

Letters between Taft and confidante illustrate Canadian connection

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Why would William Howard Taft (1857-1930), the 27th president of the United States (1909-13), write letters from Canada to a Mabel T. Boardman between 1906 and 1929? This question intrigued me when, at the invitation of Wilson Hulme (1946-2007), I looked at the British North America holdings of the Smithsonian Institution's National Postal Museum (NPM) and found more than 30 envelopes from President Taft to Miss Boardman, all mailed from Canada and most from Pointe-au-Pic, Quebec. Hulme was curator of the museum at the time of his death in 2007. One cover from the Taft-Boardman correspondence is shown in Figure 1.

Later, at my computer, it was not difficult to find out who Boardman was and why Taft wrote to her. Finding more information about Taft and Pointe-au-Pic, also known as Murray Bay, required a little more work.

Mabel Thorp Boardman (1860-1946) was born in Cleveland, Ohio, into a well-to-do family. A portrait of Boardman is shown in Figure 2. Her father, William Jarvis Boardman (1831-1915), was the son of Senator Elijah Boardman. William Boardman practiced law in Cleveland and was active in civic and political affairs, before moving to

Washington, D.C., in 1887.

Mabel Thorp Boardman's mother, Florence, was the daughter of Joseph Earl Sheffield. Florence Sheffield Boardman was a Yale University benefactor. Mabel, the eldest, had five siblings, including Josephine Porter Boardman Crane (1873-1972), a founder of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who married Winthrop Crane (1853-1920), former governor of Massachusetts (1900-03) and a United States senator from Massachusetts (1904-1913).

The Boardmans and the Tafts were family friends in Ohio. Mabel, who never married, devoted much of her time to her parents and social philanthropies, volunteered with the Red Cross (1900-40), and acted as confidante to Taft for most of her adult life.

In 1904, Boardman engineered the resignation of Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, and took over running the society (1905-13). Barton was the subject of a 3¢ stamp issued by the United States in 1948 (Scott 967, Figure 3) and on a 32¢ stamp (Scott 2975c) issued as part of the Civil War pane of 20 in 1995.

President Theodore Roosevelt signed a Congressional Charter for the Red Cross in 1905, enjoining it to provide services that addressed "the sufferings caused

by pestilence, famine, fire, floods, and other great national calamities, and to devise and carry on measures for preventing the same."

William Howard Taft, who was then secretary of war, provided Room 341 in what is now the Eisenhower East Executive Office Building of the White House to the Red Cross for its use. The White House website shows a picture of Boardman and her staff (www.whitehouse.gov/history/eeobtour/room341_nonflash.html).

Taft and Boardman first met formally when she was part of the American delegation on a visit to the Philippines in 1900, while he was president of the Philippines Commission.

Taft was born in Cincinnati to Alphonso Taft (1810-91) and his second wife, Louisa Maria Torrey (1827-1907). Alphonso Taft was secretary of war and attorney general under President Ulysses S. Grant and later U.S. ambassador to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Russia. William married Helen "Nellie" Herron in 1885, and they had three children: Robert A. Taft (1889-1953) (Scott 1161, Figure 4), who later became a U.S. senator from Ohio; Helen Herron Taft Manning (1892-1987); and Charles Phelps Taft II (1897-1983).

William had a varied career as a law-



Figure 1. One of more than 30 covers addressed by William H. Taft to Mabel T. Boardman and mailed from Canada. The cover is addressed in care of her brother-in-law at his home in Dalton, Massachusetts.



Figure 2. Mabel Thorp Boardman (1860-1946). This picture was taken around 1910. Courtesy of the Library of Congress

yer, jurist and educator but is principally remembered as president of the United States, governor of the Philippines (1901-04), secretary of war (1904-08), and 10th chief justice of the Supreme Court (1921-30).

Taft is pictured on four U.S. stamps (Figure 5): a 4¢ stamp issued in 1930 as a sheet stamp (Scott 685) and as a coil stamp (Scott 687), a 50¢ stamp (Scott 831) issued in 1938 as part of the Presidential issue, and a 22¢ stamp (Scott 2218h) included in one of four souvenir sheets issued in 1986 to honor presidents of the United States.

In 1892, following a family wedding, Taft and his wife first viewed Pointe-au-Pic from a cruise ship on the St. Lawrence River. Located just south of the Saguenay River, Pointe-au-Pic is the location of the Manoir Richelieu, one of the first vacation resorts in Canada. One of the most sought-after golf destinations was located nearby. The Manoir Richelieu, a renowned hotel in La Malbaie (once known as Murray Bay), turned 100 in 1999. The hotel was once a meeting place for the rich and famous.

President Taft, an avid golfer, opened its 18-hole championship golf course in 1925. Unfortunately, there are no Canadian stamps showing Pointe-au-Pic,

Murray Bay or the Manoir Richelieu. The Tafts first vacationed at Pointe-au-Pic in 1893, staying at Chamard Lorne's House Inn, and in 1894, they rented a cottage near the inn. They later purchased Fassifern Cottage, which they expanded over the years. By the 1920s, the cottage include 20 bedrooms and 12 bathrooms (Figure 6).

The house on Chemin des Falaises on Cap Blanc became the Tafts' summer residence until William died in 1930, except while he was president. A Taft family picture taken at Pointe-au-Pic is shown in Figure 7.

On his return to Pointe-au-Pic in the summer of 1913, Taft was elected president of the Murray Bay Golf Club, and Mrs. Taft was heard to say, tongue-in-cheek, "He was a better Golf Club President than President of the United States." President Taft loved the region, and he liked to say about Murray Bay that it was "as intoxicating as champagne, but without the headache of the morning after." Helen Taft continued going to Pointe-au-Pic for several years after the president's death.

In the earlier years (1906-09), most of the Boardman-Taft correspondence deals with the Red Cross, but from time to time, Taft asked Boardman for her advice on proposals and documents he received, particularly during his tenure as president. Although the envelopes for these presidential letters are not in the National Postal Museum's holdings, a large part of



Figure 3. Clara Barton (1821-1912), founder of the American Red Cross, is honored on this 3¢ stamp (Scott 967) issued in 1948.

the Boardman-Taft correspondence can be found in the Mabel Thorp Boardman papers in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.

There is little Boardman-Taft correspondence from Pointe-au-Pic after 1917, because Boardman purchased a property at Pointe-au-Pic in 1915, and she and her mother spent their summer holidays there at the same time that the Tafts were vacationing. President Taft, as president of the Pointe-au-Pic Association, wrote to Boardman, as a member of the association, on August 14, 1916, asking for a contribution to help defray the association's share (\$900) of a new road and bridge construction. She contributed \$50.

The exception to the dearth of letters and covers is a small correspondence in 1921 from Taft to Boardman mailed from Montreal, where Taft was one of three arbiters selected to resolve the outstanding issues between the government of Canada and the Grand Trunk Railway in the matter of the government's purchase of the railway. The NPM has seven covers from this correspondence. Taft was in Montreal virtually full time between February and September 1921, when the report of the arbiters, to which he dissented, was

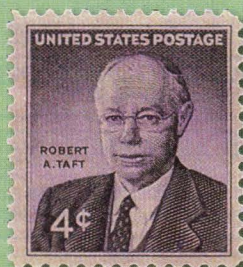


Figure 4. Senator Robert A. Taft (1889-1953), the president's oldest son, also was honored on a stamp. This 4¢ stamp (Scott 1161) was issued in 1960.

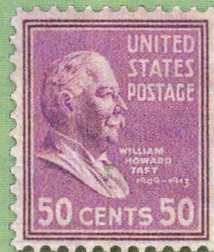


Figure 5. President William Howard Taft (1857-1930) is pictured on four United States stamps. Shown here are three of the four stamps, from left, the 1930 4¢ sheet stamp (Scott 685), the 1930 50¢ from the Presidential series (Scott 831) and a 22¢ stamp from the Ameripex Presidential sheet (Scott 2218h). The fourth stamp, Scott 687, features the same design as Scott 685, but it is a coil stamp.