

French P.O. at Cairo: Earliest Reported Cover

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Pierre Louis Grech, doyen of the study of the French post offices in Egypt, noted in 2012 that the “earliest seen date” of a cover posted at the French Post Office in Cairo was 25 January 1866 (*Note 1*). Of course, he would readily acknowledge that, in the study of postal history, earliest known dates are often subject to revision as new discoveries are made.

The Opening of the Office

The French Post Office at Cairo opened on 1 January 1866 as a *Bureau de Distribution*. The post office was issued a French date-stamp with an outer ring of dots (often referred to as “pearled”) to indicate its status. The Cairo office also received an obliterator handstamp, consisting of a diamond of dots with the number 5119 in the centre (*Figure 1*).



***Datestamp of the
Cairo French P.O.***



***Obliterator of the
Cairo French P.O.***

Figure 1

The datestamp in *Figure 1* includes the date of despatch of the cover pictured in *Figure 2*. That date, 8 January 1866, is now the earliest reported date of a cover posted at the French Post Office in Cairo.



Figure 2. The earliest reported letter posted at the French P. O. at Cairo

An Overpaid Letter

From 1 January 1862, the rate for a letter of 10 grams or less between the French offices in Egypt and France was 50 centimes. On 1 January 1866, the rate was reduced to 40 centimes for letters not exceeding 10 grams (*Note 2*). At the time the letter in *Figure 2* was posted, either the staff of the French Post Office at Cairo had not been made aware of the rate reduction and applied 50 centimes postage to the letter, or the sender, unaware of the change, had come to the post office with the letter already franked with 10 and 40 centimes French perforated Empire stamps. In either case, after the recent rate reduction, the letter was overpaid by 10 centimes (*Figure 3*).



Figure 3. 40 centimes (the stamp at right) was sufficient postage. The stamp at left (10 centimes) was not necessary

The postal clerk cancelled the stamps with the 5119 obliterator, applied the Cairo “pearled” date-stamp of 8 January near by, and added the boxed “PD” auxiliary handstamp (*Figure 4*). In France and at French post offices abroad, the PD handstamp was to be applied at the point of origin to indicate that postage had been paid to the final destination (*Port payé jusqu'à Destination*).



Figure 4.
Payé à Destination
Paid to Destination

The Route

Having been posted at Cairo on 8 January, the letter travelled via train to Alexandria. The next day, it was processed at the French Post Office at Alexandria (*Figure 4*) and placed aboard the French Paquebot *Peluse* of the Compagnie des Messageries Maritimes (*Figure 5*). The *Peluse* had been launched in 1863 and operated on the Egypt line in conjunction with identical steamships, the *Moeris* and *Saïd*.



Figure 4. Alexandria transit datestamp



Figure 5. Paquebot *Peluse*. Courtesy L'Encyclopedie des Messageries Maritimes

The *Peluse* departed Alexandria on 9 January 1866 and followed the route illustrated in the map in *Figure 6*. The vessel made stops at Messina (12 January) and Naples (13 January), before arriving at Marseille on 15 January (*Note 3*).



Figure 6. Route of the letter on the steamship Peluse from Alexandria to Marseille and then overland by rail across France

The reverse of the letter (*Figure 7*) traces the route the letter travelled in France to reach its destination: After arriving at the port of Marseille, it was transferred to the train running the *Marseille a Lyon* travelling post office (16 January) toward Paris, where it arrived on 17 January. From the capital, on a westward train, the letter traveled to Lorient in Brittany. An 18 January receiver backstamp provides the date on which the letter arrived there, but an additional Lorient receiver indicates that it was not delivered until Friday, 19 January, 11 days in transit.

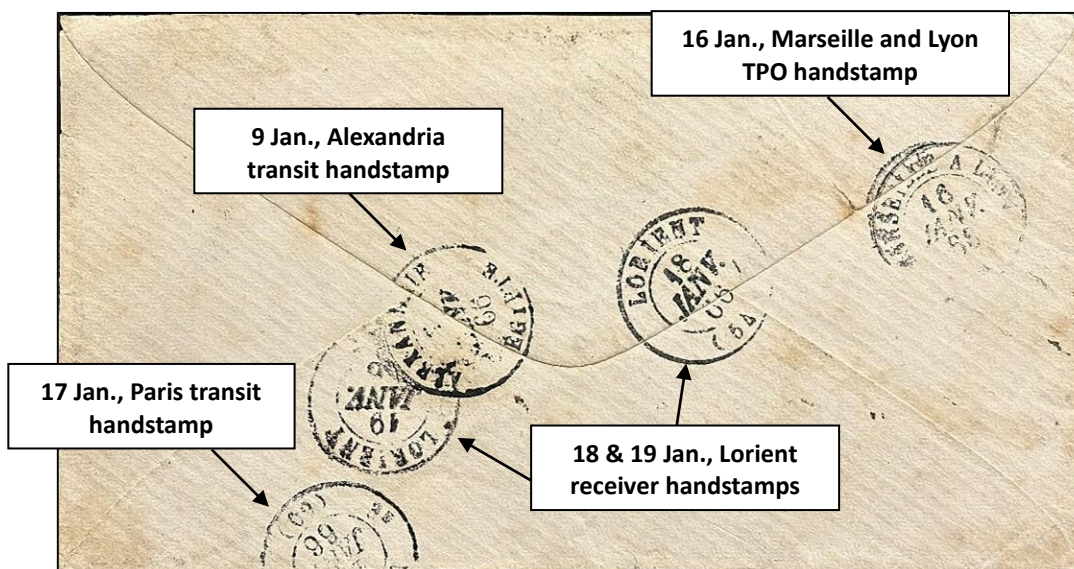
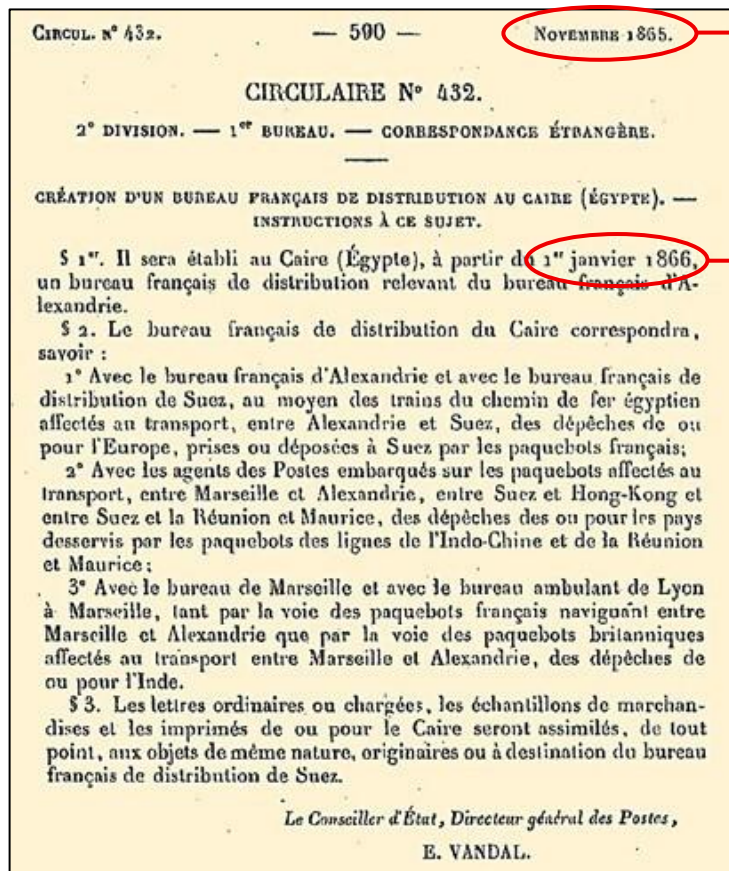


Figure 7. Reverse of the cover dispatched from Cairo on 8 January

A Note and Reminder

Collectors of the French post offices in Egypt may recall that, in his magisterial work, Peter A. S. Smith stated that the French office at Cairo opened in 1865, an error (*Note 4*). Pierre Grech correctly notes that the date of opening was 1 January 1866 (*Note 5*). The *Bulletin Mensuel* of the French Postal Administration announcing the opening was published in November 1865, a date reference that no doubt accounts for the errant conclusion (*Figure 8; Note 6*).



Circular No. 432 was published in November 1865...

...announcing the opening of the French P.O. at Cairo on 1 January 1866

Figure 8. Bulletin Mensuel des Postes Number 123, Circular 432, announced the opening of the French Post Office at Cairo. Courtesy Digital Archives of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Collectors of the French post offices in Egypt are reminded to check their collections for dates of postmarks on their covers. Perhaps one carries an earliest known date of despatch.

NOTES

1. Pierre Louis Grech, *The French Post Offices in Egypt* (Self-published, 2012), Part 1, p. 114.
2. Grech, *The French Post Offices in Egypt*, p. 81.
3. Raymond Salles, *La Poste Maritime Française, Tome II, Les Paquebots de la Méditerranée de 1837 à 1939* (Limassol: James Bendon, 1992), p. 189.
4. Peter A. S. Smith, *Egypt: Stamps and Postal History, A Philatelic Treatise* (Limassol: James Bendon, 1999), p. 91.
5. Grech, *The French Post Offices in Egypt*, p. 114.
6. The *Bulletin Mensuel de l'Administration des Postes* of November 1865 can be accessed in the digital archives of the Bibliothèque nationale de France at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5512989z/f78.item> (accessed 8 March 2026).