Mail fraud, the purchasing of items via mail order without paying for them, is a common mode of operation of modern day small time crooks. It is not new however. While trawling through the pages of nineteenth century newspapers published in Apia, Samoa (South Pacific) in the course of research on various aspects of Samoan history, I found an example of a European trader in Samoa defrauding James Fallon of Albury.

In early January 1892 Alexander Pritchard, European resident on Samoa, ordered “one or two cases of port, claret and sherry in quarts and two cases of sherry in pints and other wines you think would suit this market.” Pritchard gave clear instructions on how to ship the wine. In his letter he claimed that Fallon had been recommended to him by J.Despeissis (then NSW government agricultural expert on vines) and also stated that “we are desirous of importing our goods from the colonies instead of San Francisco.” Both the (spurious) reference and the hope of breaking into a new market dominated Californian sellers possibly influenced Fallon in filling the order on the promise that payment would occur by return mail.1 Fallon obliged on trust alone, delivering goods worth £14 5s (incl. shipping)—but no payment occurred. If a supplier could be fooled once, it stood to reason that another try would be warranted. In early June Pritchard tried again, this time under the name ‘Jas. Jackson of Lata Plantation, Savaii, Samoa,’ using flattery as his modus operandi: “Through the introduction of The Samoa Trading and Plantation Company of the next island, Upolu, who are taking great pains in getting your wines thoroughly tested by the general public, I write to please send me …1 case dry wine each quarts and pints, claret, 1 case do. do. port; 1 case do. do. sherry… Your wines are certainly the best that have ever come to this market.”2 Fallon, however, was not fooled again.

How serious was such a loss? And, by implication, how trusting was Fallon? The buying capacity of £14 5s in 1892 can be corrected to year 2000 prices using the Australian Bureau of Statistics Consumer-Price-Index.3 This correction gives us $1,318.11—a sum sufficiently large to attempt a long-distance recovery. On 1 March 1893 Fallon wrote to the Apia solicitor William Cooper in the hope of recovering the payment or the merchandise. Cooper had to inform Fallon, however, that he had little chance of recovering any of the outstanding account.4

Who was this Alexander Pritchard? He was the son of the missionary and British Consul George Pritchard. In 1888 Alexander came to Samoa from Queensland, where had been an MLA.5 It is unclear why he left Queensland, but it had been suggested by his Apia contemporaries that he had left to avoid his creditors. By early 1892 Pritchard had a major swindle operation going. He requested, and frequently received, from unsuspecting Sydney and Melbourne companies,6 goods by using the names: ‘Pritchard & Co.,’ ‘The Pritchard Trading Co.,’ ‘The Samoa Trading and Plantation Co.,’ ‘Jas. Jackson & Co,’ and ‘Jas Jackson of Lata Plantation, Savaii, Samoa.’7 For this he was hauled before the High Commissioner’s court, but because of lack of finances and any property which could be seized, was left off the hook on a caution.

And finally, why could nothing be done? It seems Pritchard had been very careful in ordering consumables and items that could be swiftly disposed of to the local Samoan community so that no assets could be seized. In the light of this, his assertion to Fallon has a very different meaning when Pritchard was “taking great pains in getting [Fallon’s] wines thoroughly tested by the general public ...”

Notes
4. William Cooper 'The Height of Impudence.' Samoa Weekly Herald vol. 1 nº 26, 3 June 1893, p.3.
5. Pritchard died 1 December 1898.—Local and General News Samoa Weekly Herald vol. 4 nº 43, 3 Dec. 1898, p.2.
6. Swallow and Ariell Ltd, Melbourne; Marc Robertson, Fitzroy; S.T. Leigh, Sydney: ‘High Commissioner’s Court.’ Samoa Times and South Sea Advertiser (Apia) vol. 4 nº 182, 16 April 1892, p.2.