

A scarce use of the “Greenock Penny Post” handstamp on an 1839 stampless folded letter from London, Upper Canada to Kilmun, Scotland via New York City.

By Charles J. DiComo, PhD

Let’s take a trip through New York City Harbor in 1839 by analyzing a well-traveled stampless

folded letter (SFL) which entered the mails in London, Upper Canada on its way to Finnart Cottage in Kilmun, Scotland in the County of Argyllshire (**Figure 1**). It originated in London, Upper Canada (U.C.) on March 31, 1839, when William Murray penned a three-page letter (**Figure 2**) to his mother and father, Captain James C. Murray of the Royal Navy (“R.N.” on the address panel), discussing the Canada Rebellions of 1838 and 1839, including the Aroostook War.



Figure1: Exploded view of the 1839 stampless folder letter to Kilmun, Scotland: Entered the mails at London, Upper Canada; to New York City harbor; via sailing vessel "Virginian" to Liverpool, England; via coach to Glasgow; via coach to Greenock; via small boat.

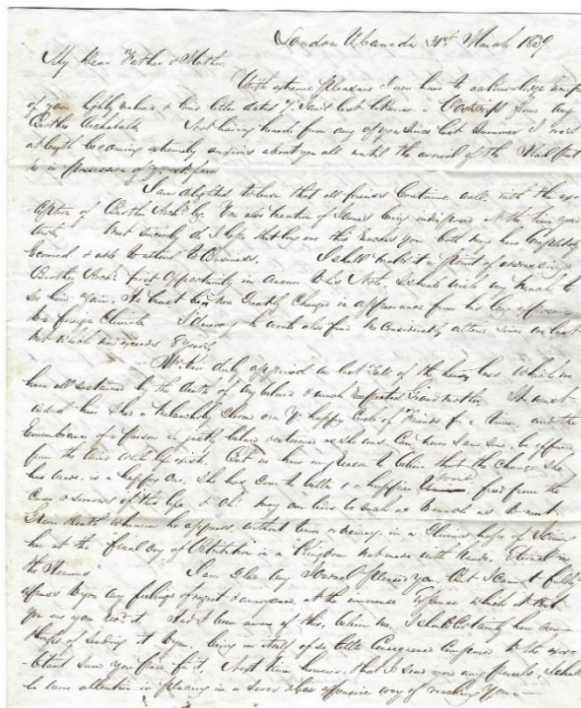


Figure 2: Page one of a single sheet, three-page letter written by William Murry to his mother and father Captain James C. Murray, R.N. at Finnart Cottage in Argyllshire County, Kilmun, Scotland.

[See related article on SFLs on page 14.](#)

During his day, Captain James Murray was the real-life 'Jack Aubrey,' the fictional character in the Aubrey–Maturin series of novels by Patrick O'Brian, who rose from lieutenant to rear admiral in the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars. Capt. Murray was illegitimately born in the British colony of Florida in 1778 and raised in Scotland (**Figure 3**). Murray (like the fictional Aubrey) lived through tumultuous times: the Jacobite Rebellion was still fresh in people's minds, and the American War of Independence was still being fought. Born of landed gentry, his grandfather was Lord Elibank. Murray joined the Royal Navy in 1796 as a volunteer. Ten years later he was made lieutenant and given his first command. For the next twenty years, Murray served on many ships in many stations from Russia to the far southern oceans. In 1825, he left the Navy having gained the rank of Post Captain and retired with his wife to Kilmun, Scotland where he died.



Figure 3: A portrait miniature entitled "The Dashing Captain Murray" painted by Samuel John Stump. Provenance: Bonhams 2007. Source: www.wigsonthegreen.co.uk/.

The letter sent to the Murray's entered the mails April 1, 1839, where a clerk struck the red "LONDON" split-ring postmark with manuscript "April 1/39" at lower left and the red "PAID" at upper right (**Figures 4A & 4B**). The postage paid at London, U.C. totaled 257½ dcy (pence Canadian currency) and is denoted at middle right. It breaks down as: 1s3 dcy for the United States overland inland fee; 7½ dcy for the sailing ship freight money fee; and 9 dcy for the Canadian overland inland fee (**Figure 4C**).

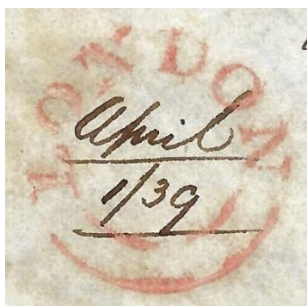


Figure 4A left & 4B above: The markings applied by the clerk in London, Upper Canada.

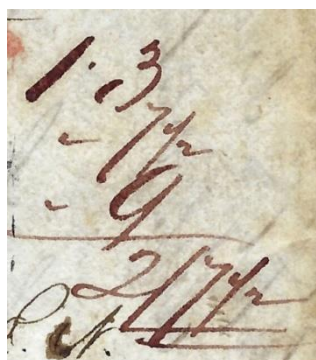


Figure 4C: The rate calculation done by the clerk in London, Upper Canada.

After an eight day transit, the SFL arrived in New York City (NYC) per the direction "via New York" written by William at top left. Upon arrival at the NYC Post Office, the clerk struck a red "NEW-YORK APL 9" circular date stamp with the uncommon use of "APL" for the month April, instead of the more familiar "APR" (**Figure 4D**). The letter was then placed in a mailbag and brought to the harbor and placed on the Red Star Line sailing vessel *Virginian*, which departed NYC on April 16, 1839.

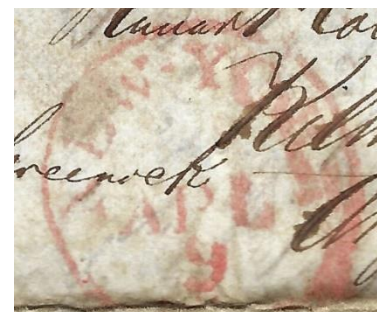


Figure 4D: The marking applied at New York dated "APL 9".

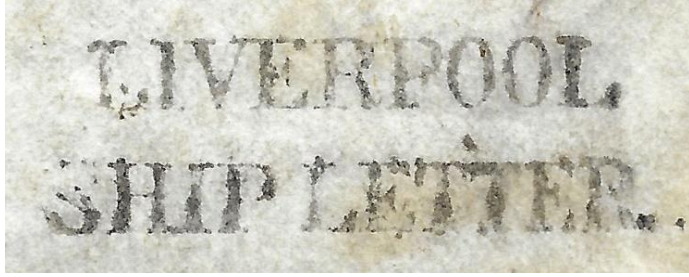


Figure 4E: The Liverpool receiving marking.

On May 6, 1839, after a twenty day transatlantic voyage, the *Virginian* arrived in Liverpool, England. The first order of business by the sailing vessel Captain was to deliver the mailbags to the Liverpool Post Office. At the Post Office, a postal clerk struck in black on the reverse “LIVERPOOL SHIP LETTER” (Figure 4E) and wrote on the obverse “1s8” (1 shilling 8 pence sterling), the postage due at destination (8p incoming ship fee plus 1sh inland fee from Liverpool to the final destination of Kilmun).

The letter then traveled 240 miles north overland by coach to Greenock (see “by Greenock” in the address panel written by William), where the scarce two-line black “GREENOCK PENNY POST” marking was added at upper left (Figure 4F). The letter then made its way by small boat across the Firth of Clyde some 10 miles to Holy Loch to its final destination of Kilmun (Figure 5), a receiving house for the Greenock Penny Post. The recipients had to pay the 1s8p in currency to retrieve the letter. Finally, there is no receiving Post Office marking on the reverse, as at this time Kilmun had no known postmarks.

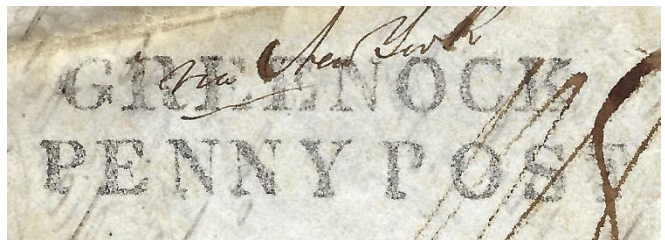


Figure 4F: The “Greenock Penny Post” marking.

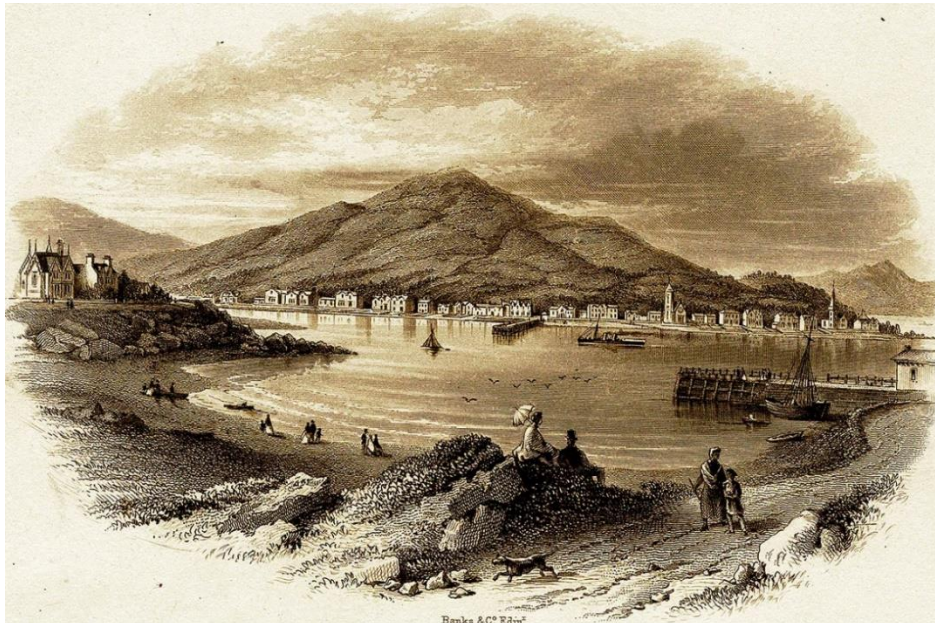


Figure 5: A view from hunter's quay (ca. 1860) of Kilmun and the Holy Loch which the small rowboat crossed to deliver the letter from William Murry to his family at Finnart cottage. source: www.delmadan.com.

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The author wishes to thank Richard Winter for his insight on the rates and routes. Any errors and omissions are the author's responsibility. He can be reached at charlesdico@gmail.com.

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Follow this cover from Upper Canada through New York City to
Kilmun, Scotland



Charlie DiComo takes us on a trip across the pond. Article on page 4.