

Fabulous Firsts: **Spain** (January 1, 1850)

by John F. Dunn

Spain's position as a worldwide political and commercial power with a far-reaching trade empire, as well as her artistic and cultural background, made an efficient postal system a must. If anything, it is surprising this did not develop faster.

During the Middle Ages, the post belonged to the Crown, and there was a long period of messengers, royal couriers and runners. Under the rule of the Habsburgs, the administration of the postal service was contracted to individuals and the Sociedad Estatal de Correos y Telégrafos, S.A.—popularly known as Correos—which is the modern national postal service of Spain, started to take form. From 1506, Philip I bestowed the postal monopoly on Francisco Tassis who created a system and organization similar to what he had used in Germany. Juan Francisco Goyeneche was the last postal service contractor.

From the 18th century, with the accession of the Bourbons to the throne, Philip V made Correos into a state service available to all citizens. The service developed through detailed regulations (two major sets of articles being issued in 1720 and in the Postal Orders of 1743). In 1755 standardized charges were introduced, as were home delivery and the establishment of post offices and post boxes.

These reforms led to further advances in the postal service in Spain and on January 1, 1850, the first postage stamp finally appeared in Spain, bearing the image of Queen Isabella II.



Spain 3413, 500th anniversary of inauguration of Tassis family postal system in Spain.



Spain Sc. 1

It was customary at the time for issuing nations to picture the reigning monarch on their first stamps. In Spain's case it was postally appropriate, as it was not until a Royal decree of October 24, 1849—signed by Queen Isabella II—that the foundation of the modern Spanish postal system was formed. That decree followed an appeal from the Spanish Home Office, to wit:

“Proposition to Her Majesty the Queen

“Madame,

“The method of franking letters invented in England and recently introduced into France, has been approved by public opinion in Spain, and the desire is general to see it adopted in this country. The time has arrived for this to be done as happens with every new idea when public opinion requires to be satisfied either by rejecting the idea or by adopting it.”

It was proposed that lower rates of postage should be applicable to prepaid letters in order to encourage people to prepay the postage. The postal rate on prepaid letters was fixed at 6 cuartos, while unpaid letters had to bear 1 real, equal to 8 cuartos. Letters of a heavier weight might be sent for 12c if prepaid, but were rated at 15c if unpaid.

The decree provided for the use of lower rates for prepaid letters to encourage use by the populous and encourage prepayment. Based on a currency of 8 cuartos equaling 1 real, the postal rates were 1 real for an unpaid letter, while a prepaid cost 6 cuartos. Letters of a heavier weight could be sent for 12c if prepaid, and for 15c if unpaid.

Prepayment was only allowed within the Kingdom of Spain, the only exception being for mail to Italy.

The decree included directions for the placement of stamps in the top lefthand corner, but this was never taken seriously.

The Decree went into effect on December 1, 1849, in advance of the January 1, 1850 issue of the first stamps.

As has been seen elsewhere, this stimulated an increased use of the mails, in part because of the lower rates,

but also because prepayment by the sender made it much less likely that the addressee would refuse it.



Sc. 2

The 6¢ stamp of 1850 (page 1) is also known as the “Spanish Penny Black”. It uses a profile of Queen Isabella II facing left, while the other denominations (12c, 5r, 6r, 10r, Sc. 2-5) use a similar profile facing right.

The portrait was not particularly flattering, but nevertheless was used until a slight improvement (right) was made in 1865 and used until she abdicated in 1868.



1866 19c, Sc. 84

The first stamps were lithographed and it is believed that the images were transferred from copper dies engraved by Bartomome Cormina of the Fabrica Nacional de Papel Sellado, where the stamps were printed. They were printed on white or yellowish, unwatermarked, paper and issued without perforations.

The 6 and 12c were printed in sheets of 255 (seventeen horizontal rows of 15); the 5 and 10r in sheets of 180 (six groups of 30 in five rows of six stamps); and the 6r in sheets of 150 (six groups of 25 in five rows of five).

As with many #1 issues, because they were so widely used, they are still affordable. An estimated 6,225,000 examples of Spain #1 were issued, and the 2012 Scott Classic prices a used stamp at just \$17 off cover and \$90 on cover.

To avoid defacing the features of Isabella, an unusual postmark, the “Arana, or “Spider” cancel was devised with



The Arana cancel on Spain 1, left, and in a detail from a rare cover with pairs of the 6r and 10r, Sc. 4, 5



A cover with a pair of the 6c black, Sc. 1, tied by a centrally located Arana cancel, also with a red March 23, 1850 double circle date stamp.

the intention of framing her portrait. It was first used in Madrid on February 22, 1850 and then in the rest of the country a few days later.

Also paralleling the experience of other nations, the Spanish postal authorities discovered that the Arana cancel could sometimes be removed and the stamps reused, so they introduced a heavier, "Parilla," cancel that was used between 1850 and 1851—which means almost exclusively on the First Issues.



A block of nine of Sc. 1 with Madrid Parilla cancels.