

Stamps of the Suez Canal Company

By Stan Cronwall

While rummaging around looking for information for a future piece that involves the Suez Canal, I came across a set of stamps completely unknown to me, and probably to most of you as well.

The Suez Canal opened on November 17, 1869 operated primarily by the Suez Canal Company (SCC) owned by the French and the Ottoman Empire.

During the construction period beginning in 1859, the SCC set up its own postal system to convey company administrative mail between its work sites. In 1860 it formed an agreement with Posta Europea for delivery of its mail to the nearest Posta Europea office in Damietta, Suez or Zagazig.

Posta Europea was a privately owned postal service in southern Egypt founded by an Italian printer who initially acted as a forwarding agent for mail to and from Europe. The enterprise became so successful that it gradually connected all major towns in Lower Egypt resulting in the government winding down its own service in the area. The firm proposed to the Viceroy that there be a uniform postage for any destination in Egypt and the issuing of postage stamps.

In 1864, the Viceroy was so impressed with the proposal that he decided to re-purchase the postal monopoly of Posta Europea. On January 2, 1865 ownership officially passed to the Egyptian Government. The cover on the right has the handstamp of Posta Europea.



A Posta Europea handstamp cover from Cairo to Marseille

At that time, SCC resumed its own postal system. The SCC carried mail free from Port Said in the north to the Port of Suez in the south until July 1868. This was primarily SCC company mail, mail of its employees and other residents of the Canal area. To cover the cost of this service, the decision was reached in November 1867 to begin charging for the carriage of private mail to take effect July 1, 1868. The

SCC



ordered a set of four stamps from Paris in April 1868.

(Do not depend on color when trying to determine if SCC stamps are genuine. The 1 centime is black to pale gray; the 5c from yellowish-green to pale green; the 20c from deep indigo to pale blue; and 40c from carmine to dull vermillion.)

The stamps were shipped in June 1868 but arrived just over a week too late for the introduction of the postal fees. Nonetheless, the stamps were immediately placed in service. The stamps were recognized by the French consulates in both ports, but not by the Egyptian Government.

The service lasted about 40 days. When some members of the public objected to what they called an “extra tax” going to SCC and the Egyptian postal authorities became concerned about this infringement on the state postal monopoly and loss of revenue, they moved to close down the SCC service. The Egyptian Postmaster General took control on August 16, 1868.

The Egyptian Government immediately opened civil post offices on the sites of the former SCC offices. Most of the SCC postal facilities and equipment were transferred to the Egyptian Government.

The map on the right shows the SCC post offices along the Canal route.

As a result, genuinely used examples of the SCC stamps are extremely rare with only a few known covers and all these have pen cancels.

(NOTE: There are no known Canal date stamp cancellations because the canceling devices also arrived late just before the Egyptian Government stopped the service.)

To complicate matters further, genuine stamps are known to exist but with forged cancels.



As always, let the potential buyer BEWARE!

Stan Cronwall is a member of the Nevada Stamp Study Society and his collecting interests include Germany: Third Reich 1933-45 and the areas it occupied (stamps covers & cards). He also collects U.S. World War II Patriotic Covers and Cards; Civil War Patriotic Covers (both U.S. and CSA); U.S Naval Covers; DDR stamps; and, Post WW II Soviet Zone Hitler Head Obliteration stamps, covers & cards.