

AL-ZAJEL



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- ◆ The Beginning of the Postal Service in Dubai.
- ◆ Founding Fathers (Part I) : HH Sheikh Rashid Bin Saeed Al Maktoum 1912 – 1990

The Beginning of the Postal Service in Dubai

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Figure (1): Aerial view of Dubai

After a few decades from the migration of Al Bu Falasah tribes from Abu Dhabi to Dubai, it became the best model for the Trucial Coast cities in terms of growth and development in tandem with the booming pearl trade. Since the late 19th century, it has become a politically and economically stable place that attracts Bedouins and traders. This is what made the Political Resident Ross describe it in 1878 as “an important port on the Arabian coast.” This description seems to have been the result of Dubai’s emergence as a pearl-fishing center in the region. Its port in the 1880s was at the forefront of the pearl trade compared to the other emirates’ ports, as it had 450 diving vessels with 8,000 people working on them.

The study is a first reading aimed at understanding the beginnings of the postal service in Dubai, in an attempt to know the importance of the economic aspects that had led to its development since the fall of Lengeh, the most important export center for goods in the Arabian Gulf. This resulted in the change of the direction of giant ships to Dubai, the inception of the work of Gray Paul & Co., the operation of an informal postal service, to the opening of the first post office in Dubai in 1909.

Port of lengeh

Commercial activity in Dubai continued to develop and flourish. It established sea bridges the most important of which at that time was the bridge that connected it with the port of Lengeh, the first export center of goods in the region at that time. Special Commissioner H. W. Maclean stated in a report written in April 1904 that:

“The ports of the Coast of the Pirates, such as Sharjah, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, are currently

commercially linked mainly to Lengeh, the nearest port that is visited by the ocean steamers, and from these ports, small boats sail to and from Lengeh.” Most of the foreign goods needed by Dubai traders came from the port of Lengeh, the commercial port and the nearest foreign goods distribution center. It was regularly and periodically visited by the British India company’s Ships. Therefore, most of the letters and telegrams of these merchants in Dubai were sent to different destinations though the person or representative authorized by the merchant via the port of Lengeh. The port of Lengeh was not only a commercial center serving the Persian regions, but it also served all the ports of the Trucial States, the Batinah coast of Oman, Bahrain and Qatar. However, as the political and commercial situation deteriorated, the port gradually, lost some of its luster. The most important reason for the deterioration of the trade there was the new hard-line system implemented by the

Persian Customs, in addition to the application of the customs tariff regime to the transit trade on which this place depended. This in turn put an end to the flourishing of Lengeh, diverting the transit trade to another place close to it on the opposite shore.

The visits of the British India Steam Navigation Company, Limited, and the Development of Dubai Trade

One of the first steps of the growth and development of trade between Dubai and India was the opening of a branch of Gray Paul & Co. in Dubai in 1900 AD as local agents of the British India Steam Navigation Company. In 1901, Lieutenant Colonel C.A. Kimball, the Political Resident in the Arabian Gulf in Bushehr, said in his annual report that the importance of Dubai is now increasing, and that the number of sailing ships visiting it is increasing over time, so the transport of goods would be directly from Dubai to India rather than by sailing boats via Lengeh. The steam ships that visited Dubai port this year are

estimated as five steam ships. During the period 1899-1901, an increasing number of merchants migrated from Lengeh and other ports to Dubai. The Native Agent in the Emirates, Abdullatif bin Abdulrahman Al-Serkal (August 1890 - 24 August 1919), estimated that the number of Banyan people in Dubai was 52, and the number of Iranians was 550. The Banyans and Iranians had a significant role in the development of trade in the town. With the deterioration of the port of Lengeh and the loss of its importance as a transit port for commercial goods to the Arabian coast, and the prosperity of the port of Dubai on the opposite side of the Gulf, at least 21 ships visited Dubai in 1902, mainly from Bombay and Persia Steam Navigation Company. Two years

later, thanks to the wise policy of Sheikh Maktoum bin Hasher, the port of Dubai was placed for the first time in the regular program of the British Indian Steam Navigation Company. On June 10, 1904, it was decided that slow vessels should come to the port every two weeks. It was also visited by ships on their way back to India, when necessary.

This growing development of Dubai trade would not have happened so quickly had it not been for the enlightened policy pursued by Sheikh Maktoum bin Hasher Al Maktoum, the Ruler of Dubai. He initiated this policy by sending a trade delegation headed by Bin Kalban to Lengeh, then establishing a customs and storage building on the Dubai Creek. The Sheikh himself visited Lengeh port and met its merchants in

1902. Sheikh Maktoum bin Hasher also abolished the tax on imported goods, thereby turning Dubai into a free port. Regarding the cancellation of the resource tax on imported goods by Sheikh Maktoum bin Hasher, the traveler Hermann Burchardt stated as follows:

“I heard that the Sheikh had cleverly eschewed the 5% customs duty he was permitted to exact and had declared Dubai a free port. As a result, many merchants have settled here. Since all the land belongs to the Sheikh, he earns a larger income by renting out houses and stores than customs would have brought him”.

During the period from 1905 to 1906, the number of steam vessels visiting Dubai was estimated at 34 British ships with a capacity of 70132 tons. In 1907, Dubai was the only port

Leaves Bombay.	Vernal.	Mangrole.	Fore-buuder.	Dwar-ka.	Catch-ma-d-vie.	Arrives Karachi.	Leaves Karachi.	Pasni.	Gwadai.	Muscat.	Jask.	Bunder Abbas.	Dubal.	Linga.	Bahrein.	Bashire.	Mahomera.	Arrives Busrab.
Monday Oct. 7	Oct. 8	Oct. 8	...	Oct. 9	...	Oct. 10	Oct. 11	Oct. 12	Oct. 13	Oct. 14	..	Oct. 16	Oct. 17	Oct. 17	Oct. 19	Oct. 20	...	...
.. 14	.. 15	.. 15	...	.. 16	...	.. 17	.. 18	.. 19	..	.. 21	Oct. 22	.. 23	..	.. 24	.. 26	.. 27	Oct. 28	Oct. 29
.. 21	.. 22	.. 22	...	.. 23	...	.. 24	.. 25	.. 26	.. 27	.. 28	..	.. 30	.. 31	.. 31	Nov. 2	Nov. 3	...	...
.. 28	.. 29	.. 29	...	.. 30	...	.. 31	Nov. 1	Nov. 2	..	Nov. 4	Nov. 5	Nov. 6	..	Nov. 7	.. 9	.. 10	Nov. 11	Nov. 11
Nov. 4	Nov. 5	Nov. 5	...	Nov. 6	..	Nov. 7	.. 8	.. 9	Nov. 10	.. 11	..	.. 13	Nov. 14	.. 14	.. 16	.. 17	...	...

Figure (2): BISN Co. tabel shows the Dubai Station between Bandar Abbas & Lengeh, 1907.

I am directed by my Association to bring to your notice that although almost every important port in the Persian Gulf has a post office the ports of Daboi and Kowsit which are also becoming centres of trade with India have none. The British India Steam Navigation Company's steamers have now been calling at these ports every fortnight but in the absence of post office merchants have to send their letters and shipping documents through passengers or their friends at other ports, the result being that they reach very irregularly or sometimes not reach at all. You are well aware that the very first and the most important factor in trade is the postal arrangement without which it is almost impossible to develop it to any great extent.

My Association therefore request that you will be good enough to give this matter your kind consideration and arrange to open post office at the above-named ports so that business arrangements with these places may be greatly facilitated.

Figure (3): Letter dated 26 July 1904, from Karachi Merchant's Association to the Director General of the Post Office of India.

in the Emirates to be visited by giant vessels. The British India Steam Navigation Company steamers visited it every two weeks (Fig. 2), in addition to the visits by Bombay and Persia vessels, which stopped at the port of Dubai whenever they had the opportunity. Apart from

the mail that was transported unofficially due to the absence of a post office then, Dubai was also an exporter of pearls, nacre (mother of pearl), and dried fish, while importing rice, wheat, textiles, spices, dates from Basra, and ropes and wood from India.

The need for a Post Office in Dubai

Since then, the mail has been sent in bundles from Bombay and Karachi to Dubai and other Gulf ports to be distributed by the agents of the British India Steam Navigation Company, who were also collecting the Dubai mail and send it from there. In 1904, some chief merchants in Dubai expressed their dissatisfaction to the British India Steam Navigation Company because of the lack of a post office. On July 26, 1904, the Karachi Merchants Association asked the Director General of the Post Office of India to open a post office in Dubai (Fig. 3); the letter reads as follows:

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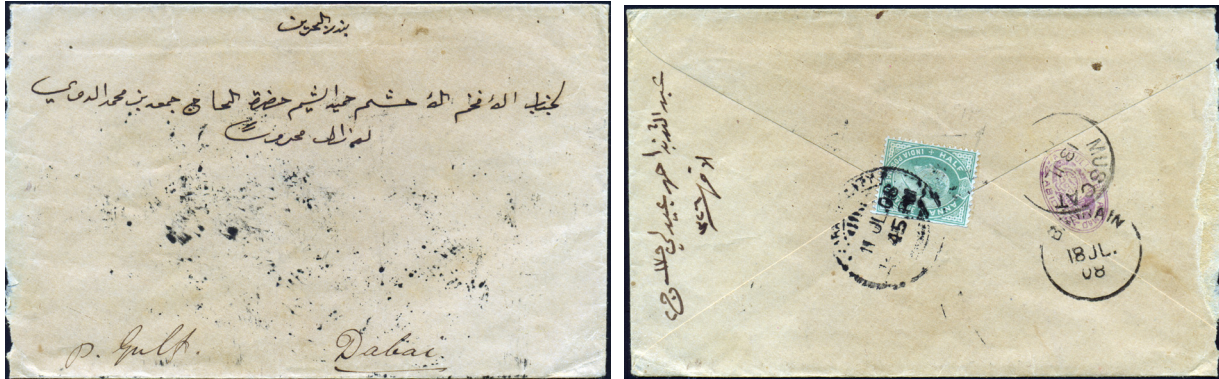


Figure (4): A pre Post Office cover sent from Bombay to Dubai via Bahrain, 1908.

post office merchants have to send their letters and shipping documents through passengers or their friends at other ports, the result being that they reach very irregularly or sometimes not reach at all. You are well aware that the very first and the most important factor in trade is the postal arrangement without which it is almost impossible to develop it to any great extent. My Association therefore request that you will be good enough to give this matter your kind consideration and arrange to open post office at the above-named ports so that business arrangements with these places may be greatly facilitated." The traders' request did not meet any response, so in 1906 they renewed their request

once again, and these repeated petitions resulted in the feasibility of opening a post office in Dubai. On March 16, 1906, in response to a request for his views on the idea of opening a post office in Dubai, the director of the General Post Office in Bombay informed the Political Resident that the Indian Postal Administration did not support the idea of opening a post office there at the moment. In August 1906, the Postmaster-General of India arranged for the dispatch to Dubai of unregistered fully prepaid letters at Indian inland rates in a special bag started in November 1908. Although this procedure has benefited Dubai's merchants a lot, it was not enough, compared

to the form and regularity of postal service if a post office was opened in Dubai. In 1907, Sheikh Butti bin Suhail sent a letter to the Political Resident urging him to open a post office in Dubai, stressing the trade community's need for it in view of the development achieved by trade there. Gray Paul & Co. did not stop doing good postal work for the residents of Dubai, but in 1908, it grumbled about the continuation of its work without any benefit for it or for the assigned worker in return. On May 7, they sent a letter to the company's headquarters in Bushehr, which read as follows: "You are well aware that we are taking mail to and from the steamers and are put to the



Figure (5): A 1909 cover sent from Dubai Post Office.

trouble of making its delivery without any remuneration from the postal authorities till this time. We do not know how long we should conduct this work and expose ourselves to the frequent botheration of the public enquires regarding the arrival of their letters and the like without any return. We hope you will kindly place the matter before His Britannic Majesty's Consul-General, and request him to arrange through the postal authorities to give us some reasonable remuneration to enable us to appoint a separate man for the work on our behalf and thus to free ourselves from the troubles and botheration."

In the same letter, it was

suggested that the post office can be managed by the company's agent, Haji Mohammed Ibrahim, where he himself offered to work as a postmaster in the office if he is reasonably paid and supplied with seals, papers and postal requisites that would help him perform the postal work. Indeed, Captain A. P. Trevor, First Assistant Resident, in Bushire, wrote to the Postmaster-General, Bombay, on June 14, 1908, to inform him about the status of the postal service in Dubai and the proposal he received from the Gray Paul Company about the possibility of appointing Haji Mohammed Ibrahim to manage the post office for an

appropriate fee. On September 12, 1908, Major Percy Cox, the Political Resident in the Arabian Gulf from Bushire, wrote to the Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign Department, explaining to him the current situation in the economically prosperous Dubai. He said that since its port was included in the visit schedule of the British India Steam Navigation Company's steam ships, trader's letters did not stop, explaining the challenges they faced when sending their mail to and from Dubai, which sometimes resulted in the loss of some of this mail due to the current situation. The Political Resident also applauded the cooperation of the British India company in this regard, by allowing their Captains to receive an unofficial mail bag for Dubai. The response of the Government of India through the Assistant Secretary in the Foreign Department, received on November 11, 1908, stated that there was nothing to prevent the appointment of an agent of the British India Steam Navigation Company



Figure (6): The First Dubai Branch Post Office Cancellation

in Dubai as a Postmaster, as an interim measure, with a monthly salary of 15 Indian rupees. The Assistant Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign Department indeed sent a letter on July 7, 1909, to the Political Resident in Bushehr, Major P. Z. Cox, stating:

"I am to inform you that instructions have been issued by the Director-General of the Post Office of India to the Postmaster-General, Bombay, to arrange for the supply to the British India Steam Navigation Company's Native Agent at Debai of the requisite stamps, seals, rules, & c., to enable him to carry on the postal work at that place."

Only one cover recorded sent to Dubai during the period



Figure (7): King Edward VII Indian Stamp

of the management of the Gray Paul Postal Service, which was initiated after the recommendation of the Indian Post Office in November 1906, (Fig. 4). The envelope was sent to Dubai from India on July 11, 1908, then through Muscat on July 13, 1908, to reach Dubai via the Bahrain Post Office, which was stamped on July 18, 1908.

The Opening of a Branch Post Office in Dubai

After the arrival of the postal equipment required by the post office which included the cancellation seal, the Indian postage stamps and the instruction manual, the branch post office was opened in Dubai on August 19, 1909. Mr. Haji Mohammed Ibrahim,

who was part of the staff of Gray Paul & Co., was appointed as Postmaster of the sub-post against a monthly allowance of Indian Rs 15. (Fig. 5) shows a copy of an envelope sent from the Dubai Post Office a few months after it was opened; dated November 28, 1909, represent the earliest known cover sent from Dubai branch post office.

With the opening of the Dubai Post Office, the cancellation seal used was the Indian Administration type (Fig. 6), which is 25 mm in diameter and inscribed "DUBAI / B. O. - PERSIAN GULF" in English only. The initials "B. O." refer to the words "Branch Office", It was one of two types that were used during the branch-office period, and continued from 1909 to 1941. It was noticed that during the use of the first Dubai "BO" type, many differences were found, mostly centered around the parts of the date (day, month, and year) in the same seal. The date might be either reversed, incomplete or stamped upside down. Some of these differences were documented in



Figure (8); Top: The Agency's location as it appears on Google Maps.
Bottom: An aerial view of the same location.

an article published in the May 29, 1959 issue of the weekly magazine "Stamp Collecting" published in Britain. The author of the article, A. C. Gledhill, titled his article "Delirium at Dubai"! More details of the first "BO" type was also documented by Abdullah Mohammed Tayeb Khoory, in highly meticulous detail in his article entitled "Dubai Donaldson Type 1" published in the quarterly Arabian Gulf Post History Journal. With the opening of the branch

post office, King Edward VII stamps of India were introduced on sale (Fig7). The values recorded used in Dubai were 3 Paises stamps of the 1902 issue, and half and 1 Anna, of the 1906 issue. King Edward's stamps continued to be used for years in Dubai's Branch office before new stamps bearing the portrait of King George V were introduced. The headquarter of the Branch post office when it was opened in 1909, was the same as that

of Gray Paul & Co., with postal bags were hung outside the office, and the names of countries written on them for civilians to put stamped envelopes in them. The distribution of letters takes place at the Gray Paul & Co.'s headquarters. After the arrival of the mail ship, people and traders would begin to meet in the same place of the Agency where the Postmaster read and delivered the names of the letter owners. If the letter owner was not present, an acquaintance would deliver it to him.

The post office played an important and vital role in the prosperity of the Emirate's trade and the growth of its economy at a regular pace, which contributed to its growth during the first decades and strengthened its position in the region. The Dubai Post office remained the only civilian post office in the Trucial States until 1963. The post offices of Abu Dhabi and Das Island were opened on March 30, 1963, followed by Sharjah Post Office on July 10, 1963. In 1964, post offices were opened in the rest of the UAE.