

The SS Royal William

▼ CHARLES J.G. VERGE

The centennial of the *Royal William's* 1833 record transatlantic crossing was commemorated in 1933 by the issue of a 5¢ stamp (Canada Scott 204) showing the steamship in mid-Atlantic (Figure 1). Interestingly, the initial engraving used to prepare the models for the plates was made from a print showing the wrong ship.



Figure 1: The 1933 *Royal William* stamp (Canada Scott 204).

On June 17, 1933, C.G. Cowan, vice-president and managing director of the British American Bank Note Co., was instructed by Post Office officials to begin the engraving process. He was asked to delay work on the frame because the design had not yet been approved. On June 21, a short memorandum was written noting that a problem existed with the design. Three days later the chief of the Post Office's philatelic section, A. Stanley Deaville, informed his superiors that the model from which the die was being engraved was not the right ship (Figure 2).



Figure 2: A proof of the incomplete die showing the wrong *Royal William*, one built later in 1837.

Deaville wrote "The engraving of the stamp was started, and the design authorized by the Postmaster General, bearing a photographic reproduction of the painting of the *SS Royal William* as contained in the old Parliament building, burned in the fire in 1917."

The painting in question had been reproduced on a greeting card used by the minister of trade and commerce and that reproduction was given to the engraver to prepare

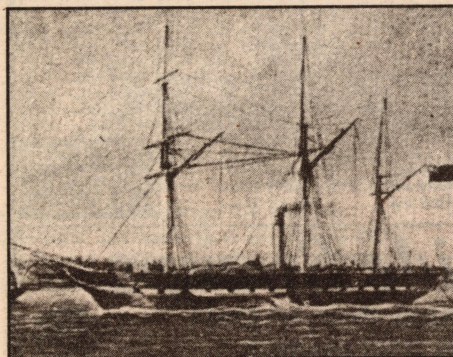


Figure 3: A S. Skillett painting of the *Royal William* sailing up the Thames near London on the way to being sold in 1833.

the die. Deaville continued: "on going to the archives to obtain further information on the picture, an official of the British American Bank Note Co. found that the picture ... was that of a steamship of the same name built in 1838 after the *Royal William* had been struck off the British registry (of ships)."

The mistake was caught in time and the image of the ship that finally appeared on the stamp was the correct one. The new design was a composite of a contemporary artist's painting by S. Skillett of the *Royal William* sailing up the Thames in 1833 (Figure 3) and the incorrect picture of the latter *Royal William*.

Die proofs were struck on July 17 and proofs in brown (large) and blue (small) were sent to the Post Office. The vignette portion of the stamp also exists as a greenish blue die proof on gummed paper.

The *Royal William*, the first seagoing steamship built in Canada, was launched in Quebec City on March 27, 1831. The historic nature of the ship was foretold by the day being proclaimed a holiday for the residents of Quebec. The ship was built at the instigation of the government of Lower Canada specifically to foster trade between there and the other provinces of British North America.

Her builder, James Goudie, was a 20-year-old apprentice foreman, who supervised the construction of the ship (Figure 4). When built, the *Royal William* was a three-masted schooner-rigged paddlewheel steamship. The ship measured 169 feet in length and displaced 365 tons. The engines, almost entirely of Canadian manufacture, were designed by John Lowe at the Bennet Henderson engine works in Montreal.

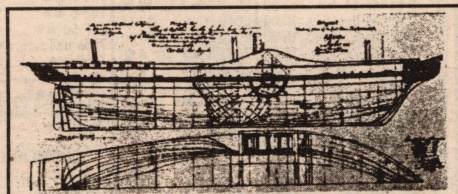


Figure 4: One of the drawings for the building of the *Royal William* prepared by James Goudie.

By the time the ship sailed on its maiden voyage to Nova Scotia it had cost her owners some £16,000. Between the launch in August 1831, and the winter of that year the *Royal William* made three successful round trips to Halifax, carrying passengers and cargo. In 1832, voyages were curtailed severely when a cholera epidemic hit North America and prevented the ship from sailing to the Maritimes.

As a result, the owners suffered severe financial losses and between the winter of 1832 and spring of 1833 the ship changed hands several times. In June 1833, the *Royal William* sailed for Halifax and then Boston, becoming the first ocean-going steamship bearing the British ensign to dock at an American port. It is also the first voyage where there is recorded proof that the *Royal William* carried mail. The public archives of Nova Scotia have a cover that traveled back in the *Royal William* from Boston.

By the time the ship returned to Quebec, the decision had already been made to sail the vessel to London for disposal. The ship's departure was advertized in the *Quebec Gazette* on July 17, 1833 (Figure 5). The *Royal William*, under the command of Captain John McDougall, sailed from

PASSAGE TO LONDON, TOUCHING AT PICTOU.



For further information, apply to the Captain on board, or to W. STEVENSON. Cabin passage, exclusive of Wine, &c. £20. Quebec, 19th July, 1833.

Figure 5: Advertizing for the departure of the *Royal William* from Quebec.

Quebec City on August 5, and stopped in Pictou, Nova Scotia, to replenish the ship's bins with coal.

The *Royal William* sailed for Europe on August 18, never to see North America again. The ship steamed up the Thames on September 12, becoming the first ship to have steamed all the way across the Atlantic.

A controversy arose a few days after the stamp was issued. Many ships, including the United States ship *Savannah*, are frequently given the credit for this feat. However, the *Savannah* was a full-rigged ship with a small auxiliary motor and paddle wheels made to be let down her side when the wind failed. Her motors did not have the strength to steam against head winds; she had to tack. Some of the other claims may have some validity. The feat itself was not behind the issuing of the *Royal William* stamp.

In the September 1941, *Popular Stamps* Lewis Ravenscroft wrote "the Post Office Department of Canada, in issuing the stamp, did not especially align itself with this or any other specific claim ... The transatlantic voyage of that vessel was an event of sufficient historical import, ..., to amply justify commemoration ... " Ravenscroft should know because "Lewis Ravenscroft" was the pseudonym for A. Stanley Deaville, the postal official previously mentioned.

In London, the *Royal William* sold for £10,000, just twice what the ship had fetched at a sheriff's sale in Quebec some months before. The steamer was chartered by the Portuguese government for a year and then sold to the Spanish government in 1834 and was transformed into a man-of-war and renamed *Isabel II*. The ship ended its life as scrap in 1840, although the Spanish took the ship's motors and installed them in a new *Isabel II* they had built.

In 1964, Spain issued a series of stamps honoring the Spanish Navy. One of these stamps, the 2 pesetas (Spain Scott 1256) shows the *Royal William* under its new name: *Isabel II*. (Figure 6).

The perf. 11 stamp issued by Canada in 1933 was printed by the British American



Figure 6: Spain Scott 1256 showing the *Royal William* after it became the man-of-war *Isabel II*.

Bank Note Co. using two plates. Five million stamps were ordered, 4,854,000 were produced. There are no collectible varieties – some minor re-entries perhaps – but 150 imperforate pairs exist.

On July 15, 1933, the Canadian Post Office Department announced that a *Royal William* stamp would be issued Aug. 18, 1933. The announcement continued by saying that the "following towns will handle orders for first day covers: Charlotte (should have been Charlottetown), P.E.I.; Pictou, N.S.; Halifax, N.S.; Saint John, N.B.; Quebec, P.Q.; Montreal, P.Q.; Ottawa, Ont.; Kingston, Ont.; London, Ont.; Windsor, Ont.; Winnipeg, Man.; Regina, Sask.; Moose Jaw, Sask.; Saskatoon, Sask.; Medicine Hat, Alberta; Lethbridge, Alberta; Calgary, Alberta; Edmonton, Alberta; Vancouver, B.C.; Victoria, B.C."

A week later, the Post Office Department announced that "it had been found necessary to advance the date of issue to August 17, 1933." The reason for the change was that the ship had been cleared by customs to leave on the 17th but in fact had not sailed from Pictou until the early hours of the 18th. In the same announcement it added Fort William, Ont. and Port Arthur, Ont. as first day cover processing sites.

The addition of these two towns did not come as a surprise to Canadian stamp collectors at the time. W. Russell Brown (Figure 7), manager of Twinport Auto Sales, lived in Port Arthur, Ont. Although two presidents of the Canadian Philatelic Society (CPA), Professor Perold and Dr. Ball, had been at the forefront in suggesting the issue of the such a stamp, it was Brown who undertook, almost single-handedly, to campaign for the stamp after the Post Office originally turned it down.

Brown, and the CPA's corresponding secretary, W.I. Mactavish, wrote to ministers, members of Parliament and senators requesting their support. Brown ensured that editors of several Maritime newspapers started write-in campaigns and got the Navy League and several stamp clubs behind the project. He personally lobbied many staff members at the Post Office headquarters and was finally successful in his endeavor.

Brown was a stalwart of Canadian philately and had a huge following and a long list of contacts he could touch for support. He had started collecting in 1892 at the age of 11.



Figure 7: W. Russell Brown, the main protagonist behind the campaign for the stamp issue after the first refusal by the Post Office. The picture shows him around the age of 20. He died at age 104 in 1985. (Courtesy the Canadian Postal Archives)

By 18, as a high school senior, he was already a veteran of the rough and tough politics of competing Canadian philatelic societies having been elected to many positions. He switched allegiances from one society to another at least three times before the age of 20.

His 1897 membership card in The Dominion Philatelic Association is still in the archives of The Royal Philatelic Society of Canada (Figure 8). His involvement in organized philately lasted until his death in 1985 at the age of 104.

Brown made his own first day covers for the *Royal William* stamp. Two versions are recorded, one with and one without his printed return address below the explanatory text. Although he had obtained the right to have first day cancels in Port Arthur and Fort William, all the envelopes I have seen with his address are postmarked in Pictou, Nova Scotia. He made the envelopes without the return address to sell to other collectors.

The editor of July 1933 *The Canadian Stamp Collector* mentioned these in his "From Coast to Coast" column: "Mr. Brown has now gone a step farther ... having commemorative envelopes printed telling the story of the *Royal William* illustrated with a half-tone cut of the ship itself. If you would like some of these envelopes to mail to your philatelic friends ... send 25 cent, 50 cents, or \$1.00 to Mr. Brown and he will send a quantity to you. The cost, we believe, is about 85 cents per 100, or one cent each." Figures 9 and 10 show the obverse and reverse of these envelopes.

The stamp was a great success and although major varieties do not exist, the story behind the ship and the people behind the stamp is fascinating. As a footnote, the *Royal William's* importance to Canadian history and heritage was commemorated with a plaque in the Canadian Parliament in 1984 (Figure 11).

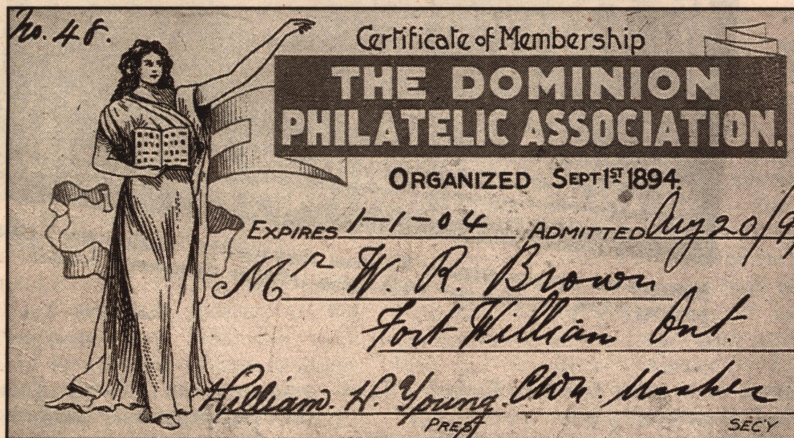


Figure 8: The 1897 certificate of membership in The Dominion Philatelic Association for W. Russell Brown. (Courtesy The Royal Philatelic Society of Canada)

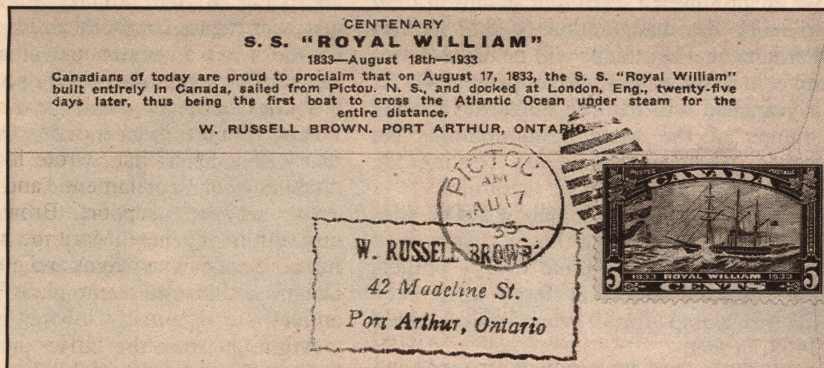


Figure 9: Obverse of Brown's *Royal William* commemorative envelope. Two versions exist: this one and another without Brown's return address under the information panel at top.

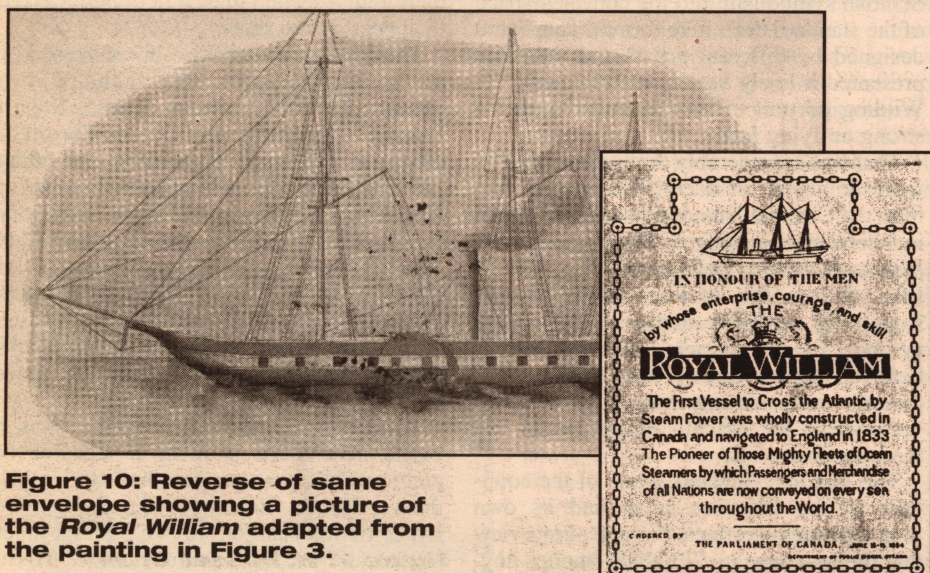


Figure 10: Reverse of same envelope showing a picture of the *Royal William* adapted from the painting in Figure 3.

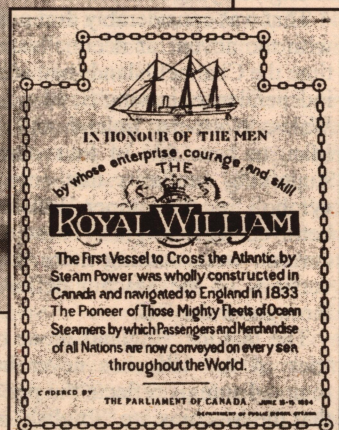


Figure 11: A copy of the plaque placed at the Canadian Parliament in 1984 to celebrate the exploits of the *Royal William*.

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