

Off Midway Island: A Transpacific Voyage Aboard S.S. *Manchuria*

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Midway Island, part of the Northwestern Hawaiian archipelago, played a strategic role in opening communications between the USA and the Far East. Midway atoll is actually about midway between San Francisco and the Asian mainland.

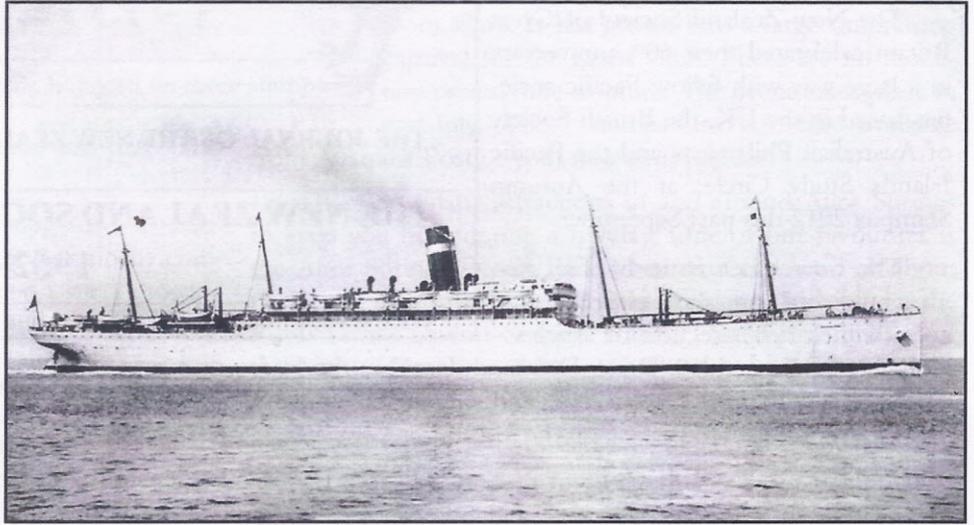
Pacific Mail Steamship Company

The Pacific Mail Steamship Company was first associated with Midway in 1871, when the PMSS started a project of blasting and dredging a ship channel through the reef to the lagoon using money put up by the United States Congress. The purpose was to establish a mid-ocean coaling station avoiding the high taxes imposed at ports controlled by the Hawaiians (an independent kingdom at the time). The project was a complete failure, and the company's workers were withdrawn in October 1871.

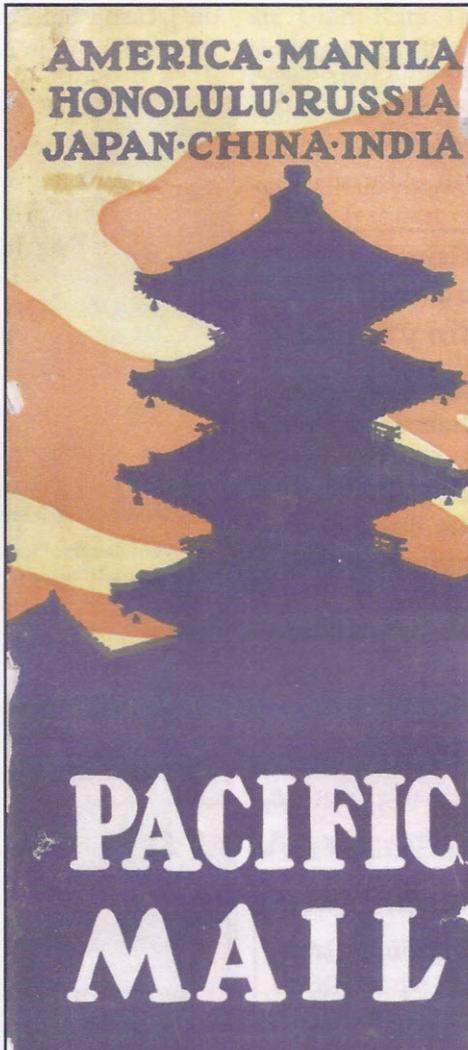
In 1903 the atoll became a link in the Hawaii-Guam segment of the first transpacific submarine cable, and a cable station operated by Commercial Pacific Cable Company was established on Sand Island.

A US civil post office operated on Midway between 1903-1918, attached administratively to Hawaii. It was there to serve the cable station workers and a detachment of US Marines who were stationed there 1904-1908. Mail cancelled at Midway during this brief period is a challenge to find. On the next page is an example of a PMSS picture post card cancelled at Midway May 1905 on a voyage to Asia. The card stayed at Midway until picked up in late May on the return trip to Honolulu.

After 1918 and until 1941, post office services were handled at either Wake Island or Honolulu. During the brief Pan-Am Clipper service 1935-1941, which included a stop at Midway, there was still no post office or cancelling device. From 1941 until the US Navy left in 1997, a military post office served both civilian and military needs.



Pacific Mail Steamship SS *Manchuria* ran between San Francisco and Asia 1904-15



Front cover of the PMSS passenger travel brochure touting luxury travel

SS *Manchuria*

The Pacific Mail Steamship SS *Manchuria* was one of a number of ships that plied a regular route from San Francisco to Asia delivering mail, cargo and passengers. The steamers *Mongolia* and *Manchuria* were sister ships built in 1904 at the Camden, New Jersey yard of the New York Ship Building Co. Each was 600 feet long with a beam of 65.3 feet and rated at 13,639 gross tons.

The SS *Manchuria* played an important historic role in July 1905, shortly after the postcard on the next page was written.

The Russo-Japanese War had begun 6 February 1904, which interrupted trade on some routes, although the PMSS ships generally stayed out of the battle zone north of Japan and around the Korean peninsula.

US President Theodore Roosevelt sent a delegation headed by his Secretary for War, William Howard Taft (a future US President) for a three-month diplomatic mission to Asia. They left San Francisco 8 July 1905 aboard the SS *Manchuria*. The main purpose of the visit was to project American influence in the area of the recently won territories of the Philippines, Guam and Hawaii.