

A FAVOURITE COVER: 1803 LETTER FROM LONDON TO CAPE BRETON

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During the years 1784-1820 the Island of Cape Breton was an independent British Crown Colony under the leadership of a Lieutenant Governor (Major DesBarres) and an Executive Council based at Sydney, which was chosen as the new capital. Shortly after gaining its independence, Cape Breton appointed its own Deputy Postmaster General (Thomas Uncle) and established the first post office at Sydney; overall control of postal services, however, remained with the Deputy Postmaster General at Halifax, Nova Scotia (Joseph Peters), as the GPO in London wished there to be only one line of communication between Great Britain and the Maritime Provinces.

Cape Breton retained its independent status until 1820, at which point the British Government decided that the island should be re-attached to Nova Scotia, which would not only provide it with more protection in the event of a sustained American assault, but also – and probably more relevantly – beef up the governance and administration of the colony which had suffered from political in-fighting and neglect during the previous 36 years. So ended a period of the Island's history, which is nicely described by J. J. Macdonald in his excellent book on *The Nova Scotia Post (I)* as “at the best ill-conceived and at the worst mis-managed”.

The provision of adequate postal services in late 18th and early 19th century Cape Breton was held back by two major obstacles. Firstly, Cape Breton's distant location from Halifax and resulting reliance upon the good nature of captains of local trading vessels to deliver mail to the Island, and secondly, inland travel was extremely hazardous, so much so that a courier's life was frequently endangered by the poor state of both roads and bridges, so vividly described by Arthur Stone using contemporary reports (2). It goes without saying that the need for and type of any postal service depends very much on the extent and nature of the population at the time. Consequently, Sydney required a post office from the very moment that the town became the seat of government in 1784 in order that official documents to and from Halifax and London could be properly processed. But, in view of the generally chaotic nature of the Island's governance, it is perhaps not surprising that no other post office was officially designated until 1825 when one was set up at Arichat, which had witnessed an ever-increasing population since the early 1800's and which had become the centre of the Island's fishing industry with its own customs office. It is of course entirely possible that this customs office had also acted as a postal facility in some form or other for many years prior to the appointment of a postmaster (John Fuller) with his own office.

Having scoured through a variety of relevant auction catalogues, articles in society journals and publications dealing with Nova Scotia, I can only conclude that very few items of mail dating back to the Island's time as a British Crown Colony have survived in the public domain. In addition, despite prodigious research carried out by J. J. Macdonald and recorded in his book, he has not discussed, or included any illustrations

of letters, to or from Cape Breton at this period. I therefore consider myself very fortunate to have been able to acquire via eBay the packet letter illustrated at *Fig 1* below, which is date-lined London, 21 September 1803 and addressed to George Moore, Naval Officer, Cape Breton, North America. The letter is an acknowledgement of partial repayment of a debt of £50 dating back to 1786 and guaranteed by the Earl of Moira; in view of Moore's character (see below), it's highly unlikely that he re-paid the balance owing during his lifetime.

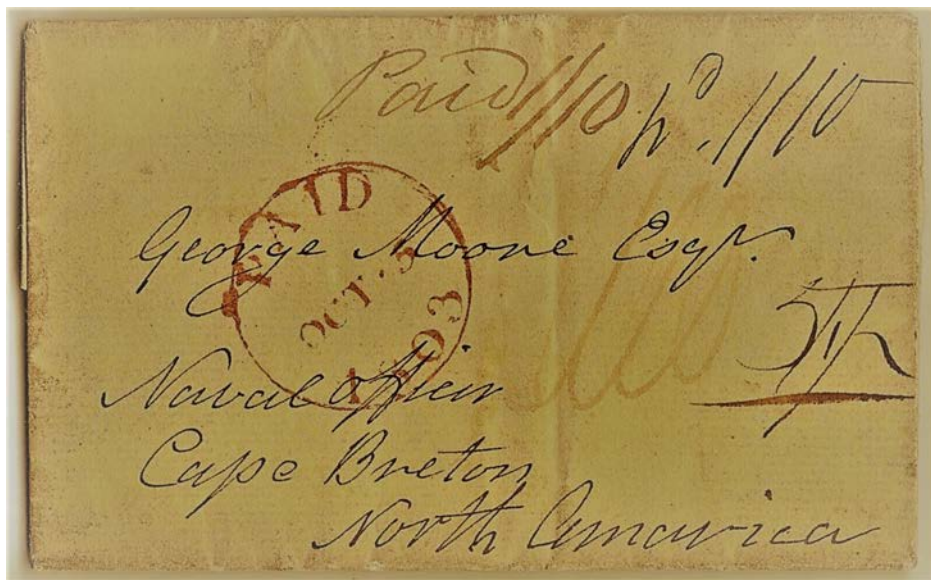


Fig 1. 1803 letter from London UK to Cape Breton.

The letter was carried on the *Duke of Cumberland*, which sailed out of Falmouth on 11 October 1803 and arrived at Halifax, N.S. on 18 November. The ship then continued on its journey to New York, off-loading the mail, together with newspapers informing readers in America of the latest developments in the Revolutionary Wars, including Napoleon's declared intention to land troops on the SE coast of England "in the next fortnight". Fortunately for all concerned this plan was abandoned before any attempt was made to carry it out, although not before "the fashionable inhabitants of Margate packed up in a violent hurry to leave the town"!

Less than a year later, the *Duke of Cumberland* was wrecked in a hurricane off Antigua. Miraculously, there was no loss of life thanks to the heroic actions of the Chief Mate, as described in the following contemporary account by Thomas Tegg (3):

The Cumberland, anchored off Antigua September 3, 1804, was caught in a very severe storm and dragged her anchors. When the hurricane struck the next day, the ship lost all its rigging and was thrown onto rocks, where all thirty one people on board would have perished, were it not for great good fortune and the courage & clear-headedness shown by Mr Doncaster, the Chief Mate, who having climbed along the bowsprit,

jumped into the water and was then catapulted onto the rocks by a huge wave, enabling him subsequently to catch hold of a rope from the ship and tie it to some trees. Using this rope, the crew were then able over a period of three hours to heave themselves ashore and make their way inland and to safety.



Fig 2 The wreck of the Duke of Cumberland.

To return to the letter in fig 1: manuscript marks (x 2) together with the London date-stamp show that the sender paid the sum of 1/10d sterling, calculated at 10 pence for the inland journey London to Falmouth plus 1 shilling for the standard transatlantic packet rate. A separate manuscript mark, presumably done at Halifax, indicates that a further 5½d (cy) was due for the onward journey to Cape Breton, but it is unclear how this rate was assessed or indeed how the letter was to be transported to its destination.

Earlier writers inform us that during the four winter months (i.e. November to February) an “Indian courier” would carry the mails on a monthly basis between Halifax and Sydney, but I have been unable to track down any further details about this arrangement. Regrettably, my own “winter” letter appears to provide no further clues. If the letter had arrived during the summer months, it is likely that it would have incurred extra charges and been routed via Antigonish, as per the 1817 example exhibited by David Handelman in 2007 (4), where the addressee was charged 11d currency for the journey Halifax to Antigonish plus a further 7d cy for the final stage to Sydney, as unpaid letters were at that date charged at each office en route to destination. Incidentally, according to Macdonald the earliest recorded Cape Breton postmark (a double-circle) dates back to 1825 and was used at both Arichat and Sydney, although he mentions the possibility that, as Sydney had a post office at a much earlier date (1784), that office could

theoretically have used a straight line mark, in common with examples seen elsewhere in Nova Scotia (e.g. Digby and Annapolis) ; if so, surviving examples have still to be found and/or reported.

Finally, a few words about the Irishman George Moore, the addressee of my letter. On the face of it, he appears to have been a fine, upstanding individual: a Naval Officer, Loyalist, magistrate, deputy collector of revenue, clerk of licences and until 1807 a member of the Island's Executive Council. However, that glowing c.v. needs to be counter-balanced by contemporary documents recording that in 1792 he "deluded and ruined" a 16 year old African slave (Diana Bastian), who subsequently died following the birth of twins and who, during her pregnancy, had received no assistance at all from Moore or his brother. Some years later, Moore was the subject of numerous allegations made by Clement Hubert, an Arichat Customs Officer, regarding illegal trading; and in his role as a Magistrate, he was also known to have meted out excessively harsh treatment for those he found guilty of criminal activity, viz: ordering a man "to be whipped the distance of one mile at a cart's tail at Arichat". All of this gives the impression that he used his rank and position to ride rough-shod over others, taking full advantage of the general lack of law and order, which as a Councillor he should have been improving, to obtain his own ends. I have no idea how many folk mourned George Moore's passing in November 1813, but there must have been many who did not!

References

1. The Nova Scotia Post by J J Macdonald, Unitrade, Toronto, 1985
2. Journey Through a Cape Breton County by Arthur J Stone, University College Cape Breton, 1991
3. Particular Account of the Loss of the Duke of Cumberland Packet etc by Thomas Tegg, London, 1809
4. Mail between BNA & UK, 1766–1875, exhibit by David Handelman, 2007, available online at
<https://www.rfrajola.com/mercury/DHE2.pdf>

Anyone interested in knowing more about Cape Breton's history during the years 1784-1820 might wish to consult the bibliography at the following link but be warned you could be letting yourself in for some long and time-consuming work!

[Sparrow's Sydney ~ Bibliography, 1784-1820 ~ 18th Century Cape Breton Island \(krausehouse.ca\)](http://Sparrow's%20Sydney%20~%20Bibliography,%201784-1820%20~%2018th%20Century%20Cape%20Breton%20Island%20(krausehouse.ca))