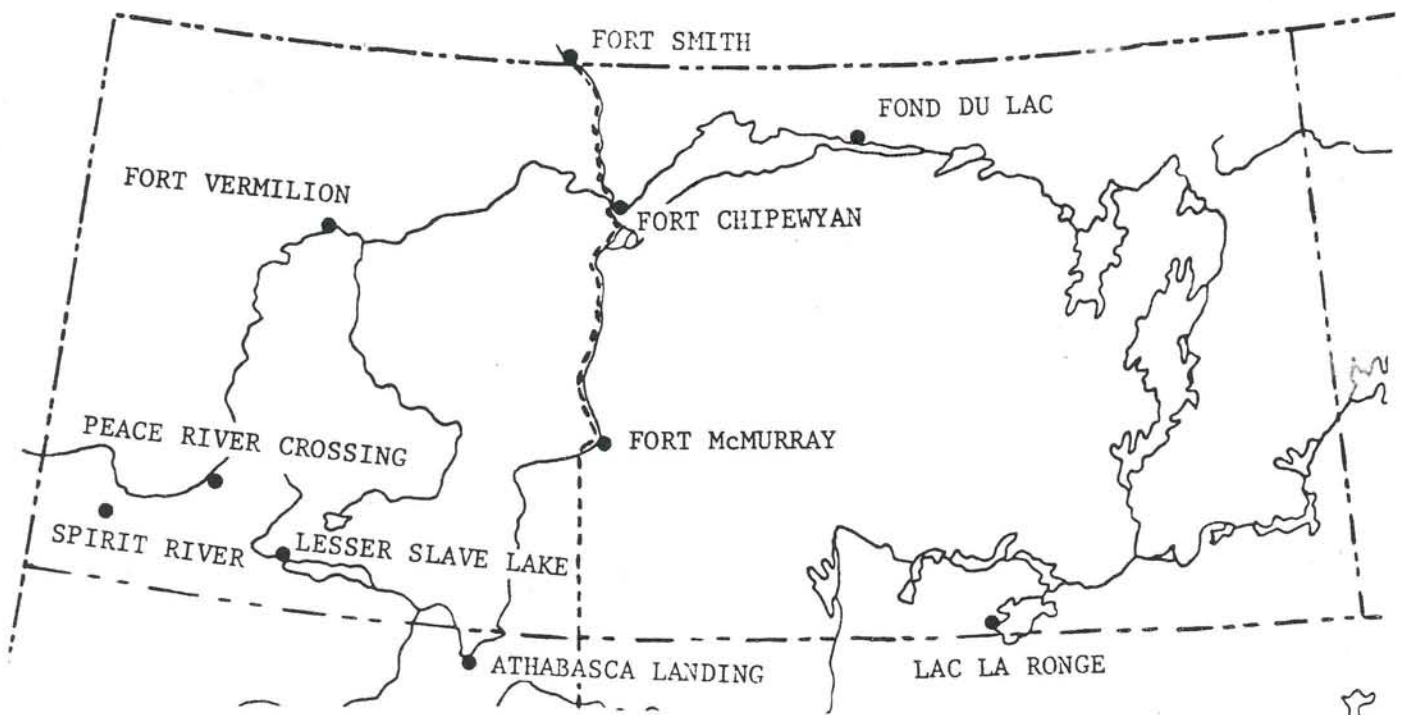


# District of Athabaska

Athabaska was one of the four provisional districts formed in 1882 from the southern part of the North-West Territories. Its first borders were the Slave and Athabasca Rivers on the east (dashed line), and British Columbia on the west, and it extended north from the Alberta territorial border almost to 60° N. On July 26, 1895, the district was extended east to the Keewatin border and a few miles north to the 60th parallel.

The District of Athabaska was incorporated into the new Provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan on September 1, 1905.



Although only one post office was open (from 1903) during the period of existence of the district, mail service was performed—primarily by the Hudson's Bay Company. Examples of this type of privately-carried mail and of several "ATHA" postmarks are shown in this exhibit.

## Fort Dunvegan, 1837

The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) performed the earliest mail service in the Ahtabaska region. Colin Campbell, chief trader at Fort Dunvegan on the Peace River, wrote this letter on April 24, 1837.



This cover was carried by canoe to Fort Chipewyan, then by the annual HBC brigade by canoe to York Factory on Hudson's Bay and to England on the annual supply ship. It was rated 1/4 collect (8d incoming ship letter and 8d postage from Deal to London).

## Portage La Loche, 1883

The Hudson's Bay Co.'s post at Portage La Loche (or Methye Portage) was the early supply point for the Athabaska region. It was located in Athabaska, east of Fort McMurray, between the La Loche River (which leads to the south) and the Clearwater River (which feeds into the Mackenzie River system). La Loche was a rendezvous point where the Mackenzie and La Loche Brigades exchanged their loads. The La Loche Brigade made a return trip from Norway House to Portage La Loche each summer.

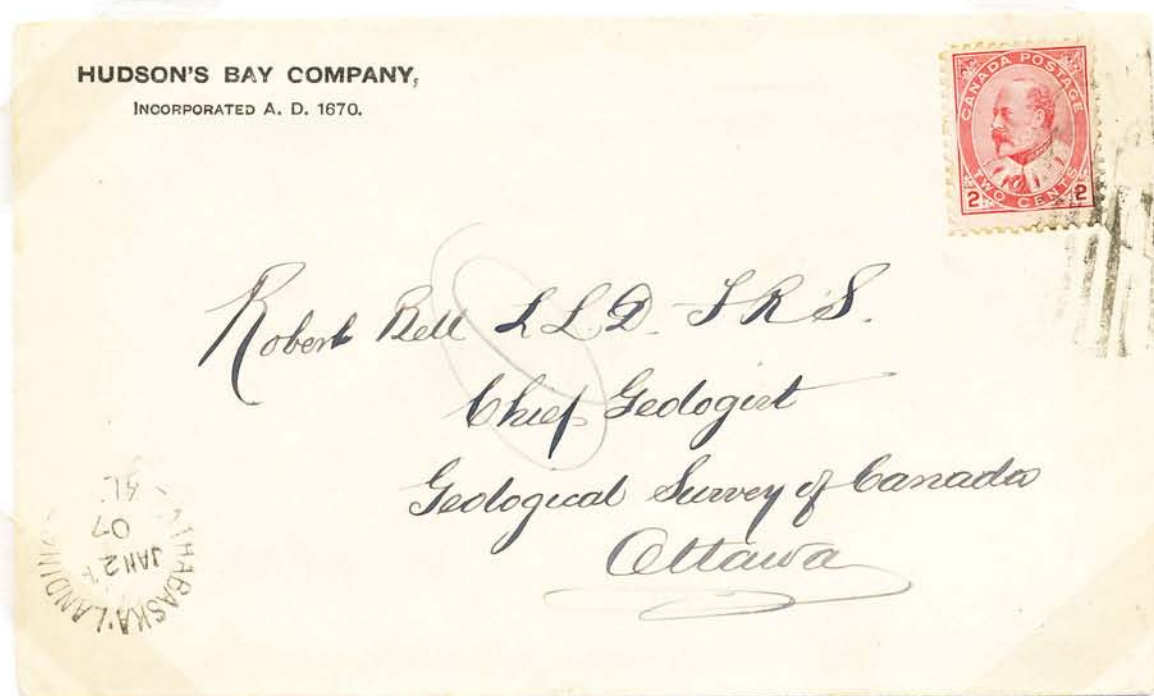
This cover bears, on the reverse, a strike of the HUDSON'S BAY CO. / PORTAGE LA LOCHE handstamp dated AUG 4, 1883 in blue ink. It was carried by the HBC couriers to Winnipeg, where it entered the government postal stream on September 19, 1883.





## Athabasca Landing, Alberta

From the mid-1880s, the town of Athabasca Landing, Alberta was the principal distribution centre for supplies entering the District of Athabaska. The 100-mile cart road from Edmonton (the Athabasca Landing Trail) saw heavy use from 1883, when the Canadian Pacific Railway reached Calgary, until the Canadian Northern Railway was built from Edmonton to Athabasca Landing in 1912. Sternwheelers serving the Peace River district and ships and scows for the Mackenzie River region left The Landing during the navigation season.



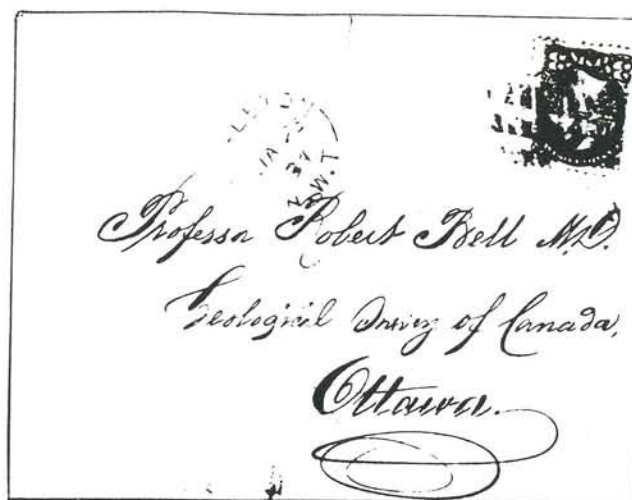
This cover was mailed at Athabasca Landing on January 21, 1907 and received in Ottawa on February 1, 1907.

From the opening of the post office at Athabasca Landing on January 22, 1901, there was weekly mail service to Edmonton. Note the spelling Athabaska-Landing in the postmark. The "K" was used by the government from 1902 to 1948 for the district, town, and river names. The town and river names are now spelled with a "C."

## Fort Chipewyan, 1883

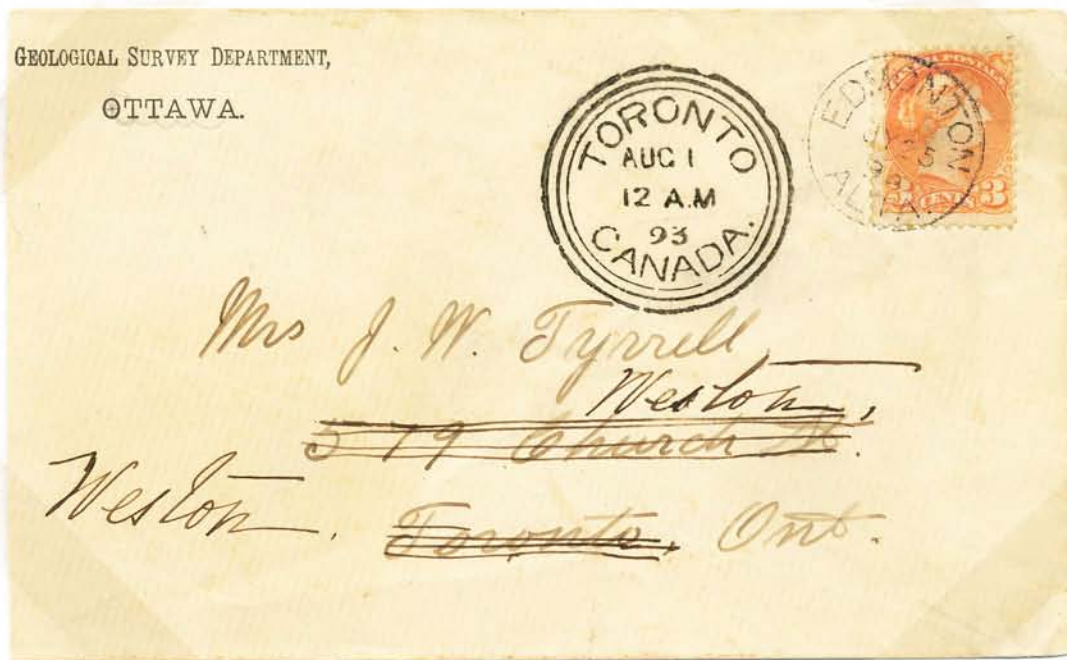
Fort Chipewyan was in the unorganized N.W.T. until 1895, then in the District of Athabaska. Established in 1788, it was the North West Company's fur trade headquarters in the north.

Roderick MacFarlane, chief factor for the HBC's Athabasca fur-trading district, sent this cover to Ottawa by the 1883-1884 winter packet (dogteam). It entered the government mail stream at Carleton, N.W.T. on January 23, 1884. The winter packet reached Carleton after stopping at Fort McMurray; it probably proceeded via the Methye Portage (Portage La Loche) but perhaps through Lac La Biche. The reverse of the cover shows the Hudson's Bay Co. blue oval handstamp for Chipewyan dated December 31, 1883 and the wax seal "R. McF." of Roderick Ross MacFarlane.

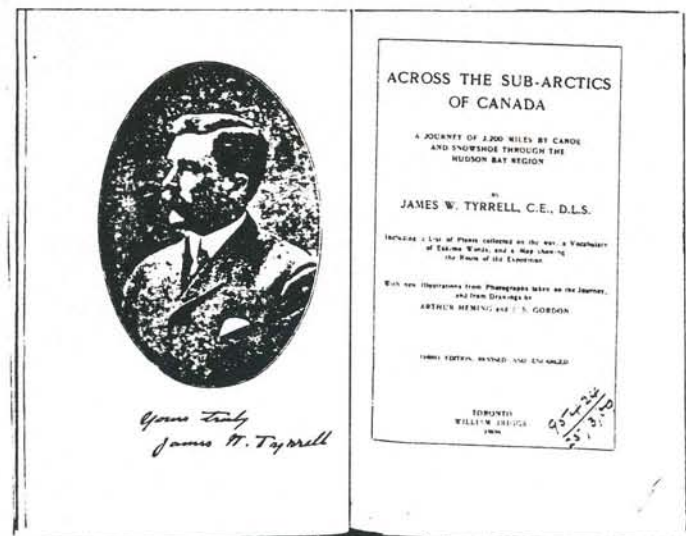


## Tyrrell Expedition, 1893

The 1893 Canadian Government Expedition to the Barren Lands travelled north from Edmonton to Fort Chipewyan, and then northeast to Baker Lake and Chesterfield Inlet on Hudson's Bay, and south to Winnipeg, where they arrived on January 1, 1894. This envelope was addressed by James W. Tyrrell (brother of and assistant to the leader of the expedition, Joseph B. Tyrrell) to his wife in Ontario, on or before June 17, 1893 at Fort Chipewyan. It was put in the mail stream at Edmonton on July 25th. Letters were sent back by the expedition from Athabasca Landing (May 31), Fort Chipewyan (June 17), and Fort Fond du Lac (June 29, probably carried to Edmonton in the fall).



The identity of the writer of the envelope was verified using an autograph on a copy of the book he wrote about the expedition.





## En Route to and from Fort Resolution, N.W.T., 1899

In the summer of 1899, Dr. Robert Bell of the Geological Survey went north from Edmonton with an assistant and four canoemen to map Great Slave Lake. The survey party left Edmonton for Great Slave Lake, N.W.T. on June 29th.

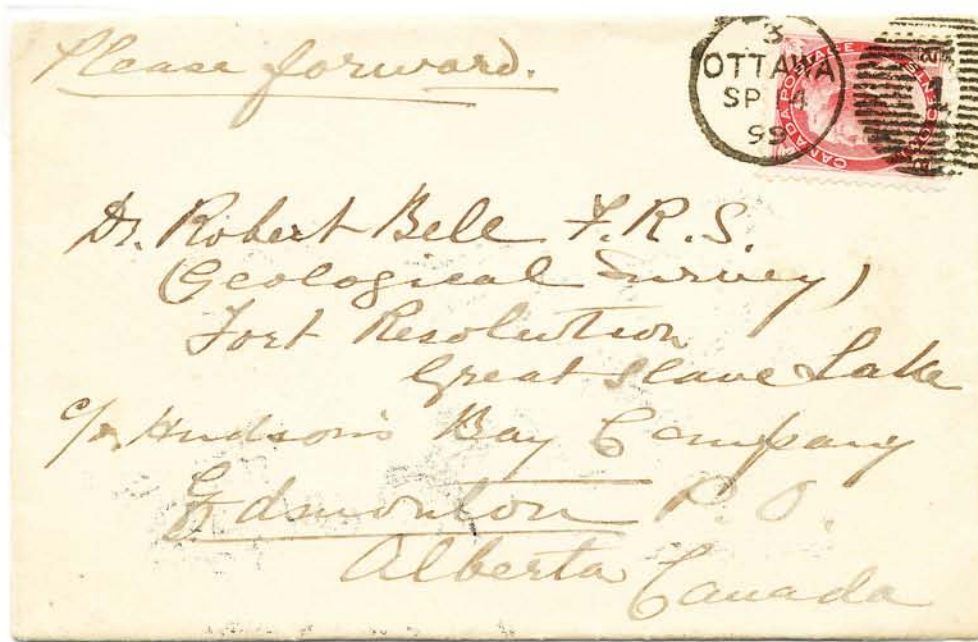
This cover addressed to Bell arrived in Edmonton on June 30th, one day after Bell had left. It would have been forwarded by the Hudson's Bay Company, perhaps reaching Bell in the District of Athabaska or at Fort Smith in mid-July.



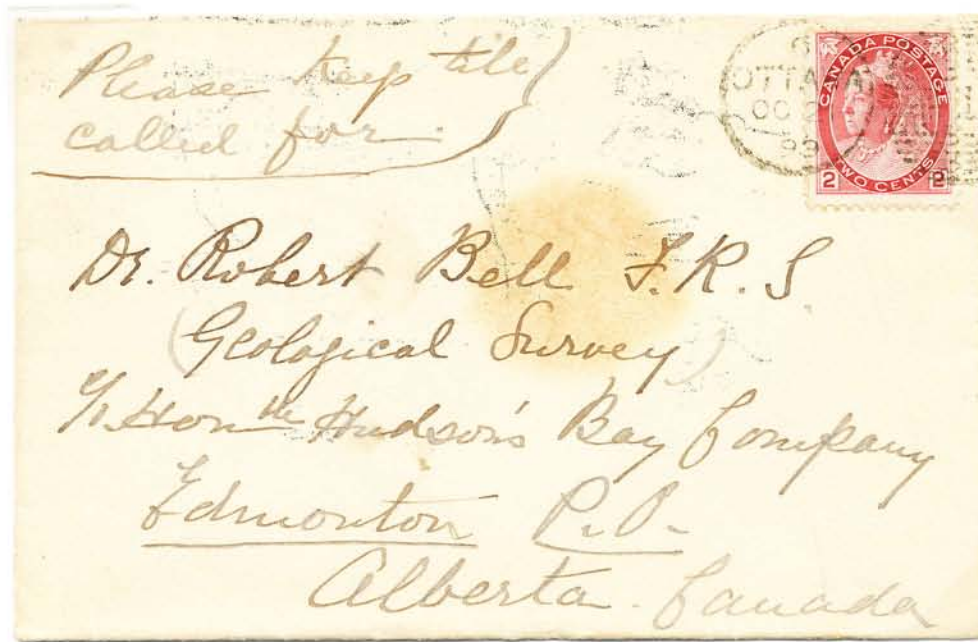
Other envelopes sent to Bell during this expedition are addressed "c/o Hudson's Bay Company, Edmonton." Supply trips of the HBC carried such mail as a favour.

## 1899 EXPEDITION

This cover was received in Edmonton on September 18, 5 days after Bell left Great Slave Lake on his 6-week trip back to Edmonton. Marked "Please forward," it probably was delivered to him in the District of Athabaska.



Later letters of the correspondence were held at Edmonton for Bell's return (October 24). This OC 21, 1899 cover from OTTAWA was received in EDMONTON on OC 25. Bell left Edmonton on October 26.



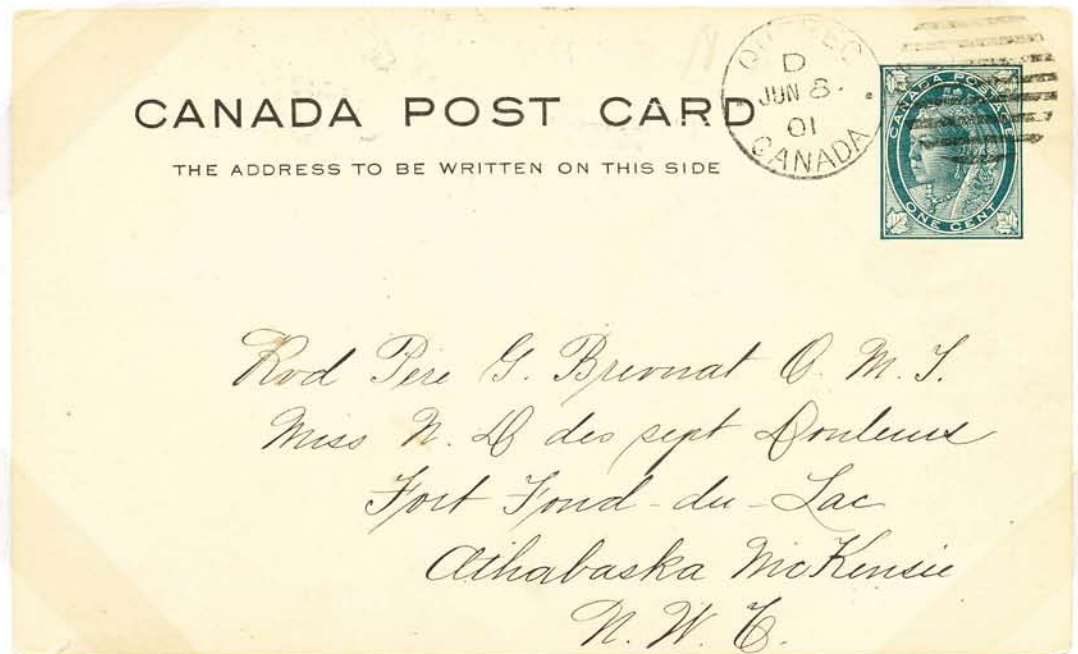
Reference: Edmonton Bulletin, Thursday, October 26, 1899.



## To Fort Fond du Lac, 1901

The Oblate order established an outpost of the Nativity Mission at Fort Fond du Lac, in the eastern section of Lake Athabasca. This postal stationary card was sent to Father Gabriel Breynat at Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows Mission outpost in 1901. The card left Quebec on June 8, 1901 and was routed to Calgary and Edmonton by train. Then it went to Athabasca Landing by stage coach, and to Fort Chipewyan and Fond du Lac by water.

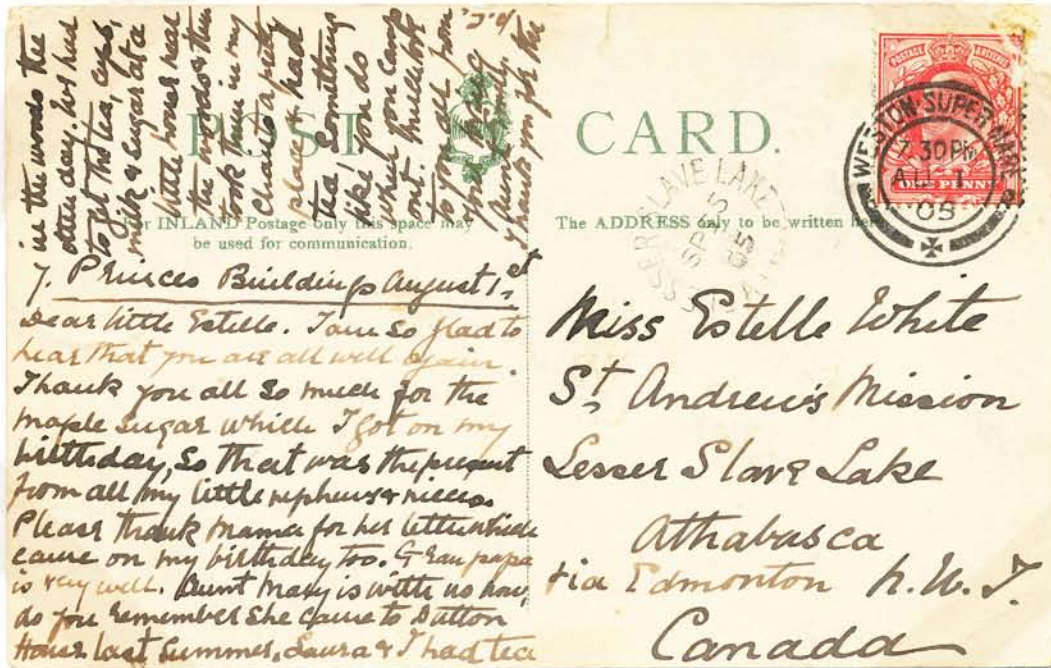
Breynat was a missionary at Fort Fond du Lac from 1892 to 1902. In late August of 1901, while he was at Fort Chipewyan, Breynat learned that he was to be made the first Bishop of the Mackenzie District. The picture of Breynat on the right was taken soon after he became Bishop.



## To Lesser Slave Lake, 1905

The only post office in the District of Athabaska opened on June 1, 1903 at the settlement of Lesser Slave Lake, terminus of the 200-mile steamboat service from Athabasca Landing, Alberta. In 1909, Lesser Slave Lake became the village of Grouard.

Regular mail service into the Peace River country preceeded the establishment of the post office. Jim Cornwall was given a contract to carry mail to Peace River in 1901.

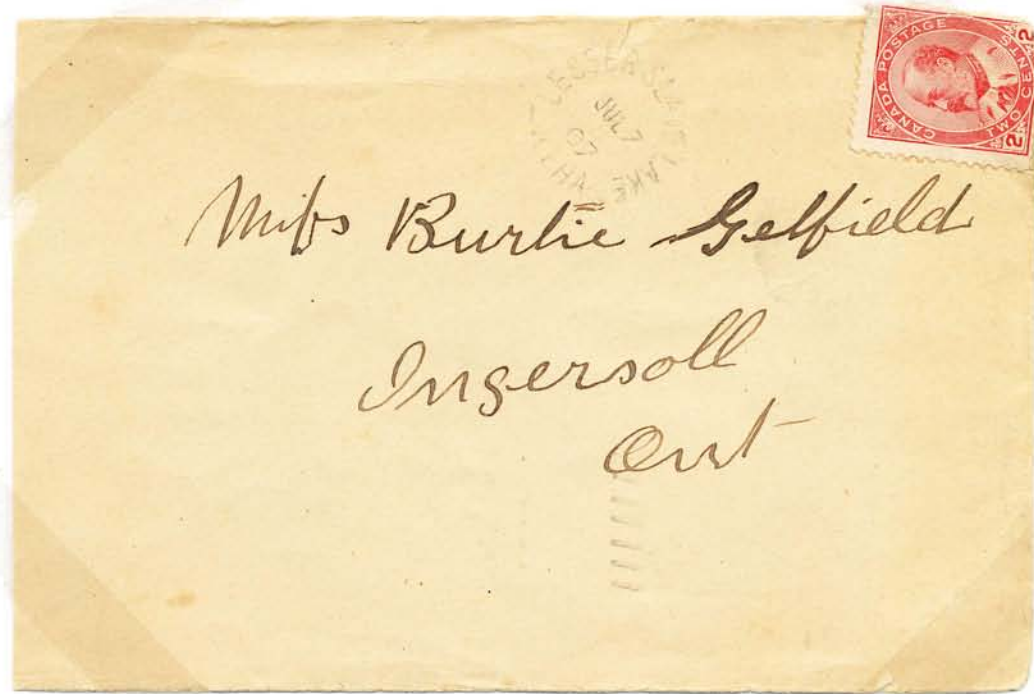


When this post card was addressed at Weston-Super Mare, England (August 1, 1905) to Lesser Slave Lake, the settlement was still in the District of Athabaska. While the card was in Athabasca Landing, Alta. (AU 16, 1905) awaiting forwarding, the territory was proclaimed part of the Province of Alberta. The final arrival marking at Lesser Slave Lake, Atha is SP 25, 1905.



## From Lesser Slave Lake, 1907

This cover was mailed at Lesser Slave Lake, Atha on JUL 7, 1907. Note the broken circle postmark with "ATHA" at the base. BY 1907, this post office was in the Province of Alberta.



The 2¢ Edward stamp appears not to have been cancelled. The envelope was received at Ingersoll, Ontario on July 18, 1907.



## Fort Smith

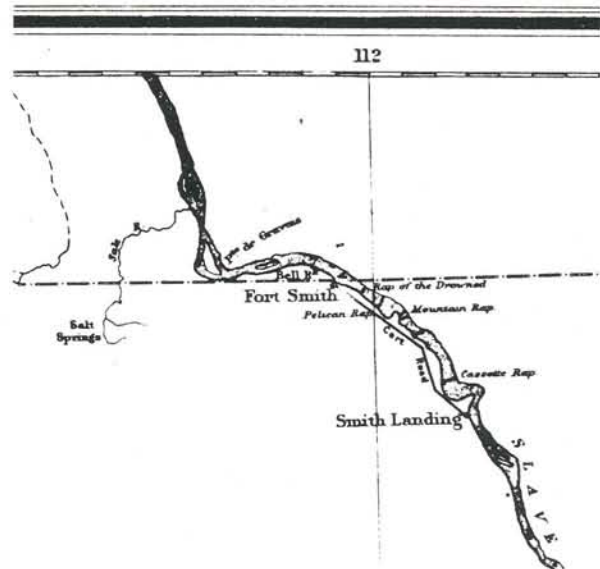
Several post offices not in the District of Athabaska received broken circle daters with "ATHA" at the base, as did Lesser Slave Lake. These offices included Spirit River and Fort Vermilion and possibly Peace River Crossing. They opened after Athabaska had become part of the Province of Alberta. However, Post Office lists show these towns as being in Athabaska (the electoral district of Athabaska) until 1908-1909.

Fort Smith also received in error an "ATHA" postmarking device. First, this office opened on December 1, 1907, over two years after the District of Athabaska had been replaced. Second, it was north of the old Athabaska-N.W.T. boundary. A correct "N.W.T." hammer was not issued until 1916.

The postmark on this 2¢ Numeral stamp is dated AU 31, 1908 at FORT SMITH, ATHA. This is the earliest reported usage of this postmark.

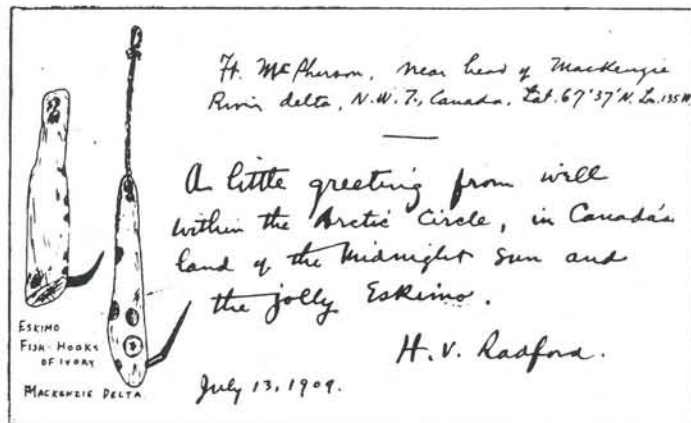


The Government possibly made the error in the territorial designation as "ATHA" because of an error in this Government map. Fort Smith actually was north of the border between Alberta and the N.W.T., not south as shown on the map. The Reports of the Postmaster General continued to list Fort Smith in Alberta long after the town was using an "N.W.T" dater.



## Fort Smith, Atha

A post card showing FORT SMITH, ATHA JUL 28, 1909. This card was written at Fort McPherson, 1300 miles north of Fort Smith, on July 13, 1909. Fort Smith was the first post office south of Fort McPherson; it was the only post office open in the N.W.T. at that time.



The card was written and illustrated by Harry Radford, an American writer who made several trips into the western Arctic. Radford was murdered by Eskimos in 1912, after threatening them with a whip. The RCMP, after hearing that Radford greatly provoked the Eskimos, made no arrests.

## FROM H. V. RADFORD - 1909

Cover mailed by Harry Radford to Dr. Robert Bell (at home, in Ottawa) from the Grand Union Hotel, New York City on JAN 15, 1909. Received at OTTAWA, ONT./CANADA on 3/JAN 6/1909.



The investigation by the Royal North West Mounted Police of the murders of Harry Radford and George Street took about six years. The murders occurred in June 1912, but rumours of the deaths did not reach Chesterfield Inlet for a year, and a search could not be started until the summer of 1914. The police officers assigned to search for Radford and Street were unable to reach Bathurst Inlet. Another patrol was able to reach there in 1918. After these officers investigated, they concluded that the Eskimos had acted in self defense, so no action was taken against them.

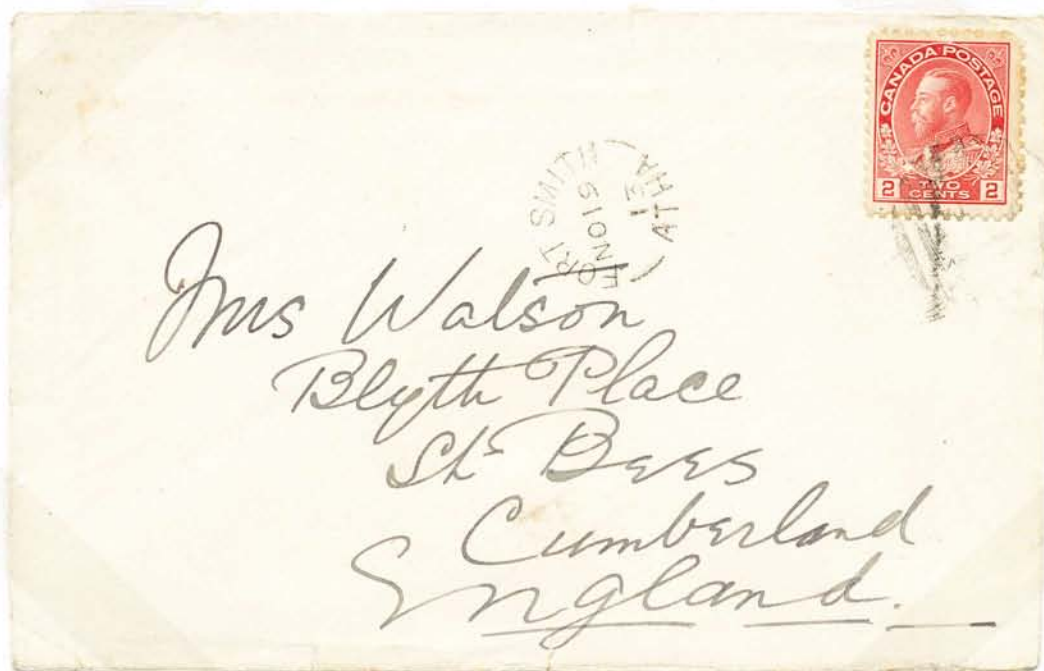
When an Eskimo (who had a good reason for not travelling) would not start the day's trip, Radford apparently had taken a whip and struck him with its handle. During the ensuing fight, Radford was speared by the other Eskimo. Street had tried to escape but was also speared. The argument had occurred because Radford could not understand the language of the Eskimos. In 1912, Bathurst Inlet was isolated from almost all outside influences.

References: "The Radford and Street Murders," *The Beaver*, September 1953, pp. 28, 29.



## Fort Smith, 1913

A cover that was mailed at Fort Smith on NO 19, 1913, with the FORT SMITH, ATHA postmark. Note the 2¢ Empire rate to England.



Other towns reported with "ATHA" postmarks:

Fort Vermilion - on stamp (1931)

Spirit River - on cover (1909)

Both of these towns were in the Province of Alberta when they opened on September 1, 1905.

## FINAL EXPEDITION - 1911

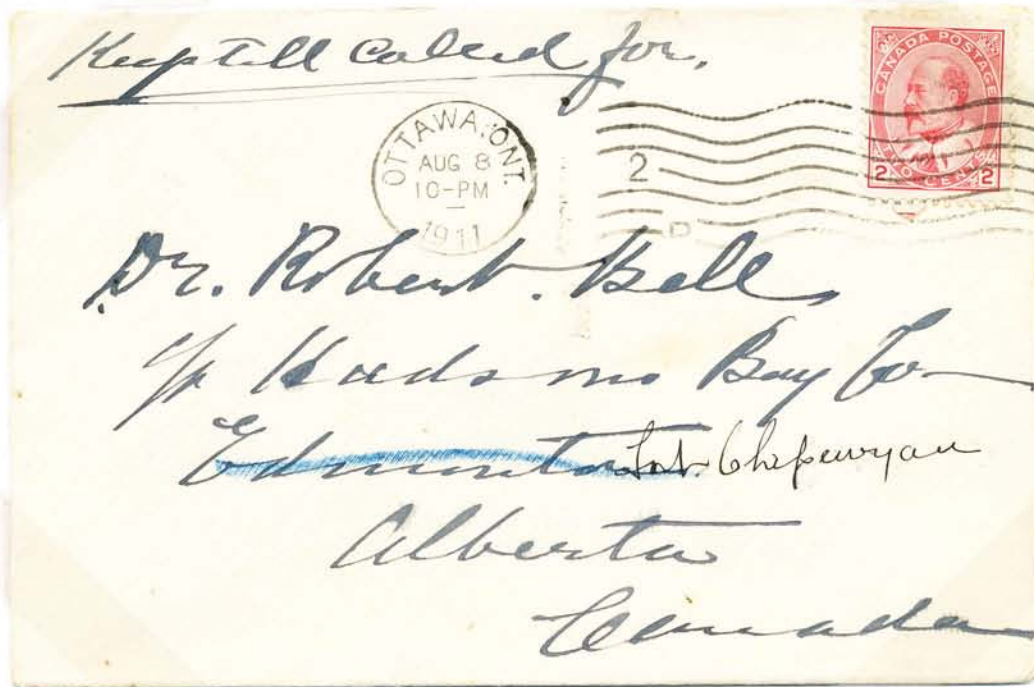
Robert Bell made one final trip to the north, in 1911. His log (sold in the auction of his papers) says that he was on the Athabasca River or Slave River from August 14 to August 31. Covers sent to him were forwarded by the Hudson's Bay Company in Edmonton.

One of several covers mailed to Dr. Bell at Portage La Prairie, Manitoba by his wife, but marked "Please forward" and sent on to the Hudson's Bay Company in Edmonton. This cover reached PORTAGE LA PRAIRIE, MAN. on AU 8, 1911 and EDMONTON, ALTA. on AUG 10, 1911. It was then forwarded from Edmonton to the north. Covers from Ottawa were marked "Please forward" until August 27, then marked "To await Dr. Bell's return." The latest of the covers awaiting Bell was received in Edmonton on September 20.



## To Fort Chipewyan, 1911

These envelopes were mailed to Dr. Robert Bell on his third trip on the Athabasca River. The first was mailed in Ottawa on August 8, 1911, received in Edmonton August 12th, and forwarded by the HBC to Fort Chipewyan. Despite being the longest continuous settlement in Alberta, Fort Chipewyan did not have a post office until June 1, 1912.



The second cover was mailed in Ottawa on AU 12, 1911, received in Edmonton AUG 16, 1911, and forwarded to Bell on the Athabasca.





## HEADING FOR PEACE RIVER COUNTRY

About 1908 homesteaders in number started for the Peace River region. The wise settlers made their trips on the Athabasca Trail and west to Grouard in the winter using oxen or horses and a sleigh.



This card was mailed in Edmonton on JUN 10 /11:30 AM /1914. Its message is :

"I am leaving for Athabasca Landing today noon. Been delayed by washouts. Men all hired and outfit together. Will be gone 3 mos. or more and will go as far as Ft. Chippewyan on Slave R.

Aff. Curt "

When railways reached Lesser Slave Lake and the Peace River country to the west and Fort McMurray (Waterways) to the northeast, Athabasca Landing lost its role as the distribution centre. Other towns such as Grouard similarly withered, as the newer towns grew up.

A cover mailed from Athabasca Landing on FE 8, 1912. Note that a duplex hammer had replaced the broken circle. This letter was carried by stage on the Athabasca Trail. In succeeding years, mail was carried by train between The Landing and Edmonton.

