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A post office saga

Post office buildings and sites have been somewhat of a saga in Nelson over the years.

The very first settlers around 1841 used to collect their letters from home from a tent the New Zealand Company had set up on Church Hill.

The very first postmaster Nelson had was Mr Henry Augustus Thompson, who was also the chief magistrate and protector of the aborigines. His offices were in a marquee on the hill, but most of the actual postmaster duties were done by his assistant, T. B. Titchener.

Records show Mr Titchener resigned from his job after several months because he had not received any salary!

Not surprisingly the increasing numbers of emigrants to New Zealand overloaded the meagre facilities the tent possessed, so the post office shifted to Mr Thompson's cottage, also on Church Hill.

Meanwhile, the British government was shuffling ideas about who should be responsible for post office duties in New Zealand. In 1843 it was put under the control of the Customs Department, and in 1849 it shifted to the Colonial Secretary's pigeonhole.

Settlers' memoirs from this time recollect that whenever a boat from home (in most cases England) arrived, the postmaster would fly a flag from the top of Church Hill to show people mail had arrived. Great was the scurrying to collect news of family and friends half a world away.

Post office business picked up during the 1850s, with more boats bringing more mail to the colony and with the spread of overland mail. This extra business caused the post office to pack its bags and traps and shift again, this time to a cottage in Hardy St in 1855.

March 1856 saw mail deliveries start between the post office and Richmond, Waimea South and West and Wakefield. The Wednesday and Saturday service eventually expanded to include Golden Bay, Motueka and Picton.

By 1858 there was considerable agitation in Nelson to have a proper post office built. The problem was — who would pay for it?

The Provincial Government thought the General Government should foot the bill. The General Government thought not.

Finally, the General Government ruled that unless Provincial Government did something, General would buy a site, build a post office and bill Provincial for its trouble.

This stirred things up and land was bought in Bridge St, near the Nelson Evening Mail office. Interestingly, there was a public outcry because the site was considered swampy and too far out of town to be practical.

A Grecian-style wooden building was opened on the site in November, 1864, in spite of the protests.

March 1866 saw a tremendous communications development. Telegraph arrived in Nelson.

This meant that for the first time news could travel more rapidly to

Nelson than by ship or by horseback messenger. Unhappily, a break in the line between Picton and Nelson delayed the first message for two weeks.

The telegraph office was in Trafalgar St, separate from the post office. This changed in 1881, when the post office buildings needed alterations and repairs. The post office was moved to the telegraph office.

The mail's arrival was quite an event then. Mail coach drivers would harness up fresh horses after crossing the Whangamoa and dash into Nelson via Trafalgar St, do a whir-around turn by the Church Steps and stop outside the post office.

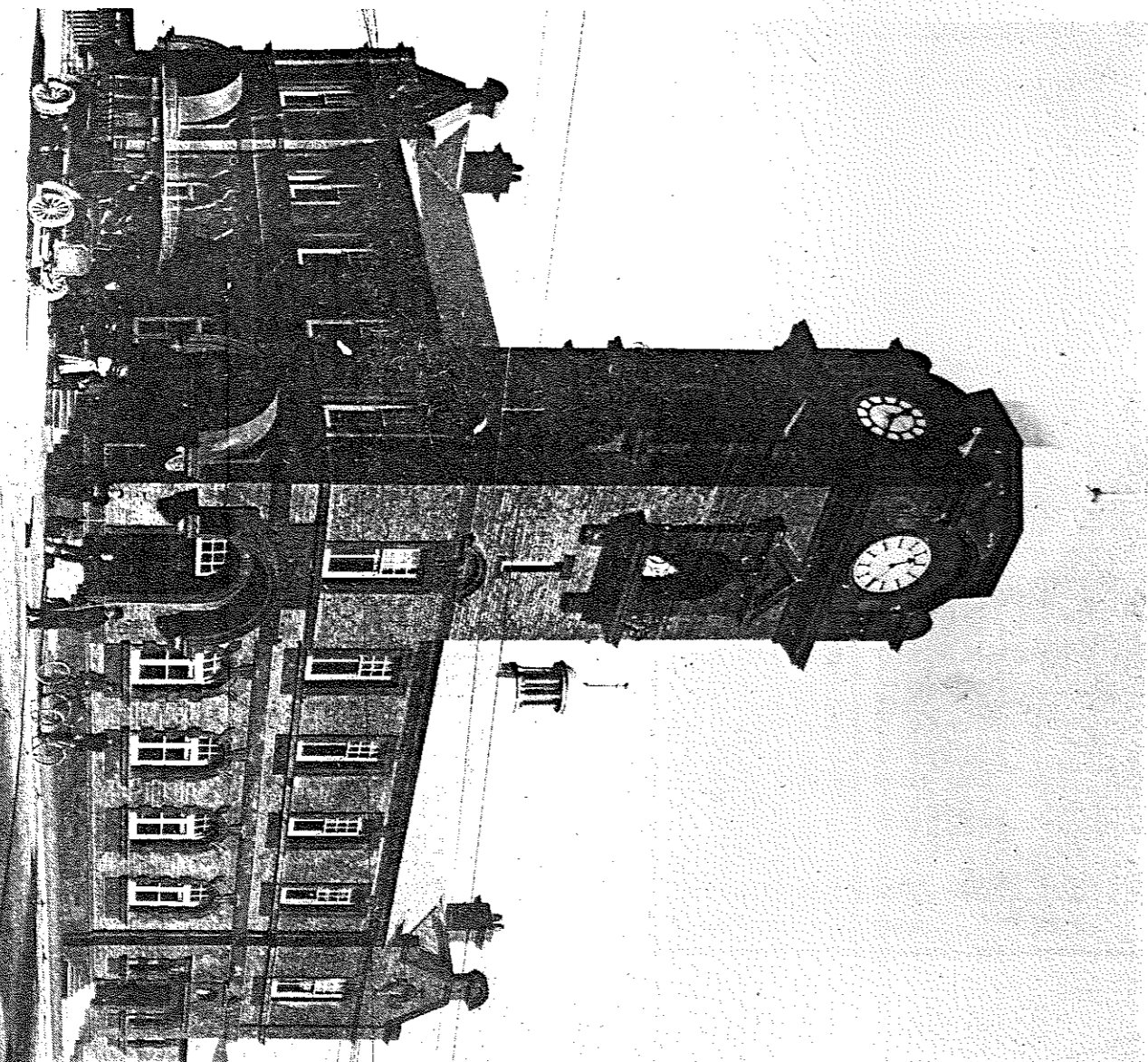
Calls for a "really substantial" post office surfaced about the turn of the century.

The site of the present post office, on the corner of Trafalgar and Halifax Sts, was chosen. Again people tut-tutted about it — it was too far away to be useful, it was swampy, there were untidy sections around it, altogether a miserable place to build.

Build they did, however, and the imposing old brick building opened in March 1906. It had a chiming clock, and the whole thing had cost the princely sum of £210.

Earthquake building standards had this old building pulled down in 1970, and the present post office built.

•Photograph courtesy Nelson Provincial Museum and information researched by Margaret Brown.



Nelson's second to most recent post office building, pulled down in 1970 because of earthquake regulations. This F. N. Jones photo, taken about 1910, shows a typical street scene of the time.

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