

# XXXV

## The Suez Canal Company Postal Service

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### Background

Although the Suez Canal Company issued but four stamps, which were in use for only 40 days, the literature about them is voluminous. However, the largest part of it is repetitive, each contribution having no newer information than those before, and not meant for the specialist collector. It is therefore not necessary to give all of the bibliographic citations<sup>1</sup> here. On the other hand, there have been serious studies by Jean Boulad d'Humières, as well as valuable contributions by the Williams brothers, among others. Boulad's studies were published at first in parts in Swiss, French, Italian, Belgian, and Egyptian philatelic periodicals, and later collected and revised in book form in collaboration with Ringström and Tester<sup>2</sup>. Except for some revisions in the section on forgeries, that work stands as the definitive treatment of the subject.

A concession was granted by Mohammed Said Pasha, Khedive of Egypt, to Ferdinand de Lesseps, an entrepreneur, on November 30th 1855 for the construction and operation of a canal from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea, to last 99 years from the date of opening. Construction did not begin until April 1859 and was finished in November 1869. Several non-philatelic books and a concise summary<sup>3</sup> have been written about the achievement. As the work proceeded, the need arose for communication between the several work sites along the route and the Company's offices in Port Said, Ismailia, Suez, and Alexandria. The Company was obliged to arrange its own courier system, until it made an agreement with the *Posta Europea* on July 15th 1860 to carry the Company's mail from the nearest *Posta Europea* office (Damiata, Zagazig, or Suez) in return for an annual fee<sup>4</sup>.

The Company's letters appear not to have been handstamped by the *Posta Europea*, which did not have offices in the canal zone except at Suez. According to the agreement, letters were to be struck with the "special stamp" of the Company's forwarding service and countersigned by the forwarding agent. The only examples known to me bear only the specified countersigning; however, so few are known that it is not prudent to conclude that they were not handstamped in the earliest period. Launches were used on the freshwater canal, which ran from Zagazig to Suez via Ismailia, and camel riders were used between Ismailia and Port Said. This convenient arrangement came to an end when the Egyptian Government bought out the *Posta Europea* in 1865 and the Company had to resume operating its own postal system. It also carried the mail of other persons residing in the canal zone, charging them no fee.

## Stamps

Eventually the General Manager of the Company's Postal and Telegraph Service, Gustave Riche, pointed out that the cost to the Company was substantial and that a large part of the cost could be recouped, even perhaps a profit made, by charging a fee to be collected by introducing postage stamps. The proposal was made in November 1867 and an order for stamps was sent on April 15th 1868 to the firm Chézaud Ainé et Tavernier of Paris.

Charging postage came into effect on July 1st 1868 and it had been expected that the stamps would have been received in time. In the event, the stamps did not reach Alexandria until July 6th and Ismailia on about the 9th. In the interim, postage was paid in cash, but it is not known if any markings, manuscript or handstamped, were applied. Letters sent out of the canal zone would have required Egyptian postage stamps in addition (or French if leaving Egypt via Port Said or Suez). The railway from Zagazig to Ismailia was opened on July 1st 1868 and the Egyptian Postal Administration opened a post office at Ismailia on the same day. Letters originating at intermediate sites along the Canal, such as Kantara, would have entered the Egyptian postal system at Ismailia (letters originating at Port Said or Suez for destinations outside the canal zone would have gone directly into the Egyptian postal system at those points). Any letter postmarked at Ismailia in the first week of July 1868 should therefore be examined for evidence of its origin (sender's cachet or internal notation); if it is not Ismailia, it is reasonable to conclude that the letter was carried by the Company.

The order for stamps consisted of four denominations: 1c. black – 1000, 5c. green – 30,000, 20c. blue – 100,000, 40c. red – 10,000. The order was accompanied by a sketch of the desired design. The archives of the Company disclose that proofs were submitted and that some small modification was subsequently required. Neither the sketch nor the proofs have survived.



Fig. 1 Genuine 20c., position 59.

The printers engraved a die for the 20c. denomination on copper, impressions from which were transferred to stone for lithography. The stones bore 120 subjects, in 10 rows of 12, an arrangement probably chosen in order to use the available sheets of paper most efficiently. There were no marginal markings. The stone was made up from 120 separate transfers from the die, and there are consequently no repeated types for this value (Fig. 1). However, the transfers were not made with great finesse and each subject can be identified from the many artifacts of the transfer process. Each position is illustrated and described by Boulad, Ringström, and Tester.

For each of the other values, transfers of four images to an intermediate stone were made, the denominations were erased, and new ones drawn in. The blocks of four subjects were then transferred thirty times to make up the printing stones. Since each subject on the intermediate stone had distinct characteristics arising from the transfer process and the erasing and new drawing of the numerals of value, the printing stones showed four types, in blocks of four throughout the sheet. The four types of the 1, 5, and 40c. are shown in Figures 2, 3, and 4; recognition of them is of great value in detecting forgeries. Furthermore, small flaws were introduced with each transfer from

the intermediate stone, and consequently, each subject on the stone or sheet can be identified. Complete plating of each denomination is available in the book by Boulad, Ringström, and Tester.

Fig. 2 1 Centime transfer Types



- Type I** The S of SUEZ is connected to the frame at the top left.  
In the white band between the left star and CANAL, there is a colored mark below and to the left of C.  
From the right side of the loop of the R of MARITIME there is a projection.  
Above the second A of CANAL there are two dots, one on either side, attached to the oval.
- Type II** To the right of DE there is a downwards projection from the inner oval.  
The L of CANAL has a projection to the right from the lower part of the stem.  
The D of DE is connected to the oval above.
- Type III** There is a horizontal line through the lower part of the D of DE.  
The right leg of the first A of CANAL is irregular in outline.  
The E of MARITIME is notched on the right side above the center bar.  
The horizon of the ocean is slightly interrupted by a white area off the bow.
- Type IV** There is a small spot of color close to the upper left part of the C of CANAL.  
The stem of the E of MARITIME is joined to the center bar by a slanting line (not visible on all stamps).  
Below the left part of the C of CANAL there is a small projection (not visible on all stamps).  
There is a spot of color to the right of DE (not visible on all stamps).  
In the lower left value circle, there is an elongated dot southeast of the small circle beneath C.  
The thick oval frame is indented below the stem of E of DE.

Fig. 3 5 Centimes transfer Types



- Type I** There are two vertical projections from the upper oval, one just to the left of R, and one extending into the loop of R.  
In the E of MARITIME the lower part of the serif on the center bar is missing.
- Type II** There is a small colored spot in the sky below the second M of MARITIME.  
The line of rigging to the right of the stern mast is broken.  
The lower left serif of the E of SUEZ is missing.  
There is a spot of color above the 1 o'clock position of the left star.
- Type III** There is a bulge on the right leg of the second A of CANAL.  
The L of CANAL has a very thick serif at the right end of the foot.  
Above the 1 o'clock position of the right star there is a blob of color attached to the frame.  
To the left of D there is a colored spot.
- Type IV** The upper left value circle shows more than the usual fragments of the erased 20.  
There is a diagonal line from the top right of the N of CANAL, joining it to the oval.  
Below the R of MARITIME there is a bulge on the inner, thick frameline.  
A blur of color breaks the white line below the P of POSTES.

Fig. 4 40 Centimes transfer Types



- Type I** The left bar of the T of MARITIME has a small break between the stem and the serif.  
The stem of T of POSTES is very long.  
Off the upper right corner of the 4 at the top right there is a spot of color.
- Type II** There is a short line just off the lower left of the C of CANAL.  
There are a number of spots of color between the rigging lines above the bowsprit.  
The top right of the E of SUEZ is connected to the oval.  
There is a minute extension of color that slightly narrows the diagonal stroke of the first S of POSTES.  
A tiny spot of color intrudes into the lower stem of the T of POSTES, from the left.
- Type III** A small spot of color lies above the 0 in the upper left value circle.  
There is a faint spot of color between MARITIME and the right star, toward the inner oval.  
Above the A of MARITIME the outer frameline is narrowed by a small white indentation.  
A colored nick extends into the stem of the P of POSTES.  
The stem of the T of POSTES is broken in the middle.  
The rigging to the right of the stern mast does not join the mast.  
A line of color joins the 4 and 0 in the upper left value circle.
- Type IV** A short colored line projects upward from the upper left part of 0 in the upper right value circle.  
To the lower left of the 4 in the lower left value circle there is a pronounced thickening of the inner circle.  
To the right of the center bar of the E of SUEZ there is a spot of color.  
A diagonal line of color joins 4 to 0 in the lower right value circle.  
The stem of the E of SUEZ tapers toward the bottom.

Owing to the odd size of the sheets, the number printed could not conform exactly to the quantity ordered. The printers therefore printed a small excess, which also enabled them to make up for spoilage. The quantities dispatched, according to the records, were:

1c. black (intense to greyish)	1,220	20c. milky blue to Prussian blue	105,644
5c. grass green to light emerald	31,232	40c. carmine-red to vermilion-red	10,863

The odd figures arose because the printers cut some stamps from partly spoiled sheets. The variations in color were most likely the result of settling of the pigments as the printing proceeded. The Prussian blue shade of the 20c. is somewhat rare, most of the stamps being light milky blue.

Smooth, white paper of medium thickness was used. The paper factory included a watermark<sup>5</sup>, apparently one on each factory sheet, which was cut into smaller sheets for printing. Consequently, some sheets of stamps had no watermark at all, some had one only in a lateral margin, and some had a single impression, reading vertically up or down, extending over about three stamps. The manufacturers were Justin, Auguste, and Eugène Lacroix and their names are reflected in the watermark, L A ✕ – F in large, double-lined letters (Fig. 5). It is 97mm long and ca. 17mm high. Most stamps are without watermark, and specimens showing any part of the watermark are scarce enough to deserve a substantial premium.

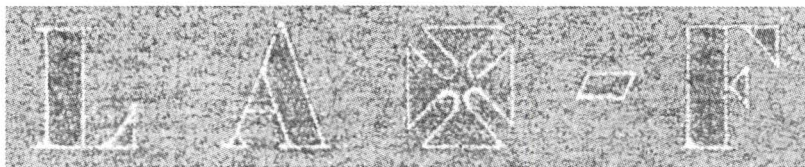


Fig. 5 The watermark.

The stamps were supplied imperforate, although perforation had been requested in the order. The printers, evidently inexperienced in perforation, demurred because of the cost.

The Company's original estimate of its needs was based on an anticipated 220 letters a day. The quantity of 20c. stamps would therefore have sufficed for somewhat over one year. The estimate for the 1c. was apparently much too low, for a supplementary supply was ordered almost immediately and 40 sheets (4800 stamps) were delivered in August 1868.

Upon completion of their work the printers destroyed the intermediate stone and delivered the printing stones to the Company. These stones remained in the Company's offices in Paris, where those of the 1, 5, and 20c. were rediscovered in 1947 by J. Boulad. They were photographed for study and record; the stones themselves are understood to have been given to the Paris Postal Museum. The stone for the 40c. was found in 1906 among the effects of a Parisian stamp dealer, E.L. d'Etiolles, and was bought at auction in 1907 by another dealer, Saatjian. It is not known how the stone came into d'Etiolles' possession. Its subsequent history, however, is dealt with later in this chapter in connection with forgeries.

Some stamps have quite noticeable constant plate flaws and retouches that are features of the plating<sup>6</sup>; there are too many to illustrate here, and the judgment as to which should be considered prominent and which trivial is subjective. The 20c. value is an

especially rich source of such varieties; on some subjects the shading of the sky and the sea is almost absent, whereas on others the sea is so heavily shaded that the ship appears to be sinking. Flaws may be colorless (broken letters and lines, etc.) or colored (extraneous spots, lines, etc.). Other flaws occurred on the intermediate stone and are therefore characteristics of one of the four types. Several of them have been illustrated and analyzed by the Williams brothers in connection with the lithographic process<sup>7</sup>. They used one example to illustrate the nature of palimpsests, in which traces of a former use of the stone can be seen, exemplified in the types of the 5c. denomination which show traces of "20c." in the value tablets. (It is arguable whether this should properly be called a true palimpsest, however, for it was a result of deliberate alteration on an intermediate stone rather than being a left-over image from a previous use.)

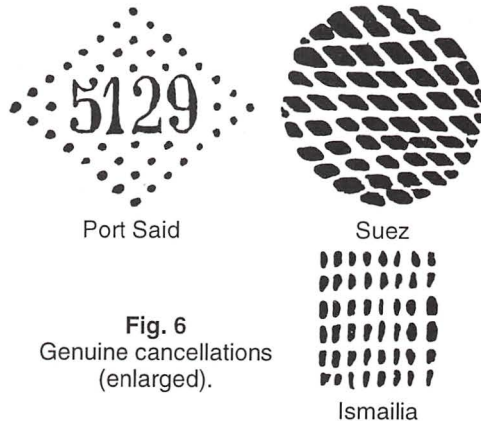
The stamps have thick, yellowish, crackly gum, which often distorts the surface of the stamps and might even cause cracks. A large proportion of surviving stamps have no gum, however. The soft paper is quite prone to thinning from removal of hinges, even when the hinge is affixed over the original gum.

A large quantity of remainders was on hand when the Company's postal service was closed down. Many were sold to the Parisian dealers A. Maury and V. Robert; others were obtained by the firm Borel, Lavalley & Co., construction contractors for the Company, and these, too, must have reached the philatelic market. Consequently, unused stamps are even today in good supply, although it is not easy to find fresh, perfect specimens of the 1c. or 40c. (and the prevalence of forgeries cannot be overestimated). Complete sheets of the 5, 20, and 40c. were offered at auction by Harmers of London in July 1995. Some 30 sheets of the 20c. still exist and large multiples of all values can be found (however, even blocks of four of the 1c. and 40c. are moderately rare).

## Cancellations

By contrast, genuinely used examples of this issue are moderate to pronounced rarities. Boulad, Ringström, and Tester recorded these quantities: 1c. – 6 (4 cancelled 5129, 1 cancelled by the Ismailia grid, 1 cancelled at the Russian P.O. at Port Said); 5c. – 3 (all cancelled 5129); 20c. – many (mostly cancelled 5129); 40c. – 7 (4 cancelled 5129, 1 by the Ismailia grid, and 2 by the Suez grid). More examples surely exist, but probably not many. These numbers are in addition to those on covers, of which a total of 21 have been recorded (12 from Port Said, four from Kantara, three from Ismailia, and two from Suez).

When the stamps were first put on sale no provision for cancellation had been made and make-shift methods were resorted to (Fig. 6). At Port Said, the Company's post office was adjacent to that of the French post office, and it appears that a reserve obliterator, 5129 in a grid of dots, was borrowed from the latter. It is always struck in black. At Ismailia, a rectangular grid of oblong dots, probably carved locally, was put into use,



always struck in blue. At Suez, an approximately circular grid of diamond-shaped dots, obviously hand-carved, served the need (known only in blue). A very similar, and seemingly identical, obliterator has been seen on a stamp of the First Issue of the Viceroyal Post. It has been speculated that the device was later loaned or given to the Company's office<sup>8</sup>. If so, it may originally have been a provisional retta obliterator used at Suez at a time when the officially issued retta either had not yet been received or had been mislaid. Examples of the Company's stamps cancelled with the 5105 obliterator of the French post office at Suez are either posthumous favor cancellations or forgeries. At Kantara, the only known form of cancellation is by pen strokes.

The foregoing group of offices amounts to only four of the twelve offices indicated by the records as having existed. The complete list, reading from north to south (Fig. 7), consists of Port Said, Raz el Ech, Kil(ometre) 34, Kantara, El Guisr, Chantier VI, Ismailia, Serapeum, Kil(ometre) 42, Chalouf (el Tarabba), Kil(ometre) 83, and Suez. No cancellation has been identified for any of the additional eight offices, all of which were construction camps. However, certain cryptic pen cancellations, for which there seems to be no possibility for authentication, may have been applied at one or more of these offices.

Proper date-stamps were ordered on May 30th 1868 from Virey Frères, suppliers to the French Post Office. They were dispatched from Marseilles on July 27th and probably reached Ismailia about August 8-10 (Fig. 8). There was evidently insufficient time to distribute them before the Company's postal service was suppressed (midnight August 15th), and no example has been seen cancelling a Suez Canal Co. stamp. However, those for Chantier VI, Kil. 34, Kil. 83, and Raz el Ech were turned over to the Egyptian Postal Administration for cancelling Egyptian stamps as a temporary measure. That for Kil. 83 was replaced on August 31st 1869 by an official date-stamp of Type II (Chapter XXVII); the others remained in use until the offices were closed in 1869. Examples on Egyptian

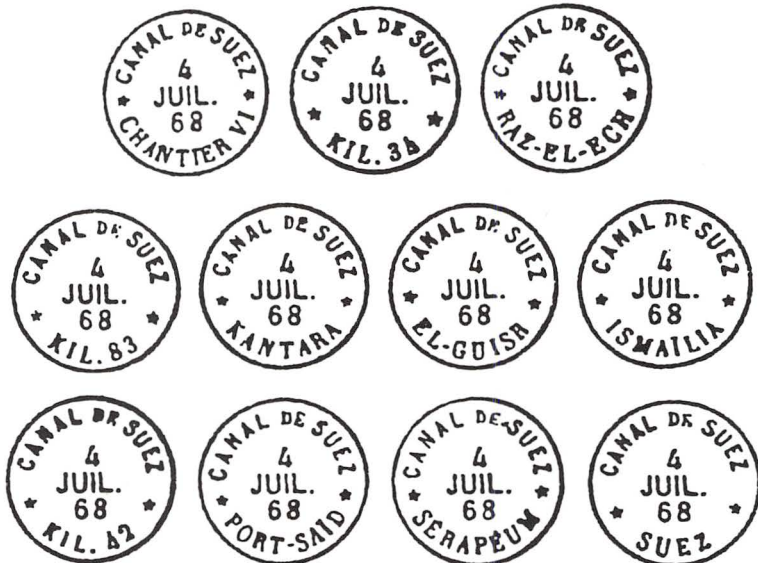


Fig. 8 Date-stamps ordered by the Suez Canal Co.



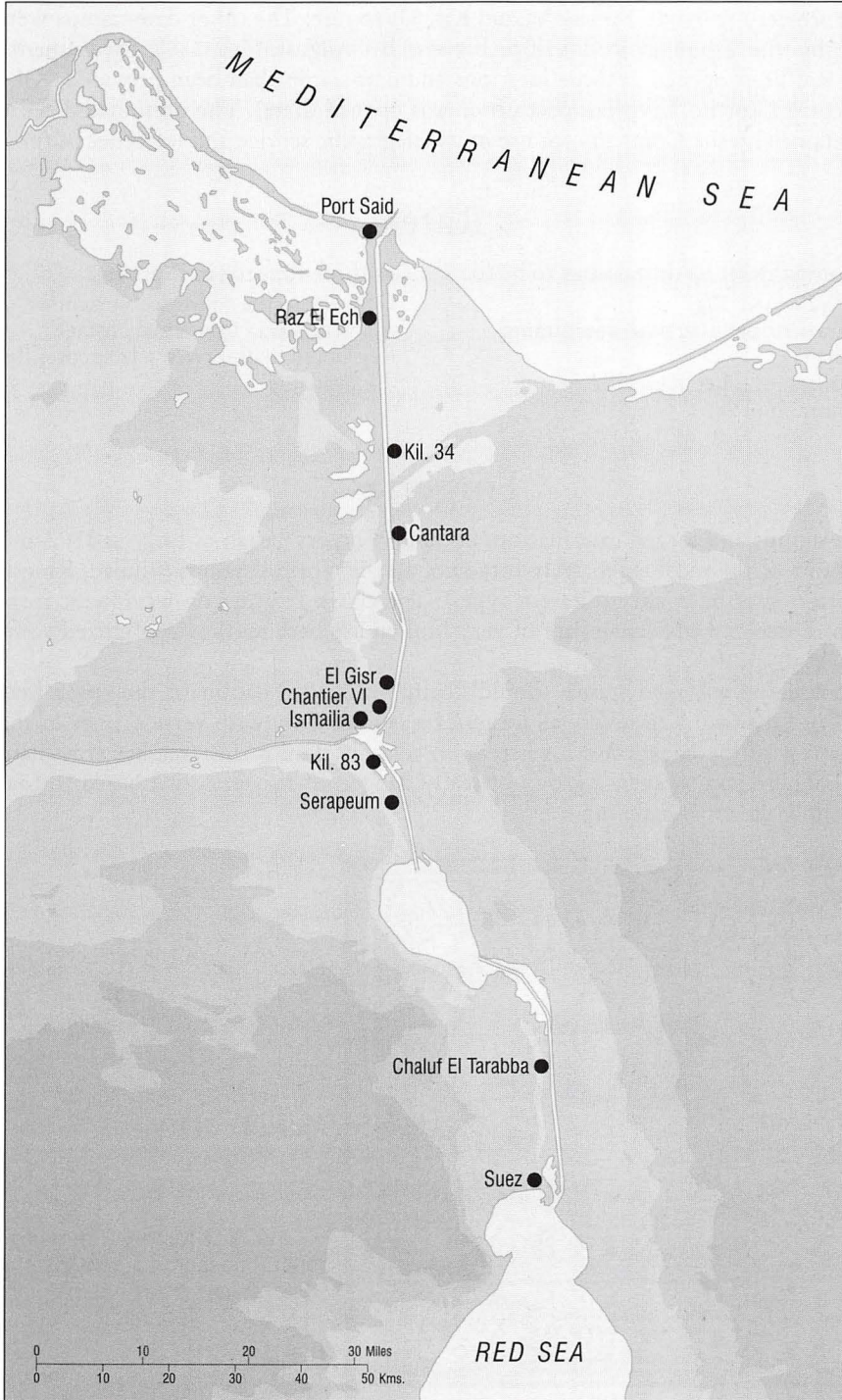


Fig. 7 Post offices in the Suez Canal zone.

stamps are very scarce (Chantier VI and Kil. 83) to rare. The other date-stamps were not needed by the Egyptian Post Office because by August 16th 1868 government post offices had been opened at those locations and date-stamps had been provided (Kil. 42 is an exception, for no Egyptian post office was opened there). The unneeded date-stamps were retained by the Company for use in its telegraphic service and for other purposes.

## Rates

The Company set its postal rates to be the same as those in force in France:

Letters – 20c. per 10g.

Circulars – 1c. per 10g, with a minimum of 5c.

Newspapers – 1c. per 10g, with a minimum of 2c.

Delivery to the addressee's premises –20c. in addition to normal postage.

Registered mail service was apparently not available.

## Forgeries

Forged stamps and forged cancellations abound. Forgery began as early as 1872 and this issue is one of the most extensively forged of all the world's stamps (Boulad, Ringström, and Tester describe twenty different types). The classic treatises on worldwide forgeries, those of Earee and of Serrane, are of very limited use because they recognized so few of the many.

Recognizing a forged stamp should begin with examination of the space between POSTES and the oval. On nearly all forgeries it is filled only with vertical lines of shading like the rest of the background, whereas on genuine stamps this area has cross-hatching (Fig. 9). There is, however, a group of really dangerous forgeries, attributed to Saatjian, which show the cross-hatching.



Fig. 9 A forgery (Fournier), superimposed on a genuine stamp, which shows cross-hatching above POSTES.

Saatjian made forgeries (sometimes called "private reprints") of the 40c. by direct use of the stone; the design, types, and plating characteristics are therefore identical to the genuine, except for those positions in the sheet where the stone was damaged in storage. However, the gum and paper are not quite like that of the genuine, and the color is not a perfect match. It is not feasible to describe the differences here and only an experienced, knowledgeable person can recognize them reliably. An enlarged line print of a sheet of Saatjian forgeries was enclosed with the book by Boulad, Ringström, and Tester.

Saatjian forged the other values by taking transfers from the stone of the 40c., changing the denominations, and building up new stones of 120. Although the resulting forgeries are still extremely dangerous, they are more readily detected than those of the 40c. The forgeries do not show the four types of the genuine 1 and 5c., nor do they match the plating characteristics of the 20c. An attempt to establish the type of a suspected specimen will therefore give a reliable answer. In this connection, it is useful to know that the stones for the forged 1c. and 5c. were derived only from Type 1 of the 40c. (in the case of the 1c. it was actually position 1, and all Saatjian forgeries of the 1c. have a roughly square white flaw on the funnel). The stone for the forged 20c., however, was made up from each of the four types of the 40c., distributed randomly rather than in groups of four. Confirmation of an assessment can be obtained by attempting to determine the plate position of the stamp, using the published descriptions, but such work is tedious.

It may be convenient to consider a list of features that characterize one or more of the forgeries. Any stamp that shows one of these features can at once be rejected:

1. Perforated.
2. No cross-hatching above POSTES.
3. Smooth, colorless gum (a forgery if not a re-gummed stamp).
4. Thin, hard paper.
5. Tan paper.
6. Shiny ink (the genuine stamps are matte).
7. Corner guide lines outside the design.
8. Continuous guide lines between the stamps.
9. Flat tops to the letters A.
10. Any number of rays other than twelve in the star-like ornaments.
11. The smoke from the funnel touches the oval frame.
12. A circular cancellation of any kind (other than the Suez grid).

Forged covers are especially deceptive, for some were made using genuine stamps. Many of them have forged 5129 cancellations, but some have more fanciful ones. Some of the covers have a convincingly authentic look and are even on envelopes having a printed return address of the Suez Canal Company. However, apart from the recognizably forged cancellations, the addresses are fictitious. The number of individuals or firms in the canal zone in 1868 was small and their names are known. The 21 known genuine covers are well pedigreed and all but three are illustrated in the book of Boulad, Ringström, and Tester. Any cover not described there should be looked upon with grave skepticism.

No less than 35 varieties of bogus cancellations have been described<sup>9</sup>. Most of them occur only on forged stamps and the only dangerous ones are imitations of the French 5129 in a grid of dots.

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### Special Acknowledgment

I express thanks to Peter Bottrill, who most kindly gave me access to an extensive work on the subject prior to publication.

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