

Consignee Letters from the Danish West Indies

by Leif Orndorf

(Translated by Nelly Kristensen, edited by John DuBois)

Since consignee letters to the DWI often are explained incorrectly — causing some to doubt their authenticity — it seems appropriate to clarify the facts about this type of mail. Many of the surviving covers with “Bit” type postage due stamps are consignee letters, but this should not detract from their interest.

I have never seen or heard of consignee letters with the “Cents” type postage due stamps and I have, likewise, never heard of consignee letters that were not handled by the postal services. There are no consignee letters recorded at St. Thomas. The earliest consignee letter I know from the DWI is dated January 1907.

A consignee letter was simply a letter

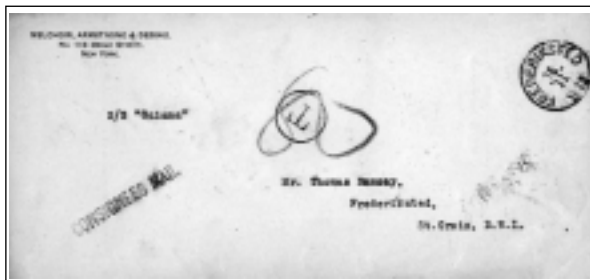


Figure 1. Typical consignee letter from the U.S. to the DWI. It was not franked by the sender, and was assessed postage due in DWI. It is quadruple weight (46 – 60 gm.) and was charged 80 Bit, double the amount of missing postage.

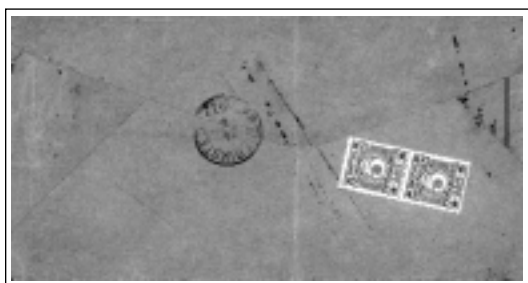
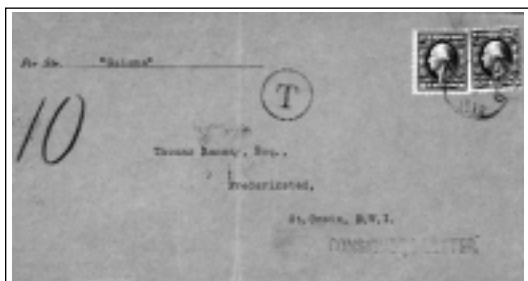


Figure 2. Example of partially paid consignee letter. Most likely a quadruple weight letter, franked in the following way: local letter of sixth weight class weight, 60 Bit, partly franked with 10¢ in the U.S. (50 Bit), therefore charged the 10 Bit difference. Only the difference between the correct rate and the partial franking was collected, not the double rate surcharge.

containing shipping documents. It was sent with the cargo on the ship on which it traveled, and the recipient of the cargo also was the recipient of the letter. As will be explained later, consignee letters normally were given to the ship’s master immediately before departure. Because these “letters” were shipping documents, they were usually rather heavy.

These letters can be classified in three groups:

1. Letters franked by the sender.
2. Unpaid letters, which therefore had postage due on arrival. (See Figure 1.)
3. Letters franked with insufficient postage. The postage due on these was only the difference between the correct rate and the partial franking. (See Figure 2.)

The arriving letters were to be given to the harbor master. The harbor regulation was that on a ship’s arrival, they were to be treated as local letters. Local letter postage was as follows: From April 1, 1905 ►

until March 31, 1912: 10 Bit per 15 grams;
from April 1, 1912 until March 31, 1917:
10 Bit per 20 grams.

Postage Due Assessed, Refunds Denied

An interesting correspondence from September 1907 concerning consignee letters can be found in the public records. In the correspondence, the superintendent for the West India and Panama Telegraph Co. Ltd's department in St. Thomas applies to the government in an attempt to obtain a refund for 6.5 francs. The money was paid in postage due on a consignee letter addressed to the captain of the company's cable ship. The superintendent explained that the letter contained only shipping documents concerning a cargo of freight received on the "S/S St.Croix" (East Asian Company).

The government, in a subsequent letter to the Treasury (under which the Colonial Office belonged), recommended "... [w]e do not refund the company the postage due paid, since these are closed letters, and it is not possible for the postal service to determine if the contents are only shipping documents."

It appears, moreover, from the letter that consignee letters arrived in large numbers, especially from the Hamburg America Line and the Quebec Line, and that they were constantly delivered to the mail service, which assessed postage due as normal letters, unless they had been properly franked.

The government simultaneously requested a statement from the Treasury Ministry and from the directorate for the mail service (or possibly from the central bureau in Bern) about the correct treatment of these consignee letters.

Since the vast majority of the consignee letters we know today are dated later than this information, we can assume that it explains their postal handling. Provided the letters were closed, they were charged postage due unless adequately franked beforehand.

It appears that consignee letters were taken on board immediately before the ship's departure, and therefore could not undergo normal handling at a post office. This explains why the stamps on franked and partly franked covers were never canceled in the sending country, but only upon arrival in the DWI.

Finally, a little about the consignee letters surviving today. Most came from the correspondence of Fredericksted grocer Thomas Ramsay. They are characterized by the fact that the due stamps are never seen canceled, which was the practice in Fredericksted. Even so, the public could not reuse them.

On the Christiansted consignee letter shown (Figure 3) the due stamps are not canceled, but as this was not a permanent practice in Christiansted, it should be possible to find consignee letters from there with canceled due stamps.

I hope to have clarified the subject a little with this article. Additional information from readers will be received with thanks. ■

Author's Note: I would like to thank Svend K. Seitzberg, Hjorring, for his review and comments.

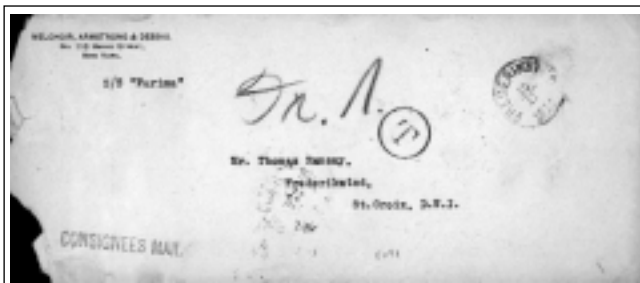


Figure 3. 1912 consignee letter from the U.S. to Christiansted. The letter is noted "Fr.1." It is certainly a quintuple weight letter. Postage due was double the missing rate: 1 Fr. or 100 Bit.