

# OLD POST OFFICE (1902/1906)

107 East Street



\*This is an edited copy of the original document, originals included in the Municipal Heritage Committee Binder – Titled: “The Old Post Office (Sault Ste. Marie Museum)”

## **OLD POST OFFICE (1902 - 1907)**

On June 26, 1902<sup>1</sup> the Sault Star announced that the government had decided "at last to make a move towards the erection of our much wanted Post Office building." The announcement came from Mr. Tarte (Minister of Public Works) on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June, and was received by M.A.E. Dryment, the local Member of Parliament. The Star announced that "Plans are being prepared and tenders will be invited in a couple of weeks." The article ended with the wary statement: "Still the Soo wears a smile of incredulity." The town Council had, however, given notice to the Post Office to vacate the school.<sup>2</sup> A new Post Office was on its way.

Following the announcement, the property at the corner of East and Queen Streets was secured for the construction of the new building. It was not until a year later, however, that tenders were called for the erection of the structure.<sup>3</sup> To make way for the new Town Hall on the site of the school, the Post Office was moved to the library.

Bernard McEvoy reported that the government had allotted \$20,000.00.<sup>2</sup> The contract was finally let to the firm of T. McCarty, D. McPhail, and T.M. Wright and work on the building began on May 1, 1904.<sup>3</sup>

On August 31, 1905 the Sault Star announced that the building was almost completed except for some electrical and Post Office fixtures that had been ordered at Collingwood.<sup>4</sup> The Star said that "given 30 days for their arrival and 30 days for installation the building will be open for public use on November 1. In fact, a couple of weeks or less should see some government tenants in the building."

However, problems with the installation of the lighting held matters up and the building was not officially opened until March 29, 1906.

On Thursday, March 29, 1906 the Sault Star announced that "Postmaster Adams expects to move into the new Post Office building on Saturday of this week and on April 5, 1906 the Star reported on the opening, and gave a detailed description of the building and the used it would be put to. The article began with a list of "particulars":

Cost: \$85,000.00

Construction began May 1, 1904 Post Office Room - 56 x 68 ft.

Number of Boxes - 695

Gross Maximum Box Revenue - \$1,963.00

Very Few Boxes Not Taken

Deposited for Keys - \$120.50

Number of Staff - 7

The Star also announced that C. James Pim walked in "fat and sassy" and unannounced, mailed the first letter.

"The building is constructed in a faultless manner" and the "workmanship is of the most finished type; the material used of the best quality. Hardwood floors, oak staircase, and trimmings, the plumbing done just right, and the whole laid out by a man who had a head on him."

There is no mention of the architect's name.

"The Post Office room is 68 x 56'. The main entrance contains a vestibule with double swing doors, as does the entrance at the corner of East Street. The office may also be entered from the East Street corridor, which leads to the customs and other departments. On the Queen Street side of the box tier are the stamp wickets, two general delivery wickets, and "Enquiry Parcel" wickets. The savings department, money order, and registered letters wickets are at the end of the East Street tier of Boxes adjacent to the rear entrance to the offices."

"The building isn't all Post Office. What seems to be an acre or more of cemented floor is an excellent basement, of which no immediate use is to be made. On the first floor up East Street is the offices of the following Dominion government officials: Gas inspectors, weights and measure inspector, Indian Agent, the Customs examining warehouse, besides a modern lavatory. On the second floor reached by a wide oak stairway are the five quarters of the Number One Company - Algonquin Rifles. These comprise three rooms. The lecture room is the largest, 30' in length, and here the sub-target gun is a fixture. The armory and officer's rooms are across the hall from the lecture hall. Then occupying the East and Queen Street corner are five rooms for the customs staff. (Mr. Plummer had a \$75.00 desk sent in by the government, and his other office chairs cost \$12.00 each) Next comes the snug quarters of the fisheries inspector where Sandy Duncan will hold forth. The Inland Revenue Department is next door (Col. Elliot). Two rooms are allotted to him. A quarter cut oak counter, and several money drawers adorn the outer office. The contractor said that all these offices would get green plush carpets and expensive furniture just like Mr. Plummer. A large area of plate-rolled glass 1" thick over which you walk on the second storey makes the Post Office interior on the first floor as light as day. The lavatory for women is on the second floor. On the third floor the caretaker reigns supreme."

The article concludes with a brief description of the outside.

"The first storey of the building is built of cut stone and the other storey of pressed brick. Mr. Kenneth McWright has charge of this work. The carpenter work was under the supervision of Messers. McCarty and McPhail. Messers, Culliton and company put in the plumbing and the heating plant, and Mr. W. Hallam had the painting."

The clock tower that adorned the building was completed with the rest of the building but did not have a clock until 1912.<sup>7</sup> Until the clock was added, the four vacant spaces were filled with glass (still stored in the peak of the tower). The clock was installed in 1912 and was built by J. Smith and Sons of Derby, England. The chime bell was cast by John Taylor of Loughborough, Leicestershire.

"In its heyday the clock was visible for miles around as a beacon to the traveller."

This building was taken out of service in 1949 and replaced by a new one. The building was maintained as a government office and housed the Unemployment Insurance Department<sup>3</sup>, and the interior was probably renovated for its new purpose. As of this year June/July 1977, the interior is again being renovated and as a result is not accessible.

In a photograph published in the Sault Star on April 13, 1920, the Post Office clock tower appears to be much shorter, although the copper roof and clock faces appear to be the same. It may in fact be the case that the tower was raised at some time. In some of the colour photographs the brick in the tower appears to be of a different tone that is not accountable through age. The 1920 photo does not show any evidence of brick decorations. The tower therefore may have been raised, although I can only point out visual evidence, I found no documentary evidence to prove this.

### **Architectural Description**

The main street of Sault Ste. Marie was laid out when the first settlers arrived and it naturally followed the shoreline of the St. Marys River. Queen Street, as a result, is not straight but makes two changes in direction. At Queen and East the street shifts from an east/west direction to a northwest direction. At Queen and Gore it returns to an east/west path. At these corners, the buildings become the visual focal point of the streetscape. Their position and structural design dictates how the sequence of space develops and how the street looks. The Old Post Office, on the northwest corner of Queen and East Streets, is such a building.

Built in 1902, the former Sault Ste. Marie Post Office employs a combination of architectural styles to fulfill its public function. With Romanesque arched windows, Italianate decorations, and classical cornices, it is a prime example of eclectic Ontario architecture. The building is three-storeys high with a two-storey section extending north up East Street. The three-storey section is approximately square with five bays on each public façade. The two-storey section has four bays facing East Street and is also approximately square. The first storey is built of squared rubble sandstone with alternately long and short blocks of stone throughout. The second and third storeys are of red brick with large pilasters extending up both floors. The third storey is topped by a large copper cornice. The two-storey section is constructed in the same manner and is topped by a smaller copper cornice. The southeast corner is dominated by a large clock tower that extends up the height of another storey. This four-sided tower has a clock in each face and has a mansard-style copper roof.

The main Queen Street façade has a three-storey projection bay on the west and east sides, the east being the base of the clock tower. The fenestration is asymmetrically arranged as the windows are of different types and sizes. In between the projecting bays is a three-bay section that is centered by a large stone portico or vestibule that projects about six feet from the wall plane.

The base course of the first storey projects slightly out from the wall plane, a feature which is continued around the entire public façade. The main entrance is approached by a double staircase with a wrought-iron railing. The double doors are wood and have a large rectangular glass panel in each one. The door itself is topped by a transom window. The door surrounds are smoothly dressed stone blocks. This includes the square door head which consists of

radiating voussoirs. Framing the surrounds are two piers of coursed, rubble stone. These extend up to the level of the door head where they support a stone pediment inscribed with the date "1902", and the words "Post Office". Each of the piers is topped by a round stone ball on a square base, signifying the accessibility of the world through the mail. The vestibule extends six feet from the wall plane and has a rectangular double-sashed window on each side wall.

On each side of this doorway is a large round-arched window. There is also such a window on the first floor of the west projecting bay. Each window is double sashed with a thin vertical post in each sash, creating a two-over-two window arrangement. Each window is recessed into the wall and has a plain stone sill. The window heads are decorated by radiating stone voussoirs that are emphasized by their extremely coarse cut. The side elements of window are also emphasized in this way.

On the east projecting bay, the clock tower base, is a large rounded stone bay that extends up the height of the first floor, and is pierced by three rectangular windows. Each window is double sashed with a single sheet of curved glass in each sash. The windows are deeply recessed and have a plain stone sill, as well as a plain stone lintel. Topping off the stone first storey, as well as this bow window, is a course of smooth cut stone. The bow window has a stone parapet wall which was originally a stone balcony,<sup>8</sup> but the door on the second storey is now a window.

The second and third floors are constructed of brick, and each bay is defined by brick pilasters. Each projecting bay has a brick pier at each visible corner. The three central bays are separated by four pilasters. The pilasters each have a stone base and a plain stone capital. The piers, however, do not.

The second-storey windows have a continuous stone sill that rests on the stone band atop the first storey. These windows are double sashed with a one-over-two window arrangement. Each window is rectangular and is decorated by radiating brick voussoirs. The third storey windows on the Queen Street façade are smaller than those on the second. Each has an individual cut stone sill but other than this and their size are sashed and decorated in the same manner.

Supported by the pilasters is a large copper classical cornice and frieze that extends around all of the three-storey section. The west projecting bay has a copper pediment as well with a stone crest in the centre inscribed with the initials, "ER". Above the centre three bays, the wall continues up a few more feet and is then tripped by another smaller copper cornice.

The large copper cornice encircles the base of the clock tower as well. The clock tower itself is built of brick with a brick pier at each corner. Each face of this four-sided tower is decorated with bricks and is pierced by a small transom-like window. Atop the piers is a small copper cornice. Above this is a copper mansard-style roof with a clock facing in each direction. Originally there was a stone ball on a square base crowning the tower but this has been removed.<sup>9</sup>

The East Street façade is decorated in much the same way with the clock tower projecting bay on the south and a pedimented projecting bay on the north of the three-storey structure. There is a three bay section in between. These three centre bays have recessed, round arched windows on the first storey, decorated in the same way as those on the Queen Street façade. Below each window, near

ground level is a small rectangular window lighting the basement.

On the first floor of each projecting bay is a round architectural doorway. Each doorway is deeply recessed and is approached by a small flight of steps that drop directly onto the sidewalk. The double doors are wood with two lower wooden panels and a rectangular window on each door. Above the doors is a round-arched fanlight of plain glass. The stone door surrounds are double arched. The first stone arch is recessed behind the wall plane flush with the door itself. It is built of cut, squared stone with small stone square radiating voussoirs in the door head. The second arch is larger and is on the same plane as the wall. It is decorated with coarse stone radiating voussoirs with a central keystone. Above each door, cut into the smooth stone band that tops the stonework of the first storey is a carved sign. The one above the south door has been removed but once read "Post Office".<sup>8</sup> The sign above the north door reads "Customs". The rest of the façade is decorated in the same manner as the Queen Street side.

The four window bays of the two-storey section, extending north up East Street, are constructed in much the same manner. The first storey is built of stone and has four round-arched windows on its public side. A smooth stone band tops the first storey and the second is built of bricks. The windows are decorated in the same way as all other second storey windows, the only difference being that there are only two pilasters on this wall, one at each corner. The pilasters support a small copper cornice that extends around the two-storey section. The roof extends up a few more feet and is again topped by a small copper cornice.

The rear of the building is built of brick on all three storeys, the stone being reserved for public display. The only stone used is for a few stone window sills and lintels.

The west façade of the three-storey section is now hidden by neighbouring buildings but it is decorated as a public façade. Old photographs reveal that this side was once more exposed.<sup>9</sup> The west façade follows the same stone and brick patterns throughout its three stories with a five-bay arrangement. The only difference is that there are no projecting or pedimented bays on this side.

\* The interior, as mentioned before, is in the process of renovation and is inaccessible.

## **Significance**

If it is true that the Post Office building was an expression of a town's pride and the political power of the local member of Parliament, Sault Ste. Marie appears to have won on both accounts. As photographs of the Post Office and main street show<sup>8</sup>, the Old Post Office in Sault Ste. Marie was the largest and grandest building in the city. Such photographs mark out the building as an important gathering place<sup>8</sup> and the physical dominance of the building can be seen in early pictures of the skyline.<sup>9</sup> Sault Ste. Marie was a rising and prosperous town in 1902 when the government allocated money for the construction of such a building. The Post Office was a monument to Sault Ste. Marie's growth and the government's recognition of the city's importance.

The Post Office also changed the looks of the city. For the early traveller to the Sault, the clock tower of the Post Office was one of the first signs of the approaching city.<sup>7</sup> With the advent of apartment buildings and other towers, its dominance has faded, but not its importance. As most public buildings in Ontario of this period, the public role of the building was emphasized by its design and location. At the vital corner of Queen and East Streets, the Post Office building marked the beginning of the commercial section of the town and yet was also close to the residential areas. The building also plays up the visual impact it has on the sequence of space as Queen Street changes direction. It dominates the corner and is visible from all directions. The building forces us to notice it and its loss would destroy the "looks" of Queen Street in more ways than might at first be realized.

The combination of various architectural elements in the old Post Office such as its large classical copper cornice and the Romanesque stone arches both relate the structure to other buildings in the city and yet give it a look all its own. The most important features of the building are, of course, its public façades. The carefully squared stone and brickwork on all three storeys, the projecting front entrance, the cornice, and the clock tower, distinguish this building and all efforts should be made to preserve and protect them. The rounded bow window with its curved glass should also be emphasized as a unique section of this building. It is with these features in mind that the old Post Office can continue to be a useful and profitable building while preserving its visual and social importance.

### **Footnotes**

1.	Sault Star, June 26, 1902 "To Go On With Old Post Office": "Mr. Tarte States that Tenders for New Building will be Invited in Two Weeks." - pg. 1
2.	B. McEvery: From the Great Lakes to the Wild West: Impressions of a Tour Between Toronto and the Pacific. - 1902 (pg. 35)
3.	Sault Daily Star, October 1, 1949
4.	Sault Star, August 31, 1905 - "Post Office by Nov. 1"
5.	Sault Star, March 29, 1906 pg. 1 (section 1)
6.	Sault Star, April 5, 1906 - "New Post Office Open" pg. 1
7.	Sault Daily Star (n.d.) "Old Post Office Clock is Repaired After Half Century of Inaccuracy" - c. 1960 - Armoury Museum newspaper clipping file
8.	See photograph in file - Sault Armouries Museum, Filing Cabinet "B:", Category "F", Item 131
9.	See photograph in file - Sault Armouries Museum - Filing Cabinet "B", Category "F", Item 142
10.	R.A.J. Phillips, Up the Streets of Ontario, Heritage Canada, Ottawa, 1976, "Public buildings" - pg. 30