

The LABRADOR MAILS

A BNAPS REPRINT

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PART 1

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Time has not changed coastal Labrador. Granted that yearly progress has been painfully slow, the passing years have done nothing to dim the air of aloof mystery and romanticism always associated with the name. But quite sadly, entire chapters of the mail service story are now missing or fast lapsing into obscurity.

Geographically placed as the far north-east peninsula of the North American continent, sub-Arctic Canadian Labrador lies between 51 to 61 degrees North Latitude.

Factually there is an interior district of vast mining wealth. Yet most of its small but thriving settlements hugging the North Atlantic coast and on numberless off-shore islands mainly evolve around a fur-fishery and mining type of economy.

Modernity flourishes; yet in a few isolated Eskimo villages, life has changed little since their discovery by a Norse explorer back in 986 A.D.

When Canada became a British Colony in 1763, Labrador was annexed to St. John's Colony, Newfoundland, given back to British North America in 1774, and re-annexed to Newfoundland in 1809.

On July 22, 1949, the Colony became the tenth Canadian province. Thus, for over two centuries the mail service history of the colony and its dependency were one and the same.

In the Labrador district, Moravian Brethren began mission station work with the northern Eskimos as early as the year 1770 — civilization's vanguard.

As time unfolded, Hudson's Bay Company opened a fur trading post at Fort Chimo, Quebec, in early 1831 and a second trading station down the coast at Rigolet, Labrador, in 1833.

In a few years, Company supply vessels established outposts at Cartwright, Davis Inlet, Nakvak, and North West River. A native courier system carrying winter mail and messages linked them all to distant

Quebec City — a second stage in progress.

Third and fourth decade history (1830-1850) is dim and cloudy. In an 1863 book of recollections "recapturing the times", London author, the Rev. Charles Pedley, noted nothing of import regarding the mails.

However, mention was made that on June 19, 1846 the Post Office at St. John's was destroyed by fire and all of the historic archive records. (This was the second disastrous fire).

Fortunately, the Canada postal history specialist, Frank W. Campbell, had listed and recorded almost all 19th century postmarks and made superb impressions of St. John's 1846-1849 period markings. Viewed, the now out-of-print reference sheets graphically illustrate: The "crowned circle" PAID 23 x 25 mm. hand stamp, the dated "circle rimless" postmark with gothic letters, and the era's "SHIP LETTER" hand stamp. All of the octogenarian "tracings" of Campbell were from old letters.



European whaling and cod-fishing fleets followed, soon finding it imperative to establish "fishing stations" and shore supply bases. Caretakers contracted to "winter-over" attracted other white settlers and seashore villages sprang up.

Old records reveal that the parent St. John's colony was granted a British post office in 1805. Accordingly, bags of letters made up by the General Post Office in London were sent "as opportunity should offer" by ship to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and then by smaller vessels to St. John's.

Communication into and out of Labra-

dor was scanty. It can be assumed that sailing ships making chance calls furnished limited courtesy accommodations. But like all true pioneers elsewhere, the lack of communication during the long winter seasons must have been unbearable.

In 1810, the appointive postmaster, Simon Solomon—an established resident jeweler—is credited with engraving an elaborate circular “ARMS” postmark, found on pre-stamped, folded letters.



Also at some undetermined early date, the London-made “superior seal”—GENERAL POST OFFICE ST. JOHN'S, NFD—was received, and placed in use.

As history moved on to July 1., 1851, control of the postal system from London headquarters ceased, with local officials from then on assuming full responsibility and keeping all revenue.

At this time, Postmaster General W. S. Solomon, with meager office staff of three, found the funds to add a Labrador mail agent. The name was never recorded, although his staff was. This is another irony of history.

January 1, 1857 witnessed issuance of the St. John's Colony one penny stamp—the first of ten imperforated stamps in pence and shilling denominations. Scott's Number 1 with the royal crown, oddly was marked “NEWFOUND”.

In keeping with the tradition of earlier stamps issued in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, all carried the Heraldic Flowers of the United Kingdom. The world in time would highly prize 260 later issues, and 19 airport stamps, while color rarities at high-philately auctions would rise from \$700 to \$2900 per single stamp.

The Labrador Steam Mail Service from the colony to the coast, started in 1870. Some sources disagree, mentioning the year 1875.

However, it is reliably known that Bowring Brothers vessels carried the mail, passengers and goods to Battle Harbour, and

extended service to Hopedale in 1880. A small steamer carried such semi-monthly mail north to Nain. At long last the neglected dependency had an official “line of communication”.

The first mail steamer “Ariel” was followed by the “Portia”, “Progress”, and “Walrus”. In succession, each were shipwrecked. All ports of call on the 700-mile coastal journey were “postal service accommodation points” only. Never was the importance of “mail from home” more appreciated.

Canada's “travelling post office” markings used during the decade read: COASTAL NORTH T.P.O. LABRADOR T.P.O. and the special London made instruments, LABRADOR NORTH, LABRADOR WEST, and WESTERN MAIL BOAT. Each specific transit mark represented a pertinent bit of history.

Dr. R. Willan, the British authority on Newfoundland, has stated in print and in letter that Labrador's first post offices were established in 1889 at Battle Harbour, Blanc Sablon, Iron Bound Island, and Lance au Loup. All earlier mainland ports had been “collecting stations”.

The increasing communication with, and dependency on, the then four existent Canadian provinces, necessitated mail links with the Coastal West TPO and the Straits TPO.



All of the “all-water routes” were on May to October navigational schedules. The fragmentary mention of a monthly overland winter mail has not been convincingly verified. However, in the late century the Nachvak and the Rigolet dog team sledge mails covered a 1500-mile coastal run leading to Quebec City. As private mail carriers, both firms had identifying “cacheted envelopes”. Many still exist. One contractor, J. D. Fraser, became the Postmaster General.

In passing, a Public Records list for the year 1902 discloses 47 post offices—about an all-time high. Mail service continually improved.