



The Port Hood Provisionals, A Century Long Controversy Presentation to PSSC by Gordon Smith – 20 September 2023

What Happened?

Penny Post was established on Christmas Day, 1898. This Imperial rate was the equivalent of two cents in Canada. This change in rates created a situation where it cost three cents to mail a one-ounce letter within Canada, but it only cost two cents to mail a letter from Canada to another colony in the British Empire. On June 13, 1898, Parliament amended the Post Office Act to change the domestic rate from three cents to two cents, on a date to be set by the Governor General. On December 29, 1898, an Order in Council announced the change in the domestic rate in Canada to two cents, effective January 1, 1899.

In its January 1899 issue, Gibbons Stamp Monthly announced the appearance of covers bearing 3 cent stamps that had been vertically bisected in one third and two third pieces and that some were surcharged with a figure 2 or 3 to denote their value. In April 1899, Gibbons Stamp Monthly quoted an extract from a letter from the postmaster of Port Hood, which stated that the change in postal rates caused the office to run out of 2 cent stamps and that to keep accounting straight, he cut 3 cent stamps into one-third and two-thirds pieces. The postmaster said that was done for one day only and he estimated that there were about 100 one-cent and 200 two-cent bisects used, mostly for delivery within Canada. He went on to say that about 100 each of each value of the bisect were marked with the figures 1 and 2, and were placed on envelopes for delivery throughout Canada.

The postmaster at the time was John Mackay. Local histories record him as an upstanding citizen. W. H. Harrington of the Post Office Department in Ottawa in a letter dated March 30, 1904 stated that “It appears that the Postmaster of Port Hood, N. S., ... acting on the advice of some stamp fiend apparently, cut up a sheet or so of stamps to make twos and ones” and that the postmaster almost lost his job over it. The letter went on to state that the Department “never got hold of any of the mutilated stamps.”

In his BNA Record of December 1930, Jarrett recounted a whimsical and somewhat imaginary account of the creation of these provisionals, wherein the postmaster claiming time off for illness was actually away rabbit hunting and the “youthful” postal assistant “being philatelically inclined and having no restraining influence, got out his scissors” and created the Port Hood Provisionals to sell to Stanley Gibbons. Blair (1938), Holmes (1943), Pollock (1944) and Stephenson (1951) more-or-less repeat Jarrett’s story. More modern accounts such as Munden (1987) continued to repeat Jarrett’s account making it the accepted story of the creation of the Port Hood Provisionals, although there is no evidence that it is accurate.



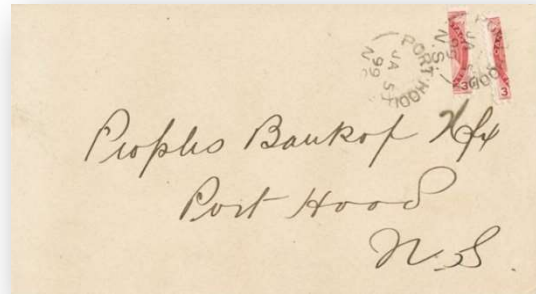
Scott, 2021



Unitrade, 2023



In 1929, Fred Jarrett stated that Donald A. King, who was a prominent philatelist and active dealer that worked for the Halifax Post Office, made enquiries about the creation of the provisionals. The Post Office Department conducted an investigation and sent an inspector to Port Hood. The inspector took possession of all used and unused copies of the provisionals that were remaining, and they were eventually destroyed. In 1930, Jarrett stated, in contrast to his statement in his 1929 book, that it was Donald King, not just a postal inspector, who went to Port Hood to seize the unauthorized stamps and brought them back to Halifax where they were “burned in the fireplace.” In 1948, Jarrett repeated his statement that Donald King was sent to Port Hood to investigate the affair but adds that King didn’t take the items he brought back to Halifax when the postmaster there offered them to him before tossing them in a fire. His imaginative story about their creation and the variations in his account of the investigation and disposal of these stamps could cause one to question the citation of Jarrett as an authority on the story of these stamps.



Legitimate Use or Philatelic Creations?

Since their creation, philatelists have been arguing whether the Port Hood Provisionals were produced legitimately by the post office in town or as philatelic curiosities for personal enrichment by an employee. Over 60 articles have been written about these stamps since 1899. Reviewing these articles 18 consider the covers to have been legitimately made and used, while 21 think that they are not legitimate; 22 offer no opinion or are descriptions of items at auction or of forgeries. Early opinions strongly questioned the legitimacy of stamps. For example, Horsely, a member of the Royal Philatelic Society, stated in April 1907 that the provisionals were “absolutely unauthorized, I scarcely think it should be recognized.” The Scott catalogue states that “Covers reported to date were backdated and never saw postal use”.

The statement that the provisionals are “no more deserving of collection as postage stamps than the hand stamp or pen mark on an envelope would be if no stamp or portion of a stamp had been affixed” that appeared in the April 1900 issue of the Montreal Philatelist, provides an interesting insight into early opinions about the collection of postal history.

Major philatelists supporting Port Hood provisionals as legitimate include Winthrop Boggs, A.E. Stephenson and Robson Lowe. Major philatelists feeling that the stamps and covers are philatelic creations include J. M. Horsley, C. A. Howes, Bertram W. H. Poole, Fred Jarrett, L. Seale Holmes, Walter Pollock and Ed Richardson.

Cryderman in BNA Topics in December 1947 says that “they are at least collectible, on cover only, of course, if they were not manufactured for philatelic purposes.”

A review of 73 auction results and 22 images in articles, revealed that 15 different covers, 15 stamps, and 12 stamps on-piece have been recorded not including known forgeries, or listings without images.



While Port Hood postmaster asserted that envelopes bearing the provisionals were mailed throughout the Dominion, the census only provides examples to addresses in Port Hood and to Charlottetown, PEI. 14 out of 15 covers were mailed to 3 to 4 people with the surname MacDonald or to the People's Bank of Halifax in Port Hood where Reginald, the son of Senator MacDonald of Charlottetown worked. While the original necessity to make provisional stamps to meet the new rate could be seen as legitimate, the lack of a variety in the people or business receiving the covers would strongly point to them as philatelic creations made by or under the influence of one person.

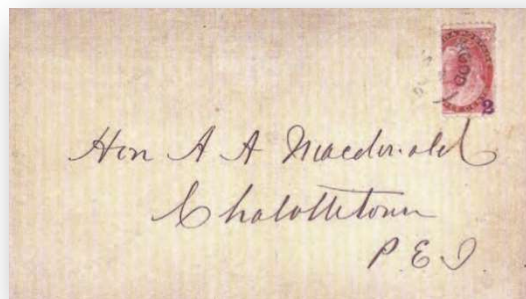
Jarrett states that a few covers were sold to Stanley Gibbons before the post office inspector arrived and that these were stamped with the firm's name on the back of the cover. Dealers and expertizing committees consider the presence of a Stanley Gibbons handstamp on the back of the cover or stamp to confer legitimacy on Port Hood Provisional items. However, the fact that Stanley Gibbons was able to publish an announcement about their presence within weeks of their creation has caused some philatelists to question the legitimacy of the Port Hood provisionals and to ask how Gibbons seemed to have obtained a monopoly on the material.

The first mention of a cover bearing a postmark of January 4, 1899, is found in Stephenson (1951) where he states that he has seen a cover with this date and he has no reason to doubt its genuineness. In 1953, he mentions in a letter to the editor, he suggests keeping "a very open mind as to the actual first day of issue of these stamps." While the Unitrade 2023 Catalogue states that the editors have seen covers dated Jan. 4 and 5, the Scott's Specialized Catalogue says that the Port Hood Provisionals were prepared and used on Jan. 5.

Based on this review of the literature, I would assert that the covers and stamps are philatelic creations.

Forgeries

Pollock in the Stamp Collectors Fortnightly of March 18, 1944 asserts that "The manner in which [the Port Hood provisionals] were made makes it impossible to expertize them ... Anyone with unused copies of the ordinary 3c. red, making sure that he had stamps from the same plate, and worn to about the same extent, could make all the "Port Hoods" he might want, with just a pair of scissors, a purple stamp pad, and a box of rubber dates." Robson Lowe states that "Expert opinions are usually valueless." Ariel Hasid of WIP International and Canadian Philatelic Expertizing Service has indicated that he feels that legitimate Port Hood Provisionals on piece should have the top to the postmark pointing to 3 o'clock.



An example of a known forgery



Are the Port Hood Provisionals Worthy of Collection?

Port Hood Provisional stamps and covers occupy places of distinction in the collections of well-known and well-regarded collectors like the Queen of England, and Dale and Lichtenstein. The material demands high prices at auction and private treaty sales. The Port Hood Provisionals are worthy of forgeries by the likes of Froedl and they continue to be listed in major catalogues like Scott, Stanley Gibbons, Unitrade, and Lowe. Undoubtedly, the story of their creation and the provenance of various pieces adds to their cachet and consequent value. They continue to command high prices in United States and Europe, but the evolution of their values over time corrected to 2023 Canadian dollars demonstrates both increases and decreases in value.

Item	Date of First Price Realized	Date of Second Price Realized	Percentage of Change	Expertizing or Dealers' Marks
M1L3 / M2R2	2002	2018	+384.2%	SG, Brandon, VGG
MST2	1970	2003	+112.6%	SG, VGG
M2L1	1958	1974	-39.7%	
P1L2	1963	1986	-85.8%	BPA
P1R1	1958	1974	-42.0%	
	1974	2009	+204.2%	PF 1976 & 1987
	1958	2009	+118.4%	PF 1976 & 1987
P2R3	1968	1997	-87.3%	BPA
P1P1	1994	2019	+185.9%	Brandon, Bühler, Calves
C1P1	1970	2016	-39.4%	SG, PF
C2L5	1967	1970	-22.9%	SG
C2L3	1969	2015	-28.3%	SG, Kakubek, BPA
C2L5	1963	2004	-22.9%	
C2L6	2009, May	2009, Sept.	+132.4%	SG
	2009, Sept.	2019	-0.02%	SG, BPA
	2009, May	2019	+132.1%	
C2L7	1969	2013	-70.1%	GS, PF, Bloch, Friedl

Table showing Changes in Values of Port Hood Provisionals sold at Auction.
Ultimately, value comes down to having a willing seller and willing buyer that agree on a price.
