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Allan L. Steinhart's postal history legacy

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The Allan L. Steinhart collection of prestamp and stampless covers to, from and through British North America, dating from 1685 to 1865, was sold at auction May 28 by HA Harmers Auction SA, a division of Matthew Bennett International. The collection was put on sale on behalf of the heirs of Allan Steinhart—his sister and her family—almost nine years after his death.

I may have been the last person to speak in person with Allan Laurence Steinhart (1940–1996) before he died. He'd had a hectic week, driving 1,500 miles from Toronto to Fort Worth, Texas, for the British North America Philatelic Society convention, then driving back to Toronto to take his regular table at Philex, a three-day Toronto stamp bourse.



Figure 1. Allan L. Steinhart, one of Canada's great postal historians.

At 8:15 p.m. on Friday night, Sept. 6, 1996, at the end of the first day of the show, I was waiting to meet friends for dinner, and Steinhart walked over to thank me for bringing back an award for him from the previous week's Baltimore Philatelic Society stamp show, which he was unable to attend because of his Texas trip. As we chatted I noticed he was uncharacteristically complimentary of a number of people, and of events that had been held recently. He then mentioned he was not feeling well and was going home, and said he would see me in the morning.

During the night, he suffered a massive heart attack while at his desk doing what he liked best: examining covers, studying their history and identifying a home for them in his own collection. If he didn't have a place for them, he would add them to his dealer's stock.

Steinhart, pictured in Figure 1, was both a dealer and a collector, and was known as a gruff and opinionated man. Yet he was also generous with information and would

frequently help others find hard-to-locate items. A world-class exhibitor and a prolific writer, he was the foremost Canadian postal historian of his generation.

A mentor to many, he saw to it that we learned, as Gray Scrimgeour put it, "What to look for, what was scarce, what was desirable and, above all, what was philatelically significant."

In addition to a large stock of covers from all countries and all periods, he collected stamps and covers from many different areas of Canada, but his love was postal history, particularly that of early British North America.

Art Leggett, a fellow dealer, once said, "Al really went first-class when it came time to buy covers for his collections. He had good taste, knowledge, and a desire to own the best."

At the time of his death, one of his protégés was 30-year old Bill Longley, a budding postal history dealer with whom Steinhart spent a lot of time and energy.

Longley was asked by the Steinhart estate to take on the responsibility of dispersing his large dealer stock of postal history items. Earlier this year he was asked by Matthew Bennett International to write up the lot descriptions for Steinhart's most famous collection for a sale titled, "Prestamp and Stampless Covers to, from and through British North America, 1685-1865."

I spoke to Longley and asked him about the auction and its results, and the manner in which the sale was held, which involved a rather unusual multi-country hook-up.

All sales results mentioned in the interview are provided in Swiss francs, and were converted to U.S. dollars using the exchange rate on the day of the sale.

Verge: *Why have the sale in Switzerland?*

Longley: Allan Steinhart's collection was mail to, through and from Canada to destinations around the world. While each item had a Canadian connection, there was another country associated with each cover, and therefore another potential collector around the world. I have an excellent database of Canadian collectors, the Bennett firm was very strong with U.S. collectors, and holding the auction in Europe would allow our combined network of British and European collectors and dealers to participate. In fact, three European collectors bought more than a third of the sale.

Additionally, live telephone bidding, multisite bidding and bidding through eBay allowed for an unprecedented level of participation and access for collectors. Narrow vision dictates, sell U.S. in U.S., Canada in Canada, but Allan's collection was truly global in nature and appealed to a wide audience that had many avenues to participate.

Verge: *Whose idea was it to have the simulcast in New York and Toronto, and what were the difficulties in putting this together?*

Longley: I suggested a live simulcast in Canada in conjunction with the Royal Philatelic Society of Canada's 77th convention in London, Ontario, since the two events were on the same weekend and it would allow Canadian collectors to participate live [see *Figure 2*].

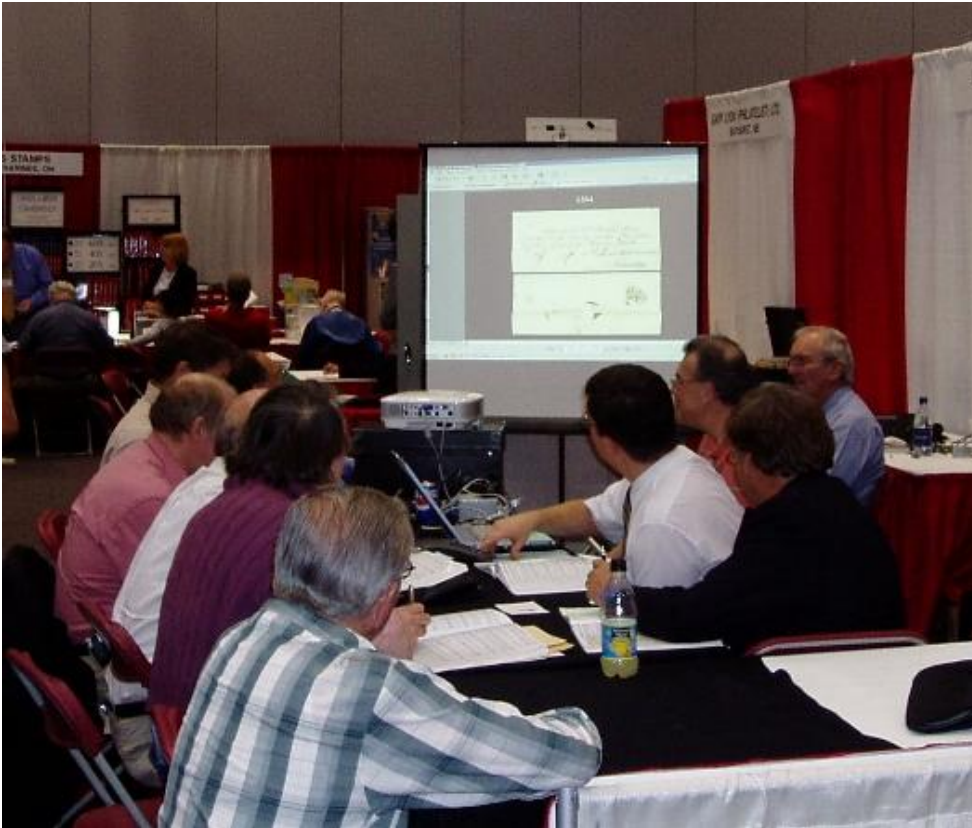


Figure 2. A view of the Longley booth in London, Ontario, at Royal 2005, the annual convention and exhibition of the Royal Philatelic Society of Canada. It was one of the simulcast sites for the sale of the Steinhart collection. Photo by the author.

Harvey Bennett established a similar connection in New York City for those wishing to participate there. The live, multisite auction was technically quite simple, with the various sites telephoning into a teleconference service provider. Additionally, there was a live eBay connection and dozens of individual telephone bidders participating as well.

Verge: What were the advantages of using such a process?

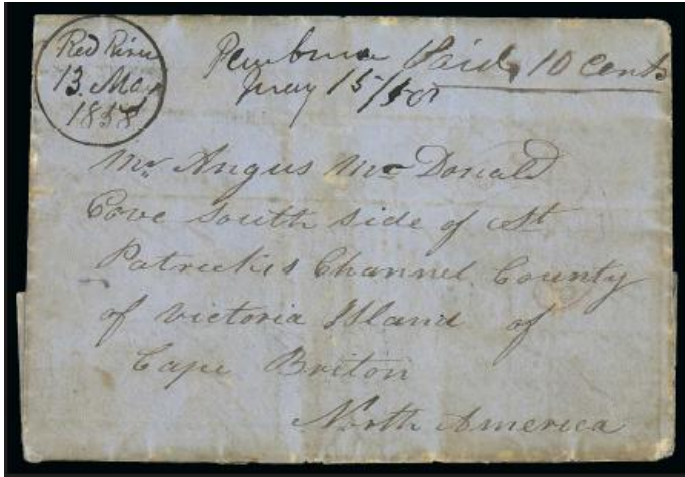
Longley: The multisite bidding allowed for greater collector participation, more active bidding and higher realizations. In addition, collectors could revise their bidding strategy if they lost out on an item.

Verge: *From your perspective, what was important about the Steinhart collection?*

Longley: Allan's collection was simply the finest Canadian stampless collection ever formed, in magnitude, scope and historical importance. He owned nearly every example of the earliest mail from each province, often the finest known example of many rare postmarks, and tremendously important historic letters from famous Canadians.

Verge: *What were the top five items based on prices realized including the buyer's premium?*

Longley: [see Figure 3, below]



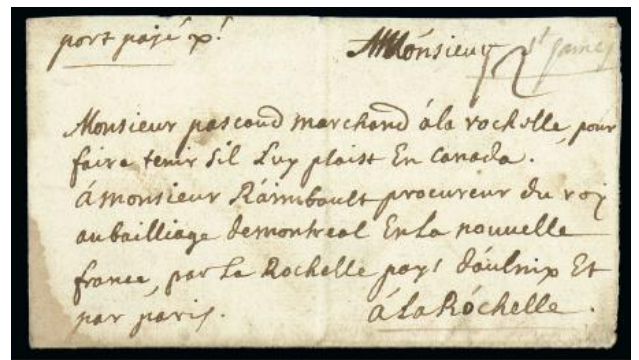
Lot 1440



Lot 1001



Lot 1203



Lot 1002



Lot 1005

Figure 3. The five top sellers at the Steinhart sale, identified by lot number. The small Red River circle manuscript postmark cover, lot 1440, sold for more than \$52,000.

Lot 1440, the Red River "small circle" manuscript postmark (64,900fr/\$52,747).

Lot 1001, 1685 earliest cover in private hands from New France with a postmark (56,050fr/\$45,554).

Lot 1203, 1792 Detroit straightline postmark, the only recorded strike in private hands (56,050fr /\$45,554).

Lot 1002, 1710 earliest cover to New France (38,350fr/\$31,168).

Lot 1005, 1749 to France (29,500fr/\$23,975).

Verge: From your viewpoint, what were the top five bargains based on prices realized?

Longley: [see Figure 4, below and next page]

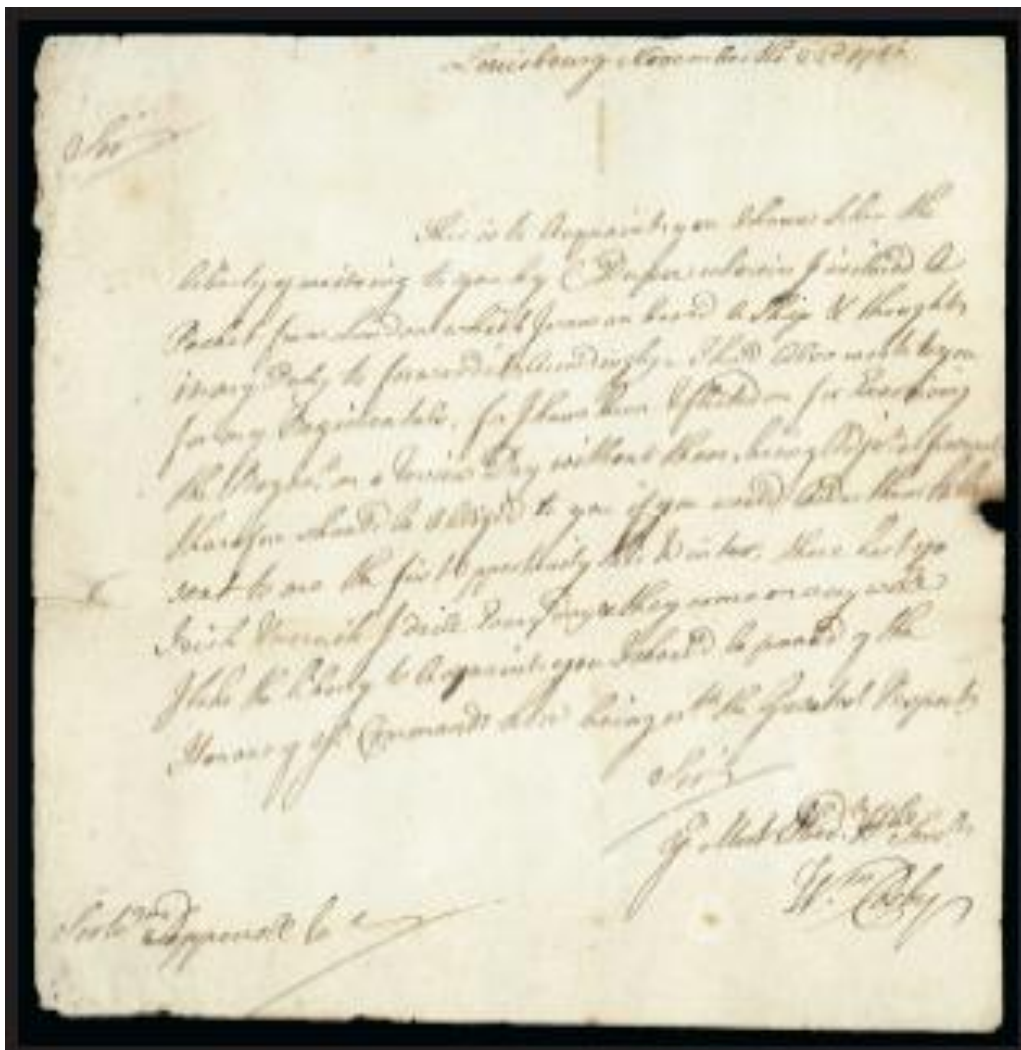
Lot 1011, the 1759 letter from de Lévis back to France transmitting news of the loss of Quebec and eventually the fall of New France, sold for 20,060fr/\$16,303, which was nearly double the low estimate. I was quite excited about the historical importance of this one and thought it might have sold for more.

Lot 1056, the Keffler's Reading room handstamp (3,835fr/\$3,116).

Lot 1216, General Hitchcock's letter en route to annex Texas (2,360fr/\$1,918).

Lot 1153, "Canada &c Art. 11" handstamp, one of only two known (5,310fr/\$4,315).

Lot 1342, A 1746 Louisbourg, Nova Scotia, letter to Massachusetts (2,478fr/\$2,013).



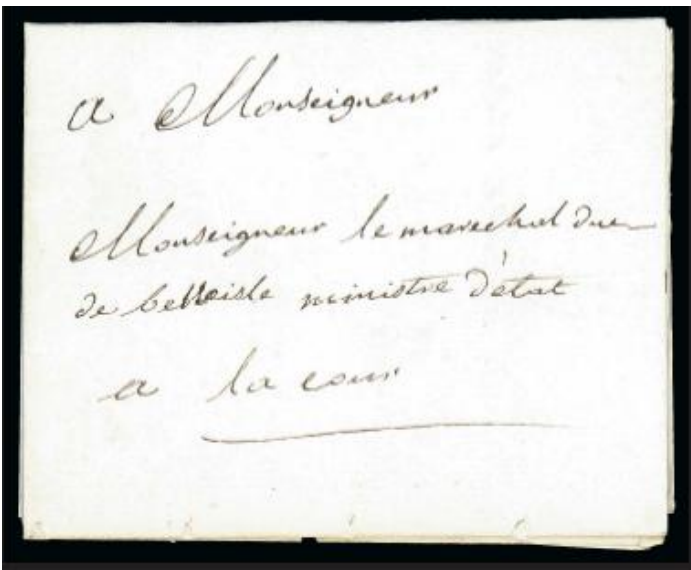
Lot 1342



Lot 1056



Lot 1216



Lot 1011



Lot 1153

Figure 4 (on both the previous page and this page). The top five bargains based upon prices realized.

Verge: *What were your five favorite items and why?*

Longley: *[see Figure 5, next two pages]*

Picking my five favorite seems like an impossible task, so I'll narrow it into five categories to make it slightly easier.

Visually Stunning—Lot 1050, an 1830 Quebec to London, England letter from Edward Hale, former secretary to Lord Amherst, with a beautiful hand-painted letterhead, which was a view of the St. Lawrence River and ships, painted from his window. Illustrated letterheads are rare in Canada, especially hand-painted ones.

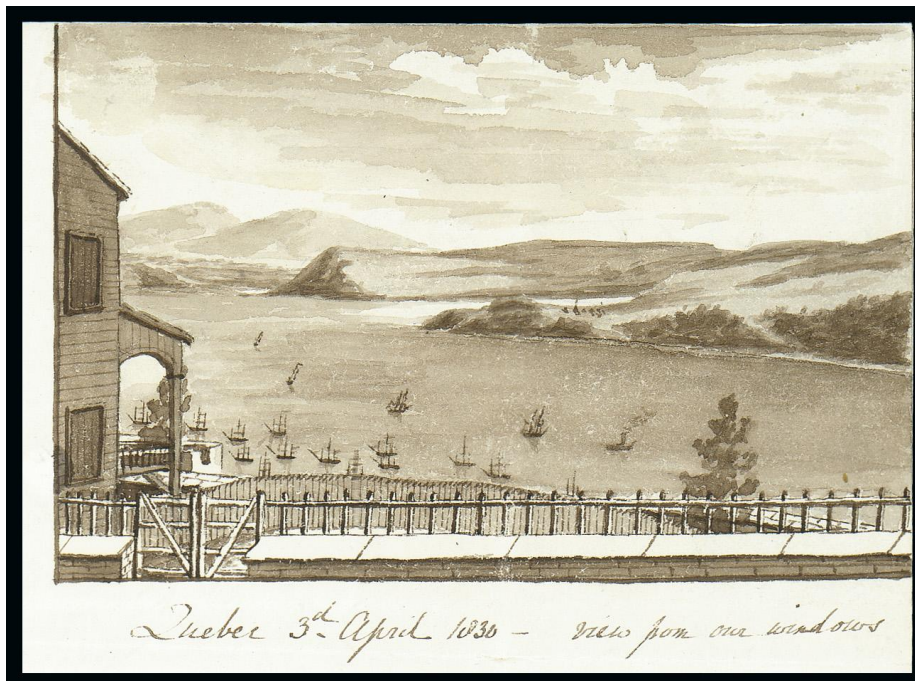
Obscure—Lot 1156, the unique [1852] "Quebec CAN" datestamp with "CAN" at the base (abbreviation for Canada). I was at a show as a youngster when suddenly everyone in the hall heard Allan let out a war whoop and called everyone to see what

he had found. This rarity is unusual because most datestamps have provincial designations at the base (such as "UC" for Upper Canada, "LC" for Lower Canada).

Exotic—Lot 1370, an 1847 New Orleans to Turin, Sardinia, letter shipwrecked in Nova Scotia *en route*, where the letter was treated as an incoming ship letter (from the wreck). A postmaster without compassion!

Rare—Lot 1203, the Detroit straight-line. This cover was one of Allan's pride and joys, not only because it was rare, but because, he told me, numerous U.S. collectors had tried to pry it from his collection.

Historic—Lot 1011, de Levis' letter transmitting the loss of New France to the British.



Lot 1050

Verge: *What were Canadian bidders interested in?*

Longley: The Canadians' interests were diverse. From my personal knowledge there were a number of collectors chasing Nova Scotia, the early period stampless, as well as military and historical covers.

Verge: *What was the total value of the sale vs. the total estimate?*

Longley: The sale brought 1.25 million francs/\$1.016 million (1.475 million francs/\$1.2 million with buyer's premium included) compared to a 1 million francs /\$812,744 estimate.

Verge: *Any reaction from the heirs?*

Longley: Allan's sister Paula was ecstatic with the results, but was equally impressed with the respect our presentation achieved for her brother's work, and that the catalog will serve as his legacy.

Verge: *Are there any other comments you would like to add?*

Longley: The phrase "once in a lifetime" is often overused, but it is truly applicable to the Steinhart collection. The sale demonstrates the strength of the Canadian collector market, and the international attention that can be brought. Matthew Bennett Inc., with its offices in the United States, Switzerland and Hong Kong, did a fabulous job bringing this collection to the international marketplace. It is the first time a multisite live auction was held for such an important Canadian collection. I am sure that this catalog will serve as an invaluable reference for collectors, and it will help generate new collectors of Canadian stampless covers.

Verge: *All in all, a great sale of an important part of Canada's postal history, and a tribute to a great postal historian, Allan L. Steinhart. ■*