

Petite Messages

The Development of Carte de Visite Mail in Nineteenth-Century France

by Thomas W. Broadhead

How small can a piece of mail be, and how little can be spent sending it? Cartes de visite, or “visiting cards” are among the very smallest and most simple items sent through the mails in the United States and many other countries, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In France, this form of mail reached a high art, and it sparked the use of other small, decorative printed greetings, which could be sent at reduced rates in unsealed envelopes.

Cartes de visite have not always been small, simple cards with the engraved name and address of the sender. The American Museum of Photography’s website¹ indicates that

the predecessors of *cartes de visite* were calling cards. During the 1850s, it was the custom to present one’s calling card at the time of a social visit. These cards were smaller than today’s business cards, frequently consisting of a name engraved and printed on glossy stock; in later years, designs became more elaborate. Families would often provide decorative baskets or trays to receive calling cards from visitors. During the 1850s, there were sporadic reports of photographers in the U.S. or Europe preparing photographic calling cards, in which the portrait replaces the engraved name. The standard 2½ x 4 inch format was patented by a Parisian photographer, Andre Adolphe Disderi, in 1854. Through the use of a sliding plate holder and a camera with four lenses, eight negatives could be taken by Disderi’s method on a single 8 x 10 inch glass plate. That allowed eight prints to be made every time the negative was printed. Not all photographers followed this method, however. And Disderi’s format did not become popular until five years after he patented it. In 1859, it is said, the Emperor Napoleon III was marching the French Army to Italy when he suddenly halted his troops and entered Disderi’s studio to pose in uniform for his *carte de visite*.



Carte de visite of Emperor Napoleon III produced in the studio of Andre Adolphe Disderi.

History

Modern understanding of the *carte de visite* more closely resembles the earlier, engraved greeting cards, but in the late 1800s, these cards took on a philatelically interesting role as mailed rather than personally delivered greetings. Bister² indicates that *cartes de visite* became a distinct class of French mail, beginning December 31, 1852 — with a local rate of five centimes and a domestic inter-bureau rate of ten centimes. Written messages were prohibited at these rates, and the small envelopes had to remain unsealed, so that contents could be verified. It was even possible to mail two cards in the same envelope at the special rate.^{3,4} Other, cheaper alternatives existed, and visiting cards could be sent as printed matter in wrappers for one centime (August 1, 1856–August

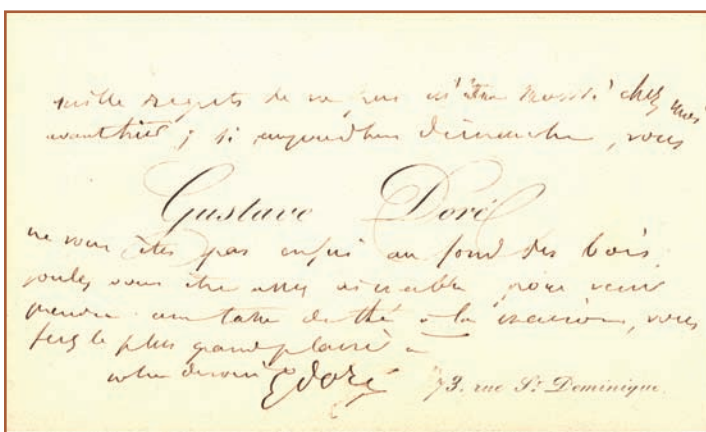
31, 1871) and for two centimes (September 1, 1871–April 30, 1878).^{5,6}

During the Franco-German war of 1870–1871, rare *cartes de visite* were utilized as postcards. Originally planned to be carried out of besieged Paris by unmanned balloons, most of the postcards mailed in late September and early October of 1870 accumulated at Parisian post offices only to be transported by manned balloons in late October.⁷

France developed postal stationery imprinted with postage in 1878, long after the United States and many European countries, and its pre-stamped envelopes did not appear until 1882.^{8,9} Prior to that time, envelopes were produced by private stationers in many sizes, including small formats for the mailing of *cartes de visite*. French interest in postal stationery envelopes is represented as early as embossed es-



Early small un gummed envelopes sent at the carte de visite rates of December 31, 1852. Above: Besançon January 4, 1856, via the Paris to Lyon train January 5, to Roanne — received January 6. Right: Paris, ca. 1863, Sénat (6) to Rue Coq Héron.



Carte de visite of French artist Gustave Doré with envelope posted in Paris, March 22, 1870, at the 10-centime rate for sealed letters delivered within the city.



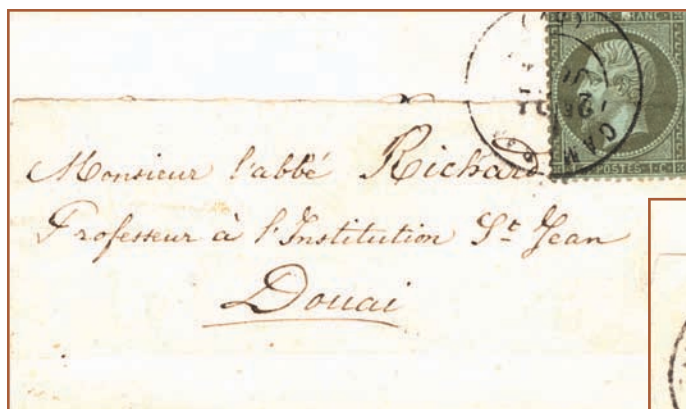
says on small (112 x 73 mm) envelopes produced in 1856.¹⁰ Somewhat more common essays were produced in 1862–1865 by several designers, who all incorporated the laureated bust of Napoleon III, then currently integral in the design of adhesive stamps.^{11, 12} Essays of embossed stamps on complete envelopes typically show that embossing was done after the envelope was assembled, leaving a reverse albino impression on the back flaps.

A new recognition and formality were brought to the carte de visite greeting when, on October 1, 1882,^{13, 14} the French post office began issuing small envelopes with un gummed closure flaps. Using the prevailing 5-centime allegorical stamp design of Peace and Commerce by J.A. Sage, the first carte de visite postal envelopes allowed their printed contents to be sent anywhere in the world under the UPU rate for printed matter — half the cost of a postcard. The first envelopes (1882–1884) measured 116 x 76 millimeters; had a simple, rounded closure flap; and were printed in sheets of twenty prior to cutting and folding.¹⁵ A similar sized envelope with gummed closure flap was issued imprinted with the prevailing 15-centime stamp for the domestic sealed letter rate. For the remainder of their history, carte de visite postal stationery envelopes mirrored the changes in defini-

tive stamps from Sage's Peace and Commerce (1882–1901) to the Liberty design of Blanc (1901–1906) and the Sower design of Roty (1907–1914).¹⁶

In 1895 the size of carte de visite envelopes was reduced to 107 x 70 millimeters, and closure flaps became pointed or tab-shaped to facilitate insertion under the lower back flap of the envelope — offering protection against the loss of contents. Three-digit printing dates — the first digit representing the year of printing, the last two being the week of that year — were added to the lower back flap in 1898. Envelopes could be purchased in small, banded packets of eight for forty-four centimes, or 5.5 centimes each.^{17, 18} Wrappers on the later, smaller size envelopes indicated in great detail the proper and improper uses of the 5-centime rate for cartes de visite.

Special printings and commemorative postal stationery, more common and diverse among French postcards of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, were very limited in carte de visite envelopes. Large printed-to-private-order



Cartes de visite sent under wrapper. Left: One-centime printed matter rate of August 1, 1856. Cambrai, July 24, ca. 1860, to Douai, July 24. Below: Two-centime printed matter of September 1, 1871, from Puteaux January 6, 1875, to Indre.



Paris 6 octobre 1870.
 Ma petite femme chérie, n'avez aucune inquiétude
 en ce qui me concerne. Ma situation est toujours la même:
 Santé parfaite. service un peu fatigant nullement
 pénible et diversions heureuses aux occupations
 administratives. Paris est toujours, comme
 doit être, plein de confiance dans le succès
 c'est à dire dans l'extermination, jusqu'aux choux
 des Prussiens qui l'entourent. eux-ci se heurtent
 toujours le plus loin possible de nos ports, qui
 défilent longuement à l'appareil de la victoire.
 l'histoire de chaque journée de guerre l'investi pour
 confiance dans le succès, ma femme chérie, en ce
 un prompt retour. Confiance, courage, et vive la France, mille

Carte de visite used as a postcard during the balloon mail of the Franco-German War from Paris (35 — Ministère des Finances) October 4, 1870, to Cambes, October 23. Carried by the balloon Jules Favre I or Jean Bart II.



(PTPO) envelopes with preprinted five centimes postage were produced for commercial use, and some examples have imprinted names and return addresses of companies. However, PTPO carte de visite envelopes are distinguished from these and from regular government issues by size (112 x 73 mm) and by nine different paper colors and paper varieties. All are attributed to an order from the Count d'Arlet de Saint-Saud¹⁹ in the 1890s, and they lack a printed name and address of the user. In 1896 government-issued carte de visite envelopes were overprinted variously with portraits of Czar Nicholas, Czarina Alexandra, and French president Félix Faure to commemorate French-Russian friendship and the visit of the Russian royals to Paris.

During more than thirty years of usage, these small pre-stamped postal envelopes received extensive use in France and at many French post offices abroad. In Paris, their popularity during the New Year holiday season produced such a high volume of mail that it became impractical to give them regular dated cancels. Instead, during those times of peak use, obsolete canceling devices (many dating back to the 1850s–1870s), including numeral dotted lozenge cancels, Paris dotted star cancels, undated circular date stamps,

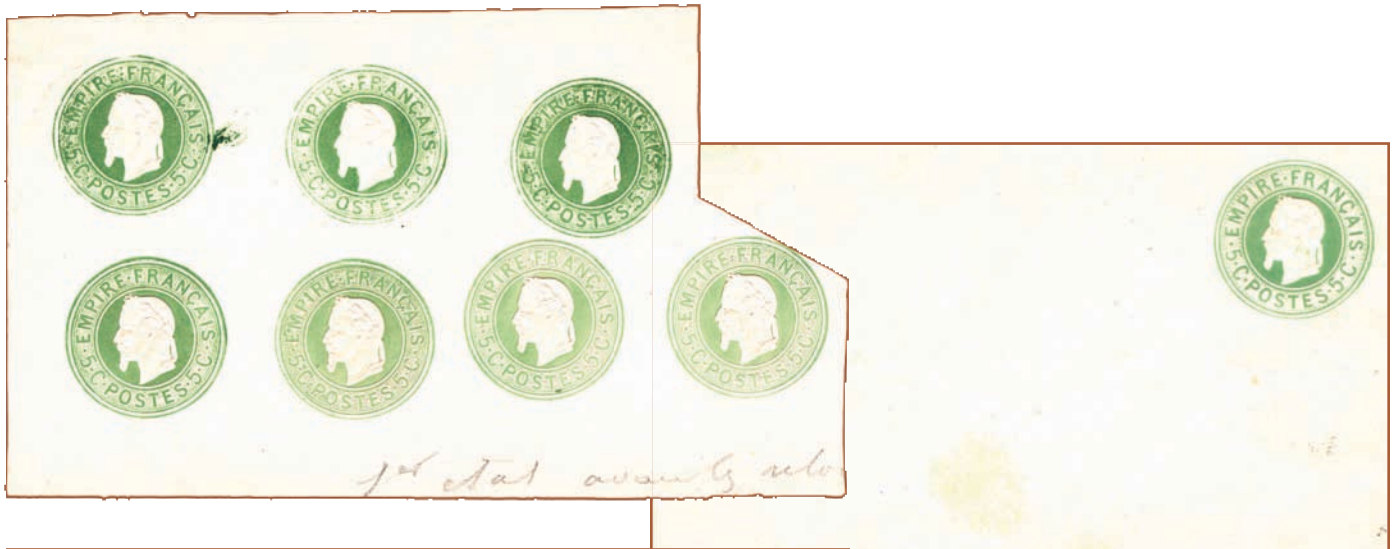
and circled numeral postal carrier cancels were pressed into quick service. These “Jour de l’An” (day of the year) cancels are interesting anachronisms used at least into the first decade of the twentieth century.²⁰

Contents

Both commercial and government printed carte de visite envelopes, although less frequently encountered in dealers’ stocks or postal history auctions than large covers, seem more frequently to have retained their original contents. Retained enclosures now provide independent verification of the correct postage rate, but also demonstrate the increased use of small envelopes beyond the mailing of calling cards. Contents range from simple calling cards to membership cards, and in the twentieth century included birth and death announcements, in addition to holiday greetings.

Rates

Privately produced, unstamped envelopes of various small sizes, which had existed since the 1850s, continued to be used alongside the standard-sized postal stationery



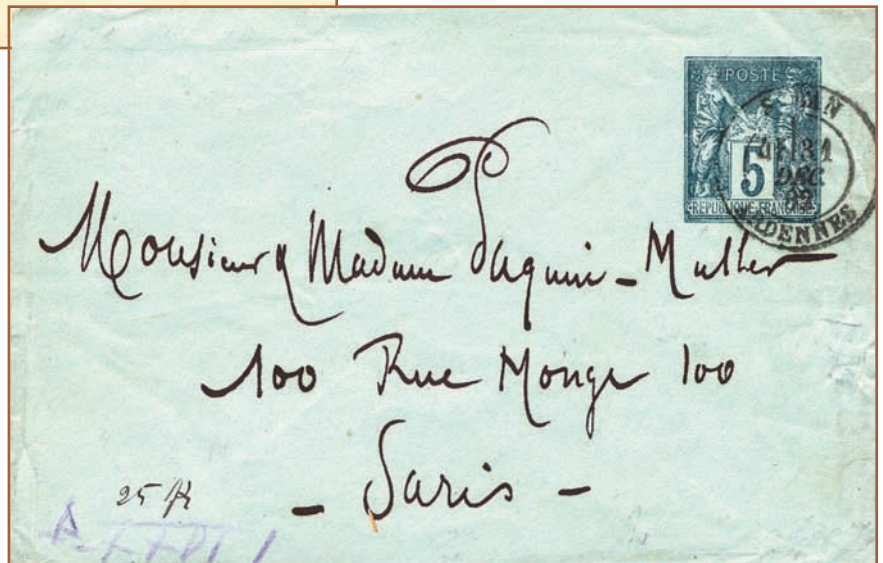
Early designs for carte de visite envelopes. Top left: Proof impressions of the 1862 5-centime embossed stamp design by Albert Barre. Above: Essay of a carte de visite envelope with Barre's stamp design. Left: Essay of a carte de visite envelope with C. Renard's stamp design. The 00c denomination is printed in green, typical of the 5-centime stamps of the time.

Five-centime imprinted stamp on blue un gummed envelope used within two months of issue from Sedan, December 31, 1882, to Paris.

issues. Serving the same function, these envelopes had either gummed or un gummed closure flaps and could be posted unsealed for only five centimes. On May 1, 1878, two distinct rates were recognized for visiting cards: five centimes for five grams in an unsealed envelope or one centime per five grams when the carte de visite was enclosed in a wrapper.²¹

From the 1880s, the option existed to send written messages in the small carte de visite envelopes, sealed, at the domestic letter rate of fifteen centimes or the foreign letter rate of twenty-five centimes. These options were available throughout the history of carte de visite envelopes and later increased in frequency, especially among envelopes sent to foreign destinations, from the 1930s onward. Whether out of convenience or a loss for words, it is interesting to contemplate the motivation to pay the price of mailing a two-page letter simply to send a little card with only a small written message!

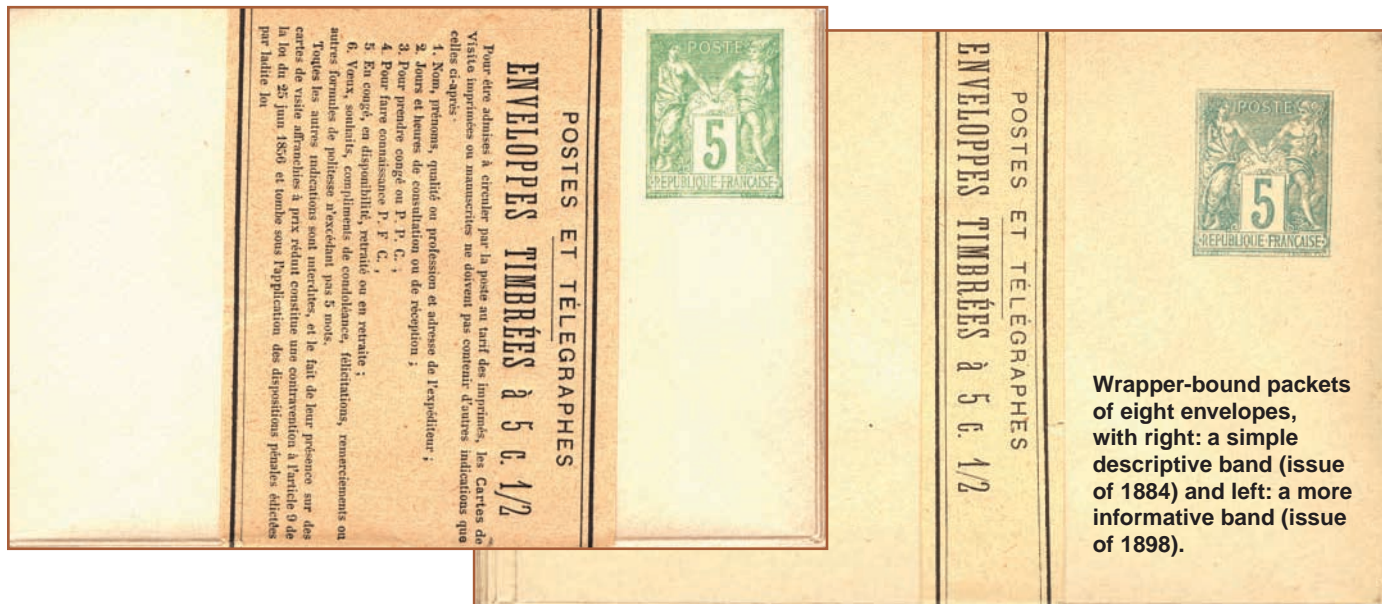
Postage beyond the basic unsealed printed message rate



is a useful guide to the nature of missing contents. Variations in postage are attributable to the nature of the contents: printed only, fewer than five-word written message, or greater than five-word message. In the last case, the contents could be even a letter small enough to fit into the envelope. Sealed envelopes required letter-rate postage, regardless of contents, and most likely contained cards with personal messages added or even folded letter sheets. Much less likely



Closure flaps include a simple rounded (government 1882 type), a pointed (government 1898 type — printing date 033 on lower back flap indicates printing in 33rd week of 1900), a tab-shaped (government or private), and gummed (private — the option existed to send unsealed for five centimes or sealed at the letter rate).



Wrapper-bound packets of eight envelopes, with right: a simple descriptive band (issue of 1884) and left: a more informative band (issue of 1898).



Printed to Private Order envelope printed on gray paper.

Commemorative overprint showing Czar Nicholas II and Russian imperial arms — Paris, January 24, 1897 to Nuremberg, Germany, January 25.

to be found are rates attributable to weight for these small pieces, and a double-weight (greater than fifty grams unsealed, or greater than twenty grams sealed) posted envelope, if found, would be expected to show significant signs of strain from its heavy contents.

Richardson's comprehensive treatise of French postal rates²² indicates there were nearly a hundred different rates for visiting cards or similar pieces of mail in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Domestic, unsealed envelopes with printed messages experienced twenty-two rate changes from 1852 to 1969; unsealed envelopes with contents containing not more than a five-word written message represent twenty-one rates from 1886 to 1969²³; and sealed small envelopes mirrored the regular letter rates with twenty-six different rate periods from 1852 to 1969. Cartes de visite sent to foreign destinations were not considered a



Used at French post office in the Ottoman Empire — Salonica, January 23, 1898, to Gafsa, Tunisia.



Large numeral cancels — “gros chiffres” — discontinued for regular postal use in 1876, but used during high-volume holiday mails as “Jour de l’An” or “day of the year” cancels.

separate category, and Richardson notes seventeen different rates for unsealed and nineteen different rates for sealed envelopes from 1876 to 1969. He further notes that cartes de visite ceased to be a separate class of French domestic mail on January 13, 1969, after which they were treated as urgent or economy mail at differing rates.²⁴

Just as the variety of rates is interesting, so are the rate periods. The 5-centime rate of May 1, 1878, for domestic unsealed carte de visite envelopes lasted more than forty-seven years until July 16, 1925, and a nearly identical longevity existed for unsealed envelopes to foreign destinations at the same rate (1876–1921). Only during the inflationary times of the mid-twentieth century did postal rates for cartes de visite undergo rapid and frequent increases, paralleling those of other types of mail.

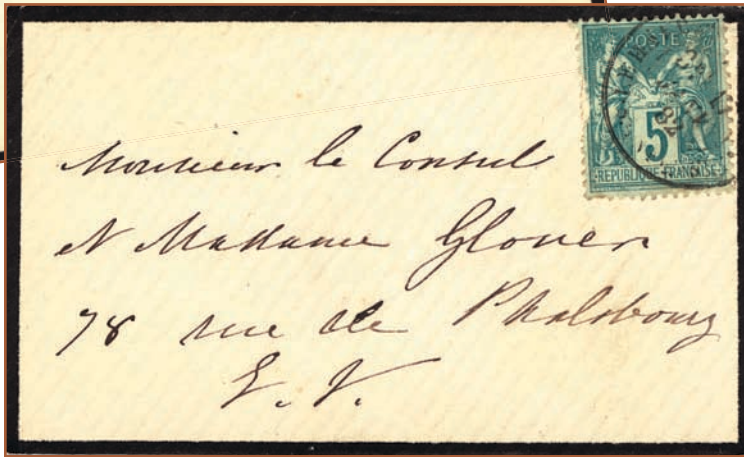
Underpaid examples were taxed as mercilessly as ordinary mail, but at the inconvenience of postal workers, who were required to open and examine unsealed envelopes. A sealed envelope, regardless of size, required letter rate postage. In the absence of contents, the nature of the enclosed message frequently can be deduced by the combination of postage and the double-deficiency postage due assessed. Unfranked envelopes were treated more harshly, at times being taxed as much as triple the basic rate.

Attempts to improperly mail carte de visite envelopes met with the same resistance as they do today. The reuse of cancelled stamps resulted in the assessment of double the rate as postage due, and, of course, stamps were required to be used on mail sent from their corresponding country.

Special Fees and Services

The small carte de visite envelopes could contain materials other than cartes de visite, and occasionally required the kinds of special attention normally associated with larger personal or commercial correspondence. Although domestic and international postal rates were largely independent of destination, an additional fee of ten centimes was required for many destinations, including the United States, that required a greater than 500 kilometer transit by sea. This “voie de mer” surtax was instituted on January 1, 1876, and lasted

From top: Mourning envelope with black-bordered carte de visite, mailed locally in Le Havre, January 17, 1882, and received the following day. Membership card in the Touring Club de France, mailed from Paris and received in Niort on December 23, 1896.





Different rates existed for sealed and unsealed envelopes. Top left: Unsealed privately produced envelope mailed from Paris, July 10, 1886, via the Paris to Modane railway and then by boat to Alexandria, Egypt, July 15. Above: Sealed envelope — fifteen centime domestic rate of May 1, 1878, La Roche-Chalais to La Valouze, September 13, 1886, with bisected 20-centime stamp. Left: Sealed envelope — 25-centime international rate of May 1, 1878, late usage of 1884 type envelope, Dieulefit, January 22, 1901, to Pretoria Transvaal, February 20 to Nylstrom.

until October 1, 1881, for far distant locales, but only until April 1, 1879, to the United States.²⁵

Additional fees were required for special services, and it can be fairly certain that carte de visite-sized envelopes mailed under these circumstances did not contain simple printed cards. Late posting, where the mailer was insistent that the piece of mail be dispatched after the last collection, required a late fee and special “levée exceptionnelle” cancel. From June 1, 1863, until March 20, 1887, a 20-centime fee was collected for each fifteen-minute time interval, up to a limit of forty-five minutes. The fee decreased to fifteen centimes in 1887 and five centimes in 1896, but with only a fifteen-minute time window allowed.²⁶

Registration fees for both domestic and foreign mail were twenty-five centimes from January 16, 1879, until after World War I, and it is likely that registered carte de visite envelopes contained letters or at least a card with an important written message. Insured letters were treated in much the same way as registered mail, and required both the regular letter rate fee and an insurance charge based upon the declared value of the contents. Typically, all flaps on the back were sealed with wax. Carte de visite envelopes were appropriate for holding small sums or at least for small numbers

of banknotes.

Size Matters

What are the dimensions for a carte de visite envelope? The 116 x 76 mm size of the 1882 postal stationery envelopes is a convenient standard for the high end of size, and many privately produced unstamped envelopes are of similar size. But what are the lower limits?

Postal administrations typically have established upper size and weight limits on posted items, but with increasingly mechanized mail handling in the twentieth century, many countries — including France and the United States — have placed minimum size requirements on envelopes. Pieces too small to be accommodated by machines now require additional postage for hand canceling and sorting. The smallest piece in my collection is a 48 x 84 mm unsealed envelope, hand canceled December 31, 1921, in Bar sur Aube.

As a matter of practicality, a minimum size of 100 x 70 mm — smaller than the 1882 envelopes — was required in France beginning July 1, 1955, and smaller envelopes were liable for postage due.²⁷ Even with the abandonment of cartes de visite as a separate class of French mail on January 13,



Postage due. Left: Official envelope from the ministry of public instruction and fine arts was not recognized as government mail and was charged triple the five-centime postage in 1900. Below: Previously used 15-centime stamp, affixed with red wax to a sealed envelope elicited a red manuscript notation advising that the tax was due to a stamp that had previously been used and a double charge 30-centime postage due stamp in 1890. Lower left: Attempted use of a 25-centime French stamp on a carte de visite envelope mailed from Monaco, taxed fifty centimes on arrival in Switzerland in 1898.



Sealed envelope mailed to New Orleans required an additional ten centimes for the "voie de mer" surtax. Mailed from Maubourguet, December 3, 1878; with transit through Paris, December 4 and New York, December 15; received in New Orleans December 18.





Late posted envelope with twenty centimes late fee added to the fifteen-centime domestic rate. Paris, February 16, 1881, to Villeneuve le Comte, February 17. Octagonal "levee exceptionnelle" cancel with "4^E" notation indicating fifteen minutes beyond the last mail collection.

Carte de visite postal envelope with additional postage to comprise the twenty-five-centime sealed foreign letter rate and the twenty-five-centime registration fee. Montargis, October 19, 1898, to Budapest, Hungary, October 21.

1969, unsealed small envelopes containing "plis non-urgents" (non-urgent letters) could be sent at comparably reduced rates over first class sealed letters. Even then, an increase in the minimum size to 140 x 90 mm was required for envelopes beginning July 1, 1972,²⁸ effectively marking the end of carte de visite envelopes.

Conclusions

Printed and photographic cartes de visite proliferated in France during the last half of the nineteenth century, and their



Sizes of Covers and Cards Illustrated (Height x Width)

Napoleon III — 104 mm x 61 mm.	Commemorative — 70 mm x 107 mm
5c — 55 mm x 94 mm	Used at Salonica — 70 mm x 107 mm
10c — 52 mm x 87 mm	Large numeral cancel — 76 mm x 116 mm; stamp impression — 22 mm x 18 mm
Doré — card — 57 mm x 92 mm; envelope — 65 mm x 103 mm	Mourning — card — 55 mm x 90 mm; envelope — 60 mm x 99 mm
1c — 55 mm x 90 mm	Membership — card — 70 mm x 107 mm; envelope — 75 mm x 115 mm
2c — 57 mm x 90 mm	Unsealed 5c to Egypt — 55 mm x 95 mm
Balloon postcard — 55 mm x 93 mm	Sealed envelope 15c — 64 mm x 103 mm
Proof by Barre — 21 mm diameter	Sealed envelope 25c — 76 mm x 116 mm
Envelope with Barre's design — 57 mm x 97 mm	Official 15c due — 73 mm x 112 mm
Essay Renard's stamp design — 72 mm x 112 mm	Reused 15c — 72 mm x 112 mm
5c on blue envelope — 76 mm x 116 mm	Used in Monaco — 62 mm x 90 mm
Rounded — 116 mm wide; pointed — 107 mm wide; printing date 03 — 2.5 mm wide; tab-shaped — 112 mm wide	"voie de mer" surtax — 71 mm x 111 mm
Wrapper-bound packets — issue of 1884 — 76 mm x 116 mm; issue of 1898 — 70 mm x 107 mm	Late fee — 72 mm x 112 mm
Printed to Private Order — 73 mm x 112 mm; stamp impressions — 22 mm x 18 mm	Registered — 76 mm x 116 mm
	Insured — 70 mm x 113 mm



Small envelope of the carte de visite size, with a declared value of 2000 francs, marked in red “CHARGÉ” to indicate an insured letter. Stamps applied total 2 francs 10 centimes, which at the rate of 10 centimes per 100 francs declared value only covers the insurance fee.² Chantenay St. Imbert, March 6, 1882; via Limoges, March 7; to Cognac, received March 7.



distribution by mail prompted the development of privately produced small envelopes and, later, government-printed postal stationery. These small envelopes were versatile beyond the special 5-centime rate for a simple printed card. With additional postage, they could carry a personal message written on the carte de visite, a small letter, or even money, and were then treated as other types of first class mail despite their small size. But as the charming etiquette of cartes de visite has waned in modern times, so have the small envelopes. Once mailable at reduced rates, they now have minimum size limitations and may require extra postage, falling to the cold, impersonal handling of machines.

Acknowledgments

The assistance of Ellen Peachey of the American Philatelic Research Library in obtaining copies of references and of Gerald Schroedl in reviewing an earlier draft of this paper is gratefully acknowledged.

Endnotes

1. Website <http://www.photographymuseum.com/histsw.htm>
2. Mick Bister, “Visiting Cards; A Brief History of Rates, Regulations, and Postal Stationery,” *Journal of the France and Colonies Philatelic Society (UK)*, No. 232, pp. 55–59, No. 233, pp. 87–91 (2004).
3. *Ibid.*
4. Derek Richardson, *Tables of French Postal Rates, 1849 to 2005*, 3rd edition (Glastonbury, Somerset: The France & Colonies Philatelic Society of Great Britain, 2006); Brochure No. 7.
5. Bister, *op. cit.*
6. Richardson, *op. cit.*
7. E.M. Cohn, “World’s First Air Mail Post Cards,” *The American Philatelist*, Vol. 112, no. 11 (1998): 1018–1024.
8. Bister, *op. cit.*
9. L’Association des Collectionneurs d’Entiers Postaux (ACEP). “Entiers Français d’Usage Courant — Enveloppes (avant les “PàP”),” <http://mapage.noos.fr/>

entiersfr/or-envel.html

10. Jean Storch and Robert Françon, *Les Entiers Postaux de France et de Monaco*, 4th edition (Annonay, Imprimerie du Vivarais, 1988).
11. L’Association des Collectionneurs, *op. cit.*
12. Storch, *op. cit.*
13. Bister, *op. cit.*
14. L’Association des Collectionneurs, *op. cit.*
15. Bister, *op. cit.*
16. Storch, *op. cit.*
17. Bister, *op. cit.*
18. Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 36. Indicates, however, that postal envelopes at this time cost one centime in addition to the face value of printed postage.
19. Storch, *op. cit.*
20. Bister, *op. cit.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. Richardson, *op. cit.*
23. *Ibid.* Indicates that, until 1917, there was no postage difference between envelopes bearing printed cards and those with a one- to five-word written message.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. Bister, *op. cit.*
28. *Ibid.*

The Author

Tom Broadhead is a professor of geology and director of Undergraduate Academic Advancement at The University of Tennessee. A member of the France & Colonies Philatelic Society, he enjoys collecting late nineteenth century and semi-modern French postal history.