

Orders for the Early Obliterators

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This article is meant to be a retrospective on the information found in the official Post Office documents concerning the first types of postal obliterators. In order to accomplish this study, we have consulted the *Reports of the Postmaster General* for the period from 1869 to 1889. As well, various archival documents were examined, primarily in the correspondence of the Secretary to the Post Office Department. We have also looked at the reports of the Post Office Inspector for the Montreal District, where we found some very interesting information concerning rubber obliterators.

Concentric circle obliterators

The use of obliterators began on April 23, 1851, as a follow-up to the issue of the first postage stamp. In 1852 Postmaster General (1851-1853) James Morris sent a document to every postmaster which stated that the stamps affixed to mail must be cancelled by an instrument furnished by the Post Office or by means of a cross applied by pen¹ (Figure 1). It goes without saying that this regulation mainly affected the larger post offices, since postage stamps were available only in the offices of large cities and in those offices which had ordered them². The use of postage stamps became mandatory only in 1875. However, a postmaster would some-

times use this type of obliterators to cancel a manuscript rate initially applied in error (Figure 2).

For the period between 1851 and 1859 we have listed in the correspondence of the Secretary to the Post Office three documents related to this first type of obliterators. On June 22, 1853 Morris wrote to the London engraver John Francis indicating receipt of the 1000 obliterators sent during the course of the previous autumn³. It is most likely that this order had been sent to Francis during the spring or summer of 1852.

Later, in 1856, an order was sent for the purchase of 50 new obliterators⁴. The London engraver Berri produced the instruments on this occasion. Finally, in 1858, an order was sent for 200 additional obliterators.

The manufacturing cost for each of these instruments was 1 shilling and 6 pence. These obliterators, initially with 7 concentric circles, were made from a piece of brass fixed to a wooden handle. In fact, each instrument was unique⁶. In examining the work of Winthrop S. Boggs⁷, we realize that there were several variants of this type of

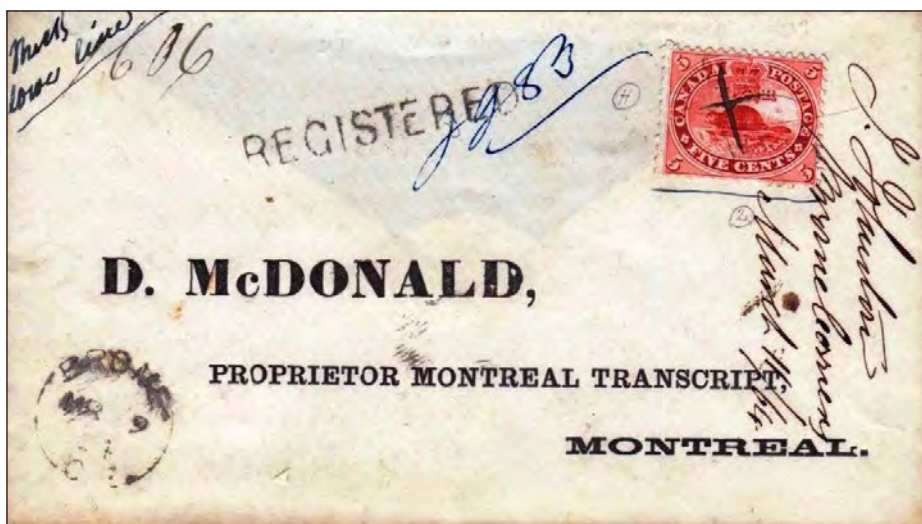


Figure 1. Postage stamp pen-cancelled by a cross [eBay]



Figure 2. 3d rate cancelled by an obliterator and replaced by the impression "FREE" (Michael Rixon collection)

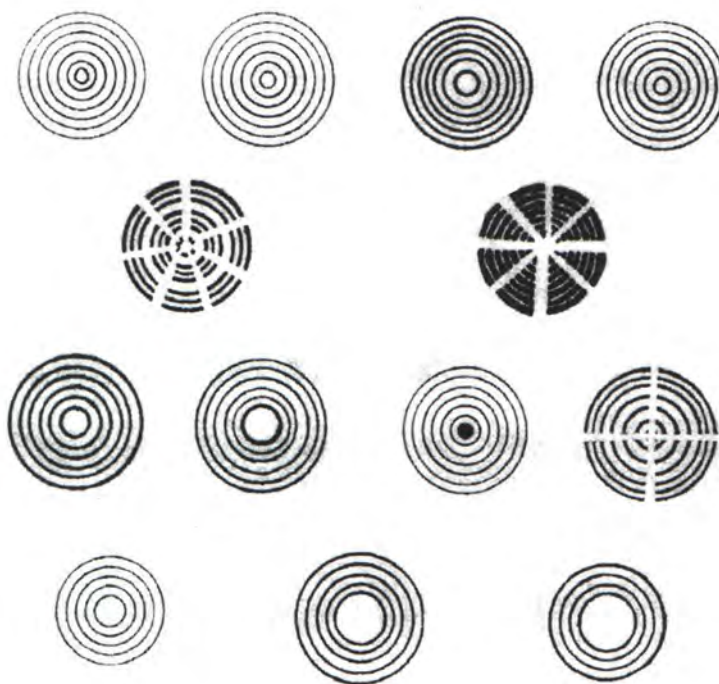


Figure 3. Some varieties of concentric circle obliterators [Winthrop S. Boggs⁷]

obliterator made during the 1850s decade (Figure 3). These instruments were used in some small post offices up to the turn of the 20th century.

Obliterators with horizontal bars

Toward the end of the 1850s England began using a new type of obliterator. Sydney Scott, the Postmaster General from 1858 to 1962, undertook steps to allow Canadian post offices to use this same type of instrument (Figure 4).

On February 24, 1860 Department Secretary Edwin Smith wrote to the engraver

John Ellis of Toronto, sending him a drawing of this new type of obliterator. On the same occasion he wished to know the cost to manufacture 1000 of these instruments⁸. On March 17, 1860, after receipt of a sample furnished by Ellis and knowing that the unit price was going to be 25¢, the Department gave its approval in order that the production of the obliterators could begin as early as possible (Figure 5)⁹.

In addition to this type of obliterator, Ellis also made numerous rating stamps. He ended his activities with the Post Office at the end of 1862, with the exception of some

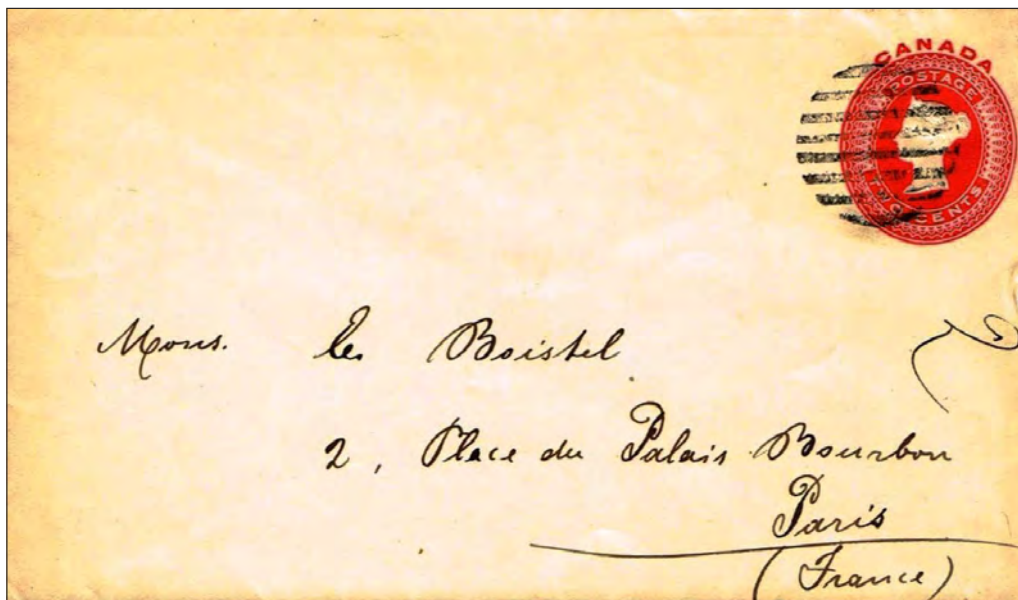


Figure 4. Example of a horizontally barred obliterator

repairs to stamps which he had made in previous years. According to information obtained in our research in the official documents at our disposition, he seems to have been the only engraver to produce obliterated stamps with horizontal bars. These obliterated stamps, which were also made of brass, were used over a very long period of time.

Cork obliterated stamps

According to several authors, it seems that the use of cork obliterated stamps began in the mid 1860s. They were certainly made by local artisans, since no funds were disbursed by the Post Office for the fabrication of these instruments. However, we can state that commercial production took place a bit later. This information is found in the *Reports of the Postmaster General*¹⁰. We include a table which will allow us to learn a bit more about

this type of obliterator (Table 1).

Donald Proctor Ross received an amount of \$10 for having cut obliterator stamps during the course of the year ending June 30, 1870. According to H. W. Duckworth, D. P. Ross worked as a clerk third class in the Toronto post office from 1866 to 1874¹¹. It seems that he produced about 27 different cork obliterated stamps which exhibited the figure "2" to identify the Toronto post office (Figure 6). A chronological study allows us to determine that Ross produced these instruments between the month of August 1869 and the end of January 1870. Due to the cork composition these artisanal obliterated stamps could only be used for a very short time, some few weeks to several months.

The Post Office initiated the commercial approach in 1873. We show that the O. Kapp Company began to make cork obliterated stamps.

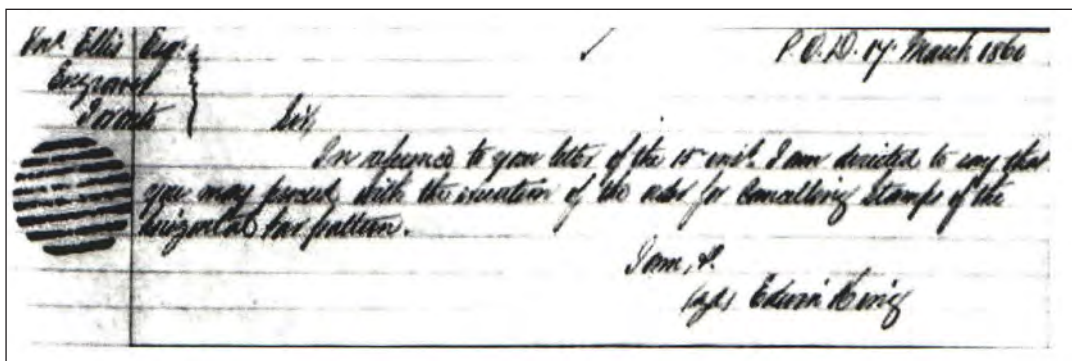


Figure 5. Copy of the document giving authorization to Toronto engraver John Ellis to begin production of obliterators with horizontal bars [LAC, RG3, vol. 375, p. 217]

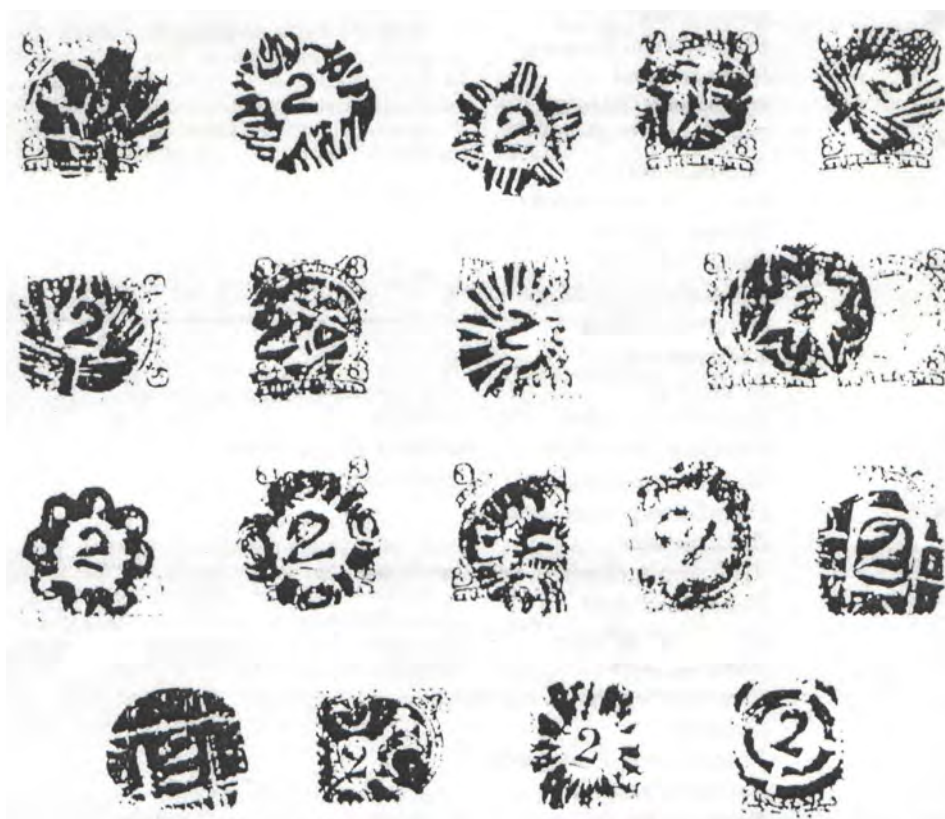


Figure 6. Some examples of cork obliterators made by D. P. Ross [N. Brassler¹²]

Table 1 – Orders for cork obliterators¹⁰

Year ending	Cork maker	Handle maker	Postal Division	Cost
June 30, 1870	D. P. Ross	-	Toronto	\$10.00
June 30, 1873	-	L. Smith	Toronto	\$290.05
June 30, 1873	O. Kapp & Co.	-	Montréal	\$45.00
June 30, 1874	O. Kapp & Co.	-	Montréal	\$75.00
June 30, 1875	O. Kapp & Co.	-	Montréal	\$75.00
June 30, 1878	O. Kapp & Co.	-	Ontario	\$78.50
June 30, 1879	Goodace & Cole	-	London	\$9.50
June 30, 1880	O. Kapp & Co.	-	Montréal	\$18.50
June 30, 1882	Canada Rubber Co.	-	Québec	\$12.50
June 30, 1882	-	J. B. Ménard	Québec	\$6.25
June 30, 1883	Canada Rubber Co.	-	Ontario	\$6.25
June 30, 1883	-	J. B. Ménard	Ontario	\$6.25
June 30, 1883	Canada Rubber Co.	-	Québec	\$6.25
June 30, 1883	-	J. B. Ménard	Québec	\$6.25
June 30, 1884	Canada Rubber Co.	-	Québec	\$9.00
June 30, 1884	-	J. B. Ménard	Québec	\$12.50
June 30, 1884	-	A. Lavigne	Québec	\$12.50
June 30, 1884	Canada Rubber Co.	-	Ontario	\$15.63
June 30, 1884	T. De La Rue & Co.?	-	Ottawa	\$78.40
June 30, 1885	Canada Rubber Co.	-	Ontario	\$15.63

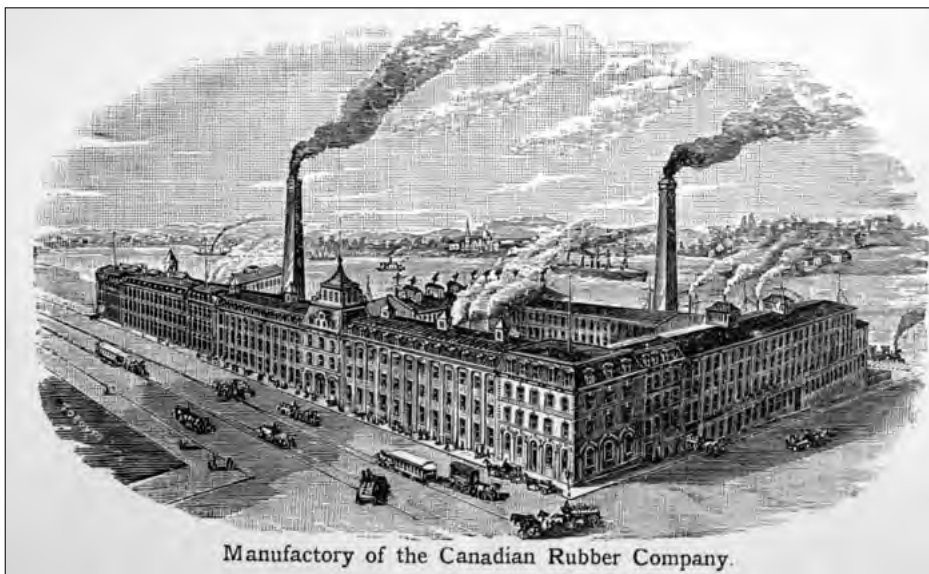


Fig. 7. Illustration showing the manufacturing establishment of Canada Rubber [Ernest J. Chambers¹⁵]

This Montreal company, located at 227 rue Notre-Dame, stopped fabricating this type of instrument at the beginning of the year 1880. A search in Lovell shows us that the name of the company is not listed from that year forward. Further research shows that beside the name of Catherine Kapp the note mentioning “widow of Otto Kapp” appears. This information clarifies the absence of the name of the O. Kapp Company in subsequent Post Office reports.

We note mention of a resumption of the production of cork obliterators in the Post Office report for the year 1882. This time it was the Montreal company Canada Rubber, established in 1854, which took on the task (Figure 7). This company, situated at 333-335 rue Saint-Paul Ouest, took the name Canada Rubber in 1863, became Dominion

Rubber in 1926 and Uniroyal in 1966¹⁴. It produced obliterators on a smaller scale. As for the handles, they were made by J. B. Ménard, whose shop was located at 17 rue Hermine in Montreal. The fabrication of this type of obliterators came to an end probably in 1885.

Before finishing our discussion of this type of instrument, we wish to mention the T. De La Rue Company, which also appeared in the 1884 report. The Department paid a total of \$78.40 to this company for the manufacture of obliterators. Although we have little information concerning this company, we have decided to include it. We believe that it is possible that it made cork obliterators due to the popularity of this material in that time period.

Rubber obliterators

On September 19, 1879 the Department Secretary sent a requisition for 500 cork obliterators to E. F. King, Post Office Inspector for the Montreal District. On March 9, 1880 King forwarded a report to the Postmaster General in which he indicated that he had ordered only 100 cork obliterators¹⁶. They were produced by the O. Kapp Company of Montreal, as indicated in the *Report of the Postmaster General*. King mentioned as well that he had undertaken steps to obtain obliterators made from rubber, which should prove to be more durable and less expensive to produce.

In order to obtain this type of obliterator, the first step consisted in producing at a cost of \$12 a special mould made of steel, which would remain the property of the Department. As a result, the company Canada Rubber made the rubber obliterators, as mentioned in the *Report*. These obliterators came to \$1.25 per pound to produce. Inspector King ordered 5 pounds of these rubber rings, which came to 307 obliterators (Figure 8). An order was once again sent to J. E. Ménard for the manufacture of handles to complete these instruments; these cost \$0.025 each to produce.

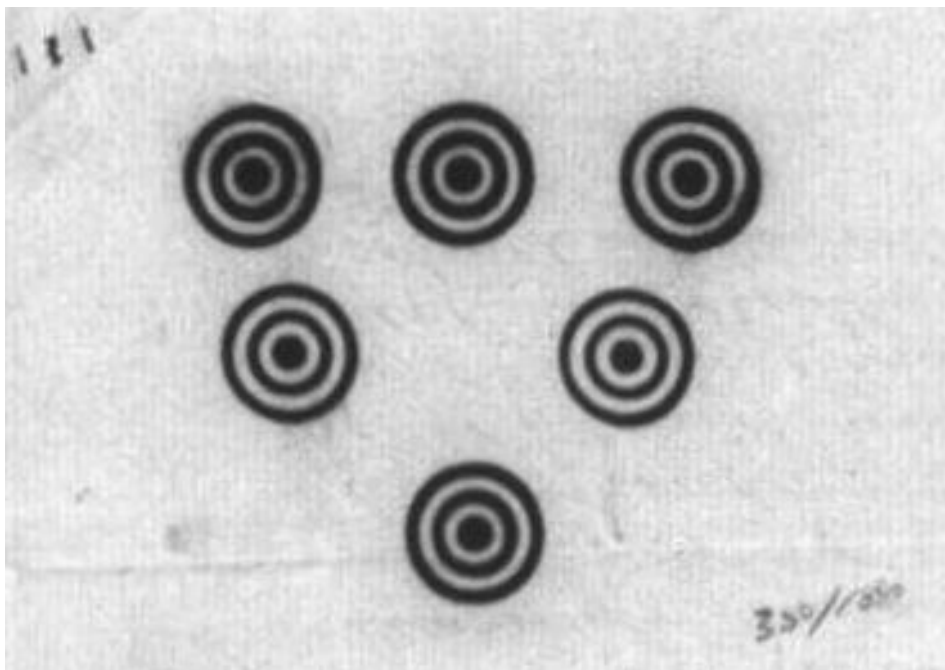


Figure 8. Impressions sent by Post Office Inspector E. F. King to the Postmaster General [LAC, RG3, vol. 124, file 350, March 9, 1880]



Figure 9. Late usage of a cork obliterator [Hugo Deshayé (Philatelist) Inc., price list 211-32]

King presents a comparative study at the end of his report in order to explain his choice of rubber oblitters. He mentions that the cork oblitters produced by the O. Kapp company came to \$0.15 each, while those in rubber cost \$0.045 apiece to produce. He also mentions that the Yale company sells its rubber oblitters at 8¢ each without handles.

In spite of the fact that the production cost of rubber oblitters was less than that for cork oblitters, it is surprising to find that the rubber oblitters were made only during a period of two years, 1880 and 1881. We have found no explanation in the official documents for the return to the manufacture of cork oblitters in subsequent years.

This type of obliterator was used in regular post offices and by railway mail clerks. Although the use of these instruments was gradually phased out over the years, an occasional impression of one of these oblitters can be found on more recent covers (Figure 9).

In conclusion, we note that the name of the H. Barnard company is mentioned in the 1888 and 1889 reports as having received payments for providing oblitters for the Department. However, the composition of these is not known. A search in Lovell shows that H. A. Barnard was an importer and manufacturer with offices at 162 rue McGill in Montreal¹⁷.

There is no further mention of obliterator manufacturers in the *Reports of the Postmaster General* from June 30, 1891 onward. Only the quantities of oblitors available in the stores of the Department's Printing and Supply Branch are shown. ☒

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