

# The Stamps of Clipperton Island

By Wolfgang Baldus



## History

The island is named after the English mutineer and pirate John Clipperton, who made it his hideout in 1705. The French claimed Clipperton in 1855, but Mexican forces invaded in 1897 and stationed troops there until 1917. In 1930, the island again came under French rule.

Clipperton island is the only atoll in the eastern Pacific Ocean. It lies about 965 km (670 miles) southwest of Manzanilla Bay, Mexico, the nearest mainland. The island, a ring of dead coral surrounding a lagoon, is flat, nowhere higher than about 2 meters (6 feet), with a single elevation in the form of a volcanic rock in the southern part of the atoll that rises 23 meters (68 feet) above sea level.

Clipperton measures less than four square miles (7 square kilometers) with the greatest distance being 3 kilometers. Only a small grove of coconut palm trees and another few single palms grow here. The rest of the land has no vegetation at all. Numerous birds use this desert and uninhabited island as a nesting place and therefore it is rich in guano deposits. In 1892, an American phosphate mining company began to exploit these guano deposits. It was at this time that European stamp dealers and philatelic magazines unexpectedly received from San Francisco a well-printed set of postage stamps issued for Clipperton, the isolated island that was unknown to almost everybody.

Midway-street job is about half done.

**CLIPPERTON ISLAND MAIL.**

**A Proposition Made to the United States Authorities by a Private Company.**

Efforts are being made to establish a mail service between Clipperton Island, a guano field, nine miles in circumference, about 750 miles southwest of Acapulco, and 1800 miles from the United States. This island belongs to the Oceanic Phosphate Company for which W. Frese & Co. of this City are agents. At times the company has between 150 and 200 men at work on the island and it is ostensibly to accommodate them that the service is to be established. In reality, as admitted by Mr. Frese, the idea is to give the company he represents a revenue for carrying the mail of its employes back and forth, which amounts to as much as \$15 on a single trip of its semi-occasional vessels, mostly schooners.

In furtherance of the proposition have been...

States...

Above: the earliest report in the non-philatelic press about planned postal activities for Clipperton Island appeared in the San Francisco Call of 24 July 1895.

Top: Clipperton Island – the only atoll in the Eastern Pacific Ocean

## Postal History

These stamps were printed in March 1895 in San Francisco by the local agents of the Oceanic Phosphate Company that was operating the guano business on Clipperton Island from 1893 to October 1897. A set of Clipperton stamps consists of ten values in six different designs. No currency is given except for the highest value which is inscribed "\$1". Since this is undoubtedly the American dollar, the remaining figures represent cents. The denominations and colors are: 1(c) dark brown, 2(c) emerald green, 3(c) orange, 4(c) red, 5(c) yellowish brown, 8(c) blackish green, 10(c) dark orange, 25(c) dark blue, 50(c) lilac, and \$1 bluish black. The design of all the values includes, in the center, an aerial view of the atoll with the year 1895 in the middle and birds and crawfish around. The birds seem to represent blue-footed or masked boobies which abound on Clipperton.

Only 200 stamps with \$1 as face value were printed, so only 200 complete sets of Clipperton island could exist. Also the 50(c) is very rare.

The vast majority of stamps presently known are surcharged with a violet double-ring cancel of the agents "W. Frese & Co. San Francisco" between the two circles and "Agents for O.P. Co." in the center. Also the few copies known on cover have this cancel revealing that it was applied before the stamps were affixed to the covers.

The Clipperton stamps were first mentioned in the philatelic press in the British magazine Stamp Collector's Fortnightly on 15 June 1895. On page 160 it reads:

*"An envelope containing a complete set of stamps, ten in all, was sent to us (without any letter whatever) all duly postmarked W. Frese & Co, San Francisco, in the outer rim, the center showing the inscription Agents for O.P. & Co. As the design is such a peculiar one, we annex an illustration [of a 1c stamp]. The various values are of a different design, which, however, are all very similar to the value illustrated. We will refrain from making any uncharitable remarks on this series, but the sooner our friends in San Francisco will let us have particulars the better we shall like it, but certainly we shall not invest in these, till particulars come to hand, and not even then perhaps."*

In August 1895, in the issue No. 5, Mekeel's Weekly Stamp News published some background information on the circumstances and reasons for printing the Clipperton stamps. The data had been researched by K. Narca, the magazine's California correspondent. His article was headlined "The stamps of Clipperton Island" and began:

*"Of all the barefaced speculative stamp issues, those of Clipperton Island take precedence. Your correspondent's attention was first called to them by a paragraph in the Stamp Collectors' Fortnightly, of London, acknowledging the receipt of a complete set of them by the publishers of that magazine."* It was added that the stamps were postmarked 'W. Frese & Co. San Francisco'. The correspondent located this firm at 419, California Street, and, after repeated calls, got a date with Mr. Frese and his partner.

In the course of the interview Frese told the story of his "ingenious enterprise" stating that his firm were the "agents of the Oceanic Phosphate Company,



A full set of Clipperton stamps comprises 10 denominations (ex coll. Fabio Vaccarezza)

which owned Clipperton Island, and which, he said, was under the protection of the United States." He estimated that there were about 1,000,000 tons of fertilizing material on the island, and valued the guano from \$18 to \$20 a ton. "At present," Frese continued, "there are but a few men on the island, but we will have between one hundred and two hundred at work there later. There is no communication with any nearer point than San Francisco, and this only by means of our vessels, which sail at irregular periods, as circumstances require. Heretofore we have carried the mail for our employees, and have taken the chance of collecting for this service. We found it difficult, in most cases, to make them pay this charge, and to obviate this trouble in the future we decided to issue stamps, which must be used to prepay postage by those sending mail to or from Clipperton Island. There are ten denominations in various colors, the values being as follows: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 25 and 50 cents, and \$1.00. Our rates are the same as those charged for foreign mail from the United States, viz., 5 cents per half ounce for first-class matter and 1 cent per two ounces for newspapers. On this basis we have at times carried as much as \$15.00 worth of mail matter on a single voyage of one of our vessels. We are now in negotiation with the postal authorities at Washington, with a view to arranging for a co-operative mail service with the United



The cancel of W. Frese & Co, agent for the Oceanic Phosphate Company, is found on the majority of Clipperton stamps. It is not a postmark.

States, as is now done with mail from Apia, Samoa."

This seems to indicate that the Clipperton stamps were used on mail from (or to) the island. When the first article about the Clipperton stamps appeared in the non-philatelic press it contained a fatal error that made authors and collectors of the past hundred years believe that the stamps were used this way. The article, titled "Clipperton Island Mail", appeared in the San Francisco Call on 24 July 1895 and reported that "at times the company has between 150 and 200 men at work on the island and is ostensibly to accommodate them that the [mail] service is to be established." However, Frese, after explaining that at present "there are but a few men on the island" just uttered his conviction that "we will have between one hundred and two hundred at work there later."

# The Stamps of Clipperton Island



One of the covers that passed regular mail bearing a Clipperton stamp. It is cancelled San Francisco, September 3, 1895, and was sent to a well-known British stamp dealer at Ipswich.

The research of Clipperton's history reveals that Frese's hope never came true. Most time of the period when Oceanic Phosphate Co. operated the guano business on Clipperton, only three individuals lived on the island, and the "population" between 1893 and 1897 never exceeded 25 people.

Nevertheless, there is proof that the stamps were used on covers that passed through the regular mail. Today, seven covers and six pieces from 1895 and 1896 including one with an illegible date can be located. All except two have the brown 5 cents Clipperton stamp next to a regular American 5c definitive illustrating General Grant, and are tied to the covers by regular San Francisco postmarks and killer stamps with different numerals. The exception are one piece and a beautiful large registered cover bearing the whole set of the Clipperton stamps plus regular US postage that will be discussed below. The cancellation dates of these covers are: 23 July 1895 (on 4 covers), 3 September 1895 (cover), 18 September 1895 (piece), 7 October 1895 (piece), 20 November 1895 (piece), 20 January 1896 (piece), 28 April 1896 (cover), 12 May 1896 (cover), 12 September 1896 (piece) and an illegible date on piece.

Thus, the postal use of Clipperton stamps between 23 July 1895 and 12 May 1896 is proven. These covers are certainly philatelic covers, prepared and written by someone in San Francisco who used the stationery of the W. Frese agents whose address is printed in the upper left corner of the covers. This

individual was possibly an employee of Frese & Co. acting on behalf of his boss who intended to make profit from the sale of the stamps to collectors. However, the covers were not written on Clipperton Island and not sent from the atoll to San Francisco to be forwarded from there. Nevertheless, they passed through the regular mail and obviously reached their addressees.

The above-mentioned item that has to be discussed separately is a cover bearing a full set of Clipperton stamps with Frese cancels. This cover is postmarked San Francisco, April 28, 1896, addressed in a

different handwriting than the Frese covers and is written in German. A long-sized 4 cents stationery envelope of "F.M. Petersen & Co., San Francisco, Cal., P.O. Box 2434, Cable address, Meredin." was used. It is inscribed "Registered" and "Einschreiben" (which is the German translation) at the top and addressed to "Fräulein Johanna Petersen, Maria Magdalena Kloster, Hamburg 6, Germany" (Miss Johanna Petersen, Maria Magdalena convent, Hamburg 6, Germany). Evidently, the writer was a German.

The entry in the Crocker-Langley San Francisco Directory for the year commencing April 1896 reveals that F.M. (Frederick M.) Petersen & Co were general brokers and agents for the San Juan Mining Co. and the Quintera Mining Co. Ltd. and resided at 1203 Golden Gate Avenue. The two mining companies were in the silver mining business and had nothing to do with the guano trade. Therefore, this cover is obviously not connected with Frese & Co. but was sent by an employee (or the owner) of Petersen & Co. who must have had philatelic interests and probably purchased a set of Clipperton stamps from Frese in the early summer of 1895. We don't know why he used the full set of stamps a year later on a cover to a female family member who lived in Hamburg. Since US postage stamps were added, he must have known that the Clipperton stamps did not pay regular postage. The use of these stamps only makes sense if the addressee had philatelic interests too. This spectacular and unique cover is the only definite witness that Clipperton stamps were used in 1896 and by someone other than Frese and his companions.

Thus ends the story of the Clipperton stamps but this is not the end of Clipperton's philatelic history. In the first years of the 20th century Mexican stamps overprinted "Clipperton" turned up and a number of commemorative cancels between 1914 and 2005 were issued by various ships that visited the atoll during scientific expeditions. A mysterious "Clipperton research station" used an own cancel in 1966, and modern bogus issues also exist including French stamps overprinted "Ile Clipperton". All in all, ten distinctive postage stamps, six types of overprinted stamps/stationery from two foreign countries, at least fifteen different commemorative cancels, and two types of bogus stamps are known from Clipperton island – not bad for an almost forgotten place!



This spectacular cover, postmarked April 28, 1896, addressed to Germany and bearing a full set of Clipperton stamps, is the only witness that the stamps were also used by persons other than Frese.