THE HISTORY OF THE CANADIAN POSTAL SYSTEM, 1763–2001, Part 1

by Jacques Nolet

[This section of Jacques Nolet's article first appeared in French in the January 2002 issue (#237) of *Philatélie Québec*; part 2 is scheduled to appear in #238. The translation was done by Robert C. Smith, and is published here with the permission of the author.]

1. Creation of the Canadian Postal System

The English-speaking merchants who established themselves in Canada after the Conquest demanded the establishment of a postal system comparable to the one set up in Great Britain in 1710, in the Queen Anne era. The British Colonial Post refused to move on this matter until the question of New France had been legally settled. This subsequently occurred in 1763 on the signing of the Treaty of Paris by the two rival powers involved in North America, France and Great Britain. After the signing of the treaty, the British lords of the General Post Office gave the authority to their assistant for northern North America, Benjamin Franklin (Fig. 1), to attend to this matter. He set to work, and chose an English merchant who had been recommended to him to organize a postal system in the valley of the St. Lawrence River.

As a result, Hugh Finlay (Fig. 2) worked quickly, and during the course of the summer of 1763 opened a first post office at Quebec City and two other sub-offices at Trois Rivières and Montreal (Fig. 3). A fourth was established in 1770 at Berthier, on the North Shore of the St. Lawrence, halfway between Montreal and Trois Rivières. The mail to or from London had to follow the Hudson River valley and transit by the port of New York. Since Finlay laid the basis for the postal system which eventually served all of British North America, he is considered to be the true founder of the Canadian postal system.
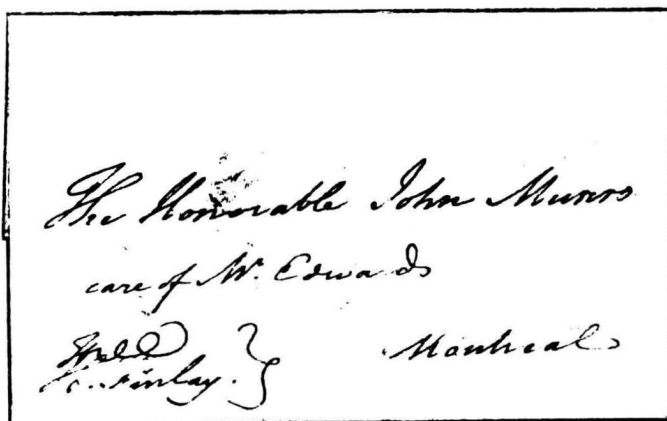

Fig. 1

Fig. 3

Fig. 2

During its War of Independence, the United States invaded Canada and almost put an end to the postal system set up twelve years earlier. The Americans believed that they could convince the French-speaking Canadians to rebel against their new mother country, and even to join their insurrection. Not only did the American invasion involve a large part of Quebec (Montreal and Trois Rivières), but it also paralysed the transportation of mail between the post offices set up by Finlay. Confined to Quebec City during the

American blockade of the town, the postal system had to await the end of the invasion before going forward again.

The task was then taken up rapidly, and the postal system reorganized after an interruption of about eighteen months. This was not done without some difficulty, especially because of the sympathies for the Americans of some of those responsible for the post houses along the route. Finally, however, the task was accomplished peacefully and practically without acrimony. Meanwhile, in London, the directors of the Colonial Post had dismissed Franklin from his duties as Deputy Postmaster General for the northern part of North America and named Finlay in his place.

Because of the American Revolution, it was necessary that Finlay find a route to replace the one to and from the United Kingdom, since the route along the Hudson River could no longer be used. During the course of the following decade his efforts were successful; the route which was opened to Halifax passed through vast boreal forests never before explored.

The new capital drew up its first official act – the Quebec Act of June 22, 1774 – which defined the borders of Quebec as follows: from Labrador (to the north), passing through the Great Lakes (at the centre), and going down to Ohio (in the south). However, these borders did not remain in effect for long, since the American Revolution would limit them to those of the present day. By an order of Quebec's Executive Council promulgated on August 24, 1792, the initial Quebec was divided into two colonies: Lower Canada (equivalent to modern Quebec) and Upper Canada (now Ontario). The Ottawa River formed the border between these two colonies.

The postal system would long reflect this new political division, since its first circular markings (large double broken circle or Campell's "Round 4," and small double broken circle or "Round 6") would show one or other of the provincial initials L.C. for Lower Canada and U.C. for Upper Canada – see Figs 4 and 5. Even after these designations were abandoned, and in spite of the changed political reality, the Post Office continued to use them – for example, on certain postal markings such as Campbell's "changelings" of Montreal (1856–62) and Three Rivers (1855–64).

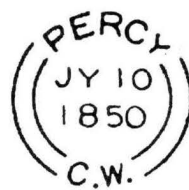Fig. 4   Fig. 5   Fig. 6   Fig. 7

In the first half of the nineteenth century there were many recriminations against the British Colonial Post in the two provinces, because all of the profits were channelled to the United Kingdom, while it spent hardly anything on local improvements in Canada. After the troubles of 1837–38, Great Britain gave Lord Durham the responsibility of examining the political situation in the country and of proposing appropriate solutions. This he did in a report of January 21, 1839 – a report which remains famous to this day. His recommendations eventually led to the Act of Union of 1840 and, in the long term, to Confederation.

A single British Colony (Canada) was created by the Act of Union, formed of the two provinces (Lower and Upper Canada) designated in a new way: Canada East and Canada West. This major political change had repercussions on the marks used by the postal system, since they used new initials: C.E. for Canada East and C.W. for Canada West (Figs 6 and 7). However, this political renewal did nothing to silence the recriminations of the reformers (both anglophone and francophone) concerning the Colonial Post; through laws adopted in each of the provincial parliaments, it even led them to demand autonomy for their postal system.

In the middle of the 19th century the British Empire was experiencing serious political tension, to the extent that around 1860 the Parliament at Westminster adopted a law giving administrative autonomy to its largest colonies. But in its Canadian Province, Great Britain had already anticipated this colonial devolution, since it had in 1848 accorded Responsible Government (Fig. 8), which gave political reality to administrative autonomy (the United Province of Canada). Results were not long in coming on other projects, and on April 6, 1851 London logically gave postal autonomy to the Province of Canada. This autonomy was evidenced by two events: the formation of a Canadian Post Office Department on the same day as the issuance of the first Canadian postage stamp on the following April 23 (Fig. 9).

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

2. Confederation

Postal developments in British North America were not confined to its central part, the Province of Canada; there were also distinct postal systems elsewhere on Canadian territory, on the Atlantic coast (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island) as well as on the Pacific coast (British Columbia and Vancouver Island).

Nova Scotia

In reality, the Colonial Post had already begun on the Atlantic coast around 1754, after the English had conquered the fortress at Louisbourg, by the creation of a post office in Halifax in order to serve communications on the east coast, from Acadia to Newfoundland. This was the very first post office in British North America. The first straight-line postmarks of the colony first appeared in 1770 (Fig. 10), due to the necessity of identifying mail coming from, passing through, or arriving at the office. Circular marks appeared later (Fig. 11) which closely resembled the "bishop marks" of the mother country.

Fig. 10

Fig. 11

After having several postmasters at Halifax, Nova Scotia got its first head of the postal service in the person of John Peters, who was appointed in 1782 and who remained in office until 1800. He was initially dependent on the British General Post Office in London (1782–84), before reporting directly to the Deputy Postmaster General of the Colonial Post in British North America, Hugh Finlay (1784–1800).

After an interregnum of twelve days with William Thompson, John Brittain became postmaster of Halifax until 1808, without however carrying the title of head of the Nova Scotia postal system. It is interesting to note that he entrusted the Nova Scotia postal service to John Howe Senior by contract

(1800–08), and this entrepreneur became the postmaster of Halifax for the next decade. In 1818 John Howe II, his son, became postmaster of Halifax as well as the head of the postal service in the colony. He reported to Daniel Sutherland, the Deputy Postmaster General of the Colonial Post in British North America (1816–1827).

Beginning in 1825, John Howe II took the initiative of opening several post offices in the interior of New Brunswick's territory in order to offer a better service to the population. Colonial Post authorities in 1828 appointed him, in addition to his responsibility as chief of the Post Office in Nova Scotia, to the same office for New Brunswick. For more than fifteen years John Howe II led the postal system of the two colonies from his office in Halifax without having to report to Quebec, but rather directly to London, where the real masters of the Colonial Post resided.

Upon his death, the Colonial Post re-divided this postal organization, and the two colonies recovered their distinct identities. Arthur Woodgate replaced John Howe II as head of the Post Office in the colony; he occupied this post until 1867.

Nova Scotia was given responsibility for its own postal system by London in 1851, and began issuing postage stamps on September 1 of that year (Fig. 12).

Fig. 12

New Brunswick

New Brunswick was the second colony of the Maritimes to develop its own postal system. A first post office was opened in the town of Saint John in 1783, but in an unofficial capacity, since it was not under the direct jurisdiction of the British Colonial Post.

The first overall head of the Post Office was appointed in 1785 in the person of Christopher Sower, who reported directly to the administration of the Colonial Post. It was during his term of office that the straight-line strikes (Fig. 13), and later the first circular markings (Fig. 14) appeared, both characteristic of the offices at Saint John and Fredericton.

Fig. 13

Fig. 14

In 1785 William Campbell became the postmaster at Saint John, without however being named as overall head of the New Brunswick Post Office. He kept this position until 1815, reporting at first to Finlay (1795–99), and then to George Heriot (1800–1815). They had overall responsibility for the Colonial Post in British North America, and controlled the New Brunswick postal system from Quebec between 1815 and 1828: Heriot (1815–16), Sutherland (1816–27), and Thomas Allan Stayner (1827–28).

In 1828, after the opening of offices in the interior of the province, the control of the colony's postal system passed to John Howe II of Nova Scotia, who carried on with this responsibility until 1843. John Howe III, postmaster of the Saint John office, in 1843 became the overall head of the Post Office in the colony, reporting directly to London.

The colony was granted its postal autonomy in 1851, and John Howe III took the title of Postmaster

General of New Brunswick, a title which his predecessors had never held. As a result, the colony could issue its first postage stamps on September 1, 1851 (Fig. 15). In 1856, John Howe III was dismissed from office by the government of New Brunswick; the postmastership at Saint John quite simply became a political patronage position.

New Brunswick was one of the founding provinces of Confederation, and as a result its postal system was incorporated into the federal system. However, following Nova Scotia's example, its postage stamps had legal validity on its own territory until March 1868.

Fig. 15

Prince Edward Island

Colonization of the Island began actively only after the Treaty of Paris in 1769, and responsibility for this postal backwater fell to Finlay, who did hardly anything to expand it. For this reason the Islanders in 1771 created their own postal system, and set up a first post office in 1786, all without official confirmation from the Colonial Post.

The legal existence of the postal system began with the appointment in 1802 of Benjamin Chappell as postmaster at Charlottetown. He opened the first official post office in 1807, the only one on the Island until 1827, in spite of an estimated population of 10,000 inhabitants! The beginnings of the organization of a postal system began in 1827, probably from the time that its autonomy was granted by London. This organization began to grow after Thomas Owen was appointed overall head of the Colonial Post on the Island in 1845, with direct responsibility to London.

In 1851, just as were the other colonies, the Island was granted complete responsibility for its postal system. Shortly thereafter, in the same year, prepayment of postage on letters became an option. After a ten-year delay, prepayment became obligatory, and to this end the Island issued its first postage stamps on January 1, 1861 (Fig. 16). The decimal currency system, although it was universal throughout British North America, was not adopted until 1872. This change likely eased the integration into the Canadian postal system which took place in the following year.
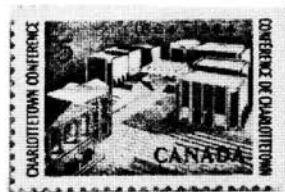

Fig. 16

Fig. 17

Although Charlottetown was the site of an 1864 conference on the creation of the future Canadian Confederation (Fig. 17), the Island joined only on July 1, 1873. Its postal system was from that time integrated with that of the federal government; its postage stamps were withdrawn on the same day, and immediately replaced by those of Canada.

British Columbia

During the year 1778 the explorer James Cook (who had already won fame in the capture of the fortress at Louisbourg in 1755 and in the fall of Quebec City in 1759) first laid claim to Vancouver Island in the name of the British Crown. It was not until 127 years later, however, that the real beginnings of its colonization took place.

It all began in 1805 with the establishment of the first fur-trading post by the Hudson's Bay Company at a location known since 1886 as Vancouver (its previous names had been Gastown, and then Granville

in 1830). First known as New Caledonia, the name of the colony was changed in 1858 to the one we know today. The change put in concrete form the proclamation of British Columbia as an official colony in the British Empire. The gold rush on the Fraser River began in the same year, and for this reason post offices were opened on November 30, 1858 at Fort Longley, Fort Hope, and Fort Yale under the authority of the office at Victoria on Vancouver Island. The first head of the postal system in the year 1858 was probably James Douglas, the governor of the colony, who had opened the first post offices in order to serve the participants in the gold rush.

The first overall head of the postal system was appointed on July 19, 1860; he was Warner R. Spalding, postmaster at New Westminster, who assumed office in 1866. The first (and famous) oval postmarks (Fig. 18) appeared in 1860. They uniquely characterized the postal system of this colony, and accompanied the first common postage stamps of British Columbia and Vancouver Island (Fig. 19).

British Columbia obtained its postal autonomy on April 9, 1864, and on the same day Spalding became the first Postmaster General of British Columbia. The first specific postage stamps (Fig. 20) appeared on January 11, 1865; before this and since 1860, British Columbia had shared its stamps with Vancouver Island.

| Fig. 18 | Fig. 19 | Fig. 20 | Fig. 21 |

Arthur T. Busby replaced Spalding in April 1866, without however taking on the title of overall head of the postal system. We do not know the precise reason for this somewhat abnormal situation. Toward the end of that same year, political union of the two Pacific colonies took place under the name British Columbia, an event which meant the disappearance of Vancouver Island's separate postal system and its integration into the one serving British Columbia. British Columbia adopted the Canadian decimal currency system in March 1867, a decision which necessitated the surcharging of its stamps (Fig. 21), first sold on January 22, 1868.

With the promise of a railway linking the colony to central Canada, British Columbia agreed to become part of Confederation on July 20, 1871. On this day all its postage stamps were withdrawn from circulation and replaced by those of the Canadian postal system. At the time of joining Confederation, the colony had a population of 36,247 inhabitants.

Vancouver Island

Although it is now a part of British Columbia, Vancouver Island was at first a distinct colony with its own postal system. First explored by Captain James Cook, it is not surprising that the Island became the first British colony on the Pacific coast.

In 1842 the Hudson's Bay Company decided to transfer its western regional office from Vancouver to Victoria as a result of the American threat created by the Oregon conquest. Because of its urgent postal requirements, the famous commercial firm in 1847 appointed one of its employees, Roderick Finlayson, an accountant, as the first head of the mails in Victoria.

Vancouver Island officially became a British colony in 1849, and its real colonization began with settlers of English origin. Captain James Sangster was appointed postmaster of Victoria. He had the first postal building constructed inside the fortifications of this settlement, which consisted of a single wooden enclosure.

The gold rush allowed spectacular development of Victoria: from the 300 people it had in 1857, its population reached 30,000 inhabitants within a period of several weeks! This massive influx of population clearly required a proportional development of the Island's Colonial Post. After the death of Sangster, Alex C. Anderson became postmaster at Victoria in June 1858. He was in office for only about one year, to May 1859.

The first common stamps of the two Pacific colonies, which would be unified between 1860 and 1864, were issued in April 1860. Two events marked the year 1865 in the development of the Island's postal system: the adoption of the decimal currency system (before British Columbia did), and the release on September 19 of the first of its own stamps, perforate (Fig. 22) and imperforate (Fig. 23), accompanied by its famous oval postmarks (Fig. 24).

Fig. 22

Fig. 23

Fig. 24

On the 19th of November 1866 the two colonies were united. One year later, which is to say in the year of Canadian Confederation, the two postal systems were unified. In spite of the political and postal unification, the validity of the Island's postage stamps was maintained until 1871, such that they could be used on both the Island and on the mainland.

Jacques Nolet's article will continue in *Journal* #111, where he will discuss Newfoundland and the modern Canada Post Corporation. A list of bibliographic references will also be included.

THE HISTORY OF THE CANADIAN POSTAL SYSTEM, 1763–2001, Part 2

by Jacques Nolet

[This final section of Jacques Nolet's article first appeared in French in the spring 2002 issue (#238) of *Philatélie Québec.* The translation was done by Robert C. Smith, and is published here with the permission of the author.]

3. Newfoundland's Entry into Confederation

We continue this study of the postal system with the entry of Newfoundland into Confederation in 1949. In order to understand this evolution, it is necessary to summarize the postal history of the island.

Although Newfoundland had been the first point visited by the English explorers in the 15th century, and more precisely by Giovanni Caboto (John Cabot) in 1497 in the name of King Henry VII (see Fig. 1), other groups had already trod the soil there on several occasions: the Vikings (Fig. 2) with Leif Erikson at the end of the 10th century, and the Basques, who came for whaling from at least the 13th century. Moreover, the name Newfoundland originated from the boats used by the Basques, the "terres neuvas." The whales provided an oil which was much sought-after in Europe for lighting.

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Although its history goes back to about the year 1000, the development of the postal system of Newfoundland did not begin officially until 1805, with the appointment of Simon Solomon as postmaster of St. John's. Considering the small volume of mail handled there at the outset, Solomon initially acted only in a part-time capacity. The post office was probably located in the dwelling of its postmaster, who was also in the business of watch- and clock-making. For some unknown reason this office was not yet incorporated into the postal system of the British colonial empire. But on November 7, 1817 the post office, and incidentally the home of Simon Solomon, was completely burned down, making it necessary for Solomon to find refuge in a small tavern called "Freemason's Tavern."

From 1826 on, because of the spectacular development of the postal service in the colony, Solomon had to put all his energy into it, and his postal reponsibilities became full-time employment. At precisely this moment the first markings used by the St. John's post office made their appearance – first the straightlines (Fig. 3), and then the circular types (Fig. 4).

Solomon applied himself to these responsibilities right up to his death in 1839. His son, William Lemon Solomon, succeeded him in the post until 1860; in other words, the position of postmaster of St. John's was a family affair for more than 55 consecutive years! After it had been in existence for more than 35 years, the Colonial Post incorporated the St. John's post office into the postal system of the empire, and as a result, the Colonial Post gave it two badges of this integration: a hammer (Fig. 4) and a seal (Fig. 5).

In the face of the discontent of the inhabitants with the colonial postal system, the governor of the

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

colony in 1848 requested postal autonomy for Newfoundland from London, a demand which was granted during the course of 1850. Somewhat later, in 1851, Newfoundland attained total independence. It was necessary for six more years to pass after this postal autonomy, however, to see the arrival of the first postage stamps. Although Solomon had been strongly asking for them since 1852, the request was not honoured until 1856, so that they did not see the light of day until January 1, 1857 (Fig. 6).

John Delaney succeeded Solomon in 1860. Delaney was a superb administrator who introduced many important innovations: new postal routes (1862), home delivery (1863), obligatory prepayment of postage (1865), adoption of the decimal system (1865), adhesion to the Universal Postal Union (1879), etc. He retired in 1885 after a quarter-century of good and loyal service, and was succeeded by J. O. Fraser.

Fig. 6

Under Fraser's ægis, on December 25, 1898 the Newfoundland postal system joined the Imperial Penny Post system for all the participating British colonies.

On April 12, 1919 Newfoundland issued the first airmail stamps in the British Empire, by overprinting an existing stamp with "FIRST TRANS-ATLANTIC AIR POST, April, 1919" (Fig. 7).

Due to serious financial difficulties, Newfoundland had to revert to the status of a Crown Colony in 1933. Finally, after several referenda, Newfoundland joined the Canadian Confederation on April 1, 1949. Its postal system was automatically integrated with that of the federal government. Its stamps were thus replaced on the same day by Canadian issues [although its stamps continued to be valid for postage throughout Canada – ed.].
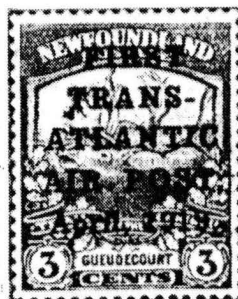

Fig. 7

4. Canada Post Corporation

On October 16, 1981, after 130 years of continuous presence of the federal Post Office Department, Canada Post Corporation (CPC) was founded, and since then has been responsible for the transportation of mail in our vast country. It is CPC which embodies the postal service at its best and at its worst. The reason is simple: having had a monopoly on the transport of mail for many years, the Post Office had practically no competition because of this privilege, which the Canadian Parliament had granted it through the Post Office Act of 1867.

Now that many competitors are appearing (UPS, Purolator – which CPC has acquired, Fedex, etc.), CPC has had to make a great effort not only to meet the competition from rival companies which carry mail, but also to confront new technologies which arise continuously (fax, e-mail, etc.). It is these technological innovations which characterize today's postal service, and CPC obviously cannot escape this tendency.

The introduction of certain innovations had begun toward the end of the tenure of the Post Office Department, which we shall try to summarize rapidly. When we speak here about mechanization, we refer

clearly to the sortation of the mail, and not to its cancellation, which had already been achieved at the beginning of the 20th century with cancelling machines such as the Imperial, the Bickerdike, the International, the Universal, etc. In the second half of the 1960s a machine called the "Transorma" appeared at Peterborough, Ont., built in the Netherlands, which began to sort mail of normal dimensions (i.e. letters). There followed experimental trials of marking stamps by applying phosphorescent and fluorescent material to them. The Postal Code appeared in 1971 (Fig. 8), followed in 1972 by mail indexing bars.

All of this was only the beginning of the mechanization of mail-handling, which became more and more important and required new and up-to-date technologies. The Department being on the brink of disappearing, privatization was inevitably going to involve a wave of new technologies which in the long term would revolutionize the handling of mail. We can summarize this avalanche of changes in three successive waves...

The first wave of modernization began in 1976 with the introduction of letter-sorting machines and the appearance of coding desks. This phase of the modernization of mail handling was based on American and Japanese technologies.

There was an acceleration in technology beginning in 1985, when optical readers and machines for handling large flat objects were introduced; these were of Japanese origin.

In 1995 the third and last wave of modernization appeared with technologies from Germany, the United States, France, and Japan, which in principle should have speeded up the handling of mail not only for simple letters, but also for large flat objects and even parcels. At the same time, new postal services appeared, based primarily on computerization applied to the transmission of mail: Xpresspost (1993), Sky Pak (1995), and XpressPost destined for the United States (2000).

All these innovations will allow Canada Post to meet the great challenge to offer service of high quality and to face its rivals both institutional (other mail services) and technological (fax, e-mail, and electronic commerce).

Epilogue

Such is the evolution of the Canadian postal system, which had its beginnings in the St. Lawrence Valley in August of 1763, thanks to the efforts of its first head, Hugh Finlay. We hope that in the course of reading this article, our readers will better grasp the importance of the April 2001 anniversary, even though Canada Post, in issuing only one stamp (Fig. 9) has missed the opportunity of mounting a more grandiose demonstration, like sponsoring an international philatelic exposition (like most postal administrations), or the emission of a high-quality souvenir sheet (another common practice of postal administrations).
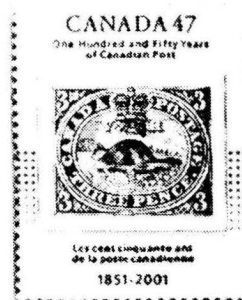
Fig. 8

Fig. 9

References

- Boggs, Winthrop S., *The Postage Stamps and Postal History of Canada*, Quarterman Publ., Lawrence, 1975.
- Campbell, Frank W., *Canada Post Offices, 1775–1895*, Quarterman Publ., Lawrence, 1972.
- Campbell, Frank W., *Canadian Postmarks to 1875*, privately published, Royal Oak, 1958.
- *Catalogue of the Stamps of Canada*, 20th ed., Darnell, Montreal, 1999.
- *One Hundred and Fifty Years of Canadian Post*, Canada Post Corp., Ottawa, 2001.
- Charron, Jacques, *Marques postales du Québec 1763–1875*, privately published, Longueuil, 1970.
- Jarrett, Fred, *Stamps of British North America*, Quarterman Publ., Lawrence, 1975.
- Lowe, Robson, *Encyclopedia of British Empire Postage Stamps*, vol. V, "North America," parts 1 & 2, published by the author, Perth, 1973.
- Maresch H. P. & A. W. Legget, *Canada Specialized Postage Stamp Catalogue*, 12th ed., Toronto, 1987–88.
- *Michel Catalogue, Mittel- und Nordamerika, 1976–1977*, Übersee Band I, Munich.
- *1981 Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue*, vol. 1, Scott Publ., New York, 1980.
- Nolet, Jacques, "Développement de la poste en Amérique du Nord britannique (1763–1827)," in the *CAPEX '96 Catalogue*, pp. 89–94, 1996.
- Nolet, Jacques, "Les débuts de la poste en Amérique du Nord britannique (Québec)," in the *Cahier spécial du Xe anniversaire de la Société d'histoire postale du Québec*, pp. 37–63, 1990.
- *Specialized Catalogue of Canadian Stamps*, Unitrade Press, Toronto, 1992.
- Teyssier, Grégoire & Marc Beaupré, *Initiation aux marques postales du Québec*, Société d'histoire postale du Québec, Sainte-Foy, 1998.