

Solving the Forbin Mystery

André Dufresne



MONS. A. FORBIN

Figure 1.

IT HAS LONG BEEN WONDERED WHAT HAPPENED to Alfred Forbin's enormous stock of fiscal stamps. There was a request by G. M. Abrams in *The American Revenuer* (November 1980, p171), which read:

Where is the Forbin collection? At last report, some years ago, the collection (and stock) had been purchased by a Mr. F.-A. Senécal of Montréal, owner of the International Envelope Co., at Claremont (no connection) and York Aves. There is no response from this address. Locating the collection, if indeed it is still intact, (potentially) can supply much needed data omitted or glossed over by Mr. Forbin. Anyone know where the material is, or was? Anyone shed further light?

In another note published five months later in the same magazine (May 1981, p102) Abrams, quoting a letter received from one David Anderson of Canada based on information apparently supplied by Yvan Senécal, a son of F.-A. Senécal, wrote that Forbin's stock and collection have 'been dispersed by bits and pieces to persons in the U.S.A. while his father was still alive. By the time of his death, nothing remained of his collection'. Abrams goes on by writing 'And now, do we give up or do we continue the hunt? Will the real buyers of the Forbin/Senécal material please stand up? Does anyone have an address for Doc Thill, our prime suspect? And we know what happened to the Thill material. Which may be the end of the road.'

For the record, Albert E. Thill, known as 'Doc' Thill, was the former president of the American Revenue Association and his collection was sold at auction by Robson Lowe in 1972.

I have good news. Forbin's stock and collection were not dispersed by bits and pieces to American collectors. Here is their story as documented by Alfred Forbin's personal archive, Félix-Adolphe Senécal's personal archive and information gleaned from conversations I had in person with Yvan Senécal and Franz Knoll in the mid-1980s. Forbin's and Senécal's archive were in my possession and they were donated to the Spear Museum in March of this year.

Part 1: Forbin's collection and revenue stamp stock

TIMBRES-POSTE POUR COLLECTIONS
MAURICE FORBIN
 Successeur de G. BEHR
 85, RUE DE RICHELIEU

Tél. : RICHELIEU 39-39
 Ch. Postal Paris 1214-92
 Reg. du Com. Seine 747 187

Paris (2^e), le 24 Janvier 1944

Figure 2.

Alfred Forbin (Figure 1) was born in Paris on 13 February 1872 (letter dated 31 January 1955 to F.-A. Senécal). According to Vanderhoof (1948), he was the father of a daughter and a son, Maurice Forbin, who was also a stamp dealer in Paris, having taken over from G. Behr. In Forbin's archive there are a few letters from Maurice Forbin to him (Figure 2). There is one dated 4 February 1944 where Maurice addresses Alfred Forbin as 'Cher Monsieur Forbin' and uses 'vous' instead of 'tu', which indicates a good education and respect between the son and the father (thus the use of 'vous' which is more respectful). Alfred Forbin always carried on business under the name of 'A. Forbin', although he also used the names 'Bulletin Fiscaliste' and 'Comptoir Philatélique Parisien'.

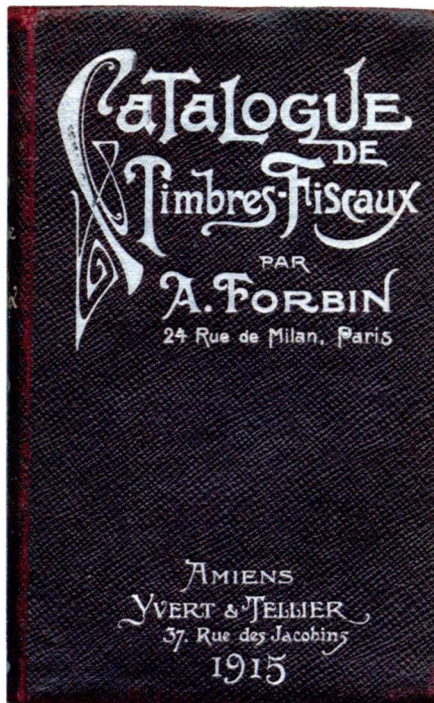


Figure 3.

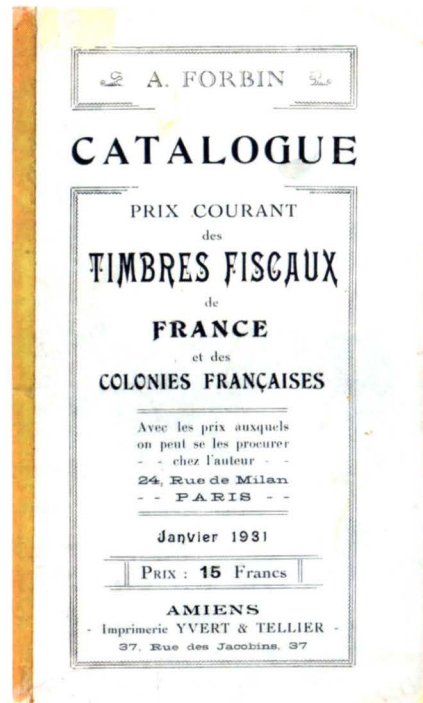


Figure 4.

He is better known for his *Catalogue des timbres fiscaux*, last published in 1915, covering worldwide revenue stamps (Figure 3). He also published through Yvert & Tellier a *Catalogue prix courant des timbres fiscaux de France et des colonies*. The last of three editions appeared in 1937 (Figure 4). Forbin's 1915 catalogue remained the 'bible' of revenue stamp collectors well into the 1980s, when one 'Forbin-franc' was considered to be equal to one US dollar for trading purposes. Forbin's 1915 worldwide catalogue was privately reprinted in the 1970s and nowadays CD and DVD copies are available. After 107 years, it remains to this day the only worldwide revenue stamp catalogue. Forbin was a founder and he became the dean of the stamp dealers' organisation 'Chambre syndicale française de la philatélie' according to Wikipedia.

Forbin sold his business at least four times: the first time in 1902 to Théodore Champion, a former employee who bought his postage stamps inventory and became the most prominent stamp merchant in Paris. Forbin sold his business a second time a few years later, when he sold his revenue stamps stock to A.B. Kay of Bridger & Kay fame. He later rebuilt a good stock of postage and revenue stamps.



Figure 5.

He sold his postage stamp holdings to Émile Pavoille sometime between 1921 and 1924, but he was to remain active in the wholesale and auction philatelic market. Émile Pavoille was a renowned stamp dealer and he signed many stamps of France and colonies, Hungary and Belgium as an expert. He kept doing business in the stamp market at Forbin's address, 80 rue de Saint-Lazare, under the name 'Maison Émile Pavoille' (Figure 5). Already as far back as 1914 Pavoille was publishing *L'Écho Postal*, a monthly philatelic magazine which ceased in 1933 and his pricelists were published at least until 1947.

After this sale to Pavoille, the evidence is that Forbin remained active up to the mid-1950s as a stamp dealer specialising in revenue stamps. On 1 March 1949, in a letter addressed to F.-A. Senécal, he confirmed that he was planning to publish a new edition of his worldwide catalogue of revenue stamps by sections. His plan was to start with France and colonies, 'the material of which exists in part', then Germany, which was already partly completed, then Great Britain, its colonies and dominions. He was also asking Senécal to invest in this new edition, which never materialised. He died of a cerebral haemorrhage after a long illness aged 84, a mere three months after his beloved wife, on 14 August 1956. Senécal's archive includes a letter written by Forbin just weeks before his death.



Figure 6.

Here I need to introduce a key character in this story - Félix-Adolphe Senécal (Figure 6). He was a Montréal businessman involved in the envelope business, first at 7000 Hochelaga Street (c. 1958) and later at 1950 Claremont Avenue under the name 'Le Comptoir National', later changed to 'Compagnie Internationale d'enveloppe inc.' or 'International Envelope Company, inc.' He was a personal friend of William Hamilton, a Canadian MP from 1953 and the Canadian Postmaster General from 1957, which led Senécal to obtain the contract for manufacturing aerogrammes for the Canadian Post Office. Hamilton was a fellow Montrealer, having been elected in the riding next to Senécal's home. By coincidence my paternal grandmother was also a Senécal and they were cousins several times removed.

F.-A. Senécal was a stamp collector of some means and his business took him to Europe in the post-war years. 1950 was the Holy Year; the Pope was promulgating the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and was proceeding with the beatification of Marguerite Bourgeois, a French-Canadian historical figure. Senécal was also a very religious man and was on a pilgrimage, together with 110 other French Canadians, to Rome in 1950. As he was waiting to board his return plane back to Paris on 13 November he was told that a high-ranking Canadian military needed to board the plane urgently and Senécal was put on the next plane to Paris. As it turns out this was the luckiest day of his life. The plane, a DC4 Skymaster of the Curtiss-Reid Air Tours Co. of Cartierville, Montréal, carrying 58 passengers (40 of them being pilgrims) crashed on the north face of Mount Obiou in the French Alps, killing all on board.

After the war, Senécal met A. Forbin at the latter's store at 24 rue de Milan in Paris while shopping for stamps. Forbin was getting old, the war years had taken a toll on his health and he was looking for someone to buy his stock and collection of revenue stamps. Senécal had money and he was interested. The two men struck a deal on 16 October 1948. Forbin sold all his revenue stamp stock and collection, including his catalogues and other publications and the printing blocks used to illustrate his catalogues, to Senécal for 250,000 francs (about £522). Even though it may seem cheap by today's standards, one must remember that the average British weekly wage packet at this time was about £10, so £522 was the equivalent of a full year's salary for the average worker. To allow Senécal to save on custom duties, Forbin made a separate invoice on 20 October for 50,000 francs. Not a man to quit the stamp business, Forbin informed Senécal in a letter dated 24 October 1950, that he was rebuilding his stock and had purchased sizeable revenue collections.

All of Senécal's stock and collection were packed and inventoried. Senécal kept a detailed list and left for Montréal. Forbin had the shipment (two large parcels containing 30 stock books, two empty albums and loose stamps in envelopes) inspected twice by French Customs prior to shipment, once in his office and once at the Customs office. His inventory was duly shipped to Montréal in two large crates. It was delivered by train to Le Havre by A. & G. Valcke & Cie, put aboard the Cunard White Star Line ship RMS *Samaria* (Figure 7) on 25 November 1948, to Halifax, Nova Scotia and thence on to Montréal by the Canadian National Railway Company.



Figure 7.

Once in Montréal it was again inspected by the Canadian Customs officers and it was finally delivered to Senécal's office by St-Arnaud & Bergevin, customs carters, on 7 January 1949. Senécal later complained to Forbin that in the process of Customs inspections, as the inspectors opened the albums, many stamps had become loose (especially those in the top rows of the stock books) and it was very difficult for him to put them back in place and make sure that everything he bought was there.

In the 1950s Senécal decided to promote his stock by placing three or four common revenue stamps in small glassine envelopes with an insert reading 'For the junior stamp collector' on one side and the French equivalent 'Au collectionneur à ses débuts' on the reverse, to be distributed as a free gift to anyone purchasing from his company. It was his son, Gilles, who spent a whole summer placing the stamps in the envelopes in the basement of their home on McDougall Avenue in Outremont, a posh town on the flanks of Mount Royal. He was hoping to create an interest in revenue stamps and develop a market to sell his duplicates.

Being a very busy businessman, Senécal never got around to classifying Forbin's stock or mounting it into his collection. He did hire someone to classify his collection but, according to Senécal, the man made a mess of his Mexican stamps, so Senécal put an end to this effort. He received many requests from prominent revenue stamp collectors of the period who were very interested in buying revenue stamps of specific countries, but Senécal always refused, claiming that he had no time for this and that he would only sell the collection intact. Some of these well-known collectors include Béla Sekula, Leone de Magistris, Ernest Rockwell (E. R.) Vanderhoof, John Bobo, Brainerd Kremer and Henri Janton. There were many more, most of whom had already been in touch with Forbin while he was still in business. In a letter of 1 April 1952, Forbin chastised Senécal because the latter would not sell him certain duplicates that he needed for his trade:

When I sold you my stock I kept no stamp. I have none and you have plenty which I need but you are refusing to sell me those that I need... Too bad that you cannot be content with what you have and that you are letting sleep an incomparable stock.

Eventually in the early 1960s Senécal placed advertisements in the philatelic press asking CDN\$10,000 for Forbin's stamps, with no takers (letter to John Bobo, 11 May 1960). In 1961 you could buy a large 3-bedroom house in Montréal for this price. He then informed the would-be purchasers (for example, a letter to Robert Furn, 21 August 1962 and to Albert W. Hilchey, 13 February 1962) that he would probably have the whole collection auctioned either in New York or in Paris with a starting price of CDN\$15,000. As it turns out, he never sold it and when he died in 1969 the collection was part of his estate. He was then living on Avenue des Sapins in the East End of Montréal, in a nice part of a ward then known as Rosemont.

Being very religious, he bequeathed the Forbin collection and his own stamp collection to the Jesuits, care of Father Louis-Joseph Goulet on Sherbrooke Street in Montréal, even though he was leaving a widow and 15 children. The 19 crates of stamps were delivered to the Jesuit Fathers by Senécal's son Gilles soon after his demise. The Jesuits in turn had Forbin's stock auctioned by a Montréal stamp dealer, possibly Montréal Timbres et Monnaies, who sold it for \$10 000 to an undisclosed purchaser who, it is said, never paid for his purchase. In turn, he sold it to a collector named Franz Knoll living in the northern suburbs of Montréal.

Knoll happened to be the next-door neighbour of a good friend of mine who, knowing of my interest in stamps, put us in contact. Knoll was living just a few kilometres from my house, so we visited each other in the mid-1980s and we would trade, until one day I bought a large portion of his Forbin duplicates in 1987. I have very fond memories of our long evenings together trading revenue stamps and then eating Swiss cheese and drinking wine to celebrate our exchanges. Knoll had in his possession Forbin's archive, which had followed the stamps and which he was not interested in keeping. He also had the printing blocks used by Forbin to print the stamp illustrations in his catalogues. Knoll offered to give me both the archive and the printing blocks. I declined the printing blocks (not knowing what to do with them) but I accepted the archive, which has thus now been in my possession for over 35 years. I am an avid collector of philatelic literature, especially about revenue and fiscal stamps and I could not pass up this opportunity.

Knoll in turn put me in touch with Yvan Senécal, who happened to still have some remnants of Forbin's revenue stamps, which he offered to me and which I bought. He sold the unwanted material, mostly duplicate mint German local revenues, to other collectors.



Figure 8.

In the archive is a most interesting document which is now in my stamp collection. It is an agreement dated 21 October 1921, between Forbin and René Lagaire, a worker who it seems had stolen from him and had been caught red-handed. René Lagaire acknowledged that while he was working as a handyman in Forbin's house and shop at 80 rue de St-Lazare, he had on many occasions stolen stamps and other valuables. As compensation and to avoid being prosecuted, he confessed in writing and agreed to pay Forbin 2,400 francs immediately, plus 600 francs on 1 May 1922 and 1,000 francs on 1 December 1922. The third page of the agreement bears a pair of 50 francs quittance (receipt) fiscal stamps duly cancelled with Forbin's handstamp on 28 October 1921 (Figure 8).

Part 2. Forbin's archive

Forbin's archive is very untidy. It is made up essentially of letters that he sent and received, some of them concerned with a real estate scam of which he was a victim with several others and which ended up in a lengthy lawsuit. There are many invoices to different stamp dealers and correspondence about their orders. In addition, there are several manuscripts of different revenue stamp catalogues which he was still working on at the time of his death. He would use any scrap of paper to write on, large or small, torn album pages, the backs of letters, children's notebooks, etc., so it looks very disorderly. Some still have the original revenue stamps used as illustrations attached to the pages.

Among others we have manuscripts for revenue stamp catalogues of Dutch municipal revenues, Australia, Brazil, Turkey, Swiss local revenues, Germany, O.P.D.A. (Ottoman Public Debt Administration) and part of a manuscript about postage stamp reprints. A whole file folder has to do with the Debreczen affair, where he was accused of having reprinted Hungarian provisional locals 20 years after the fact, later sold as genuine by others. One of the interesting elements is the different letterheads that he used over the years, showing his business addresses from the 1920s to the 1950s (Figure 9).



Figure 9.

When Forbin's archive came my way around 1987, I made a rough classification using Forbin's own file folders. Apart from 12 stamped documents which found their way into my collection and of which I shall provide good scans to the RPSL, the archive is intact. I have no reason to believe that it was otherwise tampered with over the years and Senécal's own archive is included as well. More on this below.

Forbin's correspondence touches on his business pursuits but also on more personal matters, in particular his ill health. He complained on 1 March 1951 that he was unable to climb the stairs to the second storey of his apartment to read his letters. It also includes a one-page extract from his biography, explaining how he started dealing in stamps at a very young age. He opened his first store at just 18 years of age, but he had already been dealing in stamps for a few years.

Among the most interesting documents are the original bill of sale of his stock to Senécal for 250,000 francs and a 'fake' bill of sale for 50,000 francs to save on Customs duty, the waybill for railroad transportation, the ship's bill of lading, the Canadian customs clearance and the delivery receipts to his office.

Forbin's archive comprises 26 file folders, approximately 430 letters, dozens of manuscripts and typescripts and documentation totalling over 2,000 pages.

Part 3. Senécal's archive

Félix-Adolphe Senécal was born in St. Éphrem-d'Upton, Bagot, Province of Québec, on 5 July 1892, to Adolphe Senécal and Georgianna Guay. He was married to Marcelle Stella Jeanne Lapierre and he passed away in Montréal on 18 June 1969. He was a member of the Public Morality Committee of the City of Montréal, whose main goal was to fight organised crime.

Senécal's archive includes correspondence with Forbin and with other prominent revenue collectors on the 1950s and 1960s. In these letters he was asked repeatedly to sell some parts of his stock and he always refused, claiming that he had no time for this. One wonders why he bought this enormous quantity of fiscal stamps in the first place if he had no intention of integrating it into his collection and no intention to retail it? And strangely there is no information whatsoever about any previous dealings between Forbin and Senécal. My understanding of a conversation that I had with his son Yvan in 1987, is that as he entered Forbin's store, the two men immediately got along. As Forbin was old and ill and Senécal was a stamp collector with substantial means, they made a deal on the spot. According to both Forbin and his wife, in a letter they both signed after the deal was done, they had found Senécal very intense and petulant, so much so that Forbin had to be treated twice a week for several weeks by his specialist, being somewhat in shock after the deal was concluded.

Senécal also pushed very hard to convince various fiscal philatelic associations and their officers to merge into one worldwide association. He was a member of the American Revenue Association and of the State Revenue Society and he subscribed to various philatelic publications.

His archive comprises 21 file folders, mostly letters of enquiry from fellow collectors about his Forbin stock, but there is also an interesting file of his own correspondence with Forbin, including a letter written by Forbin just weeks before his demise. Senécal's archive is a logical complement to Forbin's. Hopefully both archives will now rest with the Royal Philatelic Society London where philatelists will have access to this hitherto inaccessible mass of information.

As to Forbin's stamps, I started mounting those in my possession in the 1980s and 1990s and I stopped at letter 'M', as in 'Mexico'. The reason? Senécal's man had indeed made a real mess of it, but I am nearing retirement and hopefully I should finally be able to mount countries from 'M' to 'Z' in the next few years!

Note

The Accession Number for this material is AE578. Please contact Nicola Davies for more information.