

CANADIAN PACKET LETTERS

By Mike Dovey

Mail to and from Great Britain and the USA and Canada in the 19th century provided expats with much needed news of their loved ones. Study of the postal history of this mail enables the collector to piece together the complex factors, such as the different shipping lines and routes, that enabled these treasured items of mail to reach their desired destination.

As a collector of stamps only or even as a collector of f.d.c.s or of special events, this article may seem to have no relevance, but if you read on, it could be that there is something to be learned and maybe could alter your perception of the subject which we term as 'postal history', especially when it involves maritime postal history. Maritime postal history covers a wide variety of themes and time zones, and this article is written to show an interest in mail from Great Britain (as it was called then) to the USA and Canada in the mid-1800s, when a letter was indeed an event and the arrival of one could cause at best elation and at worst heartbreak, especially as many letters were posted in duplicate to ensure delivery, so when the postman knocked on the door to demand a fee, you knew there could well be a duplicate on the way for the same fee and, in those days, the fee was not cheap.

A snapshot of time

Ship letters in Britain had started around the 1770s to denote that a ship had deposited mail from abroad, so that the ship's captain could obtain his fee for the carriage of the letter. As such, ship letter marks sprang up at coastal ports all over the country (some, like Mevagissey and Faversham for example are very rare) and many were still in use in the mid-to-late-1800s.

In 1840, the General Post Office signed a mail contract with the Cunard Line to carry mails to and from the USA and Canada, which resulted in the new packet letter marks. Despite regular sailings, the habit of sending duplicate letters was still the order of the day for many items of post. The sender would write two letters and in many cases annotate them for carriage on two known ships maybe a week apart in the hope that one letter would get to its destination.

Prior to the invention of the envelope, letters would be written on what is known as an entire, which was the actual letter folded and sealed, or maybe the

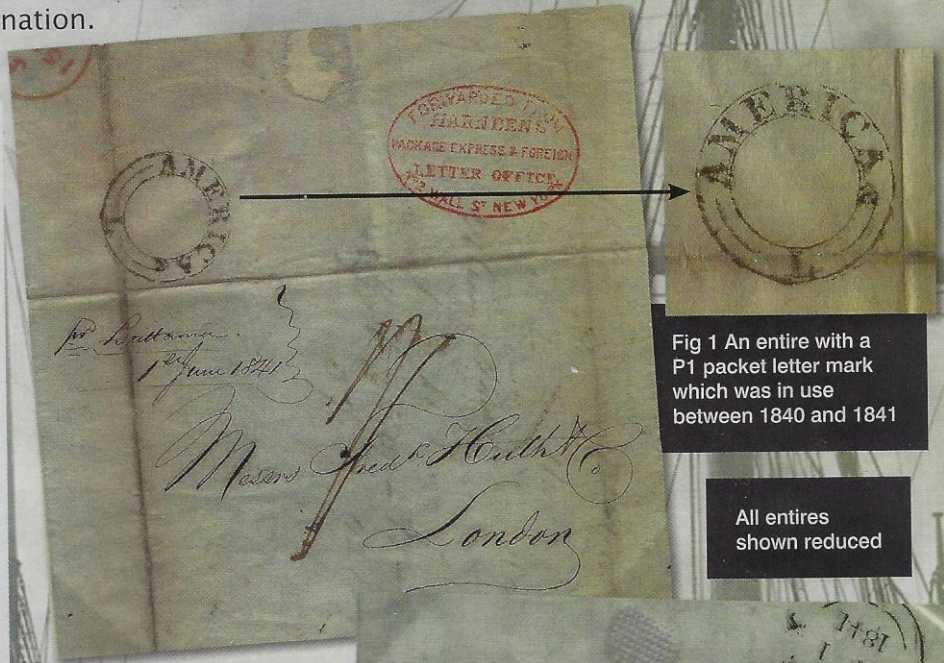
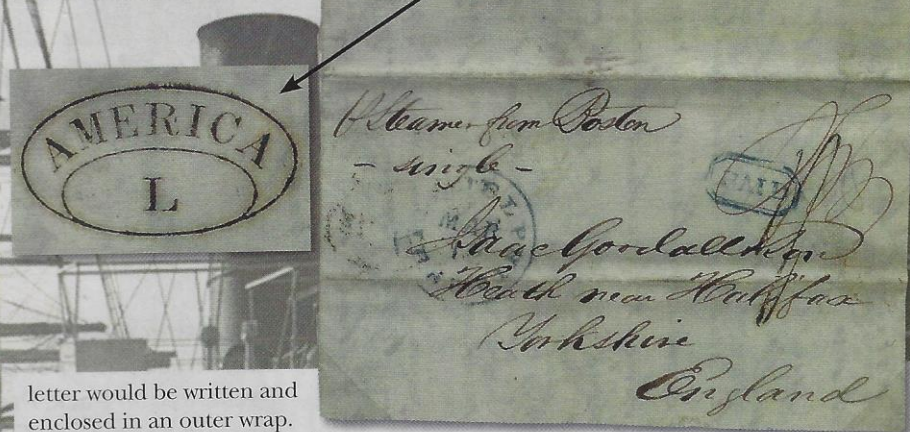


Fig 1 An entire with a P1 packet letter mark which was in use between 1840 and 1841

All entires shown reduced

Fig 2 An entire with a P2 mark in green used 1840-44



letter would be written and enclosed in an outer wrap.

While most of the letters inside an outer wrap are long lost, as are many contents of envelopes, it is the entires that provide the best notion of what can be called postal history because the content is still there for all to read many years later.

To look at and open an entire with a packet letter mark as shown in Figures 1-4, which were all used for the Cunard Mail contract, it begged the questions did one of the duplicates go down with the ship, how many years did the ship last before its demise or, when reading the content of the letter, what piece of history is presented to the reader. When read, each entire will give an insight into what was happening at that moment. Once landed at Boston or Halifax, each immigrant into North America would journey inland and then write home at some point to family, friends, and even lawyers, asking for help or advice having reached middle America. Entires explaining how they travelled by wagon train for thousands of miles are a common theme, as are

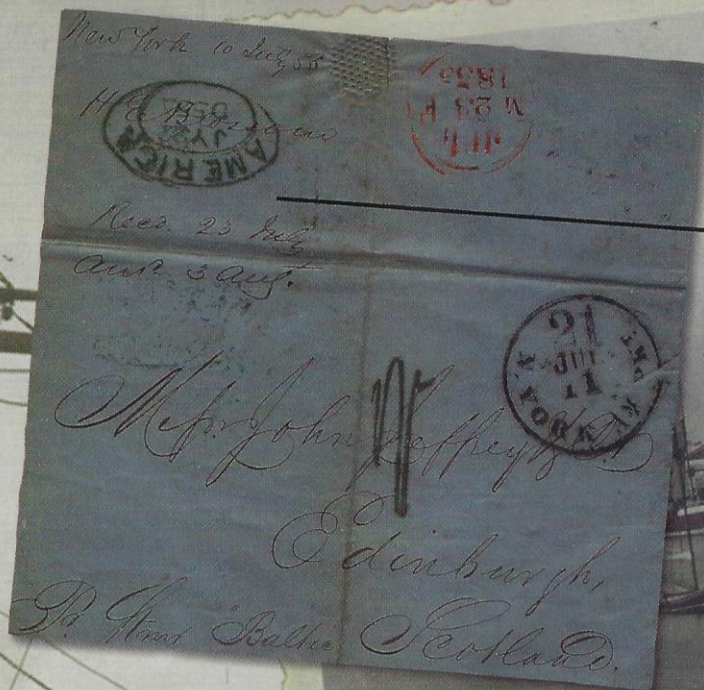


Fig 3 An entire sent from New York to Edinburgh in 1855 with a P3 mark which was in use 1850-57

letters warning those back home not to send their sons here just because they can read and write, because they have universal suffrage and many children are taught to read and write – again all pieces of social history. It is fascinating to open and read what people were doing at this time, through the many subjects, both good and bad, and you have to ask just how long did the sender survive in the newest parts of the USA and Canada.

This is what makes collecting postal history so fascinating. Did a couple make it all the way from Boston or New York to the Wild West, write home, only to be shot by a Billy the Kid before a reply could be sent?

Fig 4 An 1855 entire sent from Boston to Edinburgh with a P6 mark in red used 1849-70

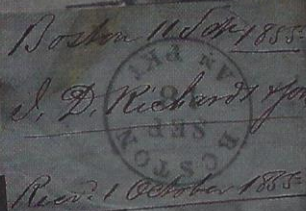
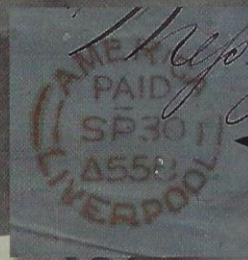


Fig 5 This mark was first known used between 1854 and 1859. It is known primarily in black and red, but there is a single green example from 1854

First sailings to the US

Following the introduction of the new mail contract in 1840, you may think the first ship to carry mail across the Atlantic, would have been a large ocean liner, such as the *Britannia*, *Caledonia* or even the *Arcadia*, but you would be wrong. The first mail to be carried to Boston was by the feeder vessel *Unicorn*. The *Unicorn* was sent out first on 16 May 1840 on a voyage from Liverpool–Halifax–Boston and then to take up station at Halifax as a feeder vessel for mail and passengers between there and Quebec. The *Unicorn* sailed between the two ports for around six years, before returning to Britain, again carrying mail. While entires and outer wraps for most ships and marks can be purchased for maybe reasonable amounts, mail from the two *Unicorn* voyages across the Atlantic will demand a very high premium – two covers, one for each voyage, sold at an auction house not that long ago sold for around £2500 each – alas not to this writer.

The *Britannia* sailed from Liverpool on American Independence Day on 4 July 1840 and arrived at Boston on 19 July; this being the first true voyage

BY-CANADIAN PACKET

of a full-sized Cunard vessel. The only loss during the first years of the service was the *Columbia*, which was launched in 1841 and wrecked at Halifax in July 1843. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said in the next chapter of packet letters to Canada.

Mail to Canada

In 1853, the Canadian Post Office decided that there was enough mail going to and from Canada to offer a mail contract to another shipping line. The chosen line was the Canadian Steam Navigation Company which was newly formed to expedite the contract. However, for a number of reasons, the line was to go bankrupt in March 1855.

In the two years, the line used seven ships, of which four were chartered and the other three were taken by the British government in 1855 for use as Crimean War Transports. The company used grossly undersized vessels that

could not carry the mails at the right speed (two of the ships chartered for the Liverpool–Quebec–Montreal route were smaller than the feeder vessel *Unicorn* used by Cunard some 13 years earlier). With the Crimean War taking so many vessels from so many lines, there was no availability to build, buy or even charter new tonnage and so the company was liquidated. The mail contract lay dormant, mainly due to the fact that there wasn't a company available to take up the contract because of the Crimean War. In the two years of operation, the company managed 26 voyages but luckily did not lose any vessels.

A number of ships from 1854-55 would have received the 'BY-CANADIAN PACKET' mark, which was used at Liverpool Sorting Office (Fig 5). It is not known why the post office created a mark deemed to be a miscellaneous one and not an official mark, although it could well have been the fact that the

mail contract was with the Canadian Post Office and not the British Post Office.

After a gap of over a year, in 1856 a new mail contract was organised with the Allan Line (Fig 6). This line was set up by Hugh Allan who had emigrated from Glasgow in 1826. He achieved his ambition of owning a shipping line in 1854 when he organised the Montreal Ocean Steamship Co. (always known as the Allan Line).

The new contract did not fair well to begin with as all of the Allan Line ships were pressed into Crimean War service and all voyages by the line from and to Britain were suspended. However, in 1856 sailings resumed and the contract was started for a fee of £25,000 a year, which was increased to £42,000 a year in 1857, so that the line could build new tonnage to service the route.

However, life in shipping circles to Canada was not as easy as it seems. Table 1 shows exactly why letters were posted in duplicate. The Cunard Line had been fortunate in that they only lost one vessel (the *Columbia*) at Halifax, but while access to ports on the Atlantic coast was poor, the access to ports going down the St Lawrence to Quebec and Montreal was fraught with difficulties because there was little in the way of navigation lights or any help at all for all ships sailing to Quebec.

The table shows that ten of the first 14 vessels built for Allan Line were wrecked and one was grounded and then refloated.



Fig 6 Picture postcards advertising the Allan Line (Reduced)

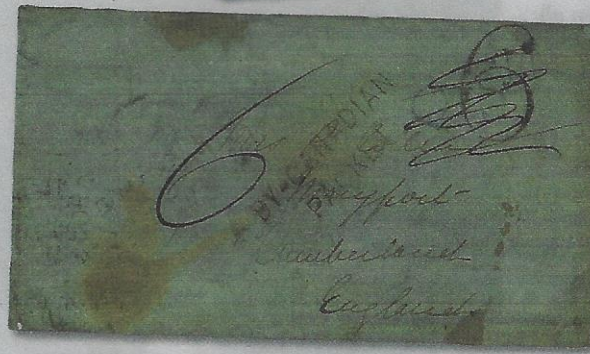


Fig 7 An envelope with contents carried by Allen Line's *Canadian* (Ship 1) which was wrecked in 1857

All entires shown reduced



Fig 8 An outer wrap, carried by the *Anglo-Saxon* (Ship 4) on her second voyage and wrecked in 1863

Table 1 Fate of ten of the first 14 vessels built for the Allan Line

Ship no.	Name of ship	Launch date	
1	<i>Canadian</i> (Fig 7)	1854	1857 wrecked near Quebec
2	<i>Indian</i>	1855	1859 wrecked at Cape Race
3	<i>North American</i>	1856	1866 grounded in St Lawrence river
4	<i>Anglo-Saxon</i> (Fig 8)	1856	1863 wrecked at Cape Race
6	<i>North Briton</i>	1858	1861 wrecked at Paraquet Island
7	<i>Hungarian</i>	1859	1860 wrecked at Sable Island
8	<i>Bohemian</i>	1859	1864 wrecked at Cape Elizabeth
9	<i>Canadian</i> (second)	1860	1861 wrecked at Straits of Belle Island
10	<i>Jura</i> (ex-Cunard Line)	1860	1864 wrecked at Liverpool, England
12	<i>Norwegian</i>	1861	1863 wrecked at St Pauls Island
14	<i>Saint George</i>	1861	1869 wrecked at Seal Island

It was fortunate that as each year passed, ships became more reliant on steam rather than sail and more control could be used when trying to navigate difficult waters. Eventually, more navigation lights, etc., were installed along the St Lawrence River and so the attrition rate of ship losses was vastly reduced. Eventually, by the late 1870s, duplicate letters were no longer needed because vessels got much bigger and better and the services much quicker. Any mail carried by the first eight vessels in the table could have received the 'BY-CANADIAN PACKET' mark at Liverpool during the 1856–59 period of Allan Line sailings.

Most transatlantic liners leaving Liverpool would sail south via Queenstown in Ireland to pick up Irish emigrants and onwards to the USA and Canada. However, when bound for Canada, Allan Line always left Liverpool and sailed north, calling at Londonderry-Moville, again for Irish emigrants, and onwards to Québec and Montreal, although in the winter, the ships could not reach these two ports and so called at Halifax and Portland (Maine).

Following the collapse of the Canadian Steam Navigation Company and the severe reduction in the availability of Cunard Line vessels to implement the mail contract, there was a problem with sending mail across the Atlantic. For one year only, in 1855, mail from

Canada was redirected to the USA where it was carried on Collins Line vessels. To show this, when mail reached Liverpool, it was given an M5 'CONVEYED BY UNITED STATES PACKET' mark (Fig 9). In 1856, after the new contract was awarded to Allan Line, this service ceased, making such marks extremely rare.

In 1858, the post office in Liverpool decided that there were far too many packet marks being used in the office with the use of the various Cunard mail Packet Letters (P5, P6, P7, P9 and P10), marks for South America (P27), Australia (P28 and P29) and many other miscellaneous marks, including the makeshift 'BY-CANADIAN PACKET' (M10), although various Ship Letter marks were not affected with the changes. It was, therefore, decided that a new range of marks would be introduced for packet letters, reduced to only three types, 'BR PACKET', 'US PACKET' and 'COL PACKET', which stood the test of time, until finally coming to an end in late 1903 (Figs 10, 11 and 12).

The Glasgow route

In 1861, a new route was introduced by Allan Line, which started at Glasgow and called at Londonderry, St John's (Newfoundland), Quebec and Montreal. The post office at Glasgow issued new packet letter marks in 1860 to treat mail coming off vessels, and while the Glasgow P1 mark had a long shelf life, the other three were all gone by 1863, it seems the Glasgow P1 mark covered all of the mail on its own until eventually being superseded by the oval P5 mark in around 1880 (Fig 13).

The P5 mark was used until 1894 when, from 1 January of that year, the new omnibus paquebot mark was introduced. It is reported that the mail contract between Allan Line and the Canadian Post Office was for mail to be delivered to Liverpool and so any mail for Scotland (i.e. Glasgow) would be bagged and transferred north to be opened and dealt with in Glasgow, whether this has any truth or not is for a source higher than my paygrade, but as Allan Line vessels were calling at Glasgow on the way back from Canada from 1860, it follows on that maybe mail was handled directly at the port and other mails on ships sailing directly to Liverpool were simply redirected in a bagged format. Maybe we will never know.

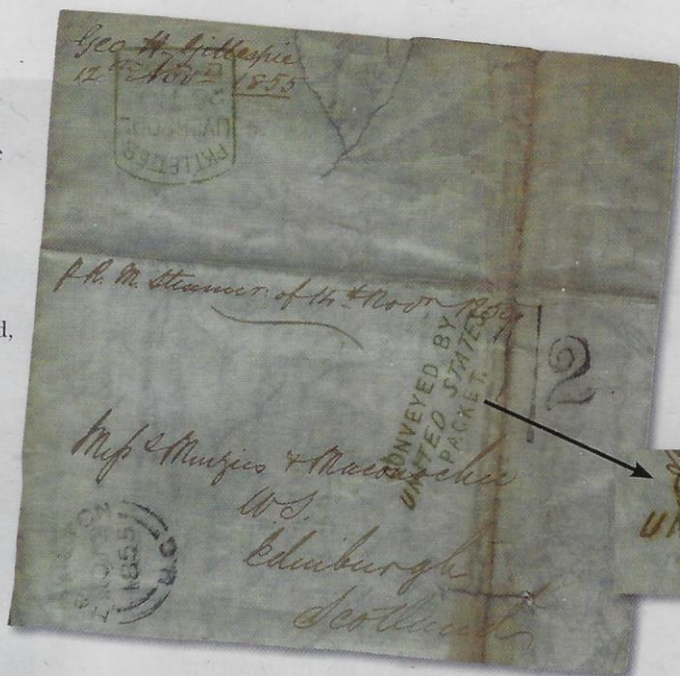


Fig 9 In 1855, mail from Canada was redirected to the USA, where it was carried on Collins Line vessels and received a 'CONVEYED BY UNITED STATES PACKET' mark (M5)



P11



P13

Fig 10 'US PACKET' marks P11 (used 1858–1903) and P13 (used 1858–1903)



P16



P17

Fig 11 'BR PACKET' mark P16 (used 1858–88) and P17 (used 1858–1902)



Fig 13 This cover was carried on the *Polynesian's* 38th crossing for the Allan Line, departing Quebec on 18 August and arriving in Liverpool on 27 August. The letter, with a Glasgow P1 packet mark, would have been in a closed bag and forwarded unopened to Glasgow



P19



P21

Fig 12 'COL PACKET' marks P19 (used 1859–1903) and P21 (used 1859–1903)

History at your fingertips

Collecting postal history is not just collecting the stamp, it is collecting the usage of the stamp; the stamp is a vehicle to a whole new world where history and events are written down, maybe in haste but now a living memorial to the writer, and maritime postal history gives a collector the chance to view the whole world at that time. A page with 20 stamps on is so much more improved if you have 20 envelopes to show where the letter was posted, who the recipient was and the datestamps to show the passage of the letter.

Further reading

The 2010 fourth edition of the Paquebot book is long out of print but is now available on a DVD disc for £25 plus postage. For details, if you are interested, please email the TPO & Seapost

Society (tpo_seapost@hotmail.com).

There is now also a new 2020 Addenda to the 2010 Paquebot book, again available by applying to the above email address.

Acknowledgements

All items shown are reduced to 65 per cent in size and are the property of the author.

Sincere thanks to Colin Tabcart for the use of diagrams from his excellent book *Robertson Revisited*.

