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TWENTY TALES OF CANADA

No 1

How Canada Got its First Postage Stamps

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By LYMAN B. JACKES

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Canadian Historical Press

HOW CANADA GOT ITS FIRST POSTAGE STAMPS

Canada was not the first country in the world to produce postage stamps: but there is no country or state that can produce a romance equal to Canada—a story that twines itself through fire, riots and royal portraits—in connection with the production of its first postage stamps.

Great Britain was the first country in the world to issue postage stamps. The first British stamp appeared in the year 1840. The United States government did not issue postage stamps until 1845 but there were stamps in certain parts of the United States as early as 1842. They were not government stamps but were issued by the post-masters in New York City Baltimore and other eastern cities. The first Canadian stamps did not appear until April of 1851 and the very early stamps were issued by the government of the United Canadas. This was the political union of Upper and Lower Canada. Those portions of the country, since Confederation, have been known as the Provinces of Ontario and Quebec.

The man who designed Canada's first postage stamps was Mr. Sandford Fleming —as such he was known in the middle of the last century. Mr. Fleming was afterwards knighted by Her Majesty Queen Victoria for his invention of Standard Time.

Prior to the year 1851 it was possible to send mail in Canada without postage stamps. Away back in the days when the early French explorers were carving an empire here it was possible to send letters by runners—often Indians. Later, when the British commenced to develop the country the stage coaches were used to carry

letters if the charges were paid in advance. The costs for this service varied with the distance to be covered. In the year 1850, when the Colonial Office regulated postal matters in Canada, the minimum charge for delivering a letter in Upper Canada was nine pence. It was in the year 1850 that the British government decided to

Monday, February 24, 1851.

Breakfasted at Ellam's Hotel with Mr Rutter & Honble Jas Morris Post Master General Designing postage stamps for him



Page from the diary of Sir Sandford Fleming and the first proof of Canada's first postage stamp.

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- Dr. Lorne Pierce -

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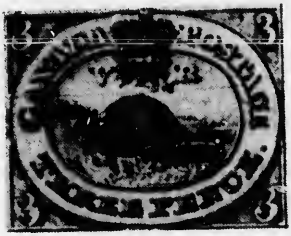

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competition for postage stamp designs. I have been unable to find any historical support for such a theory. I am, however, permitted for the first time to reproduce a letter, written by Sandford Fleming himself, in which he relates something of how the first Canadian postage stamps were designed. This letter is reproduced here by the kind permission of Miss Adelle Harman, a granddaughter of the Hon. James Morris. The letter is addressed to Miss Harman's father, who of course, was a son of the Hon. James Morris.

Ottawa, January 2nd, 1888

James Morris, Esq.

My Dear Sir;

I duly received your note enclosing one of the early three pence postage stamps which you have so kindly forwarded for my collection.

I think I mentioned to you that I have in my possession the proof of the first postage stamp issued in Canada. It is now before me in my old scrap book and I shall copy, on the other side, the explanation written with it.

> "This is the first proof from the plate of the first postage stamp issued in Canada designed by Sandford Fleming for the Post Master General, the Hon. James Morris, Toronto, February, 1851.

You ask me to inform you of the circumstances. I was then a young man about 24, ready for anything whatever. I had been making designs of some sort for Sherrif-Ruttan an intimate friend of your father. Your father had, in conversation, mentioned what he had in view with the issue of three pence postage stamps. The Sheriff referred him to me as a person who would make a design. I was sent for and was introduced to your father one morning at breakfast time at Stone's* Hotel on King Street, now occupied by

the Romain Building. According to my recollection you were present, 37 years younger than you are now. The design was made, engraved approved and used for years. The first proof taken from the plate by the engraver, is as I have stated, in my collection of scraps.

Wishing you a happy new year and all other good things

Very sincerely yours,

SANDFORD FLEMING

*This is evidently a slip of the pen on the part of Sir Sandford. The hotel where this historic meeting took place was Ellah's Hotel, a well known Toronto establishment that was located on the site of the Romain Building. This is made very clear from the diary of Sir Sandford. Under date of February 24th, 1851, he notes in his diary that the meeting took place at Ellah's Hotel.



The one shilling stamp that was designed but never issued. One or two copies were secured by stamp collectors.

To pick up the threads of the story it is necessary that the reader carry the imagination back to a bright summer morning in the month of June in the year 1845 A sailing ship has come into the harbor of Quebec after a passage of forty-two days

from Glasgow, Scotland. Two young men, Sandford and David Fleming, are passed through the customs and all Canada lies before them.

The two young men have a look at Quebec City and then decide to take one of the early river steam boats for Montreal.

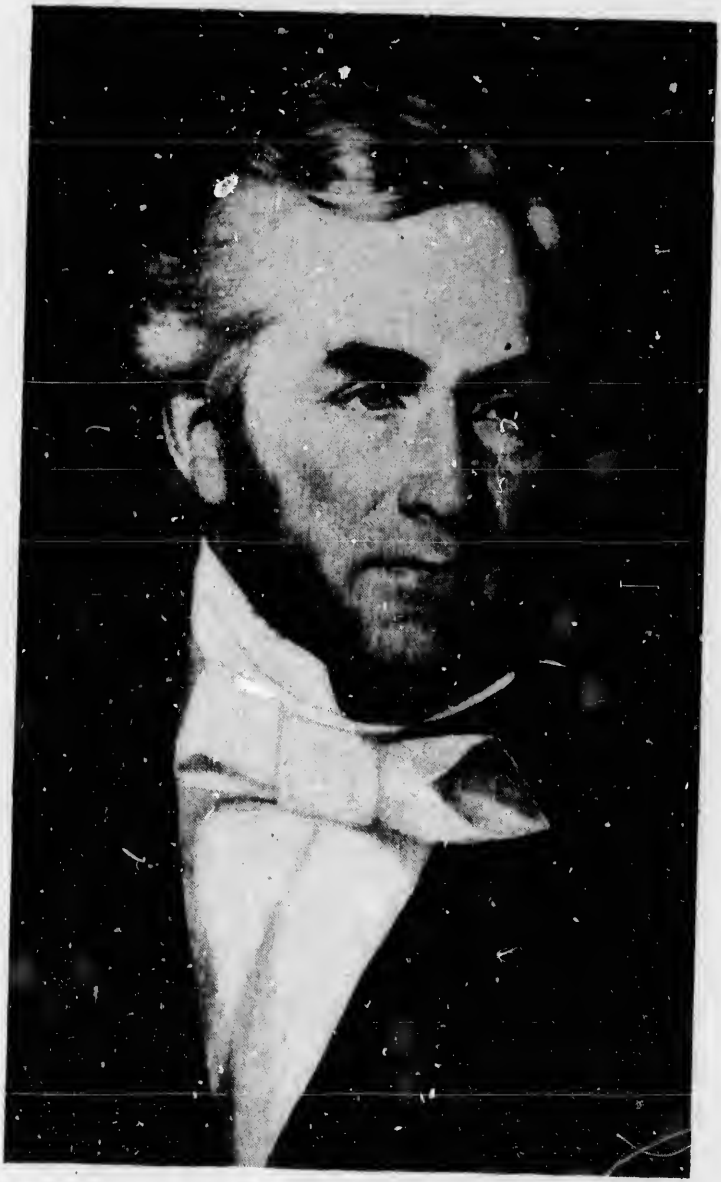
Of the two young men it is Sandford Fleming that plays the important role in this story. He was born on January 7th, 1827, in the little settlement of Kilkcaldy, Fife, Scotland. After the usual schooling he was apprenticed to a Mr. Sang who operated an engineering office in Glasgow. It was a time when Great Britain was laying the foundations for the great railway systems that were to develop and the engineering office was a very busy place. Sandford Fleming had considerable talent with his pen and his first duties as an engineering apprentice required that he decorate the maps and plans with fancy scrolls and figures. The plans were then sent to a lithographing establishment to be reproduced in numerous copies. The young man became very proficient in this work and the lithographic firm gave him sufficient work, aside from his regular duties, to enable him to save several pounds.

Early in the year 1845 he commenced to think about coming to Canada. The father travelled to Glasgow to see what arrangements might be made to transport his two sons to Canada. A sailing ship that had been given the name of "Brilliant" was loading cargo for Quebec and the Captain undertook to give passage to the two lads. The ticket issued to Sandford Fleming was in existence amongst the family papers until recently. The price of the passage was thirteen pounds sterling. They left Glasgow on April 24th and arrived in Quebec on the 6th of June. in the year 1845.



Sandford Fleming, the young Toronto surveyor and draughtsman who designed the first postage stamps used in Canada. This is what he looked like in 1850.

The hand of fate appeared to be guiding the young strangers. When the river steam boat arrived in Montreal they were delighted to meet, of all persons they least expected to see, their old school master from Scotland. He had given up school teaching and had turned his efforts to the ministry. He and his wife were on their way to the north shore of Lake Erie to set up a mission. They invited the two young men to come



The Hon. James Morris who took over the postal affairs of the United Canadas from the Colonial Office in 1850.



The copy of the Royal portrait in the Council Chamber, City Hall, Toronto.

to Upper Canada with them. This was eagerly agreed upon and passage was secured on a boat that was destined for Bytown (Ottawa). The passage then carried the party through the Rideau canal and the Rideau Lakes and landed them in Kingston, on the northern shore of Lake Ontario.

Sandford Fleming was desirous of securing employment as quickly as possible. A few enquiries in Kingston raised his hopes that he might secure employment in the Port Hope and Toronto areas. The party embarked on a steam boat that was heading up Lake Ontario and the two Fleming boys bade their friends farewell and stepped ashore at Port Hope. A few enquiries there suggested to Sandford Fleming that he might secure employment in Peterboro. A Mr. Richard Birdsall, a surveyor, was hopeful that he might have some work for the young man but as the days of unemployment increased, Sandford Fleming decided to come to Toronto and try his luck there. He had letters of introduction to certain of the officials of the Canada Company but when he presented them he was told that employees were being laid off; his drooping spirits were raised by a message that came from Peterboro.

Mr. Birdsall had some work for him. He returned to Peterboro and was employed as a draughtsman. He spoke to his employer about getting out a lithographed map of the Peterboro district and of similar work that he had done in Scotland. It was agreed that the experiment should be tried. Mr. Fleming came up to Toronto and secured some flat stones from a tomb stone cutter and brought them back to Peterboro. On these stones he laid out the map, etched the stones and printed the maps from them. There are a few copies of those maps carefully put away in collections of Canadian documents. They clearly indicate the skill and delicacy of the penman artist. It is not at all surprising that

such skill should have aroused the interest of the Hon. James Morris when he looked over the designs for Canada's first postage stamps.

The map was a modest financial success and it gave young Fleming a very good idea.



The first proposal for the twelve penny stamp drawn from the rescued painting that Sandford Fleming had stored under his draughting table in his Yonge Street office, Toronto.

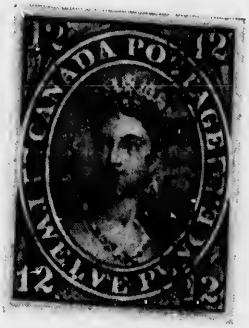
"Why not" he said to himself" learn the surveying trade?' Then he would be in a position to make all the money for himself. In February of 1846 he learned that a surveyor in Weston, Ontario would take him on as an apprentice surveyor. He came to Weston and was articled to Mr. Stoughton Dennis. He remained in Weston for almost three years. In December of 1848 all surveyors in Upper and Lower Canada were notified that legislation had been passed requiring all land surveyors, with less than several years' experience, to undertake a course of study and pass an examination. The course of study was to commence in the middle of January, 1849. The classes were to be held in the Legislative Chamber of the Parliament Buildings at Montreal.

Early in January Sandford Fleming climbed aboard a lumbering stage coach in Toronto. Five days later he transferred to a boat that was going down through the icy waters of the St. Lawrence. He reached Montreal and commenced his studies, with many other students, in the Parliament Buildings.

The inborn artist manifests itself in his own notes. While the instruction was proceeding, he says, his mind often wandered to a contemplation of a large picture that hung above the throne. It was a painting of the youthful Queen Victoria in her coronation robes. The famous London portrait painter, Chalon, had painted the original and the government of the United Canadas had ordered a copy of it.

His contemplation of this beautiful painting could not have been too diverting from his studies. He passed the examination and was notified to come for his certificate —a document that would enable him to undertake surveying work—as a professional surveyor. He was instructed to come to the Parliament buildings on the 29th of April, 1849. That date is very important to the story of how Canada got its first postage stamps. It was the day on which the Elgin riots broke out in Montreal. When the Governor, Lord Elgin, was leaving the Parliament Buildings after signing the Rebellion Losses Bill, he was attacked by a mob and shamefully treated. Sandford Fleming was standing on the steps of the building and saw that attack upon the Governor. The riots grew apace. The wooden walks were broken up and bonfires started with planks. Then some of the more daring ones in the mob suggested that the burning planks be tossed through the windows of the Legislative building. The place was soon an inferno. Mr. Fleming determined to enter the burning building and see if anything of value could be saved.

He worked his way through the smoke to the library, where he had spent many pleasant hours. The fire had made great headway amongst the books and the roof was burning. He went into the Legislative Chamber and saw the roof there was already ablaze. He called to two or three men and asked them to help save the picture of Queen Victoria. They tried to lift



The famous twelve penny black stamp issued in the summer of 1851 to replace the original shilling stamp. This bears the portrait of Queen Victoria that was drawn from the painting that Sandford Fleming rescued from the burning parliament buildings, in Montreal, during the Elgin riots of April 25th, 1849.

it from its wall hangings but the great and massive frame came crashing down to the floor. The crash loosened the canvas and its stretching frame and they passed it out one of the windows and jumped out on the snow after it just as the roof of the chamber collapsed. The four men picked up the great canvas and commenced to march through the mob with it. When they were some distance from the burning building the question arose as to what they were going to do with it. Mr. Fleming undertook to remove it to a place of safety and the others left him. When he

was alone he removed the canvas from the frame, rolled it up and took it to his hotel. Next morning he booked stage for Toronto. The great rolled up picture was part of his baggage.

Mr. Fleming opened an engineering and surveying office in Toronto upon his return. The site of this office was the third building south of Adelaide Street on the west side of Yonge Street. His office was on the second floor at the front of the building. Under the draughting tables in that office, the rolled up picture of Queen Victoria gathered dust from May of 1849 until the spring of the year 1851.

At the meeting which took place at Ellah's hotel, in Toronto, the Hon. James Morris gave to Mr. Fleming his ideas as to what was wanted in the designs for a proposed set of Canadian postage stamps. There was to be one with a face value of three pence, one with a face value of six pence and one with a face value of one shilling. Mr. Fleming submitted designs. The three pence stamp carried the picture of the beaver as its central theme. Some fairly good steel engravings of Prince Albert had recently come to Toronto and Mr. Fleming was so impressed with the work on this portrait that he decided to copy the picture and use it for the central theme of the six penny stamp. For the shilling stamp he again used the beaver, but enclosed the portrait in a different type of frame from that used on the three pence design. The three pence design was accepted at once and instructions were issued for the engraving of plates and the printing of the stamps. The six penny and the shilling stamp were not proceeded with immediately, as some difficulty arose over the proposed shilling stamp.

It was not a question concerning the design of the stamp but there were misgivings over its face value.

In the year 1851 the silver dollar of Spain still held control over much of Canada's finances. All the early Canadian banks issued their notes in denominations of Spanish dollars. The normal rate of exchange between Sterling and Spanish dollars, on the Atlantic seaboard, was five shillings to the Spanish dollar and four Spanish dollars to the pound. This rate of exchange was known as "The Halifax rate" but as finances were conducted inland the rate of exchange altered. The new Post Master General, after he had ordered the shilling stamp, saw the possibility of complications arising over the fluctuating value of the shilling. He asked Mr. Fleming to come down to Montreal and discuss this problem. The mathematical mind of Sandford Fleming had worked out a solution long before he reached Montreal. He proposed a stamp with a face value of twelve pence. The difference between twelve pence and one shilling today may seem an insignificant point. In the year 1851 it was a very important item. The shilling fell and rose in value against the Spanish dollar. Twelve pence did not fluctuate. At the Montreal meeting, Mr. Fleming was asked to design a new stamp to replace the proposed shilling stamp. On the way back from Montreal he thought of the portrait of Queen Victoria that was rolled up under his draughting table.

He studied the face on this canvas and made up a sketch to see how the subject would work into an upright stamp that would match the six penny with the figure of Prince Albert. He submitted two designs. One depicted an oval containing the head and shoulders of the Queen and the other included much more of the Queen's figure. The Hon. James Morris was delighted with the first of these designs and the plates for the twelve penny were ordered.

The question then arose as to where and how Mr. Fleming secured such a wonderful portrait of the Queen and the story of the rescued picture from the burning Parliament Buildings in Montreal was disclosed. The Government of the United Canadas claimed the picture. Before it was returned the Mayor of Toronto John G. Bowes and Senator G. W. Allan proposed that a full sized copy be prepared from it. A public subscription list was opened to meet the expenses of this project and when sufficient money had been gathered the task of duplicating the portrait was given to a local painter named Mr. Berthon. The copy that was made hangs over the Mayor's chair in the City Council Chamber at Toronto.

The first of the stamps (the three penny) designed by Mr. Fleming, went on public sale April 23rd, 1851. Public sale of the six penny and the 12 penny stamp was made a few weeks later. The plates for the shilling stamp were made but no stamps were offered for sale of the shillng denomination. A few specimens from the original plate however did leave the post office. There is one specimen known to be in Montreal and it is reported that a specimen also exists in Vancouver.

The first stamps offered for sale in Canada were not perforated. The local post master cut the required stamp from a sheet with the aid of either knife or scissors. The purchaser was required to make use of the paste pot, which was standard equipment in all local post offices; and paste the stamp on the letter or package. Sheets of perforated stamps or stamps already gummed on the back did not come into general use in Canada for some years after the first stamps were available in 1851.