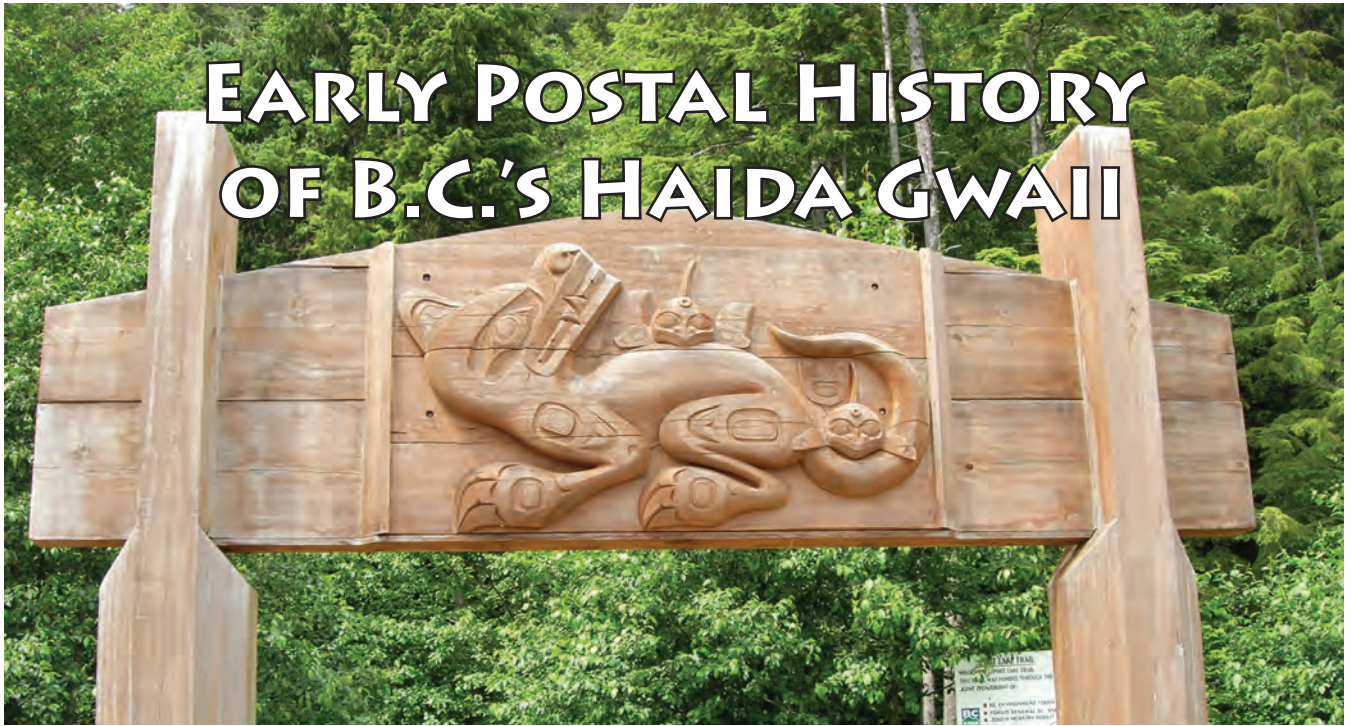


EARLY POSTAL HISTORY OF B.C.'S HAIDA GWAII



Andrew Scott

The remote archipelago of Haida Gwaii, separated from British Columbia's mainland by the treacherous waters of Hecate Strait, was one of the last parts of B.C. to acquire official postal services. The first post office, Skidegate, opened in 1897. Twelve years passed before the next offices—Jedway, Lockeport and Queen Charlotte—were established. In the period between 1909 and 1918, however, increased industrial activity and a flood of homesteaders resulted in 17 additional offices being needed. Most were extremely short-lived; only five of these 21 early post offices still exist. (Another ten, also short-lived in most cases, appeared after 1918.) This article describes Haida Gwaii's pioneer post offices and postal history, and illustrates some of the era's scarce postal markings.

The archipelago was formerly known as the Queen Charlotte Islands, after the sailing vessel Queen Charlotte. George Dixon, the captain, was the first European to trade extensively with the Haida, in 1787. In 2009 the geographical name was officially changed to Haida Gwaii, which can be translated as "islands of the people." There are two main islands—Graham and Moresby—and several hundred smaller ones. The Haida have occupied their homeland for millennia, and developed a notably rich island culture,

but non-Native settlement only began about 135 years ago.

The first Europeans to visit Haida Gwaii were searching for sea otter furs. In 1851, a small discovery at Mitchell Inlet set off B.C.'s first gold rush. Between 1859 and 1862, William Downie, Francis Poole and others found promising signs of copper and coal.

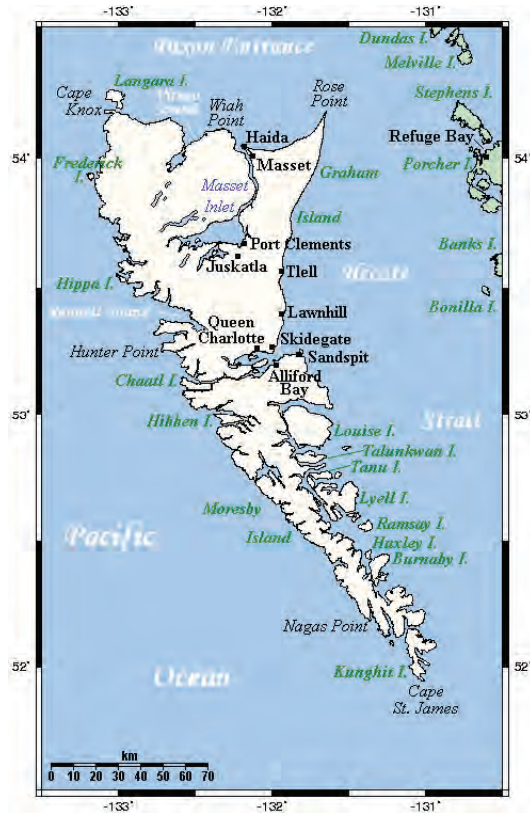
Above: a sign incorporating a Haida woodcarving at Spirit Lake in the old growth forest in Skidegate. Photo courtesy of the Queen Charlotte Visitor Centre, Queen Charlotte, B.C.

The Cowgitz coal mine operated briefly in the late 1860s, and a few early fur-trading posts appeared. But it was the humble dogfish that provided a basis for the region's first permanent industry, established in 1876. This was the Oil Works, on Skidegate Channel, where a high-quality lubricating oil was refined from dogfish livers.¹

Before the mid-1890s, mail leaving the islands was carried "by favour" (ie. privately) and entered the postal stream elsewhere, often at nearby Port Essington or Fort Simpson—or much further south. Early letters were taken across Hecate Strait by canoe, a journey of between 60 and 140 kilometres, depending on one's starting and ending points. Favour mail was carried by pioneer vessels such as the tug *Skidegate* (owned by the Oil Works), the *Glad Tidings* (operated by Thomas Crosby's Methodist mission) and the Hudson's Bay Co's *Otter*. As settlers and entrepreneurs kept arriving, marine services became more frequent and regular, and featured larger steamships, including the Canadian Pacific Navigation Co.'s *Princess Louise*, *Islander* and *Amur*. In 1909 the Grand Trunk Pacific secured the Haida Gwaii mail contract, for which it initially received \$200 per trip, and began operating the *Prince Albert*, *Prince John* and *Prince Charles* to and from the islands.²

Skidegate

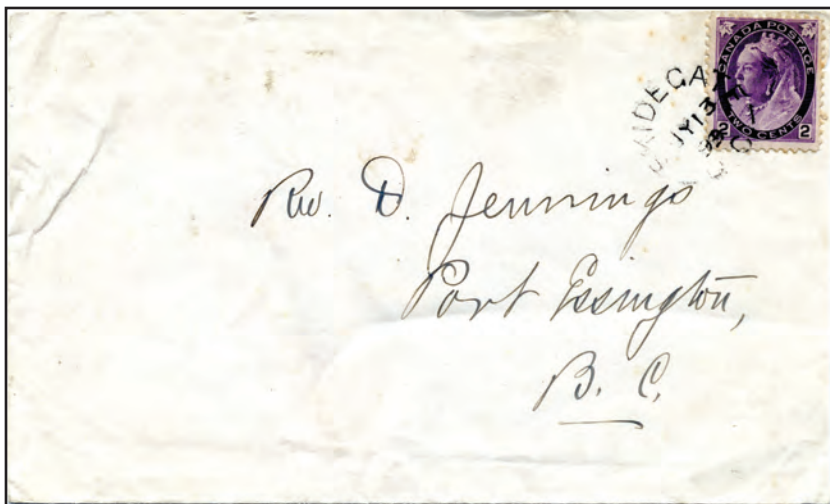
Haida Gwaii's first post office, located on the southeast coast of Graham Island, opened on Sept. 1, 1897, at the offices of the Oil Works.³ Known as Skidegate Landing today, the site serves as the main ferry terminus. Robert Tennant had purchased the oil refinery from its founders in 1885; he later added a clam cannery. By applying for a post office to be called Skidegate, he somewhat deviously appropriated a name that was well



Map of Haida Gwaii

known in the region—one that more properly belonged to a large and ancient Haida community located about three kilometres to the northeast. (When the First Nation village of Skidegate finally got its own post office, in 1921, it had to call itself Skidegate Mission.)

In a June 3, 1896, letter recommending Tennant as the first postmaster,⁴ postal inspector Everard Fletcher confirmed that two families "and about 20 single men, prospectors and employees in Skidegate Oil Works," lived at the site. Fletcher stated that mail was already being delivered and picked up at Skidegate, despite the fact that no post office yet existed. "The contract," he



SKIDEGATE / B.C. / JY 13 / 99
 This cover shows the earliest reported postal marking from Haida Gwaii. It is also the only 19th-century cover known from the archipelago. While Port Essington is a mere 160 km from Skidegate, the cover had to make a 1,600-km journey via Victoria to get to its destination.

An unused real-photo viewcard of the Haida village of Skidegate (later known as Skidegate Mission), showing a scene that likely dates from the late 1880s. The photographer is not credited.



wrote, “now in force with Capt. J. D. Warren for service of ‘Naas Harbour and Victoria and Skidegate’ provides for the service of the office now applied for, which is the terminus of the route, and no extra expense will be necessary in serving it with mails.”⁵ James Warren was an early trader, sealer and steamship operator on the B.C. coast.

In 1910, a townsite development was

laid out at the Oil Works and registered as Graham City (a name earlier abandoned by the community now known as Masset). Despite a vigorous promotional and advertising campaign, Graham City failed to attract settlers, and a nearby townsite called Queen Charlotte City (or Queen Charlotte) became established instead. Throughout this period of competition, however, the post



JEDWAY / B.C. / OC 25 / 09
 The earliest reported postmark from Jedway: OC 25/09. The face of this coloured viewcard shows "Shawatlans Falls near Prince Rupert," with an OC 29/09 Prince Rupert transit cds.

office retained the useful name of Skidegate. A small community lingered on at this location, but the post office eventually closed on Oct. 29, 1971.

Jedway and Lockeport

These two post offices, both established on Aug. 15, 1909, resulted from a prospecting boom that occurred on central and southern Moresby Island in the early 1900s. The mineral sought after was copper. Beginning in 1906, wharves, a sawmill, hotel, store and numerous cabins were built at Jedway, but only the Ikeda mine in nearby Ikeda Cove proved successful.

Sixty kilometres to the northwest, at Lockeport, another community of prospectors sprang up in 1907. A store, post office and deputy mining recorder's office soon opened. Numerous claims were staked at both Lockeport and Jedway, and some development work was done, but little actual mining took place. Speculation was the name of the game: the attempt to sell claims to ignorant investors. World War I

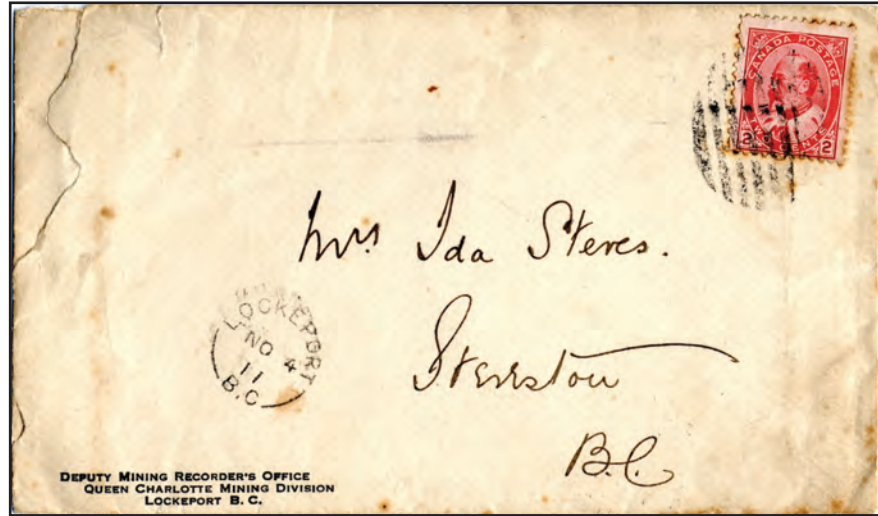
put a damper on growth, the copper boom waned, and people moved away. Jedway's post office shut its doors in 1931. Lockeport, temporarily sustained by the building of a salmon cannery, hung on a bit longer; its post office closed in 1938. Covers from either of these places are very scarce.

In 1962 a major open-pit iron-ore mine began operations near Jedway. A large camp was established on the east side of Harriet Harbour, and a second Jedway post office opened. It closed in 1968 after the ore was depleted. All the buildings at the site were removed.

Queen Charlotte

A third Haida Gwaii post office also opened on Aug. 15, 1909. Queen Charlotte—or Queen Charlotte City, as it was called, with some exaggeration, by its boosters—competed with Graham City (at nearby Skidegate) over which place would become the focus of settlement in the area. Townsites were surveyed at each location and building lots keenly promoted to potential purchasers.

LOCKEPORT / B.C /
 NO 4 / 11
 A NO 4/11 cover to
 Steveston from the
 Queen Charlotte Mining
 Division's deputy mining
 recorder. The addressee,
 Mrs Ida Steves, was a
 member of Steveston's
 founding family. An
 enclosure acknowledges
 a payment Mrs Steves
 had made on work done
 on the Fortune Group of
 claims.



Both “cities,” of course, existed mainly on paper. But Queen Charlotte had an advantage: its chief salesman was the energetic Daniel “Windy” Young, a master of his trade, who out-persuaded all rivals. Soon, Queen Charlotte boasted a large sawmill, a hotel and the region’s first newspaper (founded by Windy). The initial postmaster was George DeWitt Beattie, who remained in office for 31 years and also operated a pioneer drugstore. Queen Charlotte’s post office is still open (one of only six in Haida Gwaii today). The “city” flourished and remains one of two main commercial centres in the archipelago.

Masset

The other commercial centre is Masset (or Massett, as the post office name was originally spelled), located at the mouth of Masset Inlet on the north shore of Graham Island. It also got its start in the early 1900s. An application submitted in 1900 by post office inspector W. H. Dorman proposed Charles Harrison as postmaster but was rejected. “Residents at Massett now receive

their mail from Port Simpson,” wrote Dorman, “from which place all supplies are obtained, by means of an Indian schooner which makes occasional trips between these places. It is possible that arrangements might be made to have an occasional mail conveyed between Massett and Port Simpson, but there would be no regularity about such a service. I do not consider a post office at Massett is required at present.”⁶

The post office was eventually authorized in 1906, it seems, but its opening was delayed until 1909 (Archives Canada lists Jan 6, 1910, as the date of establishment but Aug. 1, 1909, as the date of appointment of the first postmaster). This was Rev. William E. Collison, son of the noted Anglican missionary William Henry Collison.

Collison was transferred to Stewart early in 1910, and the promoters of Graham City, a townsite development three kilometres further south, slyly took over the postal establishment. The missionary had opened the original office at the ancient Haida village of Massett, located at the tip of the peninsula



An early real-photo viewcard of Queen Charlotte City, unused, showing the sawmill at left. A note on the back identifies the building at centre as the boarding house for the lumber company's workers. The photographer's name does not appear on the card.

This unused real-photo viewcard (Peerless Photo 68) shows the main street at Old Massett as it looked about 1915. The large bear on the memorial post at centre marks the former location of Property House, owned by Chief Albert Edward Edenshaw and torn down about 1885.



that protrudes into Massett Harbour. He intended it to serve the area's First Nation inhabitants. The townsite men, knowing they would never receive authorization for a second post office so close to the first one, changed the name of their venture to Massett and, after Collison's departure, moved the original office to the store of James Martin in the new townsite. (Another budding townsite development further south, at Skidegate,

then took over the name Graham City.)

James Martin became Massett's second postmaster, and the Martin family controlled the office for the next 60 years. But now there were two communities named Massett, which caused confusion, so the First Nation village was usually called Old Massett (later Haida), while the townsite was known informally as New Massett.

The second "t" at the end of Massett was



HYDAH /B.C./SP 1/12
The only known cover from Hydah, registered, dated SP 1/12 and sent to an Ontario seed company.

LAWN HILL /B.C./FE 1/12
An early registered cover from Lawn Hill.



dropped in 1948, and the post office name changed to Masset on May 25. This was supposedly at the request of the postmaster general, because of confusion with the B.C. town of Merritt.

Hydah and Lawn Hill

Post offices for these two agricultural communities, both located on the southeast

coast of Graham Island, were opened on April 1, 1911. Hydah's first postmaster was William Leary, who came to Haida Gwaii as manager of the Skidegate Oil Works and stayed on, with his family, as a merchant and magistrate. The Learys lived near the mouth of Miller Creek, south of Lawn Hill. William wanted his post office to be called Miller Creek, but that name was apparently in use

elsewhere and his application was turned down. He tried again, with Hydah, and was accepted. The office closed on Feb. 28, 1918. Only a single cover is known from Hydah.

Lawn Hill covers are also scarce, with only five reported. Robert Scharfee, the first postmaster, and his wife opened a store on the south side of Lawn Creek, at the intersection of two early Graham Island roads. There was rich soil in the district, and the East Coast Farmer's Institute operated a pioneer experimental farm at Lawn Hill. The community also sported a hotel and a Dominion Wireless Service station. The post office closed on Oct. 31, 1930.

Rose Harbour and Naden Harbour

Whaling was an important early industry in Haida Gwaii, but little mail from the archipelago's whaling stations seems to have survived. Two stations, Rose Harbour and Naden Harbour, had post offices.

Rose Harbour, located on Kunghit Island, south of Moresby Island, was Haida Gwaii's southernmost settlement. It was originally known as Port Huff. The Pacific Whaling Co. built a base there in 1910; the post office opened on July 1, 1911. Between 100 and 150 men, many of them Japanese, worked at Rose Harbour, which was one of the most productive stations on the B.C. coast. It shut down in 1943; the machinery was moved to Coal Harbour on Vancouver Island. The post office, which closed on Oct. 6, 1943, used two different broken circle hammers, one proofed in 1911 and one in 1927. Despite the fairly long period of operation, no covers or cards from Rose Harbour are known—and no examples of the first broken circle hammer. Three strikes of the second hammer have been reported, all on piece.

The Naden Harbour whaling station, located on the north coast of Graham Island,

was built in 1911 by Canadian North Pacific Fisheries and acquired by Consolidated Whaling Inc. of Toronto in 1918. It remained in operation until 1942 (and went bankrupt in 1946). Its usable machinery was also transferred to Coal Harbour, owned at that time by B.C. Packers. A post office opened on Oct. 1, 1912, and closed June 30, 1917. The Naden Harbour broken circle postmark is only known from a 1912 proof strike; no examples have been reported, on or off cover.

Graham Centre

Charles M. Adam established a store and promoted a townsite development called Graham Centre on Masset Inlet about 1911. In 1912 he opened the first post office in the area and became the first postmaster. At nearby Queenstown (later Port Clements), Eli Tingley was busy publicizing a rival townsite scheme. There was only room for one settlement on the inlet, and Graham Centre lost the competition. The disruption of World War I accelerated the community's demise, and the post office closed in 1916.

Graham Centre, incidentally, was named because it was approximately in the centre of Graham Island, the largest island in the Haida Gwaii archipelago—which in turn was named for Sir James Robert Graham, a 19th-century British statesman and former First Lord of the Admiralty. The two Graham City townsites, however (one at Massett and one at Skidegate), were named after Benjamin Graham, a wealthy Texan, president of the Graham Steamship, Coal and Lumber Co., which acquired huge timber and coal leases on the islands and was also active in land development.

Only one cover is known from Graham Centre.

GRAHAM CENTRE / B.C /
JUL 3/12

The only known cover or card from Graham Centre, sent by postmaster Adams (see initials CMA). Postal records list this office as opening on August 1, 1912, but the card is dated JY 3/12. The face shows a real-photo view of a Skeena River sternwheeler damaged by a falling tree.



TLELL B.C / MR 20 / 19
A registered seed-merchant cover to Ontario, dated MR 20/19. The cover was routed through Prince Rupert and has EDM & PR GEORGE and TOR & FT WM RPO postmarks.

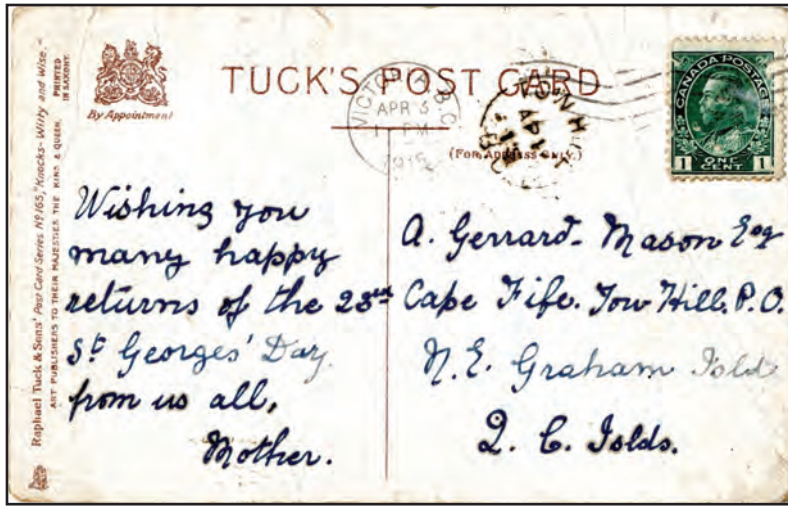
Tlell

The Tlell area, on the east side of Graham Island, is mainly residential today but got its start as the dream of William Thomas Hodges, better known as Mexican Tom, who created a cattle ranch there about 1904 on the grassy banks of the Tlell River. Other homesteaders and farmers arrived, and a pioneer hotel, the Dunes, was built nearby. A post office, which is still open, was established on April 1, 1912.

The Hodges ranch was acquired and expanded by the Walsh and, later, the Richardson families. Today the post office is located on the Richardson Ranch. Tlell is a Haida First Nation name said to mean either “place of big surf” or “land of berries.”

Tow Hill

The hill is a 150-metre-high formation of columnar basalt on North Beach, on the north



TOW HILL /B.C / AP 17/15
 Only two Tow Hill covers or cards have been reported. This one, a humorous postcard from Victoria, has a slightly indistinct receiving mark dated sometime in April 1915.

coast of Graham Island. Many Haida legends are associated with this landmark. The district was first homesteaded in the early 1900s. Jim Anderson established a store near the hill, and a post office opened on April 19, 1913. Tow Hill was one of several Haida Gwaii settlements that failed to survive the turmoil of World War I, when many young men left the area and did not return. The post office closed on July 1, 1921.

Prior to 2009, this office was represented by a single broken circle marking on a small piece. That year, however, two post cards from Tow Hill were discovered.

Woden River and Nadu River

These two agricultural communities, both located on the east side of Masset Sound, were very short-lived. Woden River was sometimes referred to as the "Holy City." Rev. J. B. McDonald erected a Roman Catholic church there in 1912, and a store and post office opened the following year. Seventh Day Adventist pastor Tom Watson and his followers, from Sewall, then moved in, and a hotel and boatyard were built. The

post office shut down in 1917 and opened again, under the name Watun River, in 1923. A cannery operated at this site for several years, but the Watun River office closed in 1932. Only one broken circle cancel, on a post card, is known from Woden River; two markings are reported from Watun River.

Nadu River, meanwhile, a few kilometres south of Woden River, opened its post office, with A. Johnson as the first postmaster, on Feb. 1, 1914. A landing float and store were built on the site of an old seasonal Haida First Nation camp. The post office closed on Sept. 20, 1923. The Nadu River broken circle was unreported until December 2010, when three post cards were discovered by the granddaughter of Elizabeth Mary Evans, the second postmaster.

Nadu, incidentally, comes from the Haida word for "nose," after the promontory created where the river enters Masset Sound. Woden is a modification of an unknown Haida word.

WODEN HILL/ B.C. / DE 16 / 13
 This real-photo viewcard of the
 observation room on the
 SS Prince Rupert features the
 only known postal marking
 from Woden River,
 dated DE 16/13.



Alliford Bay and Sewall

No postal markings have been reported from either of these communities. Broken circle proof strikes exist, however, from both offices. Alliford Bay post office opened in 1913 and closed less than six months later. The bay was the site of a “model cannery town,” established by B.C. Fisheries Ltd. The scheme attracted a number of workers from Britain, and enjoyed a brief notoriety in the newspapers, but soon went into receivership. A smaller cannery operated until 1927.

During World War II, a large RCAF seaplane station was based in the bay, and a post office, Alliford Bay MPO 1127, operated for about eight months. Today the bay is the southern terminus for the B.C. Ferries route between Graham and Moresby islands.

Sewall, named after Samuel Dart Sewall, an official of the Star Realty Co., which promoted a townsite here, only had a post office from 1917 to 1919. Star City, as it was also called, vied with several other locations to become the commercial centre for settlers on Masset Inlet. A sawmill operated there,

but the location was a poor one and most families moved away after World War I.

Port Clements

This village on Masset Inlet got its start in 1908 when Elias Tingley pre-empted land there. Brother Bert Tingley built an early hotel and James Martin opened a store. Eli laid out and promoted a townsite on his property, which he originally called Queenstown (after storekeeper Martin’s hometown in Ireland), but the application for a post office under that name was denied, because of duplication elsewhere.

The name was changed to Port Clements instead, after Herbert Clements, a local realtor and the region’s member of parliament. Clements, who had earlier served as an MP in Ontario, arranged for a government wharf to be built at the settlement. A post office, which still operates today, was eventually opened on May 2, 1914, with A. R. Mallory as the first postmaster. The community is largely dependent on the forestry industry for its economy.



PORT CLEMENTS/B.C./
DE 1/14
The earliest reported postal
marking from Port Clements is
DE 15/14.

Pacofi

One of the scarcest Haida Gwaii postal markings comes from the tiny fisheries depot of Pacofi, located on the east side of Moresby Island. The name was formed by taking the first two letters of each word of a corporate name: Pacific Coast Fisheries Ltd. The company built a cold-storage, ice and reduction plant at this site in 1909, but soon went out of business. Alvo von Alvensleben, rumoured to be a German spy, headed Pacific Coast Fisheries, and gossip circulated that Pacofi was a submarine base in disguise. A salmon saltery operated there from 1927 to 1936.

The post office's first period of operation began on Aug. 28, 1915, and ended on Dec. 1, 1919. A broken-circle postmark had apparently been proofed as early as Aug. 25, 1911, four years before the office opened. Only one strike from Pacofi's first period is known—a poor, partial specimen on piece.

B.C. Packers bought the Pacofi property in 1938 and built a cannery, which burnt down in 1943 and was rebuilt. A post office

opened again and functioned from 1939 to 1949. The cannery closed for good in 1949 and most of the buildings were sold or razed, though one large structure remained intact for many years. A circular datestamp was in use at Pacofi during its second opening. Examples are scarce. No covers or cards are known from either period of operation.

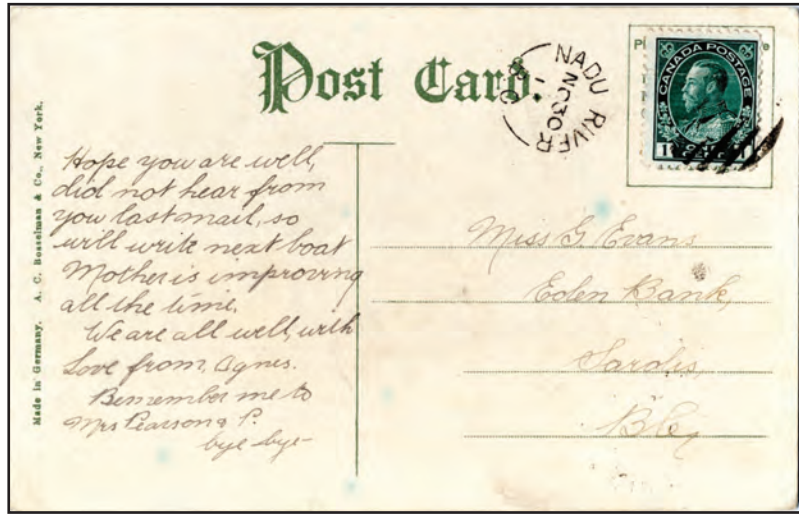
Sandspit

Early homesteaders ran cattle and sheep in this flat, grassy area on northeast Moresby Island. A school opened, and logging eventually became an economic mainstay. The RCAF built an airstrip there in 1943—now Haida Gwaii's only commercial airport. Today Sandspit is also home to an important federal communications centre. It is the only community of any size on Moresby Island. The post office, which is still open, was established on Nov. 1, 1915.

Buckley Bay and Thurston Harbour

These two forestry settlements were both established in 1918, near the end of

NADU RIVER / B.C / NO 30 / 14
 No markings from Nadu River
 were known until December
 2010, when three viewcards,
 including this one, dated
 NO 30/14, were discovered by
 the granddaughter of Nadu
 River's second postmaster.



BUCKLEY BAY / B.C / OC 1 / 20
 A scarce Buckley Bay
 broken circle, dated OC 1/20,
 on a coloured Prairie
 viewcard to Chicago.



World War I, to cut, mill and transport Sitka or "airplane" spruce for Canada's Imperial Munitions Board. The wood, famous for its lightness and strength, was used to build a variety of British warplanes.

Buckley Bay was located on the northwest shore of Masset Inlet. A large sawmill was constructed that could cut 150,000 board feet of lumber a day. Four hundred men were

employed, but after the war, demand for spruce collapsed. The Los Angeles Lumber Co. took the mill over in 1922 and shipped cants to the US, but the operation was shut down in 1925 and the site gradually abandoned. A post office opened on July 15, 1918, and closed on Sept. 30, 1934. Only five covers from Buckley Bay have been reported.



▲ THURSTON HARBOUR/ B.C./ NO ?? / 1922

A registered cover to the *Timberman* magazine, indistinctly dated November 1922. These are the only reported postal markings from Thurston Harbour.

Thurston Harbour is on Talunkwan Island, off the east coast of Moresby Island. The munitions board used the site as a collection base for spruce timber. No expense was spared to turn the remote landing into a miniature town, complete with hospital, offices, houses, a YMCA recreation centre, wireless station and store. Three large sawmills were almost finished when the war ended, and everything was abandoned or sold for a pittance. A post office opened on Nov. 1, 1918, and shut down on April 15, 1926. Post-war, the harbour remained a logging centre for a succession of companies until the 1970s. Only one postal marking from Thurston Harbour has been reported, on a registered cover.

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2. *Prince Ships of Northern BC: Ships of the Grand Trunk Pacific and Canadian National Railways*, by Norman Hacking, p 20.
3. Post office openings and closings are taken from *A Checklist of British Columbia Post Offices*, edited by William Topping.
4. Information on postmasters is taken from the "Post Offices and Postmasters" database on the Library and Archives Canada website, www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/post-offices
5. *British Columbia Post Office Revenues, 1871-1921 (Volume 2)*, by Tracy Cooper, p 675.
6. *BC Post Office Revenues (Volume 1)*, p. 441.