

Political Prisoners' Mail from the 1848 Paris "June Days Uprising"

Notes for the CHICAGOPEX Jury
(November 2025)

Treatment: This exhibit focuses on correspondence generated during and after the so-called June Days Uprising in Paris, a bloody revolt of unemployed workers against an oppressive government lasting just three days — June 24-26, 1848. It includes outgoing and incoming letters of political prisoners arrested by police and National Guard troops and held in various detention sites throughout France. Since most are folded letters, content has been preserved and the letters translated. Prisoners were articulate in describing for family members, employers, and government officials their living conditions as well as attempts to gain freedom. A primary focus of the exhibit is to permit writers through letter excerpts to speak for themselves about their contemporaneous life.

The exhibit is balanced in conformity with the proportion of political prisoners incarcerated at each of the six detention site types. For example, because far more prisoners were held in Paris and Paris environs sites than in the harbors to the west aboard prison ships and in shore installations, more pages are devoted to detention sites located in the city and its surrounding areas.

Rarity and Condition: The 30 letters in this exhibit come from a 42-item collection accumulated in the 1950s by a philatelist known to me. I acquired the collection more than a decade ago. Over the past six decades none of them have been exhibited. In 1998 a report of an additional 193 letters finally appeared in the French philatelic literature (see Gibot). Attempts to add to the collection have fallen short despite ongoing searches in major European auctions. Based upon these facts I believe all the material in the exhibit to be rare; the exhibit likely could not be duplicated. Highlighted letters thus show unusual aspects of the detention experience. All letters are intact but soiled, as expected with prisoner mail.

Importance: From the time of the French Revolution through the Franco-Prussian War, a span of approximately 80 years, France was at war with other European nations or itself. The postal history of the French Revolution, Napoleonic Wars, and the Franco-Prussian War has found its way into important exhibits and is well documented. Even the Revolution of 1848, consuming much of Europe, including France, has found representation in the frames. However, the fates of military and political prisoners of these wars and insurrections have gained little attention by exhibitors. The rarity of the material and paucity of information in the philatelic literature may explain why.

Of further philatelic importance, this exhibit illustrates official use of the free frank (*franchise*) on political prisoners' mail and postage due applied to their outbound mail for lack of funds to prepay the correspondence. Letter content often focused on means to obtain release, which likely succeeded in many cases. This and two sister exhibits covering other aspects of prisoner mail during this 80 year period represent three attempts to fill existing philatelic holes.

Research: The letters in this exhibit have been translated into English. Identities and locations of military barracks, police stations, prisons, military fortifications, prison ships (*pontons*), and shore installations add to knowledge gained from the Gibot reference, the only published philatelic source I am aware of on the subject. French postal rates and markings were extracted from French language philatelic sources. I also consulted with an expert on 19th-century French stampless postal history.

Reference:

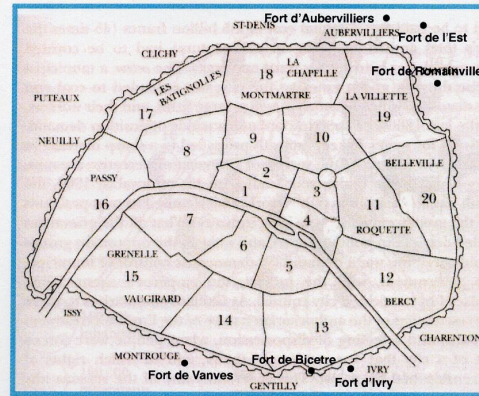
Gibot, J.F. *Autour de 1848: De la Révolution de 1848 (22 au 24 février) au 20 décembre 1848: l'Insurrection de juin 1848 à travers les correspondances de l'époque*. (Paris: Feuilles Marcophiles, Supplement to No. 293, 1998.) [Available as a 36-page scan from APRL.]

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Scope and Purpose: This exhibit presents incoming and outgoing correspondence of Parisian political prisoners generated during the 1848 Paris "June Days Uprising" and its aftermath. The letters span 18 months, beginning June 25, 1848. Examples to and from all six categories of detention sites are included. The purpose is to highlight detention sites, daily prison life, and fate.

Organization and development: The exhibit is organized in three sections; Paris, Paris Environs, and Harbor Locations. Detention sites within these locales include military barracks, police stations, prisons, military fortifications, prison ships, and shore installations. Excerpts from letters provide testimony to a range of personal circumstances and harsh living conditions endured during incarceration.

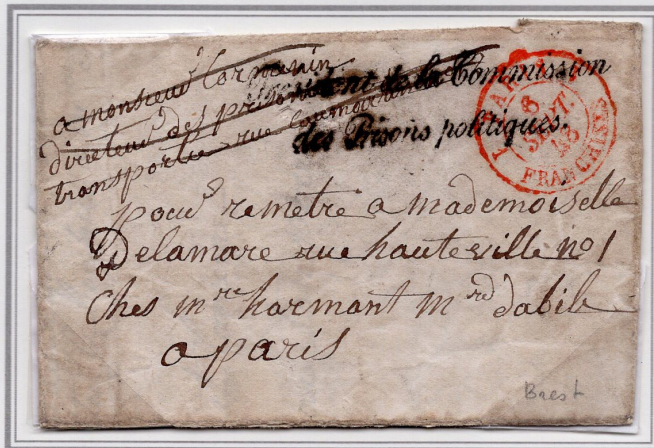
Paris and Environs



Known detention sites at military fortifications for political prisoners in Paris and environs

Historical Note On the June Days Uprising: Following the overthrow of King Louis Philippe in February 1848, the elected government of the Second Republic ruled France. In the months that followed, the working classes felt abandoned by the bourgeois politicians who had founded it. On

24 June 1848, 170,000 unemployed Paris workers rose in revolt, an insurrection known as the June Days Uprising. This bloody but unsuccessful three day rebellion resulted in dragnet arrests and detention for thousands of Parisians. Fifteen hundred workers died. More than 12,000 were arrested, although half of them were released within a few days or weeks. Five months later Louis Napoléon Bonaparte was elected President of the Second Republic, largely on peasant support.



Brest Harbor ship prisoner to Paris via the Commission of Political Prisons, Sept 8, 1848. Free frank (FRANCHISE).

Significance: Two hundred thirty-five letters involving June Days Uprising prisoners have been recorded from several collections, enabling identification of the universe of detention sites. Content of letters in this exhibit suggests indiscriminate arrests, stressful living conditions, and desperate attempts to seek release. Personal research has helped identify the fates of some prisoners. Given how little material appears to exist, the exhibit likely could not easily be reproduced.

Exhibit highlights are bordered in red and annotated in bold italics.