

The Certified Oval Negative Cancel of Puerto Rico

By Rafael Muller, PhD

It was a common practice of the Spanish post office and mail forwarding businesses in Puerto Rico during the 19th century to seal certified mail covers using wax. Thus, very important correspondence can be identified today by the wax seal at the back of the letter. This practice included very important and sensitive correspondence and valuables. In some cases, correspondence that was not registered -nor certified was sealed with wax as was consular correspondence. We can observe that fact on Figures 1 and 2, a letter addressed to the Spanish consul in Southampton, Great Britain in August 11 1868. Although the letter is not registered nor certified, it is sealed with wax on the back.



Figure1. Letter addressed to the Spanish Consul in Southampton, Great Britain, 1868 (front side).



Figure 2. Back side of the letter in Figure 1. It is sealed with wax although the letter is not registered nor certified.

The post office and mail forwarding businesses used metal tampons to squeeze the hot wax as to seal the flap to the envelope. The tampons were designed to imprint information on the hot wax, including information or initials of the forwarding businesses, name of the town and other pertinent information. The Spanish postal service in Puerto Rico designed and distributed a tampon intended to be used to seal all the important correspondence. The reader can observe the effect of using these tampons on Figures 3, 4 and 5. They show portions of a letter registered and certified in the town of San Lorenzo, Puerto Rico, addressed to the town of Lares, Puerto Rico. The front part of the letter in Figure 3 shows that the letter is registered by the stamping of the boxed R. There is a stamp missing on the upper right corner. The 3 stamps on the left add to 15 centavos de peso; the missing stamp was there to cover the rate of forwarding the letter.



Figure 3. Letter from the town of San Lorenzo, Puerto Rico to Lares, Puerto Rico.

What makes this letter interesting can be seen in Figure 4, that shows the back of the cover shown in Figure 3. It can be observed that the letter is sealed with black wax and is also certified in addition to be registered, as can be ascertained from the wax.



Figure 4. The back of the cover of Figure 3 with the black wax seal.

We can now examine the same image as Figure 4 but processed with an image processing program. What can be seen now is the negative and colorized image. We can now “easily” read the information on the wax.

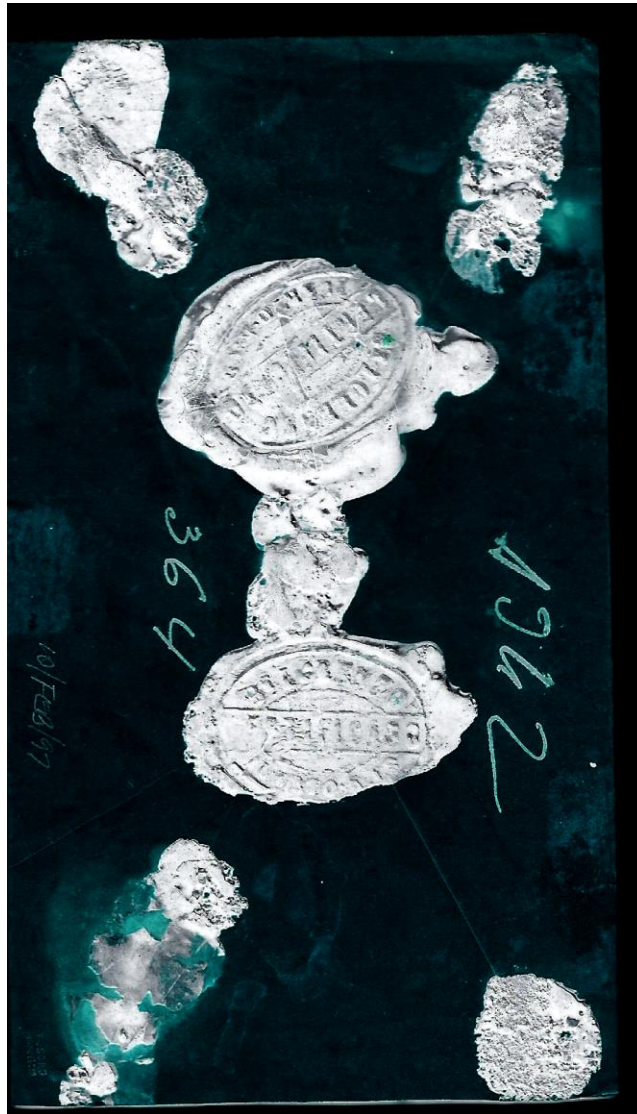


Figure 5. Inverted (negative) and colorized image of Figure 4.

Figure 6 is a cropped portion of Figure 5. It includes all the information on the wax and is as follows, from top to bottom.

Up on top is the towns name- San Lorenzo

In the middle – CERTIFICADO (Certified)

Bottom -Puerto Rico

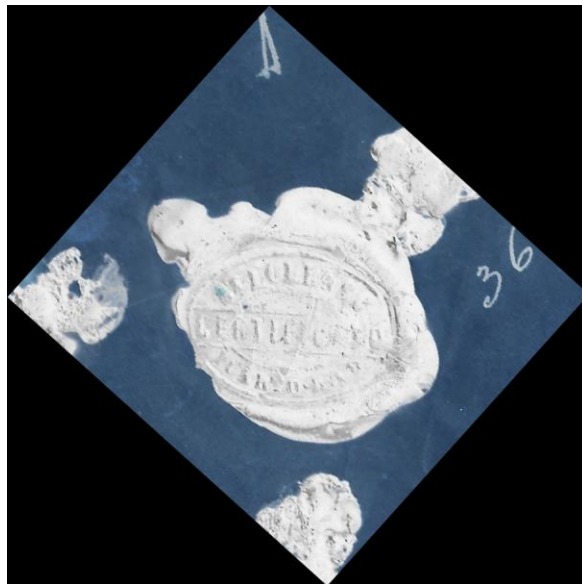


Figure 6. A cropped portion of Figure 5 showing all the information on the wax.

The tampons capable of yielding all this information were distributed at various post offices, However, we cannot conclude all post offices had them because we don't have that information at present.

We now move forward in time to the fall of 1898, after the American troops are all over Puerto Rico during the Spanish-American war, and there is a need for moving the soldiers mail and the mail of the civilians in captured towns. In many towns, the military in charge hired back many postal employees laid idle by the outgoing Spanish administrators

and gave them U.S. stamps, but in the first few weeks of the conflict, in the fall of 1898 and the next few months of 1899, canceling devices were hard to find. The Spanish administrators took all the stamps with them but left behind an assortment of stamp obliterators of the Spanish era. The returning postal clerks made good use of those devices left behind by the Spaniards. The Spanish canceling devices were used to cancel U.S. stamps for a short time. Figure 7 is a great example of the use of Spanish obliterators to cancel U.S. stamps. The Spanish “boxed R” used for registered mail (see Figure 3) is used in Figure 7 to cancel a 2-cent stamp. This is not a registered letter; it is regular mail. The 2 cents paid the intra island rate.



Figure7. Use of a Spanish obliterator to cancel U.S. stamps.

It was a matter of time before the certified oval was used to cancel stamps. The first known use of the negative oval canceling stamps comes from the well-known book of Jose Ignacio Garcia-Lomas(1977¹).

I translate (and quote) at the bottom of page 47 of his book, he states

“OVALS OF BLACK BACKGROUND

Known because of Sandborn and Preston, that knew their use at Ponce 1873.

There is a verified use (Isabela) between 1898-1900 over an U.S. stamp”.

Here is the Isabela certified negative oval:

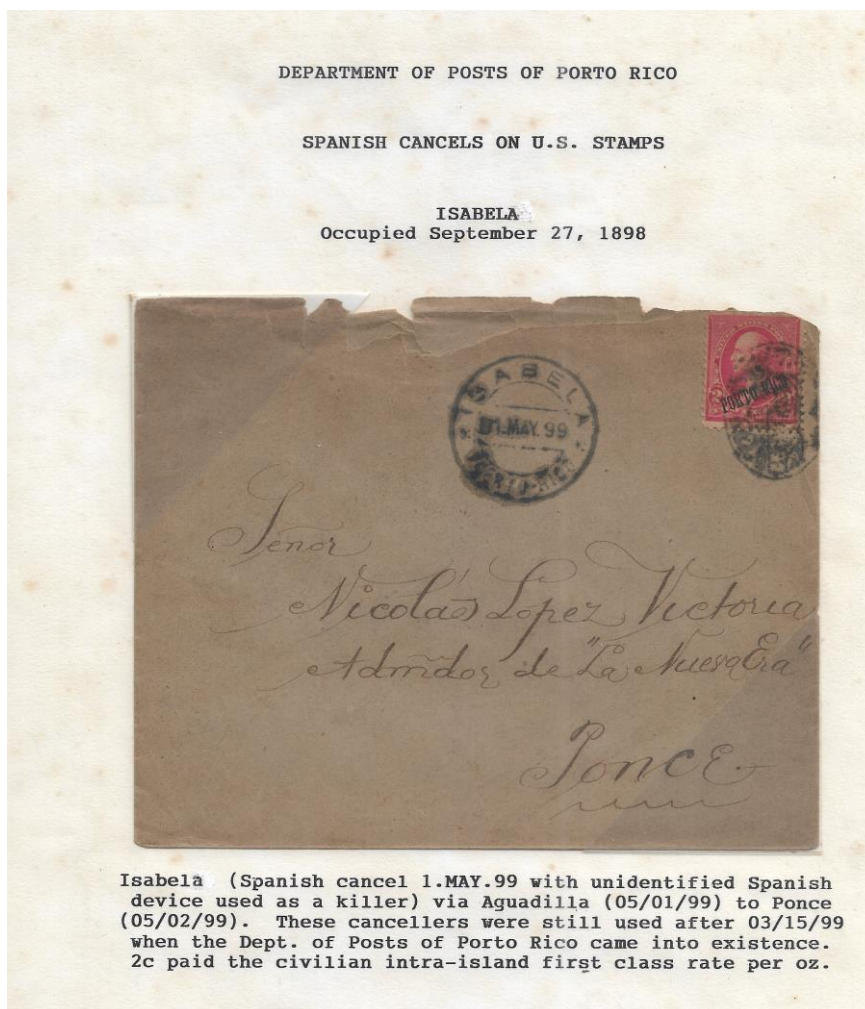


Figure 8. Certified negative oval cancel over U.S. stamp at Isabela, P.R.

The use of the certified negative oval as a canceling device showed up in various post offices on the island, and Figure 9 shows the use of the device in the town of Las Marias during the month of May 1999. The letter, addressed to a stamp dealer in New York City, shows a perfect strike of the oval, although outside of the stamp as if it was sending a message to the stamp dealers. The date is obtained from the military Sta 4 cancel on the back of the envelope.



Figure 9. Use of the Spanish certified negative oval to cancel a U.S. stamp

Use of image processing software, like Photoshop or other software on the market, can help to extract information not clearly visible in the raw images. In the case of Figure 9., processing the image of the cover makes reading the information in the dark oval much easier. Its straightforward to do so, using any image processing software. A

variation of color and contrast plus a negative of the original can take us to Figure 10, that is a processed image of Figure 9.

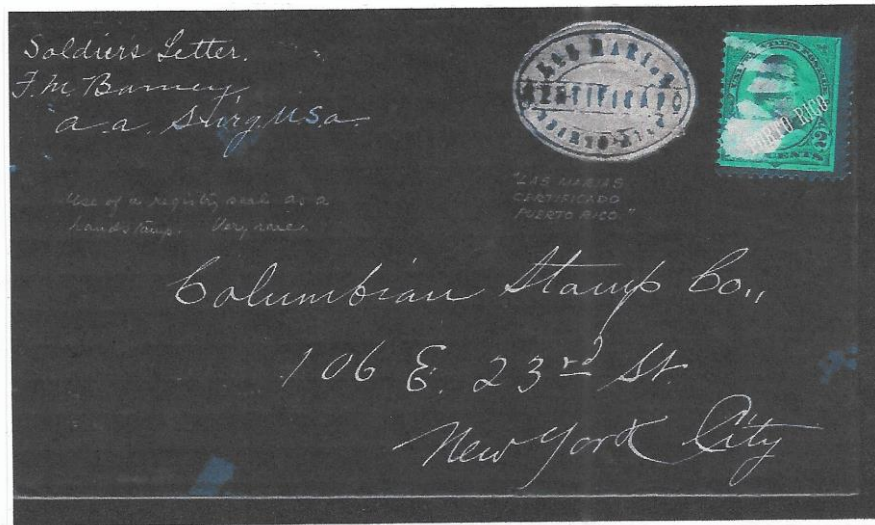


Figure 10. Processed Figure 9.

The reader can realize that it is much easier to extract information from the oval once it is processed.

There is another cover from Isabela where the dark oval is used as a handstamp for U. S. stamps as can be seen on Figure 11.



Figure 11. Negative oval cancels trans Mississippi and a 1c stamp from Isabela

You can find U.S. stamps of 1898-1900 with the certified negative oval cancelation. Figure 12 shows a group of stamps with the cancelation.



Figure 12. Stamps with the certified negative oval cancelation.

If the reader wants to decipher the words in the oval, an image processing software program is advised. First look for a negative of the image and then play with contrasts and color. You may be lucky and find from what town the oval comes from. The next and last images shows the result of attempting to get the information on the oval.



Figure 13. A stamp with the certified negative oval and the result of processing.

The stamp on the left is the raw stamp. The stamp on the right is the processed stamp. It shows the name of the town is Rio Grande, a town in the north-east coast of Puerto Rico; on the bottom it can be observed the Rico from Puerto Rico. Rio Grande is one of the most difficult town cancels to collect in Puerto Rico and here you have it from the certified negative oval. The reader should look among his

stamps and covers from the years 1898-1901 to see if a certified negative oval has been used to cancel one of her/his stamps.

Endnotes:

1. Jose I Garcia-Lomas; RESEÑA-INVENTARIO DE MARCAS, SELLOS, PRUEBAS Y ENTEROS POSTALES DE PPUERTO RICO (Como dependencia postal española). It translates as:
Review and inventory of cancelations, stamps, proofs, and postal stationery of Puerto Rico as a Spanish postal dependency
Madrid, Coleccion Filatelia Hobby.