

# The Mails of Navassa Island

Navassa Island, a possession of the United States since 1859, is located in the Caribbean Sea between Jamaica and Haiti, south of Cuba.



On December 8, 1859, to forestall a Haitian attempt to take possession of Navassa, U.S. Secretary of State Lewis Cass formally recognized an American ship captain's claim filed under the Guano Islands Act of 1856. No other overseas possession had received official recognition earlier, and none have been under U.S. administration for a longer time.

In his 1956 book *Advance Agents of American Destiny*, diplomatic historian Roy F. Nichols wrote, "In this humble fashion, the American nation took its first step into the path of imperialism; Navassa, a guano island, was the first noncontiguous territory to be announced formally as attached to the republic."

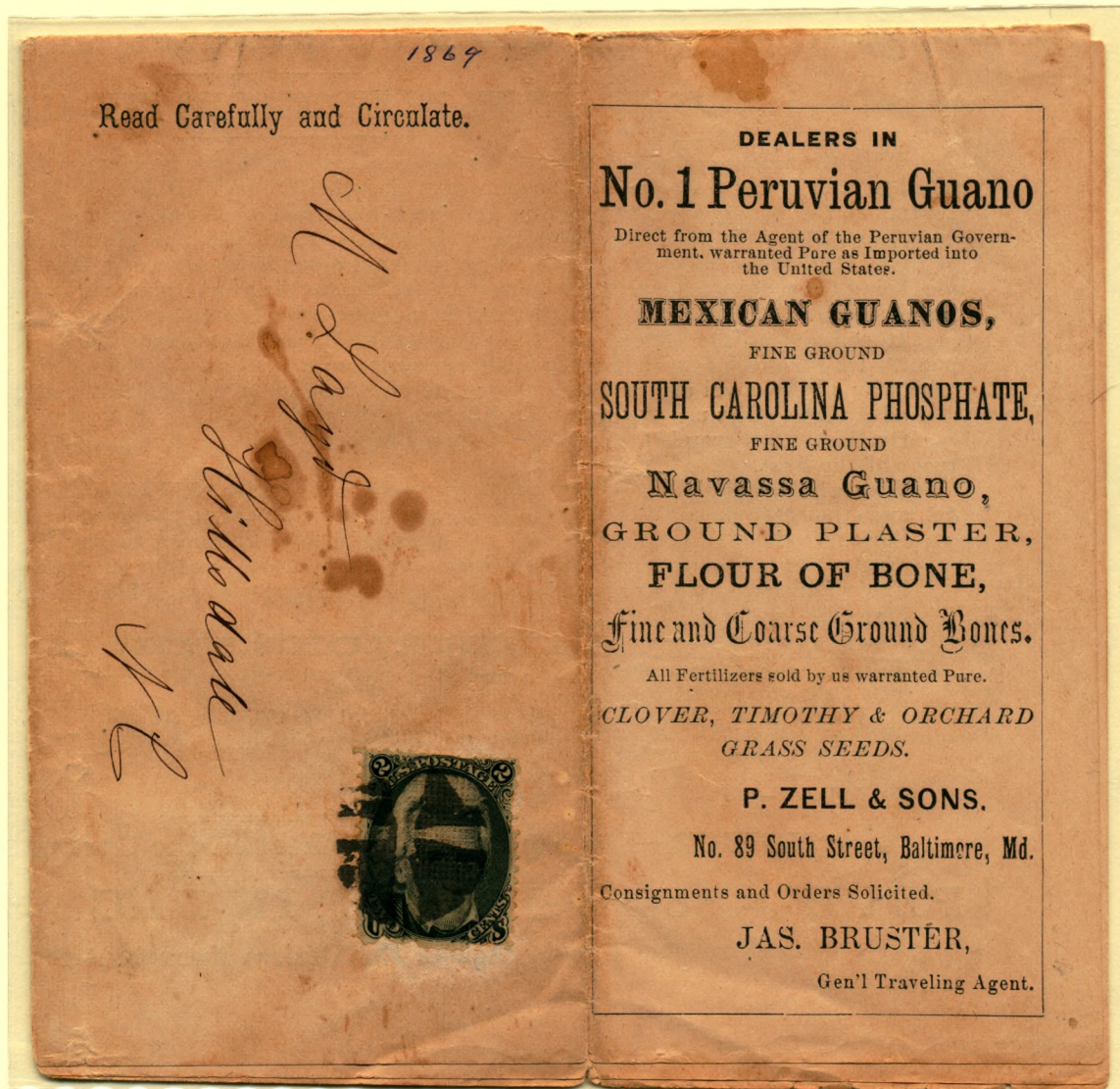
This exhibit presents collectible mail related to Navassa Island:

- An 1869 circular that advertised the sale of Navassa Island guano as agricultural fertilizer.
- The earliest recorded mailpiece that was posted in the vicinity of Navassa Island.
- Mail sent by Navassa Island residents employed by the guano mining works.
- Mail sent from Haiti to and beyond New York that transferred ships at Navassa Island.
- The only known mailpiece from a Navassa Island resident between the close of guano mining in 1898 and the establishment of a Coast Guard base during World War II.
- Mail of U.S. Navy lighter-than-air (blimp) units that carried mail to and from Coast Guard units stationed at Navassa Island.
- Mail from members of the Coast Guard stationed at Navassa Island during World War II, both surface (ship) mail and blimp mail.
- QSL cards sent by members of amateur radio DX-peditions to Navassa Island that confirmed signal receptions and chats.
- Mail sent from a Coast Guard vessel docked at Navassa Island while its crew serviced the Navassa Island lighthouse.



## Navassa Island Guano

The 1856 Guano Islands Act 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." In 1857 Peter Duncan, captain of the American brig *Romance*, filed a claim for Navassa Island based on his discovery there of "a deposit of phosphatic guano, varying in depth from one to six feet, and estimated in quantity one million tons." He sold the mining rights to a Baltimore firm, but secured a contract to transport guano cargoes from Navassa to the firm's mainland factories that processed guano into agricultural fertilizer. Mining began in September 1857.



1869 domestic mail circular that advertised chemical fertilizers including Navassa Guano. 2¢ Andrew Jackson "F" grill stamp of 1868 paid the four-ounce printed matter postage rate.



## Earliest Recorded Mail from Navassa Island

A passenger aboard the southbound Pacific Mail Steamship Co. liner *Colon* inscribed this 1¢ Liberty postal card of 1875 "Near La Vasa Is'd" (Navassa) on July 21 (1876). "I am feeling as well as one could expect on a rough ocean sailing and the weather warmer than I ever remember," he wrote. The northbound Atlas Line steamship *Alps* collected it at Navassa on July 29 and deposited it upon arrival at New York City on August 4 for postmarking and onward transport to Southbury, Connecticut.

Although the Treasury Department had notified customs offices in 1869 that Navassa Island was a United States possession, the Post Office Department did not list Navassa until the 1879 edition of *The Postal Laws and Regulations of the United States*.



actual size photocopy of message side

Postmarked upon arrival NEW-YORK AUG 4 DUE 5 CTS., the rate for a ship letter posted on the high seas or from a foreign country. It is unclear whether the 1¢ postal card postage was credited or whether the due amount was collected.



## Earliest Recorded Use of Navassa Island Postmark

Managers of the guano mining operation at Navassa Island sent letters to the United States mainland on sailing ships that carried guano cargoes to Atlantic coast ports. This cover was transported on the brig *Stephen Bishop*, which arrived December 18, 1884, at Baltimore. The sender, George Washington Tipton, was then superintendent of the guano mining station at Navassa, writing to his elderly uncle, Ninus Preston Tipton, at Mount Sterling, Kentucky.

Four covers struck by the two-line red SHIP LETTER / NAVASSA ISLAND, W.I. (West Indies) marker have been recorded. One has not been seen since 1946. The other three are in this exhibit, the one below being the earliest.



5¢ Zachary Taylor envelope canceled Baltimore December 19 (1884); backstamped Covington, Kentucky, December 20; backstamped Mount Sterling, Kentucky, December 24; postmarked Advertised Mount Sterling January 24, 1885. Rated 3¢ postage due at an unknown location; shortpaid rating partially erased; 2¢ postage due collected from the recipient. Interpretation of the rate cannot be determined with certainty. In 1990, Postage due experts Warren Bower and George Arfken opined that it was probably overweight (more than a half ounce, up to one ounce) which, as a ship letter, required 8¢ postage, 3¢ more than the value of the envelope stamp. They suggested that the Mount Sterling post office had made a simple mistake in applying a 2¢ postage due adhesive. Based on the appearance that someone attempted to erase the "Due 3¢" shortpaid endorsement, this exhibitor suspects that the Mount Sterling postmaster interpreted it as a foreign letter prepaid at the 5¢ per half ounce Universal Postal Union letter rate, but wrongly believed that the recipient owed the 2¢ fee paid to the ship for transport. Both inferences are plausible, but without knowing the original weight, the verdict cannot be settled.



## Navassa Island Ship Letters, Unpaid and Prepaid

With the 1885 domestic letter rate reduction to 2¢ per ounce, the ship letter rate became 4¢ per ounce, shown here sent prepaid and unpaid, both covers carried by Peter Duncan's bark *Romance*. Bottom cover was sent by guano mine bookkeeper Thomas N. Foster. Foster was killed by Henry Jones during a September 14, 1889, mutiny by African American miners against cruel and sadistic supervisors. Jones appealed his murder conviction and death sentence to the U.S. Supreme Court, partly based on Haiti's prior claim to Navassa Island. The court's 1890 *Jones v. United States* ruling upheld his conviction, and set the precedent that supports U.S. Guano Act claims regardless of the validity of prior foreign claims. President Benjamin Harrison commuted Jones's sentence to life in prison.



Top: 4¢ Andrew Jackson stamp prepaid the single ship letter rate. By mistake missed the mail dispatched July 16, 1888, at Baltimore; deposited at the Milford, Connecticut, post office August 12 en route to her August 19 arrival at New York City. Backstamped Richmond, Kentucky, August 14. PF 167055.

Bottom: Unpaid ship letter entered the mail December 22, 1888, at Baltimore; backstamped the same day at Wilmington, Delaware; 4¢ postage due collected from the addressee. PF 168957.



## From Haiti via Navassa Island

In mid-1873, the Atlas Steamship Company of Kingston, Jamaica, inaugurated regular Atlas Mail Line service between New York City and ports in Haiti. From 1874 or 1875 until 1898, Navassa Island served as Atlas liners' transfer hub for international mail from Haiti to the United States. Southbound steamships carried mail from New York to Haiti; they collected mail from Haiti and dropped it off at Navassa. Northbound liners picked up the Haitian mail at Navassa and took it to New York.

The Republic of Hayti (Haiti) became a member of the Universal Postal Union on July 1, 1881, which thenceforth allowed the prepayment of postage on international mail with the postage stamps of Haiti. Stamps issued in 1881 and 1882 were Haiti's first.

Under terms of the UPU convention, Haitian foreign letter charges consisted of 5 centièmes de gourde (hundredths of a gourde, abbreviated cent) postage plus 5 cents surtax per 15 grams of weight for a **total foreign single letter rate 10 cents**; postal card charges, 2 cents postage plus 1 cent surtax, **total foreign postal card rate 3 cents**.

The relay system operated in just one direction — from Haiti to the United States — and only until 1898. The war with Spain brought an abrupt end to guano mining. Evacuation left the island once again uninhabited, with no one to hold the mail for the next northbound Atlas liner to collect.



3-cent Liberty Head stamp of 1882 paid foreign postal card rate. Canceled Port-au-Prince September 4, 1886; collected by southbound Atlas liner *Athos* and dropped off at Navassa; collected from Navassa by northbound Atlas liner *Alvena*; arrived New York September 13.



## From Haiti via Navassa Island to the United States



Top: Pair of 5-cent Coat of Arms stamps of 1891 paid the single foreign letter rate, canceled Les Cayes December 29, 1893. As endorsed, collected by southbound liner *Adirondack* December 31 or January 1 and dropped off at Navassa; collected by northbound liner *Athos* January 2, backstamped New York January 8, 1894.

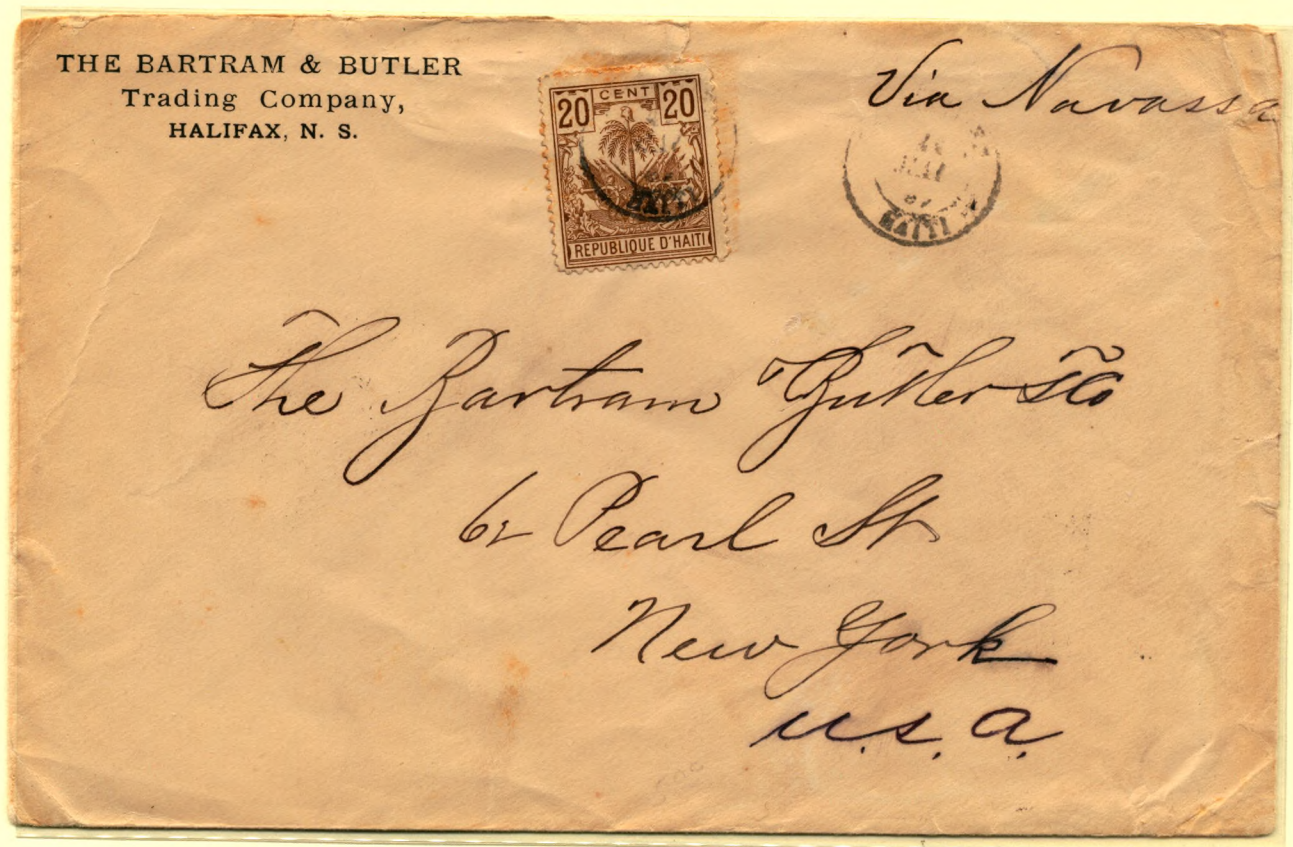
Bottom: 7-cent plus 3-cent Coat of Arms stamps of 1892 and 1891 paid single foreign letter rate; canceled Jérémie September 9, 1896; collected by southbound liner *Alene* and dropped off at Navassa September 10; collected from Navassa by northbound liner *Athos*; September 12 or 13; backstamped New York September 18, 1896.



## Despite Endorsement, Not Via Navassa Island

The Atlas Mail Line relay from Haiti via Navassa Island to and beyond New York began as a twice-monthly service in the 1870s and evolved into a weekly service by the 1890s. Nevertheless, not all mail from Haiti to the United States followed that route. Although this cover was endorsed Via Navassa, it was actually transported on a Clyde Steamship Company liner that sailed from Haiti direct to New York, arriving June 2, 1897. The next Atlas liner that brought Haitian mail collected at Navassa, the steamer *Alleghany*, arrived June 7, five days later.

The printed corner card of the Bartram & Butler Trading Company's Halifax, Nova Scotia, office suggests that the letter was sent by a business traveler to Haiti. The Via Navassa endorsement suggests that the sender was aware of the established Atlas line mail route. But the choice of transport on the Clyde liner *Saginaw*, which called at Jérémie on May 22, suggests that a Haitian postal dispatch clerk recognized the opportunity to expedite the letter by putting it aboard a vessel that would reach New York sooner.



20-cent Coat of Arms stamp of 1882 paid double foreign letter rate. Canceled Jérémie May 20, 1897, collected by Clyde liner *Saginaw*, backstamped New York June 2.



## From Haiti via Navassa Island to Europe

Mail from Haiti to Europe followed the same relay system at Navassa Island as letters to the United States. The New York City post office served as the transit point, redirecting mail to the next trans-Atlantic steamship scheduled to depart for the destination country.



7-cent, 2-cent, and 1-cent Coat of Arms stamps of 1892 paid the single foreign letter rate, canceled Port-au-Prince December 7, 1896. Although endorsed Per royal Mail, it was collected by southbound liner *Adirondack* December 9 or 10 and dropped off at Navassa; collected by northbound liner *Alleghany* December 10 or 11, backstamped New York Foreign Transit December 15, 1896.

Departed New York December 15 on the North German Lloyd steamer *Spree*, backstamped Bremen December 25 for onward rail transport to Leipzig.



## From Haiti via Navassa Island to the South Pacific

The system of expedited transport in which mail was handed off by one ship and collected by another at a location with no post office, no official representative of a sovereign government, and no wharf where ocean liners could dock resembles whalers' use of mail drops on islands in the South Seas during the *Moby-Dick* era, but adapted to the age of ocean steam navigation.



Endorsed S. Andes via Navassa - New York - San Francisco. 2-cent, 7-cent, and 1-cent Coat of Arms stamps of 1891 paid the single foreign letter rate, posted to the purser of the Atlas liner *Andes* at Jacmel August 26, 1891, and dropped off at Navassa; collected September 1 or 2 by northbound liner *Adirondack*; arrived at New York September 6. Stamps struck by New York foreign mail cancellations; backstamped New York Transit September 6 and San Francisco September 12, 1891.

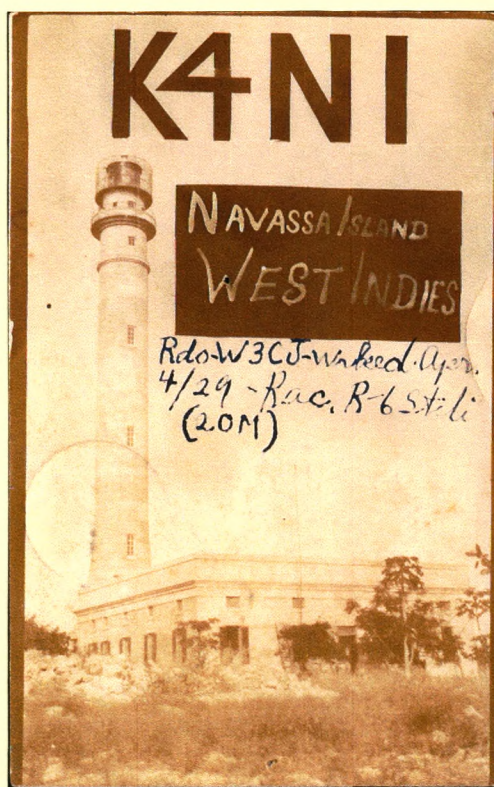
From San Francisco, probably onward aboard the steamer *Mariposa*, which departed September 18, reached Auckland, New Zealand, October 9, and arrived at Sydney, Australia, October 14. The steamer *Birksgate* departed Sydney on October 15 and took about 10 or 11 days to reach Noumea, New Caledonia.



## QSL Post Card from Navassa Island Radio Operator

Navassa Island remained uninhabited from the evacuation during the 1898 war with Spain until shortly before the United States entered World War I. Opening the Panama Canal in August 1914 substantially increased maritime traffic through the Windward Passage. Some naval authorities feared that in stormy weather Navassa would become a hazard to navigation. In 1913 Congress authorized erection of a lighthouse on the island. Construction started in 1916; operation began October 21, 1917.

After World War I ended, the Coast Guard established a radio station at Navassa. In April 1928, Russell Dunaja, sender of this card, became the radio operator. In 1929 the lighthouse was automated, powered by acetylene until 1961, and by electricity since then. Dunaja and his co-workers were the last Navassa inhabitants until 1942. **This is the only recorded mail from Navassa between 1898, when guano mining ended, and World War II, when the Coast Guard established a monitoring and rescue station there.**



reduced size copy  
of picture side



Dated April 29 at Navassa Island, collected by a Coast Guard vessel that supplied the lighthouse and radio operators at three-month intervals, canceled May 21, 1929, at the U.S. Naval Station, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and delivered at Baltimore. A 1¢ Benjamin Franklin stamp of 1922 paid the domestic post card rate of postage.



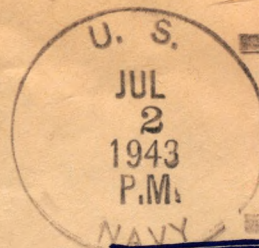
## U.S. Navy Post Office for Coast Guard at Navassa Island

During World War II, as a component of the defense against the danger to Allied shipping posed by German submarines in the Windward Passage, the Coast Guard stationed a reconnaissance unit on Navassa Island, along with the rescue launch CGR-217 of the Santo Domingo squadron and its crew.

Collecting covers to or from those men is a challenge, both because they are scarce and because they are not easy to identify. At first the Navy assigned provisional numbered addresses to a large variety of shore-based post offices, including those at Coast Guard offices. In early 1943 the Navy dedicated a block of numbers in the 11000s to Coast Guard post offices.

Under the initial scheme, Navy 49 was assigned to the Coast Guard district office in San Juan, plus Navassa Island. After Navy branch number 11046 became the post office address for the Coast Guard base at San Juan in June or July 1943, Navy 49 continued as the address assigned to Navassa Island.

Coast Guard Officer  
Navy Number 49  
c/o Fleet Post Office  
New York, New York



MAILGRAM

COMMUNICATION CENTER

U.S. COAST GUARD HEADQUARTERS  
WASHINGTON, DC

This July 2, 1943, Navy 49 cover probably originated at Navassa Island, but conclusive proof has not yet been found. The 6¢ Twin-Engine transport airmail stamp paid the military concessionary single airmail letter rate.



## U.S. Navy Blimp Units Patrolled over Navassa Island

Among the Navy's anti-submarine tactics was the use of K-class blimps armed with depth charges to patrol sea lanes and to escort convoys. ZP Squadron 51 patrolled the Windward Passage area of the Caribbean. (ZP was the designation for units that flew lighter-than-air airships.) Headquarters Squadron Five was its base unit.



Top: Aerographer's Mate 3rd Class J. C. Kennedy Jr., the U.S. Navy man who sent this April 10, 1943, cover, was a member of ZP Squadron 51, the unit that flew blimps to and from Navassa Island. The 6¢ Twin-Engine transport airmail stamp paid the military concessionary single airmail letter rate.

Bottom: This July 28, 1944, cover originated from U.S. Navy Headquarters Squadron Five, which serviced and directed Caribbean area blimp units, including ZP Squadron 51, which provided mail service for the Coast Guard station at Navassa Island. The 6¢ Monoplane embossed stamped envelope paid the military concessionary single airmail letter rate.



# U.S. Navy Blimps Transported Navassa Island Mail

Airship Squadron 51, Detachment 1, was established March 5, 1943, at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Its primary assignment was anti-submarine warfare. Navy ships from Guantanamo brought provisions for and transported mail to and from Navassa Island on a monthly schedule. Beginning late December 1943 and continuing until late November 1944, blimps of that detachment provided twice-weekly supplementary mail service for Coast Guardsmen stationed at Navassa. According to the squadron's history, "The mail sacks were lowered from the ship as it flew slowly, at a low altitude, over the one small clearing in front of the Navassa Lighthouse. Eager hands would quickly untie the sacks; and when the ship came around on another approach with the line down, out-going bags were sent on."

Coast Guard cutter *Madrona* departed Guantanamo March 27, 1944, with provisions for Navassa Island, and returned March 29. Therefore, this March 30, 1944, cover, sent by a crew member of the Coast Guard rescue launch CGR-217 after *Madrona* had departed, was collected by a Squadron 51, Detachment 1, Navy blimp.

FROM Ena George Derrick, USCG  
CGR-217, Navassa I., 49  
ADDRESS 46 West Post Office  
New York, New York

Free



## GENERAL EXTENSION DIVISION

CORRESPONDENCE STUDY DEPARTMENT

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA  
COURSE Class. Span. NO. 2634

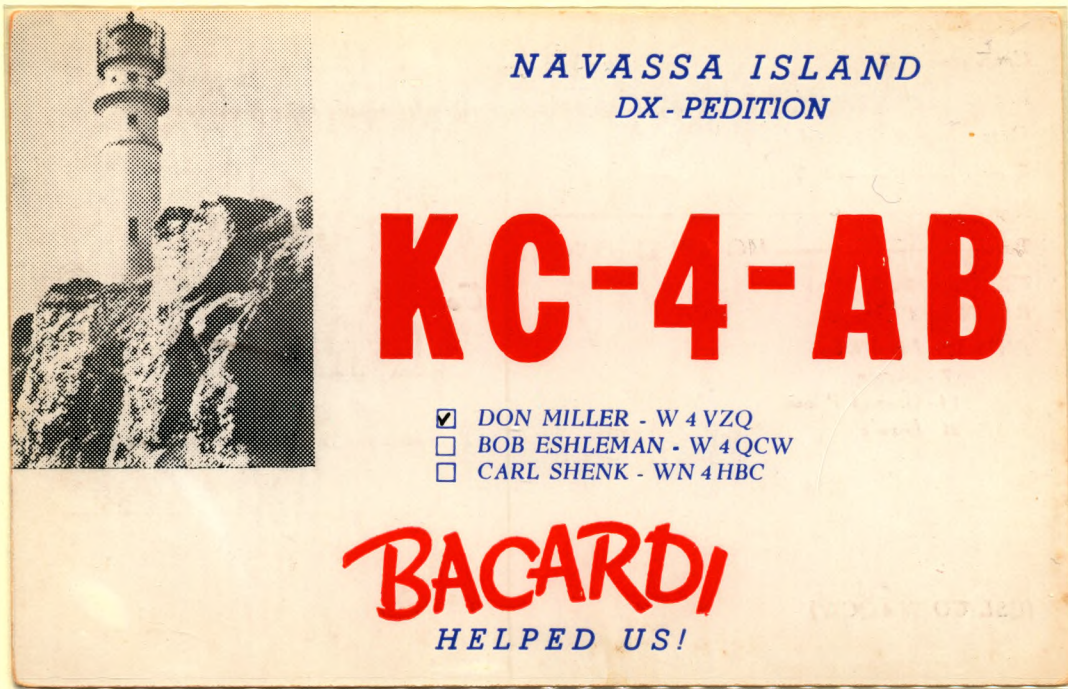
GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA

Postage was free for surface letters sent by members of the armed forces on active duty, ironic in this instance because it was flown on a blimp from Navassa Island to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, en route to its Florida destination.



# Radio Amateurs' Navassa Island DX-pedition QSL Cards

Among the few visitors to Navassa Island in the 75-year period since World War II ended have been amateur radio hobbyists who travel to distant exotic places. QSL cards, mailed in batches after returning to their homes, confirm signal reception. The upper card is from the first U.S. amateur radio DX-pedition to Navassa in August 1954. The lower one, from Haitian radio amateurs' 1981 demonstration of their government's claim to Navassa.





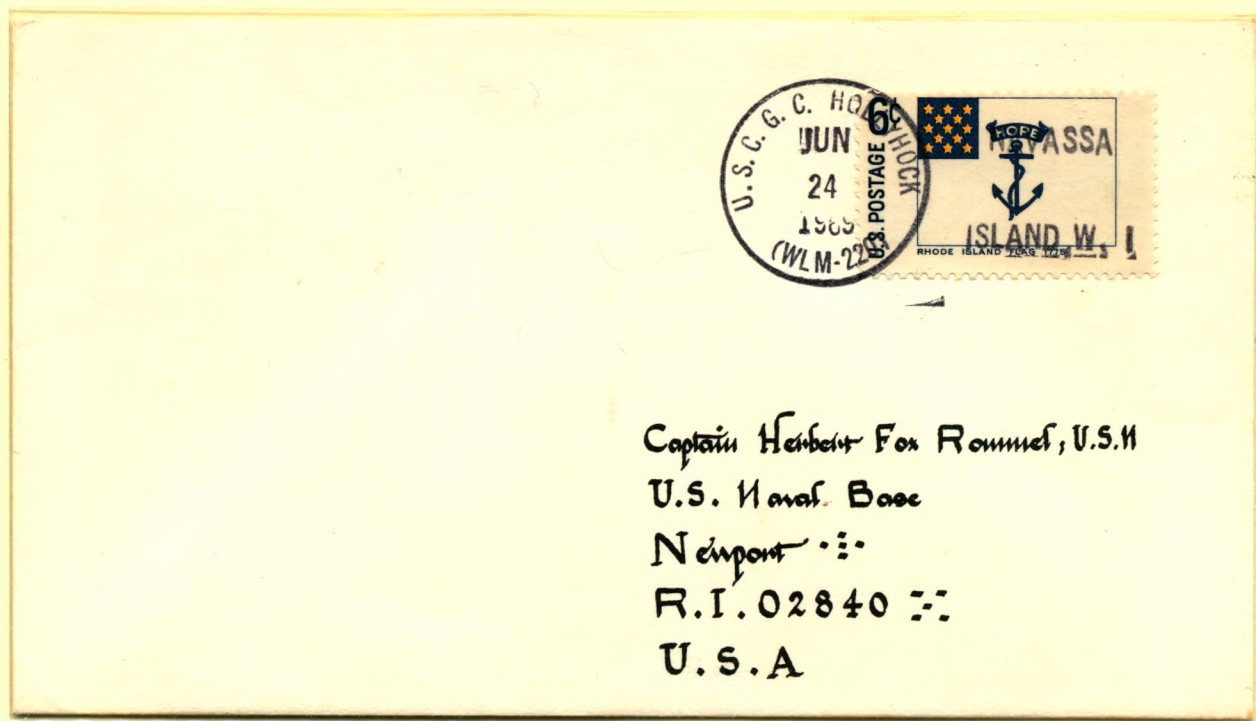
## U.S. Coast Guard Ship Post Office at Navassa Island

In the 1960s the crew of Coast Guard cutter *Hollyhock* periodically performed maintenance on the Navassa lighthouse. Being a ship with a post office, its postmarks are collectible. The June 24, 1969, USCGC *Hollyhock* cover below was canceled during one of those calls, with NAVASSA ISLAND, W.I. inscription in the postmark.

By coincidence that visit coincided with a radio amateur DX-pedition to Navassa, which was the subject of an article titled "Navassa Revisited" in the December 1969 issue of *QST* magazine. The radio tourists had reached the island by chartering a Jamaican fishing boat named *Miss Jekyll*. After completing their lighthouse chores, *Hollyhock* had departed, but reappeared one day later after someone had reported suspicious activity.

The radio author wrote, "Without our knowledge several of the Jamaicans had captured some goats and taken them aboard the *Miss Jekyll*," to the shame of their hobby passengers. "The Jamaicans were required to give up their hard-earned prize. We felt sorry for the poor Jamaicans and we were also concerned that this incident might mar the excellent amateur-Coast Guard relations."

USCGC *Hollyhock* is the only vessel with a Navy ship post office known to have called at Navassa island. The World War II shore-based fleet post office had a coded Navy 49 address; ***Hollyhock's* ship postmark is the only Navassa Island, W.I., cancellation.**



The 6¢ Historic Flag of Rhode Island stamp paid the domestic surface letter rate of postage.