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SHEDDING LIGHT ON THE MISSING YEARS OF THE SAMOAN POSTAL SERVICE 1881-1885

Dirk H. R. Spennemann

When considering Samoa postal history no period has been more enigmatic than the time between the end of the Samoa Express period and the beginning of John Davis' postal office—the period between September 1881 and late 1885. Archival research in conjunction with a biography of John Davis (Spennemann in prep) caused the author to systematically canvas consular records for the period of Davis life in Samoa. In the process evidence was located that sheds light on the interim period.

The context

Prior to the commencement of the Samoa Express mail service the Apia mail to and from international locations was handled by the various consuls, who negotiated with the masters of various vessels for the passage of the mails to New Zealand, Fiji, Australia and American ports.

This changed on 6 October 1877 when George Lyttleton Griffith started Apia first newspaper. His Samoa Times enterprise, like his enterprise in Levuka, Fiji, comprised of a newspaper, a printery, and a stationery and book shop. This combination was the rule for most country papers (Spennemann 2003a). Unusual was that G.L. Griffith also operated a postal service issuing stamps, similar to the service he maintained in Fiji. Griffith's agent (and editor) in Apia was William Edgar Agar. During Agar's absence from Samoa for health reasons, and later after Agar's death, the erstwhile assistant, Andrew Speir, became editor of the paper and manager of the Post Office. Immediately after its establishment the Samoa Times took over the management of postal affairs, as the second issue of the Samoa Times carries an item 'unclaimed letters,' where the British consulate had handed its unclaimed mail to the Samoa Times cum Samoa Express post office.

The postal history of the period is described in detail by Hughes (1987a) with chronological additions by Spennemann (2003b; 2003c). The Samoa Times never paid off as an investment. Throughout its short history we find many references that the paper is losing money and that, unless more subscribers can be found, the paper would have to close (Spennemann 2003a). On 27 August 1881 Griffith withdrew his investment, and, as no buyer could be found, the Samoa Times ceased to exist—and with it the postal service.

The next formal, stamp-issuing mail service commenced in late 1885, when the Englishman John Davis started up a private postal service with the blessing of the British and American consuls as well as the paramount chief of Samoa. Davis was a photographer who started the postal service as a money-making sideline, made lucrative through the sale of stamps (Spennemann 2002c; in prep.). The postal history and philately of that period has been described in detail by Hughes (1987b). Parallel to and in competition with, Davis, the Germans opened a postal service in Apia, operating a monthly steamship-cum-mail service (Spennemann 2002a).
The Interim Period

The years between the Samoa Express and the Davis Post Offices were described by Gibbons (1941, p. 2) as 'the stampless years.' Hughes (1987c) compiled all known information as part of the Postal History of the Samoan Islands. Some covers carry only the Apia date cancel, often in the bottom right quadrant, as well as stamps of Fiji or the USA, which are cancelled with a cancel of the respective country. On record are also covers and lose stamps with Apia date cancels on US stamps (Hughes 1897c), on New Zealand stamps (Collins 1922), and reputedly also on German and French stamps (Medals' Weekly Stamp News quoted in Hughes 1978c). Some covers with Samoa Express stamps, purporting to belong to the interim period have been published, all of which were subsequently identified as forgeries (Anon. 2002; Hermann 1994; Jensen 1990; Purcell 1993).

Who looked after the postal service at the time? It was at first assumed that a storekeeper or missionary unofficially arranged the dispatch and delivery of correspondence (Collins 1924, p. 41). Steuer, in his handbook of German pre-runners (Voralufer), commented that an Englishman had been appointed on 3 March 1882 as post master of Apia (Steuer 1985). In the literature it had been speculated that this Englishman was either Andrew Speirs, or John Davis himself. The arguments for the former rested on the fact that he had run the postal affairs as part of the Samoa Express operation, while arguments for the latter centred on the fact that Davis seems to have used the Samoa Express canceller in the early days of his own service (Hughes 1987c; Jensen 1990).

New Information

Systematic research into the life of John Davis (Spennemann in prep) caused the author to canvass the files of the American, the British and the German consul in Samoa for the period of Davis' residence in Samoa (1873–1903). The data presented in the following are derived from this work.

Not surprisingly, the demise of the Samoan postal service after the collapse of the Samoa Times venture caused problems for the Apia business community. Between 1877 and mid 1881 the population of Apia had grown, and commercial communications had increased manifold. Clearly, a solution had to be found to coordinate the mails. Even though the archival data for the period of September 1881 to January 1882 are sparse, it would appear that activities to solve the mail problem occurred both in Samoa and in the countries which were the main recipients and forwarding centres for Samoan mail.

End of the mail service.—Speirs had served as post master until the Samoa Times folded on 27 August 1881. At that point Speirs was unclear how to proceed and queried the US Consul on the matter. Up to that point in time, all mail to Samoa came in United States of British mail bags, with US mail sent via Auckland arriving in US mail bags which were in turn in New Zealand bags. Even though the Speirs had managed the mails, all mail sent in US mail bags was received and distributed by the US consul. Given the termination of the Samoa Express system the US consul suggested that all three consuls get together to reach a joint agreement on the matter or of both incoming and outgoing mails.4

During the Express period the mail had been sent on any suitable vessel departing Samoa for a major destination (Hughes 1897a; Spennemann 2003c). Much of the mail destined for the Australian colonies went via Levuka, Fiji, where it received a counter postmark (Spennemann 2003b). When the Express service stopped, the Colonial postmaster for Fiji, L.J. Walker, queried the mechanisms for the delivery of mail to Samoa. With the support of John Bates Thurston, British High Commissioner for the Western Pacific—who incidentally at one point had been colonial postmaster himself—Walker directed the British consul on Samoa, H.B. Churchward "to receive the mails from Fiji until such time as other arrangements are made in forwarding the mails [and] to collect and send the amount of postage in English money."5 By that time, however, just such 'other arrangements' had been made.

Municipal Postmaster.—Since 1879 the town of Apia had been administered by an elected Municipal government, where all regulations and senior appointments had to be ratified by the American, the British and the German consuls. At its meeting on 9 February 1882 the Municipal government passed a 'Regulation for the Post Office' (full text see appendix).6

In essence, a privately operated postal service was established under license from the Municipal Board, where the licensee had to surrender a bond of £100/$500 as surety for the proper behaviour and quality of service (for text of the bond see appendix).7 As remuneration, the licensee could charge three pence (US$ 0.15) per half ounce in addition to the postage levied by the country where the items posted in Samoa entered the normal international mail system.
On 27 February 1882 the British Consul H.M. Churchward informed the Colonial postmaster that a Mr James Laurensen has been appointed Acting Postmaster of the Municipality of Apia and that he would not interfere in the matter of mails, but had informed Laurensen of the postmaster’s requests regarding the money for postage. James Laurensen was a British citizen and co-proprietor of a boarding house in the Manfele area of Samoa and had been appointed member of the Municipal Board in January 1881.

The records are silent on how long Mr. Laurensen fulfilled his role as postmaster. Some time in 1883 or 1884 he was replaced by L.S. Kelsall who seems to have taken on this position in addition to his role as Municipal Magistrate. In August 1885 Kelsall died of a heart attack.

1877 5/- Yellow-green Times Express which fetched in the H. R. Harmer Sale in 1934

John Davis becomes postmaster.—On 14 August 1885 the British citizen John Davis was appointed postmaster. The British Consul formally notified the Colonial Postmaster of Fiji of the appointment and deposited a specimen of Davis’ signature for the files. Davis seems to have become postmaster under conditions similar to those set out in the Municipal regulations. He seems to have taken over the office in good order, for in late December he furnishes the American consul Benjamin Greenebaum with an annual report of the mail statistics for 1885. For the period January 7th to November 30th 1885 the postmaster of Apia despatched a total of 3654 letters and 93 parcels, while for the period January 3rd to November 30th 1885 he received 3168 letters, 6253 newspapers and 377 books. If the scale of fees remained the same as in 1882, then Kelsall and Davis would have earned in excess of $550 (£110) for their services for the year.

Davis seems to have carried on his service of behalf of, or with acquiescence by the Municipality for much of 1886. But mid 1886 he may have felt secure, for he ordered the printing of stamps to formalise his mail service in the eyes of the world. The commencement of the German postal service in September 1886 (Spennemann 2002a) ended the tri-partite support for a Municipal mail system. To safeguard his interests, Davis moved to have his postal service formally recognised by the paramount chief of Samoa, Malietoa on 20 December 1886, thereby sidestepping any consular squabbles.

Communication times.—The mail service during the period was far from satisfactory, as communication between Samoa and the outside world was haphazard. There are frequent comments in the files of the British Consul complaining about the unreliability of the mail. In a letter to the Foreign Office, the British Consul, for example, commented on 8 October 1883 that “the mail coming to this place being so uncertain, that we are some two and three months, and have been waiting five months for some home mail.”

Table 1 compiles the days despatches to the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific were written in Apia and received in Suva. While the transmission time was a low as 14 days, many other despatches accumulated in Apia until a suitable vessel could be found to take them to Suva. Thus, on occasion, despatches could have a delay of up to 4 1/2 months.
Table 1. Quickest mail delivery times between Apia (Samoa) and Suva (Fiji) during 1883

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Despatch No</th>
<th>Date written</th>
<th>Date received</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 January</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 January</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>15 February</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1 March</td>
<td>12 May 1883</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1 March</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>27 March</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1 April</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>9 May</td>
<td>11 June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1 June</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>15 June</td>
<td>16 July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>15 June</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>30 June</td>
<td>1 August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>13 July</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>6 August</td>
<td>18 October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>21 August</td>
<td>13 September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>30 August</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>8 September</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>17 September</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>26 September</td>
<td>18 October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>26 September</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>1 October</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because if the invaguaries of the system, some messages seem to have been sent in duplicate via different routes. For example, the High Commission for the Western Pacific acknowledged the receipt of despatch no 9 of 1883, dated 9 May 1883 both on 11 June 1883 and again on 3 August 1883.

Outlook

The end of the privately run Samoa Express mail system required the business community of Apia to look for alternative options. The British, German and American consuls were forced into taking a more collective approach, which resulted in the appointment of a municipal postmaster. The consuls had the opportunity to establish a communal mail service, but lacking the funds, opted to create a licensed privately owned and run postal service with no revenue to the municipality.

Samoa/USA combination franking from cancelled at Apia, Samoa 3 August 1894 from the Censorship March 2002 Sele. New York

Registration Label affixed to the USA in accordance with the then provisions of the UPIC as applicable to the United States
The files on the subject are sparse, but indicate that at least three such postmasters were appointed, all working on a profit basis. The third and last was the photographer John Davis, who carried on the service as a private venture until the commencement of the German colony in 1900.

Appendix

REGULATION FOR THE POST OFFICE

1. A post office shall be established in Apia.
2. The post office shall be under the control of the Municipal Board, but the Consul shall appoint and remove the postmaster in the same manner as they appoint and remove the Municipal magistrate, health officer and chief of police.
3. The postmaster, in conjunction with two sureties approved by the board, shall execute a bond to the Municipal Board for the sum of Five hundred Dollar, according to the schedule hereunto annexed.
4. The postmaster shall keep a record of the number of letters, newspapers, packets, etc. received and forwarded by him, and shall make a full report of the same to the Municipal Board at their regular meetings in January and July.
5. The postmaster shall keep an account of all moneys received by him for payment of postage and of all expenditures made by him in the same account and he shall make a full report thereof to the Municipal Board at their regular meetings in January and July.
6. The postmaster shall on the first day of each calendar month put up in front of the post office a list of all uncalled for letters remaining in the post office for the month last expired.
7. If the postmaster or any person employed by him shall unlawfully detain, delay or open any letters, packet or bag, or mail of letters entrusted to him, or which has come into his possession, and which was intended to be conveyed by mail, or carried or delivered by any letter carrier or other person employed in the postal service, or shall secrete, embezzle or destroy any such letter, packet, bag or mail of letters, although it does not contain any money or other thing of value, he shall be punished by a fine not more than two hundred dollars ($200) or imprisonment for not more than six months, or by both such fine and imprisonment.
8. Any person who shall take any letter, postal card or mail packet although it does not contain any money or other thing of value, out of the post office, or from a letter or mail carrier before it has been delivered to the person to whom it was addressed, with a design to obstruct the correspondence, or to pry into the business or secrets of another, shall for every such offence be punished by a fine not more than two hundred dollars ($200) or imprisonment with hard labour for not more than six months, or by such fine and imprisonment.
9. The rates of postage shall be threepence for every half ounce or portion thereof in addition to Foreign postage or any charges for postage or delivery made by the receiving officer.

Apia 7 February 1882

BOND OF POSTMASTER

Know all men by these presents that we A.B. of ___ C.D. of ___ and E.F. of ___ are jointly and severally bound unto the Municipal Board of the Town and District of Apia in the sum of Five hundred Dollars to be paid to the said Municipal Board for which payment we bind ourselves and each of us, for the whole, our and each of our heirs, executors and administrators, firmly by these presents, sealed with our seals. Dated the ___ day of 188__

A.B. (signature)
C.D. (signature)
E.F. (signature)

The condition of the above written obligation is such that if the above bounden A.B., appointed Postmaster of Apia do well and truly discharge his duties as such postmaster according to the Regulations agreed upon by the Municipal Board and dated ____, then this obligation shall be void, and otherwise shall remain in full force.

Signed, sealed and delivered before ____.
Endnotes


Collins, R.J.G. (1924) Stamps of the Pacific Islands. The (New Zealand), Australia, Samoa, Tonga, New Hebrides, British Solomon Islands, Gilbert and Ellice Islands & Nauru. compiled for the Christchurch Philatelic Society. NZ.


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