

## Synopsis

### 1838-42 "Wilkes Antarctic Expedition": Its Many (often unfavorable) Facets

**BACKGROUND:** The "Wilkes Antarctic Expedition" (an aspect of the 1838-42 United States Exploring Expedition) is the most important USA Antarctic expedition (and probably the most significant Antarctic expedition of the second phase of Antarctic exploration's *Heroic Age* [1822-43]). Comparable for the British is James Ross' (1838-43) Antarctic expedition. The French would counter with d'Urville's (1837-40), acclaimed the first French Antarctic expedition. Up until then, the most significant was James Weddell's from Great Britain (1822-24) that reached a new farthest south in the sea he discovered, that later was named after him.

Material from any of these four expeditions represents an enormous polar philatelic challenge. The two known pieces from Weddell are the earliest to document any Antarctic exploratory expedition. Only two posted items are known to record Ross'. Up until 2012, *nothing* was known to exist for d'Urville's.

Two to three collections only have 1-2 pieces each related to the "Wilkes Antarctic Expedition." One other collection has the rest, whose scope and number enable postally documenting the full range of the "Wilkes" expedition from its tortured preparation period (1836-38) through its departure (1838), two Antarctic cruises (1839, 1840), return (1842) and protracted aftermath (1842 into 1850s). None of the "Wilkes" pieces outside of archives and museums were known until the 1980's.

Hence, a truly remarkable philatelic achievement would be an exhibit that includes evidence from all four of these monumentally historic early Heroic Age Antarctic expeditions, while using as its basis a thorough documentation of the most important ("Wilkes"). Such an exhibit could logically and seamlessly show material from all four expeditions, while telling the complete "Wilkes" story. This is because the history of "Wilkes" overlaps and is directly related to the others'.

All three expeditions (Wilkes, Ross and d'Urville) attempted to best Weddell's *farthest* south record. Wilkes provided assistance

to his rival Ross in a quest for the South Magnetic Pole. D'Urville and Wilkes actually passed within sight of each others' ships during their second Antarctic cruises. Geographical discoveries by Wilkes, Ross and d'Urville were adjacent and declared during the same period. Wilkes', however, was paramount, as it positively identified Antarctica as a continent, which he then named.

Such an exhibit additionally could be challenged to subjectively view "Wilkes," rather than just displaying its material. The presentation theme could be its common denominator -- misery. Though highly successful as an exploratory Antarctic expedition, it was unfortunately troubled in a multitude of respects. These distressful aspects permeated every facet of the expedition's history.

This single frame is that exhibit.

**PURPOSE:** Present the chronological story of the momentous, yet troubled, 1838-42 "Wilkes Antarctic Expedition" using archival postal and related communications material. Its complex history will be seen through its numerous facets beginning with a tortured authorization and organization to well beyond its extensive and uneasy voyage, including the expedition's links to other historic Antarctic expeditions of the time.

**IMPORTANCE:** Both the material and what it represents constitute the most significant aspects of their realms; Polar historically and polar philatelically. The documented events are the most influential in the exploration history of Antarctica. The material used for this documentation is among the most exalted in polar philately.

**CONDITION:** There is no "philatelic" material from this period of Antarctic philately. Its archival material qualifies as historical artifacts, however, its condition does not always suit its character. Having been used for normal communications without any thought to retention as a collectible, it was used and abused as would any correspondence and scratch paper of this time. The harsh environment under which some of it was transmitted would have further challenged its condition and even its very survival. Hence, some of the mounted pieces bear evidence of their ordinary handling, but often

also represent the only pieces of their kind.

**EXHIBIT CHARACTER:** There are no mundane pieces in this exhibit. They are remarkable because of what they represent and their scarcity. Some additionally are extraordinary because of their unintentional philatelic merit. Those particularly distinctive are noted in red explanatory text on their page.

**EXHIBIT FIRSTS:** First ever philatelic exhibit of the "Wilkes Antarctic Expedition." Was the first ever showing of posted material related to the d'Urville expedition. First showing of anything from "Weddell." First exhibit ever to attempt showing of material from Antarctic expeditions of the *Heroic Age's* (1822-43) second phase.

*Highlights:* Only known mail from leader Wilkes on his Antarctic expedition. One of only two known Ross expedition pieces. Earliest known of two known d'Urville return pieces. Earliest known use of "Adèle/Adélie" name change, especially important since it is on her personal stationery used for expedition-related correspondence (Adèle, wife of explorer d'Urville, changed spelling of her name from "Adèle" to "Adélie," after receiving news from her husband's expedition that his discovery named after her was spelled "Adélie Land"). Only known postal documentation for hero Dibble. Only known postal documentation of renown artist Peale while affiliated with the expedition. Only postal evidence from Wilkes expedition mentioning Antarctica or "South Pole." Both known Chief Scientist Pickering pieces.

**RESEARCH:** Exhibitor responsible for the only "Wilkes" and (in English) "d'Urville" expedition polar philatelic published research, that included original findings.

Hal Vogel, *Essence of Polar Philately*  
*Ice Cap News* (journal of the American Society of Polar Philatelists), issues January 2013 (4-11) and July 2013 (60-67).

**EXHIBIT HISTORY:** PNSE'13 gold, ROPEX'15 gold + single frame grand (pre-lg. period), Large Gold: Minn. Stamp Expo'19, (Czech Rep.) Liberec'19, SESE'20, ARIPEX'20 [+grand].