

THE HALIFAX POST OFFICE

The fact that the first Post Office in Canada was established at Halifax is widely but not well known. Knowledge of it is due mainly to the research and to the writings of William Smith, the chief authority on the history of the Post Office in this country, who held the positions of secretary of the Post Office Department of Canada and deputy keeper of public records in the Public Archives of Canada. It is contained in his articles on the Post Office in volumes 4 and 5 of *Canada and Its Provinces* (1914); in his account entitled "The Early Post Office in Nova Scotia, 1755-1867," which was read at a meeting of the Nova Scotia Historical Society on November 3, 1916, and was afterwards published in volume XIX of the *Collections of the Nova Scotia Historical Society*; and in his *History of the Post Office in British North America* (Cambridge University Press, 1920). In all of those writings Mr. Smith states not only that the first Post Office in the country was in Halifax but also that it was opened in 1755. He cites the *Boston Evening-Post* of April 28, 1755, as his reference for that date, and credits Mr. C. W. Ernst of Boston with having provided him with it. It is true that the Boston newspaper of that date refers to the fact that there was then a Post Office at Halifax, but it does not describe the opening of it, and actually a Post Office of a kind had been established at Halifax in 1754.

Mr. Smith was not aware of that. But he did know, from information received from a Bostonian, that the Halifax Post Office was in existence in 1755. Actually what his correspondent had seen in the Boston newspaper of April 28 in that year was an announcement of letters remaining in the Post Office at Boston, which ended with these words:

Notice is hereby given, that a Post Office is established at Halifax, where Letters are taken in for this and the other Offices on the Continent, and received into this Office for said Port.

Thus it was that Mr. Smith had traced the Halifax Post Office back to 1755. He had made it plain that the earliest Canadian Post Office was in Halifax, and he thought that he had settled the question as to the year in which it opened. Eventually, in 1928, the Federal Government, acting upon the recommendation of the Historic Sites and Monuments

Board of Canada, affixed a tablet to the Post Office Building in Halifax. The inscription on this plaque is as follows:

FIRST POST OFFICE

In 1755 a line of packets was placed on the route between Falmouth and New York. This was part of a general scheme for closer and more regular communication between the colonies and the mother country. These packets called at Halifax. In that year and in this City was established the first Post Office in the Dominion of Canada as now constituted.

Although William Smith succeeded in getting back to 1755 in the history of the Post Office at Halifax, he had perhaps not quite reached its origin, for a Post Office of either a private or an official nature had been opened there on April 23, 1754. This is clear from an announcement bearing that date which appeared in the *Halifax Gazette* of April 27, 1754:

Halifax, April 23, 1754.

For the Benefit of the PUBLICK.

There is now open'd at the first House without the South Gate, an Intelligence and Outward

POST-OFFICE, viz.

- I That if any Gentlemen, Merchants, Captains of Vessels, or others that have got any Merchandize, Goods, Household-Furniture, or Wearing Apparel of any sort to dispose of, they may hear of a Purchaser by applying to this Office, and paying One Shilling. And if any Gentlemen, Merchants, Captains of Vessels, or others, who may have occasion to buy any of the above Articles, shall by applying to this Office, be informed gratis where to purchase any of them, (if any to be sold.)
- II If any Gentlemen, Merchants, or others, have got a House or Houses, a Boat or Boats, or any other Vessel or Vessels of any sort, white Servants or Negroes to sell or lett, may hear of a Purchaser, or Hierer, by applying to the said Office, and paying One Shilling. And if any Gentlemen, Merchants, or others, want to purchase or hire any of the above they shall be informed gratis, where they may purchase or hire, by applying to the said Office, (if to be sold or lett)
- III If any Gentleman, Merchants, or others, wants to send any Kind of Goods to any foreign Port, they may be inform'd of the first Opportunity that offers, by paying One Shilling to the said Office, Likewise Masters may hear of Journeymen, or Journeymen of Masters, by applying to said Office, and paying One Shilling.
- IV If any Gentlemen, Merchants, or others, wants to send any Letters to any foreign Port, they may depend on having their Letters carefully deliver'd to the Captain of the first Vessels bound for the Place to which their Letters are directed, by paying One Penny per Letter to said Office.

As the above Office is design'd For the Benefit of the PUBLICK, and the first of the Kind that has been erected in this Province, it is hoped it will meet with suitable Encouragement. And all Gentlemen, Merchants, or others, who incline to employ said Office, may depend on great Diligence and Fidelity, by

Their humble Servant,

Benjamin Leigh.

If a Post Office was first established in Halifax, at the first house outside the South Gate, which was near the foot of Spring Garden Road, the first Postmaster was Benjamin Leigh. A man of some education, he appeared in the new town of Halifax as early as 1751. On September 13 of that year, Governor Edward Cornwallis ordered Lewis Hays, the store-keeper, to victual Benjamin Leigh and his wife in the same manner as other settlers. Soon Leigh was busy as a schoolmaster in the new town of Halifax. In the very first issue of the first Canadian newspaper—the *Halifax Gazette*, of March 23, 1752—this announcement appeared:

At the Sign of the Hand and Pen,
Near the South End of *Granville Street* are carefully
taught.

By Leigh and Wragg.

Spelling, Reading, Writing in all it's different Hands; Arithmetic, in all it's Parts; Merchants Accounts, or, the true Italian Method of Book-keeping in a new and concise Manner; Likewise all Parts of the Mathematics, And, for the Conveniency of grown Persons improving their Learning, any of the above Arts and Sciences will be taught Two Hours every Evening, to begin at 6 o'clock.

N.B. The above Leigh draws, ingrosses, and transcribes Writings of all Kinds, and adjusteth Accounts if ever so difficult, and will keep them in a methodical Manner by the Year. SOLD at the above place, Quills, Pens, Ink, Writing-Paper, Writing and Spelling-Books, and Slate-Pencils.

Before many months had passed, Leigh widened his endeavours and diversified his activities by conducting auctions and sales at his house. As early as January 27, 1753, this announcement was published in the *Halifax Gazette*:

This is to give Notice to all People, That at the House of Benjamin Leigh, Schoolmaster, in *Granville-Street*, will be an Auction or Vendue, every Thursday in the Afternoon (or oftener if Business requires it) and to begin at Two o'Clock, Any Person or Persons that has got any Goods, Cloaths, &c &c to be sold at Auction, and will send them to the above Place, may depend on having the utmost Justice done them in the Sale thereof. The Charges on the Goods, when sold, will be Five per Cent, for selling, collecting, and paying the Money, &c. A Catalogue of such Goods as are to be sold will always be at the Door of the above House.

N.B. Any Person or Persons that do not choose to have their Goods sold at Vendue, may have them sold by Hand at the above Place, for the same Commissions before mentioned, by

BENJAMIN LEIGH.

In the spring of 1754, Leigh's enterprise is evident in new directions. Now he combines a sales agency, a real estate business, and an employment service with an outward Post Office, which he opened in a building just outside Halifax's South Gate on April 23. But his interests were perhaps

as restless as varied; and soon, for some reason or other, Leigh abandoned these projects and appears to have left Halifax altogether.

Moses Ghiselin and Richard Payne continued the office which Benjamin Leigh had started. In the *Halifax Gazette* of August 3, 1754, they inserted an announcement which begins with these words:

NOTICE is hereby given,

That the Office of Intelligence, late without the South Gate, but on account of Mr. Leigh's leaving this Place, is now kept and continued at Mrs. Trigg's Midwife, opposite the Hospital for sick and hurt Seamen, in Granville Street, . . .

Thus, if Benjamin Leigh were the first Halifax Postmaster, Moses Ghiselin and Richard Payne were his immediate joint-successors in some if not all of his enterprises.

Whether or to what extent the office opened by Leigh was at the direction of Benjamin Franklin and William Hunter, who were appointed Deputy Postmaster Generals in 1753, is not known. In any case it began in a manner not unlike earlier colonial Post Offices—as a temporary convenience rather than as a necessarily permanent institution. Moreover, the Boston Post Office was, at the latest, to take cognizance of the Halifax Post Office about a year after Leigh began his venture, and less than nine months after Ghiselin and Payne assumed charge of much of his business.

As to Leigh himself, he was to return to Halifax and then to become one of the early settlers of Liverpool, Nova Scotia. His signature appears on a letter of January 25, 1757, from the freeholders and inhabitants of Halifax to Lieutenant-Governor Monckton about the calling of an Assembly. His name may also be seen on the first Liverpool Township grant of September 1, 1759. He removed from Halifax to Liverpool, where he built a house at the Fishing Point, in John Hopkins' division. By June 1760, five dwellings, Leigh's among them, were standing near that point. Soon afterwards Leigh devised the arms of the town, and the Proprietors of Liverpool, at their meeting on July 8, 1760, accepted their device of "a Codfish, Salmon & Pine Tree, with a Sheaf of Wheat for the Crest." Whatever his ultimate fate, Leigh's creditors took possession of his house at the Fishing Point, as well as of two other dwellings belonging to him in Liverpool, on January 15, 1761.

Meantime the Post Office at Halifax continued, although the postal service was not always entirely satisfactory in those days—there or elsewhere. In May 1758, Captain John Knox, in *An Historical Journal of the Campaigns in North America*, referred to the Halifax Post Office in these words:

We are credibly informed, that upwards of forty letters for the Officers and soldiers of the 43rd regiment lately lay at the Post-Office at Halifax, and the Postmaster, not knowing how he should be repaid the postage of them, or where to forward them to, transmitted them back to New-York, by which means it is not improbable but they may all miscarry; it is an unlucky circumstance that some regulation is not set on foot, to prevent such disappointments happening to the troops throughout America, and those particularly who are doomed to exile in the miserable fortresses of this remote province.

Notwithstanding such shortcomings in the postal arrangements, the establishment of a packet service between Falmouth, England, and New York in 1755 must have provided more regular communication between the colonies and the Mother Country. Yet this improvement was much less beneficial to Nova Scotia and Newfoundland than to the other colonies because it affected them only very indirectly. This is evident from a letter of Michael Francklin, Administrator of Nova Scotia, to the Earl of Shelburne, of October 15, 1766:

The Packets with the Publick dispatches for the Government come to New York from whence the letters are dispatched by the Post to the several Colonies except to this Province and the Government of Newfoundland that those letters come no further by Post than Boston, from whence they are sent in Trading vessels, that these conveyances are very uncertain and precarious on account of their safety as well as the delays which frequently happen and this Province has so little communication with Newfoundland, that not more than one or two conveyances happen in the course of a year. . .

With the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War, this mode of communication ceased and, although the Governor of the Province recommended the inauguration of a regular packet service between England and Halifax, communications rested upon a less formal arrangement during hostilities. At the close of the war the Post Office, instead of providing a packet service to Halifax, reopened the service between Falmouth and New York. Commencing with March, 1788, the monthly packets made trips to Halifax between March and October. During the winter, however, the mails for Nova Scotia were carried to New York and forwarded from there to Boston, from which they were conveyed by schooner to Halifax. Later the War of 1812 made an impact on the postal service and, eventually, on May 4, 1839, arrangements were made for a fortnightly mail service between Liverpool and Halifax, with Samuel Cunard as the moving spirit in this new development.

Although early records of the Halifax Post Office are far from complete, certain developments during the later years of the eighteenth century may be briefly described. Charles Ingram was the Deputy Master for Halifax by June 10, 1765, if not earlier. The location of the Post Office

and the mode of its operation in 1768 may be seen in a notice which appeared in the *Nova-Scotia Gazette* in August and September of that year:

This is to inform all Merchants, Masters of Vessels, and others, that the POST-OFFICE is now kept at the House of Simon Patrick Haly, where due Attendance will be given. All Masters of Vessels are desired to take Notice, that they deliver no Letters, except into the Post-Office, but such as are immediately directed to their Owners, or those who have Goods on board their Vessels, on Pain of incurring the Penalty levied by Law for such Offences.

By 1770 James Stevens was the Postmaster at Halifax. He held the office until about 1782, when he was succeeded by Joseph Peters, who continued as Postmaster until his death in 1800.

Upon the death of Peters on February 13, 1800, William Thomson was sworn in as Postmaster on the next day. After holding this office for less than two weeks, Thomson resigned it on February 25, 1800, and John Brittain, who had been private secretary to the Duke of Kent, succeeded him.

Soon after this time, the two Howes, father and son, began a period of over forty years in the administration of the Post Office, when John Howe, Sr., by agreement with Brittain, was appointed Postmaster at Halifax on August 7, 1801. This was a hard bargain for John Howe, as his famous son Joseph was later to call it:

He had a hard bargain at the Post Office. A Mr. Britton, who held it, it was supposed was going to die. My Father was persuaded to give him £200 a year for the goodwill of the office. The arrangement was made. Britton lived seven years and a half during which my father paid him £1500. As the office took up much of his time, and greatly increased his expenses, this heavy payment laid the foundation of debts and sources of perplexity which ran over half his life. He held it about seven years and a half after Britton died the salary being £290, and of which he had to pay £100 a year to a clerk. He got £1425 out of it in that time, or £75 less than he had paid to Britton. The upshot of it was that he did the duty of Post Master General for 15 years and lost £75 .

It is probable that the Post Office was on Barrington Street, at or near the corner of Duke Street, while John Howe, Sr. was in charge of it.

John Howe, Jr. succeeded him in this position in 1818 and continued in it until 1843. In the summer of 1829 the Post Office was removed to the house, nearly opposite the old Dalhousie College building (which stood on the site of the City Hall), previously owned and occupied by William Minns.

After the death of John Howe, Jr. on January 18, 1843, H. M. Watson was Acting Deputy Postmaster General until the arrival of

Arthur Woodgate, the new Deputy Postmaster General, on May 30 of that year. Woodgate, a native of Kent, England, was a nephew of Sir Henry Hardinge, then Secretary of War and afterwards Governor-General of India and Viscount Hardinge. He had had experience both in the Home Office and the Post Office before crossing the Atlantic to Halifax in 1843.

Within a few weeks of his arrival at Halifax, Woodgate removed the Post Office to new quarters in a stone building on Barrington Street, which had been erected and for some time occupied by the late Thomas Forrester, dry goods merchant and member of the Assembly. The Post Office was in the lower storey of that building, which was at that time one of the finest edifices in the city. This was a temporary arrangement pending the availability of more permanent accommodations in the Dalhousie College building.

About a year later, after a lease for new quarters was signed on July 6, 1844, the Post Office was removed from this site to the old Dalhousie College building on the Grand Parade—the place where the City Hall now stands. It was to remain in the Dalhousie College building for twenty-seven years, until late in 1871 when it was transferred to the new Provincial Building.

The Post Office took up space on the ground floor and on the second storey of the Dalhousie College building in 1844. The inland sorting office, a delivery room, and a large room for sorting papers were all on the ground floor, while ample accommodation for the Deputy Postmaster General and his staff was provided on the next floor. Seven years later accommodations for the Post Office in this building were enlarged and improved—as may be realized by reading the following excerpt from the *Novascotian* of December 29, 1851:

THE GENERAL POST OFFICE

The improvements for some time in progress at the General Post Office, Dalhousie College are now completed. Considerable additional room has been secured in the basement of the Edifice; the centre wall (two feet and a half in thickness) has been taken down, and strong wooden piers supported by massive granite pillars, cased with wood, have been substituted to sustain the upper part of the building; convenient apartments have been assigned to the several employers in the department, including a spacious inland room, &c.; and last not least the public have now provided for their accommodation in the eastern end of the establishment, a space about 35 ft. by 10 ft. completely under cover, where they will for the future mail and receive their letters, &c. without being compelled to submit to the exposure to the weather under which they so long and so patiently suffered. Marked improvements also characterize the delivery and mailing department, as the space set apart for these comprises the entire width of the building, nearly the whole of which is of glass with the numbers marked on the panes against which the Boxes are placed. In short the comfort of the clerks and the convenience of the

community have both been combined in the recent changes; and if the contemplated arrangements for carrying the Mails, which it is said will commence on the 5th of January next, prove as agreeable as we think the former will be, the results will doubtless prove highly satisfactory to the public. Mr. D. McPherson, carpenter of this city superintended the recent improvements at the Post Office; the expense to the Governors of the College will not probably fall far short of £300; and the Government have, we understand, taken a lease of the premises at an increased rent.

Woodgate in Nova Scotia was both the last Deputy of the Postmaster General in England and the first Provincial Postmaster General. He served in the first capacity until 1851, when the British North American provinces assumed the control of their own postal services. He then served in the second capacity until Confederation, when the Provincial postal administrations were amalgamated into the Post Office Department of the Dominion, and Woodgate became Post Office Inspector for Nova Scotia as well as Postmaster at Halifax.

Subsequently, about 1873, the dual position was divided—with B. W. Cochran becoming Postmaster and Arthur Woodgate continuing as Inspector until his retirement in 1874. Since that time the line of succession of Halifax Postmasters has included H. W. Blackadar, Col. Fred H. Oxley, Donald A. King, F. A. Warner, and J. P. Morrow.

The Post Office itself was removed from the old Dalhousie College building to the then new Provincial Building (afterwards the headquarters of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police), on December 11, 1871. There it remained for sixty-five years until it was moved to the Dominion Public Building on Bedford Row on October 25, 1937.