

# Mail Routes of Rupert's Land, British North America

This exhibit shows examples from each of the four routes used to move supplies, furs, and mail in the area known as Rupert's Land – 1.5 million square miles in central British North America granted to Prince Rupert, cousin to King Charles II of England in 1670. The resulting Hudson's Bay Company became the *de facto* government in this vast region. It covers the period from the opening of regular communications in the 1820s, concurrent with the first waves non-fur trapping European settlers in the Red River area in what would become Winnipeg, through the establishment of the Province of Manitoba in 1870.

The four mail routes to, from, and through Rupert's Land and the Red River area ran:

1. **Through Montreal** – Canoe relays using the rivers and lakes to and from Montreal to the Red River area and beyond.
2. **Through York Factory and Hudson's Bay** – Canoe and York boat relays connected vast areas with Hudson's Bay Company ships at York Factory on Hudson's Bay.
3. **Through Sault Ste. Marie** – Canoes, and toboggans carried mail to and from the settlements to Fort William on Lake Superior and on to Sault Ste. Marie and Toronto.
4. **Through Pembina** – Ox cart trains through Pembina in the Minnesota (later Dakota) Territory to St. Paul connected with rail lines in LaCrosse to Chicago and the East.

In 1868, the British Parliament purchased Rupert's Land for Canada, ending the Hudson's Bay Company control of the area. The Manitoba Act of 1870 established the area as a formal province of Canada.

## 1. Through Montreal

### 2700 Miles Across the Continent by Canoe Brigade



21<sup>st</sup> April 1822

Dated "Laggan Vale [Scotland], April 21<sup>st</sup> 1822."

Private ship transport to Montreal.

Rated 11½d due at Montreal (9d local postage plus 2½d incoming ship letter fee).

**Transported 2700 miles across the continent by Hudson's Bay Company's canoe brigade courier system (≈1 year total transit).**

Addressed to John Stuart, chief factor, in charge of operations in New Caledonia (present day British Columbia). He was stationed at Fort St. James, the administrative center.

## 1. Through Montreal

### St. Boniface (Red River Settlement) to France



7<sup>th</sup> July 1838

Dated "St Boniface de la Riviera Rouge 7 Juillet 1838."

**Hudson's Bay Company summer canoe relay to Lachine (≈100 day transit to Québec).**

Red "Québec / OC 17 / 1838" datestamp; "PAID 11" [Cy to border] and "PAID 18¾" [U.S. to NY]

Packet ship *Poland* to Le Havre, where received "PAYS D'OUTREMER / PAR LE HAVRE"

(ship letter Le Havre) handstamp, manuscript "10" [grams] at upper left and "19" [decimes] collect.

Smudged Havre transit datestamp and blue Paris, November 30 datestamp on verso (≈147 day total transit).

Private (Hudson's Bay Company) carriage to Lachine (Montreal) and Québec

Canadian domestic postage rate, Québec to U.S. border (paid):

11d Cy

U.S. domestic postage to New York (paid):

18¾¢ U.S.

Packet ship letter fee ("decime de mer") to Havre (collect):

1 decime Fr

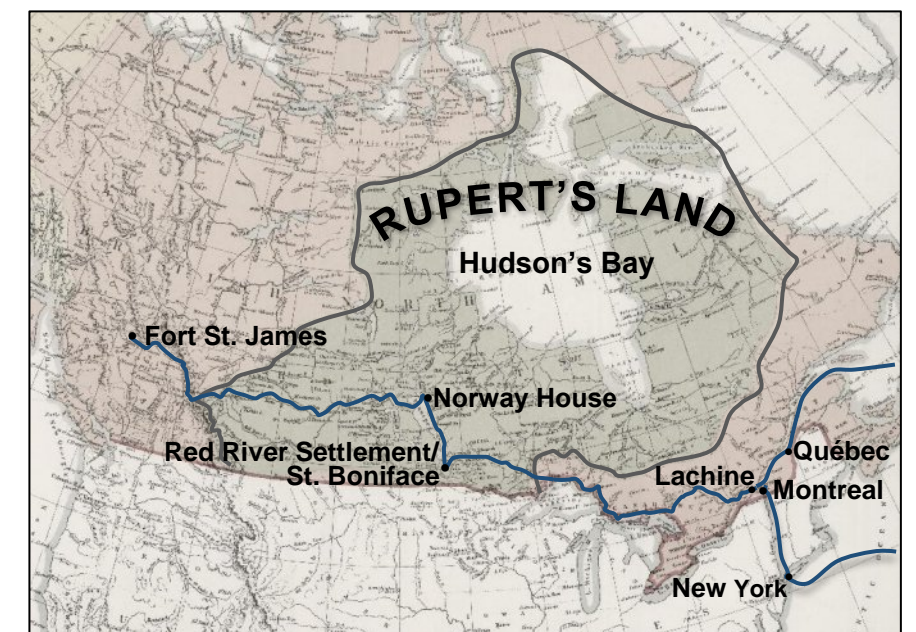
Plus French domestic postage, 10 grams, 500-750 km (collect):

18 decimes Fr

St. Boniface was the French-speaking settlement across the river from English-speaking Red River Settlement.



Hudson's Bay Company supply canoe



## 2. Through York Factory and Hudson's Bay

## Hudson's Bay Company Supply Ships

### Rupert House – Outbound



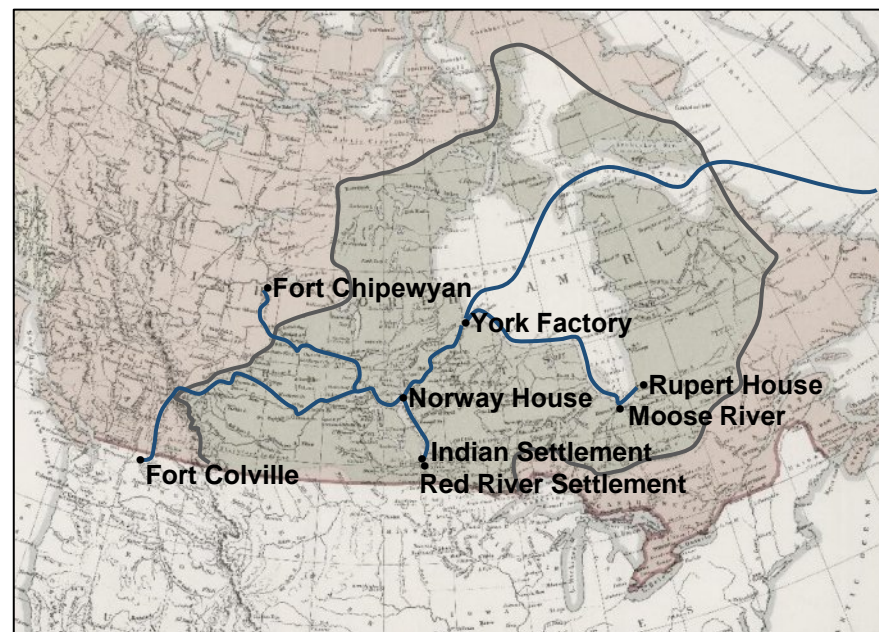
12<sup>th</sup> September 1831

Dated "Rupert House, 12th Sept. 1831"

Courier to Moose River - "An Indian arrived here from Moose by whom I received 3 letters, I am directed to send him off back again this afternoon"  
Private carriage on Fall 1831 return of Hudson's Bay Company supply ship  
Entered as Deal ship letter with 1s 4d postage collect to Cheapside (London).

Rupert House was Hudson's Bay Company's oldest trading post.

DEAL / SHIP LETTER	British ship letter fee (collect):	8d GB
Manuscript 1/4 rating	British inland postage (collect)	
London 14 NO 1831 on verso	Deal to London (74 miles):	8d GB
	Total postage collect:	1s 4d GB



### Moose River – Inbound



14<sup>th</sup> February 1832

Musselburg, Scotland to Moose River, Rupert's Land.

Musselburg Penny Post handstamp (verso).

Manuscript rating 1s 2½d postage collect to London including "Addl ½" for Scottish mail coach tax (effective 1813-1839).

Red London 18 FE 1832 datestamp on verso.

Endorsed "MR" for Moose River

Private carriage from London on Hudson's Bay

Company ship to Moose River.



Hudson's Bay Company routing markings

**Fewer than a dozen letters with HBCo. routing markings (other than RR/RRS) are recorded.**

Hudson's Bay Company supply ships made twice-a-year round trips between London and York Factory delivering supplies for the trappers and traders, returning with furs and other collected materials. Writers friendly to the Hudson's Bay Company were allowed to send letters to the North American settlements. Letters were sent to Fleet Street, London, sorted by HBCo., bundled, and the top letter marked with "RR" or "RRS" (Red River Settlement), "MR" (Moose River), "YF" (York Factory), or "NR" (Norway House), routing marks, depending upon destination.

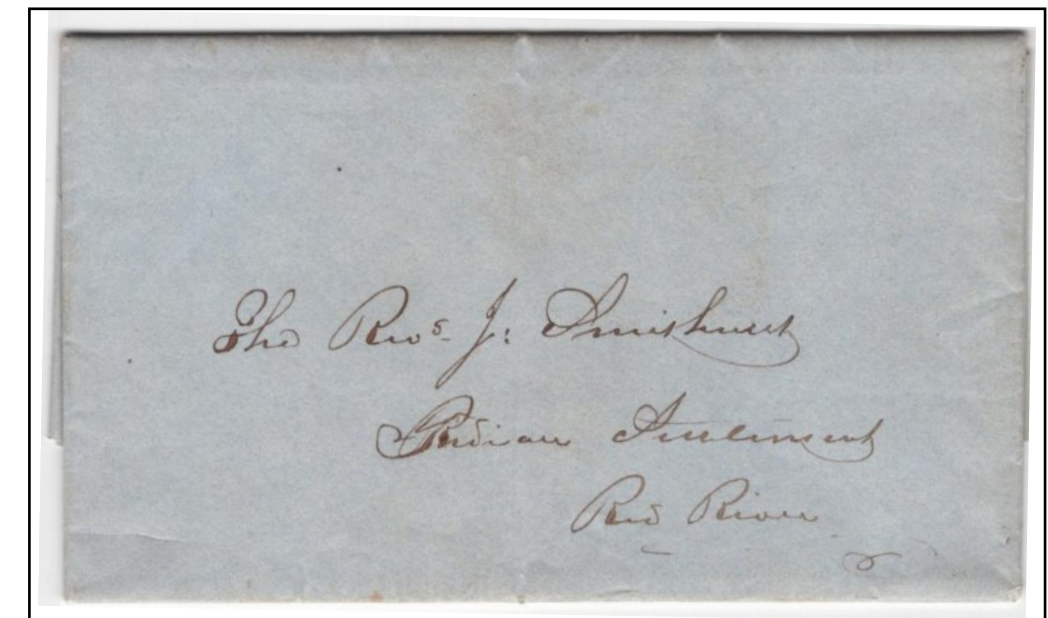
### Fort Colville – Outbound



22<sup>nd</sup> April 1837

Sent from Fort Colville on the Columbia River in what is now Washington State. HBCo. canoe relay 1700 miles via river and lake system to York Factory. Redirected to Hudson's Bay House, London and carried on HBCo supply ship. Docketed as arrived 25 October 1837 (186 day transit).

### York Factory to Indian Settlement (Red River)



25<sup>th</sup> August 1849

Dated inside "York Factory 25<sup>th</sup> Augt. 1849."

Letter from James Hargrave to Reverend Smithurst at Indian Settlement, Red River. Carried privately by Hudson Bay Company York boat and canoe relay with supplies

James Hargrave (1798-1865) was appointed Chief Factor at York Factory in 1844. Reverend J. Smithurst was Minister-in-charge of Indian Settlement until 1851.

## 2. Through York Factory and Hudson's Bay

## Hudson's Bay Company Supply Ships

### York Factory – Outbound



16<sup>th</sup> September 1837

Letter from John Ballenden, Hudson's Bay Company's Chief Factor at York Factory to John Stuart (former fur trader, explorer, and Chief Factor). H.B.Co. supply ship to England where it entered the mail as a Deal ship letter. Rated as 1/4 Stg. collect to London. Docketed as arrived 25 October 1837 (39 day transit).

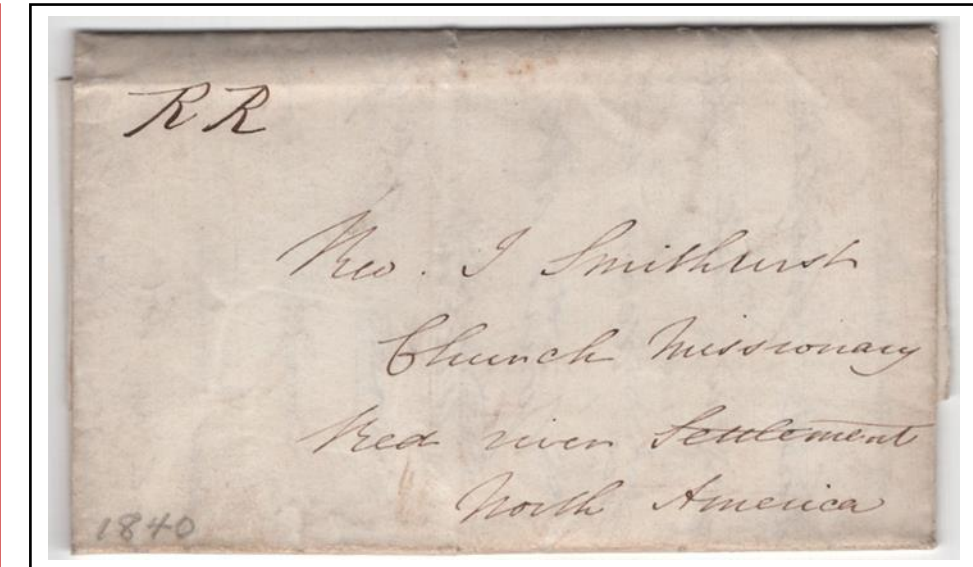
### Fort Chipewyan – Outbound



7<sup>th</sup> August 1838

Datelined, "En Route, August 7, 1838." **Written on HBCo's canoe brigade express from Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabasca** via Norway House to York Factory. HBCo ship to England and placed in the British mail at Deal. (72 day transit).

### Red River Settlement – Inbound



6<sup>th</sup> July 1840

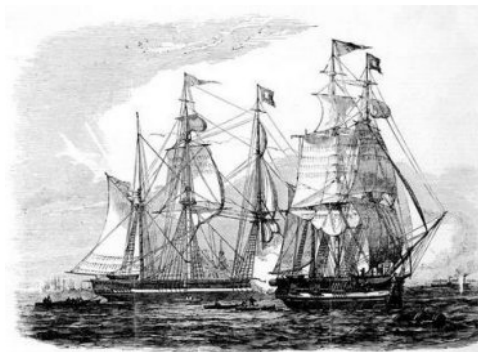
Letter delivered to Hudson's Bay House in London where it was endorsed "RR" for Red River Settlement. Private carriage from London on Hudson's Bay Company ship *Prince Rupert*. Fall 1840 supply trip to York Factory. Then by York boat and canoe to Red River Settlement.

### York Factory – Inbound



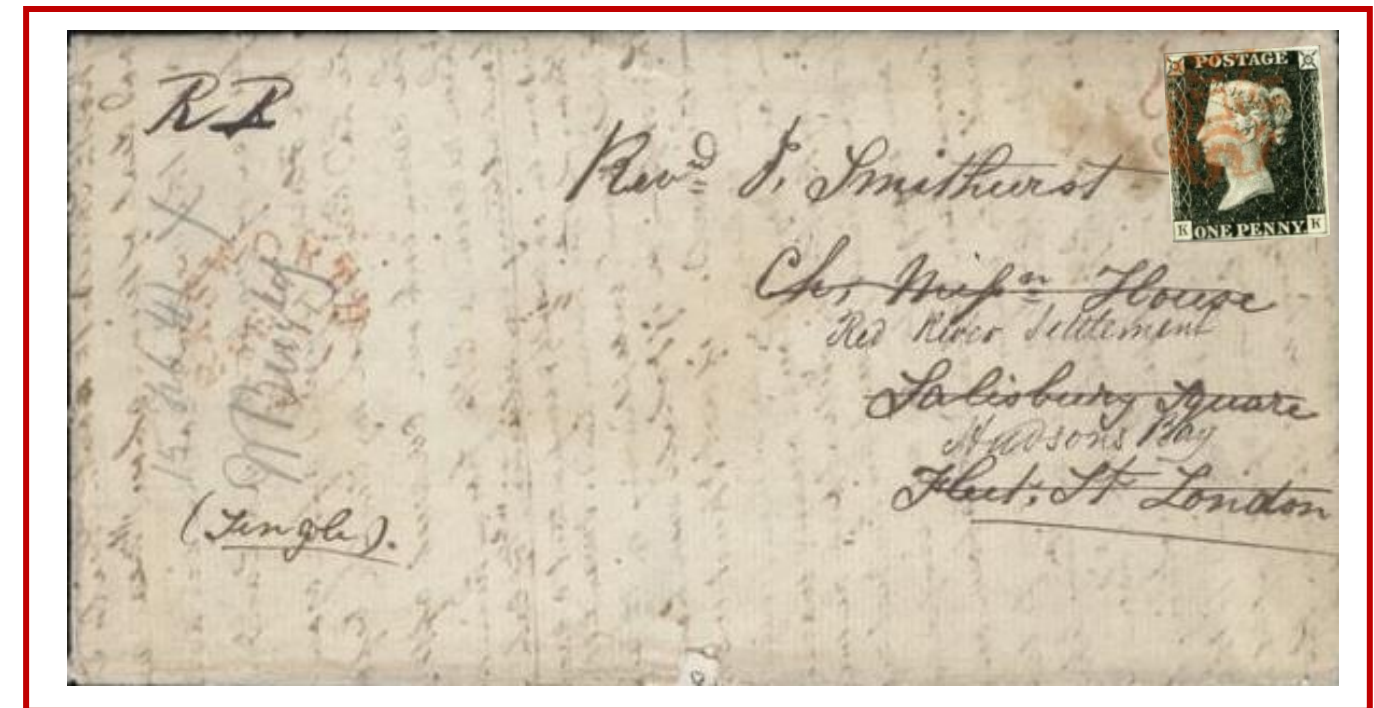
6<sup>th</sup> May 1822

Letter datelined "Edinburgh, May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1822. Addressed to York Factory, care of Hudson's Bay Company, London. 1s 1d (plus 1/2d Scottish toll road fee) postage collect. Endorsed on the reverse: "Sir: Please forward this letter with the first ship." Endorsed "YF" and sent by HBC supply ship to York Factory.



Hudson's Bay Company ships  
*Prince Albert* and *Prince Rupert*.

### Red River Settlement – Inbound



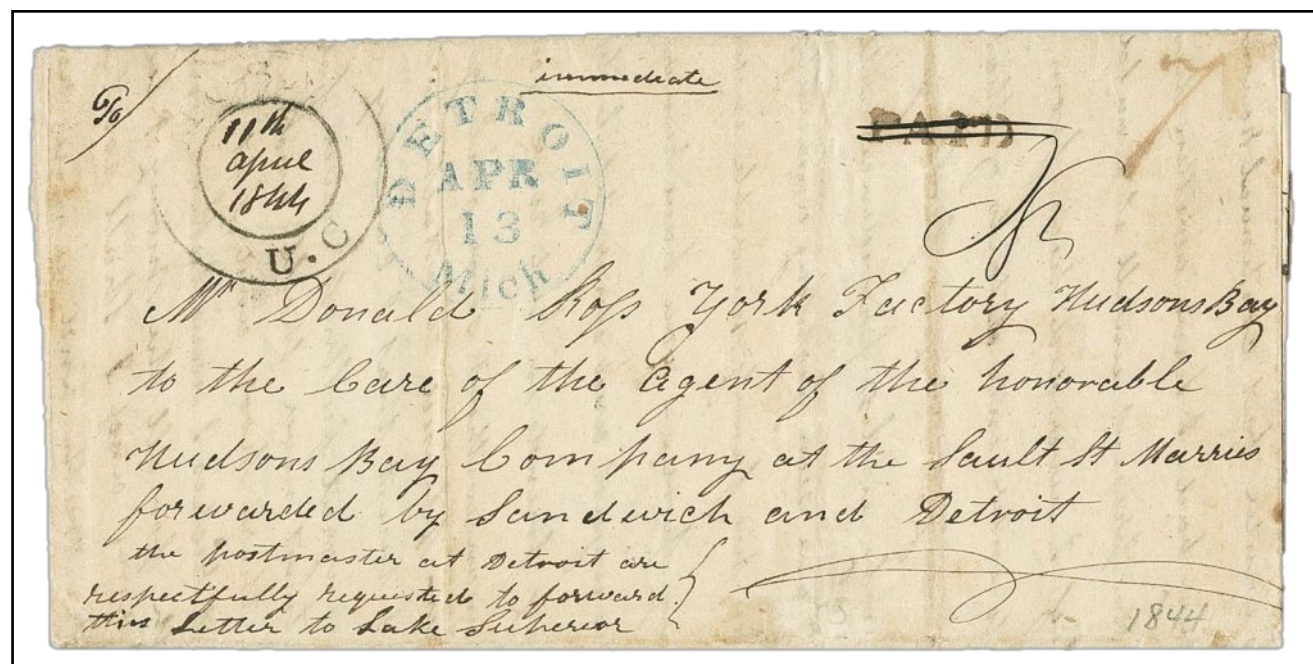
17<sup>th</sup> February 1841

Wirksworth, FE 17 1841 datestamp. Penny black adhesive paying postage from Wirksworth to London. London 18 FE 1841 transit backstamp. Re-addressed by Hudson's Bay Company to Red River Settlement and endorsed "RR". Private carriage from London on Hudson's Bay Company Spring 1841 supply trip to York Factory. Then by York boat and canoe to Red River Settlement.

As originally mailed from Wirksworth—adhesive is a replacement.

### 3. Through Sault Ste. Marie

#### Inbound from Upper Canada



11<sup>th</sup> April 1844

Dated "Township of Zone, County Kent, Western District, Canada West, April 12, 1844"  
 Entered the mails with "MOSA, U.C." handstamps with manuscript 11<sup>th</sup> April 1844 date  
 Matching "PAID" and "7"[d] handstamps for postage (to Windsor)  
 Red WINDSOR, C.W. / 12 APR 1844 two-line backstamp  
 Entered the U.S. mails with blue "DETROIT, Mich, APR 13" datestamp and lines through "PAID"  
 Manuscript "18<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" postage due to Sault Ste. Marie  
 Then by HBCo canoe relay to York Factory  
 Docketed with "August 8" receipt date (122 day transit)  
 Canadian domestic postage to Windsor (paid): 7d Cy  
 U.S. domestic postage Detroit to SSM (collect): 18<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>¢ U.S.



York boat

UXBRIDGE, U.C. 23 Feb 1853 datestamp  
 Black manuscript "3[d]" rate mark  
 WHITBY U.C. FEB 25 1853 datestamp verso  
 KINGSTON U.C. FE 27 1853 datestamp verso  
 TORONTO-CANADA FEB 28 1853 datestamp verso  
 BARRIE U.C. MR 1 1853 datestamp verso  
 PENETANGUISHENE MR 3 1854 datestamp verso  
 Canadian domestic postage rate, Uxbridge to SSM (collect): 3d Cy

#### Sault Ste. Marie Route:

Overland from Uxbridge to Penetanguishene by way of Whitby, Kingston, Toronto, and Barrie.  
 Likely around frozen Lake Huron to Sault Ste. Marie.  
 Likely around frozen Lake Superior to Fort William.  
 Hudson's Bay Company sled/canoe relay from Fort William to Red River Settlement.

#### Outbound to Toronto

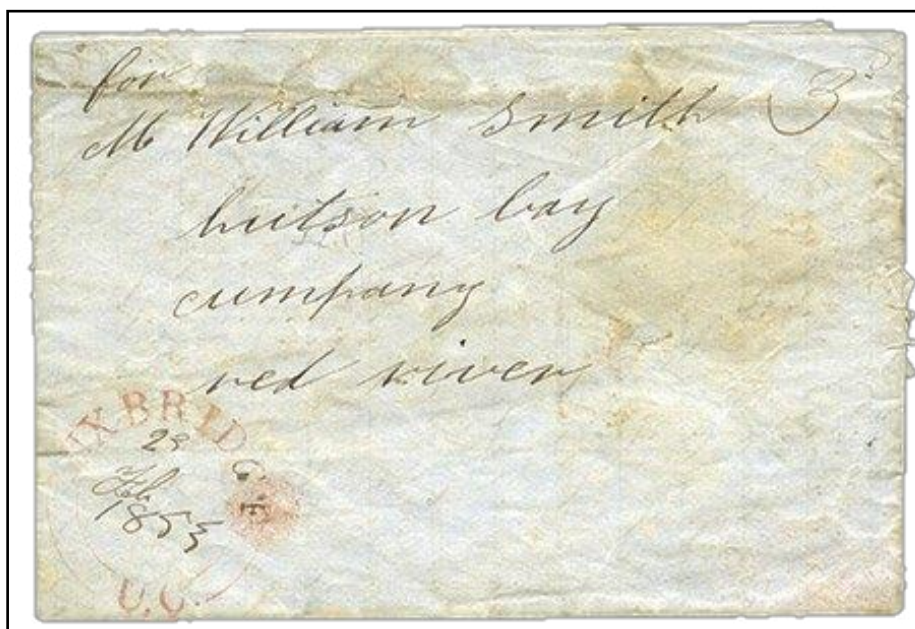


13<sup>th</sup> February 1854

SAULT STE MARIE, C.W., FE 13, 1854 datestamp  
 Red "3[d]" ratestamp  
 Manuscript docketing "Rec<sup>d</sup> March 2<sup>d</sup> 1854"  
 Canadian domestic postage rate, SSM to Toronto (collect): 3d Cy

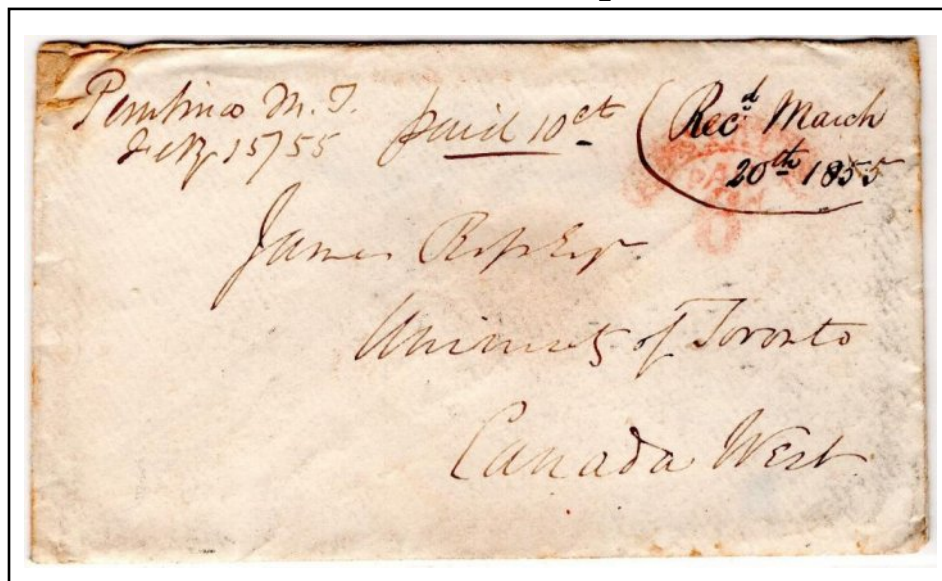


Some early mail was routed through outposts at Sault Ste. Marie and Fort William on Lake Superior. The Canadian government attempted to establish this as a regular route through British territories in the early 1850s, but it proved hard to provision and maintain. It was abandoned in favor of the longer but better established trading route through Pembina and St. Paul after about a year.



23<sup>th</sup> February 1853

With Pembina Manuscript Postmark



15<sup>th</sup> February 1855

“Pembina M. T., Feby 15/55” manuscript postmark

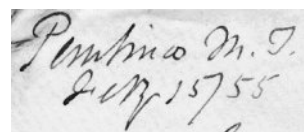
Manuscript “paid 10<sup>cts</sup>”

Red U<sup>D</sup> States / Paid / 6d exchange office handstamp

“Rec. March 20<sup>th</sup> 1855” manuscript arrival docketing

Courier from Red River Settlement to Pembina (paid): 3d Cy

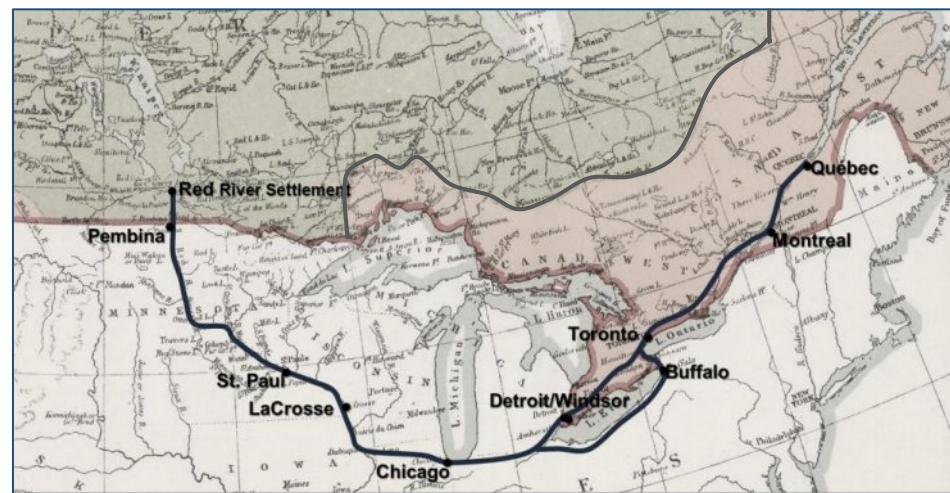
United States treaty rate postage to British North America (paid): 10¢ U.S.



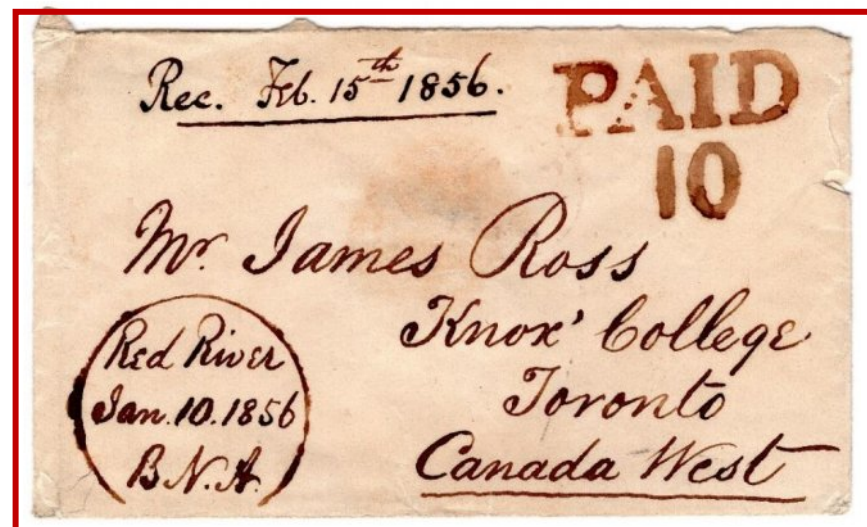
Pembina, M.T.  
manuscript postmark



Buffalo, NY  
exchange office  
handstamp



Red River “Shot Glass” Postmark



10<sup>th</sup> January 1856

Red River, Jan. 10. 1856 B.N.A. manuscript datestamp

Red PAID 10 handstamp (Red River)

“Rec. Feb. 15<sup>th</sup> 1856” manuscript arrival docketing

Courier from Red River Settlement to Pembina (paid): 3d Cy

United States treaty rate postage to British North America: 10¢ U.S.

**Nine examples of this Red River manuscript postmark are recorded**

In 1855, the Council of Assiniboia established a post office in Red River Settlement with William Ross as the first Postmaster. It is believed that Ross developed this manuscript postmark, as its use ceased after his death in May 1856.



Red River ox cart  
Used on the route from Red River Settlement to St. Paul

By 1853, settlers established a monthly courier service to Pembina, Minnesota Territory, 68 miles to the south. Contemporary newspaper reports indicate a 3d fee for each single sheet letter. From Pembina, it traveled by ox cart to St. Paul; river steamer to LaCrosse, Wisconsin, and then by rail through Chicago to the East. The opening of this southern route facilitated “regular” mail service between the Colony and the rest of Canada and the outside world. In 1855, 2821 letters, 2437 newspapers, and 580 packets were sent through the Red River Settlement post office. The courier fee was reduced to 1d Cy in Feb. 1856.

Through Detroit Exchange Office



March/April 1857

Endorsed “Via St. Paul / Minn. Territory”

Manuscript “prepaid 10 Cents”

Red (paid) UNITED STATES 6<sup>D</sup> Detroit exchange office ratestamp

Through Windsor Exchange Office



April/May 1857

Manuscript 10 (cents collect) U.S. rate marking

Black (collect) CANADA 10 CENTS Windsor exchange office ratestamp

Courier from Red River Settlement to Pembina (paid): 1d Cy

Canadian treaty rate postage from Pembina to Toronto (collect): 10¢ U.S.



Detroit  
exchange office



Windsor U.C.  
exchange office



22<sup>nd</sup> February 1853

**From Berthier, Lower Canada.**

Berthier L.C. Feb. 22, 1852 datestamp  
 Blue "6d" in circle handstamp for combined Canadian-U.S. rate  
 Montreal Feb. 23 backstamp  
 Red "CANADA" arc handstamp (Montreal or Toronto)  
 Red "Saint Paul Min. Ter. 29 Mar." datestamp  
 Forwarded to Pembina with manuscript "for" and "5" handstamp  
 "15" below for total due



11<sup>th</sup> March 1853

**From Stornoway, Scotland.**

SAINT PAUL, Min.Ter, APR 30(?), 1853 datestamp (reverse)  
 Black 5 handstamp (St. Paul) due for forwarding to Pembina  
 Manuscript 29 due for postage and forwarding

British treaty rate postage from Scotland to St. Paul (collect): 24¢ U.S.  
 U.S. Postage rate for unpaid forwarding to Pembina (collect): 5¢ U.S.  
 Plus courier from Pembina to Red River Settlement (collect): 3d Cy

"In view of the circumstances that there are no regular exchange Post Offices in those Settlements, letters can be mailed and forwarded from the St. Paul office on prepayment of the ordinary United States domestic rate of postage, provided they are directed to Pembina, Minn., and delivered at that office to agents or messengers of the persons addressed. To comply with these instructions, it will be necessary to address communications "Care Hudson's Bay Co., Pembina, Minnesota."  
 Letter from First Assistant Postmaster General at Washington

**From London.**

London, JU 1, 1861 datestamp (reverse).  
 Red "21 CENTS" (credit)  
 Liverpool exchange office.  
 Allan Line *Hibernia* to Montreal.  
 Grand Trunk Railroad to Chicago.  
 Red Chicago American Packet 24 (1 Shilling equivalent) paid.  
 Rail, steamer, and ox train to Red River Settlement

**From Bourges, France.**

Bourges, France, AOUT 29, 1866 datestamp and "574" diamond of dots cancellation.  
 Paris backstamp.  
 Red boxed "Br Service" and "3" (credit)  
 Liverpool exchange office handstamps  
 Allan Line *Peruvian* from Liverpool to Portland arriving September 11.  
 The "44 cts" possibly represents the courier fee for a stack of 22 letters (22d Cy = 44¢)



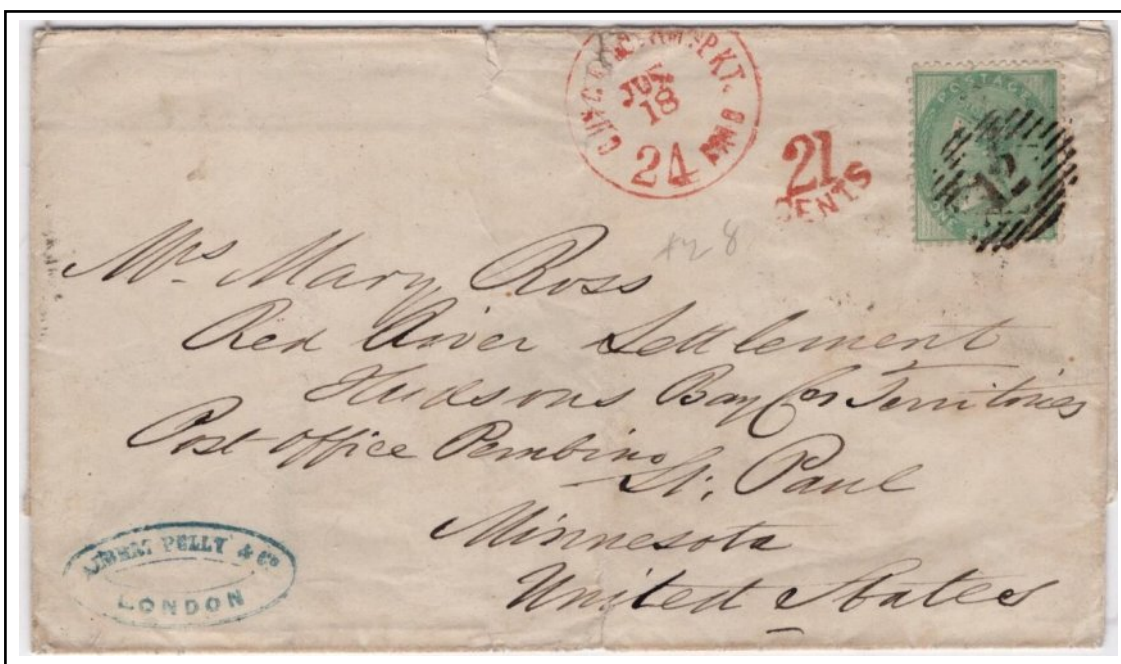
24<sup>th</sup> March 1860

**From Toronto, Upper Canada.**

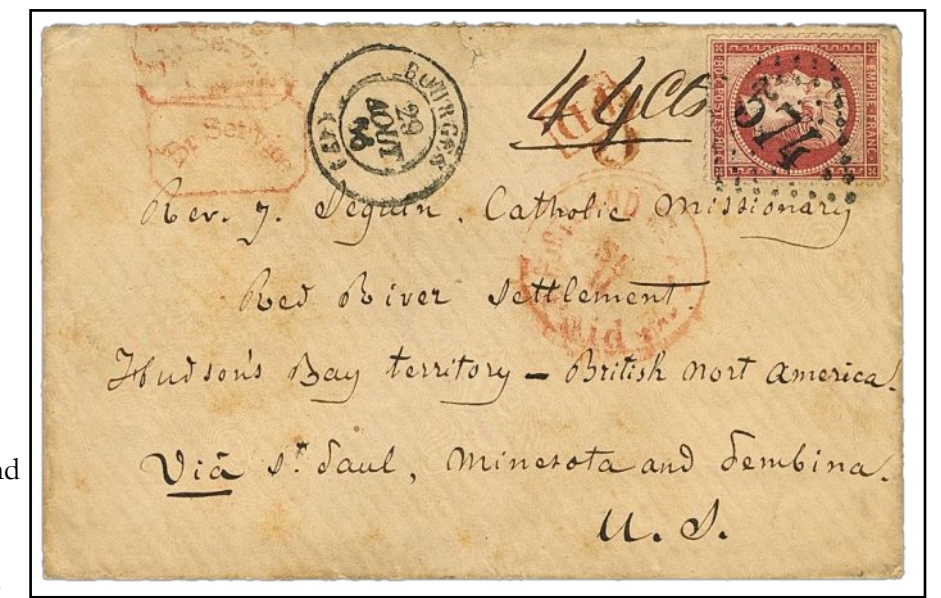
Toronto, U.C., MR 24, 1860 datestamp  
 Red PAID handstamp (Toronto)  
 SAINT PAUL, Min., APR 14, 1860 datestamp  
 Black MISSENT handstamp (St. Paul)

Note – Red River Settlement did not convert to the Canadian decimal currency until Manitoba became a province in 1870.

**This is the earliest of the four decimal-period stamped covers to the Red River Settlement.**



1<sup>st</sup> July 1861



29<sup>th</sup> August 1866

**Inbound – Fort Abercrombie to Fort Garry**



18<sup>h</sup> February, circa 1865

FORT ABERCROMBIE, D.T., FEB 18 datestamp

U.S. domestic rate postage to Pembina: 3¢ U.S.  
 Courier from Pembina to Fort Garry (Red River Settlement) (collect): 1¢ Cy

3¢ Pink 1864-65 stamped envelope mailed from Fort Abercrombie, ≈180 miles south of Pembina to Fort Garry, in what is now downtown Winnipeg. **Embossed corner advertisement reads: "GREAT NORTH WESTERN DEPOT / H McKENNEY / IMPORTER / TRADER / ASSINIBOIA / B.A."**

Fort Abercrombie was established by authority of an act of the U.S. Congress on March 3, 1857. The post office there opened in 1860.

U.S. postage stamps were available for sale in Fort Garry to facilitate the prepayment of postage through the United States. They were first advertised for sale in the June 1, 1861 issue of the *Nor'Wester*, the local newspaper.

**STAMPED ENVELOPES FOR SALE.**  
 WE have for Sale ENVELOPES Stamped for United States Postage.  
 All who correspond with parties in the States ought to have them.  
**ROSS & COLDWELL.**

**24 covers from the Red River Settlement with U.S. postage are recorded.**

**Outbound – Fort Garry to Québec**



2<sup>nd</sup> March 1869

PEMBINA, DAKOTA MAR 2 datestamp  
 MONTREAL, MR 19 69 datestamp verso  
 Québec C.E. MR 21 69 datestamp verso

Courier from  
 Fort Garry to Pembina (paid): 1¢ Cy  
 United States treaty rate to BNA  
 6¢ per ½ oz (paid): 6¢ U.S.

**Outbound – Fort Garry to Montreal**



3<sup>rd</sup> October 1870

5<sup>th</sup> September 1870

PEMBINA, DAKOTA mailing datestamps  
 MONTREAL, Q. UC transit datestamps verso

Courier from Fort Garry to Pembina (paid): 1¢ Cy  
 U.S. treaty rate to BNA (paid): 6¢ U.S. per ½ oz.

23<sup>rd</sup> August 1870

The Manitoba Act of 1870 established Manitoba as a province of Canada. At this time, a closed mail service via the United States was established. This removed the need to exchange mails between the Canadian and U.S. postal systems

Carried Through the U.S. as Canadian Domestic Mail



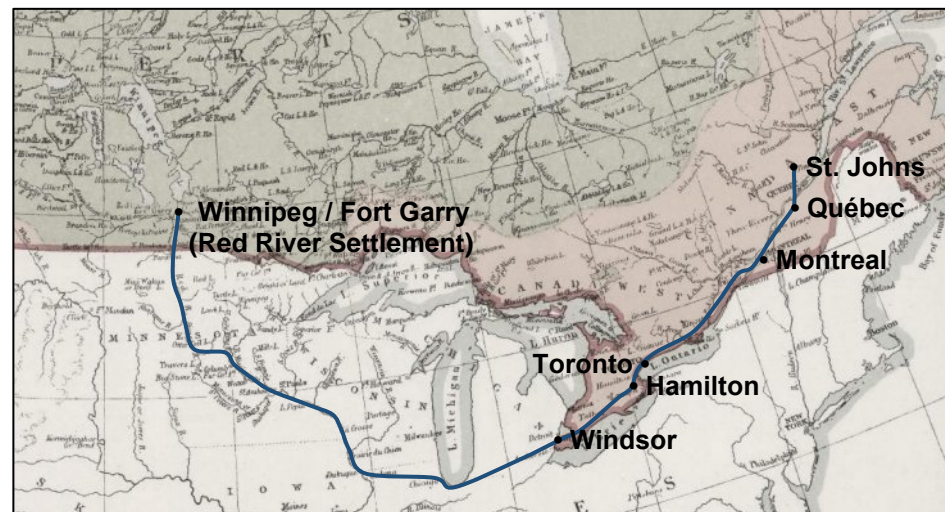
Sender's imprint on backflap

HAMILTON, C.W., SE 23, 70 datestamp

23<sup>rd</sup> September 1870

Canadian domestic mail rate postage to Manitoba – 6¢ per ½ oz.: 6¢ Cy

**This is the only recorded Small Queens cover to or from Manitoba during the 6¢ rate period.**



Sender's imprint on backflap



FORT GARRY, MANITOBA, JU 5, 72 datestamp  
WINDSOR, ONT, JU 12, 72 transit datestamp verso  
TORONTO, ONT, JU 13, 72 receiving datestamp verso

5<sup>th</sup> June 1872

Canadian domestic mail rate postage to Manitoba: 3¢ Cy

**Letter rates between Canada and Manitoba from 1870:**

- July 15, 1870 (province established) – October 31, 1870 6¢ Cy per ½ ounce
- From November 1, 1870 - regular Canadian letter rates apply 3¢ Cy per ½ ounce