

# The Georgian Courier

THE GREY, BRUCE, DUFFERIN & SIMCOE POSTAL HISTORY STUDY GROUP

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## 150th Anniversary Hanover POST OFFICE 1856 – 2006

### *A History of the Post Office and the Town Clock*

#### Al Morrow

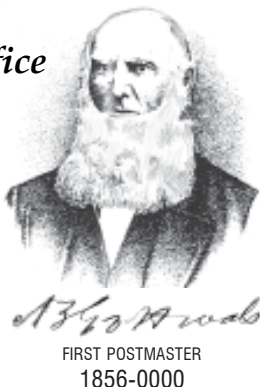
It almost seems as if we have come full circle and ended right back where we started from. We could say that history has repeated itself.

In 1856, when postal service was established in Hanover, it was located in Rev. Gottwals general store and this well known pioneer became Hanover's first postmaster.

The very first mail service came into Bentinck (Durham) from Guelph once a week. It was brought in on horseback. The first mail route from Durham to Kincardine was let by the government in 1852 and the first mail driver was a man by the name of Cowan Keyes, who did not "drive", but made the trip on foot, forty-five miles there and forty-five miles back, once a week, carrying the mail on his back.

Up until very recently, we had our postal outlet again located in a retail store. As it was, most likely, in 1856, the service is often very friendly and personable. This last holiday season, one of the postal clerks even helped me lick all the stamps for my Christmas cards. Hanover's postal service is now back in the Federal Building located on 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Stamps you have to lick are being replaced by the peel and stick variety – so we have made some progress lately.

In 1856, the government proposed opening a number of post offices throughout Ontario, and Rev. A. Z. Gottwals petitioned Ottawa to include the new village in the list. The little settlement was nearly all German and the name, Adamstown, which had appeared a few months earlier on the Bill of Sale sponsored by Messrs.



John Hahn and Henry P. Adams, was not acceptable to the majority who insisted that the name should be a German one. Mr. Christian Hassenjager, who had been the second settler to register and take possession of his grant of land, had been born in Hannover, Germany, and he wanted the village named after his birthplace in the old country. There had been a long connection between the crowns of England and Hannover, Germany, so when the name was submitted, it was accepted.

When the post office was opened, there was a growing number to be served – settlers from the surrounding area who had trudged all the way to Durham for their letters and the occasional paper.



Hanover Post Office was built in 1914.



Grand Trunk Station (CNR), Hanover, Ontario.

In 1862, the Grand Trunk Railway began to carry the mail into Hanover. A stage line took the mail to the surrounding communities daily. You could actually mail a postcard with one cent postage in Ayton at 11:00 a.m. and it would arrive in Hanover at 6:00 p.m. That can't even be duplicated today with our present postal service.

At this time, the waiting room in the post office was very small, and in sunshine and in showers, in snow or in sleet, everybody had to stand on the walk outside while the mail was sorted and if the trains were late and the school children let out, there was a wild scramble when the door was opened as to who should go in first.

The post office closed at 7:00 p.m. sharp and on one occasion a man who had been enjoying life around town all afternoon, had delayed going to the post office for his mail until he was ready to go home. He was not pleased when he tried the door and found it locked. He called the postmaster – no answer. He rattled the latch, shouted, swore. He went back to the tavern. It was Saturday night and the bar had closed (no so today). That door was locked too. It was dry and discouraging – no letters and no drinks. He sat on the sidewalk and wondered what the country was coming to. Eventually he hied himself homeward – but he had learned his lesson – the post office closed at 7:00 p.m. sharp and no amount of persuasion could change that hour.

After the town was incorporated in 1904, it was felt that a proper post office building was needed to accommodate the rapidly growing community. Mr. H. H. Miller, who was the Member of Parliament for

South Grey and a Hanover citizen finally obtained the necessary approval. For 40 years, the corner of Main (10<sup>th</sup> St.) and Proctor (9<sup>th</sup> Ave.) had been the post office corner, so after much negotiation, the property on the south side of the street (now Bank of Montreal) was acquired.

The new post office was built at a cost of \$50,000. Hanover's post office now had a permanent place of abode, and opened its doors to welcome the pleased citizens on Monday, October 5, 1914. There was no ceremony and no speeches at the opening of this imposing, long looked-for and needed structure.

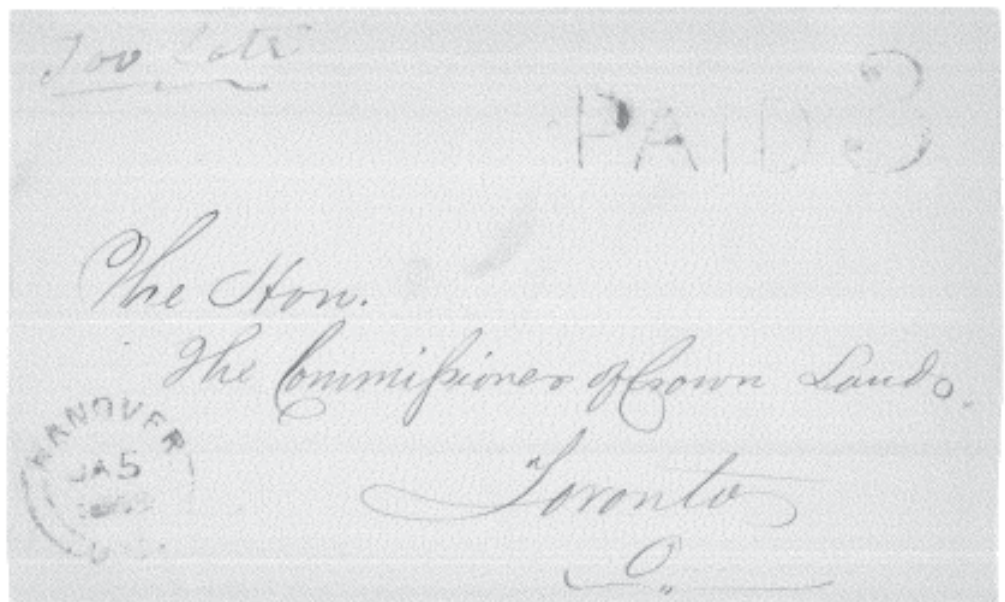
The new building comprised the post office on the main floor, Canada Customs and Excise on the second floor and the caretaker's living quarters on the third half storey. A clock was installed in the tower in 1915.

For 50 years, our beautiful, stately post office served the citizens of Hanover and the surrounding area. Its lofty tower and clock faithfully kept the minutes as the years passed – through good times and bad – war, depression and war again.

There are many stories and memories connected with the old post office and, I'm sure, each individual person who was acquainted with the building would have their own particular ones.

One of my favourites concerned a famous and somewhat eccentric citizen known as "Hanover's Human Fly". His real name was Bill Berry. A steeplejack by trade, Bill was quite used to working in high places and it really didn't seem to bother him at all. In fact, he used to say that climbing up to those high places bothered him more than being up there. "I'm always scared until I'm above forty feet – after that, I'm going to be dead if I fall, so it doesn't make much difference." Such was his attitude.

On one occasion, Bill was sitting in the barbershop listening to an interesting conversation about a daredevil who had recently visited the town and who claimed to be the "human fly". This fellow had given an exhibition



HANOVER U.C / JA 5 / 1859

*Hanover Post Office, c. 1905, at the time of Thomas Coppinger, postmaster, 1872-1912.*  
 — COURTESY OF Robt. C. Smith



of his climbing ability by quickly mounting the Hanover Inn (three storeys in those days).

Bill calmly remarked that he could also do the same as the so-called “human fly”. Some of the visitors in the shop scoffed at the statement made and one of them dared our Bill not to climb the Hanover Inn, but to scale the post office tower. He also boasted that he would buy him a cigar if he could do it.

As the story goes, a short time later, our daredevil not only climbed the tower, but stood on the ornamental ball on the top. There are pictures which exist to show this as true. Some even said that he stood on his head up there, and there were witnesses to testify to the fact. We have no pictures to substantiate this part of the story. Getting up there at all was extraordinary enough. Bill Berry was truly “Hanover’s Human Fly.”

Marjorie (Crowe) Dallner remembers the old post office building too. She should, since her parents, John and Christine Crowe, were caretakers of the building for many years (1935 to 1955) and lived on the third floor. Marjorie remarked that there were times when the ticking almost drove you crazy, not to mention the constant striking of the hours.

In later years, when visiting her parents, who still lived in the post office, Marjorie suddenly notice that her small son had disappeared. A quick search of the premises failed to find him. Finally someone suggested they try the clock room. There the little lad was found having a great time swinging on the pendulum of the post office clock. No harm was done, except that Mr. Weppler, the jeweller, had to be summoned to reset the time.

Mr. Alan Faelker states, “I was born and raised directly behind the post office on Christian St. (9<sup>th</sup> St.) and the clock stood high and mighty and watched over us as we played in the back yard. I can only guess that I must have looked at that clock many thousands of times and there never was an excuse not to be home on time – as Mother would say, ‘The clock is right there and it rings

every hour.’ I also recall how the light of the clock would shine in my bedroom window all night and act as a night-light for my comfort. I believe we were one of the closest neighbours to the clock for all those years, other than the caretakers of the post office, the Crowe family.”

As a young boy, I remember going into the post office holding my grandmother’s hand. Our footsteps would echo on the marble floor and around the high ceilings. Row upon row of tiny mail boxes with tiny windows lined the walls. You could always tell immediately if you had mail.

For many years, the post office clock was a landmark faithfully counting out the minutes and the hours from its tall tower – a part of the old post office building. Many Hanover citizens remember it fondly and many wept sadly as the tower came crashing down in 1964 – the victim of the wreckers ball.

The clock, itself, had been manufactured in Derby, England in 1915 by the Midland Clock Works. This company still operates today and manufactures only high quality timepieces. The Hanover clock was made of brass and even after 49 years of constant use (1915 to 1964), there was very little evidence of any wear to be seen on the gears and dials p it had been simply and strongly constructed to run smoothly for a long period of time.

In 1964, the post office was demolished, but miraculously the clock survived. Mr. Albert Blackburn, a local resident and clock fancier volunteered to remove the clock faces and the works at the last moment. This generous offer was precipitated by Mr. Blackburn watching workmen struggling to remove the pieces of the clock and eventually dropping the works and slightly damaging it. The pieces were stored for a few years in the fire hall.

Later, the town officials decided that the clock should be given to Mr. Blackburn and it was deposited unceremoniously on his doorstep. The gentleman, being somewhat of a mechanical wizard, loving restored the clock to working order. Every part was polished and repainted.

The Blackburns lived on the third storey of what was the old cider mill, a big square building on 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue, just north of the main street. On the second floor was found space to store the old clock mounted on a steel frame. For the next 30 years, the clock rested, out of sight and out of mind to most of the citizens of Hanover. It is interesting to note that Mr. Blackburn never considered himself the owner of the clock, only the “keeper” and it was always his wish and his hope that the town would find a use for it again.

The old clock is all that remains of our famous post office building. For almost 50 years the clock faithfully performed its function. In January of 1996, a group of interested citizens met for the first time to discuss the possibility of restoring the old clock. The committee was comprised of the following: Susan Blackburn-Krueger, Al Morrow, Ted Blackburn, Doug Morrow, Bud Morrow, Tom Brigham, George Rahn, Stu Lamont, George

Francis and Sheila Francis. After twenty months of work and planning, the construction of a new tower to house the clock began in September of 1997. The engineer for the project was Nelson Dawley and the contractor was Domm Construction from Ayton.

The new tower was designed to look very much like the former post office tower and although much of the original building materials were no longer available, the new structure resembles the old in practically every detail. It was also designed to fit in well with the colouring and décor of the adjacent new civic centre. Many have remarked that it looks so much like the old post office tower and that seeing it brings back many memories.

The original works and clock faces were installed in the new tower. Unfortunately the original brass bell disappeared after the post office building was demolished in 1964 and the committee had to find a suitable replacement. Fortunately, Bud Morrow remembered the existence of an old church bell, which was hanging unused in the belfry of Grace United Church. After inquiries were made, the congregation of Grace United Church agreed to make a gift of the bell to be used in the new clock tower.

This bell was historic in itself. It had originally been installed in the Salem Evangelical United Brethren Church in the 1880s and for many years it served the double purpose of calling the faithful to church and of sounding the alarm when there was a fire. For ninety years this bell hung in the tower of the Salem Church until it was removed to Grace United and placed in their belfry. It had been used only very infrequently after that time. Mr. Morrow remembered the bell because he, with the help of others, had placed it there in 1970.

Very quickly, this new tower with its old clock has become a landmark in the town. Many older citizens are glad to see it again. Donations to help pay for the construction poured in from all over Canada and the United States as former residents and Hanoverians heard of the effort to restore Hanover's town clock. Interested passersby crowd around the doors and the windows to view the polished brass clock works as the pendulum swings to and fro counting out the seconds and once every hour to see the wheels and governor turn to strike the bell.

One citizen was heard to remark, "When this clock began to tick once again, it was like the town having its soul back!" Another was heard to state that the ticking was like the heartbeat of the town. In one of the public schools the clock and the old post office was celebrated in a musical entitled, "Deliver the Letter". It was very obvious that this famous piece of the town's history was becoming a symbol very near and dear to the hearts of the citizens of this community. It is also a symbol of the town's determination to forge ahead, but, at the same time, to remember its roots and heritage.

On New Year's Eve (1997), the tower and clock were ready. The evening had a festive air about it. Beginning at 10:00 p.m., residents, visitors and former Hanoverians from afar – 1400 in all gathered in the Civic

Centre parking lot. While most revellers at New Year's ring in the new year by looking to the future, this huge crowd gathered around the new clock tower and celebrated the night by looking to the past. They braved the bitterly cold temperature (-15°C) to be a part of Hanover history, as the old post office clock came to public life for the first time in 33 years. They were entertained by music and many kept warm by dancing in the parking lot. Door prizes donated by local merchants were held every few minutes. The town hall was also open allowing people to warm themselves with food and hot refreshments while examining a collection of photographs depicting the original post office, as well as stages in the construction of the new tower. Mayor, Robert White was on hand to address the crowd and he commended the citizens of Hanover for taking on this project.

At the designated time, the "Keeper of the Clock" arrived via police cruiser and out stepped local resident and committee member, Tom Brigham, dressed in historical fashion. After Susan and Ted Blackburn unveiled the plaque at the front of the tower, a time capsule was placed in the cornerstone in the bottom left side of the tower. At 11:50 p.m. the faces of the clock were lit up to the "ooohs and aaaahs" of the crowd.

Rev. Alice Wilson of the St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church blessed the clock and tower with a prayer she had written especially for the occasion:

*"Bless us, God of all time and all timelessness, in the last few moments of this year about to end.*

*We are grateful for all past hours of blessings and promises, as well as past courage and understanding in our sad and difficult hours.*

*Bless us God of all times and generations. As this clock is about to strike the New Year in for us, may we not let a moment of time go by to help in the great task of encouraging one another, in filling one another with strength and courage for the days ahead.*

*We cherish our past by bringing this clock into our present and our future. So, we ask, bless this clock to our community; may it be a symbol of the precious time you have given us to be a community of family, friends, and neighbours together.*

*May we take time this year to recognize and welcome the strangers among us and may we resolve to live together in faith, hope, and above all, with love. AMEN*

With midnight drawing near, the Keeper swung the heavy pendulum which started the clock ticking, and the excitement in the crowd increased. Finally midnight arrived and the clock struck right on cue – twelve times. A confetti gun fired into the air as families, friends and neighbours hugged and kissed each other. Everyone began to sing "Auld Lang Syne". The new year had begun.

The *Hanover Post* editorial summed up the feeling perfectly . . .

"This spontaneous gathering represented the importance we hold for our family and for our community. It was a combination of the nostalgic magic we feel for things past, mixed with the excitement we feel for the future." ☒