

1838-42 Wilkes Antarctic Expedition:

Its many (often unfavorable) facets

Purpose

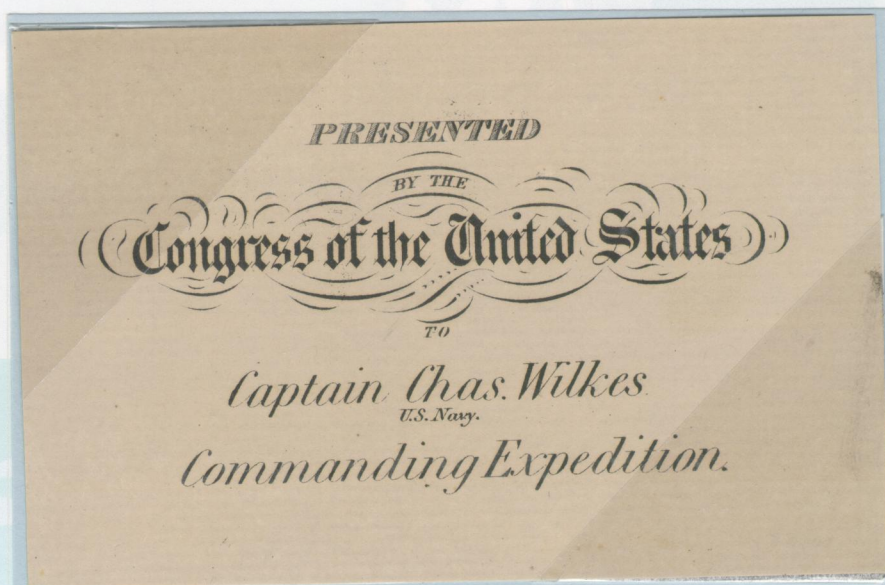
This exhibit uses archival postal and related communications material to chronicle the story of the momentous, yet troubled, 1838-42 “Wilkes Antarctic Expedition.” Its complex history will be seen through numerous facets beginning with a tortured authorization and organization to well beyond its extensive and uneasy voyage, including the expedition’s links to other historic Antarctic expeditions of the time.

Background

The 1838-42 “Wilkes Antarctic Expedition” (officially the *U.S. Exploring Expedition*, abbreviated “Ex.Ex.”) was a monumental undertaking. It was the first official USA Antarctic expedition and one of the most important expeditions in Antarctic exploration history. *It named and confirmed the existence of Antarctica.* A number of its facets amazingly link it to the three other major Antarctic expeditions of its period (Weddell’s, 1822-24; d’Urville’s, 1837-40 and James Ross’, 1839-43).

Scope

Contemporaneous material will present the history of “Wilkes Antarctic Expedition” from its ominous beginning in 1836, through its 4-year voyage, return and completion of many of its scientific publications into the 1850s. Included will be postal documentation of its competing Ross and d’Urville Antarctic expeditions, as well as that from Weddell, with whom they are all linked.



Charles Wilkes’ Congressional presentation book plate from one of 100 VIP copies of his five volume expedition narrative officially published by the U.S. Government in 1844, from which it was charged he improperly profited due to copyright manipulation.

Highlighted Material

Although much of this material shares the same extraordinary challenge factor, especially scarce and unique items are indicated in dark red text.

Text

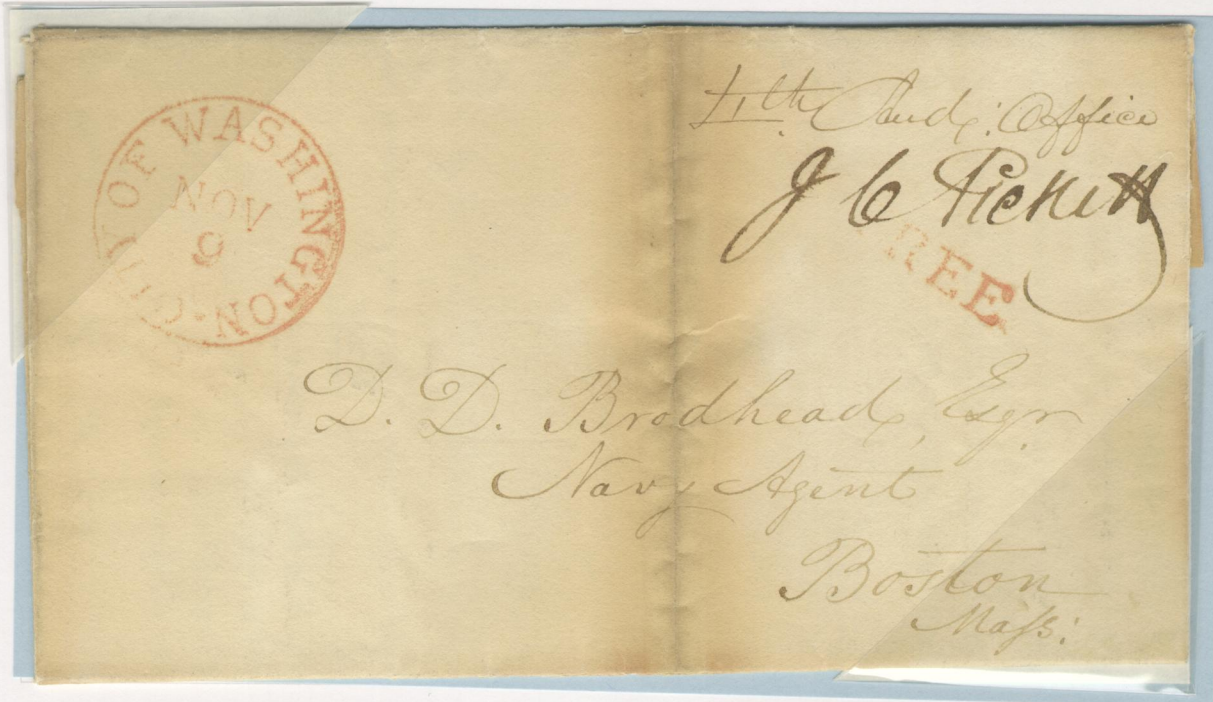
Background and historical information is in serif text. Philatelic or postal information is in sans-serif text.

Exhibit Plan

- 1 **Problem Plagued Preparation**
- 2 **To Antarctica - First Cruise**
- 3 **To Antarctica - Second Cruise**
- 4 **From Antarctica**
- 5 **Aftermath**

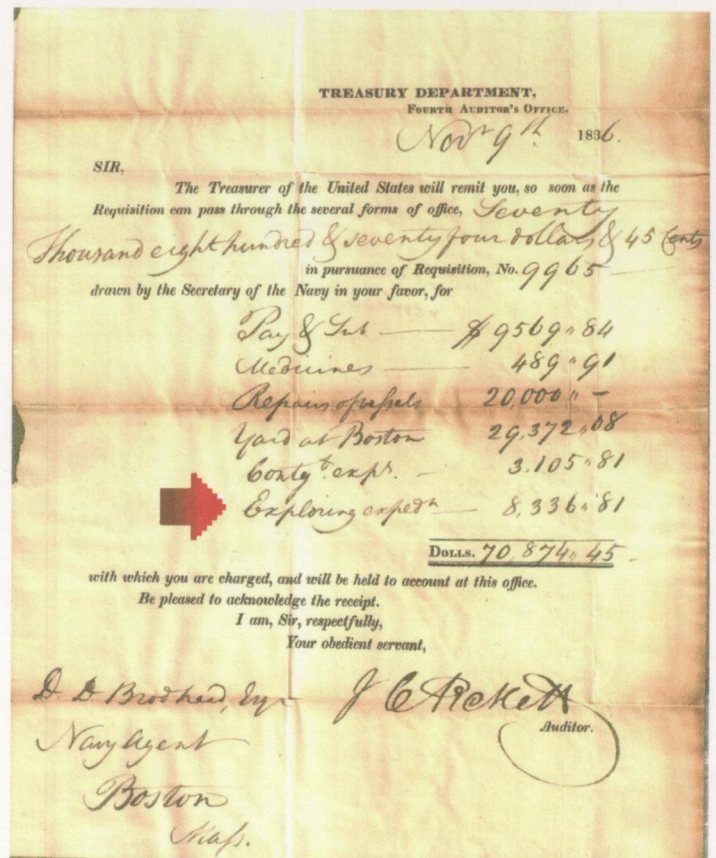
Early Postal Evidence of Expedition Funding

Philosophical and politically induced dithering delayed departure for 2+ years (1836-38) of U.S. Exploring Expedition ("Wilkes Antarctic Expedition"). On 9 November 1836 the U.S. Department of Treasury Fourth Auditor's payment notice mailed by J.C. Pickett to Navy Agent D.D. Broadhead, Boston (Navy Yard), included (red arrow) \$8,336.81 for "Exploring expedn" from \$300,000 total Congress had authorized on 18 May 1836. Procrastination led to insufficient funds for organizing expedition as originally planned.

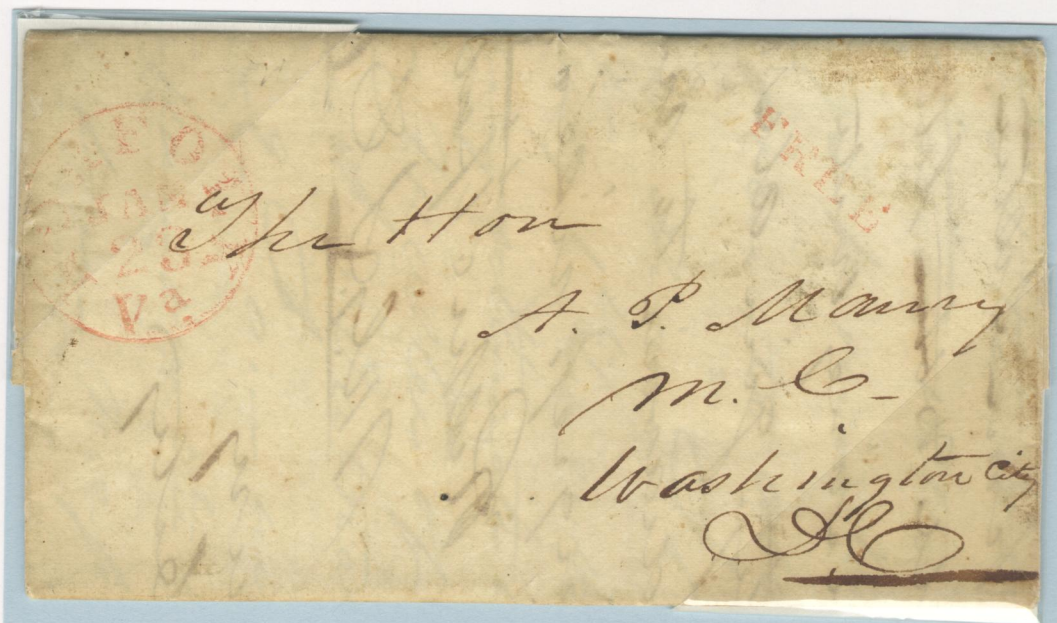


9 November 1836, Washington, DC, marked (stamped) "FREE" (official government business) posting by 4th Auditor Pickett to Navy Agent, Boston, conveying (right) "Wilkes Expedition" payment authorization.

One of two known posted U.S. Treasury "Wilkes Expedition" payment notices.



Documentation of Rejected Vessels



Five originally designated, newly built ships were eventually rejected as unsuitable for the expedition. Replaced by only four older ships due to delay-induced financial constraints. Acting First Lt. M.G.L. Claiborne writes enthusiastically from aboard barque USS *Consort* (later rejected vessel) at Norfolk Navy Yard to his sister's prominent father-in-law, A.P. Maury, Member of Congress, Washington, DC.

Postmarked 23 January [1837] sent "Free" (stamped upper right) to Member of Congress while Congress was in session.



Writing 11 months later from aboard brig USS *Pioneer* (later rejected vessel), now disgruntled Claiborne complains to sister in Franklin, Tennessee, about soon-to-be replaced commander (Lt. Wilkes would replace Captain Jones).

Postmarked New York, 22 November (1837), manuscript rated (upper right) "25" (cents) for distance over 400 miles.

Only known postal documentation related to rejected vessels.

New Navy Secretary Finally Moves Expedition

Washington 23rd April 1838.

President Andrew Jackson's Navy Secretary Mahlon Dickerson was one of many hindrances to expedition's departure, causing much personnel turnover. Next President (Martin Van Buren) replaced him with James K. Paulding, finally enabling the expedition to depart.

(TOP) Wilkes' 23 April 1838 letter request to Sec. Dickerson for appointment of an individual to the expedition as an Acting Midshipman.

(BOTTOM) Scan of original 30 July 1838 request from Wilkes to new Secretary Paulding to assign Boatswain William Smith to expedition. Smith served on expedition, though subject of Dickerson letter did not.

employment of the Son of Saml. Woodworth Esq. as an Acting Mid. on the Explor'g Expedition.

Looking alone to the efficiency of persons to be employed on the Expedition in order to engage forward to the honor and credit of the Country and those employed - I have no hesitation

in saying if Mr. Woodworth's Son has the qualifications his father represents, I think he would be an acquisition to me in the duties I have to perform - with great respect

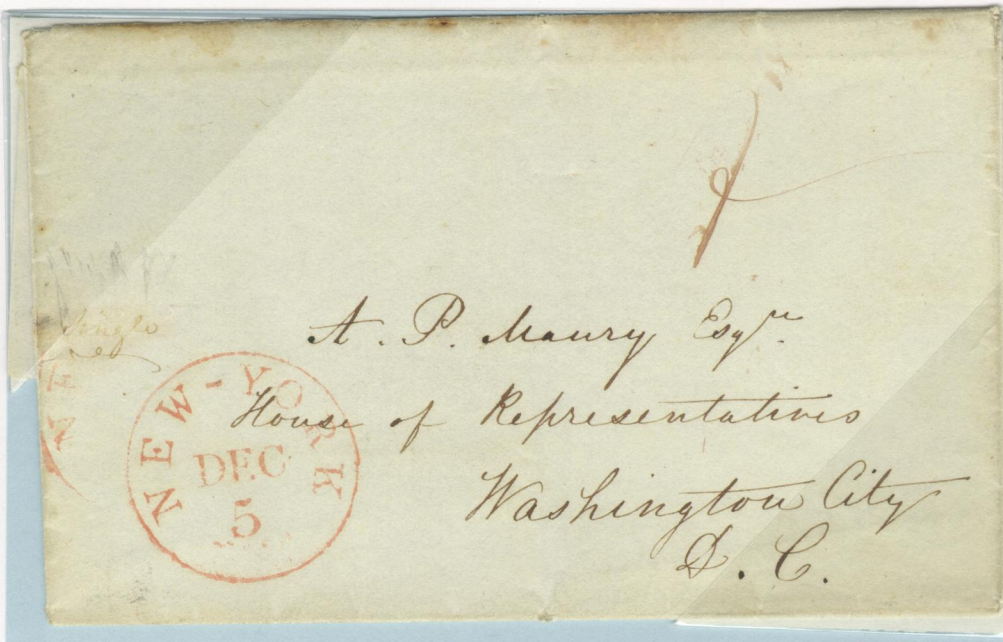
Saml. Wilkes
Secy of the Navy.

Saml. Wilkes
Comd'g In C^o Exp.

James K. Paulding
Secy of the Navy

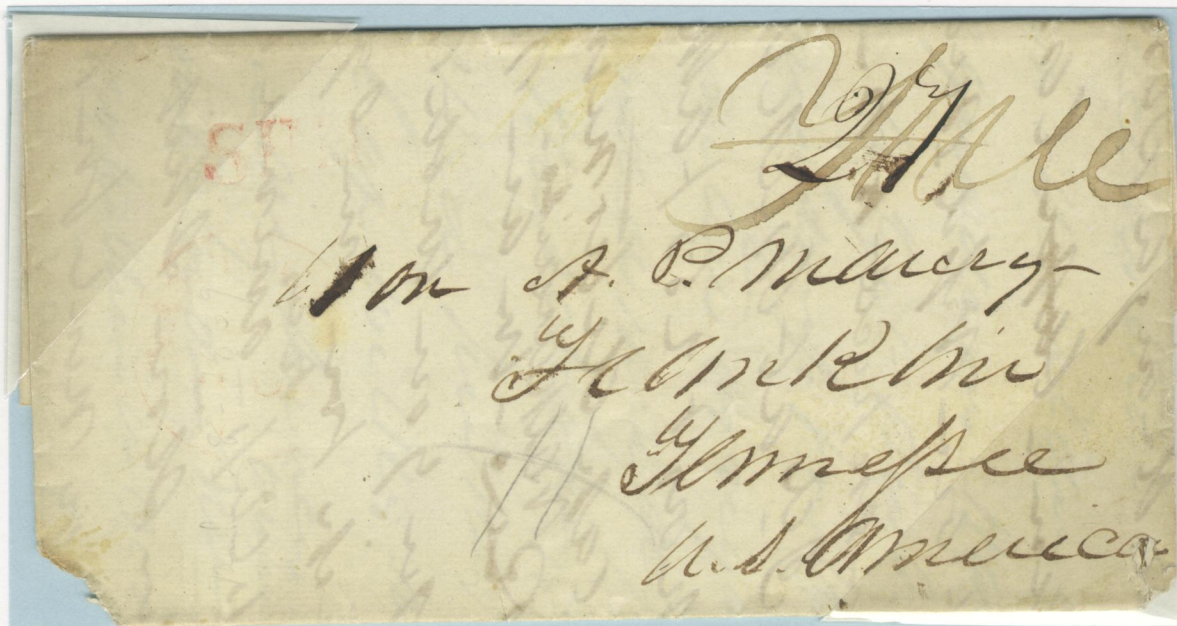
Saml. Wilkes
Comd'g In C^o Exp.

En Route to Antarctica and Back to South America



Expedition left hurriedly and prematurely from USA on 18 August 1838 to avoid any further delays. Replacement vessels still needing yard work had it done during extended port calls en route south to Antarctica. Lt. Claiborne from aboard replacement brig USS *Porpoise* writes to his sister (via her father-in-law at House of Representatives, Washington, DC) during stop at Funchal, Madeira, mentioning prospect of getting to the "South Pole."

Folded letter dated 19 September 1838 rated "F" (Free), because recipient was a sitting Member of Congress and authorized free receipt of mail while Congress was in session. Given to passing ship, entering USA mails upon arrival at New York, 5 December 1838.



Lt. Claiborne writes to sister in Tennessee from his new expedition assignment near Cape Horn, South America, aboard squadron supply ship USS *Relief*. States just seeing return of his former ship (*Porpoise*) after it had been "destined for the South Pole" following return of that portion of the squadron making expedition's first Antarctic exploratory cruise (24 February - 1 April 1839). One Antarctic squadron ship lost.

Dated 28 March 1839, handwritten "Free" correction (upper right) over "27" rating (25 cents for over 400 miles plus 2 cents SHIP [left side stamp] fee), when postal clerk realized addressed to Congressman (Maury) in Tennessee during post "free" authorization period (within 60-days of a session). Brought to USA from South America for mailing (probably at New York City) by passing USA vessel.

Only known expedition mail referencing either Antarctic cruise.

2. To Antarctica - First Cruise

Futilely Chasing Weddell's Record

Wilkes Whipped by Weddell Sea

Wilkes reached an impressive 70°S (21 March 1839), sailing down the opposite side of the Antarctic Peninsula, after failing to beat James Weddell's 1823 record of 74°S, when unable to penetrate the (now) frozen sea named after Weddell.

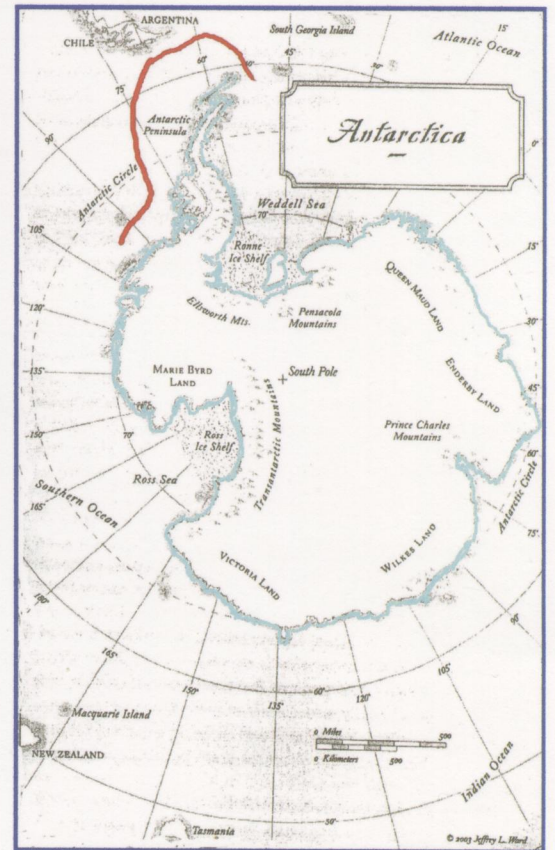
5. Hill St
Edin. Aug. 18th 1826

My dear Sir,

I have rec'd a letter from Mr. Carey informing me that he had handed you the proof sheets of my pamphlet. The mention having made you better attention which I now thank you to attend to and the sooner the tract is put into the letters.

I wrote you a short time since concerning the second Edition of my Book and when you send me copies of that now in the press I shall be glad to hear your ideas on the matter.

Yours faithfully
James Weddell



Englishman James Weddell discovered the Antarctic continent's sea named after him, probing it to a record 74°S on 20 February 1823 during his 1822-24 Antarctic exploring and sealing expedition. After returning, Weddell writes (scanned message upper right) his London publisher from "Edin(burgh)" about proofing his expedition narrative (manuscript dated "18 August 1826").

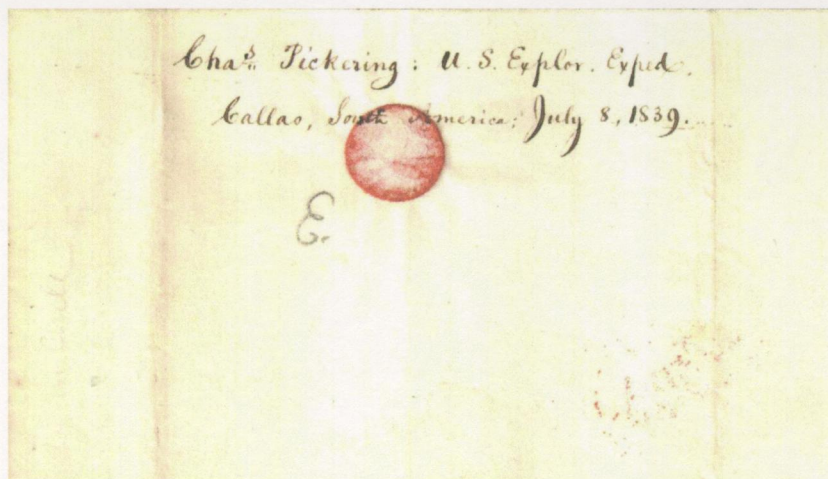
(Above) Personally conveyed into the London 2-penny post system (avoiding 13 pence Edinburgh-London charge) at Gerrard St. receiving office (upper right [smudged] boxed handstamp, used 1817-34), getting Chief (sorting) Office datestamp (22 August 1826, 7 PM [NIGHT]) per upper left oval marking (used 1824-27) with "2" (pence) charge stamp (type used 1819-40).

Red line = extent of Wilkes' 1st cruise in Antarctica, showing retreat from Weddell Sea (right) and farthest southern attainment (left).

One of two known Weddell expedition related pieces from earliest known postal documentation of Antarctic exploration.

First to Confirm its Existence & Name Antarctic Continent

Expedition headed for winter quarters in Australia before second and final Antarctic cruise. Exploring on the other side of the Antarctic continent (5 December 1839 to 5 February 1840), "Wilkes Expedition" would accomplish monumentally historic feats of the first definite sighting of Antarctic land mass, confirming it is a continent and naming it *Antarctica*.

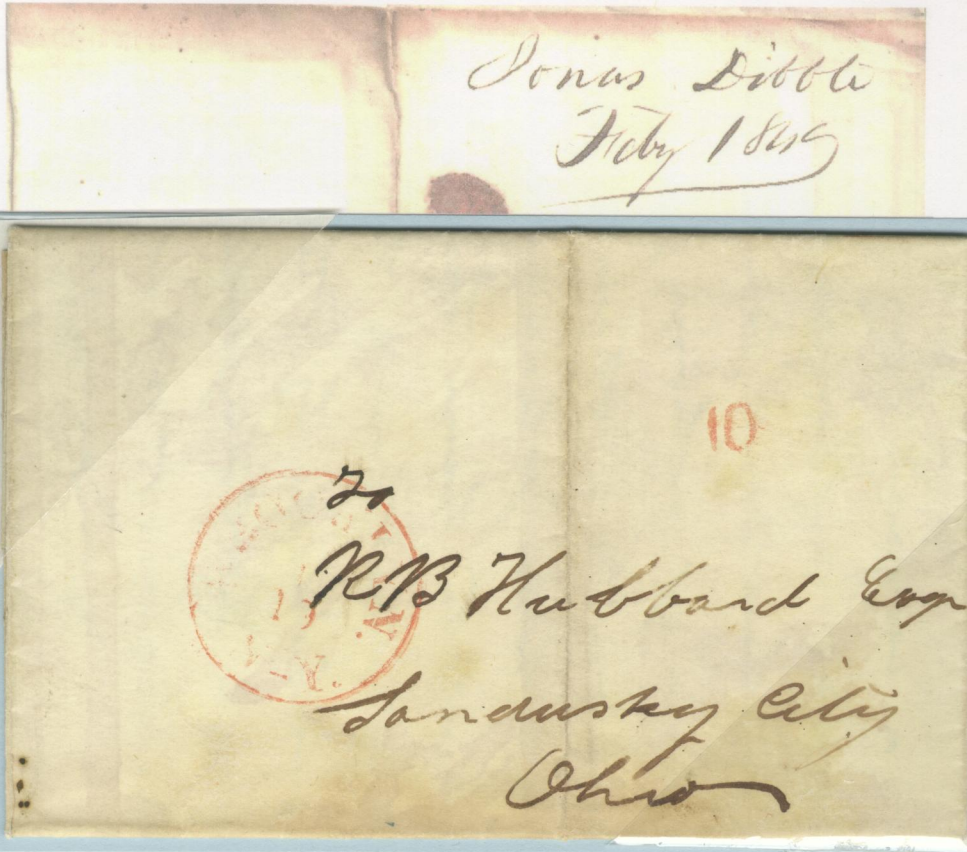


Scan of above cover's reverse showing return address.

Expedition chief scientist Dr. Charles Pickering, heading reduced staff due to limited funds, writes 8 July 1838 off "Callao, South America," from aboard expedition command vessel USS *Vincennes* to a colleague at Yale College, while expedition preparing to rendezvous at Australia in preparation for its final Antarctic cruise of discovery.

Brought back as ship letter to enter mail at New York 7 October 1839, rated 12 cents (10 cents for 31-80 miles + 2 cents ship fee).

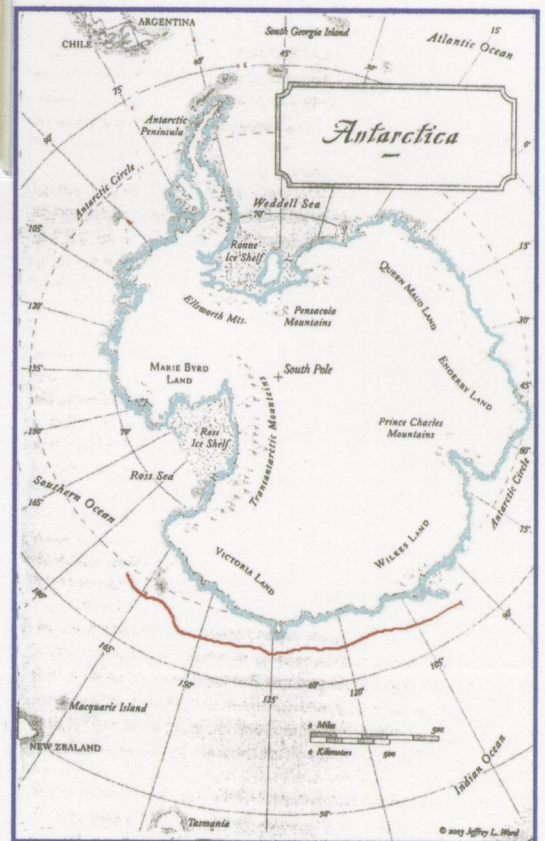
Sick Sailor Saves Ship



USS *Peacock*, separated from other “Wilkes Expedition” vessels (January 1840) due to low visibility during brutal second Antarctic discovery cruise. Losing the rudder in a fierce storm, it became unsteerable, nearly smashing into the icy coast. Ship’s carpenter Jonas Dibble, ill with many other crew due to inadequate clothing, rises from sickbed 24 January 1840 to labor all day in a snowstorm fashioning lifesaving replacement rudder.

Postmarked 18 February 1848, Brooklyn, New York, rated unpaid “10” for distance over 300 miles, from Dibble after his return from the expedition and departure from the Navy, writing to a person in his former hometown, who asked a favor of the expedition hero.

Only known mail associated with expedition celebrity Dibble.



Red line = extent of Wilkes’ 2nd cruise in Antarctica, with Ross’ Victoria Land on left, d’Urville’s Adélie Land in the middle, followed by Wilkes’ claim.

Aids Sir James Ross' British Antarctic Expedition

Already famous British polar explorer, James Clark Ross, took ships (*Erebus* and *Terror*) on a world magnetic cruise (3 September 1839 to 4 September 1843), including three voyages to Antarctica (1840-41, 1841-42 and 1842-43), discovering Ross Island, Ross Ice Shelf and claiming Antarctica's Victoria Land for the British monarch. Believed Wilkes was his Antarctic exploration competitor, especially for trying to locate the (offshore) South Magnetic Pole. Neither found it, but Wilkes had left for Ross in early 1840 at Hobart, Tasmania, a map showing Ross where he thought it might be (off his just discovered "Wilkes Land"). Ross' first two Antarctic cruises (1840-41, 1841-42) overlapped the path of Wilkes' second Antarctic cruise (1839-40). Ross' third Antarctic cruise (1842-43) was in vicinity of Wilkes' first (early 1839).



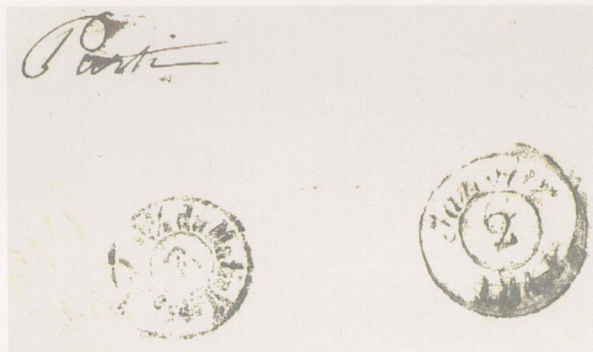
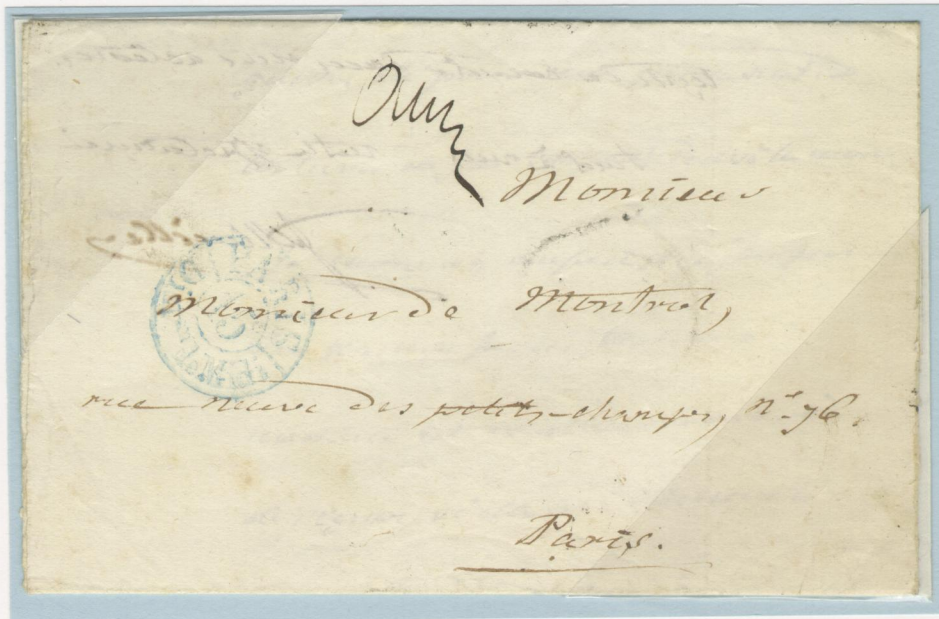
Semi-literate wife of *Erebus* seaman Richard Wall writes from Woolwich, England (left side stamped: 'WOOLWICH/1D paid'), folded letter at seaman's concessionary 1 penny rate (no more than one sheet). Routed via London 27 August 1842 (upper right dated octagonal framed "PAID" stamp). Addressed to her husband aboard *Erebus* at "St. Helena / or Else Where." Admiralty directed it to Port Louis, Falkland Islands, where received by Wall before sailing on British expedition's third Antarctic voyage (27 December 1842).

Earliest of only two known pieces of mail to or from Ross' 1839-43 Antarctic Expedition.

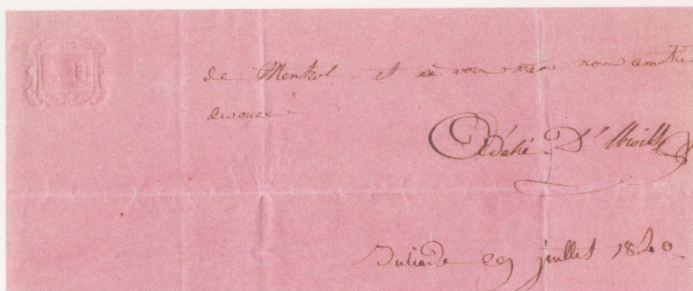
Wilkes and French Antarctic Expeditions Discover Each Other

Frenchman Dumont d'Urville with two ships (*Astrolabe* and *Zélée*) ventured twice to Antarctica (1837-38, 1839-40) during a 3-year French South Pacific scientific voyage. 1837-38 Antarctic cruise in vicinity of Wilkes' later (early 1839) first Antarctic cruise. "Wilkes Expedition" and d'Urville vessels sighted each other off Knox Coast (Wilkes Land) on 29 January 1840 on both of their second Antarctic cruises. D'Urville earlier (22 January 1840) sighted and took possession of East Antarctica wedge between Ross' Victoria Land and Wilkes' Knox Coast (Wilkes Land), naming it after his wife (Adélie Land).

Earliest of only two known mails (upper right) from d'Urville associated with his Antarctic expedition.



↑ Courier-delivered folded letter from Toulon, France, into the Paris postal system to d'Urville expedition supporter and newspaper publisher Mongin de Montrol, manuscript dated (internal) "Toulon, 26 December 1840." Paris intracity cancelled (rear) 2 January 1841, with (front) Paris Central 15c (intracity) "to pay" stamp (avoiding high 1.00f Toulon-Paris rate). Paris branch "E" 10:30 a.m. collect marking (left rear), beneath handwritten "Parti" ("not here") with corresponding mailman signature on front (top). Second delivery attempt successful, since no disposal marking. Written about expedition matters while d'Urville recovering his health at Toulon, where his expedition arrived the previous month.



↑ D'Urville's wife Adéle forwards to Montrol from Toulon 29 July 1840 report from her husband's expedition letters. Earliest known evidence (left scan) of wife's name change ("Adélie") after reading he named his Antarctic discovery (*Adélie Land*) after her.

Lt. Wilkes Beats His Mail Home

Expedition leader Charles F. Wilkes writes (20 February 1842) folded letter (given to a passing ship off Singapore) to his wife in Washington, DC. He relates some personnel difficulties (resulting in homecoming courts-martial) and announces being headed back to the States shortly, following long scientific survey through Pacific after exploring Antarctica.

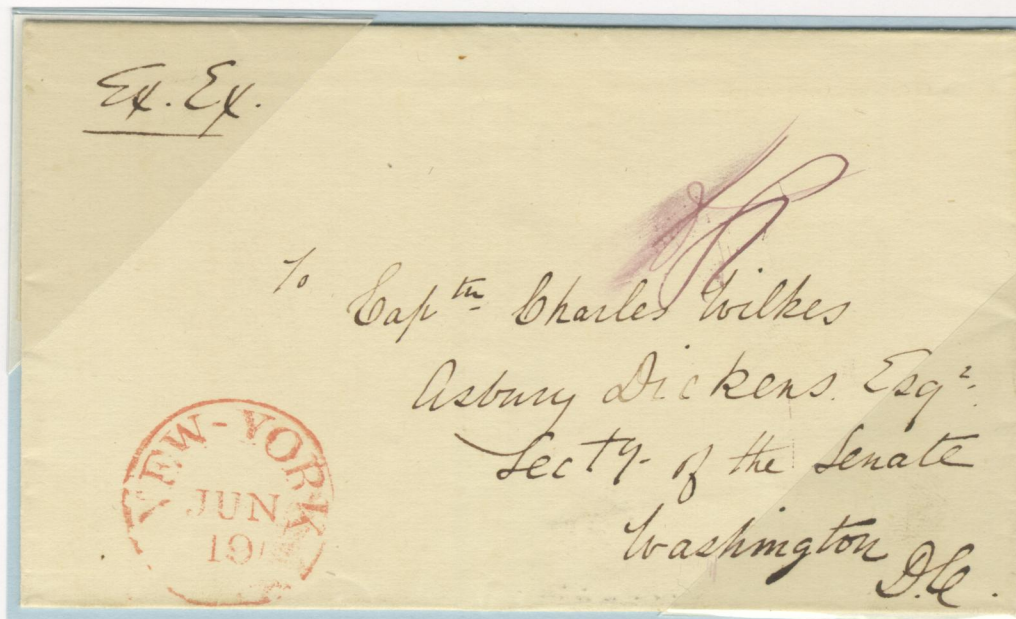


Wilkes arrived back in USA (10 June 1842) before his mail entered US postal system at Boston, 2 August 1842 (cancellation under Washington strike), where charged "27" cents for delivery to Washington, DC (25 cents for distance over 400 miles, plus 2 cents SHIP fee for initial carriage outside of postal system). Forwarded (manuscript "For'd" top center) to New York, 3 August (where Wilkes family visiting mother's family) for an additional "18 $\frac{3}{4}$ " cents (distance between 151-400 miles), bringing total to "45 $\frac{3}{4}$ " cents.

Only known mail from Lt. Wilkes while on expedition.

Wilkes Basks Alone in Spotlight

Wilkes' expedition command ship (*Vincennes*) returned first and alone to the USA at New York (10 June 1842), after other two remaining expedition vessels (one replacement) were diverted for a brief South American scientific mission en route home. Critics claim it was so the vain Lt. Wilkes did not have to share limelight of his expedition's homecoming. Neither would it be as evident that he returns with only two of his original six ships.



Headed (upper left) "Ex. Ex." (= [US] "Exploring Expedition") for clarity by unknown sender writing to the now famous leader of the just returned (first part) "Wilkes Antarctic Expedition." Mailed postage-free from New York, 19 June (1842), where Wilkes had just arrived. Addressed cleverly (to avoid payment of postage) to the "Captain" *via* "Asbury Dickens, Secretary of the (US) Senate." Secretary of the Senate is one of the government officials authorized to send and receive mail free. Wilkes resided within walking distance of the Capitol, so such an official could (using his clerk) personally deliver this celebrity his mail free of charge.

Last Letter to Member of Last Surviving Expedition Ship

Lydia Cornwall July 3rd
1842

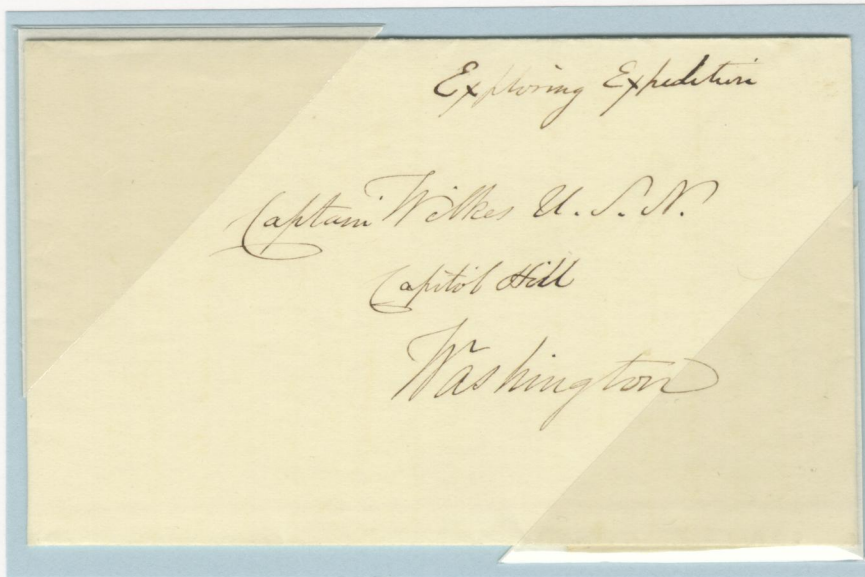
Of the last two remaining ships of "Wilkes Expedition" arriving New York, 2 July 1842, only one (USS *Peacock*) was a survivor from the original 1838 squadron. Lydia Cornwall, married sister of Lt. Reynolds aboard *Peacock*, mailed him a letter from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 4 July 1842, not knowing he had just arrived in the States.



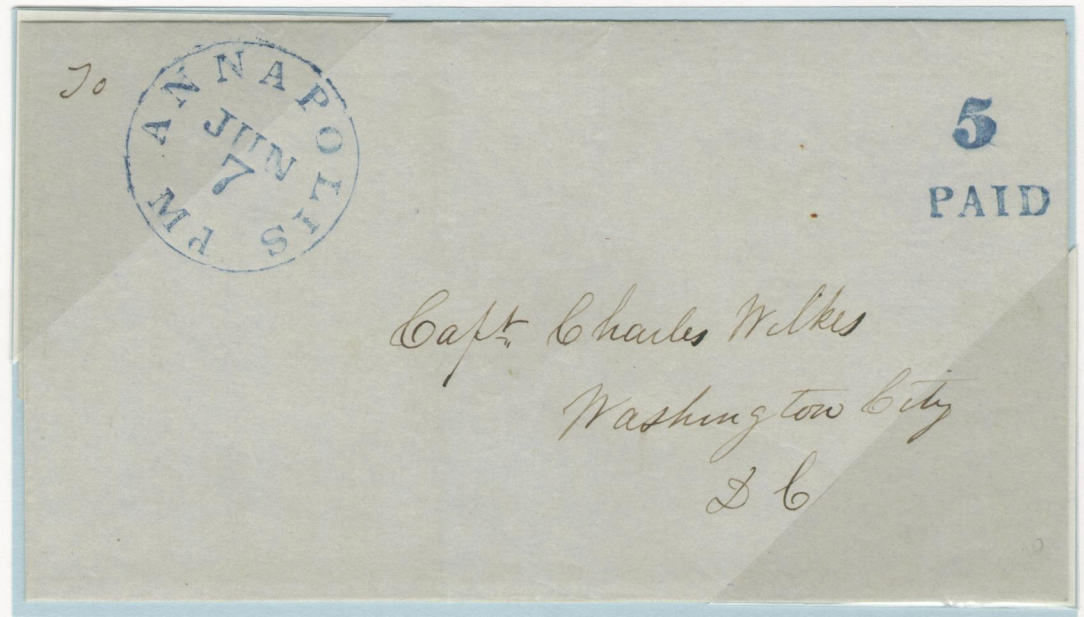
Paid 18³/₄ cents (upper right PAID stamp and manuscript amount) for distance of 151-400 miles, it is addressed to the ship "care of US Naval Lyceum / New York," where it ironically is routed (rear marking and front New York cancellation) to Lt. Reynolds, 14 July 1842, back from where it was sent. Reynolds left ship 4 July to visit family in Lancaster. Second "18³/₄" rating crossed out, presumably after seeing that it had been sent paid and technically was not forwarded. US Naval Lyceum (Brooklyn Navy Yard) was US Navy dispatch agent (1833-45).

Odd and Ordinary Mail

Upon his return, Wilkes attracted much mail from those seeking information, favors or dispensing advice. This would continue into at least the 1850s.



Some correspondents used intermediaries authorized free mail receipt to avoid paying for their mail to Wilkes. Above example makes it clear to which "Wilkes" they are writing with a heading of "Exploring Expedition." Using a temporary title for ship commander ("Captain"), it presumably was sent under cover to a government official on Capitol Hill authorized free receipt of mail, who then would have the enclosed correspondence delivered by courier to Wilkes' house in the nearby residential section of Washington also called "Capitol Hill."



Wilkes' popularity induced fan and favor mail into the 1850s. Much of it was regularly posted, as this 7 June Annapolis, Maryland, letter "5 / PAID" (for distance under 300 miles). Mailed between 1845 and 1850 (period when this PAID marking in use [1844-50] while 5 cent rate in effect [1845-51]. Courteously addressing him in Washington according to his prior status ("Captain"), rather than current rank (not promoted to Captain until 1855).

Pickering Picks Over Expedition Collection

Dr. Charles Pickering, chief expedition scientist, appointed first curator (1842-43) of massive expedition scientific collection while it was prepared for expedition publications (19 volumes printed up to and after Civil War). Left to conduct substantiating research for one of his two reports.



Dr. Pickering letter (below docketing by recipient), to his father, Boston solicitor and linguistics authority, during his visit from Boston to examine expedition collection while preparing his infamous *Races of Man* (1848). Presumably discussing anthropological matters. His volume's radical racial theory eventually debunked.

Postmarked Washington, DC, 17 February (1846), rated for distance over 300 miles ("10").

Titian Peale's Publication for the Birds

Expedition artist and chief naturalist Titian R. Peale, son of George Washington portrait painter Charles Willson Peale, laboriously worked for years on text and drawings for Volume VIII (*Mammalogy and Ornithology*), until relieved by Wilkes when his publication was withdrawn and eventually reprinted in 1858 with numerous scientific corrections.

Only known expedition-related Peale mail.



Folded letter cancelled Washington, DC, 21 January (1850), from Titian Peale (receipt Docketed along left side "28 January") to Boston scholar George Livermore (rated "10" for over 300 mile delivery distance). Posted while naturalist/artist finishing his publication's illustrations.

Wilkes handwritten (during expedition) slip noting quantity of items packed by various members of expedition scientific corps for eventual offloading. Peale's 60 "birds" (arrow) listed between James Dana's 63 "corals" and William Rich's 60 "plants." Also used as scratch paper by Wilkes for other accounting, and rough sketches of encountered South Seas natives.