

# United States 1928-1960 mail for St. Pierre & Miquelon via The Gull Fast Train through Maritime Canada

## 1. The Routes Boston to St. Pierre & Miquelon via *The Gull* Train & the *SS Belle Isle*



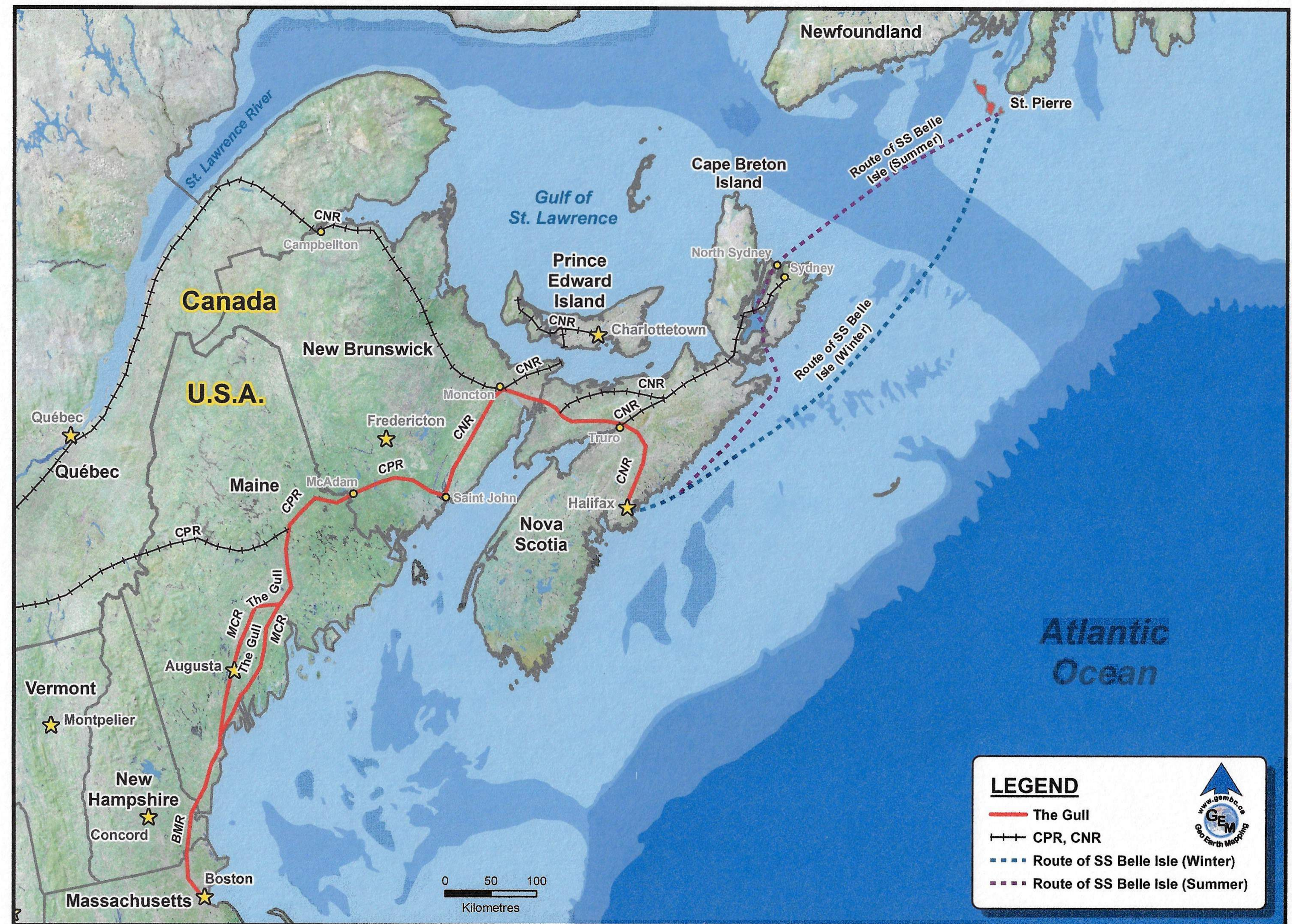
*The Gull* Express under steam on the leg run by the Maine Central Railway (MCR). The train ran an international route through the United States and Canada using the rights of way of four railroads shown as red lines on the map.



*SS Belle Isle* of the Newfoundland Canada Steamships at sea near the French Islands of St. Pierre & Miquelon. The company held a mail contract with the Island's French Colonial Post Office. *Belle Isle* routes are dashed on the map.

### Exhibit Plan

1. The Routes Boston to St. Pierre & Miquelon via *The Gull* & *SS Belle Isle*
2. Examples of United States mail sent to St. Pierre in sealed bags
3. Way bills *The Gull* via Halifax connecting with *SS Belle Isle*
4. Way bills *The Gull* via North Sydney connecting with *SS Belle Isle*
5. Return of way bills to Boston from the St. Pierre Post Office



Map of the Atlantic Coast of New England, Maritime Canada and southern Newfoundland shows the routes of rail and sea transport from Boston to St. Pierre [© used with permission].  
Route of *The Gull* Express Train (red lines) : Boston & Maine Railway (BMR); Maine Central Railway (MCR)  
Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR); Canadian National Railway (CNR)  
Route of the steamship service (dashed lines) : Newfoundland Canada Steamships—*SS Belle Isle*



**2. Examples of United States mail sent to St. Pierre in sealed bags.** The mail for the French Colony of St. Pierre & Miquelon from the United States was sent to the main Boston, Massachusetts, Post Office Foreign Section. Regular mail was bagged and the way bills for each bag were initialled and postmarked on acceptance on the RPO car and on ultimate delivery on a different connecting RPO car of the destination.

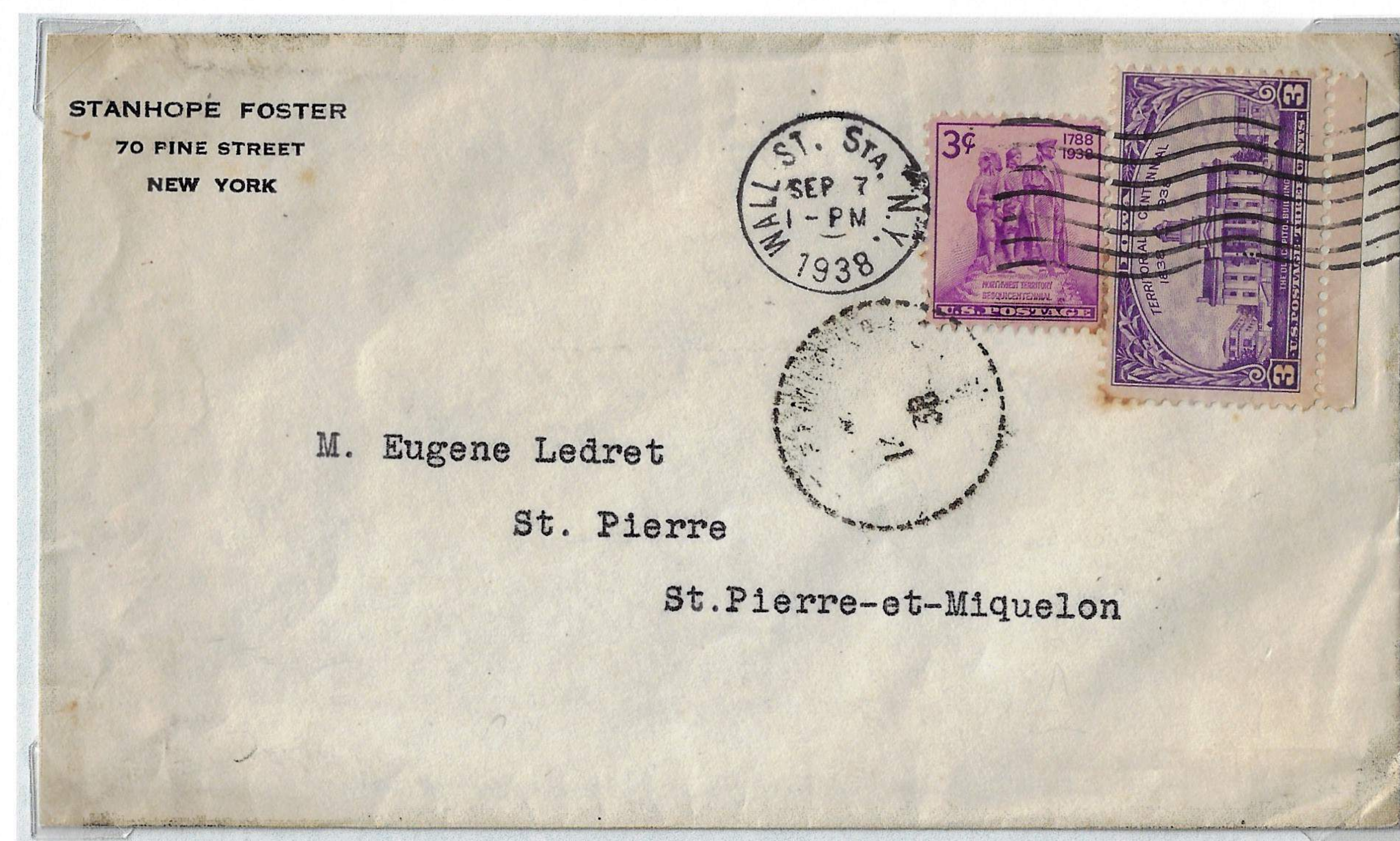
Valuable registered mail was recognised, bagged separately and the bag was subject to special security handling. The registered mail way bills were initialed and postmarked with each new clerk and each transfer to a new rail-road company RPO car along the route of *The Gull*. There were four separate rail road entities *en route*. The two Canadian companies, CPR and CNR, operated at least two or more RPO cars as the bags were switched from train to train on various Maritime Provinces tracks. The bagged letters themselves escaped additional handling *en route* and the laborious task of back stamping registered letters was confined to a single strike on the way bills.



Commercial cover postmarked Milwaukee, Wisconsin dated November 5, 1937. Addressed to E. N. Gunsaulus. E. N. Gunsaulus, Jr. was the American Vice-Consul at St. Pierre. A career diplomat, he served as American Vice-Consul in Windsor, 19322. 1932; Charlottetown, 1926-1929; St. Pierre and Miquelon 1937-1938 and Halifax, 1943.

St. Pierre receiving mark dated November 17, 1937 ties two 60 centime postage due stamps applied to a commercial letter from the United States short paid 3 cents.

(60 centimes x2) = 1.20 francs the correct amount for the postage due equal to 0.20 Swiss francs. Postage due was initially overcharged and an additional postage due stamp was added, cancelled and then removed.



Commercial cover is postmarked Wall St. Sta. N.Y. dated September 7, 1938 to Eugene Ledret, St. Pierre. Receiving mark St. Pierre September 14?, 1938.

The proper letter rate of (2 x 3cents) = 6 cents has been paid.

### ***The Gull* Fast Train Boston to Halifax**

The international fast mail freight and passenger train between Boston and the Nova Scotia (N.S.) port of Halifax was named *The Gull*. The name was appropriate as the train followed the North Atlantic coastline throughout much of its journey (map on page 2.) *The Gull* ran on the right of way of four different railroads: Boston & Maine (B&MR), Maine Central (MEC), and Canada's two largest rail systems, the Canadian National (CNR) and Canadian Pacific (CPR). The train was more a varied, pooled assemblage of through cars, as it switched tracks and equipment, than an entire through train.

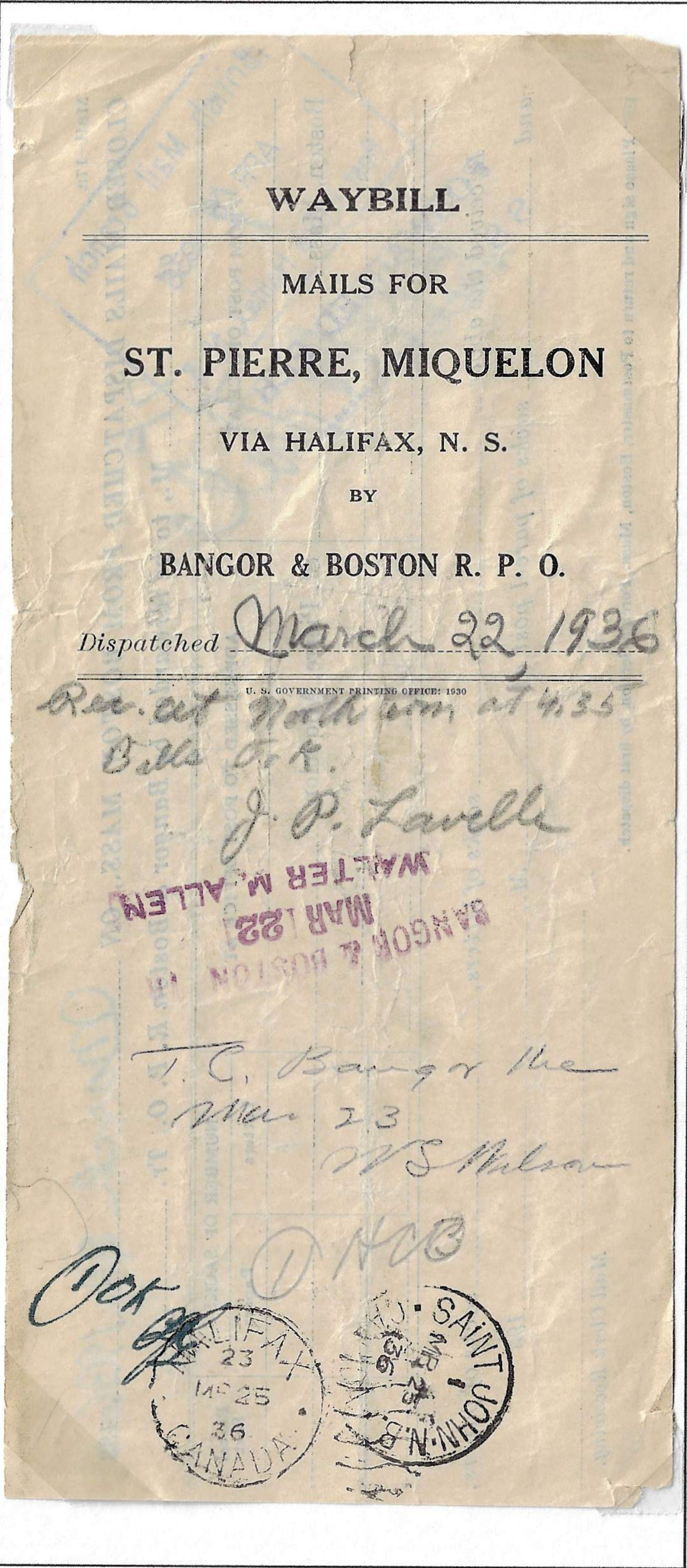
Eastbound Gull trains were leaving Boston's North Station mid-evening to cross the United States-Canada border about sunrise as westbound trains left Halifax shortly after breakfast and crossed the border in the late evening arriving in Boston at 7:00 a.m. *The Gull* ran six days per week, skipping the Saturday departure from Boston and the Sunday departure from Saint John. The train would with a dozen cars: a post office car was behind the steam locomotive and tender, and then the baggage and express car, passenger coaches, and sleepers. It was the only through train on the route, so it carried a lot of mail and express freight.

Mail bags for St. Pierre & Miquelon were labelled for dispatch to the Canadian ports of Halifax (in the winter) or North Sydney (in the summer) by fast train. Once at the rail terminus at Halifax or North Sydney, the mail bags were taken on board the steamer *SS Belle Isle* contracted by the Colony for delivery at the wharf at St. Pierre Harbour and released to the St. Pierre Post Office. In the winter months the harbour at North Sydney was subject to icing over, so the mail boats connected at ice-free Halifax.



3. Way bills The Gull via Halifax connecting with SS Belle Isle - March 22, 1936.

The individual waybills are unique documents. The various RMS and RPO postmarks and markings, with the earliest and latest dates, train designations, cancellation hammer numbers and rarity factors, that appear on the waybills are listed in specialized catalogs of these markings.



A form labelled on the front

“WAYBILL/ MAILS FOR / ST. PIERRE, MIQUELON/ VIA HALIFAX/ BY/ BANGOR & BOSTON R.P.O.”

with a dispatch date of March 22, 1936.

“Rec[ieved] at North term[terminal] at 4:35” is endorsed in manuscript by J. P. Lavelle.

The personal clerk’s hand stamp reads:  
BANGOR & BOSTON TR/ March 22/ WALTER M. ALLEN

A receiving signature of clerk W.S. Wilson is dated “Mar 23”.

Two other sets of clerk initials verify the dispatch.  
Postmarks at the bottom read:

SAINT JOHN.N.B./ 1/ MR 25/ 36/.CANADA

HALIFAX/ 23/ MR 25/ 36 . CANADA.

With a seven wavy line oval duplex

A special mail coach of the United States Railway Mail Service (RMS) carried sealed mail bags and allowed for sorting of loose local letters on board for the first leg of the journey. The Gull eastbound travelled a route 1178 kilometres (732 miles) in its entirety from Boston to Halifax (map p.2). The Gull took 23 hours of actual travel time, between Boston and Halifax - extremely speedy in its time. Its routing was via the B&MR to Portland, Maine and MEC to Vanceboro, Maine where the CPR and its Railway Post Office (RPO) took over for the leg across the United States----Canada border, with a 30-minute stop at McAdam for customs inspection and breakfast, to Saint John, New Brunswick. From Saint John, the Gull was carried via the CNR right of way through Moncton, Amherst and Truro on to the terminus at Halifax. The through rail route from Boston to the harbour at Halifax is shown in red on the map page 2

Mail-17a

CLOSED MAILS DISPATCHED FROM BOSTON, MASS., ON March 22, 1936

at 7 P.M., to be forwarded by Bangor & Boston R. P. O., Tr.

FROM POST OFFICE AT	ADDRESSED TO POST OFFICE AT	NUMBER OF SACKS		Parcel Post
		Letters	Papers	
Boston, Mass.	St. Pierre, Miquelon			

Received the above \_\_\_\_\_ sacks of letters, \_\_\_\_\_ sacks of papers, and \_\_\_\_\_ sacks of parcel post at \_\_\_\_\_ M., \_\_\_\_\_, 1936

Mail Clerk Receiving.

Please sign and return to Postmaster, Boston, Mass., Foreign Section, by first dispatch.

Scan of the back of the waybill at left shown at a 90 percent reduction

The back of the waybill is also manuscript dated March 22, 1936 at 7 p.m. Note that the destination “St. Pierre, Miquelon” is printed on the form. A purple boxed hand stamp reads:

British Mail Branch/ APR 6 (overwritten 7)/ Post Office Halifax N.S.

An additional purple hand stamp reads:

FORWARDED PER/ SS (manuscript) Belle Isle

A feature of the Belle Isle trips to St. Pierre and Newfoundland is the routing through the Bras d'Or Lakes of Cape Breton Island. This 90-mile cruise through the beautiful Nova Scotia lakes was made by daylight map page 2). The ship then touched at Sydney and proceeded to St. Pierre and Miquelon and then on to St John's, Newfoundland .

The time lapse from the March 22 dispatch to the April 7 forwarding is likely due to train delays and late arrival of the SS Belle Isle, not uncommon in late winter. Note the request in the lower left: “Please sign and return to Postmaster, Boston, Mass., Foreign Section, by first dispatch’. The security features of signatures or initials and hand stamps of individual RPOS are absent from the March 22 1936 waybill indicating that the single mail sack contained ordinary letters, unregistered.



4. Way bills The Gull via North Sydney connecting with SS Belle Isle - May 5, 1936

In the summer several rail routes on various CNR branch lines, off the main line route of *The Gull*, were followed through the Canadian Maritime provinces to Sydney on Cape Breton Island (See map p.2). The mail boat *SS Belle Isle*, contracted by the Colony, completed the 310 kilometre ocean voyage across the Cabot Strait to the port of St. Pierre. These different mail routings to the preferred summer port of Sydney are shown on the way bills.

The mail bag can be traced on its journey on Figure 5 (the back of the way-bill). The various mail clerks have initialled and struck the appropriate RPO steel hammers to the document as follows (in dated sequence):

**BANGOR & BOS./ MAY./ 5/ 1936/**  
**J.R.183/ R. P. O.** [large duplex with RMS and six bars in an oval.]

**VANCEBORO & BOSTON/ 1936/**  
**May/ 6/ 36/ TR 71/ R.P.O.**  
[large duplex with RMS and six bars in an oval.]

**HALIFAX & STJOHN/ 14/ MY 6/ 36/**  
**M.C.** [M.C. is for Mail Coach]

**HALIFAX & CAMP. R.P.O./ 4/ MY 6/**  
**36/ .** [CAMP. Is the abbreviation for Campbellton, New Brunswick]

**SYDNEY & TRURO/ 7/ MY/ 6/ 36/**  
**R.P.O.**

CLOSED MAILS FOR NEWFOUNDLAND AND ST. PIERRE ET MIQUELON DISPATCHED FROM  
BOSTON, MASS., ON **MAY 5 1936** 193  
At 7 P M., To be forwarded by Bangor & Boston R.P.O. Tr.

From Post Office at	Addressed to Post Office At	Number of Sacks
		Letters: Papers :
Boston, Mass.,	St. Pierre et Miquelon	1 :
		:
		:
		:
		:

Received the above 1 sacks of letters and  sacks of papers at 7 a.m., May-7<sup>th</sup> 1936.

Kindly sign and Return to  
Postmaster, Boston, Mass., Foreign  
Section, by first dispatch.

M. Logue  
Mail Clerk Receiving

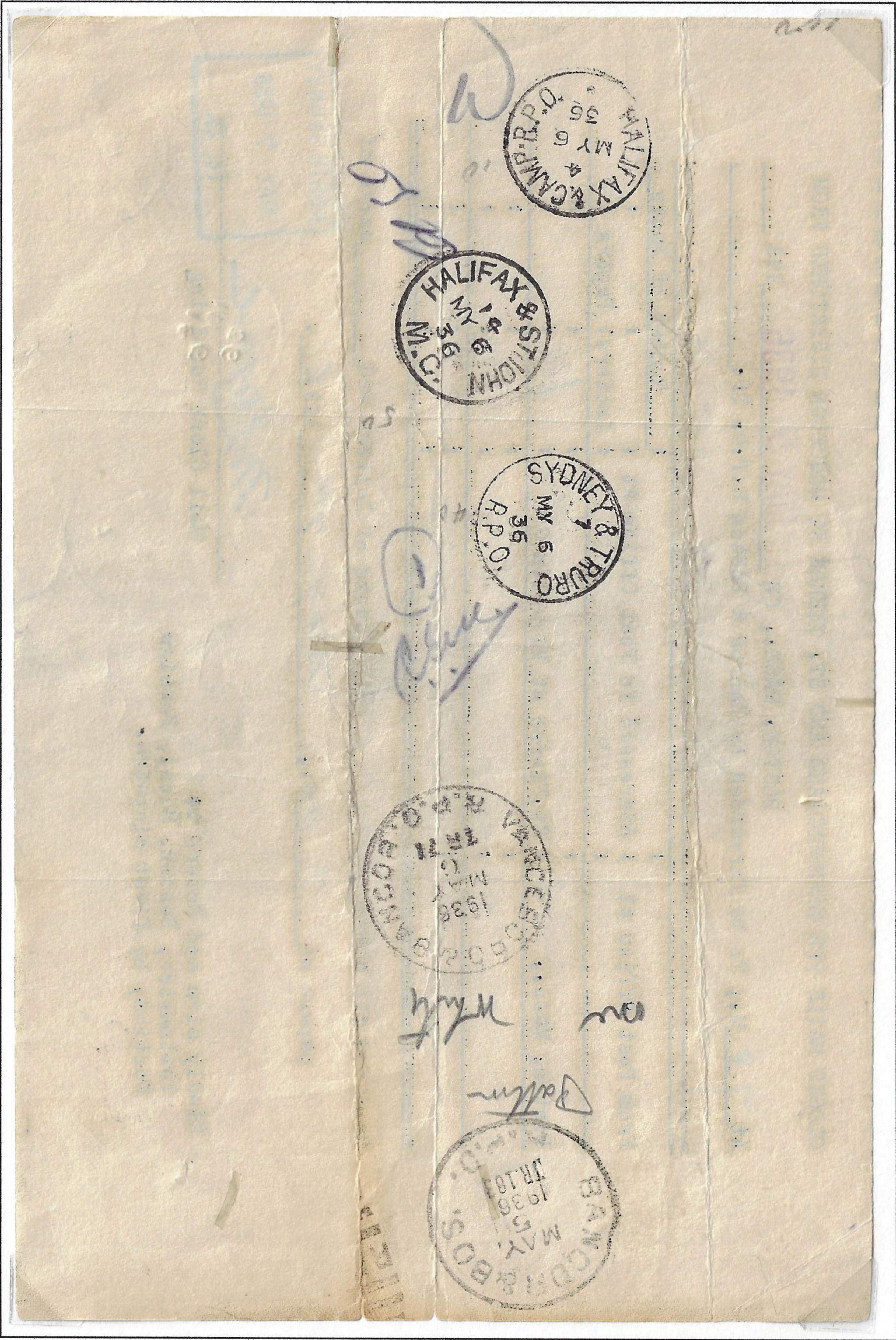
**NORTH SYDNEY**  
**MAY 7 1936**  
**N.S.**

Scan of the back of the waybill at right shown at a 90 percent reduction

A waybill captioned "CLOSED MAILS FOR NEWFOUNDLAND AND ST. PIERRE ET MIQUELON DISPATCHED FROM/ BOSTON, MASS. ON" Note the double QQ mistyped in MIQUELON. The waybill is hand stamp dated MAY 5 1936 in red ink. Figure 5 shows the single sack (mail bag) of letters was dispatched from Boston Post Office at 7 p.m. on May 5, 1936 to be forwarded by the Bangor & Boston R.M.S.. The single mail bag was addressed to the Post Office at "St. Pierre et Miquelon". The bag of letters was received at 7 a.m. on May 7, 1936 and signed for by M. Logue the Mail Clerk Receiving and confirmed by a strike of the boxed:

**NORTH SYDNEY/ MAY 7 1936/ N.S.** [N. S. stands for Nova Scotia]

The route on the various lines can be traced on the Map on page 2. The usual route from Boston took the mail through the State of Maine to the Canadian border. The Gull made connections with the CNR at Saint John and met the CNR Halifax and Campbellton line. The mail bag was transferred to the Sydney and Truro route. The CNR Cape Breton Railway connected the Canso Strait area with Sydney. To cross the Canso Strait, the train cars were placed on a large steamer at Port Musgrave, Nova Scotia and ferried across to Point Tupper on Cape Breton Island. The rail line followed the northwest shore of the Bras D'Or Lakes to North Sydney and Sydney (Map page 2).





4. Way bills The Gull via North Sydney connecting with SS Belle Isle - May 31, 1936

CLOSED MAILS FOR NEWFOUNDLAND AND ST. PIERRE ET MIQUELON DISPATCHED FROM  
BOSTON, MASS., ON May 31 1936  
At 7P M., To be forwarded by Ban-ror & Boston R.P.O. Tr. 261

From Post Office at	Addressed to Post Office At	Number of Sacks	Letters	Papers
Boston, Mass.,	St. Pierre et Miquelon	1		

Received the above \_\_\_\_\_ sacks of letters and \_\_\_\_\_ sacks of papers at \_\_\_\_\_ M., le 5 juin 1936.

Kindly sign and Return to  
Postmaster, Boston, Mass., Foreign  
Section, by first dispatch.

Mail Clerk Receiving

*[Signature]*

*[Circular Postmark: ST PIERRE ET MIQUELON 5-6 36]*

Scan of the back of the waybill at left shown at a 90 percent reduction

A similar dispatch on May 31, 1936, 7 p.m. on train 261. The initial of the 'mail clerk receiving' is dated *le 5 juin 1936* on the front. The dashed circular dated receiving postmark of the St. Pierre and Miquelon Post Office was struck lower right.

ST PIERRE ET MIQUELON/ \*/ 5 – 6/ 36 [seldom seen on a waybill]

The mail, in this case, was side tracked across the Northumberland Strait by ferry and carried via the Prince Edward Island (PEI) Railway and arrived at Charlottetown. It caught the ferry re-crossed the Northumberland Strait, re-connected with the Charlottetown and Sackville line and travelled onward via the Truro-Sydney to the CNR Cape Breton Railroad at Point Tupper to connect at North Sydney. A roundabout route, but timely, to meet the *SS Belle Isle* on its schedule.

The back of the waybill shows signatures of **A.D. Standley J.C** **No. Sta. May 31, 1936** at Boston and **H. Leighton June 1, 1936**. This mail bag had a slightly different routing shown on the back (top to bottom):

BANGOR & BOSTON/ MAY 31/ 1936/ TR2/ R.P.O.

G. P. DEMERITT/ 112 SANFORD ST/ BANGOR - MAINE [This is the clerk's personal hand stamp undated, struck faintly in purple ink]

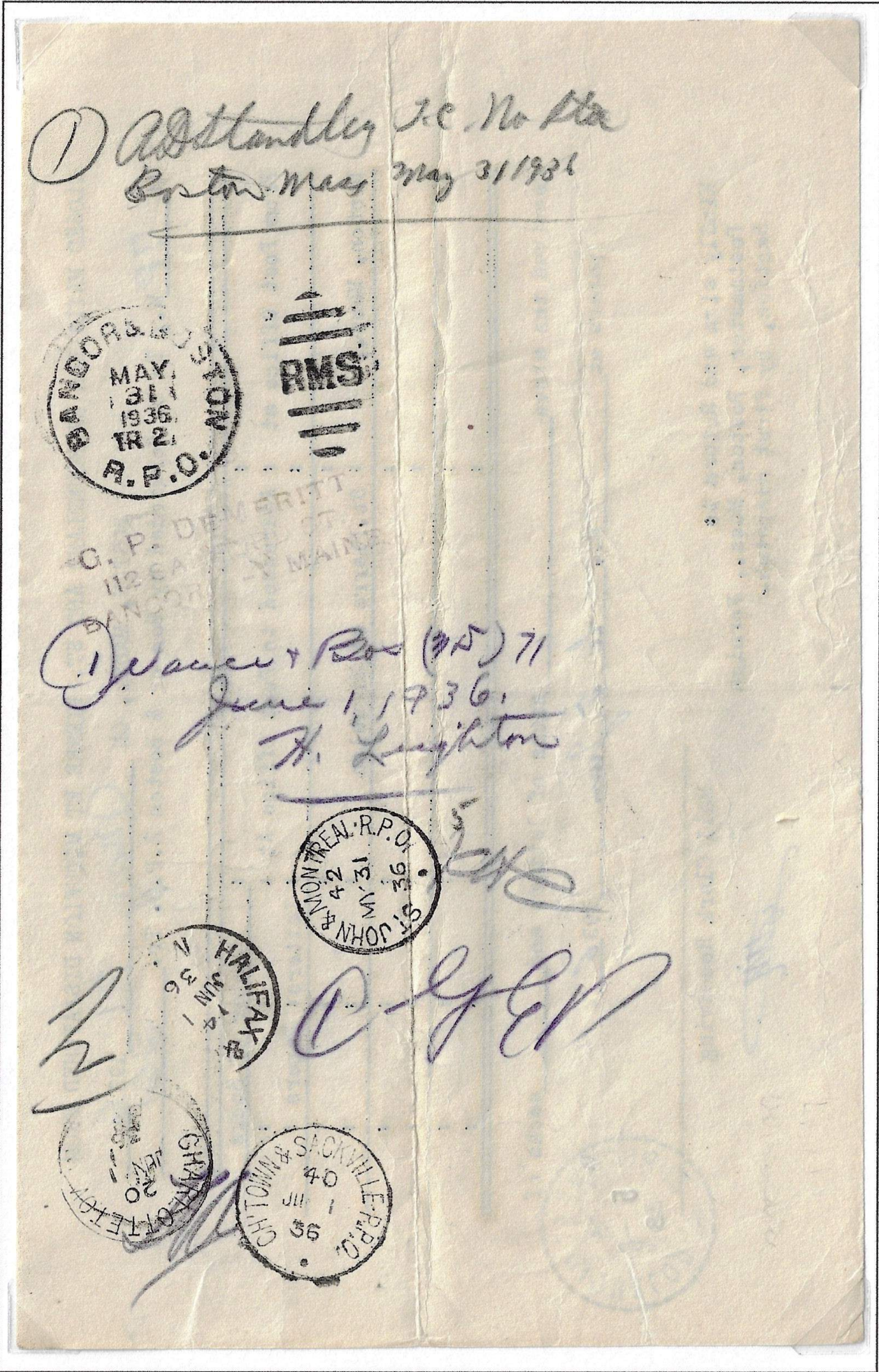
H. Leighton June 1, 1936  
in manuscript

ST JOHN & MONTREAL. R.P.O./ 42/ MY 31/ 36/ .

HALIFAX & [ST JOHN/ MC] / 14/ JUN 1/ 36/ N.S.

CHARLOTTETOWN/ 20/ JUNE 1/ 36/ P.E.I.

CH'TOWN & SACKVILLE. R.P.O./ 40/ JU 1/ 36/ .





4. Way bills The Gull via North Sydney connecting with SS Belle Isle - June 16, 1936

CLOSED MAILS FOR NEWFOUNDLAND AND ST. PIERRE ET MIQUELON DISPATCHED FROM  
BOSTON, MASS., ON June 16 1936  
At 7P M., To be forwarded by Bangor & Boston R.P.O. Tr. \_\_\_\_\_

From Post Office at	Addressed to Post Office At	Number of Sacks	Letters	Papers
Boston, Mass.,	St. Pierre et Miquelon	1		

Received the above \_\_\_\_\_ sacks of letters and \_\_\_\_\_ sacks of papers at \_\_\_\_\_ M., \_\_\_\_\_ 1936.

Kindly sign and Return to  
Postmaster, Boston, Mass., Foreign  
Section, by first dispatch.

M. Logue  
Mail Clerk Receiving

**NORTH SYDNEY**  
**JUN 18 1936**  
**N. S.**

Scan of the back of the waybill at left shown at a 90 percent reduction

A dispatch on June 16, 1936. The receiving signature on the front is endorsed boxed in blue ink:

NORTH SYDNEY/ JUN 18 1936/ N.S.

and signed by M. Logue the 'mail clerk receiving'.

The Steamship *Belle Isle*

In 1931, after winning a ten-year contract to deliver the mails to the Colony of St. Pierre and Miquelon, Newfoundland Canada Steamships initiated a trial passenger, mail and cargo service between Montreal, St. Pierre Miquelon and St John's, Newfoundland. In May of 1932, Newfoundland Canada Steamships took delivery of the new 1,960-ton passenger and cargo steamer *Belle Isle*. With dimensions of 256 by 38 feet, she could accommodate 65 first-class passengers and 20 second-class in three four-berth and one eight-berth cabins. Built at the Swan Hunter's shipyard at Wallsend on Tyne England, the new ship had cost \$250,000 and had 89,680 cubic feet of cargo space.

The SS Belle Isle entered service in the summer months between Montreal Canada, Port aux Basques Newfoundland, the Canadian ports of Sydney and North Sydney, the French Colony of St Pierre and Miquelon and St John's Newfoundland, ailing every two weeks thereafter. In the winter months navigation in the St. Lawrence River and Gulf and Sydney Harbour was closed because of ice conditions and the SS Belle Isle sailed from its winter base at Halifax, carrying passengers, mail and freight under long term contract with the Colonial Administration of St Pierre et Miquelon.

The back of the waybill shows signatures of clerk Libby. The various mail clerks have initialled and struck the appropriate RPO steel hammers to the document as follows (top to bottom):

**BANGOR & BOSTON/ JUN/ 16/ 1936/ TR, 183/ R.P.O.** [duplex RMS in 8 barred oval]

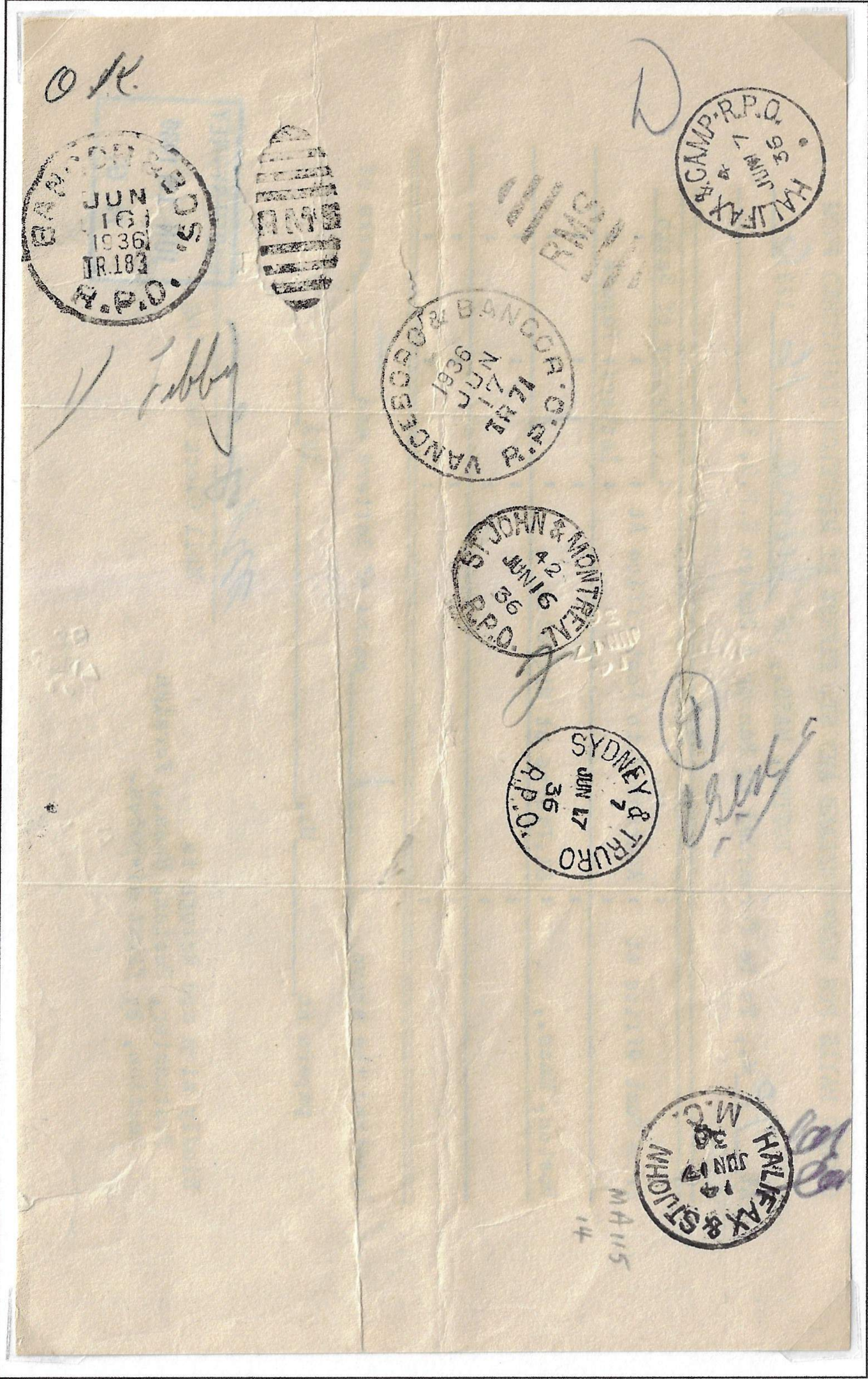
**VANCEBORO & BANGOR/ 1936/ JUN/ 17/ TR 71/ R.P.O.** [duplex RMS in 6 barred oval]

ST JOHN & MONTREAL/ 42/ JUN 16/ 36/ R.P.O.

HALIFAX & CAMP.R.P.O./ 4/ JUN 17/ 36/.

HALIFAX & ST JOHN/14/ JUN 17/ 36, M.C.

SYDNEY & TRURO/ 7/ JUN 17/ 36/ R.P.O.





4. Way bills via Charlottetown to North Sydney - November 1, 1936

CLOSED MAILS FOR NEWFOUNDLAND AND ST. PIERRE ET MIQUELON DISPATCHED FROM  
BOSTON, MASS., ON Nov 1 1936  
At 7P M., To be forwarded by Bangor & Boston R.P.O. Tr. 261

From Post Office at	Addressed to Post Office At	Number of Sacks
		Letters: Papers :
Boston, Mass.,	St. Pierre et Miquelon	1 : :
		: : :
		: : :
		: : :

Received the above \_\_\_\_\_ sacks of letters and \_\_\_\_\_ sacks of papers at Ch. Town Nov. 3<sup>rd</sup> 1936.

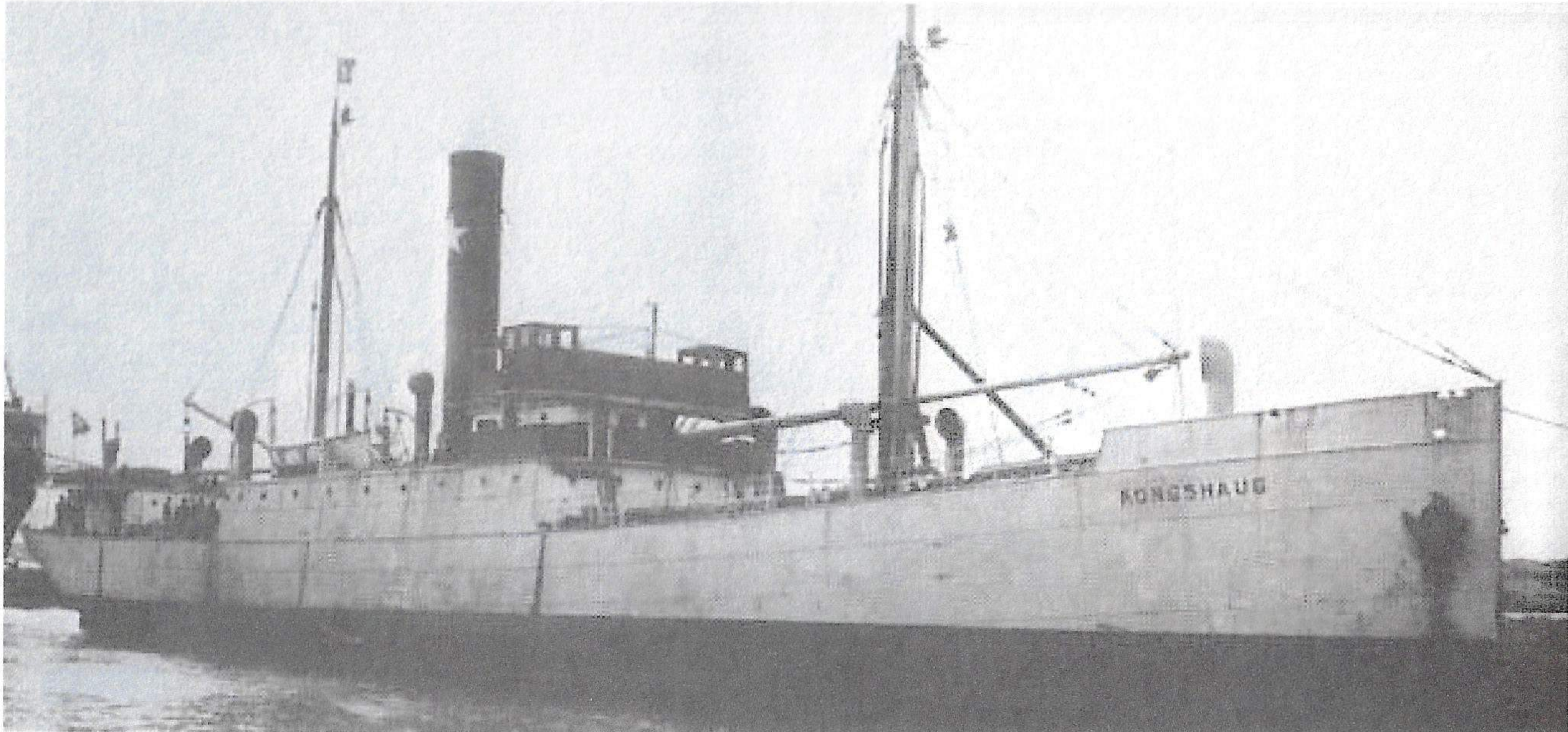
Kindly sign and Return to  
Postmaster, Boston, Mass., Foreign  
Section, by first dispatch.

*Wm Brehach*  
Mail Clerk Receiving

*Dispatched via SS Kongshaug Nov 6/36*

Scan of the back of the waybill at left shown at a 90 percent reduction

A dispatch dated November 1, 1936 at 7 pm Train 261. An unusual route to Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island (PEI) received November 3, 1926 by Wm Brehach. Manuscript "Dispatched/ via SS Kongshaug / Nov 6/36". The SS Kongshaug, a Norwegian flagged freighter, carried the sealed bag from Charlottetown PEI to North Sydney to rendezvous with the SS Belle Isle to complete the trip to St. Pierre.



The Steamship *Krongshaug*

Delivered in November, 1898 from Fevigs Jernbaneskibsbyggeri, Grimstad, Norway as the SS *Sicilia* to Otto Thoresens Linje, Christiania, Norway. Owned by D/S A/S Spanskelinjen (Fred. Olsen & Co.) from 1921.

The ship was purchased in 1935 by M. H. Kongshavn & Sønner, Haugesund, Norway and re-named *Kongshaug*. The tonnage 1147 gt for this ship when delivered.

Scan of the SS Kongshaug. The ship was assigned to the Norwegian Merchant Marine in 1939. It was torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine in 1942.

"Received 1-sealed at No. Sta. Boston Mass. Nov. 1—1936. fr. Boston, Mass  
A.J. Bresshire  
T.C No. Station, Boston, Mass. [Manuscript]

BANGOR & BOSTON/ NOV/ 1/ 1936/ TR, 257/ R.P.O. [duplex RMS in 8 barred oval]

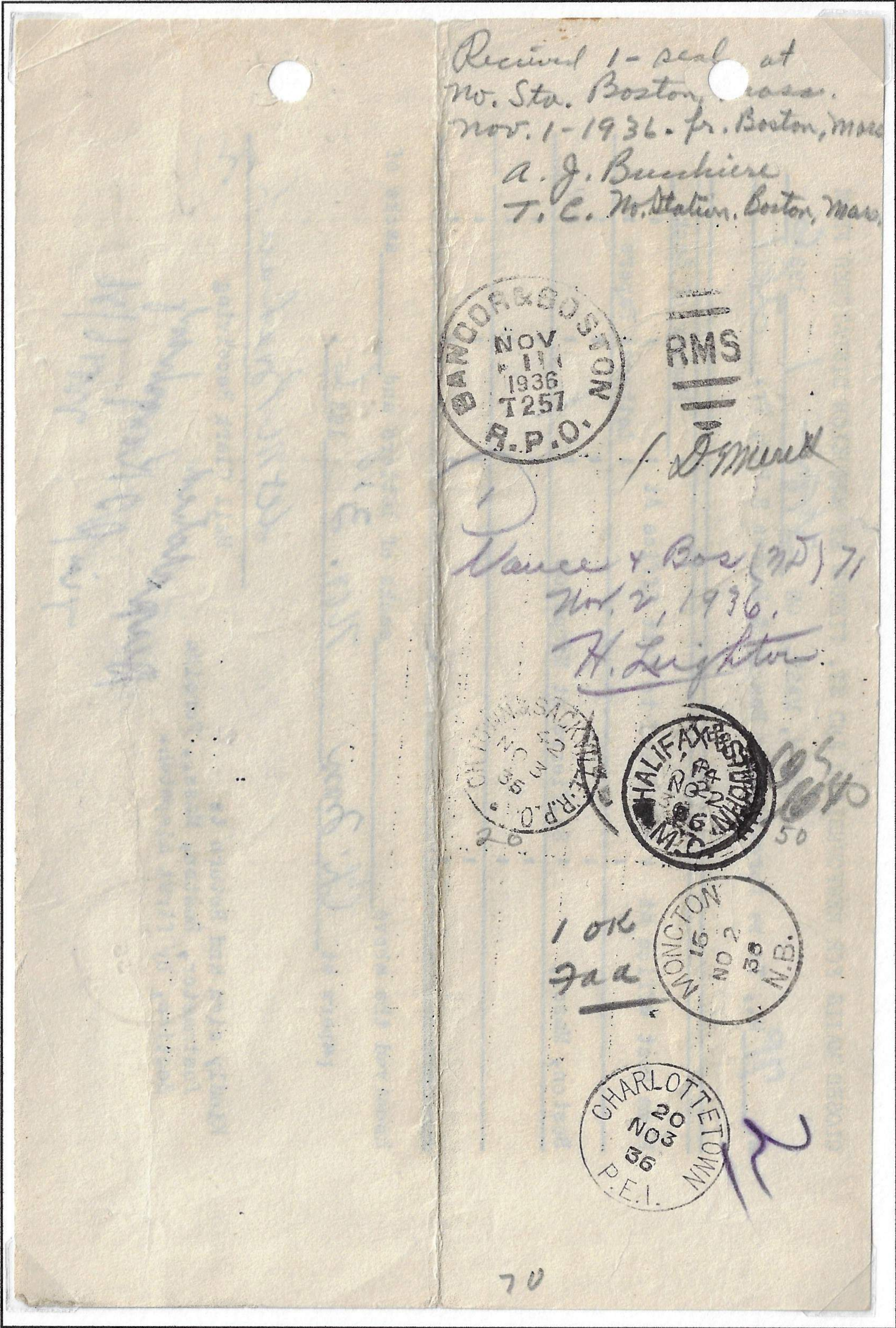
Vance + Bos Nov. 2, 1936 H. Leighton [Manuscript]

HALIFAX & ST JOHN/14/ NO 2/ 36, M.C. [double struck - a late use]

MONCTON/ 16/ NO 2/ 36/ N.B.

CH'TOWN & SACKVILLE. R.P.O./ 42/ NO 3 1/ 36/ .

CHARLOTTE-TOWN/ 20/ NO 3/ 36/ P.E.I.





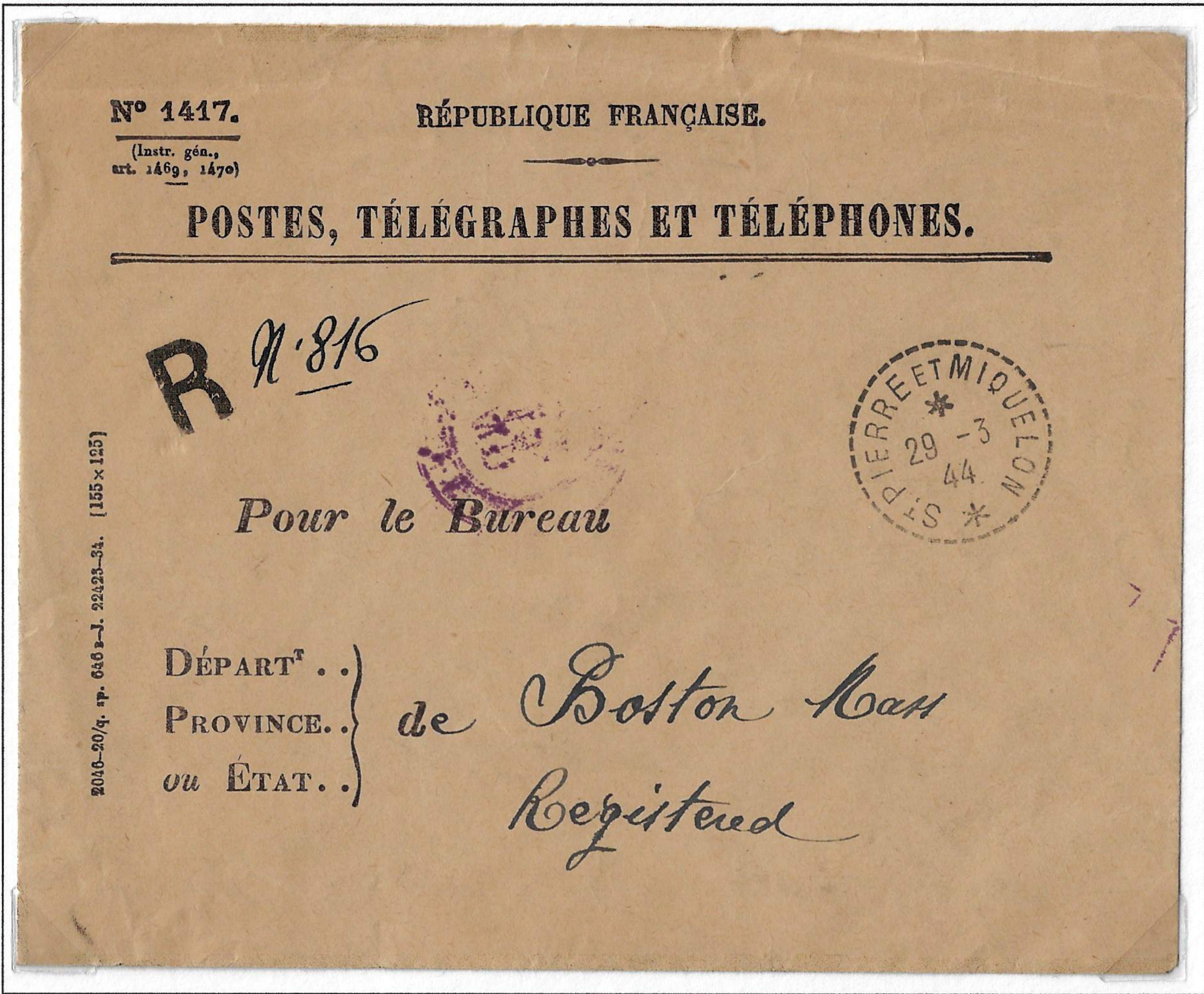
5. Return of way bills to Boston from the St. Pierre Post Office. As instructed the completed way bills were signed as received at the St. Pierre Post Office and returned in official envelopes.

Return to Boston via regular mail



Official cover shows the St. Pierre Post Office free reply envelope that returned the completed way bills back to the Boston Post Office as requested on the way bill text. This acknowledgement completed the very strict accounting procedure that tracked every mail bag.

Return to Boston via registered mail



Later similar returns of waybills to Boston have been sent by the St. Pierre Post Offices as registered mail. The black "R" signifies Registered Mail. With "N.816 "in manuscript. Perhaps the returned documents referred to registered mail bags that arrived with special handling.

Epilogue

The rather elusive, unique, paper waybills, with the interesting RPO route markings and the scarce official return envelopes allow tracing of the, sometimes convoluted, mail routes. The postal artifacts, recovered as discarded Post Office records from waste bins at the main Boston Post Office, allow the postal historian to trace the efficient (and inefficient) movements of mail during the North American heyday of rail transport, Railway Post Offices, steam engines and steamships.

The international aspect of the mail handling and the intrigue and romance associated with named trains like *The Gull* increase the interest and challenge. As more mail, freight and passenger traffic was transported by motor vehicles and by faster aircraft, the railway post offices where gradually phased out and *The Gull* train was discontinued altogether in 1960 . Even steamship sea mail was superseded by airmail around the same time.

The original research contained in this exhibit has been published in *The London Philatelist* in 2019, *United States 1928-1960 Mail for St. Pierre & Miquelon via The Gull Fast Train through Maritime Canada*, *London Philatelist*, v. 128, n. 1469, October p. 392-401.