Steamboat Mail

On Georgian Bay, the North Channel, and Lake Superior

The paddlewheel steamer
Chicora delivers mail to the North
Channel

STEAMBOAT STORIES

One of a collection of stories featuring vessels and events on the Upper
Great Lakes in the 19th and early 20th centuries

Sorting the Mail

The Opening of Southern Georgian Bay

PART I

Early Mail Service 1833 - 1855

When Charles Rankin filed his survey report in 1833 on the territory of Alta and Zero (later called the townships of Collingwood and St. Vincent), he saw land on the south shores of Georgian Bay that was virtually uninhabited.[1] No postal


First railway engine to Georgian Bay from Toronto 1855

service existed, few settlers were there, and the hinterland was still virgin forest. In the next twenty - two years the character of southern Georgian Bay changed rapidly. By 1855, the newly constructed Ontario, Simcoe, and Huron Railroad (Northern Railway) connected Collingwood to Toronto. As well, a steamboat service along the coast of the bay provided regular mail from Owen Sound to Cape Rich, Meaford, and Collingwood. It was possible to mail a letter from Stevenson's post office in Meaford at 10 a.m. and have it aboard the afternoon train out of

Collingwood to Toronto, arriving there in late afternoon. Return mail could arrive back in Collingwood at noon the next day, be placed on board the steamer *Oxford,* and delivered to Meaford by 4:40 p.m.

Before 1855, the family of William Eberts of Chatham Ontario had secured mail contracts on the Thames River and along the southern coast of Lake Huron.[2] When the railway from Toronto to Collingwood commenced operations, Captain William H. Smith, the son in law of Eberts, moved his ship *Oxford* to Owen Sound to take advantage of the developing trade on Georgian Bay. Along with the *Mazeppa* under the command of Captain Butterworth of Collingwood, he ran regular freight, passenger, and mail service from Owen Sound to Collingwood[3].
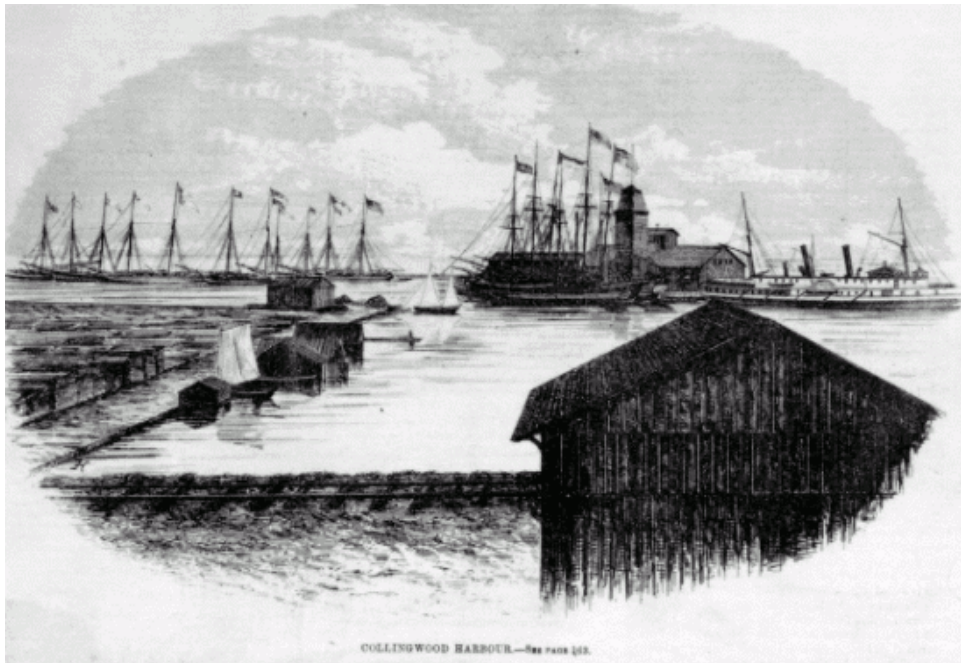
Collingwood Harbour circa 1865

By November 1855, a syndicate organized by Mr. Moberly of Barrie, Ontario, called a meeting of businessmen to purchase the 188 foot *Kaloolah* in order to compete with the *Mazeppa* and the *Oxford*. Since 1853, the *Kaloolah* had worked the Penetanguishene, Manitoulin Island, and Sault Ste. Marie route with occasional stops at Collingwood, Meaford, and Owen Sound. That same fall, the *Oxford* was wrecked, so Smith purchased the larger and faster *Canadian*, essentially pushing the plodding *Kaloolah* and the *Mazeppa* out of competition[4].

Captain Smith gained a stranglehold on the passenger and mail service along the southern shores of Georgian Bay.
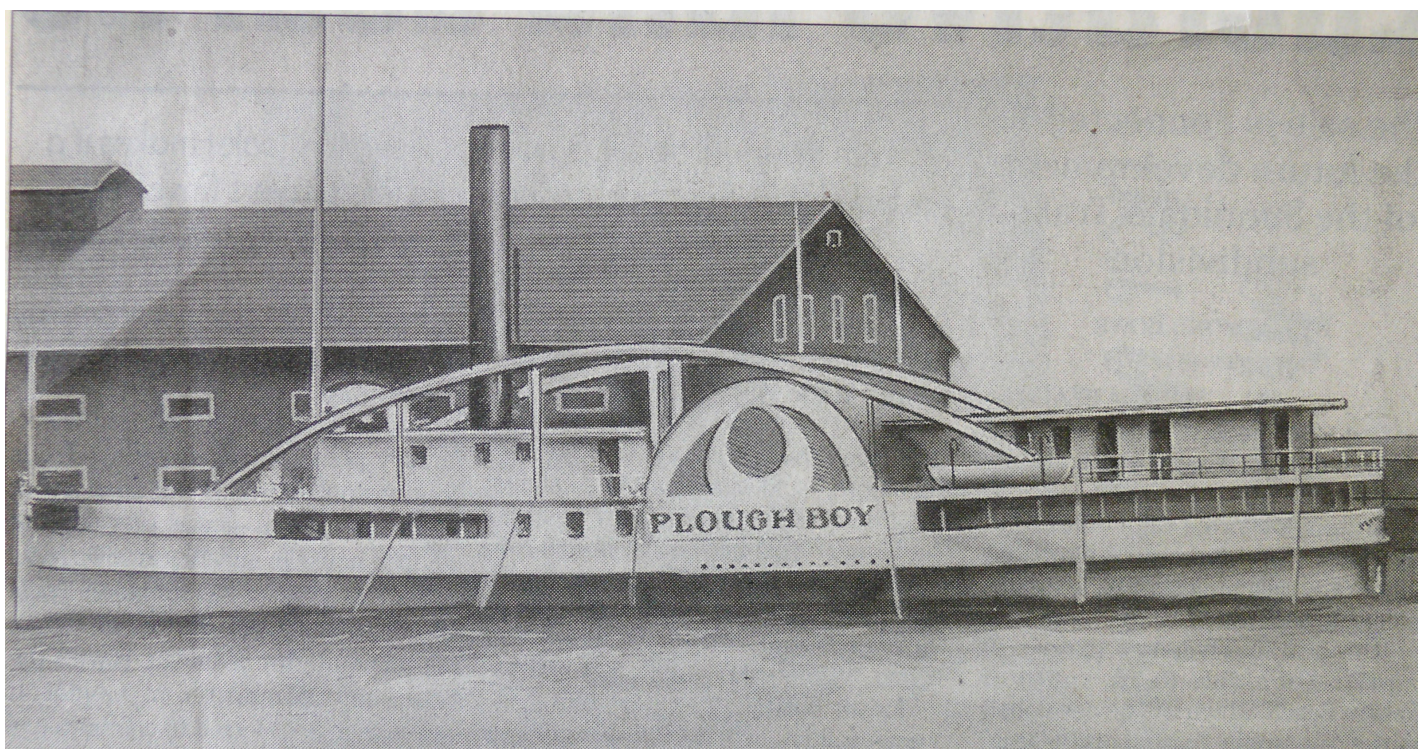
The Ploughboy at Collingwood circa 1864

PART II
Competition for the Mail Contracts 1855 -1872

Meanwhile, the *Ploughboy,* the *Algoma,* and the *Rescue* were competing for mail contracts from Collingwood to Sault Ste. Marie and beyond[5]. The opening of the locks at Sault Ste. Marie in 1855 meant that the whole north shore from Killarney to Bruce Mines and along Lake Superior was prime territory for mail contracts. These contracts were open for one year at a time and subject to competitive bidding. Captain Dick of the *Rescue* held the contract between Collingwood and the Sault in 1858 and assumed that he had it again in 1859. When he advertised that the *Rescue* carried the Royal Mail in 1859, he was quickly advised by Postmaster Giffin that such was not the case and the contract had been given to the *Ploughboy*[6]. Within a year, the contract was back with the *Rescue*. The service of the *Ploughboy* in 1859 had been judged unsatisfactory. On the south shore, Captain Smith consolidated his annual mail contracts in 1861 by replacing the *Canadian* with the 187 foot *Clifton.*

But even when competition might have soured relationships between competing rivals, there was always help at hand for ships in distress. The *Ploughboy* came to the rescue of the *Clifton* in 1863[7].

> *"The Steamer Clifton, had her cylinder [broken] last Tuesday evening a little this side of Vale's (sic) Point enroute from this place to Collingwood. A messenger was at once dispatched from this place to Collingwood for the Ploughboy, and this boat arriving at an early hour next morning, took on board the mails, freight and passengers, consisting principally of clergymen and lay delegates coming to attend the Conference of the Methodist New Connection Church."* [8]

Two months later, when the *Ploughboy* was in serious trouble near Little Current, the engineer, Mr. F. Robert, with two Indians and another sailor, rowed from Manitoulin Island to Owen Sound in an open boat to seek help from the *Clifton*. Unfortunately the *Clifton* herself was aground near Penetanguishene and was unable to assist.[9] Eventually both ships were saved, but four crew members of the

The Frances Smith was built in Owen Sound in 1867. It was the first steamer built on Georgian Bay. She carried mail from Owen Sound to the Lakehead after 1870

Private collection

Ploughboy who sought help in the opposite direction, drowned when their yawl capsized near Meldrum Bay.[10]

Disasters, wrecks, and bad weather made steamer delivery of the mail less than reliable. However, there was no alternative before 1872. No roads existed around the east coast of Georgian Bay. The roads in the south were poor except in mid winter when they were frozen. Georgian Bay residents therefore depended on steamers for letters from far away, business orders, parcels, newspapers, and most of all, money in registered letters.[11]

In 1867 the *Clifton* was replaced by the 181 foot side-wheeler, *Frances Smith.* Although no known covers exist from the *Frances Smith*, it is reasonable to assume that Captain Smith was able to maintain his contracts with this fine new steamer. When the *Frances Smith* was wrecked in late 1868, a smaller steamer, the *Quail*, was brought up in 1869 from Chatham to replace her. The *Frances Smith* was repaired by July 1869 and back in business, controlling the southern Georgian

Bay routes until 1872 when she moved to the more profitable Collingwood - Fort William route. There was little competition as the aging *Ploughboy* had been broken up in 1870, and the *Algoma* and the *Rescue* were no match for the speedy *Frances Smith*.

This shift in the route of the *Frances Smith* in 1872 marks a turning point in the history of mail delivery around Georgian Bay. Her owners saw that the railway, which was by now on the outskirts of Thornbury, would reach Meaford by 1872. During the interim, mail was delivered by stage from Meaford to Thornbury and thence by rail to Collingwood for connections to Toronto or steamer delivery to the north. A new rail line directly linking Owen Sound to Toronto was under way, which meant that there would be no need for steamer service from Owen Sound to Collingwood when it was completed in 1874.

In winter Indians deliver the mail from Penetanguishene to the Sault by dog sled.
Source Library and archives Canada

However, despite appearances that most mail delivery by steamer on the south of Georgian Bay was to be a thing of the past, the prediction of its total demise was wrong.

After 1874, the demand for mail and freight service to Manitoulin Island and the west had to be serviced from the southern shores of Georgian Bay. As well, the business community all along the shore continued to demand steamer service to the north. And so steamer services continued to provide mail service for another two decades.

Dates for the Opening of Post Offices at Communities on the shores of Georgian Bay [12]

Community Name	Date of First P.O
Collingwood	1853-07-01
Meaford	1841-07-06
Cape Rich	1853-06-01
Owen Sound	1846-07-06
Wiarton	1868-08-01
Tobermory	1881-09-01
Killarney	1854-06-01
Little Current	1864-07-01
Manitowaning	1854
Kagawong	1876-07-01
Spanish Mills	1868-09-01
Algoma Mills	1882-05-01
Blind River	1877-07-01
Thessalon	1874-08-01
Bruce Mines	1853
Garden River	1866-06-01
Cockburn Island	1880-07-01
Sault Ste. Marie	1853
Pointe aux Pins	1870-08-01
Batchawana	1865-11-01
Michipicoten	1865-08-01
Nipigon	1872-10-01
Silver Islet	1871-01-01
Port Arthur	1869-11-01

Stamp Revenue at select post offices in 1878

Location	Revenue from Stamps $	Salaries Paid $
Meaford	2958	647
Collingwood	3818	1002
Owen Sound	4036	1042
Sault Ste. Marie	592	134
Wiarton	491	491
Bruce Mines	283	154

Money Orders issued in 1878 at select post offices

Location	Number of Money Orders	Value $
Meaford	556	11,941
Collingwood	567	12,354
Owen Sound	1,040	24,374
Sault S Marie	NA	NA
Wiarton	375	6,243

PART III

Early Railway Days 1870-1884

In 1870, The *Chicora*, a former Civil War blockade runner now complementing mail service offered by the *Algoma*, secured a contract to deliver weekly mail from Collingwood to Fort William. As an addendum to the contract, the *Chicora* was to carry "such men and stores as the Government may desire to send."[13] The price to the government was an astounding $4900.00 for the season! Such an outrageous mail contract can only be understood when seen in the context of the Riel Rebellion in Manitoba. The *Chicora* was in fact being chartered under the auspices of the post office to move troops to quell the troubles in the Red River.

In the early 1870's as railways expanded their reach into Meaford and Owen Sound, the owners of the side-wheeler *Frances Smith* realized that their control of freight, passenger, and mail service along the shores of southern Georgian Bay was near the end. The solution was to shift their commercial focus to the route between Collingwood and Lake Superior destinations, and subsequently to join with other steamers in the previously established Lake Superior Royal Mail Line.

By 1875, The Lake Superior Royal Mail Line comprising the *Frances Smith*, the *Chicora*, the aging *Algoma*, and the newly built *Cumberland* (1871), secured mail delivery contracts for the North Channel from Killarney to Little Current, Spanish River, Thessalon, Bruce Mines, Garden River, and Sault Ste. Marie. The boats sometimes carried "through mail" from Collingwood to Meaford and Owen Sound before heading across the bay to Killarney. These contracts produced about $2000 per year for the company. However, mail contracts were simply extra revenue and not the bread and butter of steamers.

Their main income during the period was from transporting immigrants to Manitoba and supplying "the world's richest silver mine", Silver Islet, on Lake Superior.

Post offices around Georgian Bay were also making money by 1878 as the charts below illustrate.

The income from revenue was reduced by the high cost of getting the mail to each post office, whether by rail, steamer, stagecoach, or horseback. Indeed mail enroute from Toronto to the Sault in winter was transported from Penetanguishene onwards by Indians on foot and by dog sled. Mail delivery took three weeks.

The safest way to do business was through money orders and registered mail. As

business expanded around Georgian Bay there was a growing demand for postal money orders.

By 1878, a complex series of steamer alliances, corporate alignments, and business realignments resulted in the formation of the Great Northern Transit Company. The company's ships worked the routes from Collingwood to Parry Sound, French River, Byng Inlet, Killarney and the Sault. Much of this company's business was delivering supplies and mail to the lumber camps and small communities along the shore on the *Northern Belle* and the *Waubuno* which occasionally ran trips along the southern shore to Meaford and Owen Sound.

In 1879, The *Waubuno* sank with twenty-four hands and passengers in a November storm near Parry Sound. She was replaced with the brand new 152 foot *Manitoulin*. In turn the *Manitoulin* burned with more than a dozen lives lost in May 1882. The company then chartered the 144 foot *Asia* to fill in during the 1882 season. Initially designated as a mail carrier on Lake Huron, the *Asia* was described as a "canaller". This meant she was short enough to get through the Welland Canal. To make up extra internal capacity she was built high in the water. Unfortunately the design was not suited to November gales on Georgian Bay, A huge storm on September 14, 1882, sent her to the bottom near Lonely Island with 100 persons aboard. Only two survived.

The terrible human costs of steamer service to the north were accompanied with a looming loss of mail contracts to the smaller steamers. The Canadian Pacific Railway opened its new port in Owen Sound in 1884. Fast propeller driven luxury ships, *Athabasca, Alberta*, and *Algoma* were integrated into the railway system to give seamless mail service from Montreal to Manitoba. A railway line was also being pushed around the North Channel to the Sault, removing the need for steamer mail contracts there as well. Postal Inspector Matthew Sweetham's memos in the 1880's clearly reflect the desire to take mail contracts away from steamers.

The days of steamer mail service on Georgian Bay were soon over.

PART IV
Searching for Reliable Mail Service 1884-1889

In 1885 when the Canadian Pacific Railway pushed its way around Lake Superior as part of John A. Macdonald's confederation promise to British Columbia, there were immediate pressures put on the upper lakes steamer mail carriers. No longer did the steamboat lines have the post office "in a tight place" as Postal Inspector Sweetham complained during his negotiations with the Great Northern Transit Company (GNT) in 1884. Railways were becoming a clear alternative to moving mail to the west

By 1886 Inspector Sweetham was able to negotiate a partial steamer contract for mail between Sault Ste. Marie and Port Arthur for a reduced price of $600 with the GNT.[15] In 1884 a similar contract had been worth several times $600. Even then Sweetham was advising the Post Master General, Sir Alexander Campbell, that Lake Superior mail should be carried by rail as it was more dependable and cost efficient.

The communities around Georgian Bay were unhappy with Sweetham's hard line on service. In fact the captain of the *Frances Smith*, William Tate Robertson, managed to get considerable support in
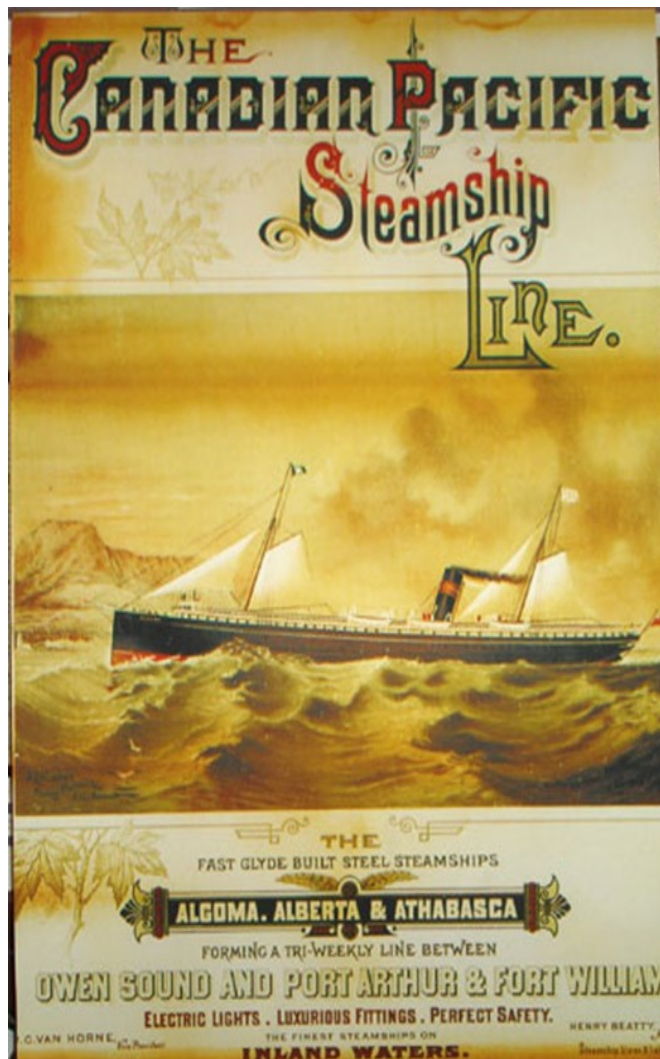

The original of this Canadian Pacific poster is located in the Community Waterfront Heritage Centre. The Algoma (pictured above) passing Thunder Cape, sank near here in 1885 with the loss of about 48 lives.

# Upper Great Lakes steamboats that carried mail in the late 19th Century
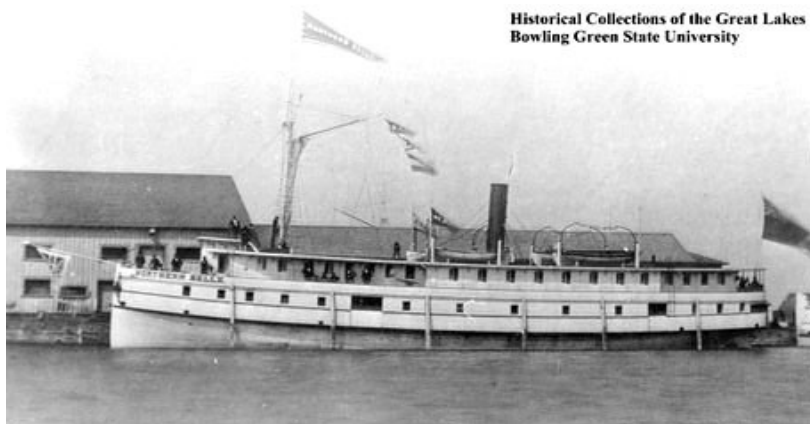
The *Northern Belle* was originally built as the *Gladys* in the US. It later was sold into Canada with a name change. The Northern Belle burned at Byng Inlet November 6, 1898
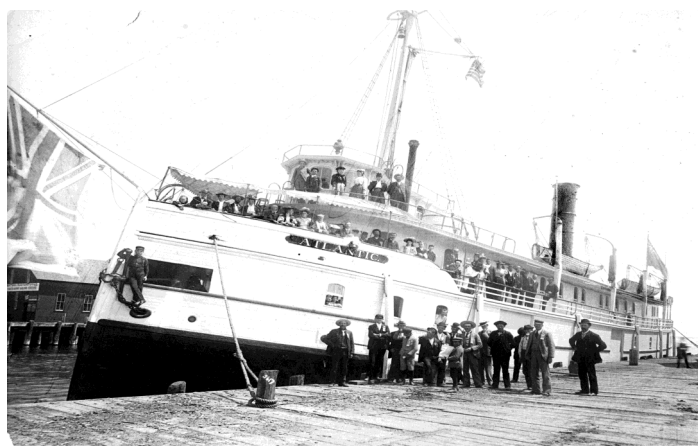

The propeller steamer *Atlantic* of the Great Northern Transit Company delivered mail from Owen Sound to points north every other week in 1887.
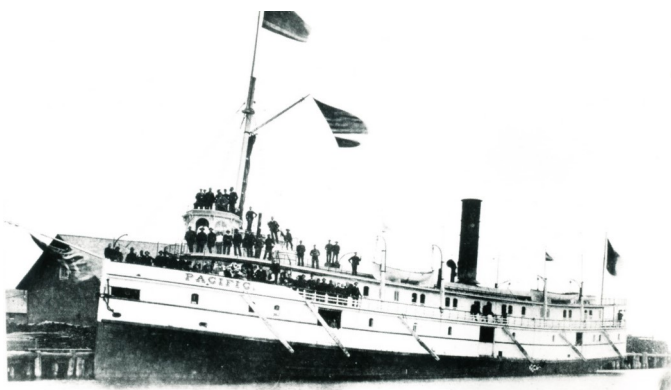
Great Northern Transit (GNT) propeller driven vessels gave the old side wheelers a run for the money. They were usually faster and cheaper to operate. Above is the *Pacific* , a regular visitor to Owen Sound

Owen Sound to have his ship carry mail to Sault Ste. Marie. The local leaders of Owen Sound wrote letters on Robertson's behalf to members of parliament, the Prime Minister and the Post Master General.[16] The gist of the argument was that "through mail" from Port Arthur, Sault Ste. Marie, and Manitoulin to Owen Sound was carried to Collingwood, then sent back to Owen Sound, even although the steamer stopped initially in Owen Sound. Businessmen believed they were at a commercial disadvantage to their rivals in Collingwood who had direct mail service.

Sweetham, who wanted the postal service to pay for itself, saw what Captain
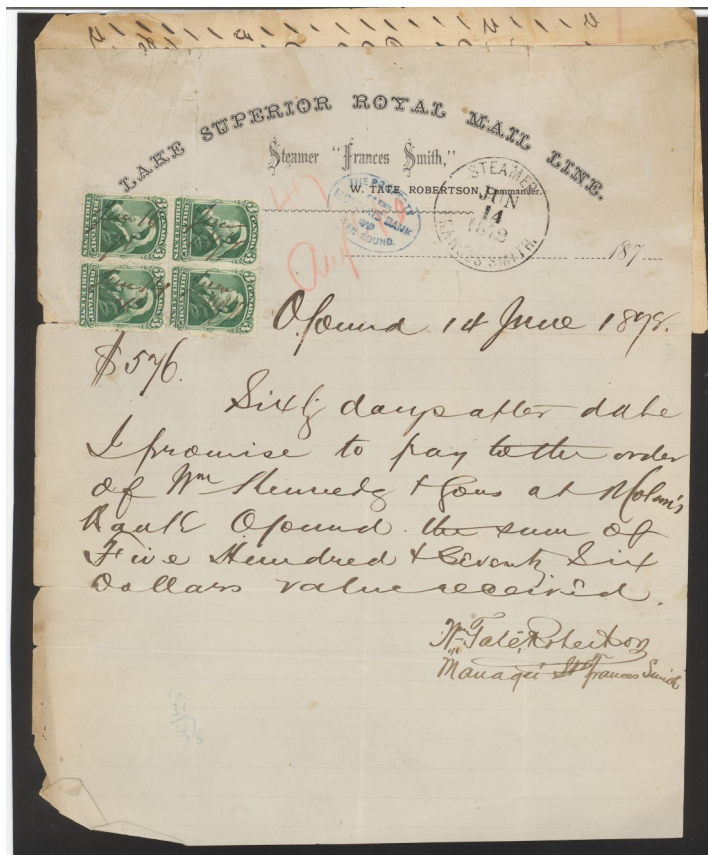
Although operating a steamer was a lucrative business, there were always expenses to cover, particularly at the beginning of the year. In June 1878 William Tate Robertson, the captain of the *Frances Smith* and the Manager of the Lake Superior Royal Mail Line had to borrow money from Molson's Bank in Owen Sound to meet financial obligations.

Image courtesy of Bill Longley

Robertson was up to: getting a contract for the *Frances Smith*. He therefore advised the post office officials not to change the mail services then being provided by the GNT steamers, *Atlantic* and *Pacific*. Revenues for Georgian Bay service by 1888 had reached over $7800 but each ship was paid $2500.[17] A year later when the *Frances Smith* joined the GNT she too managed to get a $2500 mail contract from southern Georgian bay to Port Arthur under her new name, the *Baltic*. Now Sweetham's margins were really thin.

Nevertheless, there was continued pressure on the post office to maintain regular mail service to the growing communities of Manitoulin Island, (Gore Bay, Kagawong, Providence Bay, Meldrum Bay, Michael's Bay, and Manitouwaning). Cockburn Island and St. Joseph's Island on the route to the Sault wanted service too, and large steamers carrying freight and passengers to the Lakehead were reluctant to stop at these small ports because it slowed them down. The result was that smaller ships out of Owen Sound filled the gap.

Semi weekly local service was made to these out ports from the southern Georgian Bay ports and then hooked into the railway mail service at Collingwood, Owen Sound, and Sault Ste. Marie. Despite this expanded mail service grumbling continued, especially in Meaford.

Mail from Toronto and southern Ontario was delivered daily by train to Meaford, however, the business people of the town wanted thrice weekly steamer service as well in order to connect to Manitoulin Island. They thought they were being out maneuvered by both Collingwood and Owen Sound businessmen. And so they were. But that was not Matthew Sweetham's concern. He dismissed their concerns as "trifling."

As the era of "Steamer Mail" was drawing to a close, the rivalry between companies became intense. In the face of competition the two major steamer companies with Georgian Bay contracts were forced to share the spoils. It was not a marriage made in heaven. In 1887 the operators of the *Frances Smith* and the owners of the Great Northern Transit Company (GNT) made an arrangement to split mail delivery contracts. The GNT held the contract for one week while the *Frances Smith* had it the next. That worked just fine but when the steamer *Frances*

Smith was forced into dry dock in November 1887, the GNT refused to pick up the slack in mail delivery from Owen Sound to points north. Their propeller ship, the *Atlantic* under the command of Captain Robert D. Foote refused to assume the responsibility for mail delivery because that was not part of his contract. It was not until the Postmaster at Owen Sound, Mr. Robert Crawford prevailed upon Foote. In the end Foote agreed to carry the mails until the end of the season.[18]

Meanwhile the GNT purchased the *Frances Smith* and renamed her the *Baltic*. Now with three steamers the *Baltic*, *Pacific,* and *Atlantic,* a new mail contract was negotiated in 1888. For an additional $1000 per year they would carry her majesty's mail to Lake Superior ports including Batchawana, Montreal River, Michipicoten, Silver Islet, and Fort William.

By 1889, the rail line to Sault Ste. Marie was fully operational and Postal Inspector Sweetham recommended it's use instead of steamer mail.

Except for the islands in the north channel and Lake Superior ports the days of steamer mail were over.[19]
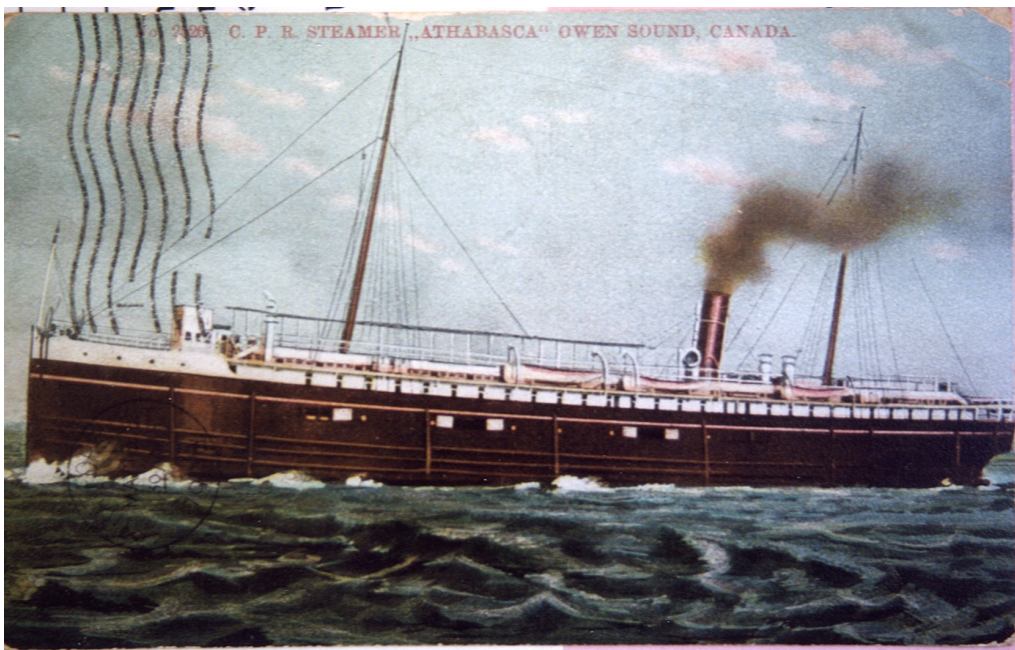
Cancelled post card of the S.S. Manitoba, one of 3 CPR ships
in 1890 that carried mail.

REFERENCES

1. Rankin, Charles, Deputy Surveyor to Surveyor General, *Report of Survey of Alta , and part of Zero,* December 16, 1833. AO.MS924 roll 5, item 60.

2. W.R Wightman, *The Evolving Upper Canadian Steam packet Service, 1816—1850,* Freshwater Vol. 9, No 3, 1994, published by the marine Museum of the Great Lakes at Kingston.

3. *Barrie Herald*, [Barrie]. 30 May, 1855.

4. The Mazeppa was sunk in the fall of 1856.

5. Parsons, R.S., *Steamboat Vignettes: The Ploughboy*, PHSC Journal No. 83. pp.226-228, September 1995 .

6. Griffin to Captain Dick, 25 April,1859, Boggs, Appendix K.

7. Parsons, R.S. *Steamboat Vignettes: The Clifton*, PSHC Journal 81, pp. 66-68, March 1995.

8. *Comet,* Owen Sound, 6 June , 1863.

9. *Comet*, Owen Sound, 20 August , 1863.

10. *Collingwood Daily Review*, Collingwood, 22 August , 1863.

11. Registered letters were introduced to Canada West in 1853.

12. National Archives website, October 2003.

13. Report of the Committee of the Privy Council , 28 January, 1870.

14. Government of Canada, Sessional papers, 1879, No4.

15. Sweetham to Post Office Secretary White, 19 July, 1886.

16. Library and Archives Canada, RG3 Microfilm T2265.

17. Sweetham to the Postmaster General, 27 March, 1889.

18. Scott L Cameron, *The Frances Smith, Palace Steamer of the Upper Great Lakes*, p.146.

19. Ibid.

The content in this story was initially published by the Postal History Society of Canada by Scott L. Cameron

Many of the communities identified on the map below were without mail service over the winter in 1860. Some were served by the railways after 1873, but several remained isolated until the 1930s.

ONTARIO

Lake Superior

Sault Ste. Marie

Garden River

Bruce Mines

Thessalon

Algoma Mills

Spanish Mills

Neebish Rapids

Hilton

North Channel

Little Current

Killarney

French River

Key Harbour

Byng Inlet

Strait of Mackinac

Cockburn Island

Great Duck Island

Manitoulin Island

Manitouwaning

Lonely Island

Parry Sound

Providence Bay

Cove Island

Cabot Head

Georgian Bay

MICHIGAN

Tobermory

Lake Huron

Wiarton

Cape Rich

Owen Sound

Meaford

Collingwood

Penetanguishene

Georgian Bay & North Channel Communities

North

50 kilometres