

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE REGISTERED LETTER STAMPS AND THEIR USES AND MIS-USES

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The Dangers of Single Imperforate Stamps

Most philatelists will be aware of the dangers of single copies of imperforate stamps when the issue also exists in perforated form. This is a particular problem with the Registered Letter Stamps of 1875.

The apparently imperforate 5 cents stamp shown in fig 1, illustrates the point.



Fig 1 Apparently imperforate 5 cents RLS

These Registered Letter Stamps were introduced by Canada in late November or early December 1875 and had a distinctive shape to draw attention to the mail on which they appeared. There are three values: 2 cents orange, paying the registration fee on domestic mail, 5 cents green for the USA and 8 cents blue for the UK (although this rate was reduced to 5 cents on 1 July 1877). Postmasters were initially 'expected to promote their use' but their use became mandatory in October 1876.

A small group of these stamps recently obtained nicely illustrates the problems the printers, British American Bank Note Co., experienced when perforating these oddly shaped stamps. The result was

Bought many years ago in a collection it 'looks good' – well centred with excellent margins and a large stamp. However, this copy came with a B.P.A. certificate, illustrated in fig 2, which says 'cannot be certified genuine', and has the signature of Robson Lowe and two others. When displayed, no viewer has challenged the statement that, despite the certificate, it 'looks good'.

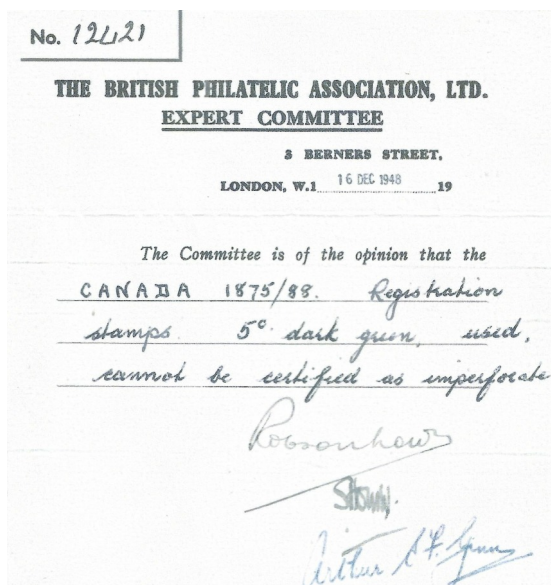


Fig 2 1948 BPA certificate relating to the stamp in fig 1

specimens that were either very narrow, normal or jumbo – see fig 3. The ‘jumbo’ copy shown here on the right in fig 3 is so large that the copy hitherto thought to be



Fig 3 Selection of 5 cents RLS's showing the wide variation in stamp size. The stamp on the right could easily be 'converted' into an imperforate single.

imperforate fits entirely within it, justifying the doubts expressed by the BPA Committee about its genuineness.

Just for the record, a genuine example of the imperforate 5 cents RLS is shown in fig 4; this time a marginal pair!

Similar misplacements of the perforations can be found on the 2 cents orange value (of which incidentally only a single pair of an imperforate variety are known); see fig 5. These can be too low (sheet position 1, or sheet position 5 from plate 2), too high (imprint showing) or too far left (again imprint showing). A very scarce variety exists on this 2 cents value where stamps from the bottom row of the sheet are imperforate between stamp



Fig 4 Genuine imperforate pair of the 5 cents RLS (courtesy of Graham Searle)



Fig 5 Selection of 2 cents RLS's all with misplaced perforations. The third stamp in the row could, with some judicious trimming, be 'converted' into a would be example of the 'imperf between stamp and margin' error.

and margin. Unscrupulous trimming of the perforations on the third example in fig 5 could easily produce a 'would be' example of such a variety. So, once again, caution is required. A genuine example of the variety is shown in fig 6 – with, in this case, full imprint and margin.



Fig 6 The genuine imperforate between stamp and margin error (courtesy of Graham Searle)

Registered Letter Stamps used on their own on cover.

It was never the intention that Registered Letter stamps should be used on their own; only that they should be used to pre-pay the registration fee. However, confusing Post Office instructions coupled with the odd bit of flagrant disregard for the regulations has resulted in a few examples of these stamps appearing on their own on covers.

When the Registered Letter Stamps were first introduced, the Post Office Circulars were fairly clear that they should be used only to pay the registration fee and not used to pay postage. The temptation to make use of the 5 cents stamp to prepay both postage and registration on domestic letters proved too much for some postmasters at small



Fig 7 June 1876 registered letter from Gorrie, Ontario to Goderich franked with a single 5 cents RLS paying both postage and registration, contrary to regulations. (Courtesy of Graham Searle)

offices. The example shown below in fig 7 was sent from Gorrie, Ontario to Goderich in June 1876 and is one of a small number of such ‘contrary to regulation’ covers known from 1876.

On 8 May 1889, the domestic registration fee was increased from 2 cents to 5 cents, leaving post offices with stocks of, now useless, 2 cents RLS. To allow these stocks to be used, a P.O. Circular was issued allowing the 2 cents stamps to be used to part pay the 5 cents registration fee in combination with ordinary postage stamps. Once again, the intention was that the use of the RLS to pay postage was not permitted although, in this case, the wording of the circular was less than crystal clear. One example of the resulting confusion is shown in the cover overleaf in fig 8 (showing both front and back). This well-travelled cover, with postage and registration paid by four copies of the 2 cents RLS was posted in Middle Musquodobit N.S. on 21 January 1897. It has transit marks for (1) Halifax N.S. on 21 Jan; (2) Halifax & Amherst N.S. M.C. W. of 22



Fig 8 January 1897 registered letter, sent within Nova Scotia and franked with four copies of the 2 cents RLS paying the postage and registration fee. Despite this being contrary to regulations the letter passed through the mails unscathed.

Jan; (3) Lower Stewiacke N.S. of 22 Jan; (4) Halifax & Amherst M.C. of 24 February, together with the receiver (5) from Upper Stewiacke N.S. of 24 February. All of which leaves you wondering where this item was between 22 January and 24 February! Despite the letter being franked contrary to the regulations it has passed through the mails without comment. The Maritime Provinces did, of course, have something of a track record for rather loose interpretation of post office regulations.

Fig 9 opposite shows a similar looking cover mailed in June 1893 from Argyle N.S. This also has the postage and registration prepaid with four copies of the 2 cents RLS. However, in this case, the letter was sent to Toronto where the item was



Fig 9 June 1893 registered letter mailed from Argyle, Nova Scotia that also shows the use of four 2 cents RLS's to prepay both postage and registration fee. This cover, sent to Toronto, was passed to the Dead Letter Office with a handstamp indicating 'Returned for postage'. (Courtesy of Graham Searle)

promptly dispatched to the Dead Letter Office with a handstamp at top left reading 'RETURNED FOR POSTAGE'.

However, just to prove that this practice was not the sole preserve of the Maritimes, fig 10 shows another, rather impressive, example of the use of a registered letter stamp on its own. This May 1893 letter was sent from the small town of Codrington, Ontario to New York. In this case the postage and registration has been paid with a single copy of the 8 cents RLS. This stamp had no legitimate uses after 1877 and had, no doubt, been languishing in the stock of the Codrington postmaster since then. Here was a perfect

Fig 10. May 1893 registered letter from Codrington, Ontario to New York franked with a single copy of the 8 cents RLS paying the combined postage and registration fee. Once again, contrary to regulations but passed through the mails without comment. (Courtesy of Graham Searle)



opportunity to use it! One can be equally sure that the New York postmaster would have had little interest or awareness of the finer points of Canadian Post Office regulations. So, once again, the letter passed through the mails without comment.

Ordinary postage stamps used to prepay the registration fee.

In the period between late 1875 and October 1876, the use of registered letter stamps was to be encouraged but was not mandatory. After October 1876 and up to May 1889, the registration fee should only have been prepaid with a registered letter stamp.

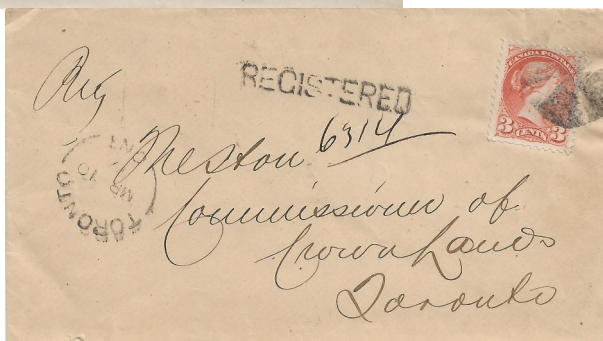
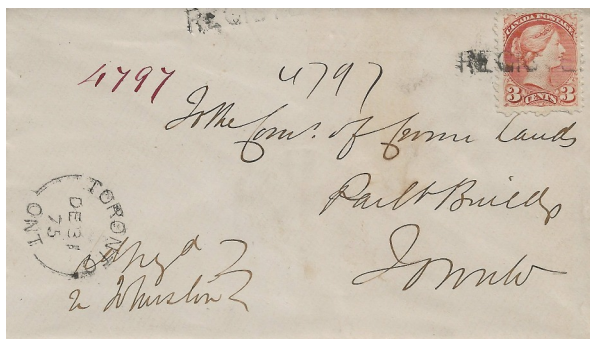


Fig 11 Trio of registered drop letters all mailed within Toronto between December 1875 and April 1879

The three covers shown in fig 11 neatly illustrate the rules (and the occasional failure to follow them) in the early years of registered letter stamps. All three of these covers are registered drop letters mailed within Toronto. One might imagine that a major post office like Toronto would show a greater adherence to Post Office regulations than some smaller offices.

The top cover was posted in December 1875 and shows the 3 cents postage plus registration fee prepaid by a 3 cents Small Queen stamp. At this time, such franking was entirely legitimate, indeed it is even possible that the Toronto Post Office had not yet received supplies of the new registered letter stamps. The second cover shows a similar franking but this time on a letter mailed in March 1877. By this time, the use of RLS to pay the registration fee was mandatory so this one has gone through the mail contrary to regulations. The bottom example, mailed in April 1879, shows the correct, post October 1876, franking of a 1 cent postage stamp plus 2 cents RLS.

The ‘contrary to regulations’ cover shown in fig 11 is far from unique. Fig 12 shows another example also mailed from Toronto (in this case to Ottawa), in April 1877,

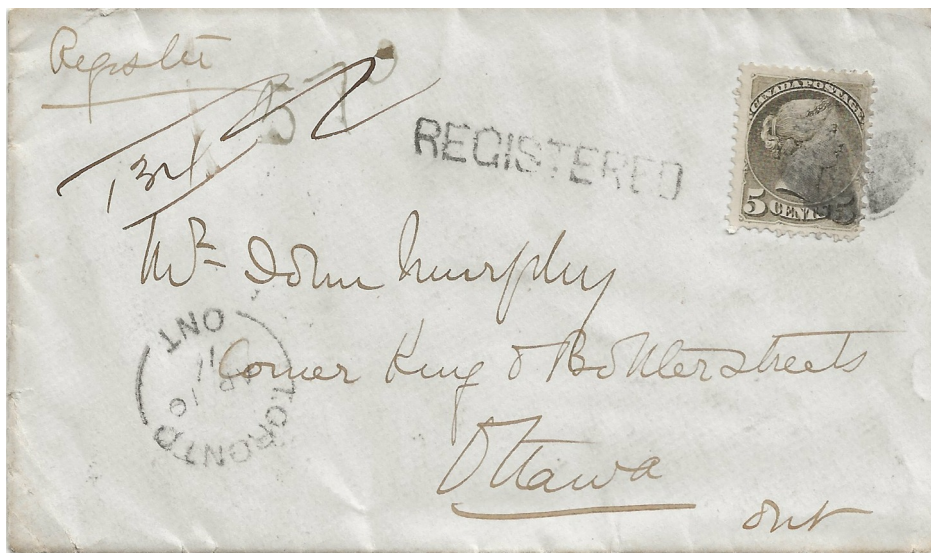


Fig 12 Registered letter from Toronto to Ottawa mailed in April 1877 and franked with a 5 cents Small Queen paying the combined postage plus registration fee.

which has the combined postage (3 cents) and registration fee (2 cents) prepaid by a 5 cents Small Queen; a scarce single usage of this Small Queen stamp.

A third example is shown in fig 13 overleaf. This is a heavy packet, weighing between 1½ and 2oz, mailed from Toronto to Madoc, Ontario. Mailed on 17 October 1876, when one might imagine the new Post Office regulations concerning registered letter stamps, issued just two weeks earlier, would still be fresh in everyone’s minds; this cover also



Fig 13 Quadruple rate (1½oz to 2oz) registered letter mailed from Toronto to Madoc on 17 October 1876 shortly after the use of RLS became mandatory. The 14 cents rate (12 cents postage plus 2 cents registration fee) has been prepaid contrary to regulations with Small Queen stamps.

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has the combined postage and registration fee of 14 cents prepaid entirely in postage stamps, contrary to the new regulations.

But sometimes people went to great lengths to get the use of the Registered Letter Stamps correct.

With all the examples shown above, one could be excused for thinking that post office staff made little effort to comply to the regulations concerning the use of these registered letter stamps. However, the example shown in fig 14 suggests otherwise.

This is part of a wrapper from a piece of registered parcel post mailed in May 1887. The parcel post rate at the time was 6 cents per 4oz, so the strip of four 3 cents Small Queens prepaying the postage on this parcel suggests that the item weighed in at between 4 and 8 oz. The sender of this parcel obviously thought that the registration fee for a parcel was 2 cents but the July 1882 Official Post Office Guide had clarified that the 5 cents parcel registration fee had to be prepaid with a 5 cents RLS. It must have been tempting



Fig 14 May 1887 registered parcel, correctly (in the end) franked with a strip of four 3 cent Small Queen paying the 12 cents postage and a 5 cents RLS paying the registration fee. A previously applied 2 cents RLS can be seen under the 5 cents RLS at the top.

to add another 3 cents postage stamp to make up the difference but this would, of course, have been contrary to regulations so a 5 cents RLS was placed over the top of the 2 cents RLS.

It is worth noting that had this package been sent as a letter the 2 cents RLS would have sufficed for the registration fee. However, the postage would have been at least 27 cents (9 x 3 cents) so the option chosen was far cheaper.

Finally, I would like to thank our Editor, Graham Searle, for providing a few of the pictures for this article from his own collection.