




Early New Hebrides philately and postal history

Presentation for the France &
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Introduction

The archipelago of the New Hebrides (since 1980 the Republic of Vanuatu) is situated about 2.500 km northeast of Sydney. The New Hebrides was a (politically and philatelically) fascinating territory being neither a British nor a French colony. Instead it was governed by the two powers jointly as a so-called condominium. The Condominium was established in 1906 as a result of the alliance of France and the UK in the entente cordiale. Under the Condominium there were three separate administrations – one French, one British, and one joint administration with the latter having jurisdiction over the postal service. The condominium lasted until 1980, when New Hebrides gained its independence as the Republic of Vanuatu.

A result of this arrangement was that British and French collectors and philatelists for a long time avoided the territory since it was jointly governed by a foreign power, which left the New Hebrides with a relatively small group of followers. Until today for example, the British and the French stamps of the New Hebrides are listed separately in the SG catalogue, which obstructs the view on the interrelationship of the issues, their single source and the single authority under which they were issued resulting in the stamps being collected according to whether they were „British“ or „French“. This is a great pity since exactly the nature of the archipelago as a condominium makes it an unusual and fascinating country to collect and research („orange apples“).

Introduction

Looking at the stamps one can see how the unique arrangement of the condominium is reflected in the stamps. The contrast of the French and the British influence is shown through the dual printings of the stamps, the currencies, the watermarks, the overprints and the rates and routes of mail.

The goal of this presentation is to give a short overview of the New Hebrides stamps and postal history. It will therefore not go too much into detail but will touch most topics on the surface.

For further reading:

Klinger: Virtual Stamp Album New Hebrides, Internetpage: www.roland-klinger.de/NH

Hals/Collas: The New Hebrides, Postal Stamps and Their History, New York, 1967

Goyns/Klinger: New Hebrides Postal Rates, Postmarks, Registration cachets/labels, Sedgefield, 2013

Introduction

In most of the 19th century there was no regular postal system and no record on how a letter should be addressed to reach its destination. The lack of an official postal service caused dependence on passing ships to take letters to the nearest port with such facilities, so that postal items related to the New Hebrides can only be identified by inscriptions on the letters.

Information on the postal system in the early and middle years of the 19th century is scarce, but as far as we know, incoming letters were transported to Sydney/NSW or to Nouméa/New Caledonia (formerly Fort-de-France) and then sent to the New Hebrides whenever suitable transport was available.

The chaotic times without a regular postal system lasted through most of the 19th century. An official postal system reached the archipelago only in the early 1890s with the establishment of a postal agency by the government of New South Wales.



09.1842: Incoming letter from Sydney to „Mr Nisbet/Tana“. Rev. Henry Nisbet (1818-1876) was a British missionary for the London Missionary Society, who had left England for the Pacific Islands in August 1840 and (along with a fellow missionary) had reached Samoa (from Sydney) a year later. They went on to Tanna in the South of the New Hebrides in June 1842 and stayed there until January 1843. The sender can be identified as Lydia Crook of Sydney, daughter of the noted missionary William Pascoe Crook. According to his diary, Nisbet received post (including this letter) by the vessel „Camden“ on 09.12.1842.

The NSW postal agency (1892-1908)

New South Wales established a postal agency on the New Hebrides in 1891. It was first located on the southern island of Aneityum, but was transferred to Port-Vila, today's capital, in the following year. The agency was first operated by the Australasian United Steam Navigation Co. Ltd. (AUSNCo), whose local manager was named postal agent for the New Hebrides on 01.07.1892. In the following year, the responsibility was devolved upon the Australasian New Hebrides Company (ANHCo) on the basis of a company contract. After the bankruptcy of the ANHCo, Burns, Philp and Co. Ltd. entered into a 10-year contract with the New South Wales Government on 01.09.1900. The Postal Agency was supplied with New South Wales stamps from 1892 on. The agency closed following the advent of the Condominium Post Office in 1908.



Letter to Sydney/NSW, correctly franked with 2d (inter-colonial rate).

The NC postal agency (1903-1908)

On 20.03.1903, the New Caledonian authorities issued a decree, establishing a postal agency on board of the vessel that operated between New Caledonia and the New Hebrides. The first mail contract was granted to the Société Française des Nouvelles-Hébrides (SFNH). By further decree on 14.12.1904, a postal agency was established in Port-Vila with the new contract granted to the Messageries Maritime. The postal agency was supplied with stamps of New Caledonia and with two cancels (Port-Vila and Port-Sandwich).



Letter to Bône/Algeria (today Annaba); Correctly franked with 15c; Backstamped Noumea 30.06.1903 and Bône/Constantine 19.08.1903; One of the oldest recorded letters handled by the New Caledonian postal agency.

Letter to the editor of the German
"Samoanische Zeitung" (Samoan Newspaper),
Erich Lübke in Apia franked with a 25c New
Caledonian stamp (backstamped Noumea and
Sydney);



The local issues of the Australasian New Hebrides Company (1897)



The Australasian New Hebrides Company (ANHCo) was founded in 1887 and handled the ship traffic between Australia and the New Hebrides. In March 1893, the ANHCo took on the responsibility for handling the mails for the New South Wales Postal Agency. Being financially weak from the beginning, the company tried to establish an inter-islands postal system for letters sent between the islands and the letters sent from the archipelago to Sydney. The New South Wales government did not object as long as their stamps were used for mail to Sydney. On 17.03.1897, the company issued 1d and 2d local stamps for inter-islands postage and for mail to and from Sydney that was carried with their ships. The company failed anyway on 30.09.1897. Burns, Philp & Co. Ltd. took over its assets (including the remainders of the stamps).

The local issues of the Syndicat Français des Nouvelles-Hébrides (1903)

The local issues of the Syndicat Français des Nouvelles-Hébrides were an ambitious attempt of French settlers to establish their own postal system in the New Hebrides. The reason might have been that the establishment of the New Caledonian postal agency was very long in coming. After being announced in September 1902, the four values were produced in Marseille and were issued on (supposedly) 01.09.1903



However, the Syndicat operated for only three weeks. The stamps were suppressed by order of the Governor of New Caledonia and the existing stocks were confiscated. Nevertheless, a significant amount of them went on sale as souvenirs, mostly on favor-stamped postcards.

The first British overprints (1908)

The Condominium Post Office came into being on 01.10.1908 as a joint authority. Both colonial administrations had agreed on the use of the French colonial postal tariff and on the use of provisional overprints until the launch of the first definitives.

The British provisional overprints were the first available and issued in Port-Vila on 29.10.1908. Seven issues of the 1903 King Edward VII Fiji key plate series were overprinted "NEW HEBRIDES CONDOMINIUM" at the Government Printing Establishment in Suva/Fiji. The 2d to 6d values were printed on the original 1903 paper with the watermark „Single Crown CA“ and the values of 1/2d and 1sh on the new 1908 paper with the (new) watermark „Multiple Crown CA“. By accident, small quantities of the 1/2d and the 1sh issue were printed on stocks of the 1903 paper.



The Fiji definitives had been printed by Thomas De La Rue & Co. Ltd. in London in sheets of 120, divided vertically into two panes of 60 (6 × 10)

Both panes were surrounded by the so-called „jubilee-line“. It was introduced in 1887 (golden jubilee of Queen Victoria) by De La Rue to protect the plates in the printing process.

Plate numbers were printed at the top above and at the bottom below the second stamp from the left and from the right.



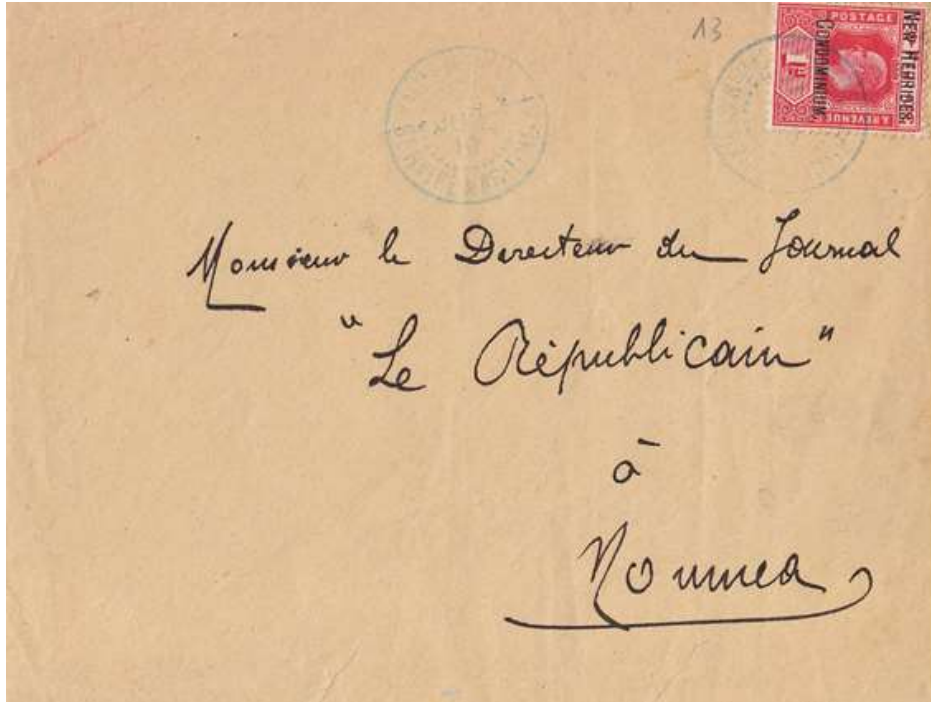
The 1d omitted overprint

The 1d-value has a rare and outstanding variety. During the process of overprinting, one row of stamps was missed in one sheet (the stereo plate fell out of the form), resulting in seven vertical pairs, one stamp with and one without overprint.

14 exemplars of this variety are known. From the left pane, six pairs were formed with the upper stamp carrying no overprint. From the right pane, a corner-block of 10 stamps (2x5) is known as well as a pair of stamps with the lower stamp carrying no overprint and three strips of four, one with gutter (see right).

In addition, there are two more pairs with the lower stamp without overprint. However, the upper stamp of these pairs shows an inclined overprint. They must descend from a following sheet that was furthermore ruined by the slipping stereo plate (printer's waste).





Letter to Noumea/New Caledonia, franked with 1d. (= 10c; correct inter-colonial rate in the French postal tariff). The French Service-Maritime-cancel was used on ships between the islands of the archipelago

Registered letter from Port Vila to Sydney/NSW, franked with the British 2d and 2½d stamps, which was the correct rate for a registered letter to Australia (2d for the letter and 2½d registration fee). One of the scarce letters with the correct registered letter rate.



The 1907 French essays

Five values of the 1905 New-Caledonia Cagou-series were manually overprinted diagonally with „NELLES HÉBRIDES“ at the Atelier du Timbre in Paris. The results were irregular. The British administration further objected the lack of the word „Condominium“.

The issue was therefore rejected. The stamps are treated today as essays.



The first French overprints (1908)

In a second attempt, the series was overprinted horizontally with the words „Nouvelles Hébrides“ (Printing by the Atelier du Timbre in Paris in six panes of 25 stamps per sheet (the 1f.-value in sheets of three panes of 25 stamps) on unwatermarked paper). Only a small portion was sent to Port-Vila for actual postal use. The main portion stayed in Paris and was sold to collectors.

Just as in the 1907 essays, the word „Condominium“ was missing but the provisional stamps were accepted nevertheless.





Letter to Nice/France with the correct postage of 10c.

Letter to Leipzig/Germany, paid with 20c; since the non-colonial rate was 25c, this was an underpayment of 5c. The charge, which was double the underpaid amount, is indicated by a manuscript 0.10 (=2x 5c) and with the T in triangle hand-stamp.



Registered letter to Paris with two French 10c stamps and an English 2½d stamp. It must have been a double weight letter as the inter-colonial letter rate to France was 10c per 15g and the registration rate was 25c.



The second British overprints (1910)

The stocks of the provisional British 1908 series were already running low in 1910 with no sign of the planned New Hebrides definitives. Therefore, an order was placed with De La Rue & Co. for further provisional supply. Seven values of the 1903 Fiji definitives were overprinted in moderate numbers by typeset. They went on sale on 15.12.1910.





Letter to Verdun/France carrying the correct inter-colonial letter rate of 1d

British 2d stamp on a letter to Ste. Foy-lès-Lyon/France





Registered letter to Sydney/NSW, franked with 1sh.

Registered letter to Paris, franked with 1sh., backstamped Sydney 20.01.1912 and Paris 24.02.1912; The letter must have been relatively heavy and probably insured, because the regular fee for a registered colonial letter was 35c.



The second French overprints (1910)

France had omitted the word „Condominium“ on the 1908 provisional stamps which caused protests from the British side as it breached the Condominium agreement. After the stocks of the 1908 stamps ran low and need for further provisionals occurred, this mistake was corrected on the second provisional series. The values of 5c, 10c and 1f went on sale in Port-Vila on 11.09.1910, whereas the other two values were shipped there only in 1911. It is doubtful if they were ever officially on sale in Port-Vila. The sale of the series in Paris to collectors had started long before (10.03.1910).



The 1908/10 overprinted stamps were all from one special edition with the „millésime“ 8 (the year 1908). They were printed only for the purpose to be issued with the overprint in the New Hebrides and were not issued without overprint in New Caledonia.



Postcard to London, with the correct inter-colonial rate of 10c („Service Maritime“).

Registered letter to Nouméa/New Caledonia, correctly franked with 35c (10c French colonial letter rate for letters up to 15g plus 25c registration fee).



Letter to Coffs
Harbour/Australia,
franked with the
heavy letter rate
(triple) of 3d (=30c)



The definitive series of 1911/1912

The first definitives of the New Hebrides were launched following the entry of the Condominium into the Universal Postal Union (UPU) on 01.03.1911. Separated British and French issues with the same design were released picturing a local native cabin. The design was the work of Jules Giraud, a local French resident. Both issues were recess-printed by De La Rue & Co. Ltd. in London in sheets of 30 stamps. The stamps had already arrived at Port-Vila in March 1911, but were held back and placed on sale on 25.07.1911 after the 1910 provisional issues were exhausted.





The British watermark caused disapproval in the French colonial administration. For that reason, De La Rue had to reprint the issue again in the following year (1912). A special paper was created for this re-issue (large sheets of 60 stamps with huge letters "R" and "F" in the sheet as a watermark). Because of the size of the watermark, many stamps do not have one at all.

RF



Letter to Calvados/France, franked correctly with the inter-colonial rate of 10c

Letter to Monbert/France carrying stamps of both the British and French. One of the scarce WWI letters.





Letter to the United States with the correct rate for non-colonial destinations of 2 1/2d for letters under 15g.

Letter to Leeds/England bearing 25c.





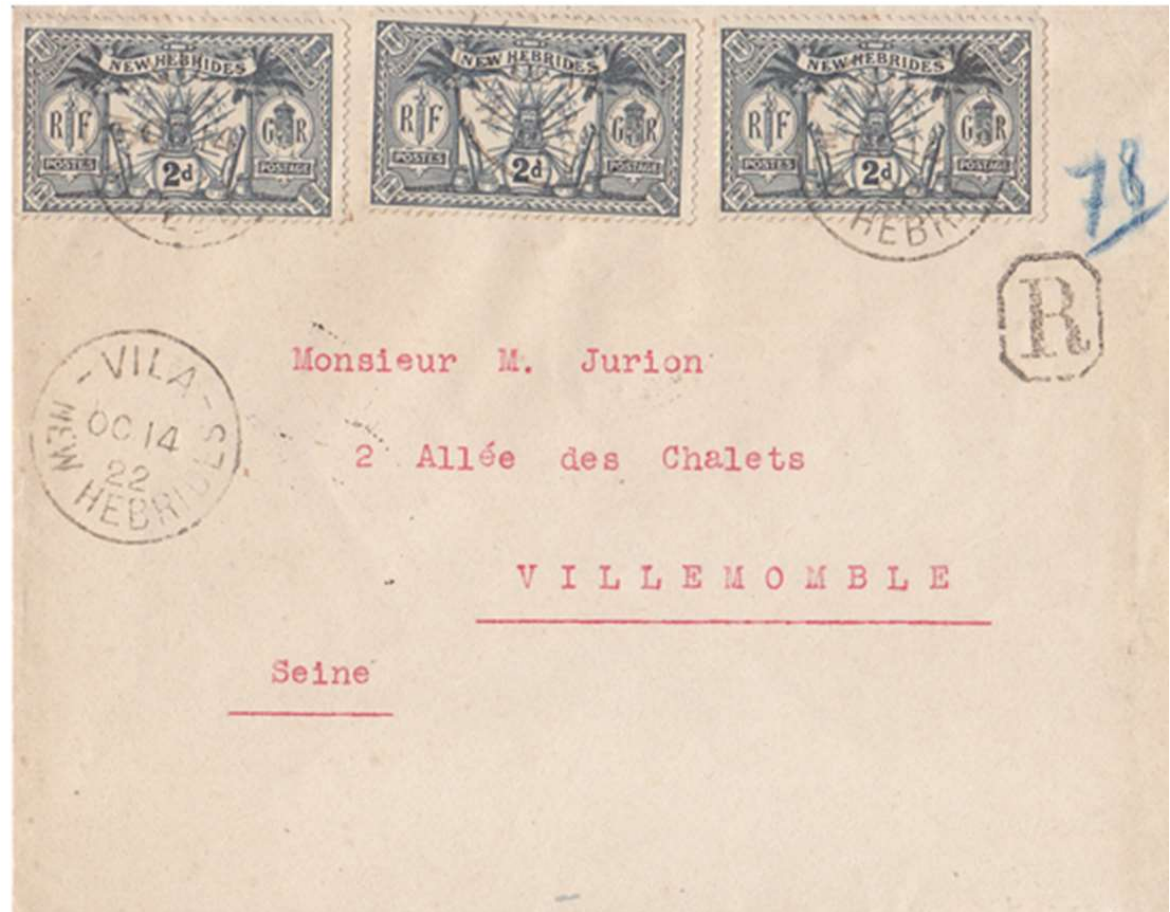
Registered letter to Apia, Samoa franked with 7d to pay the triple rate for non-colonial destinations (Samoa was a German colony at that time) plus 2½d registration.

Letter to Uturoa on the island of Raiatea in French-Polynesia via Papeete/Tahiti (backstamped 08.09.1923), transported with and cancelled on the „El-Kantara“. This mailboat started the passenger service by Messagerie Maritimes between Nouméa and Marseilles in 1923. After leaving Port-Vila on 21.08.1923, the ship stopped at Suva and Apia before arriving in Tahiti on 04.09.1923. It would leave Papeete on 09.09.1923 and arrive in Marseille via Panama on 27.10.1923.





In 1921, the new watermark „Multiple Script CA“ was introduced for colonial stamps. The values of 1d, 2d and 6d were reprinted on the new paper by De La Rue. The issue was placed on sale in Port-Vila in August 1921.



Registered letter to Villemomble/France. The inter-colonial tariff was 2d for letters up to 20g, the registration fee was 3d. Another fee of 1d was due for every additional 10g, so this letter must have been between 20g and 30g.

The provisional overprints of the 1920s (1920-1925)

The years between 1920 and 1925 represent a relatively chaotic time in the postal history of the New Hebrides. The stocks of the 1911/12-definitives were running low and a new series was not planned yet. The reason was that a lot of the lower value stamps (the higher values being better protected) were destroyed by the tropical humidity. As a result, a number of the higher values was surcharged with lower values. The surcharge printing was performed by the government printer in Suva/Fiji.



In 1920 a number of five different values was surcharged. Those were the 1911 British values of 1sh, 2sh and 5sh (surcharged with 1d) and the French 1910 values of 25c (surcharged with 5c) and 50c (surcharged with 10c).

In the printing process of the 1920 surcharges, at least one sheet of the 1908 provisional overprints (= the first provisional series, which had omitted the word „Condominium“ in the overprint) was accidentally surcharged and sent in the stock to the Post Office in Port-Vila, where they were sold. The number of surcharged 50c stamps of the 1908 issue is uncertain, but there is some evidence that two sheets have been overprinted. That would be 300 stamps as there were 6 x 25 stamps on a sheet.



Registered letter to Melbourne/Australia



The next set of surcharged issues was already released in 1921. It is highly questionable if this really happened because of a postal necessity after a high number of stamps was overprinted just the year before. Monetary interests of the postal administration seem to have been another reason.



The British surcharges



The French surcharges



Registered letter to Melbourne, franked with 30c. and 3d.

In 1924, more overprints were produced to meet the standards of the 1920 International Postal Convention (certain colours for all values). The Government Printer in Suva/Fiji was commissioned to overprint again old stocks to have the most important values comply with the convention.



Two panes of 30 stamps of the 5d-on-2 1/2d value were accidentally inserted upside down, with the stamps having the surcharge inverted. Of the 60 stamps bearing the inverted overprint, 39 are known so far.



Registered Postmaster letter to Paris, the 1911/12 with mixed frankings (20c stamp and the 1924 3d overprinted stamp). 5d (=50c) was the correct inter-colonial rate for registered letters (20c inter-colonial letter rate plus 30c registration fee).



The dual currency definitive series of 1925

In 1925, a new series of definitives was issued, for the first time with both colonial currencies expressed on each stamp. The necessity of new definitives being issued was the UPU 1920 colors and rate change. The design of 1911 was therefore modified. The recess printing was performed by De La Rue & Co. Ltd..

The British issue with nine denominations (representing the British Colonial rates) carries the French currency on the left and the British currency on the right (Watermark: Multiple Script CA; Perforation 14).

The French issue with eleven denominations had the British currency on the left and the French currency on the right side (Watermark: RF, Perforation: 14).





Letter to Paris paying the correct inter-colonial letter rate of 5d (=50c).

Letter to Jditah Chtaura/Lebanon, franked with the correct colonial 50c rate since Lebanon was under a French League of Nations mandate at that time; Backstamped Beirut; the recipient of the letter was Paul Brun who ran the „Domaine des Tourelles“, the oldest commercial winery in Lebanon.



Letter to Connecticut/USA bearing the correct rate for non-colonial letters of 1,50f (=1sh 3d)



Registered letter to France, franked with 1,50f (50c new inter-colonial letter rate for letters up to 20g plus 1f new inter-colonial registration fee).



Registered letter to Paris, franked correctly with 1sh 3d (= 1,50f) (5d inter-colonial letter rate plus 10d inter-colonial registration fee).

Letter to Paris, franked with 1f (= 10d). The letter seems to have been relatively heavy for this has been the letter rate for letters between 50g and 100g.



Registered letter to Le Mans/France, franked with 2f (= 1sh 8d). This was the rate for colonial registered letters heavier than 50g.

In July 1929 the French cruiser „Tourville“ visited the New Hebrides carrying two waterplanes. One of these was supposed to land in Port-Vila. On this occasion, the first „airmail“ stamps were produced on 16.07.1929 by overprinting the stamps on cover with a 36mm x 4mm „PAR AVION“ rubber stamp. The letters were supposed to be flown to the Tourville by the waterplane. It is however uncertain until this day if the letters were actually in the air.



The 1920's and 1930's saw a worldwide expansion of airmail, but it was not until 1934 that a regular postal air service was established in the New Hebrides. The service seems to have started early in 1935 and involved shipping the post to Sydney and then flying it from there to its destination. The postage charge was calculated by adding the relevant surface rate (plus relevant registration fee if required) to the relevant air letter rate from Sydney (which was between 1935 and 1938 1/6d to the United Kingdom and 1/9d to the rest of Europe including France per 1/2 oz).

The surface rate was calculated in metric weights while the air letter rate was calculated in imperial weights. This caused considerable confusion with the result, that almost all of these airmail covers show incorrect (=overpaid) postage.



Registered Air Mail cover to France; The 5/10d (7,25f) overpaid the postage by 2/10d.

The postage due stamps

In 1925 the first postage due stamps were created by overprinting stamps of the regular design with the words "Postage Due" (British) and „Chiffre Taxe“ (French). As the British values of 30c/3d and 1f/10d did not exist, they were printed to perform the overprinting. The production was performed by De La Rue. 2100 sets of the British series were produced. The number of French sets is unknown.



Incoming letter from Takeo/Cambodia (then Indochina) to Port-Vila, underfranked with 1c, franked with a British postage due stamp (10d). Transit cancel Saigon (29.09.1932) and Noumea (06.11.1932),



The gold currency definitive issue of 1938

This new series of definitives was issued on 01.06.1938. For the first time, the stamps were issued in a single currency, the „gold franc“. This was an „artificial“ currency that was used by the UPU for postal rates. The reason for introducing this fictional but stable „currency“ was the growing disparity between the two colonial currencies in the 1930s. The stamps pictured the volcano on the island of Lopevi. They were based on a design made by Jean Kehor and were recess-printed by Bradbury, Wilkinson & Co. Ltd. of New Malden, Surrey, England in sheets of 30 (3x10) (Engraver J.G. Hall, Watermark Multiple Script CA, Perforation 12).



This letter was sent from Port-Vila to the little village of Mele (situated only a couple of kilometers away) and is franked with the local postage rate of 5gc. The addressee Edouard Pouillet ran a plantation in Mele.



First Day Cover to Sydney/NSW with the correct new colonial postage of 10gc.



Letter to Australia, franked with the correct inter-colonial tariff of 10gc. It is one of the few civilian letters of that time that was not censored.

Registered letter to Australia, franked correctly with 30gc (10gc inter-colonial letter rate plus 20gc inter-colonial registration fee). One of the few non-censored civilian letters of that time.



Another early use, showing 30gc on a registered letter to Paris (10gc colonial tariff plus 20gc registration fee)

Censored letter to the United States of America, franked correctly with 30 gc (non-colonial letter rate). The sender was the catholic apostolic vicar for the New Hebrides, Bishop Jules Halbert SM. It was censored in Port-Vila.



Letter to the International Comitte of the Red Cross in Geneva/Switzerland. The letter is franked with 30gc, which was the rate for non-colonial letters up to 20g. In WWII (two large U.S. military bases were situated on the islands of Efate and Espiritu Santo) civilian letters were censored as well.

Censored letter to the Bedford/United States carrying stamps of both the British and French series. It was opened and censored in Sydney.



Letter to Bedford/Massachussetts paying the correct tariff for non-colonial territories (30gc). The letter was censored in Port-Vila.



Pre-WWII registered letter to Paris, forwarded to Enghien-les-Bains/France. The letter is franked correctly with 1,50gf (0,10gf inter-colonial tariff, 0,20gf inter-colonial registration fee, 1,20gf airmail surcharge)

Another registered airmail letter, sent from the island of Pentecost in the north of the New Hebrides to Paris. It is backstamped Sydney and Paris. Since the archipelago did not have a landing strip prior to WWII, airmail letters were carried to Sydney by ship and then forwarded by plane



Missionary letters of the 1940s



Registered airmail-letter to Argentina;
 Backstamped Sydney 05.10.1947; Correctly
 franked with the non-colonial letter rate (30gc),
 the non-colonial registration fee (30gc) and
 twice the airmail surcharge (1st class) per 5g of
 55gc to South America (1,10gf)



Airmail letter from the island of Aoba to
 Kolding/Denmark, franked correctly with the non-
 colonial letter rate (30gc) and twice the airmail
 surcharge per 5g 1st class of 45gc to non-colonial
 Europe.

French colonial mail from the early 1950s



The France-libre-overprint of 1941

In the early 1940s, world history arrived at the New Hebrides. The French administration made history in refusing to give allegiance to the superior colonial administration of New Caledonia (which was loyal to the regime of Vichy) and joining the „France libre“ movement of General de Gaulle as the first French colonial territory at all on 22.07.1940.

The overprint „France Libre“ was made in New Caledonia, which had joined the „France libre“ movement shortly after the New Hebrides. 5960 whole French sets were overprinted and released in Port-Vila on 15.04.1941 and in Santo on 19.04.1941. A part of that was sent to General de Gaulle’s headquarters in London and sold to collectors. No specimen were made.





A lot of covers bearing the overprint are of philatelic origin like these:



But there are also examples of commercial use:

Letters to Sydney and to Manchester with the correct inter-colonial tariff of 10gc, both censored in Australia.



1946 Registered ship letter sent from the island of Ambrym to Los Angeles. The sender, John Leslie Mitchell, was an Anglo-Australian planter, who ran Ranon plantation on Ambrym for many years. Transit cancels: San Francisco Registered 21.09.1946, Los Angeles Terminal Annex 24.09.1946, arrival cancel: Los Angeles O.B. 25.09.1946.



The postage due stamps

Postage due stamps were issued as well. As in 1925, the definitives were overprinted with „POSTAGE DUE“ and „CHIFFRE TAXE“. The overprinting was performed by Bradbury, Wilkinson & Co.Ltd., New Malden, Surry, UK.



Inwards letter from Australia, bearing 6 1/2d, underpaid and taxed 15gc on arrival at Port Vila on 07.08.1951.

The sender was the department store Anthony Hordern & sons, once the largest department store in Sydney. The company used its perforated stamps for postage. The addressee was Gabriel Gomichon des Granges (1904-1971), a French lawyer and planter who ran the Bellevue plantation near Port Vila.



The 1949 UPU-issue

This issue represents the first series of commemorative stamps of the New Hebrides. It was a British Omnibus issue celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Universal Postal Union (Design Eduard Dulac, Watermarks Crown Script CA (br.) / RF in sheet (fr.); Perforation 13 1/2 x 14 (br.) / 13 1/2 (fr.)). The printing was performed by Waterlow & Sons Ltd., the first day of issue was 10.10.1949.



The UPU-issue is rarely seen on commercial letters as most stamps were used for FDCs or commemorative letters.

Letter to Negropo/New Caledonia, labeled as airmail but franked as regular letter



Commercial cover to Vesoul/France, franked with 55gc (slightly insufficient postage, as the inter-colonial tariff was 10gc and the airmail surcharge to France was 50gc).

Thank you for your patience!