

Canada Dead Letter Office 1829

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Figure 1

Several authors, including Winthrop Boggs¹, Fred Jarrett², and more recently George Arfken³, appear to have drawn from the same general source that states, “Canada’s Dead Letter Office was established by Deputy Postmaster General Stayner in about 1830”. Similar information is also in an article by David Handelman that appears online at Richard Frajola’s website, and which includes an image of the earliest known Returned Dead Letter wrapper dated March 9, 1833, from the Dead Letter Office in Quebec⁴.

I have recently acquired (Fig.1) a cover that permits us to amend the documentable date of operation of Canada’s Dead Letter Office to the fall of 1829. The cover came from a grouping of letters found on a family farm in Woodlands, Ontario that was flooded by the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway.

On May 23, 1829, Adam Marshall of Alnham, a small hamlet in north-central Northumberland, England, wrote to his cousin, a recent immigrant to Canada. He was responding to a letter written by his

cousin that had arrived on January 6, 1829, and which was likely written in the summer or early fall of 1828. This letter to Canada was addressed to James Marshall, St. Rose, Isle of Jesus, care of Mr. Alexander Shaw, Inn-keeper, Montreal, and North America. The message relates to the addressee, family matters in England and Scotland, weather, agriculture, and current social issues in the British Isles. The unabridged text is printed at the end of this article in the Addendum.

The cover bears no evidence of having entered the British mail system or of having been carried by favour of a ship's captain. The first postal marking (Fig. 2) is a Quebec

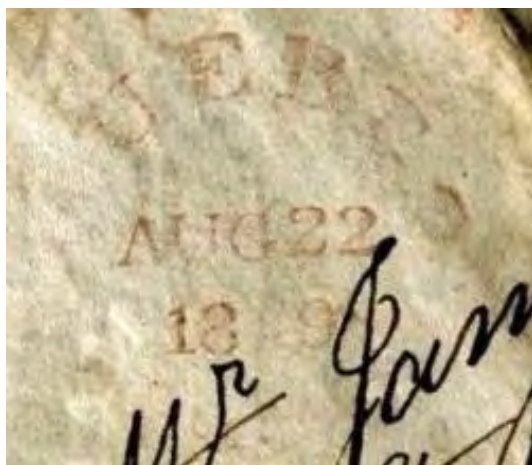


Figure 2

split circle cancel, struck in red and dated August 22, 1829. This is accompanied a manuscript "9" also in red ink. I presume that the cover was carried from England to Quebec as a favour to the sender. There were several ships arriving in Quebec in mid to late August 1829 including several from Liverpool

that carried passengers, one of whom was the probable source of transport for the letter. This person, a friend or an acquaintance mailed it upon arrival at Quebec and paid the 9d postal fee for carriage to Montreal. The red ink used on the manuscript signifies that the postal fee had been paid.



Figure 3

The cover, date-stamped on August 25, arrived in Montreal three days later (Fig. 3).

The point of application of a red FORWARDED hand stamp is uncertain although one may postulate that it was added by the post office in Montreal when the cover failed of delivery or receipt and was forwarded to the Dead Letter Office.

The letter was sent care of Mr. Alexander Shaw. Shaw was a Montreal tavern keeper who is listed in the Montreal City Directory of 1820 as having premises on Wellington Street. It appears the letter reached his tavern, and since there was no post office in Ste-Rose (Isle of Jesus) until 1848⁵, one may assume the cover was advertised or at least held in the hopes that Mr. Marshall would



Figure 4

come to claim his mail. This clearly did not happen, and the address was amended to reflect the status of non-receipt of the letter by the stroking out of the tavern keeper's name.

Fig. 4 illustrates the reverse of the letter which contains two significant manuscript markings. The first manuscript is "*not caled [sic] for*" This was consistent with postal regulations requiring the reason for non-delivery to be clearly written on the item of mail, a regulation begun by the British post office that continues to the present day.

Deputy Postmaster Stayner's instructions stated that "All unclaimed letters that had been in a Post Office for three months and had been advertised (*in a newspaper or by handbills displayed in the Post Office*) for at least

six weeks of that time were to be considered 'dead letters' and should be forwarded to the General P. O. (Quebec) along with refused letters and the accounts."⁶

As the period between the Montreal marking and the next manuscript marking is significantly less than three months, one may speculate that the addressee had moved to a new, unknown, location.

There are other manuscript markings however they appear to be initials, possibly those of various clerks or others through whose hands the cover passed.

Fig. 5 shows the most significant marking on this cover. The marking, written in red ink, reads *Dead Letter Office, Quebec, 15 Oct 1829*. It is accompanied by initials that seem to read *TAS*, most likely those of Thomas A. Stayner, Deputy Postmaster General, whose responsibilities included the Dead Letter Office.

This manuscript marking concerning the Dead Letter Office in Quebec is the earliest recorded date indicating the DLO's existence.



Figure 5

References

1. Boggs, W.S. *The Postage Stamps and Postal History of Canada*. Kalamazoo, Mich., Chamber Publishing Company, 1945-46 2v. (Chambers handbook series). Reprinted Lawrence, Mass., Quarterman Publications Inc., 1974: 715-716
2. Jarrett, F. *Stamps of British North America*, concise explanatory notes on all issues...with a complete checklist and priced catalogue of the postal stationery of Canada by T.L. Derwent Kinton. Toronto, W.R. Phillips & Co., 1929
3. Arfken, G.B. *Canada's Small Queen Era: Postal Usage during the Small Queen Era, 1870-1897*. Toronto, Vincent G. Greene Philatelic Research Foundation, 1989
4. Handelman, David *Returned from the Dead Letter Office, Canadian DLO returned letter covering envelopes & wrappers to 1954*, Ottawa, 2011, rochelle2@sympatico.ca
5. Walker, Anatole *Les Bureaux de Poste du Québec*, Le Marché Philatélique de Montréal, 1987
6. Boggs: Ibid

Addendum

The text of this amazing letter is shown in its entirety with no corrections of grammar or spelling. Assistance has been received from Brian Atkins, a postal historian in England, in clarifying some of the terms used in the text. Information provided by Brian is marked with an *.

Alnham 23rd May 1829

My Dear James,

I received your long and interesting letter of the 6th of January last three months ago and ought to have answered it ere now, but I cannot delay longer. The longer one delays, the more unwilling one is to begin. I was thinking that you had forgot (sic) your promise of writing me but was agreeably mistaken when your letter arrived and a correspondence is begun between us. I hope it will be a regular one. We were all most happy to learn that you arrived in safety. I have not seen my Uncle Robert since I received your letter but he is happy to hear that Mr. Anderson and Mr. Earhart were so attentive to you. Floe got another daughter the other day and it is the 10th child, all living. Roger and you would have a pleasant tour through the Country. You do not say how you like that well named place (in) which you have taken up your abode and if it is as good as its name imparts it will certainly give you entire satisfaction. I suppose you have only taken it until you can get suitable land to purchase. You will be more able to inform me of the country in your next. If you speak favourably of it who knows but you may persuade me to come out to you. I certainly prefer remaining in my native land if a living can be made at all but there is no encouragement for farmers here now, and particularly for sheep farmers. Several of the Coquet farms [farms along the Coquet River in Northumberland] were to let this year and they were immediately taken at the old rent again although wool is now worth little or nothing, and there is no prospect of it selling better this year. Last year salved wool* was only sold from 9/ to 10/ and white from 16/ to 18/ per St*. White certainly sells better than the other but it is much lighter. Sheep are selling better in proportion than wool, but both will not save the farmer at the present rents. Sales have been very high this year, but I am afraid the purchasers will not pay themselves as the fat markets are very bad. Mutton is selling at Morpeth at present for 4d and 5d per lb. Beef is rather better. The manufacturers are in a very distressed state just now. Many of them are actually starving and when that is the case the farmers always feel the effects of it. Agriculturists are not well off either but have not as much reason to complain as the sheep farmers. Corn was high in the beginning of Winter, (and) particularly Wheat owing to the inferior crops of last year. At one time it was above 20/ for new (?), which is four kennings*. It fell afterward as there was an immense quantity of foreign corn imported but it is now rising again. You will get regular accounts of our prices here as we do of yours. The Wheat crops this year are looking well at present but nothing can be said about them until the harvest is over. Barley and Oats are quite the contrary as we have had a very bad seed time and I dare say a part of the grain is rotten in the ground. It is coming very thin and shows no appearance of a good crop, or an early harvest. The weather in general was very mild, but the Spring very bad.

The Weather is now very fine and has been so for a fortnight past and there is a wonderful change in the Country for the better. The snow will be all gone with you before this time. We were very much affected when we heard of Andrew's death and it will no doubt be very distressing to you all. Poor fellow, I sincerely hope he is in a better world than this. We have all to follow him in a short time. I have not seen any of your friends at Sunbridge since the mournful tidings arrived. Your mother and Edward were here on their way to and from Wooler about a month ago and stayed a night with us. I think I never saw your mother looking better. You will have heard before this reaches you of the death of John Marshall (Edin) and your Uncle Preston. John died of a fever on the 9th of March, but according to the opinion of his Physicians who examined the body after his death he would have recovered from its effects but for an internal complaint which had been going on for a considerable time. He was much respected and now lamented by all who knew him. I will feel the want of him when I go to Sutherland, to which I intend going in a few weeks. His house was always a home to one. Your Uncle Preston died two or three weeks ago but I do not know of what complaint. I must now leave off as my store of information is exhausted.

All here join me in every kind of wish for your health and happiness and hoping you will write me soon again.

I remain my dear James.
Your affectionate cousin
Adam Atkinson Marshall

***Salved wool:** salving wool was a 19th century treatment of a sheep's wool coat that allowed the sheep to survive harsh winter conditions while at the same time protecting the wool. The term and treatment are now obsolete. White wool was untreated wool.

***St:** an abbreviation for Stone: Wool was always weighed in pounds. Approximately 14 pounds was equivalent to 1 Stone.

***Kenning:** A kenning is an obsolete measure of dry volume that was used in Britain between 1824 and 1963. 1 kenning or bucket was equal to 4 gallons. 2 kennings equaled 1 bushel. Thus, 4 kennings were equivalent to 2 bushels. The statement in the letter is unclear as a small piece of the letter is missing due to the removal of a wax seal.