



# Steamship Mail along the Mekong River (1866–1908)

Bryan Dowler

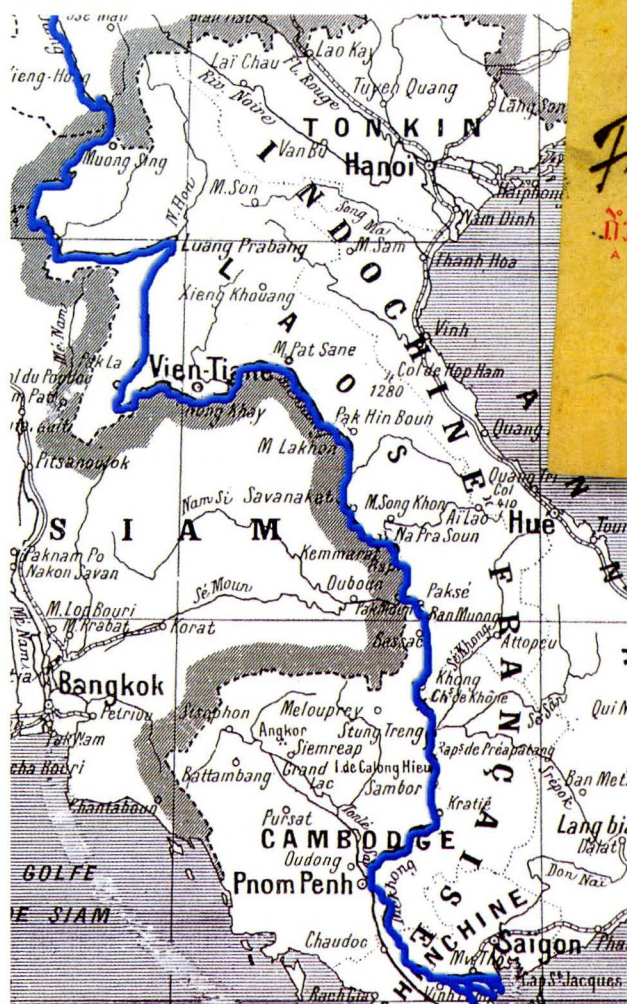


Figure 1 - A Siamese Second Issue 4-att postal card addressed to a French officer in Arles, France, tied by a Type 3 'Vapeur No. 7' double ring cancel dated 18 Dec 05 with an Arles arrival postmark, a Phnom Penh transit mark, and a Ligne N. PAQ.FR cachet on the reverse. Note, at present, the Mekong runs down the North and Eastern side of Thailand from the Chieng Saen district to the Vieng Kaen district in Chiang Rai province, and then flows into Laos, flowing along Thai border again from Chieng Kan district in Loey province to as far as the Khong Jiem district in Ubon Ratchathani. The use of Siamese mail on a French Mekong river boat is extremely rare.

Angkor, no invader had penetrated the Mekong basin in Southeast Asia.

Figure 2 - Map showing the Mekong river route from China past Burma, past the former Siamese territories, past Vien Tiane, Pak Sane, Savanaket, Kemmarat, Paksé and Bassac (in Laos), and past Stung Treng, Kratie, and Pnom Penh (in Cambodia), and ultimately past Mytho before entering the South China Sea.

## Historical Background

The Mekong is the tenth largest river in the world traveling some 3,000 miles from its source in Tibet to its delta at Mytho in Vietnam. The river passes through Yunnan (in China), Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. (Fig. 2.)

Since Kublai Khan's 13<sup>th</sup> century invasion of the land now known as Thailand and Laos, which incursion stopped at

That 600-year period ended in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when the French, who had already annexed what is now Vietnam, dispatched naval personnel, botanists and geographers up the Mekong from Saigon with instructions to explore and map the river and its surrounding area and proceed as far up the Mekong as physically possible. The chronicler of this exploration was a French naval lieutenant, Francis Garnier, who accompanied the expedition for two years, beginning in 1866. (Fig. 3, 4 & 5.)

The real purpose of the expedition (in today's parlance, 'the real agenda') was to determine whether this great river could realistically be used for commerce and, more specifically, to increase France's share of the Far East trade, which at this time was almost 90% controlled and enjoyed



**Figure 3** - An 1866 cover from Dr. Clovis Thorel of the French Expeditionary Corps to his future wife, Marie-Amelie Moreau. Francis Garnier left the letter at Pnom Penh while the rest of the expedition went on to the east of Bassac (now Champasak). This cover is franked with the 20c Eagle tied by the Pnom Penh deep blue lozenge CCH (Type L1) with a blue octagonal CORR. D'ARMÉES SAIGON 2 NOV. 66 (Nov. is inverted - Type C2). There is an arrival backstamp: 'Morlaix 6 December 1866.'



**Figure 4** - An 1867 stampless letter from Francis Garnier to his brother in Paris when the French explorers in June 1867 were about to leave Siamese territory and were awaiting permission from the King of Burma to enter his dominion. This cover has an octagonal CORR. D'ARMÉES SAIGON 18 JUIN 67 datestamp and a hand-stamped '30' postage due marking. On the back is the 'La Varenne - St. Hilaire (60) 8 AOUT 67' receiving mark.

by England, much to France's annoyance.

The history of the exploration and the attempt to turn the Mekong (which the French colonial lobby referred to as 'our river') into a superhighway for trade by the French colonialists during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is closely intertwined with the French military occupation of Chantaburi (1893-1904), and further linked to the long held intention by the French to annex the whole of Siam as part of France's expansive colonial ambitions in Southeast Asia. However, making the Mekong into such a superhighway to provide a counterweight to the British trade monopoly in the Asian region by enabling French traders to pour the wealth of

China into the coffers of France was to prove difficult.

There was a major problem as the French found out. The Mekong had never been fully navigable and was at no time a continuous length of navigable water. The river was really a disconnected number of navigable segments forming a linked succession of interrupted waterways. Even quite small boats had difficulty traveling the whole way from Luang Prabang to My Tho; trade more often than not had to abandon the main waterway and follow overland dirt track routes using bullock carts. Garnier's group initially used gunboats, then, as the river became less and less navigable, pirogues, and finally horses and palanquins.

**Figure 5** - An 1873 cover from the French 'Cabinet du President/ Conseil de Prefecture de la Seine' addressed to Francis Garnier at Saigon. The cover, routed via Marseilles, bears a French Ceres 25c tied by a boxed 'PD' in red, and also a boxed hand-struck instructional 'Affranchissement Insuffisant.' There is a military 'Corr D' Armees Saigon 26 JANV 74' receiver on the reverse. Garnier was awarded many honors by the French Government including the Legion d' Honneur. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 1873, he and his troops were ambushed by guerillas in Siam and Garnier was executed. He died before this cover and its letter reached Saigon.





Figure 6.1 - A picture of the steamer 'Jules Rueff,' a member of the Messageries Fluviales on the jetty at Phnom Penh, which was the highest point on the river that this size of steamer could reach due to the rapids at Kemmarat (between Paksé and Savan-Nakhet) and (lower down the river near Stung Treng) the waterfalls at Khong - the insurmountable barrier to further progress known as the Chutes de Khone.

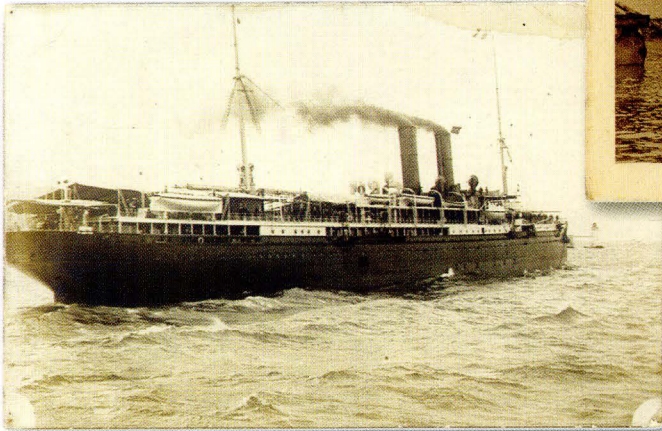


Figure 6.2 - A picture post card of 'Le Tonkin,' a steamer of the Messageries Fluviales de Cochin Chine.



Figure 6.3 - A picture post card of the 'Cigogne,' one of the smaller steamers in the 'Messageries Fluviales' fleet.

Figure 7 - A picture post card: 'Sur le Mekong - Grande Pirogue désarmée pour le passage d'un Rapide.'



### The Messageries Fluviales de Cochin Chine

Pursuing their ambition to open up the Mekong, the French from about 1880 started building a fleet of shallow draft steamers - a total of 28 were constructed - which became known as the Messageries Fluviales de Cochin Chine. (Fig. 6.)

These vessels were based at Saigon and steamed the Southeast Asian coasts stopping whenever an inlet was known to be large enough to accept the steamer. Three times each week they steamed up the Mekong, around the 'Grand Lac' of Cambodia and up as far as Phnom Penh. During the high water season (July to mid-December), a traveler could proceed further upriver by a small boat and pirogue, even as far as Luang Prabang in Laos. (Fig. 7.)

The steamers carried passengers and, in addition, each steamer had a mail room for carrying bags of mail between the various Siamese and French post offices and also carried a stock of French stamps for sale to passengers and others posting mail on board. It was normal practice on these steamers, like many other French vessels, for each boat to have on board a postal agent whose only function was to handle the mail. In addition to retailing stamps, each of these agents carried a numbered 'Vapeur' handstamp for canceling mail posted on board. But, because each agent took





Figure 8 - Illustrations of the 'Vapeur' cancellations Five types of the 'Vapeur' handstamps have been identified (J. Desrousseaux, LES POSTES ET COURRIERS FRANÇAIS EN EXTRÊME-ORIENT: LIVRE 3, p. 190)

his Vapeur handstamp with him as he moved from steamer to steamer, it has never been possible to match a particular Vapeur number with a particular ship's name. (Fig. 8.)

### The Legendary 'Chutes de Khone'

Here, in 1882, a small railway line had been built by engineers of the Messageries Fluviales across two of the islands in the middle of the river which was roughly eight miles wide at this point. This railway crossed the islands from south of north - a distance of some seven kilometers. In 1893 this railway had been used to transport two French gunboats - 'the Massie' and 'the Hamluong' - upriver into Laos, these gunboats being used to drive home to Siam the impossibility of Siam defeating France's claims to the land on the east bank of the Mekong and the river itself. The events of the

1893 'Paknam Incident' further convinced Siam that it could not realistically withstand French military pressure.

The wonderful French engineering feat to avoid the 'Chutes de Khone' has now virtually disappeared. What little remains of this narrow gauge railway that hauled cargo from beneath the falls up to Don Khon Island and across to a wharf on Don Det now runs through paddy fields and woods; the rails are long gone and the rail bed is traceable only by following bits of wooden ties. This railway was the only railway ever constructed in Laos, and today, one blackened French built engine (probably brought in from Vietnam between the two world wars) rests in a siding now reduced to not much more than a giant riveted body on steel wheels. (Fig. 9.)



Figure 9 - A modern photograph showing a section of the 'Chutes de Khone' as it is today and a contemporary photograph of the deserted, derelict and slowly decaying French locomotive of the 'Chutes de Khone railway.' French hopes and dreams of turning the Mekong into a major commercial thoroughfare died forever on this spot.





Figure 8.1 - A post card to France bearing Indo-China Yvert 6, the 5c yellow green, tied by a Type 1 'Vapeur No. 1' of 16 Dec 02, routed via Saigon Central 18 Dec 02. There are a number of receiving marks of 12 Jan 03 of Chanos Cusson, Drome and Romans Drome.

Figure 8.2 - A picture post card to France. This card bears Yvert 28, the 10c red, canceled in blue by a Type 2 'Vapeur No. 2' dated 3.12.06. The next day the card was again postmarked at Phnom Penh - 4 Dec 1906. Having arrived at Saigon, it joined a further steamer - this time of the Messageries Maritimes - for the remainder of the journey to France, and - if Raymond Salles can be believed - the final steamer was the Ernest Simons of the Ligne N leaving Saigon on 15 Dec 1906 and arriving in Marseilles 7 Jan 07.



Figure 8.3 - A 1903 Chinese Red Band envelope sent to Saigon bearing Indo-China Yvert 19, the 15c grey, tied by a Type 3 'Vapeur No. 3' of 25 Sep 03. The reverse of the cover has a Mitho [Mytho] transit mark of 29 Sep 03 and a Saigon Central receiving stamp of the same date.



Figure 8.4 - A picture post card addressed to Paris bearing Indo-China Yvert 18, the 10c, tied by a Type 3 'Vapeur No. 4' double ring cancel dated 1 Oct 04.

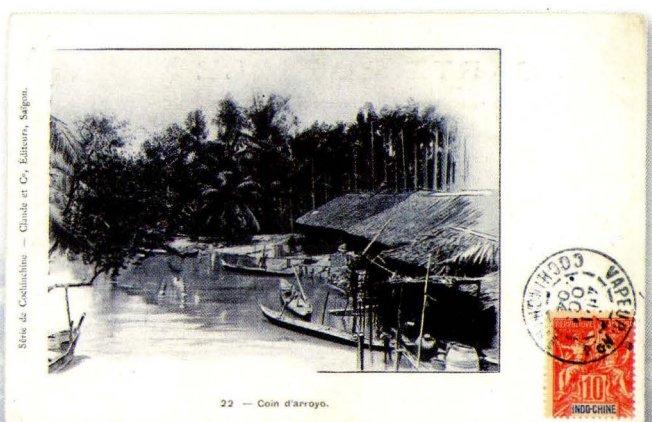


Figure 8.5 - An 1896 postal stationery envelope addressed to the Messageries Fluviales office in Paris posted on board a steamer on the Mekong with a 5c green cancelled by a Type 3 'Vapeur No. 10' double ring dated '25 12 96.' There is a Mytho/Cochinchine transit '25/12' on the reverse.



Figure 8.6 - A small cover sent from Long Xuyen on 12 July 1901. Long Xuyen, on the Mekong, lying halfway between Pnom Penh and the sea. This cover was sent unstamped and postmarked with a Type 3 'Vapeur No. 12' mark in blue dated 12 July 1901. At Saigon the cover was given a Tax handstamp and a 30c red postage due stamp was affixed, which was postmarked at Saigon on 14 July 1901.



Figure 8.7 - A 1908 cover to Nimes, France, written at Vien Tian on 7 Mars 08 and bearing an Indo-China 10c red canceled with a Type 3 'Vapeur No. 19' dated 1 Fevr 08 (which must be in error for a post date of 7 March). This cover is backstamped Savan Nakhet (illegible date), Saigon Central 27 Mars 08, and Nimes arrival (again, date illegible)

Figure 8.8 - A picture post card addressed to Switzerland having five strikes of the Type 4 'Vapeur 23' cancel dated 6 Nov 05 and with the standard Saigon postmark of the next day. The reverse has a picture of the steamer this card was probably carried on - the CIGOGNE, obviously one of the smaller steamers in the 'Messageries Fluviales' fleet. There is a Côte aux Fées arrival postmark on the face.

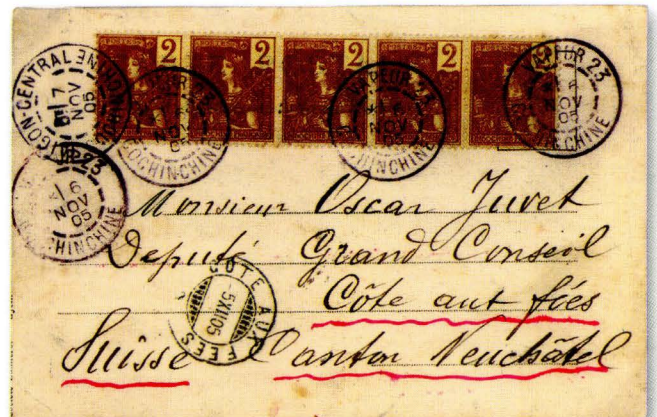


Figure 8.9 - A 1903 picture post card written on 16 November 1903 on board the French Steamer 'L'Ibis' addressed to Cochin China and bearing Indo-China Yvert 23, 15c on 25c blue tied by a Type 3 'Vapeur 24' Cochinchine double ring cancel dated 16 Nov 03 and a Travinh arrival '21 Nov 03.'

Figure 8.10 - A picture post card to France bearing Indo-China Yvert 28, the 10c red, tied by a Type 5 'Vapeur No. 27' postmark dated 14 Oct 06 and a handstamped 'FLAMANT' steamer mark.

