

# Cabot's Landing 500th Anniversary

▼ CHARLES J.G. VERGE

Last June 24, 500 years to the day that John Cabot appeared on the shores of North America, Canada and Italy had a joint issue commemorating the event (Figure 1). The same designs, with different values, were used by both countries. They incorporate the three colors of the Italian flag (red, white and green), show an outline of the map of Newfoundland and Cabot's ship, *The Matthew*, sailing towards land.

Who was John Cabot and what historical impact did he have to cause celebrations 500 years later?

**SEBASTIAN CABOT DID SUCH A GOOD PUBLIC RELATIONS JOB IN TAKING CREDIT FOR HIS FATHER'S WORK THAT IT WASN'T UNTIL THE 19TH CENTURY BEFORE JOHN CABOT FINALLY RECEIVED THE RECOGNITION HE DESERVED.**



Figure 1: Canada's 1997 commemorative saluting the 500th anniversary of John Cabot's landing in North America.

John Cabot was born between 1450 and 1455 in Genoa, Italy, as Giovanni Caboto (Caboto means coastal seaman in Italian). As a

## BACKGROUND

Five years after Christopher Columbus appeared in North America, Cabot landed at Cape Bonavista, Newfoundland (Figure 2), on St. John's day, June 24, 1497. Other historians believe Cabot's landfall was at Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, or somewhere in Massachusetts or Maine.

Derek Croxton, in his detailed paper, *The Cabot Dilemma: John Cabot's 1497 Voyage & the Limits of Historiography*, found on the

World Wide Web at <http://www.lib.virginia.edu/journals/EH/EH33/croxto-3.htm> concludes that

"it is simply impossible to establish firmly and without doubt the place where Cabot landed because of the paucity and in-sufficiency of the extant documents." He goes on to say that Cabot's "general accomplishments are far more important than the specifics of his voyage."

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youth he may have known and played with Columbus, who was born in the same city in 1451. Around the age of 11, Cabot moved to Venice where he began a career in trading and map making that was to prove very helpful in his rise to prominence in Spain, Portugal and England. He is believed to be the same Juan Caboto Montecalunya who lived in Valencia, Spain, in the 1490s and was renowned for his charts and diagrams.

By 1476, he had married a lady called Mattea and they had three sons: Lewis, Sebastian and Santius (Sancho). Sebastian (Figure 3) became well known as an explorer in his own right. John Cabot was ignored by history for many centuries in large measure because Sebastian attempted, with some success, to take credit for his father's discoveries as well as those he made on his own South American voyages.

## CABOT AND BRISTOL

Rejected in Italy, Spain and Portugal in his attempt to obtain backing for his trips,



Figure 3: Marginal pair of plate proofs purporting to be the portrait of John Cabot, is actually that of his son, Sebastian. The original of the painting by Holbein, on which the stamp is based, first hung at Whitehall Palace, London, and later found its way to Scotland, then to Bristol and in 1834 was purchased by Richard Biddle, Cabot's biographer, for £500. It was destroyed by fire at his home in Pittsburgh, Pa., in 1845.

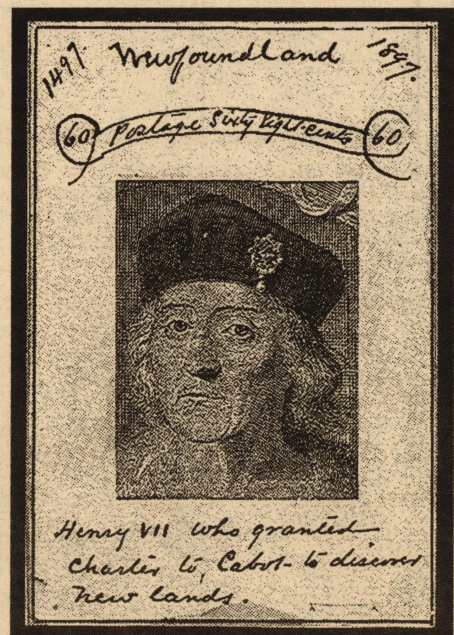


Figure 4: Composite model for the 60c "Henry VII" stamp (1897).

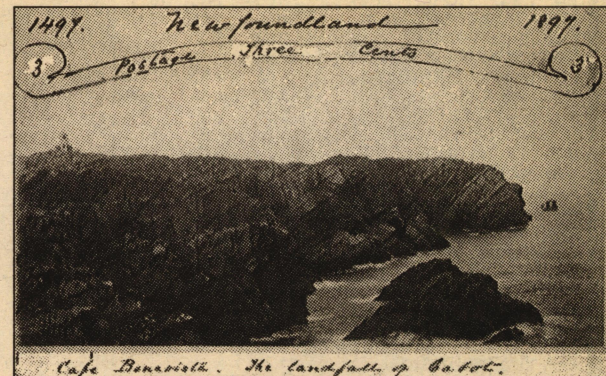


Figure 2: Composite model for the 3c "Cape Bonavista, The Landfall of Cabot" stamp (1897).

Cabot moved to Bristol, where his name was anglicized. At the time, Bristol was second only to London as a major English sea port. City merchants had profitable commerce with the continent and Iceland, particularly in the salt and woolen trades. By the 1480s the Icelandic trade began to decline.

The merchants and fishermen of Bristol went out to search for new fishing grounds and new markets for their cloth. It is not surprising therefore that Cabot proposed that Bristol try to divert the spice trade from the Mediterranean countries. He argued that if Bristol succeeded in its attempt it would become the richest port in Europe. The merchants agreed to supply money and ships if Cabot could get the King's approval. Fortunately, England's shrewd monarch, Henry VII (Figure 4), had a businessman's love of profit and readily agreed.

## LANDFALL IN NEWFOUNDLAND

Cabot made an exploratory journey in the Western Atlantic in 1496. He and his Bristol crew were driven back by bad weather and severely reduced provisions. In May 1497, resupplied by the Bristol merchants, Cabot set off on *The Matthew* (Figure 5), a new ship probably named after his wife Mattea.

The ship was no bigger than Columbus's smallest ship, the *Nina*. It was a three-masted caravel with a crew of 18, 73 feet in length, a beam of 21 feet and a displacement of 85 tons loaded. It is now known that Cabot never reached Asia but discovered the "New Founde Landes." After anchoring his ship and riding ashore, he planted a cross and the banners of King Henry VII, the Pope and of St. Mark, the patron saint of Venice.



Figure 5: Replica of *The Matthew* based on period illustrations and archeological data. She was designed by Colin Mudie and built on Redcliffe Wharf in Bristol, England. Work started in 1994. She sailed from Bristol to Cape Bonavista, arriving on June 24, 1997, 500 years to the day Cabot first saw Newfoundland.

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**Figure 6: American Bank Note Co. Model Order sheet.** The colors shown for each stamp on the order are exactly or quite near to the color in which the stamps were printed except for the 24¢. It was ordered in yellow and printed in blue.

After a slight detour when he mistook Brittany for Landes End in Cornwall, Cabot arrived back in Bristol on Aug. 6, 1497, to a hero's welcome. As a reward, the King gave him £10 and a pension. Cabot suggested a return voyage to the King.

He was given five ships for his 1498 attempt. This did not include *The Matthew*, which by then had joined the normal mercantile service out of Bristol. John Cabot did not return from this second trip, although the four other ships of the fleet did. What happened to him is a mystery. Some historians conjecture that he perished at sea in a storm, hit an iceberg, reached the New World or died at the hands of the Indians, or more likely, the Spanish.

Although Cabot found rich fishing grounds around Newfoundland, the English did not take effective steps to exploit the vast territory opened up by his voyages until more than a century later. It was not until May 14, 1607, that they landed at Jamestown Island and founded the first of the thirteen American colonies.

#### 1897 COMMEMORATIVES

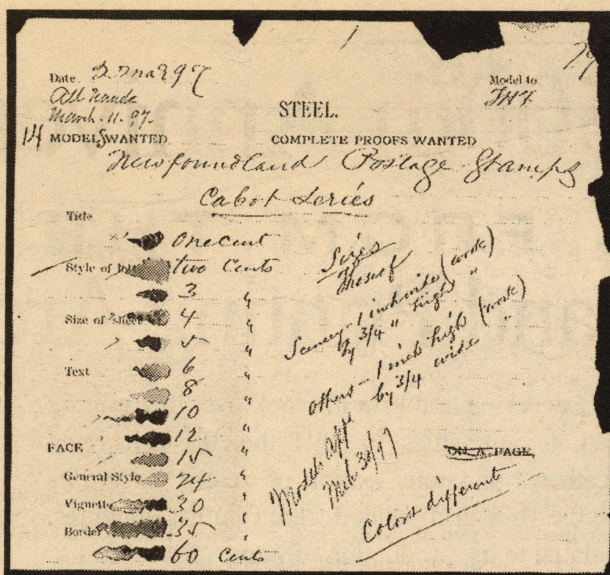
Sebastian Cabot did such a good public relations job in taking credit for his father's work that it wasn't until the 19th century before documents began to surface and John Cabot finally received the recognition he deserved. By the end of the century his place in history was secure.

Newfoundland issued a series of 14 stamps honoring the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Cabot at Newfoundland (Figure 6). The Cabot commemoratives also had a dual purpose by commemorating the 60th anniversary of the reign of Queen Victoria (1¢ value). Two Holbein paintings were used to show Cabot (2¢) and King Henry VII (60¢).

The Cabot painting (Figure 7), identified as John Cabot on the stamp, is really one of Sebastian painted by Holbein for King Edward VI in the 1550s. Other stamps in the set depicted the Seal of the Colony (30¢)



**Figure 8: A used example of the very rare Newfoundland de Pinedo overprint airmail stamp of 1927.**



and *The Matthew* (10¢).

The Government of Newfoundland couldn't resist the opportunity the commemoration gave them to promote the island's resources (Caribou Hunting, 4¢; Mining, 5¢; Logging, 6¢; Fishing, 8¢; Ptarmigan Hunting, 12¢; Seal Hunting, 15¢; Salmon Fishing, 24¢ and Tourism, 34¢).

The stamps, printed in Montreal, went on sale June 24, 1897. Sir Robert Bond, the Colonial secretary, chose the design. The idea for this issue originated with Judge Daniel W. Prowse, a noted Newfoundland historian.

#### OTHER PHILATELIC RECOGNITION

Later, trial surcharges were prepared on two values of the issue. The 6¢ was overprinted "Three cents" in black or red and the 60¢ received a red "2 Cents" overprint. None are known used. In 1920, some provisionals were issued using the 1897 Cabot stamps. The 15¢ and 35¢ stamps were surcharged "Three Cents" in black while the 30¢ received a "Two Cents" surcharge in the same color. Many errors and varieties exist for both the trial and issued surcharges.

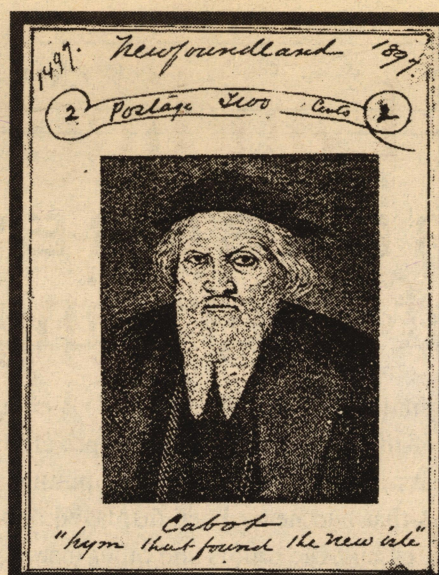
Newfoundland, being as close to Europe as you can get in North America, became the departure and landing stages of many of the most famous trans-Atlantic aeronautical attempts. It is not surprising that airmail stamps of Newfoundland are among the



**Figure 9: 5¢ Cabot on the deck of *The Matthew*, issued by Newfoundland in 1947 for the 450th anniversary of Cabot's arrival in Newfoundland.**



**Figure 10: *The Matthew*, Canada's 1949 tribute to Newfoundland joining the Canadian Confederation as its 10th province.**



**Figure 7: Composite model for the 2¢ "Cabot, Hym that found the new isle" stamp (1897).**

classic offerings of world aerophilately. On three occasions, the 1897 Cabot stamps were overprinted or surcharged to be used as airmail stamps.

On June 9, 1919, 10,000 15¢ Seal Hunting stamps were surcharged \$1 for the Alcock and Brown flight (Scott C2). Nov. 16, 1921, saw the issuance of an overprint on 14,000 35¢ Tourism stamps for the St. John to Halifax air mail service (Scott C3). Many varieties exist for both.

The classic Newfoundland airmail is the one issued on May 18, 1927, for the de Pinedo flight Scott C4. The 60¢ Henry VII stamp, which was issued mainly to pay the parcel post fees, was overprinted "Air Mail/De Pinedo/1927" in three lines (Figure 8). A short 7 in 1927 variety exists.

Prior to 1997, the last Cabot commemorative stamps were those put on sale by Newfoundland and Canada in 1947 (Scott 270, Figure 9) and 1949 (Canada Scott 282, Figure 10). They both showed different views of *The Matthew*.

Throughout 1997, the governments of Newfoundland and Labrador will host celebrations, conventions and conferences in honor of Cabot and his discoveries.

Stamp collecting will play a major role as well. The British North America Philatelic Society (BNAPS) will hold its annual convention and exhibition in the Hotel Newfoundland in St. John's, Newfoundland, August 28 to 30.

BNAPS is a 50 year old society specializing in the stamps and postal history of former British stamp issuing colonies in North America (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, British Columbia, Vancouver Island, American States prior to 1776) and Canada.

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