GUAM ISLAND MAIL 1899-1904
THE OVERPRINTED STAMPS
By Alfred F. Kugel

This article concerns itself with the "classic period" of Guam philately, which can be viewed as the first five years under American administration. This is also the period during which the only stamps specially provided for the island were in use. These stamps and the postal markings that were used at the time are the subjects for this discussion.

BACKGROUND

Guam is the main island in the Marianas group in the Western Pacific Ocean. With an area of 210 square miles, it is the largest island in Micronesia, located about 3,300 miles west of Honolulu, 1,500 miles southeast of Tokyo and 1,500 miles east of Manila. The island was discovered and claimed for Spain by Ferdinand Magellan on March 6, 1521. It remained a sleepy backwater of the Spanish Empire for the next 350 years. Today it is the westernmost of all the U.S. possessions.

Modern times began with the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in April 1898. The U.S.S. Charleston arrived on June 20, 1898 en route on a voyage to Manila. Its commanding officer, Lieutenant Glass, demanded surrender by the unsuspecting Spanish governor, who complied although he was unaware that war had been declared. The island was formally ceded to the United States by the Treaty of Paris on December 10, 1898 although the Americans did not take over actual administration until August 10, 1899 when U.S.S. Yosemite and Captain Richard L. Leary, the newly appointed Governor of Guam, arrived. The population is estimated to have been about 9,000 at that time, mostly native Chamorros.

Governor Leary appointed Chief Yeoman Thomas F. Hobby as Acting Postmaster, and postal service under the auspices of the U.S. Navy was inaugurated on board Yosemite on August 15, 1899, utilizing a supply of U.S. stamps appropriately overprinted "GUAM" and a straight-line postmark. (See Figure 1 for a cover with the first postmark.) Postal activity was moved to Government House in the main town of Agana on November 25, 1899.

Figure 1. January 1900 cover with three overprinted stamps cancelled with the first Guam postmark

As to the stamps which were overprinted in Washington and sent to the island, there were eleven denominations of the U.S. First Bureau issue of 1894, ranging from 1 cent to $1.00, as well as the 10¢ special delivery stamp of 1895. These were placed on sale on the opening day of the postal service. The stamps had been purchased by the Navy from the Bureau of Engraving and Printing at cost.

The 2¢ rose carmine stamp, which paid the domestic letter rate, was expected to be in the highest demand. A total of 105,000 copies were produced, including a second printing of red stamps made during December 1899. The next largest printings were the 1¢ for domestic postcards (25,000) and the 5¢ for international letters (20,000). Printings of most the other regular postage stamps and the special delivery were more limited, ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 copies each. However, there being no conceivable commercial use for the 50¢ and $1.00 denominations, these were printed in quantities of just 4,000 and 3,000, respectively. In fact, these two stamps are only seen on covers that were prepared by or for philatelists or as souvenirs of the occupation.
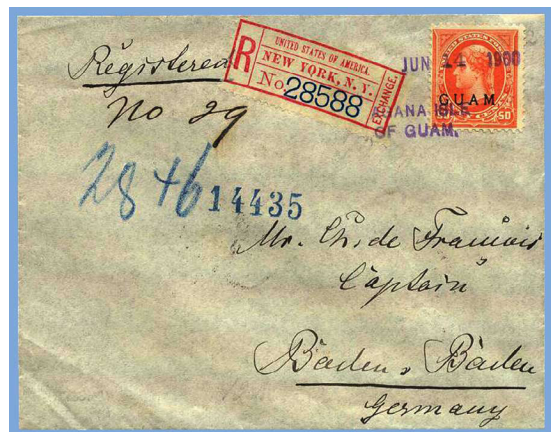

Figure 2. June 1900 cover with 50¢ stamp sent registered to noted philatelist in Germany.

There is no record that any commemorative stamps were sold on Guam during the classic period. However, there are a few examples of such stamps with Guam cancels, indicating that they were either carried or sent to persons on the island, who used them on mail. Examples of Columbian commemoratives used on a piece of a cover are shown as Figure 3.

Figure 3. Columbian commemoratives on June 1900 piece showing Guam postmark.

EARLY GUAM POSTMARKS

The postmark that came on U.S.S. Yosemite was placed in service the day that the post office opened, August 15, 1899. It is recorded as used until May 22, 1900. The latest recorded example of this marking, on a cover franked with 2¢ postage and a 10¢ special delivery stamp is shown as Figure 4.

Figure 4. Cover with May 1900 latest recorded date for the first postmark sent Special Delivery.

In addition to the postmark that arrived on Yosemite, several old Spanish markings were found in Government House in Agana, and it is believed that they were used there temporarily by Assistant Postmaster Perez, a native Guamanian, while Hobby conducted the postal business on board Yosemite. The cds was inscribed

"Marianas" and did not have a year date. It was usually accompanied by an oval killer filled with dots and a star in the center. Registered mail was designated by an additional strike of a rectangle inscribed "CERTIF." These markings are recorded as used between August 17 and December 8, 1899. The earliest registered letter from Guam is shown as Figure 5.

Figure 5. August 1899 earliest registered cover showing old Spanish postal markings.

For one reason or another, three other provisional straight-line postmarks were used during the period when the service was under the jurisdiction of the Navy Department. The first was inscribed "AGANA, GUAM" in serifed letters. It is only known used on a single day, December 5, 1899. (Figure 6.)
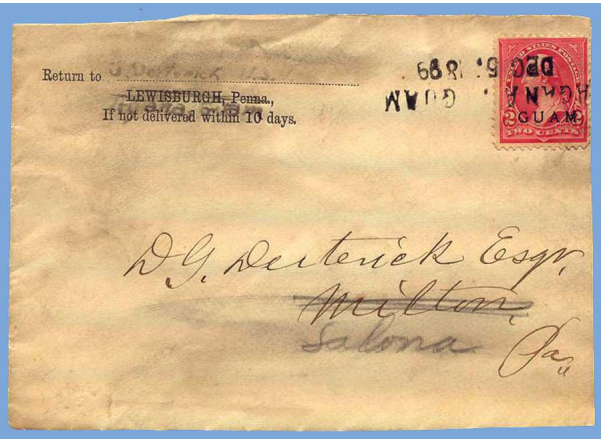

Figure 6. December 1899 cover with second straight-line cancel. No other example reported.

Whether it was damaged or lost isn't known, but there is no indication of any subsequent use. However, a new marking with a large "AGAÑA, GUAM" in sans-serif lettering was widely used over an extended time period from February 7, 1900 to July 13, 1901. An example is shown as Figure 7.

Figure 7. August 1900 cover with large straight-line cancel and circular registration marking.

Another widely-used marking was inscribed "AGANA, ISLE OF GUAM" in small capital letters. It is recorded as used from June 14 to October 14, 1900.

There was an additional marking that was used on registered letters during the classic period -- a circle inscribed "Agaña/Guam" with a space in the center in which the registration number would be entered. This mark is recorded as used from December 24, 1900 to January 11, 1902.

Not all of the postal activity was at Agana during this period. A second post office was opened at San Luis d'Apra, a bay south of Agana that provided a better anchorage. Figure 8 shows a cover with the first San Luis postmark, a straight-line device recorded as being used from December 9, 1899 to July 11, 1900.
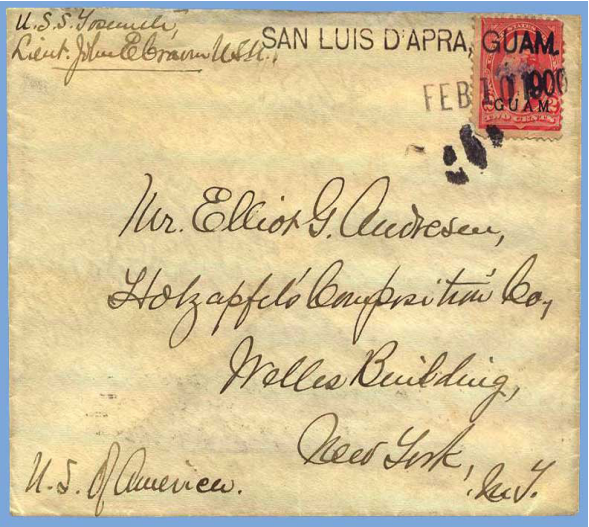

Figure 8. February 1900 straight-line San Luis d'Apra cancel on cover.

Figure 9. October 1900 circular San Luis d'Apra cancel on stationery envelope.

THE POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT TAKES OVER

On March 29, 1901 responsibility for the operations on Guam were transferred from the Navy to the Post Office Department. At that time, unoverprinted U.S. stamps were placed on sale (although the overprinted ones remained available until supplies were exhausted, and they continued to be valid for postage). A new steel cds inscribed "AGANA/ISLE OF GUAM" was brought by the Postal Agent and used from April 1901 until November 30, 1904. (See Figure 10.)

Figure 10. March 1902 cover with unoverprinted stamp and first USPO cancellation.

During that same period, a second steel cds inscribed "GUAM/LADRONE ISL'S." was placed in use in August 1901 – Figure 11.

Figure 11. January 1902 registered cover to German Marianas with Ladrone Isl's. postmark.

However, there were objections by members of the indigenous population since the word "Ladrone" meant "thieves" in Spanish. As a result, it was replaced by a new device inscribed simply "GUAM/ISL.GUAM" on April 1, 1903. (Figure 12.)

Figure 12. Third steel cds postmark used on cover.

One final postmark provided during the period under study was used as a backstamp on inbound mail. It was a steel cds inscribed "Guam, Isl. Guam./Rec'd." It is recorded as used starting on February 4, 1904. (Figure 13.)
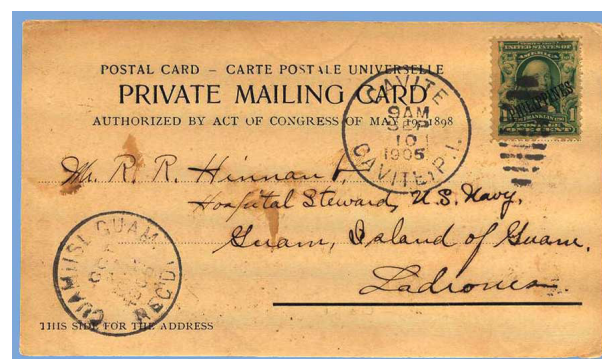

Figure 13. Receiving mark used on postcard from The Philippines.

NAVAL STATION SHIPS

Guam was first designated as a Naval Station on December 23, 1898 two weeks after the Treaty with Spain, but the island was not occupied until Cmdr. Edward Taussig and a contingent of Marines arrived on U.S.S. Bennington on February 1, 1899. During the classic period, several different vessels were designated as "Station Ships," which meant that they remained on station and provided services and supplies to other ships passing by and for onshore Navy activities. The first of these was U.S.S. Brutus, which was on station from January 1 to August 7, 1899. It was joined by U.S.S. Nanshan, which arrived on March 1, 1899.

Both of these ships were relieved when Yosemite arrived with Governor Leary on August 7. Unfortunately, the latter vessel was lost in a typhoon and sank about 60 miles north of Guam on November 13, 1900. Brutus then returned to duty and served as Station Ship from that date until March 28, 1901. It subsequently alternated on station with U.S.S. Supply for the next few years, leaving for the last time on March 7, 1904.

Unfortunately, on board post offices were not authorized for U.S. naval ships until 1908, so none of these vessels had postmarks that could be identified with Guam during the period studied. However, collectors can look for covers sent via the onshore post offices with return addresses on the ships that were in the harbor. W. H. Rush, Executive Officer of U.S.S. Solace (a Navy supply ship), was especially active in this regard.

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