

NEW JERSEY'S PIONEER AIR MAIL FLIGHTS

By Robert G. Rose

Within a decade of the Wright Brothers first flight of an airplane at Kitty Hawk in 1903, aviation advanced quickly. Beginning in 1910, mail was authorized to be carried on flights at aviation meets, exhibitions and demonstrations. In 1911, Congress appropriated \$50,000 in order to officially sanction a series of aerial mail trials. By 1912, the Post Office had authorized 31 flights for short-haul experimental air mail delivery in 16 different states.

Small quantities of mail were carried on airplanes and postmarked from temporary postal substations. These substations were officially authorized by postal authorities in Washington as temporary mail routes with designated route numbers. The routes were numbered in the 600,000 series. The first three digits identified the state of origin of the route, and for each state, the last three digits were assigned to flights flown in each state in sequential order. New Jersey was assigned number 609. Four of these pioneer flights took place in New Jersey or have a connection with the state. They were designated as 609001 through 609004. A total of 97 pioneer flights throughout the United State have been recorded.¹

The very first such pioneer flight was authorized by Postmaster General Frank Hitchcock. The flight was originally scheduled to take place on November 5, 1910 from the deck of on an outgoing German Lloyd Line steamer on a ship to shore flight back to New York. Bad weather cancelled the flight.² A second attempt was scheduled for November 12 from the Holland American Line's S.S. Pennsylvania.³ The ship sailed from Hoboken N.J. at noon on November 12, with a stop about three miles off the coast of Long Island, 50 miles from New York City. There, a Curtiss biplane was to have been launched from a specially built platform at the rear of the ship. The attempt was cancelled a few minutes prior to take-off due to a broken propeller.

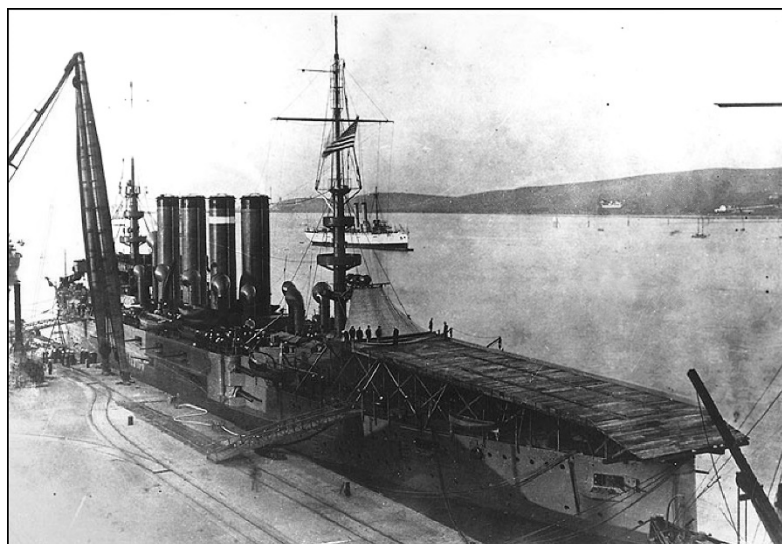


Photo courtesy of Aerodacious⁵

Fig. 1: S.S. Pennsylvania showing specially built platform for launch of plane.

Mail that had been collected for the flight was returned by pilot boat and sent to both the Hudson Terminal Station in New York and the Rutherford post office in New Jersey. Shown below in *Figure 2* is a pre-printed cacheted cover for the flight, postmarked at East Rutherford on November 13, 1910. This flight is designated as No. 1a in the American Air Mail Catalog.⁴

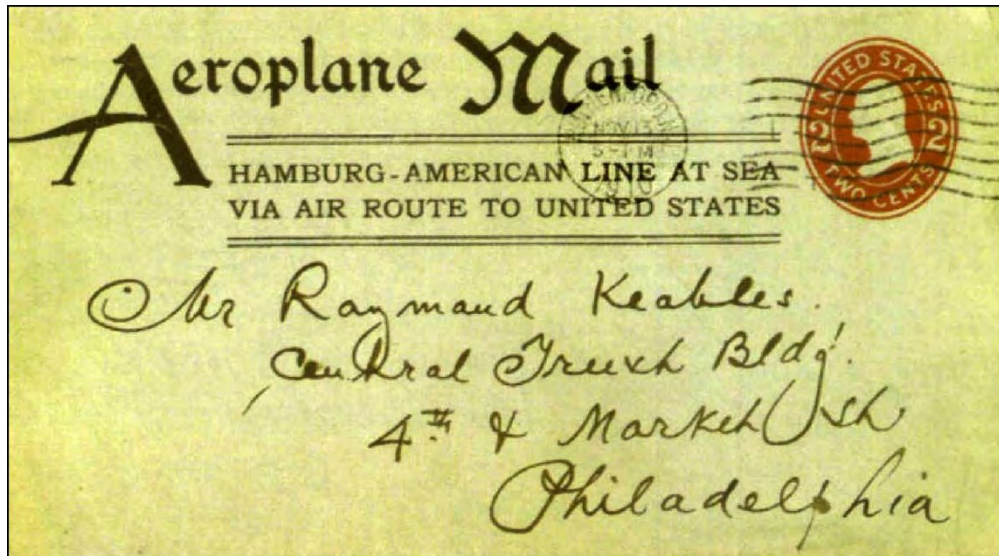


Fig. 2: Failed ship to shore flight, postmarked at East Rutherford. AAMC 1a, Nov. 13, 1910.

The summer months of 1912 witnessed the four remaining pioneer flights in New Jersey. On July 4, 1912, an experimental Wright-Burgess hydroplane flew some two miles from South Amboy to Perth Amboy across the mouth of the Raritan River to the post office at Perth Amboy where the mail was dropped from the plane.⁵ This demonstration flight was officially designated as Route No. 609001. However, the local postmaster prepared a purple handstamp with the erroneous designation as “AERO PLANE Route No. 900006,” as seen in *Figure 4* below. Some sixteen pounds of mail with approximately 1,000 postcards and covers was carried on this flight.



Photo courtesy of Aerodacious⁵

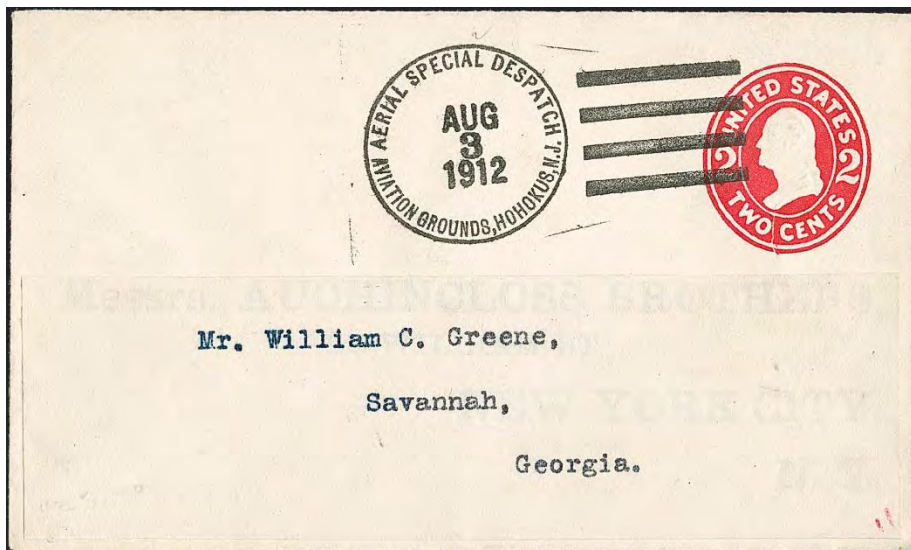
Fig. 3. Wright-Burgess hydroplane.

**AERO PLANE,
Route No. 900006.**



Fig. 4: South Amboy to Perth Amboy experimental flight, AAMC 38.

On August 3, 1912, an aviation meet was scheduled at the Hohokus Speedway which had been recently converted from a race track. The flight, officially designated as Route No. 609002, was from Hohokus to Ridgewood. “French aviator Francis Durafour was to fly a pouch of mail from the Hohokus Speedway. When Durafour lost his way flying from Hackensack to Hohokus, Joseph Richter was substituted to make the 1.5 mile flight. Richter landed at the YMCA field in Ridgewood where he passed the mail over to postal authorities for transmittal to the post office.”⁶ One mail pouch, containing 1,662 pieces of mail was delivered to the Ridgewood post office, as illustrated below in *Figure 5*.



Courtesy Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries, Inc., Lot # 897.¹
Fig. 5: Hohokus to Ridgewood aviation meet. AAMC 45.

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During the week of August 3 through August 10, 1912, mail and passenger service over a 21-mile route was provided on Route No. 609003 on the Jersey shore between Ocean City and Stone Harbor. Postal substations were established in both towns for the flights. Four flights were made in a converted Wright hydroplane, as illustrated in *Figure 6*, from the Hotel Normandie in Ocean City to the Yachtman's Club in Stone Harbor,⁷ carrying 11,500 pieces of mail and passengers. Three return flights were made from Stone Harbor to Ocean City, carrying 1,000 pieces of mail. Illustrated below in *Figure 7* is a postcard with an August 8, 1912 Ocean City postmark, and the official purple handstamp.



Photo courtesy of Aerodacious .⁵

Fig. 6: Pilot Marshall Earle Reid and passenger aboard Wright hydroplane.

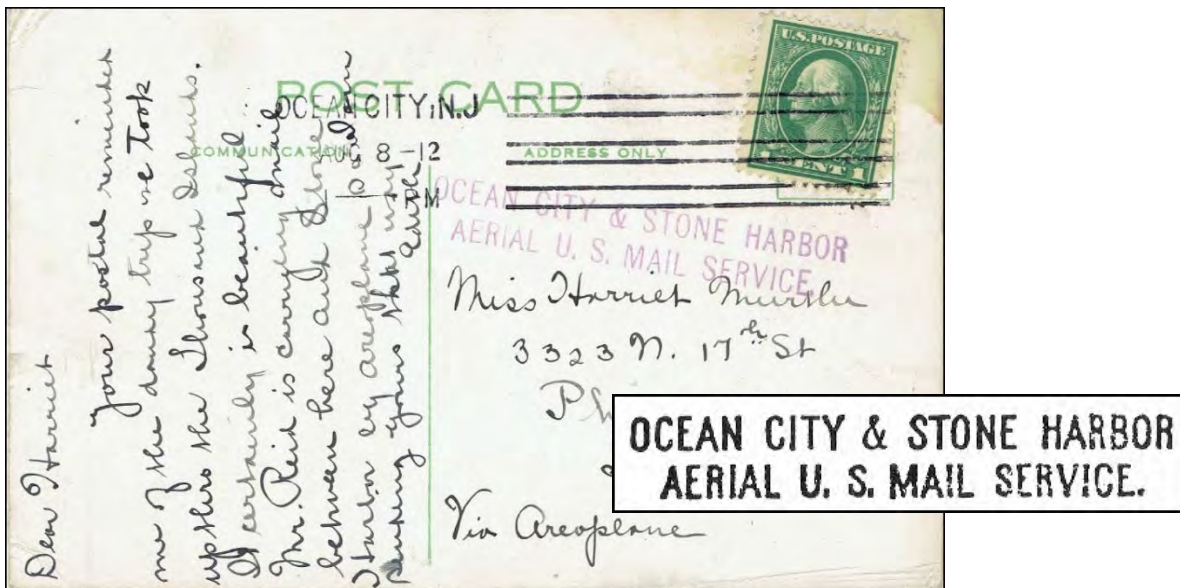


Photo courtesy of Aerodacious.⁵

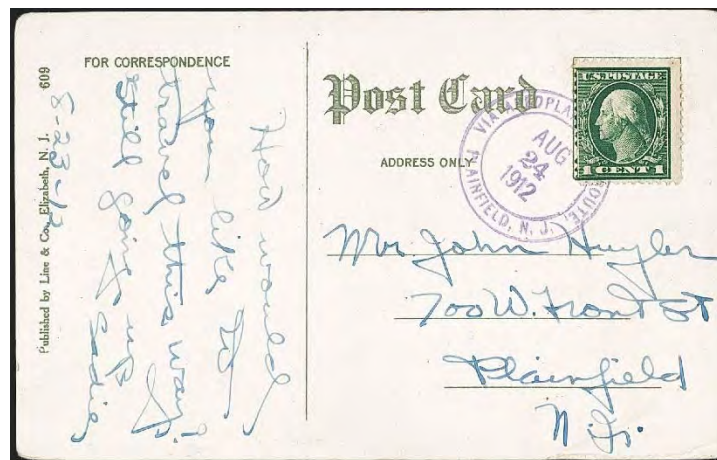
Fig. 7: Ocean City to Stone Harbor inter-city mail service and handstamp. AAMC 46.

On August 23 and 24, 1912, an aviation meet was held at the Plainfield Driving Park at which a postal substation was established. A Curtiss biplane, as illustrated in *Figure 8*, carried the mail about one mile to the South Plainfield post office where the mail pouch was dropped at the end of the flights each day.⁸ The route was officially designated at 609004. A total of 3,293 pieces of mail was carried on these flights.

Photo courtesy of Aerodacious.⁵



Fig. 8: Pilot Lincoln Beachey at controls of Curtiss biplane.



Courtesy Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries, Inc., lot 909.¹

Fig. 9: Plainfield to South Plainfield aviation meet. AAMC 50.

ENDNOTES:

¹ A complete collection of all reported pioneer airmail flights was the subject of a recent auction sale: Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries, Inc., *The James P. Myerson Collection of Pioneer Flight Mail, 1910-1916*, Sale No. 1176, March 8, 2018, at https://siegelauctions.com/sales.php?sale_no=1176. The Myerson collection can be viewed on its original exhibition pages on the Richard Frajola website; www.rfrajola.com/pioneer/pioneer.htm.

² www.aerodacious.com (retrieved May 19, 2018). This website displays the content of the “PIONEER Air Mail First Flights” catalog. It includes the photo illustrations used in this article.

³ *Ibid.*, see website listing for 1910 flights.

⁴ American Airmail Catalog, 7th ed., Vol. 3 (2017).

⁵ www.aerodacious.com/PIO1912.HTM (retrieved May 19, 2018)

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.* Details concerning the flight and its background by author Harlan B. Radford, Jr. can be found at <https://rivertonhistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/THE-FIRST-AIR-MAIL-FLIGHTS-IN-SOUTH-JERSEY-1912.pdf> (retrieved May 19, 2018).

⁸ *Ibid.*