

## THE FIRST AIR MAIL FLIGHTS IN SOUTH JERSEY - 1912

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**Air mail pioneer Marshall E. Reid with his Wright Brothers-built aeroplane on the beach at Stone Harbor, N.J., August 1912**



**Detail of postcard from author's collection**

For this aerophilatelic story, we have to start at the beginning and trace the early developments of U.S. Air Mail. The origins of this particular story are rooted in the pioneer era of aviation and mark the start of yet another incredible aerial journey, this time centering on two small coastal towns in Southern New Jersey.

Try to imagine a time when aviation was in its infancy, and early flyers and their flying machines were looked upon with great fascination. The American public back in the early 20th century was literally captivated and even transfixed by the newly introduced contraption known as an aeroplane. Throughout the world and in the United States as well it could be said that speed in transportation was becoming the so-called “watch-word” of progress and it would not take long before a new age would be ushered in, namely the advent of air transportation!

In 1911, the United States Congress recognized this amazing fascination with the aero-machine and appropriated \$50,000 in order to officially sanction a series of aerial mail trials, or “flying demonstrations,” with an eye on transporting mail using the U.S. Post Office Department. By 1912, the Post Office duly authorized 31 orders, and thus created a federal plan for short-haul experimental air mail delivery flights in 16 different states.

During the month of August 1912, one such officially sanctioned order and subsequent aerial mail trial occurred on a short 21-mile route between two popular and growing South Jersey seashore resort communities,

namely Ocean City and Stone Harbor.

Ocean City at this time was the older and somewhat more developed town while Stone Harbor was just getting its start and would not incorporate until two years later in 1914.

The announcement of this temporary service would usher in the very first air mail flights in South Jersey. In a letter from Second Assistant Postmaster General James Stewart and designated as route #609,003, this order stipulated the following:

*The Postmasters at Ocean City (E.M. Sutton) and Stone Harbor (George Greshell) are hereby authorized to dispatch mails between said post offices, one trip each way, on August 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10, 1912 by aeroplane service provided that such mails be carried by a sworn letter carrier and without expense to the department.*



**FIG.01** “Greetings from Ocean City, N.J.” - A multi-view post card postmarked 1936 shows popular attractions including numerous tennis courts, remnants of the famous 1901 “Sindia” shipwreck, the wonderful bathing beaches, and the famous boardwalk and municipal music pier.

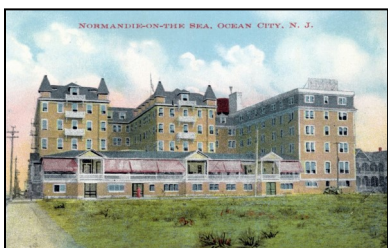


**FIG.02** “Greetings from Stone Harbor, N.J.” - A Multi-view postcard, c. 1930s, depicts scenes showing 1) Boardwalk and Beach, 2) Riding the Surf, 3) On the Beach and 4) Bathing Beach.



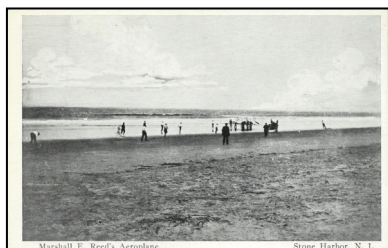
A pilot and member of the Aero Club of Philadelphia by the name of Marshall Earle Reid was engaged to conduct these flights between Ocean City and Stone Harbor. Reid then owned a single-engine, chain driven, 1911 model Wright ‘pusher biplane’ with two propellers weighing 300 pounds that was built by the famous brothers, Orville and Wilbur Wright of Dayton, Ohio.

After disassembling his aircraft, Reid and three mechanics proceeded to tow his airplane from Philadelphia across the Delaware River by ferryboat, then traversed the state of New Jersey, and arrived at Ocean City, where they re-assembled the craft. Since the plane would be taking off and landing on the wide sandy beaches along the seashore, Reid installed wheels and skids. The prominent Hotel Normandie located at Ocean City became the so-called base of operations for Reid and his associates.



**FIG.03** “Hotel Normandie-on-the-Sea, Ocean City, N.J.” c.1912: Located at 9th Street and Ocean Avenue, the eloquent six-story Normandie Hotel was destroyed when the worst fire in Ocean City’s history occurred on October 11, 1927.

On the afternoon of Saturday, August 3, 1912, newly sworn in as an official U.S. mail carrier and before a large group of onlookers assembled on the Ocean City beach, Reid received a bag of mail containing some 500 pieces of mail and became airborne at 5:45PM. Flying south and mostly over the ocean, Reid piloted his craft and landed on the beach by the Yachtsmen’s Club at Stone Harbor at 6:14PM. Flying time was just 29 minutes.



**FIG.04** Postcard view showing Marshall E. Reid’s (sic) aeroplane alighting on the beach at Stone Harbor, N.J.

(Note the misspelling of the pilot’s last name, which appears as *Reed* shown in the lower left-hand corner margin of this item.) Shortly thereafter Reid received another pouch of mail and took to the air returning northward back to Ocean City. Reid wore aviator goggles and sat on

the bag of mail in a rickety bucket seat located just in front of the motor.

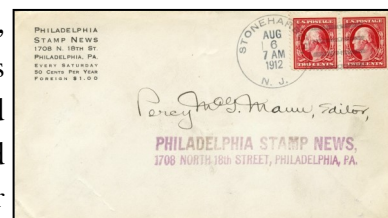
According to the American Air Mail Society’s *The Pioneer Airplane Mail of the United States* by Thomas J. O’Sullivan published in 1985, Reid carried over the period of the week of August 3 - 10 a total of 11,456 pieces of mail in four trips from Ocean City and 1,059 pieces of mail on three trips from Stone Harbor. Thus, it was documented that a grand total of 12,515 pieces of mail were flown with the bulk of these being picture post cards sent by many who were vacationing at those two resorts.

As best can be determined, actual mail-carrying flights from Ocean City occurred only on August 3, 5, 9, and 10 and from Stone Harbor just on August 3, 7, and 9. According to the AAMS, and designated as U.S. pioneer air mail flight #46, “very few pieces of mail got into collectors’ hands” and “this is a scarce air mail pioneer, regardless of the amount of mail flown!” Anyone seeking to obtain for purchase such air mail covers flown in either direction will readily understand their relative scarcity. Seldom do such items come on the market, and when they do, they will invariably command a premium.

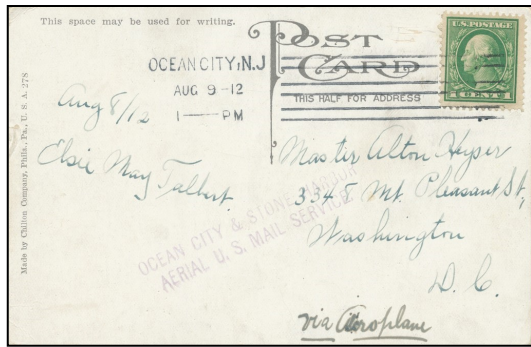
Furthermore, in order to identify the mail that was to be flown on the above dates, the two seashore post offices penned notations by hand and/or applied inked markings stating the following: ‘VIA AEROPLANE MAIL’ or ‘VIA AIRPLANE.’ The Ocean City post office utilized their regular machine-canceling device bearing the flight



**FIG.05-FIG. 06** Scenes of crowds pictured in two early Stone Harbor postcard views exemplify what it might have looked like when onlookers assembled on the beach awaiting Pilot Reid’s landings and take-offs.



**FIG.07** Postmarked at Stone Harbor on the morning of Aug. 6, 1912 and most likely intended for dispatch on the new, temporary air mail service to Ocean City, N.J., it cannot be determined if this cover was actually flown as it does not bear the postal markings indicating such service was rendered. If not flown, this would certainly have been a disappointment to the Philadelphia recipient!



**FIG.08** U.S. Pioneer Air Mail Flight No. 46 - Postcard dated and flown Aug. 9, 1912 from Ocean City to Stone Harbor, N.J. Note hand notation "VIA AEROPLANE" on this extremely rare philatelic find.

flight dated "AUG. 9 - 12 - 1PM" with six elongated straight killer bars in black ink.



**FIG.09** Picture side of the rare flown postcard above: "Boardwalk and Beach, looking North from 8th St., Ocean City, N.J.", circa 1905, depicts well-dressed summer strollers on the ever-popular boardwalk, shops, two pavilions, or gazebos, a fishing pier, and a sign advertising the Tahoma Restaurant.

"Via Aeroplane." Examples of such markings were applied both at Ocean City and at Stone Harbor. Yet another two-line cachet imprint, also using black ink, has been reported which states "VIA AEROPLANE / ROUTE." Use and application of such cachets was not necessarily consistent or uniform and therefore several different variants exist.

All mail postmarked at Stone Harbor is known to depict a circular rubber hand-stamp with four heavy killer-bars in black ink. Unfortunately, not all the mail flown received the customary backstamping at both destinations. Additionally, a review of the literature finds that due to the popularity and success of this venture, the Post Office Department extended the special air mail service between the two resort towns from August 12 to September 5.

Cessation of this service fittingly occurred on Labor Day Weekend of 1912 when vacationers generally left the sea-

dates mentioned. The remarkable post card example shown at left reveals the standard Ocean City postmark for one such southbound

In addition, a two-line cachet imprint in magenta ink was applied by hand noting "OCEAN CITY & STONE HARBOR / AERIAL U.S. MAIL SERVICE." One can see that the card also received, as was the practice, a hand-written endorsement,

shore and returned to their permanent homes to resume school and work activities. Exceedingly few pieces of mail flown during this extended period have ever been reported.

If you wish to learn more about the Ocean City - Stone Harbor pioneer airmail service that took place in August of 1912, visit [stoneharbormuseum.org](http://stoneharbormuseum.org) and view their 5min., 26sec. video entitled: "[First Air Mail Flight to Stone Harbor Stories on YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)." Enjoy the show!



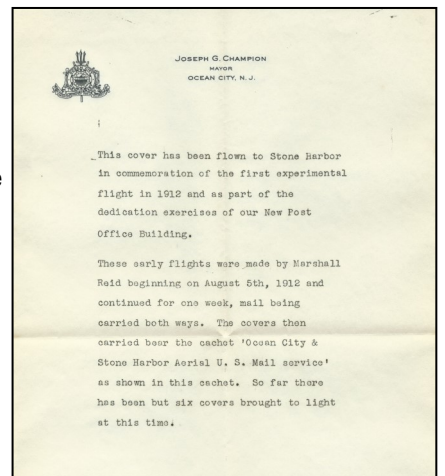
## related philatelic items



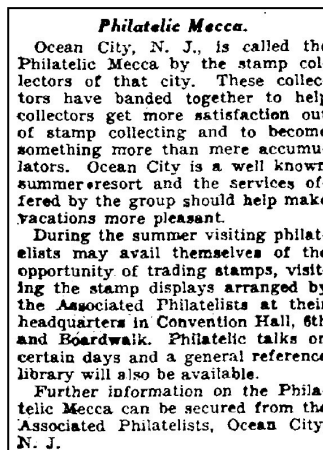
**FIG.10** A souvenir air mail envelope bearing a red cachet imprint Commemorating / 25th Anniversary / "Ocean City & Stone Harbor / Aerial U.S. Mail / Service." Marshall E. Reid, Pilot. Postmarked at Ocean City, N.J. on Aug. 7, 1937.



**FIG.11** The cachet imprint on reverse side incorporates the popular Music Pier in the design and notes "Ocean City, N.J., U.S.A." as a "Philatelic Mecca" which "Opened July 8, 1935." The Music Pier has historically been a real focal point for vacationers and visitors to Ocean City. A related news item below also references Ocean City, NJ as the Philatelic Mecca.



**FIG.12** That envelope postmarked Aug. 7, 1937, also carried a letter from the Office of Mayor Joseph G. Champion of Ocean City stating it was "flown to Stone Harbor in commemoration of the first experimental flight in 1912 and as part of the dedication exercises of our New Post Office Building."



**FIG.13** "Philatelic Mecca", July 21, 1935, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, p.46.



**FIG.14** Air Mail Cover Commemorating National Air Mail Week - May 15-21, 1938 at Ocean City, N.J.: The envelope bears the signature of Ocean City Postmaster, Leroy Jeffries, and the cachet design recognizes the "First New Jersey Air Mail" between Ocean City and Stone Harbor during August 5-12, 1912, and proudly promotes the town as "America's Greatest Family Resort."