



Silver in

# COBALT, ONTARIO

and Early Postal History

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When the Timiskaming & Northern Ontario Railway (T&NO) was built from North Bay to New Liskeard (1903–1905), silver was discovered at mile 104 embedded in cobalt “bloom” (erythrite) in the rock cuttings slightly north of Long Lake as is indicated by the arrow in Fig. 1, the main vein of which assayed from 700 to 14,000 ounces per ton of ore<sup>1</sup>. This was the LaRose strike. The townsite was named by Dr. Willet Green Miller (Professor of Geology at Queen’s University and the Provincial Geologist) during a field trip in the spring of 1904,

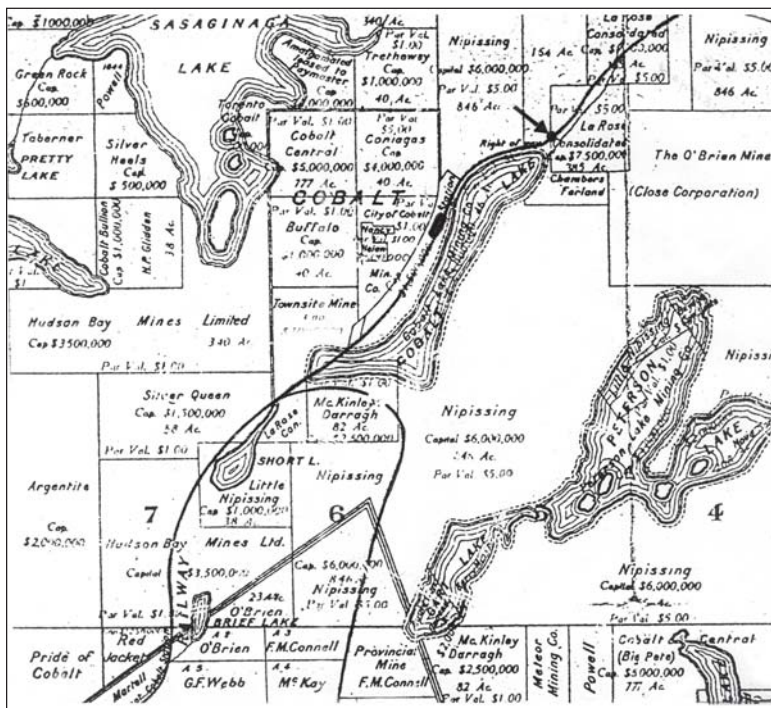


Fig. 1 – A portion of the claims record map of Coleman Township showing the railway line and station, the original (1903) LaRose Strike (arrow) and the locations of the major mining consortia within and around the townsite of Cobalt, Ontario. For each claim, the capital investment, as well as the par value of stock issued is shown.

COURTESY – Staff of the Cobalt Mining Museum.

Fig. 2 – A postcard printed by Lake and Lewis (1905) showing the first railway station in Cobalt, the low, dark building just to the right of the siding.

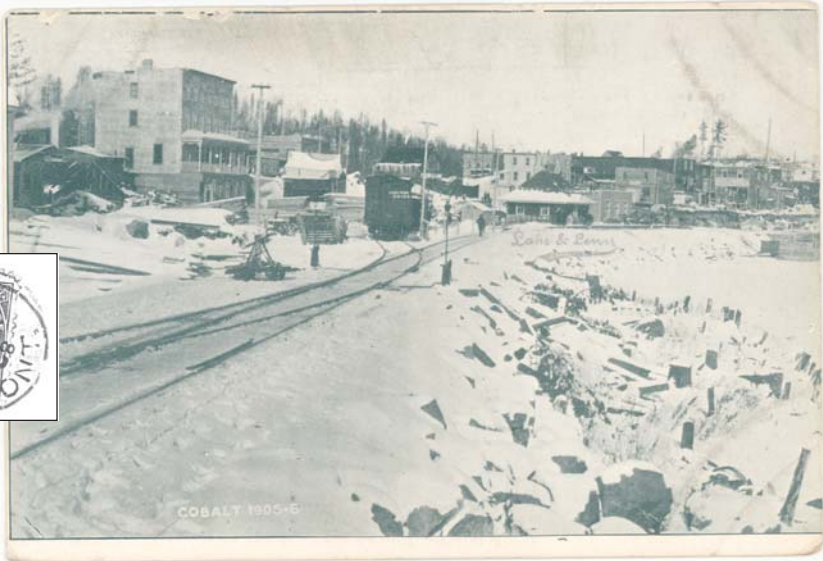


Fig. 3 – COBALT ONT. / PM JUN 11 / 08. This is one 12 known cds hammers for Cobalt. No known proof date.

writing the name “Cobalt” on a piece of board with a burnt stick<sup>1</sup>. News of the silver “strike” was followed by rapid development of the Cobalt “camp”. The T&NO completed the first station on December 6, 1904 (Fig. 2) and began to sell unserviced lots on the rocky terrain overlooking the railway line and the lake, renamed Cobalt Lake. However, as is shown in Fig. 1, mining claims were staked within and around the town.

Silver veins ran in all directions within the townsite and to the east of the lake, some on the surface, some below ground, though most were above the 800 ft. level, giving rise to both open-pit and underground operations. By 1907, when the town was incorporated, there were 11 mines operating within the town boundary, burrowing beneath the meandering streets, buildings, shacks, log cabins and tents built on and around the staked claims<sup>1</sup>. By 1909, when a new and larger railway station was built, the townsite was dotted with large waste tips and headframes, some of which can be seen in Fig. 4.

The railway station is still there, presently being used as a war museum.

Other productive mines were located on the east and south sides of Cobalt Lake, these including the O’Brien Mine, the Nipissing, the Cobalt Lake, the Little Silver Vein and the McKinley-Darragh mines. The last mine was the first and richest strike, the ore assaying 4,000 ounces per ton<sup>1</sup>. Fig. 4 is a view of the McKinley-Darragh mine and the town beyond it showing many mine headframes and, to the left, the Cobalt Reduction Plant for crushing the ore of a number of mines.

Table 1 illustrates the phenomenal amount of silver extracted by some of these mines, second only to that obtained from mines in Mexico. In 1906, 20 mines shipped out \$2 million worth of silver. The peak activity was in 1911 when, with silver worth only 16¢ per oz., 30 million ounces were mined<sup>2</sup>. The total value of silver shipped from all Cobalt area mines between 1904 and 1915 was \$122,750,000. Some mines kept operating until the 1930s when the price of silver rose to 77¢

TABLE 1

*Productivity of Major Silver Mines  
Within the Town of Cobalt\**

MINE NAME	SILVER (OUNCES)	PRODUCT. YEARS
City of Cobalt	12,000,000	1904–1917
Buffalo	14,082,953	1904–1919
Nancy Helen	99,770	
Conigas	31,286,744	1904–1923
Tretheway	6,000,000	1904–1920
Hudson Bay	6,405,938	1904–1923
La Rose	25,324,576	1904–1923
Nipissing (all operations)	100,000,000	1904–1930s

\* Data derived from P. Fancy, *A Coleman Township Road Guide to Historic Cobalt Mines*. Temiskaming-Abitibi Heritage Association, 1994.

per oz. In the first 60 years, the Cobalt “camp” shipped nearly 1.185 million tons of silver highgrade ore and concentrates, over 420.5 million ounces of silver worth more than \$264 million<sup>2</sup>.

The Cobalt post office opened on December 15, 1904, located in the store of Pipe

and Presley General Merchants. An artist’s depiction of the early town (see cover) and a photo view is shown in Fig. 5<sup>3</sup>. Later photographs (in books) show that little change was made in the structure except for an addition on the left side for a restaurant named “Uwanta Lunch”<sup>1</sup>.

Table 2 lists the postmasters of Cobalt, J. F. Presley, of the general store, being the first, serving in this capacity for 13 years until 1917. One postmaster of note was Edward James Holland, an early settler in Haileybury, a former army major and a recipient of the Victoria Cross in the Boer War, who was postmaster from 1931 until his death in 1948<sup>1</sup>. Others served as postmasters for long periods of time.

The first datestamp used in Cobalt was a broken circle (A1 type, 19.5 mm diameter). the earliest recorded date being Aug. 5, 1905<sup>4</sup>. I have yet to see one of these. At some time before May 31, 1906, a circular datestamp, 23mm diameter (Figs. 3, 13) was introduced and used until early 1910. By 1910, the first of many duplex hammers appeared, the one shown in Fig. 8 being an A9 type (23.5 mm diameter)<sup>5</sup>. Later duplex cancels

Fig. 4 – A view of Cobalt from the Nipissing property showing the enlarged 1909 station (left centre), a number of headframes within the townsite and the extensive waste tips from these mines.

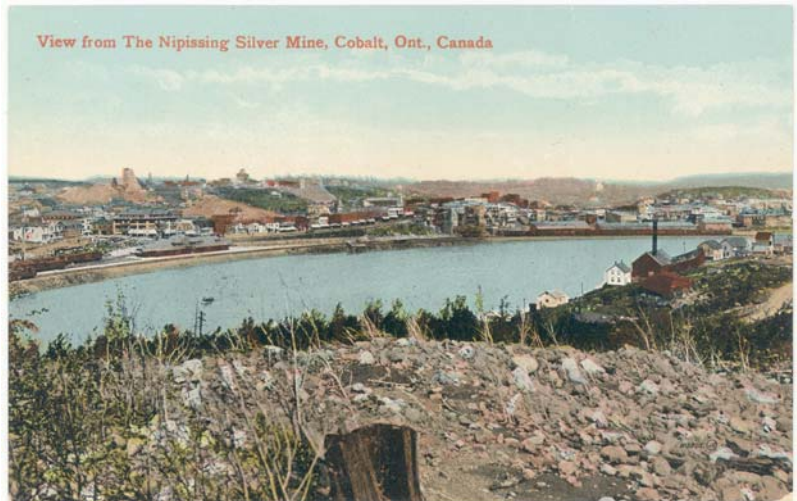




Fig. 5 – A postcard view of Cobalt and the McKinley-Darrogh mine, showing mine head-frames, waste tips and the ore reduction stamping mill (the dark building on the left). The message on this postcard, carrying a 1913, North Bay & Cochrane RPO, was “This gives a good idea of what a silver mining camp looks like”.

Fig. 6 – An photo postcard of the Pipe and Presley store, the location of the first post office. For earlier view see front cover.

COURTESY – Robt. C. Smith

ranged from 23-mm to 24-mm diameter for the datestamp portion. The latest duplex hammer on record was proofed July 31, 1962, with the latest recorded date being Feb. 21, 1963<sup>5</sup>. Machine cancels were common through the 1940s onward (Fig. 13). A circular datestamp (23.5 mm diameter) was still in use in 1986.

Disasters were commonplace in Cobalt. Fire was a constant danger over the years because of the wooden construction of all of the buildings. The fire of July 1909 was the most destructive of any, with a loss of much of the town, except the new railway station (Fig. 4). Fires at the mines were common events. Another ever-present danger has been the occasional cave-in due to the collapse of a tunnel under the streets and building lots, the most recent being the disappearance of the front lawn of the senior citizens’ residence down a hole.

The town of Cobalt was revitalized during and after World War II when uses for the undesirable cobalt lying around in tailings were recognized<sup>1</sup>. These included uses in: jet engines because of its heat-resisting properties; a cobalt-chromium alloy (stellite) in cutting tools; electroplating; and isolation of the isotope cobalt-60 for use in treating cancers<sup>1</sup>.



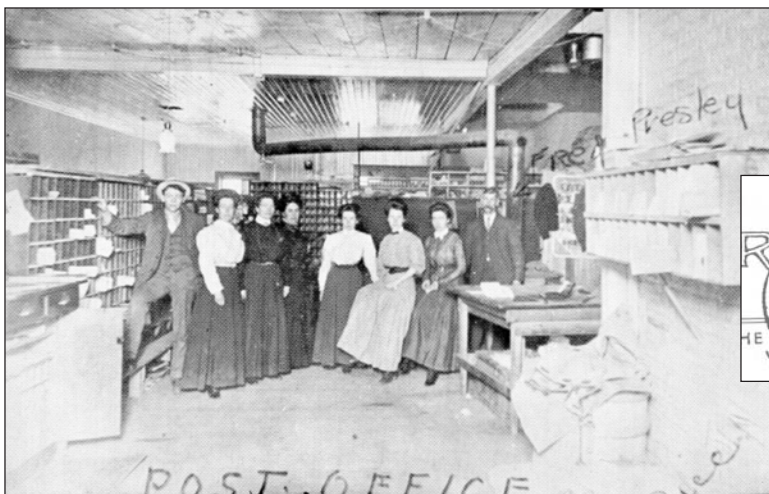


Fig. 7 – A reproduction of an early post card showing Postmaster Fred Prestley (right) with store clerks and clients.  
COURTESY – Robt. C. Smith



Fig. 8 – Cobalt (DON-356) was first duplex hammer and was used between 1908 and 1912.

TABLE 2  
**Appointments of Postmasters in Cobalt\***

POSTMASTER	APPOINTMENT	VACANCY
J. F. Presley	1904-12-15	1917-12-22
Walter J. Binney	1918-03-04	1931-04-
Edward J. Holland	1931-07-24	1948-06-18
Miss Alson Creighton	1920-04-28	Assistant
Miss Alson Creighton	1948-06-21	Acting PM
Miss Alson Creighton	1948-11-09	1965-03-31
Miss Eliza Creighton	1965-04-01	1967-09-29
Peter B. Murray	1907-09-29	1981-03-02
Michel St. Jean	1981-03-02	

\* Data obtained from Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

Fig. 9 – This cover from E. A. Zakibe, General Dry Goods, mailed to The A. W. Ault Co. in Ottawa was postmarked with Cobalt's second duplex hammer, DON- 357. This damaged hammer was replaced by the one shown in the inset (DON-358).



There is an excellent mining museum on the main street of Cobalt opposite the visitor centre, the model headframe and the ore trucks. It is well worth a visit to see the samples of ore as they were seen by the early miners, the trickles and streams of raw silver embedded in the cobalt-tinged rock.

It should be appreciated that the profits

Fig. 10 – An unused postcard (photograph) showing the July, 1909 fire that destroyed most of Cobalt's wooden buildings.



Fig. 11 – Nipissing Mining Co. Limited cover mailed to a supplier in Kitchener. (DON-359)



Fig. 12 – Early use of machine cancel on the post card of “The Square, Cobalt” as shown on the front cover. COBALT ONT. / AUG 27 / 3 -PM / 1929. Cobalt utilized a large number of duplex hammers and machine cancels indicating a busy office during the mining period.



made in silver in Cobalt and in Coleman Township went north into the Kirkland Lake and Porcupine “camps” when gold was discovered there. Names familiar in Cobalt became famous further north in the gold fields. A message on one postcard in my possession, dated Sept. 27, 1911, states that the writer was “off for Porcupine gold camp in the morning”. Perhaps, another story!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like to thank the staff of the Cobalt Mining Museum for discussions and my colleague, David Platt, who obtained the list of Cobalt postmasters from Library and Archives Canada. ☒

REFERENCES:

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4. W. Bruce Graham. *Ontario Broken Circles*. D. Handelman (Editor), Postal History Society of Canada, 1999.
5. R. A. Lee. *Catalogue of Canadian Duplex Cancellations*, Second Edition. Robert A. Lee Philatelist Ltd.

*A Selection of Postmarks used in a Century at Cobalt*



COBALT ONT.  
PM / FE 18 / 35  
DON-361



COBALT ONT.  
PM / 9 VIII / 60  
DON-366A



COBALT ONT.  
PM / 7 VII / 98  
CDS



COBALT ONT.  
AM / MY 31 / 06  
CDS



COBALT ONT.  
PM / XI 17 / 52  
DON-365



COBALT ONT.  
PM / VII 17 / 69  
CDS

Fig. 13

*Over the past century Cobalt has used many different postmarking instruments. There are 13 different recorded duplex hammers, at least 12 different cds devices, one known machine cancel and numerous designated instruments for money orders, registration, etc.*