

CANADA GATEWAY TO SAINT PIERRE'S MAIL. Canadian Postal Markings on Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon Mail 1858-1961

SYNOPSIS

This collection was originally exhibited in a two-frame format. It has been fully revised and expanded into a three-frame exhibit.

Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon (SPM) consists of a few islands, under French jurisdiction, near the Burin peninsula of Newfoundland.

Although not far from Newfoundland, the islands of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon (SPM) were quite isolated postally in this period. The islands did not have a direct link to France, Canada or the United States of America. Some mail from SPM came to Canada on fishing vessels and later on boats chartered by the SPM government.

Since Halifax, Nova Scotia, was a port of call for many transatlantic ships sailing from New York to Southampton or from Boston to Liverpool in Great Britain. Hence, Saint-Pierre mail found its way overseas through Canada and sometimes Newfoundland. Although St-John's (Newfoundland) was closer to SPM, it did not have the same frequency of sailings to Europe or the USA as Halifax and was rarely used.

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Once the postal system was developed, two features specific to these islands determined the way the mail was transferred to Canada.

1-Weather conditions.

The closest harbour to SPM, North Sydney, was then 17h sailing time away. However, in winter while the harbour was often blocked by ice, the SPM mail was directed towards Halifax which was 36h sailing time away. Exceptionally, mail was routed to Saint John's, Newfoundland.

2- A peculiar offering for the convenience of patrons and businesses.

In Saint-Pierre, mail could be dropped off near the departure time of the mail boat, in a mail box on the harbour. This box was emptied and its contents (not postmarked) transferred to the mail boat. This is the so-called "open bag mail" or "loose pouch mail". At destination the mail was processed as "foreign" or "paquebot" mail following UPU regulations.

Mail that was deposited during post office hours was "closed bag mail" and its stamps were cancelled at Saint-Pierre.

Nearly all mail postmarked North Sydney are from open bags since closed bags were forwarded unopened directly to Halifax for processing.

During WW2, all mail had to be deposited at the post office in order to pass through the censure. Hence, all mail was SPM cancelled as there was no "open bag mail" between June 1940 and 1945. Mail with censure markings, applied in Canada or at Saint-Pierre are illustrated.

PURPOSE OF THE EXHIBIT

The purpose of this exhibit is to show the postal markings (cork cancels, duplex, machine cancels, paquebot, censure, etc.) used in Halifax, North Sydney(NS) and St. John's (NL) applied to letters leaving Saint-Pierre for destinations in Canada, France and the United States. Only the mail from the

island of Saint-Pierre is part of the exhibit since mail from Ile-aux-Chiens or Miquelon is almost nonexistent.

THE CHALLENGE FACTOR

As outlined below not much mail from this period exists since there were fewer than 2500 inhabitants on the islands when the post office opened in 1854. It has taken me over 10 years to assemble the exhibit in its present form.

Various cancelling devices were used on SPM stamps in Halifax and North Sydney. Cork cancels wore out quickly and had to be replaced often and no two of these were identical. Furthermore, the post office clerks sometimes used whatever device was handy to deface the stamps. I know of the existence of such unexpected usages but very few examples have been reported and exist only on fragments.

MATERIAL HIGHLIGHT

Rarity is difficult to establish as, in general, little mail was sent from the islands since there were only 2800 inhabitants in 1858 and about 6000 nowadays. Most mail related to fishing and business activities. Letters of a personal nature, usually sent to France, are very rare. Some of the items shown in the exhibit are rare as only 3-5 examples have been reported. A unique letter, shown here, was sent to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, a very unusual destination. A business letter destined for Halifax and carried through Saint John's, Newfoundland, then a British Colony, is a unique example of such itinerary.

ORGANIZATION

The exhibit has been organized first by harbor location (Halifax, North Sydney and Saint John's) and then chronologically from 1858 to 1961 when a regular airmail service became available.

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