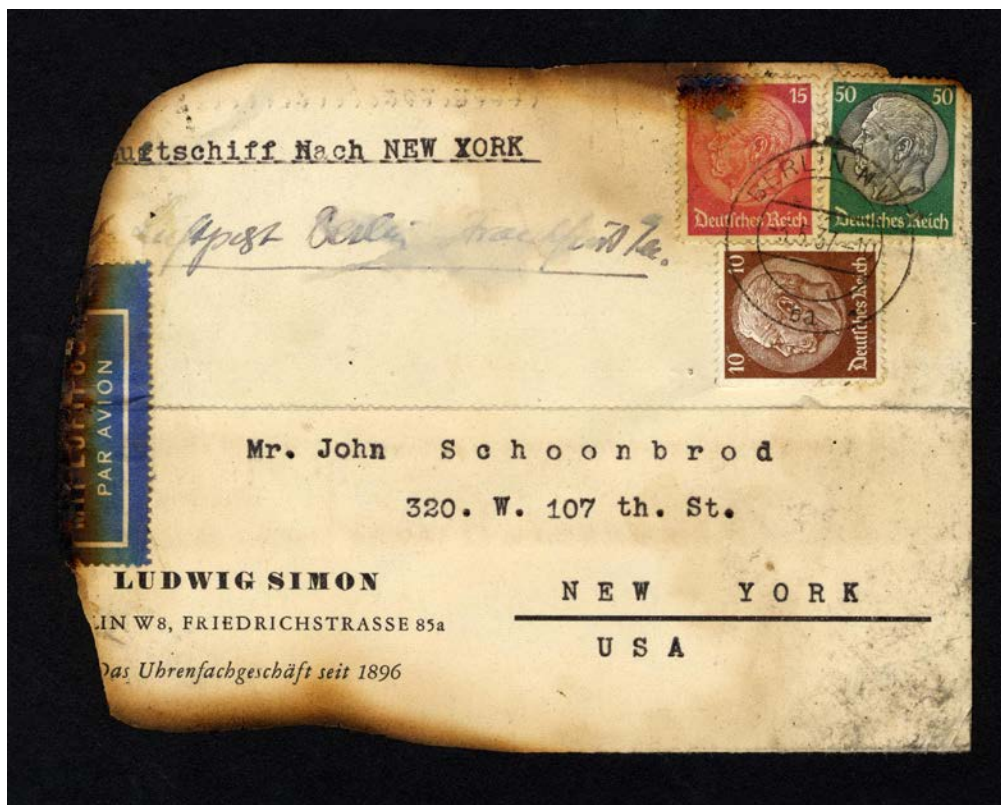

ZEPPELIN *HINDENBURG* CRASH MAIL DOCUMENTS:

The “Arthur Falk *Hindenburg* Papers” and “Postal Inspection Service *Hindenburg* Disaster File”

FINDING GUIDE

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Hindenburg disaster card, May 6, 1937 (Accession No. 1993.2002.70)

Officials salvaged this piece of mail from the wreckage of the airship *Hindenburg*. The burnt card reached its address in a glassine with an official seal. At least 360 of the more than 17,000 pieces of mail on board the airship survived the disastrous fire.



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This finding guide will be available online at
<http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/findingguides/index.html>
Check online to be certain you have the latest revision.

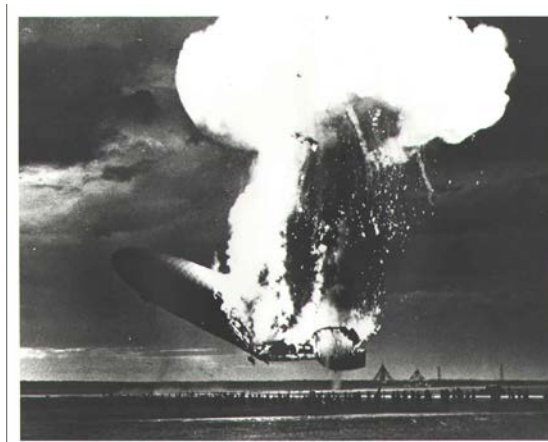
Table of Contents

Arthur Falk *Hindenburg* Papers

Collection Scope & Content.....	3
Provenance	3
Narrative Description.....	3
Collections Inventory.....	4

Postal Inspection Service *Hindenburg* Disaster File

Collection Scope & Content.....	3
Provenance	3
Narrative Description.....	3
Collections Inventory.....	4
Bibliography	6
Credits & Acknowledgments.....	8



As the German passenger airship *Hindenburg* attempted to land at New Jersey's Lakehurst Naval Air Station, it caught fire and was destroyed. Of the 97 people on board, 35 died. Courtesy of National Air and Space Museum.

Arthur Falk *Hindenburg* Papers

COLLECTION SCOPE & CONTENT

At 6:25 P.M. EST on May 6, 1937, while approaching Lakehurst Naval Station's mooring mast between storms, *Hindenburg* burst into flames. Within thirty-four seconds, fire consumed the entire airship. Passengers and crew members jumped from the burning airship, some falling to their deaths. Thirty-five of the ninety-seven men and women on board, plus one member of the ground crew, died. At least 360 of the more than 17,000 pieces of mail on board the airship survived the disastrous fire. The disaster ended transatlantic commercial travel in lighter-than-air vessels. Debates continue regarding the cause of the spark that ignited the hydrogen and outer covering.

This collection includes the first list of mail salvaged from the wreckage to reach philatelic hands. Postal officials typed the lists in 1937 as they prepared the disaster mail to be processed and delivered to the addressees. In addition, certificates of expertization, correspondence, and clippings kept by Arthur Falk relate to *Hindenburg* disaster mail.

These papers are held in the NPM curatorial archives with restricted use.

PROVENANCE

The United States Post Office Department documented the mail salvaged from the German zeppelin LZ-129 *Hindenburg* after its disaster on May 6, 1937. Philatelists had never seen the typed lists and internal correspondence of the POD until, during the 1970s, stamp dealer Arthur Falk found some records. He had been told that the file had been in the desk of the late Albert Goldman, New York City's postmaster during the 1930s and 1940s. Falk obtained a letter of introduction from a postal official in Washington, D.C., to postal officials in New York City. He sought out an older postal employee, who directed him to Goldman's desk. Searching through a basement of miscellaneous postal discards, he located the desk. When he opened a drawer, he found the prized file, and soon received permission to photocopy the documents. Since then, the desk's contents have been destroyed.

Until recently, Falk's lists were the only source available to identify *Hindenburg* crash mail. He used the lists to publish his book *Hindenburg Crash Mail: The Search Goes On* in 1976. Falk held back some of the information on the lists so that he would have the sole access to that information for expertising. Unfortunately, the book does include some errors and misidentifies some forgeries as genuine. Falk saved the information for history and provided the first clues of the kinds of information logged by postal officials. In 2011, the late Arthur Falk's sons Ronald and Allen donated the papers to the Smithsonian National Postal Museum with the assistance of Robert Horn. These papers provided valuable research information for the museum exhibition *Fire & Ice: Hindenburg and Titanic*, www.postalmuseum.si.edu/fireandice/index.html. They served as a resource for currently definitive source on *Hindenburg* disaster mail and forgeries, *LZ-129 Hindenburg Zeppelin Crash Mail* by Dieter Leder.

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

Box 1

- Folder 1 Acquisition and releases. This collection of papers includes confidential names and addresses that require **restricted use** for privacy purposes.
- Folder 2 Book: *Hindenburg Crash Mail: The Search Goes On*
- Folder 3 Post Office Department documents
- Folder 4 Expertising documents
- Folder 5 Certificates and correspondence
- Folder 6 Correspondence and clippings
- Folder 7 Dieter Leder's *LZ-129 Hindenburg Zeppelin Crash Mail*

Postal Inspection Service *Hindenburg* Disaster File

COLLECTION SCOPE & CONTENT

The United States Post Office Department, Office of Inspector, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, file includes reports about the 1937 *Hindenburg* disaster mail and lists of mail transferred to the New York post office for further processing and handling. The case file # was 123109-D. This file includes details previously unknown to philatelists.

These papers are held in the permanent collection of the museum. The entire file is accessible online.

PROVENANCE

Protecting the mail and the postal system is the job of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service. Postal inspectors are the federal law enforcement and security arm of the United States Postal Service (previously the Post Office Department). In 2013, postal inspectors transferred some of their historical files to the Smithsonian National Postal Museum, including the file on the *Hindenburg* disaster. Postal inspectors from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, visited Lakehurst, New Jersey, and *Hindenburg's* crash site to collect and document mail before it was forwarded to addressees. This file includes different typed lists and information in memorandums not previously known to philatelists.

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

Box 1

Folder 1 L.N. Regnier and C.R. Lynch, Postal Inspectors, to Inspector in Charge, Philadelphia, May 7, 1937, regarding damage and destruction of mail matter by fire aboard dirigible *Hindenburg* on May 6, 1937. Regnier and Lynch received a batch of approximately 136 salvaged letters and cards on May 6.

H.R. Nicol, Postal Inspector, to Inspector in Charge, Philadelphia, May 7, 1937, regarding zeppelin *Hindenburg* disaster May 6, 1937, 7:23 P.M.; mail matter damaged and destroyed by fire. Report includes notes about interview with crew member Kurt Schoenherr, a *Hindenburg* postmaster. This report also transmitted six letters and twenty postcards found that day.

Folder 2 C.R. Lynch, Postal Inspector to Postmaster, New York, New York, May 10, 1937.

L.N. Regnier and C.R. Lynch, Postal Inspectors, to Inspector in Charge, Philadelphia, May 12, 1937, regarding zeppelin *Hindenburg* disaster on May 6, 1937, 7:23 p.m.; mail matter damaged and destroyed by fire. This report explains how the salvaged mail was handled: separated, dried, and address portion cleaned for identification, sorted into two groups (one destroyed by fire and water, the other only by water and intended for the return trip), notes that Inspector Lynch delivered mail to New York. Typed lists of mail included with

the report are marked Group I and Group II. The lists of incoming mail include: addressee, description (letter or card), postage, and sender.

Folder 3 H.R. Nicol, Postal Inspector, to Inspector in Charge, Philadelphia, May 12, 1937, regarding damage and destruction of mail matter by fire aboard dirigible *Hindenburg* on May 6, 1937. The report describes his meeting with postal officials in New York City and the determination of how the salvage mail should be delivered by registered mail. Officials also concurred that the U.S. post office would not be responsible for the payment of any indemnity on registered mail since it had never been received. Discussions focused on the amount of mail on board in various classes and how to return mail to Germany. Notes on a second interview with crew member Kurt Schoenherr during which he explained his role as postmaster on board.

H.R. Nicol, Postal Inspector, to Postmaster, Morgan Annex, New York, May 12, 1937. In this letter, Nicol confirms the decisions from the meeting, including that mail will be sent registered, that German postal authorities will be contacted on recovered mail with requests for numbers of pieces and sacks and weight of registered and ordinary mail sent by *Hindenburg*.

Washington, D.C., Postal Inspection to H.R. Nicol, Postal Inspector, two office phone call memorandums May 11, 1937, regarding questions on delivery procedures for the *Hindenburg* mail.

Mail intended for the *Hindenburg* send forward by, May 7, 1937, with list of ships and country destinations.

**To download images of the papers, view:
<https://flic.kr/s/aHskBfAa4n>**

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Selected resources found in the Smithsonian National Postal Museum Library include:

Dieter Leder, *LZ-129 Hindenburg Zeppelin Crash Mail* (Meersburg, Germany: Topo/Verlag, 2012).

Arthur Falk, *Hindenburg Crash Mail: The Search Goes On* (New York: Arthur Falk, 1976).

Cheryl R. Ganz and Daniel Piazza, *Fire & Ice: Hindenburg and Titanic* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian National Postal Museum, 2012).

Zeppelin Post Journal (Zeppelin Study Group).

“The Zeppelin Collector,” *Jack Knight Air Log* (American Air Mail Society).

Other resources are:

Airships: The Hindenburg and other Zeppelins, www.airships.net

Faces of the Hindenburg, facesofthehindenburg.blogspot.com

Zeppelin Study Group, www.ezep.de

CREDITS & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This finding aid was prepared with the assistance of Michael Devaney, Rebecca Johnson, Dieter Leder, and Terry Sheahan.

Images are from the National Philatelic Collection at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum unless otherwise credited.