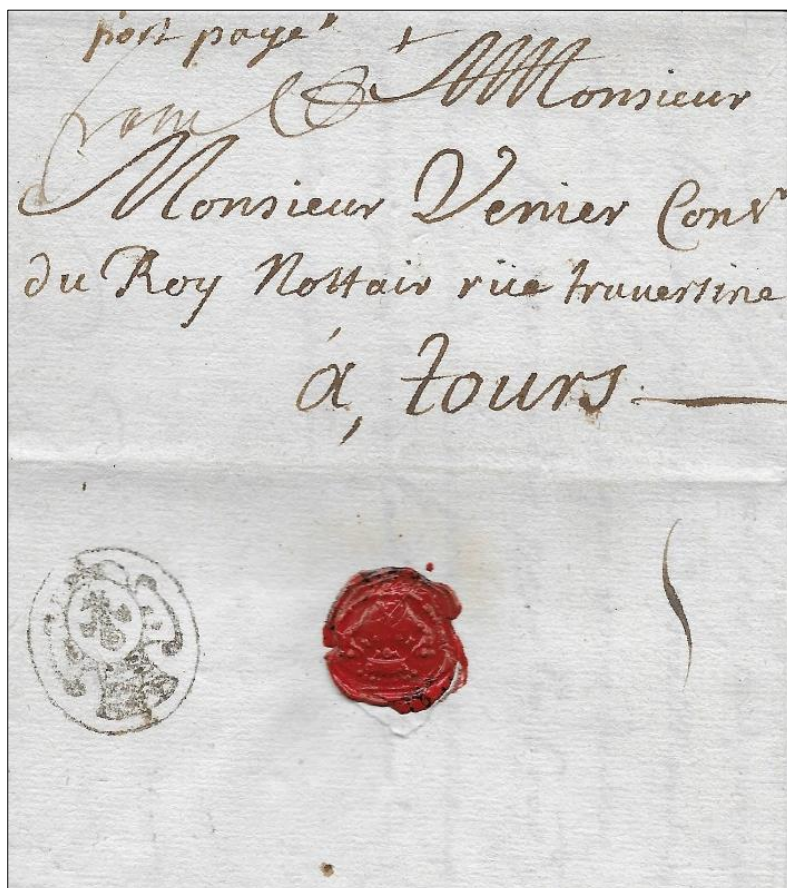
12 deniers = 1 sol 20 sols = 1 livre.

Weight was pounds and ounces – 16 ounces to the pound.

Distances were stated in leagues which did not have a standard definition. In practice a league was similar to that in England – 3 miles approximately.

The General Post handstamps

Letters paid in advance were the exception and therefore needed to be clearly distinguished. Most offices began to use decorative marks for paid letters at quite an early period and the first in Paris dates from 1701. These early ones were simply in the form of a device like a seal but postal officials understood the significance.

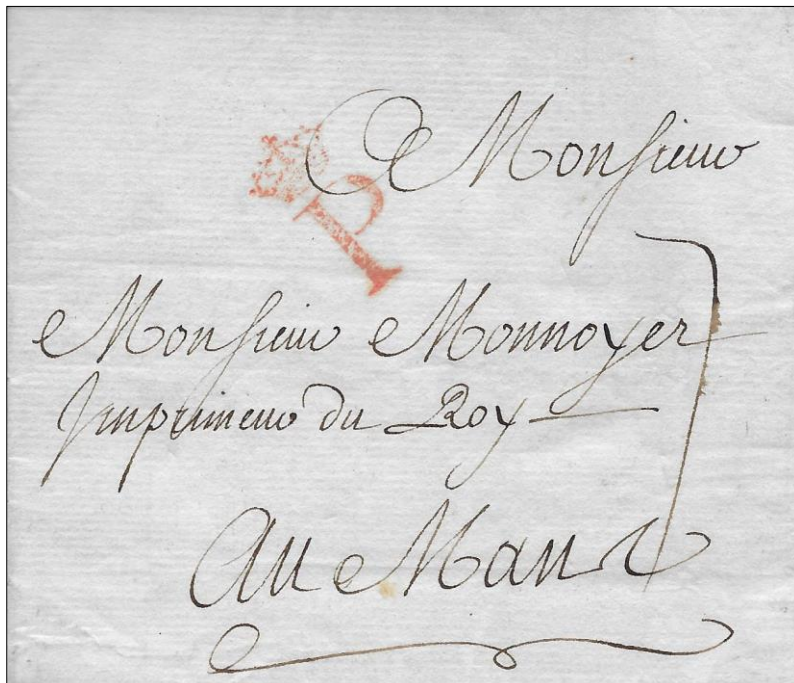


The first Paris paid mark recorded in use from 1701.

12 August 1714 to Tours. The instructions advised that the rate paid in advance should be marked on the back and to begin with the handstamp was also often placed on the reverse of a letter.

port payé has been noted on the front in manuscript and the rate of 5 sols at the tariff of 1704 marked on the reverse.

An instruction of March 1749 advised post masters to use a handstamp to clearly indicate the origin of letters they collected but Paris did not feel bound to accept this suggestion. Whilst there was a succession of decorative marks in Paris for pre-paid letters it was not until July 1771 that handstamps were introduced for unpaid letters to show the origin. A number of handstamps with a crowned P were put into use, for the first part of July 1771 red was used and thereafter black became the norm.

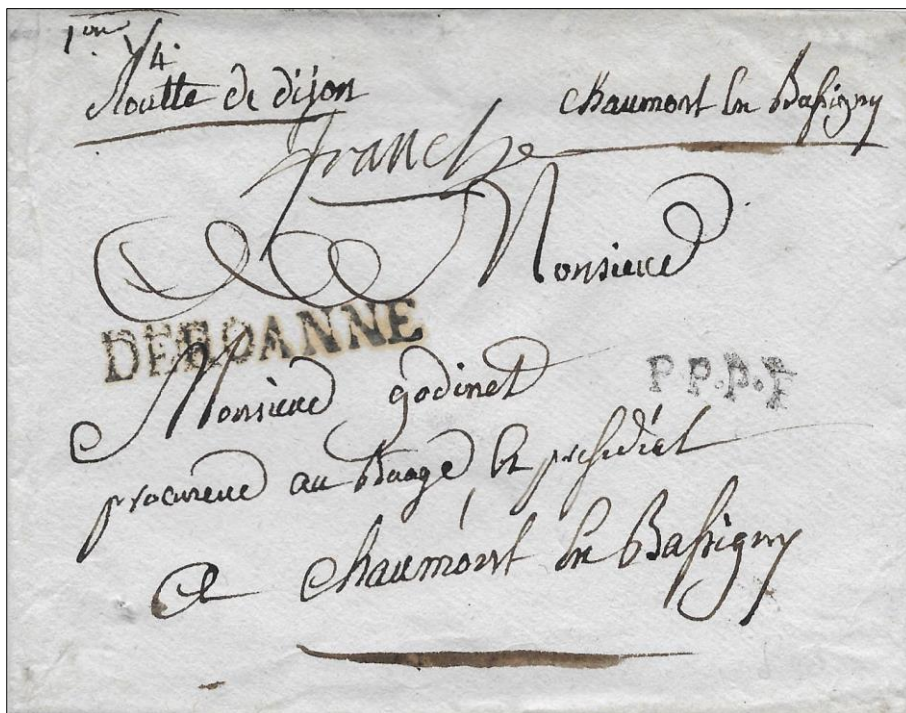


The first handstamp used in Paris on unpaid letters. For the first month of use in July 1771 red ink was used but after that black became the norm.

6 July 1771 to Le Mans.

7 sols due on delivery.

Paid letters in transit via the capital were struck with a paid transit mark P.P.P. from 1766.



An undated envelope from Roanne to Chau mont en Bassigny.

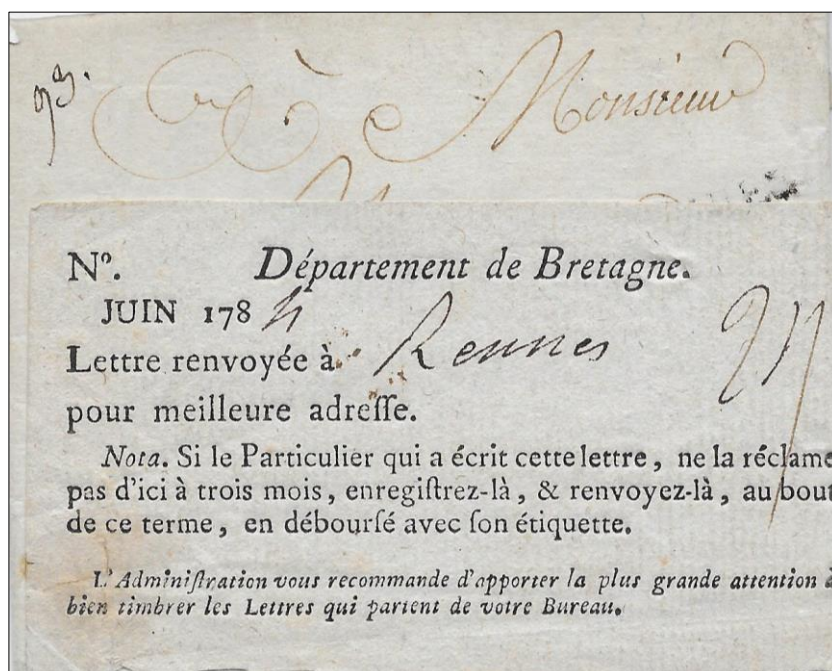
The weight is marked in the top left 1¼ ounces.

Roanne to Paris 40 sols plus Paris to Chau mont 35 sols, in all 75 sols or £3 15s as marked on the reverse.

Paris has applied its paid transit mark P.P.P. (port payé passe Paris).

The Dead Letter office

In May 1738 the Grimod-Thiroux group took over the Ferme Générale des Postes from the Pajot-Rouillé group. Less generous terms were now offered as remuneration and this led to a more rigorous approach to the problem of letters which could not be delivered. As postage was usually paid on delivery any inability to find an addressee meant a loss of revenue. December 1748 saw the beginnings of a Dead Letter office in Paris and detailed instructions on how to handle undeliverable letters were set out. These were to be returned to Paris in the first instance and then sent back to the office from which the letter had been sent for further research. Around 1771 labels were applied to such items with clear instructions on procedures. If a new address was provided the letter would be returned to Paris which would remove the label and send it on to its new destination and the rate adjusted if necessary. Should the sender be unable to do this but wished to retain the letter the postage had to be paid and it is only in these circumstances that these labels survive intact. The alternative was for the sender to 'abandon' the item and in due course it would be returned to Paris and ultimately destroyed.



30 May 1784 a letter sent from Rennes to Bordeaux.

The sender in Rennes has not supplied a new address but paid the postage due of 24 sols and kept it for his records. Paris has marked the postage on the label to make it quite clear how much was required.

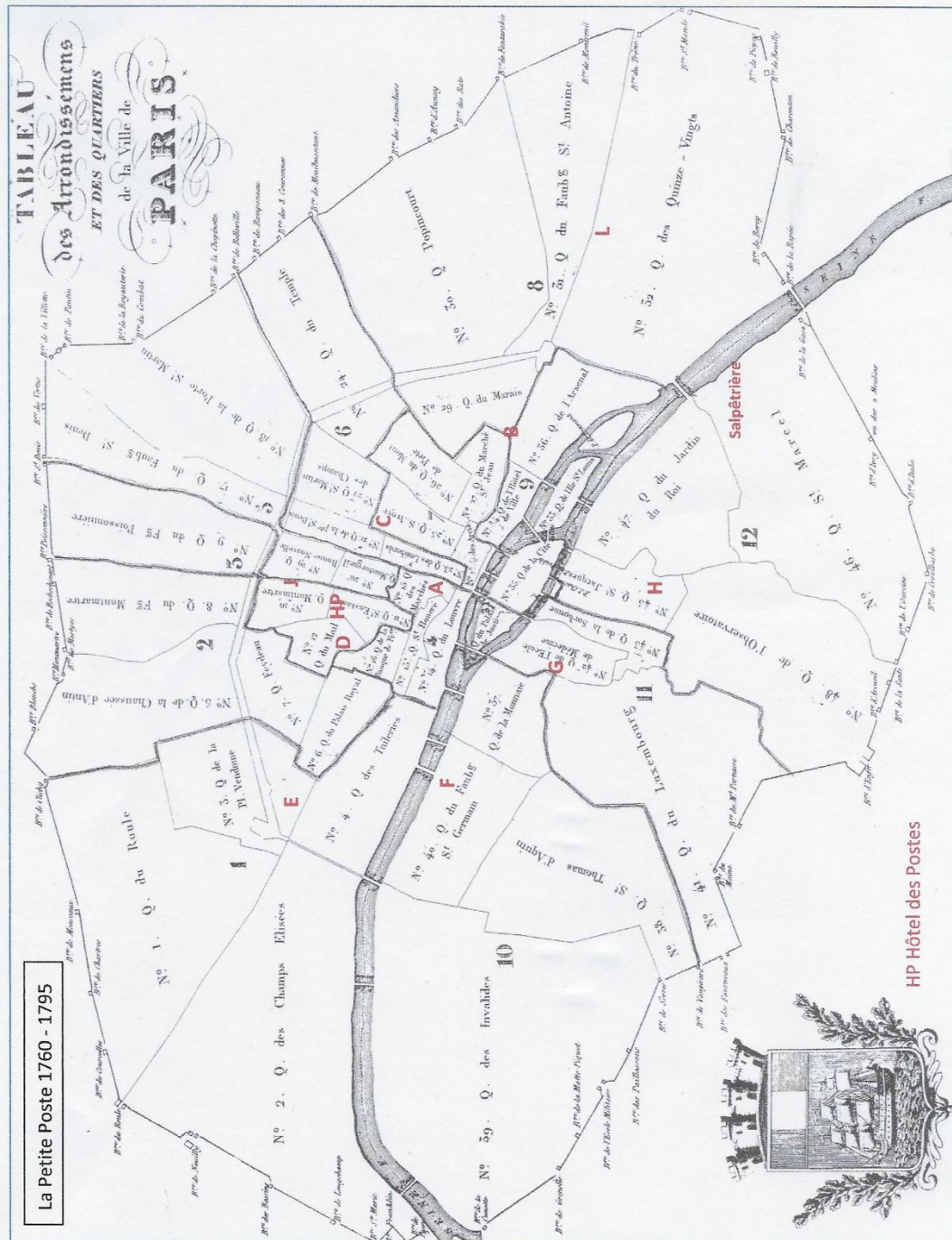
Later on during the revolution as the movement of people became much greater this meticulous way of investigating things became unmanageable as the volume of undeliverable letters increased substantially. Such letters would then simply be held in Paris until either the sender or recipient took the initiative and made direct enquiries of the Dead Letter office in Paris.

The Franchise

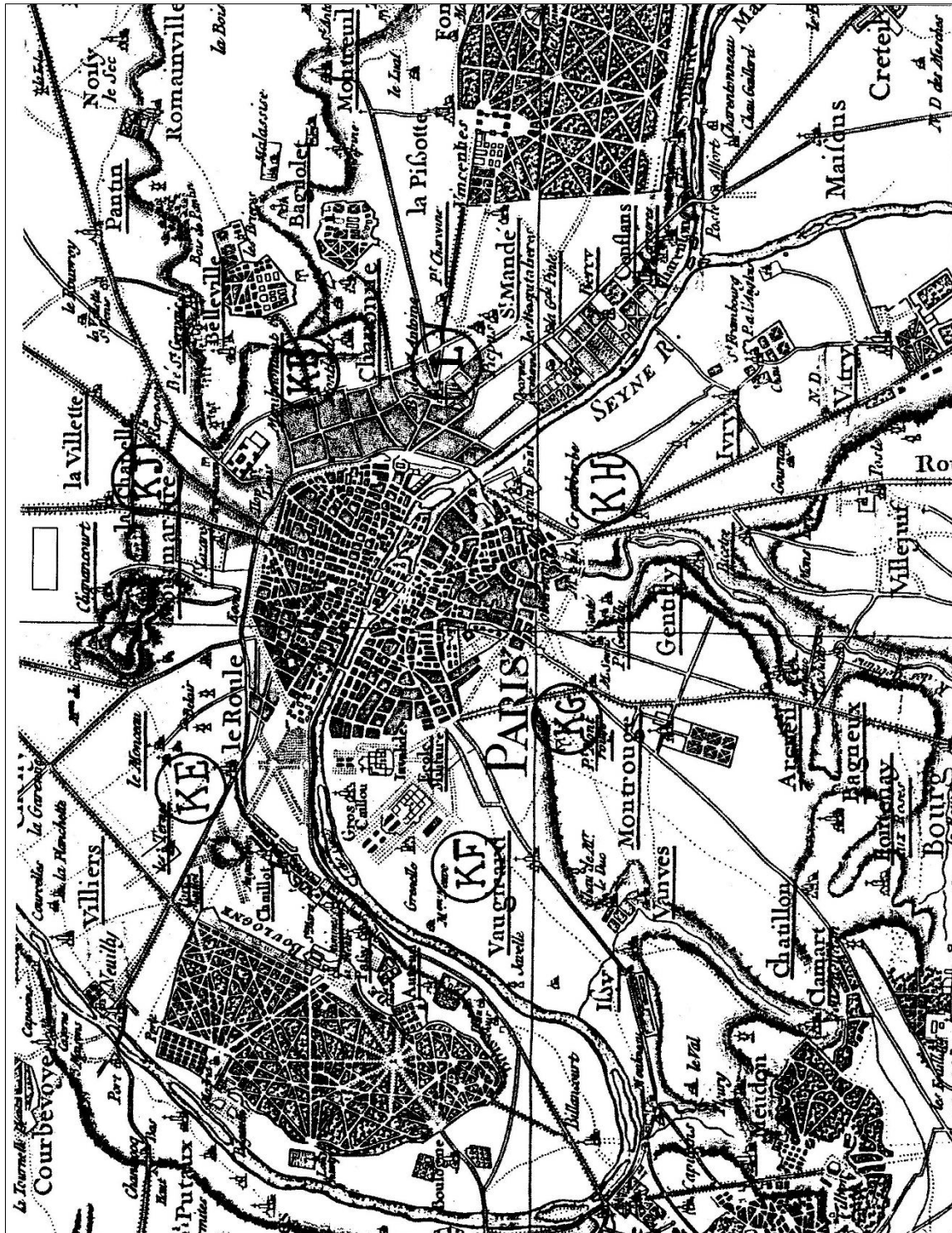
Letters sent by or on behalf of the monarch and those sent by officials or notables were granted the privilege of franchise and sent without postage charges. The post office kept detailed records of entitlement and in time marked such mail with a paraph or stamp to confirm the status. Abuse was always the problem and was sometimes tolerated depending on the circumstances. No religious order was given this privilege but the obituaries sent to the various priories of the Carmelite order were often exempt from postage by favour. The Superior of the order in Saint Denis was a Madame Louise who happened to be the daughter of Louis XV.

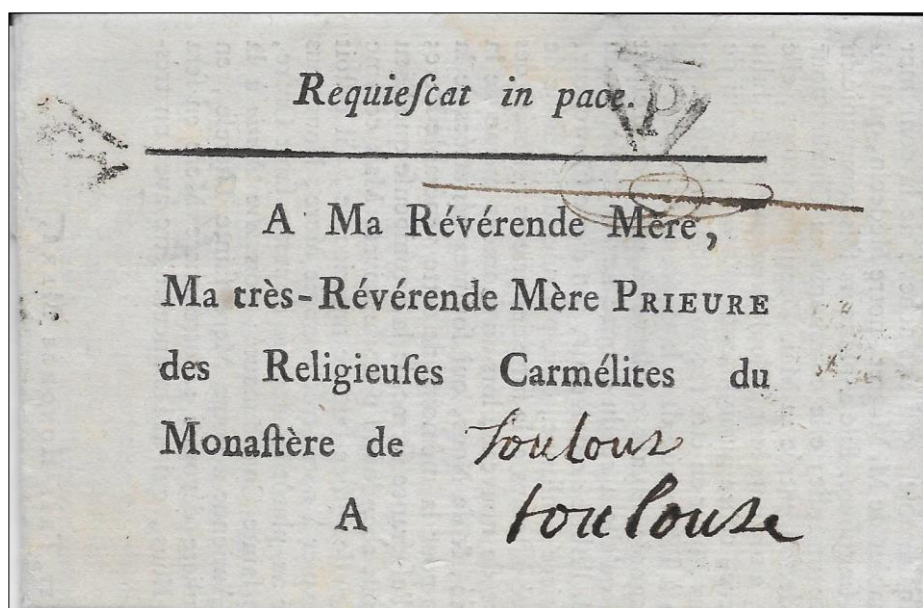
La Petite Poste 1760 to 1795

Location of the district offices



Areas covered by the suburban postmen and the villages around Paris





6 July 1784.

From the Carmelite Couvent de la Sainte Mère de Dieu in the rue Chapon near the Temple in Paris to a sister house in Toulouse with news of a recent death.

No postage has been charged.

A manuscript paraph has been marked.

Newspapers and printed matter

The tariffs of the *ancien régime* never set specific rates for these. Editors and those sending such things as printed circulars negotiated rates with the post office as required according to the number to be posted and how frequently. The periodical section of the Paris post office became quite a substantial department with its own handstamps for its various needs.

La Petite Poste

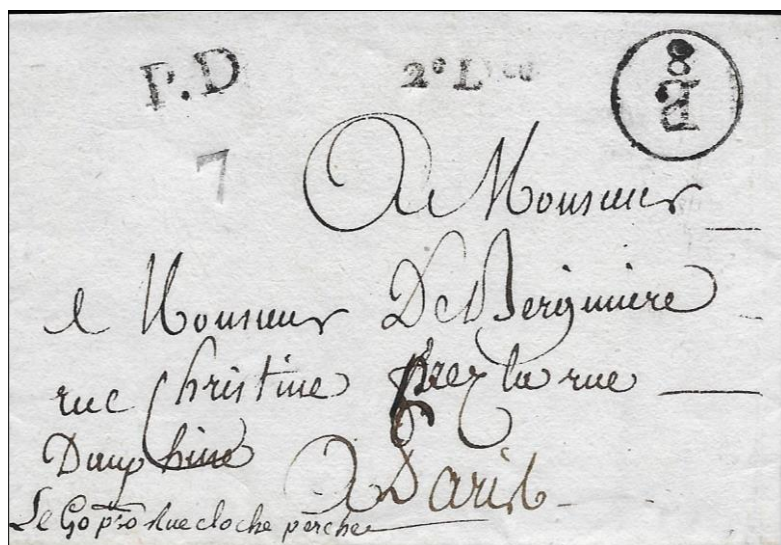
This began as a private local postal service under direct royal remit in June 1760. In July 1780 it was taken over by the state but remained quite separate from the General Post. At the beginning there were 11 district offices but 2 closed quite quickly, they were designated by letters of the alphabet: A to L. Each had up to 20 postmen and a network of post boxes. By 1761 the number of daily collections had increased from 3 at the start to 9 from 6 in the morning and then at intervals of one and a half hours throughout the day. The rate within the town was 2 sols paid in advance unlike the General Post.

Office handstamps were simply the office letter in a circle, the postmen, the office letter and their number in a circle and the post boxes, the office letter and the box number. The postmen both collected and delivered letters. They carried a rattle to advertise their presence and a locked bag for letters given to them. On their return to the office the bag would be opened and their personal stamp applied. Because pre payment was the norm the post boxes were placed in shops, cafés and the like which could look after the box and collect the postage. Unpaid letters received an extra mark – PD (port dû or postage due) and the person accepting such a letter had to personally guarantee payment.

Letters could be accepted for the General Post at a charge of 1 sol paid in advance. They would then be treated as any inland letter and charged postage due appropriately. Letters to and from the suburbs cost 3 sols.

An office K for the suburbs is mentioned in 1761 but by 1768 had certainly closed. Some 3 letters have now been recorded handstamped K. Its postmen continued to serve their rounds in the suburbs on the edges of the city but were now attached to the office nearest to their walks. If we

take office B near the Bastille it was allocated 3 suburban postmen with handstamps KB1, KB2 and KB3. These operated to the east of the city from Belleville down to Bercy.



Dated 6 August 1760.









Postman B8.

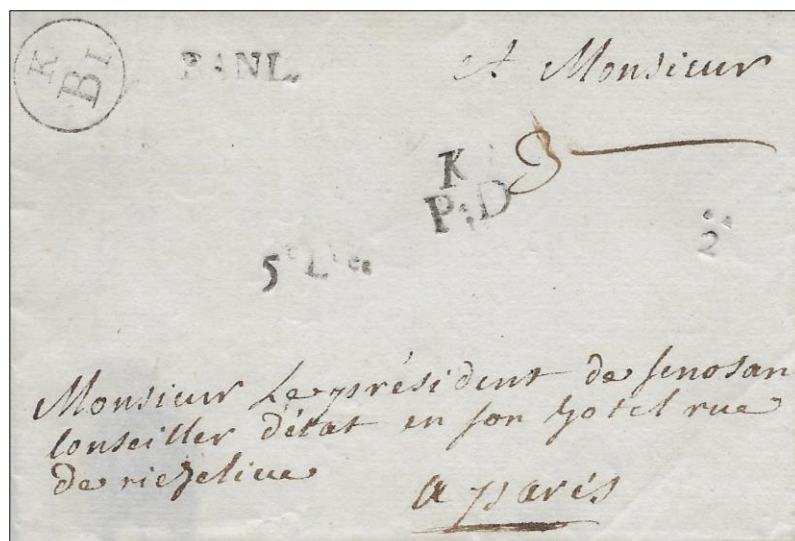
P.D (postage due).

2^e L^{vee} (2nd collection).

7 the day of the month
received by the post.

Handstamps used by the local post

		
Office	Postman	Post box number
		
Day of the month		Collection number
		
Postage due marks on unpaid letters		



Dated 'à Charonne 2 Fevrier 1766' to an address in the rue de Richelieu.

Collected by suburban postman KB1 who served the area around Belleville and Charonne.

K P.D to signify postage due and 3 sols marked as the rate from the suburbs.

Collection 5, day of the month 2 and BANL.

The suburban service of *la Petite Poste* extended far beyond Paris itself into the countryside around the city. Almost 200 villages and hamlets are recorded in various listings of the time although many have no recorded postmarks. As the General Post slowly opened more offices the local service began to withdraw, it was not allowed to operate in areas covered by the General Post.

Around 1788 the head post office of the General Post was allocated a branch of the local post and was now able to accept local letters.



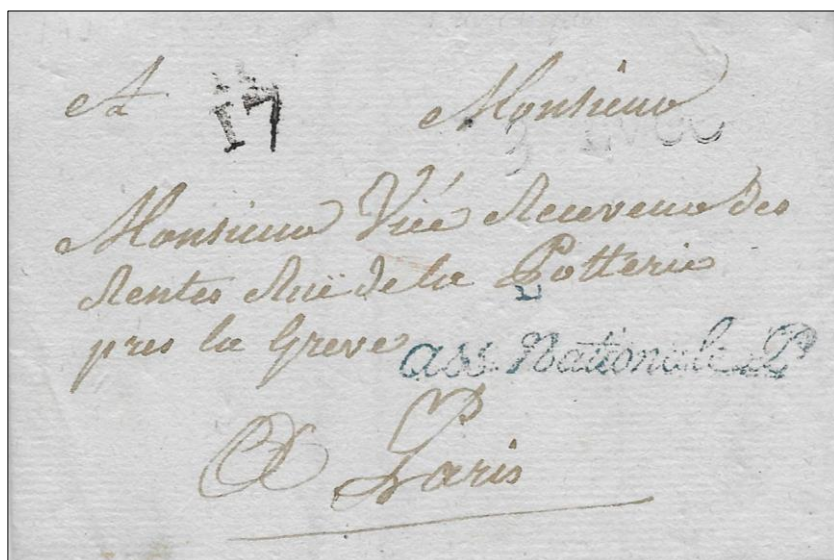
A local letter dated
10 September 1793.

On the back is 2^e L^vée and
day of the month stamp 11.

The significance of the letters
P.B.G. have never been
determined but it certainly
was used on letters posted
at the local counter at the
Hôtel des Postes.

Special Offices

The revolution greatly increased the business carried out by the government. There was also a great influx of people from the provinces, all with a need to correspond with their contacts in the places from which they had come. To facilitate this extra business the post office opened offices specifically to serve various branches of the government. Although much of the correspondence they handled was on official business they could handle all classes of mail. These offices changed to suit the changes made to the structure of the ruling bodies as the revolution progressed.



ass. Nationale. P.

A local letter from the
Assemblée Nationale,
the P is for Paris.

Dated 13 March 1791.

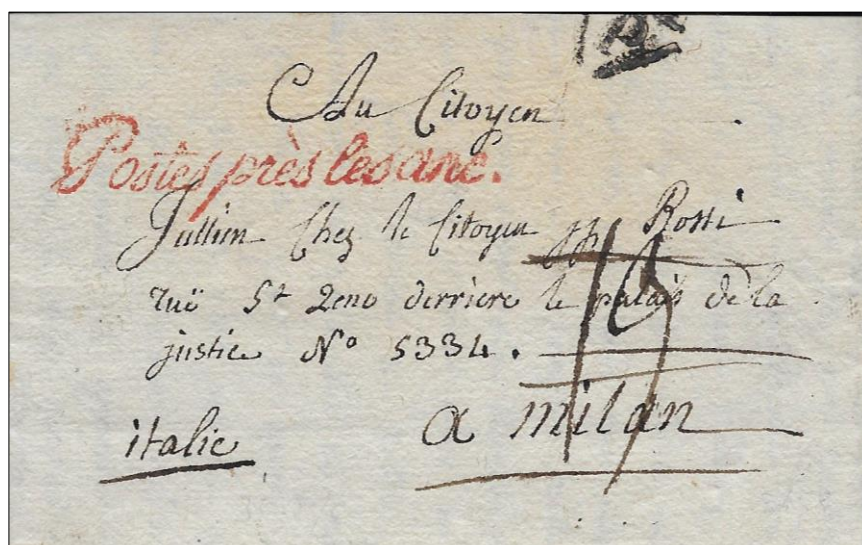
The day of the month 17
and 3^e L^vée are stamped
on the front by the local
sorting office.

The effects of the revolution on the post

Whilst it is true that the revolution sank into a fearful period of terror, it began with great hope and many reforms can be traced to this period. Reason and logic were to replace superstition and religion. For administrative purposes France was reorganised into 83 departments in 1790. A new tariff based on firm principles rather than the rather ad hoc methods used hitherto was introduced in 1792. A central point in each department was set and distances measured as the crow flies. Postage would then be calculated from the department where a letter was posted to the department for which it was destined. Weight progressions replaced the use of the number of sheets as the measure for heavier letters. Rates were now marked in sous a name now used in place of the sol. These fundamental rules, using distance and weight, remained the basis for all future tariffs until the introduction of uniform rates in 1849.

A new calendar was introduced with 12 months each of 30 days. The 5 remaining (6 in a leap year) were complementary days, originally *les sans culottides*. The year began on the 22 September old style and the new calendar was put into effect in the year 2 in 1793. That there were now 10 rather than 7 days between days of rest may have contributed to its unpopularity, and of course there was no Christmas day. Today the 31 March 2016 is 12 Germinal in the year CCXXIV. In the year 2, beginning on 22 September 1793, the calendar is as below. The post office reverted to the Gregorian calendar in December 1805, starting with 1 January 1806.

Vendémiaire	The month of the wine grapes	Sept. 22 to Oct. 21
Brumaire	The misty months	Oct. 22 to Nov. 20
Frimaire	The chilly month	Nov. 21 to Dec. 20
Nivôse	The month of snows	Dec. 21 to Jan. 19
Pluviôse	The rainy month	Jan. 20 to Feb. 18
Ventôse	The month of the winds	Feb. 19 to March 20
Germinal	The month of new life	March 21 to April 19
Floréal	The month of flowers	April 20 to May 19
Prairial	The month of green fields	May 20 to June 18
Messidor	The Harvest month	June 19 to July 18
Thermidor	The month of heat	July 19 to August 17
Fructidor	The month of fruits	August 18 to Sept. 16
Complimentary days 1 to 5		Sept. 17 to Sept. 21



6 Frimaire An 6
(26 November 1797).

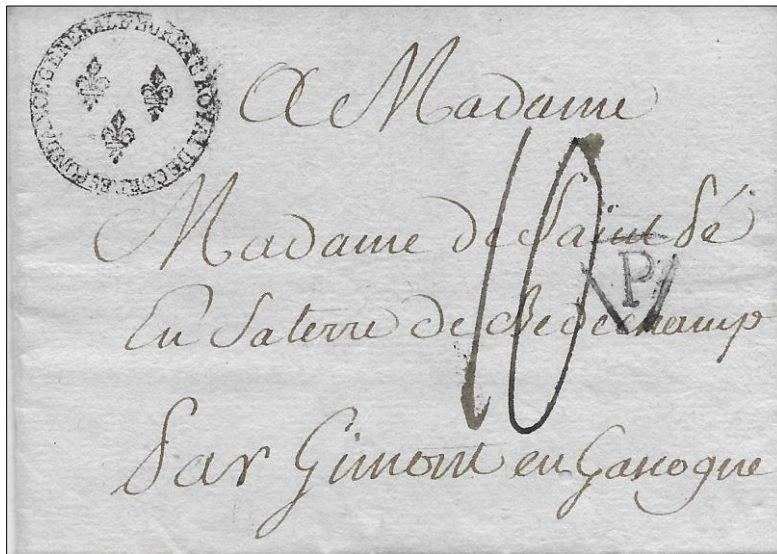
Le Conseil des Anciens
(Council of Elders) was
the upper house of the
Corps Législatif
established in August
1795 after the terror.

The postage charge of 13
sous has been crossed out
so it may have been
allowed as franchise.

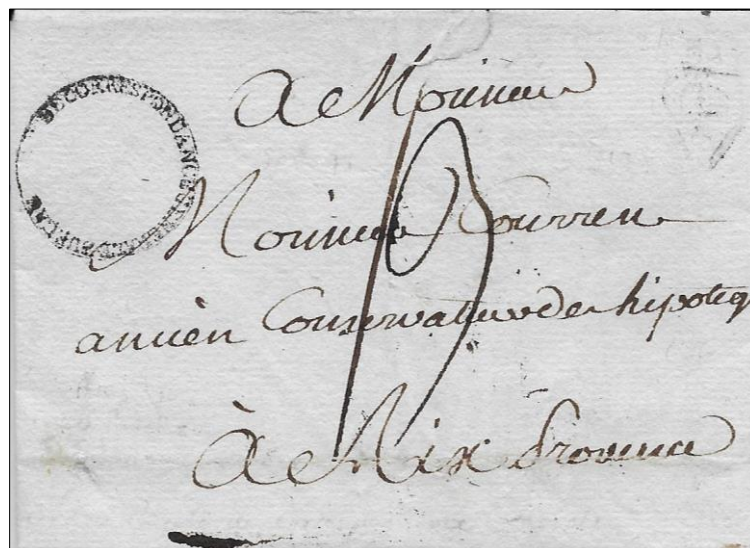
Le Bureau Royal de Correspondance

A state recognised office that dealt with such business matters as rents, pensions etc on behalf of individuals. It used its own handstamps to indicate whether paid or unpaid; although these are not postal.

Any symbol with royal or religious connections was absolutely proscribed once the old régime was overthrown. Crowns, fleur-de-lys, saints names and anything that could be construed to be non revolutionary were all rigorously eschewed. Handstamps had such symbols filed off.



24 March 1789 to pay to Gimont in Gascony
10 sols to pay at the tariff of 1 August 1759.



14 March 1793 to Aix en Provence
13 sous to pay up to 150 leagues at the tariff of 1792
The word Royal and the fleur de lys have been filed off.