

## The Post Office — A Community Icon

Every community, from the smallest village to the largest city, has a post office. Whether a corner office in a general store or a massive edifice occupying a city block, the postal service touches almost every citizen on a nearly daily basis and, as such, is one of the most visible manifestations of the federal government.

The development of the United States Postal Service closely corresponds to the growth of the nation's transportation and communication infrastructure. Reliable mail service necessitated the development of postal roads. Later railroads, shipping lines, and airplanes provided service throughout the country and the world.

The establishment of a post office was an important event in the life of a town. Its creation often formalized the name and spelling of a municipality and helped define its borders. Post offices played a daily role in the life of most citizens: in addition to sending and receiving mail, customers visited with neighbors. The post office often housed other governmental functions such as IRS offices, draft boards, even a postal banking service. The post office also provided meeting rooms for community organizations such as the Boy Scouts.

Until the 1950s, post office buildings were typically located in the center of towns, making them a quintessential feature of the Main Street America.



*The Mifflinburg Post Office in Union County.*

## Post Offices — Architectural Styles

Until the mid-20th century, all federal buildings, including post offices, were built with funds appropriated by the Treasury Department and were designed by the Treasury Department's Office of the Supervising Architect. Originally the Supervising Architect favored monumental, elegant structures built from high quality materials. These buildings were meant to exemplify architectural excellence in the cities for which they were built.

Some post offices from the late 1800s, like the massive Williamsport Post Office, were built in the Romanesque style. Philadelphia, like New York and St. Louis, boasted monumental post offices built in the Second Empire style. Early 20th century post offices reflect a preference for classical and early American styles. Concerns about expenditures led to a classification system, where the design of a post office was related to its postal receipts and the size of the municipality in which it was located.

In rare cases, post offices were designed by private architects. Lorimer Rich, the designer of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier for Arlington National Cemetery, also designed the Johnstown Post Office (1938). Harry Sternfeld, a Philadelphia architect known for his Art Deco buildings, designed the Milton Post Office (1936) as well as the Moderne-style Post Office and Courthouse (1940) for downtown Philadelphia.

During the New Deal the federal government embarked on massive public works projects to provide employment. To streamline the design and building process, the Treasury Department developed ten stock post office designs chosen from a national competition. Most of these plans were simple, symmetrical designs usually in brick, in the colonial revival or "classical moderne" styles. Designs and building materials were selected to harmonize with the surrounding architecture of the town.

Post office design changed dramatically following World War II, reflecting aesthetic and demographic trends of the time. Post offices became more functional and stripped-down in appearance and lost the stylistic



*The Williamsport Post Office, built in 1891, now functions as the City Hall. Its massive scale reflects Williamsport's importance as a county seat and an economic center.*



*The Milton Post Office is a superb example of the Art Deco style.*

hallmark of government buildings, such as entrance steps and the symbolic eagle. Post offices were now located in suburban areas with ample parking, to better accommodate automobile traffic. Some facilities even experimented with drive-through service. Since the 1950s, the official preference is to lease space in privately-owned commercial buildings for postal service.

## Post Offices in the New Deal Era

During the New Deal the government built hundreds of post offices across the country. The majority of these buildings remain in use, and as a group, represent an interesting period in the history of federal architecture. The smaller post offices, based on stock designs, were less costly to build, and allowed the Treasury Department to locate them in smaller communities which had previously been ineligible for federal buildings.

The Treasury wanted buildings of "simple government character in consonance with the region in which they are located and the surroundings of the specific site." Most of these plans were simple, symmetrical designs usually in brick, in the colonial revival or "classical moderne" styles. Although modest in scale they still conveyed the dignity and formality of larger government buildings. The flagpole communicates its federal function: elevated steps and an American eagle over the front door create a ceremonial entrance. Details such as cupolas, weathervanes, lighting fixtures allowed the basic design to be individualized.

When a town was selected to receive a post office, an official was sent to make a field report. Potential building lots were identified and evaluated during the typical 3 to 5 day-investigation. The field officer also solicited public opinion about preferred sites, taking note of the prevailing architecture and building traditions of the town. This information was then used by the Supervising Architect's Office to select a design that would be stylistically appropriate for the town. In this way, the government created a post office that both expressed its federal functions while accommodating local preferences.



*The Mercersburg Post Office (1937) is based on the Colonial revival style plan but is faced with field stone rather than the more typical brick .*



*The Danville Post Office (1937) is a "classical moderne" building — a simple symmetrical design with little ornamentation.*



*Eagles with upright wings, such as Milton's (1937), fell out of favor during World War II due to its resemblance to the Nazi eagle. Eagles with outstretched wings, such as Mifflinburg's, became the preferred style.*



## Post Office Art in the New Deal Era

Many of the post offices built during the New Deal contain artworks created for a specific location. These were commissioned by a department within the Treasury known as the Section of Fine Arts (known simply as the Section). Formed at the beginning of the New Deal, the Section invited artists to enter national competitions for large post offices around the country; runners-up were offered commissions for smaller post offices.

The artworks were expected to reflect the town's heritage in some way. Popular subjects included local industry, agriculture, and history. Artists were expected to travel to their assigned post offices, meet with the post master and other residents (often a local historian or librarian) and generate several ideas for subject matter. After a sketch was approved by the Section's administrators, the artist could proceed to create his or her artwork.

The Section was active from 1934 to 1943. During this time, Pennsylvania received 94 commissions for murals and sculpture for federal buildings (88 post offices, 5 courthouses, 1 customs house). Nationwide, 80% of post office artworks are murals and 20% are sculpture. In Pennsylvania, almost half of our artworks are sculpture, giving Pennsylvania the most sculpture of any state, and the second largest collection of both murals and sculpture in the country. The artworks were distributed across the state in urban and rural locations.

The following survey shows artworks in nine Pennsylvania post offices. They are located across the state in both cities and small towns, and their artworks represent the major themes of industry, agriculture, and history. The murals and sculptures are displayed in active post office facilities and may be viewed by the public during regular business hours. With the exceptions of Belle Vernon and Union City, all artworks are in the post office buildings for which they were created. Whenever possible, color photographs have been provided; archival black and white images have been used for the others.



*The mural in the Renovo Post Office shows the typical placement of the painting — over the postmaster's door. "Locomotive Repair Operation" (1943) depicts Renovo's main industry.*

- 1) Allentown
- 2) Belle Vernon
- 3) Chester
- 4) Mount Union
- 5) Pittsburgh (Squirrel Hill Branch)
- 6) Renovo
- 7) Selinsgrove
- 8) Union City
- 9) Wilkes-Barre (Kingston Branch)

## Allentown Post Office (1933)

The monumental Allentown post office dominates the corner of West Hamilton Street and 5th Avenue in the downtown. The scale and formality of the building communicate Allentown's importance as the political and industrial center of Lehigh County. The "classical moderne" building was a popular style of architecture for civic buildings in the 1930s. The post office retains the massing and symmetry of earlier neo-classical and revival style post office buildings but largely omits surface ornamentation. Features typical of earlier designs, such as fluted columns, are here streamlined into square columns.

In contrast to the generally simple facade, the massive entrance portals exhibit highly exuberant Art Deco ornamentation. Black granite slabs rise several stories to surround the doorway and windows. A cartouche with an eagle occupies the space between a broken cornice of modillion blocks and sits atop a lintel with five stars. Step banding, the series of incised lines, wraps around the top corners and continues down the outside. Bas relief panels which frame the opening vertically feature a variety of geometric designs and animals including, curiously, a pair of sea horses.

The post office lobby provides its own variety of ornamentation. In addition to the ten Gifford Beal murals depicting scenes of Lehigh County's history and industry, the lobby floor is paved with handmade Mercer tile. It seems likely that the architect was inspired by the Harrisburg State Capitol, built twenty years earlier, which also features a variety murals and a dramatic Mercer tile floor.



*Postcard featuring the Allentown Post Office.*



*One of three massive entrance portals.*

## Mount Union Post Office (1936)

New Deal era post offices were basically rectangular in shape and had similar floor plans. The simple exteriors could easily be customized to harmonize with their surroundings. The geometric tan brick of the Mount Union Post Office complemented the town's nearby commercial buildings. Architectural presence is achieved through the bold vertical blocks surrounding the entrance and windows and the upright lamp posts on either side of the steps. The Mount Union Post Office has even less surface ornament than the similar Danville Post Office.



## Selinsgrove Post Office (1937)

Like the Mifflinburg and Renovo post offices, the Selinsgrove Post Office is based on one of the Treasury Department's stock Colonial revival style designs. Rather than a cupola however, the red brick building was enhanced with decorative cast stone work above the windows. It was further customized with a beautiful Georgian style entrance portico. During recent renovations, the missing "T" in "STATES" and "S" in "POST" on the portico were restored. The letters had to be fashioned by hand to match the originals from the 1930s.



## Renovo Post Office (1940)

The Renovo Post Office is a typical Colonial revival style building. It is virtually identical to the Mifflinburg Post Office. Similar details include the white cupola with weathervane and American eagle above the doorway. This style of eagle, which outstretched wings, became more prevalent as World War II approached and also fit the arched space well.



## Belle Vernon Post Office (1981)

The brown brick post office in Belle Vernon exemplifies the spare designs typical of the 1970s and 80s. Post offices built during this time were located away from town centers to provide for plenty of customer parking and easy access for postal vehicles. The spare design reflects an emphasis on functionality and inexpensive construction. Gone are the architectural details of pre-World War II post offices like entrance steps and eagle sculptures. The only feature that remains is the flagpole.



## Union City Post Office (1999)

Like most contemporary postal facilities, the Union City Post Office is located away from the town center to provide easy access and ample parking space. The gabled roof, white siding, and large windows help give this post office a more inviting appearance than the spartan Belle Vernon Post Office. The wood sculpture "The Lumberman," is beautifully displayed behind glass in the lobby.



# The Post Office — Preserving Your Community Resource

All of the post office buildings are of high quality construction. The majority of those built before World War II still survive and function as postal facilities. A post office located in your downtown is an anchor that brings business to the commercial area. Even those that have been decommissioned are usually repurposed as libraries, municipal offices, or some other kind of public building and remain a source of local pride.

## Community Initiatives

There are a number of things your community can do to encourage the appreciation and preservation of your post office. First, learn everything you can about your post office. A great deal of information will be in the post office itself. Usually a copy of the blueprints is stored in the building. Ask the postmaster if you can examine the plans. Find out if your post office was designed by a prominent architect or, in the case of a stock plan, if any modifications were made to harmonize with neighboring buildings. Check your library for newspaper reports. The construction of postal facilities was usually well documented by the local press. Dedication ceremonies were often attended by state and local politicians, and postal officials, who addressed thousands of residents.

Some communities feature their post office in walking tours of the downtown. If your post office has an artwork that relates to your town's history, consider incorporating it into your town's heritage day. Always discuss your plans with the postmaster to make sure there is no conflict with postal business.

## The National Register

Your post office may be eligible for National Register status. Consult the "National Register Bulletin #13: How to Apply the National Register Criteria to Post Offices" which outlines the categories of significance: architecture, art, commerce, communications, community planning and development, economic, education, exploration/settlement, politics/government, social history, or transportation. Also consider a multiple listing nomination. A group of post offices in a county or region might better represent a theme that one individual building.

To request copies of Bulletin #13 contact:  
The National Register of Historic Places  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
P.O. Box 37127, Suite 250  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127  
[www.nps.gov/nr](http://www.nps.gov/nr)

If your community's post office has a mural or sculpture, consider forming a group to promote it. If cleaning or restoration work is needed, contact Dallan Wordekemper, the Federal Preservation Officer, at:  
phone: 703-526-2779  
email: [dallan.c.wordekemper@usps.gov](mailto:dallan.c.wordekemper@usps.gov)

Restoration services are coordinated and paid for by the U.S.P.S. There have been cases of public/private funding for restoration projects, ask Mr. Wordekemper if your group would like to explore this possibility.

## Community Success Stories

**Mifflinburg** — In the 1990s, the Mifflinburg Revitalization Association decided improve the appearance of their post office as part of its downtown revitalization effort. Residents along with the Boy Scouts and Kiwanis Club landscaped the grounds with plants donated from a local nursery. With the help of the officers at the U.S.P.S. Harrisburg Division, funds were provided to replace the rusted flagpole, replace the windows, and build an access ramp.

**Milton** — Milton participates in Pennsylvania's Main Street Program and has formed a subcommittee dedicated to preserving its Art Deco post office. The Federal Preservation Officer has provided funds for an architectural and engineering analysis of the building and a restoration report has been submitted. The Milton Garden Club found the original landscaping plan in the post office and plans to recreate the 1930s design as a restoration activity.