

The Cover Story

The Rise and Fall of the “Pine Apple” and the Conch Shell by John Gehrig

The Bahama Islands were not a prosperous place in the 1850s. The economy was moribund. The principal exports of this mini colony were two exotic products - pineapples and conch shells. Pineapples were then an extremely exotic fruit, not yet grown in abundance outside the Bahamas and other Caribbean islands, but the fruit was much sought after by prosperous gourmets in the United States and England. The Islands’ other export, conch shells, were available in huge numbers because conch fishing was one of the largest legitimate economic activities in the colony. The large shells were in great demand in France and other parts of Europe for use in jewelry such as cameos and brooches.

The real main cash engine of the economy of the islands was “wrecking” - the salvage of ships and their freight wrecked from unlucky collisions upon the rocks and reefs of the islands. Sometimes (perhaps most times) the wreck occurred due to the intentional intervention of the buccaneer-like salvors who moved lights or other navigation devices to hazardous areas. Salvage was an unsavory trade and certainly not one the colonial government wanted to publicize. Aside from the snail shells and the pineapples, there was little economic news to brag about.

In 1858, a decision was made in London to begin transferring the operation of the postal administrations of the various Caribbean island colonies from the United Kingdom postal authority to the various colonial governments. C. J. Bayley, Governor of the Bahamas, wrote the Colonial Office on July 6, 1858 to request the production of a postage stamp die and the printing and forwarding of 1,000 One Penny stamps three times per year. These stamps were to be used for mail directed within the islands. British stamps would continue to be used for foreign mail directed to Britain and the rest of the Empire and other overseas destinations.

The Governor cited the backwardness of his colony in his written petition to the Colonial Office. Bayley also proposed a design for the stamp which promoted the “Pine Apple” and the conch shell as the two principal export products of the Bahamas. His words:

“...the Colonial Postmaster informs me that it would be useless for us to keep the die (for printing the stamps) here, as there is nobody in this place capable of taking off the impressions correctly. Your Lordship will observe the design of the stamp is a “Pine Apple” and a “Conch Shell.” Each of these is the produce of the various islands for whose postal communication the stamps are now required.”

In due course, the contract for stamp printing was awarded to Perkins, Bacon & Co., which was already producing stamps for other colonies. The firm originally objected to the Governor’s proposed “Pine Apple and Conch Shell” design because the proposal contemplated a stamp of circular shape. The Governor’s design appears in **Figure A1 on the front cover**.

Perkins, Bacon were then using the iconic Chalon portrait of Queen Victoria on stamps for Tasmania and working on a Chalon portrait design for the stamps of New Zealand. Nothing is recorded as to what the printers thought of the aesthetic merit of the Governor’s proposed design, which has been described by Gisburn in his *Postal History of The Bahamas* “as ...this curious design (in which a bashful conch appears to be paying court to a coy pineapple on an extremely barren landscape).” In

any case, Perkins, Bacon came forward with a stamp design successfully using the beautiful Chalon portrait. The printers made a concession to the Governor's suggested design by incorporating the pineapple and conch shell motif in separate small ovals at the bottom corners of the stamp. Also, added at the top of the stamp was a banner proclaiming "Interinsular Postage" - which was the precise purpose of the issue. The first consignment of 1,000 stamps was dispatched to Nassau on May 4, 1859. The final design for the One Penny stamp appears as **Figure A2 on the front cover**.

The year 1861 brought a startling reversal of fortune to the Bahamas. The Blockade of the Confederacy imposed by the Union during the American Civil War brought a huge economic boom to the Bahamas as it became the epicenter for blockade runners transshipping both ways, cotton to England and weapons to Wilmington and Savannah. Life was good in Nassau until the Civil War ended and economic doldrums rolled once again over the Islands. General economic depression ensued and persisted. As for the industries which were so well exemplified on the One Penny stamp - the conch shell trade all but disappeared due to the changes in fashion - over the years usage of mother of pearl and plastic in fashion jewelry erased conch shell export. Pineapple farming on a commercial basis almost vanished due to a combination of mammoth international competition and Bahamian lassitude. Today there are only a few pineapple farms left in the Islands.

Lassitude may also have set in upon the Governor's Office, the Colonial Office, and the printing firm De La Rue, who succeeded to the printing of Bahamian stamps in 1862 after Perkins, Bacon lost the job. Despite the disappearance of the pineapple and the conch shell as viable exports, the Bahamas continued to issue stamps bearing the pineapple and conch shell motif throughout the remainder of Queen Victoria's reign and through the reigns of Edward VII, George V and George VI. **Figure A3 on the front cover** shows the design of the post-Chalon Victorian definitives. **Figure A4** shows the designs of the pineapple and conch definitives issued during the reign of the three male sovereigns after Victoria's reign, the pineapple and conch shell images were moved to the middle of each vertical frame of these issues.

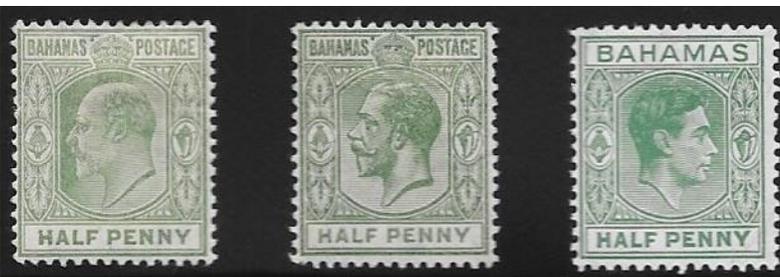


Figure A4

running was nothing the colonial government cared to brag about. The design of postage definitives continued uninspired and stuck on pineapples and conch shells.

World War II and the following years injected fresh blood into the Bahamian economy. The war turned the Islands into a military center and brought American/British air force runways which turned into two new post-war international airports. Tourism began to boom, accompanied by casino gambling. Also, the Bahamas became an international tax haven and American and European "run away" money began to flood the Island for both investment purposes and for parking in numbered secret "Swiss style" bank accounts. The Islands gained internal self-government.

Beginning with the pictorial issues of 1946, Bahamian stamps became more modern in design, publicity oriented and "Bahamas-centric". The "Pine Apple and Conch Shell" disappeared as an enduring motif of Bahamian stamps as the fruit and the snail shell had become echoes of a bygone era. The pineapple and conch shell motif have reappeared postally only three times since the end of the reign of George VI and then only on commemoratives issued in 1959, 1984 and 2009 celebrating anniversaries of the issuance of the One Penny of 1859.