

**A Lasting Source of Civic Pride:
The Renaissance of Truro's Old Post Office**
by Lihua Huang

In the last hundred years, Truro, Nova Scotia's Old Post Office Building has housed a post office, police station and adult classrooms. Now preserved, this designated National Historic Site is significant for its successful blend of the new with the old.

The building is now Truro's Town Hall after a four-year, \$4.4 million restoration project was completed in 2004. Prominently located at the corner of Prince and Lorne Streets, it anchors the historic centre of the town.

It All Began in 1883

This stately 122-year old building was constructed by the Department of Public Works under a federal building program in 1883. It was one of 74 such buildings built across the nation in the 1880s and 1890s.

The building was designed under the supervision of noted federal chief architect Thomas L. Fuller who oversaw the design of some eighty post offices in Canada. Characteristic elements can be found in the steep pitch of the roof, the contrasting of red brick and pale stone trim, and the mixture of details from various historical periods in keeping with the spirit of the time.

However, the Truro Post Office has unique features which distinguish it from Fuller's standard post office designs. An irregular profile and textured surface details lend variety to the standard symmetrical plan of the building. It illustrates "a combination of Victorian Gothic massing with Flemish and Romanesque details," as reported to the Historic Sites and Monument Board of Canada (HSMBC) in 1989.

The stylistic eclecticism is echoed in the principal façade where a Flemish tympanum is coupled with Romanesque vousoirs. The entryways are heavily decorated and pedimented with a stepped stone entablature and massive ogee stone brackets and stone dentils.

The Centre of Truro Life

When it opened in 1884, the post office occupied the main floor with a mail sorting department, letter boxes, postmaster's office and service wickets. The second floor housed Canada Customs offices and the third floor held the caretaker's lodgings.

Truro was strategically located at the geographic centre of the province and had become the hub of key communication and railway routes. It was inevitable that the town's post office would become the centre for Nova Scotia's postal communications.

An extension was added to the rear of the building in 1928-29 to accommodate expanding mail services and for the next 77 years the building served as the town's post office.

In 1961, when postal services grew to cover surrounding rural areas, the post office relocated to a newly constructed federal building nearby and the Old Post Office became home to the Nova Scotia Power Corporation.

In 1968 the Town of Truro purchased the building from the federal government. The main floor then became the Truro Police Station with the Truro Boys and Girls Club on the upper two floors. In 1998, in need of additional space, the police station moved to a new building, leaving the Old Post Office vacant.



The Old Truro Post Office (1883) showing symmetrical angled entranceways. (Photo c. 1935)

Photo: J.E. Sponagle, courtesy of Scott Robson.

For a time the building was leased to the local school board for an adult occupational program. To accommodate the school program, the interior was completely modernized. Despite losing the original interior design, the building's exterior remained intact and retained its recognized historic architectural merit. The lease ended in 2001 to allow the extensive restoration project on the building to begin.

Repairs, Restoration, Rebuilding and Renewal

The building's exterior was seriously worn down after such a long period of service. A provincially funded study in the 1990s documented threats to the integrity of the building due to physical deterioration.



A 2000 report to HSMBC stated: "Present threats to the building envelope are mainly due to moisture and weathering; the most recent interior renovations (for school program use) may have exacerbated this problem." Items listed included the failure of the brick and stone work; the need to rebuild the chimney; the need to repoint much of the masonry; the failure of the roof's wooden members; and the need to repair its slate tiles.

But for Truro the Old Post Office had always been a valuable centre of community life. It had strong historic associations with respected institutions and community leaders. As owner and steward of this part of the community's historic and architectural patrimony, the town committed itself to saving the building. It commissioned a study on the physical condition of the building and sought options for restoration.

The restoration project presented a number of challenges. "The building is small, however, the details of the construction are complex," said commissioned consultant J.W. Cowie Engineering Ltd. "There are no design drawings for the building; consequently, the concealed construction defects are unknown."

These factors also applied to the extent of deterioration and modification that had taken place over the past 116 years. Many hidden defects were discovered during the course of the project. For example, damage caused by a fire in 1947 had simply been covered up rather than properly repaired.

Parameters of the project included ensuring that restoration was faithful to the original architectural design. In order to make future use of the building feasible, it was decided that the project would include replacing the dilapidated 1928 one-storey extension on the north side with a two-storey addition that would be sympathetic to the existing building.

A Renewed Commitment To Its Heritage

Despite costs exceeding the original estimated budget the town remained firm in its commitment to the project and to raise necessary funds.

"We had reached the point of no return and felt the building was in the local and national interest to preserve! Comments from citizens since the building reopened suggest Council made a good decision," says Mayor Bill Mills.

The town's civic offices moved into the refurbished building in September 2004. A grand opening reception and open house was held to celebrate this historic event.

The Old Post Office project is a success and the life of this piece of built heritage has been extended. "It was a challenge but it should last for a hundred years or more," stated Leo Rovers from L&R Construction Ltd., the major construction contractor of the project.

"It's (now) a solid national heritage building that blends the new with the old that we can be proud of," added Mayor Mills.

Lihua Huang is a student in the Master of Planning program at Dalhousie University working with the Town of Truro under the Summer Co-operative Employment Program. Lihua researched the history and restoration of the Truro Old Post Office in collaboration with: Mayor W. R. Mills; Juanita Bigelow, Planning Administrator; Charlotte MacQuarrie, Chair of the Heritage Advisory Committee; and Robert Hilchey, local historian.