

BRITISH NORTH AMERICA PHILATELIC SOCIETY

TRANSATLANTIC STUDY GROUP

Newsletter No. 6

March 1988

In the October 1987 (No. 5) Newsletter, I noted that none of the Group members had sent me any material for inclusion in future issues and I asked them to do so. Since then, I have only received a letter from Maggie Toms, enclosing some interesting photocopies relating to the exchange of Mails between B.N.A. and France in the 1850s. Unless I get some response, I shall be hard pressed to find subject matter for future newsletters.

One of the letters Maggie sent to me brings out an interesting situation which undoubtedly happened from time to time. An 1855 letter from France to St. John's, Newfoundland was found on arrival to be less than 1/4 oz. in weight, although it had been rated by the G.P.O., London as a double weight letter with 2/5 Sterling postage due. This was reported to London and the letter returned as proof. In replying to St. John's, London confirmed that the letter had been overweight when it was rated, but as the St. John's postmaster had certified that it was under 1/4 oz. on arrival there, "the overcharge of 1/2½ may be allowed." This often happens when absorptive materials are moved from a moist to a dry climate!

Should Inland Postage be charged on St. Lawrence Steamboat Letters?

When the General Post Office announced in March 1839 that the postage on Falmouth packet letters had been reduced to the uniform single rate of 1/- Stg. without additional inland postage, this was interpreted in B.N.A. as including the excessive mileage-based inland postage from Halifax to the Canadas. However, this was not the intention and, after a few months of cheap postage, the B.N.A. inland postage was again charged. By way of explanation of the original intent, Thomas Stayner, Deputy Postmaster General of the Canadas, was informed that the reduced 1/- Stg. rate paid the postage on a letter from any part of Great Britain and Ireland to the port where the Falmouth packet called in North America.

This was accepted by the general populace until it was announced that, along with the start of the Cunard steam packet service between Liverpool and Halifax/Boston, a mail steamer would operate between Pictou, N.S. and Quebec City during the months that the St. Lawrence River was open. With such a routing, the transatlantic Mails would only be transported overland between Halifax and Pictou - about one-sixth as far as to Quebec City.

Stayner was prompted by local residents to ask London in February 1840 whether he should "impose the full internal land rate, as I do now, (vizt. 1/8 Cy or 1/6 Stg) or whether the fact of the letters being conveyed for more than 5/6ths of the distance between Halifax and Quebec, by Her Majesty's Steamers, may not affect the regulation!" He went on to explain "that after the Mails are landed at Halifax from England, they will be conveyed overland to Pictou, about 100 miles, they will there be re-shipped into a Government Steam packet, and thence conveyed to Quebec, direct, a distance of perhaps 5 or 600 miles. - It is argued by persons here interested in the correspondence with England, that if the Mails were transhipped at Halifax instead of Pictou, or if they came on direct from England to Quebec, a letter from London would under your notice of March 1839, be delivered at Quebec for the simple charge of 1/-; whereas my intention, except I am corrected by instructions from you,

is to impose the same additional charge under the head of internal postage that I do now; and this it is contended would be wrong, inasmuch as it does not appear consistent with the spirit of the regulation."

On receipt of this letter, Thomas Lawrence of the G.P.O. Secretariat sought a legal opinion from M.B. Peacock, who commented that "if Letters forwarded from the United Kingdom to Quebec be landed at Halifax and be forwarded from thence to their destination in part overland and in part up the river St. Lawrence, I am of opinion they will be legally chargeable with the internal postage granted by the 5G3 c.25." This was apparently accepted.

By July 1840, all was in readiness for the arrival of the Britannia at Halifax to mark the start of the new steam packet service, and the mail steamer Unicorn was standing by to carry the Mails for the Canadas from there to Quebec City. However, for this first trip the Unicorn was to take the Mails all the way from Halifax, instead of collecting them at Pictou, and this would be the pattern of future years as well, as the Unicorn was based at Halifax during the winter months.

This first voyage of the Unicorn from Halifax to Quebec City with a Mail prompted Stayner to reopen the question of internal B.N.A. postage on transatlantic letters, but from a slightly different angle:

"With reference to the construction of the Act of Parliament relative to the postage on letters to and from England...it appears to me that whenever the English Mails are reshipped at Halifax, and thence brought round by the Steamer - or whenever our Mails - put on board the Steamer at Quebec - are carried thence direct to Halifax, - the Post Office has no right to charge the internal postage granted by the Act of 5th Geo: the 3rd - Cap: 25! - If such be the fact you will readily see, Sir, the difficulties that must grow out of it - it will not merely involve the necessity of altering the postage charge several times in each year - but in the interior of this Country, it cannot always be known what rate of postage is to be exacted."

Peacock was again consulted and this time supported the position put forward by Stayner:

"Letters conveyed from this Country to Quebec by a packet boat direct would not be chargeable with any Colonial postage in respect of such Conveyance; and I apprehend that the circumstance of the British Mail bags for Quebec being taken out of one Packet boat and put into another at Halifax does not make any difference - I think therefore that no Colonial Postage is chargeable in respect of the Packet Conveyance of such Bags from Halifax to Quebec -"

On 21 August, the matter was referred to the Treasury to see whether there should be any alteration in the present Contract with Cunard because of this. The Treasury response is not known, but it became largely academic with the reduction of the B.N.A. internal postage on transatlantic letters to 2d Stg. or 2½d Cy. with effect from 4 September 1840.

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Somebody send me something for the next newsletter, please! Jack Arnell