

Fabulous Firsts: **Mauritius** (September 21, 1847)

by John F. Dunn



Mauritius' port city of St. Louis today



1847 1p, Sc. 1

Mauritius, philatelically famous for her "POST OFFICE" issue, is a British Island Colony in the Indian Ocean some 550 miles east of the island of Madagascar.



1847 2p, Sc. 2

It seems that there

was no human settlement on Mauritius until the 17th century, although it was known to sailors from the surrounding areas, and was visited by the Portuguese in 1507. Dutch sailors were stranded there in 1598 and named the island after Prince Maurice, at that time Stadtholder of the Netherlands. A permanent Dutch settlement was established in 1638, but it was abandoned in 1710.

French from the neighboring Reunion Island then took the island in 1715, and renamed it Ile de France. The French under Governor Mahé de La Bourdonnais devel-

If you enjoy this article, and are not already a subscriber, for \$12 a year you can enjoy 60+ pages a month. To subscribe, email subs@stampnewsnow.com

oped a sugar production based economy and the island flourished. La Bourdonnais also established the port and town of Port Louis. In 1810, the French surrendered to the British, the island got back its former name, Mauritius, and the island was formally ceded to the British in 1814.

The Republic of Mauritius has a total area of 787 square miles and an estimated population of 1.2 million. In addition to its stamps it is probably most well-known for the extinct Dodo bird and the extinct giant tortoise. Port Louis is the capital city.

Little is known of the postal history of Mauritius prior to 1846, when the postal system of the island was completely reorganized and the rates fixed for inland and overseas mail; it being specifically stated that stamps were about to be issued, and prepayment of postage upon letters leaving the colony being made compulsory.

Stamps were ordered to be prepared, but the local means for their proper production being non-existent, the job was entrusted to a watchmaker of Port Louis, Joseph Osmond Barnard, who engraved by hand both the two required values upon a la-



Joseph Osmond Barnard

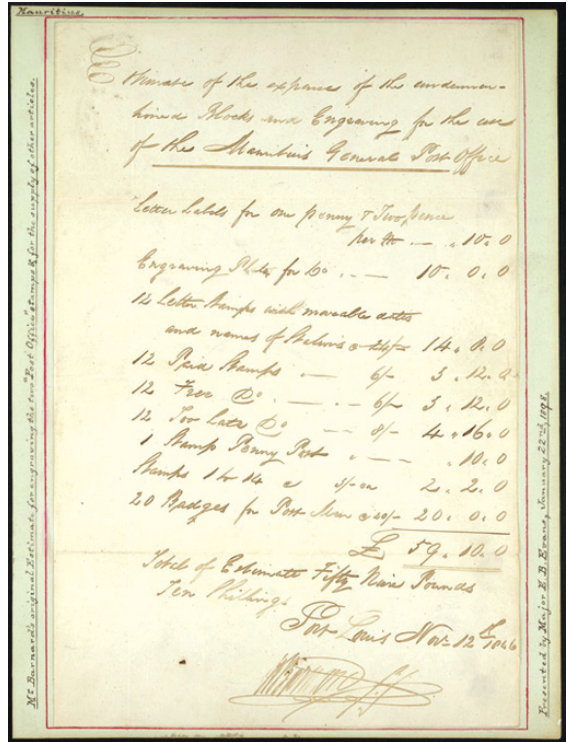


The proof taken from the original plate made by Barnard for the 1847 "Post Office" issue

dies' visiting card plate, measuring 53 x 36 mm. Upon this small copper plate he cut the One Penny value in the upper left corner, and the 2p in the upper right.

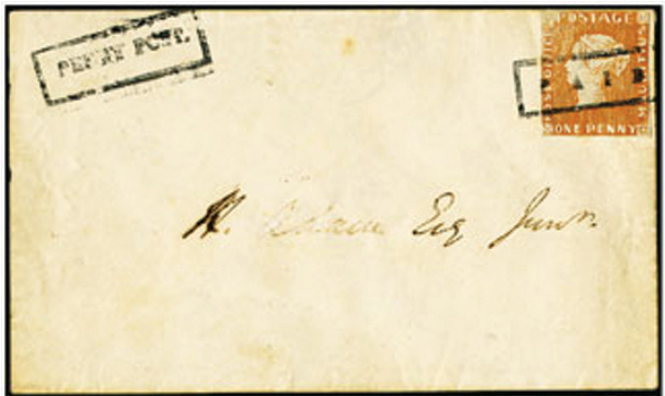
Barnard's estimate for the work, from the Tapling collection of the British Library

His designs were based on the then current issue of Great Britain stamps, first released in 1841, bearing the profile head of Queen Victoria and issued in two denominations: a one penny red brown and a two pence blue—for Mauritius the 1p was in orange and the 2p in deep blue (see page 1).



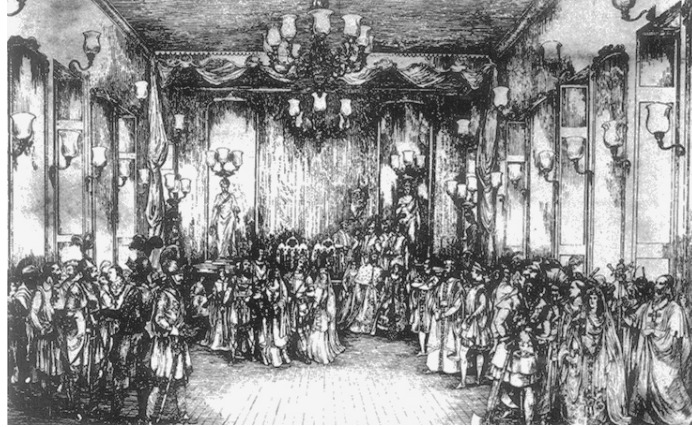
Five hundred of each value were printed from a single plate bearing both values and issued on September 21, 1847, many of which were used on invitations sent out by the wife of the Governor of Mauritius for a ball she was holding that weekend.

The stamps were printed using the intaglio method (recessed printing), and bear the engraver's initials "JB" at the lower right margin of the bust. The original plate was discovered in 1912 amongst the deceased Governor's effects.



The Ball Envelope, franked by the 1p "Post Office" issue, first used to send invitations to a Fancy Dress Ball. Only three such envelopes survive today: one is held in the British Library Museum, another is owned by Queen Elizabeth II and is a treasure of the Royal Collection and this is the third.

Ten pounds was the charge for engraving the plate, and ten shillings for printing the thousand stamps. Legend has it that Barnard had made an error of inscribing “Post Office” where “Post



An artist's rendition of the Fancy Dress Ball given by Lady Gomm at the Government House in 1847, and for which the Ball Invitations were sent.

“Paid” had been intended. However, some philatelic scholars believe that the “Post Office” inscription was intentional. Adolphe and d’Unienville wrote that “It is much more likely that Barnard used ‘Post Office’ because this was the legal name of the government department concerned”.

Adding support to this argument is that the plates were approved and the stamps issued without any fuss at the time—although it can be counter-argued that the need to issue stamps could have led to the acceptance of an erroneous name. In addition, several rubber stamps used in Mauritius on letters prior to these stamps also used the words “Post Office”, as did the first two stamps issued by the United States in July 1847.

In any event, this “Post Office” issue was soon exhausted



1848 1p, Sc. 3

and for some time no stamps were available; the engraver having to undergo treatment for his eyesight, it was not until May, 1848, that the “Post Paid” plates were ready for use. The new, larger plates were



1848 2p, Sc. 4

prepared by the same engraver, each bearing 12 impressions, separately engraved.

The original plate was discovered in 1912 among the deceased Governor's effects. The plate was rediscovered, and reprints from the plate were made.



1911 Reprints, made after the plates were presented to the Royal Philatelic Society and defaced, including Reprints from the back of the original plates. The back of the 1p plate has an ad for the Hotel d'Europe in Port Louis in French, that of the 2p has a similar ad in English.

The new plate was engraved on the back of a copper plate previously used to print advertisements for a hotel in Port Louis. Each position was individually engraved, so each is unique. Position 7 of the 2p (third row, first position) is the only position with the distinct "PENOE" spelling error.

1848 2p blue, "PENOE" (instead of "PENCE") issue with Intermediate Impression Sc. 6ad



During the next decade these soft copper plates made in 1848 were so often put to press that they became so worn as to be useless. However, specialists do collect stamps in the various states of the plate from sharp early impressions to hardly visible late states. The five widely recognized states of the plate are Earliest, Early, Intermediate, Worn, and Latest. The Earliest and Early are the scarcest since the plate wore fairly quickly.



1d, Sc. 3, complete plate reconstruction, positions 1 to 12



Early impression 1d and 2d, Sc. 3 and 4, tied by target "3" cancels of Souillac, also with octagonal "Souillac/SP 7 1854" and crown "Mauritius GPO/SP 8 1854" crown and circle c.d.s. One of two known covers with this combination.

Left, Sc. 3a, the 1853-55 1p orange vermilion on greyish paper early impression with a light "14" in double circle cancel; right, Sc. 3e, an 1857-59 1p orange red pair, latest impression.





2p deep blue Lapirot issue, Small Fillet, Sc. 14a

Another plate for 12 impressions of the 2d was engraved locally by Lapirot, also by hand and on copper; this seems to have worn out in a few months, as although only in use from March, 1859, in October it was replaced by the



2p deep blue Sherwin issue, Sc. 15, one of two unused examples in private hands

first Barnard plate for this value, being entirely re-cut by another local engraver named Sherwin. Depending on the size of the Fillet (head-band), these two latter are known as the “Small” and “Large Fillets” respectively.

Both values were replaced in the following December by the lithographed stamps prepared by Dardenne (known as the “Greek Border”). The Barnard 1d plate was also re-engraved, but never put to press except for the reprints.



Dardenne Issue 1p and 2p, Sc. 16, 17

In the meantime, other values had been prepared by Perkins, Bacon & Co., from engraved plates bearing the figure of Britannia. Although the printed sheets of the red, green and magenta stamps were delivered in 1848, none were put into use before 1854. The reason for this delay is not known. Early in 1859 Pearson Hill, of the G.P.O., London, was sent out to Mauritius to reorganize the postal services.

The Mauritius “Post Office” stamps were unknown to the philatelic world until 1864 when Mme. Borchard, the wife of a Bordeaux merchant, found copies of the one and two pence stamps in her husband’s correspondence (page 8). She traded them to another collector. Through a series of sales, the stamps ultimately were acquired by the famous collector Ferrary, and were sold at auction in 1921.

The “Bordeaux Cover” with Mauritius “Post Office” 1d orange red and 2d deep blue, Sc. 1, 2, earliest impressions, cancelled with framed black “Penny Post”, tied to cover by red Dec. 26, 1847 Boulogne c.d.s., applied on arrival in France. Markings on front also include manuscript “via England”, boxed “Colonies/ & Art. 13”; on back, “Mauritius Post Office/OC 04 1847”, framed “Ship Letter/ Plymouth, red Paris Dec. 26, 1847 c.d.s. and Bordeaux Dec. 28, 1847 arrival double circle c.d.s.



Over the years, the stamps became legendary in the philatelic world and sold for increasing and ultimately astronomical prices. Mauritius “Post Office” stamps and covers have been prize items in collections of famous stamp collectors, including Sir Ernest de Silva, Arthur Hind, Sir William Beilby Avery, Alfred F. Lichtenstein, Alfred H. Caspary, and King George V.

As the story goes, King George V paid £1,450 for an unused Two Pence “Post Office” at an auction in 1904, which was a world record price at the time. (Adjusting for inflation that would have been about £137,500, or \$215,000, in 2010.)

Reportedly one of his secretaries commented that “some damned fool” had paid a huge amount of money for one postage stamp and King George V replied, “I am that damned fool”.

If you enjoyed this article, and are not already a subscriber, for \$12 a year you can enjoy 60+ pages a month. To subscribe, email subs@stampnewsnow.com