

Yukon Heritage Inventory
Phase III, Part 2

Customs Offices: A Theme Study

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Customs: A Theme Study

Introduction

This study of Customs Offices in Yukon is directed at assessing the physical resources which fall under the theme Political/Governmental, Administrative, Operational, government offices. Since the collection of customs was one of the first manifestations of government in the Yukon, it was considered to be an important theme to examine. The police were the first customs collectors and continued in that capacity for many years in the more remote areas of the Territory. This study should be read, therefore, in conjunction with "Law Enforcement: A Theme Study".

The Need for Customs Collection

By 1888, there were already miners working the gold deposits of the Yukon. In that year, Dominion Surveyor William Ogilvie was laying out the Canada-US border in the area of the Forty Mile River. He noticed that American miners were not only working the area without concern for Canadian mining laws, but they were also taking goods and gold across the border without paying duty. While he reported this fact to Ottawa, he also advised that the situation be ignored so as not to inhibit development of the area.¹

When significant deposits of coarse gold were discovered at

Forty Mile, the need arose to bring formal government representatives to the Yukon in order to regulate the booming mining community. While there was not a burning need to collect customs, it was used as one of the sops to encourage the government to send police. The Assistant Manager of the North American Trading and Transportation Company at Forty Mile suggested to Ottawa that the customs revenues to be had might cover the costs of a police force in the Yukon.² When the police did come, the collection of customs from a populace unused to paying such fees was the only activity from which they expected any trouble.³

In 1894, Canada's Privy Council passed a resolution to provide for the collection of customs duties upon the "extensive imports" coming into the Forty Mile area from the United States.⁴ The provision they made was to send the police to collect the customs duties and to carry out the functions of several other government agencies as well.

The police seem to have encountered some grumbling about the collection of customs duties but no real trouble. This situation continued quite smoothly until gold was discovered on Rabbit Creek. The resulting boom in the population and goods going in and out of the country placed great stress on the police. No one had anticipated that customs collection would become such a huge task. Of course, since the police were doing it anyway, and doing such a good job, the government in Ottawa let them continue in that capacity despite police protestations

that they could not properly handle it. Even though civilian personnel formally took over the customs functions in June of 1898, the police still had to man the borders to enforce the regulations.⁵ At more remote postings, the police carried out customs collection into the 1950s.

Opening Up and Closing Down

During the rush of gold seekers, the police stationed men on the border entrances to the country. Most of these were in British Columbia and are, therefore, outside of the mandate of this study. There was also a customs office established in Skagway, which is also outside of the mandate of this study. Since these activities affected customs collection in the Yukon, however, they are worth examining briefly.

The main border crossing during the Rush was through the Chilkoot Pass. There was an uncertainty at that time just where the border lay and, as a result, the American officials and the police overlapped somewhat into each other's territory. In 1898, the Americans required all goods purchased in Canada and bound for the Yukon via Skagway, to be escorted to Bennett Lake by an American official. Once the police established themselves in the passes at what they took to be the border, however, they turned these convoys back at that line. This caused a certain amount of friction until the Americans gave up the convoy practice later in that year.⁶

Relations seem to have normalized thereafter since both the

police and Customs maintained offices in Skagway. The major amount of their work involved checking goods coming into Skagway bound for the Yukon and Atlin. Of course, the B.C.-Alaska border was also where they watched most dilligently for smuggling operations.⁷

There were also important border offices established at Forty Mile, Rampart House and Herschel Island. While these saw less traffic than the B.C. and Alaska offices, they were important in establishing Canadian sovereignty at these border crossings. Forty Mile was especially important during the years when large volumes of gold left the Yukon via the Alaska-bound sternwheelers. It was one of the main functions of the Forty Mile police to ensure that there were no goods crossing the border without duties and royalties being paid. For west-bound ships, they had a summer detachment at Coal Creek whose sole purpose was to stop river traffic that tried to bypass Forty Mile. In later years, Rampart House and Forty Mile were both important points for checking game leaving the country. Both of these sites seem to have been shut down in 1929 when the decision was made in Ottawa to close a number of outports and employ postmasters as customs collectors. By 1935, the police were once again collecting customs at Forty Mile.⁸ They were also collecting customs at Sixty Mile, supposedly on the gold leaving the country from that area.

Customs were also set up at Dalton House (not to be confused with Dalton Post) in British Columbia, and briefly at

Tagish where the police often sent people coming across the Chilkoot in order to avoid bottlenecks on the windswept pass in bad weather. There was no further need for these posts by early in the century. The customs function was transferred from Pleasant Camp to Dalton House in 1905 when the volume of traffic through the pass no longer warranted a customs post. The next year, Dalton House was closed and the Champagne police detachment assumed the responsibility for customs collection along the entire Dalton Trail. There was not a great deal of importing or exporting activity on the trail, however, and the customs office at Champagne closed in 1909, the files and records being moved to Whitehorse.⁹

By 1902, there was a customs office in Caribou (Carcross). The main function of this office seemed to be inspection of goods arriving on the train and bound for Atlin. Once the Atlin goldfields were well established, they were importing large amounts of equipment from the United States and duty on it was paid at Carcross before it was transhipped to B.C.¹⁰

As mentioned above, the police carried out customs duties at several locations, few of which were formally designated as sub-collection points or out ports. After 1929, when some postmasters were authorized to collect customs, the function of collection dispersed to various post offices.

Inspection and Collection

During the early part of the century, large amounts of goods came through the southern mountain passes and up the Yukon River. The customs inspectors collected duties on goods from outside of the country and inspected livestock, liquor shipments and wild-life products, to name a few, to ensure they met with import and export regulations. The correspondence available in the Yukon Archives records on Customs deals mostly with this function of the department and its inspectors: what was dutiable, what the duty payable was, refunds for improper duty charges, smuggling and keeping an eagle eye on foreign groups moving through the Territory. This scrutiny even included the boundary surveyors and American Army units.¹¹ For the most part, customs collection was paperwork, which was one reason the action-oriented police objected to it so strenuously. The work of a customs collector was a myriad of forms and accounts and correspondence regarding just where on the customs form one should place Apricot Brandy and Sloe Gin.¹²

American goods coming through Canada, but bound for Alaska, travelled through the Yukon in bond. By this process, called the In Transitu Entry rule, goods were sealed in Skagway or at their point of origin and were not opened again until they arrived at their Alaskan destination. This was a rather tricky procedure to control around Dawson where sternwheelers were passing in and out of Alaska on a daily basis.¹³ There were also some cases which required interpretation of the rule, such as a situation in 1904

where a sternwheeler built in Washington but bound for Alaska was reconstructed in Whitehorse. It passed duty free.¹⁴

In the early part of the century, sternwheelers were all charged a customs duty. This was called Tonnage Dues and Inspection Fees whereby the Customs Office tried to raise revenue for the time it took to inspect the riverboats by levying a fee based on the tonnage of the vessel. This did not prove particularly practical nor profitable so it was abandoned in 1903.¹⁵

Offices and Officers

The official correspondence also deals at length with appointments to the various customs offices. Even well into the 1950s, the police were still acting as the customs agents in some of the more remote sites such as Herschel Island. Dating from the very early years of the century, however, there were full-time customs agents and inspectors appointed. The Customs Collectors were stationed in Whitehorse and Dawson. There were sub-collectors at various times located in Carcross, Rampart House and Forty Mile. There is some confusion about whether or not a policeman qualified as a sub-collector since they were on the Customs payroll but were not technically part of the Department. The police handled customs at Champagne, for example, but the correspondence does not refer to them as sub-collectors as it does the employees at Carcross. In 1925, the postmaster at Mayo was appointed as a customs agent simply to

handle the international mail coming through that town to the big mines in the area. As mentioned above, after 1929, appointing the postmaster to act as customs officers became quite common.

When the police were in charge of customs, the customs office was wherever the detachment was located. In the southern passes, this was usually a tent.

Formal customs offices were established in Whitehorse and Dawson. We were unable to determine where the Dawson office was located. The Customs Collector's house still exists but has been included in the study of Dawson Housing where it more properly belongs. The Whitehorse office was located in the old liquor store which has since been demolished.

Rampart House had Customs Outport status but this may have been operated by the police. It has not been confirmed whether anything remains of the police post or not.

Carcross

Caribou first appears in the official correspondence in 1902 as a sub-collection point under the authority of Whitehorse. In 1905, Leo E. Simmons was hired as the sub-collector from Vancouver. The Simmonses established something of a sub-collection dynasty in Carcross as there is a J.A. Simmons who took over the office through the 1930s.

The first sub-collector's office in Carcross burned down in 1909 but its replacement still exists. The office is still part of the Simmons estate. It was run at one time as a Candy Shop

and Tea Room by Gladys Simmons. From 1930 to 1950, it was the office of Northern Airways, one of the first commercial air operations in the Yukon.¹⁶

The building is in good condition and, so far as we could ascertain, is on its original site. This should be confirmed through historic photograph research if possible. It is, nevertheless, part of the Carcross Core Complex, a very compatible context for this structure.

Sources:

Yukon, Yukon Archives, YRG 1, Series 1, Vols. 68 and 69.

Yukon, Department of Tourism, Heritage Branch, Yukon Heritage Inventory Form # 105D/2/3.

Herschel Island

Like many other places, Herschel Island's customs office was the police detachment. In 1926, Herschel detachment received official customs outpost status, though the police had been collecting duties there since 1903. Herschel also boasted a bonded custom's warehouse. The police used the Newport House and Bone house on the Island for warehousing and it is likely that both of these served the function for some time. The Newport house has burned down but the Bone House still stands. The police later acquired the store and warehouse of the Canalaska Company. By the mid-1950s, the warehouse sported a Canada Customs sign but it is unsure how long before that it may have

been used for bonded storage. The police headquarters was located in the former Pacific Steam Whaling Company's Community House.

All three structures are in good condition and on their original sites.

Source:

Yukon, Department of Tourism, Heritage Branch, R. Ingram and H. Dobrowolsky, "Waves Upon the Shore: An Historical Profile of Herschel Island", 1989.

Forty Mile

The customs function at Forty Mile was carried out by the police. The police detachment was located in two buildings known as #10 and #12 or the Roadhouse and NWMP Detachment. While there had been a customs service at Forty Mile and Fort Constantine (across the river), since the police arrived in 1896, there was probably a civilian officer performing the duties from early in the century until about 1929 when the police resumed the function. Building #10 was referred to in 1939 as the "old customs house" and the police are known to have occupied it during the 1930's. The customs function may have been in this building from the turn of the century until the police left the site around 1938.

Sources:

Canada, Sessional Papers, Annual Reports of the North West Mounted Police.

Yukon, Department of Tourism, Heritage Branch, "Forty Mile Historic Townsite Concept Plan", 1987.

Yukon, Department of Tourism, Heritage Branch, Rob Ingram, "Law Enforcement: A Theme Study", 1990.

Yukon, Yukon Archives, YRG 1, Series 1, Vols. 68 and 69.

Champagne

The police officers at Champagne were appointed by Customs as Preventative Officers for a brief time from 1906-1909. The old post (YHI File # 116A/16/15) would have been the building to house this function. There was very little customs activity at this post and very little along the Dalton Trail on the whole.

The building is in fair condition and, according to site plans, on its original location. Although there has been some modern infill on the site, in size a scale it is a similar environment to that which existed during the historic period.

Sources:

Canada, Sessional Papers, Annual Reports of the North West Mounted Police.

Yukon, Yukon Archives, YRG 1, Series 1, Vol. 69, File 13.

Yukon, Department of Tourism, Heritage Branch. Rob Ingram, "Law Enforcement: A Theme Study", Jan. 1990.

Yukon, Department of Tourism, Heritage Branch, Yukon
Heritage Inventory File # 116A/16/15.

Conclusions

The police who were given the duty of acting as customs agents would agree that it was not the most exciting work in the Yukon. There was little smuggling, none of which was on a large scale. It was mostly tedious but necessary paperwork. On the other hand, the collection of customs on this frontier at a time when the boundaries between Canada and Alaska were not yet established, made a strong statement of sovereignty. It was not armed force which ensured Canadian rule in the Yukon, it was the imposition of Canadian law and government on an unsettled territory. Customs collection was perhaps the most visible, and potentially the most volatile, expression of that dominion.

The physical resources associated with the theme are very limited and most of them are more strongly associated with police and law enforcement activities than with customs. That too is a statement on how customs activities developed in the Yukon.

The primary source material available in the Yukon Archives on this subject is limited. I suspect a great deal of early information was lost in the transfer of offices and with the burning of the earlier Carcross office. There may be further material available in the National Archives which could shed light on activities centred out of Dawson City and provide some information on the 1935 to 1955 period. Photographic research

may also provide confirmation on the site of the Carcross office.

Endnotes

1. William R. Morrison, Showing the Flag: The Mounted Police and Canadian Sovereignty in the North, 1894-1925, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985, p. 14.
2. Morrison, Showing the Flag, p. 16.
3. Ibid, p. 21.
4. quoted in Ibid, p. 18.
5. Ibid, p. 36.
6. Ibid, p. 36.
7. Yukon, Yukon Archives, YRG 1, Series 1, Vol. 68, File 11, Pt. 1, 1902.
8. Yukon, Yukon Archives, YRG 1, Series 1, Vol. 68, File 11, Customs 1928-36.
9. Yukon, Yukon Archives, YRG 1, Series 1, Vol. 68, File 11, Pt. 1, 1905, 1906, 1909.
10. Yukon, Yukon Archives, YRG 1, Series 1, Vol. 69, File 12, Customs Carcross, 1905-14.
11. Yukon, Yukon Archives, YRG 1, Series 1, Vol. 68, File 11, Pt. 1, 1902.
12. Yukon, Yukon Archives, YRG 1, Series 1, Vol. 68, File 11, Customs 1928-36.
13. Yukon, Yukon Archives, YRG 1, Series 1, Vol. 68, File 11, Pt. 1, 1903.
14. Yukon, Yukon Archives, YRG 1, Series 1, Vol. 68, File 11, Pt. 1, 1904.
15. Yukon, Yukon Archives, YRG 1, Series 1, Vol. 68, File 11, Pt. 1, 1903.
16. Yukon, Department of Tourism, Heritage Branch, Yukon Heritage Inventory Form # 105D/2/3.

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Morrison, William R. Showing the Flag: The Mounted Police and Canadian Sovereignty in the North, 1894-1925. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985.

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