

The Postal History of PORT HOOD ISLAND

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Port Hood Island is located approximately 1.5 kilometres off the western coast of Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia (see Figs. 1, 2 and 3). The Mi'kmaq called the area "Ragweamkek" which means "sand bar", likely referring to a sand isthmus that attached what is now Port Hood Island to the mainland¹. From 1713 to 1755, the French quarried stone on the island and built ships for Fortress Louisbourg and French forts in the West Indies.² The French called the area *Juste au Corps* which loosely translates as "up to the waist." Later settlers mispronounced *Juste au Corps* as *Chestico*, with the Scots referring to it in Gaelic as *Seastico*. Samuel Holland called the area *Port Barrington* on charts he created in the mid-1700s.

The area was settled by United Empire Loyalists in the 1780s. By this time, the name of the area had been officially changed to Port Hood in honour of Samuel Viscount Hood, the British Commander-in-Chief in North America in 1767.

Port Hood Island was originally settled by Captain David Smith in 1786 and was known at the time as Smith's Island.

Tradition says that the mail was originally carried free as a public service to the Island³. The community of Port Hood Island established a post office in 1865⁴, prior to the confederation of Canada, while Nova Scotia was still a separate British colony. The National Library and Archives of Canada

indicates that the office was a way office until 1868⁵. The office was serviced from Port Hood on the mainland.

John Smith was appointed on July 1, 1867 by the new Dominion of Canada to provide mail service from Port Hood to Port Hood Island at the cost of \$30.00 per annum⁶. John also acted as postmaster for Port Hood Island, operating the post office out of his general store (see P.O. location 1 on Fig. 4). He was a successful trader dealing extensively with the American Fishing Fleet, who purchased large quantities of ice, bait and general fishing supplies⁷.

Upon John Smith's death on March 19, 1869, his son Joshua took over the fish business with his brother Hezekiah. Joshua and Hezekiah



Fig. 1

Fig. 2 – Island's relationship to mainland.

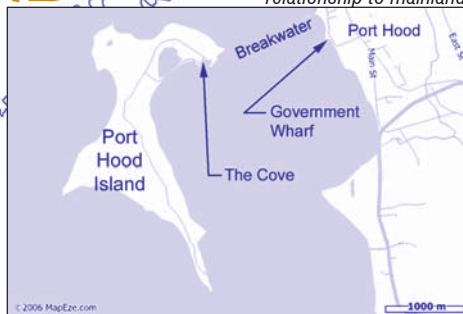
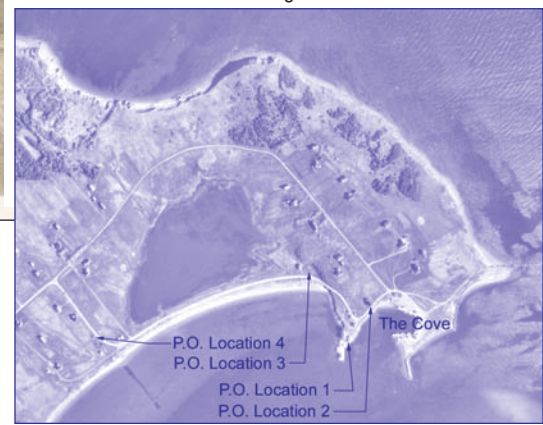




Fig. 3 – View from Port Hood to Port Hood Island.

Fig. 4 – Post Office Locations.



operated the business under the Estate of John Smith for a number of years until they dissolved the partnership. Joshua built a wharf, general store, fish house, smoke house, and other buildings. He took over as postmaster and mail courier, remaining in the position for 53 years until he resigned on September 2, 1922. He also acted as Justice of the Peace and Issuer of Marriage Licences.⁸ Figs. 5 and 6 shows the hammers and the bag seal in use during Joshua Smith's tenure as postmaster.

Following Joshua's resignation, his son Henry Guy Smith became postmaster and mail courier until his resignation on May 31, 1926. He also succeeded his father in the fish business⁹.

After Henry Guy's resignation, the duties of the postmaster and mail courier became separated. The operations of the post office on the Island were taken over by Daniel Cameron, a local farmer and fisherman¹⁰. Daniel was postmaster from June 30, 1926 until his death on May 7, 1948¹¹. He originally operated the post office out of the community hall near the wharf (see post office location 2 on Fig. 4, and Fig. 7) and later replaced it with a stand-alone building (see location 3 on Fig. 4, and Fig. 8). The building was later converted to an outbuilding to one of the houses on the Island. Figs. 9 and 10 show postmarks that came into use during Daniel's tenure.

In 1948, Miss Elizabeth (Betty) Cameron, daughter of Daniel Cameron, took over as postmaster until 1950, when her brother, Wilfred Cameron took over along with his

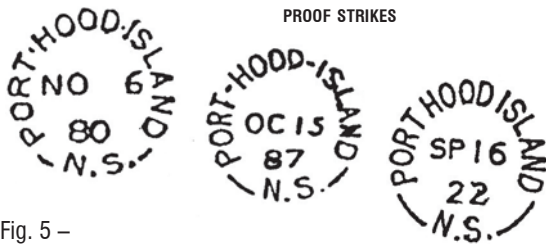


Fig. 5 – Postmarks in use during tenure of John Smith¹



Fig. 6 – Bag seal strike for Port Hood Island²

Fig. 7 – Community hall, a portion of which housed the post office during the tenure of Daniel Cameron.



Fig. 8 – Second post office building during the tenure of Daniel Smith (not in original location). Note mail slot under window on right.

wife, Elsie Parks Cameron. During his tenure, Wilfred built a new post office building beside Jubilee United Church (see post office location 4 on Fig. 4). On September 24, 1951, the post office was reduced to a non-accounting office. After the post office on the island closed, the building became a fish shed at the wharf.

When the post office on the Island permanently closed on June 29, 1968, group mail box service was instituted for the roughly 20 homes in the community. The mail courier became responsible for placing the mail in the green group mail boxes, the precursor of the super mailboxes in use today.

Letters, magazines and newspapers could be placed in the individual locked mail slot. Bigger parcels were locked into a larger shared compartment, and the key for the larger compartment was placed in the addressee's mail slot.

When the addressees had retrieved their parcels, they left the key inside the larger compartment for use by the mail courier when the next parcel was delivered. All sorts of things were delivered via mail. The author has heard stories of live chicks being delivered and left in their shipping crate beside the mailbox for pickup.

In 1926, Daniel Smith's brother, Sinclair Smith took over the responsibility for carrying the post from Port Hood to Port Hood Island. In 1930, Warren Tobey became the mail courier. He was married to Grace Smith, a daughter of Joshua Smith, an earlier post-

PROOF STRIKES



Fig. 9 – Money Order Office Datestamp (MOOD) mark introduced in 1931³.

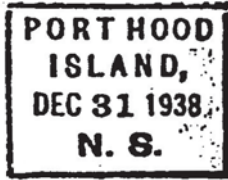


Fig. 10 – Money Order Transfer Office (MOTO) mark from 1938⁴.

master and mail courier. Warren was paid \$350.00 per year, for which he was obliged to make 6 deliveries (involving 12 crossings) per week. For this amount, Warren had to provide his own boat and fuel.

Arnold Tobey and his cousin, Harold Smith, carried the mail from 1936 to 1940¹². Arnold used the boat, the *Seldom In*, which was 7.5 metres long and was powered by a 4 horsepower engine¹³.

In 1950, Les Tobey was awarded the contract to carry the mail at \$720.00 per year.

He kept the contract until 1975¹⁴. During his tenure, the post office on the island closed and the mail courier became more like a rural delivery person responsible for sorting and placing the mail in group mailboxes. Les used a variety of boats to collect the mail, including the *Getaway III*, *The Four Boys*, *The Cheryl Lynn* and *The CHALA*. Les was a full-time fisherman in addition to being the mail courier. He would fish in the morning, finishing in time to collect and deliver the mail in mid-afternoon. At this time, the mail was delivered to Port Hood by train. Les could see one of the train signals on the mainland from his house on the island. When it would change from red to green, Les knew that the train carrying the mail would soon be arriving in town and that if he left immediately, he could cross the channel in his boat, pick up his car on the mainland and drive to the Post Office to arrive just in time to collect the mail immediately after it was sorted for the different rural routes out of Port Hood.

Fig. 11 – Les Tobey receiving \$100 for saving the mail when his boat went upon the rocks⁵.

REWARD FOR VALOUR --
Mail Contractor Leslie Tobhey (right) is presented a cheque for \$100.00 and commended by Area Superintendent H.A. Lewis on behalf of a grateful Department for successfully saving the mails when his boat foundered in a storm. This story was carried in the April issue of the Postmark. Present also are (extreme left) Postmaster Wilfred Cameron, Port Hood Island, N.S. and Postmaster C.A. Macdonald, Port Hood, N.S.





Fig. 12 – Example of a six-wheeled amphibious vehicle used by Les Tobey to transport the mail to and from Port Hood Island⁶.

The mail courier's job could be dangerous at times. If it was stormy, high winds and waves could make the crossing difficult. The setting of the ice in harbour could also make crossings hazardous. In fact there were days, especially in winter, when conditions would make the crossing impossible, and people would have to wait for their mail.

Over the history of the mail route, crossings were made on foot, in rowboats, sailboats, dories, and motorboats. When the ice was thin, postal couriers would walk the 1.5 kilometres from the island to the mainland on planks that they would laboriously pick up from behind and then place in front, time and time again.¹⁵ Postal couriers also used snowshoes, ice boats, horse and sleigh, trucks, cars, and snowmobiles, depending on the thickness and surface conditions of the ice in winter.

Perhaps the most dangerous time was when the ice was setting. When the channel between the mainland and the Island was filled with floating ice, the postal couriers would row across in a skiff which they could haul up onto the ice cakes and down into the water in between. When they reached ice that

was too thick to push through, but too thin to walk on, they would scramble over the slippery rocks of the breakwater, if they could reach it. This was hard and dangerous work and sometimes the 1.5 km crossing would take two hours¹⁶.

Les Tobey had a number of serious incidents while carrying the mail from Port Hood to Port Hood Island. The author recalls stories of him jumping open leads of water while carrying the mail on his snowmobile in winter. Les also lost a boat while carrying the mail in 1962, when the engine on his boat *Get-Away III* failed. The boat drifted onto the breakwater between the island and the mainland. Pounding waves smashed the boat, filling it with water. Les held onto the remains of the boat with one arm and gripped the mail bags tightly with the other until four men in a dory came to his rescue. The islanders received their mail that day as usual although it was a bit damp. Les was okay, but his boat valued at \$10,000.00, unfortunately uninsured, was a total loss¹⁷. Fig. 11 shows him receiving a reward of \$100.00 from the Post Office for saving the mail. Vivian Tobey, Les's wife, wrote in November 1976, "For a wife, all these past experiences in carrying the mail make one shudder to see another winter season begin."¹⁸

Perhaps, it was incidents like these that led to Les purchasing what must be one of the most interesting vehicles ever used to deliver mail. Fig. 12 shows a six-wheeled amphibious vehicle called a "jigger". The author recalls seeing it only one season, so perhaps it could not climb onto the ice from the water in the middle of the channel and given the limited freeboard, it may not have been very good in the often rough seas of the area.

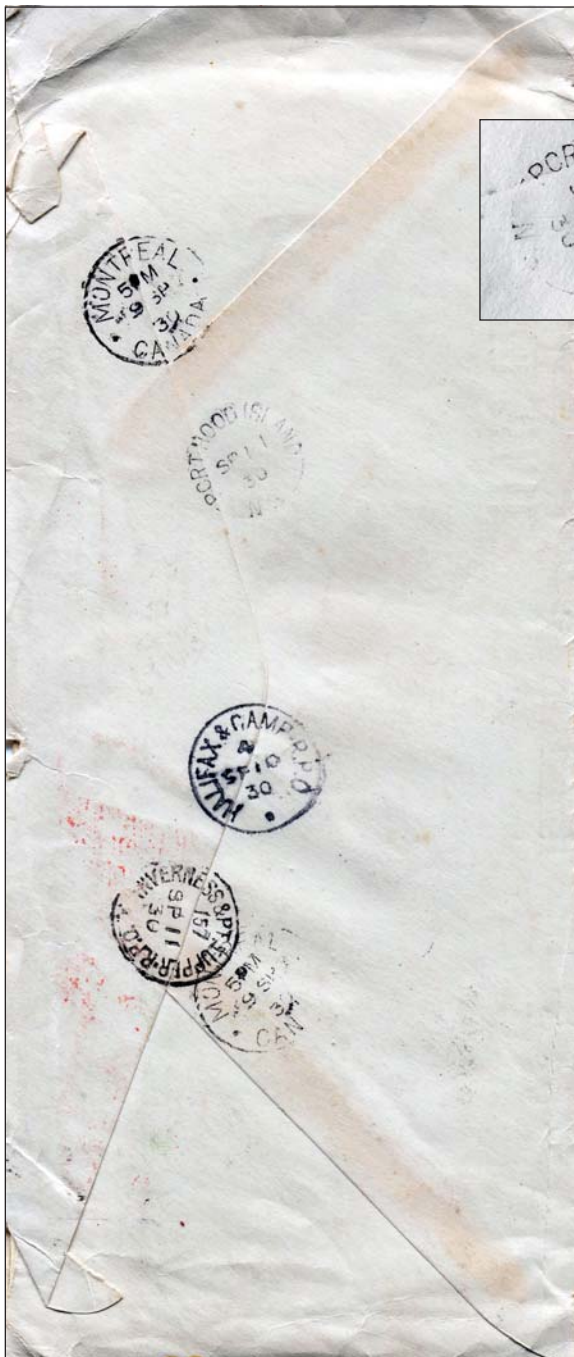


Fig. 13 – Back of cover addressed to Port Hood Island showing receiving stamp dated SP 11 / 1930. The enlargement illustrates enhanced copy of postmark.

In 1975, Ken Sangster succeeded Les Tobey as the mail courier. He used his boat, the *Super* to travel between the mainland and the island. The *Super* was 8.5 metres long and powered with a 90 hp motor¹⁹. When Ken retired in 1980, Bertie Smith bought the *Super* and took over as mail courier. Bertie was the last official mail courier until the route was closed on August 1, 1987, when the full-time population of the Island dropped to only a couple of families. Bertie would take mail given to him to place in the post on the mainland, and would accept mail care of his address for as a favour for summer residents. Since there is no longer any delivery service on Port Hood Island, house owners can get a mail slot at the Port Hood post office free of charge.

The “mail boat” as it was colloquially known, carried more than mail. Summer residents of the Island would rush to the wharf to be in time to catch a ride to the Island. People on the Island requiring groceries or hardware from the Co-op would catch it from the Island across to the mainland and would rush back to the wharf to be in time to catch their ride back. Tourists wishing to visit the Island would use it to get back and forth. In many ways, the mail boat acted also as a ferry.

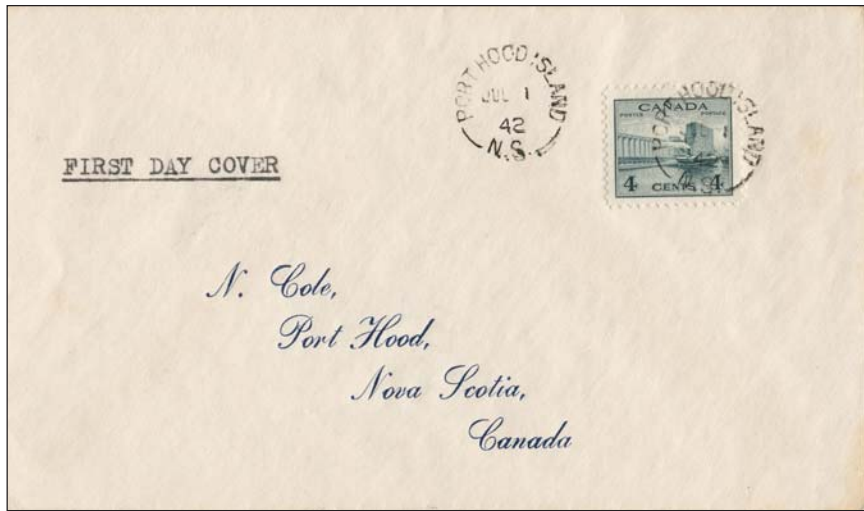
Finding postmarks from Port Hood Island is difficult. Mail addressed to the

island often only shows receiving marks from Port Hood. Figs. 13a, 13b and 14 illustrate the only two covers that the author has in his collection showing Port Hood Island postmarks. The cover addressed to Cole is obviously philatelic. Interestingly, there are fake reproductions of the famous Port Hood provisional addressed to a person of the same surname. If anyone has information about Cole and his activities or tenure in the Port Hood area, the author would like to receive it. ☒



Fig. 13a – Front of cover as illustrated in Fig. 13.

Fig. 14 – Cover
postmarked JUL 1 / 42.



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- ⁹ *Ibid.* p. 112.
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- ¹³ Zwicker. *Op. cit.*
- ¹⁴ Zwicker. *Op. cit.*
- ¹⁵ Zwicker. *Op. cit.*
- ¹⁶ Tobey, Arnold. As quoted in Zwicker, *op.cit.*
- ¹⁷ Zwicker. *Op. cit.*
- ¹⁸ Tobey, Vivian, as quoted in Zwicker. *Op. cit.*
- ¹⁹ Zwicker. *Op. cit.*



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