

The Controversial Port Hood Provisionals

A Review of Articles

and a Census of Materials

Gordon Smith

This article introduces these bisects. The author has published a more detailed monograph and census of Port Hood Provisional covers, pieces, and stamps with the Postal History Society of Canada, which can be found at

The PHSC webpage: <https://www.postalhistorycanada.net/php/Library/Books/index.php> and the author's webpage: <https://postalhistory.ca/>



Figure 1: Image of the left side 88C from the Unitrade catalogue (Harris, 2022)



Figure 2: Image of the left side 88B and left side 88C from the Scott catalogue (Bigalke, 2021)

The Port Hood Provisional stamps (Unitrade / Scott 88B and 88C, see Figs. 1 and 2) were created in Port Hood, Nova Scotia, Canada, on January 5, 1899, and have caused much controversy and discussion ever since. When the sudden announcement of a change in 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 was the

postmaster's application of a handstamp to provide the value of each stamp.

There have been many references in various stamp journals and books over the last 120 years written about the Port Hood Provisionals, often by prominent philatelists. The digitization of journals back into the 1890's, the creation of union catalogs for various collections of philatelic literature, and improved communications over the internet has enabled the review of over 60 primary source articles and the creation of an extensive census of the stamps, stamps on piece, and covers containing the Port Hood Provisionals. An annotated bibliography of the written

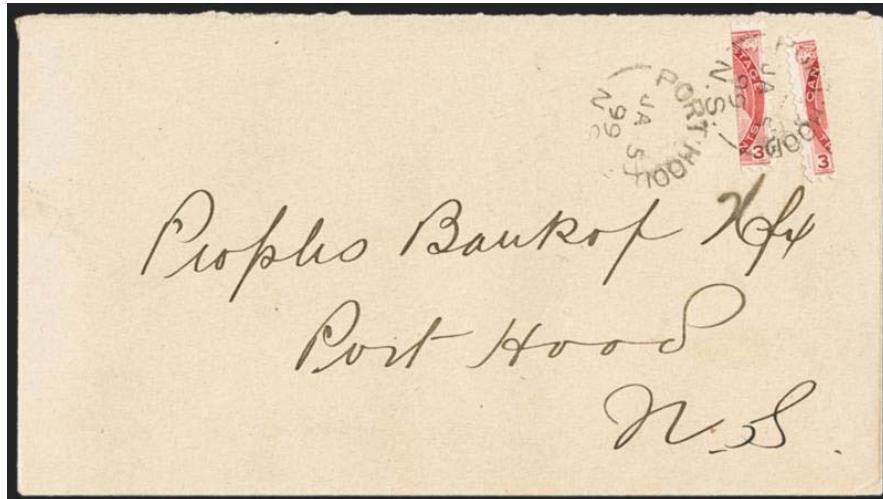


Figure 3: Right side and left side 88B's tied to cover with January 5, 1899, postmark.
Credit: Siegel Auctions, 2016. [Ed.: Cover is reduced to 80%]

references can be found in the monograph and on the author's website. Basic information regarding the census can be found later in the article, with more detailed information in the monograph. Figs. 3 and 4 provide examples of what the covers look like. More extensive illustrations of items in the census can be found in the monograph mentioned above.

The Evolution of the Story of the Creation of the Port Hood Provisionals

Initial articles provide descriptions of the provisional stamps and quote information from letters from various correspondents and the Port Hood postmaster. Speculation about their creation doesn't begin until Poole (1916) in which W. H. Harrington, a senior clerk in the Post Office Department in Ottawa, states in a letter dated March 30, 1904 that "It appears that the Postmaster of Port Hood, N. S., ... acting on the advice of some stamp fiend apparently, cut up a sheet or so of stamps to make twos and ones" and that the postmaster almost lost his job over it. The letter goes on to state that

the Department "never got hold of any of the mutilated stamps."

Jarrett (1929) states that the Post Office Department conducted an investigation and sent an inspector to Port Hood. The inspector took possession of all used and unused copies of the remaining Provisionals, which were eventually destroyed. However, a few covers were sold to Stanley Gibbons before the postal inspector arrived, and these items were backstamped with the firm's name. Miller (1929) repeats this story using very similar language and quotes Jarrett's (1929) statement that the inspector took possession of all used and unused copies of the Provisionals and that they were eventually destroyed.

In his BNA Record of December 1930, Jarrett recounts a whimsical and somewhat imaginary account of the creation of these Provisionals, wherein the postmaster claiming time off for illness (is actually away rabbit hunting) and the "youthful" postal assistant, "being philatelically inclined and having no restraining influence, got out his scissors"

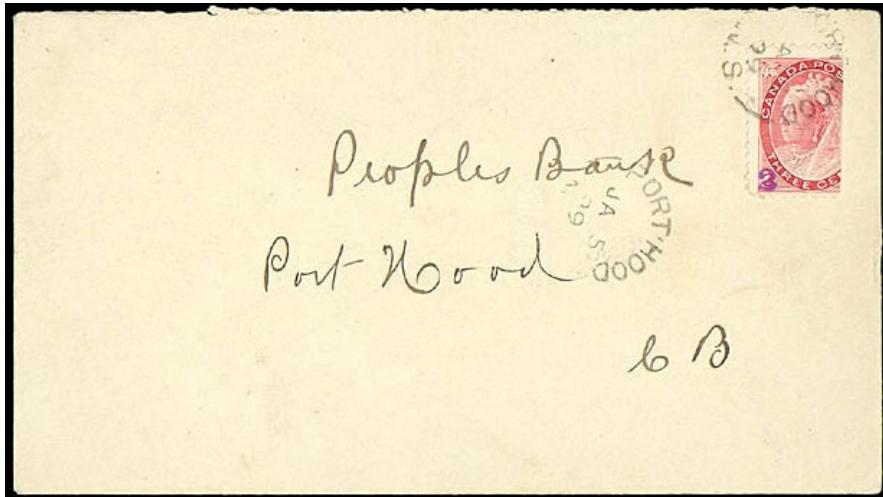


Figure 4: Left side 88B tied to cover with January 5, 1899, postmark. Credit: Matthew Bennett Auctions, 2004 [Ed.: Cover is reduced to 80%]

and created the Port Hood Provisionals to sell to Stanley Gibbons. Many articles, in the years following, repeat Jarrett's story, making it the accepted account of the creation of the Port Hood Provisionals, although there is no evidence that it is accurate.

Disagreements as to Legitimate Use or Philatelic Creation

Since their creation, philatelists have been arguing whether the Port Hood Provisionals were produced legitimately by the town post office or as philatelic curiosities for personal enrichment by an employee.

While there is no mention of Port Hood, the appearance of 3 cent stamps bisected in one-third and two-third portions, some bearing 1 cent or 2 cent surcharges corresponding to their size, was first described in a note by E.B. Evans (1899a) in the January 1899 issue of *Stanley Gibbons Monthly Journal*, quite a fantastic coincidence, considering that the stamps were only produced on the 5th of January of that year. Notice was sent to Stanley

Gibbons via a letter franked with a two-thirds portion of the stamp. In this article, Evans describes the creation of these stamps as a "horrible" occurrence. The *Stanley Gibbons Monthly Journal* of March 1899 (Evans 1899b) is the first article stating that Port Hood was the location where the surcharges were applied. By June 1899, Evans's (1899d) opinion of the stamps appears to have changed, and he states that "it should not be considered too serious an issue if a postmaster who runs out of 1-cent stamps bisects 2-cent stamps to keep the accounting straight."

Table 1 provides a more quantitative analysis, indicating that the various authors are evenly split in their opinions.

Table 2, which is based on an analysis of people whom the author anecdotally considers to be significant authorities on Canadian philately based on their publishing record or recognition by other philatelists, indicates that most of these experts feel that the stamps are illegitimate.

| Opinion | Number |
|---|--------|
| Legitimate | 19 |
| Not legitimate | 21 |
| No Opinion / Undecided | 12 |
| Not Applicable (i.e. description of items at auction, description of forgeries, etc.) | 11 |
| Total | 63 |

Table 1: Number of Articles Regarding the Legitimacy of the Port Hood Provisionals

| Major philatelists supporting Port Hood Provisionals as Legitimate. | Major philatelists feeling that the Port Hood Provisionals are Philatelic Creations |
|---|--|
| Winthrop Boggs, 1945 | J.M. Horsley, 1907 |
| A.E. Stephenson, 1951, 1953 | C.A. Howes, 1911 |
| Lowe, 1973 | Bertram W.H. Poole, 1916 Fred Jarrett, 1930, 1931, 1948 L. Seale Holmes, 1943 Walter Pollock, 1944, 1948 Ed Richardson, 1963 |

Table 2: Listing of Major Philatelists' Opinions Regarding the Legitimacy of the Port Hood Provisionals

Discussion based on a Census of Port Hood Provisional Stamps and Covers

A review of articles and auctions has revealed 57 different Port Hood Provisional items, including 14 mint, unused or off-paper stamps, 18 stamps on piece, and 15 covers in various conditions. Eleven of these items have been identified in the articles and auctions as fakes or forgeries. One has been identified in an article as a fake, but that identification is suspect. One is an unattributed sketch presented in a popular American newspaper series like *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. The monograph published on the PHSC website provides detailed information about these items, tracks the publication of individual

items in articles and auctions, and shows illustrations of most items.

Despite the Port Hood Postmaster asserting that envelopes bearing the Provisionals were mailed throughout the Dominion (Evans, 1899c), the census of covers only provides examples to addresses in Port Hood and Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island.

Table 3, an examination of covers in which an addressee is visible, shows that 14 out of 15 covers were mailed to 3 to 4 people with the surname MacDonald or to the People's Bank of Halifax in Port Hood, where Reginald, the son of Senator MacDonald of Charlottetown, worked¹.

There is a distinct lack of variety in the



Figure 5: Right side 88C tied to piece with January 4, 1899, postmark

Credit: Daniel Kelleher Auctions, 2014



Figure 6: Se-tenant mint pair of right and left side 88B's

Credit: WIP Stamps, 2020

recipients of the covers. While the original necessity to make provisional stamps to meet the new rate could be seen as legitimate, the lack of a variety in the people, businesses and destinations receiving the covers would strongly point to them as philatelic creations made by or under the influence of one person.

Thoughts on Forgeries.

Jarrett (1929) states that a few covers were sold to Stanley Gibbons before the post office inspector arrived and that these were stamped with the firm's name on the back of the cover. Dealers and expertizing committees consider the presence of a Stanley Gibbons handstamp on the back of the cover or stamp to confer

legitimacy on Port Hood Provisional items.

Jarrett (1929) says collectors should not collect unused copies and should be extremely careful when considering covers. Pollock (1937) states that these stamps on the cover may be of interest to the "extreme specialist", but off-cover, the stamps are "officially fraudulent" and since the surcharge was made from rubber type, it is easily forged. Blair (1938) cautions that there are many forgeries of these stamps, especially unused copies and suggests not purchasing used copies unless they are on cover and even better, come with a guarantee. Holmes (1943) calls these stamps "freaks that anyone could make." Pollock (1944) says that the stamps are impossible to expertise and that "anyone with unused copies of the ordinary 3c. red, making sure that he had stamps from the same plate, and worn to about the same extent, could make all the "Port Hoods" he might want, with just a pair of scissors, a purple stamp pad, and a box of rubber dates. Boggs (1945) says that used copies equalling 2 cents, the appropriate postal rate at the time, should be tied to covers dated January 5, 1899.

Ken Pugh, an expert on Canadian fakes and forgeries, states that the bisect stamps alone do not carry sufficient evidence to determine their genuineness and provides an excellent illustration of this contention (Pugh 2020a). While both stamps illustrated in Fig. 7 were judged genuine by recognized professionals, Pugh asserts that both cannot be genuine due to "their obvious differences". The surcharge handstamps are in different fonts and colours.

Richardson (1963) mentions that poorly made forgeries of the stamps are quite common. Lowe (1973) states that he has seen more forged Port Hood Provisionals with forged cancellations with certificates of genuineness than [he] has seen genuine Provisionals. Lowe states that the test to

| Addressee | No. of Covers |
|-------------------------------|---------------|
| MacLennan | 1 |
| Peoples Bank | 5 |
| McLean – Bank | 1 |
| R.H. MacDonald -People's Bank | 1 |
| c/o R.H. MacDonald | 1 |
| R.H. MacDonald | 1 |
| Macdonald | 1 |
| Senator Macdonald | 1 |
| Hon. Senator Macdonald | 1 |
| Hon. A.A. Macdonald | 1 |
| Pieces showing "nald" | 1 |

Table 3: Addressees of the Port Hood Provisional Covers

determine genuineness is so simple that he will not provide it, as that would enable forgers to do a better job. Ariel Hasid of WIP International and Canadian Philatelic Expertising Service has indicated that he feels that legitimate Port Hood Provisionals on a piece should have the top to the postmark pointing to 3 o'clock (Hasid 2022).

Pugh (2020b) attributes the postmark illustrated in Fig. 8 as a Fred Eaton forgery. Pugh describes the postmark as a broken circle, 20.5mm in diameter with the second "O" of "Hood" being flat at the top, the left side of the bottom curve of the "5" extending past the vertical stroke of the number, the "S" of "N.S" appearing to be inverted, no dot at the end of "N.S", and no dot between the "T" and the "H". Pugh states that most of these cancels on fakes are very cleanly struck.

Pugh does not consider any Port Hood Provisional cover "entirely genuine" (Pugh 2020c). While "genuine covers" are listed in Scott, he feels their status is dubious. Pugh suggests that it is possible that when the

Maritime agent for Stanley Gibbons Ltd. heard of the Provisionals, he travelled to Port Hood, where he obtained some covers, back-dated to January 5, from the postmaster and some genuine Provisionals that the postmaster still had. Most of these covers were reportedly sold by Stanley Gibbons to Ferrari and later Alfred Lichtenstein. Pugh states that these covers never travelled through the post. Pugh states that he, like many other postal historians, does not recognize these favour covers as "completely legitimate," but he also states that there are many other favour covers that are accepted by leading philatelists as philatelic rarities.

Dates

The Port Hood postmaster, quoted in a letter a portion of which is reproduced in the April 1899 issue of the *Stanley Gibbons Monthly Journal* (Evans, 1899c), states that he produced the Provisionals for one day only. Unfortunately, he does not provide the date. He may have made this statement to try to limit



Figure 7: Illustration of Two Port Hood Provisionals Off Cover Illustrating the Challenge of Determining Genuineness (Pugh 2020a)



Figure 8: Fake Cancellation (Pugh 2020b)

the reprimand he might receive for having contravened regulations for a longer period.

The first reference to a date for the creation of the Provisionals is Horsley (1907), in which he describes showing a meeting of the Royal Philatelic Society of London a Port Hood Provisional cover dated January 5, 1899. Following this first mention of a date, 17 authors also quote January 5, 1899, as the date of creation.

Miller (1929) states that all copies he examined were from A.F. Lichtenstein's collection and were dated with the "correct" date of January 5. Although Boggs (1945) states that "used copies must be on covers dated 5 Jan. 1899", he does illustrate an example of right two-thirds on piece that has a date of 4 January, although this has only become apparent with more recent higher resolution scans of the piece that more clearly show the date.

The first mention of a cover bearing a postmark of January 4, 1899, is found in Stephenson (1951), where he states that he has seen a cover with this date and he has no reason to doubt its genuineness.

While the Unitrade 2023 Catalogue (Harris, 2022) states that the editors have seen covers dated Jan. 4 and 5, the Scott's Specialized Catalogue (Bigalke, 2021) says that the Port Hood Provisionals were prepared and used on Jan. 5. The Scott catalogue goes onto state that the "Covers reported to date were backdated and never saw postal use."

Based on a review of known covers, all those with a date of January 4, 1899, are addressed to Senator A.A. MacDonald in Charlottetown. They are also the only known covers addressed outside of Port Hood. Despite the writing of the name having some differently shaped letters, the writing looks similar on all the covers. Given that all these items have received expertizing certificates from various organizations and that two of them have Stanley Gibbons backstamps, the unusual date and the same addressee would point to these items being philatelic creations, perhaps made before or after the Port Hood postmaster created "legitimate" bisects. If we accept the premise that these items are philatelic creations, then items with similar handwriting, but not addressed to Charlottetown, could also potentially be considered philatelic creations.

So, are the Port Hood Provisionals worthy of collecting?

While this consideration is open to individual opinion, Miller (1929) acknowledges that the Post Office did not authorize the stamps and covers, but since they were listed by all major catalogues at the time, they have "philatelic recognition." Cyderman (1947) states that bisects on covers are collectible only

| Item | Date of First Price Realized | Date of Later Prices Realized | Percentage of Change | Expertizing or Dealers' Marks |
|-------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| M1L3 / M2R2 | 2002 | 2018 | +384.2% | SG, Brandon, VGG |
| MST2 | 1970 | 2003 | +112.6% | SG, VGG |
| M2L1 | 1958 | 1974 | -39.7% | |
| P1L2 | 1963 | 1986 | -85.8% | BPA |
| P1R1 | 1958 | 1974 | -42.0% | |
| | 1974 | 2009 | +204.2% | PF 1976 & 1987 |
| | 1958 | 2009 | +118.4% | PF 1976 & 1987 |
| P2R3 | 1968 | 1997 | -87.3% | BPA |
| P1P1 | 1994 | 2019 | +185.9% | Brandon, Bühler, Calves |
| C1P1 | 1970 | 2016 | -39.4% | SG, PF |
| C2L5 | 1967 | 1970 | -22.9% | SG |
| C2L3 | 1969 | 2015 | -28.3% | SG, Kakubek, BPA |
| C2L5 | 1963 | 2004 | -22.9% | |
| C2L6 | 2009, May | 2009, Sept. | +132.4% | SG |
| | 2009, Sept. | 2019 | -0.02% | SG, BPA |
| | 2009, May | 2019 | +132.1% | |
| C2L7 | 1969 | 2013 | -70.1% | GS, PF, Bloch, Friedl |

Table 4: Changes in Value of Port Hood Provisionals at Auction

if they are not philatelic creations.

Port Hood Provisional stamps and covers occupy places of distinction in the collections of well-known and well-regarded collectors like the Queen of England, Dale and Lichtenstein. The material demands high prices at auction and private treaty sales. The Port Hood Provisionals are worthy of forgeries by the likes of Froedl, and they continue to be listed in major catalogues like Scott, Stanley Gibbons, Unitrade, and Lowe. Undoubtedly, the story of their creation and the provenance of various pieces adds to their cachet and consequent value. They continue to command high prices in the United States and Europe, but ultimately, value comes down to having a willing seller and a willing buyer who agree on a price.

The first listing of a Port Hood Provisional appears in Gibbons Stamp Monthly of July 1914. It is offered at £6, which is equivalent to Canadian \$1,330.51 today. Unfortunately, no image of the stamp is provided, so it is not possible to compare it to what it may have commanded more recently.

Thirteen Port Hood Provisional items have been sold at two or more auctions, allowing an analysis of price differentials. Table 4 shows the trends of the prices between the two most widely separated dates of an item being sold at auction. For items P1R1 and C2L6, differentials have been separated where prices have trended differently (up or down) between auctions. The changes should only be used to look at general trends because normalization of the data would not provide

more meaningful results, given the highly variable “time period.” Out of 17 situations, the item’s value has increased seven times and decreased nine times. Items with a larger spread in the dates of sales appear to have a more positive increase in value, although there are a few outliers like P2R3 which showed an 87% drop in value over a 31-year spread, C2L7 which had a 70% drop in value over a 44-year spread, and C2L6 which showed a 32% increase in 4 month spread. Expertizing or the presence of a dealer’s mark does not seem to make a marked difference in how items hold or increase in value.

Reference:

1. Local Briefs, *Charlottetown Morning Guardian*, August 31, 1900.

Bibliography:

Bigalke, J. (Ed.) et al. (2021). *Scott Specialized Catalogue of Stamps and Covers 1840-1940*.

Blair, A. (1938). Unusual items: Port Hood Provisionals. *Stamp Review*, 2(2), 19.

Boggs, W. S. (1945). Chapter XVII- The Port Hood Provisionals. In *The Postage Stamps and Postal History of Canada* (pp. 335–337). Quarterman Publications, 1975 (2nd printing).

Evans, E. B. (Ed.). (1899a). Canada. *Stanley Gibbons Monthly Journal*, 9(103), 112.

Evans, E. B. (Ed.). (1899b). Canada. *Stanley Gibbons Monthly Journal*, 9(105), 146.

Evans, E. B. (Ed.). (1899c). Canada. *Stanley Gibbons Monthly Journal*, 9(106), 159.

Evans, E. B. (Ed.). (1899d). Canada. *Stanley Gibbons Monthly Journal*, 9(108), 191.

Harris, R. (Ed.) et al. (2022). *The 2023 Unitrade Specialized Catalogue of Canadian Stamps*.

Hasid, A. (2022). Personal Communication, June 10, 2022.

Holmes, L. S. (1943). The “Numeral” Issue of 1898, Chapter 35. In *Holmes Handbook and Catalogue of Canada and British North America* (pp. 111–113).

Horsley, J. M. (1907). Notes on the Stamps of Canada. *The London Philatelist*, 16(184), 89.

Howes, C. A. (1911). The “Numerals” Issue, 1898–1902. In *Canada: Its Postage Stamps and Postal Stationery* (pp. 170–174). The New England Stamp Co.

Jarrett, F. (1929). Port Hood Provisionals and Queen Victoria Numeral Issue. In *Stamps of British North America* (pp. 79, 106,124). Quarterman Publications, Inc, 1975.

Jarrett, F. (1930). Port Hood Provisionals. *Jarrett’s B.N.A. Record*, 1–2.

Jarrett, F. (1931). Port Hood Bisect. *Jarrett’s B.N.A. Record*, 2.

Jarrett, F. (1948). Letter to the Editor. *BNA Topics*, 5(2), 14.

Local Briefs. (1900, August 31). *The Morning Guardian*, 5.

Lowe, R. (1973). The Port Hood Provisionals. In *The Encyclopedia of British Empire Postage Stamps 1639–1952: Vol. V-The Empire in North America* (p. 217). Robson Lowe Ltd.

Miller, M. (1929). Canada-Port Hood Bisect. *American Philatelist*, 42(8), 505–508.

Pollock, F. W. (1937). The Stamps of the Dominion of Canada. In F. W. Loso (Ed.), *The Stamp Collectors’ Round Table*. Frederick A. Stokes Company.

Pollock, F. W. (1944). The Port Hood “Mutilateds” of Canada. *Stamp Collectors Fortnightly*, 50(1279), 41.

Poole, B. W. H. (1916). Chapter XVIII-The Bi-sected Provisionals. In *The Postage Stamps of Canada* (pp. 56–57). Severn-Wylie-Jewett.

Pugh, K.W. (2020a). Genuine Port Hood Provisionals – Or Not? Series II – Release 21.

Pugh, K.W. (2020b). Fake Port Hood Provisional Cancellation - F.E. Eaton. Series II – Release 22.

Pugh, K.W. (2020c). Port Hood Provisional “Favour” Cover. Series II – Release 22.

Richardson, E. (1963). #688-Counterfeit Port Hood Provisionals. *Canadian Philatelist*, 14(6), 265.

Stephenson, A. E. (1951). The Maple and Numeral Provisionals, 1899. *Maple Leaves*, 3(8), 133.

Stephenson, A. E. (1953). Port Hood Provisionals, 1899. *Maple Leaves*, 4(6), 144.

Congratulations to Gord for winning a gold medal for this eBook!

Great American Stamp Show 2025, August 14-17, 2025, Literature Palmares

Class: Handbooks

Awarded: Gold with 87 (points)

Gordon Smith: *The Port Hood Provisional Stamps of 1899, A Literature Review and Census*.



PHSC Journal

Nº 185

ISSN 0714-8305

September 2025



Three letters are known to have been sent from Canada to Mexico during October and November 1897, paid at Canada's 3c domestic rate and the United States' preferred rate.

The earliest and most impressive cover at this 3c rate is shown.

C.R. (Ron) McGuire and Brian D. Murphy's article starts on page 37.

The only national journal dedicated to Canadian postal history