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with images replaced or added*



The Postmaster Provisionals of 1898

By R. B. PRESTON, A.P.S. 13004

INTRODUCTION—

It is unfortunate that collectors consider the provisional stamps issued at Ponce and Coamo in 1898 as Puerto Rican provisionals. As a matter of fact they should more correctly be classed as United States postmasters provisionals. They were issued under specific authority from the commanding officer of the United States armed forces, in his capacity as representative of the government of the United States.

[Note: Only the Ponce and Coamo Provisionals are listed in Scott, still as Puerto Rico Provisionals. JFD.]

REASON FOR THE ISSUE OF PROVISIONALS

WHEN the United States forces landed on the south coast of Puerto Rico on July 25, 1898 the Spanish armed forces were forced to withdraw towards San Juan on the north coast. As they withdrew most of the Spanish

government civilian employees left with the troops; incidentally most government jobs were filled by civil servants from Spain, not by Puerto Ricans. The postmasters, being Spanish rather than Puerto Rican, left with the army and as a result the American Army advanced into an area where all postal and telegraph service had ceased. To reopen this vital service it would have been necessary to train a new force of postal employees recruited from the Puerto Rican population or else to bring in a staff of American postal workers.

The American army of occupation, as originally landed in Puerto Rico, was accompanied by only three postal clerks. It does not seem possible that this staff could have brought with them sufficient postal supplies, such as stamps etc., to have cared for the requirements of the troops. The fact that a large native population would also clamor for postal facilities was not foreseen—we had no AMG officers in 1898!

Shortly after the occupation of Ponce, the second largest city, the situation became chronic. It must not be forgotten, in these days of “total war” that in 1898 we did not consider ourselves as being at war with the native population of either Cuba or Puerto Rico, but only with the Spanish Government forces who were considered as oppressors of the native islanders. Actually the native Puerto Ricans received the American Army as liberators, and were considered by the soldiers as being a “captive people.” Local municipal governments continued to function under their former elected or appointed leaders.

The Alcalde (mayor) of Ponce, Sr. R. U. Colon proposed to organize a provisional mail service within the occupied territory, to operate until such time as the United States postal service could organize a proper service. With this thought in mind he presented the following petition to Major General Wilson, Commanding the American Army at Ponce:—

“Honorable Commander of the District.

Sir:

The important mail service between this city and other towns is now entirely suspended because with the retirement of the Spanish Army all government employees left their posts, abandoning both telegraph and mail stations.

It is not necessary that I stress the importance of quickly resuming this vital service, since your honor is well aware of its importance.

The purpose of this petition is to request your honorable authority to the establishment of a PROVISIONAL MAIL SERVICE BETWEEN THIS CITY AND THE TOWNS WHERE THE SOVEREIGNTY OF THE AMERICAN GOVERNMENT IS RECOGNIZED AND ESTABLISHED.

To this effect, I ask your Honor to give me authority for the following:

1st. The Ayuntamiento de Ponce (municipal government) will establish a postal service between this city and:—La Playa de Ponce, the towns of Adjuntas, Penuelas, Guayanilla, Yauco, Cabana Grande, San German, Juana Diaz, and Santa Isabel.

2nd. This postal service will be extended to other towns as they are occupied by the American Army, or which may spontaneously recognize your sovereignty, thus making AN EXCHANGE OF MAIL POSSIBLE.

3rd. The Alcalde de Ponce will arrange the necessary dispositions for the guarantee and regularity of this service, coming to an understanding to that effect with the authorities of the towns to which it may be extended.

4th. To provide for the expenses, or part of them, occasioned by this service. the Ayuntamiento de Ponce would be AUTHORIZED TO PRODUCE A POSTAGE

STAMP, of the value of 5c (*Spanish currency*) to bear in the upper part the word "POSTAGES," and in the lower part the word "CORREOS" and in the center "5 cts," to be printed on common paper, and as a control mark to be further impressed with the official seal of the Ayuntamiento de Ponce, which has as its design the Coat of Arms of Spain, this stamp to prepay single letters, weighing no more than 15 grams ($\frac{1}{2}$ oz.).

5th. Also, for the purpose of covering the expenses occasioned by this service, the Alcalde de Ponce WILL MAKE SIMILAR ARRANGEMENTS with the Alcaldies or Ayuntamientos using this provisional mail service.

6th. This mail service will only operate for a limited time, until the regular service to be established by the Government of the United States is fully organized; its establishment being only requested due to the present emergency, so that commercial relations and the exchange of mail between the aforesaid towns shall not be wholly interrupted.

Very respectfully,

(Signed) R. U. Colon
ALCALDE DE PONCE

APPROVED By Command of Major General Wilson

Tasker H. Bliss
Lieutenant Colonel and Chief of Staff

TO BE PUBLISHED IN THE NEWSPAPER "LA NUEVA ERA" for the general information of the public.

R. U. Colon
ALCALDE DE PONCE

To fulfill to duties of the local administrador of posts, as authorized by this document, I appoint Don Julio Mirailh y Ortiz, a competent and responsible person.

R. U. Colon
ALCALDE DE PONCE

The above quoted translation of Alcalde Colon's petition was taken from the Ponce newspaper LA NUEVA ERA. A careful reading of the approved

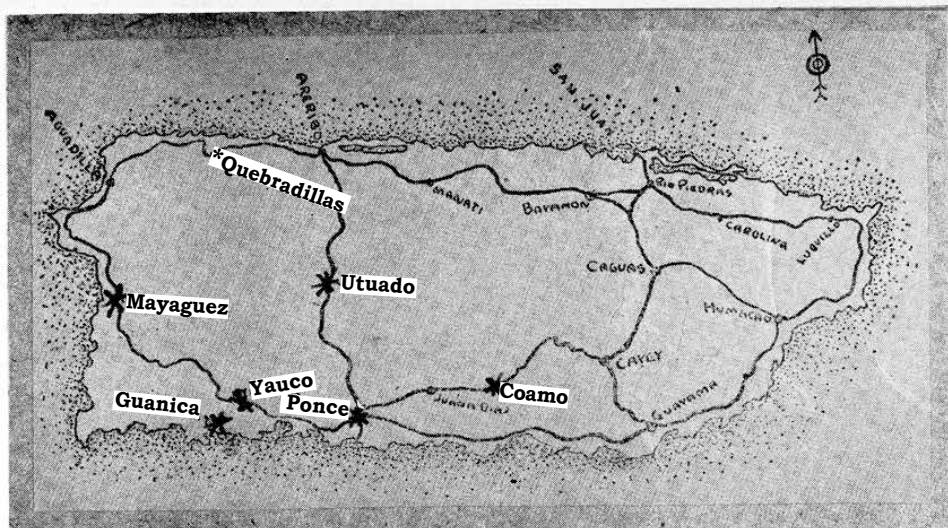


FIG. 1—Stars indicate towns known to have used provisional stamps or provisional "postage paid" markings.

request will show that any municipality (Ayuntamiento), acting as a part of this provisional mail service, is authorized to produce a provisional stamp; two did just that, produced provisional adhesive postage stamps, but at least four other towns produced, and used no less than five types of "frank" markings which were struck direct on the envelope to indicate that postal charges were fully prepaid in cash. Unfortunately none of these markings have as yet been found on unused covers thus proving definitely that they were entitled to full provisional status.

The Ponce Provisional stamp was placed in use first, just when we do not know, however we can be fairly sure that it was authorized either August 7th or August 8th. This can be assumed from the towns mentioned by Alcalde Colon as being in the hands of the American Army; he lists Juana Diaz which was occupied on August 7th, but he does not include Coame (the next town beyond) which was not occupied until August 9th, after a sharp fight.



The Ponce Provisional. In a Robert A. Siegel Galleries 2020 auction, the auctioneers stated, "in recent years the entire issue has been discredited by a few specialists, which forces us to offer this 'as is'." The Scott 2022 Catalogue does not question the issue. JFD.

These stamps, as shown by Fig. 2, are handstamped on a white wove paper, having a yellowish tinge. The yellowish appearance may be the result of tropical aging caused by chemical action of the gum, which is brownish in color. Often it is unevenly applied, although on one copy seen gum was smooth. There is a clearly seen mesh in the paper. The ink is best described as dull violet; with the control applied in the same color, however because of the format of the coat of arms the ink at first gives the impression of being duller in color.

This is no doubt a very rare stamp, I doubt if more than fifteen or twenty copies exist; to the best of my knowledge no used copy has ever turned up, although they may well exist. Until recently the stamp has been so infrequently seen that it was in little demand but lately a few copies have turned up in auctions. I know of four or five tucked away in Puerto Rican collections. Pairs or strips are as yet unknown although they may well exist. A few years ago a continental American lady, long a resident of Puerto Rico took a block of six to New York with the idea of attempting to dispose of them, her pocketbook was stolen from the hotel room and the stamps thus lost. As the Ponce stamp was then uncatalogued no doubt the thief discarded the stamps as being of no value.

I have never been able to learn how long this provisional was in use, however a considerable number must have been used as a well regulated mail service was set up, in newspapers of the period the following notice was given :

“POSTS—Daily, authorized by Major General Wilson, the Alcalde has provisionally established a mail service between this city (Ponce) and the following towns:—

Adjuntas, Penuelas, Guayanilla, Yauco, Sabana Grande, San German, Santa Isabel, and Juana Diaz.

To attend to the expenses occasioned by this service 5c will be charged for each letter when deposited at the post office, situated in the Public Library, in the first floor of the Ayuntamiento.

One centavo for each letter will be paid to the person distributing the mail to home addresses. Newspapers free.

Time of Departure & Arrival of Mail

	<i>Leaves for</i>	<i>Arrives from</i>
Adjuntas	3 PM	3 AM
Guayanilla	4 PM	8 PM
Juana Diaz	7 AM	9 AM
Sta, Isabel	9 PM	12 AM

All correspondence must be in the letter box at least half an hour before departure time.”

It would seem that the Post Office Department at Washington must have known, and approved of this provisional mail service. On August 18th we find :

“Robinson (Postal Agent) asks what rate of postage should be charged on letters addressed by citizens from one town to another on the island. Instructed to let these letters go forward by native carriers duly authorized and without expense to the department.”¹

It is possible that “native carriers, duly authorized” refers to the provisional mail service authorized by Major General Wilson.

PONCE PROVISIONAL STRUCK ON U. S. STAMPS

Once in awhile a United States stamp turns up with the basic Ponce Provisional impressed on the face. These are not understood by the average collector or dealer, and as a result are often wrongly described in auction lists.

The Army postal service had established their postoffice (Military Station No. 1) at La Playa de Ponce on August 3rd 1898. La Playa is some two miles from the city of Ponce itself, a considerable distance to have to go to mail a letter! After the provisional mail service ceased to function as a postal service proper, it continued in operation as a carrier service, transporting mail from

¹ Report General Superintendent, Railway Mail Service, 1898.



FIG. 3—Ponce Provisional markings on United States stamps.

Note: color images are replacements for similar images from the original article.

Ponce to the postoffice. During this time the Ponce provisional markings continued in use, being used as a cancellation usually impressed on the United States stamps, which strange to say were seldom given a further cancellation upon reaching the Military Postal Station at La Playa. A typical cover is shown in Fig. 4.

The fact that postal cancellations were not struck over the Ponce marking has caused certain dealers to offer such stamps as “unused, without gum” when they were actually properly used.

Fig. 4 pictures a stamp so tied to cover by the Ponce marking; I know of three such covers, one of which is in my collection. All are addressed to Santisteban Chavarri y Cia. and came out of a find of 1898 correspondence that was broken up some years ago. These covers all passed through Military Postal Station No. 1 (Ponce Playa), as well as Station No. 4 (San Juan) and on none was the stamp further cancelled, however they bear backstamps of both military postal stations. A number of loose stamps are also known with the impression of the Ponce Provisional marking, those in my collection being shown in Fig. 3;



Fig. 4. Cover showing use of the Ponce Provisional marking on U.S. Sc. 279B, when thus used it shows payment of a carrier fee, not a Provisional usage. See also, p. 18

a number of others are in Puerto Rican collections, and a few have recently been offered at auction in New York.

When the provisional marking is found on U. S. stamps the impression is almost always from a handstamp differing slightly from the one used to make the genuine adhesives, indicating that more than one rubber handstamp was in use during operation of the provisional mail service. I suspect that the original rubber stamp, from which the adhesive provisionals were produced, was found insufficient—or had to be replaced—by the time that the carrier service was put into operation, that is after the adhesive provisionals were no longer used for actual prepayment of postage. Nevertheless care should be taken when buying as fakes do exist.

A few years ago, while looking for old covers in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, I inquired if any examples of the Ponce Provisional might be obtainable. The old man to whom I was talking, suggested that if I could return in a month or two that perhaps he might have one for me on full cover. When I went back he produced the cover pictured in Fig. 5 saying that he had obtained it for me in a near by town among old correspondence. Only a glance was necessary to determine that it is a fake.

The postmark gave the faker away. The cancellation is dated “Sept. 5, 1899” although it requires a glass to read the 1899 date. This type of American postmark was not put into use until long after the Ponce carrier service ceased

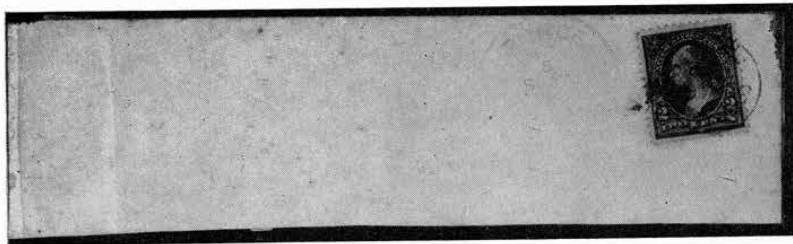


Fig. 5. A fake impression of the Ponce Provisional marking on a genuine cover. See also p. 18 for a better example.

operations, thus it could not have been correctly used. Fakes such as this may be offered in the future, however, as the adhesive provisional itself has been counterfeited.

COUNTERFEITS

I know of two types of counterfeits of this provisional; both being shown in Fig. 6. See also p. 18 for another counterfeit.



Counterfeit "A"



Counterfeit "B"

FIG. 6—Counterfeits of the adhesive provisional.

See also p. 18 for what appears to be a counterfeit that is different from these two.

Counterfeit "A," Fig 6 came from Spain and is quite well done. It was impressed on a piece of blue paper possibly from a U. S. envelope, of course there is no control mark. Refer back to Fig 2 showing two copies of the genuine provisionals and note that both have a break in the top of the first "R" of "CORREOS" which is constant in all genuine adhesives seen. Further in the genuine there is always a blur in the frame line over the "G" of "POSTAGES."

Counterfeit "B," Fig. 6 is an impression taken from a rubber handstamp offered to me in Ponce a few years ago, and claimed to have been the actual rubber stamp from which the provisionals were made. This is of course impossible as can be seen by checking the originals in Fig. 2. As far as I know this rubber stamp is still in existence and might be used to produce fakes. Neither of these counterfeits was made from the die used to produce the fake shown in Fig. 5.

THE COAMO POSTMASTERS' PROVISIONAL

The Coamo provisional was known to collectors many years before any notice was given to the earlier Ponce Provisional. As regards rarity it is relatively common compared to the much scarcer Ponce stamp.



FIG. 7—The complete setting of the Coamo provisional stamp.

As early as November 26th 1898 they were pictured and described in "The Metropolitan Philatelist," shortly after "Meekel's Weekly Stamp News" devoted considerable space to the provisional issue. Fortunately for collectors the stamps were discovered (as regards collectors) by Mr. A. O. Tittman, an American salesman, who happened to be in Ponce a few weeks after the occupation of that city by the American army.

Mr. Tittman secured some 330 of the Coamo provisionals, out of a total printing of about 500 stamps. All of these went into collectors hands, thus the relative commonness of the stamp. In view of the fact that so much has been written concerning this provisional I shall not attempt to repeat any more than necessary, omitting the usual references to the stamp itself, and only touching on its use, etc.

The Coamo was in use from about August 13th until September 4, 1898 when the Military Postal Station at Ponce informed the authorities at Coamo that they would no longer be accepted and that from then on only United States stamps could be used. During this period the Coamo was accepted in the United States mails as having full franking power. For this reason it

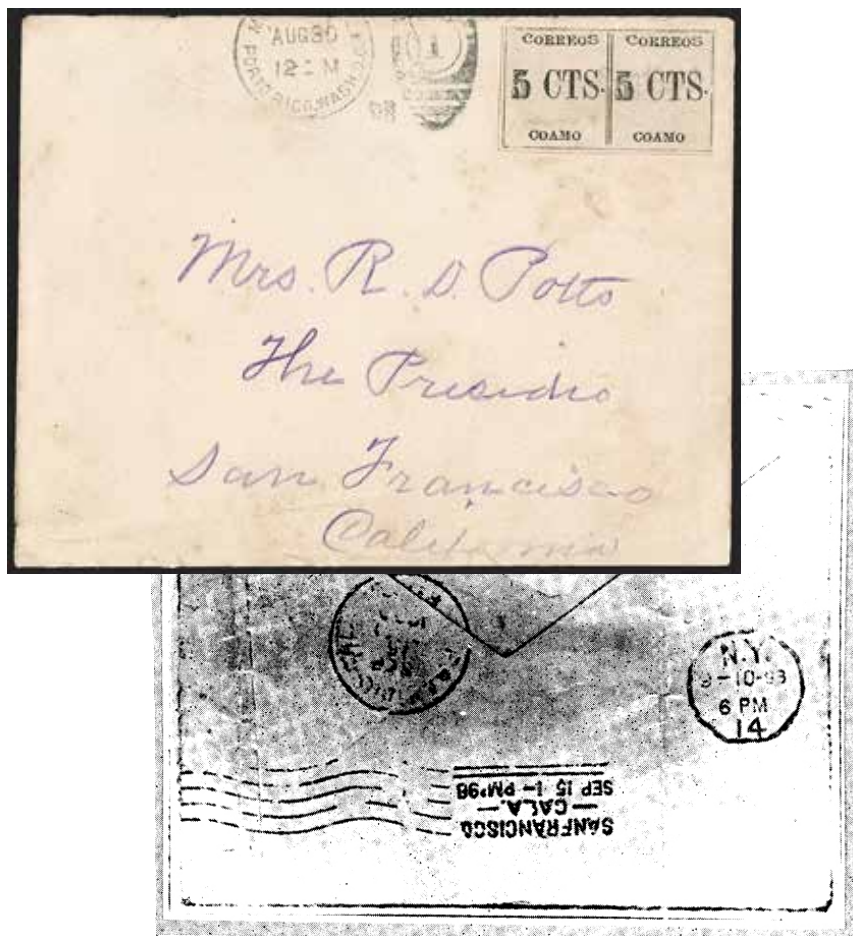


FIG. 8—The COAMO provisionals, prepaying postage through the United States mails, showing that they were honored by (1) the Military Postal Station at Ponce, (2) the New York postoffice, (3) the San Francisco postoffice, and (4) the postal station at The Presidio.

The color image is of a different cover than that in the original article, while the black & white is from the cover in the original article. The caption still applies. See also p. 18 for another example.

should be considered a United States postmasters provisional, not a Puerto Rican provisional. Mekeel's commented on such use in their issue of May 4, 1899:

“Captain R. D. Potts, of the United States Army had the goodness to show us a complete sheet of ten of the much spoken of Coamo Provisional stamps. The stamps were used somewhere around the first of September * * * * * We had the pleasure of seeing franked with two of these stamps Nos. 8 and 9, unsevered) which was mailed on September 2nd in Coamo,

duly reached San Francisco, and was delivered, without any postage due, on December 15th to Mrs. Potts, Presidio. We were told that three similar letters arrived recently at their destination * * * *’

During the campaign in Puerto Rico Captain Potts, (a regular Army officer who later rose to the rank of Brig. General) had been in command of Battery “F,” 3rd Field Artillery which was in action on August 12th on the road between Coamo and Aibonito. As he was using Coamo stamps early in September he was no doubt stationed in Coamo after the armistice.

Fig. 8 shows a cover addressed to Mrs. Potts, no doubt the same one referred to by Mekeel’s, although it should be noted that this letter is backstamped on September 15th, not December 15th as incorrectly stated by them. A similar, and almost duplicate cover with different dates belongs to Mr. Robert L. Jungmanns of Bayamon, Puerto Rico. Both of these letters were accepted in the United States mails without question, and both were properly cancelled by the Military Postal Station (No. 1) at Ponce showing that they honored the Coamo provisional stamps.

I have seen a number of covers, franked with the Coamo provisional, for local delivery. In no case was the stamp cancelled. Locally (among Puerto Rican collectors) it is a pretty well accepted fact that the Spanish postmaster in Coamo removed or destroyed all equipment when leaving the postoffice, consequently when the provisional mail service was put into operation there was no post-marking equipment or cancellation stamps to be pressed into service. Once in a while a Coamo provisional will turn up with an old type double ring Spanish dated town mark as a cancellation. Such a cancellation could be “good” or “bad” depending on what town it was from.

In the case of a letter mailed in Coamo, and addressed to territory held by the Spanish it might be that the postmaster observing a letter from Coamo with an uncanceled stamp, would cancel it with his office cancel. After the armistice mail was freely passed through the lines from American held territory to that still occupied by the Spanish forces.

COUNTERFEITS

The Coamo stamps have been extensively counterfeited. As they were type set they offer a fine chance for faking, but the one attempting the duplication seldom knows enough about observation of philatelists to make a good duplication. Fig. 9 shows a few fakes that have come to my attention. As a rule none are especially dangerous if you are familiar with the original, however, they do creep into old collections being proudly mounted up as an original. One seldom sees an old collection here in Puerto Rico without finding one of these fakes displayed.

Referring to Fig. 9—the first counterfeit in the plate is the most dangerous type, this was picked up on the continent. The layout is pretty well done, the ink matches that originally used quite closely but the paper is too thin and too white; furthermore there is but a single frame line showing that this fake was made up singly. This type counterfeit might easily be passed off on an

unsuspecting collector as an original Coamo, unless one was careful to note the "5" which differs from any used by "Imprenta El Alba" when setting up the original type.



FIG. 9—Five types of Coamo counterfeits, made to defraud collectors.

None of the other four fakes are very dangerous, the position of "Coamo" give them away at once in the case of the second and fourth, while the other two shown are so crudely drawn that only a child could confuse them with the original.

THE YAUCO PROVISIONAL MARKINGS

As shown on the map (Fig. 1) Yauco is the first large town west of Ponce; it is included in Alcalde Colon's petition as one of the towns to operate as a part of the provisional mail system.



The Yauco Provisional

Yauco actually is known to have made use of marking to indicate prepayment of postage, which has as yet only been seen when impressed on the face of the envelope. I have seen four or five such covers, and know of another portion on which the provisional marking was impressed.

As Yauco's marking is in general very similar to that used in Ponce it may well be that adhesives were also prepared and used.

It must be recalled that only a few years ago the Ponce stamp was almost unknown.

A counterfeit impression, offered as having been used has been offered from Spain. One of these is shown by Fig. 10. In this the value has been abbreviated, as it was on the Ponce stamp. The fact that an odd value, such as the seldom used 4c value which at this time could only have been correctly used for a double rate soldiers letter, tends to give the fake away. The faker was probably attempting to create a rarity!

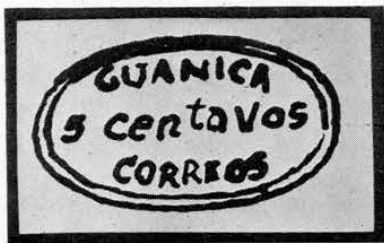


Fig. 10. Two counterfeit Yauco Provisional markings. The image on the left is the one referred to by the author

THE GUANICA PROVISIONAL MARKING

Guanico is west of Yauco. It was the first town occupied by United States forces. In 1898 it must have been only a small hamlet, even today it is one of the smaller of the Puerto Rican towns.

Alcalde Colon, in his petition requesting authority to organize the provisional mail service, made no mention of Guanica. He did mention Yauco as well as Sabana Grande, the first being east of Guanica while the latter is north west, so he merely omitted the hamlet as being too small to be expected to cooperate. Nevertheless Guanica was a part of the provisional service, and actually used two forms of markings indicating prepayment of postage!



The Guanica Provisional.

One form of provisional marking closely resembles the type employed by the Yauco office. It probably was made by the same person. As far as I know but one example of this provisional marking has been found. A tracing of the marking is shown here. The cover changed hands last in 1940, having been purchased by the present owner for \$75.00.

The full cover is shown by Fig. 11, and as pictured the backstamp of the Military Postal Service appears on the face! Actually the receiving mark was impressed on the back, and was later cut out and stuck on the face of the cover. No other markings were applied so it is pretty safe to assume that the cover was passed through the mail as having been fully prepaid at Guanica.



FIG. 11—One form of the provisional marking used by the provisional mail service at the tiny Guanica postoffice.

The other form of provisional marking used at Guanica is known on two covers, one of which is before me as I write. This cover is pictured by Fig. 12.

THE MAYAGUEZ PROVISIONAL MARKINGS

Mayaguez in 1898, as it is today, was the third largest city in Puerto Rico. It was occupied by the American forces on August 11, 1898; the Spanish postal equipment was taken over by the invading forces who used Spanish postmarks

A computer enhanced view of the second form of the Guanica Provisional on this opened cover.



Em of A

*Dr Ayudante encargado del
Faro del Guánico*



Capital P.R.



FIG. 12—The second form of provisional marking used from the little Guanica post-office. Two such covers are known, one mailed on Nov. 22nd, the other on Nov. 28, 1898. The provisional markings are in magenta, postmarks in black.

as late as August 29th. Fig. 13 shows an example of a provisional prepaid marking, on a cover mailed at Mayaguez, September 1, 1898.

The cover pictured is the only one known to me, with provisional markings from Mayaguez. The present owner purchased the cover from a well known Spanish dealer many years ago.

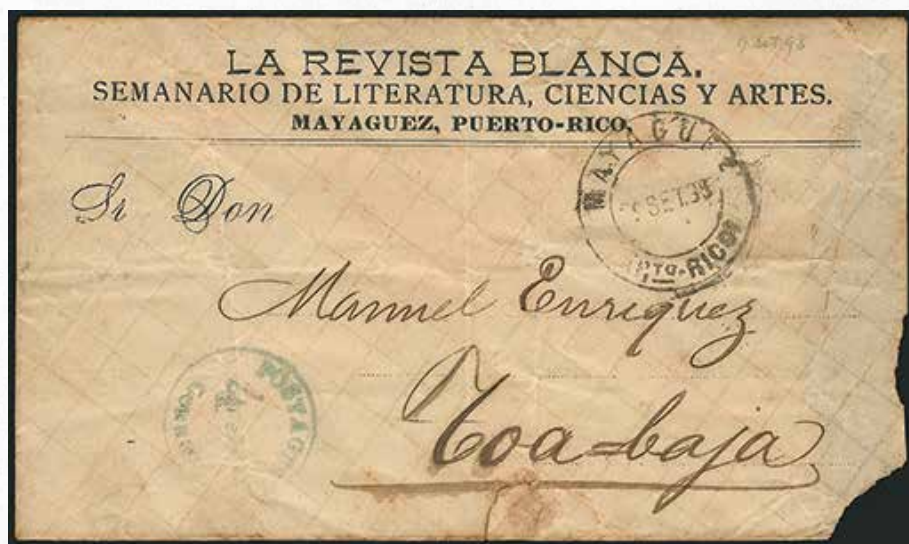


FIG. 13—The provisional prepaid marking used by the Mayaguez office, only one example is known.

The Mayaguez provisional marking was struck in green ink, of a light shade that does not reproduce well in a photograph. The postage charge was "4 ct." whereas all other offices collected "5 ct" in accordance with the approved postage rates mentioned by Alcalde Colon in his petition.

Tough to see in the original article's black & white photo, it shows well, lower left, in this color photo.

PROVISIONAL MARKINGS USED AT UTUADO

The town of Utuado is in the mountains, almost in the center of the island between Ponce and Arecibo. It was occupied by a force of Americans before the armistice of August 12th. Military Postal Station No. 6 was created on September 9th but between date of occupation, and actual opening of the military postoffice the provisional mail service took care of civilian mail.

In Utuado no special handstamp was prepared, at least none is known, to indicate provisional prepayment of postage. Instead the Alcaldes Municipal seal was pressed into use; affixed to the face of a cover, which was then post-marked seems to have indicated that postage had been prepaid. No doubt the provisional mail service was operated under the control of the Alcalde (mayor) who received payment in money and as a receipt had his stamp struck on the face of the envelope. I know of about half a dozen covers with this marking.

The municipal seal, as used on these covers is interesting. The coat of

arms of Spain has been removed and in its stead a star inserted. The same alterations were used in the towns of Camuy and Quebradillas upon the arrival of the American forces.



FIG. 14—A cover from Utuado on which the Alkalde seal was impressed to indicate prepayment of postage for transportation by the provisional mail service.

Additional images, pages 18 and 19



U.S. Sc. 287 with Ponce Provisional used as payment of a carrier fee, not a Provisional usage.



Cover to Paris with Ponce Provisionals on three U.S. stamps, with U.S. Military station date stamp.



Above, large part of a cover; right a cover front. Each with a stamp tied by a U.S. Military Station duplex cancel, with counterfeit Ponce Provisionals.



Per the Siegel Galleries lot description, "A cover to Ponce P.R., with a "Military Sta. 1 Porto Rico, Wash. D.C. Recd. Aug. 19, '98" backstamp, the earliest known use of the Coamo Provisional. Ten Coamo covers are known in total, including three which were used by Captain R. D. Potts on mail to San Francisco (One shown, page 10). Seven are known with single Coamo stamps exhibiting the proper local use within Puerto Rico during the approximate three-week period when regular stamps were not available. None of the stamps was cancelled at its origination, probably because there were no cancelling devices left in Coamo when the Spanish evacuated.



The Quebradillas Provisional

Not included in the original article, this cover was included in an October 2021 David Feldman of Switzerland auction with this caption:

“Quebradillas Provisional. 1898 (Nov 9). Cover to Camuy, bearing “AYUNTAMIENTO DE QUEBRADILLAS/ALCALDIA” double oval postmark in violet representing 5¢ postage paying the civilian single rate, in conjunction with blue dispatch cds at top right, some usual minor tone spots, rough opening at right and top, with portion torn off at top right; the only example known of this Provisional postmark; ex Preston, García Lomas and Dávila.

Note: The Quebradillas Provisional was made by altering the city mayor’s official seal, removing the Spanish symbols inside. As in the other few towns with Provisionals, the mayor’s office had control of the mails during the interim period before stamps became available.