
Researching Canadian Postal History:

A Primer

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The author thanks Gray Scrimgeour for his assistance in preparing this article.

The editor asked me to write an article about researching postal history. While I can write about how I do it for northern postal history items, many of these techniques can be easily applied to your own area of interest. These tricks-of-the-trade should assist you in turning your covers into stories.

Sender, Return Address and Enclosures

With Canadian postal history, my very rough guess would be that less than 50% of the surviving covers, cards, wrappers and forms have a return address. Even if there is no return address on a cover, there may be other ways to check who sent it or when it was sent. Check inside the cover, especially on the flap (try inside the flap too) or for any enclosure. Even if you think the enclosure is just a blank piece of paper, it can be worth checking it because someone may have put a message on it. Philatelists would often send self-addressed covers and not seal the envelopes. The person who handled the mail may have left a greeting or message on the stuffer (see Figure 1 on page 12).

There may be clues by determining the manufacturer of the stationery or paper that was used in making an envelope

or postal history item. Many government forms have printing dates and numbers on them that will indicate when an item may have been used, even if it is not dated in some other manner. Check for watermarks or embossing (see Figure 2 on page 13).

If you are really keen to get more information on the sender of a postal history item, do a thorough internet search. You will sometimes be amazed at what turns up. I like Dogpile www.dogpile.com as an internet search engine because it combines results from a number of other search engines such as Google and Yahoo. Try doing searches with dates, places, adding the word "history", using just the last name. Genealogy websites are becoming much more useful and helpful in providing vital statistics information (birth, marriage, death data). Newspapers are increasingly being made available on-line, sometimes in completely searchable formats and occasionally for free! These can be very helpful in tracking down events, first-hand accounts and business information. Subscriptions are sometimes required but can usually be cancelled within a certain trial period which may still allow you to do

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Figure 1. Two interesting philatelic covers with a printed cachet for the 25th anniversary of Peary's trip to the North Pole. The top cover had what appeared to be a plain paper insert, but when I opened the cover, I found an insert with a note: "Greetings from Hopedale, Labrador." "Effie M. Morrissey"/"R.C. Bartlett Master./ per R.F.D." The bottom cover is dated from Craig Harbour, NWT on August 19, 1934, a rare date other than the regular call of the Eastern Arctic Patrol (the Nascopie called there on September 16-17, 1934). The insert helps prove that the two covers were carried by Capt. Bartlett on board his ship.



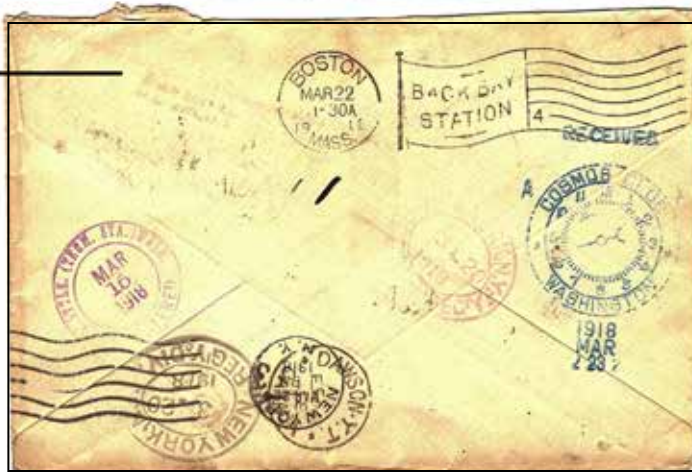


Figure 2. Registered cover sent by Stefansson on Canadian Arctic Expedition (CAE) stationery, mailed from Herschel Island, Yukon or Fort McPherson, NWT. Carried out on the Dawson Patrol of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police (RNWMP) and placed in the mail at Dawson on February 28, 1918. The stationery had apparently been sent by Mrs. Anderson, care of her husband, to the men (see Jenness 1991, pages 362 and 786, note 7). The envelope is on stationery of an odd size for North American mail of this period. There is an embossed imprint on the back of the envelope that reads "WILL H. BECK CO./SIOUX CITY, IOWA". Will H. Beck Company was a large jewellery store in Sioux City. The Andersons lived in Sioux City at the time of the CAE, so Mrs. Anderson probably arranged for the purchase of stationery from this firm.

Figure 2

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your research for free. Some helpful websites include:

<http://www.genealogybank.com/gbnk/>

<http://www.ancestry.ca/>

<http://newspaperarchive.com/>

Address

You can apply the same research techniques in searching for information on the recipient of a postal history item and the final destination. Check to see if there may be any docketing or notes made on the item that indicate when it may have been received, who it may have been from or the subject matter of the contents. Figure 3 (see facing page) shows an intriguing example of docketing that led to some interesting research to put it all together.

Markings and Routings

While a straight-line journey between a return address and the recipient's home almost never happens, postal markings can often provide additional clues as to actual transportation routes and handling. Franking, covered in the next section, may also come into play as to what type of mail service was prepaid or available.

Two helpful mapping tools are:

- **Toporama** (<http://atlas.nrcan.gc.ca/site/english/toporama/index.html>) is The National Atlas on-line at the Natural Resources Canada website. This contains scalable maps that show communities, geographic features and more that is searchable by name. This can provide useful information on the exact location of a community or post office and the surface routes between

communities. Unfortunately, the features are mapped based on air photo surveys that were often carried out in the 1960s to present so historical data is not presented. Maps can be saved and I have used them in postal history articles.

- **Google Earth** is a searchable set of air photo and satellite images that covers the entire planet. You will need to download the program at www.google.ca and do a search for "Google Earth". Addresses, communities, businesses, and geographic features are some of the features that can be searched for in the images. Once a feature is identified, it is possible to zoom in and out. The resolution is quite good in built-up areas where individual buildings and vehicles can be seen. Recently, street views have been added for an increasing number of major roads, so one can actually see what the features look like, just as though one were walking or driving by. Images can be saved as jpeg files. There are even some historical air or satellite images from some places.

There are some helpful sources of information on Canadian post offices and postal markings. There is a searchable database of post office and postmasters on the Library and Archives Canada website at: <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/post-offices/001001-100.01-e.php>.

Office openings, closings, changes of name, postmasters and their period of service can be found there. Unfortunately, the database is only searchable by post office name and location but very important clues for postal historians can often be found. For example, if you ever see a man-

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Figure 3. This rather plain-looking cover would be very difficult to identify without the docketing at the left in pencil that reads "Posted from Herschel Baillie Island/Arctic SS Roche/Aug 4/28/Eric (SEALEY)". This tells us that the cover and enclosure were dated August 4, 1928 and mailed from Herschel Island, Yukon or Baillie Island, NWT. The logs of the St. Roch are at the Vancouver Maritime Museum (see http://vancouvermaritimemuseum.com/sites/default/files/null/St_Roch_Research_Collection_2012.pdf) and show that the ship was at Baillie Island on August 4, 1928 and that the ship met the Baychimo near Wilmot Island, NWT ten days later. This cover was transferred to the Baychimo as it headed south and was placed in the mail at Victoria when it reached there.

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uscript postal markings after date stamps began to be used more frequently (i.e., after about 1870), check the opening date of the post office. If the manuscript is soon after the official opening, it is likely the date stamps may not have been manufactured or received in time for the opening. There might also have been an interruption in service because of a fire or an accident, or a date stamp may have been stolen. Susan Sheffield (1996) compiled a very interesting and useful list of post office fires that includes further information on this topic.

One of the best sources of information on Canadian postal markings is the exhaustive work by J. Paul Hughes who clipped copies of all of the available Post Office Department and manufacturer proof impression books that were made available to him in the 1980s and 1990s. He then sorted and organized the over 300,000 clippings: first by marking type (e.g., broken circles, full circles, squared circles, transportation, military, and others) and then by jurisdiction (provincial and territorial) and then alphabetically in most cases. There is a series of almost 40 volumes published by Robert A. Lee Philatelist Ltd. between 1989 and 1995. I cannot recall how many times I have used this fabulous resource but it must be hundreds if not thousands of times. If you can have only one set of books on Canadian postal history, this would probably be it. There are several other key references and databases that provide information on Canadian post offices and their markings includ-

ing several on the Postal History Society of Canada website.

Early *Canada Official Postal Guides* from 1863 to 1900, administrative circulars and *Monthly Supplements to Canada Postal Guide* 1917 to 1932 are also available. Most of these are searchable by date and key words and are available on-line at: <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/postal-publications/001033-100.01-e.php>

Newfoundland Postal Office Circulars (1936-48) and the only full Newfoundland Postal Guide are all available on-line. Here is one site where they are currently located: <https://archive.org/search.php?query=creator%3A%22Newfoundland.+Dept.+of+Posts+and+Telegraphs.%22>

Franking

Check the rating and date of issue of the stamps. The post card shown in Figure 4 (see facing page) has stamps issued after the date stamp. What does this tell us? Either the item bears a date stamp that was backdated or the indicia were not changed.

The authoritative sources on Canadian postal rates are:

Steinhart, Allan. 2011. *The Rates of Postage of Canada 1711 to 1900, Including Some Rules and Regulations Regarding Rating and Treating of the Mails*. Edited by Gray Scrimgeour. Postal History Society of Canada. [available on-line to PHSC members for free on the PHSC website]

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Figure 4. Post card mailed at Craig Harbour, NWT but bearing a Bache Peninsula broken circle date stamp April 12, 1933. Bache Peninsula was a very isolated place and the annual resupply by the Eastern Arctic Patrol ship was unable to reach it in 1931 or 1932. Supplies were landed at other locations and sledged to Bache Peninsula. The Medallion stamp series was not issued until December 1, 1932 so it was physically impossible for the stamps to be at Bache Peninsula on April 12, 1933. The RCMP personnel at Bache Peninsula were informed by radio to abandon that site and move down to Craig Harbour, where they were evacuated. They obviously brought out the postal hammer and mail was backdated to around the time they left that site.

Smith, Dr. Robert C. and Anthony S. Wawrukiewicz. 2000. *Canada Domestic and International Postal Rates and Fees 1870-1999*. The Press for Philately, Snow Camp, North Carolina. [available from Jay Smith at: <http://www.jaysmith.com/Literature/lit102-wpr.html>]

Steinhart, Allan. 1981. *The Admiral Era: A Rate Study 1912-1928*. Jim A. Hennok, Toronto.

http://www.adminware.ca/checklist/chk_rate.htm#1943 This website has some postal rates from 1943 to present.

Chung, Andrew; Harry W.E. Machum, and Roger F. Narbonne. 2004. *Postal Rates and Fees of the Elizabethan Era in Canada 1952-2002*. Volume One (two parts). Privately published.

Chung, Andrew; Harry W.E. Machum, and Roger F. Narbonne. 2006. *Postal Rates and Fees of the Elizabethan Era from Canada 1952-2005*. Volume Two. Privately published.

<http://postalhistorycorner.blogspot.ca/> This website has a number of postings with rate information.

Conclusions

The internet has opened up a whole new world for Canadian postal historians. It is easier than ever to conduct serious research from your home. Archival visits can also prove useful and are often assisted by an increasing number of documents being made available on-line or with detailed finding aids being made available to allow for focused requests from a distance.

With some of the sources and suggestions in this article, there should be no more excuses for you to write-up that favourite cover!

References

Jeness, Stuart E. 1991. *Arctic Odyssey: The Diary of Diamond Jenness, Ethnologist with the Canadian Arctic Expedition in Northern Alaska and Canada, 1913-1916*. Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Sheffield, Susan. 1996. *Canada Post Office Losses by Fire 1889-1917*. Keyboard House Publishing, Edmonton. ✉