THE 1930s - THE GOLDEN DECADE FOR

THE SIX SISTER "MAIL BOATS"

- OF THE GREAT WHITE FLEET OF THE UNITED FRUIT CO.

MERCHANT MARINE ACT OF 1928
comments from an article in the “Naval Institute Proceedings”

SITUATION - Costs of shipping to foreign ports using foreign registry vessels much higher than it “should be”. U. S. Merchant Marine far too small; **similar to today’s tariff arguments -** U. S. paid 253 million dollars in shipping fees of which only 83 million went to U. S. ships; “Remainder of 173 Million went to “Our Rivals”

Merchant Marine Act of 1928

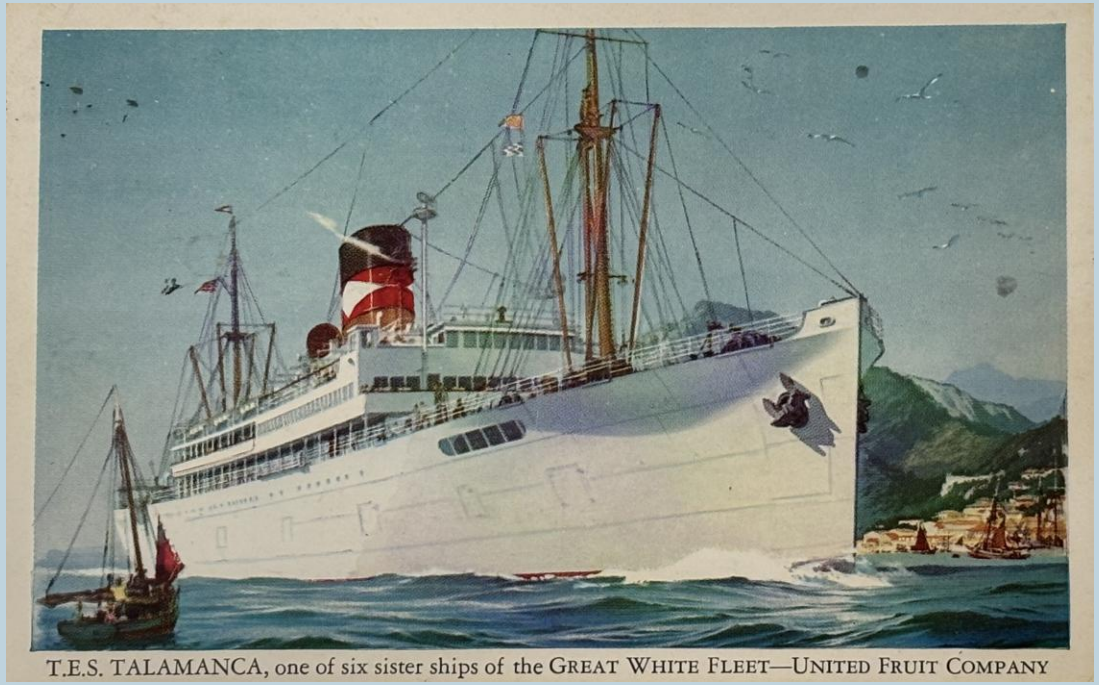
1) Created a loan fund of 250 Million Dollars @ 2.5 per cent to cover 75% of cost of new ships approved by the U. S. Navy.

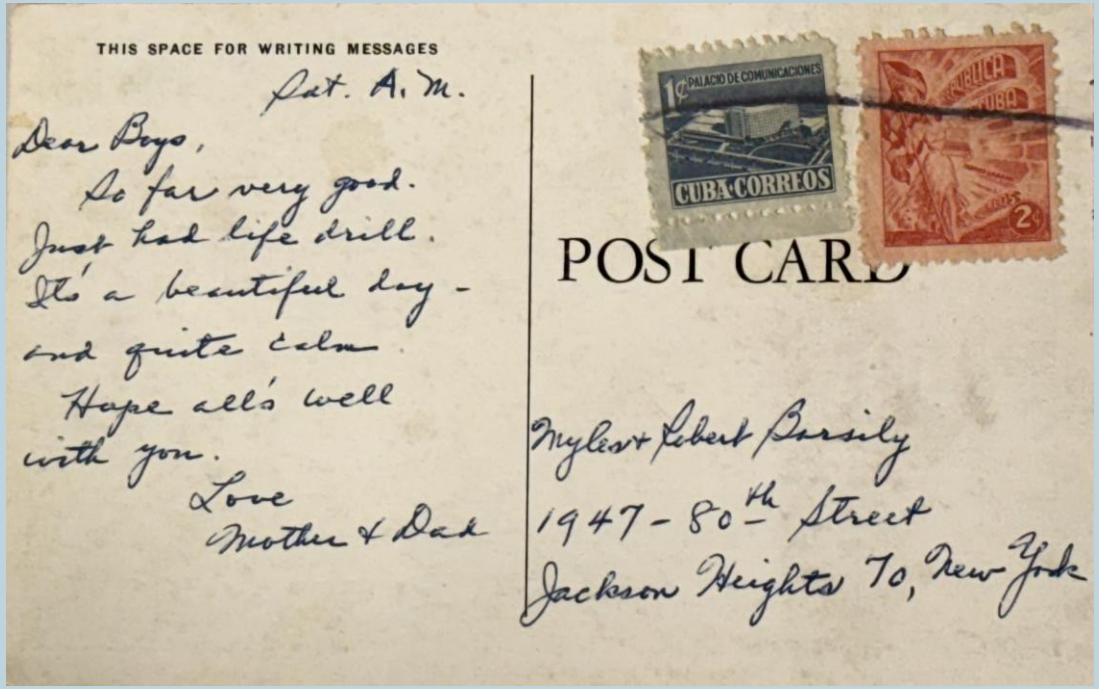
2) Revised International Sea Mail Service Routes with Subsidy contract amounts - 32K Month Subsidy for certain ships (United Fruit)

3) Designed to specifications approved by the U. S. Navy with reference to ease of conversion to an auxiliary naval vessel in time of emergency.

4) Vessels to be staffed with all officers and two thirds of crew who are U. S. Citizens - designed for naval draft or naval reserve duty.

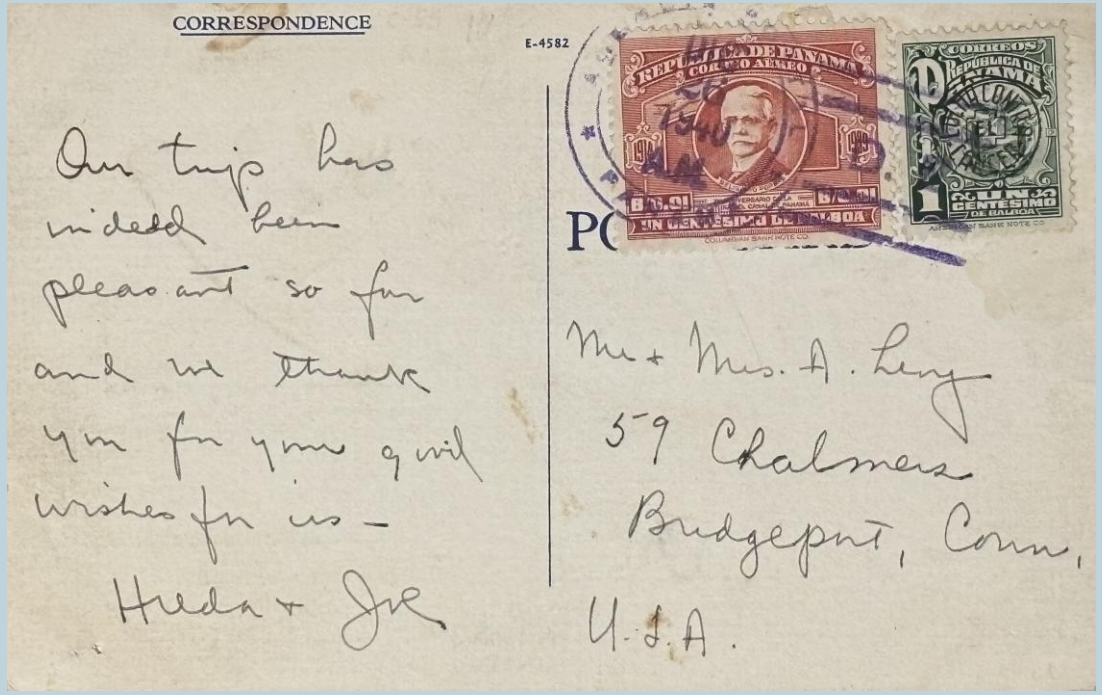
- TREMENDOUS FINANCIAL ADVANTAGE - Loans paid off in 1933, four years after being made, instead of taking advantage of the full fifteen year scheduled amortization


T.E.S. TALAMANCA, one of six sister ships of the GREAT WHITE FLEET—UNITED FRUIT COMPANY

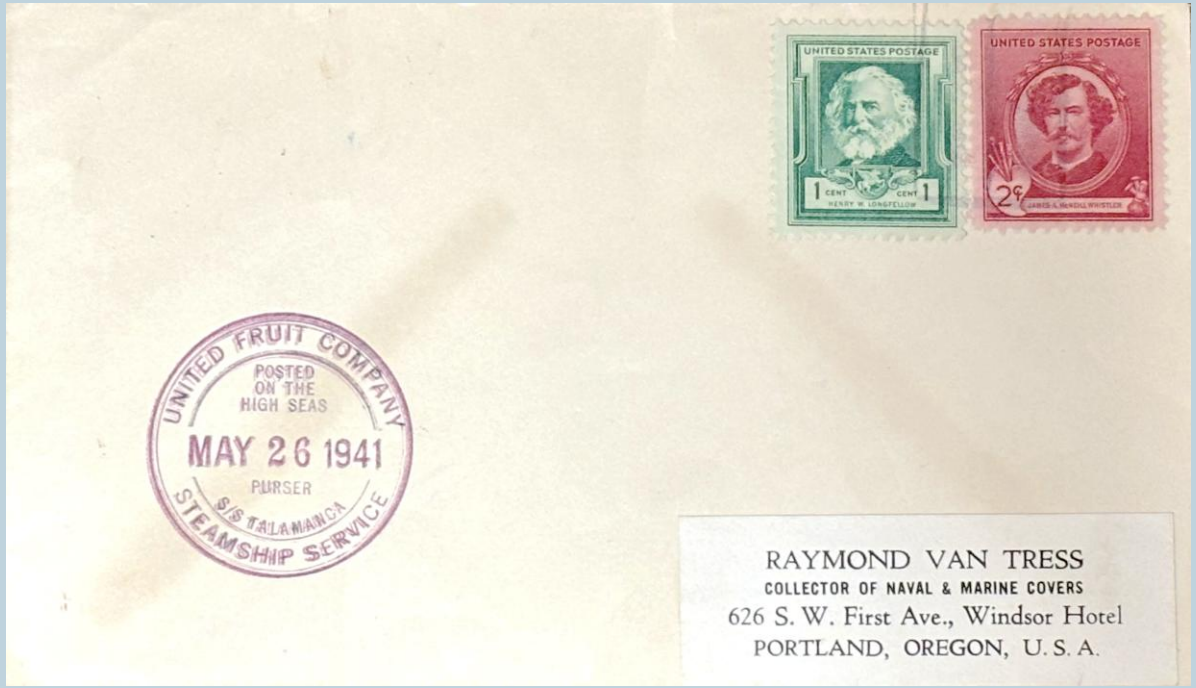


TALAMANCA

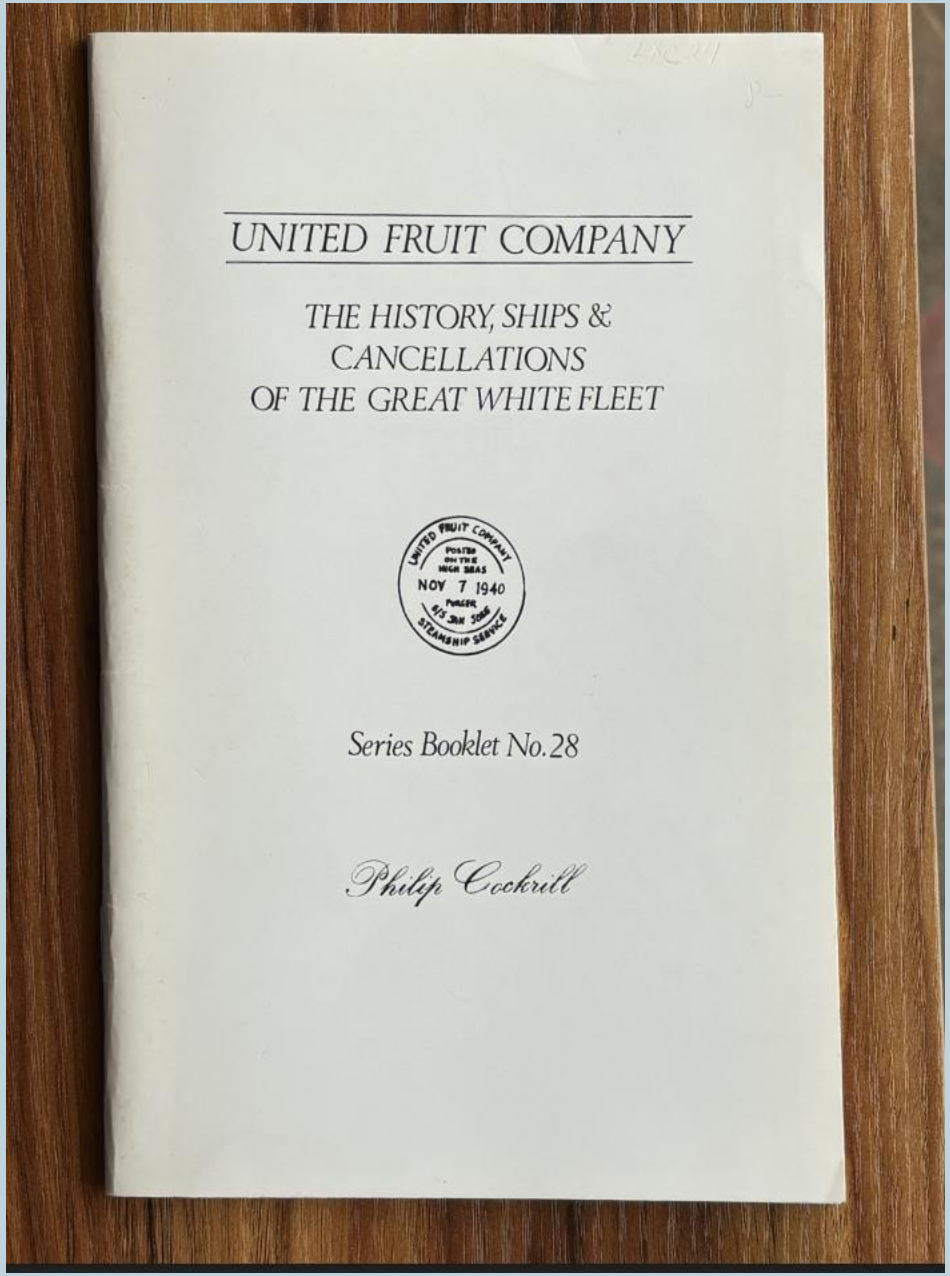
Assigned to the PACIFIC Division - First of the Class of "Mail Boats" Launched August 15, 1931 by Mrs. Herbert Hoover at Newport News Shipbuilding Yard. Caption on the front of card is T.E.S. which stands for "Turbine Electric Ship" The card was mailed in Cuba, presumably Habana, which was a regular port of call, and then pen cancelled. Message reads "Sat A.M. Dear Boys. So far very good. Just had life drill. It's a beautiful day and quite calm. Hope all's well with you. Love Mother and Dad". Postcard presumably bought on the boat and written after breakfast and mailed in town on a day tour of the harbor - this procedure explains for the postal markings on about half the items you will see tonight.



This is the second Talamanca item. Picture is of the same boat but a different version. Very generic and common design - only difference among the generic boat pictures is the name on the hull. Card was cancelled in Balboa, on the Pacific side of the Panama Canal the day after Christmas, 1940. The message on the card says “Our trip has been pleasant so far and we thank you for your good wishes for us - Hilda and Joe” Pretty stiff and proper. The stamps are Panama Scott 235 1 Centavo definitive from 1924 and C 54, 1 Centavo Air Mail, issued in 1939. The airmail is the low value of an airmail series commemorating the 25th Anniversary of the opening of the Canal in 1914. It shows William H. Taft, who actually supervised construction of the Canal as SecWar and in 1909 succeeded TR as President and oversaw the completion of its construction.

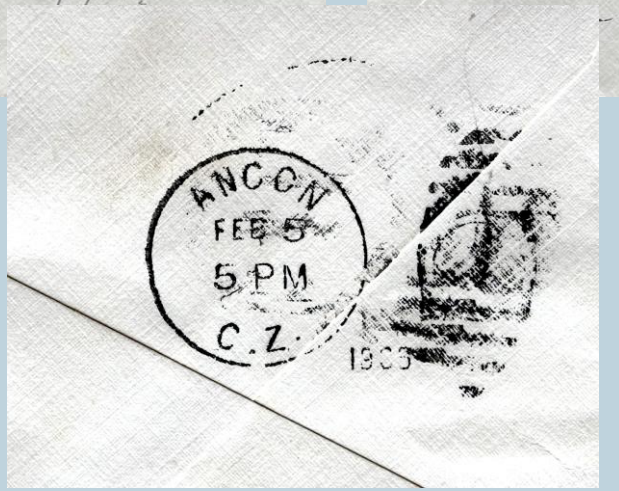


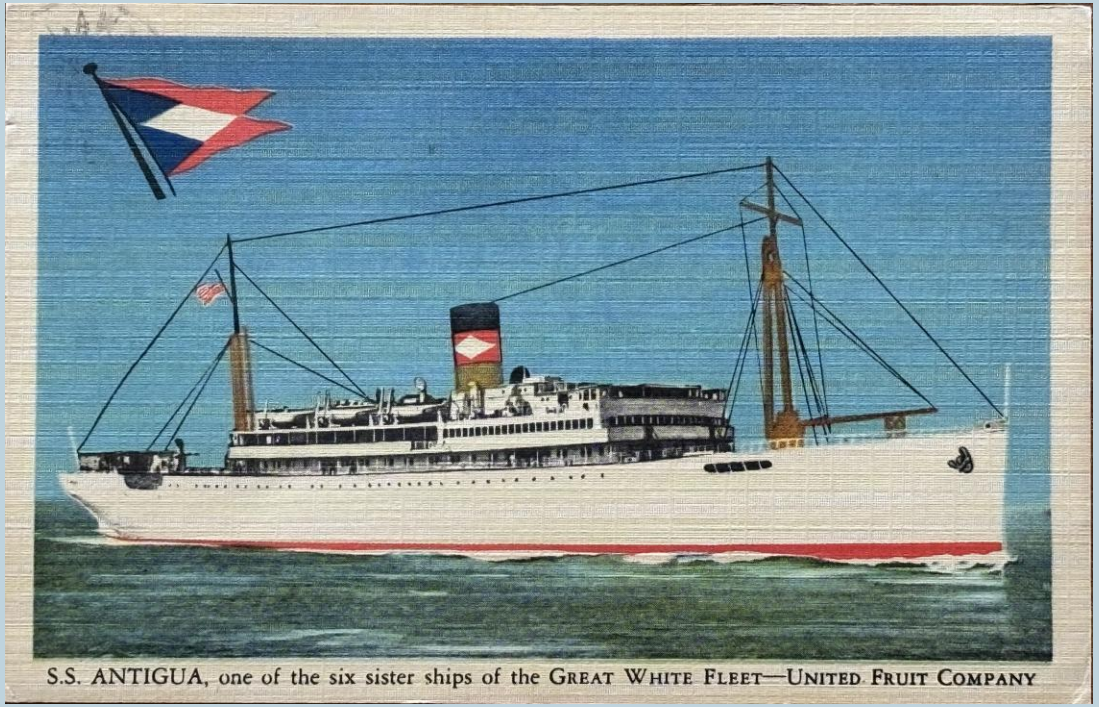
Next TALAMANCA item - A cover bearing 3 Cents worth of U. S. Famous Americans with an unreadable cancel but a very clear and clean “Posted On The High Seas” type of cancel stamp. I am going to refer to these handstamp impressions as CANCELLATIONS although they are not official cancellations at all as the impressions were applied by United Fruit ship personnel and not government appointed postal employees. The United Fruit Cancelation indicates that the letter was received on the high seas by the Ship’s Purser or his designated employee on May 26 1941 and then supposedly delivered by the ship’s employees into the postal system of the nation having jurisdiction over the next port of call. I say supposedly because there are instances where the mail was withheld from the postal system of the next port of call due to alleged inefficiency of that system or some other reason. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume here that this envelope entered the postal office of Los Angeles or San Francisco. Please noteat the addressee is a “Collector of Naval & Marine Covers” Does this make this item a philatelic cover? A word about the “United Fruit High Seas” cancellation.

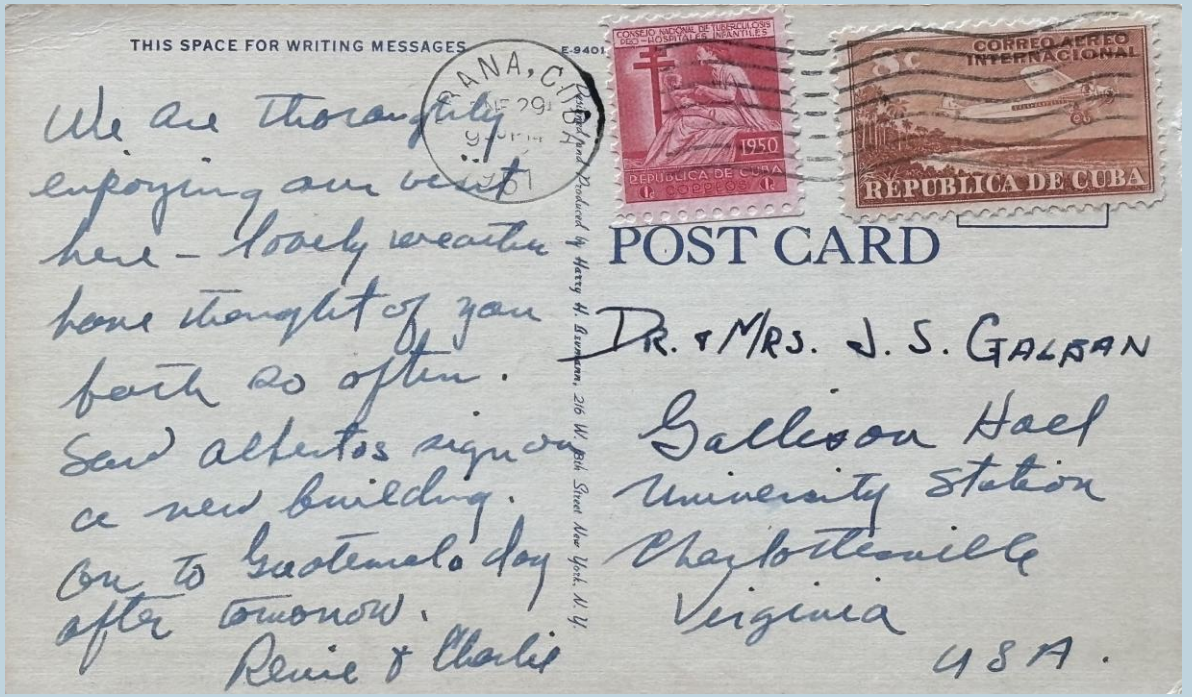


A word about the “United Fruit High Seas” cancellation. Almost all my knowledge on this topic comes from a little book called “United Fruit Company - the History, Ships and Cancellations of the Great White Fleet” This is a pretty obscure little pamphlet and pretty hard to find. If anyone here wants to borrow my copy - just ask me - but please give it back.

Last TALAMANCA item - A cover bearing United States C9 20 Cent Airmail cancelled February 2 1936 @ 530 PM in Oakland, CA and back stamped February 5, 1936 @ 500 PM in ANCON, CZ - less than 72 hours from California to Canal Zone - not too shabby at all. Addressed to a M.D. Surgeon on the staff of the Talamanca - note address “Surgeon, Talamanca, United Fruit, Balboa.” Pretty simple and straightforward.



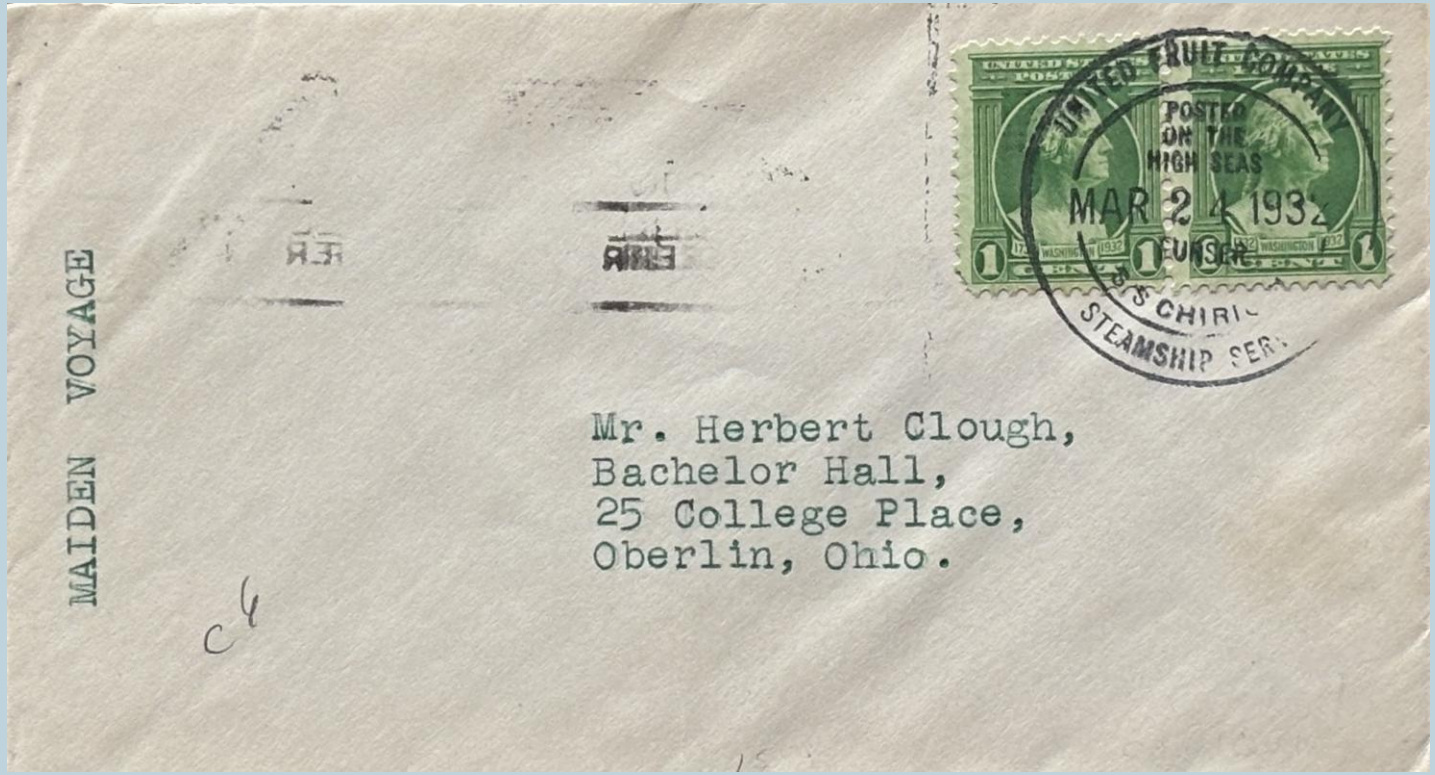




ANTIGUA

Launched December 12, 1931 at Bethlehem Steel Boatyards, Quincy, MA and assigned to the Pacific Division, shuttling between San Francisco and Balboa until 1936 when she was placed in the Atlantic Division and began shuttling between New York and Cuba and Puerto Barrios, Guatemala. Shown is a Postal Card cancelled December 29, 1951 with a C 40 Centavo Cuban International Air Mail issued 1948 and a RA 10 issued in 1950 Cuban Postal Tax 10 Centavo w/ the International TB symbol - double cross. Spent half an hour trying to find the 40 centavo air mail in Scott - looks like C4 through C11 Series of 1931 and another half hour trying to find the RA 10 because I didn't know Cuba issued Postal Tax stamps. The card message reads "We are thoroughly enjoying our visit here - lovely weather - have thought of you both so often - Saw Alberto's sign on a new building. On to Guatemala day after tomorrow."

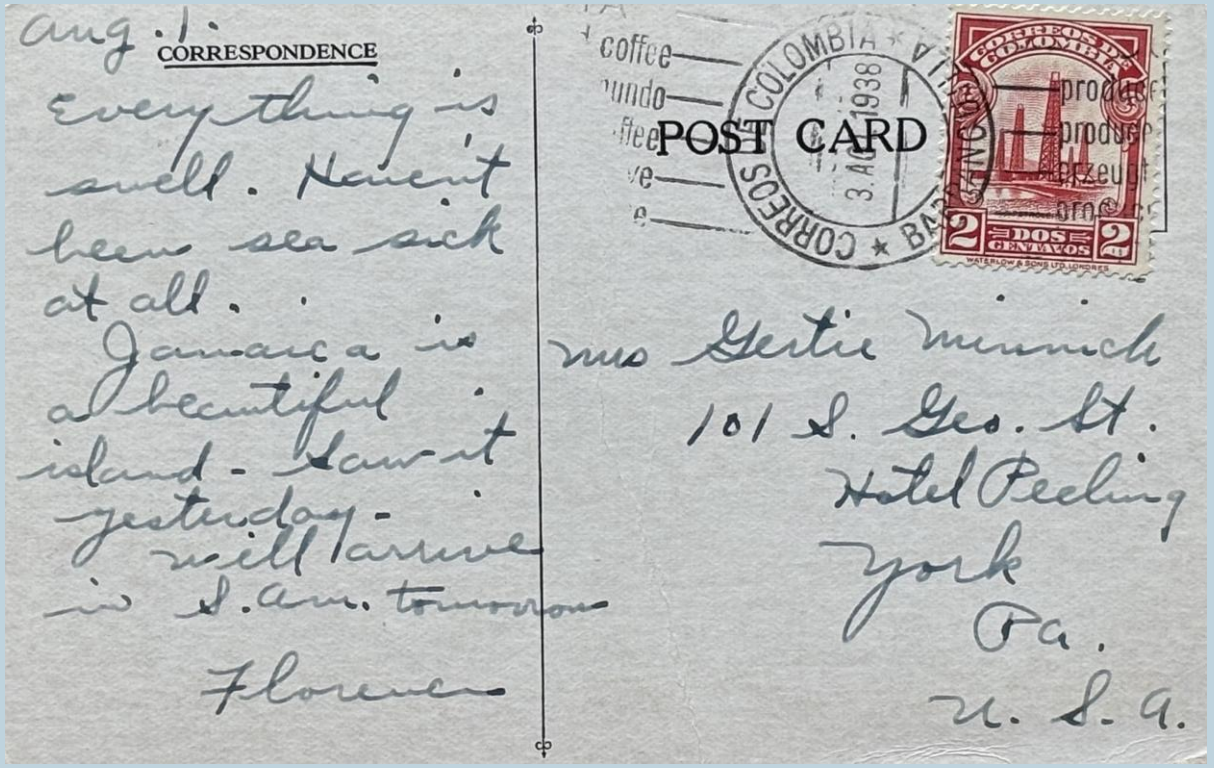
Another ANTIGUA item - An envelope bearing a round United Fruit “Posted On The High Seas” cancel calling out the S.S. ANTIGUA and dated July 18, 1951 and bearing an unreadable cancel - but proof that the ANTIGUA used the traditional round High Seas cancel.



Items from the CHIRIQUI - Chriqui was launched at the Newport News Shipyards during November, 1931 and assigned to the Pacific Division for shuttle between San Francisco and Balboa with a 19 day round trip. BTW, Chiriqui is the name of the Panama province next to Costa Rica and the location of Puerto Armuelles, UF banana port in Panama.

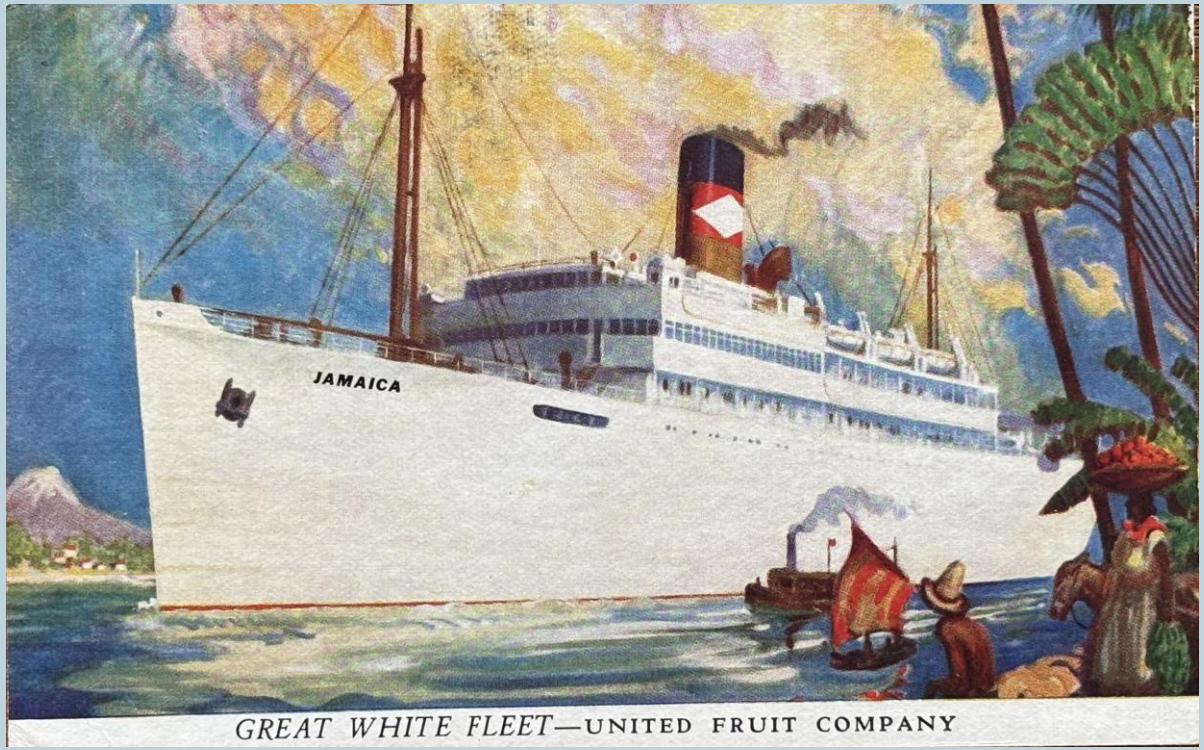
First item - This is a MAIDEN VOYAGE COVER, posted on May 24, 1933 and bearing two one cent US stamps. The cover is back stamped Habana, Cuba two days later, May 26, 1933. PAQUEBOT CANCEL? Not delivered into Cuba Mail service by government authorized postal bag - yet bearing US Stamps? Cuban backstamp a postal favor? An anomaly? In any case, the backstamp is flavored “sweetly”.

GREAT WHITE FLEET—UNITED FRUIT COMPANY

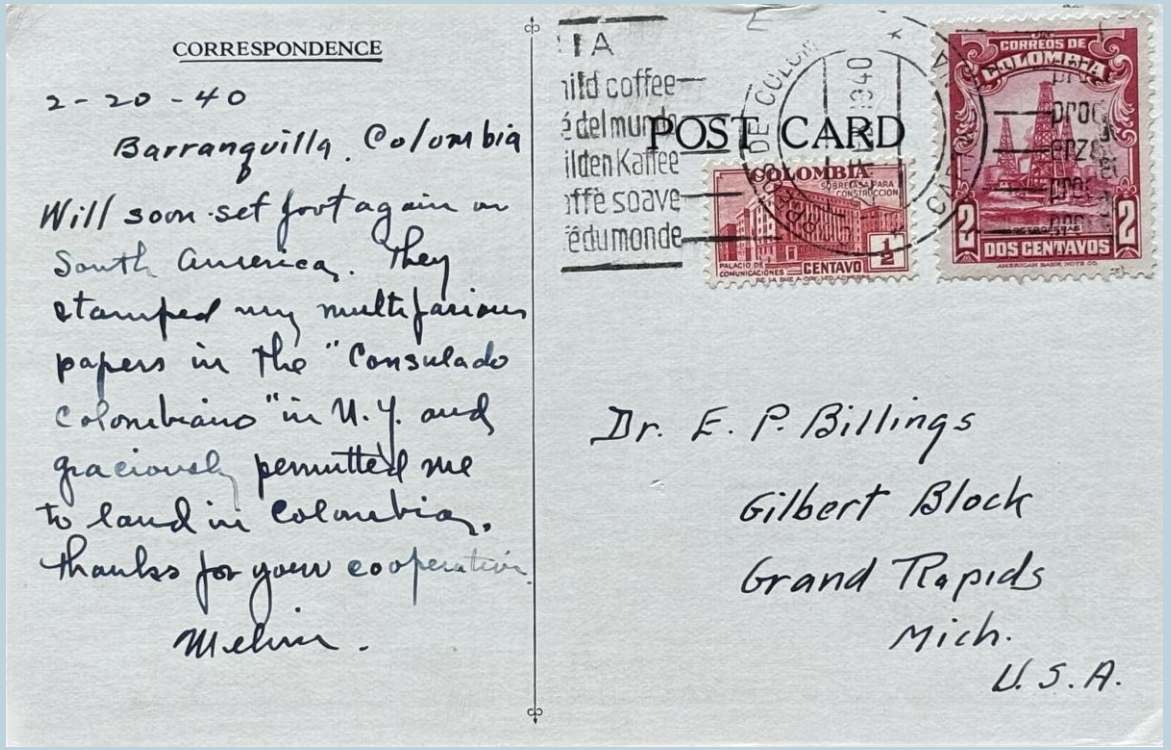


Another generic postcard - where the only difference is a name change on the ship hull, the postcard is cancelled BARRANQUILLA, August 3, 1938 and this postmark is coffee flavored, note the left hand portion of the postmark. The stamp is a 1932 Colombia Scott 412 2 Centavo Carmine oil derricks design - which looks REMARKABLY SIMILAR to the 2 Centavo oil derricks design on the next item. Count the number of derricks on the left of the central derrick on this one - Two.

Barranquilla is a very large port in Colombia, right in the middle of the Banana region, and, as the card states, the next United Fruit port after Jamaica, which is where the card was actually written, Card reads “Aug 1. Everything is swell. Haven’t been sea sick at all. Jamaica is a beautiful island - saw it yesterday -will arrive in S. America tomorrow. Florence” Obviously from a happy camper.

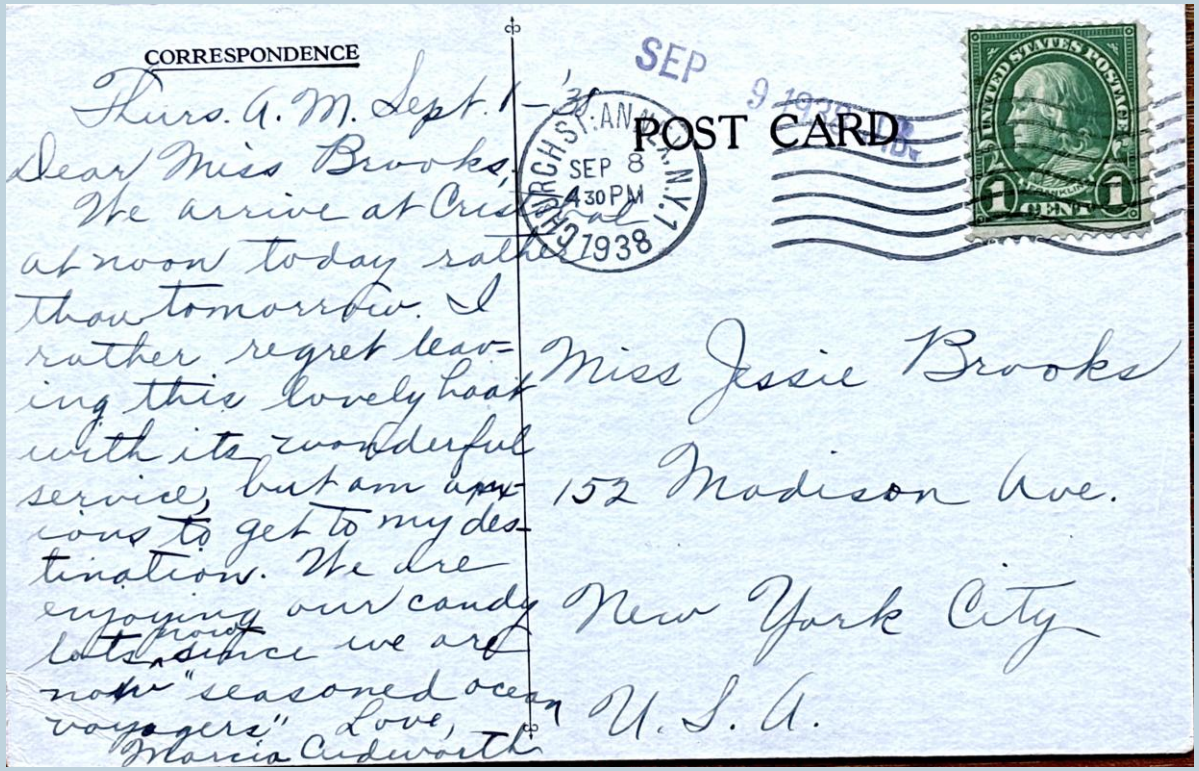


GREAT WHITE FLEET—UNITED FRUIT COMPANY



THE “JAMAICA” was the third and final name for one of the Mail Class boats. The ship was originally named ‘Segovia” but burned at the shipyard during construction and was almost totally scrapped. It was rebuilt and delivered to United Fruit exactly one year after it was first launched, which was the same day as the Talamanca. The ship was renamed the PETEN when it was delivered and went into service with the Atlantic Division. The Peten was subsequently renamed as the “Jamaica” in 1937.

This is another generic postcard - the only difference is a name change on the hull. Card cancelled BARRANQUILLA, March 22, 1940 and the postmark is coffee flavored. The stamps are a 1932 Scott 412 2 Centavo which looks remarkably similar to the 2 Centavo oil derrick stamp on the last item. This stamp has only one derrick to the left of the center derrick. Also a Scott RA 9, 1/2 centavo Postal Tax - which took me a half hour to look up because I didn’t know Colombia used Postal Tax stamps. Also - “coffee” cancellation.

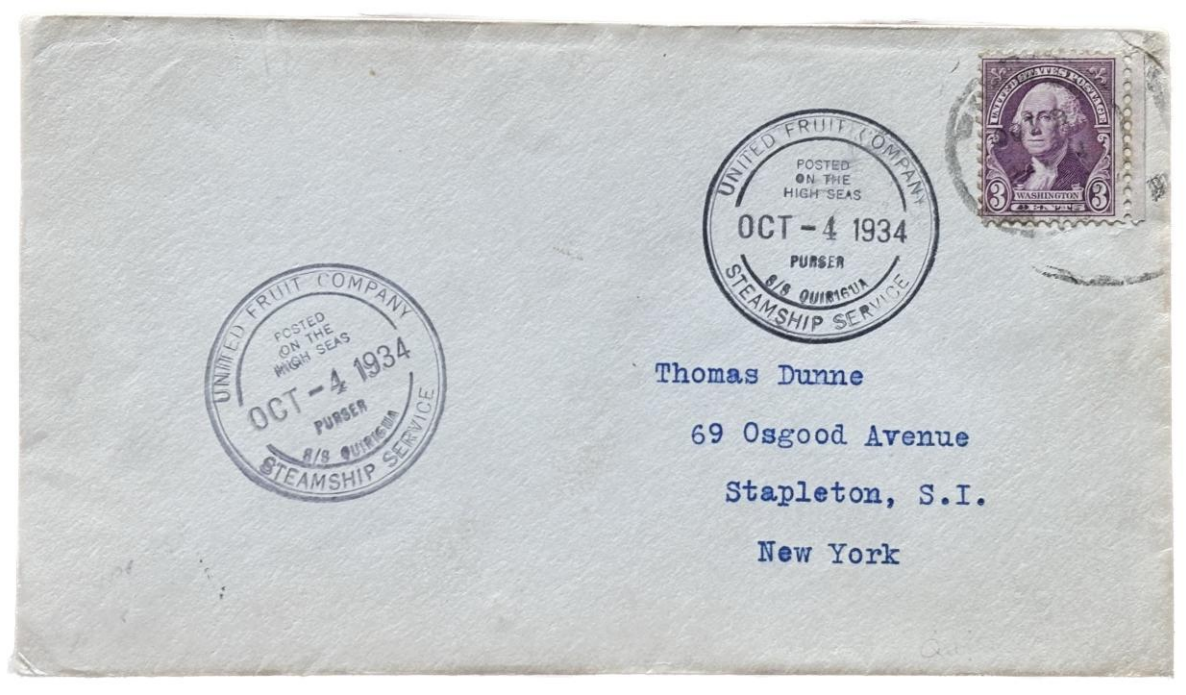


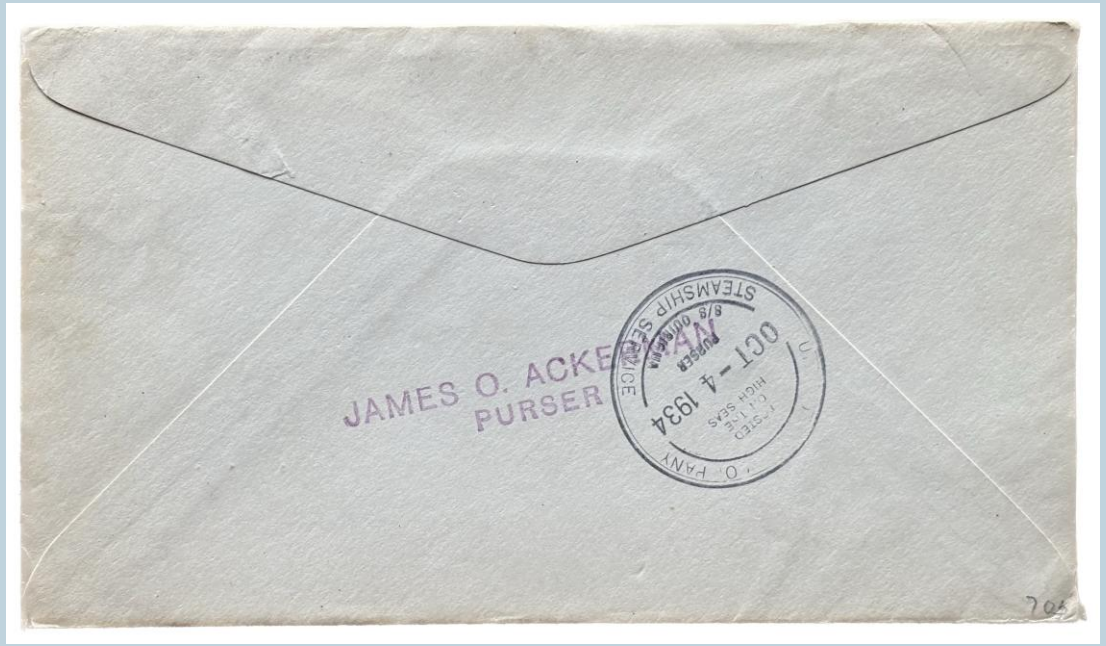
VERAGUA - The VERAGUA was launched from Bethlehem Shipyard April 23, 1932. She was the last of the six “Mail Ship” class boats to be launched. She was assigned to the ATLANTIC division.

The first VERAGUA item is yet another GENERIC POSTCARD. Only the name of the hull is different. The card bears a one cent stamp cancelled at the Church Street Annex, New York City, September 8, 1938 and, from the message, it was obviously mailed a week after the card was written. The message is ”Thur A.M. Sept 1 - 38 Dear Miss Brooks We arrive at Cristobal at noon today rather than tomorrow. I rather regret leaving this lovely boat with its wonderful service but am anxious to get to my destination. We are enjoying our candy lots since we are now seasoned ocean voyagers. Love, Melissa Cadworth”
Another happy camper.

The second VERAGUA item is a cover with a 3 cent U. S. Kearney commemorative cancelled at Church Street Station, NYC, January 21, 1952, and bearing the traditional black “POSTED ON THE HIGH SEAS” cancel dated January 12, 1952 - 10 days before - TWICE. Two Purser’s cancels. My daughter asked me why I thought that “double hand stamps” was important enough to make it a showable artifact - I had to tell her, first because it was from the Veragua, and then I thought it might be credible evidence that there was a possibility that banana boat mailroom personnel sometimes had the DTs.

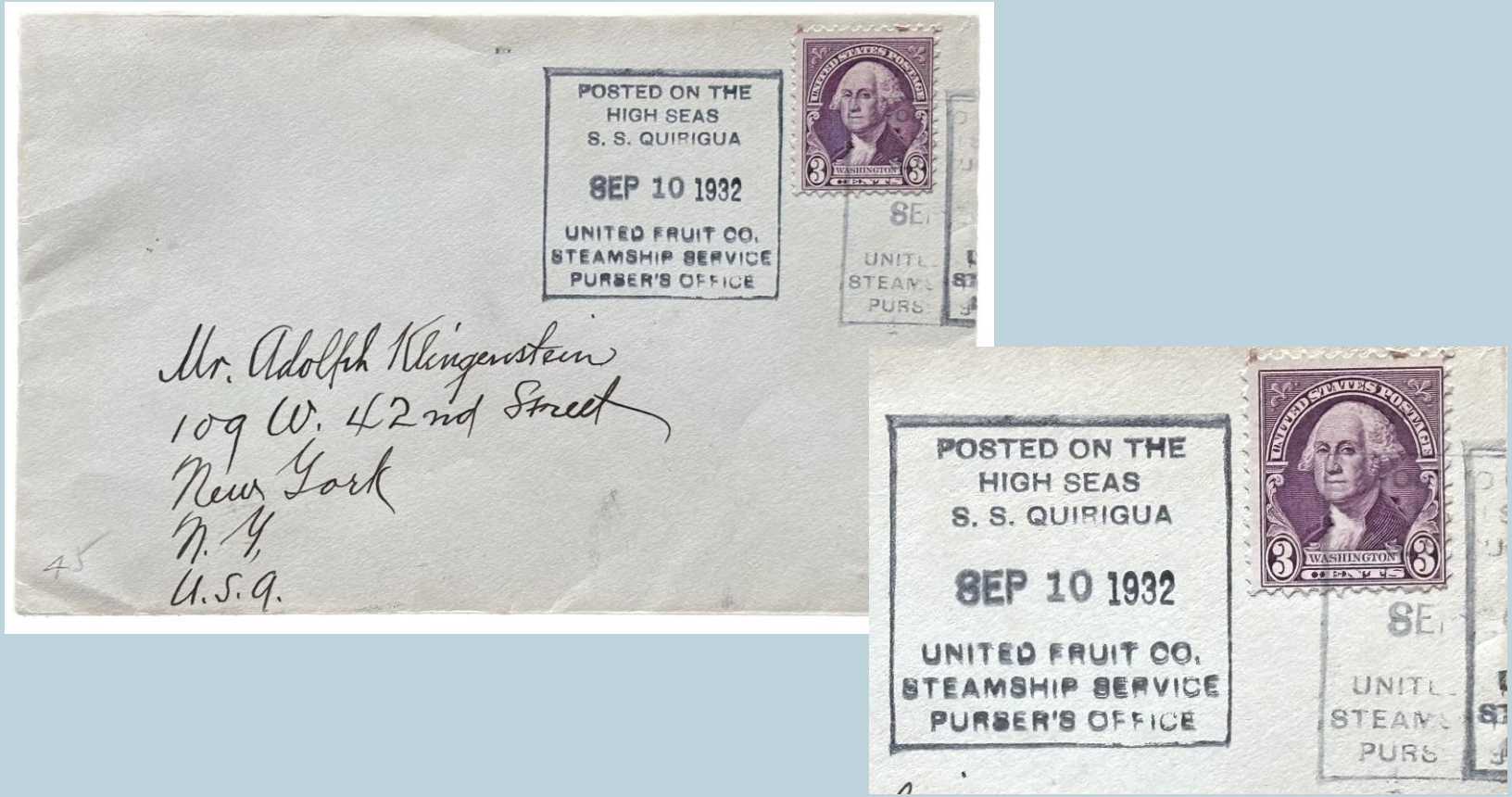
The last VERAGUA item is a cover with the traditional black “POSTED ON THE HIGH SEAS” VERAGUA round purser’s cancel, dated July 3, 1956 and franked with two pence Jamaican definitive postage cancelled with a round hand stamp reading “Myers Wharf Jamaica unreadable date 1936”
The cover is noteworthy for two reasons 1) Myers Wharf is not a separate municipality in Jamaica but an integral part of the harbor docks in downtown Kingston. How it rates its own postmark is anybody’s guess. And 2) this cover was mailed just months before the VERAGUA was physically cut down and reduced to a freighter at Newport News in 1957.





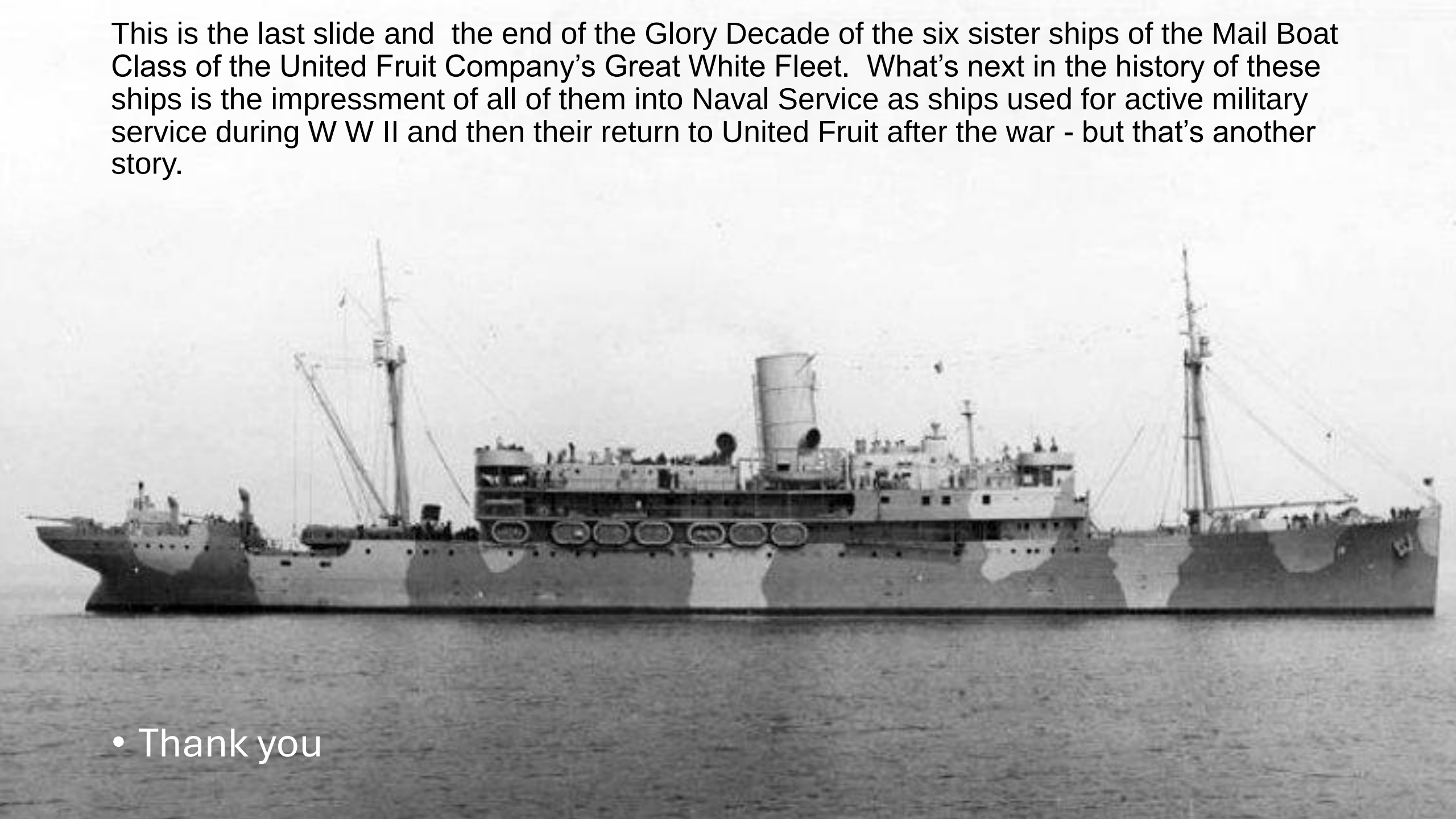
The last two items are from the S.S.. QUIRIGUA. The Quirigua was launched on February 6, 1932 at the Bethlehem Shipbuilding Yard in Quincy, Mass. The ship was the second of the Mail Ship class boars built and it was launched. It was by Mrs. Herbert Hoover fifteen minutes after the first ship, the Talamanca. The Quirigua was named after a Mayan city in Southeastern Guatemala and it was assigned to the Atlantic Division.

The first Quirigua item is a cover franked with a U. S. 3 Cent Washington, Scott 720, with an unreadable cancellation but the cover is decorated with 3 Traditional Round United Fruit “Posted On The High Seas” Cancellations - all dated October 4, 1934. Two of the U F round hand stamps are on the front and a third with a two-line handstamp reading “JAMES O. ACKERMAN / PURSER” is on the reverse. Purser Ackerman was obviously a great fan of rubber stamps.



The second Quinqua item and the last philatelic item to be shown is a cover franked with the same U. S.3 Cent Washington - but with a truly unique United Fruit handstamp. Remember the little handbook I mentioned earlier, the font of all my wisdom on UF handstamps, therein on page 21 is shown a square box cancel of exactly the same type as the one you are looking at- with the note “Type C21 (1932-1934) Known only from S. S. Quirigua” “Why a square Purser’s cancel from only one ship in the whole Great White Fleet - and why only in use for three years during the Glory Decade. Surely a mystery over which to lose many nights sleep.

This is the last slide and the end of the Glory Decade of the six sister ships of the Mail Boat Class of the United Fruit Company's Great White Fleet. What's next in the history of these ships is the impressment of all of them into Naval Service as ships used for active military service during W W II and then their return to United Fruit after the war - but that's another story.



- Thank you