

## 70 Years Ago in Mekeel's:

# "Buffalo" Balloon Postage, 5¢, Nashville, Tenn.

by V. Leyoung Ardiff (From Mekeel's Weekly, April 27, 1942, with images added)

In the issue of December, 1929, *The Airport Journal* carried an illustration of this old pictorial, after a copy in the collection of Major Steinmetz, of Philadelphia, and the same number, under the headline "From the Editor's Scrapbook", presented an inquiry, viz., "Here is another mystery piece which offers the amateur detective a splendid opportunity to do some sleuthing. The stamp illustrated is in imperforate condition, and a dull greenish-blue color. What it is or was, no one seems to know. Does the 'Buffalo' refer to the well known City on Route No.

20, or is it the name of a particular balloon? The general impression of the stamp is that it is very similar in workmanship to several Confederate stamps issued during the Civil War. The color and imperforate condition help this illusion. Perhaps the South instituted a balloon service during the war, similar to that employed by Paris during the Franco-Prussian war."

Following the death of Major Steinmetz, the collection of this air mail enthusiast was dispersed, the accumulated wealth of material being sold at auction in the spring of 1929. The Buffalo balloon stamp was one of the items thus sold, to be incorporated in another collection.



Prof. Samuel Archer King

King, had on prior occasion so pleased the citizens of Buffalo that they had collected and given to him the wherewithal—a matter of \$1,500—to defray the cost of constructing a new balloon.

Made of oiled cotton cloth from the Wamasutta Mills, the bag was of large size, having a capacity of 91,000 cubic feet. The new balloon was built in 1873 and was named "Buffalo" in honor of the donors' city. The "Buffalo" was used by Professor King in an ascension from the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia in August, 1876, and then placed in storage, following the Professor's decision not to employ it any more, owing to the cost of inflating a bag of that size and its bulkiness in packing and transportation after landing.

It was this balloon, however, which he subsequently used in a number of ascensions in Tennessee. Professor King was a veteran American aeronaut, having made



Scott CL1

Subsequently, a British air mail dealer handled a tete-beche pair and a single mint copy of the Buffalo balloon stamp, and, in the course of his investigation of the background of these items, leaped to the conclusion that the city of Buffalo, New York, was the place of issue. He cited the Buffalo Historical Society as his informant. That organization told him that an aeronaut, one Professor Samuel Archer



The balloon before an ascension in Cleveland, Ohio

One of three covers known with a Buffalo Balloon stamp, this cover is believed to have been carried on an August 30, 1877 flight of the balloon from the Philadelphia Centennial Fair grounds. With no postal markings, it is deemed not to have been placed in the mails.



his first balloon ascension on September 25, 1851, from the Zoological Gardens in Philadelphia, in which city he was born in 1827.

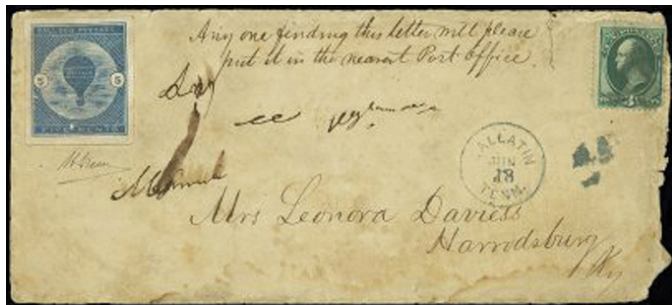
Mr. Melville assumed a research interest in the subject and thereupon devoted an article to "The Buffalo Balloon Stamp" in his journal, *The Stamp Lover*, April, 1934. Mr. Melville told how, in the perusal of old files of the *Philatelic Monthly* of Philadelphia, he happened upon a forgotten reference to this adhesive. The statement, carried as a reprint in the aforesaid *Philatelic Monthly*, was originally published in the June 15, 1877, issue of the Nashville, Tenn., *Daily American*. Carried as an editorial notice under the headline, "Balloon Postage Stamps", the Nashville story read as follows:

"We have received a stamp thus named from Wheeler Bros., No. 20 North Cherry Street, designed by Jno. B. Lillard, and engraved by Mr. J. H. Snively, of this city. It is 1-1/8 by 1-1/8 inch, has the words 'Balloon Postage, five cents' in straight lines at top and bottom, and is printed in blue, with a good picture of the Buffalo in the centre. All letters left at the signal office with this stamp and bearing a United States three cent stamp will be taken up in the Buffalo. The American reporter will take up a supply to put on all letters he drops from the clouds."

And when Mr. Melville saw the illustration of the stamp in the Standard Airport Catalogue (which then indicated wrong year of issue and gave wrong conclusions about this stamp), Mr. Melville mentioned the matter in his review of the catalogue in *Mekeel's Weekly Stamp News*. Whereupon Mr. Erik Hildesheim, American air mail stamp enthusiast, and himself a veteran balloon pilot, resumed an interest in the story and background of this stamp, to which he had devoted attention in previous years, and went to Tennessee to look into the situation "on the ground", as it were.

Time, the sages tell us, waits for no man, and surely, in the case of the Buffalo balloon stamp, nothing could be more true. The years had wreaked havoc with the most likely sources of information. Mr. Hildesheim found that the printery and book shop of Wheeler Brothers existed no longer, and the street on which it once stood had in fact since been renamed. Mr. Lillard was no longer available to tell how he conceived the idea for the special balloon stamp, or from whom he got it and who was to receive the proceeds of sales.

It is reasonable to assume, however, that the revenue from the sale of the Buffalo balloon stamp went to augment the income received by Professor King for this ascension. Very possibly, this was the case. Mr. Hildesheim states, on the basis of contemporary newspaper reports, that the Professor's expenses were not covered by the advance subscriptions of \$100 each, which were taken up by a number of citizens; further, the amount of paid admissions was as small as usual in aeronautical exhibitions of that day, since outsiders could see almost as much and as well as those of the inner sanctum.



A flown cover carried on the June 18, 1877 Buffalo Balloon flight from Nashville to Gallatin, Tennessee, with a 3¢ green (Sc. 158) tied by a cut cork cancel with "Gallatin/Tenn./Jun 18" duplex below, inscribed at top "Any one finding this letter will please/put it in the nearest Post Office."

The partial list of subscribers mentions the United States Signal Service (now the Signal Corps, United States Army), and also includes the name of A.C. Ford, Sergeant, U.S. Army, its Nashville observer, who was delegated to take part in the Buffalo ascension and to make a meteorological report thereof. Along with Duncan R. Dorris, city editor of the *Daily American*, Dr. Ford—as the newspaper stories styled him—appears to have been the most active passenger. Following an intermediate landing, Ford substituted for Dorris as the *American's* representative when the editor hastened back to Nashville to record his impressions. Lillard, designer of the stamp, was *The Banner* reporter on the Buffalo balloon trip, and the local Nashville press accorded thorough coverage to the event. In addition to Robert, King's assistant, the passengers comprised C.R. Staley, of Nashville; and J.H. Andrews, of Pulaski, both of whom came forward during the filling preparations and paid \$100 each for the privilege of going aloft. Professor King had stated that ladies who might wish to join the party might do so without charge, but we have to report that the fair sex was not represented among the active participants on this occasion.

At the time of this ascension, there were two daily newspapers published in Nashville, *The American*, which has since ceased to publish, and *The Banner*, which had commenced during the preceding year. Old files of the latter were not available during Mr. Hildesheim's visit to Tennessee, but the State Library had a set of the *Daily American*, from which a transcript was had of all references to King's two balloon ascensions at Nashville.

Professor King and party made the mail-carrying flight from Nashville on June 18, 1877. *The Daily American* of June 19, 1877, says, inter alia:

"Our reporter carried up with him several large envelopes upon which was 'Message from the Balloon Buffalo. To the Nashville American. Please deliver to the operator at the nearest telegraph station who will send contents to the American.' To these were attached streamers about nine feet long, made of tissue paper representing the flag of our country. Each envelope contained an ounce of shot to increase its velocity downward. Several of these envelopes were dropped during the trip; one which was picked up two miles out on the Gallatin pike, at 5.30 p. m. by R.C. Bowers had the following contents '1,800 feet high—Prof. King had a passenger concealed on the train. He intends to drop the Monsieur out in a few minutes, with a parachute. The Monsieur is made of air proof cloth, and is about six feet high. The country spread out before us presents a fine appearance. The green groves look magnificent. The air is growing cooler, and the present stage could not be more delightful. The balloon moves so easily that writing is a pleasure, Prof. King does not think that he can go beyond Gallatin'."

The Buffalo was landed at Gallatin after a trip of two hours, and was thereupon weighted down for the night. One of the first to greet them there was a Captain Turpin "for whom", D.R. Dorris reports, "Dr. Ford, Prof. King and I had especially conveyed our compliments on an American envelope with red, white and blue streamers attached". Because of loss of gas overnight the balloon was able the next morning to ascend only with



A cover also carried on the June 18, 1877 flight. Addressed to E.F. Gambs in St. Louis, it has a Gallatin, Tenn. duplex postmark on the front and a St. Louis receiver on the back (folded out here). The cover also bears a 1¢ ultramarine and 2¢ vermillion (Sc. 156, 178) tied by cork cancels, while the CLI bears a pinkish-red cancel.

King, Ford and Andrews. This time it drifted slowly back toward Nashville and came down at noon three miles from Taylorsville.

Mr. Hildesheim in 1934 assembled his notes on the Buffalo balloon stamp in article form, published as "The Buffalo Balloon Stamp and the King Ascension at Nashville, 1877", in *Stamp and Cover Collecting*, issue of February, 1935, copy of which we have seen by courtesy of Mr. Hildesheim, with whose generous assistance the present article was prepared.

The Buffalo balloon postage stamp was also illustrated, this time as "World's Oldest Air Poster Stamp...", and discussed by Mr. Hildesheim in the May, 1937, number of *Poster Stamp Bulletin*. One of the tete-beche pairs of this stamp served as the cover picture of *STAMPS Magazine*, issue of February 10, 1940.

At least one of the envelopes carried by and dropped from the Buffalo balloon in course of this Nashville ascension, is known to collectors. It came to light in recent years. The cover is postmarked Gallatin, Tenn., June 18, although the three-cents U.S. stamp is not tied on. The Buffalo balloon stamp appears in the top lefthand corner. There is a handwritten request, inscribed on the face of the cover, arranged in several lines of long hand, in pen and ink, viz., "Anyone finding this letter will please put in the nearest Post Office". The address is that of Mrs. Leonora Daviess, Harrodsburg, Ky....

The Buffalo balloon postage stamp was freely advertised for sale in the old philatelic press, and it is a reasonable assumption to conclude that many a collector of the period gave the balloon picture stamp a berth in his album—a haven from which it was evicted in later years and consigned to the oddments and phantasies category, when the collections in question were broken up or otherwise dispersed. Very possibly, specimens are still hidden away, and they are occasionally found even today, amidst accumulations of days gone by, safely ensconced among the pages of some old-timer's album. A letter written by Lillard, after he removed to New York, mentions the Buffalo balloon stamp as having been printed in "sheets". However, no pieces larger than tete beche pairs are known, and it is believed, lacking evidence to the contrary, that they were printed thus. We would welcome, for the record, reports of any copies of the Buffalo balloon postage stamp in collectors' hands today, and would especially be glad to hear of any that may be extant on covers, such as the one above described.

Comprising as it does the first stamp issued in connection with aeronautics, and though admittedly semi- or unofficial in character, the historical patina of the Buffalo balloon postage stamp is entirely respectable, and air mail enthusiasts can be thankful for the fact that the rapid development of air mail services, and the attendant collecting and historical research interest on the part of philatelists has saved this Tennessee stamp from the oblivion which for so long was its fate. As Mr. Hildesheim so aptly puts it, here is another instance where, "in stampdom, as in real life, recognition comes often only long after the hero did and died unnoticed".