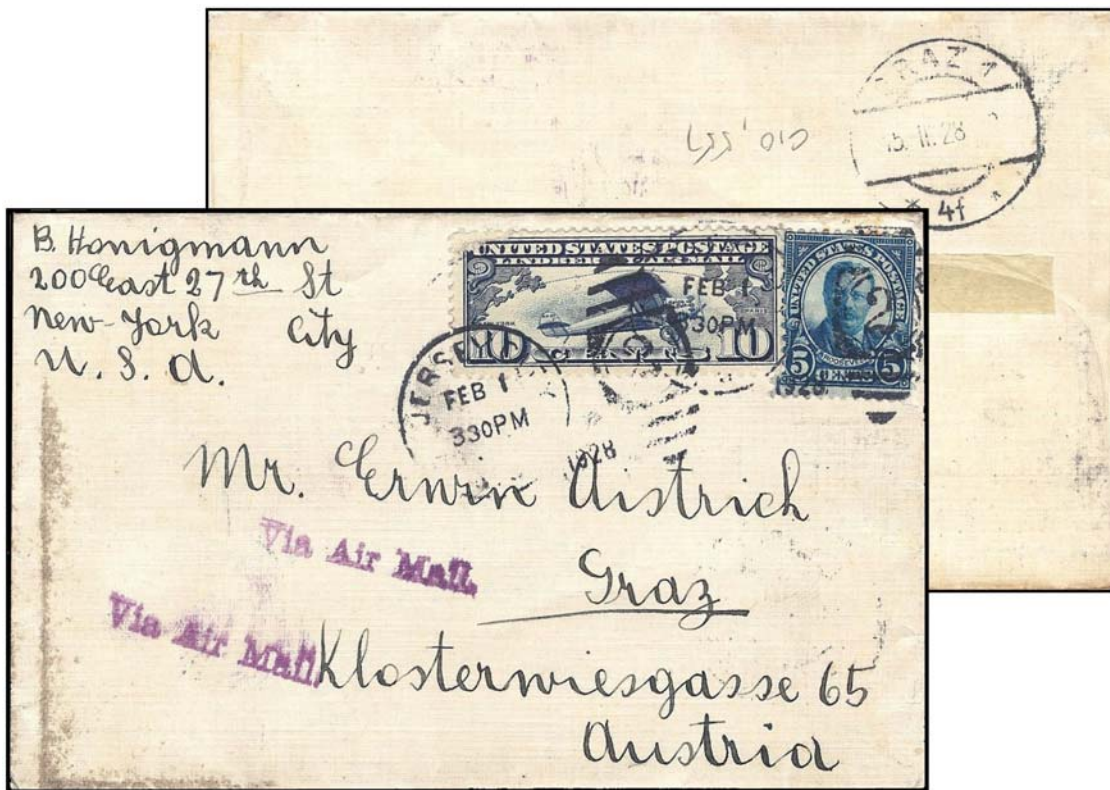


## INTENDED FOR THE GRAF ZEPPELIN BUT CARRIED BY STEAMER? A 1929 Jersey City Transatlantic Airmail to Basel Switzerland

By John Trosky

The first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the dawn of a new age in mail transport, airmail. By the late 1920s the US Post Office Department had established many routes across the continental US to speed the transportation of mail. Transatlantic mail on the other hand remained the purview of the fast ocean steamer. It was only in 1927 that Lindbergh had finally conquered the Atlantic by aircraft.

Things progressed rapidly from that point on, with some sporadic but not too successful attempts at transatlantic mail. But people were eager to use airmail, as the cover below from Jersey City to Graz shows, with airmail postage. This does not pay air mail across the Atlantic – there was none yet – but paid air mail on arrival in Europe on to Austria. Transit time for this cover to Graz was two weeks, from 2/1/28 to 2/15/28. This was speedy airmail in the 1920s! True air mail service across the Atlantic did not occur until 1939.<sup>1</sup>



*Fig. 1: A cover from Jersey City to Graz, Austria in February 1928, incorporating an endorsement “Via Air Mail.” This cover serves to illustrate the rapidity of change in air mail.*

This cover helps illustrate the precipitous drop in air mail rates that was continuing to occur in these early years of service. This cover is franked with a 5¢ Theodore Roosevelt Fourth Bureau Issue stamp and a 10¢ Lindbergh Airmail stamp and posted at the same Greenville Station in Jersey City as the cover below (see Figure 3). Only one year later this same service would cost 5¢ for the surface overseas rate but only 4¢ for the air supplement, instead of a 10¢ supplement!

## INTENDED FOR GRAF ZEPPELIN BY CARRIED BY STEAMER ~ John Trosky

It was also at this time that lighter-than-air craft were reaching their golden age. Philatelic and postal history collectors the world over have always held an abiding interest in stamps and artifacts related to the age of lighter-than-air travel with particular emphasis on items with a connection to either the Graf Zeppelin (LZ-127) or the Hindenburg (LZ-129). Prior to the launching of the Graf Zeppelin, transatlantic mail was carried solely by fast ocean steamer with port to port times in the range of 4½ to 5 days plus. The lighter-than-air ships significantly cut this time to approximately three days depending on direction and wind speeds. With the dawn of air transportation, steamship companies, particularly the North German Lloyd line, began experimenting with catapult mail from ships as they came closer to shore. Mail was loaded onto a catapult aircraft and launched several hundred miles from shore to cut precious hours off of the all important transit time. The NDL steamer Bremen was a pioneer in this regard.



*Fig. 2: Graf Zeppelin LZ-127 at Friedrichshafen*

In 1929, The Graf Zeppelin (LZ-127) embarked in May from Friedrichshafen, Germany on the first round-the-world flight by an airship. Passengers and westbound mail were carried on board. The newspaper tycoon, William Randolph Hearst paid the Zeppelin Company \$100,000 in financing for the trip provided they would do a flyover of New York City and the Statue of Liberty. Having severe engine trouble on this initial trip to Lakehurst, NJ, the pilot, Dr. Hugo Eckener, Chairman of the Zeppelin-Reederei, aborted the trip and safely landed in Cuers, France. A second successful, attempt to cross the Atlantic was begun on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1929, arriving in Lakehurst on August 4<sup>th</sup>. All westbound mail was then sent to New York for processing and backstamped August 5<sup>th</sup>.

It was at the Lakehurst Naval Air Station that the round-the-world flight would actually commence. This was an event of historic proportions, not only for Germany but for many of the countries that the zeppelin would traverse. The Graf Zeppelin would not only be carrying some very well-to-do passengers such as Lady Grace Drummond-Hay, representing the Hearst Corporation, but also several official government representatives including Lt. Commander Charles Rosendahl and Lt. Jack C. Richardson, naval airshipmen on board as official observers for the US. In order to defray additional operating costs, the zeppelin company carried mail, much of which was commemorative in nature. A US franked letter rate was established at \$1.05 for a one ounce letter to Germany or 35¢ for a post card. The cost of a letter circumnavigating the globe required a total of \$3.55, a princely sum in 1929. This was quite high when compared to the existing domestic airmail rate of 5¢ and the identical transatlantic surface rate for the same weight. This brings us to the cover at hand.

The cover in *Figure 3* was posted from Jersey City on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1929 and is endorsed “Via Air Mail” by the Post Office. It is also endorsed by the sender with the inscription “By Airmail” and “From Lakehurst to Friedrichshafen.” The postage rate paid is 5¢ which would be an international surface rate, however, a 4¢ “air supplement” was added. Postage was paid using a 5¢ Theodore Roosevelt Rotary Fourth Bureau issue and a 4¢ Martha Washington Flat Plate Printing. Both were cancelled by a duplex canceller with station “2,” indicating the Greenville station in Jersey City. The air supplement would carry the correspondence via air once it reached Europe. Receiving stamps on the letter indicated that it was initially processed through the Gare Du Nord Station in Paris on August 15<sup>th</sup> at 4AM and then received at Basel Flugplatz (Airport) and stamped in at 6PM the same

day. The transit time of ten days would be consistent with ocean transport. There were no transatlantic airmail routes in 1929. German zeppelin mail was the closest approximation at the time.

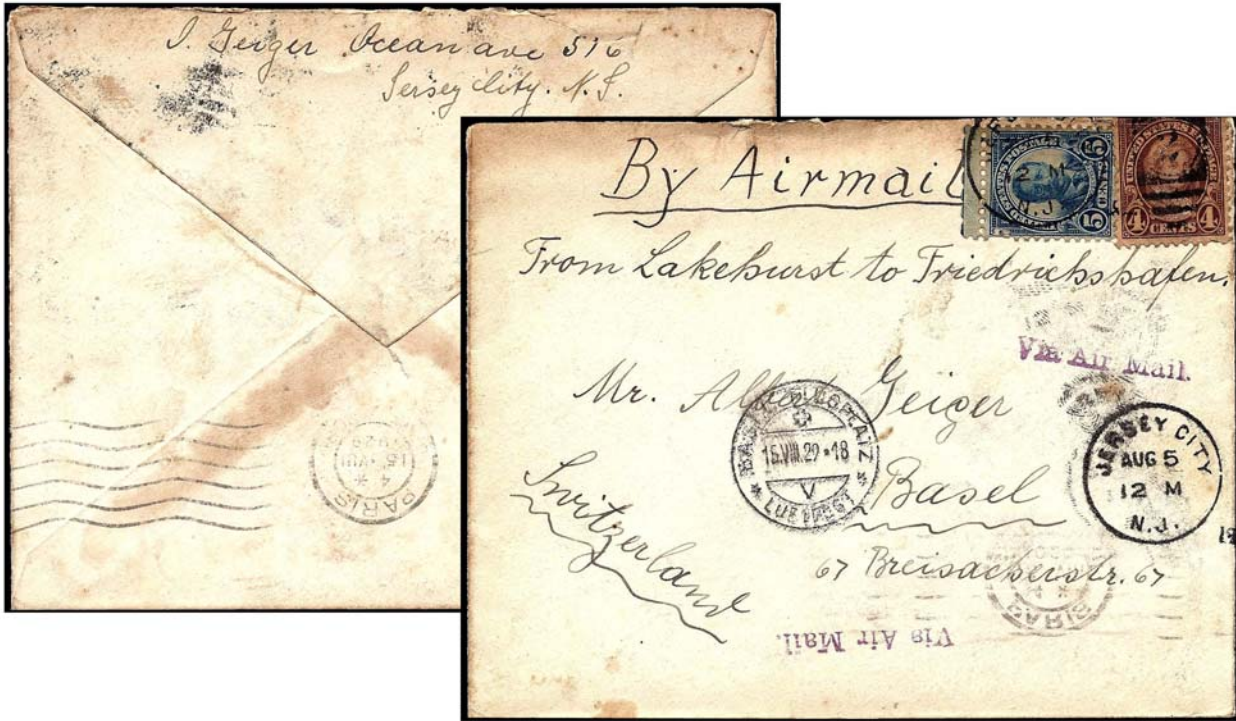


Fig. 3 (a & bB): Sent August 5, 1929, the front and reverse of a cover intended for the Graf Zeppelin LZ-127 flight from Lakehurst on August 8, but insufficiently franked.

However, the intent of the mailer seems to imply that he wished this letter to be carried by the Graf Zeppelin on its round-the-world flight with the final destination of the letter being Basel Switzerland. Mail destined for carriage on the zeppelin was processed through the New York Post Office and then forwarded to Lakehurst for loading onto the airship. The mailing date is consistent with the anticipated departure time. The Graf Zeppelin was scheduled to leave Lakehurst on August 8<sup>th</sup> for what those in the USA would deem the first leg of the round-the-world flight back to Friedrichshafen and then on to Tokyo, Los Angeles and back to Lakehurst. The question remains as to why the postal clerk permitted the “From Lakehurst to Friedrichshafen” endorsement to remain on the cover when insufficient postage was paid for this service.

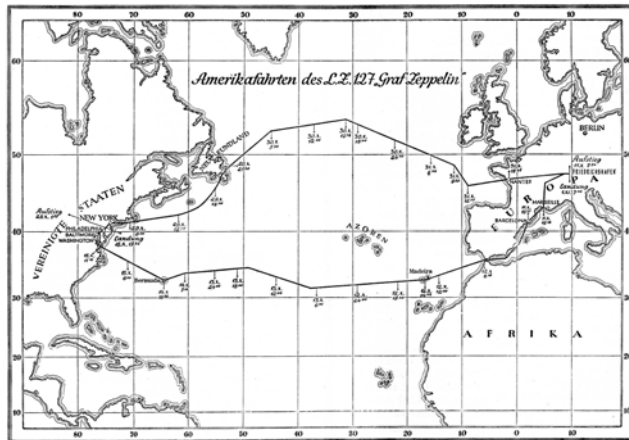
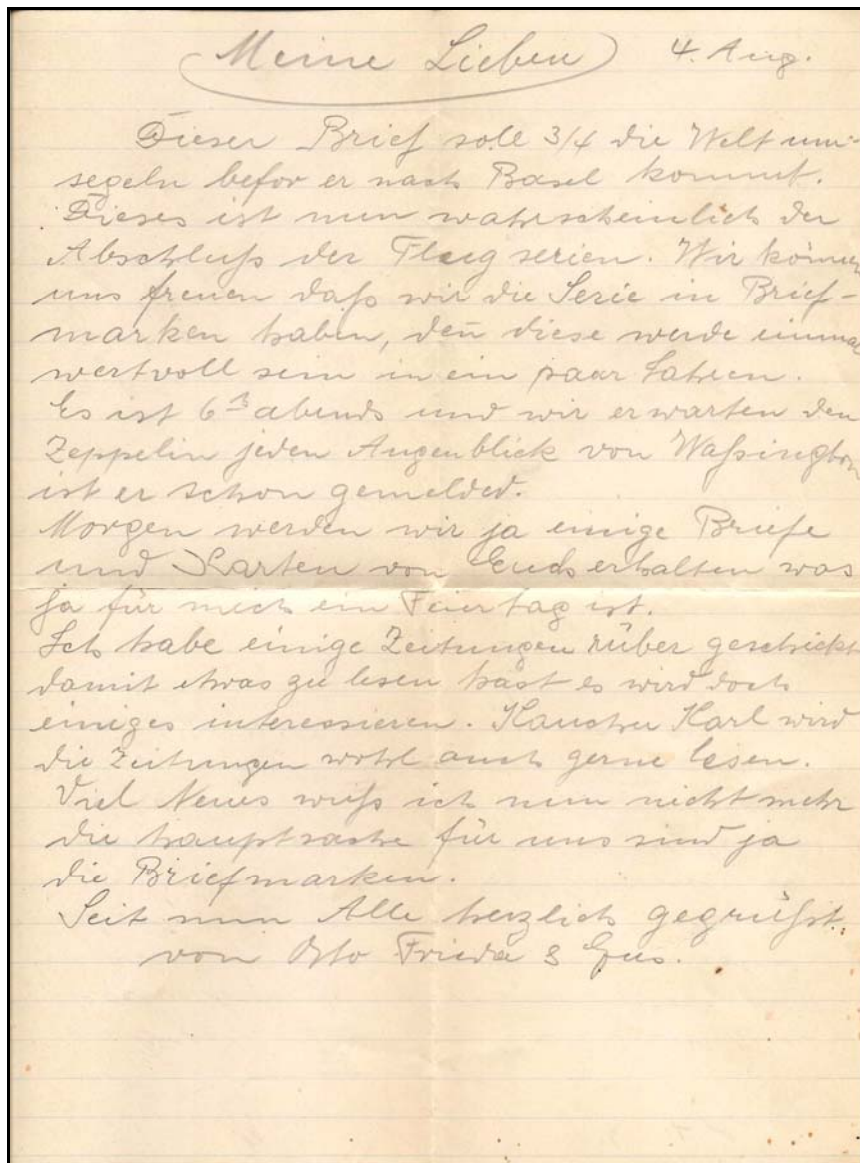


Fig. 4: Graf Zeppelin LZ-127 routes across the Atlantic and return in 1928. Clicking on this map, if you are online, will take you to a version which can be further enlarged,<sup>2</sup> at <http://www.airships.net/wp-content/uploads/graf-zeppelin-amerikafahrten.jpg>

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This cover contains an enclosure written in German to the recipient in Basel that may shed more insight on the intent of the mailer. The letter with this cover has a peculiarly philatelic bent. The enclosure describes the letter being carried  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way around the world before it arrives in Basel (somewhat confusing, as that might have been the case if LZ-127 were travelling westbound, but in fact its route was eastbound, returning to Europe, and then across Asia to Tokyo, across the Pacific and returning to Lakehurst by way of Los Angeles). They are looking forward as well as to having postage stamps to commemorate the flight. The letter is dated on August 4th, the arrival date of the Graf Zeppelin in NJ from Germany, which they hope to observe that evening as it makes its way to Lakehurst. The balance of the correspondence concerns the sending and receiving of cards, letters and newspapers which may be of interest to either party. I have attempted a translation of the letter using Google translation and some other online services to decipher the message.



**Fig. 5:** The letter enclosed, dated August 4, seems to indicate that the writer expected this cover to travel around the world. Why he posted it with insufficient postage is unclear.

An English transcription is below:

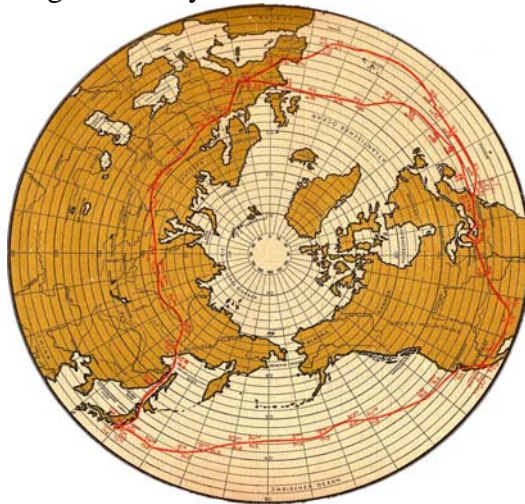
*My Dears,*

*This letter shall circumnavigate  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the world before it comes to Basel. This is probably the conclusion of the air travel. We can look forward to having a series in stamps that will be valuable in a few years. It's six o'clock in the evening and we expect the Zeppelin any moment from Washington where it's already reported. Tomorrow, which is a holiday for me, we'll put together some cards and letters for you. I have some newspapers to send over that might be of interest to read. Karl will read the newspapers and probably like them. Lots of new things but the most important thing for us is the stamps.*

*For now, warm greetings from Otto, Frieda & Gus.*

It seems this was an avid stamp collecting family with a strong interest in early aero philately. The final destination of the LZ-127 on August 4<sup>th</sup> was Lakehurst NJ and the route described in the correspondence is consistent with the route followed one year earlier on its inaugural intercontinental flight to America. The Graf Zeppelin crossed over Cape Charles, VA and then proceeded up the eastern seaboard past Washington DC, Baltimore, Philadelphia, on to New York City (at the behest of William Randolph Hearst) and then circled back to land at Lakehurst NJ. The map above (*Figure 4*) shows the standard route of the LZ-127 on its transatlantic crossings in both directions, the one below (*Figure 6*) is the entire round-the-world route.

Was Otto Geiger mailing his letter to Switzerland in 1929 hoping to have it carried eastbound by the Graf Zeppelin to Friedrichshafen for a total of nine cents instead of one dollar and five cents, or did he mistakenly think that it would travel westbound three quarters of the way around the globe as stated in his letter for the bargain price of nine cents? There is no evidence of any postage missing from the cover so it shall remain a mystery. Did the postal window clerk fail to tell this customer that his letter would be going to the piers for a steamer instead of to Lakehurst and into the belly of the Graf Zeppelin? In reality, it most likely went via steamer to France and then by air to Basel. In the end though, unbeknownst to him, he created a cover with a far more interesting back story.



*Fig. 6: Showing the round-the-world route in 1929. This map will also connect to a web site with an enlargeable version,<sup>3</sup> at <http://www.airships.net/wp-content/uploads/weltfahrt-map-web.jpg>.*

## ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES:

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- <sup>1</sup> Allaz, Camille, *History of Air Cargo and Airmail from the 18th Century* on Google books at:  
[http://books.google.com/books?id=fPLm9omt\\_YIC&pg=PA116&lpg=PA116&dq=history+of+us+transatlantic+airmail&source=bl&ots=0OySF2k8tl&sig=jx340DSiT0p3afuDPtqRVdb2Veg&hl=en&sa=X&ei=4DIIdUZ--I4LZ0wHzx4HIDw&ved=0CE8Q6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=history%20of%20us%20transatlantic%20airmail&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=fPLm9omt_YIC&pg=PA116&lpg=PA116&dq=history+of+us+transatlantic+airmail&source=bl&ots=0OySF2k8tl&sig=jx340DSiT0p3afuDPtqRVdb2Veg&hl=en&sa=X&ei=4DIIdUZ--I4LZ0wHzx4HIDw&ved=0CE8Q6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=history%20of%20us%20transatlantic%20airmail&f=false)
- <sup>2</sup> <http://www.airships.net/wp-content/uploads/graf-zeppelein-amerikafahrten.jpg>.
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.airships.net/wp-content/uploads/weltfahrt-map-web.jpg>.

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