

Woods Hole Buys Its Post Office

Judith G. Stetson

The village of Woods Hole has had its own post office ever since 1826. In 1827, President John Quincy Adams appointed Ward Parker Woods Hole's first postmaster, authorizing him to receive the mail from ships and stagecoaches. The post office was in a small building between the old Swift farmhouse (now WHOI's Challenger House) and the Davis/Fish house now owned by The Woods Hole Research Center.¹

For the next hundred years, the post office occupied space in the postmaster's own home or in one of the village stores. From 1885 to 1889 it was located in Eliel T. Fish's store. That house, now owned by Dr. and Mrs. Thomas H. Ballantine, still stands at the edge of the water on Little Harbor Road. In 1928, the post office was moved into its current brick building on Water Street. Walter O. Luscombe had built that building expressly for the post office, equipping it with

three big service windows and double combination locks on the customers' oak and brass-trimmed postal boxes.

The architectural and historical significance of the 1928 post office building was recorded for the Falmouth Historical Commission by Candace Jenkins and Susan Abele in July 1990:

The Woods Hole Post Office is located on the south side of Water Street, west of its intersection with Woods Hole Road. It is a small, one-story brick structure that faces a three-bay gable-end to the street. The symmetrical facade is centered on an entry framed by pilasters and a modillion pediment enclosing a round-arched fanlight. Flanking windows contain 8/1 sash, as do the windows on the four-bay side elevations. The entry is surmounted by an elliptical fanlight in the gable field. This post office is typical of small-scale offices of the early 20th century.



Woods Hole's first Post Office building was next to the imposing Ephraim Manassah Swift Home as shown in this 1831 scene. Ward M. Parker, Woods Hole's first Postmaster, later bought the Swift Home. In 1850, Joseph Story Fay bought it and named it The Homestead. Today it is owned by the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution and is called Challenger House. The shed, grocery store, post office, and cobbler shop no longer exist. The stagecoach driver was William Hewins, later Town Treasurer. From an original oil by Franklin Lewis Gifford, Woods Hole Public Library Collection. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith, 1974.

The Woods Hole Post Office was constructed in 1926 when construction of post offices and other federal buildings was just beginning to pick up after World War I. It was probably designed by the Supervising Architect's Office, then headed by James A. Wetmore (1915-1933.) A major public building act was passed in 1926, but the Woods Hole branch was probably authorized under the preceding Public Buildings Act of 1913. During this period, the design, scale, and materials of post offices were directly linked to local conditions, including the value of postal receipts. The current post office stands on or very near its immediate predecessor, a wood-frame structure attached to Howes Market. Prior to this time the post office was located in Eliel T. Fish's store on Government Street, now Little Harbor Road. The Woods Hole Post Office was officially established in 1826, and was located next to the Swift House.²

Wherever its location, the Woods Hole post office has always been a central gathering place. Everyone knew when the mail came in and when it was distributed. "Getting the mail" was a pleasant daily ritual for most villagers, a time to socialize, to exchange news and to gossip. In the decades before World War II, the Woods Hole post office did as much business as the Falmouth post office. In those days,

... mail was distributed four or five times in the post office. And that was sort of a social event. The seven o'clock mail at night, the post office would be filled. You could hardly get in the door because everybody was up and everybody went about 15 minutes to half an hour early to discuss the happenings or the latest gossip of the day. Everybody was up at the post office in the evening after they'd had their evening meal; they'd go up and visit and talk to people and that's how they had a little socializing, and so forth.³

Cynthia Cahoon Smith remembers that when she and her friends were children "... the older people were waited on first, and if we giggled, we were stared at."⁴

In 1993, Woods Hole almost lost its cherished post office.

The story of how the post office was saved is also the story of why it was saved. It was saved by the community because it was an integral part of the community. A community is essentially intangible; it is not just a collection of houses in proximity. Nevertheless, both the feeling of community and its absence are unmistakable. The deep rooted, overarching sense of community that used to grow so well in thousands of small villages like Woods Hole has become rare today. Com-

Woods Holl Post Office from 1885 to 1889. Building owned by Capt. Charles Davis, retired whaling captain, uncle of Miss Florence and Miss Josephine Fish. Building originally used as Woods Holl Social Library and for a notion store run by Capt. Davis which carried red flannel, gum drops, fish-hooks, Corticelli thread, etc. Courtesy WHHC.





The current Woods Hole Post Office, constructed in 1928; probably designed by the Supervising Architect's Office, then headed by James A. Wetmore. Courtesy WHHC.

munity cannot thrive in a fast, impersonal, fragmented, violent age.

Woods Hole village is a community. During most of its history, its residents have known each other well and looked out for each other. They have told each other the stories of their lives and of the lives of their ancestors. They have taught each other's children the ways of the village and its surrounding waters. The Woods Hole post office has been part of all these lives.

The post office was saved because it is a center that continues both to express and to create the sense of the community that is named Woods Hole.

That name has changed slightly over the years, as Jane A. McLaughlin wrote in *The Book of Falmouth*: an early summer resident, Joseph Story Fay, was "responsible for changing the name of the village, for a time, from Wood's Hole to Wood's Holl. Fay argued that holl was the Norwegian term for hill applied to this locale by Norse explorers, and that the place was not named for a water passage. The U.S. Post Office which had established a Wood's Hole office in 1826 adopted the new spelling, Wood's Holl, on October 27, 1875, but changed it back to Woods Hole . . . without an apostrophe. A stone marked 'Woods Holl' that once was a part of an arched bridge spanning Eel

Pond channel now stands in front of Community Hall."⁵

Woods Hole has always been the name of the narrow passage of swirling tidal waters that separates the mainland from the Elizabeth Island chain. Woods Hole passage is dangerous, as are the other holes between the Elizabeth Islands. The streaming tides of Buzzards Bay and Vineyard Sound race through them.

Those holes, and many other sea lanes of the world, were more familiar and more reliable than inland roads for the first 200 years of Woods Hole's history. There used to be a post office at Tarpaulin Cove half way down on the Vineyard Sound side of Naushon Island where schooners would anchor to wait for a favorable wind and tide to carry them up the Sound. Oscar Hilton remembered those days and those two-three- and four-masted schooners:

There wasn't any Cape Cod Canal. All the boats and vessels had to go down over the shoal through Pollock Rip Slough, or else they had to go outside around Nantucket, to go into Boston. So there used to be a lot of sailing vessels that would bunch up in the Sound here, in Tarpaulin Cove, in Vineyard Haven. When there'd be a storm coming on, why, they'd anchor and put their sails down and lay for several days sometimes, till the weather cleared, and it began to look decent, so they could go . . .

There used to be a family lived at Tarpaulin Cove, in what they called the Tarpaulin Farmhouse : . . they had a kind of a seaman's store there. They kept a few groceries, and the sailing vessels that were running shy of food could buy stuff like that, for quite a good many years, until the Cape Cod Canal was built, and they did away with sailing vessels practically altogether . . . Then there also was always a family in the lighthouse back in the olden days there, in my early days in Woods Hole.⁶

Almyra Wainwright grew up in the farmhouse/post office in Tarpaulin Cove, later marrying Captain John Veeder who ran the MBL collecting boat *Cayadetta* for many years. His great niece, Marjorie H. Moore, responded to the WHHC publication of *The Diary of Ruth Anna Hatch* with further family information:

Ruth Anna writes on January 10, "Had a letter from Myra today. She and Thankie each sent me a pretty card."

Thankful (born 19 May 1863) and Almyra (born 10 June 1865) were the daughters of Capt. Peter W. and Mary (Clifford) Wainwright. The Wainwright house on the shore of Eel Pond you will find labeled on the 1880 map in the Diary. Capt. Wainwright for a period was postmaster at Tarpaulin Cove. Myra told me once that she and her sister enjoyed helping all the young men who came ashore there, in those pre-

Canal days, for their mail. This may have been where they were when they were corresponding with Ruth Anna Hatch.

In the fall of 1881, when Ruth Anna was going off to Abbott Academy, Myra was preparing for her wedding. She married Capt. John J. Veeder in the church on Cuttyhunk on Nov. 16, 1881. Theirs was the first wedding in the new church, and Myra has said that for lack of other music in this church without piano or organ she asked all her friends to bring their canaries.⁷

Oscar Hilton told of one enterprising mailman:

Walter Nickerson carried the mail . . . the 10:00 train used to come into Woods Hole. He'd take the mailbag. He used to have lobster pots on the Sound. He'd carry the mail up, and he'd haul the traps when the tide showed right so he could get them. Then, he figured he'd go to the Cove with the mail and then get the mailbag back again.⁸

Prince Crowell had the job of delivering the mail to Tarpaulin Cove during two college summers in the early 1900s. He sailed down in his Woods Hole sprit-sail, never missing a day. He learned all the currents and eddies so well that he also won all the local sprit-sail races. Later his younger brother, Allan Crowell, delivered the mail. Prince Crowell's daughter, Olive



The farmhouse/post office at Tarpaulin Cove on Naushon Island. The old post boxes are still in the room to the left of the front door. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith, July 4, 1993.



Flat roofed Post Office between the store of Jotham Howes and Howes Market. Congregational Church at far right. Man in derby hat is Benjamin R. Gifford, later Postmaster. c. 1900. Courtesy Florence H. Gordon.

Crowell Beverly, confided that on really bad days the brothers would sail over to Nonamessett Island and then walk down to Tarpaulin.⁹

When Roger Savery's grandfather, Ernest Rohmeling, arrived from Hanover in Germany, his first job was taking the mail to Tarpaulin. He used Madison Edwards' boat and sailed from Madison Edwards' dock just beyond the schoolhouse.¹⁰

Elizabeth Spooner married Joseph Story Fay's son in January 1876, just after the U.S. Post Office had adopted the elder Mr. Fay's new spelling for the village. In 1930 she described the "Wood's Holl" of her early married life:

There was one general shop on the corner where the Main Street and the road to the station divides and which, very soon afterwards, became the post office. That shop was owned and run by Jabez Davis and his son-in-law and partner, Walter O. Luscombe. Mr. Luscombe's wife, Helen, the daughter of Jabez Davis, had recently died; and, a few years later, Mr. Luscombe married Lunette Shiverick.¹¹

Mrs. Fay remembered the post office as an important part of the village in the 1870s and '80s. From a distance of 50 years, she also remembered the people who owned and operated the post office building. That human element has remained a defining characteristic of the Woods Hole post office. It is another important reason why the Woods Hole post office was saved.

Jotham Howes was running that shop at the end of the century. He was appointed postmaster on January 2, 1892, and reappointed on October 9, 1899. In those years, the post office was in a little flat roofed building sandwiched between that Howes store and the adjacent Howes Market (a butchers shop.) Ellen Griffin, daughter of artist Franklin Gifford, recalls that "... you went down a step from this store inside, you'd go right down into this other little room and that was the post office."¹²

When Railroad Avenue was constructed in 1903, the stores were rebuilt. On May 18, 1904, Jotham Howes requested permission from the Fourth Assistant Post Master General in Washington to move the Woods Hole post office 75 feet Southeast. According to Mr.

Howes' Statement to the Post Office Department, mail was carried 18 times per week, his proposed change would decrease "the distance necessarily traveled by the carrier in going once over the route" and the village had 1,000 inhabitants.¹³ Ellen Griffin remembers that the new post office was on "that sort of peak where the bank is." And Leighton Peck recalls: "The main door going into the post office was right on the corner. I can remember there was a great big flat stone there that was the doorstep. It was one step up and you went in there."¹⁴

Mr. Luscombe, the "Mayor of Woods Hole," who owned much of the land on that hillside, later gave George Look a hundred-year lease on the new store in the fork of the road. George Look was appointed postmaster on January 19, 1905, and reappointed on June 25, 1909. More than 70 years later, Eugenia Gardiner Rudd and Dr. Margaret C. L. Gildea vividly remembered Mr. Look, as well as most of the other Woods Hole storekeepers who treated the two young girls so kindly in the years before World War I.¹⁵

In World War I, Americans went Over There. At the end of World War I, the Spanish influenza came Over Here. In 1977 Bob Neal, a longtime Woods Hole resident, recounted a decidedly gruesome story from those days that involved the U.S. mail going through Woods Hole to Nantucket. He was the featured speaker on the occasion of the opening of the railroad exhibit at the Bradley House Museum and was responding to a question from the audience:

Well, that gets into the steamship operation. That was in the year 1918 and '19. We just had a terrific winter. Well, that was the worst two winters, I think, that I ever put in at Woods Hole, 1918 and '19. Bear in mind that everything that went to the islands in those days either came through Woods Hole or through New Bedford. Our freight house down on the dock was loaded at that time. Camp Devens had the flu epidemic and the boys were dying there so fast that they couldn't get coffins to put them in. They were just—the bodies put in boxes and shipped



Postcard showing newly constructed Railroad Avenue at left, newly rebuilt market in center and Main Street going towards Eel Pond on right. c. 1903. Courtesy WHHC.



U.S. Post Office in 1910, occupying part of George C. Look's Grocery Store which had replaced the Jotham Howes store. Courtesy WHHC.



The Woods Hole Market shortly before World War I. Courtesy WHHC.

wherever they lived. And I have had as many as three or four bodies with United States mail piled on top, beef and all kinds of groceries—and that freight house was loaded from end to end. Finally, after about two weeks, the Federal Government sent a minesweeper to Woods Hole. We loaded all the bodies and all the perishables, what groceries and United States mail we could on the minesweeper. And she went around the back side of Nantucket and landed all the stuff in over the ice. I don't know how true it is, but they tell me that there was fourteen feet of ice in Nantucket Harbor. Now you say, how fourteen feet? I never heard of such a thing! A drop in the tides, the drop in the tides, and it would keep building up until they said it was fourteen feet of ice. I don't know; I didn't measure it.¹⁶

Benjamin R. Gifford was appointed Woods Hole postmaster in 1913 by President Wilson. He held the office for the next 25 years. Mr. Gifford's brother was Franklin Gifford, a famous local painter, and both were direct descendants of William Gifford, one of the original twelve settlers of Woods Hole in 1677. He was also a memorable character in his own right. Benny Gifford's great niece, Charlotte Christian, remembered many stories about "Benny R."

It is a somewhat delicate question politically just how my uncle maintained his political standing, because he stayed in from Wilson through Roosevelt. He was one of the two, and my mother states this categorically, Democrats in the village . . . The story got around that in order to get the job away from another gentleman, he turned Democrat in 1913. According to my mother, that's not true.

. . . he rented the house his father had built from Mr. Walter O. Luscombe for all the 25 years. He owned a house but he rented this one and lived right opposite the post office. Any morning, you could see him come out at 6:30 with his heavy sweater, his derby, sometimes in overshoes, and his umbrella furlled—regardless of the weather—for the trip from the corner of School Street to the Post Office across the street. If he didn't appear at that hour, something was really wrong. And he didn't go back until 7:30 at night; it was a long day.

He was at the Post Office six days a week, 6:30 in the morning to 7:30 at night when the last mail was delivered. That was a great social occasion . . . Everybody came that had a leg under him and met down by Crowell's Wall and sat there and talked. And you could hear my grandfather coming with his cane, which was an umbrella stripped on purpose. It made a terrible rattle. So they'd say, "Frank Gifford is coming." Sundays—he was a very unusual person and postmaster—very dedicated. . . . on Sundays my uncle was there up until 4 o'clock. Even on Sunday!

. . . he was a hypochondriac in a way. He had a great fear of drafts and this was one of the eccentricities he had. He wore a very fine quality of silk and wool underwear, long underwear, winter and summer, which came from R.H. Stearns made expressly for him. He went to the Mass. General to have an operation and I think he had Dr. Chute, and he didn't want to part with the underwear for anything, not even for going into the operating room. So I'm under the impression they anesthetized him or else they did the operation with it on . . . Finally, Dr. Chute said that it was such an emotionally traumatic thing, to leave him alone . . . For a man that was born the grandson of a Nantucket whaler, he sure wasn't born on the deck of a ship . . .

He asked Mr. McKenzie, who was the chief mail clerk, a great friend of his—he didn't have many friends, but they met every day when Mr. McKenzie brought the registered mail from the train to the post office regularly—he asked Mr. McKenzie to buy him a derby in Boston without holes. Mr. McKenzie returned with an expensive derby but there were holes. Uncle Ben had to straighten it out and he filled in, according to the story, the holes with white cotton. Speaking of Mr. McKenzie, they were very formal with each other. It was "Good morning, Mr. McKenzie" regularly as a clock. "Good morning, Mr. Gifford."

I think he kept his pulse on the love life of the village. So he did have some interests beyond being a bachelor and running the Post Office. A friend of mine used to receive a daily letter from his fiancé, and when Uncle Ben would get the letter, he'd say "One a day! One a day! Here you are, don't wait any

*longer!" I don't think he took an interest beyond what he should have, but he was interested in what the young people were doing. And he was human to that extent.*¹⁷

In 1926, George Look sold the market containing the post office to the Woods Hole postal clerk, Charles E. Morrison.¹⁸ Forrest Higgins, managed the store for Mr. Morrison. In 1976, Clara Higgins, Forrest's wife, recalled those days. The store was full of fishing tackle and foul weather gear, hip boots, lamps, lanterns, washtubs, scrub-boards, and the penny candy loved by all children. Upstairs was full of very old things, some surely antiques, but all slowly vanished over the years. A big flat stone doorstep right on the corner of the street led up to the main door of the post office section.

*The corner where the bank is now where there is a sort of bay window was the doorway to the old post office. One end of the market was the original post office People would go in there, of course, for their mail And they used to have the old-fashioned coffee grinder and that end of the store always smelled so wonderful from the coffee being churned. No one had instant coffee in those days, of course.*¹⁹

Forrest Higgins and Austin White, Clara's brother, bought the store from Charles Morrison in 1927. During these years, Postmaster Gifford's ambition was a real post office building; he was sure that if people would just buy their stamps in Woods Hole, he would have it. In 1928 he got it. The post office was moved out of the store, out of the corner that had been its home since 1890 and into the brick building built for it by Walter Luscombe on a vacant lot just down the street.

Mr. Morrison was appointed Falmouth postmaster in 1936 by President Roosevelt, holding that office until he retired in 1957. Homer Smith recalls that when the old mailboxes were replaced and more added, the MBL went to Falmouth to ask the Postmaster for the old mailboxes for the MBL mail room. They are still in use today.²⁰

Bob Neal had a few hard words for a change Mr. Morrison engineered in 1939:

Well, talking about post offices: Charlie Morrison was elected [ed. note: postmasters were always appointed by the President] as Postmaster of the Falmouth Post Office. Woods Hole, at that time, was



Woods Hole Post Office in 1920
 "at that sort of peak where the bank is."
 Gift of Mrs. Forrest Higgins.
 Courtesy WHHC.

the same class post office as Falmouth. But through politics he got the two of them interwoven; and that made Falmouth a first class office, and it made Woods Hole a third or fourth class office. So you see, who gained and who suffered.²¹

W. Harry Hauston, the superintendent of the Woods Hole branch for six years until his appointment as Falmouth Postmaster in 1957, shared Bob Neal's suspicion that the change had been political:

Because Woods Hole, next to Falmouth at the time, was the largest post office in the town. Their affiliations with the MBL and Oceanographic and all the things that they handled gave it much more in receipts than any other post office. But somehow it snuck into the lap of Falmouth.²²

One oldtimer recalled that in the village of those years:

. . . the story was that the people inside the post office read our postal cards. We all knew each other. And I can't remember the details, but I know that one time, we didn't have a telephone in our house, but our neighbors, the Cavanaughs, had a phone. If they wanted to reach us, they'd phone the Cavanaughs. One of us went over to get a message and it was to my mother from a woman who worked at the Post Office and she said, "I thought your mother would like to know that your brother is coming tomorrow."²³

Mr. Hauston confirmed this rumor:

When I was a letter carrier, people used to go away on vacation. And on the card, they'd put "Hi, Harry!" on there. I'd never acknowledge that I ever read it; I would just sort of forget. Well, it's not something that you're being snoopy. I think if you work in a post office, you can pick up a lot of . . . you read the name, the address and the thing all in one glance. And your vision seems to, for some reason, just go left and you pick up the message on the card also. You learn to read quickly and then keep your mouth shut!²⁴

Dr. Paul Reznikoff recalled Mr. McKenzie and the days before the MBL built the Swope Center where

three small old houses named Do, Re, and Mi used to sit, one beside the other facing Eel Pond:

You mention United States mail. If I remember correctly, Bob McKenzie was the mailman coming from Boston. The reason I remember him is that we lived at the McKenzies' here at what we used to call the "Mi House." Off the Eel Pond.²⁵

Bob Neal remembered Bob McKenzie and those busy years very well:

I didn't mention that we had mail cars on at least two trains out and two trains in. Our post office was open seven days a week, from 7 o'clock in the morning until the last train got into there at night. Those were the happy days! Today, you can't get into the post office on a Saturday after 12 o'clock.²⁶

Old Woods Hole residents remember that in those days if you mailed a letter in Boston in the morning, your family got it by noon.

Leighton Peck, later Falmouth's Fire Chief, spent boyhood years in Woods Hole. He recalls that:

Mr. Neal had the job of delivering the mail from the railway cars postal service up to the Post Office. He had a two-wheel tip cart and the wheels in diameter were much higher than I was standing up straight. The wagon used to come up to about my chin and I had to push the mail pouches (I didn't have to; I did this as a hobby.) Mr. Neal would allow me to take the mail up there, the pouches and the parcel post. Push it up the hill, coming up from the Steamboat Authority to the corner. I remember sometimes that wagon was so heavy that I had to zigzag across the street to get it up the hill because I was so small. I had no trouble going down the hill with it . . . I'd bear down on the handles so it wouldn't get away from me and wind up down into Mr. Phillip's barn down there or the Eaton's store where Mrs. Lyons' folks took over afterwards.

As I say, Mr. Gifford used to watch out the side window. There was a plate glass window on the Depot Avenue side, or the railroad side. He could see me come around the end of the station, come around the end of the fence and come up the hill. He'd watch

Woods Hole Postmaster appointments on record with the United States Postal Service and/or the National Archives and Records Administration.

Ward M. Parker	13 January 1826
Ward M. Parker	30 December 1828
Ephraim Eldridge	29 April 1837
John C. Parker	16 August 1838
William Swift	29 April 1847
Sylvester Bourne	29 July 1847
Benjamin B. Webster	12 April 1850
John L. Webster	30 June 1851
Jeremiah Hopkins	26 July 1852
Elihu Fish	3 June 1854
Owen Eldridge	15 September 1856
Thomas Arsey	21 September 1866
Benjamin Matthews	29 October 1866
John Heale	13 February 1873

name changed to WOODS HOLL on October 27, 1875

Owen Eldridge	27 October 1875
Eliel T. Fish	5 May 1885
Elza D. Bassett	18 May 1889
Jotham Howes	2 January 1892

name changed back to WOODS HOLE on October 9, 1899

Jotham Howes (reappt.)	9 October 1899
George C. Look	19 January 1905
George C. Look (reappt.)	25 June 1909
Benjamin R. Gifford	6 May 1913
Benjamin R. Gifford (reappt.)	16 May 1930
Benjamin R. Gifford (reappt.)	30 May 1934
Benjamin R. Gifford (reappt.)	28 June 1934
Alvern P. Clough, Acting Postmaster	1 April 1939

Woods Hole was discontinued as an independent post office on June 10, 1939, effective June 30, 1939, and became a branch office of Falmouth Post Office.

me also when I went back to make sure that I had the routine route, didn't make any extra steps, or what. But that was quite a lot of responsibility in a way, I thought, to have a ten year old boy pushing the mail cart. You never knew, of course, what was in the mail. There was always a pouch; that would

be the first class mail and that would have a padlock on it. The only ones that had the keys to that were the postal people, like Mr. Gifford who had it in the Post Office and the railway clerks on the railway cars.

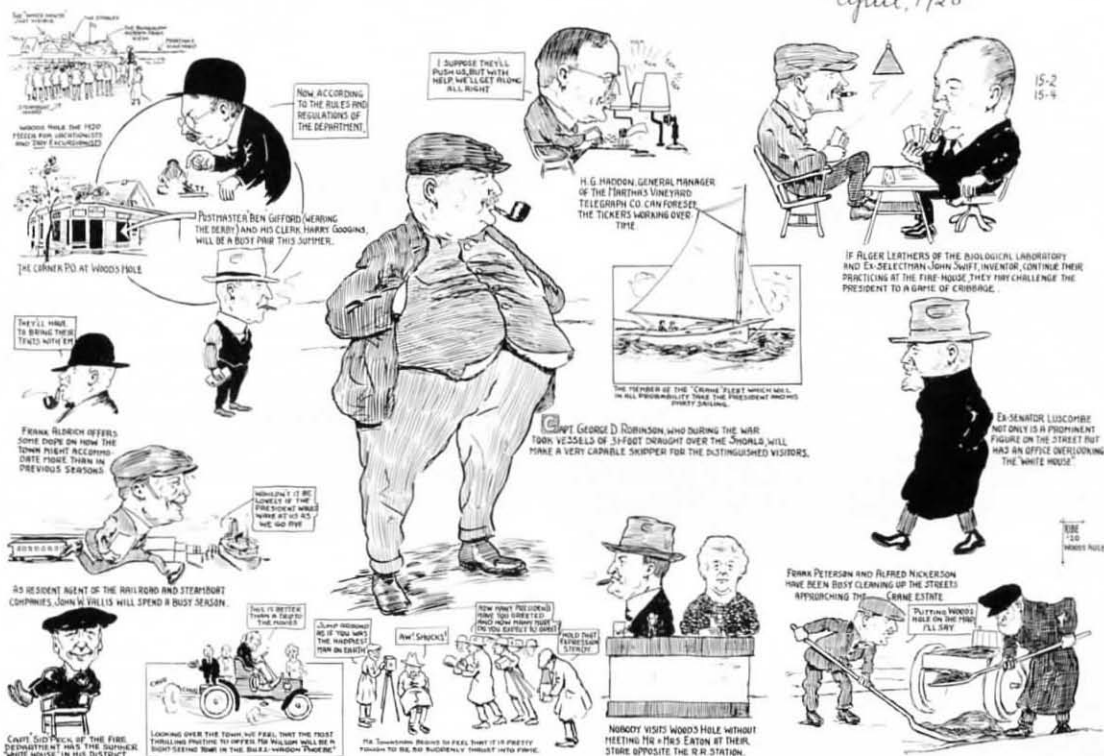
I think the registered mail . . . the postal man had to hand deliver that from Mr. McKenzie. That all had to be hand-carried, at least here in Woods Hole. It would have to be signed for by the Postmaster. I can remember Mr. McKenzie always used to come in in the morning. He was the chief postal clerk. He used to have either one or two assistants on the mailcars going up. He used to go out in the morning right around 7 o'clock and come back on the late afternoon train. And as he went to work in the morning Mr. Gifford would be in the Post Office. He would pick up any registered mail that was going out and sign for it with Mr. Gifford and then he'd go down to the train and into the railway car where they sorted the mail between here and Boston.

. . . I think we were paid ten cents for delivering a Special Delivery letter. Now that didn't make any difference whether it was just down the street to the Laboratory or whether it was out to the end of Penzance Point. You had a bicycle; you were in business. If you didn't, you had to walk it. As I say, ten cents in those days, why, penny candywise, we were millionaires!²⁷

Elsa K. Sichel said that Benny Gifford:

. . . was very careful to have the boys, whoever delivered the Special Delivery letters, to receive their fee for that. Because in 1927, my friend who later became my husband had been waiting for a letter which had a check from Canada. He had been here on a fellowship from the Royal Society of Canada and was waiting for the check; and he knew it was sent. It was to come on a certain date, so he went to the Post Office to ask if the registered letter had come. Mr. Gifford said, Yes, it had and it had come Special Delivery and it would be delivered after school. Ferdinand said, "Well, I'm right here and I have identification." He said, "It's Special Delivery and if you are at the Laboratory in the afternoon it will be delivered." So Ferdinand said, "I'll give the

Just a reminder of "What Might Have Been." By R.V. Tribe
New Bedford Standard
April, 1920



R.V. Tribe's cartoon from the *New Bedford Standard* April 11, 1920. Note Post Office and Benjamin R. Gifford at upper left. Walter O. Luscombe is at middle right. Gift of David Simoneau in memory of his mother, Edna James Simoneau. Courtesy WHHC.

boy an extra dime." "No, it's to be delivered to you."
So Ferdinand went to the Lab and waited.

One Woods Hole native recalled long ago school days:

I remember Benny R. We were waiting in the Post Office for the high school bus. In those days, the bus didn't come around the pond. We had to walk to the Post Office, which was on the corner. And, of course, waiting there, the bus wouldn't be right there, and everybody would get to horsing around, making a little noise. And, oh, Benny R. would get so provoked; and he'd make us all go outside and wait in the cold.

Charlotte Christian responded:

There was no exception for anybody. If it had been the President, it would have made no difference. Speaking of Presidents, one of the Presidents was coming here to make a summer White House (I think it was Wilson in 1922.) And he was going to have Mr. Charles R. Crane's house. In connection with it, there was a nationally syndicated cartoon, a whole page, of the outstanding characters of Woods Hole. Walter O. Luscombe and my great-uncle was prominent with a big derby and his sweater and I think his umbrella and corncob pipe . . . It was really very clever, although it didn't happen.

... he was in the new post office during the hurricane of '38 and Al Clough was working with him; he later became the Postmaster. Mrs. Clough was getting nervous over on the Eel Pond because the water was rising up her steps from the cellar. She called and Uncle Ben said, "Oh, Al, she's just a nervous woman." They didn't feel it over here and they didn't see it. So the third time she called, the water was coming in the kitchen underneath the door and Benny said, "Oh, go home and take care of her!" So he went home, and I guess he had to take a rowboat to get her out. But Uncle Ben didn't believe in upsetting the hours for even hurricanes. I'm sure he didn't mean to be unkind.²⁸

Mr. Hauston had many memories of Woods Hole postal patrons in the 1950s. One was of Kitty Eagan who lived in a big house over the bridge, who was convinced that the Russians were coming, and who:

... delighted in coming into the office and if she caught Reverend Mason Wilson or Father Stapleton in there, she'd just stand there in the middle of the lobby and tell stories with a lot of color to them, you know. If Mason Wilson would be over there, he'd cringe a little. You could see the flush come into him, you know. But she just delighted in it; she knew she was doing something wrong, but she loved it.

Sid Peck would come in the morning, and we'd say, "Well, Sid, what's the weather going to be?" He'd look out the window and he'd say, "Well the wind's backing around from the southwest and the crows are flying over the pond there. Well, it's going to rain about 2 o'clock." And sure enough, it would! And with all the sophisticated equipment we have today, he could hit it right on the nose, every single time.

And then in the summertime, he had an old pair of pants and he'd cut them off at the knees; he had shorts. He'd come in and do a little dance there in the lobby.

I remember Dr. Warbasse; if any of you have post office boxes you know that there's two dials on them, and he had always extreme difficulty in getting his box open. So I says, "Doc, I can fix it for

you." So I took the first dial and disconnected it completely and then on the second one, I put a red mark on it. So all he had to do was come in and fiddle with the first one, which meant nothing, and then he just put the next one on the red mark and he got his mail!

When I came down, there was Ruth Peirce and Bob Thompson ... as you come in from the lobby and face the windows there were three windows. There was a large one for parcel post; there was a center one which we never used; and then a third one was basically for writing money orders. And each clerk had a position where he put his or her cash drawer. Bob's was always in back of the money order window, and so when some girls would go to lunch, why he'd stay over there; and the people would come to the parcel post window and he would have to go over, give them stamps, go back and make the change. And he did that three or four times. And somebody came in and stood at the window for two or three minutes. And he held his ground at his window. And pretty soon he says, "You want to come over here; I'm making like a jack rabbit. I'm getting tired of it."

We had another—you know these laundry bags that mothers send to their kids in school. I guess they don't do it any more, but they used to. For some reason, they seemed to get damaged badly. A lady came in one day and she had a brand new one, an aluminum one, beautiful. She mailed it to her daughter and said, "Now, see if they can wreck this one on me." Well, it went along nicely for about a month; and one morning it came in and that thing—I don't know, they ran a truck over it or something. It was horrible! I said, "There's no way we can give this to her; we're going to be in trouble." So I got a hammer and a piece of wood and I opened it and knocked all the dents out and straightened it just as well as I could, you know. So when she came in to pick it up, why she looked at it and said, "Well, this looks like it'd been damaged a little bit." Bob speaks up and says, "You should have seen it when it came in!"

According to Mr. Hauston, those laundry boxes, and other mail for Woods Hole in the 1950s may have

been brought up from the Railroad station by a female Station Agent:

A woman won one of the first victories for Women's Lib or women's advancement, or whatever you want to call it. She became a Station Agent in Woods Hole, which was unheard of. They had a woman because I remember the discussion in the old Enterprise was, she wouldn't be able to do it because she had to pull the mail bags off the train, and packages, and things. And she proved she could do it, so she got the job. And she was the Agent down at the Station for quite a number of years.

Mr. Hauston said the Woods Hole post office was known as:

the post office with livestock, mainly because the MBL did have crates of frogs coming in; and there'd be chickens coming in there. You'd think it was Spring; you'd hear the frogs chirping even in the dead of winter! One morning, I recall, the clerk opened the post office and I came in and he says, "There's a sack there I don't want to touch." I says, "What's the matter?" He says, "Look at it." And the thing was wiggling all over the floor, you know. So that was in the days of the trains and I said, "Well, probably some freight train rat or something's got in there." So, very gingerly, we picked it up and took it on the back steps and shook it. Out came turtles. There were turtles in there; they'd gotten out of the box.²⁹

Eugene Young's memories of MBL shipments go back even further:

. . . in those days, they sent everything out in wooden kegs and wooden buckets, in salt water. Their life expectation was pretty good because the Railway Express in those days was excellent. The trains were in and out of here four times a day, so every day there'd be one of those wagons that you see with the big, red wheels on it, loaded up with things from the MBL. The MBL would ship specimens to all over the East coast, to the Ivy League colleges and so forth. They had quite a business, and at that time made dollars.³⁰

National Marine Fisheries Services, Sea Education Association and the U.S. Geological Survey all use the Woods Hole Post Office.

The Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution is another major user. These days:

Judy Cushman of the Mailroom notes that WHOI alone receives some 4,000 pieces of mail per day from the Woods Hole Post Office and sends out between 800 and 1,000 pieces, averaging about \$600 per day in postage or \$12,000 to \$13,000 per month.

"If the Woods Hole Post Office were not here in the village, WHOI would have its own delivery, just like a regular customer," Cushman said. "We'd get one delivery a day, probably about 10 a.m. Right now we pick up incoming mail and drop off outgoing mail to the Post Office six or seven times a day beginning at 7 a.m."

Cushman said the Post Office gets the incoming mail at 5 a.m. and sorts it before WHOI staff arrive at 7 a.m. WHOI staff then sort for about an hour before starting the regular delivery schedule within the Institution.

"Not only is it a great service to us here as a business, but many of our staff use the Woods Hole Post Office for personal mail and many rent post office boxes there," Cushman added. "If we didn't have the local branch we would all have to drive into the center of Falmouth."³¹

1993 was the year that the Woods Hole Post Office almost did close. A realty trust under the umbrella of the South Shore Bank that owned the building prepared to sell it. Several commercial enterprises expressed an interest in purchasing it for retail use. If that happened, the post office would probably have to close.

Enter the Woods Hole Foundation. This foundation was inspired by Jean Keith, a Quissett resident who was committed to preserving and enhancing the community of Woods Hole. One of the Woods Hole Foundation's three guiding Purposes is "to maintain

and preserve community buildings vital to retain the character of the village and town." In the years following its incorporation in 1979, the foundation grew large enough to make significant donations to a number of local organizations. But it had never bought a building, let alone a whole post office. In fact, nobody knew you *could* buy a post office until this one came on the market.

Mary Louise Montgomery, the courageous President of the Woods Hole Foundation, asked her Board of Directors to authorize her to make an offer on the building. Equally courageous, the board gave her unanimous support.

An offer of \$119,500 was ultimately accepted by the sellers. To finance the purchase, the Foundation then took out a six month note, secured by part of its assets . . . In purchasing the building, the Foundation assumed the remaining year of the present lease with the United States Postal Service, as well as the obligation to front the cost of the handicap access ramp which must be in place if the lease is to be renewed next year. The USPS will, by terms of its lease, reimburse the Woods Hole Foundation for the cost of the ramp's construction and whatever other associated capital improvements prove necessary. Rent paid by the USPS will be sufficient to pay off the loan interest.³²

Fundraising began immediately. The goal was to raise \$150,000 to fully pay off the cost of the building and its improvements. The venture was exciting, unusual, and very specifically community-based. It seemed reasonable to hope for generous, widespread support, but that was never assumed. A letter soliciting contributions was mailed to 50 potential lead donors on June 25, 1993. Another mailing to 400 potential donors followed. By August 23, \$33,000 in cash contributions and pledges, including three corporate matches had come in. Publicity about the Woods Hole Foundation's need for its support was spread through-

out the community. And that community has responded enthusiastically.

The local scientific institutions have given generously of time, materials, and money—to the limit of their tax-exempt abilities. Skills and labor have been donated by many residents. Tom Renshaw, noted community builder and rebuilder has done small repairs and offered further maintenance work. Mario and Paul Fernandes of General Tree Care pruned the elderly elm in back of the post office in preparation for an oncoming hurricane and then refused to submit a bill. The grandchild of an earlier postal worker in Woods Hole made a contribution. And someone in Maine simply mailed in a five dollar bill anonymously.

One of the fundraising ideas was to sell T shirts. Douglas Rugh designed the logo: a 29 cent postage stamp featuring the building. Douglas works at the MBL; his family has summered in Woods Hole for generations. In only one day of public sales, all but 15 of the original 200 "first edition" T shirts were sold. A visitor suggested that a second edition should include the window boxes maintained by the Woods Hole Women's Club. Their red geraniums have become a symbol of the Woods Hole Post Office. Edie Bruce featured a painting of this new version in the art show at the Community Hall in Woods Hole. It was made by the daughter of an MBL worker and now hangs in the post office.

The T shirts were sold from a portable tent contributed by Joyce Stratton, owner of *Under The Sun*. The tent may have been portable, but it required its own community effort to set it up each Saturday morning and then to take it down again at noon. Patrons of *Pie In The Sky*, a bakery on the former site of Howes market, helped with the setup, and Bill Simmons, author of the recent *Spritsail* article on House Music, was usually on hand to take it down. Local stores also carried the T shirts, when they could get them. Mary Louise

Montgomery reports that she frequently sold out as she carried a delivery along the sidewalk. Senator John Kerry bought his T shirt at the Woods Hole Farmers Market.

The community effort to purchase its own post office was very newsworthy. Both the *Cape Cod Times* and the *New York Times* ran stories about it.

Christine S. Cozzens, writing in the *Sunday New York Times* of November 21, 1993, made it clear that things are still very much the same today as they were when Mr. Hauston helped Dr. Warbasse:

... the red-brick post office just before the draw-bridge in Woods Hole breeds the kind of postal romance that is rapidly disappearing from American cities and towns. Built in 1928 and still fitted out with the original oak-framed post boxes trimmed with brass eagles and dual combination locks, the Woods Hole Post Office is the center of social and business life in the community.

Boxes of pink geraniums decorate each white-trimmed windowsill and, inside, the customer portal is invitingly framed with cartoons and other amusing bits cut from the newspaper—all contrary to postal regulations, of course. The head clerk, Johnny Klink, greets returning summer residents with gruff friendliness, and tries to say at least a few reassuring words in each foreign visitor's native language. A cup full of gumdrops is always on the counter "for pacification" of customers waiting in a line that hardly ever grows more than three or four deep, even during the summer months.

Mr. Klink takes full credit for preserving the unique qualities of the Woods Hole Post Office: "I don't let anything change," he says simply, and at 65 [ed. note: Klink turned 66 shortly before the article was published] with no plans to retire, he lives by this principle. Boxes here are so precious (there are only 740) that one summer resident bequeathed hers to a daughter in her will. There are not many post offices left where the clerk will actually ask whether the package you sent to your son at camp last week arrived safely, and keep a straight face when you send baseball cards, comic books and candy by pri-

ority mail. Unless the line of gumdrop munchers grows to an unacceptable five, he will wait patiently for a customer to choose among the sheets of stamps fanned out on the counter.

Sarah Keller went into even more detail in her article for the *Cape Cod Times* published on December 28, 1993:

Woods Hole—Johnny Klink licks nearly every stamp and sticker he posts on letters and packages when he works the window at the Woods Hole Post Office.

Use a sponge? "I never have," Klink says with a shrug. The taste? "It doesn't bother me."

Klink, 66, was assigned to be postal clerk in Woods Hole in 1974 and has since accumulated a network of friends and popularity so strong that each year local residents celebrate "Johnny Rotten Day" on his birthday, after his nickname.

With bagpipes played by fellow clerk Roger Gamache, decorations on the post office lobby walls, and cards and flowers from P.O. box-holders, Johnny Rotten Day on Oct. 8 has virtually become a community holiday for the town.

"Last year we tried to have a parade," Gamache says.

Built in 1928, the small, square building is one of the last of its kind. While post offices in many towns and cities across America have grown into monstrous, cement incarnations with no more personality than toll booths on the freeway, Woods Hole's post office has stayed pretty much the same

.... Klink knows every one of the 740 box holders by number and name. He greets foreign travelers in their home tongues, be it French, German or Japanese. As a world traveler with the U.S. Air Force during the 1940s and '50s, he picked up small talk in several languages.

When he is concerned about a customer's family member who's ill or in trouble, Klink inquires. When an elderly person appears too weak to carry a heavy package to the car, Klink has a clerk carry it out.



Postal Clerks Johnny Klink and Roger Gamache wearing the Woods Hole Post Office T shirts outside the Woods Hole Post Office. Photo by Alan Stewart, August 5, 1993. Courtesy The Enterprise.

And when little children enter the post office, Klink opens the postal door, hand-delivers their package, and calls them by name . . .

Examples of locals' fondness for the place are tacked on the wall in the form of post cards sent from around the world. No matter how far they travel be it Taiwan, Hawaii, Alaska or Guatemala, Woods Hole residents still can't seem to get the post office off their minds.

Indeed, the place has become kind of a social and business center.

"It's kind of like a family," Gamache explains. "People feel very good here. They meet here. They talk in the lobby. It's almost like a meeting ground for the town."

Gamache interrupts himself to answer a female customer who's peering through the window. "I got your message, I can't make it tonight," he says, explaining she is a drummer with whom he occasionally jams. He also met the owner of the Leaside

Cocktail Lounge here and set up a regular gig for his band, Stage Door Canteen.

The busiest times of day are mid-morning and noon, but rarely does the lobby get more crowded than five- or seven-full.

It is a spot where scientists—many of them Nobel Prize winners, including George Wald and Baruj Benacerraf—exchange ideas. The nearby Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution and Marine Biological Laboratories combined send about \$21,000 in mail a month.

And it's a place where romances happen. Gamache says he's noticed several occasions during the five years he's worked there that box-holders have merged boxes because they fell in love, moved in together or otherwise joined lives . . .

These people know what's going on around town. Anyone wanting to find out the news is best off asking Klink or his clerks.

Indeed, once a person with a life-threatening blood clot came to town because he'd heard of the horse-shoe-crab blood cancer research scientists here had been working on. He'd been in such a tizzy that he didn't know where to go. So he rushed to the post office, and Gamache directed him to the MBL . . .

Behind [Klink], as he scrounges the cash drawer for change and carries a constant stream of parcels to and from the meter, is a small cardboard box holding two coffees to-go and a package marked for "Amy E. Bruce" in St. John's, Caribbean. Her mother, Edie Bruce, a Woods Hole artist, thought to drop off the coffees for her post office friends when she brought the package by.

Clerks and customers say the post office as the meeting-place of choice is a direct result of Klink's personality.

"He's like the gramps of the town," says Chrissy Dexter, who works at Linda Lebach Realty up the street. [ed note: In the house on Luscombe Ave. that Clara Higgins lived in when her husband and brother ran the market that the post office shared until 1928.] . . .

Another customer rushes in, exclaiming, "Hi Johnny, I need a candy!" She reaches for the gum drop cup, which is tucked around the corner, just out of view. (Klink says the people who need it know where it is.)

"I enjoy coming to work each day," admits Klink. "I like the people, not just in here, but out there."

Klink says he was always a people man. As an orphan in Syracuse, N.Y., he grew up in a boys' home called House of Providence, where it was crucial to be friendly.

"That's how I was brought up," he says. In 1968, he moved to East Falmouth, where he lives with his wife of 40 years, Beverly.

If you ask him how he does it, how he creates the magic postal charm, Klink seems at a loss for words. He starts, stops short, and gives a gruff laugh.

"I just give 'em a lot of talk," he says. When pressed, he adds: "I don't want to brag, but I have a keen thing for names and numbers."

Mary Louise Montgomery led the rescue of the Woods Hole Post Office building from her position as President of the Woods Hole Foundation. She had already increased the visibility and effectiveness of the Foundation. Now at a special meeting on June 29, 1993, she emphasized that:

... the acquisition of properties whose preservation was important to maintaining the character of the village represented (1) a new role for the Foundation, (2) an opportunity to involve Corporation members more actively in the Foundation's affairs, and (3) a demonstration to the public at large of the role that can be played by community based foundations.

Lindsay Ware and Mary Lou Smith spoke for the Corporation in thanking Mrs. Montgomery in particular for her courage in steering the Foundation into uncharted waters. . . . To a number of questions raised about specific issues (design of the access ramp, management of the building, etc.), the president pleaded for time, saying that as she had never

owned a post office before, she and her Board still had a lot to learn.³³

Looking back on that momentous decision, it is clear that Mrs. Montgomery and the Woods Hole Foundation had a lot to teach as well as a lot to learn. They taught the Woods Hole community that it is still a community. Within seven months the loan was paid off. They continue to teach the value of community to us all. This value, like all values, is one that can only be realized through action. The Woods Hole Foundation offered an inspiring challenge to its community; in its response that community has expressed and strengthened itself.

Judith G. Stetson is a contributing editor of *Woods Hole Reflections*, *The Book of Falmouth*, and *Spritsail*.

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