

Learning about California's Postal History from Covers Sent to Canada and the Maritimes

By Luc Frève



Figure 1. 1855 entire to Huntingdon, Canada East, bearing a San Francisco Wells Fargo handstamp.



Figure 2. Reverse of the Figure 1 cover, showing two Canadian postmarks: Montreal LC OC 2 1855 and Huntingdon LC OC 2 1855.

When I began my research on California's postal history, I quickly found out that dating a cover or identifying the route it traveled could be challenging. In this article, I use a few covers sent to Canada and its Maritime Colonies (later to become the Maritime Provinces – New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island) to illustrate new information on early California postal history.

As many California postmarks only show the city, state, and day/month slugs, in many cases it is difficult to ascertain the year. If you are lucky, a dated endorsement may be present or the cover may bear a receiving or transit post office postmark with a year. However, in Canada, by regulation, postmasters had to handstamp mail received and the majority of postmarks show the year.⁽¹⁾ Such year-dated postmarks provide valuable information when you are studying a cover.

A Wells Fargo's Cover Carried on the Nicaragua Route

According to my census for 1849-1859, nearly all mail from California to Canada was sent through California's post offices (versus via express). This meant that a letter to Canada would normally be carried on the Panama route. This is not surprising, as Canadians generally relied on governmental services in their country before travelling to California. Americans were more open to use alternatives, such as express companies or routes being experimented with before the end of the ocean mail contracts.

After acquiring a cover to Canada bearing a San Francisco Wells Fargo & Co. Express handstamp (Figure 1, prior page), I wanted to identify the steamer which carried it to New York. All I knew was that it had been carried outside the mail from San Francisco to New York by the express agent who brought it to the post office (postmarked "NEW YORK OCT 1"). The year 1855 noted on the front of the cover was confirmed by Montreal and Huntingdon backstamps (Figure 2, prior page).

I searched New York newspapers for arrivals by the US Mail Steamship Company on October 1 from Aspinwall. However, none were listed in the *Marine Intelligence*. In fact, their steamship arrived on October 2 in New York. ⁽²⁾ On that date, the cover of Figure 1 was already in Montreal on its way to Huntingdon LC (Lower Canada), its final destination.

Expanding my search to previous days, I discovered that a steamship from Nicaragua, *SS Star of the West*, had arrived on Sunday Sep 30, 1855 with a Wells Fargo agent on board to accompany a gold shipment. As there has been death from cholera during the trip, the vessel was under quarantine. ⁽³⁾ This may explain why the express agent dropped the mail he carried from California in the post office on October 1, the day after he arrived.

When I began this collection, only one cover to Canada was known on the Nicaragua route: a California Penny Post entire to Port Stanley, Canada West (Figure 3, #337 in Richard Frajola's census of California Penny Post covers). ⁽⁴⁾ I do not have a copy of the back of this entire, but the lot description indicated the presence of a Dec. 13, 1855 Canadian transit backstamp. ⁽⁵⁾ This is consistent with the arrival on December 11 of *SS Northern Light* at New York from San Juan del Norte. ⁽⁶⁾ Working backward, the Penny Post cover was carried by *SS Uncle Sam* which departed San Francisco on November 20, 1855. ⁽⁷⁾ This makes the Wells Fargo cover shown in Figure 1 the earliest "Via Nicaragua" cover to Canada by few months. And there is a bonus! According to my latest census, it is also the earliest Wells Fargo's cover sent to Canada from California! For the record, the second earliest was mailed few months later. It bears a December 30 (1855) New York postmark that coincides with the arrival of a steamship from Panama.

Most, if not all, of the "Via Nicaragua" covers I documented over the years had a San Francisco



Figure 3. San Francisco's "Ocean Penny Postage" imprint cover sent to William Hindley, Yarmouth, Elgin Co., Canada West (via Port Stanley) (Courtesy Robert A. Siegel Auction Gallery).



Figure 4. April 8, 1862 cover sent from Brush Creek, Cal. to Walter Butler, Grand Lake, Queen's Co., New Brunswick.

Figure 5. Back of the Figure 4 cover showing two New Brunswick transit marks: St. John JU 27, 1862 and Gagetown, JU 28, 1862.



letter bag operator handstamp or a manuscript directive to use that route. It is worth the effort to verify if a cover carried by an express company to New York actually matches the arrival of a steamship from Panama. Other “Via Nicaragua” covers may be hidden in these California Express covers postmarked in New York upon arrival.

Updating Williams’ “California Town Postmarks 1849-1935”

According to Williams, the only known copy of

Brush Creek’s first handstamp (BUT-480) is dated April 8, 1862.⁽⁸⁾ The cover is addressed to Walter Butler, Grand Lake, Queens Co., New Brunswick (Figure 4). Had it not been for the New Brunswick transit markings (St. John NB JU 27 1862 and Gagetown NB JU 28 1862) on the back (Figure 5), Williams would not have been able to date this cover; hence, the importance of studying covers sent to Canada and Maritime Colonies to better understand California postal history.

Three covers previously unrecorded by Williams are discussed in the following paragraphs.



Figure 6. February 2, 1853 cover sent from Volcano, Cal. to James Stuart, Osgoode, Canada West.



Figure 7. Back of the Figure 6 cover showing 1853 docketing by the sender, Collin G. McCrone.

Volcano

When I acquired the folded lettersheet shown in Figure 6, the description read “USA Volcano Cal 1853 SFL Gold rush Cover to Bytown Canada, Great Read.” On the reverse (Figure 7), there is docketing with the sender’s name and date: “*Collin G McCrone Letter 1853.*” Two Canadian receiving broken circle postmarks can also be seen: “Montreal MAR 23, 1853” and “Bytown MAR 24 1853.” Per the description, a “great read” it was; but, I found out later that the important information was the year -date of the postmarks and the docketing.

Back home with my cover, I began my study and read that Williams (page 56) identifies the postmark as AMA-1520 with an earliest use of 13 JUL 54. As such, the cover of Figure 6 predates the Williams’ earliest use by 17 months. Furthermore, in 1853, Volcano was not part of Amador County; rather, it was included in Calaveras County. Williams previously only reported a manuscript postmark for the period prior to June 14, 1854. The cover shown as Figure 6 tells us that the handstamp postmark was in use earlier than previously reported.



Figure 8. July 5, 1869, Black Point, Cal. addressed to William B. Lyons, Picton, Ontario, Canada.



Figure 9. Cover from Patterson, Cal. dated Aug 21 addressed to George Poley, Cathcart, Burford Co., Canada West.

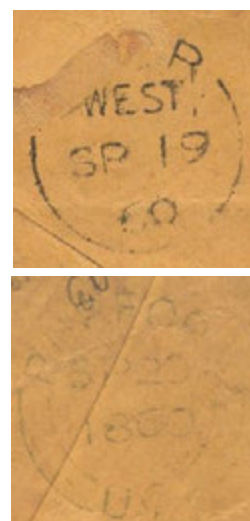


Figure 10. 1860's Great Western Railway (GWR) and Burford UC postmarks found on the reverse of the Figure 9 cover.

Black Point

My interest in this Black Point cover (Figure 8) rests in the fact that it is the earliest cover to Canada carried on the transcontinental railway after the mail contract was signed in July 1869, after which it became the official default route. When I studied the cover, I discovered it was the earliest MRN-260 type (Williams, page 527). Black Point's post office was opened in 1865. Williams reports October 7, 1873 as the earliest date for use of a handstamp postmark. Thus, this July 5, 1869 postmark is the new earliest reported date for this type.

Patterson

NEV-1870 is the first handstamp of Patterson, Nevada County, California with a very short period of use recorded: from May 5, 1857 to July 1, 1857 (Williams, page 695). The cover shown in Figure 9 is dated August 21 extends the period of use to four years. This is a new late reported date for NEV-1870, as Canadian transit markings on the verso year-date it to 1860: GWR WEST SEP 19 1860 and Burford CW SEP 20 1860 (Figure 10). It also narrows down to August 1860-July 1861 the period for when the next handstamp NEV-1880 was introduced.

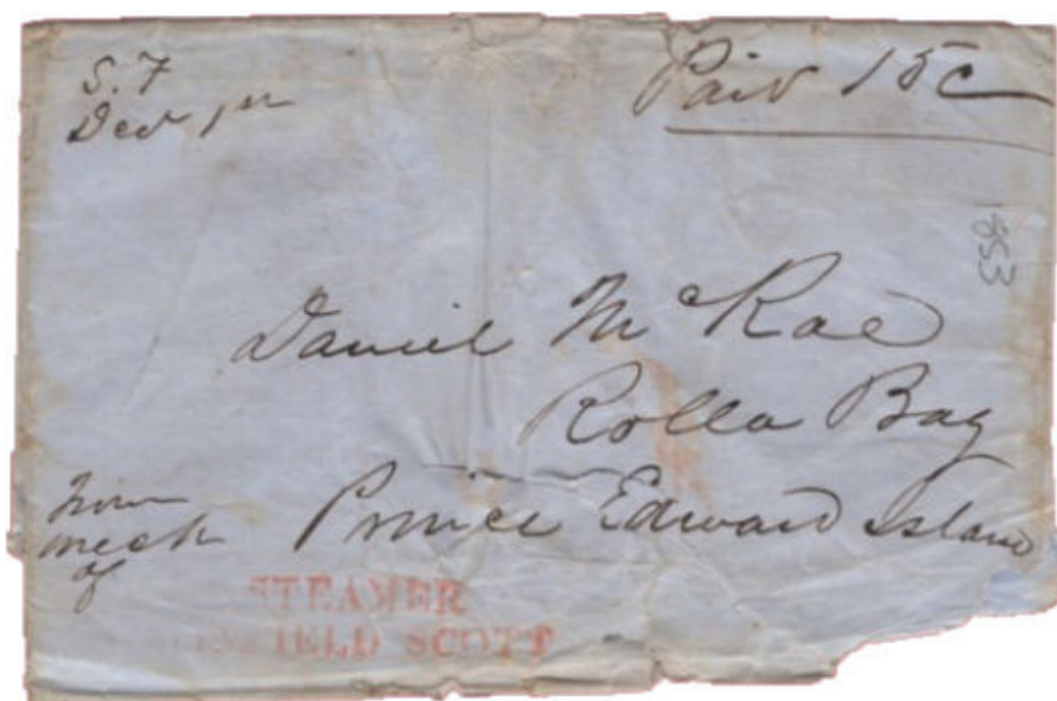


Figure 11. San Francisco December 1, 1853 cover sent to Daniel McRae, Rollo Bay, Prince Edward Island, carried on *SS Winfield Scott* and bearing the red two-line purser's handstamp



Figure 12. St. Andrews FE 2 1854 N.B. transit postmark on verso of Figure 11 cover.

Handling of Steamer *Winfield Scott's* Mail after the Shipwreck

SS Winfield Scott operated in the Atlantic before being dispatched to the Pacific in 1852. To my knowledge, she is the only Pacific Mail Steamship Company vessel that had its own handstamp. In his 2018 census, Mingee recorded a total of 15 covers with the marking, all mailed to the United States.⁽⁹⁾ The wreck cover shown as Figure 11 is a new discovery and the only cover sent to a foreign country with the steamship marking. This cover is also important as it provides new information on how the mail recovered from the wreck was processed.

SS Winfield Scott departed San Francisco on December 1, 1853. To save time, the captain went through the Santa Barbara Channel. That evening, a thick fog set in that resulted in limited to zero visibility. Thinking he had a clear path to the ocean, the captain decided to turn southeast and hit Middle Anacapa Island at full speed at 11:00 PM.

On December 6, the purser, ladies and children, along with gold dust and mails, were taken aboard the *SS California*, which was heading back to San Francisco from Panama.⁽¹¹⁾ The *California* left San Francisco on December 7 and stopped to recover the

passengers and some of the *Winfield Scott's* mail. The *Illinois* carried some mail to New York on January 5, 1854.⁽¹²⁾ The balance was detained by the U.S. Consul in Panama to dry.⁽¹³⁾ Roughly half of the mail was still under water.

In an effort to recover the remaining mail aboard the *Winfield Scott*, the *Republic* left San Francisco on December 8⁽¹⁴⁾ with Mr. Henderson, a Post Office Department official, on board. The *Republic* arrived at the site of the shipwreck on December 10 and recovered 24 bags of mail of which seven were letters. That mail was wet and required drying. It was estimated that 19 mail bags were lost. The *Republic* reached San Francisco on December 14 with what could be salvaged.⁽¹⁵⁾

Polland wrote in 1974 that “All of the mail from the wreck was not removed in the first attempt at recovery, some of it being under water.”⁽¹⁶⁾ Walske and Frajola added to the story by noting that the postal authorities sent 69 salvaged bags by *SS California* to Panama to dry, picked up on December 30 at Aspinwall by USMSC *George Law*, and carried to New York on January 10, 1854.⁽¹⁷⁾

Mail from New York to Prince Edward Island usually went through Boston and New Brunswick before reaching the island. In the early 1850's, the

average transit time between New York and the exchange office of St. Andrews, New Brunswick, was five days. The Figure 11 cover shows a St. Andrews' February 2 postmark on the reverse (Figure 12, prior page). If carried by *George Law*, it should have reached St. Andrews around January 15. So, based on the cover's backstamps, I believe this cover was carried from Panama by *USMSC Ohio* which arrived in New York on January 29, 1854. This means that not all covers left in Panama were carried by *George Law*; some took longer to dry and were carried by subsequent steamships such as the *Ohio*.

Conclusion:

Mail exchanged between British North America and California is my main collecting interest. This is why I used covers to Canada and Prince Edward Island in this article to show how they can assist any student of California postal history. It would be interesting to find out if a study of mail to other countries can provide additional new information.

References:

- 1) Canada, General Post Office, "*Circular: [Stamping and labelling of mail by postmasters]*", Quebec, August 10, 1843 (<https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?app=canposoffpub&idNumber=19195&ecopy=400085KQ>)
- 2) New York *Daily Times*, Vol. 5, No. 1261, October 3, 1855, p.8.
- 3) New York *Daily Times*, Vol. 5, No. 1259, October 1, 1855, p.1.
- 4) Frajola, Richard (website), "*California Penny Post Cover Census*", <https://www.rfrajola.com/CP3/CP3.htm>.
- 5) Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries Inc., Sale 1167, November 8-9, 2017, Lot 2412.
- 6) New York *Daily Times*, Vol. 5, No. 1321, December 12, 1855, p.1.
- 7) San Francisco *Daily Alta California*, Volume 6, Number 291, 21 November 1855, p. 4.
- 8) Williams, John H., "*California Town Postmarks 1849 - 1935*," Western Cover Society, 1997, Louisville, KY, page 64.
- 9) Mingee, Rick, "*Remnants of the SS Winfield Scott*," Western Express, Vol. 68, No. 1, Whole No. 67, March 2018, pp. 31-38.
- 10) *Shipwrecks: The Winfield Scott*, Channel Island, The National Park California, <https://www.nps.gov/chis/learn/historyculture/winfieldscott.htm>
- 11) San Francisco *Daily Alta California*, Vol. 4, No. 318, December 7, 1853, p.2.
- 12) New York *Evening Post*, Vol. 53., January 5, 1854, p.2.
- 13) Bangor (Maine) *Daily Whig and Courier*, Vol. 20, No. 170, January 7, 1854, p.2.
- 14) San Francisco *Daily Alta California*, Vol. 4, No. 320, December 9, 1853, p.2.
- 15) *San Joaquin Republican*, Vol. 3, No. 127, December 17, 1853, p.2.
- 16) Polland, W.S., "*Wreck Covers from the Steamer Winfield Scott*," Western Express, Vol. 24, No. 1, January 1974, pp. 3-5.
- 17) Walske, Steven C. and Richard C. Frajola, "*Mails of the Westward Expansion, 1803 to 1861*," Western Cover Society, 2014, page 259.

∞§∞§∞§∞§∞