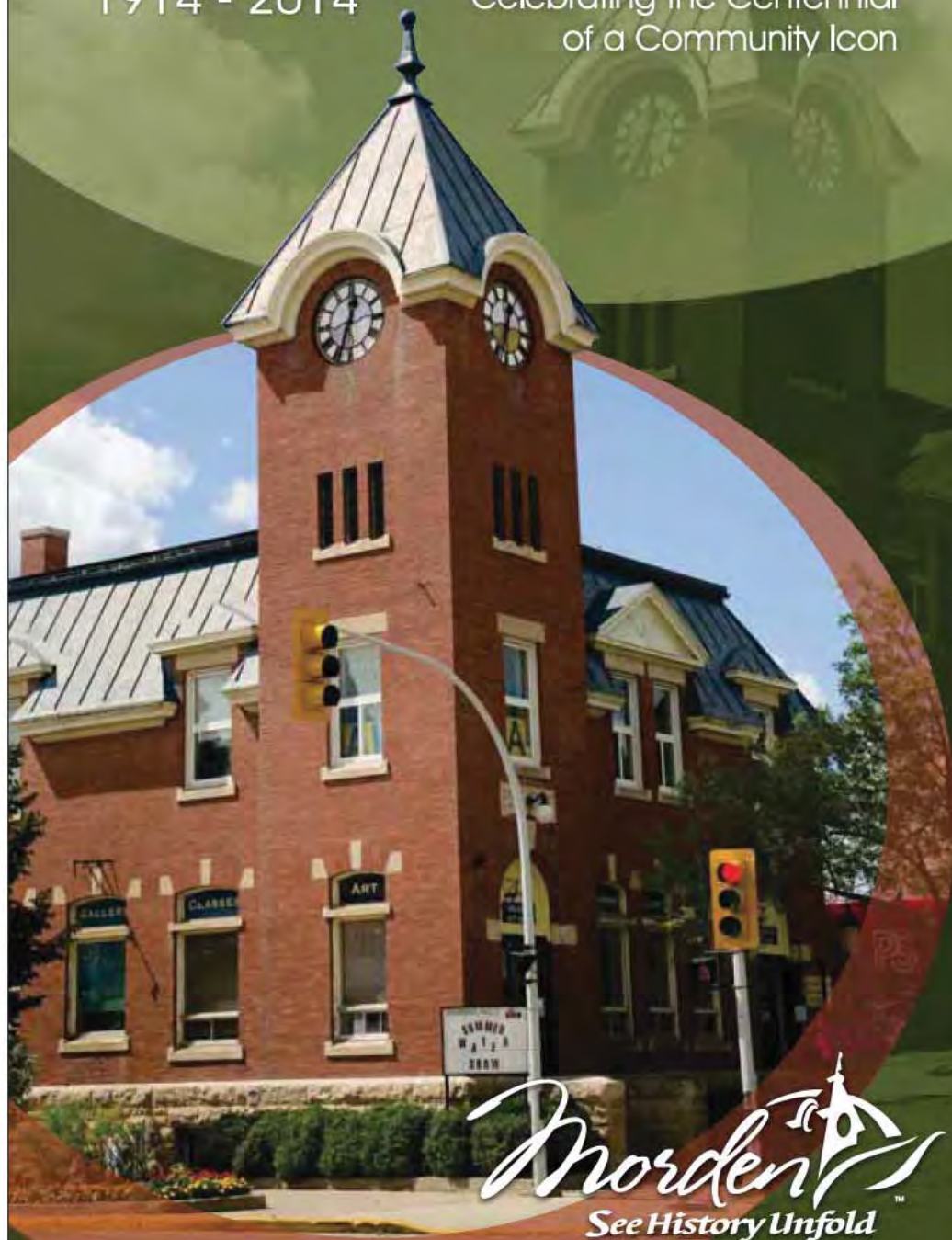


DOMINION POST OFFICE

1914 - 2014

Celebrating the Centennial
of a Community Icon



Morden
See History Unfold™

Morden Dominion Post Office

The post office holds a significant place in Canadian and Manitoba history. It was there that people stopped to send letters to loved ones, collect parcels and presents, and meet with their neighbours. It was a place filled with hope and cheer – the pioneer's connection to their home community or native land and to the larger world. Extremely busy places in the days before telephone and telegraph, post offices were vital parts of community life.

As a physical presence of the Dominion Government in the early 20th century, post office architecture was designed to impress. While each building was unique, many of the post offices constructed across the country in the early 1900s had similar features and were often the most imposing landmarks in town. They were multi-purpose buildings combining a number of federal services.

The Chief Architect's Office of the Department of Public Works was responsible for the design and construction of all federal buildings. David Ewart served as chief architect from 1897 to 1914. Morden's Dominion Post Office was one of over 340 new buildings and substantial renovations that were undertaken during his tenure - one of the most productive periods in the history of the office.

Tenders Called for the New Post Office

The advertisement appears in this issue calling for sealed tenders for the erection of a public building at Morden and as they are to be supplied to the superintending architect of the Dominion Public Buildings in the Province of Manitoba, it is safe to presume that they are intended for the construction of the Post Office, Customs and Armoury Building. The land for the site has already been purchased and comprises two lots on the corner of Eighth and Stephen Streets opposite the Meikle store. The appropriation was made last year. Work will most probably be commenced in the spring according to present indications and the building ready for occupation in 1914.

*Source: The Morden Times,
January 23, 1913*



The Building

According to the *Canada Official Postal Guide*, the first Morden post office opened in October 1884 - two years after the community was established. In the early years Morden's post office operated out of various downtown buildings. In 1913, it was located a few doors west of where a new post office would be built.

Early in 1913, a call for tenders for the construction of a public building appeared in the Morden Times. In May 1913, the Times reported that Browns Construction Company of Winnipeg had begun work on the site for a new Post Office and Customs Building. Plans called for a structure that would cost approximately \$35,000 to be located at the corner of Eighth and Stephen Streets.

By mid-December 1914, Postmaster James Stirton was moving into the new Morden Dominion Post Office.

New Post Office Opening This Week

This week Postmaster Stirton is busy moving to his quarters in the new customs and post office building on the corner of Stephen Street and Eighth Street. It is a splendid ornament to the town occupying one of the most prominent business positions where such a fine building appears to particular advantage. Red pressed brick is the material of which it is constructed while the trimmings and mouldings are of white sandstone. The northeast corner is decorated with a lofty and graceful clock tower directly over the main entrance. The roof of hopper variety inclining downward instead of upward completes a very harmonious effect. The cellar is of cement concrete and contains three large rooms—store room, furnace room and a large corridor which contains two huge soft water reservoirs and an engine for operating the waterworks system. The main floor is taken up with the post office. Red tile on a base of pure cement constitutes a splendid floor very hard and durable. The interior fittings for the office are calculated to facilitate the work of the postmaster for the accomplishment of the greatest amount of work in the least time and correspond in appearance with the dignity of the surroundings. The second floor is entirely taken up by the offices for the collector of customs and the private apartments of the caretaker.

*Source: The Morden Times,
December 17, 1914*



The main floor of the imposing red brick building was dedicated to the post office. The interior layout and equipment were designed to allow the postmaster to accomplish the greatest amount of work in the least time. Half of the second floor was occupied by the Customs Office. The other half contained an apartment for the building caretaker. Presumably, one of the caretaker's duties was to keep the coal furnace burning during the winter months.

The building's most notable feature was the clock tower. For unknown reasons, when the post office opened in December 1914, the hand wound, public clock had yet to be installed. However, on January 20, 1916 the Morden Times reported that the post office clock was "up and running". It is now among the last working post office clocks in Manitoba.

Post Office Clock

The post office clock is up and running, but considerable work has to be done to it yet before it is pronounced completed. It strikes the hours and quarter hours. The clock was put up by Major Forrest M. McKinnon doing the carpenter work in connection with it. Owing to the openings in the tower being blocked with scaffolding and other woodwork, the clock is not heard at any great distance when it strikes. When the framework is removed, which will be in about three weeks, there will be no cause to worry about the sounding powers of the clock.

Source: Morden Times, January 20, 1916



For many years, mail was delivered to Morden via the Canadian Pacific and Great Northern Railways. Post office wickets closed for a period each day when staff picked up/delivered mail to the trains. In later years, the mail was delivered by truck. The area behind the post office, where the Suncatch is now located, was a parking lot. It was there that the postal truck would back up to the door with deliveries.

Individuals who worked in the building in the 1960s recall that the post office was a busy place, especially on days when pension, social security, family allowance or grain cheques arrived – a time when people would meet and chat. During lulls, staff members stationed at the service wickets could look out the east side windows at the activity on Stephen Street.

By the late 60s, the post office staff was dealing with a severe shortage of space. To create more area for sorting and storage, the postmaster's office had been moved to the second floor. From 1967 to 1969, to handle the busy Christmas season, the over-taxed facility was supplemented by a parcel pick-up depot located at the St. Thomas Anglican Church Annex on 8th Street. The depot was open during the regular post office hours, from 8:30 am to 5:30 pm Monday through Saturday.



In November 1968, the Federal Government announced that a new federal building would be built in Morden. It would accommodate postal and other federal government services. Having served the community for over half a century, operations at the Morden Dominion Post Office shut down at noon on July 29, 1970.

Parcel Depot at Anglican Church Annex

Morden's postmaster, Mr. T. C. Scobie has announced that the over-taxed facilities at the Post Office will be supplemented by a parcel pick-up depot again this year.

It is located at the St. Thomas Anglican Church Christian Education Annex on 8th Street, just north of the Post Office. It is simply a matter of walking in and turning to the left. The depot will be open during the regular post office hours, from 8:30 am to 5:30 pm Monday through Saturday.



Source: Morden Times, December 11, 1968

A Second Life

As planning for the new federal building progressed, residents discussed the fate of the "old" post office. In March 1969, members of the Morden branch of the Regional Library Board and the historical group urged citizens to attend a public meeting to "discuss the possible purchase of the post office building to provide a library and museum complex for the town". Allister Morden was elected chairman of a committee that would explore potential uses of the building and recommend to Town Council that it be purchased from the Federal Government.

At one of the committee's meetings, attendees felt that something should be done so that "it would not be high noon in Morden forever" – referring to the fact that the post office clock had been stopped at 12 o'clock for several years. In the early 70s, Danny Dack, owner of Dack's Pharmacy, undertook a six month repair job to bring the clock back to life - a fix that lasted for 25 years.

Morden Council received word in February 1971 that the old post office was available to purchase for \$3,000. The next hurdle was to undertake renovations to make the building usable for the Regional Library, Chamber of Commerce and Museum.

Old Post Office Now Morden Property

Mayor B. G. Morden announced last Wednesday afternoon that a letter had been received that morning from Roland LaPrairie, secretary and legal counsel to the Crown Assets Disposal Corporation, to the effect that a copy of the agreement approved by the governor-in-council on March 5 will be forwarded authorizing the town to take immediate possession of the former post office building. The letters patent transferring the title will follow when the signatures have been obtained from all the federal departments involved in the transaction. The building, Mr. Morden said, was purchased for \$3000 and labour costs for renovation have had prior approval from the province, under the work incentive program.

Source: Morden Times, March 17, 1971



The original entrance to the Post Office (east side door) became the entrance to the Chamber office which occupied 360 square feet in the former box lobby area. The west side door, previously used to access the 2nd floor, became the entrance to the library. The library's move was accomplished during the last week of June 1971 with the help of 11 high school students pulling wagons and carrying boxes across the street. The new space allowed library staff to implement a number of new services, and books that had been in storage were now available to users. Children's story hour, which had been launched the previous year in the Anglican Church hall due to lack of space, was moved into the library.

The Morden and District Museum opened on the 2nd floor during the 1971 Corn and Apple Festival. The basement became a workshop and storage area for the fossils that were being excavated in the Pembina Hills. The paleontological collection quickly outgrew the basement and in 1979 the museum moved to the new recreation centre. After the museum vacated, the Thrift Shop operated from the 2nd floor.

A small basement room, accessed through an outside rear entrance, was used as a clubroom by a group of senior gentlemen referred to as the "Happy Gang". Later, the Retail Merchants Association used the room for storage of street barriers and other equipment. Some years later, it was home to a toy lending library.

Further renovations took place in 1983 when the library expanded to the entire main floor after the Chamber of Commerce relocated to the Morden Civic Centre. The librarian's office and a work room had moved upstairs to provide more book space on the main floor. Otherwise, the 2nd floor was mainly used to store books donated for the annual book sale. To assist in moving boxes from upstairs to the book sale, youth groups would form a human chain to move the boxes down the stairs. The youth were eventually replaced by a conveyer assembly borrowed from a local business. Boxes of books literally flew down the stairs!



Finding itself again critically short of space, the library moved to larger premises in spring 1996. To fill the vacancy, Morden Council voted to lease the building to Pembina Hills Artists Inc. who had opened an office in 1994 on the 2nd floor in a bedroom of the former caretaker's apartment. When the library vacated, the main floor was developed into a gallery and the second floor became classroom and studio space.

In fall 1995, Morden found itself frozen in time, when a bent shaft stopped the rotation of the clock hands at one minute to five o'clock. Once again, Danny Dack and a group of volunteers rallied to bring the clock back to life. At the time, Mr. Dack proclaimed, "That clock'll run for another 50 years."

The Pembina Hills Arts Council has continued to undertake renovations to restore original features of the building's interior. The latest renovation in 2012 transformed the dark, damp basement into a bright and comfortable pottery studio.

Tower Clock Chimes Again

Morden is no longer frozen in time. The clock hands on the old post office tower are showing the right hour again after spending six months frozen at five o'clock.

Retired pharmacist Danny Dack has enlisted help from around Morden to fix the 80 year old clock and keep it wound. "It was going pretty well all the time, up to this year," said Dack, who took over the care of the clock from the Town of Morden...

Source: Morden Times, June 17, 1996

Celebrating a Community Icon

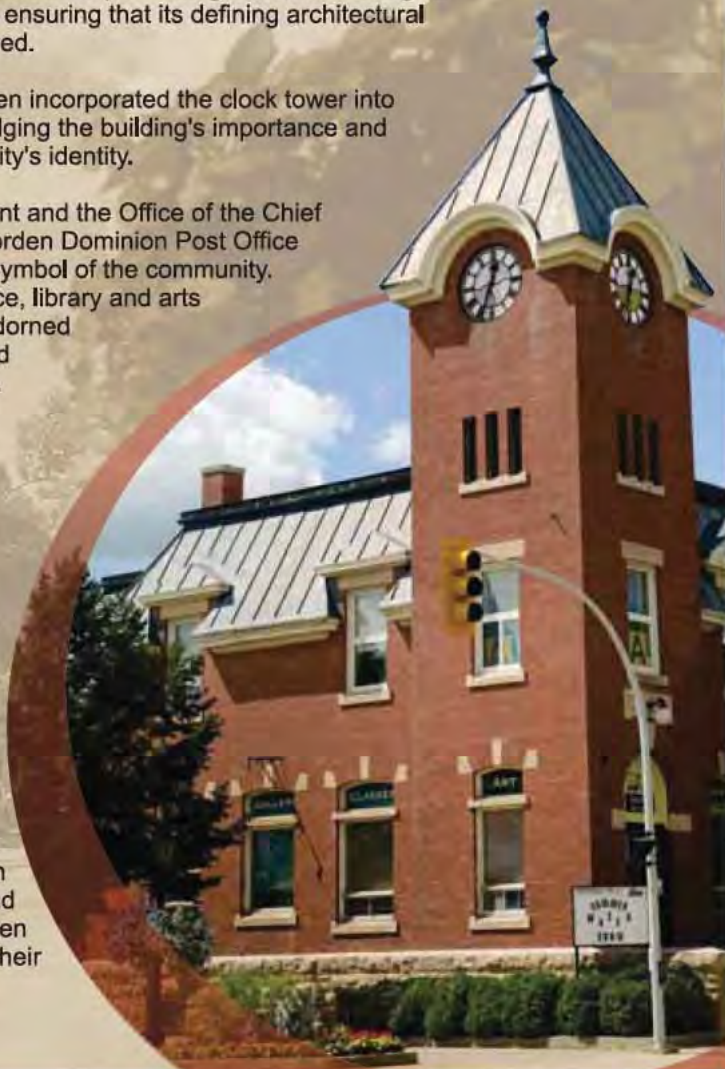
The "Old Post Office" recalls the importance that the postal service played in our history, and preserves one of the impressive designs that defined this type of building in the early 20th century. On June 14, 1988, the Town of Morden designated the building as a municipal heritage site, confirming its historical significance and ensuring that its defining architectural features would be preserved.

In 2004 the Town of Morden incorporated the clock tower into its logo, further acknowledging the building's importance and linking it with the community's identity.

As the Federal Government and the Office of the Chief Architect intended, the Morden Dominion Post Office became a landmark and symbol of the community. For a century, as post office, library and arts centre, the building has adorned Stephen Street and served as a public meeting place.

Thank You,

To Iris Loewen, Phyllis Binda, Peggy Krause, Catherine Evenson, Gloria Collins and Pamela Smith for their reminiscences and to the staff at the Morden Times for access to their newspaper archive.





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