
Early Danish Balloon Mail

Ernst M. Cohn

Introduction

Early airmail is fascinating for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it is a portion of philatelic postal history that concerns bridging obstacles otherwise more difficult if not impossible to overcome: A message attached to a stone or an arrow may land in a fortress much easier than a messenger can slip in during war. Homing pigeons travel long distances faster and with fewer dangers and obstacles, hence greater certainty, than men on foot or mounted, singly or organized in relays. While kites have been known for a long time, I am not aware of any proven kite mail. The story of such, across the lower Potomac during the Civil War, may have been nothing more than a means of getting the Federals off the trail of smugglers.

Europeans generally learned of the existence of balloons in 1783 through demonstrations at Paris by Professor Charles (Charlières = hydrogen balloons) and the Montgolfier Brothers (Montgolfières = hot-air balloons). These were not the earliest but certainly the most spectacular experiments with balloons until then.

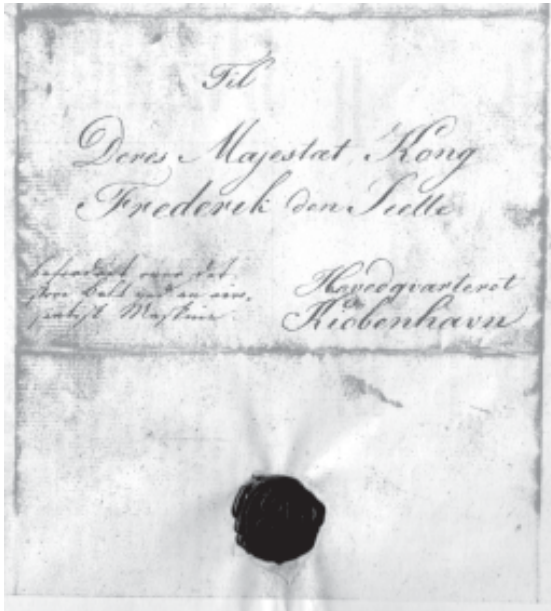


Figure 1. A facsimile of one of Colding's four surviving letters now in the Royal Danish State Archives. This letter was addressed to King Fredrik VI at "Headquarters Copenhagen" with a notation that it was "Carried across the Great Belt by aerostatic machine."

It took just about another century before the first dirigible balloon was demonstrated, also in France, equipped with an electric battery that powered a propeller. Although another Frenchman made a short, secret flight by a powered heavier-than-air machine about that time, it was not until after the Wright Brothers' widely publicized flight, early in the next century, that aeroplanes were quickly developed.

Today, some philatelic postal historians confuse 'airmail' with 'aeroplane mail,' forgetting about the various means by which messages were transported at least part way through the air. Many such are still available for collection and study, particularly those from the Franco-German War of 1870/71, sent by unmanned balloons from Metz, Paris, and Belfort, by manned balloons from Paris, and by homing pigeons both from and to Paris. Most pigeons sent to Paris carried their messages on microfilm, invented in 1839 in England, with a first useful application on a small scale in that war, and later on a large scale as V-mail by the U.S. in World War II.

The early history of European balloon mail allows interesting observations on the development of this means of indirect communication. As long as flight direction was uncontrollable, balloon mail, while spectacular, offered no advantage over terrestrial transport except in war, when normal ways were

closed by enemies. At any time, however, even non-dirigible balloons can quickly and widely distribute general messages. Old examples of various types of balloon messages still exist:

- (1) The American Philosophical Society has what it claims to be the first airmail letter. Dated December 16, 1784, it is addressed by Benjamin Franklin's son, William, at London, England, to his son William Temple Franklin, at Passy near Paris, France. It was carried by John Jeffries on the first Channel crossing by balloon, piloted by Jean-Pierre Blanchard, from Dover to Calais on January 7, 1785. This international letter went totally outside official postal channels, arriving safely even if a bit late.



- (2) The Austrian War Archives have proof of two unmanned French balloons, one launched from besieged Condé (in May or June 1793), and the other from besieged Valenciennes (in June of that year). Both fell into Austrian hands; mail from the former having been destroyed, that from the latter still exists in Austria. While it includes a number of private letters, the official, printed report to the French Government at Paris was the only reason for sending a balloon. One of the private letters is addressed to “Mansle – par un ballon.” It never arrived there, of course, but it may carry the earliest balloon (and airmail) endorsement in existence.
- (3) The Royal Danish Library and Archives contain evidence of experimental balloon mailings made in 1808 to try breaking the British blockade. It was discovered by Holger Philipsen. The test flights, though not too successful, were followed by the use of unmanned balloons for spreading printed election propaganda, which the Danes sent to neighboring Sweden. It was another first for balloons – international aerial propaganda. Details about its author are found in the Swedish Postal Museum’s yearbook for 2002, which, together with the well-known ones about the balloon expert, complete the story.

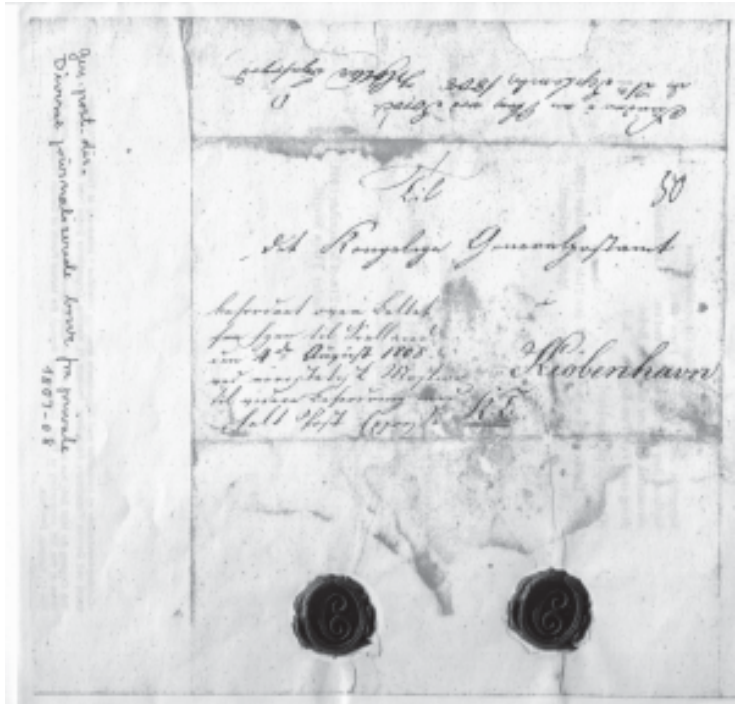


Figure 2. This Colding letter was addressed to the Royal Post Office General in Copenhagen with the notation, “forwarded across the Belt from Funen to Sjælland the 4th of August 1808 by aerostatic machine for further transportation by Field Post Express. K.T.” A notation on the back flap by a town sheriff is that the letter was found in a forest near Sorøe on September 21, 1808.



Figure 3. A 90-øre stamp issued in 1974 to mark the 350th anniversary of the Danish postal service. The motif shows one of Colding’s small balloons floating above some sailing ships, presumably the British who were blockading Copenhagen at the time.

Johann Peter Colding, Balloon Expert

Colding’s first and last names have been spelled various ways, but that is how he signed two notes addressed to Fredrik VI, King of Denmark, the earlier one dated June 2, 1808, the later July 2 at 9:30 a.m. Colding, a candidate of philosophy and philology, had been ordered on May 8, 1808 by the king to proceed with test flights across the Big Belt by unmanned mail balloons.

A stamp, designed by Holger Philipsen and issued in 1974, shows a small balloon flying over sailboats. Part of the stamp’s inscription tells that the balloon flew on 2 June 1808. A postal announcement of August 1974 claims – in English as well as in German – that “the launching took place on the 4th June, 1808,” thus contradicting the stamp design. However, an essay is known of a 70-øre stamp showing the date as 4 June.¹





Figure 4. Balloon mail lands in some trees. The illustration depicts discovery of a balloon from Metz, France during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. Some of Colding's and Ehrensvärd's balloons 60 years earlier had similar landings and discoveries.

Later in 1808, King Fredrik VI decided to disseminate some propaganda for himself in Sweden to try to replace its recently proclaimed King Gustav IV. Colding was ordered to send packages of an anonymous pamphlet from Kronborg (Helsingør) to the province of Skåne in Sweden when the wind was favorable. He released packages of 30 pamphlets and watched the balloons land in Skåne. One such Colding balloon is kept in the château of Löveröd. The local guards soon got orders to seize and deliver the propaganda to the governor for destruction. When Gustav sent an envoy to Fredrik, informing him of this unfair action and asking him to keep aloof from such despicable practice, Fredrik informed him that he was the instigator of that "Balloon Letter."⁴

Carl Fredrik Ehrensvärd, Soldier, Conspirator, Writer

This man appears to be little known in philately.⁵ In 2002, however, Fredrik Ydell published a 33-page paper on Swedish Pioneer Airmail in *Postryttaren*, the Swedish Postal Museum's yearbook.⁶ One section covers Ehrensvärd, telling more about this political conspirator who became one of the early figures in balloon mail. This section is based on the corresponding portion of Ydell's paper, translated by Peter Bergh.

Nobleman Carl Fredrik Ehrensvärd was born in Stockholm on January 9, 1767. At age eight, he became a page to Queen Lovisa Ulrika, widow of King Adolf Fredrik, who had died in 1771. The young Carl Fredrik was brought up at the royal castle. Lovisa Ulrika, mother of Gustavus III, later became one of her son's political enemies. This political conflict marked the education of Ehrensvärd, who was commissioned a lieutenant in the Swedish army in 1789.

Ehrensvärd participated in a conspiracy that led to the murder of Gustavus at a masked ball on March 16, 1792.⁷ Some conspirators, Ehrensvärd among them, were condemned to loss of their nobility patent and property, as well as being beheaded. On August 15, 1792, their sentences having been commuted to lifelong exile, they were immediately transferred under guard to Helsingborg and sent to Denmark.

Letters from three tests, dated June 2, July 2, and August 4 (two letters from this date) still exist.² Nothing appears to be known about when and where the first of these arrived. The second was found rather promptly, as proven by a notation on it, dated the 3rd. It was discovered by a farmer's boy in his field and delivered to the postmaster at Skielskiør. The last turned up in a forest near Sorøe on September 21.³

About the time when Colding was giving his big 1807 show of unmanned balloons, aerostiers in Woolwich, England, had used their balloons to disseminate aerial propaganda domestically, perhaps the first of its kind. No doubt the news traveled to Denmark at that time.



Figure 5. Carl Fredrik Ehrensvärd, who was not averse to changing his name.



Ehrensvärd changed his last name to his mother's maiden name, Gyllenburg, when he left Sweden. He continued on to Hamburg, stayed there for a while, moved to Holstein and, in 1798, to the outskirts of Copenhagen. At that point, he changed his last name's spelling to Gyllembourg. After his farm had burned down in 1806, he and his wife moved to downtown Copenhagen.

Around that time he met Danish Crown Prince Fredrik, later to become Fredrik VI. Fredrik asked him to influence his friends, and the Swedish public generally, so as to depose Swedish King Gustavus IV Adolphus and choose the Danish king as head of Sweden and Norway as well.

Inspired by this idea, Carl Fredrik published an anonymous 16-page pamphlet in 1808, calling upon the Swedes to revolt, depose their king, and replace him with the Danish one. *Random Notes About the Situation in Sweden in the Summer of 1808* was printed in an edition of 300 copies. Its contents made it impossible to show the author's name since he would face capital punishment in Sweden once more.

At the time, Denmark and Sweden were at war, so it was impossible to travel to Sweden to distribute the pamphlet. Boats could not be used to distribute the pamphlet since the Öresund was frozen in the winter of 1808-09. Balloons presented a possibility, however, and for safety's sake it was decided to use unmanned ones for the transport.

Every balloon being large enough to carry some 30 pamphlets, 10 were needed. The king had given permission to launch them from Kronborg castle in Helsingør. The first ones were sent in December 1808, but most followed in February and March 1809. It was hoped that they would land at various places in Skåne, would be read there, and would convince the Swedes to help the Danes who, early in 1809, were getting ready to land on the other side.

Swedish authorities, however, quickly discovered the balloons and their contents. They did not get much beyond Helsingborg, where Johan Christopher Toll, royalist Governor General of southern Sweden, instructed his people to secure them.

The king ordered Toll to destroy all but four pamphlets, to be sent to him. Today, one is in the Royal Library, one in the War Archives, and two are owned privately. The first page of one of the pamphlets is shown here.⁸ When and where did the preserved pamphlets arrive in Sweden? Assuming that each balloon contained 10 copies and that the four sent to the king came from the same balloon, then the answer is a pencil notation on the front of the one kept in the War Archives: "Found in a Danish balloon that fell near Knutstorp in Skånia on 9 March 1809."

The dream of one king to rule three countries was never realized because the Swedish Diet, meeting at Örebro in 1810, elected the Frenchman Jean Baptiste Bernadotte, who became Karl-Johann, King of Sweden and Norway.

In 1813, upon obtaining Danish citizenship, Carl Fredrik changed his last name again, this time to Gyllembourg-Ehrensvärd. He died at age 48 in Copenhagen on May 10, 1815. ■

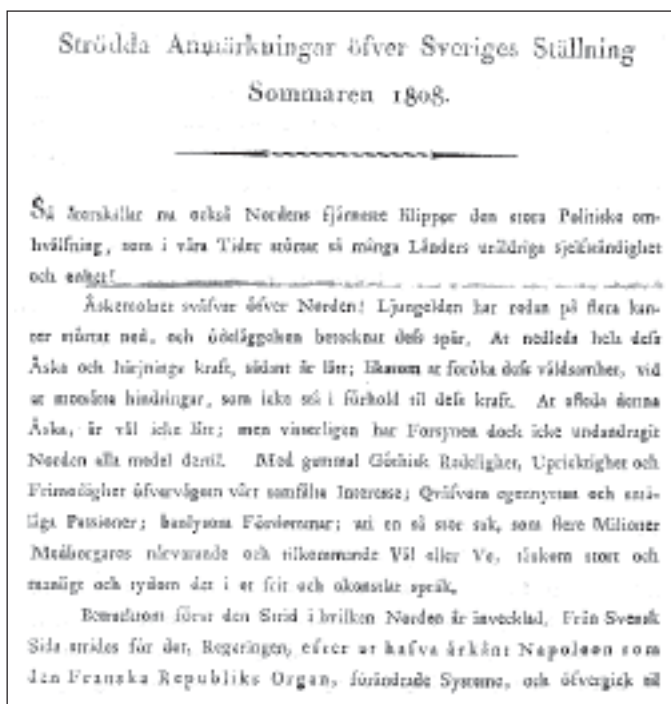


Figure 6. The first page of Ehrensvärd's political pamphlet sent by balloon from Denmark and confiscated upon landing in Sweden. Four copies are known to exist.



(Editor's Note: Appreciation is extended to translator Peter Bergh, the Swedish Postal Museum, and Fredrik Ydell for their assistance in making information available concerning Carl Fredrik Ehrensvärd. Illustrations courtesy of author Ernst M. Cohn, Frederik Ydell, Jay Smith, and the Swedish Postal Museum.)

Endnotes

¹ "The World's Oldest Airmail: Mail by Balloon in 1808," by Peter Ibbotson, *Philatelic Magazine*, No. 9, June 1983, pp. 436-439.

² See "Denmark's First Airmail," Ernst M. Cohn, *Scandinavian Scribe*, April 1975, page 51.

³ These letters and related material were reproduced in 1968 for sale by the Mutual Fund of Danish Philatelists, Postbox 11, Kastrup, Denmark.

⁴ This is reported by Lennart Ege, *Balloons and Airships*, 1973, Blandford Press, London, p. 109.

⁵ I have seen his name only once before when Christer Brunström mentioned him as C. F. Ehrenswärd-Gyllembourg in an October 11, 1986 issue of *Stamp Collector* (pages 18-19), where he wrote that one of the four surviving pamphlets was shown at the Stockholm stamp show that year.

⁶ "Svensk pionjÄrluftpost," by Fredrik Ydell, *Postryttaren 2002*, Sweden Postal Museum, 2002, pages 99-102.

⁷ *Un Ballo in Maschera*, an opera based on this crime, was first performed in 1859, music by Giuseppe Verdi based on an 1833 text by Eugène Scribe.

⁸ Printed with permission of the Swedish Postal Museum and Fredrik Ydell.