

The Era of the French Colonial Allegorical Group Type: The Stamp Dealership of N'Gomo, Gabon - A Rich Connection

by Edward Grabowski

One of the challenges and delights of collecting the French Colonial Allegorical Group Type is to be able to obtain material from the small and remote village post offices. Often there are but one or two covers available from many of these villages and it

may take decades for one to appear on the market. There is little documentation on availability of covers from these villages so one often has to make an on-the-spot decision as to whether to purchase a seemingly rare cover or not. Little had been published on Group Type postal history as of the 1980s, so there was not much guidance in the literature at that time. Indeed, my first publication on the Group Type, a joint effort with Bob Stone who was the Dean of French Colony collectors of his generation, was not to appear until 1984.¹ In this article, Bob and I tried to present the first detailed overview in English on the history of the issue and collecting it as stamps and postal history. Most of the time the covers from small and remote villages prove to be rare, but occasionally such is not the case. This is the story of one such village, N'Gomo, Gabon, and some of its covers.

For me this story begins at a New York City American Stamp Dealers Association Show in 1983. I had been collecting the

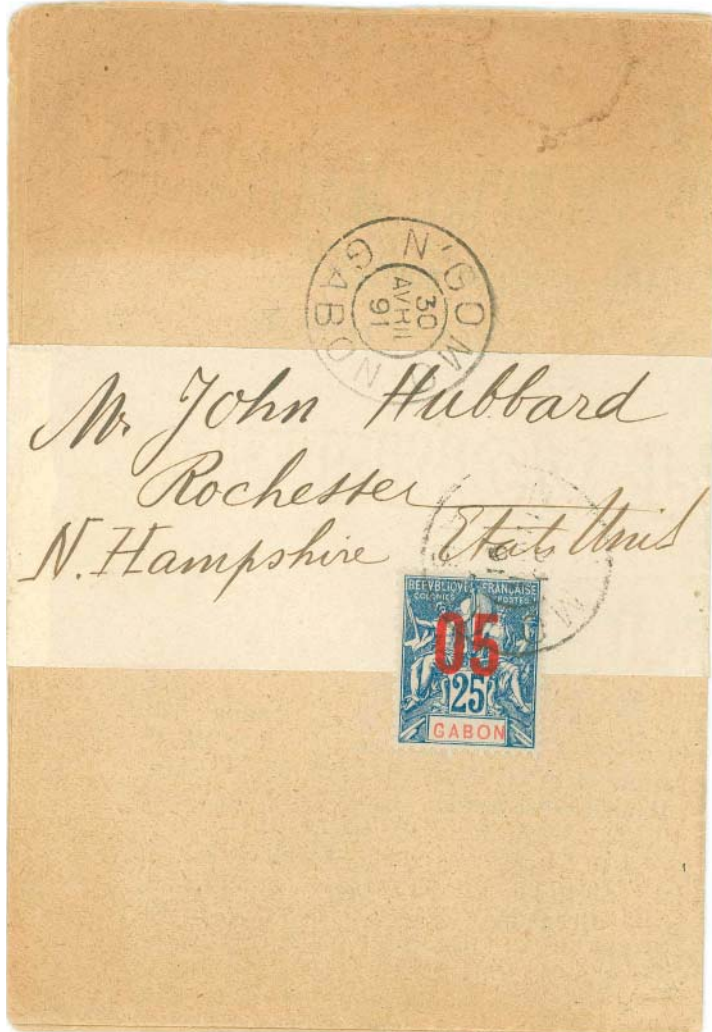


Figure 1. Complete printed matter cover from N'Gomo, Gabon, to the United States.

Group Type from all of the French Colonies for fewer than 10 years at the time, and was still learning about the issue. While looking through the French Colonies stock of one of the small postal history dealers at the ASDA show, I came across the unusual cover shown in Figure 1. It is a twice-folded printed sheet surrounded by a wrapper band that is nicely tied to the sheet by the stamp and a datestamp. At this time I was fully aware that complete examples of printed matter with contents and wrapper bands were unusual and desirable additions to collections. I was pleased to buy this item (at the asking price), which was posted from the remote tiny village of N'Gomo, Gabon, located on the Ogooué River. The map in Figure 2 shows the location of N'Gomo on this principal river of the colony. It is from a book by Albert Schweitzer who will be discussed shortly.² The

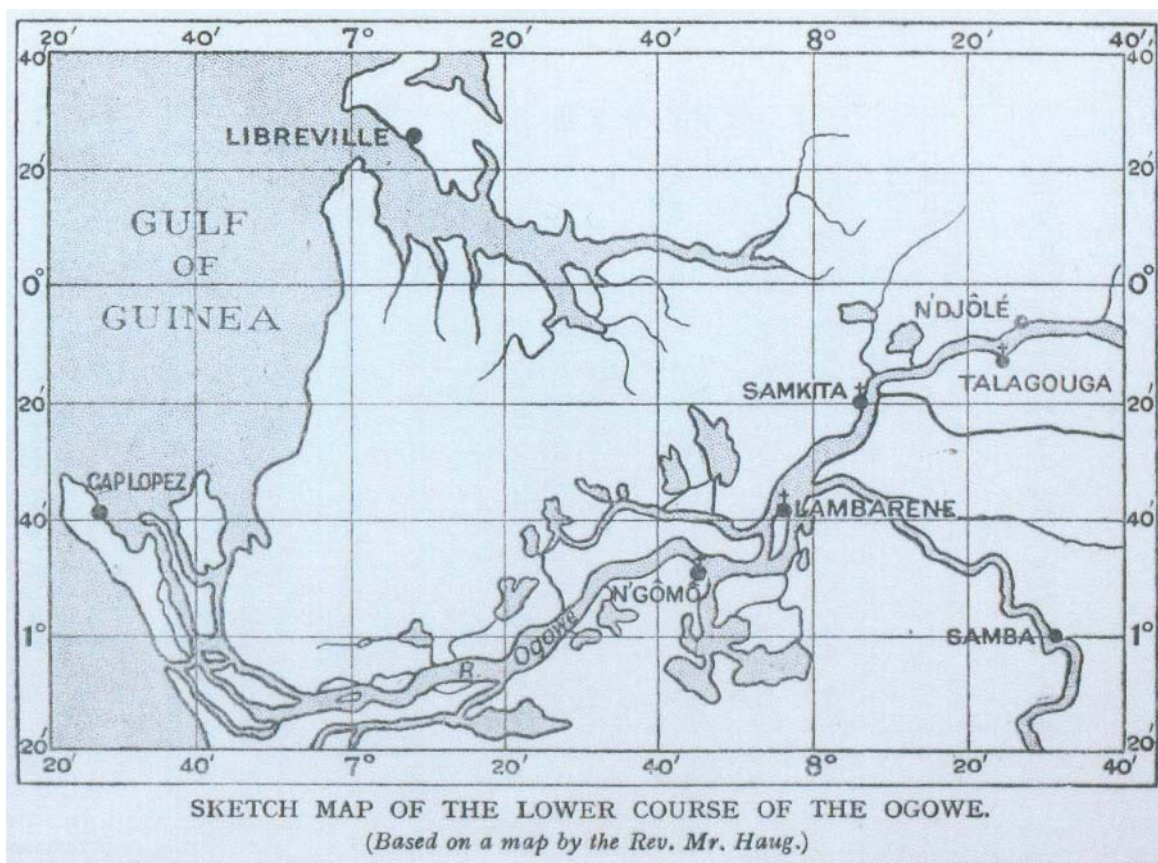


Figure 2. Map of Gabon highlighting the location of N'Gomo.

cover in Figure 1 is franked at the proper 5 centimes (henceforth 5c) printed matter rate of the time with an "05" overprint on the Gabon 25c blue Group Type stamp. In 1912 the stocks of Group Type stamps for all of the French Colonies were overprinted "05" and "10" in Paris in an effort to get rid of existing material, which by this time had been superseded by definitive issues specific to each colony.¹ These were the most-used rates in the French Colonies at the time, with 5c corresponding to the printed matter rate and 10c corresponding to the existing French Community rate, which included France and its colonies, offices and territories. The datestamp, which ties the stamp and wrapper to the printed sheet, reads: "N'GOMO GABON, 30 AVRIL 91," suggesting that the item had been posted in 1891! Clearly this is in error, as the stamp used for postage did not exist until 1912. Someone had inverted the "16" plug in the datestamp such that it appears to read "91," a situation which was to continue for much of 1916, as we shall see.

Upon opening the item, I saw the printed sheet shown in Figure 3. I was struck by the headline: "LARGE POSTAGE STAMPS EXCHANGE WANTED," in not quite correct English. The printed sheet contained an offer from a dealer in N'Gomo, listed as Mr. Geo. Faure at the Mission Evangélique Française, to exchange a variety of French West and Equatorial African stamps for a variety of other specified foreign stamps based on Scott numbers and catalog values. Specifically offered for exchange are the 1912 Group Type overprints, their millésime pairs (pairs with the last digit of the year of printing shown on the in-between gutter) and their wide-spacing varieties. In addition to his stamp dealing interests, Faure was also the missionary in charge of this mission, and lived there with his wife. I was delighted to purchase this item, and pleased to note that it showed an offer to sell the very stamps whose postal history I was collecting, and the item in itself was an example of that postal history!

LARGE POSTAGE STAMPS EXCHANGE WANTED

Want list with SCOTT STANDARD catalogue numbers

Please put above the stamps the catalogue numbers

United States: 57 to 61, 74 to 78, 78a, 78b, 78c, 86 to 91, 105 to 111, 118 to 122, 156 to 166, 182 to 191, 200 to 204, 230 to 245, 280 to 284, 294 to 307, 338 to 353. — Antigua: 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12 to 16, 27 to 30, 32 to 34, 38 to 41. — Argentine Rep.: 1 to 4, 4a, 4b, 6, 7, 7a, 7b, 7c, 8 to 22, 49a, 49b, 49c, 50a, 50b, 51a, 51b, 51c, used or unused; 195 to 200, unused. — Australian Commonwealth: 10 to 15, 19 to 25 unused. — Bahamas: 34 to 43; 49 to 56 unused. — Bangkok: all are wanted. — Barbados: 79 to 99 used or unused; 116 to 126 unused. — Bermuda: 12 to 18, 22 to 29, 40 to 47. — British Columbia and Vancouver Isl.: 8 to 18. — British Guiana: 45 to 68, 77, 79, 80, 85 to 91, 112 to 128, 169 to 170 used or unused; 178 to 187 unused. — British Honduras: 1 to 11, 22 to 33, 48 to 51, 53, 69, 70, 71, 80 to 83. — British Salomon Isl.: 8 to 17, 19 to 33, 38, 39, 40. — Canada: 1 to 16, 28 to 36, 48a, 49 a, 55 to 63, 95, 95 unused; 102, 103. — Cayman Isl.: 1 to 12, 16 to 21, 24 to 30, 37 to 48. — Cook Isl. Federation: 1 to 14, 20 to 23, 28 to 38. — Curacao: 1 to 7, 18 to 23, 35 to 40, 43 to 59. — Danish West Indies: 3 to 15, 18 to 22, 31 to 42, 47 to 50. — Dominica: 1 to 3, 13 to 19, 22, 23, 24, 31 to 40, 50, 51, 52. — Dominican Repub.: 10 to 26, 31 to 35, 44 to 53, 186 to 199. — Falkland Isl.: 1 to 11, 14 to 19, 22 to 25, 34 to 40. — Fiji Isl.: 15 to 26, 30 to 33, 43 to 50, 59 to 69, 93 to 98. — Gilbert and Ellice: 10, 15 to 24. — Grenada: 5b, 5d, 6 to 13, 18 to 19, 29 to 33, 48 to 67, 83 to 90. — Guadeloupe: 60 to 70. — Post. Due Stps 213 to 222. — Hawaiian Isl.: 30 to 49, 70 to 77. — Jamaica: 1 to 6, 9 to 12, 18 to 30, 58 to 71. — Leeward Isl.: 5 to 8, 11 to 16, 24 to 28, 40 to 45, 54 to 58. — Marianna Isl.: 21 to 29. — Marshall Isl.: 18 to 25. — Montserrat: 12 to 20, 27 to 31, 35 to 42. — New-Britain: all stamps are wanted. — Nevis: 26 to 32. — New-Brunswick: 5 to 12. — New-

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HUBBARD'S Monthly Bargain List.

Prices here given do not include postage or express. Anyone buying goods from this list to the value of 50 cents or over, will be given a year's subscription to the CURIOSITY WORLD.

- | STAMPS. | MISCELLANEOUS. |
|--|---|
| 12,000 Canada 2 cent Registered, at \$1.50 per 1000, or 17 cents per 100. | 3 Fossil Shark's Teeth, only 25 cts. |
| 8,000 Canada Bill stamps, at \$2.10 per 1000, or 25 cents per 100. | 2 Amethysts from Madrid, India, large and fine, only 50 cents each. |
| 75,000 mixed Foreign stamps, at 15 cts. per 1000. | 1 Chinese Prayer Bell, wood, finely carved. Rare and curious, 75 cents. |
| 300 United War Department, 1 cent, at 75 cents per 100. | 2 old newspapers, 1791-98. Price 25 cents each. |
| 400 India Envelope, 1-2 a. green, at 50 cents per 100. | Volumes III., IV., V., VI. and VII. of "Golden Days" \$2.00 per Vol. |
| 5,000 India assorted, 18 cents per 100. | 75 copies "Rare American Coins" issued by Chariton Numismatic Society, and retailed at 10 cents each. Price 25 cents per dozen. |
| 700 Sweden, fine assortment, 18 cts. per 100. | 84 Copies "Philatelic Frauds," published by Simmons, 1883. Retail price, 15 cents. Price 75 cents per dozen. |
| 800 Portugal, assorted, 15 cents per 100. | 5 Taumen's 85 cent Mineral Cabinet, 60 cents each. |
| 2000 Mexico, well assorted, at 50 cents per 100. | |
| 225 packets each containing 35 varieties of foreign stamps, price 30 cents per doz. packets. | |
| | INDIAN RELICS. |
| | 6 fine grooved axes, only \$1.25 each. |
| | 50 Sinkers, at 20 cents each. |
| | 25 Spear Heads at 10 cents each. |
| | 20 Spear Heads at 15 cents each. |
| | 12 Spear Heads at 25 cents each. |
| | 15 Skinners at 25 cents each. |
| | 10 fine Drills at 25 cents each. |
| | 75 Perfect Arrow Heads at 6 cents each. |
| | 5 for 25 cents. |
| | 7 Pestles at 75 cents each. |
| | 150 Imperfect Arrow Heads, 25 cents per dozen. |
| | 25 Pieces of Pottery at 3 cents each. |
| | 3 Red Catlinite Pipes, with wooden stem 1-2 feet long. Price \$3.00 each. |
| | 1 Buckskin beaded tobacco bag \$1.00. |
| | 1 Indian Pony whip, 50 cents. |
| | 1 Beaded hair and quill Head Ornament, \$1.00. |
| | 1 Buffalo Horn Spoon, 50 cents. |
| | 1 Buckskin beaded Medicine Bag, 75 cts |

Continued on last page of Cover.

JOHN M. HUBBARD,
Lake Village, New Hampshire

There is another element of this cover to be discussed. It is addressed to "Mr. John Hubbard, Rochester, N Hampshire, Etats Unis." Who was Hubbard and what were his claims to fame, if any? At the time of purchase it was difficult to locate information such as this, but such is not the case today. A quick Google search establishes that Hubbard was a serious stamp dealer from Lake Village, N.H., a tiny village outside of Rochester, N.H. He published a philatelic monthly at the end of the 19th century and into the 20th titled *The Curiosity World* (Figure 4). He not only sold stamps and stamp supplies, but also coins, miscellaneous collectibles and Indian relics! Given his focus on stamps, he was an ideal person with whom Faure could exchange stamps and an obvious choice for the solicitation to do so.

One serious problem that I have had with stamp collecting is that I never know when to stop buying. Is one example of a cover from a remote village enough? Over the years I have tended to buy similar covers so long as the newer ones brought additional ele-

Figure 3 (top). Printed sheet offering the exchange of stamps from a dealer in N'Gomo, Gabon.

Figure 4 (left). Hubbard's *The Curiosity World*, dealing mostly with stamps.

Figure 5. Printed matter envelope from N’Gomo to Halifax, Nova Scotia.

ments to the collection. The net result is I tend to have great depth in what I collect, which leads to new discoveries and ready publications. This publication is a direct outcome of my collecting style.

Shortly after finding the cover in Figure 1, the one in Figure 5 came into my collection as a result of a Gold Medal mail sale. Gold Medal Mail Sales was the vehicle by which the J. & H. Stolow firm of New York City sold material not suitable for its monthly auctions. Each of these mail sales could contain about 10,000 lots, all with minimal descriptions. Only a few of the items were pictured. Bidding was a bit of a crap-shoot, but over the years I purchased a number of good items from these sales.

The envelope in Figure 5 is from the same origin as that in Figure 1 – now listed as J. Georges Faure in N’Gomo, Gabon. It was franked at the 5c printed matter rate with the Gabon 1912 “05” overprint on the 15c gray Group Type stamp. It was posted on Jan. 4, 1916, and shows the same inversion in the year datestamp – “91” in lieu of “16.” It is addressed to Mr. Henry Heckler of Halifax, Nova Scotia. Items in my French Colonies General Issues Guadeloupe collection had already established that Heckler was a stamp dealer and philatelic publisher in Halifax. The cover bears a customs transit/arrival handstamp: “**Customs Canada 6 Duty Free, Postal Parcels, Mar 16, 1916.**” Undoubtedly, Heckler received much business mail in Halifax, and Canadian Customs examined his mail carefully for dutiable material. With the new elements present in this cover – including a different stamp of the overprint issue of 1912, an unusual destination, a Customs arrival handstamp



in Canada and the ability to establish that the transit time for this item from N’Gomo to Halifax was about 10 weeks – I thought it a worthy addition to my collection. Its original printed matter content, most likely the printed sheet shown in Figure 2, was not present.



Figure 6. Postcard showing the Protestant mission in N’Gomo.



Postcard collecting was popular during the early part of the 20th century, and the African Colonies were always favored in France. The postcard shown in Figure 6 is readily available, and shows the very Protestant Mission that Faure operated. Little is known about the mission. It had a small church, a school and dormitories for the students. I could find little on Faure via Google, including any information on his ecclesiastical and philatelic activities. He

and his wife are mentioned in Schweitzer's book, which is focused on the Doctor's work in Lambarene, a village further up the Ogooué (see map in Figure 2).² Possibly the proceeds from Faure's philatelic enterprise were used to support the mission? I have only seen covers from the mission from 1913-17, suggesting his association with the operation was short-lived. There are suggestions in the literature that Faure and his wife were the only two Europeans located in N'Gomo, but I have not been able to confirm this with certainty. Normally having but two western residents in a small French colonial village would put a severe limit on the amount of mail available from such a village.

Figure 7 (above). Unusual registered printed matter cover at 15c rate.

Figure 8 (left). Cover of the Lambert book.

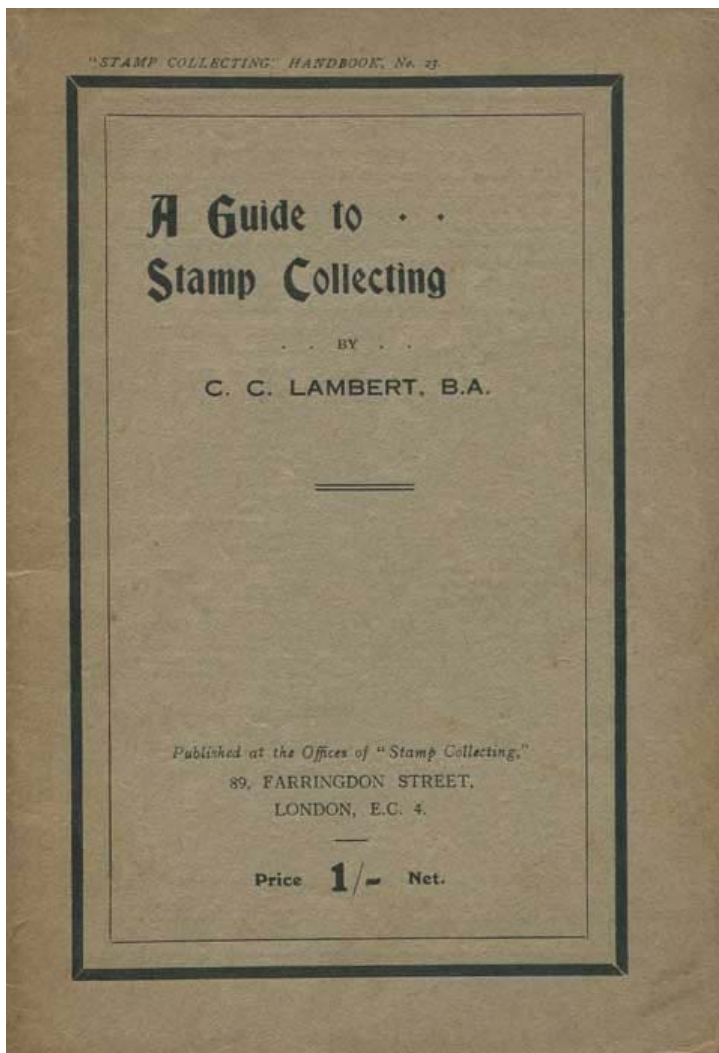


Figure 9. Letter from Faure to Rome in 1915 with a Bologna censorship handstamp.

At this point I decided to continue to collect covers from N'Gomo so long as they added new elements to the collection. The cover shown in Figure 7 proved to be a no-brainer. It was posted from N'Gomo on March 3, 1914, and franked at 15c with three of the of the 5c 1912 overprints on the 15c gray Group Type stamp. It transited via Cap



Lopez, Gabon, on March 14 (See Figure 2.), and arrived in London on April 14. A regular steamer traveled between the upper reaches of the Ogooué River and Cap Lopez.² From there, mail traveled on coastal steamers to Libreville where it was placed on the French Packets for transit to France. This letter bears a manuscript "*Printed Matter Registered*" endorsement and a chamfered "R" for registration. For most of the Group Type Era one sees a 30c rate for this service, 5c for up to 50 grams of printed matter and 25c for registration. In this case the rate appears to be 5c for postage and 10c for registration of printed matter. No stamps have been removed or lost from the front or back of the cover. I have seen other examples of Group Type mail from the period just before and during World War I, which suggest a special 10c rate for registration of printed matter from the French African Colonies, but I have not seen any official documentation of such. I believe this cover to be an example of what must be a very rare rate for registered printed matter for the period. The addressee, Mr. C.C. Lambert, was apparently a stamp dealer, as suggested by the cover of the book shown in Figure 8. It is most likely that this too is one of the Faure covers that contained printed matter that was important to business between the two dealers. At this point I am reasonably certain that all of the covers shown herein are from Faure in N'Gomo, even if the direct connection between the covers and Faure or philately is yet to be made.

Figure 9 shows a cover franked at the proper 25c overseas rate with a group of 1912 overprints from Faure in N'Gomo on May 3, 1915, to an addressee in Rome. It transited via Cap Lopez, Gabon, on May 4 and arrived in Rome on June 5. It undoubtedly traveled to France on the regular French Packet, which served the West African colonies, and arrived in Marseille. It transited to Italy by rail, where it received the blue "**BOLOGNA, Posta Estera**" (Bologna, Foreign Mail) transit/censorship handstamp enroute to Rome. World War I censorship between Italy and allied countries in Bologna and other Italian cities is discussed in a recent article by Laurenzi to which the reader is referred.³ Clearly the Bologna censorship handstamp and Italian destination represent added elements for the collection.



Figure 10. Registered letter from N'Gomo to Holland.

Figures 10 and 11 show the front and reverse of a cover from N'Gomo to Holland posted at the correct 50c registered rate on May 15, 1916 (note inverted "16" in datestamp). The cover is franked with a combination of Group Type 1912 overprints and the 5c and 10c Warrior pictorials of Gabon from 1910 with the "CONGO FRANCAIS GABON" colonial name.

It transited via Cap Lopez on May 17, 1916. The cover was censored in France as evidenced by the censor tape at the left, and the "OUVERT Par l'AUTORITÉ MILITAIRE 6" handstamp. After arrival in Haarlem it was forwarded to Driebergen in Holland on July 3. There is no association with Faure present on the letter. However, discussions with noted Dutch specialist Kees Adema have established that A.C. Voss, the addressee, was a noted stamp collector of the period and maintained a voluminous international philatelic correspondence. Given the N'Gomo origin and the philatelic interests of the addressee, this cover is undoubtedly from Faure.

Although N'Gomo was a tiny village by most standards, mail from it is not as rare as I initially expected because of the existence of a stamp dealer who maintained a regular correspondence with dealers and collectors around the world. In fact, a simple N'Gomo search on eBay or Delcampe has a good chance of bringing up additional material from this office, because the addressees were associated with philately, and their material had a much greater probability of reaching the philatelic market. So what other element could be added relative



Figure 11. Reverse of the letter shown in Figure 10.

to my burgeoning N'Gomo collection? Today, with the power of modern computers and related software, we are able to easily search far and wide for material for our collections. One of my favorite websites is *Philasearch* (www.philasearch.com) which provides ready access to dozens of auctions, mostly European, and net-price sales. The search engine is excellent, and the company's software is nicely tied into bidding on or direct purchase of philatelic material. I search the website weekly and have come up with a number of excellent items that I would normally not encounter. Recently, the cover in Figure 12 came to my attention via *Philasearch*. I bought it from one of the many smaller German auction houses. It is identical in every aspect to the cover in Figure 1 save for one: the addressee. Is that enough of an element to warrant adding it to my collection? Normally a definite and resounding **NO** would be the answer; however, in this case it is a definite **YES!** The item is addressed as follows: "*Mr Steph. Rich, 489 Manhattan Ave, New York Etats Unis.*" OMG as the tweeters tweet! This is none other than Stephen G. Rich (1890-1958), one of the most distinguished and famous members of the Collectors Club (Figure 13). I first became aware of Rich based on my early associations with the France & Colonies Philatelic Society, the Philatelic Foundation and the Collectors Club. At the France & Colonies Philatelic Society our annual competition was named The Stephen G. Rich Memorial Exhibit. Occasionally, French-area material from the Foundation's Rich Reference Collection was presented at our FCPS meetings for study and discussion. One of the rear rooms of the Collectors Club was named in his honor. I was delighted to add this touchstone to one of our most famous and noted philatelists to my collection.



Figure 12. N'Gomo cover addressed to Stephen G. Rich in New York City.



Figure 13. Stephen G. Rich, noted philatelist and Collectors Club member.

I came upon NYC philately too late to meet Stephen G. Rich, though I heard much about him from the senior members of the FCPS. For those who have not heard about him, I believe that the following summary from the George Alevizos website is worthy of note (www.georgealevizos.com/www/famous.htm):

"Any philatelist who was active in the 1940s and 1950s and reading nearly any of the major stamp collecting publications couldn't help find the prolific writings by raconteur Stephen G. Rich. Without doubt, he was one of the most well-known collectors of his day – active in so many fields within the hobby that it would be hard to count them. Not only was he a very renowned philatelist, Steve Rich was also outspoken! If he disagreed with something or someone in the hobby, he was quick to point it out in his articles. The son of another



Figure 14. Philatelic cover from N'Gomo in 1917 to a Paris dealer.

famous philatelist, Joseph S. Rich, he grew up in a philatelic atmosphere. He was especially active in the Society of Philatelic Americans, the Collectors Club of New York and the APS. As a publisher, Rich produced the Mitchell-Hoover **Bureau Precancel Catalogue** and Harry Konwiser's **Stampless Cover Catalogue**. He also edited the monthly **Precancel Bee** and **Postal Markings** journals. He joined the APS Hall

of Fame with the class of 1959. The most amazing thing about Rich was the depth of knowledge he had on a diverse array of philatelic subjects. For instance, he is revered among South African collectors for his excellent book on Boer War philately – and respected also for his devotion to French and Polish philately. For most of his life Steve Rich was a regular fixture among the stamp shops of New York City."

When I asked Kees Adema for information on the cover to Holland, he wondered if it might be philatelic, given the variety of issues on the reverse. In a sense, all of my N'Gomo covers, now numbering 10 from 1913-16, are philatelic! They all originated with a stamp dealer, and they all were addressed to fellow dealers and collectors. However, Wikipedia defines a philatelic cover as: "... an envelope prepared with a stamp(s) and address and sent through the mail delivery system for the purpose of creating a collectible item." In their defense, none of my N'Gomo covers were prepared as elegant souvenirs for the philatelic market as were most zeppelin or Tin Can Mail covers. They all served a purpose germane to Faure's business; they are posted at proper rates, they reflect the efforts of the French to finally end the use of the old Group Type stamps, they have postal markings and indicia of interest supporting the routes to their destinations and they capture various other elements of the philatelic history of their time.

Are there any true philatelic covers of this period from the office at N'Gomo, Gabon? The only one that I have

Figure 15. Reverse of the cover shown in Figure 14.



noted just recently came to my attention, and is shown in Figures 14 and 15.⁴ It is based on a Gabon 10c Warrior postal stationery envelope with a proper 5c Red Cross surcharge below the stamp. The full set of 13 Gabon 1912 overprints is shown on the front and back of the envelope, corresponding to a registered rate of 1.10f + 5c surcharge, an impossible rate. The stamps are canceled with the N'Gomo datestamp of Jan. 13, 1917, with the "17" in the datestamp inverted as already noted for a number of the 1916 covers. Possibly Faure started doing this in 1916 as a means of identifying his covers, or as a way of getting others to notice his covers. The envelope transited via Cap Lopez on January 15, and there is no arrival marking. Rounding out the philatelic nature of this cover, it is addressed to a known Paris stamp dealer who has no other connection with this story.

Despite the fact that unusual circumstances have made covers from the tiny and remote village of N'Gomo more available than one might at first expect, I believe that they still have an interesting story to tell. ☐

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