Smithurst, Ontario

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Smithurst was a post office in Wellington County open from Jan. 1, 1869, to June 30, 1887. Postal revenue was very low – it averaged less than $10 per year and totalled just $185.40 over the 18$^{1}/_{2}$ years the office was open.[1] Although it was a minor post office, the origin of its name is interesting. It was named for Reverend John Smithurst (1807-1867) who spent 12 years in the Red River Settlement before moving to Ontario.

Fig. 1 shows a cover from Smithurst, Ontario sent in 1882. Given the low postal revenue, it is not surprising that such covers are rare. Until this cover was found, there were no covers from Smithurst in the PHSC database.

John Smithurst was born in Lea, Derbyshire, England in 1807. He joined the Church Missionary Society in 1836 and was ordained as a priest in 1839. He was appointed by the Hudson's Bay Company as a company chaplain and sent to Rupert's Land in Sept. 1839. From 1840 until 1851, he served as a missionary at the Indian Settlement which was located at the point where Netley Creek flows into the Red River.[2] This was north of Fort Garry and close to the south end of Lake Winnipeg.

Reverend Smithurst is well known to postal historians who have an interest



Figure 1. Registered cover sent from Smithurst, Ont. on Nov. 25, 1882 to the Wilcox Chemical Company in Philadelphia.

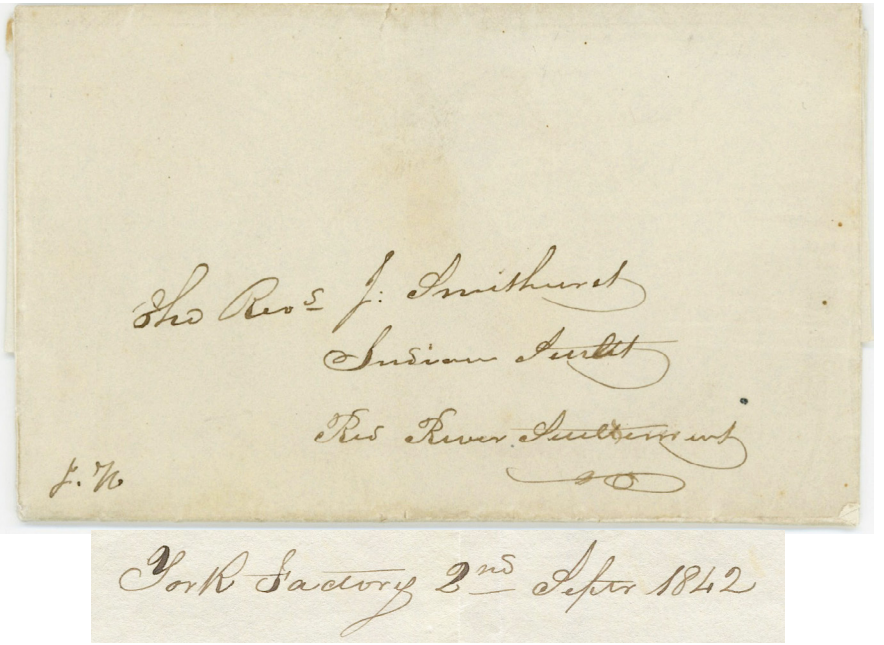


Figure 2. Folded letter from York Factory sent to Reverend Smithurst at the Indian Settlement in Red River in 1842.

in the Red River Settlement because his correspondence has survived. Some of it is in archives, but a group of about 150 letters and covers to Smithurst was found by Ron Kitchen many years ago at an antique store or flea market in Elora, Ontario.[3] The correspondence is noteworthy both in providing many examples of mail carried within Rupert's Land by the HBC, and because the many letters that survived give it historical interest beyond the movement of the mail. Fig. 2 shows a folded letter sent to Smithurst in 1842 from James Hargrave, the Chief Trader at York Factory. Because it was carried by Hudson's Bay Company couriers, it does not have postal markings. The letter concerns supplies for the Red River Settlement.

Smithurst resigned in 1851 and briefly returned to England. He came back to Canada in 1852, first working in the Niagara district, and then as Rector of St. John's Anglican Church in Elora, Ontario.

Fig. 3 shows a folded letter sent from the Red River Settlement to Smithurst at Niagara. The letter was written on June 28, 1852. It was carried east by Hudson's Bay canoe express through Fort William to Sault Ste. Marie. There it entered the Canadian mail system as indicated by the Sault Ste. Marie postmark dated Aug. 2, 1852. It was marked 3d. collect, which was the rate for a letter under half an ounce. It passed through Orillia on Aug. 6, then went to Toronto, and arrived in Niagara on Aug. 9.

Smithurst resigned from his position at St. John's in Elora in 1857 due to failing health and spent time at his farm north of Harriston in Minto Township. He named his farm Lea Hurst after his hometown in England.[4]



Figure 3. Folded letter sent from the Red River Settlement to Reverend Smithurst in Niagara in 1852.

Smithurst never married but many accounts of his life say that he had been in love with Florence Nightingale when he was a young man. One of her family's homes was at Lea Hurst in Derbyshire, in the same area that Smithurst was born. The story is that he proposed marriage, but the families would not allow it because they were first cousins.[5] Thompson in his short biography of Smithurst says that the story "seems to have no basis in fact".[6]

Fig. 4 shows a cover from the Red River Settlement sent to Smithurst at his farm in 1865. The cover is addressed to Smithurst at Lea Hurst, Clifford P.O., Minto, Wellington Co., Canada West. Clifford was west of Smithurst's farm and was the nearest post office at the time. The dateline from the enclosed letter (Fig. 5) shows that the cover was sent from Headingly Parsonage. It is from Henry Cochrane, who was a teacher and a Church of England minister. The letter has two parts. Cochrane began writing the letter on Dec. 1, 1864, and completed it in March 1865. As was standard for mail from Red River at the time, the cover was carried from the Red River Settlement by courier to the U.S. Post Office in Pembina, Dakota. It had a U.S. stamp which has been removed. There is a partial Pembina postmark dated March 26 (1865) on the front of the cover. The letter went through the U.S. and re-entered Canada at Windsor. There is an Elora, Ontario postmark on the back dated April 17, 1865.

Reverend Smithurst died in Elora in 1867. He had been active in the local community near his farm, and when a post office opened at the site of his farm in Jan. 1869, it was named in his honour.[7] A post office opened east of Smithurst at Drew a month later. Smithurst was midway between Clifford and Drew. When the railway came through, the Smithurst community came to be known as part of Drew. The Smithurst post office closed in 1887, but in 1899 a post office opened on the railway at



Figure 4. Cover from Red River to Smithurst at Lea Hurst in Minto.

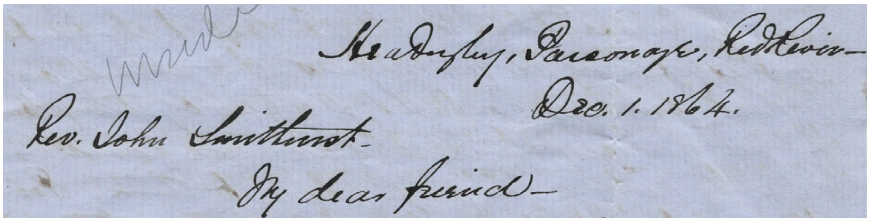


Figure 5. Dateline from the letter enclosed in the cover in Fig.4. [Ed.: Image is reduced to 70%]

Drew Station. It was located 3 lots to the east of the original Smithurst office.[8]

Notes and References

[Ed.: Covers are reduced to 90%]

1. Reports of the Postmaster General, Ottawa, 1869-88.
2. Thompson, A. N., "Smithurst, John," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 9, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003.
3. Scrimgeour, Gray, "Item 652. The Smithurst Correspondence," *The Northerner*, October-November 1998, p. 817.
4. For a local history Minto township, including a discussion of Smithurst's farm and his contributions to the community, see Clifford M. Harrison, "The Way It Was: A History of Minto Township", 1978, Local Histories Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.
5. See for example Harrison's *History of Minto Township* cited above
6. Thompson in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* cited above.
7. A plaque commemorating the post office and Rev. Smithurst was erected at the site by the Clifford & District Historical Society in 2007.
8. See the map in Harrison's *History of Minto Township*, cited above.