

Jeu de mail in France

Région Hauts-de-France

The region Hauts-de-France contains five departments:

- ◆ Aisne (02)
- ◆ Nord (59)
- ◆ Oise (60)
- ◆ Pas-de-Calais (62)
- ◆ Somme (80)

In this region, I found several original mail courses; however, no information about the people who played the game. Only on an engraving of Folembray can one see anonymous people playing the game.



Most information is about who and when the mail alleys were laid out, and sometimes how they disappeared.

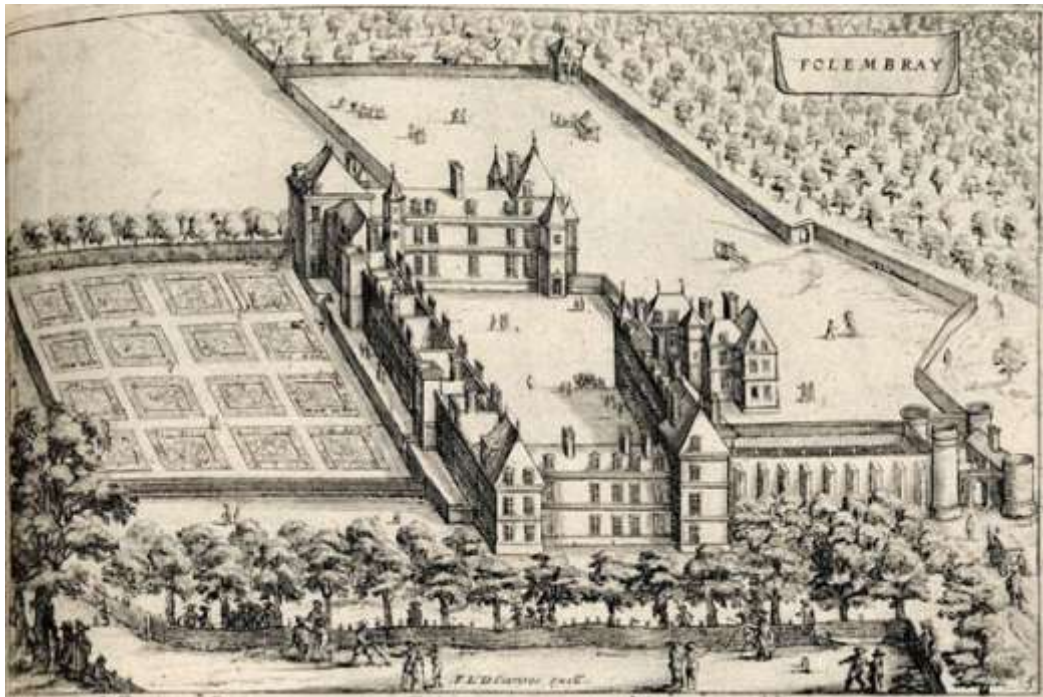
Aisne (02)

Folembray

The royal castle in Folembray was built in the Renaissance style by François I between 1540 and 1552. In 1552, it was burnt down by the troops of Marie, Queen of Hungary, and partly reconstructed by Henri II. Between 1589 and 1610, it served under Henri IV as a hunting lodge.

On the engraving from 1626, one can clearly see the mail course with several people playing the game.

All that remains of the castle are some basements and part of the tower on private terrain.



*Engraving (1626) by François Langlois, said Chartres, after Jacques I Androuet du Cerceau –
Institut national de l’histoire de l’art, Cote NUM FOL EST 104 –
Histoire du village de Folembray*

La Ferté-Milon

In the departmental archives of Aisne, there are some old postcards, not dated, of the Promenade du Mail, the Place (square) du Mail and Le Mail. No proof is found if it concerns an ancient alley of a promenade, laid out for the residents for strolling and other divertissements.

Today, the name Mail has disappeared from the list of street names.



If the building in the background once included a mail course, it is possible, but it is unproved. – m 1 8 Fi 570 - La Ferté-Milon, promenade du Mail – <https://archives.aisne.fr/>

Soissons

L'île d'Aisne, named 'le Promenoir (promenade), with a length of about 500 metres and an average width of 90 metres, was changed into a public promenade for the residents of Soissons. Beautiful trees were planted, and also, a mail alley was constructed, which gave the name to the promenade 'du Mail'. These changes date from before 1680.

(*'Histoire de la ville de Soissons'*, Jean Leroux, 1838)

In 1846, the Mail certainly no longer served for the game, but transformed into a promenade. – Cadastral plan Soissons, 390908_03 section A: 2nd leaf 1946 – <https://archives.aisne.fr/>

Up to today, the name lives still on in the Avenue du Mail, the Mail Bridge and Le Mail Scène Culturelle.



Villers-Cotterêts

Long before the restoration of the castle and its enclosure, François I, King of France (1494-1547), decreed a site for the games of ‘paume’ (hand-tennis), ‘paille-maille’ (mail), ‘tamys’ (a variant of hand-tennis) and other divertissements. The terrain was 100 ‘toises’ (± 200 metres) long and lay out as an extension of the royal vegetable gardens and along the Soissons Road. In 1911, only a small footpath remained. (Bulletin de la Société historique régionale de Villers-Cotterêts chargée de la conservation du Musée Alexandre Dumas, 1911 – Bibliothèque nationale de France)

Nord (59)

Beuvrages

The ‘Revue agricole, industrielle et littéraire du Nord / publiée sous le patronage de la Société d'agriculture, sciences et arts de l'arrondissement de Valenciennes , 1895’ mentions a canal near the Saint-Saulve fountain, named after the jeu de mail, which had been installed earlier along this watercourse by the lord.

Cambrai

In the 16th century, there were several transactions with houses near the Porte (Gate) du Mail and in the Porte du Mail Street.

In that time, the word mail concerned the game. Only in later centuries, when the game did not exist anymore, and councils transformed the courses into promenades, the meaning of the word changed.

(‘Département du Nord. Ville de Cambrai. Inventaire sommaire des archives communales antérieures à 1790, Édouard Gautier et André Lesort’, impr. de F. Deligne, 1907)

Earlier, the Porte du Mail changed name several times: Porte St Géry, Porte Notre Dame.



Long after the game died out, in 1926, the council constructed the Mail Saint-Martin. This mail served for fairs and festivities. Surrounded by trees and decorated with flower tubs, the population appreciated this mail.

The Mail Saint-Martin today. – <http://serge-photospassion.centerblog.net>

Coudekerque-Branche (59)

In the Napoleonic cadastre, one of the sheets bears the name 'Jeu de Mail', but the alley is not designed. In later years, it was the name of the quarter, taken over by Dunkerque in 1851.

There is still an Avenue du Mail.



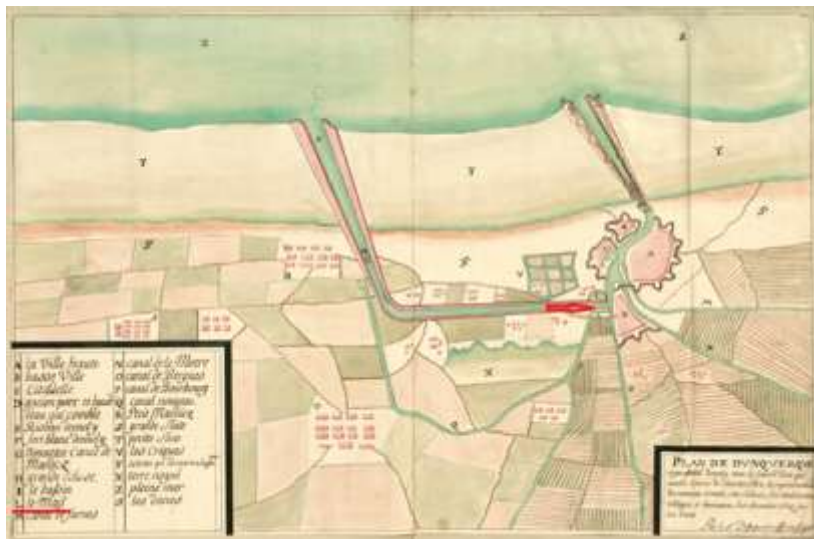
Detail from the section in the Napoleonic cadastre (cote P31 / 025), called 'Jeu de Mail' (1810) – Archives départementales du Nord

Dunkerque (59)

This map shows that in Dunkerque, there was a mail at the end of the 17th century/beginning of the 18th century. At that time, a mail was for playing the game and not yet, as in later years, for strolling. Anyhow, that was long for the annexation in 1851 of the Jeu de Mail quarter at Coudekerque-Branche.

I could not find any traces of the game or its players.

Today, there are still a Place and a Rue (street) du Jeu de Mail.



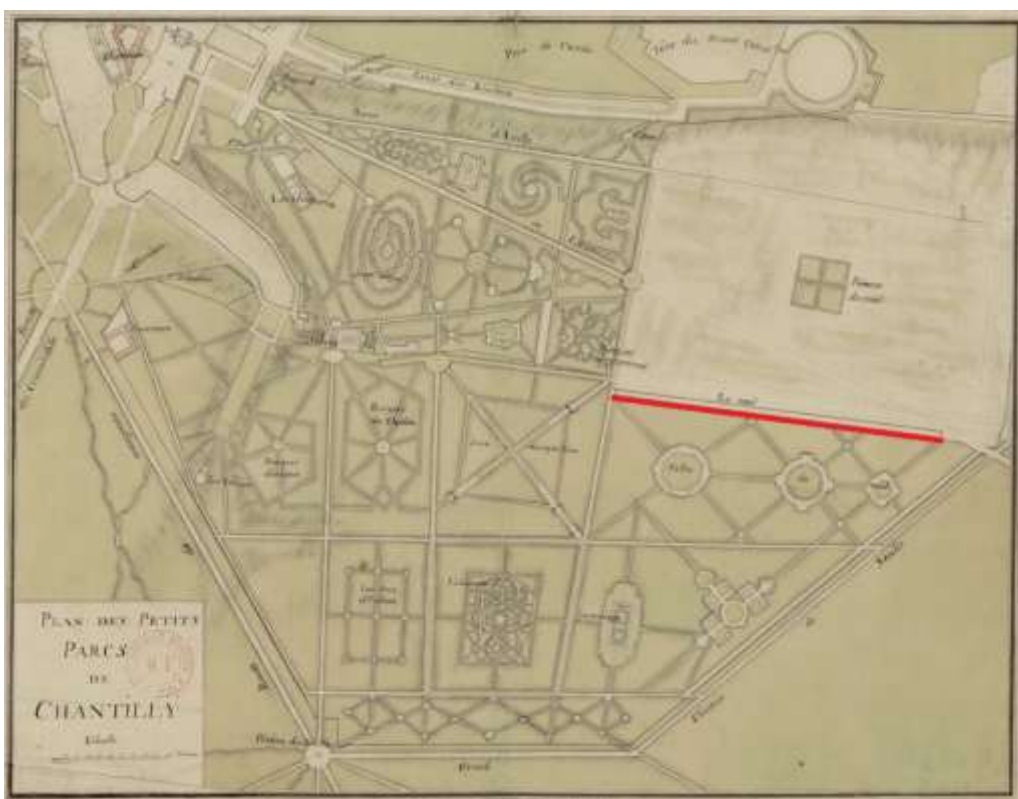
Map of Dunkerque of the 17th century, showing the Mail. – Drawing by Louis Desorgeries, engineer-cartographe of King Louis XIV – Bibliothèque nationale de France

Oise (60)

Chantilly

In all the descriptions from Chantilly Castle, the beautiful jeu de mail is mentioned. The long mail alley dates from the Grand Duché (1621-1686). Alas, there is no information about the people who played the game, nor about the later destination of the mail alley.

On a map from 1742 by J.F.D. Breteuil, the mail alley still bears the name 'jeu de mail' (Bibliothèque du Musée Condé).



The red line locates the mail alley on this 'Plan des petits parcs de Chantilly' – Anonymous, date unknown but certainly the situation until at least 1742. On the next plan with a date, 1843, the jeu de mail is called Allee du Mail (drawing by J. Rethoré, surveyor).– Bibliothèque nationale de France

Compiègne

The first royal residence in Compiègne was built in 1374 for Charles V, and a long procession of successors both visited it and modified it. Caterina de' Médici, an Italian noblewoman who became queen of France by her marriage to Henry II, was one of them.

In 1547, she repaired the castle of Compiègne and laid out the King's Garden. The king laid out a mail course in the forest, facing the garden. It was on the mail course that, in 1557, he heard the first news about the Battle of Saint-Quentin, a Spanish victory in France. Charpentier mentions that the mail court still existed in 1647.

(Le Séjour royal de Compiègne', Adrien/Antoine Charpentier, 1647)

Liancourt

Today, there is still a Rue (street) du Mail in the Quartier des Ducs. This name is a tribute to the luxuriant gardens created by Anne (called Jeanne) to keep her husband, Roger du Plessis, at the Liancourt grounds and away from the royal court. In these gardens, there were a jeu de mail and a jeu de paume. She and her husband laid out the gardens from 1623 onwards.

Excavations in 2012 revealed the vestiges of the gardens and the ponds of the 17th century, evoking the former splendour of the domain.

(<https://museedupatrimoine.fr>)

Nanteuil-le-Haudouin

The castle of Nanteuil-le-Haudouin was embellished with great pomp and circumstance from 1543 onwards. The descriptions mainly concern the interior. There was a vegetable garden, beautified with a grotto.

(<https://museedupatrimoine.fr>)

In the letters to his father (1556-1557), Henri, Duc de Guise, called the Balafre (Scarred Face), wrote about the beautiful 'paille-maille', constructed by his mother.

(Observations sur plusieurs lettres inédites de François et Henri, ducs de Guise, Jacques Berriat-Saint-Prix, 1822 Bibliothèque nationale de France)

During the Revolution, the castle was confiscated, and the Republic ordered its demolition in 1794.

(<https://museedupatrimoine.fr>)

Verneuil-en-Halatte

From the middle of the 16th century onwards, the castle changed several times from owner, amongst others, King Henri IV, who offered it to one of his mistresses.

(<https://museedupatrimoine.fr>)

In 1693, Christiaan Huygens, a Netherlandish mathematician, physicist, engineer, astronomer, and inventor, visited Chantilly. Probably on his way to or from Chantilly, he made a stop in Verneuil-en-Halatte. At the entry of the castle, he and his company descended from the carriage to walk the last part. They saw 4 or 5 alleys, shadowed by trees, and in their midst a wider one, which served for the mail game. The mail alley led to the entrance of the castle.

(‘Œuvres complètes de Christiaan Huygens. Supplément à la correspondance varia’, Société hollandaise des sciences – La Haye, M. Nijhoff, 1888-1950

In 1705, the princes de Condé bought the castle to destroy it in 1734, while it ‘shaded’ the Chantilly Castle, some 10 km farther. The ruins became overgrown with weeds and disappeared progressively.

(<https://museedupatrimoine.fr>)



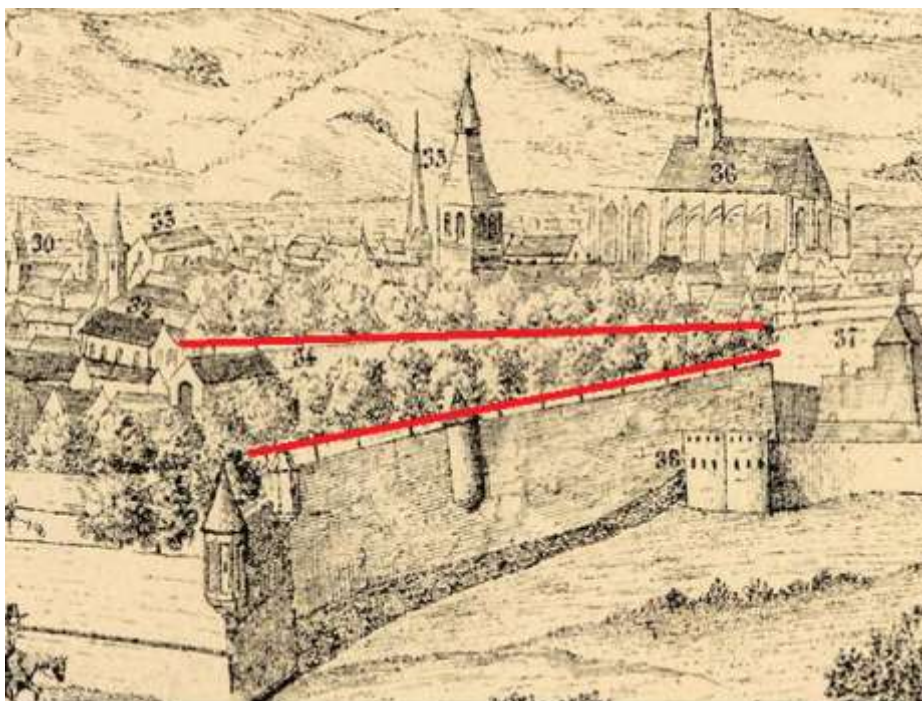
In 1987, the council decided to save the remains. Only the foundations could be restored. – <https://www.verneuil-en-halatte.fr/histoire/>

Somme (80)

Abbeville

In the ‘Bulletin de la Société d’émulation d’Abbeville’ from 1911, one can read that in 1620, a gun was placed on the ‘paillemail’ on the remparts to welcome King Louis XIII.

The map underneath is the only trace I found of the mail game in Abbeville. The mail is not memorised in today’s street names.



*Detail of a map of Abbeville under the reign of King Louis XIII. –
Bibliothèque nationale de France*

Amiens

In 1617, a priest, canon of a church, inherited a tenancy agreement for a parcel near the Paillemail.

(Répertoire et appendice des histoires locales de la Picardie. 1, François-Irénée Darsy, 1877 – Bibliothèque nationale de France)

In Amiens, there were several mails. In 1687, the first alderman changed the covering of the ramparts by more than one metre. He paid for the project with the revenues of the cut lime trees on the Mail-à-Prestres, the Parmail and the Grand-Mail.

(‘Les enceintes successives d’Amiens’, Antoine Goze, 1854 –
Bibliothèque nationale de France)

In 1704, an unmarried woman legated her house with garden and pavilion on the Mail to the penitent girls, the general hospital and the poor people, each a third part. In 1789, the hospital still received part of the penitent girls. (Répertoire et appendice des histoires locales de la Picardie. 1 –
Bibliothèque nationale de France)

The showmen asked in 1792 if they could hold their fair on the mail instead under the covered market. Their request was not admitted. A sale of trees was organised on the mail the next year. Later that year, trees on the mail were cut to be replanted some time later. (Inventaire sommaire, Arrêtés enregistrés des administrations 1790-An IV –
Archives de la Somme)



At the beginning of the 20th century, the Boulevard du Mail was used by the army for holding parades, making portraits, or just for strolling.

On a map of 1845 of Amiens by Ch. Pinsard, the street along the fortifications was named Boulevard du Mail until 1916, when the name changed into Mail Albert Ier after the death of the Belgian king. There was also a street, named Rue du Mail, today Rue Duthoit. – Plan of Amiens, anonymous, 18th century - Bibliothèque nationale de France