

Analytical Study of Canada's 2-Ring Stamp Obliterators of 1869 and Their Spinoffs.

Synopsis, October 14, 2020

Importance. The sixty 2-ring obliterators issued by the Post Office Department (POD) in 1869 created a numbered post office system for the newly federated Dominion of Canada (1867), as noted on the title-page.

Historical research. After the exhibitor found many 2-ring numbers with more than one obliterators, documentary proof was needed. The exhibitor spent four months on line and at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa reading tens of thousands of pages of 19th-century post office records. The four most important findings are that (1) a previously overlooked Postmaster General's letter to Montreal mentions its "six" POD 2-ring 1 obliterators made of brass in England by David Berri; (2) the largest post offices cancelled millions of items per year, so they needed more than one obliterators; (3) separate departments in large post offices needed different obliterators; and (4) some post offices got POD funds for obliterators made locally of cork, wood, and metal.

The purpose of this project expanded, to identify every 2-ring number with more than one obliterators.

Manual Study. A huge database of 7,500 2-ring cancels from 3 collections was scrutinized. The shapes of all 60 numbers were described and measured in tenths of a millimeter. Several numbers appeared to have more than one obliterators with several constant distinguishing features, ideally on three or more strikes and one on cover. The best available cancel was chosen as a control for each type. But how could it be proved that those control types were not just distorted strikes, or fakes?

Digital confirmation. All cancels were taken to the Vincent Graves Greene Philatelic Research Foundation in Toronto, where Garfield Portch introduced the Foster and Freeman Video Specular Comparator 6000 (VSC). Every viable strike was superimposed in one colour over every control type in a different colour. The first constant finding was that *strikes from the same obliterators always lie symmetrically over each other, producing a single image* despite distortions, differences in inking, or surface wear. The second constant result was that *strikes from different obliterators always mismatch, producing a double image*. This work indicated that the eye alone cannot be trusted, since several distinctive strikes that looked as if they were from different obliterators turned out to be merely distortions.

Strikes from same obliterators overlap symmetrically.



Some 2-ring 12 strikes have an angle on the stem of the "2." Others have a gentle slope. On the VSC, angled examples (displayed in red) and sloping ones (in green) overlap symmetrically. The single black image shows that distortion is the cause, not a different obliterators.

Strikes from different obliterators produce a double image, due to varying number shapes and sizes. VSC overlays can be displayed in three different colour combinations: red/green, grey/black, and tan/dark blue.



Left: Two copies of Type 1 overlap in red and green: narrower "9", flatter back.

Middle: Two copies of Type 2 overlap in grey and black: wider, rounder "9."

Right: Type 1 (tan) is taller than, sits above, and is left of Type 2 (dark blue).

Identification. For 19 2-ring numbers, 75 multiple obliterators have been identified. **All 53 newly identified obliterators are labelled in red.** All Berri ones are known in more than three strikes, with most on cover.

Challenges of identifying early strikes abound. Collectors prize clear, sock-on-nose cancels, but postal employees were simply trying to get a job done quickly. Clerks at St John, New Brunswick, kept their cancelling devices clean and well inked, so their four 2-ring 7 obliterators are easily identified. Other multiple obliterators can be difficult to identify for these reasons:

- Some clerks produced light, unreadable cancels.
- Some clerks struck stamps on a distorting angle.
- Cancels through cloth obscured number shapes.
- Some numbers have few distinguishing features.

Challenges of identifying worn strikes. The POD obliterators were made of durable brass that took years to wear. Their numbers were hand-engraved, with tools cutting on a curve away from the face of the number. Numbers thickened when surfaces wore, as shown here:



Symmetrical overlays show different *states* of worn obliterators, not different *types* of obliterators, as shown here:

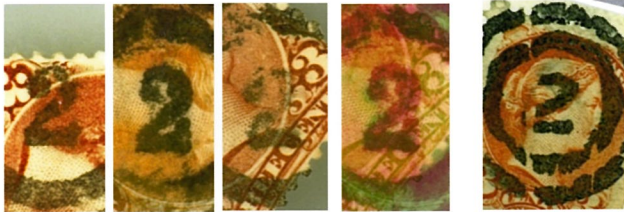


1869 strike. 1880 strike. 1869 over 1880.

The POD recorded payments for making local obliterators from metal, cork, and wood. Examples of all three kinds of materials appear in the exhibit.

Soft, porous cork wore out relatively quickly from constant pounding. Numbers widened at first, then

pieces of cork started falling away randomly, leaving gaps in cancels. Strikes on dated covers indicate that most corks broke up after two to four weeks. Symmetrical VSC overlays helpfully document states of wear in cancels that sometimes look unrelated. (The bright highlights of scans cannot be toned down without losing details of numbers.)



Cork numbers widened, then crumbled. Overlay. Wood grain split.

Wood is a harder material, but it is difficult to carve gracefully. Dates on known covers show that some wood obliterated could last at least four months before breaking, usually in straight lines along the grain.

Challenges raised by 2-ring obliterated not made by Berri. Published sources disagree about whether obliterated not made by Berri existed. For example, K.M. Day and E.A. Smythies in *Canadian Fancy Cancellations of the Nineteenth Century* list six non-Berri 2-ring 2s (plates II and III, types 43, 47, 49, 54, 55-56, and 57), but D.M. Lacelle in *Fancy Cancels on Canadian Stamps 1855 to 1950* rejects most of them as distorted strikes (note D13, p. 154 of 2nd ed. or p. 158 of 3rd ed.). The following considerations move evaluation away from simple opinion.

Provenance. Few people consider how profoundly previous collectors have shaped the hobby. Long-standing habits can be difficult to identify and critique. Many past collectors of 2-rings looked for SON strikes of all 60 numbers on every stamp denomination. They included the Duckworths, Hennok, Hill, Richardson, and Wellburn. Today many collectors continue this practice. All have tended to reject non-Berri strikes because they “do not look right” beside Berri ones. They are set aside and even thrown away as “distorted” or “bogus” or “fake.” When material is not collected for many decades, it becomes very scarce. However, upon close examination, several factors suggest that local obliterated should not be summarily dismissed: Toronto often experimented with new cancelling devices and had POD funding, other offices imitated Toronto’s sensible business practices and aesthetic decisions, the obliterated were made from period materials and ink, seven are on cover and two on piece, they cluster in the years 1869 to 1876, and the stamps do not have previous cancels removed. Fakes tend to be on common, inexpensive stamps with cancels removed, as shown in chapters 3 and 4 of this exhibit.

Inference from circumstantial evidence. POD documents list payments for some locally made “obliterated,” but they are never identified as “2-rings.” Other circumstantial evidence for local 2-rings can be strong or weak, leading to inferences ranging from high probability through possibility to unlikelihood. This exhibit places

material in four chapters ranging from the highly probable to the unlikely.

1. Toronto’s 15 locally made 2-ring 2s (in exhibit chapters 5.2 and 7.2) are most probably genuine because POD reports list payments there for cork, wood, and metal obliterated in both the Large Queen (LQ) and Small Queen (SQ) periods. Six of nine Toronto LQ types survive on cover, though two have not been acquired by the exhibitor. Toronto produced six new SQ 2-ring 2s between 1870 and 1876, the same years when ten other offices made new 2-rings. One of the six is on cover.

2. Several interlocking factors suggest that the seven SQ examples in chapter 7.3 are probably genuine. Two are on cover and one on piece. These cancels come from post offices influenced by Toronto since it was close on the railway and its practices made good business sense or were desirable. These obliterated are all made from period materials and appear on stamps from 1870 to 1876 with no cancels removed. It is unlikely that a forger would take all these factors into consideration.

3. The four SQ examples in chapter 7.4 come from post offices too far from Toronto to be influenced immediately. However, they remain in the same time frame of 1870-76, making them possible examples. SQ stamps are dated based on John Hillson and J. Edward Nixon, *Canada’s Postage Stamps of the Small Queen Era, 1870-1897* (Greene Foundation, 2008), fine tuned by the exhibitor’s extensive calendar collections of SQ stamps.

4. The cancels in chapter 7.5 look genuine but are ambiguous or too late to be included with confidence.

Conclusion. All the findings from research and study show that this exhibit involves heritage preservation of material whose value has been underappreciated.

Difficulty of acquisition. The exhibitor’s 3,224 2-ring cancels on and off cover were acquired strategically over ten years. Examples of different obliterated and other rare items were pursued aggressively, sometimes by acquiring entire collections for a few items. Only six known multiple hammers with the same number have remained inaccessible. It would be very difficult to duplicate the breadth of this collection.

Uniqueness of the exhibit. This exhibit substantially extends knowledge of post office operations in the Large Queen period. It is the first to find so many multiple obliterated with the same 2-ring number, the first to use digital techniques for confirmation, and the first to use groundbreaking research to explain why post offices needed or wanted multiple obliterated.

REFERENCES

- Alexander Globe, “Canada’s Post Office in the 1850s, and Its Multiple 4-Ring Stamp Obliterated Featuring the Same Number,” *BNA Topics*, no. 558 (2019), pp. 5-14.
- Alexander Globe, “Canada’s Post Office in 1869, and Its Multiple 2-Ring Stamp Obliterated with the Same Number,” *BNA Topics*, no. 560 (2019), pp. 28-37.