

Newfoundland's Columbia Air Mail—Revisited

Norris R. Dyer

This article looks at the 1930 Newfoundland 50¢ surcharged air mail issue from today's perspective, 68 years after its issue. I examine prices at auction. Additionally, C.H.C. Harmer stated that "well centered copies are rare," so my research also focuses on the centering of some 36 copies that have reached the market in the last few years [1]. A limited history of the best centered specimens is also included.

Figure 1. One of Last Surviving Blocks of Columbia. UL and LL Demonstrate "Fine" Centering, UR, "Superb", and LR, "Very Fine".



The Columbia Flight

His business suit recently pressed, J. Erroll Boyd gunned the engine of the Bellanca monoplane, Miss Columbia, down the 4,000 foot Harbour Grace runway, the sun low in the western sky. The 4% declining grade helped to power the plane down

the strip and Boyd, with his navigator, Harry Connor (also suited), successfully took off for England. It was October 9, 1930. On board were about 325 letters, 100 of them franked by a 50¢ surcharged Newfoundland stamp. The famous 1930 flight had begun.

Two thousand, six hundred and fifty miles later, the *Miss Columbia* was forced down on the beach at Tresco Island, 25 miles from Land's End, England, out of gas because of a faulty rear petrol tank. It was Friday, October 10th. A seaplane was dispatched to help them, brought fuel, and the monoplane reached Croydon, on Saturday.

The flight was basically successful, although the pilot and navigator had to have been a bit nonplused over their open-jawed flight, after stressing before take-off the "routine nature" of the flight justifying the business attire [2].

The Columbia Air mail

Three sheets of 100 of the 1919 olive green 36¢ Caribou stamp had been surcharged, in blocks of four, for the flight. With customers limited to one stamp, 252 went on sale in St. John's, on September 25, 1930 at 9 a.m., and were sold out within 15 minutes. Forty-eight were reserved for mail emanating from Harbour Grace. Somewhere along the line, two complimentary blocks of four were given to Boyd and Connor. Ultimately, 65 stamps would be used for covers postmarked September 25 from St. John's, and 35 for those postmarked at Harbour Grace on October 9. In addition, unsurcharged stamps (50¢ worth of postage) were used to frank mail—180 covers from St. John's and 25 or so from Harbour Grace. There were also a few odds and ends of supplementary mail from Harbour Grace, including several Canadian covers franked both in Canada and Harbour Grace.

From the above, one would assume that 292 singles resulted and two blocks of four, but one must never count out the avarice of some governmental officials. Harmer states there were *five* blocks of four, but today there may only be one or two. The block in Figure 1 was intact in 1996, and may still be—at least I have not seen any singles from it in recent auction catalogues. The block pictured on page 103 of Harmer's *Newfoundland's Air Mails*, 1984 edition, has been broken up, as one of the singles I describe in Table I comes from the lower left of the block (stamp #8). A few pairs were also around for a while, but I have not seen any.

The Columbia air mail is one of three very limited overprinted issues. The other two are the Hawker and de Pinedo overprints. Harry Hawker was the pilot in a failed 1919 attempt to fly the Atlantic in a Sopwith biplane. De Pinedo was the Italian plot who flew an S. 55 flying boat from Trespassey, Newfoundland to Ostia, Italy in 1927 after several stops along the way (see Table II for numbers issued of the three stamps). I did not include data on the 1919 Martinsyde, scripted "Aerial Atlantic Mail", of which perhaps 32 were created, and not placed on sale to the public, but acknowledge it here.

The Survey

Using auction catalogues from the last few years, with the primary focus on 1996/7, I have found 24 Columbia's that have been sold—17 mint, 3 used, and 4 on cover. I have photos of 12 others, including the block in Figure 1. These latter are not in the table, because they were: unsold at auction (7), withdrawn from auction (1), offered on retail basis (3), or I couldn't get the auction price realized (1). Since they cover the period 1995/98 I have, however, used them for a study of overall centering. I feel the larger sample size has increased the confidence level of the results, compared to a much smaller study I did in 1996 [3].

Table 1: Columbia At Auction

#	Auction	Date	Description*	Pos.	Price
Mint					
1	Cherrystone	1/98	Fine, LH, blunt perfs	LR	\$4557
2	Maresch	10/97	Superb, NH	LR	6038
3	Ivy & Mader	9/97	Fine, LH, sm perf crease	UR	4271
4	Shreves	6/97	VF+, VLH, weak strike	UL	4400
5	Ivy & Mader	6/97	F, NH	UR	4929
6	Ivy & Mader	3/97	VF, trivial HR	LR	4436
7	Robert Siegel	10/96	VF, HR	LL	7857
8	Eastern	3/96	VF, NH	LL	7150
9	Eastern	3/96	VF, LH, surch. smudged	UR	3850
10	Bennett	2/96	VF, NH, perfs bit short	UL	6600
11	Shreves	2/96	VF+, LH	LR	5107
12	Cherrystone	1/96	VF, small hinge mark	UR	4243
13	Eaton & Sons	6/95	F, VLH	UR	4044
14	Shreves	3/95	VF, LH	UR	5107
15	Firby	3/95	VF, OG-perf slightly toned	UL	3929
16	Maresch	11/94	F+, two light HR's	LR	4400
17	Firby	3/94	VF, NH	LL	8643
Used					
18	Eastern	9/96	Fine	LL	2860
19	Apfelbaum	2/96	Fine	Unk.	5500
20	Eastern	3/95	Fine+	LL	5940
On Cover					
21	Rodgers	11/97	Cover fold, stamp VF, S.J.	LL	6243
22	Ivy & Mader	6/97	Signed, VF, but pulled perf. S. J.	UR	3614
23	Ivy & Mader	3/97	Cover faults, but stamp VF, H.G.	UR	6571
24	Paradise Valley	8/96	Cover and stamps VF, S.J.	UR	6914

S.J. = St. John's H.G. = Harbour Grace

* "F" "VF" "Superb" are qualities related to centering. "F" = perfs clear design. "VF" = good margins on all four sides. "Superb" = opposite margins are full and identical.

Table II: Quantities Issued of the Rare Newfoundland Air Mails

Year	Stamp	#Mint	#On Cover	Total	Postmark
1919	Hawker	87	95*	182	St. John's
1927	de Pinedo	71	225	296	St. John's
1930	Columbia	200	100	300	St. John's - 65 H. Grace - 35

* Harmer estimates only 80 covers, which would make the total 167.

Although the sample at its maximum is a healthy 12% of the total issue, standard statistical tools are difficult for such things as pricing as there is too much variety in the individual cells *e.g.*, "Fine, LH, sm perf crease", to "Superb, NH." Prices realized, based upon condition, do make sense, however, as you'll see, and the sample certainly appears large enough, vis-à-vis centering, to challenge the literature.

Table I has 17/24 mint, or 71%, compared to actual 200/300 usage, or 67%. Of the 12 in my backup group, 11 are mint, and one is used on a St. John's cover. The total then, is 28/36, or 78% mint. If the ratio of three used singles to five on cover means anything, there are considerably fewer Columbia's remaining on cover than the 100 created in 1930. A truly representative sample of 36 Columbia's, for

example, should theoretically include eight covers from St. John's and four from Harbour Grace. Instead we have only four (including the back-up cover) and one. If nothing else, this sample suggests Harbour Grace covers are truly scarce.

Description/Centering

I have used three standards for centering—fine, very fine and superb. Surprisingly, the Columbia's seem to be about half nicely centered and half rather badly centered, looking at my sample of 36. The block in Figure 1 provides examples of all three types. UL and LL are fine, UR is superb, and the LR is very fine. To be superb, opposite margins must be basically equal. UR meets the test, LR has a bit too much lower margin, but still has good margins on all four sides. Figure 2 shows another example of very fine—again nice margins, but a bit too much at the bottom to be superb. It is #12 in the table. Figure 3 shows stamp #2, and the only other stamp of the total sample I have classified as superb. Truthfully, the left and right margins are only 85% equal according to painstaking (and eye-straining) measurements but I felt this was close enough, and the copy is obviously handsomely centered, based upon even a casual inspection.

Figure 2: Very Fine Centered
(#12 from Table I).



Figure 3: Superb Centered
(#2 from Table I).



Of the 36 stamps, centering is broken down as follows:

superb	2
very fine	..	17
fine	17

Many auction houses have taken the position that only 30 Columbia's are well centered. Either 63% of these have come on the market in the last 3-4 years, or something is wrong with their standard. The basis of the problem is what C.H.C. Harmer stated in his *Newfoundland Air Mails*, originally printed in 1953:

"The stamps given to the printer were often off-center with the results that well-centered copies are rare. It is difficult to estimate the proportion of perfect specimens, but it seems evident that possibly 50 or 60 were good average copies, of which number not more than about 30 can be described as really well-centered." (italics added).

I have read this paragraph many times, and frankly it makes limited sense. One would have to know Harmer's definitions of such things as "rare", "perfect", "good average copies" or "really well-centered," especially the distinction between "well centered" and "really well-centered." He states only 50-60 (or 17%-20%) of the issue represent "good average copies" and that only 30 of these are "really well-centered." Obviously one can not use modern definitions of stamp grading to help us interpret his statement, as *all* of the Columbia's in the sample are better than "good/average" even the poorly centered LL in the block pictured.

We can reduce the apparent discrepancy between my finding that a bit over half the Columbia's are very fine or superb and Harmer's projection that only 30 are "perfect" and "really well-centered" by assuming his standards apply only to the two stamps I classify as "superb." The two represent 5.5% of my sample of 36. This would extend to 17, looking at the total issue of 300. There could possibly be 28 more "superb" copies out there somewhere, thus meeting Harmer's projection of 30.

The confusion in centering standards for the Columbia's has led some dealers to description creep with copies that are only fine being termed "very fine for the issue." This is free enterprise at work. I believe there are a lot of well-centered (very fine or superb) Columbia's around, and that my sample, at 12% is statistically reliable on this point. A counter, and admittedly rather cynical, theory would be that the collecting public is selling their well-centered copies and holding on to their poorly centered ones.

Position

Of the 36 specimens, I can plate 34 as to position in the setting of four. In most instances I am working from photographs, and sometimes (especially with used copies) I can not make out enough detail. Here is what I looked for to help identify the proper positions:

- Upper left: best sign is an incomplete serif in the **A** of **MAIL**. Also, the **i** of **Columbia** is to the right of the **M** above.
- Upper right: best sign is incomplete serif in **A** of **Atlantic**.
- Lower left: best sign is **t** of **September** under left stroke of **u** of **Columbia**. Also has raised **e** in **Cents**.
- Lower right: best signs are distortions in **1** of **1930**, as well as raised **e** in **Cents**, more opened than at the lower left.

The best approach is to have a photo of an authentic block, such as Figure 1, or from the Harmer book. Forgeries do exist. The first generation was created shortly after the originals, in blocks. The forgeries were in jet black ink, and thick, heavy and partly blurred in impression. Often the commas around **Columbia** are distorted or tail-less. Other forgeries have been made subsequently. Ed Wener of Indigo pictured a forgery with clear and properly spaced letters several years ago, but with a missing upper right serif in the **M** of the third row [4]. Also, it did not plate. Never buy a Columbia without plating it, or having a professional plate it for you.

The 34 plated copies break down as follows:

Upper left	5
Upper right	11
Lower left	8
Lower right	10
Total	34

The upper left is underrepresented, although normally easy to plate. I have no explanation for this, but in any case we know 75 of each position were created.

Prices Realized

The prices in Table I are in Canadian dollars, converted at \$0.70 to the U.S. dollar, when necessary. Auction house commissions are included in the prices. Breaking average prices down into categories, I get:

Mint	\$5268	(17)
Used	4767	(3)
On cover	5836	(4)
All specimens	\$5300	(24)

Breaking the mint copies down by condition, realizes:

VF/Superb NH	\$7108	(4)
VF hinged	4866	(8)
Fine/NH	4929	(1)
Fine hinged	4318	(4)
All mint specimens	\$5268	(17).

Although the mint groupings consist of small pockets, the spread seems to make some sense on its face, from the highest prices for the ideal, well-centered, post office fresh specimens to the lowest for the more poorly centered, hinged ones. Although some traditionalists might not like it, the data suggest absence of hinging does significantly increase value.

The used and on cover samples are small at three and four. Additionally, if we remove #22 from the cover group (because the stamp has a fault), we get a much higher average of \$6576. I contend that this higher amount is more in the ballpark when we look at relative scarcity.

There are no other VF/Superb NH copies in the back-up sample of 12, so only four out of the 28 mint stamps in the total sample, or 14%, are in this condition. Applied against the maximum possible mint population of 200, this approach would mean only 28 of this condition theoretically exist. This is certainly fewer than the number of covers, even if only 50-75 of the original stamped covers still exist, so the highest prices for excellent mint copies seem appropriate.

I cannot give you much of a price history on the Columbia. I have little early data and price data often does not come with an adequate description of condition. Here are a few tidbits:

Robson Lowe - 1966/70, reports prices ranging from \$960-\$1510 (7) for mint and, 1970/71, St. John's covers from \$960 to \$1670 (4) and 1968, H. Grace cover at \$1800 (1).

Irwin Weinberg Rarities - 1976 offers fine mint for \$2400 and very fine used on St. John's cover for \$3200 [5, 6].

It's possible prices peaked during the early 1980's when speculation in stamps reached its height; but one must consider it was much harder to speculate on this issue with only 300 created, than on stamps such as the Balbo air mail at 8,000.

Table III is also in Canadian dollars and shows the current catalogue values assigned to the Columbia. All catalogues represent their creator's version of "retail" which is normally higher than auction realizations. The numbers speak for themselves [7 - 10].

Table III: 1998 Columbia Catalogue Values

Catalogue	Mint	Used	On Cover
Stanley Gibbons	\$10,285	\$9,714	-----
Scott	8,571	8,571	-----
Nfld. Specialized	7,300	5,900	S.J. - \$6,500 H.G.- 6,800
Air Mails of Canada and Newfoundland (AAMC)	7,714	-----	9,286

Although I have not intentionally collected current price data on the other two rare Newfoundland air mails, shown in Table II, the prices I have seen and catalogue values do not always tally with the numbers of stamps and covers created. While we would expect the mint Columbia's to be selling for less than the Hawker and de Pinedo (and they do) why doesn't the Columbia *on cover* catalogue and sell for more than the de Pinedo—100 covers compared to 225?

The bottom line on pricing suggests one must pay around \$4500-5000 for a well centered mint Columbia (including commission), if one does not mind hinging. The prices in Table I indicate you can do even better, if lucky. Note, for example #6 and #12. This is probably as good a time as ever to consider a purchase, as prices seem to be stabilizing. A nice cover will probably cost more.

The Matejka Block

One of the stamps I have classified as superb is the upper right of the block in Figure 1. It was *ex* Matejka when it last went to auction in 1995 by Charles Firby's firm. It was described as "OG, perfs shortened by separation at L & Pos 1. Has a scratch at T, possibly caused at time of surcharging." [11]. Firby states that it was probably only one of the two remaining blocks. The estimate was U.S. \$20,000 and the Canadian owner refused to accept the top bid of \$10,000. The owner then placed it on private treaty with a Canadian dealer. The price demanded at that point was C.D.\$20,000-25,000, according to the dealer. It did not sell, and the dealer tells me he last saw it when the owner took it to a Canadian show. As of early this year, he was unaware whether it had sold. None of the singles in this study are from the block, so it may well continue to exist intact. One hopes the block does remain intact for historical reasons. There may be no other.

The Superb #2

This superb, never hinged stamp was purchased by a post office employee at the time of issue, in 1930. It had carefully been preserved for 50 years, when the two daughters of the worker shopped it around in St. John's. The dealer who eventually bought it had heard about this from a number of friends before the ladies finally showed up at his doorstep. He confirmed that it was genuine, purchasing it for \$2200. He eventually sold it to a Canadian dealer, who sold it at private treaty in 1981 for \$9500. It was purchased at that time for the Cole collection.

The stamp was placed on auction through R. Maresch & Son by its Toronto owner in October of last year, where it was purchased by the same dealer who had sold it in 1981. As of the end of 1997, it was on the market at U.S.\$9250. Maresch described it as has having "exceptional freshness and center, full o.g. and *never hinged*, a wonderful stamp in every respect, with clean 1982 Greene certificate." [12]. The dealer describes it as "likely the finest known." Who knows—he may be right!

Sixty-eight years ago, Newfoundland surcharged 300 stamps for the Miss Columbia flight. Even given that remarkably small number, specimens are not rare on the auction market today. I hope this modest survey leads to more research by others, and would appreciate any additional price data from 1994 onwards.

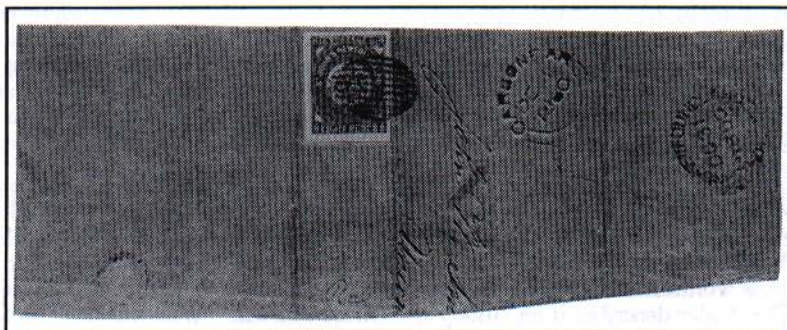
References

- [1] Harmer, C.H.C., "Newfoundland Air Mails," reprint of 1953 edition, American Air Mail Society, Cinnaminson, NJ, 1984.
- [2] Smyth, Rosc, "A Visit to Harbour Grace and its Glorious Air History," COPA Newspaper, June, 1984.
- [3] Dyer, Norris "The Columbia Air Mail - Scarce But Not Elusive," *Newfie Newsletter*, #59, St. John's, Newfoundland, March/April, 1996.
- [4] Wener, Edward, and Nicolins, Naya, Indigo price list, Hibiscus Coast, New Zealand, November, 1993.
- [5] Lowe, Robson, "The Encyclopedia of British Empire Postage Stamps, Volume V," London, 1973.
- [6] Weinberg, Irwin, "Treasures of Philately," fourth edition, Wilkes-Barre, Pa., 1976.
- [7] "Scott Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue," 1998 edition, Sidney, Ohio, 1997.
- [8] "Stanley Gibbons Stamp Catalogue," 1998 edition, London, 1997.
- [9] Walsh, John and Butt, John, "Newfoundland Specialized Stamp Catalogue," fourth edition, 1998, St. John's, Newfoundland, 1997.
- [10] "The Air Mails of Canada and Newfoundland," a volume in the sixth edition of the American Air Mail Catalogue, Mineola, NY, 1997.
- [11] "Charles G. Firby Auctions," Waterford, MI, catalogue for auction of September 12, 1995.
- [12] "R. Maresch & Son," Toronto, Ontario, catalogue for auction of October 7, 1997.

A Rarity of Newfoundland

Colin D. Lewis

Most of the Newfoundland Pence Stamps found on cover, letter sheet or even piece, are extremely rare indeed, whilst some of the issues only exist in used condition on loose stamps. Below is an example of the 8d scarlet vermilion of the 1857 "First Pence" issue used on a large part letter sheet.



Checking Robert H. Pratt's *The Pence Issues of Newfoundland 1857 - 1866* shows that he records just one complete cover of this rate, using the 8d scarlet vermilion, and this was part of the "Tucker" correspondence to Baltimore U.S.A. (see page 148, Fig. 63 of his book). The 8d rate was for a double weight port-to-port letter, up to one ounce, during the period this item was mailed. It is likely to have originated at Carbonear; see December 31 1860 hammer, and the same date transit mark of St. John's, Newfoundland. This is possibly only the second such usage recorded.

The destination of the letter sheet is open to speculation, because it only carries a portion of the name and address of the recipient. The detail that can be identified and my guess as to the missing elements is: John N. or W. Sm(ith), Union (Street), (New York?). I would be extremely interested to receive any information from readers, as to its precise destination and the exact name of the addressee. Any provenance that can be attributed to it would also be appreciated. The item does have a 1997 RPSL certificate.

Slogan Pieces Come Together

Cecil C. Coutts

From 1920 most of the Canadian cancelling machines were Universals leased from an American firm. As early as 1915, Montreal inventor Joseph Omer Lamoureux busied himself attempting to fabricate a better cancelling machine. U.S. patents were granted to Lamoureux in 1915, 1918, 1925 and 1926. His Canadian patents were approved in 1923 and 1931; there was also a forerunner, alluded to in his 1923 patent, that has not been located to date.

The inventor made several attempts, without success, to sell his machine to U.S. postal authorities. Similar efforts were made in Canada, and finally in 1925 the department allowed a Lamoureux machine to be placed in a Montreal post office on a trial basis. A postal impression resembling a Lamoureux product, and dated at Montreal May 22, 1922, has been seen. This is the only impression known, and if authenticated as a Lamoureux, then it would be the first trial known and a forerunner to the 1925-26 experiments.

About this same time, it seems that Lamoureux's inventions were either acquired by one George H. Robert of Montreal, or at the very least, Robert had become a business associate. Robert was now vigorously promoting the machine; but the patent in 1931 was in Lamoureux's name. No Robert patents have been found.

Politics now came into play as government officials pressed for a Canadian-made cancelling machine. In reply to a letter dated April 29, 1927 from the Deputy Minister of Public Works, the Deputy Postmaster General wrote, "Buy the Lamoureux machines, Canadian made."

When the Coutts' Slogan Catalogue was published in 1996, only one example of an experimental slogan from a Lamoureux machine was known. This slogan was number C-267 reading CANADIAN GOODS ARE BEST and dated Dec. 1, 1925 (Figure 1).