Early covers from Jaluit in the Marshall Islands

by Jan Berg

The German Postal Steamship Agency Apia or the “Deutsche Postdampfschiffsagentur Apia” as it was named in German opened its operation on September 21, 1886 – the same day as the German steamship Lübeck of the Australian Branch Line arrived at Apia on its inauguration trip. After complaints from the consuls of Great Britain and the United States the German Postal Steamship Agency Apia was changed into the Imperial German Postal Agency Apia on July 23, 1887.

With the establishment of the German Postal Steamship Agency Apia (later the Imperial German Postal Agency Apia) and through the connecting Australian Branch Line or the “Australischen Zweiglinie” as it was named in German, Samoa had rather good connections to Sydney and further on to Germany and other parts of the world.

Apia also had postal connections with other countries through the Municipal Post Office, established already in 1882, and later on through the John Davis Post Office, established in 1886. These connections also included the eastbound steamship lines to San Francisco.

The Marshall Islands were proclaimed as a German Protectorate on October 15, 1885 and it was managed by the Jaluit Company (Jaluit-Gesellschaft in German) already from 1887. To be able to handle mail from the islands it was decided to open a German Postal Agency in Jaluit on October 1, 1888 but out of some disturbances the actual opening date was delayed until March 29, 1889.

The Marshall Islands did not have any direct connecting shipping lines with major ports like Apia had, but as the Jaluit Company was responsible to arrange passage of the mail a number of different routes were made available. I am here able to show two different covers that although very different in the way they were handled both passed through Apia on their way to San Francisco.

Fig. 1 - Cover from “Hersheim & Co.” in Jaluit dated 29. FEBR. 88 to San Francisco with arrival CDS MAY 12 on the front
Early covers from Jaluit in the Marshall Islands (contd.)

The cover in Fig. 1 was sent from the German company “Hernsheim & Co.” in Jaluit on February 29, 1888 to a recipient in San Francisco and it is one of very few covers from the period before the operation of the German Postal Agency started. The cover was sent from Jaluit on a private sailing vessel to Samoa where it was put into the post of John Davis on April 24, 1888. The rate for a single rated cover from Apia to San Francisco was 6d together with the U.S. charge of 5¢. The cover finally arrived in San Francisco on May 12, 1888 – after almost two and half months of travelling.

The cover in Fig. 2 has the date 24 SEP. 90 set in a purple cancellation of the “Haupt-Agentur der Jaluit-Gesellschaft – Jaluit” struck on the back. The cover is franked at Jaluit with four of the 10 Pf stamps available at this time and they are all cancelled Jaluit Marschall-Inseln 24/9 90. The cover was sent “Per S.M.S. Sperber via Apia” to San Francisco where it arrived on October 27, 1888.

The Apia cancellation on the back is dated 10/8 90 - an obvious mistake as it should have been 8/10 90 instead.

The very few covers emanating from the Marshall Islands during this early period are all great rarities and of these few not even a handful were sent through Apia. I am very pleased to be able to show these covers as they tell very different stories how the mail was handled during these early years.