



Bombardment of Algiers 1816 (1836), by George Chambers. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England.

Dodging the Algerine Corsairs

Dangers of the Mediterranean Sea

KENNETH NILSESTUEN

The captain muses as he looks over his crew during this sail from north Africa to Marseille. The hold is filled with palm oil, dates, and wool. His clients will be pleased and pay him well upon arrival. It's just past dawn and he notes that the square-rigged ship they first saw yesterday has gained greatly on them overnight.

The first mate peers through his glass and tells the captain it's the same flag as theirs. The ship is friendly.

The captain frowns. I don't like this, he thinks. By dinnertime, we'll either be toasting with this new ship's crew or my crew and I will be in shackles. Corsairs are everywhere.

Let's break from the scene and leave the outcome to your imagination. Does our captain and his crew have a pleasant side-by-side near the southern coast of France? Or, does the trailing ship – much faster because it clearly carries no cargo, but could be carrying 100 or more well-armed and vicious bandits – overtake our captain's merchant ship and claim its bounty and crew?

For hundreds of years, the Algerine corsairs – for which I will offer a brief history, including some postal history of the

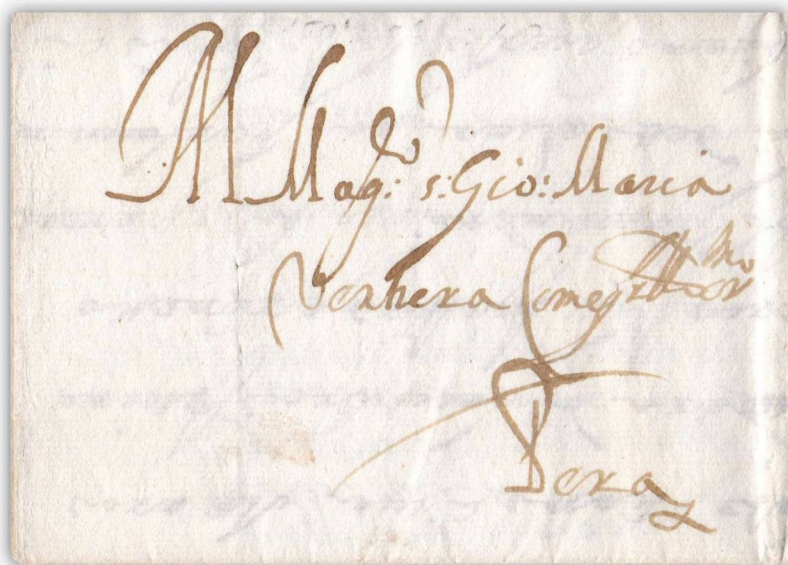


Figure 1. A folded letter from Algiers to Pera, Turkey, on the European side of Istanbul and the Golden Horn. There are no postal markings. It was written while Queen Elizabeth I was on the British throne! Expertized as "only recorded cover."

period – were an all-too familiar sight on the European and African seas. People have written books about this, so check out the reference list if you want to learn more.

First, "Algerine" refers to people who lived in the city of



Figure 2. A folded letter from Algiers to Marseille, France. The writer notes a commercial credit balance is 1,748 livres at a time when the average worker earned about 1 livre per day.

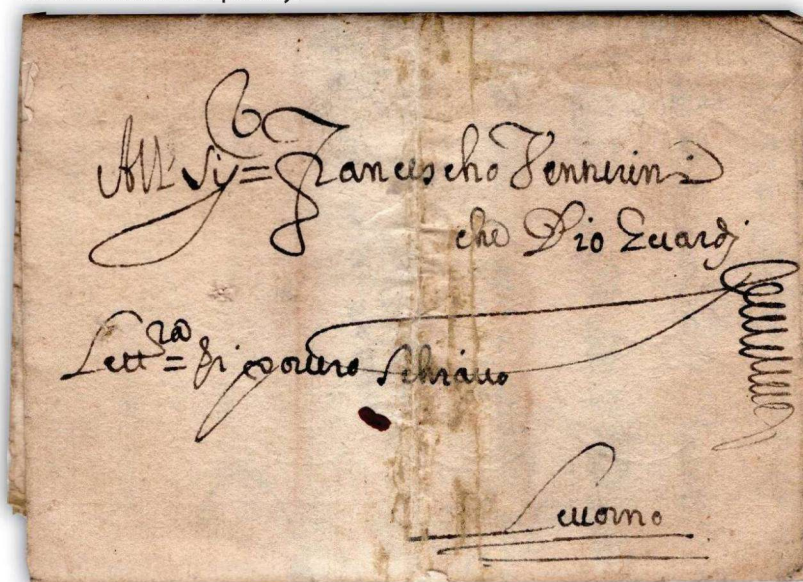


Figure 3. A letter from Algiers to Livorno, Tuscany. The wording at lower left states, "Letter of a poor slave." The squiggle at the right represents a hangman's noose, suggesting what might happen to the person carrying the letter if they do not execute their duties faithfully and promptly.

Algiers before the country was named Algeria. Now we refer to these folks as Algerians. Corsairs are distinguished from pirates by having the legal backing of their government to essentially act as pirates.

Corsair raids began in the late 14th century in the Mediterranean Sea. Following some European attempts to stop the raids over the next century, in 1529 Ottoman corsairs took a small fortified island off the coast of Algiers (called the peñon) from the Spanish, dismantled the fortress to build a causeway to improve the harbor, and began 300 years of steady corsair raiding under Turkish rule.

The purpose of these raids was essentially economic. By capturing cargoes, ships and people, the corsairs supported their Turkish government in Algiers, as well as their own lifestyle. The Turks often negotiated with European governments to raid the ships of their enemies in return for tribute payments. These relationships were extremely fluid, and be-

cause the Europeans were so busy fighting each other, they couldn't mount a unified effort to shut down the Algerine corsairs.

The Turkish presence was based in Algiers, although their control was spread across north Africa. Semi-autonomous rulers controlled cities in Tunis, Tripoli and Oran. Tripoli was a separate Turkish province that remained under Ottoman control until 1911.

The corsairs did not write much down. The population of North Africa was largely illiterate. There was no postal system on which they could rely. Any outbound correspondence was entrusted to a European ship captain going toward the letter's destination. Because this was unreliable, often letters were copied and sent by three or four different ships in hopes that at least one would arrive at its destination.

As a result, surviving letters are largely those written by Europeans who lived as traders, diplomats or even slaves in Algiers. My collection includes the oldest of which I know, written in Algiers to Pera, Turkey. Dated January 4, 1597, it is also the only letter I have seen that went from Algiers (or Algeria) to Turkey. It was written by a Milanese in a regional dialect. Unfortunately, the only word one can easily read in the letter is "Colombo," quite possibly a reference to Christopher Columbus. See Figure 1.

Life on the Mediterranean was dangerous. In addition to the Algerine corsairs, Europeans also raided ships to capture booty and slaves. Cholera, plague, yellow fever and other diseases were common and easily spread from person to person and from city to city. Of course, bad weather was also an issue since this was centuries before any reliable forecasting was available.

France, the Netherlands and Britain all had consuls in Algiers. North Africa was partially agrarian, producing grain, olives and other important commodities. Despite the unpleasant necessity of dealing with the Algerine Turks, it was important for the Europeans to maintain relationships with them.

The earliest British representatives were more like corporate agents, in their case representing the Levant, or Turkey Company. This entity was much like the British East India Company, formed to oversee business with the foreign nations. Master John Tipton represented the Turkey Company as early as 1580, then was appointed British consul to Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli in 1585 with the approval of the Turkish sultan. British letters are largely retained in British archives, the earliest from Algiers dated 1600.

What is likely the second-oldest letter available to collectors was written by a Frenchman in Algiers on June 13, 1603, addressed to Marseille. Written in medieval script, it

is a commercial letter outlining adjustments, including interest, to a credit between the writer and recipient. They seem to be on good terms, since the writer signs as “your good friend ...” (Figure 2).

Danger from the corsairs was not limited to the Mediterranean. In 1631, the corsairs raided Baltimore, Ireland, carrying off 237 men, women and children into slavery. The corsairs continued their raids into the 1640s, striking at Penzance and Plymouth in addition to other English, Irish, and European coastal towns.

The corsairs encouraged Europeans to ransom the enslaved Christians. In England, the affected citizens, usually relatives of the slaves, constantly pleaded with the kings and Parliament to redeem their family members. Eventually, Parliament enacted a 1 percent tariff on all imports and exports to fund these payments. The British consul used the gold and silver to ransom more than 200 slaves in the mid-17th century. While the British were active diplomatically and militarily through the period, their citizens were not the only enslaved Christian Europeans. In 1674 one unhappy Tuscan slave wrote the letter shown (Figure 3). He beseeched his family to ransom him from his miserable life under Ali Raïs in Algiers.

If a slave achieved freedom, they needed to be able to prove that they were no longer a slave of the Turks. The freed person needed papers to show their status. The next illustration (Figure 4) is a passport signed by the French consul Jean le Vacheur. The passport was issued to Paolo Alfonso, who had been ransomed for 570 pieces of eight. He was 23 years old when the passport was issued and had been enslaved for 7 ½ years.

In 1682, Frenchman Abraham Duquesne, Marquis du Bouchet, attacked Algiers. After hammering the city, there was no conclusive result. Reportedly, this was the first naval use of artillery shells (exploding ordinance) rather than solid cannon balls.

Duquesne bombarded Algiers once again in 1683. Unfortunately, the initial result was that French consul le Vacheur was tied to a cannon and blown toward the French ships, where his body parts rained down on the decks. Duquesne did manage to rescue about 100 Christian slaves and reach a 100-year treaty with the Algerines. However, the treaty last-

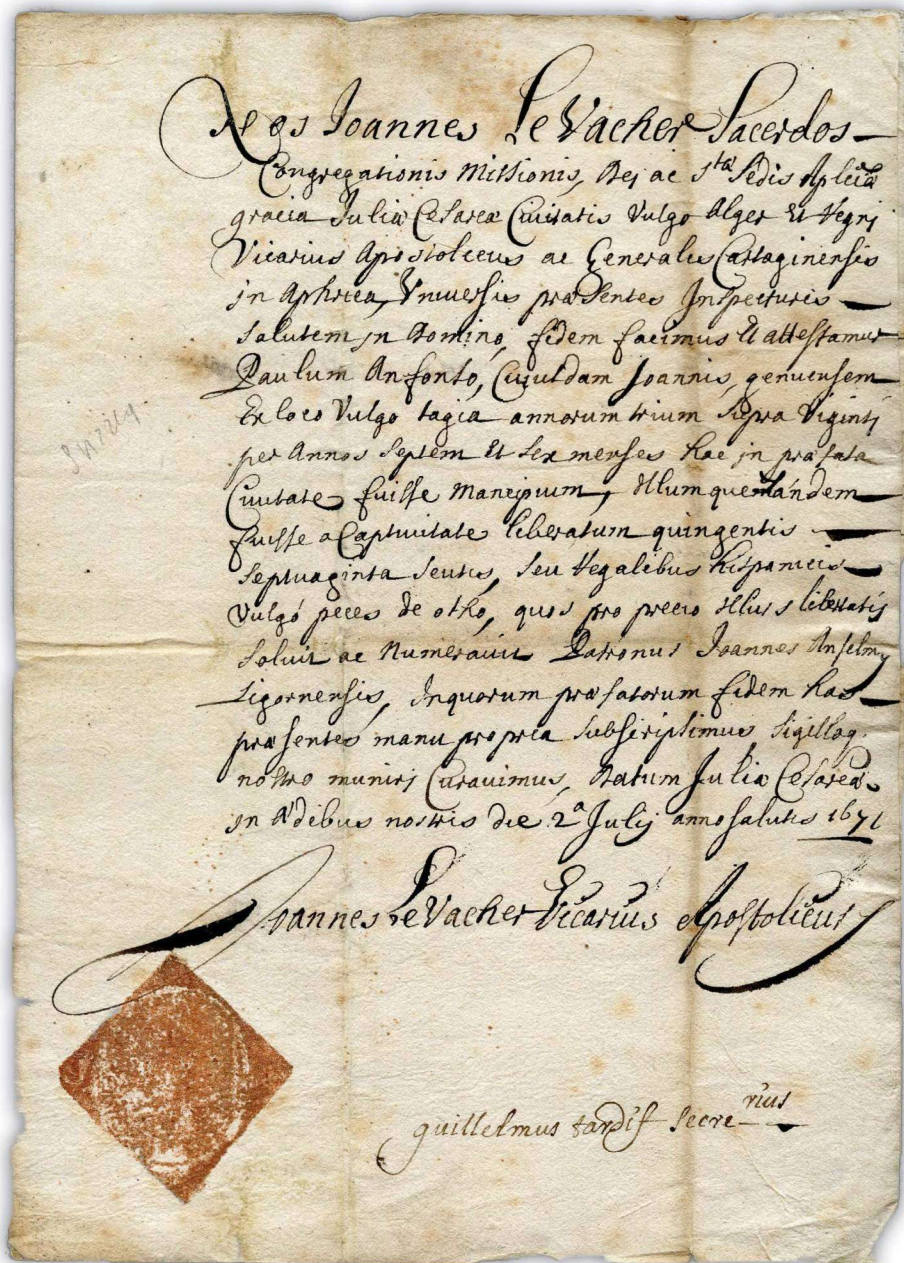


Figure 4. Dated July 1676, a passport warrants that the holder was a free man. Algiers is described as Julia Caesarea, the Latin name for the city. (Courtesy collection of Winston Williams.)

ed less than five years. This time the Turkish janissaries (elite infantry units that formed the Ottoman sultan’s household troops) murdered the dey of Algiers as a result of their frustration that the dey would consider a treaty with the French. (See sidebar, opposite page.)

Louis XIV sent Maréchal Duc d’Estrées to again express French displeasure with the corsairs’ activities. In 1687, and also for several months in 1688, the French repeatedly attacked Algiers. Although a second French consul, André Piolle, was rumored also to meet le Vacheur’s fate, though he may have been beaten to death, not necessarily a better result for him. The cannon was renamed “la Consulaire.”

The result of the 1687-1688 bombardments was a new treaty between France and the Algerine Turks. This treaty lasted until the Napoleonic Era, the early 1800s.

Letters provide evidence of other commerce and difficulties in Algiers. The letter shown (Figure 5) was written by a Frenchman in June 1785. He had been sickened by some illness that killed several others. In his letter he says he was in fear of his life to report the disease through the French consul, so he was writing directly to the health commission in Marseille. It isn't clear from his letter why he was so afraid.

The Spanish still had a presence in Algiers, too. The earliest postal markings are Spanish, seen on the letter shown (Figure 6). This letter, written on the revolutionary calendar date 18 brumaire an VIII (November 8, 1799), mentions that Bonaparte has arrived in France, so the writer is again able to resume trading with the recipient. See the sidebar on page 21 for more about the revolutionary calendar.

Americans also were subject to attacks by the Algerine corsairs. There are archives of material at various places in the United States, but one letter has survived for collectors. The letter shown (Figure 7) was written on Christmas Day, 1793, in Cadiz,

Spain, and sent to Plymouth, Massachusetts. The ship captain who wrote the letter was distressed about the unknown fate of 123 Americans who had been captured by the corsairs and enslaved or killed. He expected to leave Spain for the United States, hoping to travel in a Spanish convoy for safety.

While the principal economic activity of the Algerine Turks was piracy, there was also more typical commercial activity between North Africans and the French. Shown (Figure 8) is the interior of a letter from the bey of Oran to a merchant in Marseille. The bey has sent 1,000 wool blankets to France in a Swedish ship and expects to send another

The Deys of Algiers

When the Turks stepped in to rule Algiers and other north African cities (1517), the first titles were "beylerbey." These early Turkish rulers were politically connected to the Ottoman Empire, often having commands in the Ottoman navy as well as ruling north Africa.

During the second period (1577-1659) the Turkish rulers gained the title of Pasha, which was granted by the "home office," so to speak. For a brief period following this, through 1671, the title became "agha."

The first dey of Algiers ascended to the role in 1671 and diminished the role of the Ottoman Empire. "The dey was chosen by local civilian, military, and religious leaders to govern for life and ruled with a high degree of autonomy from the Ottoman sultan," according to Wikipedia.

This idea of Algiers being independent of Ottoman rule continued more or less until the French overthrow in 1830.

For a summary of what happened under each dey, there is a good article in Wikipedia titled "List of Governors and Rulers of the Regency of Algiers."



Figure 5. A 1785 cover from Algiers to Marseille. There are no postal markings, but a notation at lower left states the writer is entrusting his letter to Captain Recousset for delivery. The letters "D.L.C." abbreviate a Latin phrase "Deo Laudes Cantate," or "Sing praises to God," invoking God's protection for the ship.

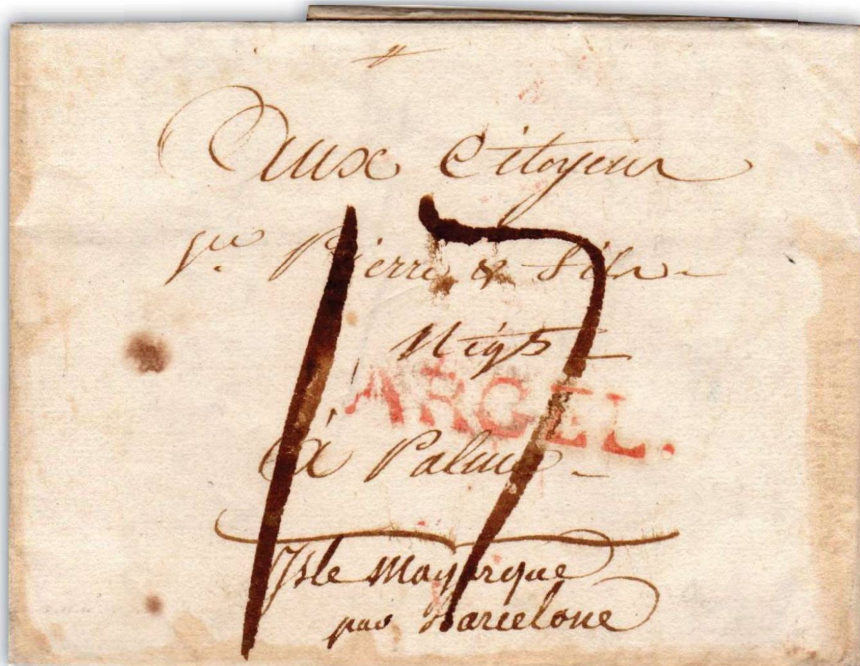


Figure 6. A folded letter from Algiers to Palma, Majorca, Spain. The Spanish name for the city is Argelia, abbreviated as Argel. This is the earliest of three surviving Argel cancels. It is rated 17 reales, collected from recipient.

2,000. The letter was undoubtedly written by a French clerk, to which the bey applied his seal.

Another letter originating in Oran, North Africa, is a one addressed to a family member (Figure 9). The letter discusses transactions for paper, cocoa originating in the Americas and other commercial goods, plus news of the family living in Oran. While the Turks ruled Oran during this period, the corsairs were based largely in Algiers. Oran, located about 250 miles west of Algiers, was more of a trading post for Spanish and French merchants.

By now you are asking how all of this ends up in a journal that is focused on French philately, right? As you saw above with the passport, the commercial letter and the stories of the unfortunate French consuls, the French were in Algiers. The consuls, as with those of other nations, were charged with facilitating commerce, keeping the dey happy, and ransoming slaves. There are letters available to collectors from these consuls, some of which I show in the rest of this article.

Most of the consular correspondence went to the health administrators in Marseille. The consuls reported on ship passengers and their diseases. As I described earlier, the letters were disinfected by slitting them with knives and dipping them in vinegar or exposing them to mustard gas. The idea was that the letters would no longer transmit disease from writer to recipient. Remember that despite some earlier

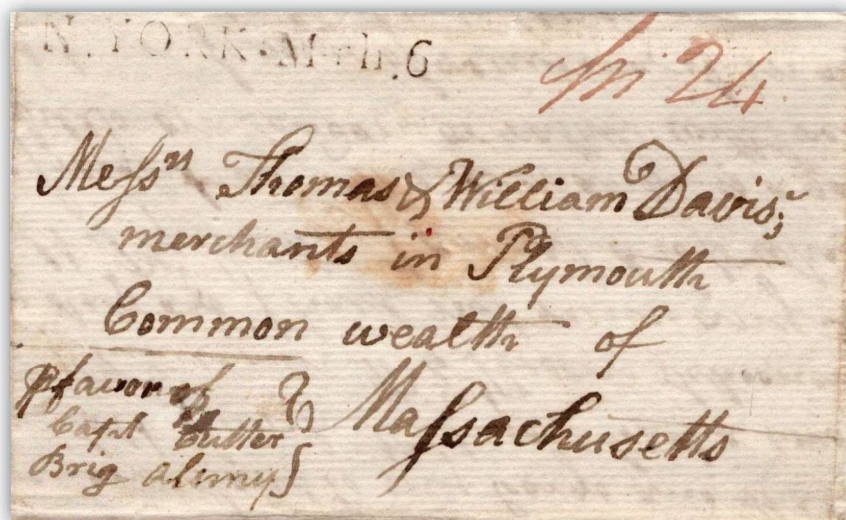


Figure 7. A folded letter from Cadiz, Spain, to Plymouth, Massachusetts. It carries a New York transit marking (March 6, 1794) and has a manuscript "Sh[ip]" letter rated 24 cents – 20 cents for delivery from New York to Plymouth, 4 cents for the ship fee.



Figure 8. A cover dated June 18, 1795, from Oran to Marseilles. There are no postal markings, so it was entrusted to a ship's captain. It is slit by a knife for disinfection by exposure to mustard gas or vinegar (a practice thought to prevent transmission of communicable diseases). Docketed as received and reply sent.

Revolutionary Calendar

Following the French Revolution in 1789, the republic established a new calendar. The republican government and its citizens used the calendar for about a dozen years, from late 1793 until 1805. It was based on ten 30-day months divided into three 10-day "weeks," with extra days added to fill out the normal 365-day year or leap year.

The drivers behind the change were to eliminate references to Christianity, to recognize the revolutionary nature of the new France and to mark the new "era of liberty."

There was a lot of discussion about when the first year should start, when to adopt the new calendar, and so on. The final decision was that the calendar should reflect the declaration of the first French republic on September 22, 1792. It was introduced in 1793. September 22, marked the beginning of year two ("an II" in French).

The new names of the months were to reflect the seasons. Brumaire, the month the Figure 6 letter was written, came from "brume" in French, mist in English. The month started around October 22. The dates also received new names, essentially based on the numbers 1 through 10.

Napoleon signed a law dated 22 fructidor an XIII (September 9, 1805,) that repealed the revolutionary calendar because it really didn't work very well. One can easily find conversion tables and more history of the calendar on the internet.



Figure 9. A folded letter from Oran to Barcelona, Spain, written January 27, 1788. This is the earliest postal marking from the Algerian section of North Africa (fewer than five survive in collector hands). It was carried by the Spanish postal service, rated 12 ½ reales due from recipient.



Figure 10. A disinfected letter from Algiers to Marseille, with the revolutionary date of 1 germinal an 10 (March 21, 1802). At upper right is a French postal marking "V.D.M.P. TOULON," or voie de mer par – via sea to – Toulon. It is rated "3" décimes due from recipient.

discoveries, we humans didn't accept that germs were the cause of disease until well into the 19th century, long after these letters were written.

Figure 10 shows an early letter from Consul Dubois Thainville. He is reporting that there is plague in Oran. Three or four people were dying of plague each day. The letter is quite discolored as a result of being dipped in vinegar. The interior is still pristine, apparently because the disinfectant didn't soak through the slits. Shown is the consul's seal on the reverse, and the letterhead from the inside of the letter, clearly unaffected by the disinfecting agent.

We should note that while there was a postal system developing in France (resulting in markings like the one in Figure 10), there was no formal postal system in North Africa. Writers continued to entrust their letters to various ship captains, who were then responsible to either deliver the letter or get the mail into the French postal system for delivery.

A second letter, also from Consul Dubois Thainville to the health commission in Marseille, describes his frustration with the fatalistic attitude of the Muslims. The dey is unconcerned about the spread of life-threatening disease because it is simply Allah's will. This letter has no postal markings, just the consul's seal on the front and reverse. Dubois Thainville mentions that he sent the letter in quadruplicate in hopes that at least one copy would reach its destination.

Mail didn't always go directly, either. The Figure 11 letter (unfortunately without its contents) again originated with the French consul in Algiers. We know this because he applied his oval seal to the front (upper right) and back. Addressed to Toulon, it was first delivered to the French consul at Alicante, Spain. The Alicante consul added his consular seal at the lower left, then placed the letter in the Spanish postal system. The Spanish added a faint red "ALICANTE" marking and sent it on. Upon arrival in Toulon the recipient owed 15 décimes.

These letters about health conditions in north Africa continued after Napoleon came to power. During the First French Empire (1804 to 1814), French consuls in Algiers had the same duties as their pre-

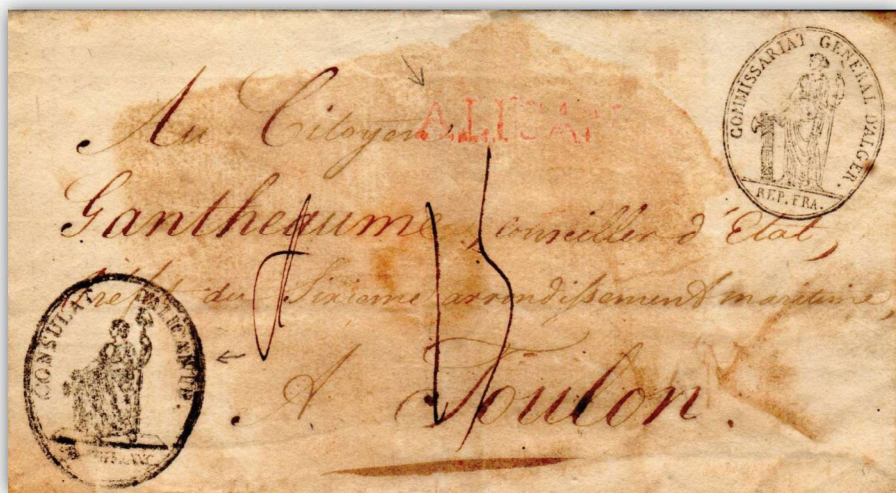


Figure 11. A letter from Algiers to Toulon, France. The ship carrying this was probably forced off course and landed at Alicante, Spain, rather than in France. Citizen Ganteaume, the recipient, was the Marine Prefect at Toulon at the time this letter would have been sent (1802 to 1804).

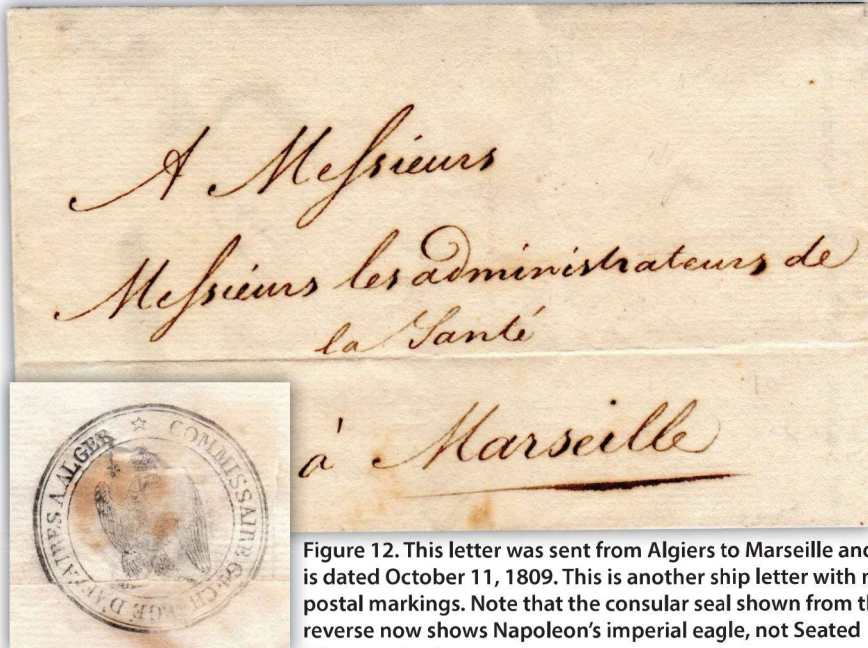


Figure 12. This letter was sent from Algiers to Marseille and is dated October 11, 1809. This is another ship letter with no postal markings. Note that the consular seal shown from the reverse now shows Napoleon's imperial eagle, not Seated Liberty as in the past.

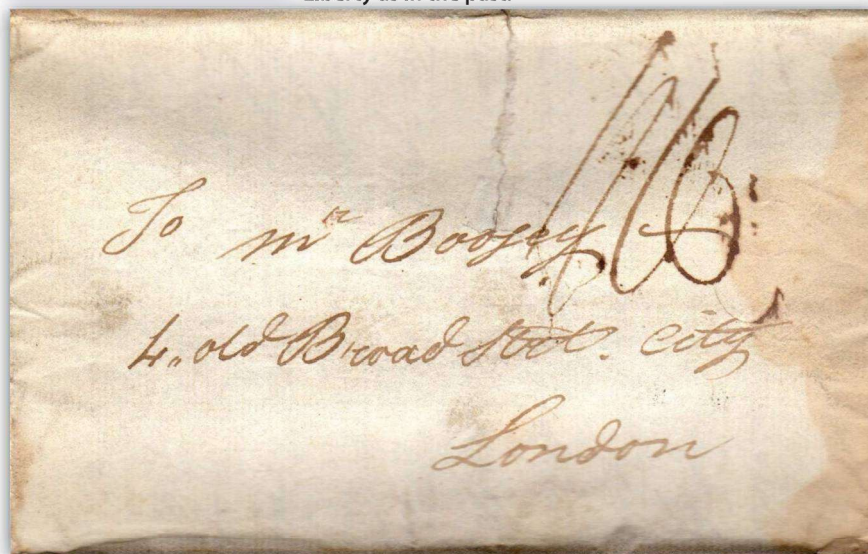


Figure 13. A letter written in Algiers harbor, September 2, 1816, and carried aboard Exmouth's flagship, HMS *Queen Charlotte*, to Plymouth, England, and forwarded to London. Rated 1 shilling, 6 pence, made up of 8-pence ship letter fee, 11-pence inland postage (Plymouth to London), less 1 penny concession. On the reverse is a Plymouth transit marking and London receipt (October 7, 1816).

decessors. A typical letter (Figure 12) is from Consul Ragueneau la Chainaye, again for the Marseille health commission. The consul reports that there is plague in Smyrna, Turkey. He has attempted to quarantine arriving passengers from there to prevent the disease from spreading in Algiers.

The British also remained active in the Mediterranean. After the Napoleonic Wars ended in 1815, future King George IV (regent under George III) dispatched Lord Exmouth to Algiers, Tripoli and Tunis. Exmouth redeemed 3,000 Christians and signed a treaty with the dey.

The dey didn't completely control the corsairs, and a band of them proceeded to massacre a group of roughly 200 Sicilians, Corsicans and Sardinians under British protection. This resulted in one of the most serious attacks by the British in August 1816. A letter shown (Figure 13) was written by Lord Exmouth's English interpreter, Abraham Salamé, just after the battle while still in the harbor at Algiers. In his letter Salamé recounts the battle and lists the points that the dey agreed to in a new treaty.

During the Napoleonic Wars, both the British and the French were competing for grain supplies from the Algerines. John Falcon, the British consul, so aggravated the dey that Falcon was expelled. It took a while for the British to retaliate, but in 1824 they returned and again bombarded Algiers to express their displeasure. The British naval officer Lt. Greene wrote a letter (Figure 14) just after the bombardment while his ship was still in the harbor at Algiers. Generally, the Europeans were increasingly frustrated by Algerine piracy.

The next letter (Figure 15) was written by French Consul Deval, again to the Health Commission in Marseille. In this letter he reports that the corsairs didn't respect the Dutch passports the captain was carrying. The dey did agree their papers were in order, so Deval is now reporting that the ship's crew is in good health and there is no plague or other serious disease in evidence in Algiers.

As a result of the grain supplied on credit during the Napoleonic Wars,

France owed a significant amount of money to the Algerines. They were unwilling to pay the full amount due, which really angered the dey. In 1827, Deval and the dey were reportedly discussing this when the dey struck Deval with something we might consider a feather fly swatter or fan. You can imagine the insult to Deval, although he fared better than le Vacher had 140 years before.

Charles X, king of France from 1824, used the diplomatic insult first to establish a blockade of Algiers. It was effective at preventing the French from trading with Algiers, but the corsairs were able to evade it. Charles X sent an ambassador to resolve the matter in 1829, but the dey responded with canons.

Charles X was extremely unpopular in France. Recognizing that his actions at home might trigger insurrection in the army, he decided to send troops to North Africa. This had at least two potential benefits: the army was out of France and therefore not in a position to depose him, and the army had the potential to overthrow the Algerine Turks and thereby significantly reduce or eliminate the corsairs in the Mediterranean.

The army approached Africa in early June, then retreated while the force was strengthened. A letter (Figure 16) is from one of these soldiers who had seen Algiers, then the ship sailed for Mallorca, from where he was writing. He anticipates an imminent return and an invasion.

The French landed west of Algiers on June 14, 1830, with a force sufficient to overpower the Turks and their troops. Following a significant battle on June 19 at Staouéli, the French occupied Algiers on July 5. Within a few days the dey and his family accepted exile to Naples.

When the French arrived, they brought along the accoutrements needed to establish a military postal system. While intending to land with the troops, a storm delayed the French post office embarkation until June 19. A letter shown (Figure 17) was written by Count de Damrémont, commander of the 1st Brigade, 2nd Division, to his wife. He was sitting in a captured Arab tent where he described the day's events in his letter.

The French invasion marked the end of the corsairs and the beginning of French administration in North Af-



Figure 14. A folded letter from Algiers to Fareham, England. It was written July 27, 1824, by Lt. Greene aboard HMS *Revenge*, to his mother about the recent bombardment and the new treaty with the dey. It is rated 1 shilling for the 8-pence ship letter fee and 4-pence inland postage. Carried aboard HMS *Lightning*, it then landed at Motherbank, England, where the letter was disinfected. It was then forwarded to Portsmouth and delivered to Fareham.



Figure 15. A letter dated August 27, 1826 from Algiers to Marseille. The letter was carried aboard the Dutch *le Curacao* by the ship's captain, Stefan Cashin, who is the subject of the letter. It was received August 31 in Marseille. "Q.D.C." at lower left is an abbreviation for Latin "Quem Deus Conservat," or "Whom God Preserve."

rica. The military postal system continued for roughly five years before being turned over to civilian administration. The French named the territory Algeria in 1839, bordered on the west by Morocco and on the eastern side by Tunisia. Algeria was pacified over a period of 17 years, which allows us to conclude that the French presence was not uniformly acceptable to the north Africans.

Despite his attempts to deflect his unpopularity, Charles X abdicated on August 2, 1830. This was another indication of the dangers of the Algerine corsairs – even putting them out of business could not save the French king. In addition to disease, piracy and slavery, one can add political disruptions to the difficulties caused by the Algerine corsairs.

The subsequent political changes in France are an entirely different story, so I leave that to you if you are interested.

France administered Algeria as a part of metropolitan France, never as a colony. The Algerians started a civil war for independence in 1957, an especially bloody conflict for the times. It lasted until 1962, when Charles De Gaulle agreed to Algeria's independence. I am summarizing in a few sentences a significant historical period, of course, and one that includes a rich postal history.

Resources

A good beginning point to learn more is the Wikipedia article "French conquest of Algeria." The article includes a link to another, "Regency of Algiers," and from there one can spend hours reading about the events that took place during the regency. Another starting point might be "Bombardment of Algiers (1816)," again on Wikipedia.

There are many sources written in French and some in English. Perhaps the most recent is *The Kings of Algiers*, by Julie Kalman. This book describes the interrelationships of two Jewish families, the Bacris and the Busnachs, and their incredible role in banking, finance and trade in the Mediterranean. These were the people who financed the grain shipments during the Napoleonic wars, where the unpaid debts resulted ultimately in the French invasion of Algeria. Dr. Kalman's work also includes an excellent list of source materials and their locations.



Figure 16. A letter written June 8, 1830, aboard the *Nestor*, near Palma, Mallorca. It is rated 9 décimes due, transit mark applied in Toulon. After arriving in Moulins, France, the letter was re-folded and forwarded to Compiegne, France.

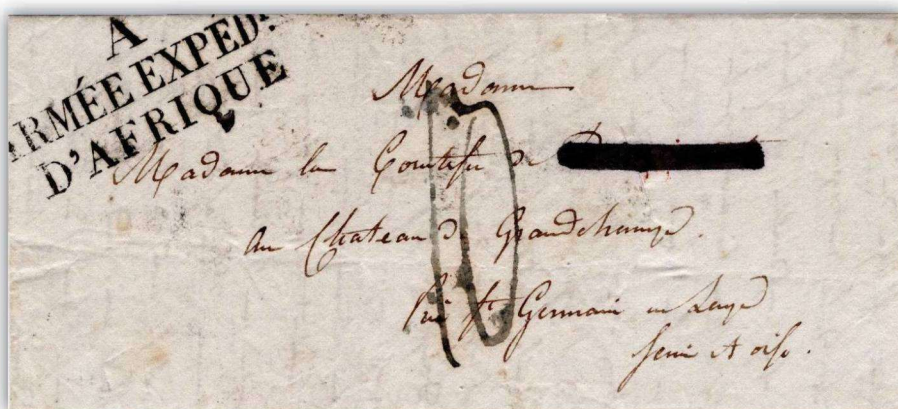


Figure 17. A letter from the camp at Sidi-Kalif, North Africa, to St. Germain-en-Laye, France. The three-line handstamp was first used on the date of this letter, June 19, 1830. It is rated 10 décimes due from recipient. On the reverse is a handstamp "BANLIEUE," a St. Germain receipt marking and a rural mail carrier mark.

The Author

Ken Nilsestuen has studied the postal history of Algeria (through 1876) for more than 30 years, at one point winning a grand award for his exhibit. He's currently president of the American Association of Philatelic Exhibitors, a past treasurer of the APS and APRL, an accredited judge, and has held many other roles in the philatelic world. Although retired from his career as a certified public accountant, Ken continues to write and research in our philatelic world.

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