



**John Robertson**

**T**he Spanish River post office, established Sept. 1, 1868<sup>1</sup>, was one of the early post offices to operate in the District of Algoma in Northern Ontario. On Jan. 1, 1906, the post office name was changed to Spanish Mills, more reflective of the economic purpose of the community. For the years of operation of the post office, Sept. 1, 1868–Oct. 1, 1927 (excluding closure Nov. 10, 1922–May 14, 1924) only two postmarks have been reported, both broken circles<sup>2</sup>. (Fig. 2-5)

The Spanish River, the largest watershed draining into Lake Huron, flows 338 km from its headwaters in Lake Biscotasi and Duke Lake in a southerly direction to empty into the North Channel of Georgian Bay near the town of Spanish<sup>3</sup>. The river's name, "Spanish", is highly unusual in Northeastern Ontario, whose geographical nomenclature usually reflects Ojibwa, French, and British

traditions. Legend has it that a Jesuit priest travelling in the area during the French colonial period encountered a Spanish-speaking woman and children living with an Ojibwa tribe, who had been captured by

*Fig. 1 (above): Spanish Mills circa 1911. (Accessed online at <http://www.ghostownpix.com/ontario/towns/spanishmills.html>)*



Figures 2-5. Various broken circle cancels used at the Spanish River post office between 1878 and 1920.

an Ojibwa war party which had ventured far south of the Great Lakes to Spanish territory, and named the river after her.

The village of Spanish River was located not, as one might expect, on the banks of its namesake, but, instead, on Aird Island, 4 km from the mouth of the Spanish River in the North Channel of Georgian Bay. The town was the first of a cluster of lumbering towns in the area that developed during the later decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to harvest a seemingly limitless pine forest. In addition to the forestry resource, two key factors determined the location and viability of the community<sup>4</sup>:

1. The Spanish River and its tributaries for the annual spring drive of logs to the mouth of the river; and
2. Access to the Great Lakes for the transportation of logs and lumber to American markets and for the movement of men and supplies to the town.

Nevertheless, isolation posed a formidable barrier to the development of the labour-intensive forestry industry along the North Shore. During the navigation season, seven months or so in duration, steamers from Collingwood and Owen Sound, approximately 150 miles away, stopped regularly at Spanish River. During the winter months, however, communication and supply to the town was limited to travel over the ice of Georgian Bay by dog-sled and snowshoe. Completion in 1884 of the Sudbury-Algoma Mills segment of the CPR line, which would ultimately reach Sault Ste. Marie, spurred economic development<sup>4</sup>. Scott Cameron provides an excellent review of the evolving postal transportation services along the North Channel during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in his chapter entitled "Delivering the Royal Mail" in *The Francis Smith, Palace Steamer of the Upper Great Lakes, 1867-1896*.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 6: Arrow on map points to location of Spanish Mills

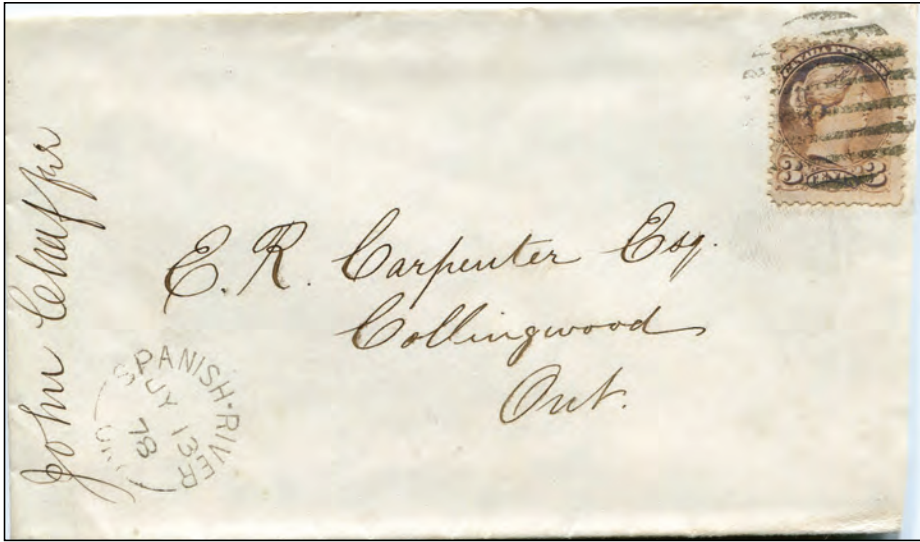


Fig. 7: Cover sent from Spanish River to Collingwood 13 July 1878. The 3¢ franking paid the then current domestic letter rate.



Fig. 8: Cover sent cross border to New York state 21 July 1882.

## The Spanish River Post Office

Perhaps in anticipation of the CPR link, an American company, the Spanish River Lumber Company, applied for and was granted a Charter in 1882 to harvest saw logs to supply its mill in Spanish River. Logs cut over the winter were driven down the Spanish River and its tributaries in the spring, rafted and towed to the island mill. Lumber produced over the summer, 250,000 ft/day during WWI, was transported by boat across Lake Huron to the US market<sup>6</sup>.

During the early years of operation, revenues of the Spanish River post office were as follows: \$62 (1871), \$35 (1875), and \$51 (1880)<sup>7</sup>. Consistent with growth of the community which followed the arrival of the CPR at nearby Spanish River Station (renamed Spanish in 1905), revenues grew to \$481.73 in 1915<sup>8</sup> and were associated with the issue of 1,408 money orders valued at \$23,667.55.

Increasing costs of operation, however, threatened the financial viability of the Spanish River Lumber Company<sup>6</sup>. Production was limited to the late spring and summer and the supply of logs within easy access of the mill had become increasingly scarce. In 1927 operations at Spanish Mills ceased, and the mill was dismantled and moved to Skead, nearer to the company's timber limits. Without an economic base, the town quickly died. The loggers moved on, some skidding their homes over the ice to Spanish. ☒

## RESOURCES

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