

# Labrador bogus stamp scheme designed to exploit collectors

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A set of bogus stamps (Figure 1) with ties to both the United States and Canada created a stir in the philatelic press during the early years of the 20th century. A bogus stamp is a fictitious stamp-like label created for sale to collectors.

Why did the announcement of what are now called the Labrador, USA, bogus stamps, first appear in the French philatelic press? The answer is likely because their originator, Dr. Raymond Villecourt (1867-1932), was French, immigrating to Canada in 1900. It can be assumed that he was well aware that the stamps were fraudulent and, therefore, should not be publicized in North America. Nothing of what is known of the doctor's studies, hobbies or career indicate any prior involvement with philately in France, Canada or in any of the many other countries he traveled to or resided in as a medical doctor in the French navy.

In early 1908, he passed himself off as an official of the Labrador Company when he ordered the stamps from the Montreal Lithographic Company, a legitimate company formed in 1896 largely from the reorganization of the Sabiston Lithographic and Publishing Company and still operating well into the middle part of the 20th century.

The press release announcing the stamps indicated they were issued by the Labrador Company, a company that supposedly received a charter from the governments of Canada and Newfoundland to develop industries and natural resources in Labrador, in exchange for providing postal ser-

vices between Labrador and the two dominions. The Labrador Company was a legitimate entity at the end of the 19th century but might not have existed in 1908.

In 1892, it claimed its rights of seigneur in a case heard in the British House of Lords Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, then the highest court of appeal for Canada. The case in question was about the ownership of a strip of land 400 miles long and six miles deep on the coast of Labrador. It was important because with ownership came the rights to hunt, fish and cut lumber. The company lost its appeal and was left with a vastly smaller piece of land, albeit many miles square.

Among many of its activities, the company offered wealthy patrons — mainly Americans — the ability to hunt or fish in pristine territory. The same Privy Council Committee did not decide the boundaries between Labrador and the Canadian province of Quebec until 1927.

The unsigned and undated notice was accompanied by a set of the three stamps and was published in France in the April 15, 1908, issue of *L'Écho de la Timbrologie* and repeated in the May 1, 1908, issue of *Le Collectionneur des Timbres-Poste*.

The timing of these articles was interesting, because it virtually coincided with Villecourt's taking possession of the remainder of the stamps from the printer. There were two deliveries: March 31 and April 10, 1908. The editor of *L'Écho de la Timbrologie* had already seen through the scheme; he commented at the end of the notice that he felt the company had been formed to exploit collectors.

The editor of *Le Collectionneur des Timbres-Poste* stated that he would like more information on the charter of the company, because it seemed unlikely that the labels had postal validity, unless accompanied by postage stamps from Canada, Newfoundland or the United States. He made inquiries April 24, 1908. He received a letter dated May 1 from A.E. Clément, who made preposterous statements, including that the Labrador Company was an American company and that the United States Post Office Department would take over the postal service, hence the "U. S. A. Postage U. S. A." inscription on the 5¢ stamp and 25¢ stamp and the "U. S. A. Post Office U. S. A." on the \$1 stamp.

Clément claimed that this was the first issue and others would follow, and that only 100,000 stamps had been produced. He attached a newspaper clipping from *La Presse* and a cover franked with a 25¢ stamp, which, as the editor had surmised, was placed alongside a regular Canadian 2¢ stamp and canceled in Montreal.



Figure 1. The three denominations of the Labrador, USA, stamps. The bogus stamps were first announced in France in the early 1900s.



The only reference to A.E. Clément that I could find was a full-page ad in the 1904 edition of Ernest J. Chambers' *The 5th regiment: Royal Scots of Canada Highlanders: a regimental history*. In this ad, Clément is identified as an importer and manufacturer of "Hats, Caps and Furs" with a store at "323, St. Lawrence Boulevard" in Montreal. Although I have found no information on Charles Lavoie, who supported the stamp issue in a letter to the Montreal daily *La Presse*, signing himself as a customs officer for the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and Howard R. Howard, who did the same in *Meekel's Weekly Stamp News*, they are likely real people somehow associated with Villecourt and Clément.

Although officials of the Montreal Lithographing Company did not believe Villecourt's claim, they proceeded with the printing. The total stamp production was 273,400 stamps with a face value of \$89,420 Canadian: 108,400 5¢ stamps, 108,000 25¢ stamps, and 57,000 \$1 stamps.

This was confirmed in an interview that H. Warren K. Hale had with company personnel in 1936, when he was preparing his *Collectors Club Philatelist* article, "Canadian Locals: the Labrador Company, U. S. A." (Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 143-152). In that same interview, Hale discovered that the printing bill had never been paid. This is surprising, because Villecourt was a prominent medical doctor who was well-known in the Montreal community. The question to be asked then is why didn't the company pursue the matter?

Undoubtedly, because the philatelic press was beginning to expose this attempt to defraud collectors, someone decided to unload a large quantity of the stamps by shipping them to a Mr. Hiller in St. Pierre et Miquelon, either in 1908 or 1909. The suitcase went unclaimed and was returned to Montreal. In 1910, second-hand dealers T. Astrofsky



Figure 2. A block of four of the bogus \$1 Labrador, USA, stamp. The stamp shows a crudely and inaccurately drawn map of Labrador and its geographical position in relation to Newfoundland, Canada and Greenland. Many of the \$1 stamps show damage.

and M. Frank bought the suitcase sight-unseen for \$3.50 at an auction of unclaimed freight. *The Montreal Daily Star* (July 4, 1910), commenting on the later police seizure, mentions that the pair paid only 30¢ for the suitcase. They sold several sets of the stamps to collectors for 25¢ each. This came to the attention of the Montreal Police's Fraud Squad Department, who informed the Dominion Police because this was considered a federal offense. The Dominion Police confiscated the stamps from Astrofsky and Frank. After judicial review, the stamps from the suitcase were destroyed.

By nature, bogus stamps created for defrauding collectors or the public are less well-documented than legitimately issued stamps. Such is the case with the bogus Labrador stamps, although many apocryphal stories have popped up over the years. Hale's article describes how far-fetched the stories can be — from smuggling, to murder and suicide. To his credit, Hale did a masterful job of detection, and his article stands the test of time.

Hale reported that W.R. Patton, editor of the Canadian and Newfoundland department at the *Weekly*

*Philatelic Gossip*, contacted the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in 1927 to obtain correct information regarding the stamps. The RCMP was created in 1920 by the merger of the Royal North West Mounted Police (founded 1873) and the Dominion Police (founded 1868). Its seventh commissioner, Cortlandt Staines (1864-1934; commissioner, 1923-31), wrote to Patton in September 1927, in response to Patton's letter of August 20. In the letter, Staines debunked all the stories, confirmed that the stamps had been seized in Montreal in July 1910 and stated that he could "throw no further light upon their history."

The stamps were mainly wholesaled in North America by cleverly issued press releases to Montreal's daily newspaper *La Presse* and to larger philatelic newspapers — none of which, except *La Presse*, gave credence to the labels. Additionally, Villecourt and Clément, or their agents, visited stamp dealers in Montreal, offering them quantities of the stamps for sale. Other Canadian dealers were approached by letter.

There are no guarantees that any of the stamps made it to Labrador. The small number of covers mentioned in



the literature — likely fewer than 10 — all bear additional Canadian stamps and, with one or two exceptions, are canceled in Montreal. Used stamps exist, as do a half dozen stamps on piece. The earliest-known cover is an item bearing the 25¢ Labrador stamp and a pair of 1¢ Canadian Edward VII stamps tied with an April 29, 1908, Montreal cancel.

The bogus Labrador stamps are poorly drawn and gaudy in color but are well-produced. The presswork, gumming (smooth yellowish-white gum) and perforations (perf gauge 12) are of a good quality — typical, it seems, of Montreal Lithographing Company's other work. The stamps were printed on white wove paper in sheets of 100 (10 by 10), with no marginal markings except for small Greek

crosses used to register the colors. These markings are found in the middle of the margins on both short sides of the sheet.

The color registration is good for the 5¢ stamp and 25¢ stamp, but leaves much to be desired on the \$1 denomination. Hale reported in 1936 that no preproduction material or plates exist. He surmised that the material was destroyed by court order in 1910, at the same time that the printing plates were destroyed.

The 5¢ stamp is black and green and shows a Harp seal. The 25¢ stamp is black and blue, and shows an Inuit holding a spear and a club, typical of those used to slaughter the seals. The \$1 stamp is black, green and red, and shows a crudely and inaccurately drawn map of Labrador

and its geographical position in relation to Newfoundland (to whom it belongs), Canada and Greenland. A block of four of the \$1 stamp is shown in Figure 2.

Hale reported, "This was not the last of the labels to be dumped on the market." Reminders — mostly of the \$1 stamp — had been damaged, likely by water, and the sheets stuck together. They had been soaked in water that removed the gum and decreased the intensity of the colors. Many of the stamps are stained, particularly on the back.

The Labrador stamps appeared on the U.S. market beginning in 1934. Today, most of the stamps offered have no gum. The 25¢ denomination seems to be the most difficult to acquire, particularly with original gum. ■

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1579	16.00	1722	15.00	1802	24.00	1935	30.00	2041	28.50
1580c	18.50	1723-4	19.00	1803	23.50	1936	30.00	2042	28.50
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