

NEWSLETTER

The Town of York Historical Society

December 2015

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A TREASURE TROVE OF 17TH-CENTURY LETTERS



The linen-lined leather trunk, waterproofed with sealskin, in which a cache of undeliverable mail was sealed by a postmaster in 1707.
Photo: Hague Museum for Communication.

A perfectly preserved collection of 300-year-old letters is currently being studied by an international team of academics in The Hague. Written between 1689 and 1707, they were kept by postmaster Simon de Brienne and his wife Maria Germain when they proved to be undeliverable. Many of the intended recipients could simply not be found. Others had died. Other letters had been refused, either because the addressee did not wish to pay the postage or because the missive was thought to contain unwelcome news. This was likely the case of a letter to a wealthy merchant from a woman writing on behalf of a mutual friend. It is clear upon reading the letter – which the merchant never did – that the friend, an opera singer, was pregnant and needed his help.

Many of the letters were written by musicians. Then, as now, they were often on tour. It was music historian Rebekah Ahrendt (Yale) who, in 2012, came across mention of the letters in a 1938 French journal. She eventually tracked down their curator at The Hague Museum for Communication.

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George Brown House

Of 36 designated National Historic Sites in *Toronto*, only two were originally used solely as private residences. One is The Grange. The other was built for *Globe* founder and “Father of Confederation” George Brown and his wife Anne. They called it Lambton Lodge. Designed in the then-fashionable Second Empire style, it had, as Brown wrote to his

wife in 1875, “exactly the appearance we would wish...that of a thoroughly comfortable, solid, tasteful residence of a well-to-do citizen.”

This is a fairly modest description of what was, in fact, a 9,000-square-foot home with 15 fireplaces and a carved stone door-surround fit for a town hall. Even Mr. Brown conceded that the latter might be a “little too much displayed.”* Based on drawings by architect William Irving, it was executed by architect and builder Edward Hutchings, and completed in 1876. Sadly, Mr. Brown would not live long in his dream home. Shot in the leg by a disgruntled employee in March of 1880, he succumbed to an infection and died two months later.



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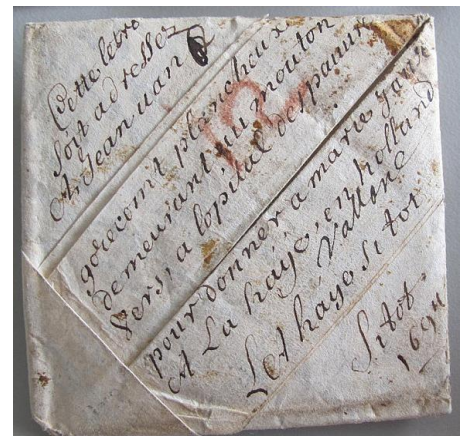
Dutch Letters, *from page 1*



In addition to Ahrendt, the research team includes scholars from MIT and the Universities of Leiden, Groningen and Oxford. A public-private partnership, the project has been called “Signed, Sealed and Undelivered.” It will eventually provide unprecedented insight into life at the turn of the 18th century, as the letters were penned by people from the highly educated to the barely literate. Many refer to the turmoil of the times, and report perils such as highway robbery, forced military conscriptions (press gangs) and religious persecution. Written in six languages (including Latin!), they are all to be transcribed and translated. The 600 (of 2,600) letters that are unopened will remain that

way, their contents to be divined using contemporary imaging techniques.

The research team was intrigued by the physical form of the letters and the various elaborate ways in which they are folded. Some, such as those written by spies, are pleated in a manner referred to as letter-locking, making them very difficult to open. Many of the letters have enclosures as interesting as their written contents: tokens of love or piety (such as the paper dove seen below), forget-me-nots, or even commercial samples. One letter contains lengths of various types, colours and gauges of thread, each carefully fastened to the page with a wax seal. Found with the letters were also postal records and accounting books, which will lead to a greater understanding of the postal system of the era, including details on routes and pricing.



One single letter in our own collection – from a teenaged Henrietta Sewell in Quebec to her brother Henry (Hank) at Oxford in 1827 – has taught us so much about daily existence in early 19th-century British North America. Multiply that by 2,600, and imagine what we are soon to learn about life in Europe during the time of William of Orange’s “Glorious Revolution.”

All photos are from the Hague Museum for Communication. Funding for “Signed, Sealed and Undelivered” came from MIT Libraries, the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), and Metamorfoze, the Dutch national program for the preservation of paper heritage.



While you may not have a stash of correspondence as large as the one described above, you probably have some used greeting cards lying about that are just too darn beautiful for the blue bin. Come learn how to transform them into useful items such as notebooks, wallets and more! You’ll get instructions for 6+ projects, and all the help and supplies needed to make as many as you like. As an added bonus, participants will receive a 10% discount in our gift shop on the day of the workshop.

Sunday, January 17, 1-3 pm. Toronto's First Post Office, 260 Adelaide Street East. \$10 / \$11.20 on Eventbrite. For further information call 416-865-1833 or email tfpomuseum@ca.inter.net.

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT



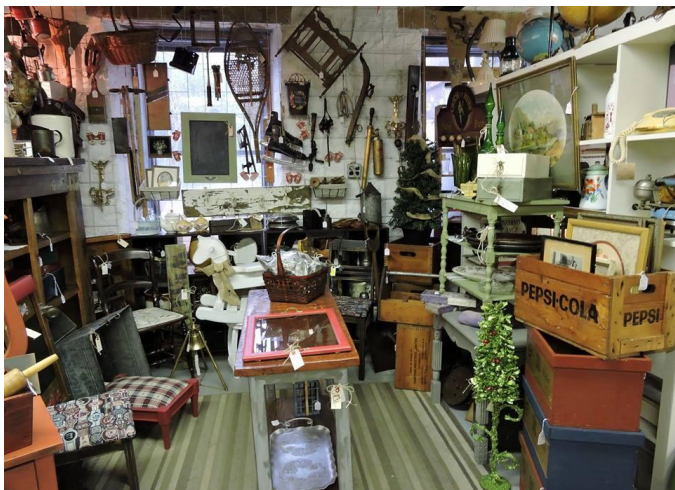
Fall Colours Tour

The fall foliage was resplendent on our October tour of Norval and Glen Williams, although there was a nip – and even a few flakes – in the air. Norval was home to author Lucy Maud Montgomery from 1926 to 1935. The manse (above) in which the author



lived, and penned six of her novels, was vacant, so we got to peer in the windows at what seemed an unaltered interior. Glen Williams was full of surprises, one of the nicest being an impromptu organ

performance at the church of St. Alban the Martyr. Local historian Mark Rowe gave us a walking tour and a brief outline of the village's early development and founding families. He did *not* mention that the Beaumont family's former woolen mill is now a 36-vendor antiques market. We did manage to find the place, however, as you can see below.



Holiday Open House



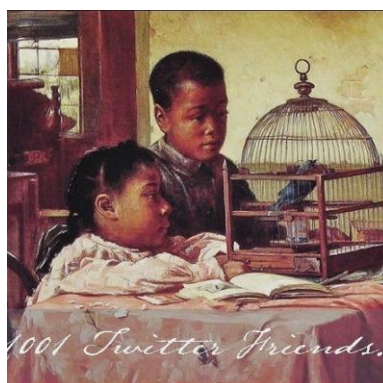
Over 100 people came to visit the post office during our annual open house, including no fewer than five of our favourite four-legged friends. It's a good thing we held our little social event early this year, as by the following week it was "All hands on deck!" While we were expecting mountains

of parcels to process, we were pleasantly surprised to learn that the tradition of sending Christmas cards in the mail seems to be enjoying a renaissance.

Once the dust has settled, we will be making some small renovations within the museum. It will be business as usual, but be prepared to encounter the odd bit of caution tape or "wet paint" sign on any visit early in the new year. Our model of the city in 1837, meanwhile, has gone across town to visit an artist's studio for a much-needed makeover.



A Little Bird Told Us...

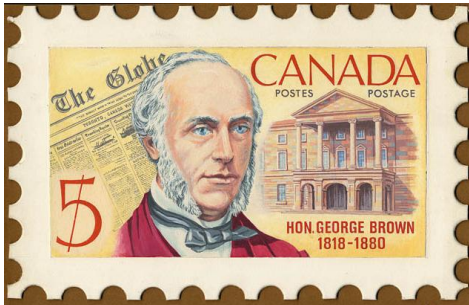


On December 11th, Toronto's First Post Office (@TOs1stPO) surpassed a thousand followers on Twitter. It's a small milestone but a gratifying one. Thanks everyone for your support!

Image: *Watching the Blue Jay*, Harry Herman Roseland.

George Brown House, *from page 1*

In 1889 the house was sold to Duncan Coulson, General Manager and later President of the Bank of Toronto, for \$31,000. Coulson is responsible for the magnificent Art Nouveau dining room (seen at right), designed by David Brass Dick, and the ornate front-hall fireplace. A veranda, thankfully now gone, was added to the façade in 1990.



This postage stamp, created for George Brown's 150th birthday in 1968, was to have been released on August 7, but was delayed two weeks owing to a postal strike.

The neighbourhood altered in the early 20th century as the moneyed class moved north and west to Rosedale or Parkdale, and today the house (at 186 Beverley Street) is an anomaly in east Chinatown, just south of the University of Toronto campus. From 1920 until 1956 it served as headquarters for the Canadian National Institute for the Blind. When it was designated a National Historic Site in 1976 it was not in good repair. Ten years later, threatened by demolition, it was acquired by what is now the Ontario Heritage Trust, and an extensive restoration was undertaken. Today George Brown House – as it is commonly known – accommodates the offices of the Ontario Museum



Association, in addition to rental facilities for conferences and weddings.

*Quoted in Tom Cruickshank, *Old Toronto Houses*, 2nd Edition (Toronto: Firefly Books, 2008), page 78.

The photograph on page one is courtesy of Canada's Historic Places (historicplaces.ca).



United Way

Did you know...?

You can direct your United Way payroll deductions to Toronto's First Post Office and the Town of York Historical Society! United Way contributions won't come to us otherwise, and your donation means a lot to the preservation, research, and education of history in Toronto's Old Town.

To direct your donation: on the reverse of your workplace's pledge form, just write "Town of York Historical Society" and our charitable number (108101627 RT0001) in the "To another Canadian registered charitable organization" section.

Town of York Historical Society

Care to join us?

Individual Memberships \$30
Family Memberships \$50

Directors: Tom Arnold, Kevin Both, Shirley Farrar, Luisa Giacometti, Susan Grav, Suzanne Kavanagh, Judith McErvel, Councillor Pam McConnell and Nancy Wigston.

Toronto's First Post Office

is administered by the

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Monday to Friday: 9:00 – 5:30

Saturdays: 10:00 – 4:00

Sundays: 12:00 – 4:00

Closed on holiday Mondays and the Sundays preceding them.

The Post Office will close December 25-28th for Christmas, January 1 for the New Year, and February 15 for Family 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.