“PANAMA HAD NO VOLCANOES”

Philippe Bunau-Varilla

“STAMPS THAT CHANGED THE COURSE: THE PHILATELIC INFLUENCE ON THE SELECTION OF THE PANAMA CANAL”

Postal Stamp Of The Republic Of Nicaragua

An oficial witness of the volcanic activity of the istmus of Nicaragua.

On acccount of the earthquake consecutive to the eruption of the volcane (to be seen smoking In the background) the greater part of the warf (to be seen in the foreground) went to the bottom of the lake with a large quantity of bags of cofee on March 21, 1902, at 1:55 P.M. (Democracia de Managua). (See also New York Sun of June 12, 1902)

Facsimile of a letter sent to the United States Congress

In 1902, Philippe Bunau-Varilla, a French engineer and former investor in the failed French canal project in Panama, devised a strategy to shift the decision in favor of the Panamanian route. He noted that in 1900, Nicaragua had issued a series of postage stamps depicting the Momotombo volcano erupting, with smoke rising from its summit. Capitalizing on this imagery, Bunau-Varilla sent a letter to each U.S. senator, enclosing one of these stamps and emphasizing the volcanic hazards of Nicaragua. This tactic was particularly effective, as in May 1902, the Mont Pelée volcano on the Caribbean island of Martinique had erupted, killing approximately 30,000 people, heightening fears of volcanic activity in the region.

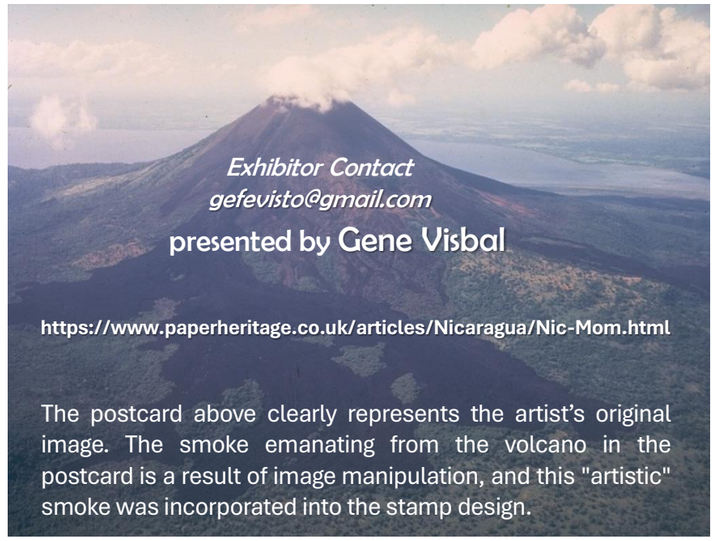
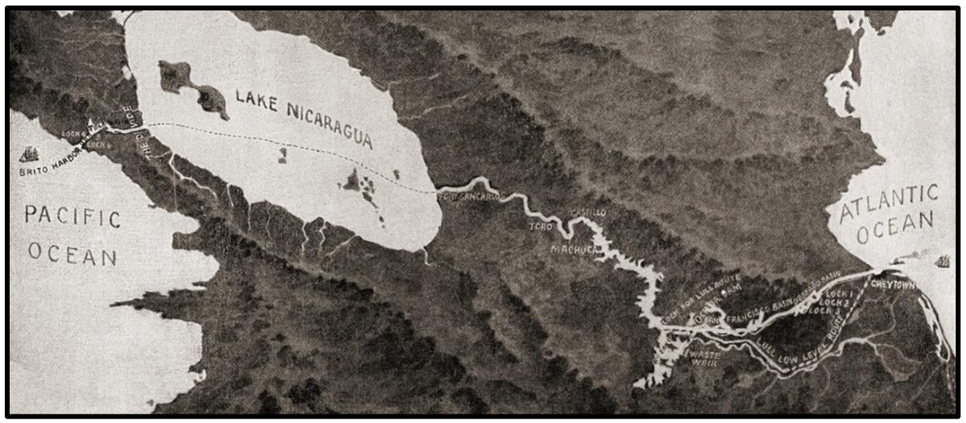


Plate proofs were only produced for five values and all are shown above. The 1c, 5c, 6c and 1 Peso are printed on thin ungummed paper and are in the issued colours, whereas the 3c is printed on ungummed thick card and in an unissued colour (the colour of the 1c). The stamps on thin paper are very rare whilst there are no other examples recorded of the 3c. All the stamps are affixed to thick card.

it could have been, but it wasn't!

At the beginning of the 20th century, the United States sought an efficient route to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans via an interoceanic canal. Two main options were under consideration: a route through Panama and another through Nicaragua. Initially, many in the U.S. Congress viewed Nicaragua as a safer and more viable option due to its political stability and favorable geographical features, such as the presence of Lake Nicaragua, which would facilitate construction.



Fragment of the map of the Nicaragua canal route

Bunau-Varilla’s campaign achieved its goal. Influenced by the perceived volcanic risks in Nicaragua, the U.S. Congress decided in 1904 to resume and complete the canal project in Panama. Thus, a simple postage stamp featuring a smoking volcano played a crucial role in one of the most significant geopolitical decisions of the era.

REGULAR ISSUE: 1900

The first stamp issue of 1900 was printed using intaglio by the American Bank Note Company, maintaining a very high standard of quality. No significant variations have been reported for this issue, aside from a few imperforate pairs. The printing contract was secured by Dr. Asenjo, under an agreement whereby he would supply the stamps free of charge in exchange for an immediate allocation of 50,000 canceled-to-order sets for resale in the philatelic market.