

# Flags of French maritime companies

By Dominique Cureau

**Abstract** The presentation reports on the different flags which were flown by french merchant ships for the purpose of communication or identification. The houseflags of ship owners are especially developed in the presentation.

## Maritime vexillology is quite rich because sailors use a lot of different flags



- one for the ship's nationality,
- one to honor the country where the boat is sailing,
- those that allow the ship to communicate with other ships or with an observer on earth. A complete set, according to the International Code of Signals, has 40 flags,
- from 1817 to 1929, french crafts had to wear a flag showing the maritime district of their home port,
- a standard can indicate the presence of a high ranking personality, such as an admiral, head of state...
- assistance boats like tugboats, pilot ships... can show their functions thanks to a particular flag,
- a long pennant with the craft's name is sometimes displayed. The canadian vexillologist Kevin Harrington gave to that particular flag the name of ONOMAST,
- the houseflag of the ship's owners, the subject that this article will explore in full.



## District flags

From 1817 to 1929, french crafts had to wear a flag showing the maritime district of their home port.

District were cut in two. One part bore a burgee, the other one a pennant.

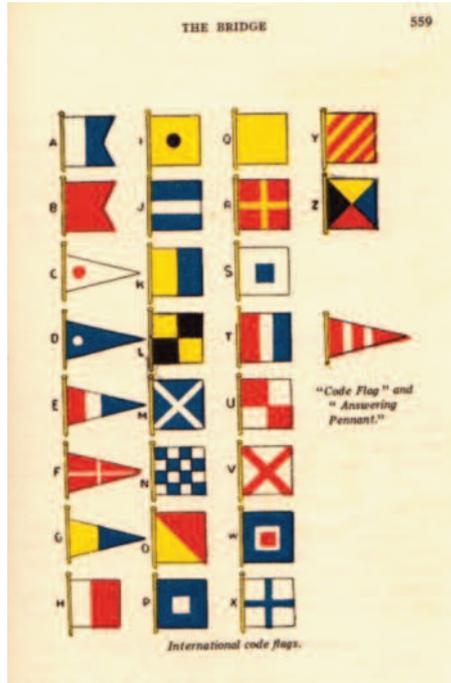
District colours were blue and white for Cherbourg, yellow and blue for Brest, red and blue for Lorient, green and white for Rochefort, red and white for Toulon.

Two other flags represented eastern and western colonies.

## Communication flags

Charles REYNOLD de CHAUVANCY developed a Multi-lingual Nautical Telegraph Code in 1855 which was made obligatory throughout the French naval and merchant fleets that same year.

French diplomacy then played a role in having this code adopted by 15 foreign nations: Great Britain, the Netherlands, Sardinia, Sweden, Greece, Naples, Belgium, Prussia, Norway, Uruguay, Hamburg, Oldenburg, Chili, Denmark and Austria.



The REYNOLD'S Code was excellent but had the disadvantage of being French which British pride could not endure in matters maritime. Britain refused to apply this code and worked on another project for a Commercial Signal Code. In 1863, the Minister of the Marine cancelled the decree of 1855 and dispatched a commission to work with the Board of Trade for the validation of the new code. This one became known as the LARKINS Code, which was adopted internationally and eventually became the International Code of Signals.

### Identification flags



Name pennant



Number flag



< Identification by signals.

Sail could be identified by her name, her number in the company or her registration number in international code.

## Function flags



Pilot ship flag



Signal to require a pilot

## House flags

Before the XIXth century, we haven't so much documents treating about ship-owners flags.

But there's noteworthy exception: East Indies Company (la Compagnie des Indes orientales) – or with complete name French Company for the East Indies Trade (Compagnie française pour le commerce des Indes orientales) – which is a trade company founded in 1664 in order to compete with dutch and english East Indies companies.

< The ships of the company had a white flag with royal arms.

The company was suspended in 1769 to be recreated by Louis XVI in 1785. It was finally dissolved in 1795 during the French Revolution.

The use of specific flags by ship-owners became widespread since the beginning of the XIXth century. Early nineteenth-century ship-owners were often family houses.

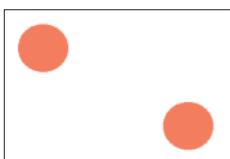
### Armement MASURIER

Masurier is an old family from Le Havre because we find an owner in Le Havre-de-Grâce in 1531 named Jehan Masurier. This shipping began in 1800 with the name of L.J. Masurier. It launched the first line Le Havre-Southampton by sailing ships. In 1834, it fit out 5 boats. In 1842, Louis Masurier took the head of the business and got 19 ships three years later.

Under the heading of his son, Jules, the company still did well and fleet fluttered red standard with A.M. initials. The fleet counted 40 vessels in 1870. Jules Masurier committed himself to the city of Le Havre: member of the Chamber of Commerce, chairman of the city Salvage Firm, mayor from 1874 to 1878. In 1878, he settled in Paris and played an important part in the Gathered Loaders Company. He died in 1888 in Paris.

### Maison POSTEL

Created by Bon Auguste Postel (1787-1856) in 1820. It carried wheat, exotic wood, sugar... to West Indies, Ceylan, Mumbai and even passengers between Cherbourg and Dunkirk. Sons Emils (1819-1901) and Auguste Félix (1817-1895) developed the company since Cherbourg and Le Havre. Between 1830 and 1890, the firm was important owning 120 sails.



The steamer "Ville de Cherbourg" sinking in 1903, lost with all hands on board, jeopardized company finances because it was really badly ensured. It was a common situation during that period.

Fitting out has been slow down and the company turned consignee and maritime officer jobs.

Emile Postel (1889-1966), chairman of the Cherbourg Chamber of Commerce, was the last ship-owner of the family.

The firm flag is white with two moved back red balls.



It looks like to the one of the Transatlantic General Company (Compagnie Générale Transatlantique), which was the most powerful XXth century French maritime company) with only one red ball.

Postel family has an explanation for that similarity: Auguste Porel and Péreire brothers (Maritime General Company - Compagnie Générale Maritime - creators, forebear of the Transat), patronizing themselves and having created their firms at the same time in the same department (Manche), they opted for complementary flags.

#### **Armement Théodore BARBEY, puis PEULVE-PETITDIDIER**

The Le Havre ship owner Isidore-Théodore Barbey founded his shipping company in 1839 with only one boat "le Ludovic" with the intention to trade with Valparaiso and Lima. The firm prospered, became a public limited company with the name of Maritime Shipping Company - Compagnie d'Armement Maritime - in 1855.

He created sailing liner routes from Le Havre to Valparaiso, Veracruz, La Plata, Bahia and Reunion.

Those beautiful sailing boats had white hulls, which gave them their nicknames "white clippers". The flag is white with letters ITB in black.



The ship owner used to never insure his vessels and reinvest immediately saved bonuses. In 1857, he owned 39 boats in-service and 34 in construction.

In 1864, Isidore-Théodore Barbey passed on the tradition to his nephew Jules Peulvé and to his partner Arthur Petitdidier. They kept the white flag but changed the previous letters with their initials PP in black. These initials was present also on the sails.

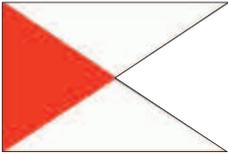


1870 was the company blaze of glory: with 81 boats sailing, this is the biggest French company. But steamers rivalry will reverse the society growth cycle. In 1875, the flotilla counts only 40 sailing boats and in 1879, the company is sold off.

Life on board these big clippers was not such easy for sailors. A seaman song had this chorus:

"To be happy in crew	<i>"Pour être heureux en équipage</i>
You should always sail	<i>Il faudrait toujours naviguer</i>
But, believe me, don't make campaign	<i>Mais, croyez-moi, ne faites pas campagne</i>
Aboard a T.B. stamped clipper"	<i>A bord d'un clipper marqué T.B."</i>

Since the middle of the XIXth century, ship owners understood the interest of being united, and then to open companies to capital in the form of public limited companies.



### **Union des Chargeurs**

« Union des Chargeurs » (Loaders Union) was a ship-owners and traders association from Le Havre which operated, since 1844, regular sailing clippers routes to South America. This company was original because it was an intermediate organization between the ship-owner possessing personally his fleet and the capital company. Members carried their boats, traders their loadings and chambers of commerce their finances. The aim was to provide a regular start the 1st and 16th of each month thanks to 12 clippers. One needs to count forty-or-so traveling days to join Le Havre to Rio. White and black ships were nicknamed “les Hirondelles de Rio” (Rio’ swallows). “Union des Chargeurs” flag was a white burgee with red triangle.

Market had been so much profitable that they had to suffer with competition to other Le Havre ship-owners (Quesnel, Grosos...). But because of steamers growth, the company was ruined. In 1872, « la Compagnie des Chargeurs Réunis » (Gathered Loaders Company) was created. Main « Union des Chargeurs » managers left to enter in the « la Compagnie des Chargeurs Réunis » board; thus, in 1880, it was the end for the firm.

### **Compagnie des Chargeurs Réunis**

Les Chargeurs Réunis (Gathered Loaders Company), french steamers company, was founded in Le Havre in 1872. In addition to provide routes with regular starts (original idea of l’Union des Chargeurs), it added a new technology: steam and financial organization of a public limited company.

In 1898, its fleet brings together 35 ships. They carry in 1891 around 470000 ton of goods and 13600 passengers over 1 million nautical miles. They mainly join Le Havre to the African West coast, Brazil, Argentina and New York.

The flag is white with five red stars, one by continent.

Passed into the fold of Fabre company in 1927, the firm tries to purchase the Aéro-postale in 1933 and confirms its wishes to invest in airfreight with foundation of the Aéromaritime.

In 1937, Chargeurs Réunis gets back to its independence relative to Fabre. The company purchases Fabre during the 60s, as well as Fraissinet, SGTM, Paquet and then Union Navale. Its activities are spread over some international freight fields: maritime freight, airfreight (63% of UTA parts, purchased in 1990 by Air France), warehousing, ports customs clearance, and even hospitality (UTH network).

The group is named over « Chargeurs » in 1983.

Between 1983 and 1995, Chargeurs is converting : abandon of maritime and air fields, reinforcement in textile, and opening to a new development field: communication. In this way, the group acquires Pathé Cinéma in 1990.

From 1996 to 1998, Chargeurs gets on with its globalization and its specialization policy initiated with the 1996 split, by refocusing over its four main businesses: wool teasing, wool-based fabric, stiffening with canvas and safety films for industrial surface.

### **DELMAS**

In 1867, Delmas brothers, Franck and Julien, create in La Rochelle the shipping company of the same name. In 1871, their eldest brother Emile leaves the Alsace (Prussian annexing) and joins his brothers in La Rochelle. As a souvenir of the land he had



to leave to stay French, he suggests the Mulhouse's wheel as company symbol. Indeed that 8 paddles water-wheel appears on Mulhouse's coat of arms, the city of mills.

Léonce Vieljeux, Franck Delmas' son-in-law, takes on the company in 1898. In 1919, its name becomes Delmas Frères et Vieljeux (Delmas brothers & Vieljeux), then Compagnie Delmas-Vieljeux (Delmas-Vieljeux Company) in 1935. In 1944, Léonce Vieljeux is shot by the Wehrmacht because of resistance acts.

Since 2006 DELMAS company belongs to the CMA-CGM group.

Alongside to these respectable companies, a lot of others shipyards or littler shipping companies were still alive.

#### PRENTOUT-LEBLOND

Henri Prentout (who had placed alongside to his surname his wife's name Leblond) managed from Rouen a huge flotilla on his behalf, either with various partners like Bonniface, Leroux, Heuzey, or handling boats from different companies.

When he retired in 1914, he managed:

- 1 sailing oil tanker belonging to GRAMONT refineries,
- 1 *MM. Tiberghien Fils de Tourcoing's three-master*,
- 4 sailboats from *Compagnie Rouennaise de Transport Maritime* (Rouen's Company of Maritime Freight) (red flag, white strip, blue star and CR initials),
- 5 sailing boats belonging to *Société anonyme des Voiliers Normands* (ex *Société Bayonnaise de Navigation*),
- 8 *Société Bretonne de Navigation's* sailing ships (red flag, white strip, blue star and SB initials),
- the "France II" five-master from *Société anonyme des Navires Mixtes*.

His successors Leroux, Heuzey and Chastellain went on with the company till 1967.

The star of Prentout's flag is drawn with either 5 or 6 points.

#### Société des Voiliers de Marseille

The 1893 law which grants a 1,70F bonus by barrel of crude gauge and 1000 nautical miles roamed to shipyards building trading ships in France, boosted big sailboats construction and utilisation. 200 three and four-master fitted out for 2000 to 3000 barrels were built in 5 years. During that time, companies were founded with the names of Voiliers Nantais, Voiliers Dunkerquois, Voiliers Havrais... Marseille was not outdone as in 1900 Société des Voiliers Marseillais was operating and made build 6 ships: Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde: April 1900, lost in New Caledonia in August 1901; Canebière: June 1900, sold to Brown and Corblet in 1910; Château-d'If: June 1900, sold to Brown and Corblet in 1910; Mistral: October 1900, lost in sea in 1908; Joliette: October 1901, ruined by a cyclone in New Caledonia in 1909; Bonneveine: June 1902, sold to Brown and Corblet in 1910.

Company's flag was blue with SVM initials and three stars.

Jean Randier in "Grands voiliers français" indicates points between the letters and five-pointed stars.

Other sources don't indicate points between the letters and six-pointed stars.





#### **Société Maritime de Courtage et Transports**

Firm created in 1926 for oil freight. It was purchased in 1935 by Galani group.  
In 1968, the activity turns towards exclusively the dry and was wound up in 1979.  
Its flag showed a phoenix rising out of the ashes.



#### **Association Pétrolière**

The Société Générale des Huiles de Pétrole created a maritime sector in 1921 to carry petroleum. In 1939, its flotilla was made up of 2 boats.  
In 1954, it became the Société Maritime des Pétroles BP.  
Its flag was simply a green strip on a yellow background.



#### **EURONOR**

Euronor company, alias Comptoir des Pêches d'Europe du Nord, has definitely the most recent houseflag. This offshore fishing firm was created in 2006 in Boulogne-sur-Mer. This blue flag with white diamond and red star oddly looks like to the one of Compagnie des Bateaux à Vapeur du Nord (1853-1970).



So I've asked to the Euronor management if there was any filiation between those two companies; Boulogne being close of Dunkirk, CBVN headquarters. The reponse was negative. Euronor flag's filiation comes from Le Garrec shipping created in 1929 and Nord Pêcheries, created in 1945, firms which are behind creation of Euronor.



Those few flags and ship-owners that I just showed you, are only little part of the subject. On my website <http://pavillon.houseflag.free.fr/>, I've currently took an inventory of 900 flags and more than 2300 french ship-owners liable to have displayed a flag. There are still possibilities to make deeper research about this subject!



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### **Bibliography**

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### **Flags drawing**

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### **About the author**

Dominique Cureau was born in 1956 inside of the Merchant Navy School of Bordeaux. This environment gave him an intensive attract to maritime flags. His website

<http://pavillon.houseflag.free.fr/> presents all his work about that subject. Presently you can find information about 900 french flags and 2300 maritime companies.