

The Pretoria Paquebot Mark!

I recently bought the 'Paquebot Cancellations of the the World and more...' DVD which came with a leaflet promoting 'The 2020 ADDENDA' whose front cover displayed "the newly discovered Pretoria Paquebot Cover" of WW2 vintage.

I immediately thought "no way!". Most South African collectors will share my reservations about this. Pretoria is 300 miles from the sea and cannot be reached by sailing up the mighty Apies River. Clearly, the "Pretoria Paquebot Cover" is NOT what it seems to be. I do not think this is a deliberate fraud or hoax despite 1st April being only a few days away! It is the result of wishful thinking by Paquebot enthusiasts suspending disbelief. As far as I know, there are NO other examples of such a Pretoria Paquebot mark. Do you have one? No, I didn't think so. So what is it and why?

What are Paquebot Marks?

In 1892 the Swiss-based Universal Postal Union decreed that all ships were their own sovereign territory while on the high seas and outside of territorial waters. This allowed ships to act as postal authorities. Starting in 1894, Paquebot mail was soon an international convention that allowed ships' passengers and crew to write letters, add stamps from the country in which the ship was registered and to post them in the ship's mailbox on board ship at sea for onward dispatch at the next port of call. As Pretoria was not a port, it was never part of the UPU Paquebot system!

While passengers and sailors are required to use the stamps of the country whose flag the vessel flies, it was also permissible for their letters to bear the receiving country's stamps provided these were posted in the ship's mailbox, sometimes also called the 'closed mail bag'. The criteria for a letter receiving a Paquebot mark is the letter's inclusion in the mail bag when these were taken to the nearest post office by a crew member, often the ship's purser, for entry into the UPU's international postal system. Sometimes hundreds, even thousands, of letters would come of a passenger ship in its mail bag. Machine cancellers like the practical Krag series made short work of franking them.

Today, Paquebot mail is a popular and enthusiastically collected area of postal history. The fact that Paquebot specialists, specifically the publishers, the TPO (Travelling Post Offices) & Seapost Society, and its authors, Mike Dovey and Keith Morris, have allowed this "New Discovery" of the Pretoria Paquebot mark to go as far as to get onto the front cover of their 2020 Addendum to 'Paquebot Cancellations of the the World and more...' is surprising. To be fair, I believe they have some reservations about it also and have put it to their members to discuss.

How the so-called 'Pretorial Paquebot mark' came into existence.

As a wartime naval and maritime security precaution, some Paquebot machine cancellers had their datestamps removed. This cover came off a British warship in October 1940, probably in Cape Town, where it received such a dumb Paquebot machine canceller, PCOW's No. 2739. It was then sent to Pretoria where it was received with a Divided Double Circle Pretoria datestamp on '16 OCT 40'. (Editor. This statement by the author is now known to be incorrect. See Alex Visser's comments below. It was stamped 'PRETORIA' only after being re-routed.) As the cover was quite 'busy' the postal clerk consciously applied the datestamp to the only place at the top of the letter where there was empty space - between the parallel horizontal lines where the circular datestamp had been removed.

The application of the datestamp is slightly skew and rotated in relation to the horizontal lines and does not sit evenly. It is also far to large for a machine canceller's circular

datestamp. Part of the outer circle overlaps the lower line at bottom right. You would expect it to be properly aligned if it was a 'proper' machine canceller. It is not!

I think this is an honest mistake on the part of the publishers of the PCOW ADDENDUM, in large part bought about by a failure of their own reference work to show more than one image of the different machine canceller types, as well as not properly listing the different varieties of machine canceller dies in a way that is easily understood and usable. Had they included an image of the dumb CAPE TOWN KAAPSTAD Paquebot mark in their book/DVD with, as they say in the small print, the "circular portion during WW2 removed", they might have been able to use their own reference work to better understand the origin of the so-called 'Pretoria Paquebot Mark'.

All this 'Pretoria Paquebot Mark' cover is is their No 2739 CAPE TOWN KAAPSTAD (possibly other) Paquebot mark with the circular portion removed and a Pretoria datestamp fortuitously and deliberately but, I believe, not mischevously struck in the clear part of the datestampless machine cancellation. These experts can be forgiven for not identifying the postmark. This 35mm Divided Double Circle Pretoria 92 datestamp is not included in Putzel. It is a more recent discovery listed by Alex Visser in his on-line Addendum as No. 150r. I am not expert in machine cancellers but I would be willing to bet that few come with such a large high-numbered datestamp.

So, yes and somewhat sadly, the "Pretoria Paquebot Cover" is a coincidental hybrid, the result of two South African postmarks coming together to give the appearance of a new and unidentified one. A pity but to me as a postmark collector, it was obviously wrong from the moment I first saw it. Still, others are holding out in the hope that this is what they wish it to be. It is not!

Note that all the machine cancellers shown on the cover's below are despite their obvious differences all numbered No. 2739 according to PCOW. This is because PCOW lists only one machine canceller and assigns all its different circular dies with the same number. No attempt is made to list the different dies or to describe them meaningfully as Nos. 2739a, b or c. The absence of a visual reference and list of varieties is a shortcoming, one which has arguably facilitated the misidentification of the so-called 'Pretoria Paquebot Mark'.

I will shortly begin work on a first draft of Southern African Paquebot marks including datestamps and machine cancellers. I will post this as a Club Collective Display and invite you to send me your examples by email.

Source:

<https://southafricanphilatelyclub.com/forum/topic/new-discovery-the-pretoria-paquebot-mark>