

# FLORIDA POSTAL HISTORY JOURNAL

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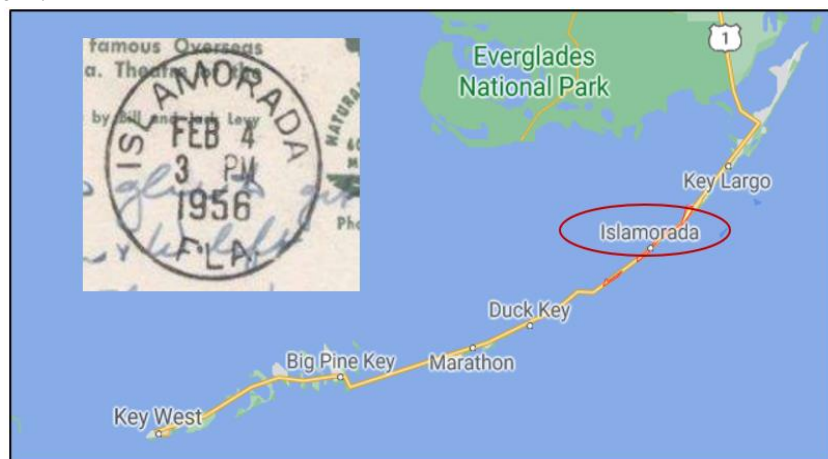
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## The Islamorada, Florida Post Office

By Juan L. Riera

Islamorada (Purple Island) is a name given by the Spanish in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to an area of islands just south of Key Largo (*Figure 1*). The area was inhabited by native Americans about 500 A.D., but archaeologists have had difficulties identifying what cultural group inhabited the area. The debate revolves around the possibility that the natives of this area were Tequesta, as those from southeast Florida (Greater Miami area), or Calusa, as those from southwest Florida (Naples/Ft. Myers area), or a hybrid or completely different group that has been referred to as the Matecumbe Indians, the name given to the group by the Spaniards who encountered them.



*Figure 1. Islamorada islands, south of Key Largo.*

The modern village of Islamorada was incorporated on November 4, 1997, consisting of 7.2 square miles (7.1 of land and 0.1 of water). In 2010, the population consisted of 6,119 people.

Famous people who reside, or have resided there, include Jimmy Johnson, college and NFL coach; Ted Williams of the Boston Red Sox; and Gene Hackman, the actor.

The village consists of five islands: Tea Table Key, Lower Matecumbe Key, Upper Matecumbe Key, Windley Key and Plantation Key. Tea Table Key is also known as Terra's Key and is located at mile marker 75 along U.S. Highway 1. Lower Matecumbe Key is located between mile marker 75 and 78 and had Indian mounds, middens, and natural wells that were destroyed in the railroad era. That period was from the very earliest 20<sup>th</sup> century to 1935 when Henry M. Flagler was extending his Florida East Coast Railway to Key West until it was destroyed by the Labor Day Hurricane of 1935.

The southwest end of the island was the site of a sand mining operation. Anne's Beach, a popular attraction for locals and tourists, is found at mile marker 74 Oceanside. Upper Matecumbe Key is the site of the original settlement of Islamorada. There are many Indian mounds and habitation sites located here that in recent years have been studied by various archaeologists from a few universities, such as Tracy Aldren of the University of Miami.

*Continued on page 3*

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**The Islamorada, Florida Post Office**  
by *Juan L. Riera* ..... 1, 3-6

**Florida Telegraph Covers**  
by *Deane R. Briggs, M.D.* ..... 6-7

**Princess Catherine Daingerfield Willis Gray Murat**  
by *Phil Eschbach* ..... 8-10

**Warm Mineral Springs**  
by *Thomas Lera* ..... 11-12

**Daytona, Florida Post Offices**  
by *Juan L. Riera* ..... 12-16

**Bellamy Letter – More Information**  
by *Ed Evan and Francis Ferguson* ..... 17-19

**Florida Postal History Society Dealer Members Contact Information** ..... 20

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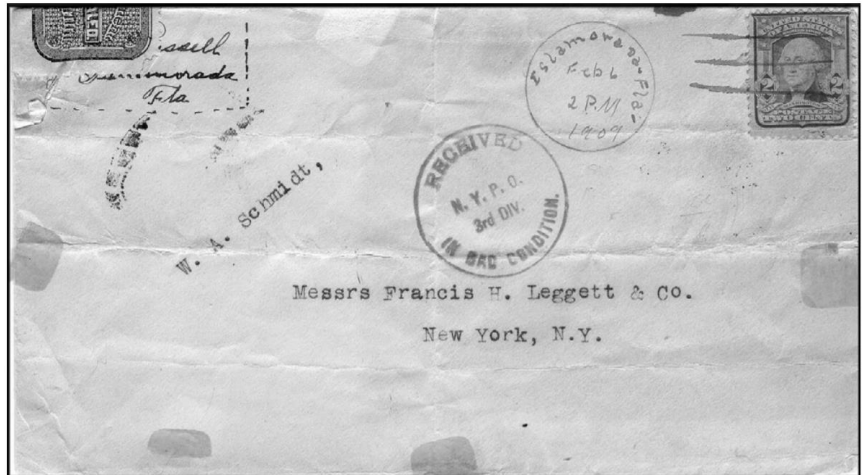
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Islamorada has an intriguing post office history including differing opinions by postal historians as to the first and second postmasters. According to the Historic Preservation Society of the Upper Keys website<sup>1</sup>, the upper keys obtained semi-reliable mail service with the arrival of the railroad in 1908. As the site maintains, this prompted a post office application for Islamorada by Elsie M. Rue. However, an application made by John H. Russell predated Ms. Rue's application leading to Russell's appointment as postmaster on June 1, 1908. Subsequently, Elsie Rue was appointed postmaster on October 21, 1908 and held the post until June 2, 1909 when John A. Russell became postmaster, continuing 59 years of service by the Russell family.

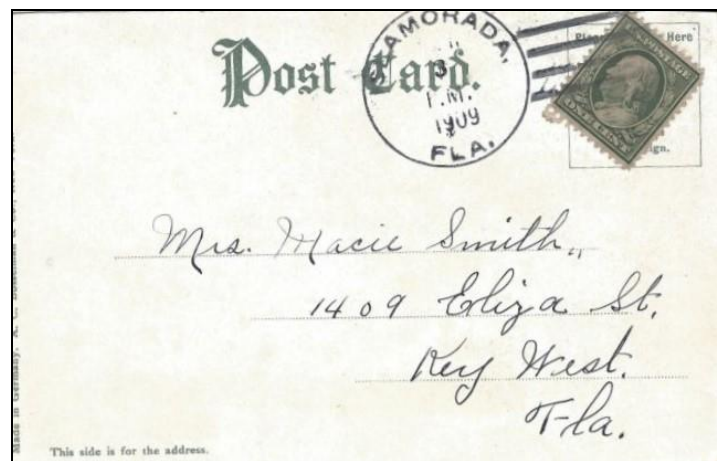
Contrary to this account, John S. Gallagher indeed agrees in his "Florida Post Offices"<sup>2</sup> that the Islamorada post office opened on June 1, 1908, with John H. Russell as postmaster, but Gallagher makes no mention of Elsie M. Rue.

However, Ms. Rue's service is "validated" with the cover shown in **Figure 2** presented by Richard Helbock and Jerry Wilkinson in their *La Posta* 2004 article, "Postmarks Among the Palms: A Postal History of the Florida Keys."<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 2. 1909 Islamorada cover with hand drawn provisional postmark.**

The authors state that the "early cover from Islamorada bears a hand drawn provisional postmark that dates from February 1909 while Elsie M. Rue served as the Islamorada postmaster." In this same article, the authors present the cover in **Figure 3**, courtesy of Dr. Deane R. Briggs collection, saying, "This postcard displays an impression of Islamorada's first official handstamp dating from what appears to be June 9, 1909." However, the authors do not associate the postcard with being serviced by either Elsie Rue or John A. Russell.



**Figure 3. 1909 Islamorada postcard with first official handstamp.**

When John A. Russell was appointed postmaster on June 2, 1909, he built a wooden post office building near the train depot. This remained in use until 1926 when he built a coral rock post office building attached to a store, restaurant and gas station that was in use until the 1935 Labor Day Hurricane that destroyed it (**Figure 4**).