

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND



In March of 1834, when the Town of York was incorporated as a city, the town's fourth post office became Toronto's first. It had been built in 1833 by Postmaster James Scott Howard, and served him as both post office and residence. The Post Office

and the nearby Bank of Upper Canada became a hub for the early city of about 9,000 people.

The bank's directors were drawn from the small group that made Toronto's political elite, the "Family Compact". Howard tried to appear politically neutral but, as an Irish Methodist, he was viewed with suspicion by the mostly British Anglican government. During the Rebellion of 1837, Howard was framed as a rebel and dismissed from his position without formal charges. Charles Albert Berczy replaced him as Postmaster. Berczy continued to operate the Post Office in the building until 1839 when he relocated to Front Street, west of Yonge.

James Scott Howard, still the building's owner, rented out the premises until he sold it in 1841 to a hardware merchant. In 1873, it sold again to the Christian Brothers who ran a school out of the old bank building. The De La Salle Institute operated until 1915. Used briefly as a Royal Air Force Records and Recruiting Office, it was again sold, in 1921, to Christie Brown & Co. Ltd. whose cookie factory now houses George Brown College. They, in turn, sold it to the United Farmers Cooperative in 1925 and the Post Office building, already greatly altered, was converted into a cold storage facility. The 1960s and 70s saw a long period of decline for the buildings, until a devastating fire in 1978. They were then fully restored and renovated as the museum, the home of the Town of York Historical Society, and office rentals.

TORONTO'S FIRST POST OFFICE

is operated by the Town of York Historical Society, a legally incorporated non-profit organization and registered charity.

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MEMBERSHIP

Membership in the Town of York Historical Society supports heritage preservation, interpretation and education, and entitles you to the Society's quarterly newsletter, special event pricing, and 10% off your gift shop purchases.

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Town of York HISTORICAL SOCIETY  TORONTO'S FIRST Post Office

WELCOME TO TORONTO'S FIRST POST OFFICE



Originally built in December of 1833, this building served as the new city of Toronto's Post Office until 1839. Restored to that period, it opened again as a post office, a museum, and a National Historic Site in 1983. It is the oldest surviving purpose-built post office in Canada.

This brochure will guide you through the museum's three rooms and provide some background information to enrich your visit.

Translations of this guide are available at the postal counter in several languages.

THE POST OFFICE

Just as it did from 1833-1839, this room again serves as a post office. Then, as a branch of the Royal Mail, and today, as an outlet for Canada Post services. The hand-painted post boxes are replicas of the originals, as rented by such historic figures as Toronto's first mayor and rebellion leader William Lyon Mackenzie, education reformer Egerton Ryerson, and Premier of Canada West Robert Baldwin.

Letters mailed from Toronto's First Post Office are hand-cancelled and receive a reproduction of the 1834 cancel in red ink.

THE READING ROOM

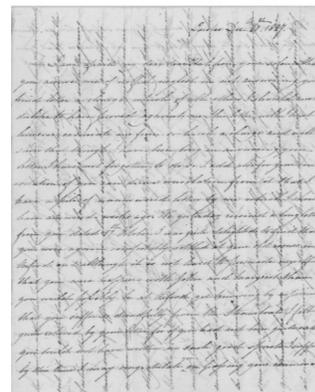


In an era of rough roads and horse-drawn transportation, a trip to the post office could cost the farmer an entire day's work. In order that they not have to make two trips, this room was used as a place for people to both read and reply to the letters they had come to retrieve. In this post office, Howard employed 6 post office assistants who could help those who could neither read nor write. Postmasters would have pens and ink available for the public to use. You'll find small slips of cotton rag paper on the tables. Please try your hand with the ink and quill pen—a cut goose feather—provided. In the 1830s, writers were still drying their correspondence with "pounce" or sand. To dry your work quickly, sprinkle sand on the paper, then return it to the pot.

If you would like to write a letter with quill and ink and seal it with wax, please ask at the postal counter for a full-size sheet of paper.

As there was no door-to-door delivery, the Postmaster was required to publish quarterly lists in the newspapers to notify those for whom letters were waiting at the Post Office. One of these lists can be seen on the notice board in this room.

The exhibit *Royal Mail: Postal Service 1830-1840* shows how letters were written in the 1830s, and how they would travel to their destinations. Both



paper and postage were very costly in the 1830s and, as Upper Canada did not have its own currency, they were paid for at British rates but using a wide assortment of coinage as shown here.

The furnishings and objects in the Reading Room all date from the early to mid 19th century and the fireplace is original to the building. In the 1830s, it would have been the source of light and warmth as visitors read and replied to their post.



THE EXHIBIT ROOM

The original use of this room is unknown. It now features changing exhibits, and a topographical model of Toronto in 1837. The Post Office, with its four chimneys, is located close to the centre of the model, on Duke Street. This building and the Bank of Upper Canada are two of the very few buildings that still remain from this time. Note the residence just to the east, at the top of Frederick Street. This is the home of Chief Justice William Campbell, which has since been moved to Queen Street West (at University Avenue) and also operates as a museum. All of the model's sites are identified in the book *Toronto 1837: A Model City*. This was the young city, along with the encircling farm community, served by the Post Office at Duke and George.