

# NEWSLETTER

## The Town of York Historical Society

December 2008

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### FORMER NATIONAL HOTEL IN PERIL



The National Hotel as it appeared in 1945

Ram's Head Development Inc. is currently seeking to amend a city by-law in order to construct an eighteen-storey mixed-use building on the southeast corner of King and Sherbourne Streets. The proposal entails the demolition of a building known for much of the twentieth century as The National

Hotel. A hotel was first established on this corner in the 1850s when George Ross opened the British Exchange Inn. By 1861, a three-storey brick building, still owned by Ross but occupied by innkeeper Francis Sullivan, is clearly recorded on the tax-assessment rolls.

The building has been greatly altered twice – expanded eastward in 1878 to become the Grand Central Hotel managed by William Burke, and southward in 1905 when owned by Charles Brewer who named it the National. The 1878 expansion was likely in response to legislation enacted under pressure from the temperance movement which increased the number of guest rooms a tavern was required to have in order to qualify for a liquor licence. The 1905 renovation involved the work of architect Henry Simpson, responsible for the building's current appearance with its rounded archways and pressed metal cornice. This was a reflection of the Richardsonian Romanesque style favoured by Toronto's pre-eminent architect at the

*Continued on page 4*

### Intrigue and Revelation at the Grange

Get thee to The Grange! For not much longer, Art Gallery of Ontario docents are offering magical mystery tours of this 1817 brick house, originally home to D'Arcy Boulton and his wife Sarah Anne, that are as gripping as any episode of CSI. Anthropologist Dr. Chantal Lee, aided by the recently donated papers of the Boulton's butler, Henry Whyte, has been excavating the hidden handiwork of an Irish servant girl by the name of Mary O'Shea. Mr. Whyte was as obsessed by the activities of this young woman, whom he nicknamed Amber, as O'Shea herself was with the practice of encasing small objects in beeswax and secreting them beneath the floors and behind the walls of every room in the house. The objects "Amber" squirreled away in this fashion include infants' toe-nail clippings and milk teeth, cinnamon, sugar, animal bones and braids of human hair. The tour comprises a number of escalating "reveals" that astonish and astound. Rather than offering solutions, however, these only serve to deepen a mystery fascinating enough to keep you up at night or, at least, to dine out on for weeks.



## The Royal Mail from York

In 2008 Toronto's First Post Office marked its twenty-fifth anniversary of operations. In order to celebrate this achievement, it was decided to mount an exhibition at The Market Gallery, a showcase for the City of Toronto's Culture Division. Two years in the making, *Over Any Distance Imaginable: The Royal Mail from*



*York* opened on October 25 with a large crowd in attendance. Councillor Pam McConnell was on hand to deliver congratulatory remarks.

*Over Any Distance Imaginable* offers insight into a tumultuous period in Toronto's history – the 1830s – and one in which letters were the only form of long-distance communication. Toronto's First Post Office is the custodian of an unparalleled collection of early 19th-century letter-writing and post-office paraphernalia. These and the letters themselves tell the stories of Toronto's early citizens and of how their words were transported around the world.

This exhibition continues until February 28, 2009. The Market Gallery is located on the second floor of the South St. Lawrence Market building at 125 Front Street East. It occupies the former council chamber which is all that remains of the City Hall that stood on this site from 1845 to 1899.



At top: Kate McAuley, TFPO Assistant Curator. Here, left to right: TYHS President Jennifer McIlroy and Secretary Cynthia Malik, TFPO Director/Curator Janet Walters, and Pamela Wachna, Co-ordinator of Collections and Outreach for the City of Toronto, at the exhibition's opening on October 25.

## Letters to Santa Launch



The Market Gallery was chosen by Canada Post this year as the venue for its annual letters-to-Santa launch. Children from St. Michael's School were on hand to learn about the North Pole Post Office (postal code H0H 0H0) and were rewarded for their letter-writing efforts by a visit from Mr. Claus himself.

Since the program's inauguration in 1982, postal elves – more than 11,000 current or retired Canada Post employees – have helped Santa to answer over 16 million letters. Last year alone they responded to 1.2 million in 26 languages, including Braille.

## "A Victorian Christmas"

### A History of Toronto's Christmas Traditions

**Muddy York Tours** presents late-afternoon high tea and a talk by the fire at Toronto's First Post Office on December 13, 14, 20 and 21 at 4 p.m. The cost is \$35 (or \$50 for an adult and child). Reservations are essential as space is limited. For the menu and other information, or to make a reservation, please call 416-487-9017 or e-mail [richard@muddyorktours.com](mailto:richard@muddyorktours.com).





## UPCOMING PROGRAMS



### Puzzles, Pinpricks and ♥ Knots of Love ♥

Toronto's First Post Office presents a lecture and workshop on the evolution of the paper valentine. Participants will learn how to create three styles of valentines popular in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Dates: February 7th and 8th, 1:30 p.m.

Cost: \$20 or \$15 for members, supplies included.

Enrolment is limited to fifteen participants each day. Content and level of difficulty not suitable for young children. Call 416-865-1833 to register.

### Celebrating Mother From Ancient Greece to Upper Canada



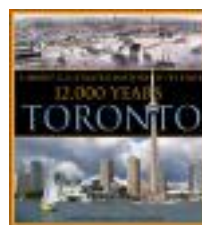
Toronto's First Post Office presents a workshop on the long history of motherhood appreciation. Participants will create old-fashioned letters to mother bearing emblems associated with her in the early nineteenth century. Traditional Simnal cake will be served.

Date: Sunday, May 3rd, 1:30 p.m.

Cost: \$20 or \$15 for members, supplies included.

Registration is limited to 15 participants. To make a reservation, please call 416-865-1833.

## New Books in the Gift Shop

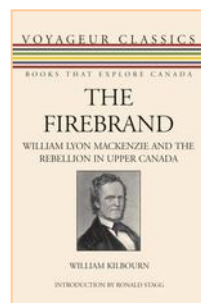


### Toronto: An Illustrated History of Its First 12,000 Years

Ed. by Dr. Ron Williamson

James Lorimer (2008), 160 pages, \$29.95

Telling Toronto's story from the final retreat of the Laurentide Ice Sheet to today's metropolis, a team of expert authors brings beautiful illustrations and fascinating, fresh perspectives together in this new natural, archaeological, and social history.



### The Firebrand

By William Kilbourn

Dundurn Press (2008), 288 pages, \$24.99

First published in 1956, this touching and often hilarious book deftly portrays the complex character that was William Lyon Mackenzie. Kilbourn also vividly recreates the ill-fated march on

Toronto during the Upper Canada Rebellion of 1837, the rebellion's aftermath and Mackenzie's subsequent escape and exile.



### Fashioning Fabric: The Arts of Spinning and Weaving in Early Canada

By Adrienne D. Hood

James Lorimer (2007), 96 pages, \$19.95

This engaging social history explores the methods, tools and patterns used by early immigrants to create their homemade textiles and offers striking examples of clothing, quilts and coverlets.



### The Power of the Press: The Story of Early Canadian Printers and Publishers

By Chris Raible

James Lorimer (2007), 96 pages, \$19.95

This book will appeal to readers interested in the early press's role in the history of Canada and the equipment and tools of the letterpress era. The history of the industry is intertwined with portraits of the colourful figures – including Joseph Howe (Halifax), William Lyon Mackenzie and George Brown – whose impassioned words sparked controversy and even rebellion during the formative years of the nation.

## Hotel, from page 1

time, E. J. Lennox. While the building at King and Sherbourne is no longer the same as it first appeared in Boulton's atlas of 1856, its embodiment of these historical changes is surely as important to preserve as any pristine "originality."



And there is more. From 1874 until 1878 this building, prior to either expansion, was home to one of Toronto's earliest museums. In an 1875 photograph taken from the then recently completed spire of St. James' Cathedral, a sign on the hotel's west parapet reads: "Terry's Museum." John Terry, in addition to being a flour merchant and the operator of a parcel delivery service, was for a brief period the curator of a Museum of Canadian Curiosities. According to an 1878 city directory, Terry was "a collector and dealer of Indian curiosities, minerals and fossils of Canada." This he undertook more than a decade before the Royal Canadian Institute opened its Museum of Natural History and Archaeology on Richmond Street. The RCI's charter of 1851 had committed it to the establishment of a museum but it did not do so until after being joined by the Natural History Society of Toronto in 1885.



One of the Town of York Historical Society's stated purposes is "to foster the preservation of the Town of York's surviving built environment." While the threatened building is not historically part of the Town of York, it does lie squarely within those geographical boundaries and its roots are 150 years old. Furthermore, as a 19th-century example of a combined parcel-delivery office and museum it is of particular interest in relation to Toronto's First Post Office which also juggles these two functions.

The City of Toronto currently has two teams of consultants working on plans for special lighting and interpretation of the old town in order to highlight what little remains of its built heritage. At the same time it is entertaining a proposal that involves the demolition of yet another historic building. At a community consultation meeting held November 6 at St. James' Parish Hall, considerable opposition was expressed to the proposed development, especially by residents of the immediate neighbourhood. An interested group of these citizens has developed a website, *Better Planning for All* ([www.bpfa.ca](http://www.bpfa.ca)), with an on-line petition to save the National Hotel.

### Toronto's First Post Office is administered by the Town of York Historical Society

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#### Hours of operation:

Monday to Friday: 9-4

Weekends: 10-4

Closed on holiday Mondays and the Sundays preceding them.

**The Post Office will be closed December 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>  
for Christmas and January 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> for New Year's Day.**

Toronto's First Post Office is a museum and National Historic Site. The Town of York Historical Society is a legally incorporated non-profit organization and registered charity. Gratefully acknowledged is the support of the City of Toronto; the Ontario Ministry of Culture; our members, donors and customers; and Canada Post Corporation.

### The Town of York Historical Society

Individual Membership	\$15
Family Membership	\$25
Lifetime Membership	\$150

Directors: Bruce Bell, Patricia Braithwaite, Richard Fiennes-Clinton, Gerald Doyle, Sheldon Godfrey, Cynthia Malik, Judith McEvel, Jennifer McIlroy (President), Councillor Pam McConnell, Melville Olsberg.