

XV. RAILWAY MAIL

RPOs offer endless and fascinating study. If there is a part of you that loves trains, then collecting RPOs propels you into the glorious saga of the development of our railways. From the Newfie Bullet, through the Maritimes, along the Grand Trunk between Quebec and Windsor, across the country on the Canadian Pacific transcontinental; it's a memorable trip. While these main routes did yeoman's service in moving the mail efficiently over great distances, the smaller railways and branch lines offer surprises to the RPO student.

RPO is the abbreviation for Railway Post Office. RPO also refers to postmarks applied by railway mail clerks on board the mail cars. They span the 1850s to 1971, paralleling the development and decline of Canada's railway system. Early RPOs often can be recognized by the name of the railway in the postmark—WELLAND RAIL ROAD and CENTRAL ONTARIO RWY. are among those seen. RPOs were first used in Canada in 1853 on the St. Lawrence and Atlantic Railroad, the Canadian portion of the line running between Montreal and Portland, Maine.

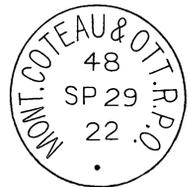
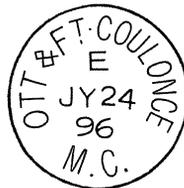
The first Canadian RPO is shown at the left. The next figures show two hammers used 1854-55. Other initials may be found on RPO cancels, such as MC for mail car, PC for postal car, RyPO or RwyPO for railway post office, and PO car. Most RPO cancels have an '&' connecting an origin and a destination, although the same hammer was used in both directions. Most early RPOs indicate the direction the train was travelling, being

shown in the cancellation by the words or letters UP, DOWN, E, W, N, S, SOUTH, EAST, etc. The cancel shown below indicates, for example, that the mail car was travelling east from Fort Coulonge to Ottawa.



Later the directions were generally replaced by the train number of the particular run. Many collectors have a collateral collection of timetables relevant to their interests. Examination of a CN timetable for

train 48 shows that the train was travelling east (Ottawa to Montreal via Coteau Station) when the mail clerk cancelled the letter. The cancel shown was postmarked on train 48.





TPOs (Travelling Post Offices) and other marine postmarks used in post offices on steamboats and ships are also studied. Newfoundland had many TPOs, as many of the outports could only be reached by sea. The cancel at the left shows that the letter came from the steamboat travelling south from Okanagan Landing, BC to Penticton.

Mail clerks were tested regularly for sorting accuracy and speed, RPO clerks being subject to higher standards than other clerks. As the train rolled down the track, the postal clerk was in the mail car sorting and postmarking mail. Bags were filled to be dropped off and others taken on. On some runs, a large number of clerks were involved and many hammers were needed in the mail car. The inclusion of a number, such as No. 5 or No. 6, meant that sorting errors could be traced back to the clerk responsible.



Hammers 5 and 6 on the examples shown here were assigned to clerks on the busy railway run between Calgary and Edmonton.

As a condition of employment, the RPO clerk had to purchase a private handstamp. Seen in a variety of shapes, they were to be used on internal paperwork—facing slips, bag tags, and letter bills—but they occasionally may be found on cover, contrary to post office regulations. Examples of private mail clerk handstamps are shown here.

The Railway Post Office Study Group of BNAPS has published 6 newsletters a year for the last 36 years. All aboard!



RPOs

What to collect?

- A particular route - Quebec and Montreal, Calgary and Vancouver
- A geographic region - RPOs of Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Southwestern Ontario
- A railway - Grand Trunk Railway, The Great Western Railway
- A particular period - Victorian, Edward VII, George V, George VI, Elizabethan
- Hammer studies - the classification of similar postmarks offers hours of squinty fun

Paquebot Covers

Here is an area just waiting for a major collection to be formed. There are many world-wide ship cancel collections but few dedicated to Canadian material! A little background: At the 1897 UPU Congress held in Washington DC, it was agreed that the French word “Paquebot” would be the international word meaning “posted at sea.” To get a mail piece into the mail stream under UPU rules, mail posted on board a ship using the postage available on that ship would be dropped off at the next port of call. One could arrange a Canadian Paquebot collection in three sections. First, one could show Canadian stamps bearing foreign post-marks. We know that more than 20 countries postmarked Canadian postage with a Paquebot cancel. We are sure there are many more out there to find. The second area of collecting might be foreign stamps bearing a Canadian postmark. We believe this is

the area of greatest potential in your Paquebot collection.

Pictured here is an example of a Canadian Pacific Steamships Ltd. letter card from the SS *Empress of France* that has been franked with Great Britain ½d and 1d stamps paying the postage rate from Great Britain to the U.S. The stamps have



been cancelled at Quebec, as that was the first port of call.

Probably the most difficult area to collect would be the third segment—Canadian stamps used on mail addressed to Canada but still carried on board a ship. This would be particularly difficult for trans-Pacific steamship mail because trans-Atlantic mail is more common. The ports of Vancouver and Victoria used Paquebot cancels on mail coming to Canada, as did Chinese, Japanese, and Australian ports. For a number of years, New Zealand had marine post offices (with cancels) on ships that arrived in British Columbia.

Canada has many thousands of miles of coastline and many remote coastal communities were served by coastal steamer. An envelope posted on a coastal steamer might receive a “Way Mail” cancel indicating it was posted along the way and would enter the postal system at the first port of call with regular postal service.

A dedicated Canadian Paquebot collection could be a truly interesting collection, and a world class exhibit if your collecting interests take you along the exhibiting road.