

# Collecting Postal History



## The 1924 Panama Coat of Arms Stamps

by Jim Cross

**L**ike many philatelic collectors of my generation, my first interest was a general world stamp collection. When I went to work abroad in Iran in 1974, I decided to specialize in Colombia and Panama (which was part of Colombia before it became independent). I soon narrowed my period of interest, first to the stamps issued 1886–1904 and, finally, just to the postal history of that period. I accumulated material for two postal history exhibits, one covering 1886–1899 and the second the 1899–1902 civil war and its inflation aftermath, which has been the subject of two previous articles in this publication.<sup>1</sup>

By 1997 it was becoming difficult to find new material for these collections, and I decided to collect the 1924 Panama arms issue. At the time, I knew little about the issue — except that it was used for more than two decades and that some of the stamps were overprinted or surcharged in later years.

There are major differences between collecting and exhibiting stamps and postal history. A stamp collector can consult a number of general catalogues and, for many countries, specialized catalogues to see what stamps and varieties exist. Catalogue prices can serve as a guide to scarcity and what collectors might have to pay to acquire the stamps. Collecting postal history is not as clear cut.

While a few catalogues have begun to show prices for stamps on cover, this oversimplifies a complex subject. Covers have many characteristics that affect



Four stamps from the set of ten coat of arms issue that was commissioned by Panama in 1923 and produced by the American Bank Note Company. They were the definitive stamps of Panama from April 1924 to 1941, and continued to be used extensively until 1950.

their value. The stamp on the cover is only one. I rate my covers in six areas:

- |                         |                      |
|-------------------------|----------------------|
| O. — Origin             | D. — Destination     |
| R. — Rate               | P. — Postal Markings |
| U. — Usage of the stamp | M. — Miscellaneous   |

Then I assign each category a value, based upon scarcity, as follows:

1. Only one cover recorded.
2. Two to four covers recorded.
3. Five to nine covers recorded.
4. Ten to twenty-five covers recorded.
5. More than twenty-five covers recorded.
- , Not applicable.

This creates a consistent profile that can be applied to the individual covers.

It should be obvious that, in order to classify a cover in this way, it is necessary to learn a lot about the material being collected. That is one of the challenging aspects of collecting postal history. First one should search the literature. Little has been written about Panama stamps after 1920. The late Dr. James B. Helme collected this issue and his notes included a list of 177 arms issue covers in his collection. This provided some information about origins and destinations. I knew from looking for Panama material for my earlier exhibits that only a limited number of covers from domestic mail have survived. This was confirmed by the Helme notes. Covers from origins in the interior of the country were scarce during the 1886-1903 period. Helme's notes showed that there were more origins for arms issue covers, but that in many cases only a single cover from a town had been recorded. There was no published information on Panama postal rates or postal markings after 1906. I began purchasing covers, noting what was available. In three years I had acquired more than 200 and, with the list of Helme covers, it was possible to reach tentative conclusions about availability in all categories.

At the same time the Colombia/Panama Philatelic Study Group (COPAPHIL) began assembling examples of postal markings from its members for the publication of a handbook.<sup>2</sup> These provide a valuable source of information about small town origins and markings. I believe I can now assign profiles to my covers with a fair degree of accuracy.

## Origins

A list of Panama post offices published in the 1916 *Canal Zone Postal Guide*<sup>3</sup> included more than 150 locations. Probably another fifty were opened between 1916 and 1950. However, the postal markings project has found examples of markings on covers from only fifty-seven offices, and only



An example of usage on a UPAE registered letter from Changuinola F4 to Chicago, February 20, 1931; rate 2 plus 10 centesimos.



An example of usage on a registered letter to a non-UPAE country, Panama to Martinique, March 24, 1936; rate 5 plus 10 centesimos.



An example of a 2-centesimos stamp overprinted for use in the Canal Zone, shown on postcard from Cristobal to Atahualpa, Peru, sent June 5, 1924.



Wrapper from a small box sent to Cuba by registered mail. One of the few covers carried on the February 9, 1929, flight that was not sent to a U.S. address.

one cover has been reported from thirteen of these.

A 1931 registered cover sent from Changuinola F4 had a 2-centesimos coat of arms stamp added to a registered postal stationery envelope to pay the sea mail postage. Changuinola, on the Caribbean coast, was the site of a number of banana plantations of the United Fruit Company. Separate postal facilities were established at some of them. F4 probably stood for *finca* [plantation] 4. Obviously, the registration marking also is unique on cover. The cover's profile is:

O	D	R	P	U	M
1	5	5	1	4	-

## Destinations

Tabulation of the covers in the two collections indicates that about 70 percent are addressed to the United States. An additional 10 percent are addressed to Europe and 10 percent to other countries in the Americas. About 8 percent are from domestic mail, including mail to the Canal Zone, and the remaining 2 percent are to destinations in Asia or Africa. These figures probably understate the percentage addressed to the United States, because such covers are so plentiful that neither Dr. Helme nor I purchased all that were available.

A 1936 registered cover addressed to the governor of Martinique is franked with three 5-centesimos arms stamps to pay the 5-centesimos sea mail postage and 10-centesimos

registration fee. This is the only recorded arms issue cover sent to Martinique. Its profile is:

O	D	R	P	U	M
5	1	4	5	3	-

There are fewer than ten covers showing use of three 5-centesimos arms stamps to pay this rate:

The 2-centesimos stamp overprinted for use in the Canal Zone is shown used on a postcard sent to Peru. The overprinted stamps were only on sale in the Canal Zone for five months in 1924 when the United States abrogated the Taft agreement that required "Canal Zone" be overprinted on Panama stamps. Although 370,240 of the 2-centesimos stamps were sold, uses to destinations other than the U.S. or locally in the Canal Zone are scarce. The profile is:

O	D	R	P	U	M
5	1	5	5	4	-

## Rates

During the period the arms stamps were in use, Panama had two basic first-class letter rates. The rate for domestic letters and letters to members of the Postal Union of the Americas and Spain (UPAE) was two cents per ounce — these included the United States, Canada, and all independent countries in Latin America. Postage for letters to other countries was five cents per ounce, the UPU rate. After June 15, 1939, a 1-centesimo postal tax stamp was required on first class mail.

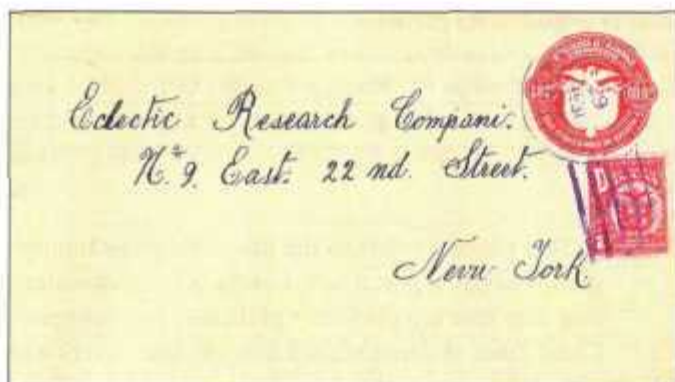
There was a domestic printed matter rate of ½ centesimo, a UPAE printed matter rate of 1 centesimo, and a UPU printed matter rate of 2 centesimos.

The UPAE postcard rate was 1 centesimo and the UPU postcard rate was 2 centesimos.

The registration fee was 5 centesimos and the acknowledgment of receipt fee was 2½ centesimos from April 1, 1906 through March 31, 1929; these rates were doubled to 10 and 5 centesimos on April 1, 1929.

Panama air mail rates were complex and not all details are known. Covers indicate there were at least six different rate schedules in effect from the first air mail flight on February 9, 1929, through 1950. The early rate schedules included different rates for individual countries in the Americas.

The wrapper from a small box sent to Cuba by registered mail on the first air mail flight on February 9, 1929, is franked with 6 centesimos in postage, indicating that the box weighed 2–3 ounces. For this flight only, the air mail fee was 25 centesimos per piece, apparently without regard to weight, paid by overprinted "Correo Aereo Veinticinco Centesimos" stamp. The remaining 5-centesimos stamps paid the registration fee. This was the only air mail flight to occur while the 5-centesimos registration fee was in effect,



A double-weight letter to New York required the addition of a 2-centesimos stamp to the 2-centesimos envelope.



Use of the 1/2-centesimo stamp to pay local business papers rate; local drop letter from Colon on May 8, 1931, handstamped PAPEL DE NEGOCIO [business paper].

and only a few registered covers from the flight have been recorded. This cover's profile is:

O	D	R	P	U	M
1	5	5	1	4	-

A local letter mailed in Colon is marked PAPEL DE NEGOCIO [business paper]. Apparently there was a special 1/2-centesimo rate for mailing business papers. While one might think that bank statement mailings would be common, this is the only cover illustrating this rate that has been recorded. Its profile is:

O	D	R	P	U	M
5	5	1	5	1	-



One of two recorded non-philatelic uses of the 24-centesimos stamp, this one from Colon to Buenos Aires on April 29, 1942. The air mail rate was 15 centesimos.

## Postal Markings

This includes markings applied by the dispatching post office, by offices handling the item in transit, and by the receiving post office. Some markings are scarce even from post offices with large volumes of mail. An example of one cover has special significance for me. The small village of Pocri was the home of my wife's grandmother. It is one of two villages in Panama with that name, and is known as "Pocri de Las Tablas" or "Pocri de Los Santos" to distinguish it from Pocri de Aguadulce. One cover has been recorded with each of those three origin markings. This one is postmarked Pocri de Los Santos. A 2-centesimos coat of arms stamp has been added to a 2-centesimos

Coat of arms stamp used to pay fee on a request to trace a registered letter, May 24, 1947.

REPUBLICA DE PANAMA  
POSTES ET TELEGRAPHES  
AGENCIA POSTAL  
AGENCIA POSTAL  
RECLAMACION  
RECLAMACION

Formula No. 4

Si un objeto resguardado ..... con el No. 25519 ..... (a)  
 o un objeto certificado ..... (b)  
 o si un objeto de valor declarado de ..... (c)  
 o si un objeto con valor declarado ..... (d)

(a) - Registered Article No. 25519 dispatched to \_\_\_\_\_  
 on May 1, 1947 in Jacket No. \_\_\_\_\_ Special List \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_ Entry \_\_\_\_\_  
 (b) - Jacket No. \_\_\_\_\_ dispatched to A.K.F. Chicago, Ill. \_\_\_\_\_ entered on  
 Special List 144 Page 1 Entry 4 under Rotary A 48879-0186  
 (c) - Rotary \_\_\_\_\_ dispatched to Miami, Fla., on May 1, 1947  
 Lock Bill 180 Entry 5 and the receipt of G. L. Martin \_\_\_\_\_ is held.  
 Postmaster, Balboa, Canal Zone, per M.S. Brandon, Jr.

GP-49800(500) VW



Front and back of domestic registered special delivery letter with acknowledgment of receipt requested; rare example of domestic special delivery cover.

stamped envelope to pay for a letter weighing between one and two ounces. Its profile is:

O	D	R	P	U	M
2	5	4	1	3	-

### Usage

This element refers to the use of single or multiple stamps to pay a postal rate. I exclude from consideration uses that are obviously philatelic. For example, a Canal Zone resident mailed himself four covers with first day uses of the first Panama special delivery stamp, although he lived less than a mile from the post office and the Canal Zone had no special delivery service. The same individual sent himself an ordinary letter franked with a 24-centesimos arms stamp. There was no indication that the letter was overweight and required more than 2 centesimos postage. Non-philatelic uses of high-value stamps from Panama on cover are extremely scarce. Some 24-centesimos, 50-centesimos, and 1-Balboa stamps of the 1906-1950 issues have not been recorded on cover. They were intended primarily for use on parcels and almost never have survived on the wrappers.

### Profiles of Covers in Panama Arms Exhibit

Frame	Page	O	D	R	P	U	M	Remarks
8	1	5	4	5	5	2	-	Commercial use of Scott 277, fewer than 5 recorded.
8	1	5	5	5	5	3	-	FDC of Scott 277 Colon-Buffalo, NY.
8	2	5	5	4	2	1	-	Flown cover with Scott 277/C20.
8	2	5	5	5	3	3	-	One of six recorded covers of Scott C19. All local addresses, philatelic.
8	3	5	5	5	5	2	-	Scott 321A FDC. Variety inverted surcharge. Philatelic?
8	3	5	5	5	5	2	-	Scott 321A FDC. Variety double surcharge. Philatelic?
8	6	5	5	5	5	2	-	Scott 333 & 335. Few commercial registered uses known.
8	7	5	5	5	5	2	-	Scott 334 x 3 for 15c air mail rate. Few air mail uses known.
8	7	5	4	4	5	1	-	Scott 336 x 3 for 45c air mail rate to England.
8	8	5	4	2	5	1	-	Scott 338-339. Only use of either stamp on commercial cover.

One example shows use of a 24-centesimos arms stamp (plus two 1-centesimo stamps) on a 1942 registered cover to Argentina. Air mail postage was 15 centesimos, the registration fee was 10 centesimos, and a 1-centesimo postal tax stamp was required. This is one of only two recorded covers showing non-philatelic use of this stamp on cover. Its profile is:

O	D	R	P	U	M
5	4	4	5	2	-

Another example shows use of a 10-centesimos stamp on a tracer form for a registered letter. A fee was required for this service in Panama. It is one of two recorded tracer requests with arms stamps. Its profile is:

O	D	R	P	U	M
5	5	2	5	2	-

What is arguably one of the most unusual covers with arms stamps can be seen in the only recorded pre-1950 cover from Capira, one of a handful of recorded domestic special delivery covers. It was registered with acknowledgment of receipt requested. There is a manuscript A.R. marking on the front. It is the only recorded cover on which an arms stamp was used to pay the special delivery fee of 10 centesimos. Incoming registered letters to the city of Panama with street addresses bear the handstamp of the carrier who delivered the letter on the reverse. These are quite scarce and only numbers 1, 3, 6, 8, 9, and 10 have been recorded thus far. The carrier number on the reverse of this cover is No. 10. Its profile is:

O	D	R	P	U	M
1	5	3	1	1	-

A 1936 air mail cover from Panama to David is franked with the 2-centesimos regular and 5-centesimos air mail overprints on Panama arms issue stamps. These commemorated the 100th anniversary of the birth of Pablo Arosemena. Only 30,000 of the air mail stamps were printed. At that time the domestic airmail rate was 7 centesimos per half ounce. Curiously, although this rate was in effect from 1930, Panama did not issue a 7-centesimos air mail stamp until 1938; before this date it was necessary to add a 2-centesimos stamp to a 5-centesimos air mail stamp on a domestic air mail letter. Given the low survival rate of domestic covers in Panama, it is perhaps not unusual that a 1944 note in an air mail publication suggested the Arosemena commemorative might be the scarcest Latin American air mail stamp on cover. This is the only use of the stamp on other than a first day cover that I have seen, although other covers may exist. The cancel with numeral 4 was used by the section of the Panama post

## Panama Centennial

From 1821 to 1903 Panama was a part of Colombia; however, from October 1899 to November 1902 there was a major civil war in Colombia, and when the war was ended by the Treaty of Wisconsin, signed aboard the U.S. battleship *Wisconsin*, most of Panama was in rebel hands. The Hay-Herran Treaty, providing for the construction of a canal in Panama, was signed in Washington, DC, in March 1903. This treaty was rejected by the Colombian senate in July 1903 by a vote of 24-0 with the three senators from Panama abstaining.

Three factors now combined to precipitate matters:

- Citizens of Panama feared that the United States would decide to build a canal in Nicaragua instead.
- The New French Canal Company, which had been promised a payment for the French property and equipment, was still on the isthmus.
- President Theodore Roosevelt was impatient to begin the canal construction.

The exact role played by these three elements in Panama's declaration of independence is the subject of controversy. However, the result was that a Panamanian junta declared its independence from Colombia on November 3, 1903, and signed the treaty that permitted the United States to construct the Panama Canal.

office responsible for dispatch of domestic mail and only two examples have been recorded. The cover's profile is:

O	D	R	P	U	M
5	5	4	2	1	-

A 1947 cover to Guam has franking that includes the 50-centesimos surcharge on the 24-centesimos arms stamp,



Arosemena overprint used on domestic air mail cover, September 28, 1936. The 5-centesimos air mail stamp is very scarce on cover.



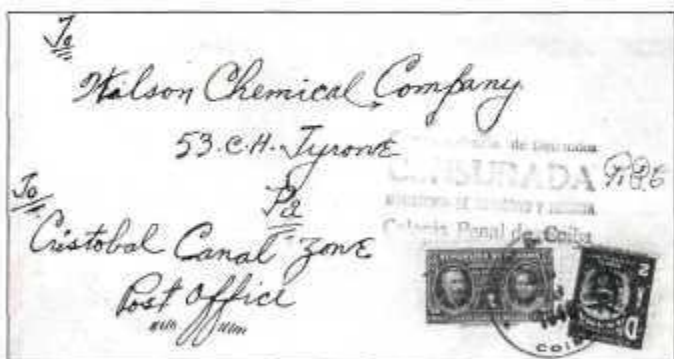
Overprinted 24-centesimos stamp; the only recorded use on a cover other than first day covers, and a very unusual destination.

Scott 352. This is the only recorded commercial use of this stamp on cover. At least one first day cover is known. This is the only recorded cover from Panama to Guam before 1950, and it is presently the only recorded cover showing the 60-centesimos rate for an air mail letter to Asia weighing 16–30 grams. Its profile is:

O	D	R	P	U	M
5	1	1	5	1	-

The arms issue included a 12-centesimos stamp that did not pay any common postal rate when it was issued. Only 205,000 of the 12-centesimos stamps were issued without overprinting. After the registration fee was raised to 10 centesimos in 1930, it could be used to pay the postage on a domestic or UPAAE registered letter. Only one recorded example is known of the 12-centesimos stamp used alone in this way — a preprinted cover sent to the Charles R. Spicer Company of Memphis, Tennessee. The profile of this cover is:

O	D	R	P	U	M
5	5	5	5	1	-



Censored prisoner mail from Panama Penal Colony, sent December 19, 1946, and destined for the Wilson Chemical Company in Tyrone, Pennsylvania. (In the small world department, APS webmaster Doris Wilson lives in Tyrone. Several of her relatives worked for Wilson Chemical Company, which made Cloverine salve.)

One post-1939 example exists of this use with an added postal tax stamp.

## Miscellaneous

This category is used for other characteristics of the cover worth noting. Examples include combination frankings with stamps of other countries, covers with postage due collected, mail from and to celebrities, censored covers, interrupted or disinfected mail, official mail, indications of misrouting and undeliverable mail.

One cover in this category is from an inmate in the Panama prison located on Coiba island off the coast of Panama, west of David. Prisoners' mail was censored, and this letter bears a large censored handstamp. At least three of these covers exist, all mailed by the same individual. Its profile is:

O	D	R	P	U	M
2	5	5	2	5	2

One of the most unusual covers with an arms stamp was sent from Bocas del Toro to Macao by ship in November 1941. While it was en route, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. The cover, which was in the Helme collection, was marked "MAIL SERVICE SUSPENDED" and returned to the sender. After the use of postal tax stamps began to be required on June 14, 1939, very few pieces of sea mail have been recorded. This cover's profile is:

O	D	R	P	U	M
5	1	3	1	3	-

The final illustration is not an arms stamp cover. It is a classic example of a cover with a profile of M-1. It was sent in 1886 from the United States to Ferdinand De Lesseps at the Panama Canal Company in Panama, but was underfranked. A Colombian 5-centavos stamp was applied to pay the postage due. This is the only recorded incoming cover to Panama on which such a stamp was used in this way. Four covers dated between 1887 and 1903 have been recorded on which stamps of Colombian issues for Panama were used to pay postage due. This cover (ex-Castillejo) was sold at auction by AFINSA in July 2002. Its profile is:

O	D	R	P	U	M
5	4	5	5	1	1

In preparing either a postal history exhibit or the uses on cover portion of a traditional philatelic exhibit, a collector should always look for covers that have at least one value of three or lower in their profile, although it may be necessary at times to include more common covers to tell a complete story. My rule of thumb is that, for a postal history exhibit to merit a gold award, at least 75 percent of the covers exhibited should meet this criterion. When showing even a



Underfranked cover sent in 1886 from the United States to Ferdinand De Lesseps at the Panama Canal Company in Panama. A Colombian 5-centavos stamp was applied to pay the postage due. This is the only recorded incoming cover to Panama on which such a stamp was used in this way.

common use a collector should search out an uncommon example.

As an example, several million 1-centesimos arms stamps were used to mail picture postcards from Panama between 1924 and 1939, and thousands of them have survived. However, uses to Latin American countries for which the 1-centesimo rate was valid or cards mailed aboard ship with paquebot markings are much scarcer and should be shown in preference to ordinary uses.

One thing that should be clear from this article is that there is a lot to learn about the postal history of any country. Neither dealers nor members of show juries can be expected to know all of this information for every country. One effect of this is that non-specialized dealers sometimes offer extremely rare items at very low prices. One of the covers illustrated in this article was sold by a dealer for \$12. Another was found on eBay with a starting bid of \$3.

The downside of this lack of knowledge, however, is that exhibits of very scarce material from less popular countries often do not receive a fair evaluation from show juries. Instructions to exhibitors are ambiguous. If the write-ups of too many covers in an exhibit mention their scarcity, jurors often criticize the exhibitor for this. Exhibitors are invited to list highlights of the exhibit on the synopsis that they furnish

to the jury, but juries don't expect to have the exhibitor tell them that 75 percent of the covers included are highlights!

One way to evaluate an exhibit is to prepare a sheet in the format shown below. Fill in the cover's profile and explain the scoring briefly. In an eight-frame exhibit, list the one hundred covers with the highest profile. If your exhibit measures up, but is not receiving a gold medal, try sending a copy of such a sheet with your synopsis the next time.

#### Endnotes

1. Jim Cross, "The Thousand Days — Colombia's Unknown War," *The American Philatelist* 112, no. 8 (August 1998): 752; "Colombia — Inflation Covers 1904–1905," *The American Philatelist* 113, no. 2 (February 1999): 154.
2. Robert L. Mitchell Jr. and Robert A. D'Elia, *A Philatelic Bibliography of Colombia and Panama 1865–1999* (COPAPHIL, El Cajon, CA, 1999).
3. *Canal Zone Postal Guide*, 1916; the extracted Panama post office list was published in *COPACARTA* 1, Number 4 (May 1984).

## The Author

Jim Cross, founder of COPAPHIL, the Colombia/Panama Philatelic Study Group, has served as editor of its publication since 1983. He has written extensively on Colombia and Panama postal history. His most recent article was a history of Panama Registered Mail through 1950 published in the *Collectors Club Philatelist*.

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