

# PUERTO RICO



## The Potts and the Coamo Provisional

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Unlike the doubt and uncertainty that surrounds the existence of a Ponce provisional adhesive, there is no philatelic debate about the origins of the Coamo provisional. It's production and usage have been well established. Collectors, the philatelic press and government officials, all from the late nineteenth century, as well as today's postal historians have documented its usage and production.

There does, however, still exist a source of debate over at least one key issue—Is the Coamo provisional a United States provisional stamp recognized by the U.S post office as being valid for postage? The evidence today seems to say “no.” But let's explore both sides of the argument.

The key evidence for those on the “yes” side of the argument are three extant covers mailed by Captain R. D. Potts to his wife in San Francisco. Potts was an American officer in command of Battery “F,” 3rd field artillery, which saw action around Coamo. Those three covers are reproduced as [Figures 1, 2 and 3](#). There is no doubt that these three covers

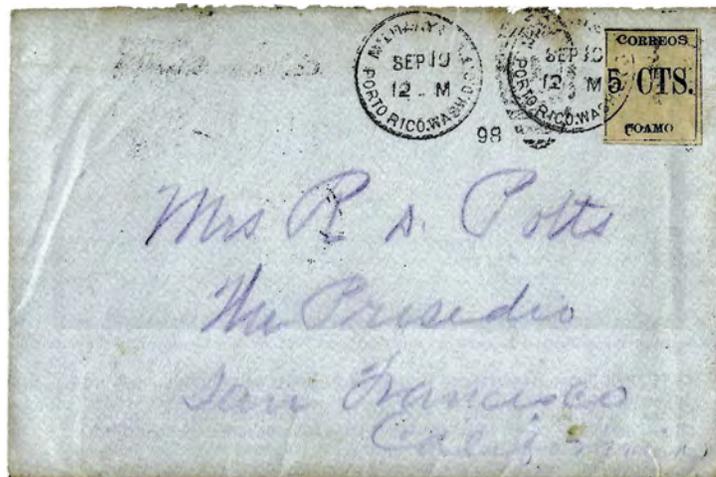


Figure 1

Figure 2



Figure 3



passed through the mails to the mainland. The stamps are tied with a Military Station No.1 postmark and on the back are San Francisco receiving marks. They are franked with authentic Coamo provisional adhesive stamps. There is no indication on any of the covers of any postage due requested or received. On the surface, it seems obvious that these were treated as legitimate United States stamps.

One of the chief proponents of the validity of the Coamo to pay U.S. postage was R. B. Preston who, in the 1930s and 40s, wrote informative, in-depth articles on the stamps and postal history of Puerto Rico. In one article, Preston wrote:

“The Coamo was in use from about August 13<sup>th</sup> 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 should be considered a United States postmasters’ provisional not a Puerto Rican provisional.”<sup>1</sup>

Not so, Mr. Preston. It is neither a United States stamp, nor was it ever officially accepted for U.S. franking during that brief period. Three covers may have slipped through, but they should not have. Though the legitimacy of the Coamo as U.S. postage is fueled the apparent “acceptance” of Potts’ covers, there are a few more things to be known about Captain Potts.

Potts was a stamp collector who recognized early on that the Coamo stamp could possibly be something special. As a member of the army, he did not have to use a local post. Daily service was available through the military system from Coamo to Ponce beginning September 1<sup>st</sup> <sup>2</sup> and the military station opened on September 9<sup>th</sup>. Since he is not identified on the cover as a member of the military, sending mail by the local post to the mainland would require a 5¢ UPU rate. The value of the stamp is in Puerto Rican centavos, not U.S. currency. The exchange rate was about 2:1, so the Coamo stamp was worth 2½ U.S. We know that one of the covers included another letter to be sent to the New England Stamp Company and so would probably be subject to a double rate. Another cover (Figure 3), does not pay a proper rate to the U.S. The Coamo stamps were obviously used by Potts to create philatelic souvenirs. So, we know that Potts was a known collector with philatelic motives.

There are 10 known Coamo covers. These are part of a census maintained by Siegel Auction Galleries.<sup>3</sup> Of these covers, only the Potts covers have military station marks on the front.<sup>4</sup> Others, properly used, have the station mark on the back used as a receiver. There are also known covers received in the military post office that show postage due, indicating there was no recognition of payment by the Coamo for U.S. postage. One of these covers is shown in Figure 4. It is very possible that collector Potts requested favor cancels from obliging postal clerks wanting to help the Captain. If a Christmas seal, in place of a stamp, passes through the mail and is canceled, without due markings, one still cannot call it a stamp or assume that it had franking power. One would call it a mistake or a favor.



**Figure 4. Coamo to Ponce. Properly used example of the Coamo Provisional. The cover has a Military Station No.1 mark on the back, August 24, 1898 on the back. Since the Coamo stamp was a local post not recognized by the U.S. post office, it was assessed 2¢ due for the local rate in occupied areas. Since the military system did not offer delivery, the cover was most likely picked up and delivered by a privately contracted carrier for which the addressee paid an additional fee.**

Granted, the Coamo is not a seal. It is a stamp, but even so, if a foreign stamp is used in the U.S. and reaches its destination without postage due, it does not mean that stamp has full franking power in the United States. It means the post office made a mistake. That Potts was a collector seeking philatelic collectables is only circumstantial evidence that the Coamo stamps were not properly treated by the post office and had no value for U.S. postage. There are other more compelling reasons.

**First.** It was never the intent that the Coamo be used for anything other than a local post. In a paper read before the Philatelic Society in New York in January 1899,<sup>5</sup> J. M. Andreini reported his findings about the Coamo provisional that included direct responses received from collectors in Puerto Rico and the Coamo mayor. The mayor's response in part was:

“The stamp to which you allude was in use a few days, because not only we had no American postage stamps, but it was issued also with the object of covering the expenses of

establishing a mail messenger between this town and Juana Diaz.”<sup>5</sup>

This establishes that the town of Coamo (the issuer of this stamp) had no purpose for it other than the payment for the services of a local post.

**Second.** There is no evidence that the Coamo stamp was created by any authority empowered to approve it for use as U.S. postage. A collector from San Juan wrote to Andreini on December 8, 1898:

“The Coamo stamps were issued by the municipality without authority from either the American or the Spanish government and were in use a few days only, until the invading army provided the post office with U.S. stamps.”<sup>5</sup>

Some may point to General Wilson’s approval of R. U. Colom’s, the mayor of Ponce, request for permission to establish a local post as authority for other cities as well, but that is an assumption. There do not appear to be any records of other official approvals granted. In January 1899 C. H. Mekeel wrote directly to General Wilson asking specifically about the authorization of the Coamo stamp. In his reply, Wilson spoke only of the Ponce stamp:

“I authorized the Mayor of Ponce to open postal communications with the towns of his district, and to charge 5¢ per letter to pay carriers, but I had nothing to do with the printing of the stamps.”<sup>6</sup>

It is possible to infer from General Wilson’s reply that that there was tacit approval for other towns to “open postal communications.” But what is very clear is that the authorization was for local posts and that there was no American approval or recognition for the Coamo stamp.

**Third.** The American military government had no authority to approve a stamp for United States postage. By order of President McKinley, the postal system in the Spanish-American war zones was under the direction of the Postmaster General in cooperation with and approval of the War Department.<sup>7</sup> There was no authorization from the post office department for anything other than U.S. stamps to be used. In fact, on July 21<sup>st</sup> a Presidential order was issued<sup>8</sup> extending postal service to occupied territory specifying that United States stamps were to be used.

**Fourth.** The postal system was under orders from the Postmaster General that the military system was to incur no cost for carrying local mail.

Revenues of the local posts were retained by the cities they served with no payment to the United States. There was no payment to the United States because no services were rendered. Honoring the Coamo stamp as U.S. postage would result in the military system providing free mail to the civilian population, a cost to the postal system—a direct violation of orders.

**Fifth.** At the time the Potts covers were sent, the Coamo stamp was not only not valid for U.S. postage payment, it was no longer valid for the local post. The three Potts covers are postmarked at Military Station No.1 in 1898 on August 30<sup>th</sup>, September 2<sup>nd</sup>, and September 30<sup>th</sup>.

A letter<sup>9</sup> was sent to mayors of occupied territory from the postal service and datelined August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1898, Port Ponce, Porto Rico. The opening paragraph of the letter stated:

“Referring to former communication sent you under date 16<sup>th</sup> instant, with reference to mail handled by this office, the Major General Commanding desires me to further state that all outgoing mail from towns within the lines of the United States Army is subject to U.S. postage. Correspondence between the towns on the Island within our lines to be prepaid with United States stamps at domestic rates...”

This would be consistent with the July 21<sup>st</sup> presidential order. Mayor Santiago of Coamo acknowledged receipt of the August 25<sup>th</sup> directive<sup>10</sup> and informed Robinson he would implement the order as soon as U.S. stamps could be acquired. Since the directive was issued from Playa de Ponce, the clerks at the Playa de Ponce post office would be immediately aware of the instructions. As of August 25, 1898—before the Potts letters were sent, the Coamo was not valid for any type of postal service let alone the payment of U.S. postage to the mainland. The mayor informed the city council on September 5<sup>th</sup> that the U.S. had taken responsibility for mail between Coamo and Ponce.<sup>11</sup>

So, there we have it—stamps that were never intended for anything other than a local post; stamps that were never approved by any U.S. authority; stamps whose usage provided no revenue to the United States; stamps that were not valid for any use when the Potts covers were sent.

This is a Puerto Rican local post stamp with no U.S. franking power. It may have caused some confusion in the military post office, but one could strongly argue, however, that the small staff of the military station had all ambiguity removed with the August 25<sup>th</sup> notification by Robinson that only

U.S. stamps were to be used. While ignorance of the regulations by the clerks may have been a contributing factor, the most likely conclusion is that these covers were allowed to pass as a favor to Potts not because they had “full franking power.” It is not known if these covers ever used the local post. Potts was in Ponce frequently and could have taken the covers directly or perhaps the carrier for the military was asked by Potts to deliver them to the clerk at Ponce. Certainly, the authorities in Coamo were aware that for at least the September 30<sup>th</sup> cover, U.S. postage was required.

It is not the intent to minimize the importance of these three covers in the postal history of Puerto Rico. They serve as an example that covers created for a philatelic purpose can make valuable contributions to understanding the postal history of the time. However, it must be noted that these three covers were not proper uses of the stamp, were not valid for U.S. postage and were created for philatelic purposes. The hope is that the few legitimate uses of this uniquely Puerto Rican stamp as illustrated in **Figure 4** will take center stage as true and proper rarities in Puerto Rican philately.

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### **Endnotes**

1. R.B. Preston, “Puerto Rico Postmaster Provisionals of 1898,” *The Stamp Specialist: Chartreuse Book*, Vol. 16, 1948, pp. 65–81
2. Service was probably available before this date. Robinson wrote a letter to the Coamo mayor on that date informing him that daily service was available. Ovidio Dávila, “The Official Municipal Documents Pertaining to the Coamo Provisional Issue,” *Possessions*, Vol. 11, No. 4, (Fourth Quarter 1988), p.8.
3. Census of 5c Coamo Provisional on Cover (Scott PR 201), The Siegel Census, *Siegel Auction Galleries Inc.*, accessed July 17, 2017 from <https://goo.gl/QZJLif>
4. There exists a Coamo stamp on piece tied by a Station No. 1 mark (ex-Roca). It is not possible to determine destination or if the cover had a due marking.

5. This paper was reproduced in *The Metropolitan Philatelist*, Vol. X, No. 20 (January 21, 1899), pp. 181–183. Also *Mekeel's Weekly Stamp News*, January 26, 1899, pp. 50–51.

6. *Mekeel's Weekly Stamp News*, January 26, 1899, p. 51.

7. Annual Report of the Post Office Department for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1898, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1898, p. 26, accessed July 17, 2017 from <https://goo.gl/B6oVU6>

8. War Department, General Order No. 105 from the Adjutant General's office relating President McKinley's orders, *General Orders and Circulars, Adjunct General's Office, 1898*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899, p. 307, accessed August 11, 2017 from <https://goo.gl/9ZGAKr>

9. Letter from Henry Robinson to Mayors, August 25, 1898, United States Archives. This letter was initiated by Robinson and sent to General Wilson on August 24 for his approval. A copy of this letter was found in the Coamo General Archives and reported by Ovidio Dávila, "The Official Municipal Documents Pertaining to the Coamo Provisional Issue," *Possessions*, Vol. 11, No. 4, (Fourth Quarter 1988), p. 7.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 8

11. *Ibid.*