

## Post Office in Whitehall

By Barbara Bedau Brow  
White Lake Area Historical Society



Whitehall Postoffice from around 1896. Pictured Left to Right: Royal C. Merrick, a mail carrier; Geroge J. Moog, Mortician; Miss Elizabeth Chapman; Miss Roby Brock; John H. Chapman, Postmaster; E. M. Ruggles, Village President; Saul Morin, drayman; Charles Ocobock, businessman; John Bell, blacksmith. According to a newspaper copy of this picture, the Postoffice was located in the meat department of the former A&P store – now the eastern portion of Pub 111.

Postmasters were usually appointed by the Postmaster General or, if they were to make more than \$1,000 per year, by the President of the United States with the consent of the U.S. Senate. U.S. Citizenship was usually required to become a postmaster at all but the smallest of post offices. Prior to 1971, postmasters were also required to live in their post office's delivery area. Women were eligible and were frequently appointed postmasters of small rural post offices, especially starting in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Postmasters served as little as a few months or more than thirty years. Appointment terms were usually for a four-year period. That could change due to the resignation or death of the individual. Sometimes, control of the post office was a family affair, with multiple generations of a family serving as postmaster of the same post office.

It is recorded that the local Post Office was first opened in 1861, with Albert Mears as the first Postmaster, a position he held for 4 years. The exact location of this first Post Office is unknown but it could possibly have been in his store which was built at the foot of Colby Street about that same time. S. C. Hall, on foot, was the first mail carrier, followed by Horace Jones. Mail was collected and brought up to the area from the Grand Haven-Ferrysburg area.

In December 1874, Paul I. Hedges is listed as becoming the Postmaster, a position he held until January 1879 when Charles C. Thompson was appointed. Thompson was reappointed in December 1879 and again in 1883.

By 1875, the Whitehall Post Office had located to the new Foster block which was located on the north side of Colby just east of the Railroad tunnel. William A. Row received the contract to carry the mail between Whitehall and Montague.

At about 8:00 A.M. on Saturday morning, January 9, 1875, when the thermometer indicated 12 degrees below zero, and a storm of wind and snow was at its height, the alarm of fire was sounded from the House of Whitehall Steam Fire Engine Co. No. 1. The boys responded quickly and found dense smoke coming from Foster's new two-story building on Colby, occupied by Dr. J. A. Wheeler's drug store, the U.S. Post office, and Postmaster Paul Hedge's family.

The mail, boxes, and all other government property in the Post Office were saved, although in a somewhat damaged condition.

Postmaster Hedges sustained a loss of about \$300 on household goods, beside the loss by Mrs. Hedges of her wardrobe.

Dr. Wheeler's stock of drugs was about \$4,500, on which there was insurance of \$2,000.

The building, owned by D. J. Foster, was a loss of about \$3,000, on which there was no insurance carried. The rear portion of the building was able to be saved and the fire was prevented from spreading to other wooden structures nearby.

This was the first major fire since the fire department had been established.

In 1883 the Post Office was located on the north side of Colby in a veneered building just east of the alley. They also shared the space with the Whitehall Forum at that time.

January 1888 saw John H. Chapman appointed as Postmaster. He would become Postmaster again in May 1894.

Edwin J. Smith, editor of the Whitehall Forum was appointed in March 1892.

The Post Office relocated in April 1892 to the Squire's building located in the middle of the block east of Mears Avenue, the Mears Hotel, and the alley. (This could be the tall portion of the Bell furniture building now.) The reason for this move was because of the refusal by the owner of the former quarters to make needed improvements. The new location proved to be much better suited to the purpose and the public would be better served.

John H. Chapman was again appointed Postmaster in May 1894. James H. Williams was appointed in May 1898 and again in 1902 and 1906.

By 1902 the Post Office was located on the South side of Colby, in the middle of the block known as the Covell Block, east of the alley where the A&P and Home Television Services would later be located. According to a couple of maps, from 1902 & 1910, the Post Office appears to be in the East half of the building, which is now Pitkin's Sale Shoppe.

Edward D. Skeels was appointed Postmaster in March 1910. He retained the current clerks who were Miss Willa A. Flinn and Miss Isabel Dean.

In July 1911 it was announced that the rural mail carriers will receive \$1,000 per year for their services.

In September 1911, the Whitehall Post Office was named as a Postal Saving Bank. The object of the government postal bank was to offer the people who are afraid of the security of banks and trust companies, and who hoard their savings to get the wealth back into circulation. The postal bank operated under a very strict manner with specific rules and regulations. Montague Post Office was also designated as a Postal Saving Bank.

Skeels was followed by James L. Kleet in March 1914 who was reappointed again in September 1918. William B. Conley had been appointed assistant postmaster by Kleet.

Miss Willa A. Flinn became the Acting Postmistress following the death of James Klett. She was appointed Postmistress in January 1920 by President Woodrow Wilson and was reappointed in 1924 and 1928. She married Arthur J. Ruggles on April 11, 1921. At the time of her death in October 1930, she had been associated with the Post Office for nearly 30 years, previously working under James H. Williams as a special clerk and later as a full-time assistant. She also worked under Edwin Skeels and W. B. Conley was named Assistant Postmistress by Mr. Klett.

In October 1930, Arthur H. Ruggles, husband of Willa Flinn Ruggles, became Acting Postmaster, completing the remainder of her term of service.

February 1931, it was announced that Ernest A. Hopperstead was appointed by President Hoover to become Postmaster. He had been the White Lake agent for the Goodrich Transit company for nine years prior to taking the post office job. He served until 1935.

During this time, an ad was placed in the Whitehall Forum for proposals "for furnishing suitable quarters for post office purposed for a period of 5 to 10 years." A post office inspector would visit Whitehall on or about February 27, 1931, "for the purpose of conferring with prospective proponents. The post office department reserves the right to reject any or all proposals." At this point, it's unclear where the post office was located and if other suitable quarters were found.

July 1935, Francis E. Benjamin, World War veteran, was appointed Postmaster. He had worked at the Forum office for a time and had been associated for the past fifteen years with his father-in-law A. L. Ainger, in a meat market here. He was postmaster for 18 years retiring in 1953. The post office then was located in the building beside the alley that later became Miss Mary's Dance School and is now part of Pub 111.

A notice regarding applications for the position of rural mail carriers was posted in the paper in August 1949. General information indicated that all rural carriers must furnish and maintain, at their own expense, sufficient automobile equipment for the prompt handling of the mail. They are allowed an equipment maintenance of 7 cents per mile on the basis of the daily mileage schedule. On a standard daily route of 30 miles, the salary of a rural carrier was \$2,470 with \$20 per year additional for each mile or major fraction in excess.

In April 1951, it was announced that the lease on the building occupied by the Whitehall post office would be expiring soon and bids for a new lease were being accepted. Anyone having an available building was asked to submit a bid by May 10. Leases are made out for either 5 or 10 years.

Clarence L. Carlson was appointed Acting Postmaster in April 1953 and became Postmaster in August 1954.

In May 1954, it was announced that Muskegon attorney George Stribley had purchased the Whitehall Post office building. The building had been purchased two years prior by three Whitehall men to keep the Post office from being moved over to Montague. The men, City Attorney Fred J. Loyda, City Manager Howard Gwinnup, and Editor Louis Berman, obtained a 10-year lease with the federal post office department. The lease, which was transferred to Mr. Stribley, had nearly eight years still to run.

Also in May, tentative approval for house-to-house mail delivery was granted. When the delivery service started there were to be two carriers; one to cover the area where there were sidewalks, and one to travel by car to the outlying parts of the city where there were no sidewalks. This change in delivery service meant the city was required to have sidewalks either repaired or built throughout the city where there were none. Under post office department regulation, no mail delivery would be made to any blocks which does not have sidewalks.

In September the use of house numbers was urged by Postmaster Carlson, as that was how the mail would be sorted in the future.

Home mail delivery started on October 1, 1954. Mail Carrier Jack Binns carried mail to the homes in the so-called "down-town" section. Motor Carrier Leon Schmelzer made deliveries by car to rural boxes in the so-called "Bunker Hill" and "South Whitehall" areas.

"New Postoffice Is Approved For Whitehall" was the headline on The Whitehall Forum on December 1, 1960. The site at Mears and Spring was planned. The plans call for a building of about 2,500 square feet, plus a loading platform and parking and truck maneuvering areas. It will be located on the site occupied by the former Congregational Church parsonage.

Mr. W. Eugene Atkinson was granted the construction option by the Postoffice Department, which, when completed, will then be rented to the Postoffice Department. Since the lease on the current building expires December 31, 1961, the new building must be completed sometime the next year. Atkinson will begin at once to tear down the present building on the site and obtain bids for the construction of the new building.

When they torn down the house to make room for the postoffice, a note and newspaper from 1894 were discovered. The note stated that "George F. Sibley owned the house and it was built by A. Sauders in 1894. Dated February 4, 1894."

In addition to providing much needed space to efficiently handle the volume of mail, the new location will also offer better parking space for postal customers. For years they have been forced to park wherever they could find a spot, often parking illegally in the alley next to the postoffice.

In October 1961, construction of the new Post Office was delayed for about 5 months. In July 1962, it was announced that construction of the new postoffice would begin in 30 to 60 days. The original bid was let for the building, but the contractor defaulted, delaying the construction. Finally, in October 1962, excavation for the new postoffice on Mears Avenue and Spring Street began. The scheduled completion date of April 1, 1963 was finally met.

John C. Scheer became Postmaster in May 1981, replacing Clarence Carlson, after nearly 28 years. In January 1985, Scheer was promoted to a position as Postmaster in Ludington.

When Scheer left in 1985, Postal worker Debbie Arsneault was appointed Supervisor of Postal Operations, a position formerly held by Leon Schmelzer who retired after 34 years of service. As Supervisor Mrs. Arsneault oversaw the staff of eleven in morning mail processing and distribution of mail to carriers as well as other administrative duties. She answered to an Officer in Charge before the new postmaster was appointed.

Norm Hamelink became the Interim Postmaster in May 1985. Rocky A. Freed was appointed Postmaster to replace Scheer in August 1985.

Others who served as either Postmasters (PM), Acting Postmasters (AP) or Officers in Charge (OIC) include: Vicky L. Trejo (OIC) July 2004; Richard L. Howard Jr (PM) December 2004; Kevin R. Hutchison (AP) March 2006 & (PM) June 2006; Vita R. Trygstad (OIC) January 2009; Kathleen L. Sanford (OIC) September 2009; Corinna L. Woodring (OIC) December 2009; Tamara J. Wade (OIC) May 2010; Roxann VanLaan (OIC) November 2010; Susan Hancock (OIC) July 2011; Veronica A. Mauseth (OIC) July 2012; Roxann VanLaan (OIC) December 2012; Shelby Visser (OIC) October 2014; Lori Mayfield (OIC) Date unknown; tamara J. Wade (PM) July 2015; Kathleen L. Sanford (OIC) November 2015; Vita R. Trygstad (PM) May 2017; Shelby Visser (OIC) September 2018; Jane E Stewart (PM) September 2018.