



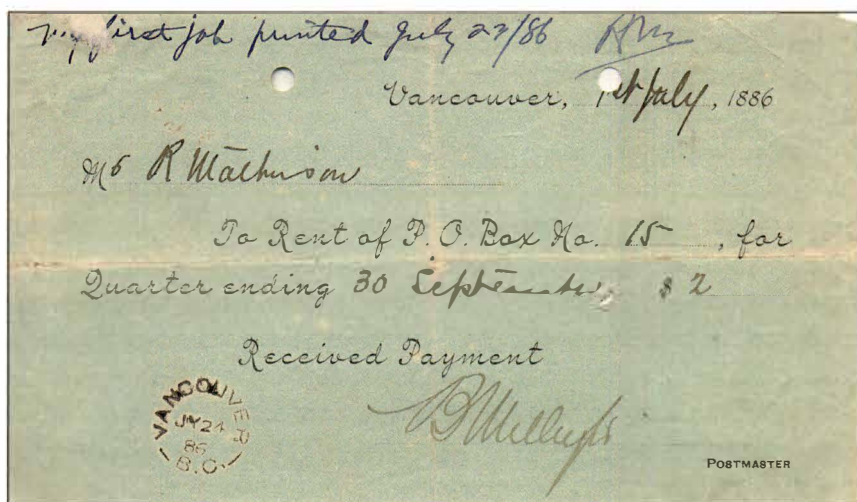
ROBERT MATHISON JR.'S TASTY PRINTING

A unique collection of material from Vancouver's first job printer records the hopes, prejudices and routine business of a bygone era.

By Stephen Lunsford

Vancouver in early 1886 wasn't much of a place—mostly stumps, swamps, shanties and speculators. The Canadian Pacific Railway's executives had pulled a fast one on Port Moody the previous year, and announced the *real* terminus of the transcontinental railway would be the newly named townsite of Vancouver. The terminus would be located at the end of an extension just a few miles farther west. As a result, hundreds, then thousands of entrepreneurs and job-seekers began arriving at the former sleepy western end of Burrard Inlet. To announce the birth of Vancouver, its first newspaper, the *Vancouver Weekly Herald and North Pacific News*, was printed on a handpress brought from Toronto and issued January 15, 1886. The *Vancouver Daily Advertiser* followed on May 8, with the *Vancouver Daily News* arriving on doorsteps June 1.

Among the job-seekers arriving from eastern Canada was Robert Mathison Jr., son of Belleville's superintendent of the



Ontario Institute for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, Robert Mathison. The senior Mathison had previously worked as a reporter for the *Hamilton Times* and by 1871 was the co-editor/proprietor of the *Brantford Weekly Expositor* as well as secretary-treasurer of the Canadian Press Association. He had moved his family to Belleville in 1879 to take the superintendent's position, and would remain there till 1906. The younger Mathison, only 20 years old, left Belleville in early March 1886, travelling via the Grand Trunk and Northern Pacific railways to Portland and thence to Victoria and Vancouver by steamer. He arrived on Tuesday, March 23, and the next day secured a job with the *Herald*, setting type, pulling the press and selling papers on the streets.

Mathison described his arrival and early experiences in two lengthy letters sent home and published in Belleville's *The Ontario* newspaper in May and June of 1886. From the tone and style of the letters, it is clear Mathison had an agreement with the *The Ontario* to report on Vancouver's industries, wages and progress. And, although he doesn't mention it, Mathison clearly has some experience of printing—presumably as a result of his father's influence, but possibly because of some direct association with the Belleville press. He particularly describes the possibilities of newspaper publishing in Vancouver, noting that James Ross, a Belleville printer, and N. Harkness, a Picton

CITY PRINTING HOUSE †

‡ R. MATHISON, JR. †

† Fine †

† † JOB AND COMMERCIAL † † Printer

HASTINGS STREET WEST

VANCOUVER, B. C.

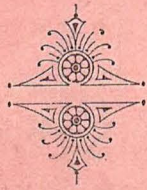
publisher, had arrived in town with the intent to start a daily paper “within two or three weeks.” When their paper, the *Daily News*, appeared, Mathison was already working for them as well as for the *Herald*.

Exactly when Mathison decided to go into business for himself as a job printer is never mentioned in the letters and other accounts left by him of his early days in Vancouver. However, the defining event must surely have been the fire of June 13, 1886, which wiped out the heart of the fledgling city—and with it all three of its printing operations. The fire, originating with slash burning from the townsite clearing, spread in a matter of minutes through the wooden buildings and tents making up most of the city, destroying virtually the whole of Vancouver before it burned itself out at the water’s edge. Within days, however, the city was being rebuilt literally amid the ashes, and on June 17 an “emergency” edition of Ross’s *Daily News*, printed at New Westminster from type set by Mathison, was the first newspaper to reappear. Ross had gone to Victoria on June 14, bought a press there, returned on June 15, and by June 16 had the plant reassembled in time to produce the single-sheet issue of the *Daily News* by the next day.

While Mathison was busy setting type and assisting in the printing of both the *Daily News* and the *Herald* after the fire, he appears to have ordered a press and type from back east,

✧ New Dry Goods ✧

SPRING 1889



THE LONDON HOUSE

164 CORDOVA STREET

CHAS. H. STRUTZ & CO.

R. MATHISON, THE PRINTER



NOTICE



**Gentlemen Having Nothing but Ideas
to Exchange will Call Later**

“TIME IS MONEY”

DON'T SPEND TOO MUCH AT ONE PLACE

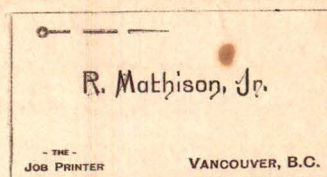
MATHISON, THE PRINTER

intending no doubt to take advantage of the reconstruction of the city by becoming its first job printer. He reports in notes made in 1939, “I built a 12 by 25 foot shack on Hastings St. where Morris’s tobacco shop is now, and opened a job printing office July 23, 1886, three days before I was 21 years old. My first job was Post Office box receipts (see page 4) and my second, agreements for the sale of land for the C.P.R. given me by Mr. L.A. Hamilton, who was Assistant Land Commissioner.”

Job printing—producing printed matter to order for specific needs (e.g., letterheads, circulars, business forms, schedules, announcements and the like)—had apparently been done primarily in New Westminster and even Victoria for the Vancouver market, presumably since the local *Herald’s* press must have largely been taken up with getting out the rather lengthy newspaper. Although no specific dated examples have been found, both the other Vancouver papers may have done some job printing before the fire as well, set perhaps by Mathison himself. Post-fire examples of job printing from all three papers are known.

Mathison, however, was the first to set up specifically as a job printer. His little shop at 323 Hastings Street was ideally located to attract business—between the post office and the CPR office—as his first two commissions demonstrate. His youthfully ebullient personality is apparent from his own

This paragraph is printed with type cut in imitation of one used on the Remington type-writer. The edges of the letters are a trifle rounded, to contribute to the thick appearance of work printed through a ribbon, and some of each letter in the font are cast out of line, either above or below, making the print to resemble work done rapidly on the type-writer. While each line may be started flush, time is not calculated so that it will end so; hence type-writer work always has a ragged appearance on the right side of the page. This type is now largely used for business circulars.



circulars announcing the opening of his business, as is his playful use of font styles and sizes. In a city booming with new businesses, and with old businesses relocating or rebuilding after the fire, Mathison must have found his little office flooded with printing orders.

He cites, for example, the orders placed by the CPR, which “was a good account particularly in 1888 when the C.P.R. boats were bringing shiploads of Chinamen across and taking them to San Francisco before the U.S. Exclusion Law went into effect, as many special printed forms were needed.” In the same memo, Mathison recounts, “When the Hotel Vancouver opened I printed the dinner menu each day for a couple of months but gave it up as it was inconvenient having to have my one press available for the job each afternoon.”

Mathison, according to a list prepared by him for Major Matthews of the Vancouver City Archives in 1936, printed at least 200 to 300 different jobs for as many businesses and individuals between 1886 and 1890. The businesses include musicians, ice cream shops, bars and saloons, realtors, architects, laundries (Chinese and white), blacksmiths, hotels, druggists, dressmakers, dentists, bakeries, doctors, the Vancouver Board of Trade and Vancouver Real Estate Board, the Provincial Exhibit Association, Knights of Pythias, IOOF and other fraternal lodges, Bank of B.C., various churches, the Cricket Club, and

- PRINTING -



A BUSINESS is judged in a large measure by the Office Stationery and Printed Matter used in conducting it. — — To insure a favorable impression being made on your correspondents

HAVE YOUR
Business Card !

—AND—

OFFICE & STATIONERY

PRINTED IN A

NEAT ^{AND} ATTRACTIVE STYLE

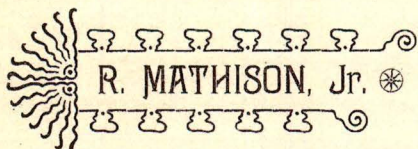
—BY—

MATHISON, THE PRINTER

323 HASTINGS ST.

West of Post Office

VANCOUVER



P. O. BOX 7



THE JOB PRINTER

Vancouver, B. C., 1890

(Dictated)

Gentlemen,--

I have much pleasure in soliciting your esteemed orders for Job Printing.

Neat, tasty and well-printed Commercial Work is my specialty, though anything in the way of printed matter which you may require, I can turn out for you in a style equal to the best.

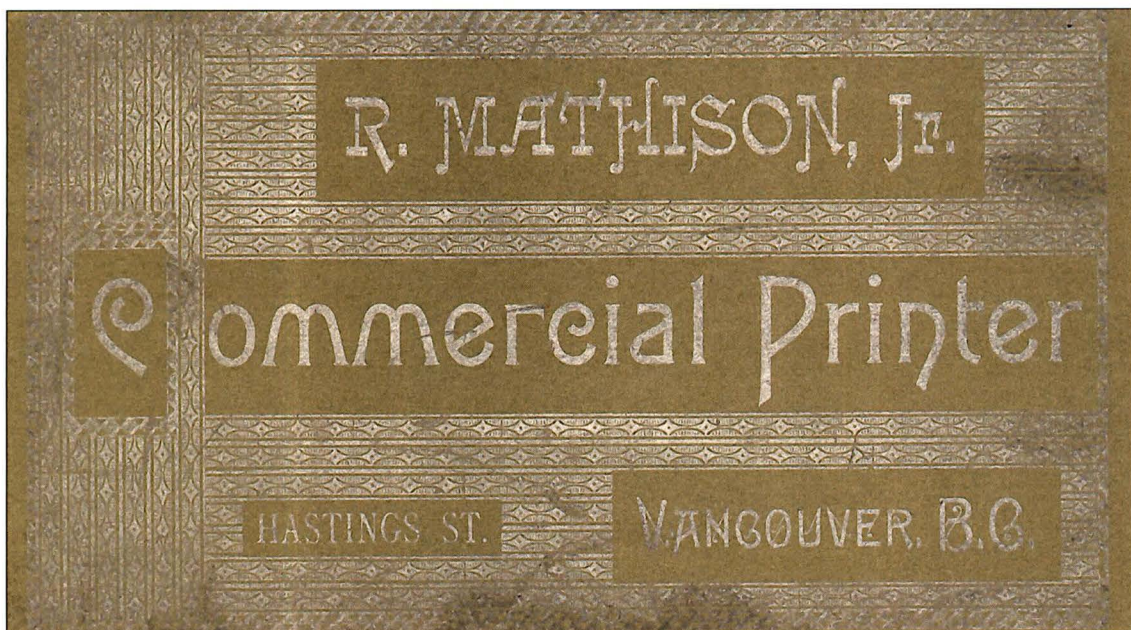
Good Printing, such as befits your business, neither above nor below it; not mean in any way, nor extravagant; business-like; proper; correct; is what I aim to do. I make closer prices for it than for "cheap" work, because I want this class of business.

For your past favors I thank you most heartily, and hope for a continuance of your patronage.

Yours faithfully,

R. Mathison, Jr.

"The Printer"



many others. He also seems to have had the entire job work of the CPR, printing the earliest train and steamship schedules as well as auction sales announcements. His accounts with the municipality and the City included at least the Mayor's Office, the Police and Fire Departments, and the City Clerk's Office. One item he specifically mentions is the first calendar printed in Vancouver, which he produced with calendar sheets extending only from June to December 1886.

Mathison sold his business to Evans and Hastings in mid-1890 (see page 32), studied dentistry back east, and later returned to B.C. to operate as a dentist until his retirement in the 1940s. Fortunately, many examples of Mathison's work can be found in the City of Vancouver Archives and in a few private collections. Given their ephemeral nature, this is at first surprising. When J.S. Matthews, the city's first archivist, contacted pioneers in 1936 to contribute their stories of Vancouver's founding to the archives, he found Mathison had retained copies of many of his job works. Over the next couple of years, Mathison donated examples to the archives, which can be found in various topical files in Matthews' papers and elsewhere in the collection. A Victoria job printer's archive that came on the market in the late 1980s turned up many more examples, and numerous examples have been discovered in private collections of early Vancouver business ephemera. Given the diversity of Mathison's



THE SOCIETY'S

—*— SECOND CONCERT —*—

Is intended to be given on the THIRD TUESDAY
IN MAY (17th) at which selections from Sullivan's
latest opera, "Ruddigore," will be rendered.

J. S. ADAMS
DIRECTOR



R. MATHISON, JR., THE PRINTER

Programme

VANCOUVER

Glee and Madrigal Society

FIRST CONCERT

—ON—

▷ Tuesday Evening, April 19, 1887 ◁

—IN—

THE METHODIST HALL

The Audience are requested to be in their seats at 5 minutes
before 8 o'clock as the National Anthem will be sung at 8 o'clock
precisely.

work, examination of many institutionally or privately held archives relating to early Vancouver would probably bring others to light.

Once seen, Mathison's work is easily identifiable by a number of stylistic features. First, he repeatedly used several distinct fancy fonts, usually two or three per item and sometimes as many as six. Second, he seems to have been fond of printing in gold ink, using it to advantage on, of course, menus and other items for the Gold House, a hotel and restaurant run by Emma Gold. Additionally, Mathison seems to have consciously combined coloured inks with coloured papers to achieve what he called a "tasty" appearance.

Relatively little material exists documenting early printing in British Columbia, other than newspapers and official government documents. For Victoria, a major point of entry into British North America and the hub of several worldwide gold rushes from 1858 onwards, only a meagre couple of imprints are known for 1858, with perhaps two known examples of the "fancy job-printing" advertised in the city's first newspaper, the *Gazette*. In fact, no bibliography or record of early imprints exists for any locale in British Columbia. My own efforts to compile imprint checklists for B.C., a direct result of 35 years as a bookseller with a particular interest in early printing in the Pacific Northwest, have yielded numerous previously unknown

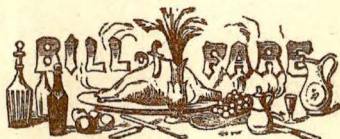
The Gold House

WATER STREET, VANCOUVER, B. C.

MRS. EMMA GOLD,

PROPRIETRESS

DINNER



6 to 8 p. m.

SOUP

FISH

ENTREES

BOILED

ROAST

VEGETABLES AND RELISHES

PIE

DESSERT

PUDDING

CAKES

FRUIT

NUTS

RAISINS

TEA AND

COFFEE

The Waiters are Supplied with Wine Cards

Mathison, The Printer

The † Citizen's † Banquet

—TO—

↳ HIS WORSHIP ↳

Mayor ❁ MacLean

—AT—

↳ THE DOUGALL HOUSE ↳

VANCOUVER, B. C.

Saturday Evening, December 31st, '87

AT 9 O'CLOCK

.....
Committee

W. J. McGUIGAN, *Chairman*

J. P. LAWSON

JOHN DEVINE

F. X. MARTIN

J. C. DOUGLAS

I. OPPENHEIMER


J. J. BLAKE

MATHISON, THE PRINTER

R. MATHISON, JR.

The Job Printer, is not

OUT FOR MAYOR

He is satisfied at present to be known as the presiding genius of the Leading Job Printing Establishment in Vancouver (323 Hastings St. West). He believes that "whatever is worth doing at all, is worth doing well," as his work will testify. When you want neat and well-printed office stationery or any other description of printing go to him.  Aldermanic candidates in want of campaign printing should call on him and get good work printed in a catch-the-eye style and so catch the votes.

and unsuspected imprints but represent more a hit-and-miss empirical approach and good luck than systematic study. The fact that Vancouver has such a quantity of extant early printed material is unusual in the extreme.

Even so, what makes this early job printing so fascinating and even worthy of noting, much less collecting? It is easy to overlook, in this period when technically perfect printing is available to anyone with access to a computer and a fifty-dollar printer, that printing was a labour-intensive and machinery-limited craft even in the late 1800s. Yet printing constituted the conduit for information, for commerce and for culture in any community, so the introduction of the first press into many areas of the largely unsettled West was always an event of great note and consequence throughout what was still wilderness in many respects. Printed news collected from travellers, especially from inbound ships, was quickly disseminated throughout communities. World events, market prices, even goods themselves of every description were communicated by broadsides, announcements, window cards, handbill advertisements and hot-off-the-press news sheets. Each of Mathison's "fancy works" tells us about the daily lives of the earliest citizens of Vancouver. From the novelty of an ice cream shop to the celebration of a strawberry crop, from the sale of a city lot to the opening of a "white labor only" laundry, these bits of coloured paper have



stories to tell about the hopes, prejudices and routine business of a bygone era.

And more than this, Mathison's "tasty" work allows us to appreciate some of the aesthetic values implicit in his time, values presumably shared by his patrons and those they were attempting to influence, to persuade or to inform. The 19th century had seen the rise of commercialization and a consuming middle class, and along with it the rise of increasingly sophisticated advertising psychology. This sophistication, perhaps viewed as naive by today's standards, was expressed in print media by the adoption of colour printing, coloured papers, illustration, and a proliferation of decorative type elements and fonts. Mathison's work, viewed in this light, typifies much that was shared by the early pioneers of Vancouver and their cities of origin. Mathison brings to his job printing, within the limits of his hardware and his imagination, a certain earnestness, leavened by "fancy-full" attractiveness, that surely brings us into closer contact with the hearts and minds of early Vancouverites. For all these things, we pay this slight homage to him.

Stephen Lunsford is a bookseller who specializes in Pacific Northwest history. He has offices in Vancouver, BC, and Blaine, WA.

**STRAWBERRY
FESTIVAL**

— AT —

F. M'CLEARY'S RANCH

NORTH ARM

FRIDAY &

SATURDAY

JUNE 14th and 15th, 1889

—
(MATHISON, THE PRINTER)