

Missent To: A Lighthearted Look at Mail Gone Astray

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As the saying goes, “To err is human.” The Post Office Department, recognizing this, had regulations to deal with mail that ended up at the wrong destination. This article will look at the requirements for postmasters in handling missent mail and speculate on some examples of why such mail took a wrong turn.

At least as early as 1830, postmasters were given written instructions on how to deal with letters going to the wrong office. A letter sent to the Huntingdon L. C. postmaster on May 21, 1830, stated:

When Letters arrive at your office missent by accident as sometimes happens. You will mark them “MISSENT TO” (here insert the name of your office) and you will have them put in a mail and addressed to the office where they should have been sent originally.¹

The regulations for handling missent (mis-directed) mail were further codified over time. The 1853 Journal of the Legislative Assembly appendix shows an excerpt from the Regulations and Instructions for the Government of the Post Office Department in Canada.(Fig. 1).

Note “Missent To” was handwritten. Boggs indicates that larger offices had been supplied with handstamps that said MISSENT, or more commonly, MISSENT TO, at least by 1859, with other offices being supplied with handstamps as time passed. The earliest examples I’ve seen indicate that the largest offices got handstamps even earlier.

Fig.2 shows a letter missent to Quebec in 1856 with a nice crisp “MISSENT – TO” handstamped mark, though on the back of the envelope. I have also seen a MISSENT – TO

PART XIII.

MISSENT AND RE-DIRECTED LETTERS.

Missent Letters, &c.

128. When Letters, Newspapers, &c., intended for another place are missent to a Post Office, the Postmaster will write the words “Missent to” in red ink on the front of each, and affix his Office Stamp immediately after, and such Letters, Newspapers, &c., must then be forwarded on to their destination by the first post.

Figure 1: Excerpt from 1853 document.



Figure 2: Missent to Quebec from 1856.



Figure 3: Missent to Guelph from 1861.

Hamilton from 1852, as indicated above.

Guelph, a mid-sized town of about 3000 in 1864, still did not have a handstamp at that time as Fig.3 shows. A cover mailed from Toronto in March 1864 has “Missent to Guelph”, all handwritten. Note that even “Guelph” was written out, which was against the official instructions, as the “Office Stamp” was

to indicate the town name. Its usage would also include the date, informing recipients the mistake had been dealt with promptly.

“MISSSENT TO” handstamps certainly became more common, and by the start of the 20th century, almost all offices seemed to have them, as they could be found on mail from quite small offices.



Figure 4: Missent to Wilson

Rather surprisingly, instructions on handling missent mail did not appear in the first official Post Office Guide in 1863, nor in any succeeding publications I checked until 1896. In that edition, the instructions were the same as those for 1853, except wordier (extolling the PM to look more carefully at addresses), and there is no reference to red ink. The relevant sentence in the paragraph is “Every such letter, in addition to being back stamped on receipt, be stamped on the face with the date of re-dispatch and with the words “Missent to” on the left hand of the date stamp.” There was no mention of either writing or stamping the words; probably, most offices had handstamps by this time. Similar instructions seemed to have been included in subsequent guides until 1938-39.

Despite the lack of instructions in the Guide in its early years for handling missent mail, instructions like these shown here must have been conveyed to postmasters as letters from that era follow the basic pattern.

Why does mail go astray?

As a collector of Ontario town postmarks finding a missent card or envelope is always a treat. There is the likelihood of getting an extra town mark, with two or three (if there is a receiving mark) for the price of one! In addition to the extra town cancels it can be fun to see where this mail went and speculate on why it went astray.

Certainly, in an age of cursive writing, the most common reason for mail to go to the wrong address is simply misreading the town name on the address. Numerous obvious examples of this can be found.

Despite the fine penmanship in Fig. 4, this letter went to Wilson instead of Milton. It must have been easy to mix these two up. Throw in Wilton and you have a triumvirate (all in Ontario) of possible combinations, of which I have seen a few.

Poor handwriting would only lead to more mistakes. In Fig. 5, one can just see

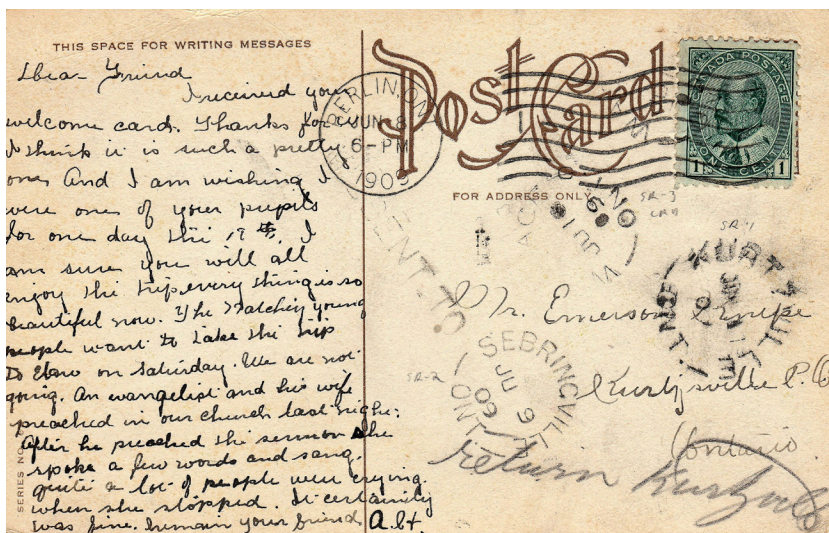


Figure 5: Missent to Sebringville



Figure 6: Missent to Eagle River



Figure 7: Missent to Lieury

how a scrawled Kurtzville could look like Sebringville. At least they are both in Perth County.

Sometimes, the address is quite clear but just not read carefully enough. Fig. 6 shows a 1909 postcard from Okotoks, Alberta, addressed to Eagle, Ontario, in Essex County, that was missent to Eagle River, in Kenora District. While that sounds way off, it makes some sense if we realize the mail from out west was probably coming east by train. Eagle River would have been the first eagle-named town in Ontario the train came to (or at least close to), and the post office employee on the train may have been much more familiar with that town than one much further south. Eagle River being near the rail line we can further speculate that the letter was not much delayed, though no receiving mark was applied.

One of the more unique ‘misreadings’ of an address is the 1883 letter from London being addressed to Livery, Sarnia (Fig. 7). Presumably, the intended recipient was the

Livery Stable in Sarnia, but we must feel some sympathy for the postal clerk who sent it on to Lieury, Ontario. This town was about 35km from London and would likely have been well known to the London post office. The Lieury Postmaster made sure the correct town would be noted by double underlining Sarnia along with his handwritten “Missent To”.

Sometimes, it takes some detective work to figure out what went wrong, especially if regulations were not met and MISSENT TO markings were not used. Fig. 8 shows a 1905 card mailed from Toronto to Antrim with two Trout Creek cancels two days apart (Sept. 4 and 6) on the front side. Trout Creek is in the Parry Sound District, NW of Toronto. Antrim in Carleton County is outside Ottawa, NE of Toronto. This could not have been the intended route. Looking around Parry Sound District, one can discover there is an Arnstein, about 40 km west of Trout Creek. Trout Creek was the transit post office for Arnstein, connected by what is now Hwy. 552. No doubt the card



Figure 8: Missent to Arnstein



Figure 9: Missent to Belleville

ended up in Arnstein on Sept 5th, though no "Missent To" marking was affixed. It did reach Antrim on Sept 9th, seven days after being posted in Toronto.

Sometimes, it appears that the letter must get redirected in transit. Mail seems to have gone in the right direction but ends up in a nearby town or one along the way. The 1871 letter from Kingston to Toronto was surely going by train when, for some reason, it got off at the station in Belleville (Fig. 9). Did the train clerk just put it in the wrong bag, or did the letter get stuck to another letter? In any event, it arrived in Toronto the day after it was posted in Kingston, so the mistake was quickly rectified, and hopefully, no harm was done.

A 1907 postcard (Fig.10) from Saskatchewan to Cherry Valley in Prince Edward County, Ontario, ended up in Bloomfield, only

13 km away. Both are small towns outside the County hub of Picton, and it was likely there that the clerk had slipped the card into the wrong bag for local delivery.

In addition to sloppy handwriting, the sender could make other mistakes. In 1943, Miss Rosie B. of Delhi, Ontario, was sending a letter to her friend, Miss Jeanette M., in Tillsonburg and must have been somewhat distracted, as in addition to Tillsonburg, she also added her town afterward (Fig. 11). She was probably so used to writing Delhi, Ont. it just came out without thinking. The Delhi Postmaster seemed unreasonably impatient with this mistake, scratching out Delhi, slapping two "MISSENT TO" marks on the front cover, and sending it the next day. With a letter that never left the Delhi office could they not just have fixed it without comment?

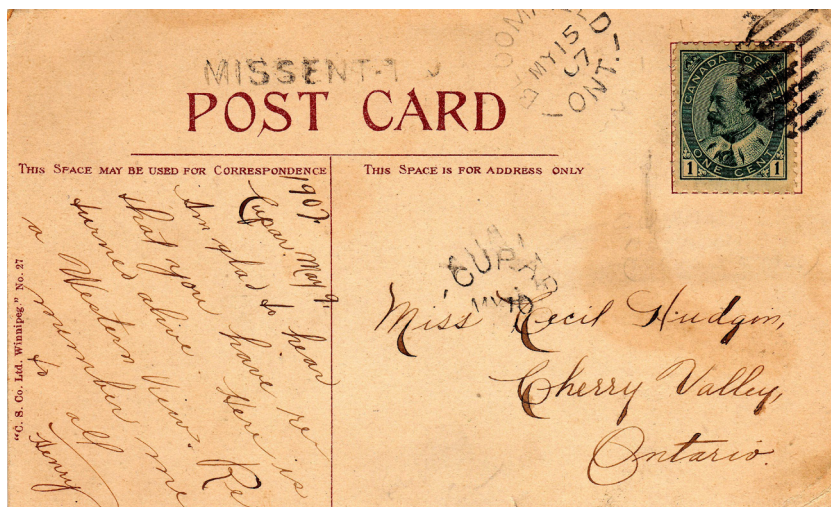


Figure 10: Missent to Bloomfield



Figure 11: Missent to Delhi



Figure 12: Not Known in London, Canada – Try England.



Figure 13: Missent to Clinton

Senders and clerks also sometimes forget that towns with the same name exist in other countries. For example, Kingston is located in both Ontario and Jamaica. Perth in Ontario, Scotland, and Australia. London in both Ontario and England. The latter must have had many mix-ups as the card from 1909 in Fig. 12 shows that London, Ontario, even had a handstamp made that read “Try England.” In this case, the error was clearly with the sender as London NW Canada was written, but it was truly meant to go to England. 30 Oakford Rd, London NW (England) still exists and can be viewed on Google Maps today.

By contrast, the fault must lie with the clerk in the case of Fig. 13. Addressed to Clinton Mass, US (admittedly, the Mass US is hard to read), the 1910 card ended up in Clinton, Ontario. Easy to do, I would think, as Clinton, the US would not be a commonly known foreign destination. The “MISSENT TO” handstamp is shaped like a pointing hand

(top centre of card). This style is unique in my experience, and I wonder if it was applied in the US. Has anyone seen this style mark on Canadian letters?

An international missent struck close to home in 1998. My wife’s grandmother always sent her 20 pounds cash for her birthday from England every year and nervously awaited confirmation it had arrived. In that year, we waited and waited. Grandma called to inquire if it had arrived a few times, but nothing yet. Finally, some two months later, it showed up with a neat “Missent to Adelaide South Australia” on the front (Fig. 14). One wonders if the clerk in England thought one colony was much like another.

This article started with a saying, “To err is human...” Of course, the rest of that saying goes, “...to really mess things up requires a computer”. Missent mail continues into the modern era when most sorting is automated. In the 90s, when the Air Miles™ quarterly up-



Figure 14: Missent to Adelaide South Australia.

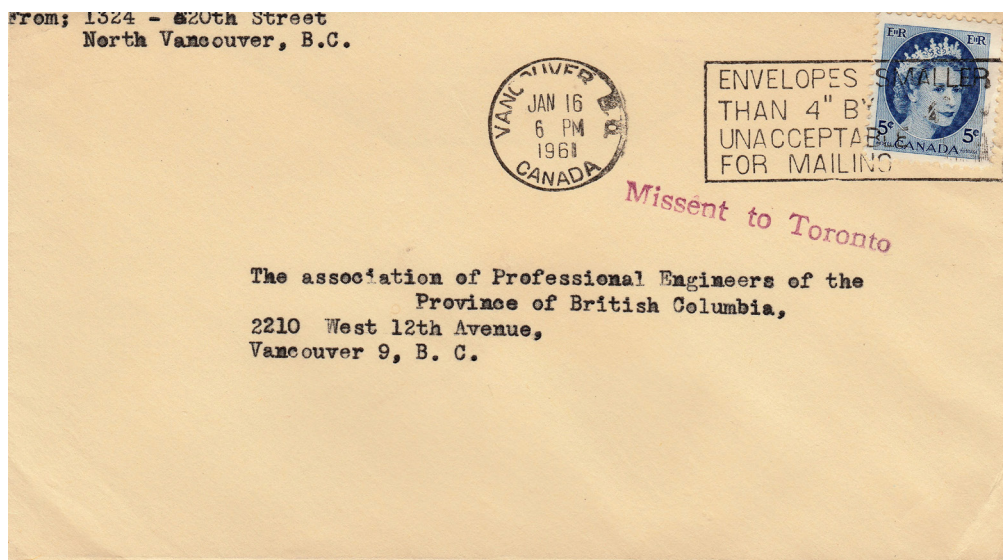


Figure 15: Missent to Toronto

dates came by mail, we were living in Bloomfield, postal code K0K 1G0. For whatever reason (perhaps our error), they had Bloomfield, K0L 1G0. This was the postal code for Boulter, Ontario. Despite our attempts to correct this, their computer would not change the address, and for years, the postal sorting computer read the code and not the town, so our updates went to Boulter. I can only imagine a long-suffering postal clerk there dutifully scratched out the postal code and stamping a neat Boulter PO-CON on the envelope four times a year. I regret I only saved one of the envelopes with a rather imperfect Boulter strike.

There was no “Missent To” stamp on those Boulter envelopes. With the advent of typed messages and perhaps because there were far fewer post offices to get lost to, there seemed to be less missent mail. Certainly, the handstamped “MISSENT TO” marks became much scarcer after 1920. I am not sure when they disappeared, but the latest example I have seen of their standard use with an “Office Stamp” and a large font, “MISSENT TO,” is for Cooksville, Ont. in 1956. Fig. 15 shows a different style stamp, with a “Missent to Toronto” from 1961.

Handwritten “missent tos” appear occasionally since then, with and without an Office Stamp. The latest I’ve seen is from 1997 but no doubt there are more modern ones scattered around. Nor do I know when (or if) the instructions for missent mail changed or left the Postal Guides, but they certainly must have since the stamped and written “Missent To” has all but disappeared from the mail stream. Mail delivery may be cleaner now, and less prone to human error, but I miss the extra town cancels and the stories they told of mail gone astray.

References:

[Ed.: All covers illustrated in this article are reduced to 80%]

1. Boggs, W.S., 1945. The Postage Stamps and Postal History of Canada. Reprint 1974, Quarterman Publications, Inc. Lawrence, Massachusetts, 581.
2. Official Postal Guides for Canada - various on Postal History Society of Canada Website, October 2023.

<https://www.postalhistorycanada.net>



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