

This Day in History... January 7, 1785

First Known Mail Delivered by Air

On January 7, 1785, mail was carried by an air vehicle for the first time.

The honor of flying that first airmail delivery went to Jean-Pierre Blanchard of France. Blanchard was a balloon flight pioneer.

Blanchard made his first successful balloon flight on March 2, 1784, just four months after the world's first balloon flight. He was part of a wave of balloon pilots that triggered "balloonomania" among the public. During this period, people became enamored with balloons, decorating their goods with them and wearing clothing *au ballon*—puffy sleeves, rounded skirts, and some articles that pictured balloons. Some even wore their hair à la Blanchard.



1991 stamp from the Mini-scapes Series.



These stamps were issued in 1983 for the 200th anniversary of manned flight.

In August 1784, Blanchard moved to England to find wealthy fans to help finance his ballooning. There he met John Jeffries, a wealthy doctor from Boston who had come to England during the Revolutionary War. Ballooning fascinated Jeffries and he and Blanchard quickly became partners, staging a flight demonstration for the Prince of Wales that garnered them significant attention.

Next Blanchard wanted to become the first person to fly across the English Channel. Jeffries covered the expenses, but also wanted to take part in the flight. Though Blanchard didn't want to share the honor, they eventually decided to fly together. On January 7, 1785, they piloted the balloon up over Dover, England to cross the channel. Blanchard had printed pamphlets about himself beforehand and dropped them over the English countryside.

The flight over land had been peaceful, but once they reached the sea, the balloon continuously dropped nearer and nearer to the water. Blanchard and Jeffries frantically threw whatever they could overboard, including the bag of mail they were supposed to deliver and most of their clothes.

However, after about two and a half hours, they reached their destination, Calais, France, and landed safely. Though they had dumped most of the letters into the sea, they carried one all the way to France. It was a letter sent from American loyalist William Franklin to his son William Temple Franklin. The younger Franklin was serving as a diplomat in France with his grandfather, Benjamin Franklin.

For his accomplishment, Blanchard received a pension from King Louis XVI. He went on to make the first balloon flights in America, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and Poland.



This stamp was issued in 1861 for use during the Civil War.

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