

A Philatelic and Postal History of Newfoundland

By kind permission of the author

Brien C. Damien

THE SOLOMON YEARS 1792-1839

On a far-off day before envelopes and postage stamps, before Xerox and computers, before telephone and telegraph, and even before Newfoundland's capital city had a post office, and in the year 1792, an ambitious Englishman of twenty-five years stepped down from an ancient sailing vessel, trod over a twelve-foot-wide rut trod over earlier by Cabot and later by Marconi, and surveyed this environment new to him. He may have brought jewelry and precious metals for watchmaking; or perhaps his sole material possessions were the clothes on his back. He did bring determination and a specialized skill, and both were as valuable as anything material.

The local bureaucracy recorded his presence and arrival as follows: "No. 197./ Occupier's Name: Simn. Solomon/Owner's Name: Wm. Prendergast/Occupier's Occupation: Watch Maker/Years in the country, i.e. Solomon's: 3/ Marital status: single/Religion: Protestant/ Residence: St. John's; in third division, from Jno Noble's Cove to the Engine House." Little is known of what Solomon did in the next several years, although we do find this record: "Date: 12 February 1798./ Groom: Simon Solomon./ Bride: Sarah Thomas . . ."

Thirteen years after landing, Simon Solomon would be named Newfoundland's first postmaster, bringing to a close only part of the Solomon years, 1792-1839.

Prior to 1806, letter communication with and within Newfoundland was poor; it depended entirely on the cooperation of merchant mariners, fishing-boat captains, and others having reason to travel in and around Newfoundland and Labrador. These travelers carried letters for one shilling each, a fee altogether out of proportion to the value of Sterling and the inhabitants' means to pay. Taking into account the devaluation of Sterling and inflation, the 1800 shilling is worth roughly fifty cents or a dollar.

It should be emphasized that during the period there was no real need for local posts, that is, an exchange for local letters. St. John's then as now the island's largest town, was merely an eyesore stretching for

a few hundred feet along the harbor and an even shorter distance inland. Of course, it was more natural to visit someone than write him a letter.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sea captains used a primitive system of sending letters from remote regions. Upon arrival at a well frequented yet isolated anchorage, the master would send a member of his crew ashore to procure a large flat, round stone about fifteen inches in diameter, and have carved upon it the ship's and master's names, and the date. On the shore a bowl-like enclosure was built to hold the letters in such a way that when the mail stone was placed on top, a watertight compartment was formed. Hopefully, another ship coming from the opposite direction would stop at the spot, pick up the letters, and post them upon arriving at a port. There is no proof of the use of these stones, but with imagination they can be used to explain some of Newfoundland's unusual place names.

Otherwise, we can assume that another primitive means of sending letters was used by Grand Banks fishermen. A ship leaving the fishing grounds for home port was likely to carry back letters for other fishermen of the same nation. This may have been carried on from the first fishing season.

The first action to obtain an organized, government postal system was taken in 1792 by a committee of St. John's merchants who drew up a petition to Pitt — unsuccessfully. Letters were sent to the Postmaster-General in London, and to the Commissioners of the Treasury. One flowery-penned letter received by the Commissioners even offered to run a postal system under government subsidy. Christopher Towill wrote that he would provide "two voyages in the year from England to Newfoundland with letters to be delivered and received at and from all the Harbours between St. John's and Catalina . . . (St. John's to be) the place of resort for the packets — and from thence to Trepassy . . ." Alas, Towill was forty-eight years ahead of his time, for the Newfoundland government did not see fit to institute an inland system — a system for the outports — until 1851.

No move was made to secure a post office for St. John's by a government official until Governor Admiral Sir Erasmus Gower, one of the few naval governors having any respect for the inhabitants, wrote to Francis Freeling, Secretary of the General Post Office, as follows:

"Sir,

The Merchants and other Principal Inhabitants of St. John's, Newfoundland, under my government, having requested that I will endeavor to obtain for them the convenience of a postmaster in that Port, to whom bags of letters made up at the General Post Office in London may be sent, as opportunity may offer by Merchant Ships, and being of an opinion that such an establishment would be productive of an

advantage to the Trade, and add something to the Revenue, I beg you will be pleased to propose this measure for the consideration of the Right Honorable the Post Master's General, and to name as a proper person for that situation Sir (sic) Simon Solomon, a Watch Maker of good reputation, who is prepared to give the requisite security.

"As I understand there are many letters sent to Newfoundland by way of Halifax, where they remain till taken up, they might be forwarded from thence to the Postmaster in Newfoundland, as opportunity may serve, with some additional charge. I am, Sir, Your most obedient humble servant, E. Gower."

(To be continued)

Precancel Notes

By Merv Quarles, No. 393 — 17344 Mahoney Parkway, Hazel Crest, Ill.

After an absence of some time I have been asked to resume the preparing of a monthly column on Precancels. During this absence I have been tied up in a number of activities strictly non-philatelic — being Scoutmaster for about two years (I am still active at the District level of scouting) serving as Treasurer of our village for three years; forming a modest scouts on stamps collection and acquiring a 1400 variety honest to goodness Canada Precancel collection with numerous examples on original cover including some very fine precancelled stationery.

There are even several examples of provisional precancels included in this collection. After two years I am still sorting the duplicates and can certainly further identify some of the Die varieties on the Precancelled Admirals the listing of which started in BNA TOPICS.

One item I found was a large block containing the inscription "WARNING TO BE USED ONLY AS SPECIALLY AUTHORIZED".

H. G. Walburn reported in **The Precancel Optimist** "This first appeared on '4530' (Toronto) precancels about 1940, evidently as part of the precancelling plate, and now appears on one wide margin per pane of 100 on all Canada precancels.

The warning now given to precancel users, on the margin of the pane, is probably directed to those who might wish to use them for other purposes than are covered by the post office regulations.

This inscription may still be found on the current precancels restricted For General Use only as the Numeral Types became obsolete after being used on a special Christmas mailing in 1953.

Walburn in the same article also stated "Here is news about a hitherto unchronicled precancel in an entirely new type. So far only one copy has been unearthed, but its issue is confirmed by the P.O. Department in Ottawa. It is the 2c carmine Admiral (Hoover's No. 86) and reads:

Postage

Paid

at

Ottawa

Present information indicates that it was a provisional, prepared and issued at Ottawa, in 1916, for use on soldiers' mail. It was planned to issue similar precancels for the major Canadian cities, such as Toronto, Montreal, Hamilton, Winnipeg and others, but for some reason, the project was abandoned.

G. Ross Workman (BNAPS No. 845) later reported in BNA Topics February 1955 that he has the following examples:

Postage paid at Ottawa	3 copies
Postage paid at Ottawa, Canada ..	2 copies
Postage paid at Ottawa (with line) ..	3 copies
Toronto Ontario 125	3 copies

The Post Office Department was able to advise that the stamp precancelled Toronto Ontario 125 identified the sub post office from which the stamp was sold—the premises of The Robert Simpson Co.