

# ***From architectural elegance to commercial function: The history of Postal Services viewed through the arc of its architecture in the Grand Valley.***

## Abstract

The recent dissociation and industrialization of modern postal services in Canada is the circular culmination of a century and a half of evolution. From the earliest developments prior to Confederation the commercial service was born of diffuse service delivery and proto-industrial processing. Through four historical periods we can trace, in the architecture of the buildings, a gradual change from this beginning to more integrated service and processing operations and devolution back to the original segregated services. The Grand region is a unique area for the study of this development because of the sheer number of buildings available to illustrate the trends.

Prior to Confederation Postal services were delivered through a combination of small community outlets and large offices located in key provincial cities. Shortly after Confederation the federal Department of Public Works began an unprecedented national project to supply new buildings to meet the growing demand for federal services.

Hundreds of Postal buildings, designed in Chief Architects Branch of the Department, were constructed across Canada between 1871 and 1939. The architecture of these buildings evolved in concert with the evolution of the service. Some twenty-five buildings from this period were constructed in the Grand Valley region.

In the 1960s the Post Office commissioned the first Segregator, Stacker, Facer-Canceller (SEFACAN) equipment, which set the Post office on its path to industrialization. It also presaged the abandonment of direct retail service and the return of licensed outlets.

## **National and Postal Beginnings: 1850 to 1871**

One way to understand the evolution of Postal Service in Canada is through its ziggurats. In my view the Grand River region provides a unique frame to model this heritage. I previously argued that in order to see Canada's most symbolic monumental federal architecture, one really does need to go beyond our Capitol and consider the regions (Boileau, 2008). More than 100 postal locations are recorded in Waterloo County alone. Numerous heritage examples are among them.

Letter delivery did not become an organized service in Canada until the 1850s. Prior to Confederation letter handling took place in a handful of centralized facilities and countless locations in general stores and homes throughout the provinces.

Major ports of entry into Canada, like Halifax or Toronto were already home to larger edifices dedicated to customs and postal activities. At Confederation there were about two dozen such buildings that became part of our national real estate inventory. All dated to the 1850s and 1860s, and were built to local desires and requirements. Architecturally they shared only the global tendency toward Classical features. Several still survive today in nearby Hamilton and Kingston.

Other more modest buildings, also built by local artisans, are what we would call "retail outlets" today. These original service locations were not architecturally significant, or cohesive. Each originated due to local circumstances and locations were often transient, moving as individuals or entrepreneurs elected to deliver this often money losing service. One such example, the Linwood Post Office, which dates from ca. 1858, illustrates this (Figure 1). It is from these local outlets that much grander buildings evolved dramatically during the initial two-thirds of Canada's first century.

## **Rising Commercialization: 1871 to 1897**

With Confederation, the local Post Office became an essential retail outlet and internal embassy of the federal government. In 1868 the Savings Bank Act expanded the Postal mandate. By 1871 it became clear that more locations would have to be built to meet the growing demand for federal services. A newly created federal Branch of Public Works began the unprecedented national project to design these buildings.

The decentralized system of distribution eventually evolved into a commercial enterprise, the Royal Mail, as it was known in England. The written word was becoming more and more important in the daily life and culture of the colonies also. It was becoming the basis of business information processing throughout the world economy. Citizens and business owners demanded reliable delivery service. Politicians were eager to comply because it permitted them to direct the construction of grand buildings for this use.

Thomas Seaton Scott prodded the federal bureaucracy (Archibald, 1993) into recognizing the Architectural profession in 1871. Building design was also evolving as a separate skill, apart from engineering and construction. Public Works appointed Scott as Chief Dominion Architect. It was just in time to expand the role of the Post Office and Customs services.

Towns and cities in our region were integral to the dramatic peopling of Canada. Post Offices in Guelph (1876) and Brantford (1880; Figure 2), early works from Scott's drafting table illustrate this (neither still exist). Guelph's 9,000 residents would not be served by a General Store postal outlet. Indeed, this original construction was described as a "Dwarf" by local critics that sought an even more monumental representative. It took several major renovations to reach this goal. In many cases the scale of the buildings exceeded the real commercial needs although Customs and caretakers did also occupy these spaces.

Scott's federal works were generally Second Empire in style, which was rapidly replacing the previously favoured Gothic. Few of his designs survive today, only 5 to my knowledge, and none in the region.

A tendency for retail monumental in Postal buildings was embraced by the political class of the times and patronage was also instrumental in to next Branch Architect's future and designs. Thomas Fuller parleyed his connections (Archibald, 1993) and significant Canadian fame as the winning designer of the Parliament Capitol to force the early exodus of Scott (Wright, 1997). From 1881 to 1896 he succeeded and exceeded Scott's modest launch of a national building project.

Mail delivery was now a requirement in every community. To meet the design demands of this federal government charge, the Architects Branch under Fuller's leadership became the largest of its kind at the time.

Berlin (1884; demolished) and Galt (1885; Figure 3) Post Offices are two of his uncommon clock-towered creations. Galt remains the oldest surviving example of this Fuller type. Another regional example at Orangeville (1885; Figure 4) was more typical of Fuller's work. I have dubbed this type as a "Naked Classic" (Boileau, 2006) because it lacked the corner towered pavilion. The Gothic window openings in Orangeville and Berlin were also rare uses of this older style.

Fuller's Canadian style was evolving from a unique blend of the architectural preferences of the day. The favoured Romanesque arches were mated to pyramidal mansard roofs with rustic stone massing, often chosen from quarries with strongly contrasting colours. All of these examples were monumental in anticipation of greater needs than the extant population, this during a period of deep global depression.

## **Monumental Momentum: 1897-1927**

The Canadian population expanded quite dramatically beginning in 1896. David Ewart had been employed in the Architects Branch for twenty-five years and finally assumed the mantle of the Chief in time for economic prosperity to precipitate a design explosion. More than fifty Post Office buildings were constructed from his designs in Ontario alone (1897-1914), about a dozen in the region (Table 1).

Two of the earliest known works from Chief Architect Ewart were completed nearby but not in the Grand River Valley per se: Ingersoll and Woodstock (1899). Only Woodstock remains today, as the Woodstock City Hall. Its present use, housing about 50 municipal administrative personnel for a city of about 40,000, suggests that as a Post Office and Customs House it was monumentally over sized for its original use.

**Table 1 Federal buildings in the Grand River region designed during tenure of Chief Architect David Ewart**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Building</b>	<b>Date</b>
Woodstock	Post Office, Customs and Inland Revenue	1899
Ingersoll	Post Office; demolished	1899
Paris	Post Office; demolished	1902
Waterloo	Post Office, Customs and Immigration House	1912
Elora	Post Office	1912
Fergus	Post Office	1912
Listowel	Post Office; demolished	1912
Mount Forest	Post Office and Armoury	1912
Brantford	Post Office and Customs House	1913
Harriston	Post Office and Customs House	1913
Shelburne	Post Office	1913
Burford	Post Office	1914
Elmira	Post Office and Customs House	1915
Milverton	Post Office	1915
Preston	Post Office and Customs House; demolished	1915
Palmerston	Post Office, Customs House and Armoury	1916

Virtually all of the Post Office structures from this period were clock-towered buildings (Figure 5) that dominated the central core space of their respective towns or cities. There were about 100 of these built across Canada.

Ewart’s towers came in several distinct styles and his office also refitted numerous Naked Fuller Classics with unattractive cupola and clock towers throughout Canada. While the buildings were making a federal imprint on the communities of Canada, the Postal Service was firmly consolidated under one roof.

Retail activities like lock-box delivery soon expanded to include home delivery, registered mail, parcel post, special delivery and COD. Proto industrial processes like collection and bulk sorting were integrated with service delivery. Mail volumes began to require improved handling processes like mechanized sorters.

The orgy of building soon led to constraints in the more extravagant architectural elements. Expensive stone sculpturing and accents gave way to austere clay brick. Ewart’s office produced a number of standardized designs to accommodate the sheer volume of buildings in demand. Successors to Ewart, Edgar L. Horwood and Richard C. Wright were never to see a fraction of the design activity. Horwood merely completed some previous projects in progress as World War I raged.

## **Return of Decentralized Retail: 1927-1939**

Another major building period began just at the onset of the Depression. The inventory of federal offices was essentially doubled in a few short years. These outlets expanded the federal reach into even smaller municipalities. Although a number of examples are represented in Ontario and our region, this phase is truly characterized by rapid growth in the rest of Canada.

Thomas Fuller's son Thomas W. took over the Chiefs mantle in 1927 after spending his entire career within the Architect Branch. The Postal Service was turning a corner, perhaps even a U-turn. The volumes of mail, especially funneling through the larger urban centers frequently meant that their existing building space was inadequate. At the same time demand for retail services continued to climb in smaller communities. These two key elements began their gradual divergence within the Post Office.

During T. W. Fuller's tenure the Post Office real estate expanded again dramatically. The inventory grew to over 300 buildings. They came in two sizes and began to explore new architectural styles.

The traditional Post Office of nearly 100 years was diffusing into smaller communities across Canada. They were focused on local mail pickup and delivery. The buildings reflected this mission. Several examples from the Grand region are important because they illustrate the smaller sized buildings that soon dotted the landscape.

Hespeler (1929) and Arthur (1938; Figure 6) are typical of about 100 similar buildings across Canada. To me these buildings represent the return to decentralized retail focused postal services. They illustrate some elements of the architectural style that prevailed in these smaller buildings. They employed clay brick and some stone accents, and often had mansard roofs reminiscent of the Fuller Senior and Ewart periods.

Many buildings from the period began to embrace elements of the Art Deco style that soon came to dominate all architecture, including some Public Works Post Offices. Dunnville Post Office (1935) and especially the next Post Office in Guelph (1935) are examples of the Deco style. Although these two were somewhat larger than the typical small building, they still illustrate the retail-dominated operation.

Two buildings from the period, however, illustrate the emerging phenomenon of the industrialized Post Office. The new Galt Postal Center (1936) and especially the Kitchener Main (1938; Figure 7) were designed primarily to accommodate the processing of large mail volumes. Kitchener Main epitomizes the Art Deco style that was employed almost exclusively across Canada for these large volume processing centers (eg. Toronto Main, now Rogers Arena; Hamilton; Moncton; Sault Ste. Marie; Brandon; Trois Rivières).

## **Corporatization and Industrialization: 1939 to present**

The Second World War essentially brought an end to the iconic federal buildings project. The Chief Architect's Branch was eventually dismantled. Public Works never returned to such an extensive office construction effort again.

In the 1960s the Post Office as a Savings Bank was discontinued, a sign of things to come as the Post Office slowly decoupled itself from many postal retail services. Canada's early adoption of the Segregator, Stacker, Facer-Canceller (SEFACAN) equipment set the Post office on its path to industrialization. The Postal plant traces this loss of retail and flight to the industrial suburbs. Two other later events solidified this trajectory.

In 1971 a Postal Code scheme was adopted, designed around the machine handling of mail and in 1981 the Post Office became a Crown Corporation. The Corporation focused the efforts of its work force on the industrial processes. It also began to license many retail products and services. Urban renewal and Departmental apathy prompted the sometimes callous destruction of the legacy buildings.

It is perhaps a credit to the people of the Grand region that the worst examples from this period (1960s) are not found here. I have drawn a distant example to illustrate the architectural pattern that began in the late 50s and continued until the early 70s.

In Sarnia, a David Ewart structure (1905) was demolished and replaced by an expansive Federal Building (ca. 1958; Figure 8). Buildings of this style and scale were built in a number of cities like Chatham, Belleville and Nanaimo among others. During this period some communities received non-industrial Post Office/Federal buildings of this style (e.g. Grimsby).

Decentralization and industrialization of modern postal services in Canada is now essentially complete. In Guelph the two grand buildings of previous times are replaced by an industrial warehouse-like Distribution centre (Figure 9) and numerous retail locations housed in third-party businesses. Shoppers Drug Marts (Figure 10) like this are among the most common examples and complete the cycle back to the origin of our postal service.

## **Literature Cited**

Archibald, Margaret 1993. *By Federal Design: the Chief Architect's Branch of the Department of Public Works, 1881-1914*. Parks Canada, Ottawa.

Boileau, Marc 2006. *Towers of Time*. Looking Back Press, St. Catharines.

Boileau, Marc 2008. *Timeless Towers*. *The Beaver*, 54-55

Wright, Janet 1997. *Crown Assets: the architecture of the Department of Public Works, 1867-1967*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

## Figures

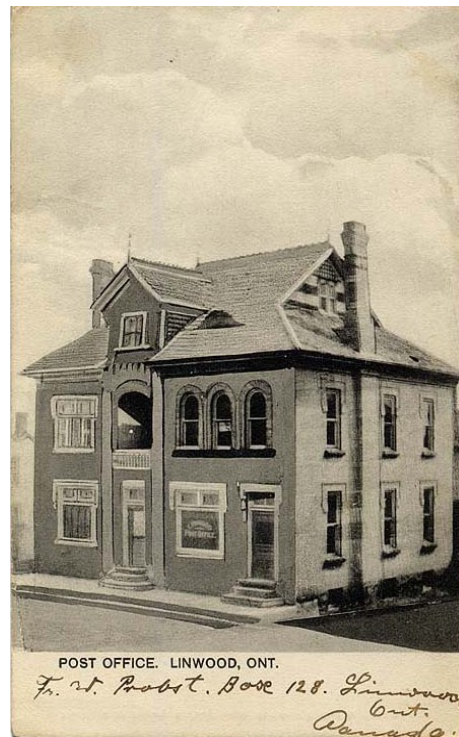


Figure 1 Postcard image of Linwood Post Office. (Author's Collection)

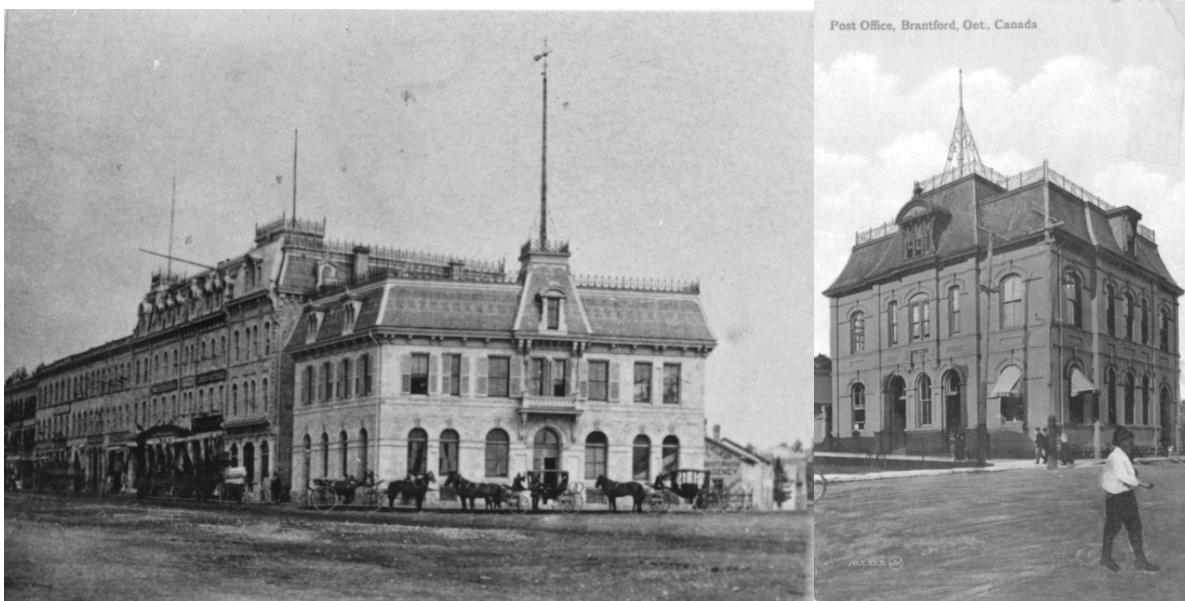


Figure 2 Postcard images of Guelph (left; Courtesy of Guelph Public Library) and Brantford (right; Author's Collection) Post Offices.

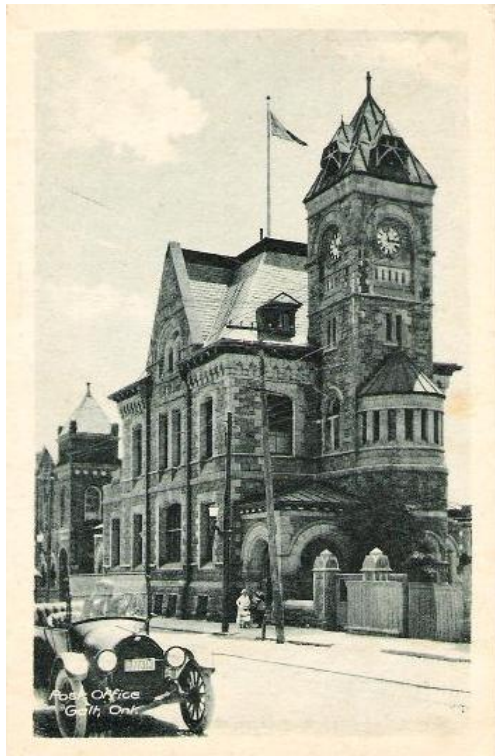


Figure 3 Postcard image of Galt's Post Office and Customs House (Author's Collection)



Figure 4 Postcard image of the demolished Orangeville Post Office and Customs House (Author's Collection)



Figure 5 Postcard images of Harriston (left, Author's Collection) and Preston (right, Courtesy of Cambridge Archives) Post Offices and Customs Houses



Figure 6 Postcard image of the demolished Arthur Post Office. (Author's Collection)



Figure 7 Postcard image of Kitchener Main Post Office. (Author's Collection)



Figure 8 Photograph of Sarnia Federal Building (Post Office). (Author's Collection)



Figure 9 Photograph of Guelph Distribution Centre. (by Author)



Figure 10 Photograph of modern licensed Postal outlet. (by Author)