

The Richness of Cuban Philately by Ernesto Cuesta

Cuban philately offers a rich and wide range of collecting opportunities that compare very favorably with those of the most interesting and varied country philatelies of the world and offer the philatelist specializing in Cuba multiple avenues to explore and exploit. In this brief article we will try to present a summary of Cuban postal history, the corresponding philatelic epochs derived from that history, and a view of the collecting possibilities that are available to anyone that might be interested in our rich philately.

HISTORY OF THE POSTS IN CUBA – Establishment and evolution

Creation of the Public Office of Postmaster General of Cuba

By the year 1754 with a population of close to 140,000 people, the island of Cuba had generated its own postal needs. Those needs motivated the Royal Order of 26 August 1754 authorizing the creation of the Internal Mail Service under the administration of the local government. Two years later on 1 March 1756 a “*mail service between La Habana and Santiago de Cuba*” is authorized to be planned and established, thus creating the *First Postal Route* in Cuba.

The mounting needs mentioned above result in the creation of the *Public Office of Postmaster General* a year later on 30 September 1757, with the stipulation that the postal service should cease to be provided by the government, that it should be sold to the highest bidder at a public auction, and that as an incentive, it should be combined with the office of Alderman of the Habana Town Hall. Following these instructions, the Office was awarded via a public auction held on December 7 of the same year to **Don José Cipriano de la Luz**, a wealthy and influential member of the community, for the sum of 18,000 pesos.

Creation of the Main Postal Administration of La Habana

Eight years later on 6 August 1764, King Carlos III issued a Royal Decree creating the “*State Maritime Posts*” (Correos Marítimos del Estado). Several days later, on August 24 the regulations governing it are published, therein establishing the **Main Postal Administration of La Habana**, ruled and administered once again by the state.

Don José Antonio de Armona y Murga is named Administrator of the newly created entity on 17 October 1764, but is not able to take office until 17 February 1765, so that Don José Cipriano de la Luz continued in his role as Postmaster General until that date. Between the years 1764 and 1792 the following postal administrations were created: Guanabacoa, Matanzas, Villa Clara, Sancti Spiritus, Trinidad, Puerto Príncipe, Bayamo, [Santiago del Cuba, [San Juan de los] Remedios, Santa María del Rosario y Jaruco.

Establishment of the Maritime Posts

The Royal Decree that created the Maritime Posts also stipulated that a monthly paquebot should travel from the port of La Coruña to the port of San Cristóbal de la Habana with all of the correspondence for YNDIAS and that upon its return it should bring all correspondence going to Spain.

For decades Spain maintained all Cuban ports closed to exterior commerce, only allowing Spanish vessels to enter Cuban ports. To avoid attacks and sacking of ships by pirates and corsairs, warships called galleons escorted ships transporting the mails. By Royal Order of 14 April 1802, the ships transporting the mails were replaced by warships until 1827 when the sailing ship company of *Arrieta, Villota y Cía.* is established.

By Royal Order of 24 May 1819, Colonel Juan de O’Farril obtained the rights to introduce and implement coastal ship transportation and mail services, establishing on February 15 of the following year a maritime communication route between the ports of La Habana and Matanzas serviced by the steamship *Neptuno*.

Eventually the restrictions on foreign commerce were lifted and in 1843 the first steamship coming from Europe, the English paquebot “Thames” of the «**Royal Mail Steam Packet Company**», entered the port of La Habana with mail from that continent. By the year 1850 sailing vessels had mostly been replaced by steamships and that change significantly impacted the postal communications between the island and the main cities of Europe and the Americas.

Establishment of the First Railroad Line

The first railroad line in Cuba was established on 19 November 1837 between La Habana and Bejucal and two years later in 1839 this line was first used as a means of transporting correspondence. Through the following years a real network of railway lines was created and postal routes serviced by them were established.

The First Stamp Issue

The Royal Decree of 18 December 1854 established that all correspondence between Spain and its overseas possessions (Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Philippines) had to be paid via postage stamps. Another Royal Decree of 15 February 1855 established the mandatory use of postage stamps for the pre-payment of all correspondence. This was a rather radical change since before then letters traveled without stamps and the recipient was the one who paid the postage upon receipt.

On April 20 of the same year, the first stamp issue for Cuba was placed on sale and by the end of the month all correspondence originating from Cuba circulated bearing postage stamps.

On 15 November 1855, the Official Gazette announced the inauguration of the Internal Mail Service for La Habana which would bring with it a notable improvement in the postal communications of the city and of the commercial sector in particular.

New Postal Services

The Royal Decree of 4 May 1858 ordered that all maritime correspondence be transported by steamships and that such services should be auctioned. That same year the **registered mail** and the **declared value mail** services were established. In 1860 the regulations for the postal carrier service are approved and implanted as well as many other improvements in the postal services. Later, on 1 May 1877, Cuba is integrated into the **Universal Postal Union**, resulting in a considerable improvement and regularization of the postal communications between Cuba and foreign countries.

Telegraph Services

In 1851 Samuel Kennedy was authorized to establish a telegraph line within the city of La Habana between the Villanueva Theater and the Monserrate Plaza. In 1853, two years later, a line was inaugurated between La Habana and Bejucal and starting from that year a real telegraph lines network was put in place all along the length and width of the island. It must be noted that **the telegraph service, as well as the railway service were established in Cuba before than in Spain.**

In 1867 a maritime cable was laid between Cuba and Florida and in 1868 permits were granted for similar cables connecting to Puerto Rico, Mexico, Panama and the northern coast of South America. By 1879 there were 172 telegraph stations in Cuba with five main offices in La Habana, Santa Clara, Puerto Príncipe, Victoria de las Tunas and Santiago de Cuba.

The Royal Decree of 29 May 1884, published in the Official Gazette of La Habana on June 24 of the same year, mandated that the postal and telegraph services be joined into a combined Communications Corps under the direction of one General Administrator.

The U.S. Postal Administration

Once the Spanish-American War was over and the military government was established in Cuba in 1898, the government embarks in a program of real improvements in the postal and communications services. Among the important changes that were made were the separation of the postal and telegraph services, the establishment of **ambulatory post offices** using the maritime and railway routes in operation, the installation of a greater number of post office boxes, the modification of the national postal rates, the promulgation of the **Postal Code**, the creation of the **Dead Letter Office**, improvements in the **Registered Mail** service, and many others.

Start of the Republic

The improvements in the postal services introduced during the U.S. Administration were adopted and continued by the new authorities. Upon inauguration of the Republic on 20 May 1902, a National Executive Decree created the Communications Directorate within the Government, to provide executive and administrative direction to the postal and telegraph services. On 9 December 1902 the Central Railroad inaugurated direct rail service between La Habana and Santiago de Cuba, a distance of 869 kilometers. This railway route and most of all of its connecting branches were used for the transportation, classification, distribution, and delivery of all national mail and all international mail during its national transit. Likewise, the Central Highway, a vital communications artery for the entire island that was built in the decade of the 1930s at a cost of \$111 millions, was a main contributor to the improvement of the Cuban postal services.

Airmail Postal Service

On 16 January 1921 the recently created **Compañía Aérea Cubana** undertook an experimental flight between La Habana and Camagüey using a Goliath aircraft. This flight carried an employee of the postal service with a bag of correspondence, but the flight was a failure commercially and only remained as an experimental flight for the transportation of mail by air. It was not until the years 1928 to 1932 that regular airmail services were established and extended throughout the island from La Habana to Baracoa in the easternmost end of the island.

Modernization of the Postal Service

Between the years 1940 to 1960 many new postal management systems were established in the island, not only at the national level, but for the handling of international mail. By 1960 the first studies with American and German companies were initiated for the automatization of the handling of correspondence using electronic systems. We leave the evolution of the postal service during the Castro era to someone with more knowledge of the subject.

PHILATELIC PERIODS

One can distinguish four periods in Cuban philately: the Colonial Era, the U.S. Administration, the Republic, and the Revolution.

1) The Colonial Era – The Colonial Era comprises two very distinct periods: the pre-philatelic period and the colonial stamps period.

Pre-Philately -- This period goes from the inception of the mail service in Cuba until 1855 when stamps started to be used for the pre-payment of all correspondence. Before the use of stamps to frank correspondence, postal markings were used to designate the town or city of origin, the points of transit and receipt, and the postal rates. The study of these postal markings trace the route that was traveled by each letter and is a fascinating aspect of our philately.

The Stamps of the Colonial Era – This period goes from the use of the first stamp issued by Spain for use in Cuba in 1855 until the stamps of the last Spanish issue for Cuba, the 1898 stamps of Alfonso XIII that were used in that year until the American intervention in the Spanish-American War. This is the classical period in the stamps of Cuba. It is interesting to note that the first stamps issued by Spain for use in Cuba were also placed in use in Puerto Rico and the Philippine Islands, and thereafter until 1876 inclusive, stamps were issued for the common use of Cuba and Puerto Rico. It was only starting in 1877 that Spain issued stamps for their exclusive use in Cuba. The classic period of Cuban philately includes some of the great rarities of world philately, such as the first surcharged stamp of the world, issued officially for the franking of correspondence within the city of La Habana in the year 1855. [A surcharged stamp is an already issued stamp on top of which a “surcharge” is applied changing its use and denomination (postal value)—in the case of the first surcharged stamp of Cuba, it was a 2 reales stamp that was revalued to ¼ of a real for the specific use of mailing letters within the city of La Habana.]

2) The U.S. Administration – This period extends from the middle of 1898 after the U.S. occupies the island of Cuba after its victory in the Spanish-American War until Cuba is declared an independent Republic on 20 May 1902. Although this was a short period of time, it is immensely rich and interesting from the philatelic point of view due to the variety of stamps used to frank correspondence during that transitional period and their various uses, many of a provisional nature. During that period some U. S. stamps were used as such to frank military correspondence, Spanish Cuba stamps continued to be used to frank correspondence for several months, some of these stamps were even surcharged in U.S. currency for local use in the area of Puerto Príncipe, U.S. stamps were surcharged for use in Cuba, and finally, the U.S. issued stamps for the sole use of Cuba. The study of the postal rates applied during this period presents various aspects, spanning the continued use of Spanish Cuba postal rates and stamps to provisional and transitional rates, including special rates for the U.S. troops in Cuba that initially even saw the use of U.S. stamps in military mail, and ending with the final postal rates that were in effect upon the inauguration of the Republic and even some time thereafter.

3) The Republic – This period extends from 20 May 1902, date in which Cuba achieves independence until the triumph of the Fidel Castro revolution on 1 January 1959. During the Republican era a great number of commemorative stamps are issued honoring distinguished individuals and significant events in Cuban history. During this period there is great interest in Cuban philately as evidenced by the numerous postal issues and the philatelic societies and clubs that are created and the considerable number of philatelic journals that are published, some of which had runs of many years with substantial philatelic content.

4) The Revolution – This period extends from 1 January 1959 to date. It is characterized by the great numbers of stamps issued as vehicles of indoctrination and source of revenue for the state. During the years that the Castro government has been in power up to April 2005, it has issued 4058 different stamps according to the Edifil Specialized Catalog of Cuba, Volume II.. As a point of comparison, there were a total of 813 stamps issued during the Spanish and U.S. Administrations and the Republic combined according to Volume I of the same catalog. That is, the production of stamps during the Castro revolutionary government has been about 5 times greater than that of all of the previous philatelic eras. As we have noted, a great number of the stamps issued have a political theme for

indoctrination purposes. The rest are of a topical nature, showing flowers, birds, art object, sports and similar topics to try to attract the attention of topical philatelists.

COLLECTING AREAS

Following we will try to summarize the various types of collecting areas that the stamps and covers from Cuba offer to the philatelist.

Among the stamps we can choose between regular postage, airmail, special delivery, newspaper, postage due, revenue, telegraph, official and charitable stamps. Additionally, within these different types of stamps we can specialize in varieties, essays and proofs, errors, and forgeries. We can collect all of these unused and used and within the latter, we have the possibility of collecting all sorts of cancellations, such as those of origin, transit, receipt, special handling, and propaganda. Finally, we can collect any and all of these from the point of view of various topics they portray.

We also have the letters or covers as philatelists refer to them. Within these we have stampless (before the use of stamps) and stamped. In the stampless letters one looks for the postal markings that were applied during transit through the mails, such as markings of origin, transit, arrival, special handling, and postal rates—the so called postal history. This postal history angle can also be applied to letters with franked with stamps, complicating the matter with the various combinations of stamps used to complete the required postal rates in effect at the time of mailing. Additionally, we have stamped postal cards and stamped envelopes with the stamps already printed on them, and of course, all of the variants of these with regular stamps added to complete higher frankings than those originally intended. Later in the 20th Century we have commemorative covers of the first days of issue and with the advent of aviation, covers commemorating first flights and the creation of aerograms. The collecting of letters and postal markings is infinite in its possibilities.

And if these collecting areas are not sufficient to motivate you, perhaps we can interest you in a related area, such as collecting post office memorabilia, mailing labels, catalogs of philatelic auctions, and philatelic literature—a subject matter that is dear to my own heart.

THE INTERNATIONAL CUBAN PHILATELIC SOCIETY

Fortunately, to guide the steps of those that have not already been scared by the wide range of collecting possibilities afforded by Cuban philately and who wish to explore any of its aspects, you can seek the assistance of the International Cuban Philatelic Society (ICPS). This Society was founded in 2010 by Ernesto Cuesta, and currently counts with over 100 members all over the world. This Society has as its objective the promotion of all aspects of Cuban philately worldwide, revealing the wide range and richness of collecting areas it offers to the collector seeking new philatelic horizons. If you are interested in Cuban philately, we recommend you become a member of the Society. You can get in touch with the Society at the following address:

ICPS
P.O. Box 34434
Bethesda, MD 20827
U.S.A.

If you have access to the Internet, you can also get in touch with the Society through its Website using the following Internet address (url): <http://www.cubafil.org/>

Author's Note: The section on the history of the Cuban mails is taken and adapted from the article "A Brief Story of the Development of the Postal Services in Cuba" by Pedro Rodríguez.