

THE CENTRAL POST OFFICE, OTTAWA

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The official opening in December 1939, by W.L. Mackenzie King, of the new Central Post Office, Ottawa, came at the end of a more than three year effort of planning and building. The completion of this structure had significance in the history of federal government direction of town planning in Ottawa and in government espousal of a particular architectural style as the semi-official Canadian style.

The federal government from the 1890s onwards was sporadically concerned with creating in Ottawa a magnificent capital to serve as a symbol of the nation. In 1926 the government was in the hands of Mackenzie King and his active interest in the physical appearance of Ottawa is reflected in the quickened pace of government action on questions of possible development schemes. In 1927 the Federal District Commission was created from the old Ottawa Improvement Committee, with wider discretionary powers on questions of land use and property expropriation.¹

In April of 1928 the Russell Hotel at Elgin and Sparks Streets burnt, and the opportunity of possessing this piece of property in the heart of Ottawa was one of the major factors toward King's allocating a \$3 million capital grant to the Federal District Commission for land purchase with which the Russell Hotel and adjoining structures were bought and razed. This area was turned into a green space and named Confederation Park. Nearby, at the entrance to the Chateau Laurier Hotel was the triangular open space known as Connaught Place which had been created in 1912.

Since the end of World War I a memorial to Canada's war dead had been under consideration. In 1925 Vernon March, an English sculptor, was chosen to design and execute the memorial. The resulting sculptural group entitled Victory Response was completed in 1932 and then stored while the government decided where it should be located. The summer of 1936 found the administration at last ready to act. The area of Confederation Park and Connaught Place was to be joined to create a large square with the War Memorial as its focal point at the north end of a widened Elgin Street.

The Ottawa Post Office, at Wellington and Elgin Streets was thus an obstacle in the middle of this proposed square and was slated for demolition. On 17 July 1936, T.W. Fuller, the Chief Architect of the Department of Public Works, corresponded with Mr. Hunter, his Deputy Minister, and detailed a dinner he had with Mackenzie King the previous evening during which King stated that he definitely wanted the new Post Office facing onto the proposed square, and brushed aside Fuller's explanation of the technical difficulties involved in re-using the pink granite of the old Post Office in the facade of the new structure.² The very next day, 18 July, King wrote to Hunter

Please keep in mind that my wishes in the matter of having this work in readiness to bring to completion next year is based on a desire to have the national war memorial erected in 1937 so that there may be a permanent association of the memorial with the year of the coronation of King Edward VIII.³ Although it was King's stated desire that the entire Confederation Square re-development be completed in 1937, the contracts commissioning execution of plans for a new Post Office were not signed until 19 May, 1937, and the old Post Office still remained in the War Memorial's ultimate destination. The reason for this delay is to be found in King's trip to Paris in September 1936.

While in Paris King visited the World Exposition and was guided about the site by the fair's chief architect, Jacques Greber, a Professor in the Town Planning Institute of the University of Paris. King asked Greber to come to Canada to act as consultant on the development of Confederation Square. It would seem that the opportunity of having Greber work on the planning of downtown Ottawa was more important to King than having the square completed on schedule. Greber's initial mandate to study Confederation Square broadened after his arrival in Canada to include a plan for the entire centre of the city.

Greber's plans were completed in May 1937 and on 19 May a local architect, W.E. Noffke, was contracted to prepare presentation drawings and plans for the new Post Office, to be constructed on the north-west corner of Sparks and Elgin Streets, and designed as well to serve as the new home of the Post Office Department which was centralizing its operations. Noffke, in

the middle of a distinguished and busy career in Ottawa had a reputation as an extremely competent and professional architect, who had designed numerous commercial structures, as well as homes for many of Ottawa's most influential citizens.⁴

In the plans created in the years 1913 to 1915 by the Federal Plan Commission, not only were questions of land use discussed, but recommendations were made as to the appearance of new government buildings. The Commission felt that the new structures should harmonize with the Parliament Buildings and suggested that the architecture of the Chateau Laurier was appropriate as a general pattern.⁵ A 1920 Public Works Commission reached much the same conclusions and by 1927 the Department of Public Works felt ready to report that since the Holt and 1920 Commissions agreed that the buildings should suggest the Norman French Gothic type to harmonize with the Parliament Buildings and be suitable to the northern climate, the Deputy Minister could recommend the adoption of the French Chateau style. The Confederation and Justice Buildings on Wellington Street were constructed following these guidelines, and Ernest Cormier the architect of the Supreme Court stated that its chateau style roof was imposed on his severely classical structure.⁶

In December of 1937 property at the north-west corner of Elgin and Sparks Streets was expropriated adjacent to Confederation Park to create a large enough site for the construction of the new Post Office. Thomas Scott's old Post Office was demolished in April 1938, as were the buildings on the new Post Office site and test borings were conducted. In May 1938 Noffke's completed plans for the building were sent to Greber in Paris and initiated a series of (7) letters and telegrams as Greber decided on changes in the plans, which although not extensive showed the degree of power he held over even relatively small details. By 15 June, 1938 Noffke had made the required changes and was officially appointed architect for the Central Post Office. Tenders were opened and set for 15 July, 1938 while completion was slated for 1 May, 1939. September saw construction under way.⁸

The construction of the Post Office took place amidst considerable chaos as the entire Confederation Square area underwent a transformation. In January 1938 work had commenced on installation of the National War Memorial which neces-

sitated the creation of terraces, a promenade and grading of the plaza sloping upwards to the west towards the Post Office. The Memorial was in place by October 1938. In August 1938 work was begun on renovation of the area known as Connaught Place and new bridge supports, roadways and sidewalks created an eastern approach onto the square.⁹

The Central Post Office is roughly rhomboidal in shape, has two visible, symmetrical facades, one on Elgin Street and one on Sparks Street, is eight storeys tall, sheathed in Queenstone limestone and is topped by a steeply pitched copper sheathed roof. Although the facade is divided into three horizontal bands, the vertical elements pierce and dominate these somewhat arbitrary and thin horizontal divisions. This tension in conjunction with the light and reflective limestone creates a building in which surface tautness is emphasized and which is not greatly suggestive of interior volume and external mass. The Elgin Street facade, with its pale limestone and polished granite, topped by the roof which proportionately is one-third of the building height speaks directly across the square to a major determinant of its style, the Chateau Laurier Hotel. The Sparks and Elgin facades meet at a curved corner which functions importantly as the location of the main door of the building and the site of the large ornamental clock at dormer height. The corner doors are of bronze decorated with eight panels depicting the history of the mails in Canada. Dormers in the Francois I style decorate the roofline and reinforce the verticality of the uppermost part of the building. The tower proved a picturesque solution to the mechanical problem of space for an elevator and fan room.

The ground floor is allocated to the post office and its lobby shows an Art Deco influence in the very stark smooth marble walls broken by contrasting flat pilasters with incised decorative carving to suggest capitals. Decorative grillwork of silver nickel and bronze includes common Art Deco devices.

The building is framed with steel, fireproofed with brick and terrazzo, contained the most modern heating, plumbing and electrical circuitry and then was clothed with an historical facade. Architects such as Noffke saw no discrepancy in building a technically and

structurally modern building and then giving it an historical skin.

The Central Post Office was not completed in time for the visit of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth to Ottawa in May 1939, although all stages of the Confederation Square redevelopment had been slated for completion by that time. Bunting hid the unfinished building when George VI unveiled the National War Memorial on 21 May, 1939. The outbreak of war in September 1939 led to the War Department moving into the building which was however opened as the home of the Post Office by Mackenzie King in December 1939.

1. National Capital Planning Service, Plan for the National Capital (Ottawa, 1950), 147.
2. Public Archives. Department of Public Works Registry File. Record Group 11. vol. 4156, file no. 12503-3-A, pg. 589380.
3. Archives, Public Works, vol. 4156, file no. 12503-3-A.
4. Harold Kalman and Joan Mackie, The Architecture of W.E. Noffke (Ottawa, 1976).
5. Harold Kalman, The Railway Hotels and the Development of the Chateau Style in Canada (Victoria, 1968), 24.
6. Kalman, Railway, 25.
7. Archives, Public Works, vol. 4156, file no. 12503-3-A.
8. Archives, Public Works, vol. 4156, file no. 12503-3-A. The total cost of the Central Post Office was \$1,041,965.
9. Department of Public Works, Report of the Deputy Minister of Public Works (Ottawa, 1938-39), 42.

PARK PLANNING IN OTTAWA

Sally Coutts, Ottawa

The notion that Ottawa should become a glittering capital city was first put forward by Sir Wilfrid Laurier in 1893. He reiterated this point when he entered Ottawa as Prime Minister in August 1896. During his speech that day in Cartier Square he stated:

I have said that Ottawa ought to be the Washington of the North; I have not forgotten these words and will try and live by them. It is part of any nation to be proud of its capital...it is my purpose to make Ottawa a capital of which every Canadian shall be proud. 1

The first federal step towards creating a "Washington of the North" came in the summer of 1899, when An Act Respecting the City of Ottawa was introduced into the House of Commons. This act provided for an annual grant of \$60,000 to the city of Ottawa. The grant was to be administered by the Governor-General in Council and was to be used for "the purpose of improving and beautifying the City of Ottawa, by the acquisition and maintenance and improvement of public squares, and the improvement of the streets and thoroughfares of the said city." 2 The Honourable Henry Fielding (Finance) supported the expenditure saying:

We make this proposal upon the ground that the capital city of Canada has claims upon the Government and upon Parliament such as cannot be advanced by another city. 3

The Act was assented to on August 5, 1899 and the Commissioners chosen shortly thereafter.

The Ottawa Improvement Commission was made up of four men, three appointed by the Governor-General and one by the city. The first members were, Henry N. Bate, Joseph Riopelle, C.R. Cunningham and Thomas Payment. Henry N. Bate was a longtime Ottawa resident who with his brother ran a wholesale grocery business. He was a director of many companies including the Bank of Ottawa and, most important to his appointment, a life long Liberal and member of the Reform Club. 4 He was one of the members of the Liberal party who welcomed Wilfrid Laurier into Ottawa in 1896 and escorted him to Cartier Square. The Ottawa Improvement Commission was