

First Flight of the "Jenny"

The Story of the First United States Government Airmail Flight

The first U.S. Government airmail service was hastily organized in 1918 for a May 15 inaugural flight. Planes and pilots from the U.S. Army Signal Corps—daredevils who hoped to serve in World War I—were ordered to prepare for the relay flights between Washington D.C., Philadelphia and New York. This exhibit tells the story of the events of May 15-17, 1918.



Curtiss JN-4H with tag #38262



Landing field pass, May 15, 1918

Lt. Torrey H. Webb (#38278)
Depart Belmont May 15 11:29AM
Arrive Bustleton 12:58PM
First Successful U.S. Airmail Flight
Carrying 144 lbs mail
(2,457 letters plus packages and newspapers)

Lt. James C. Edgerton (#38274)
Depart Bustleton May 15 1:14PM
Arrive Potomac Park 2:50PM
Carrying 136 lbs mail

Washington D.C. (Potomac Park Polo Field)

Crash Waldorf Md.

New York (Belmont Park)

Lt. H. Paul Culver (#37944)
Depart Bustleton May 15 2:15PM
Arrive Belmont 3:37PM
Carrying 20 lbs mail
(200 pieces to NYC, 150 beyond)

Philadelphia (Bustleton)

Northbound May 16 from Washington D.C. Lt. James C. Edgerton (#38262) Depart Potomac Park May 16 11:25AM Arrive Bustleton May 16 1:33PM Carrying mail from previous day and 1,330 additional pieces (7,930 total)

Lt. George L. Boyle (#38262)
Depart Potomac Park May 15 11:46AM
Crashed 12:05PM approx. 25 mi south near Waldorf Md.
Carrying 140 lbs mail (6,600 pieces, including 300 to
Philadelphia, 3,300 to NYC, and 3,000 beyond)



On May 15, 1918, at 11:46AM, Lt. George L. Boyle took off from Potomac Park Polo Field in Washington D.C., heading south instead of north. After flying about 25 miles, he crashed in a farmer's field near Waldorf Md. The mail was unharmed and was carried on the next day's flight.



FLOWN TO PHILA.



Signed by Capt. Benjamin B. Lipsner: Pictured second from left: This cover was autographed by Capt. Lipsner as "First U.S. Air Mail Supt." Major Reuben Fleet was the officer in charge of Aerial Mail Service, and Captain Lipsner came from the Aeronautics section, but was not a pilot. In August 1918 Captain Lipsner resigned his military commission and was appointed the first Superintendent of the Aerial Mail Service. He used this title on this cover, which indicates it was signed well after May 15.

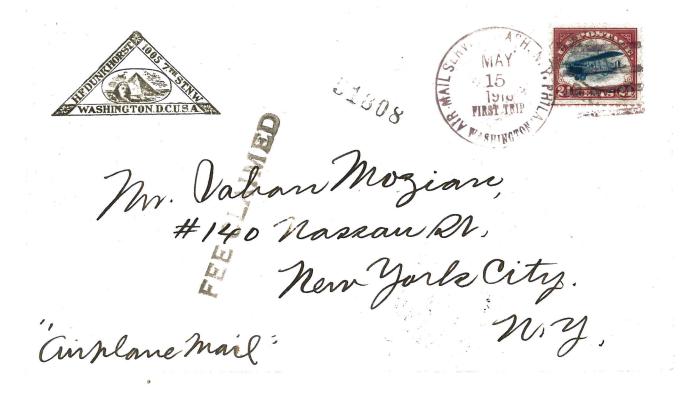


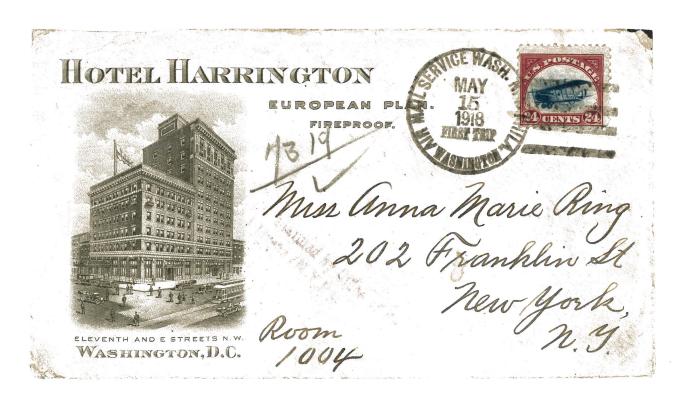




Airmail Special Delivery Rate: The 24¢ stamp comprised postage and the special delivery fee, but the public was confused and added additional 3¢ postage, the prevailing wartime rate. The top cover was embellished by a philatelist with Trans-Mississippi and Pan-American commemoratives.







Corner Cards: The top cover was sent from H. F. Dunkhorst to Vahan Mozian, two prominent stamp dealers. The bottom cover has an illustration of the Hotel Harrington at Eleventh and E Streets in Washington, D.C.





Registered Mail: An additional 10¢ registration fee was required on registered First Flight covers, of which very few are known.



Mail to Foreign Countries: Although the 24ϕ stamp paid for domestic airmail postage and the special delivery fee, a letter addressed overseas was carried by plane only to New York, without special delivery service. The 5ϕ stamp was added to pay the UPU rate to France. Washington D.C. "10AM" duplex.





Private Use of Postmaster General's Penalty Envelope: Bertram J. Murphy, a Reading Pa. attorney, used one of the Postmaster General's Office penalty envelopes, but paid postage and was careful to cross out "Official Business" before mailing it to his home town. This cover was flown to Philadelphia.





Heavy Packages: The 10¢ special delivery fee incorporated into the 24¢ rate should have been a flat fee, but it was subject to multiple rates. This package wrapper was mailed to the New York Herald newspaper office with ten or eleven stamps (nine remain).







FLOWN TO PHILA.

Postcards: Very few May 15 flight postcards are known. Confusion over the 24¢ airmail rate resulted in postcards prepaid with 2¢ regular postage plus the 24¢ airmail stamp, as on the bottom card. The top card shows the New York May 16 4 PM arrival datestamp, and the bottom was flown to Philadelphia and shows the May 16 3 PM arrival datestamp





May 15 "10AM": On the morning of May 15, the "1918" year slug was removed from the datestamp and "10AM" was inserted. This variety is much scarcer than the normal "First Trip". The mails closed at 11:00 AM.



The mail carried by Lt. Boyle on the May 15 flight was postmarked with the special "First Trip" duplex up to 11:00AM the morning of the flight. After 11:00AM the "First Trip" was removed and the times were changed. Ironically, because Lt. Boyle crashed, all of the May 15 mail actually made the first successful northbound trip from Washington D.C.



May 15 "11AM First Trip" and "2PM" Postmarks: The "11AM First Trip" is scarce and was probably applied to the last letters accepted for the May 15 flight scheduled for 11:30AM (the mails closed at 11:00AM). The 2PM duplex has "First Trip" removed, but as it turned out, the letter was actually carried on the first flight from Washington D.C. on the following day, May 16.

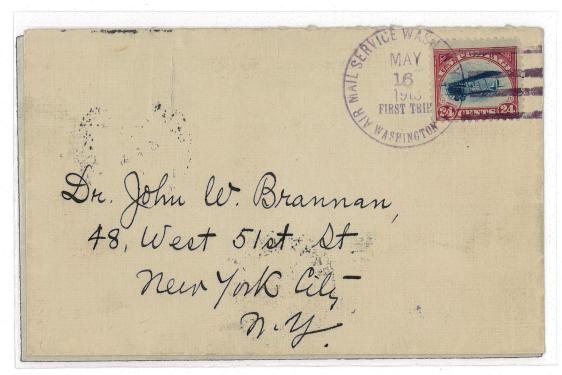






May 15 "3PM" and "4PM" Postmarks: The time slug was changed throughout the day on May 15 after the mails closed for the 11:30AM flight. The postal clerks were probably unaware that Lt. Boyle crashed his plane in a farmer's field south of Washington D.C. (two each of "3PM" and "4PM" reported by Joe Kirker).





May 16 "First Trip" Postmark: After the Washington D.C. duplex date was changed to May 16, the "First Trip" slug was restored, either in error or because the postal clerk considered the 2nd attempt a "First Trip."



FLOWN TO PHILA.

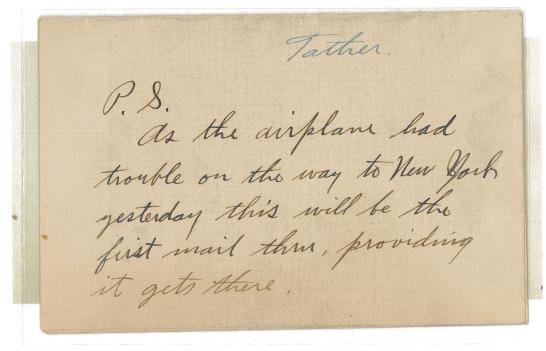
May 16 "9AM" Postmark: "First Trip" was removed from the Washington D.C. duplex and replaced with time slugs (two "9AM" strikes reported). This letter was flown to Philadelphia and sent to U.S. Signal Corps member in Tennessee (missent on train).





May 16 "11AM" Postmark: This is probably the last mail to reach Lt. Edgerton's plane on the morning of May 16. It is backstamped New York City May 16 4:30PM, confirming that it made the flight. The stamp has a straight edge at top, indicating it came from the first sheets printed, which were trimmed at top. The letter has a postscript regarding the failed May 15 flight:

"As the airplane had trouble on the way to New York yesterday, this will be the first mail thru, providing it gets there."





May 15, 1918 — Phíladelphía Pa. Northbound Maíl to New York Cíty

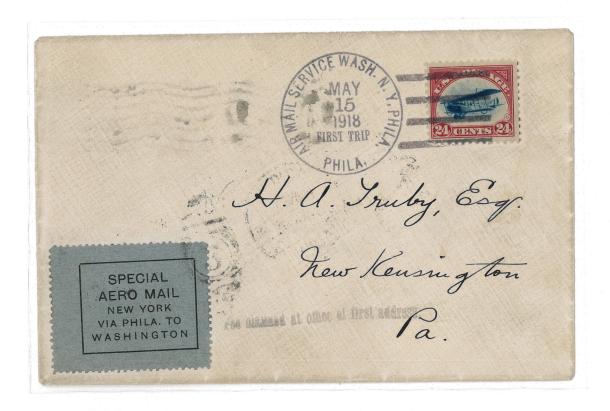
Shortly after Lt. Boyle crashed (around noon), he was able to telephone Capt. Benjamin Lipsner, who in turn telephoned Lt. Paul Culver to give him the news that the northbound plane would not arrive at Bustleton. He instructed Lt. Culver to fly back to New York with the Philadelphia mail. Lt. Culver flew #37944 with 20 lbs of mail, about 350 pieces.



May 15 "First Trip" Postmark: Philadelphia used the same duplex on all of the May 15 northbound mail to New York and beyond. The cover at bottom made a round trip (the return by train).



May 15, 1918 — Phíladelphía Pa. Northbound Maíl to New York Cíty





Etiquette Label: The "Special Aero Mail" labels were used on a small number of May 15-16 flight covers. They are found only on mail from Philadelphia.



May 15, 1918 — Phíladelphía Pa. Northbound Maíl to New York Cíty



AIRPLANE MAIL

WASHINGTON—PHILADELPHIA—NEW YORK.

MAY 15, 1918.

FIRST FLIGHT.

STAMPS PUT ON SALE HERE AT 12 NOON. SALE STOPPED AT 4 P. M.

WITH KINDEST REGARDS

K/P

Tengunetle

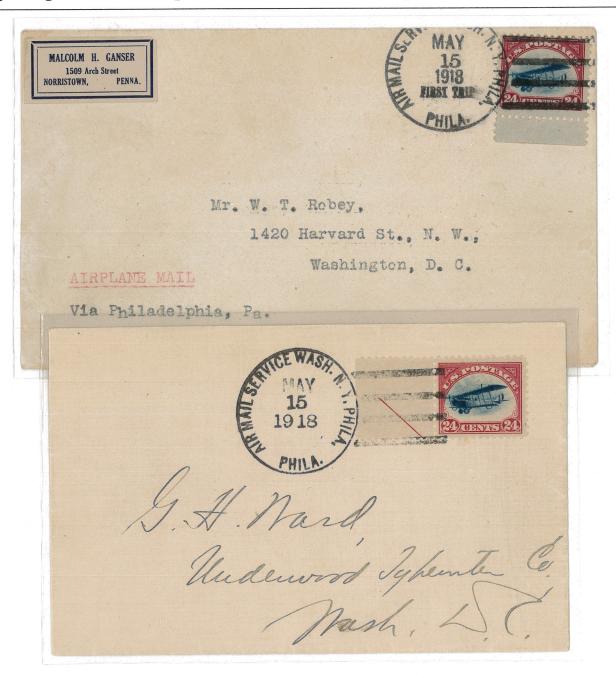
To Australia: Carried by plane to New York, then by ship to Australia. The 2¢ stamp was added to make up the UPU postage. This might be the only May 15 flight cover to Australia. It was sent by Eugene Klein to a dealer in Sydney.

Klein's letter reports "Stamps put on sale here at 12 noon. Sale stopped at 4 p.m." – after Inverted Jenny was discovered.



May 15, 1918 — Phíladelphía Pa. Southbound Maíl to Washington D.C.

Immediately after Lt. Webb arrived at Bustleton with the New York mail, the "through" bag and Philadelphia mail were loaded into Lt. Edgerton's plane #38274. He took off at 1:14 PM and arrived at Potomac Park at 2:50 PM, just twenty minutes behind schedule. He was met by a crowd, which included his younger sister, who presented him with a bouquet of roses.



Top: Flight Cover to William T. Robey, Discover of the Inverted Jenny

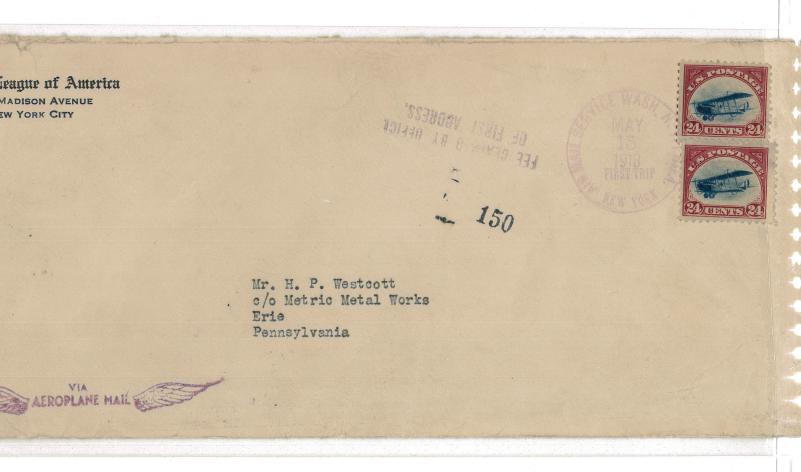
Bottom: Philadelphia Large "1918": Three examples of the "1918" large numeral are known, all addressed to G. H. Ward, the father of Philip H. Ward.



May 15, 1918 — New York N.Y. Southbound Mail to Philadelphia Pa.

The First Successful United States Government Flight

Lt. Torrey H. Webb became the first pilot to complete a leg of the May 15 flight when he flew from Belmont Park in New York at 11:29AM and arrived at Bustleton field in Philadelphia at 12:58PM.



Aerial League of America: This organization prepared a large number of First Flight covers. The purple "Via Aeroplane Mail" winged handstamp was a private marking. The double franking pays the 48¢ postage on a letter weighing more than 1 oz. The 10¢ special delivery fee was technically required for the first ounce only, but it was multiplied in the 24¢ airmail rate.



May 15, 1918 — New York N.Y. Southbound Mail to Washington D.C.

The First Successful United States Government Flight

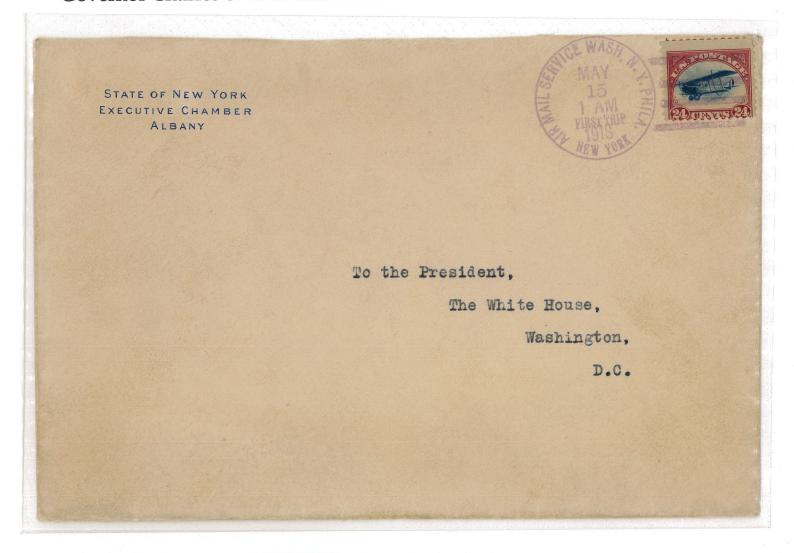


New York May 15 "First Trip": Southbound mail from New York was postmarked with the "First Trip" duplex in magenta, purple and black (purple and magenta shown above).



May 15, 1918 — New York N.Y. Southbound Mail to Washington D.C.

Governor Charles S. Whitman of New York to President Woodrow Wilson





President Wilson and First Lady

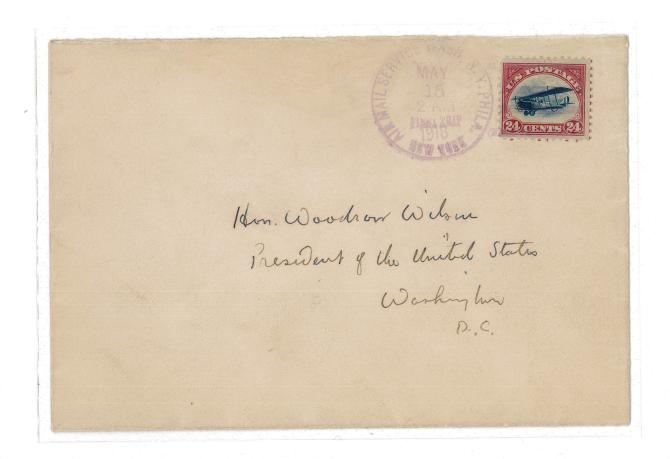
Special White House Mail Bag

Mail addressed to President Woodrow Wilson, the First Lady and others at the White House was prepared at the New York post office into the early morning hours of May 15. The "1918" yeardate was struck separately below the normal "May/15/1AM/First Trip" four-line slug. The 1AM, 2AM, 4AM and 8AM times are found only on mail to the White House.

This cover is described in *New York Times* article about the May 15 flight. It contained a letter offering support for the Red Cross campaign.



New York Postmaster General Thomas G. Patten to President Wilson



Special White House Mail Bag

This cover from the New York Postmaster General, Thomas G. Patten, to President Woodrow Wilson was postmarked at the New York post office during the early morning hours of May 15. The "1918" yeardate was struck separately below the normal "May/15/2AM/First Trip" four-line slug. The 1AM, 2AM, 4AM and 8AM times are found only on mail to the White House.

This cover is described in *New York Times* article about the May 15 flight. It contained a letter offering congratulations on the first airmail flight.



May 16, 1918 (2nd Day) — New York N.Y. Southbound Crash Maíl

The May 16 southbound flight from New York to Philadelphia by Lt. Stephen Bonsal resulted in a crash at 1:10PM. Lt. Bonsal, lost and off course, attempted to land at the fairgounds race track at Bridgeton, New Jersey. The plane hit a post, flipped over and was destroyed. Lt. Bonsal and the mail survived unharmed. The mail was forwarded to Philadelphia, then flown to Washington.



Crash Cover: The cover below was postmarked May 16 at New York and made the flight by Lt. Bonsal, which crashed at Bridgeton, N.J. The facing slip at right accompanied the airmail flown on May 16 from Philadelphia to Washington D.C.







May 17, 1918 (3rd Day)—Washington D.C. Northbound Crash Mail

On May 17 Lt. George L. Boyle was given another opportunity to fly the mail from Washington D.C. to Philadelphia. He was instructed to keep "Chesapeake Bay on your right." Lt. Boyle was escorted by Maj. Fleet in another plane as far as Baltimore, then Boyle proceeded on his own, keeping Chesapeake Bay on his right, which caused him to fly far off course. He ran out of fuel once and refueled at Cape Charles Va., 200 miles south of Philadelphia. After getting directions, he took off and ran out of fuel again, this time crashing his plane at the Philadelphia Country Club at 7:10PM. The late-arriving mail was put on a train for New York.





Major Fleet and Lt. Boyle (right)

Crash Cover: The cover above was postmarked May 17 11AM at Washington D.C. and made the flight by Lt. Boyle, which crashed at the Philadelphia Country Club, short of Bustleton, at 7:10PM. It was sent by train to New York City (three reported May 17 crash covers).