

# NEWSLETTER

## The Town of York Historical Society

September 2012

Vol. XXVIII No. 3

### CANADIAN RETAILER CELEBRATES 175 YEARS



Princess Elizabeth in her Holt's mink, a wedding gift from Canada, 1947

This year Canadians celebrate a number of anniversaries. 50 years ago medicare was introduced in Saskatchewan; 100 years ago the Grey Cup and the Calgary Stampede were inaugurated; 200 years ago the Americans declared war on Britain and invaded her territories in Upper and Lower Canada. At the time, many “Canadians” and First Nations joined in their defence. 25 years later, rebellions took place in both Canadas against the same British rule that had been fought for previously. Also in 1837, a new monarch ascended to the throne – the young Victoria – who would rule Britannia and Canada for more than 60 years.

In the year of our current Queen’s Diamond Jubilee, we recognize the 175th anniversary of a Canadian retailer who, during Queen Victoria’s reign, became furrier to generations of British royalty. In 1947, Holt Renfrew & Co. was chosen by the Canadian government to design a wedding present for Princess Elizabeth. It was a coat of wild Labrador mink. Many North American women owned furs at the time, but the harsh realities of post-war Britain are evident in the photograph at left in which one man, fists clenched, has not doffed his hat.

*Continued on page 2*

### James Scott Howard’s Family Bible Finds Its Way Home



On a hot day last August a young couple delivered a very special gift to Toronto’s First Post Office: a bible they had bought at an estate sale. On the one unprinted page between the old and new testaments was recorded the marriage, on June 8, 1822, of James Scott Howard and Salome McLean. The births of their three children are also recorded, as is the death of the youngest, Archibald, at the tender age of four, just two days after Christmas in 1834. We are extremely grateful to the Tufaro family for the research that led them to Postmaster Howard, and for their decision that the bible should be part of our museum’s collection.





## Holt Renfrew's 175<sup>th</sup> Birthday, *from page 1*

In 1834, William Samuel Henderson arrived in Quebec City with a load of caps and hats from his native Ireland. Within a year he had joined the retail firm of Ashton & Co. and in 1837 he bought a controlling interest and renamed the shop after himself. Fur garments were introduced for wealthy patrons living in a cold climate. The company that was to become the luxury retailer Holt Renfrew was founded at a time “of colonial society’s preoccupation with ascendancy” (Sarah Hamson, *The Globe and Mail*, October 6, 2012). It was also an era when hard-working employees could eventually become partners. George Richard Renfrew bought a partnership in 1860, and by 1867 John Holt had joined the company and bought Henderson out.

The firm was known as G.R. Renfrew & Co. in 1883 when a group of Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald’s admirers purchased for him a stylish coat, which he wore for a portrait sitting at an Ottawa photography studio, as seen at left. In 1886, the Quebec retailer’s display at the “Colonial and Indian Exhibition” in London was visited by Queen Victoria, who purchased a set of sable accessories including a muff. This was to be a pivotal moment in the firm’s history; a warrant was subsequently issued by the Queen’s Mistress of the Robes appointing G.R. Renfrew & Co. “Furriers in Ordinary to Her Majesty” – the first of five generations of such warrants. The Holt Renfrew archives contains both the letter covering payment for that first purchase, and one from Charles Tupper, then Canadian High Commissioner in London, alerting the firm to the impending endorsement.



In 1889 the company opened a store in Toronto. The year of Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee, 1897, saw the death of G.R. Renfrew, the ascendancy of John Holt, and Allen E. Renfrew taking his father’s place as a junior partner. In 1908 the firm officially became Holt Renfrew & Co. and the following year it incorporated as a limited company. Stores were soon opened in both Montreal and Winnipeg, and the Toronto shop was moved to larger premises at Yonge and Adelaide Streets. John H. Holt, respected as an astute businessman and a generous philanthropist, died in 1915, but the name of the company remained the same.

During the depression of the 1930s, Holt Renfrew & Co. catered to those few who could afford luxury items. International designers were added to the mix, including an exclusive contract with Christian Dior. For the firm’s centennial in 1937, a new art deco flagship store was opened in Montreal. In 1942 an Ottawa store was added. Others followed in the 1950s and 1960s; some (eg. Hamilton) no longer in existence. For two decades after 1965 the firm languished under foreign ownership. In 1979, owing to the separatist climate in Quebec, the head office was moved to Toronto.

The Holt Renfrew we know today dates from its acquisition in 1986 by Galen Weston and its revitalization under the direction of his wife Hilary. Most recently it was again “rebranded” with the HR logo by Weston’s daughter Alannah. When we consider that Timothy Eaton’s empire was lost after 130 years, the 175-year life story of this one-time fur hat shop is quite remarkable.

**Top:** Sir John A. Macdonald in a coat from G.R. Renfrew & Co.

**Centre:** The flag displayed by G.R. Renfrew stores to mark Queen Victoria’s jubilee.

**Bottom:** An advertisement in a book celebrating Toronto’s centennial in 1934, alludes to Jesse Ketchum in a bid to show the depth of Holt Renfrew’s roots in the city., although Renfrew did not open a Toronto store until 1889.

## Postal Station K Threatened by Development



Although the words “PUBLIC BUILDING” are carved into the stone façade of Postal Station K, Canada Post is considering the sale of the 1936 post office, located just north of Yonge and Eglinton. The crown corporation has apparently stipulated that the existing structure be incorporated into any future development, but there is a lot more at stake here than the building itself. Its location is both historically significant and highly valued by area residents. Postal Station K sits on the National Historic Site of Montgomery’s Tavern – whence, in 1837, William Lyon Mackenzie and his rebels

began their ill-fated march on the capital of Upper Canada. Today, the small park in front of the building remains the only public space on Yonge Street for miles in either direction, and many locals gather there every day. Indeed, even at the height of summer, it is the only sunlit spot along this highly built-up corridor. Two nearby condo towers, at 37 and 54 storeys, have created a precedent that developers can cite, and proposals have already been approved for more such towers in the vicinity.



Local MPP Mike Colle (pictured above) is collecting signatures on a petition, copies of which can be obtained by calling 416-781-2395. William Lyon Mackenzie would likely approve, although he might look askance at the regal lion and unicorn flanking the building’s main entrance. Ironically, the royal insignia is that of Edward VIII, who thumbed his nose at the throne when he abdicated after only eleven months to marry American divorcée Wallis Simpson.

*(Editor’s note: More information on Postal Station K can be found in our September 2009 newsletter.)*

## Royal Visit Update: Laura Secord Met the Prince of Wales!



Speaking of the Prince of Wales...in July we told you about young Prince Albert Edward’s travels to North America in 1860. One little known fact about that visit was that HRH met with the eighty-five-year-old Laura Secord. In advance of a ceremony the Prince was to attend at Queenston Heights commemorating the death of Sir Isaac Brock, an address of welcome had been signed by 1,193 veterans of the War of 1812-1814. All save one of the signatories were men. Months before the Prince’s arrival, Laura Secord travelled to Niagara and insisted on signing the address, despite the objections of the clerk in charge.

She also sent a petition to the Prince in advance, at Quebec City, informing him about her wartime service to the crown. Following the ceremony at Queenston Heights, Mrs. Secord was presented to the Prince of Wales at a church service in Chippewa. As a result of her efforts, the heir to the throne sent Mrs. Secord £100 in gold upon his return to England. This was, despite her years of lobbying, the only financial reward she ever received for warning the British of a planned American ambush at Beaver Dams. The *Niagara Mail* (as cited in Ian Radforth’s *Royal Spectacle*) declared the Prince “a true gallant...with a warm regard for the old ladies as well as for the young ones.” Buoyed perhaps by her windfall, Laura Secord lived another eight years, and saw the confederation of Canada before her death in 1868 at the age of 93.



## IN CASE YOU MISSED IT



Photo: Dennis Hanagan for *The Bulletin*

These people are looking very pleased with themselves. It was July 14. Apart from the glorious weather, Janet Walters

(Toronto's First Post Office), Councillor Pam McConnell, Rollo Myers (Architectural Conservancy of Ontario) and Linda Schulz had two reasons to be happy. The first was that real progress had just been made towards public ownership of the First Parliament Site. The second was that three of their friends were being honoured that day. National Geographic had just named St. Lawrence Market the "No. 1 Food Market in the World" and Jorge Carvalho, Michael Comstock and Alan Seymour – who have contributed so much to the success of the Market and its neighbourhood over the years – were each presented with a ceremonial key.

## Book Launch for Dorothy Duncan



It was standing-room-only at a July 24 launch for Dorothy Duncan's latest book, *Hoping for the Best, Preparing for the Worst – Everyday*

*Life in Upper Canada, 1812-1814*. Those who joined us at the post office were treated to Ms. Duncan's thoughtful insights into the lives of York residents two centuries earlier, a scant week after the declaration of war. They also got to sample some food that would have been eaten at the time, including aged cheddar, dried salmon, and "nice cookies that will keep good three months." There were also two sorts of peppermints, both of which, we were assured, would have been available at one of the shops along King Street in 1812.



## Pop-Up Post Office



On July 25 the Paper Place (887 Queen W.) held a Letter-Writing Summer Social. Guests had access to the store's craft cupboard and spent the evening creating exquisite missives, munching

on macaroons and generally making merry. In the end, however, every letter writer needs a post office. Knowing this, Kate McAuley of Toronto's First Post Office offered to set up temporary shop on site and was welcomed with open arms. The next morning Kate mailed the finished letters bearing TFPO's distinctive pictorial and historic cancels. The experiment was such a success that it bears repeating. If you need a pop-up post office for your next correspondence-centred event, contact us (see page 8 for details) and we'll see what we can do!

## Off-Site Presentations



Toronto's First Post Office holds letter-writing workshops of its own, although these tend to involve plain cotton paper, goose quill pens, black walnut ink and wax seals. Creating letters in the manner of the 1830s is the hands-on portion of our education program, and is preceded by a discussion of the growth

of the Town of York into the City of Toronto and the nature of communications at that time. Recently, TFPO has introduced an off-site version of this program: "The Postmistress in the Classroom." If your group can't come to us, we will come to you!

Should the members of your group prefer not to get their hands dirty, but still want to learn about early Toronto and its postal history, we can leave the quills behind and show up with a PowerPoint presentation instead. More information about all of our programs, including walking tours of the old town, can be found on our website ([townofyork.com](http://townofyork.com)), or contact [tfpomuseum@ca.inter.net](mailto:tfpomuseum@ca.inter.net).

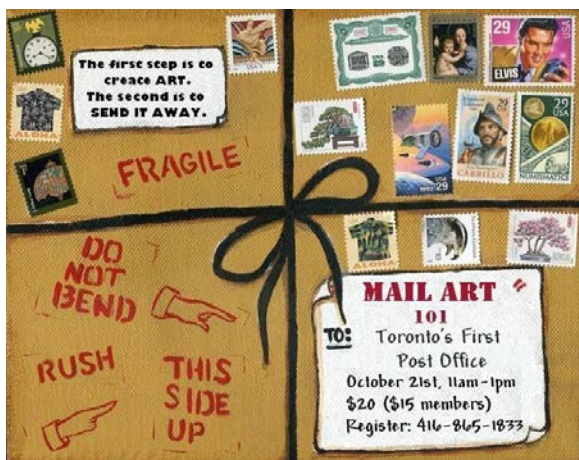
# UPCOMING EVENTS AT THE POST OFFICE

## Workshop: Mail Art 101

*The first step is to create a piece of art. The second is to send it away.*

Everyone knows what a treat it is, in this day and age, to receive a handwritten letter. Imagine, then, the joy of getting a hand-made work of art in the post!

Join us for what we hope will be the first of many workshops covering the "rules" of mail art: why and how to create it, and where to send it. Participants are welcome to use our stash of decorative paper, rubber stamps, stickers, and found objects to create one-of-a-kind messages, envelopes, and packages. We will even have a vintage typewriter on hand courtesy of Eclectisaurus.



Don't consider yourself an artist? You'll find that mail art is a wonderful medium for any level of talent, even if you got stuck at stick men. We'll unlock your creative mind and show you how to use it!

You are also very welcome to join the members of the Post-a-Letter Social-Activity-Club afterwards for their informal monthly meeting.

**Date:** Sunday, October 21, 11 am – 1 pm

**Location:** Toronto's First Post Office, 260 Adelaide Street East

**Cost:** \$20, or \$15 for members, all supplies included (postage extra). Ages 12 and up. Please call 416-865-1833 or e-mail [tfpo@total.net](mailto:tfpo@total.net) to register.



## Janice Nickerson to Speak on Donald Maclean



Donald MacLean was one of the few identified casualties of the Battle of York on April 27, 1813. But who was this war hero? His many offices included Seigneur of St-Patrice, Riviere-du-Loup in Lower Canada; Justice of the Peace for the Home District, Upper Canada; Clerk of the House of Assembly for Upper Canada; and Deputy Postmaster General (the third postmaster in the Town of York). But he was also a devoted father to at least four children, some legitimate and some not, whose descendants were unaware of their ancestor's "double life" until recently.



Janice Nickerson is a professional genealogist, CBC researcher and magazine contributor. She is also the recent author of *York's Sacrifice – Militia Casualties of the War of 1812*. Come hear her intriguing story of one of York's earliest postmasters.

**Date:** Tuesday, November 6, 7 pm

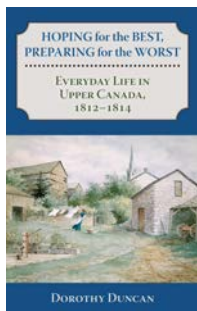
**Location:** Toronto's First Post Office, 260 Adelaide Street East

**Cost:** \$7, or \$5 for members. Please note that seating is limited, so please make a reservation at 416-865-1833 or [tfpo@total.net](mailto:tfpo@total.net).



Illustrations: Silhouette of Donald Maclean, by Owen Staples, John Ross Robertson Collection, Toronto Public Library, (JRR3404); *The Death of Captain Neal McNeale at the Battle of York, 27 April 1813*, by B.T.A. Griffiths, c.1930, gouache and watercolour on artist's board, 68.0 x 100.4 cm, City of Toronto Museum Services.

## New in the Gift Shop

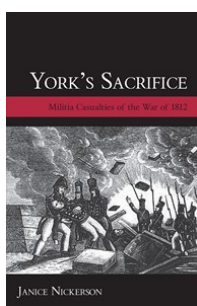


### Hoping for the Best, Preparing for the Worst – Everyday Life in Upper Canada, 1812 – 1814

By Dorothy Duncan

Dundurn Press (2012), 248 pages, \$21.99

This book explores the web of human relationships that developed in Upper Canada in the years leading up to the War of 1812, and during the conflict that raged for two years. It focuses on the families, homes, gardens, farms, roads, villages, towns and fabric of everyday life in this frontier society.



### York's Sacrifice – Militia Casualties of the War of 1812

By Janice Nickerson

Dundurn Press (2012), 224 pages, \$19.99

The militia's contribution to the War of 1812 is not well understood. Even 200 years later, we don't know how many Upper Canadians died defending their home. *York's Sacrifice* profiles 39 such men, including 19 residents of the Town of York, five residents of York County, and 11 residents of Halton, Peel, and Wentworth Counties.



### Vintage Postage

Available in packages for domestic, U.S. and International destinations

There are beautiful stamps currently on offer from Canada Post, but then there always have been. These vintage postal bundles clutter up the outside of your correspondence in the most delightful way, and still get it where it

needs to go in the same amount of time.



### Old-School Library Cards and Card Pockets

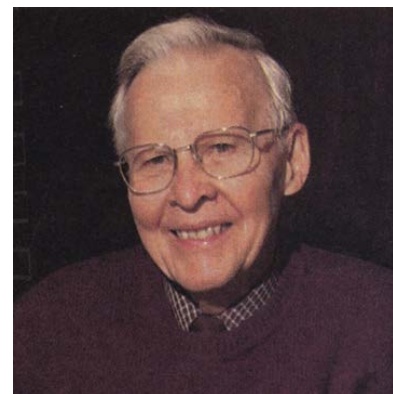
\$5.95 for packs of ten

While you can always use these book pockets and library cards to monitor loans from your personal collection, they can also be fashioned into other things, such as invitations to

book-club meetings, place cards or just plain notes. One of our favourites: insert a pocket into a book that you are gifting to someone and write a personal message on the card including the reason you chose that particular volume for him or her.

## A Gift to Our Library

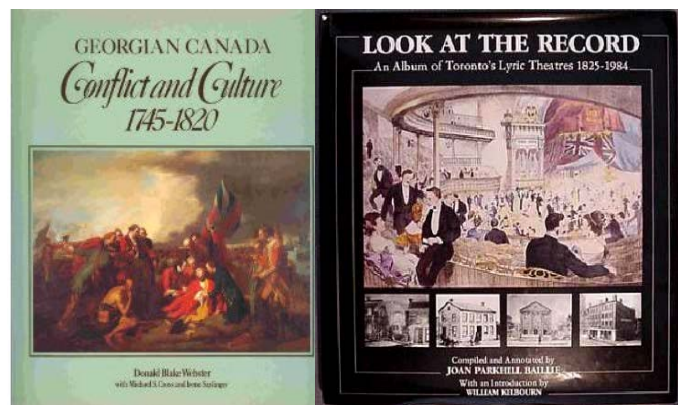
The Town of York Historical Society recently received a rare and wonderful donation of books from Walter Jennings of Oakville, Ontario. This collection of over fifty titles largely focuses on the architecture and history of Toronto and environs. It also contains some splendid reference volumes, such as the massive *Ontario's History in Maps*, and all three volumes of the *Historical Atlas of Canada*.



Walter Jennings grew up in Burlington and attended McMaster University in Hamilton. He began his career as a chartered accountant and later worked as a management consultant and financial planner in Toronto. Involved with the Oakville Historical Society for four decades, he served its board for a number of terms as treasurer. He also curated a number of exhibits for the Erchless Estate Gallery, and one for the OHS archive on local transportation. For many years he led walking tours of Oakville's historic Main Street.

Besides books, Mr. Jennings collects advertising tradecards – popular around the turn of the previous century – inspired by a small collection he inherited from his paternal grandmother.

We are grateful to Mr. Jennings for his thoughtfulness and also wish to thank his son, Norman Jennings – an Associate at Moriyama & Teshima Architects – for facilitating this unique donation.



# THE NEIGHBOURHOOD AND BEYOND



## A CHILDHOOD IN NORTH YORK CIRCA 1902

Until December 14, Monday to Friday, 9:00 am – 3:00 pm

In 1902 a series of villages stood where North York is today. Between them lay meadows, orchards, rivers and forests – so many places a child could escape to between school and the daily chores at home. Playing hockey on the street, fishing in the Don, picnicking in the orchards of Willowdale: these were just a few of the pleasures to be had in the near-countryside of Toronto. Partners in the production of this

exhibit include the Archives of Ontario, Gibson House Museum, the North York Historical Society, the Société d'histoire de Toronto, the Toronto Public Library, Toronto's First Post Office and Zion Schoolhouse.

**Alliance Française Centre, 95 Sheppard Avenue West. Free admission.**

## THE WATER CZAR: R.C. HARRIS WORKS FOR TORONTO

Until March 2, 2013, Tuesday to Saturday, 10:00 am – 4:00 pm

R.C. Harris spent over three decades tackling Toronto's water challenges – bridging it, making the harbour accessible, obtaining a secure supply of tap water and getting rid of wastewater. When he died in office in 1945, Toronto was a safer, healthier, better functioning and more beautiful place. The Prince Edward Viaduct and the art deco architectural gem that is the R.C. Harris Water Treatment Plant are but two of his legacies.

**The Market Gallery, 95 Front Street East. Free admission.**



## WAR FOR DESSERT – New Theatre in the Schoolhouse

Friday and Saturday, October 26-27, 7:30 pm



It's June 25, 1812. In the dining room at Fort George, on the banks of the Niagara River, British officers from the 41st Regiment have gathered to share a jovial meal in friendship with their American counterparts. By the end of the evening, however, the two groups discover that they are to meet again soon – as enemies on the battlefield! To view a theatrical teaser, visit [facebook.com/gibsonzion](http://facebook.com/gibsonzion).

**Zion Schoolhouse, 1091 Finch Avenue East. Tickets are \$18 plus tax.**

**Pre-registration and prepayment required. For more information, please call 416-395-7432.**

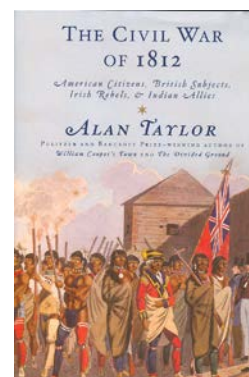
## WINNING THE BORDER: SETTLING THE WAR OF 1812

Thursday, November 1, 7:30 pm

The Archives of Ontario and York University's Department of History present a public lecture by Professor Alan Taylor (University of California at Davis). Prof. Taylor has recently published an award-winning book – *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels and Indian Allies* – in which he presents the international conflict as, in effect, a civil war between related members of a founding nation.

**Lecture Hall W 132, Schulich Building, York University, 4700 Keele Street.**

**Free. RSVP at <http://goo.gl/7EcuH> by October 23.**



## UPPER CANADA REBELLION BUS TOUR

Sunday, November 4, 11:00 am – 5:00 pm

Commemorate the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the uprising by following the route of the rebels from Lloydtown to Toronto. The guided bus ride begins and ends in Schomberg, with stops along the southbound route including Gibson House, the site of Montgomery's Tavern, Mackenzie House and, lastly, the site of the execution of rebels Lount and Matthews.

**King Township Museum, 905-833-2331 or [kingmuseum@king.ca](mailto:kingmuseum@king.ca) to register.**

**\$45 per person – price includes bus, lunch and admission to heritage sites.**

## Missing Michael Comstock (1945 - 2012)

On September 22, our friend and colleague Michael Comstock passed away at his home after a brief battle with pancreatic cancer. He shall be sorely missed. What we at TYHS will remember most about Michael was his tremendous generosity of spirit. If you needed help or advice on a local initiative, all you had to do was ask. And it was never about *him*. On the exquisite souvenir poster he produced for Toronto's 175th birthday, for example, his signature is only evident in the logos of the ten sponsors he was able to garner towards its publication. We reprint with permission the following excerpt from *The Bulletin*, to which Michael was a regular contributor, by his friend Edward Nixon:



“If you look around anywhere in St. Lawrence, in the broader Old Town Toronto area, including Corktown, the Distillery and Queen Street East you can see evidence of the material impact he had: he led the initiatives to improve the Front Street East streetscape ... Through his leadership on the board of the South East Downtown Economic Redevelopment Initiative (SEDERI) he was part of the team that gave us the decorative street signs to identify all our historic neighbourhoods. He was the one who launched The Kitchen at St. Lawrence Market to celebrate the food and history of our neighbourhood anchor.

“If there was an initiative to improve, celebrate or market the neighbourhoods of Old Town Toronto, he either instigated it or was a leading part of it ... A strong advocate of traditional main-street businesses, he worked to maintain a healthy retail environment in St. Lawrence Market, and all across Toronto, through his work on the Board of the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas (TABIA), of which he lately served as President ... His love, interest and attachment to his community carried on to the end.”

### WHY NOT JOIN US?

Help us tell the story of the Town of York and early Toronto through research, exhibitions, interpretation and outreach, education programs and more!

As a member you will receive (in the mail, of course!) the TYHS newsletter and invitations to all events sponsored by the Society or held at Toronto's First Post Office. Membership also entitles you to a 10% discount in the museum's gift shop and in-house use of the Society's library. Your tax-deductible membership helps in ways that exceed its nominal cost. It declares your belief in the importance of Toronto's history and the preservation of its built heritage!

### The Town of York Historical Society

Individual Membership	\$25
Family Membership	\$40
Lifetime Membership	\$250

Directors: Patricia Braithwaite, George Fells, Sheldon Godfrey, Sanford Hersh, Meredith Hogan, Ewa Jarmicka, Judith McEvel, Jennifer McIlroy (President), Councillor Pam McConnell and Melville Olsberg

## 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 October 7-8 for Thanksgiving and November 11 for Remembrance 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 Tourism, Culture and Sport; our members, donors and customers; and Canada Post.