

For Want of Some Mail:

A look at the development of Indiana's post offices before 1970

By Hayden Fletcher, Intern

Indiana DNR, Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology

You've likely been in a post office before, whether it was a squat brick building without many flourishes or a grand building constructed of limestone and marble. But have you ever wondered what the post office was like in the next town over, or halfway across the state? What about one from 50 years ago? 70? 100? How has the design of the Hoosier post office changed up to 1970?

Why stop at 1970? That year saw the passage of the Postal Reorganization Act which made sweeping changes to the Post Office Department, reforming it into the United States Postal Service of today.

A Phase I study from 1987 conducted by Historical Research Incorporated for the United States Postal Service laid the groundwork for a more intensive study in the future. The end goal for the study would be to apply for a state-wide multi-property National Register nomination. The report details the shift from individual to standard design and broke postal construction down into roughly decade long chunks.

*Title Photo from The Indiana Album,
Shirley and Mike Benham Collection*

Timeline

Village Post Era: Pre-1903

The earliest post offices built in the state varied wildly from town to town, except for the city federal buildings built during the latter half of the 1800s. These latter buildings were often built in the Gothic Revival style and were landmarks in their respective locales. Each of them was individually designed and approved by the Office of the Supervising Architect, an agency of the Department of the Treasury. Post offices were often housed in mixed-use buildings, small, dedicated storefronts, or even extensions to houses. This era would come to an end with the start of construction on the United States Courthouse in Indianapolis.

Village Post Era Examples

1876-
1879



Evansville

The last of the city federal buildings to survive, and the second built in the state, the Evansville Post Office and Customs House was built between 1876-1879 in the Gothic Revival style. Others in the category include Fort Wayne, Lafayette, Madison, New Albany, South Bend, and Indianapolis. They were all built in various revivalist styles but served similar functions, hosting the city's post office and other federal agencies, bureaus, or departments.

1876



Webster

The Webster Post Office, located in Wayne County, like many others from the Village Post Era, is in a mixed-use building that shares the space with the C&C Webster store. The building is a 19th Century commercial building with Colonial Revival flourishes.

circa
1890



Brownsville

The Brownsville Post Office, located in Union County, is an example of the dedicated small post offices of the era. It has served its community since the 1890s and has seen the various changes in delivery the Post Office Department employed.

James Knox Taylor Era: 1903-1912

James Knox Taylor became the head of the Office of the Supervising Architect (OSA) in 1897, but his name wouldn't appear on Hoosier post offices until 1903. The construction of the last federal buildings of the previous era had started just before he entered office, but a recent change to how federal buildings were approved and funded made sure his name would be on almost twenty projects in the state. That change was the passage of the 1902 Omnibus Public Building Act that approved 150 projects at once, shifting from individual approvals to batch approval. Buildings of the period were designed with an emphasis on presence and symbolism. Simple things like the inclusion of stairs, physically lifting a patron onto the same level as representatives of the federal government, were steeped in meaning. All other parts of the post office were given just as much thought.

James Knox Taylor Era Examples

1903-
1905



Indianapolis – US Courthouse

The construction of the US Courthouse and Post Office ended the previous era of postal design and marked the beginning of another. The building's cornerstone was laid in 1903 and construction finished in 1905. The large limestone structure has been a downtown landmark and influenced the style of several notable buildings around it. Until the 1970s, the building was also the main postal facility for Indianapolis.

1908-
1909



Bedford

Finished in 1909, the Old Bedford Post Office is beautifully carved from limestone that likely came from the many nearby quarries. The old Bedford Post Office showcases the individualism of the era and the idea that a post office should accent its community. At the time the post office was under construction, many of Bedford's buildings were built using locally sourced limestone.

1911



Wabash

Although smaller than others from this period, the Wabash Post Office built in 1911 demonstrates the Neoclassical style common among post offices in the era. It is also one of the few from this era still operating as a post office, while many others were repurposed as law firms, businesses, restaurants, or local government offices.

Transitional Period: 1913-1919

During a House Committee meeting on public building expenditures in 1912, Taylor was asked to justify the expenditures of the OSA, defending the stance that no government building is similar to another, and “each is individual to itself.” Total expenditures of the Post Office Department reached \$248,525,450 that year and Taylor was replaced by Oscar Wenderoth in 1913 while Congress investigated ways to reform the process. The first was to end rural postal construction for towns with less than \$10,000 in postal receipts, setting a baseline for where post offices should be built. The Tarsney Act, which allowed the OSA to hold competitions for which architects or firms would build federal buildings, was mostly ignored by Taylor and repealed in 1914. James A. Wetmore took over the post in 1915 and would stay for sixteen years, finishing the individually designed post offices and implementing the recommendations of the Public Buildings Commission, headed by William McAdoo. American entry into World War One would put a hold on all federal construction between 1917-1919, and with that ending the transitional period.

Transitional Period Examples

1913



Brazil

The Brazil Post Office was built in 1913 and carried on many of the ideas of the prior era. It is a large, Neoclassical building made of stone and was meant to be an important part of the town. Today it is home to the Clay County Historical Society.

1913



Princeton

Built in 1913, the Princeton Post Office was Indiana's central depository for the new Postal Savings System. On March 26, 1911, Princeton was the last of 19 announced as central depository locations, before an additional 25 were announced the next day.



Seymour

Built in 1915, the Seymour Post Office is a neoclassical building made from limestone and featuring a clerestory to provide natural light. Other interesting features of the Seymour Post Office are the ventilation tower and layout. Today, the old post office is home to the Seymour Museum Center.

McAdoo Era: 1919-1957

Beginning with the resumption of federal construction and the implementation of the Public Buildings Commission's recommendations, the McAdoo Era was named for William McAdoo, the Secretary of the Treasury during the Wilson administration, and creator of a four-class system for post offices to follow. There was also a distinction between first- and second-class cities based on a city or town's population. The McAdoo system would stay in use for nearly 40 years and served as the framework for the system that replaced it. World War II halted all new post office construction. The population boom and shifting populations following the conclusion of the war would warrant expansion and changes from the Post Office Department.

Class A: Post office has annual receipts of \$800,000 or over; building is an important part of the city around it and would be made of fine stones with metal frames, sashes, and doors, ornamental bronzes, mahogany finishes.

Class B: Post office has annual receipts from \$60,000 to \$800,000; building stands out from the city around it. Limestone or sandstone construction, metal external frames and sashes, wooden internal frames, sashes, and doors.

Class C: Second class post office with annual receipts more than \$15,000. Or first-class post office below \$60,000. Built of brick with stone or terra cotta trim, only simple ornamentation

Class D: Annual receipts less than \$15,000. Built of brick with minimal trim, wooden sashes, frames, and doors.

McAdoo Era Examples

1924



Bluffton

Located in Wells County, the Bluffton Post Office was built in 1924 in the Colonial Revival style, which was a common style for post offices built in the era. It was a Class B ranking in the McAdoo system. Other post offices would usually include a second floor for office space, but Bluffton's post office is unique in that it had a side addition.

1937



Gas City

Built in Grant County in 1937, the Gas City Post Office is an example of the Art Deco style popular after the start of the Great Depression. Above the entrance are three reliefs depicting the primary methods of delivery at the time, trains, planes, and ships. It garnered a Class C ranking in the McAdoo system.

1942



Marion

The Marion Post office is the only one in Indiana that was constructed during World War II. It opened on Sept. 1, 1942 and is considered a Class A under the McAdoo ranking system. It is a large building made of limestone with minimal external décor. Its unique design is shared in the state only by the abandoned Gary Post Office in Lake County.

Standard Design Era: 1958-1970

On April 1, 1959, the Post Office Department published a brochure titled “Building Designs” that included 37 building plans ranging from 1,000 – 12,000 square feet. In Indiana, 32 post offices were built using these plans.

In addition, the Post Office Department shifted its delivery methods. In the late 1940s, 90% of mail traveled by train but by 1967, rail postal contracts ended and truck deliveries took over. After a large intake of mail at the Chicago Post Office in October 1966 shut down mail processing, Congress created the Kappel Commission to determine its cause. In June 1968, the Kappel Commission published scathing findings that the Post Office Department suffered a “principal failure...of management.” The Post Office Department dissolved in 1971 with the passage of the Postal Reorganization Act which established the United States Postal Service that still exists today.

Standard Designs Era Examples

circa
1965



Rosedale

One of the 32 post offices built in the Standard Design Era; the Rosedale Post Office is based on Plate #2 from the 1959 “Building Design” guide. It is approximately 1,000 square feet and was intended for a postmaster “whose PFS level was less than 7.” The PFS level replaced the earlier postal receipt system for determining what type of post office should be constructed in a town based upon the size and frequency of mail.

circa
1960



Darlington

The Darlington Post Office in Montgomery County is one of a series of 12 post offices scattered throughout Indiana’s small towns. The design is shared with post offices in Bainbridge, Francisco, Hardinsburg, Harlan, Metamora, Pine Village, Rossville, and Velpen. Darlington stands as the standard for these post offices with others varying in things like windows for the workroom and style of fronting.

1966



Washington

Built in 1966 the Washington Post Office replaced an earlier one built in 1916. The building is based on plate #101, a design of 10,000 square feet for a postmaster “whose PFS level was 10 or below” features of #101 include offices for the postmaster and assistant postmaster, a vault for Postal Savings Deposits, and a dedicated entrance and lookout platform for postal inspectors.

Construction of post offices didn’t stop after 1970. Post-1970 constructions are the second largest group with approximately 93 post offices built between 1971 and 2004. However, with the change from post offices representing part of the federal government and instead a commercial entity, much of the symbolism in previous buildings was left out of new constructions. Post offices that followed the Postal Reorganization Act are characterized by small vernacular buildings serving rural communities, large industrial sorting facilities, and commercial style buildings. On your next visit to a post office, be sure to take a look around, guess what year it was built, which era it would fall under, and most importantly, thank your local postal workers.