

Forget Planes! The First Airmail Was Flown by Balloon

The first manned flight in an untethered balloon took place in Paris in 1793. The aeronauts were Pilâtre de Rozier and the Marquis d'Arlandes in a balloon constructed by the Montgolfier Brothers. Sadly, de Rozier and a passenger were the first balloon fatalities just two years later. Over the next 75 years, ballooning became popular, though most flights were tethered.



When the Prussians surrounded French cities during the Franco-Prussian War, the French had to innovate quickly. After Metz was surrounded in early September, 1870, unmanned balloons were used to transport notes on small slips of paper. Later that month, the surrounded Parisians used manned balloons to carry mail. The Neptune, the first balloon, is shown at left.



The Armand Barbès carried Minister Leon Gambetta to the government delegation in the city of Tours, safely away from the Prussians. [Background image]

One foggy night, the wind carried the Ville d'Orléans across the North Sea to Norway. After a perilous landing during which the two aeronauts jumped out of the rising balloon, they and the mail made it back to France via England.



This letter was carried on the Ville d'Orléans. It traveled by balloon, foot, boat, sled, train, coach, ship, train, ship, and trains, a total of about 2,250 miles over 18 days to reach a town 200 miles from Paris.

Larry Rosenblum
imperf@larryr.com

Although there were some lost balloons and others captured by the Prussians, about 2.5 million letters were transported safely out of Paris until the armistice of January, 1871.