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PHILATELIC  
LITERATURE

# *Review*

## **The Winding Road of Research**



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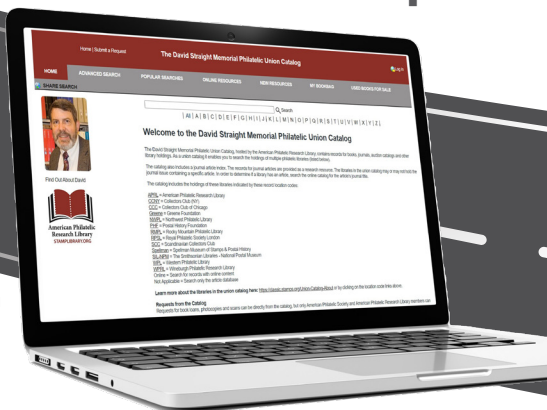
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# THE WINDING ROAD OF RESEARCH

## Unraveling the Story of the Port Hood Provisional Stamps

By Gordon Smith



I started looking at the Port Hood Provisional stamps about 25 years ago in the late 1990s. My family is from Port Hood Island, Nova Scotia, Canada and I started collecting the postal history of the area around that time.

Despite having collected stamps as a youth and then starting again with the hobby in the mid-1990s, I hadn't heard of the Port Hood Provisional until someone teasingly asked me if I was going to get one and sent me an album page with a space for one. I looked them up and was immediately intrigued. Then, I looked at the prices for the material, which were way out of my league. So, I started to see what I could find

out about the stamps and how they came to be.

The Port Hood Provisional stamps (Scott 88B and 88C) were created on January 5, 1899, in Port Hood (Figures 1 and 2). When the sudden announcement in a change of rates from 3 cents to 2 cents caused a shortage of the 2-cent stamps, the postmaster in Port Hood took 3-cent stamps and split them into one-third and two-thirds pieces, where the two-thirds represented a 2-cent stamp and the one-third represented a 1-cent stamp.

While bisect stamps had been tacitly accepted in Nova Scotia for many years at this point, what made these cut stamps unusual



**Figure 1. A Port Hood Provisional with a cancellation, 88C, *Unitrade Specialized Catalogue of Canadian Stamps*.**

was the method of bisection and the postmaster's application of a handstamp to provide the value of each stamp. The creation of these stamps was reported in the January issue of *Stanley Gibbons Stamp Monthly* less than a month after their genesis and many subsequent authors claimed that they were illegitimate philatelic creations made by the postmaster and a philatelically inclined friend as a profit-making venture.

Indeed, most of the covers have only been sent within Port Hood and to Charlottetown to people with the surname of MacDonald. These stamps have proven to be very controversial in philatelic circles and many articles have been written about them.

### The "pre-internet" days

While I lived in Botswana in the late 1990s, I traveled back to Canada annually and on one trip I was fortunate to find a copy of *Canadian Philately Bibliography and Index 1864-1973* by Cimon Morin in the Calgary Public Library. The index, published in 1979 by the National Library of Canada, listed seven references to the Port Hood Provisionals.

I also managed to get a photocopy of

information reported by Robson Lowe and Winthrop Boggs. I was traveling to Ottawa on the same trip and was able to visit the Canadian National Library and Archives, where I obtained copies of articles mentioned in Morin's bibliography.

After I moved back to Canada in 2002, I purchased a copy of the supplement to *Canadian Philately Bibliography and Index* (1983), which listed a further three references. I managed to receive via interlibrary loan a copy of one of those articles from the Canadian National Library and Archives. Interestingly, although Dr. Alexander Gyorfi's "About Cape Breton Provisionals and Bisects" from HALPEX '65 was listed in this bibliography, I was unable to obtain a copy of it from Canadian National Library and Archives until 2022! I also obtained the list of postmasters of Port Hood from the Library and Archives Canada website.

In total, I found 10 references. My sources had to have good bibliographic references that could be shared with a library to enable interlibrary loan. However, this was sometimes hit-or-miss depending on the interest and knowledge of the library with which one was working.

Gradually, my interest in the Port Hood Provisionals waned because the materials I obtained did not provide really satisfactory answers to my questions about who produced these and why.

### The early internet days

In 2007, I came across an online reference to the Port Hood Provisionals in Canadian Stamp Auctions stamp market commentary that further whet my appetite, quoting from L. Seale Holmes and Boggs and mentioning four auctions in which Port Hood Provisional materials were sold. I did further research and managed to get copies of some articles and other primary



source materials that were mentioned in books.

For example, I obtained a copy of a Clifton Howes article from 1911 from a small regional library in Nova Scotia. I was able to obtain a copy of a 1916 article by Bertram Poole from Project Gutenberg, a volunteer service which was (and is) digitizing books and journals in the public domain. However, this was still the early days of this type of material becoming available on the internet as well as the early days of software that created searchable image files, so it was a text-only copy.

I also was able to borrow a copy of a 1929 Fred Jarrett article from my local stamp club. In 2009, I saved a hardcopy of *BNA Topics*, which contained an article referencing these bisected stamps.

With some more hunting, I found a few more references, mostly older books that were deemed worthy of digitization in these early days, and I borrowed more articles via interlibrary loan from the Canadian National Library and Archives.

In total during this period, I obtained copies of a further half-dozen references and found references to several other primary sources and auction lots. The digitization of library catalogs and the creation of general union catalogs like *Amicus* – a database of bibliographic records for the collections of the National Library of Canada and from contributing Canadian libraries – made finding materials in unusual places somewhat easier, but sometimes obtaining copies of the materials was a challenge. I still did not find the information that I obtained to be very satisfactory and my interest waned once again.

## Current day

Following my foray in the later 2000s, I



**Figure 2. Port Hood Provisionals, 88B and 88C, 2021 Scott Specialized Catalogue of Stamps and Covers.**

began to think about creating a census of materials sold at auction to track how the Port Hood Provisionals had changed in value over time. It wasn't until 2022 that I picked up the torch again, and this is where things really took off.

Online search tools and the availability of digital copies of journal articles, books, auction catalogs, and other types of information have improved considerably in the last few years.

Union catalogs specifically for philatelic libraries have been created. The two best sources I have found are the David Straight Memorial Philatelic Union Catalog through the American Philatelic Research Library (APRL) and the Global Philatelic Library Virtual Library, which can be accessed through the Royal Philatelic Society of London. These catalogs allow a searcher to find libraries that have the sought-after references (Figure 3).

In addition, many stamp clubs, societies, research facilities, and philatelic and non-philatelic libraries have been digitizing bound copies of many old journals, and therefore you can immediately download many of the articles directly.



# BISECTS

by Michael Miller

## Canada—Port Hood Bisect

Canada, our neighbor to the north, has a very interesting philatelic history and with us it is really the most popular country outside of the United States. Its first issue of stamps was in 1851, but the denominations it offered did not enable the public to apply them to all the then current postal rates, making it necessary to bisect some of the stamps in order to make up the rates, especially the 7½ pence. There are a number of bisects, some not necessary, but inasmuch as the writer is now confining himself to the surcharged bisect, the others will be the subject of future articles. These bisected stamps were issued in 1899 and are commonly known or designated as the "Port Hood" provisionals.

When the new rate of 2c for ordinary mail went into effect in January, 1899, there was a sudden shortage of 2c stamps in the town or Port Hood, one of the small towns of Nova Scotia. Without first getting permission, the postmaster decided that he would prepare provisional stamps so that he would keep his records straight. Accordingly, he took about three sheets of the 3c carmine Queen Victoria numeral issue of 1898 and had it bisected vertically in unequal portions, surcharging them 1 and 2 respectively. The explanation given by the postmaster is clear and to better understand the same, recourse is had to the following article appearing in the Monthly Journal of April, 1899:

"In reference to the cut and surcharged 3c stamps a correspondent sends us the following extract from a letter from the postmaster of Port Hood:

"When the change in Canadian postage was made—of which we got notice by wire—I had only very few 2c stamps in stock, so that before I got my supply from Ottawa I ran completely out of them, and, to keep my account straight, I was compelled to cut threes, making three twos out of two threes. This was for one day only, and not over 300 stamps were cut. I would say about 200 '2' and 100 '1' were used. Those stamps I put on letters for delivery within the county as much as possible. About 100 '2' and probably nearly as many '1' were marked with the figures 2 and 1 as you describe, and were placed on letters for delivery in towns throughout the Dominion. Those were the only provisional stamps used by this office."

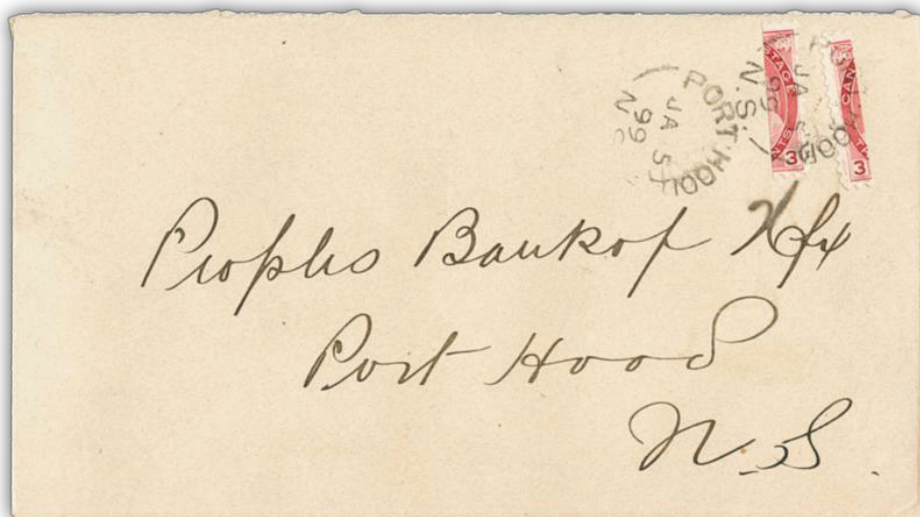
It will thus be noted that he endeavored to do the best he could under the circumstances. These provisional bisects were called to the attention of the postal authorities, who have always been strict and never permit any irregularities. As a result Mr. Donald A. King, then employed in an official capacity in the Halifax Post Office and today its postmaster made inquiries and the matter was investigated by the department and an inspector was accordingly sent to Port Hood. Jarrett in his book on Canada, says that all copies on hand, which were not very large, were taken possession of by the postal inspector, including all the used and unused and were eventually destroyed. A few, however, had been sold to Stanley

**Figure 3. Articles such as this one – Page 505 of the May 1929 edition of *The American Philatelist* – have become much easier to locate with advances in technology.**

New information continues to become available as more clubs, societies and libraries follow suit. Articles that have not been digitized or harder to obtain material, like information from older auction catalogs, can often be found at the APRL, the Vincent Graves Greene Philatelic Research Foundation, and the Western Philatelic Li-

brary, whose staff and volunteers offer great help. It can still be difficult to find more obscure material when the reference is in a lesser-known journal or a show catalog. Hard copies of older material of this sort tend not to have been saved.

However, sometimes finding information is just persistence, luck, and the up-



**Figure 4. Some auction houses – such as Robert Siegel Auctions from where this Port Hood Provisional cover was obtained – make auction and item information available online. (Courtesy of Siegel Auctions, 2016).**

loading of additional sources to the internet. Howes mentions in his 1911 article that a Mr. “Horsley” had a copy of a Port Hood Provisional. Multiple searches over a decade for that name combined with terms such as philatelist, stamp collector, and Port Hood Provisional, did not deliver any relevant hits.

Then, one day in early 2023, about 15 years after coming across the mention, I plugged “Port Hood Provisional” into my search engine again out of curiosity to see what would come up. Lo and behold, I found a copy of a paper read by M.H. Horsley (1907) to the Royal Philatelic Society of London, in which he talks about his copy of the item.

As more information is digitized, online search engines such as Google can assist with finding primary source material (i.e. the original article) by searching for the publication, author, or sometimes just a phrase quoted in a secondary source.

Using the advanced search tools offered by search engines like Google can help narrow the results received; for example, putting quotation marks around the word or phrase will limit results to hits containing

that exact word or phrase.

Many currently active auction houses host their auctions online, either through their own websites or through auction service websites like Stamp Auction Network or Stamp Circuit. While many auction houses are putting their old catalogs online, challenges remain with finding material in pre-1980 catalogs (Figure 4). However, many libraries and research foundations have strong collections of these auction catalogs.

While these often are not digitized, libraries will provide scans, if not for free then at a minimal cost. While information on past auctions is available from sales hosted on Stamp Auction Network, and eBay results can be obtained back to 2004 from stampmarketindex.com, information about items sold on HipStamp and Delcampe is ephemeral and is lost quickly after the item is sold and the information is taken down, making the creation of a census challenging.

With this additional research, I have added many references and now have copies of more than 70 articles and more than 90 auction records spanning 123 years related to the Port Hood Provisionals.



## Conclusion

If you have been researching a topic for a long time but have been unable to find the references you are seeking, keep looking. Persistence pays off. Libraries and societies are improving their catalog collections. New material is becoming available on a regular basis as societies, clubs, and libraries digitize their collections, and internet search engines are continuing to improve. You may be surprised at what you find.

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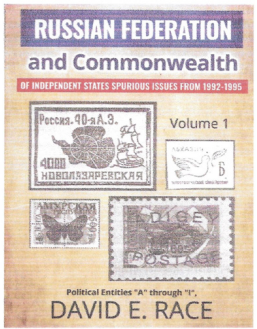
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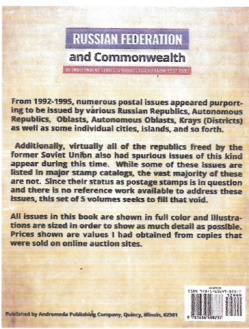
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**RUSSIAN FEDERATION and Commonwealth**  
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Volume 1  
Political Entities "A" through "I"  
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Political Entities "A" through "I"

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All issues in this book are shown in full color and illustrations are sized in order to show as much detail as possible. Prices shown are values I had obtained from copies that were sold on an online auction site.

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