

The Battleship Oregon (1893-1919): “Bulldog of the Navy”

Purpose and Scope: Using examples of mail, postcards and other ephemera, a brief history of the battleship OREGON is presented for the period 1893-1919.

These days, the story of the battleship OREGON is not as well-known as it once was. But in her time, she was probably the most famous ship in the U.S. Navy, mostly remembered for her key actions during the Spanish-American War. She was ordered to Cuba from the west coast, and steamed around the horn of South America in record time, and during the Battle of Santiago Bay she chased down the Spanish flagship. As the exhibit will show, OREGON was then sent to the Asiatic Station, decommissioned in 1906, recommissioned in 1911 and served in a limited capacity until 1919. With that, her active service ended.

Even as a child growing up in Oregon I was interested in the USS OREGON, but was disappointed when I learned she wasn't as big as the gigantic modern battleships. It was many years later, especially as I began collecting naval covers, that I gained a real appreciation for the ship—both for the history and the mail associated with her.

For collectors, covers either to or from OREGON are notoriously scarce. Even one cover would be a highlight in an advanced collection. A significant challenge for this exhibit was not only to find material, but to find material that represents different aspects of her naval service. To my knowledge, only one other exhibitor has ever done this before. My exhibit, first presented in 2022, was temporarily retired in 2024 and then completely revamped for the 2026 showing at PIPEX. The entire exhibit was converted to double pages, the title was changed, new material was added, and a couple of problematic covers were taken out and replaced with others more suitable to the story. Per suggestions by the judges, chapter headings were expanded and the ending changed. Next to the chapter headings I also added a small box that moves the story along and provides information about mail possibilities for the time period. I was thrilled when the exhibit won the Grand Award.

Since the PIPEX 2026 showing, an important 1897 penalty mail cover was discovered and added to the exhibit. Per judges' suggestions, I also made a few minor changes to the text to help with census and historical context.

I've done additional research on OREGON and individuals associated with the covers, especially with regard to the ship's location and operational status. Timelines done by others, I found, were not accurate. Using mostly newspaper articles published at the time, I created my own timeline for the ship, especially focusing on the period 1911-1919. One discovery was that OREGON was in reserve status with a skeleton crew for longer periods than standard sources imply. When public events were scheduled from time-to-time, the crew would be temporarily expanded. This is interesting because it may help to explain the lack of mail reported by collectors.

Presentation: The history of the ship is arranged chronologically in chapters with items of special importance marked by double-line borders. The history of the battleship OREGON progresses with each chapter, along with philatelic possibilities and examples of related mail.

Exhibit Highlights:

- 1897 Outgoing mail from OREGON – earliest known example
- 1898 Incoming to Bert Edwards – colorful patriotic cover, just after leaving Cuba.
- 1911 Official Seal – (1) example of impression paper (4 known)
(2) example on a RPPC (only known philatelic use)
- 1912 Locy Type 2 Cancel – rarity R-4 (examples from 2 different devices)
- 1917 Locy Type 2 Cancel – late use of device (R-4)
- 1918 RPPC with Locy Type 1z Cancel (2 examples known)

Note: I've written four articles for the USCS LOG about early USS OREGON covers I've purchased. But surprisingly, after the revamp, none of those covers are presently in the exhibit. A list can be provided if wanted. During the period that OREGON was a museum ship (1925-1942), I've also written a number of articles. In fact, I'm presently researching and working on a catalog of cachet covers related to the battleship OREGON during this period (about 400 pages so far), and her influence on the roots of naval cover cachet in Oregon.

Sources:

Catalog of United States Naval Postmarks (5th Ed), USCS 1997
Navalcovermuseum.org and USCS.org
USCS Reference Collection No.2 (sold on USCS website)
Dowle, Alfred H., "Dowles' Column" [re: USS OREGON Official Seal], USCS Log, April 1965, p.3
Boylan, F.T., "Oregon Really Had a Post Office," [mentions official seal] USCS Log, June 1965, p.1

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For most of her active career the battleship OREGON was arguably the most famous ship of her time. Her key actions during the Spanish-American War became the stuff of legend. In 1898, in the days before the Panama Canal, she steamed from Bremerton to San Francisco, and then “around the horn” of South America to assist naval operations in Cuba. During the Battle of Santiago Bay, OREGON chased down the Spanish flagship as she attempted to escape. She then deployed to the Asiatic Fleet for several years before being placed out of commission at Bremerton in 1906. Affectionately called “*The Bulldog of the Navy*,” when recommissioned in 1911, OREGON drew crowds in every port she visited—all wanting to see the celebrated ship.

Although OREGON served until 1919, by then she was of limited value to the navy. She was often in a reserve status with a skeleton crew, but her fame made the ship especially useful for public events.

Covers related to OREGON: Despite her long service, mail either to/from OREGON is notoriously scarce. Most examples are hand-written envelopes or postcards. It was not until 1912 that OREGON was issued a postal device—unknown to collectors until the mid-1960’s. Examples are rare.

Presentation: The exhibit is arranged chronologically in **Chapters**, with items of special importance marked by double-line borders. The history of the battleship OREGON progresses with each chapter, along with philatelic possibilities and examples of related mail.

- Chapters:
1. Launching (1893)

2. Commissioning (1896)

3. Early Service (1896-1898)

4. Spanish-American War (1898)

5. Asiatic Station (1899-1901)

6. Back to the West Coast (1901-1902)

7. Return to U.S. Asiatic Station (1903-1906)

8. Recommissioning (1911)

9. Pre-WWI Operations (1911-1916)

10. World War I (1917-1918)

11. Final Decommissioning (1919)

12. Fate of the Battleship Oregon

Chapter name in **Gray Box** on each page

Launching of OREGON (1893)

Ship History: OREGON was the first battleship built by Union Iron Works. After the 1893 launching, it took over 2-years to finish construction.
Mail: N/A

Invitation to launching of OREGON, October 26, 1893 – 1 of about 10 known



Names appearing on Launch Invitation:



Daisy Ainsworth
(1867-1957)



Eugenia Shelby
(1877-1950)



Ruth Dolph
(1876- 1943)

(Unused PC) – A Battleship Launching at Union Iron Works (where OREGON was built)



(undivided back) Edward H. Mitchell Co., c1901, probably using an 1890’s image