

The Royal Canadian Rifles in Fort Garry, 1857–1861: An Early Military Cover from the Red River Settlement

By Brian Copeland

The Riel Rebellion of 1869 and the Northwest Rebellion of 1885 are key events in Canadian history involving soldiers sent to what is now western Canada. Surviving mail and covers to and from soldiers in these episodes¹⁻³ are much sought after.

It is less well known that soldiers were sent to Western Canada on two earlier occasions: 1846–48; and 1857–61. These episodes are mentioned briefly in standard Manitoba histories.⁴ But probably because there were no insurrections or battles, they have received relatively little attention.

This article focuses on the events of 1857–61 and is motivated by two letters and a cover sent by a soldier in the Royal Canadian Rifle Regiment who was stationed in Fort Garry from 1859 until 1861. Alvin Gluek provides an excellent analysis of reasons for this military expedition^{5,6} and there is a good early account by Charles Bell.⁷ There is also much interesting original source material available from Library and Archives Canada.⁸ However, I have been unable to find previous discussions in the postal history literature about mail to or from soldiers in Fort Garry during those times.

The first letter (the cover has not survived) was sent on Sept. 1, 1859 from Toronto by Captain William Sharpe to his sister Amelia Darlington, who was living in Pennsylvania with her husband. The introductory and concluding parts of the letter are shown in Figure 1.

A transcription of relevant part of the letter follows:

Toronto 1st Sept. 1859

My dear Amelia

You will be very much surprised to hear that Annie and I and the three youngest children leave on the 7th for Fort Garry, Red River Settlement. We will probably be two or three years there when we will be relieved by some others. It is a long journey and takes a fortnight to reach it.

It will be a very fatiguing journey for Annie and the children as there are four days travel by railway, 7 by stage over the prairies, encamping at night, and 3 days by steamer. It will be a very expensive journey as I shall have to pay the expenses of the children and Annie. Will take the two boys and the baby if Annie's sisters will not take care of the latter. The twins and Louisa, Annie's sisters take care of...

If I were not the senior captain of my regiment and consequently very good chances of getting a Majority, I would not go to Red River, but would sell out. It is a very hard thing to break up the children and leave them for two or three years, but [if I did not move] I should be sacrificing a great deal and... depriving the children of much...

Annie and all the children send their love to you and Charlotte and the Doctor.

Your loving brother,

W.H. Sharpe

When you write address

Captain W.H. Sharpe

Royal Canadian Rifles

Fort Garry

Red River Settlement via St. Paul Minnesota

When Sharpe wrote this letter, members of his regiment had been in Fort Garry for two years. He was being sent to replace the original commanding officer, Major George Seton. The reasons for Seton's early departure are entwined with the rather shaky rationale for the mission. The ostensible reason for sending troops was to defend the border against American expansionism. However, as Gluek argues⁵, the actual reasons were more complicated.

By the 1840s, the monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company for the fur trade in Rupert's Land was threatened by a free trade movement. The Company faced increased competition from American traders because of the westward expansion of settlement south of the border. There was no permanent military or police force in Rupert's Land and so the HBC found it difficult to assert its authority. The British were unwilling to commit troops to support the HBC's commercial interests, and so the Company exploited concerns about American expansionism to support its case for a military presence.


In 1846, based on the loss of disputed territory in the Oregon crisis and the presence of Americans south of the border near Red River, the HBC convinced British authorities to send troops. Soldiers from the 6th Regiment of Foot arrived in Fort Garry in September 1846, but were withdrawn in August 1848. The limited authority of the HBC was dramatically illustrated the

following year. A Métis trader named Pierre Sayer was arrested for illegally trading for furs with indigenous people. An armed mob assembled outside the courtroom on the day of the trial. Sayer was found guilty, but under pressure from the mob was released.⁹

In 1856, U.S. troops visited Pembina (just south of the border) and this gave the HBC another opportunity to convince the British to send troops. There were rumours that the U.S. intended to establish a military garrison at the border. George Simpson (the Governor of Rupert's Land) wrote a report saying that "...the effect of it will be to intimidate the natives and inhabitants within the British territory and weaken their confidence in our means of protecting them."¹⁰ The HBC formally requested that troops be sent to Fort Garry. The proposal initially met with a mixed reception, but after the HBC offered to pay for transport of the troops and their daily rations while in Red River,¹¹ the expedition was approved.

The troops departed on board the sailing ship *Great Britain* from Quebec on June 26, 1857 and arrived at York Factory in Hudson's Bay on Aug. 23.¹² They then went by boat to Fort Garry. The commanding officer, Major Seton, arrived before the troops. He travelled with George Simpson to Fort Garry via Lake Superior.

Seton quickly soured on the mission. On March 14, 1858, he sent a remarkable letter to Sir William Eyre, the commander of British Forces in North America, arguing that troops should not be stationed in Fort Garry.^{5,13} He downplayed the threat of American expansionism, noting that the US had no troops nearer than Fort Ripley (400 miles away). He did not think it appropri-


 of
 Toronto 1st Sept^r
 My dear Amelia 1859

You will be
 very much surprised to
 hear that Annie and I
 and the three youngest
 children have on the 1st
 for Fort Garry, Red River

When you write address
 Captain W. H. Sharpe
 Royal Canadian Rifles
 Fort Garry
 Red River Settlement
 via St Paul Minnesota

Figure 1. Letter from Captain Sharpe to his sister Amelia, Sept. 1, 1859

ate for troops to be sent to such an isolated place for what amounted to police duty. Even if it was decided to keep troops in Fort Garry, he wanted to be withdrawn because the presence of a field officer was “wholly superfluous.”

Seton’s analysis found some support in the War Office.¹⁴ However, by challenging the decisions of the British government, he had gone too far. The Military Secretary in London instructed Eyre to point out to Seton that the decision to send troops was made by

Her Majesty's government and having decided to send a detachment there, obviously there should be a field officer. "Her Royal Highness can therefore attach no value to his opinion..."¹⁵

This brings us back to Captain Sharpe. By the fall of 1858, Seton had resigned his commission and left Fort Garry,⁵ leaving Captain Francis Hibbert temporarily in charge.¹⁶ In September 1859, Sharpe was sent out to assume command.

In the 1859 letter to his sister, Sharpe described the route to Fort Garry as via the U.S. through St. Paul and Pembina. By the late 1850s, this had become the standard route for travel and for shipping goods to and from Fort Garry. The British could not send a contingent of troops through the U.S., but individual officers and their families could use the route. It was also the route used for mail for the soldiers. A military memo¹⁷ dated "Montreal, 17 April 1858" regarding the correct address to Red River states that the address should be "Royal Canadian Rifles, Fort Garry via St. Paul and Pembina, Minnesota, United States." It goes on to say that:

Any letter getting to Pembina is certain to come on to Fort Garry. The words via St. Paul and Pembina, it appears, are necessary or letters, as many have done, take a long time to reach their destination. The words 'Red River Settlement' and 'Hudson's Bay Territory' I am informed are superfluous and incumber the address.

Sharpe's stay in Fort Garry was mostly uneventful. The Archives record only one episode in which he was called upon to deploy his troops. This arose from a visit by a group of Sioux Indians to negotiate a peace treaty with the Métis and Saulteaux Indians. John Bunn (the magistrate of Fort

Garry) formally requested that Sharpe deploy his troops to maintain peace between the rival parties of Indians. Sharpe brought the detachment to the Court House, where he found the Sioux surrounded by about 300 Métis and Saulteaux. He escorted the Sioux out of town towards Pembina.^{5,18,19}

Shortly after this, the British government came to the view that troops were not needed in Fort Garry. On June 21, 1860, a letter was sent to the Governor of HBC saying that the troops would be relieved and that the British Government was not inclined to replace them.²⁰ The HBC was asked if there was any good reason why they should reconsider. The HBC sent a lengthy reply in July but to no avail.

There was then the question of how to bring the troops back. Allan MacDonell proposed a route via Lake Superior.²¹ The HBC advocated for the Pembina route. They pointed out that they had abandoned the Lake Superior route even for passengers, and as further evidence, noted its weaknesses for mail service:²²

Some attempts have lately been made by parties under contract with the Government of this province to carry mail to Red River via Lac la Pluie but the service proved so difficult and was consequently so unsatisfactorily performed that the public lost confidence in it and the bulk of the correspondence between Canada and Red River now passes through the United States Post Office via Minnesota.

The War Office viewed the route through the U.S. as out of the question and the route via Lake Superior as problematic due to large amounts of luggage.²³ On Dec. 31, the HBC was informed that the troops would come back via Hudson's Bay.⁵



Figure 2. Cover sent from Fort Garry via Pembina on Aug 3, 1861 to Pennsylvania.

A few months later, Captain Sharpe wrote to his sister telling her that they were coming home. The cover is shown in Figure 2. It is addressed to Mrs. Darlington / Dr. Darlington at the Concordville Post Office, Delaware County, Pennsylvania, United States. Sharpe's sister Amelia was married to Hilborn Darlington, M.D. and they lived in Concordville.²⁴ The cover is marked "Paid" in red in the upper right and "Paid" in manuscript at the lower left. Although mail from Red River used U.S. postage stamps starting from about 1863,^{25,26,27} prior to then the postmaster in Fort Garry would collect cash postage and apply a red "PAID" handstamp.²⁸ The red "Paid" handstamp on this cover differs from those illustrated on covers from Fort Garry in the De Volpi sale.²⁹ In those cases, "PAID" was all in upper-case letters. Those covers also did not have "Paid" in manuscript in the lower left of the envelope. I have been unable to determine whether this simply reflects the existence of more than one "Paid" hand stamp, or

possibly a different handling of mail from the soldiers.³⁰

The U.S. postage rate was charged, which at this time was 3¢ per half ounce for mail to a U.S. address for a distance of up to 3000 miles. In addition, for mail handled by the post office in Fort Garry, there was a charge of one penny per half ounce to have the letter taken by courier to the U.S. post office in Pembina. The Red River postmaster was responsible for keeping accounts and paying the U.S. postmaster for the postage.³¹ At Pembina the envelope was put into the U.S. mail system. A "PEMBINA, MIN. AUG 3" postmark was applied. Although Pembina became part of the Dakota Territory on March 2, 1861, the "MIN." date stamp was used for some time afterward. Risvold illustrates a cover from May 1862 using this cancel.²⁸

A scan of the opening part of the letter is shown in Figure 3. The relevant part of the letter reads as follows:

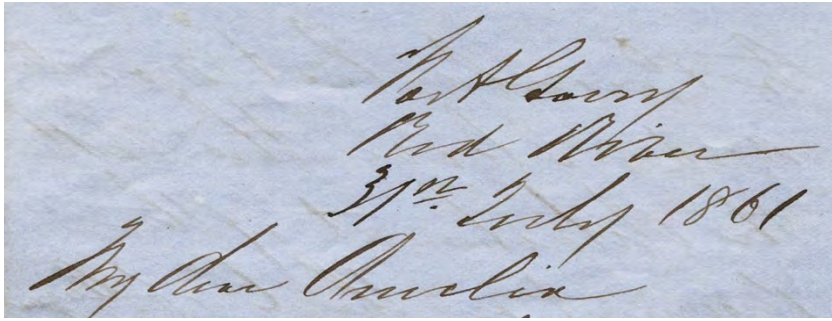


Figure 3. Letter written on July 31, 1861 from Sharpe to his sister.

Fort Garry, Red River
31st July 1861

My Dear Amelia

...Annie and the boys returned to Canada last month³² and I leave with the detachment of the regiment on the 6th of August and return to Canada by Hudson's Bay, the Atlantic and St. Lawrence. A ship left England in June to meet us at York Factory on Hudson's Bay. We go to York [along the] Red River, through Lake Winnipeg and down the river to York. We shall be about a fortnight in reaching York and if the "Sir Colin Campbell," screw propeller ship meets us, we hope to reach Quebec the second week in September. If the ship should not succeed in reaching York before the 1st of September we will have to return to Red River again. This I hope and trust we shall not have to do. It would be a deep disappointment for me to be separated for so long a time from Annie and the children. I have not seen the four girls for nearly two years...

I hope you are not in the vicinity of any of the contests that are going on in your adopted country. This conflict is an unhappy one and must bring a great amount of misery and suffering upon both north and south...

Your still affectionate brother
William

The second paragraph is a reference to the U.S. Civil War. This further underscores the impossibility of moving British troops through U.S. territory. The first paragraph refers to the upcoming journey home. Sharpe notes the name of the ship that will take them back (the *Sir Colin Campbell*) and refers to the tight window of ice-free navigation.

On Aug. 3, 1861, William McTavish, the HBC's Chief Factor in Fort Garry, wrote:²⁰

Twelve freight boats have been provided to convey the detachment of the Royal Canadian Rifles from here to York Factory; they leave on the 6th instant (August), and in the event of the vessel sent to carry the troops to Canada not reaching the Factory by the 5th September, are to bring back the detachment here.

Although the ship arrived in time, its passage through Hudson's Bay was not without incident. On Oct. 9, 1861, Captain Herd of the HBC's Ship *Prince of Wales*, recently returned to London from Hudson's Bay, wrote to the Secretary of the HBC:²⁰

On our outward passage, about 15th August, we fell in with the barque *Sir Colin Campbell*, somewhat in a disabled state, having broken her rudder with the ice, and had been on shore on Charles Island; I therefore kept company with her down to York. After the

necessary repairs to her rudder, and embarking her troops, she sailed for Quebec on the 31st August, and we saw nothing more of her.

The troops arrived back in Quebec safely. Prior to their departure, the *Nor'wester* commented that removal of the troops was "much to be regretted".³³

We believe that their presence has served an important purpose. A superficial observer may conclude that because these men have not been called into active service, their presence can be dispensed with, and will not be missed; but this is far from evident. May not their very presence have obviated the necessity of an appeal to their services?

The HBC continued to make a case for sending troops back to Fort Garry, but without success. Troops did not arrive again in Fort Garry until the Riel Rebellion broke out in response to events triggered by the transfer of Rupert's Land from the HBC to the Canadian government.

Captain Sharpe was eventually promoted to Major as he had mentioned was a possibility in his 1859 letter, and in 1870 he became a Lieutenant Colonel. He is remembered today at Fort Wellington National Historic Site, where the officer's quarters that he lived in while a Lieutenant in 1846 have been preserved.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Gray Scrimgeour for advice and very helpful editing.

References and Notes

1. Richardson, Edward A., "Canadian Military Postal History - The Northwest Rebellion 1885," *BNA Topics* Vol. 42, No. 6, Nov.-Dec. 1985
2. Scrimgeour, K. Gray and Allan L. Steinhart, "Covers from the 1870 Riel Rebellion," *PHSC Journal*, Whole #62 (June 1990)
3. Thompson, Donald W., *The Stories of the Riel Uprising at Fort Garry and the Northwest Rebellion in Sas-*

katchewan, BNAPS Exhibit Series No. 92, Sept. 2016.

4. Morton, William L., *Manitoba: A History*. University of Toronto Press, 1967.
5. Gluek Jr, Alvin C. "Imperial Protection for the Trading Interests of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1857-1861." *Canadian Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (1956): 119-140.
6. Gluek Jr, Alvin C. *Minnesota and the Manifest Destiny of the Canadian northwest: A study in Canadian-American Relations*. University of Toronto Press, 1965.
7. Bell, Charles N., "Some Red River Settlement History," *Transactions of the Manitoba Historical and Scientific Society*, Series 1, No. 29, April 1887.
8. Library and Archives Canada: British Military and Naval records, PAC Military series RG8, series C, Vol 364. Henceforth I refer to this as LAC, RG8 series C, Vol.364
9. Morton, William L. "Sayer, Pierre-Guillaume," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 7, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003
10. LAC, RG8 series C, Vol.364, p. 5
11. LAC, RG8 series C, Vol.364, p. 25-31
12. LAC, RG8 series C, Vol.364, p. 133
13. LAC, RG8 series C, Vol.364, p. 115-18
14. LAC, RG8 series C, Vol.364, p. 119
15. LAC, RG8 series C, Vol.364, p. 158-59
16. LAC, RG8 series C, Vol.364, p. 169
17. LAC, RG8 series C, Vol.364, p. 128
18. LAC, RG8 series C, Vol.364, p. 199-200
19. *Nor'wester* (Newspaper), Fort Garry, Red River Settlement. March 14, 1860. Available online at <https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca>
20. Sessional Papers, House of Lords, 1863. Correspondence between the Colonial Office and the Hudson's Bay Company, 191a, p. 3-7.
21. LAC, RG8 series C, Vol.364, p. 237
22. LAC, RG8 series C, Vol.364, p.294-297
23. LAC, RG8 series C, Vol.364, p. 274-278

24. Cope, Gilbert, *Genealogy of the Darlington Family*, West Chester, Pa., 1900.
25. De Volpi, Charles P., "U.S. Adhesives from Red River Settlement," *BNA Topics*, Vol. 38, No. 1, Jan.-Feb. 1981.
26. Gliedman, Chip, "U.S. Stamps used at Red River, British North America: A History and a Cover Census," *The Chronicle of the U.S. Classic Postal Issues*, 262, Vol. 71 No. 2, May 2019.
27. Stamped envelopes were available in Fort Garry as early as at least mid-1861. An ad from Ross & Coldwell in the *Nor'Wester* on June 15, 1861 says "We have for sale ENVELOPES stamped for United States postage. All correspondence with parties in the States ought to have them." However the 1862 covers to the U.S. shown in the De Volpi sale (Maresch, 1982) are both stampless.
28. Risvold, Floyd E., *The Minnesota Territory in Postmarks, Letters and History*, Collectors Club of Chicago, 1985.
29. Maresch, R. & Son, *Auction Sale No. 140*, May 1982. Lots 100 and 101
30. An article in the *Nor'wester* on the convenience of a new location for the Fort Garry post office published on Aug. 15, 1861 (just after the soldiers had left) states: "The officers and soldiers of the Royal Canadian Rifles used to receive and despatch quite a respectable little mail themselves, but this of course is now at an end."
31. Whitely, David H., "The Red River Settlement Post Offices, 1855-70," *PHSC Journal* No. 81, March 1985, p. 11.
32. The departure of Captain Sharpe's wife and boys from Fort Garry on the Steamboat *Pioneer* in late June is reported in the *Nor'wester* (July 1, 1860).
33. *Nor'Wester*, June 15, 1861.

