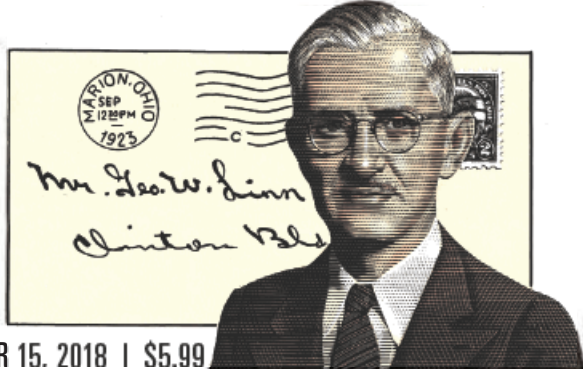


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UPDATE



SWAN ISLAND

MAIL OF A FORMER U.S.
CARIBBEAN POSSESSION

BY KEN LAWRENCE

Mail of Swan Island, a former United States Caribbean possession

FEW REMOTE PLACES IN THE WORLD HAVE AS MANY INTERESTING STORIES AND TALES OF ESPIONAGE AND INTRIGUE TO PIQUE COLLECTORS' INTEREST AS SWAN ISLAND.

During the past five centuries the hurricane-battered Swan Island has been a pirate's lair, a refuge for shipwrecked mariners and castaways, a storm warning station, and a base for espionage and intrigue. Searching for and acquiring postal mementos of this former American tropical paradise off the coast of Central America can be a gratifying pursuit.

The Swan Islands in the Caribbean Sea, more frequently called Swan Island, lie about 100 miles north of the nearest Honduran shore, and about 200 miles southwest of the Cayman Islands, the closest anglophone land. With a combined area of about 3 square miles, the constituent

units include habitable Great Swan, rugged and inhospitable Little Swan, and a small rookery called Booby Cay.

When Christopher Columbus sailed past them on Aug. 17, 1502 (St. Anne's Day, according to historians of the event), en route to landing on the coast of present-day Honduras, he called them *Islas Santa Ana*. He claimed the land for the Spanish Crown. The historical record of Columbus' sighting and proclamation became important more than 400 years

later, when the government of Honduras pressed its claim for possession of the islands.

In 1680, Charles Swan, a British ship captain of the sailing vessel *Cygnat*, gave his name to the archipelago when he and his crewmen, who had sailed from London on a merchant voyage, became pirates. They might have been the first buccaneers to use the islands as their hideout, but they were not the last. Nevertheless, by the dawn of the 19th century, Swan Island was again devoid

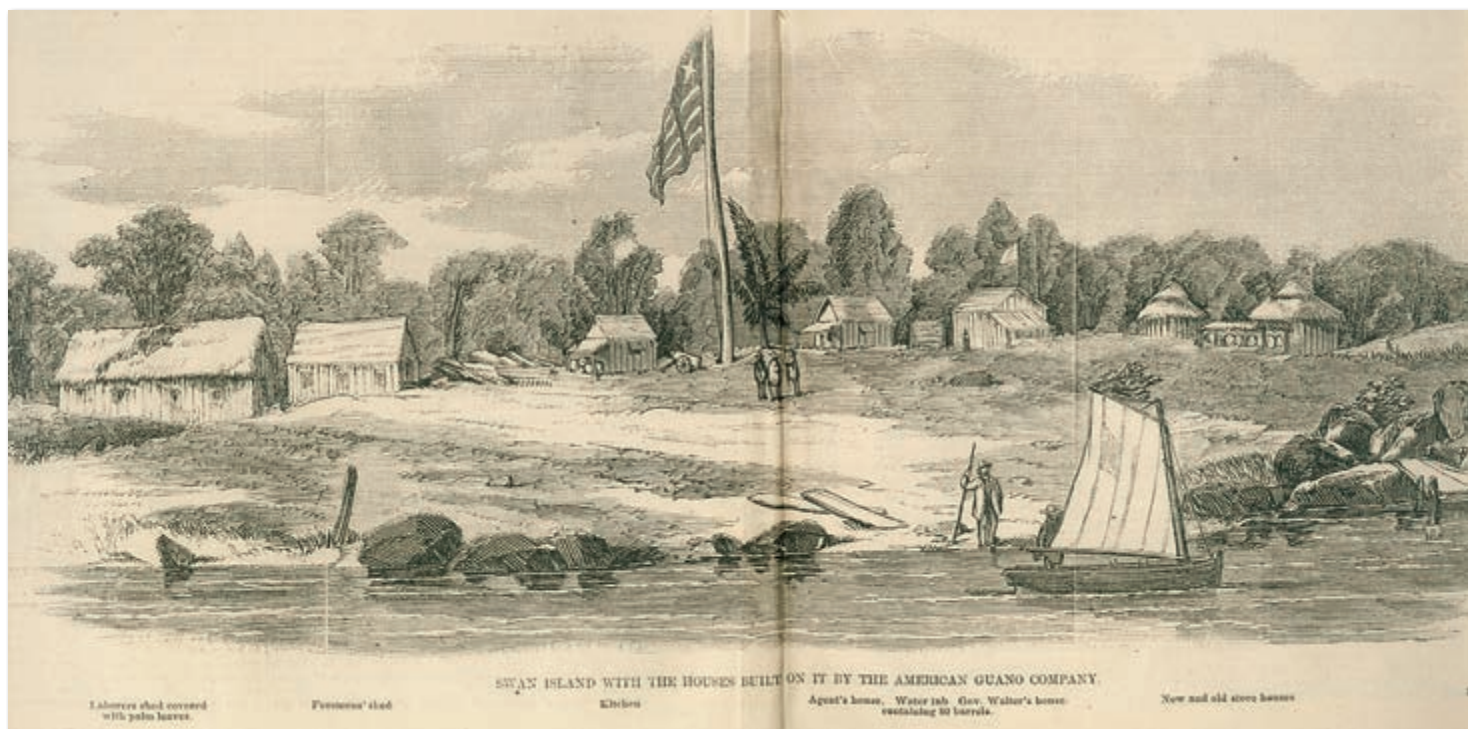


Figure 1. These wood engravings from an 1860 newspaper (shown on this page and the facing page), based on pencil sketches drawn by a member of a guano mining colony, are probably the only surviving pictorial images of the first American settlement on Swan Island. One is a panoramic view of the settlement structures; another is a view of the miners' rustic sleeping and dressing quarters. Three other wood engravings represent abuses of the laborers by the company's self-styled "governor," Thomas Walter. He is flogging one miner bound to the flagpole, and shooting his pistol at another. The third example is the ramshackle hut built by men whom Walter had evicted from the company employees' shelter.

of human habitation, as it had been when Columbus came upon it.

1857: AMERICAN DISCOVERY OF GUANO AND EXPLORATION OF SWAN ISLAND

An unpublished memoir titled *The Story of Swan Island* by longtime island caretaker Donald Emerson Glidden (1892-1981) chronicled the arrival of the first Americans as told by his grandfather. Glidden and his forebears were seamen who crewed ships that carried passengers and freight between their Cayman Islands homeland and Honduras, often

stopping en route at Swan Island. Glidden was licensed as a mate for steam and sail, and a master for sail vessels.

This was his grandfather's story:

He said that he made several of these trips, always called at the island, and found it desolate. But here is the surprise — one day when they stopped in and dropped anchor they saw two men (white men) appear on the beach. They beckoned to them by way of the hand, and they hastened to get to them. They put out on their boats and went to meet them. They were sailors on a two-masted American trading schooner, fore and aft, driven only by sail. The white men told my grandfather that their ship was headed for the United States of America from Central America, and they sighted this island ahead. Their captain through curiosity stopped at the island, went ashore, and found it uninhabited, took a look over, and found something on the eastern end of the island that he thought was phosphate. He took samples of it to the United States, and reported it to the guano companies that were operat-

ing in the West Indies digging phosphate. He visited the island and found stuff that some of it analysed 90% good. This was the starting point of the phosphate industry on Swan Island.

A U.S. State Department document provides the names of the claimants and gives April 3, 1857, as the date of their discovery. It's a detailed official American counterpart to Glidden's grandfather's recollection:

Following the passage of the Guano Act, a claim to Swan Islands was presented to the Department of State in a letter from Joseph W. Fabens, dated May 19, 1857, in which he stated that he had discovered deposits of guano thereon; that he and his associates were desirous of organizing a company to bring away the guano deposits on the islands referred to and inquired concerning the steps to be taken in order that he and his associates might be entitled to occupy the islands in question. ... on the 18th of June, 1857, Joseph W. Fabens and Charles Stearns wrote to the Department of State transmitting affidavits of George V. White and Samuel E. Stearns, together with an assignment of their rights in the islands to Fabens and Charles Stearns, and an associate, General Duff Greene. The affidavit of White, dated June 16, 1857, set forth that on the third day of April 1857 he had landed on Swan Island, where he had found "certain deposits of guano and accordingly took possession of the same in the name of the United States according to the provisions of the Act of Congress relative to guano discoveries." The affidavit of Samuel E. Stearns, dated June 17, 1857, corroborated the evidence submitted by George V. White.

Continued on page 66





Figure 2. This specimen of a Swan Island hutia, an odd-looking rodent species that has gone extinct, is part of the Museum of Comparative Zoology collection at Harvard University.

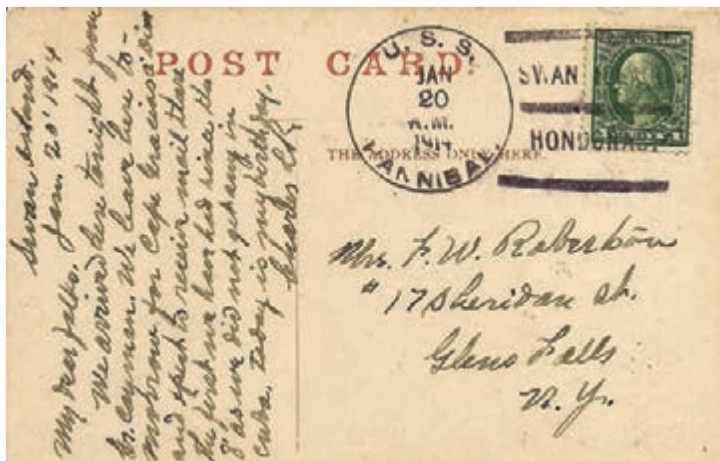


Figure 3. A sailor aboard the Navy ship *USS Hannibal* sent this Jan. 20, 1914, postcard, with SWAN ISLAND/HONDURAS between the obliterator bars of the cancel, to his family in Glens Falls, N.Y. Henry Sweets collection.

Continued from page 65

Congress had passed the Guano Act in August 1856, which provided "That when any citizen or citizens of the United States may have discovered, or shall hereafter discover, a deposit of guano on any island, rock, or key not within the lawful jurisdiction of any other government, and shall take peaceable possession thereof, and occupy the same, said island, rock, or key may, at the discretion of the President of the United States, be considered as appertaining to the United States."

If any original 19th-century letters from Swan Island exist today, they are probably filed away in government or academic archives, but I have not located any. Contemporaneous newspaper reports recorded comings and goings, some of which had been mailed or brought by favor from the settlement.

The May 6, 1858, *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* noted: "The bark Hanson Gregory, Capt. Sylvester, from Swan Island, Caribbean sea, reports April 26th when off Ha-

vana, was boarded by a boat from a Spanish war steamer, which was in pursuit of a slaver reported to be off the island three days previous. The H.G. brings three seamen of the brig *Nanatske* recently wrecked at Swan Island."

1858-1862: THE FIRST AMERICAN SETTLEMENT ON SWAN ISLAND

A comprehensive report — "News from Swan Island" by "Our Swan Island Correspondent" dated Nov. 24, 1858 — appeared in the Dec. 18 *New York Herald*, led by a windy opening that is best omitted.

... You may wonder how your correspondent came here, and what he is doing, of all places in the world, at Swan Island. Nothing terrible, let me assure you, despite my magniloquent prelude. ... We are a bona fide American colony, engaged in a legitimate and honorable occupation, in the pursuance of which we have the assured protection of Uncle Samuel, all duly certified to by Hon. Lewis Cass, Secretary of State. We have as pretty an island home as ever lover sighed for, about the size of Manhattan, with leafy pathways through the forest for dirty streets, and live rabbits in lieu of dead ones.

This island is held by the Atlantic and Pacific Guano Company of New York, by virtue of their discovery and occupation under the act of Congress,

authorizing protection to be given to guano discoverers. They have been here about a year, and have already mined and shipped several cargoes. Lieut. Sinclair, of the United States navy, who recently visited the islands as the agent of the company, estimates the guano deposits at five millions of tons, which is a very moderate estimate. Here we have the compact essence which is to be developed and fill granaries for future generations.

Governor Walter, the new agent of the company, arrived in the Empire (auspicious name) on the 31st inst., and received a salute from our pocket piece on landing. The American flag was then run up, three cheers were given for the flag, three more for the Atlantic and Pacific Guano Company, and three more for Swan Island, which were answered by the boys in the ship with a will. The Governor is a son of Thomas U. Walter, Esq., the distinguished architect of the national Capitol extension at Washington, and is a worthy chip off the old block.

Our life is a somewhat monotonous one, and, unlike our neighbors in Honduras and Nicaragua, we do not have as many revolutions as Sundays in the year. Our recreation consists in a visit to the cocoa nut grove on the north side of the island, facetiously named "The Widows" by one of our boys, where the wreck of the *Nanatske* is piled up. Like the body of the man in the story, she is useful in decay, for turtles infest her hold, and we are never short of the aldermanic luxury of turtle soup and steaks. ...

We are all in good health and spirits. We have dug a well, which gives us an abundant supply of excellent water, and



Figure 4. The colorful map in this 1935 Christmas card from the Navy destroyer *USS Trenton* showed the route of its goodwill tour of Latin America, including a call at Swan Island.



Figure 5. This Aug. 2, 1915, cover from the United Fruit Co. Wireless Telegraph Dept. office in New York City to the company's wireless station manager at Swan Island was probably transported as inter-office company mail, not through a post office. *Jon Krupnick collection.*

have plenty of fresh grub in the shape of rabbits, birds, iguanas, with now and then the tail of a Rocky Mountain eel.

No other news here. We can load 1,000 tons of guano per month, and expect to be able to load 10,000 tons per month, and receive the Herald regularly.

An item in the Jan. 29, 1859, *Baltimore Sun* reported: "On Wednesday the brig Golden Lead sailed with reinforcements for the American colony settled on Swan Island, among whom were two families. The colonists go well supplied with grains and seeds and farming implements, and it is the intention of the company to occupy the island, in addition to mining and shipping guano, to be prepared to afford supplies to whalers and other vessels who may touch there."

An ad for "SWAN ISLAND GUANO — 400 tons prime quality, now landing and for sale," appeared in the April 18, 1859, *New York Herald*, the earliest I found.

A year later the news was no longer cheerful. An article in the Jan. 7, 1860, *New York Illustrated News* presented a harrowing account of working conditions under "Governor" Thomas Walter,

who seems to have wielded a thoroughly despotic sway over the rest. In illustration of this, it is asserted that eleven of the laborers, whose terms of service had expired and who refused to enter into a new contract, were refused the privilege by Mr. Walter of spending their nights in the shed which served as sleeping and dressing rooms for the laborers, and were forced to build a hut from logs and palm trees to shelter themselves against the myriads of insects which began to show

life as soon as the sun was down. There were also denied a share of the loathsome provisions which theretofore had been furnished to them, and had not the other laborers divided their scanty stock among them, they must inevitably have starved to death.

Pencil sketches shown in Figure 1, drawn by one of the miners and reproduced as wood engravings in the newspaper, are probably the only surviving pictures of the original American settlement on Swan Island. One shows Walter flogging an employee as punishment; the flag pole had become his whipping post. Another drawing shows him shooting a pistol at a worker who tried to flee.

1863: THE UNITED STATES OFFICIALLY CLAIMED SWAN ISLAND

Beset by former employees' and creditors' lawsuits and further hampered by the onset of the Civil War, the proprietors sold their interests in Swan Island to the New York Guano Co. on Oct. 4, 1862. The new owners petitioned Secretary of State William Seward to recognize their claim under the Guano Act, and he complied.

Swan Island thus officially became a U.S. possession on Feb. 11, 1863. An 1890 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Jones v. United States* upheld the constitutionality of the Guano Act and held that the secretary of state's certificate or proclamation is equivalent to a declaration of the president to satisfy the legal requirement. The

Jones ruling concerned the U.S. claim of Navassa Island, but the principle applied also to Swan Island.

The New York Guano Co. had been mining and selling guano from Pacific islands since the mid-1850s. Perhaps its purchase of Swan Island and securing formal recognition of its claim during the Civil War was intended to deny the island's guano to potential competitors and to secure a reserve source of supply. I found no evidence of that firm's attempts to market Swan Island guano until the spring of 1866, and then only briefly.

1870: PACIFIC GUANO CO. TOOK POSSESSION OF SWAN ISLAND

In 1870 the owners of the New York Guano Co. deeded their Swan Island property to the Pacific Guano Co. of Woods Hole, Mass., the only natural deepwater harbor on Cape Cod.

Woods Hole had been a prosperous whaling station in the early 19th century, but by 1860 that industry was in decline. Meanwhile Boston merchants were seeking cargo for return voyages of their ships. Guano seemed to suit their wish, so Pacific Guano Co. was organized in 1859. Howland Island, about 1,500 miles south of Hawaii, was secured as the source of supply, and the guano works at Woods Hole began production in 1860.

By 1867 the Howland Island deposits were depleted. Acquisition of Swan Island became the new source that kept the firm going until 1889, when Pacific Guano Co. declared bankruptcy and went out of business. By then chemical fertilizers had largely supplanted guano as the most economical for agriculture.

Continued on page 68



Figure 6. Delivered Feb. 6, 1938, to the purser of the *SS Baja California*, this cover from Swan Island to St. Louis entered the mail at a port in Nicaragua, indicated by postage stamps of that country. *Jon Krupnick collection.*

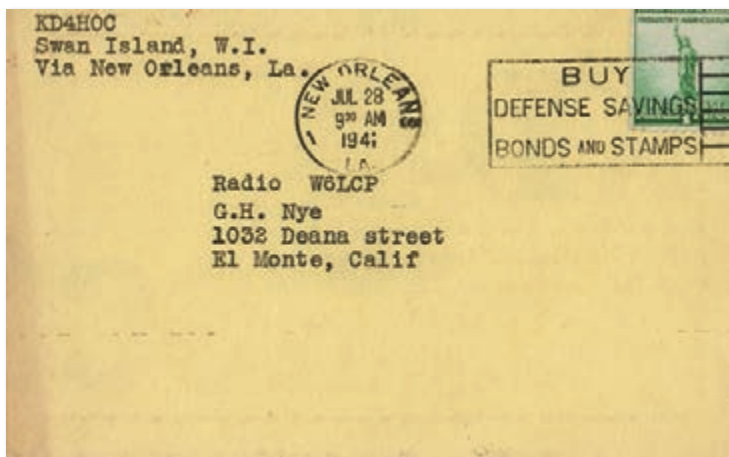


Figure 7. Two postcards mailed at Swan Island in 1941 illustrate how mail reached destinations in the United States. New Orleans was the closest U.S. post office, and the default entry and departure point for most Swan Island mail, but many United Fruit ships carried their cargoes, passengers, and mail to New York for delivery. *Jon Krupnick collection.*

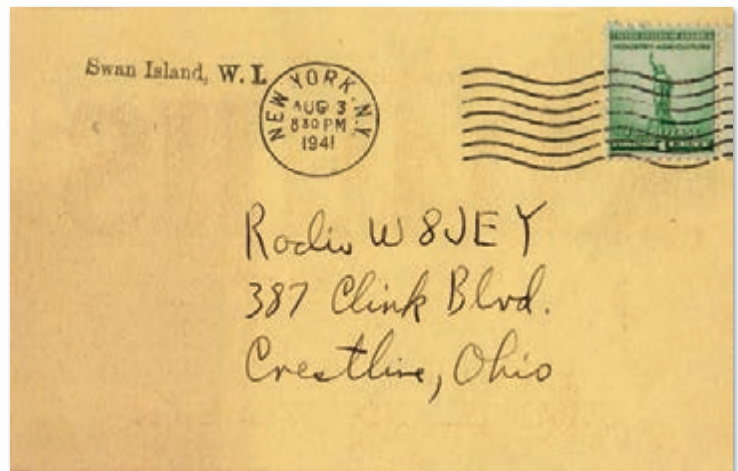


Figure 8. This Feb. 12, 1942, cover from the Swan Island Trustees in Boston to caretaker Donald Glidden at Swan Island shows that New Orleans continued to be the departure point for mail to Swan Island after the United States entered World War II. *Jon Krupnick collection.*

Continued from page 67

As the firm's business declined, living conditions on Swan Island deteriorated and grew desperate for the dwindling number of residents. A brief article dated Key West, Fla., titled "An Island People Starving" appeared in the Nov. 1, 1883, *New York Herald*:

Captain Adams, of the schooner Henry Dennison, reports that on passing Swan Island, Caribbean Sea, October 24, his vessel was boarded by a boat seeking provisions. The island people — fourteen in number — had nothing to subsist upon but cocoa-nuts. There are wild hogs there, but no ammunition with which to shoot them. Captain Adams supplied them with provisions, probably enough to last ten days. This compelled him to put in here. The people were expecting a vessel from Baltimore, but she was very much overdue. If no sail passed since the Dennison left the island Captain Adams says the people must be nearly starving.

A Nov. 18 follow-up reported, "The tug Gladisfen, from Charleston, sailed to-night for Swan Island, carrying provisions for the island people previously reported in a starving condition."

The natural resources of Swan Island were no longer a source of profit. Nevertheless, the Woods Hole Historical Museum is today a repository of archival references for studies of the guano industry

and Swan Island, cited here. Glidden's typescript memoir is an important document in the museum's archive. Alas, the museum has no postal mementos from Swan Island.

After Pacific Guano Co.'s bankruptcy, the Swan Island rights passed through several hands. Eventually the Albion Chemical Co. of Boston took possession on July 1, 1902, but the success of that firm's Florida phosphate plant rendered guano mining redundant, so the company abandoned Swan Island on Feb. 5, 1904.

Glidden's father had worked for all three fertilizer firms. "Father told me that the first company that worked Swan Island treated the laborers so badly that they all had to quit. The next company treated them so good that they went broke. The third company done all right, but they failed after spending \$200,000. The Florida phosphate industry killed the Swan Island market."

Alonzo Adams, a ship captain from Boston who had called at Swan Island several years earlier on a tour out of Mobile, Ala., filed a claim for Swan Island five weeks after Albion Chemical Co. departed. The State Department accepted Adams' claim on March 14, 1904; he took possession of the island the following day.

Glidden recalled: "I went to Swan Island to work for his son Wallace. The old man Alonzo Adams was then on the island for his health, he and his old lady, and they left for their home in Boston that same year, 1910, and soon after that we heard that they were both dead."

In November 1908 Adams had transferred his title to Swan Islands Commercial Co. of Boston. Upon his death in 1910, Sumner Smith became head of the trust. For the next 62 years, Smith managed the property, until it ceased to be a U.S. possession.



POSTAL HISTORY GEM LOST IN A FLOOD: AN 1880S FOLDED LETTER FROM SWAN ISLAND

In the 1930s, fiction writer and collector Vernon L. Ardiff (1914-1982) possessed a rare, possibly unique, 1880s folded letter from Swan Island marked SHIP that had entered the United States at Key West. He had stored that letter and other irreplaceable covers and

documents from Swan Island, Navassa Island and Clipperton Island guano operations in a steamer trunk while he served in the Army during World War II. All were lost when his parents' Illinois home was inundated by floodwater.

Despite the tragic loss of his precious postal and philatelic treasures, Ardiffe renewed his collection after the war. Swan Island covers in many collections, including mine, originated from his correspondence with Glidden family members and other residents of the island.

Other collectible Swan Island covers include mail to and from U.S. Navy and United Fruit merchant vessels that called at the island; United Fruit, Civil Aeronautics Administration (later Federal Aviation Agency) and U.S. Weather Bureau personnel stationed on the island; Gibraltar Steamship Co., Radio Swan and Radio Americas souvenirs and broadcast reception acknowledgments; and Cuba Libre Courier Service covers.

SWAN ISLAND FLORA AND FAUNA, A LITTLE-KNOWN NATURAL PARADISE

An April 26, 1884, *Baltimore Sun* article titled "Two Queer Animals — They were Caught on Swan Island — A Place Abounding in Tropical Riches" provides a comprehensive overview of Swan Island as the guano industry faded.

Captain Charles H. Davis, of the schooner Florence Rogers, from Vivorilla Cay, arrived on Wednesday night. A visit to his vessel disclosed an interesting exhibition of curiosities. On his way to Baltimore he stopped at Swan Island, in the Caribbean Sea, and was so attracted by its loveliness and abundance that he remained several days.

Swan Island is the most isolated island in the Caribbean. It is one hundred miles from the main land and one hundred and thirty from the nearest settlement on Roatan Island. It has lately been taken possession of by the Pacific Guano Company, which has placed a superintendent and a few workmen there to retain proprietorship. The American flag flies over the island. ...

Captain Davis brought home with him from Swan Island two strange animals for which he can find no name. They are dark gray in color, and about the size of cats, but with heads, teeth and eyes like rats. Their tails are very short. There are but few of them on the island, and they cannot be found on the other islands. A peculiarity of the animals is the strong affection which exists between them. If the male is caught the female becomes a willing prisoner, and vice versa. They were shipped to Boston on Thursday.

The top of the cabin of the Florence Rogers is honey-combed with coral branches, some of which are two feet in length. Specimens of cocoanuts, bananas, checkwood, pigeon plumwood, manchineel, princewood, fuchsia, sandalwood, satinwood, ebony and lignum vitae, sea mosses, sea coral, sea fans, sea eggs, sea porcupines, tortoise shells, whips made of sea trees, sea shells, sea beans, conchs and brooms of cocoa, all the products of the island, are scattered over the vessel in endless profusion. Lillies, with beautiful variegated leaves, and cacti, all of which grow wild in this veritable paradise, are also among the valuable collection of Capt.

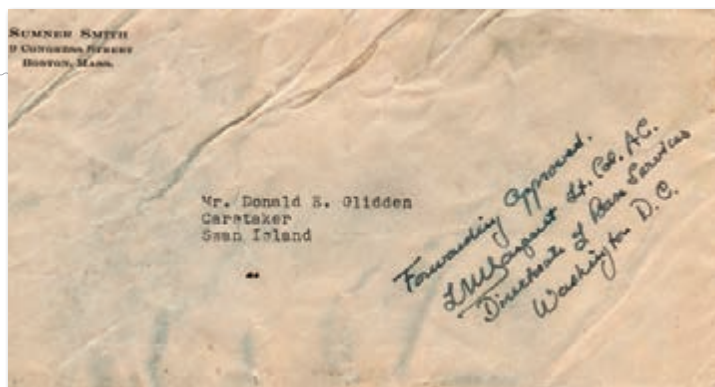


Figure 9. This cover from Glidden's employer in Boston to him at Swan Island was carried out of the mails by a military courier. The enclosure notified Glidden that the Civil Aeronautics Administration had leased part of the island for a radio station and that the War Department had leased a strip across the island, probably as an emergency landing field for aircraft. The contents are dated Dec. 23, 1942. Jon Krupnick collection.

Davis. The bananas are thin-skinned, and of the most delicious flavor.

Capt. Davis says the ground on the island is covered with cocoanuts. ... Besides all this wealth of nature, Swan Island has rich deposits of guano and phosphate rock. The superintendent of the island told Capt. Davis that last year he had to free over three hundred turtles, weighing from 200 to 300 pounds apiece, from his "crawls" because no vessels called at the island. Capt. Davis will send his curiosities to his home, in Brooklyn, where he has a valuable collection, gathered in all parts of the world.

That article was probably the first published report of the odd-looking rodent, shown in Figure 2, later named the Swan Island hutia. An American Society of Mammalogists publication wrongly credits the original discovery to naturalist Charles H. Townsend in 1887.

From those beginnings Swan Island became a study area for a succession of itinerant academic specimen collectors. A 1911 book, *A Naturalist on Desert Islands* by Percy R. Lowe, includes a chronicle of his three-week exploration of the island in 1908. Upon arrival aboard the yacht *Zenalda*, he wrote:

Less than a mile from the anchorage, a small boat manned by two negroes and a white man

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Figure 10. After German submarines sank the *SS Baja California* off the Florida coast in July 1942, United Fruit shipping was curtailed for the rest of the war. Later, mail for Swan Island was routed via Balboa, Canal Zone, and forwarded by the U.S. Navy. This June 7, 1944, cover from Boston is an example. Jon Krupnick collection.



Figure 11. In 1945 Hamilton Brothers Co. ships began frequent runs between Tampa and Swan Island, carrying mail in both directions. This Aug. 22, 1946, cover to Chicago was carried to Tampa on one of those trips. Jon Krupnick collection.



Figure 12. This postal card from Swan Island was carried to Belize, British Honduras, as paquebot mail aboard a merchant vessel that had no post office of its own and entered the mails there Jan. 3, 1947.

Continued from page 69

was seen to be coming out to meet us. The white man turned out to be an American, and a son of the owner of the island, which for the first time we discovered to be private property. ...

Mr. A. entertained us with an account of how he, his father, mother, and a brother were the only residents (negro servants excepted) on the island, and of the sort of 'Swiss Family Robinson' life they led there, turning their hands to almost any sort of job imaginable, from healing fever-stricken castaways, who were once wrecked upon the island, to building a house, milking a cow, making a boat or a landing stage, or growing cocoa-nuts, sugar-cane, tobacco or other crops. Also of how the United States had now annexed the island (a thing which was news to us), and of how his father owned it, and was, in fact, accredited lord of all he surveyed.

Such, then, with the exception of a period in which a Guano Company exploited the island for phosphates, are the "short and simple annals" of our little island.

Museum of Comparative Zoology naturalist George Nelson sailed to Swan Island on United Fruit Co. ships five times between 1912 and 1919, staying an average of two months each time to collect specimens.

Report on Birds Recorded by the Pinchot Expedition of 1929 to the Caribbean and Pacific by Albert K. Fisher and Alexander Wetmore includes pictures of Swan Island and a summary of the party's April 16 and 17

visit, and lists the species seen and gathered for museums.

Walter Edward Guinness, better known as Lord Moyne, briefly called at Swan Island during his 1938 official tour of British colonies in the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea. He

was evidently the last to collect live specimens of the hutia before they went extinct, probably killed off by Hurricane Janet, which devastated the island in 1955.

From reading these accounts, I believe it will be only a matter of time before entrepreneurs in Honduras begin to promote tours to Swan Island as a less extravagant and potentially more rewarding alternative to Ecuador's Galapagos Islands. If and when that does occur, the island might finally gain a post office and its own postage stamps.

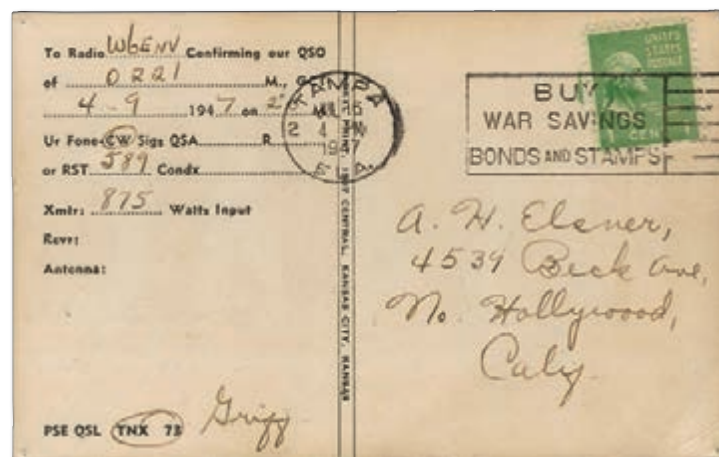


Figure 13. This QSL card from Civil Aeronautics Administration radio operator Fabian A. Griffin at Swan Island entered the mail at Tampa, Fla., on July 16, 1947.



Figure 14. Richard R. Rasche, the U.S. Weather Bureau station manager at Swan Island in the 1950s, had previously served the Weather Bureau on Wake Island and Canton Island, remote U.S. possessions in the Pacific Ocean. A Dec. 17, 1952, surface mail greeting card to him at Canton Island was forwarded Feb. 19, 1953, from there to his Swan Island location. A colleague sent the Oct. 26, 1952, airmail cover from Wake Island. The postage due marking was probably a mistake by a postal clerk who was unaware that both Wake Island and Swan Island were domestic mail addresses. Jon Krupnick collection.



POSTMARKS RECORDED U.S. NAVY SHIPS THAT CALLED AT SWAN ISLAND

Over the past century, U.S. Navy ships have called at Swan Island on several occasions. Sometimes they named Swan Island as the port of call in their postal cancellations.

In May 1911 the gunboat *USS Paducah* was sent to determine the island's true geographic coordinates. In January 1913 while performing hydrological measurements, the auxiliary ship *USS Hannibal* included the inscription SWAN ISLAND/HONDURAS in its canceler, as shown in Figure 3 on the postcard from Henry Sweets' collection.

The destroyer *USS Ballard* reported from Swan Island in 1920, and *USS Hannibal* returned in 1922. The light cruiser *USS Trenton* participated in the Special Service Squadron goodwill tour of Latin America in 1934 and 1935. Glidden recalled that the ship stayed for three days. I have seen a *Trenton* ship cancel dated Sept. 10, 1935, that included the inscription SWAN IS./U.S.A.

I have not yet found any Navy ship covers struck with Swan Island cancels for my collection, but I'm happy to have *Trenton*'s Christmas card map of its 1935 tour that highlights the island, which is pictured in Figure 4.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH OTHER PLACES CALLED SWAN ISLAND

A cautionary note is important here. Swan Island in Oregon was the location of Portland's airport from 1927 to 1940. It was the site of a major shipyard and shipbuilding center during WWII. Many flight and naval covers showing Swan Island origins and cachets are related to that place, not to Swan Island in the Caribbean.

Besides Oregon, postal covers can be collected from Swan Island and Swans Island, Maine; Swan Island, Atlanta, Ga.; Swan Island, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada; Swan Island, Glengariff Harbour, County Cork, Ireland; Swan Island,

Loch Lomond, Scotland; and the merchant tanker *SS Swan Island*.

In 1949, James F. Clayton of the Heaton Technical School stamp club in England used a spirit duplicator to create panes of crudely drawn violet and pale blue cinderella stamps as a way of teaching about errors and varieties. The vignette of each is a sketch of a swan, and the inscription reads "Swan Island." Oddly, in about 1965, someone forged copies of them. Both the originals and the forgeries appear occasionally on eBay, wrongly attributed to Australia.

Keeping in mind that none of these are related to Swan Island in the Caribbean, let us return to Glidden's domain.

1907: UNITED FRUIT CO.'S WIRELESS TELEGRAPH RELAY STATION ON SWAN ISLAND

In the early years of the 20th century, the Swan Island Commercial Co. leased part

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Figure 15. Rasche sent this March 10, 1952, airmail cover from Swan Island via Tampa to his mother in Ohio.



Figure 16. Managers and laborers employed by Swan Island's owners were natives of the Cayman Islands. Sometimes they sent letters during trips to their homeland, such as this April 23, 1956, airmail cover.

Continued from page 71

of Great Swan to United Fruit Co., which planted thousands of coconut palms. For the first time since the departure of the guano companies, economic activity returned to the island.

With a large fleet of ships transporting passengers, mail and perishable cargo between Central America and the United States throughout the year, United Fruit sought a means to transmit time-sensitive weather and navigation information rapidly throughout the region. As late as 1904 the only direct communication link with the United States was a cable station at Colon, Panama.

In 1907 United Fruit bought United Wireless Telegraph Co. radio stations at New Orleans and Burrwood, La. (90 miles south of New Orleans, at the mouth of the Mississippi). Swan Island was selected as the location for a relay station between New Orleans and Port Limon, Costa Rica.

Construction of two 200-foot steel antenna towers on Swan Island, plus gale-resistant buildings, generators, fuel tanks and the station itself took about eight months to complete. Until then, high levels of static interfered with communication between the North and Central American terminals. The addition of the Swan Island station overcame that problem.

In 1911 United Fruit expanded the Swan Island station by adding two 250-foot towers, by increasing the height of the original pair to 250 feet, and by installing a more powerful transmitter. With higher power and improved directional ability, the new equipment became operational in 1912, the year that United Fruit hired Donald Glidden as straw boss of the laborers while his older brother Charles was caretaker.

In 1913 the Tropical Radio Telegraph Co. became a wholly owned subsidiary of United Fruit, with headquarters in Bos-

ton. The network of stations provided cable and telegraph services to the public, not just to the company itself, further elevating the importance of Swan Island.

Donald Glidden returned home to Grand Cayman to get married in 1915; Charles remained as the Swan Island caretaker until 1927. From the time United Fruit began construction of the radio station until 1942, mail for Swan Island was sent in care of the firm's New Orleans office and delivered by company ships out of New Orleans.

Florida collector Jon Krupnick has an enviable collection of Swan Island covers.

He shared images of several with *Linn's*, including a 1915 cover from the United Fruit Co. Wireless Telegraph Dept. office in New York City to the company's wireless station manager at Swan Island, a fine memento to illustrate that chapter of the island's history. The cover is shown in Figure 5.

1927: DONALD GLIDDEN'S RETURN TO SWAN ISLAND

When Charles Glidden retired in December 1927, Smith hired Donald Glidden to take his place as caretaker of Swan Island, a position Glidden retained until he retired in the 1970s. United Fruit paid him a salary of \$100 per month plus



Figure 17. This April 28, 1959, airmail postcard from Swan Island to Philadelphia was sent by the Federal Aviation Agency radio operator. Before 1958 the FAA's duties had been performed by the Civil Aeronautics Administration.



Figure 18. Members of an amateur radio DXpedition to Swan Island in February 1960 used call letters KS4AZ for their broadcasts. (DX is the telegraphic code for distance or distant.) This QSL card acknowledged reception of a Feb. 18 Morse code shortwave transmission.



Figure 19. The U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey ship *Explorer* called at Swan Island March 19, 1960. Before that trip, *Explorer* had no post office. Before departing the Panama Canal Zone, Capt. Edmund L. Jones had been sworn as an assistant postmaster so his ship cancels could be struck on souvenir covers. The public was told of the ship's missions to collect scientific data and to perform a population census, but its secret mission was to transport equipment and personnel for a radio station that the Central Intelligence Agency would operate to transmit anti-Cuba propaganda.

80-percent commission from sales of the island's coconut crop, out of which he paid the laborers' wages.

The radio station became important not only for communication between the firm's headquarters in Boston, plantations in Central America and the Caribbean, and ships at sea, but also provided timely weather data during hurricane seasons throughout the region from 1928 to 1932. In 1938 the U.S. Weather Bureau established a part-time station on Swan Island, staffed only during hurricane seasons. In the early 1940s, it became a year-round operation.

United Fruit vessels called at Swan Island about every six weeks, delivering and collecting mail. A cover in Krupnick's collection, pictured in Figure 6, was handed to the purser of *SS Baja California* on Feb. 6, 1938. Colorful stamps of Nicaragua indicate that it entered the posts when the ship reached that country as its next port of call.

Most mail from Swan Island to the United States entered the mail at New Orleans because that was the destination of most northbound company vessels that called on the island. But some United Fruit ships were routed to other ports, landing the mail at

whichever one happened to be its first mainland U.S. anchorage.

Two 1941 postcards in Krupnick's collection illustrate this. Both are shown as Figure 7. One was canceled July 28 at New Orleans; the other, Aug. 3 at New York City. By this time



Figure 21. Herbert Rosen, manager of the Interpex stamp show in New York City, arranged for commemorative covers to be flown March 17, 1961, from Swan Island to New York. That philatelic activity camouflaged a flight of the CIA-sponsored air transport service that supported the Bay of Pigs invasion four weeks later.

WWII fighting had engulfed nearly all of Europe and the North Atlantic Ocean for almost two years, but had not yet reached the Caribbean islands. That was about to change. In late 1941 the U.S. Weather Bureau established a station at Swan Island, built and supplied by the Navy.

Krupnick's Feb. 12, 1942, cover from the Swan Island

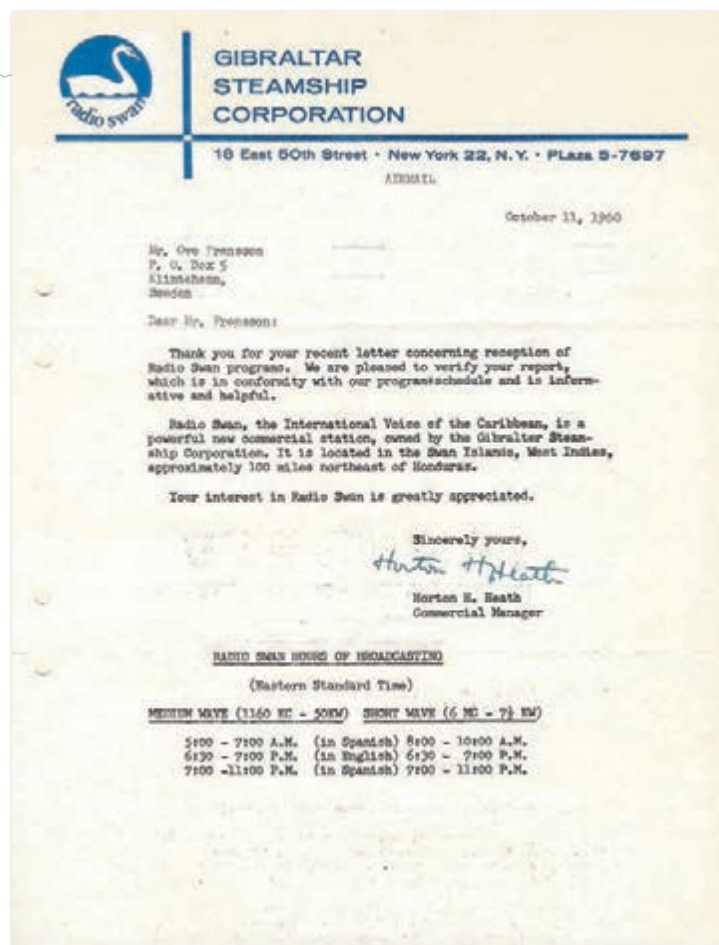


Figure 20. Gibraltar Steamship Corp. owned no ships but provided ostensibly private commercial ownership and management of Radio Swan to disguise the CIA's propaganda operation. This Oct. 11, 1960, letter from the firm's New York office verified a Swedish listener's reception of a Radio Swan broadcast.

Trustees in Boston to Glidden at Swan Island, shown in Figure 8, was routinely dispatched from New Orleans as usual. But on July 19 a German submarine sank the *SS Baja California* off the coast of Mexico. United Fruit shipping was immediately curtailed, and transported no more mail to or from Swan Island.

Glidden recalled: "The next shipment out of New Orleans for Swan Island was landed in Castilla, Honduras, and brought

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Figure 22. As Radio Swan's anti-Castro transmissions led up to and followed the CIA-organized invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961, the headquarters of Gibraltar Steamship Corp. moved from New York, represented here by the Jan. 5 airmail postal card; to Swan Island before the invasion began, represented by the Feb. 28 cover routed via Tampa; and to Miami after the invasion was defeated, represented by the Aug. 5 cover to England.

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up to Swan Island by a small Honduran boat. That same ship, our transport, was shelled and sunk later on, alongside the dock in Port Limon, Costa Rica."

1942: SWAN ISLAND IN WORLD WAR II

Glidden received no mail from June to December 1942. Finally a military courier



Figure 23. Swan Island manager Sumner Smith sent this Aug. 25, 1964, letter to Glidden by way of a Miami post office box. It might have been forwarded by the CIA's air courier service affiliated with Radio Cuba Libre. John Krupnick collection.

brought him a Dec. 23, 1942, letter from his employer in Boston, which notified him that Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) had leased part of the island for a radio station and that the War Department had leased a strip across the island. The letter is shown in Figure 9.

That cover from Krupnick's collection is endorsed "Forwarding Approved" and signed by an officer of the War Department Directorate of Base Services. It probably got to Swan Island on a military vessel that served U.S. Army and Navy bases in the Caribbean.

When regular mail service resumed, it was routed to the Panama Canal Zone and delivered to Swan Island by a U.S. Navy ship. Krupnick's June 7, 1944, cover to Glidden from Boston is a typical example and is shown in Figure 10.

1945: SWAN ISLAND IN THE POSTWAR ERA

Shortly after the war ended, a merchant ship paid a surprise visit to Swan Island. Its captain called to pay respects to Glidden, an associate from many years earlier. The ship was operated by Hamilton Brothers Co. of Tampa, Fla., which brought bananas from Nicaragua to the United States every 12 days.

Hamilton Brothers ships then became mail carriers to and from Swan Island from late 1945 until the 1970s. Krupnick's collection includes the Aug.

22, 1946, cover to Chicago, illustrated in Figure 11 and canceled at Tampa. My collection includes more than a dozen covers routed via Tampa from 1946 to 1964.

Some Swan Island mail traveled by more circuitous routes. The Jan. 3, 1947, postal card pictured in Figure 12 went via Belize, British Honduras, as paquebot mail on an American ship. A paquebot letter or card is handed to an officer of a ship that has no post office aboard. It is delivered to a post office at the next port of call.

In 1946 the CAA installed an aircraft radio-navigation beacon on Great Swan, bringing another government office to the island, and more possibilities for mail to collect. With so many radio personnel active there, a significant proportion of postwar postal history consists of reception acknowledgments. The Jan. 3, 1947, QSL card shown in Figure 13 from the operator of radio station KS4AC is a good example. A QSL card is written confirmation of reception, usually a postcard sent by one amateur radio station operator to another.

In 1948 and 1949, the U.S. Agriculture Department used Great Swan as a quarantine station for Latin American cattle being shipped to U.S. markets.

On March 22, 1949, the Post Office Department made Tampa the official port of entry and departure for mail to



Figure 24. Surface mail from Swan Island continued to be carried by merchant ships to Tampa. No stamps were available, so 5¢ postage due was collected from the addressee when this cover was delivered Aug. 26, 1964, at Oakland, Calif., after being forwarded from Modesto.

and from Swan Island. Correspondents no longer needed to rely solely on the indulgence of a friendly shipping company. Service was weekly in both directions.

Krupnick's collection includes two truly amazing covers to Swan Island from remote Pacific Ocean islands, illustrated in Figure 14. One originated at Wake Island; the other was sent from Hammonton, N.J., to Canton Island and from there was forwarded to Swan Island, both in 1952. The addressee, Richard R. Rasche, had served the U.S. Weather Bureau in both locations before being assigned as the bureau's Swan Island station manager. My collection includes a cover from Rasche at Swan Island to his mother in Ohio, shown in Figure 15.

1954: CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY PROPAGANDA AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE BROADCASTS

In June 1954 the CIA orchestrated a coup d'état in Guatemala that deposed the elected president, Jacobo Arbenz Guzman, and brought to power the military dictatorship of Carlos Castillo Armas.

To support the coup, in 1953 CIA agents E. Howard Hunt (later of Watergate burglary notoriety) and David Atlee Phillips set up clandestine radio stations, called Voz de Liberacion, to broadcast anti-government propaganda and to wage psychological warfare against government supporters. The main transmitter was located on a United Fruit plantation in Honduras, with a backup at Swan Island.

In a 1998 letter to radio historian Bart Lee, Hunt recalled:

As to Swan Island, it was, and perhaps is, a piece of real estate owned, leased or occupied at the time by a cooperative radio communications company that may have had a tie-in with United Fruit. Its transmissions were made available to our task force, specifically to Dave Phillips, who developed a propaganda writing team of experienced Guatemala refugee writers. They put together the broadcasts that in no small way contributed to the success of our effort to rid Guatemala of Col. Arbenz.

According to the book *Clandestine Radio Broadcasting* by Lawrence C. Soley and John S. Nichols, "Voz de Liberacion, the first full-scale use of clandestine radio by the CIA, was closely associated with an entirely successful operation. As a result, it became the model for most future counterrevolutionary stations in the Western Hemisphere, including several that continued to operate in the middle 1980s."

On Sept. 27, 1955, Hurricane Janet, one of the strongest Atlantic hurricanes on record, devastated Swan Island. In a harrowing firsthand account published in the August 1956 edition of *Weatherwise*, John Laban of the Weather Bureau staff wrote, with the wind still blowing at gale force after the worst had passed, "The island seems desolate — out of 10,000 coconut trees, a few are still standing. Most have been snapped at an average height of 15 feet from the ground."

Besides destroying the island's agricultural economy, the storm toppled the radio towers and brought the Swan Island hutia to extinction. A Navy ship evacuated American personnel, leaving the Cayman Islanders to clear the debris and rebuild. My collection includes a 1956

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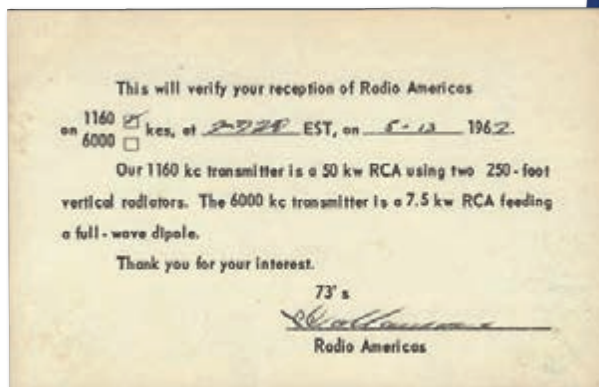


Figure 25. Radio Swan was renamed Radio Americas after August 1961. Colorful QSL cards and pennants, as pictured here, were sent to listeners. Radio Americas went off the air May 15, 1968.

Figure 26. This airmail cover, which entered the U.S. mail July 12, 1965, at St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, probably originated at Swan Island, brought from there by the CIA's Radio Cuba Libre air transport courier. A higher amount of postage would have been required for transport out of the mails from a foreign country; no courier service would have been needed for other United States domestic locations served by the airline.

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cover mailed from the Cayman Islands to Tampa by a Swan Island resident. The cover is shown in Figure 16.

In 1958 Congress transferred CAA authority to the new Federal Aviation Agency (FAA). I have an April 28, 1959, airmail postcard mailed from Swan Island to Philadelphia by the FAA radio operator, shown in Figure 17.

In February 1960, three amateur radio buffs hitched a boat ride from Tampa to Swan Island to communicate with their fellow hobbyists around the world by short-wave radio using call letters KS4AZ for their broadcasts. My collection includes a QSL card, shown here as Figure 18, that confirmed a Feb. 18 connection. Their timing was serendipitous, just a month before the CIA returned to the island to support a clandestine operation against Cuba.

1960: CIA ANTI-CUBA PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE AND PROPAGANDA BROADCASTS

The CIA's "Brief History of Radio Swan," formerly classified SECRET EYES ONLY,



Figure 27. All or nearly all covers bearing \$2.50 Cuba Libre Courier Service express labels are addressed to De Laurence at 180 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago, Ill., but without including the firm's name, because its occult publications and products were illegal in Jamaica, the origin of most surviving mail that used the courier service.



begins with this paragraph:

On 17 March 1960, President Eisenhower approved a covert action program to bring about the replacement of the Castro regime. Within the propaganda framework of that program, an important objective was to create and utilize a high-powered medium and short wave radio station. CIA was asked to provide such a station, outside the continental limits of the United States, and have it ready for operation within sixty (60) days.

It's clear from philatelic evidence that the agency had anticipated the president's approval and had begun to implement that phase of the program before he had signed it. Amid abundant fanfare, the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey ship *Explorer* called at Swan Island March 19.

Explorer had begun its journey Feb. 2 on the West Coast, taking hydrographic measurements, collecting rock samples, filming underwater features, and gathering other scientific data without attracting significant publicity. But that all changed when the ship reached the Panama Canal.

In preparation for *Explorer's* final survey mission at Swan Island, Capt. Edmund L. Jones was sworn as an assistant postmaster. The Feb. 25 *Postal Bulletin* listed the *Explorer* post office as a temporary branch of Washington, D.C. Collectors were invited to submit covers for cancellation at Swan Island; 5,000 pieces of philatelic mail were canceled

there. Figure 19 shows a cover canceled on *Explorer*.

The Swan Island survey was unlike any other. A census recorded a population of 28 residents — 19 Cayman Islanders, three Hondurans, and six U.S. citizens attached either to the Weather Bureau or the FAA station. A publicity blitz reported charting and mapping, dredging, taking core samples, and collecting wildlife specimens.

No mention was made of *Explorer's* covert mission to deliver personnel and equipment to build and operate a 50-kilowatt clear-channel radio station on Great Swan, which went on the air May 17. Programs in English and Spanish included anti-Cuban propaganda, popular music and religious broadcasts, recorded in New York City and flown to Swan Island by chartered Coastal Air Inc. aircraft from Miami via Cozumel, Mexico.

Coastal Air had previously flown a mission, crewed by Cuban exiles, to drop propaganda leaflets on Caracas after Venezuela's leftist president Romulo Betancourt had been the first foreign leader to host Fidel Castro after the Cuban Revolution.

Radio Swan staff consisted of 15 engineers and technicians under contract from the Philco Corp., serving six-month terms on the island.

The station was reported to be owned by a New York firm, the Gibraltar Steamship Co., which did not operate steamships. Figure 20 shows an Oct. 11, 1960, letter from the firm's New York office that verified a Swedish listener's reception of a Radio Swan broadcast.

Thomas Dudley Cabot, a former president of United Fruit and a former director of the State Department Office of Security Affairs, was the president of Gibraltar Steamship Co. Smith was vice president. Station manager Horton Heath told reporters that Radio Swan was a commercial station that leased the land from Smith.

1961: RADIO SWAN BROADCASTS FOR THE BAY OF PIGS INVASION OF CUBA

Radio Swan inaugurated the CIA's plan to oust Castro, which culminated in the April 1961 invasion at the Bay of Pigs. The CIA planners had expected Castro to be assassinated by the time the assault was launched, but mobsters who were tasked with that assignment botched it.

On March 10 CIA Director Allen Dulles gave a top-secret briefing to the CIA Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, in which he praised the effectiveness of Radio Swan:

We developed the radio equipment on Swan Island, which you have heard a great deal about. That has been going on now for about six months and is, we think, very effective. That reaches practically all of Cuba. And we are working very carefully with the Cubans, and we have the very best Cuban refugees working on that program.

Privately the CIA was less sanguine. According to the formerly secret eyes-only CIA report:

Toward the end of 1960, the effectiveness of Radio Swan began to diminish. Although

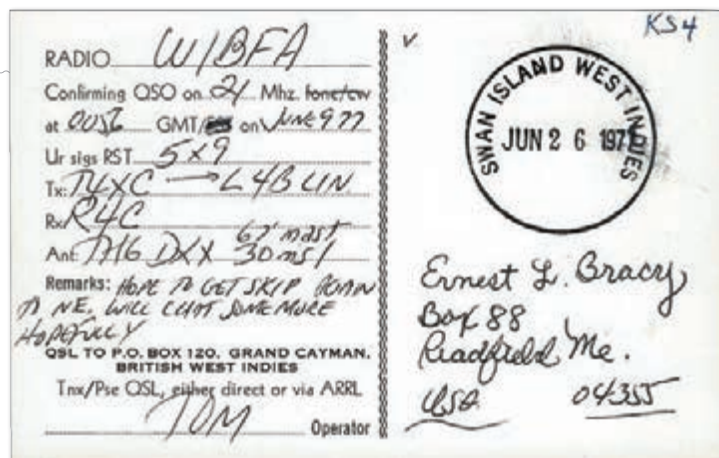
great numbers of Cubans still listened to the station, its credibility and reputation began to suffer as the result of statements representing the selfish interests of the Cuban groups producing the various programs. ... the program producers began to exaggerate in order to give their broadcasts a touch of sensationalism. They made statements which were obvious lies to the listeners. An example: One of the announcers stated that there were 3,000 Russians in a park in Santiago de Cuba — the residents had only to walk to the park to see that this was untrue.

To remedy the problem the agency tried to supervise content of the propaganda broadcasts. Then, as the fateful date approached, CIA planners devised a ruse to test Radio Swan's effectiveness.

As late as March 1961, a survey was made to determine the extent of listening coverage. An inexpensive ballpoint pen was offered to those listeners who would write in to the station. The reply was immediate: almost 3,000 letters from 26 countries. This barrage of mail included significant amounts from all parts of Cuba.

Once again a philatelic promotion served to elevate the visibility of Radio Swan. Special labels on cacheted covers were struck with nonpostal March 16 Radio Swan date-stamps, flown to Miami on a Coastal Air charter flight, canceled there on March 17, and flown to the Interpex stamp show in New York City. An example is shown in Figure 21.

One month later Cuban armed forces defeated the CIA's invasion force. During and after the invasion began, Radio Swan became a vehicle for psychological warfare orchestrated by Phillips, the man who had managed clandestine broadcasts during the 1954 Guatemala coup. Some of the faux coded messages read like caricatures from spy comedies, such as, "Look well at the rainbow. The fish will rise very soon." and "Attention, Stanislaus, the moon is red April 19." Others urged the invasion



to fight on after they had been soundly beaten.

In the humiliating aftermath, Dulles and the chief architect of the fiasco, Richard Bissell, were forced to resign at President John F. Kennedy's insistence. Phillips' role did not hinder his career; he later headed the Western Hemisphere division of the CIA. And Radio Swan continued to broadcast propaganda.

1962: FROM RADIO SWAN TO RADIO AMERICAS

Three of my covers, pictured in Figure 22, show how Gibraltar Steamship Co. mail originated from New York City in January 1961, from Swan Island via Tampa in February, and — after the mission had failed — from Miami in August.

Headquarters formally relocated to Miami in September 1961. The name of the station changed to Radio Americas in October 1962. The name of the parent company changed first to Vanguard Service Corp., and finally to Radio Americas, Inc., of Coral Gables, each one either a CIA proprietary company or contractor. For the rest of its existence, Radio Americas broadcast Radio Cuba Libre propaganda, news and entertain-

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Figure 28. When the United States transferred Swan Island sovereignty to Honduras, the Honduran government agreed to allow the U.S. National Weather Service Upper Air Sounding Station to remain. This June 26, 1977, American QSL card confirmed reception of a radio transmission. The circular datestamp resembles a postmark, but cards from this station were properly franked and mailed in batch envelopes posted at Grand Cayman.

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ment programs that were produced in Miami.

Neither Radio Swan nor Radio Americas was licensed by the Federal Communication Commission, which denied knowledge of their existence. But the CIA men on the island had an amateur radio club station for their personal use, licensed with the call letters KS4CC. Shortly before this article went to press, I snagged a KS4CC QSL card on eBay for my collection.

The CIA flights left Miami for Swan Island twice each week, in a circuit that included stops in the Florida Keys and on Caribbean islands whose governments hosted stations that broadcast the Radio Cuba Libre programs. Those other locations and call letters have been redacted from the declassified CIA report, but reporters have named the Bahamas and the Dominican Republic as two of them. In later testimony, Phillips said that the programs were air-expressed to "about 40 stations in five countries around the Caribbean."

Under the new arrangement, airmail was transported to and from Swan Island on the CIA flights. Calls by Hamilton Brothers ships occurred at two-month intervals, so surface mail was much slower than it had been before 1960. Krupnick's collection includes a 1964 cover sent by air from Smith to Glidden via a Miami post office box, shown in Figure 23. My cover, a 1964 surface letter from Swan Island to California, forwarded, with postage due collected from the addressee, is shown in Figure 24.

Radio Americas vied with Radio Havana Cuba for the loyalty of listeners in Latin America. Correspondents were rewarded with colorful QSL cards and pennants, as pictured in Figure 25. But surveys consistently reported that the Cuban station was more popular throughout the hemisphere. Radio Americas went off the air May 15, 1968. A heavily redacted retrospective CIA analysis from 1991 concluded:

Radio Americas may have had a deleterious effect, though one consonant with US policy. It may have slightly aggravated discontent on the island and thus contributed to the exodus of some of the very people who might have helped to overthrow Castro. If such is the case, it also contributed to the costly immigration problems which have plagued Miami and other cities.

1964: CUBA LIBRE COURIER SERVICE

Besides distributing taped Radio Cuba Libre propaganda programs to Swan Island and other Caribbean locations, in 1964 the air carrier added a courier service between them that expedited letters at a charge of \$2.50 in addition to postage (with dollars misspelled "Dollors" on its express labels).

The cover illustrated in Figure 26 from my collection, which entered the mail and was canceled July 12, 1965, at St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, is an example. I believe it originated at Swan Island because the U.S. 8¢ stamp paid the domestic airmail rate. Other domestic U.S. locations along the route had post offices; a foreign origin would have required a higher amount of postage.

The boxed marking reads, "POSTAGE PAID in accordance with Sec. 20 U.S. Code." The actual reference is not to the code but to a Post Office Department publication titled *Restrictions on Transportation of Letters: The Private Express Statutes and Interpretations*. Section 20 states, "Letters may be carried by an individual, express company, or any other person outside the mails to any point within or without the United States, provided appropriate postage is paid."

The envelope has no addressee's name, only the address: "Suite 515, Fifth Floor, 180 North Wabash Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60615 U.S.A." As shown in Figure 27, that was the address of De Laurence, a company that sold books and paraphernalia — potions, incense, amulets, and jewelry — related to occultism, mysticism, spiritualism, and magic. Its clientele included adherents of African and Afro-Caribbean cults and religions such as obeah, voodoo and Santeria.

That helps explain why a

CIA-sponsored carrier would have provided a service for the firm. Psychological warfare operations often exploited occult beliefs and practices, superstition, fear of hexes and black magic. One was a 1962 scheme named Operation Mongoose, which proposed to fire "star shells from a submarine to illuminate Havana" after dark on All Soul's Day (Nov. 2) "to gain extra impact from Cuban superstitions" while spreading rumors "about portents signifying the downfall of the regime."

Most of the Cuba Libre Courier Service express covers I've seen originated in Jamaica, where "all publications of De Laurence Scott and Company of Chicago in the United States of America relating to divination, magic, cultism, or supernatural arts" were forbidden by law. That's why the firm's name didn't appear on the envelopes. The latest use I have recorded is Oct. 7, 1967, but the service probably continued to mid-1968.

Proprietors of the De Laurence firm knew that covers from their customers in sub-Saharan Africa and remote parts of the Caribbean were often the only ones available to collectors. After filling the enclosed orders, they sold the empty envelopes to a Chicago stamp dealer who marketed them to hobbyists.

1972: TRANSFER OF SWAN ISLAND TO HONDURAS

Honduras had formally protested U.S. occupation of Swan Island in 1921 and began to press its claim in earnest in 1940. After the Bay of Pigs defeat damaged America's prestige in Latin America, the Kennedy administration began negotiating the transfer of Swan Island to Honduras as part of an offensive to redeem respect for the United States.

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SPOTLIGHT ON PHILATELY

Smith sued in federal court to validate his company's title to Swan Island. He lost, clearing the way for diplomats to close the deal. On Nov. 22, 1971, representatives of both governments signed a treaty to transfer sovereignty to Honduras. The FAA station on Swan Island closed, leaving only five representatives of the Weather Bureau. Terms of the treaty guaranteed that the U.S. weather monitoring station could remain.

The date of the formal transfer was Sept. 1, 1972, when instruments of ratification were exchanged. President Ramon E. Cruz of Honduras, U.S. Ambassador Hewson A. Ryan, and Vaughn D. Rockney, chief of U.S. Weather Bureau overseas operations, were present when the U.S. flag was lowered and the Honduran flag was raised.

During its entire history as a United States possession from 1863 to 1972, Swan Island never had a land-based post office. In the Oct. 29, 1972, issue of *Linn's*, Herman Herst Jr. published a picture of an envelope with a Swan Islands West Indies circular datestamp struck on a pair of 6¢ U.S. stamps, which he called a "Swan Island cancellation." It wasn't. It was a nonpostal datestamp, as seen in Figure 28 on my June 26, 1977, QSL card, used at the U.S. Weather Service station during and after the transition to Honduran sovereignty.

Despite the transfer, Swan Island again became a base for U.S. espionage and intrigue in the 1980s. A Jan. 15, 1987, *New*

York Times article titled "Honduran Island Used as CIA's Base for Contras" reported that Swan Island "has reportedly become the main depot for a CIA-run military operation supplying rebels fighting the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. ... The Swan Island site is said to have been selected for the supply operation because of the Honduran government's desire to keep contra activities out of public view."

In a 1998 letter to U.S. Senator Lauch Faircloth, former CIA communications specialist Kenneth C. Stahl recalled:

a small station which was established on Swan Island in support of a variety of operations which were being conducted as part of our support for the CIA's efforts in Nicaragua. This facility was centered on an airstrip, which was used as a base of operations for pilots who were dropping supplies to the rebels, which the CIA was supporting.

I haven't seen any postal vestiges of that operation, but if any are in collectors' hands, they would extend a Swan Island collection past the era where mine ends.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Susan F. Witzell, archivist of the Woods Hole Historical Museum, for research assistance, to Jon Krupnick for sharing images of covers and letters from his collection, to David Kent for information about Navy ship cancels, and to Henry Sweets for the image of his *USS Hannibal* postcard. ■