

SMITH, BELL AND COMPANY: A BRITISH BUSINESS FIRM IN THE SPANISH PHILIPPINES 1847-1898

by Don Peterson

This is the last of a four-part series on the history of four major business firms in the Spanish Philippines. This article addresses the British business firm of Smith, Bell and Company. The three previous articles addressed the firms of Peele, Hubbell and Company (PPJ, 1992), Russell, Sturgis and Company (PPJ, 1993), and Ker and Company (PPJ, 1996).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE FIRM

The origins of Smith, Bell and Company can be traced back to Liverpool, where on June 16, 1846, the parent firm of Smith, Constable and Company was formed by James Adam Smith of Liverpool, Henry Constable of Glasgow, and Lawrence R. Bell - all Scotsmen. Mr. Smith had been in Manila since 1838, as agent for the British firm of Jardine, Matheson and Company of Canton. In early 1847, the firm chose Robert P. Wood of Liverpool to go to Manila to establish a branch office of Smith, Constable and Company. Mr. Wood and a Benjamin James Bell arrived in Manila on April 12, 1847. The firm officially opened for business in Manila on April 17, 1847, and called itself Constable, Wood and Company.

In 1850 or 1851, Lawrence R. Bell arrived in Manila and directed the firm until 1862. In 1853, John Knox Smith joined the firm and Robert P. Wood returned to Liverpool. Also in 1853, the firm changed its name to Smith, Bell and Company, although it functioned as a subsidiary of the London and Liverpool firm of Smith, Wood and Company. In 1860, Neil MacLeod joined the Manila firm, and his

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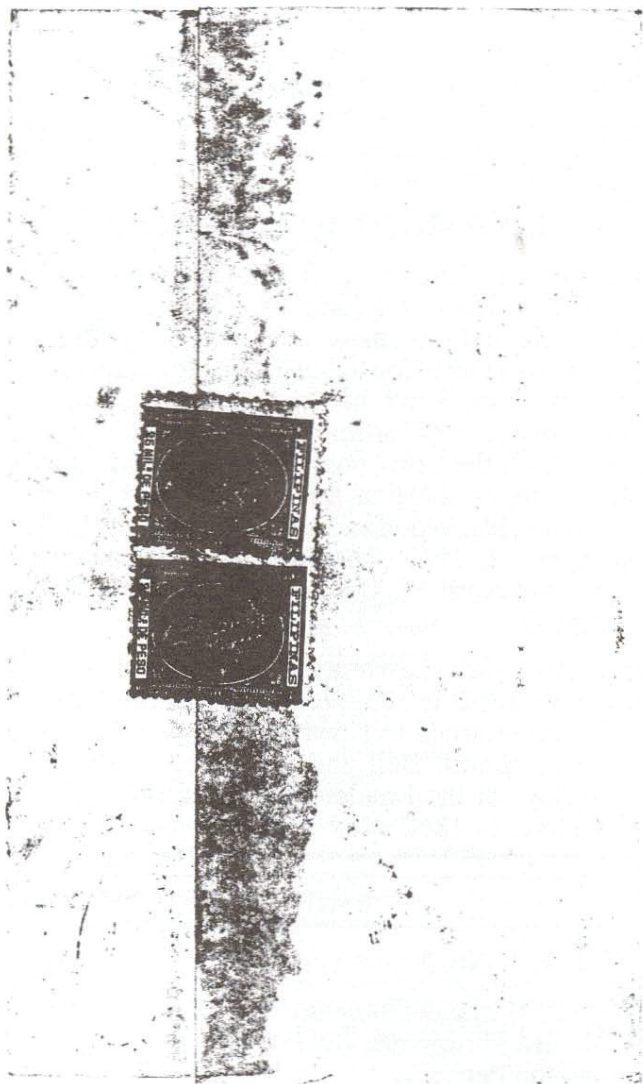


Figure 1. 1879 Manila to Cebu letter, carried via the inter-island steamer from the Spanish firm of Ynchausti y Compania in Manila to the firm

Mr. Sorsogon
H. V. Jahrling
Cebu



SORSOGON, owned by Smith, Bell and Company. The letter was written of Valerio Jahrling in Cebu.

brother, Alexander Stewart MacLeod, joined in 1864. A branch office was opened in Cebu in 1867. In 1870, Neil MacLeod, then head of Smith, Bell and Company in Manila, left the firm to form MacLeod, Pickford and Company of Manila. A branch office was opened in Iloilo in 1876.

In 1875, documents still show the occasional use of the firm's previous name of Constable, Wood and Company. Initially, the firm handled general merchandise. Later, it developed a substantial shipping and insurance business and constructed the first large rice mill on the Islands. In 1875, the firm was the agent for Commercial Union Assurance Company of London, Imperial Fire Insurance Company, Netherlands-India Sea and Fire Insurance Company, China and Japan Marine Insurance Company of Shanghai, Eastern and Australian Steamship Company, and Oriental and Australia Maritime Company. In the 1870s (and probably through 1898), this firm owned several steamships involved in the Manila-Hong Kong run and in inter-island trade. For example, the firm's steamship FORMOSA was involved in the Manila-Hong Kong run from 1872 through 1875; and the steamship SORSOGON was involved in inter-island trade between Manila, Cebu, and other ports from 1875 through 1879. Mail was frequently carried on these steamers. (FIGURE 1).

In the late 1870s, Henry C. Hoskyn was with the firm in Manila. In 1880, a J.M. Wood was known in Manila; however, any relationship to this firm is not known. In the 1880s, George Shelmerdine, of British background, was head of the branch office in Iloilo. He was also the U.S. Consular Agent in Iloilo from June 1, 1886, through August 1887; and from December 14, 1893, through January 7, 1897. In the 1880s, Ralph D. Wilson, an American, was a clerk at this firm in Iloilo and apparently was the only American businessman in Iloilo in 1889. In Iloilo, Mr. Wilson was also the U.S. Acting Consular Agent from September 1, 1889, through October 14, 1889 and U.S. Consular Agent from October 15, 1889, through December 1, 1893. In 1895, the firm took over the hemp business from the American firm of Peabody and Company of Manila. In 1898, Smith, Bell and Company opened branch offices in Legaspi, Tabaco, and Lagonoy. This firm was present in the Philippines into the 20th century.

POSTAL HISTORY OF THE FIRM

Letters

Letters to and from Constable, Wood and Company in Manila (scarce) are known from 1847 through 1853, when the firm changed its name to Smith, Bell and Company. Letters to and from Smith, Bell and

Company from Manila (common), Iloilo (uncommon), and Cebu (scarce) are known from 1853 through 1898, and into the 20th century. One letter, dated in 1875, still referred to the firm as Constable, Wood and Company.

Forwarding Agent Handstamps

Two forwarding agent handstamp types are known to have been used by this firm, covering the period from 1865 through the 1880s. Neither handstamp is listed by Rowe (1984). According to Rowe (1984), a forwarding agent is a "person or firm who undertakes to see that the goods or correspondence of another are transported without himself acting as a carrier." Correspondence carried in this manner was usually marked by a handstamp, referred to as a forwarding agent handstamp. Forwarding agent handstamps usually contain the words "forwarded by". The two types are described as follows.

TYPE 1 Double-lined rectangle with rounded corners. Words in three lines composed of **FORWARDED BY** on the top line, **Smith Bell & Co** in the center, and **MANILA** on the bottom. Sans serif letters. Color: black. Size: 15mm by 45mm. Not listed by Rowe (1984). Only one example known. Found on Manila cover to Spain, dated January 8, 1865. Very rare. Not illustrated.

TYPE 2 Single-lined rectangle with rounded corners. Words in three lines composed of **FORWARDED BY** on the top line, **SMITH, BELL & Co** in the center, and **MANILA** on the bottom. Sans serif letters. Color: black. Size: 14mm by 32mm. Not listed by Rowe (1984). Found on 1880s postal stamps. Rare (**FIGURE 2**).



FIGURE 2. Forwarding agent handstamp Type 2 on Scott #83.



FIGURE 3. Perfin Type 1 on Scott #52.

Perfin

One perfin type is known to have been used by this firm in the 1870s and 1880s, and sporadically in the 1890s. The perfin type is described as follows.

TYPE 1 Hole-punched S.B. on top and & Co on the bottom. No period after the "B". Also occurs inverted. Found on Scott #52, 56, 81, 78-80, 87 (with circular cancel, dated 1887), and 201. Rare (**FIGURE 3**).

Business Handstamps

Business handstamps were commonly used by Smith, Bell and Company from Manila (common) from the 1870s through 1898, and into the 20th century; and from Iloilo (uncommon) and Cebu (scarce) from the 1880s through 1898, and into the 20th century. Business handstamps were used as a return address, for advertising purposes, or as a "control" to prevent the theft of stamps (when applied directly over the stamp). Many types of business handstamps are known from this firm. The following are descriptions of 13 business handstamp types used by Smith, Bell and Company.

TYPE 1 Double-lined rectangle with rounded corners. Three lines composed of a curved SMITH, BELL on top, & CO in the center, and MANILA on the bottom. Sans serif letters. Color: black. Size: 12mm by ? Earliest handstamp of this firm. Only known example on Scott #71. Rare (**FIGURE 4**).

TYPE 2 Straight-lined SMITH, BELL & CO. Sans serif letters. CO oval. Color: violet. Size: 4mm by ? Only known example on Scott #87. Rare. Not illustrated.

TYPE 3 Straight-lined SMITH, BELL & Co. Serif letters. Color: magenta. Size: 3mm by ? Only known example on Scott #88. Rare. Not illustrated.

TYPE 4 Oval with single outer line and single inner line. SMITH, BELL & Co. on top, blank in the center, and ILOILO on the bottom. Sans serif letters. Color: black. Size: ? Only known example on Scott #85. Rare (**FIGURE 5**).

TYPE 5 Straight-lined SMITH, BELL & Co. Serif letters. Color: violet/blue. Size: 4mm by ? Found on 1880s postal stamps. Scarce (**FIGURE 6**).

TYPE 6 Straight-lined SMITH, BELL & Co. Serif letters. Color: magenta. Size: 5mm by 58mm. Found on 1880s postal stamps. Scarce (**FIGURE 7**).



Figure 8. Business handstamp Type 7 on giro revenue stamp.



Fig. 4
Type 1



Fig. 5
Type 4



Fig.6
Type 5

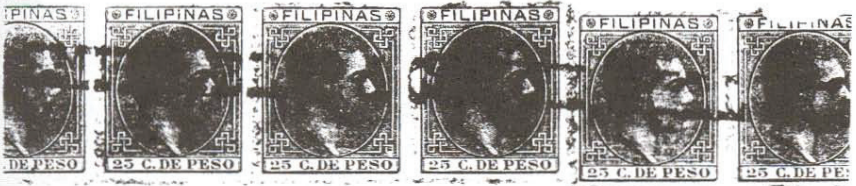


Figure 7. Business handstamp Type 6 on Scott #88.

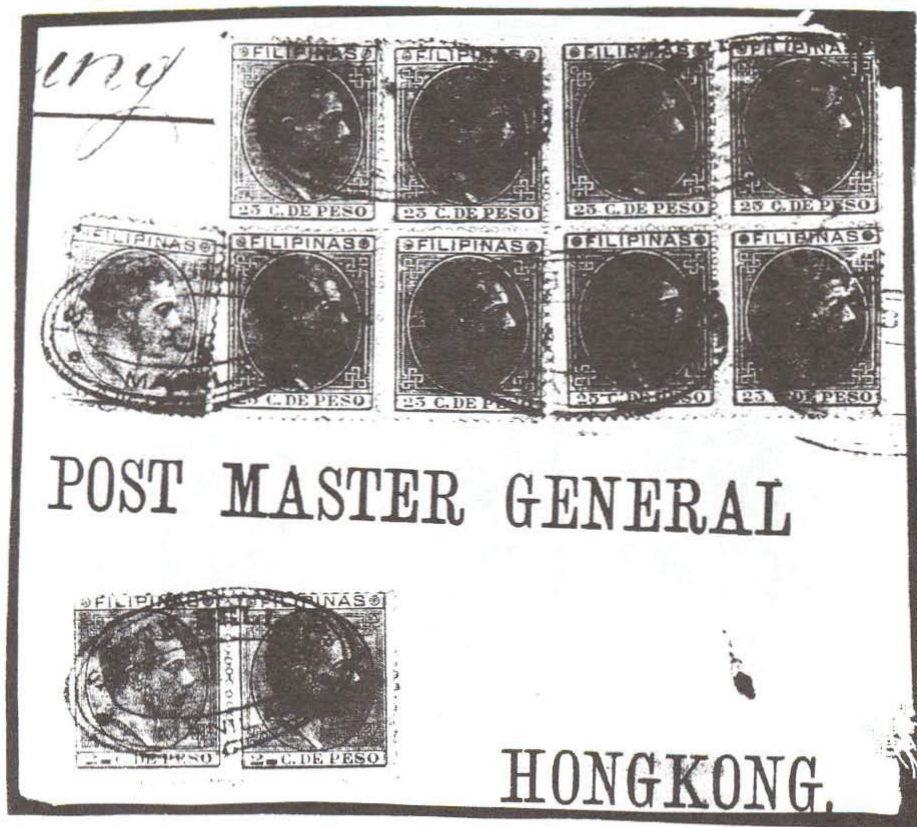


Figure 9. Business handstamp Type 8 on Scott #76, 87, and 88.

- TYPE 7 Straight-lined SMITH, BELL & Co. Sans serif letters. Co rounded. Color: magenta or violet. Size: 3mm by 42mm. Found on 1880s and 1890s postal and revenue stamps. Scarce (FIGURE 8).
- TYPE 8 Oval with double outer line and single inner line. SMITH, BELL & Co on top line in serif letters, blank in the center, and MANILA (common), ILOILO (scarce), or CEBU (rare) on the bottom line in sans serif letters. Small circle on each side of the oval. Color: black, blue/ violet, or magenta (rare). Size: 21mm by 35-37mm. Found on 1880s and 1890s postal stamps. Common (FIGURE 9).



Figure 10. Business handstamp
Type 9 on Scott #174.

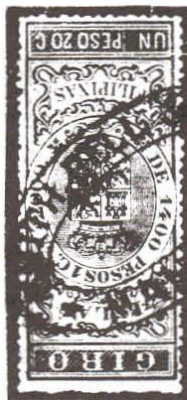


Figure 11. Business handstamp
Type 10 on giro revenue stamp.

- TYPE 9** Oval with double outer line and single inner line. SMITH, BELL & Co (or Co) on the top line, date in the center, and MANILA (scarce), ILOILO (common), or CEBU (rare) on the bottom. Star in the corners of the oval. Sans serif letters. Color: black, violet/blue, or bluegreen. Size: ? Found on 1880s and 1890s postal stamps. Common (FIGURE 10).
- TYPE 10** Oval with single outer line and single inner line. SMITH, BELL & Co. in serif letters on top, blank in the center, and MANILA in sans serif letters on the bottom. Large star on each side of the oval. Color: blue, blue-green, or magenta. Size: 25mm by ? Inner oval 13mm wide. Found on 1890s postal and revenue stamps. Scarce (FIGURE 11).
- TYPE 11** Oval with single outer line and single inner line. SMITH, BELL & Co. in serif letters on top, date in the center, and MANILA in sans serif letters on the bottom. Small star on each side of oval. Color: violet or purple. Size: 25mm by ? Inner oval 15mm wide. Found on 1890s revenue stamps. Scarce. Not illustrated.

- TYPE 12 Same as TYPE 11, except blank in the center. Scarce. Not illustrated.
- TYPE 13 Oval with single outer line and single inner line. Both ends squared. SMITH, BELL & Co. on top, blank in the center, and MANILA on the bottom. Star on each side of the oval. Serif letters. Color: blue or bluegreen. Size: ? Found on 1890s postal stamps. Scarce. Not illustrated.

My thanks to Dr. Geoffrey Lewis for reviewing the handstamp types and for his helpful suggestions. If anyone has any additional information about this firm and its postal history, contact Don Peterson, 7408 Alaska Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20012.

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