

## The Early Machine Cancels of Cuba By Richard E. Small

- **AUTHORS NOTE:** While scanning the Smithsonian website recently I saw a display of the Roberto Pichs collection of Cuba. Under the title "Postal History – The Republic" at page 14 it stated that the first canceling machine was used on April 25, 1911. However an illustration on page 7 of the same collection displays an International machine cancel dated Dec 26, 1910. This discrepancy and my memory of earlier machines led me to my reference material and the following article.

### The Earliest Cancellations

Before the advent of machine cancellation, every piece of mail was handled separately. Pen cancellations and cork cancellations were



**Parilla cancellation**

common forms of cancellation. In Spanish countries such as Cuba, the use of the parilla hand stamp was common as well. The cork cancellation and parilla performed their primary job of preventing reuse of the stamp, but gave the mail's recipient no information about when the item was mailed or where it was coming from.

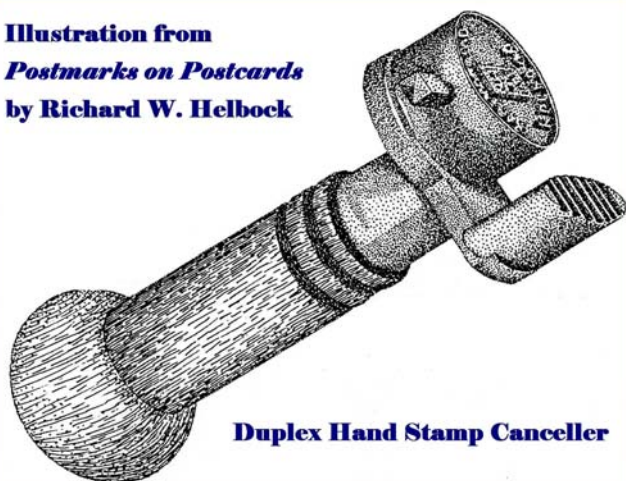


**Cork cancellation**

Later a "duplex canceller" became common, because not only did it obliterate the stamp, but a die impressed the basic information about the place, the date and time of the cancel. This was certainly an improvement, but it was still a hand stamp, limited to perhaps 25 pieces a minute. This would be sufficient for a small postal operation in the provinces, but what about the increasing volume of mail that was being handled in Havana? The prospect of being able to process 1000 postcards or 600 pieces of envelopes of various sizes in an hour doing the work of three or four clerks would be welcome indeed. Something had to speed up the process.

This was an improvement over the cork canceller

**Illustration from  
*Postmarks on Postcards*  
by Richard W. Helbock**



**Duplex Hand Stamp Canceller**

### Hampden machine cancellation

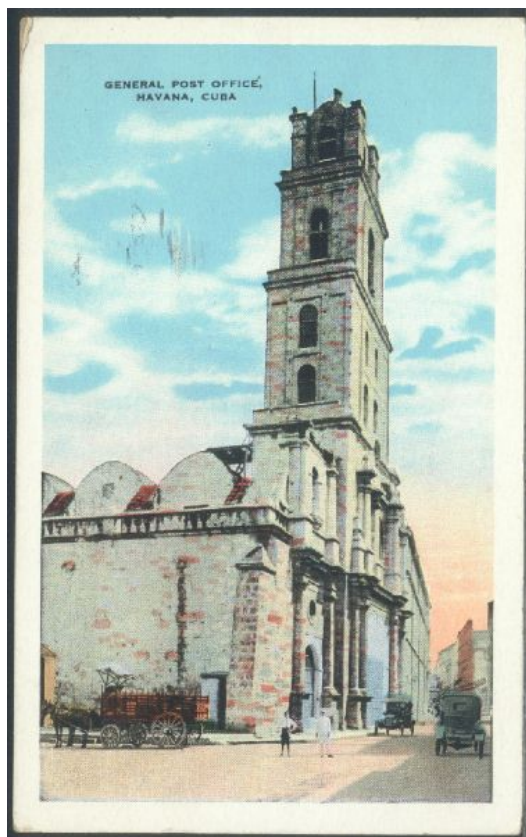
The initial experiment was less than satisfactory. It was the use of the Hampden (Landfear) Machine Canceller.

Machine cancellation of the mail saw its first use in Havana, Cuba in 1899 during the U.S. intervention period which lasted from 1898 to 1902. It held the promise of speeded up postal operations.

The cancellation itself was comprised of two parts. The first part was a postal marking which generally told where the cancellation took place, the day and the time. The second part was “the killer” which obliterated the stamp and made its reuse impossible.

Examples of the first machine cancel by the Hampden Canceling Machine Co. of Holyoke, Massachusetts is quite scarce. Thirteen examples are known ranging in dates from 30 September 1899 to 30 October 1899. The cancellation consisted of “Havana / Cuba, the date, the time, and seven killer bars at a 13° angle to the horizontal.

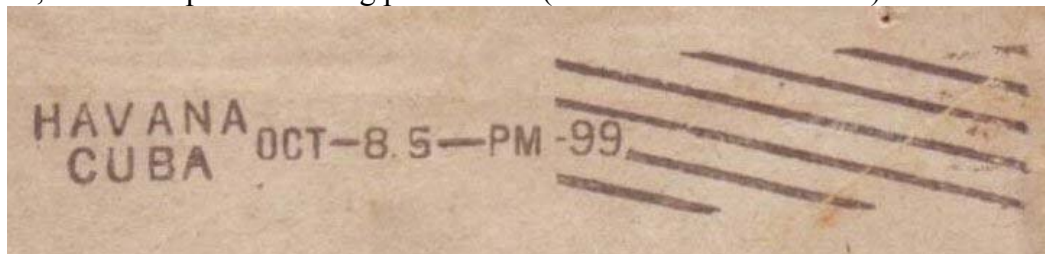
The Hampden hand cranked machine was of inferior quality. A total of 100 machines were sold at \$300 per machine. Most were in service only a few weeks or months. One machine went to Havana. Three machines were sent to San Juan, Puerto Rico.



**Havana Main Post Office, circa 1900.  
Presumed site of the Hampden  
machine canceller.**

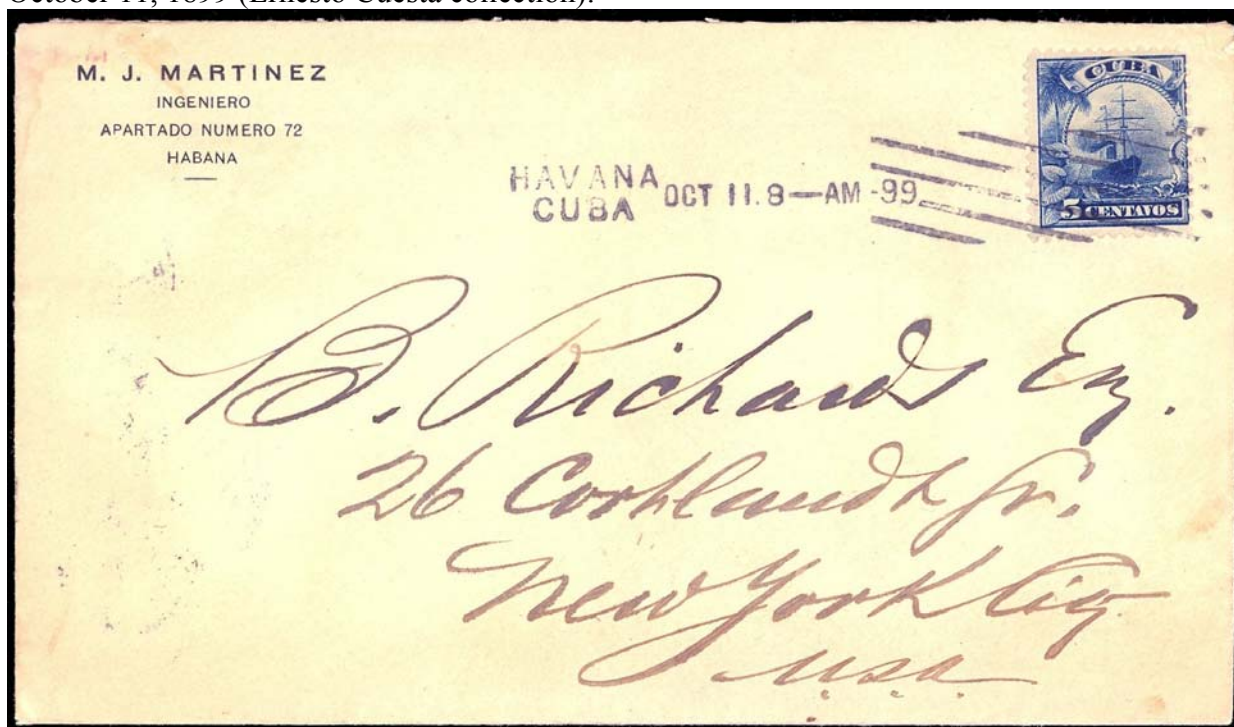
Here are some of the known Hampden cancellations:

October 8, 1899 Hampden receiving postal mark (Robert Littrell collection):





October 11, 1899 (Ernesto Cuesta collection):



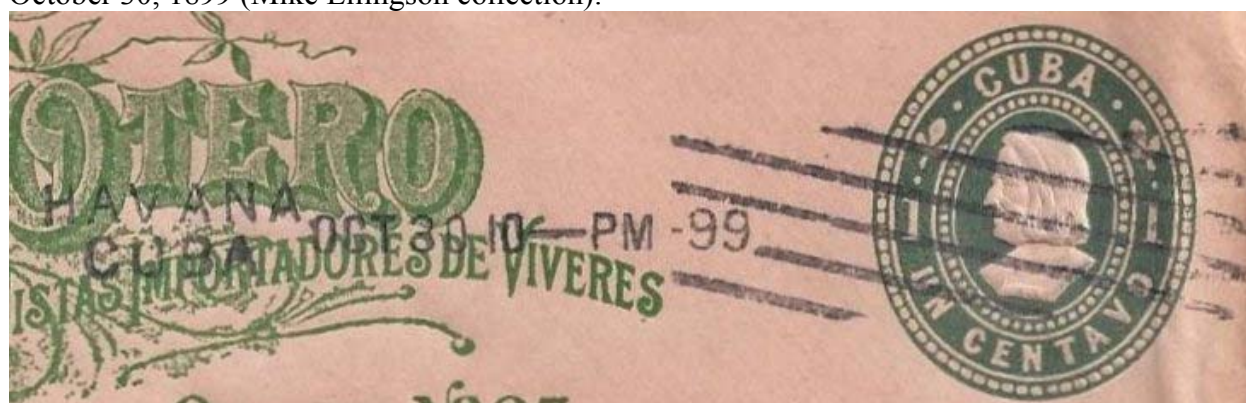
October 21, 1899 (Ernesto Cuesta collection):



October 5, 1899 (Robert Littrell collection):

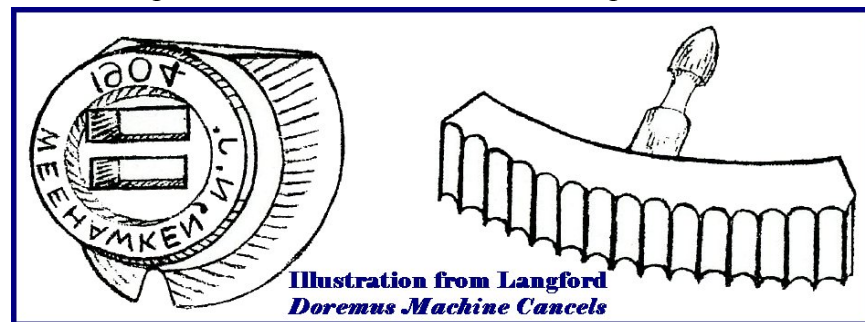


October 30, 1899 (Mike Ellingson collection):



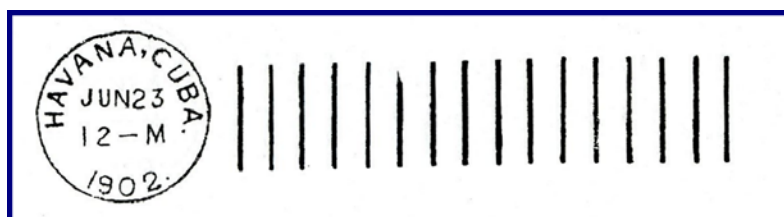
### Doremus machine cancellation

By early 1900, the criticism of and trouble with the Hampden machines was such that the post office requested bids for remodeling and refurbishing the Hampden machines. The Doremus Company of Washington, D.C., won that bid. The Hampden Co. was not invited to bid. By 1902 their product was more advanced. The postmark and killer became two separate parts of the machine and are illustrated at left.



The only known Havana markings have been recorded as follows:

June 23, 1902, Type D  
(ex Frederick Langford collection):

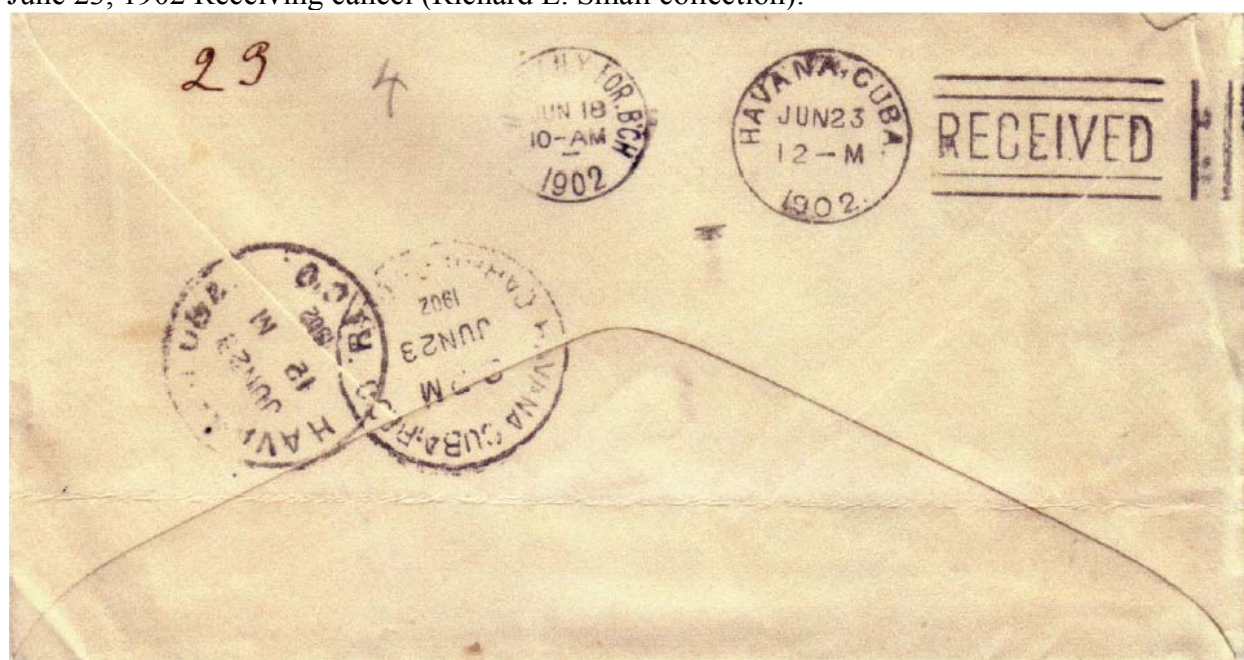




May 31, 1902 Receiving cancel (Nick D'Ercole collection)



June 23, 1902 Receiving cancel (Richard E. Small collection):



### Krag machine cancellation

The next machine cancel recorded is from a Norwegian Krag machine. Hand operated, foot operated or electricity were the modes available on the Krag machine, invented in 1905 and improved thereafter. It is unknown which mode was used in Cuba. This machine offered the first rapid speed continuous impression (two die head) postmarking machine. All postmarks were a circular die with a “bridge” in it separating the HABANA from the Date/Time Stamp from CUBA. The killer portion was either absent or four straight lines or four wavy lines. Repeating means it formed a continuous cancellation across the top of the envelope.

Examples from 1908 to 1910 include:

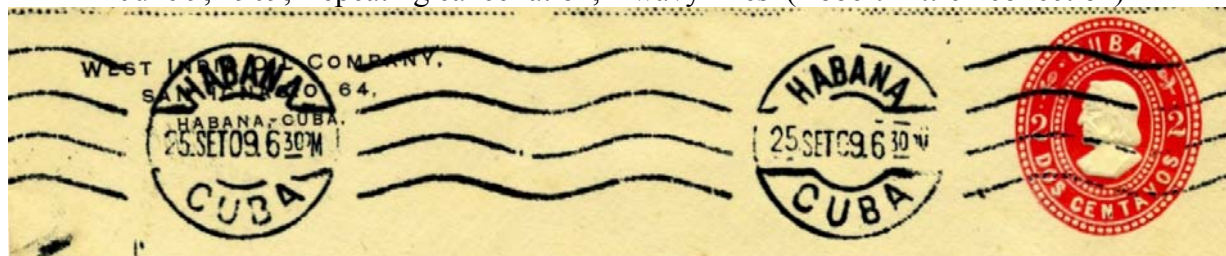
March 24, 1908, Repeating cancellation, 4 wavy lines



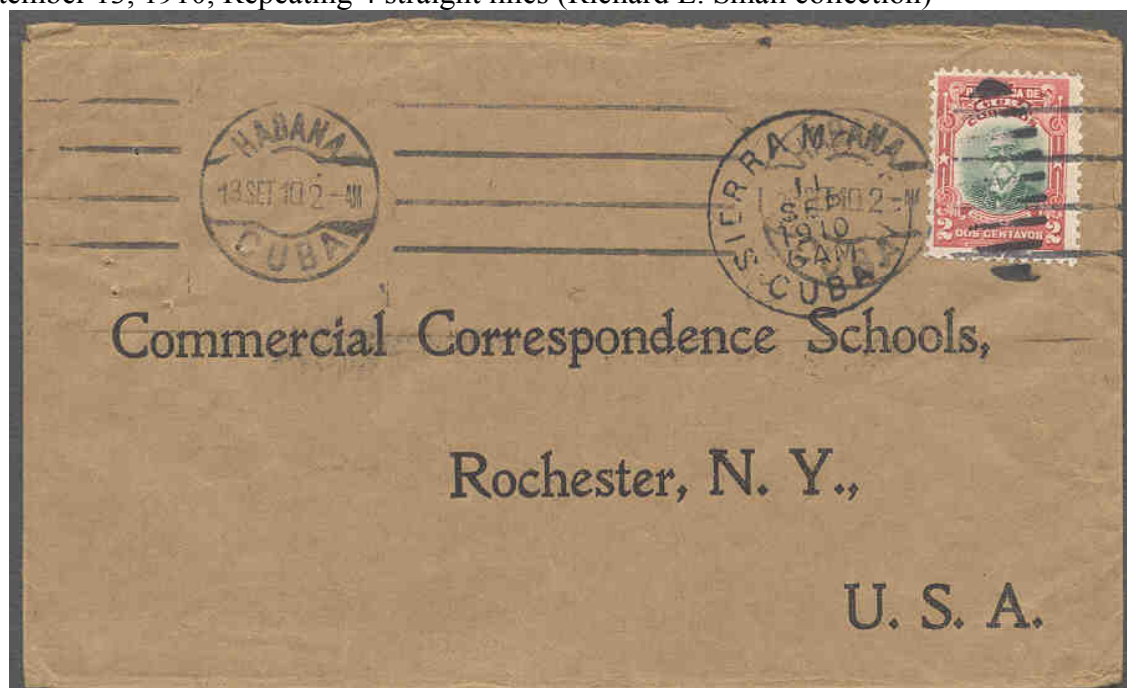
August 16, 1908, Repeating cancellation, 4 straight lines (ex Bob Payne collection)



June 9, 1909, Repeating cancellation, 4 wavy lines (Robert Littrell collection)



September 13, 1910, Repeating 4 straight lines (Richard E. Small collection)





The use of both wavy and straight lines over the same time period as represented above would indicate that there were at least two machines in Havana. One would also imagine that the repeating cancellation across the entire letter would not be a popular one with commercial concerns that took the time and money to imprint a nice corner card only to have it obliterated.

### International machine cancellation

The next machine recorded is from the International Postal Supply Company, New York, NY. It has been recorded from August 11, 1910 to September 9, 1921. Examples include:

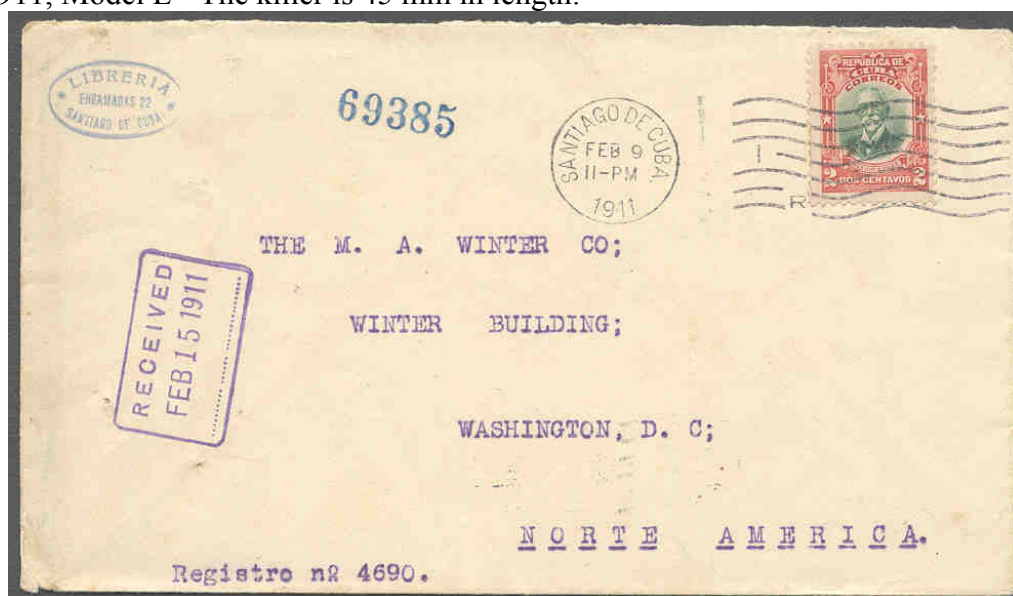
Aug 11, 1910 - Flyer Model - The killer is 55 mm in length (Ernesto Cuesta collection):



Dec 26, 1910 - Flyer Model - The killer is 55 mm in length (Roberto Pichs collection):



Feb 9, 1911, Model L - The killer is 45 mm in length:



September 9, 1921, Model (?) The killer is 64 mm in length (Robert Littrell collection)



Those are the machine cancellations known to the author. The process got off to a shaky start in Cuba, but the International machines proved reliable and they had a more reasonable lifespan. Those readers who have more and different information are encouraged to contact the author.



**REFERENCES:**

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Smithsonian National Postal Museum, Roberto Pichs Collection –  
<http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/pich/postal>