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THE POSTAL HISTORY OF PUERTO RICO



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Foreword

During the five years of 1939-1943 inclusive we published serially in *The American Philatelist* the text matter now contained in this volume. We had intended to bring out the book much earlier, but four years of war shortages delayed it for awhile, and it is only now that the book is presented for your consideration.

So far as we are aware, this is by far the most complete and detailed account extant of the subject matter which it covers. No such volume could ever be called entirely complete, but this comes about as close to it, for the early postal history of Puerto Rico, as one is ever likely to see. We consider it a very real contribution to the reference literature of philately.

A. P. S. Philatelic Research and Literature Committee
RALPH A. KIMBLE, Chairman.

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Introduction

The island of Puerto Rico has been United States territory for almost fifty years. In spite of this there are a large number of Americans who are still unaware that it was ceded to the United States as a result of the Spanish American War. This ignorance is found even among some collectors who style themselves as "U. S. Specialists." In view of the fact that Puerto Rico is forgotten territory it might be well to briefly review the history of the Island which is full of romance and interest.

Puerto Rico was called BORINQUEN (Land of the Brave Men) by the native Indians whom Columbus found on the Island when he stepped on the west coast on November 19, 1493. Columbus landed neither troops nor colonists, sailed away from Puerto Rico after having sent a few sailors ashore to fill their water casks from the waters of a small river which flowed into Mona Passage. Although Columbus did not name the island he noted in his diary that it was fertile, and in 1505 the Spanish Crown granted the governorship to Captain Vicente Yañez Pinzón, who had been with Columbus in 1493. Captain Yañez, however, never came to Puerto Rico, selling his rights to a second party, who did send colonists to take possession of the island. This party, however, had little luck on Puerto Rican soil. The Indians were not only unfriendly, but they were too numerous to be enslaved and the colonization party left Puerto Rico, disillusioned, to join the Spanish settlers on the island of Cuba.

The first actual governor of Puerto Rico was the famed Don Juan Ponce de Leon, who had accompanied Columbus as a common foot soldier. Ponce de Leon arrived in 1508 and founded the little settlement of Caparra, several miles south of what is now the capital city of Puerto Rico, but soon moved his settlement to the present site of San Juan and abandoned the original settlement of Villa Caparra. The new site was named Puerto Rico, the name of the island at that time being San Juan Bautista. The city of Puerto Rico soon became famous, not because there was gold in "San Juan Bautista", but, according to legend, because the Spanish treasure ships from Mexico made it a port of call and because literally scores of them were captured by pirates or by British and French privateers within a few hours after they had sailed from Puerto Rico (Rich Port of the Caribbean) for Spanish ports. The names of the capital and of the Island gradually became transposed so that by 1900 the city was known as San Juan Bautista, while the Island was Puerto Rico.

The history of Puerto Rico throughout the 16th and 17th centuries was the history of pirate raids and war. The French tried to seize the island in 1528. For a century and a half Puerto Rico was repeatedly harassed. Sir Francis Drake's fleet attempted to capture San Juan Bautista in 1595—legend has had it that during the attack the famed British mariner John Hawkins of Spanish Armada fame, was killed, but recent evidence has been found indicating that he died of dysentery. On June 5, 1598, the Earl of Cumberland landed a heavily armed force of British who, after two weeks of desperate fighting, drove the Spanish defenders from the island and captured El Morro itself. An epidemic of smallpox, which had already depleted the Spanish garrison, forced the English to abandon the island after it had been under British control for 157 days. In 1625 a Dutch fleet of 17 ships and 2,500 men captured the city of San Juan Bautista but were repulsed while trying to storm the walls of El Morro. British invasion again threatened in 1797, but the fortifications had been so greatly strengthened that after two weeks of futile bombardment the attack was given up.

In 1816 began a reign of terror for Puerto Rico caused by pirates from neighboring islands. American shipping was so interfered with that the United States sent a fleet under the command of Commodore David Porter into Puerto Rican waters. Porter's god-son, then fifteen years old, the future Admiral Farragut, accompanied the expedition. A high-light of the campaign was when one of the American ships being refused

permission to enter San Juan harbor, insisted on going into the port anyway. A shot from El Morro killed the American ship's commander. A subsequent apology from the Spanish Governor General was accepted and historic El Morro did not again fire on an American ship of war until 1898 when it successfully repulsed the American fleet. An American schooner, searching for pirates, was seized by authorities in the harbor of Fajardo. Commodore Porter landed, spiked the guns of the port battery and left. The United States Department of State was later forced to apologize for this action.

During a period of over four hundred years the only attempt at armed rebellion against Spanish authority took place in 1868 in the mountain town of Lares. Strange to say, this abortive attempt to found the "Republic of Puerto Rico" was partly engineered by an American, Matthew Bruckman, and an exiled Venezuelan. The revolt was premature, and did not have the support of the Islanders at large, who, after nearly four centuries of misrule, were reluctant to attempt rebellion, fearing failure with subsequent harsh reprisals. Bruckman and his companion were killed resisting arrest. These were the total casualties in this ill-timed revolution.

During all of this period the Island had been more or less neglected by Spain. In 1815 it was thrown open to colonization, and as a result large numbers of loyalists who had been expelled from South American countries, upon their declaration of independence, flocked to the island. During the first Spanish Republic the Island was made a province of Spain and given full representation in the Spanish Cortes. This right was withdrawn, however, upon the overthrow of the republic. Slavery was abolished in March 1873. Between 1875 and 1886 there was considerable agitation for a more representative form of government. In 1897 certain reforms were granted by the Crown but there was little time for them to become actually operative before the war with the United States changed the political status of the Island.

For some unknown reason the stamps of Puerto Rico have been sadly neglected by the American collector. Possibly this unpopularity is traceable to the lack of philatelic literature to encourage new specialists, and show them what to seek. In other words, the ignorance of the average American of the better class as to the history and geography of our outlying possessions, is matched by the ignorance of the average American collector as to the possibilities of studying such a virgin philatelic field as Puerto Rico. This state of affairs is most unfortunate as we find that the stamps of Puerto Rico are of tremendous interest and we hope that our efforts to enlighten the American collector will awaken some desire for these issues which are fast becoming almost unobtainable in used condition.

Practically no attention has been given to the postal history of the Island under the Spanish administration of the postal system. What little has been done is published in Spanish, thus making it difficult to read for the American collector. Within the past few years some study has been given to the American military postal service, as created and operated by the Military Government in 1898 and 1899.

In attempting to compile a reasonably accurate synopsis of the early postal history of Puerto Rico we find ourselves confronted with tremendous obstacles. As far as we now know this is the first attempt, in English, at anything of this nature. We realize that any philatelic history is always subject to revision and addition; thus our first attempt may be far from complete. If, as a result of this work, we are successful in uncovering any new unknown facts, or if any of our theories are disproved; thus throwing more light on unknown details, we will be content to have information brought to light in connection with the Puerto Rican postal service.

Fire having destroyed part of the main post office, and postal administration building, in San Juan during the year 1890 (also part of the Island's stamp supply, hence the scarcity of certain stamps of the 1890 issue) all of the old postal records of the Island were destroyed. The records of the postal administration from 1890 up to the evacuation of the Island by the Spanish authorities at the close of the Spanish-American War in 1898, were removed to Spain along with the rest of the Royal Archives, and deposited in a place evidently unknown to mankind. Before the civil war in Spain

the Archives of the Indies, at Sevilla, contained some thirty two thousand portfolios of historical documents relating to the discovery, exploration, conquest, and loss of the Americas; while in the beautiful Administration Building of the Postal Service at Madrid a search disclosed nothing on the postal history of Puerto Rico during its four hundred and five years of Spanish Dominion!



Fig. 1.—The earliest Spanish West Indian post mark that we have seen. Letter is dated at Havana, in 1815. Evidently Cuba was then referred to as "ISLAND OF BARBADOES". Presumably some similar form of postal marking must have been in use in Puerto Rico.

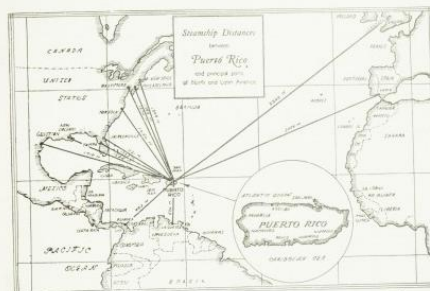


Plate No. 1.—The location of the Island of Puerto Rico in relation to the mainland of the United States.

It will be seen by referring to Plate No. 1 that the island of Puerto Rico lies at the extreme eastern end of the West Indian group known as the "Greater Antilles", of which Cuba, Haiti and Jamaica are the larger units.

The island, which is one hundred miles long and thirty-five miles wide, has a population of approximately 2,000,000. The inhabitants are now American citizens. Both English and Spanish are spoken, but Spanish is still the prevailing tongue of the mass of the population.

As yet we have been unsuccessful in locating data as to the postal tariff schedules in force during the early days of the Puerto Rican postal system. We do know with a

ADJUNTAS AGUADA AGUADILLA
AGUADILLA ANASCO
ARROYO BARRAN BARROS
CAMUY QUITAS CAYEY
CAGUAS. CABOROJO
BAYAMON CIALES CIDRA
GUAYAMA DORADO COROZAL
GUAYAMA. GUAYANILLA
HUMACAO GUAYANILLA
JUANADIAZ JUNCOS LARES
LUQUILLO MANATI MARIAS
MARICAO MAUNABO MOROVIS
MAYAGUEZ NAGUABO
PATILLAS PENUELLAS
PEPINO PIEDRAS PONCE.
RIOPIEDRAS SABANA DE
SABANA PALMAR
GRANDE SABANA DEL
SANGERMAN PALMAR
S. LORENZO TOA ALTA
TOABAJA TRUJILLO
UTUADO VIEQUES VEGABAJA
VEGA ALTA YABUCOA

Plate No. 2.—Types of Puerto Rican straight line town marks as found on pre-stamp covers.

certain degree of surety, however, that a fixed tariff was in force. The "Ordenanza General de Correos" of 1794 provides:

"The postal rates . . . shall be clearly displayed in each mail station, hung on the wall in such a manner that they can be clearly seen, so that no excess charges can be collected under any condition."

"It is hereby specified that if any postman should carry greater weights than specified (on the postal way bills) or if it be proven that he has added postage on the envelopes of the letters, . . . he will be deprived of his titles and will be discharged from his office, and can never again work for the Treasury. (The postal service was evidently part of the Treasury Department)."

It is only by an examination of the pre-stamp cover itself that we are able to determine the actual rates of postage in force during certain periods. For instance we know from an inspection of a number of covers that the following rates were in force between the dates as shown:

1847 Jan. 16 to 1850 June 28, 4 reales per ounce,
1852 Oct. 30 to ? ? ? 2, 3 reales per ounce.

1/2 9 7 9 19 1 1/4 9 1 1/2 9
2 1/2 9 9 9 14 9
2 3 1/4 9 31 1/2 9 55 9

Plate No. 3.—Types of rating marks having the unit of weight expressed in ounces or fractions of an ounce.

In addition to rating marks showing rates in unit of weight, we note a second form of rating mark which shows the "rate" as a unit of currency. Examples of these are shown in Plate No. 6. Our studies of actual covers bearing these currency ratings leads us to believe that these markings were often made from two or more dies, each one impressed separately to make up the desired rate. From the appearance on cover it seems that the unit of value was struck from a series of numeral dies and the currency unit then impressed separately. These ratings are usually found impressed in blue, or black ink, the former predominating. The small fraction type (see Plate 6) is not often found during the pre-stamp period but is quite commonly used in connection with the first issue of stamps.

From the few covers available for study, we gain the impression that rating marks were most often used by the larger offices, such as San Juan, although we do occasionally find instances of their use in other towns.

Envelopes seem to have been more widely used in Puerto Rico at an earlier date than in the United States. We base this assumption on the relatively large number of pre-stamp covers seen, which consist of a hand made envelope rather than the usual folded letter sheet. This is probably due to the fact that the Puerto Rican postal rates were based on weight rather than "sheets" as was the case in the United States.