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Nicholas Van Allen
The University of Guelph

Don Lafreniere
Michigan Technological University

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RESEARCH

Rebuilding the Landscape of the Rural Post Office: A Geo-Spatial Analysis of 19th-century Postal Spaces and Networks

Nicholas Van Allen* and Don Lafreniere†

This paper uses Post Office (PO) petitions to uncover the complex spatial relationships that developed through the unique social space of the PO. These petitions were signed by the rural people of Middlesex County, Ontario, and submitted to the Postmaster General in order to request changes in the workings of their postal services. When used in a historical GIS they allow us to recreate and reconstitute postal communities in late-19th-century rural Middlesex. By observing the spatial relationships that surrounded the collective requests for changes in postal services, we show how the space of the post office reinforced and helped form rural community and neighbourhood networks. The participation of the post offices users who signed and conducted the petitions is developed at each level of the paper, showing that rural Ontarians were deeply involved in interpreting and altering their own community and neighbourhood landscapes.

Keywords: Historical GIS; Post Office; Communities

Introduction

The story of the communications role of the Post Office system, the Post Office as an institution, and the Post Office as an arm of governmentality is relatively well known in Canada (Smith, 1920; Osborne and Pike, 1984; Campbell, 1994; Lee, 1989). Yet, though some scholars have examined post offices from a more social/cultural perspective (Osborne and Pike, 1984; Amyot and Willis, 2003; Little, 2006; Willis, 2007), what has not been thoroughly interrogated is the function of the social space of post offices and their contribution to the local communities that frequented them.

This is surprising given the prevalence of post offices in the 19th century and the important role that they played in building and maintaining community and neighbourhood social landscapes, especially in local, rural areas (for local histories on post offices in Middlesex County, see Ward, 1985; Grainger, 2002). Similar to rural landscapes in the United States (Fuller, 1972; Alwin, 1974; Winsberg, 1993; Henkin, 2006), almost every hamlet, village, and town in Canada had a post office (Campbell, 2007), and post office 'space' was the central feature for day-to-day business and social activity.

Indeed, post offices were woven into the social fabric of communities during the era, and, as this paper makes clear, they formed the basis for rural peoples' interpretation of

local landscapes. In Dandekar's words (2010), rural buildings also helped to forge connections between rural families and a created 'landscapes of the heart and mind' in North American agrarian society. They were central to creating and maintaining communities and neighbourhoods in rural Ontario because the space of the post office and the postmasters (PMs) who ran them became anchors (or nodes) of local community and neighbourhood networks. This paper therefore seeks to depict the centrality of postal space to local landscapes in rural Middlesex County, Ontario, while at the same time showing that rural peoples themselves actively and directly managed post office placement and function in specific geographies. Similar to what Coates (2000) found in place in Habitant society, rural citizens in Middlesex were able to define their own relationships and therefore their own landscapes.

Method

This paper will illustrate how rural post offices functioned in their local communities by utilising a corpus of detailed post office petitions written to postal inspectors and the Postmaster General between 1870 and 1900. We use petitions written by residents of Middlesex County, Ontario, to their local postal leaders. We georeferenced and record-linked the petitions within a historical geographic information system (HGIS) that includes the precise location of all 7,100 rural households and the 102 post offices in Middlesex County in 1878. The petitions take advantage of the HGIS by allowing the study to locate not only the post offices in the county and the petitioners who signed them, but also to precisely measure and analyze the spatial relationships between post offices and

* The University of Guelph, CA

† Michigan Technological University, USA

Corresponding author: Nicholas Van Allen (vanallen@uoguelph.ca)

their communities. When viewed through this geospatial lens, they provide insightful detail about the debates surrounding post office locations, services, and their roles in maintaining and creating strong, rural communities. While we did not differentiate petitions based on size, the longer petitions tended to offer better details and a greater number of household identifiers from which to glean spatial information for mapping and analysis.

We capture post offices at the cusp of late-19th-century industrial development in Canada. At this time, successful parts of rural Ontario like Middlesex County were growing, and publishers began creating atlases that detailed the settlement of each county in the province. Much like city directories, rural county atlases were a commercial venture, sold by subscription, and in them advertisements and biographical sketches were paid for by prominent county residents. Also like city directories, they list the names of residents; however, whereas city directories provide civic addresses, county atlases mapped each residents' location via their lot and concession, noting the location of the main places of residence. We harnessed the property information embedded within these maps by georeferencing it within a historical GIS. Georeferencing is the process of assigning geographic coordinates to maps or other sources that do not have spatial reference information already embedded within them. The HGIS allows us to place the historical map in a digital representation of the actual space, thereby opening the historical records to spatial analysis.

Once georeferenced, we mapped households to their exact residence, as noted on the county atlas maps. To our benefit, the county atlases also recorded which post office each household was assigned. We record linked each household to their respective post office, uncovering the spatial relationship between residence and the post office. Using a custom algorithm developed in the statistical software R, concave hulls were calculated that capture all of the households served by a given post office. These concave hulls represent a recreation of the postal spaces of each postal community. Each petition described in this paper was then mapped to the exact space postal service was requested and placed upon the historical atlas plates. Relationships between petitioned spaces and existing postal communities were analysed using the HGIS. This geospatial approach provides us with the unique ability to measure changes in distances travelled when post offices were moved and to analyse the relationships between postal facilities and the customers they served.

The Space of the Post Office

Post offices were social spaces similar to markets, taverns, and general stores, where community and neighbourhood networks converged through association and shared exchange (Kornblum, 1974). This paper uses the term social space to mean not just a building, but an area where people gathered for everyday cultural practises (Mayol, 1988: 7–14). As Linda Stoneall (1993: 219) has described, spaces such as these functioned to provide a community or neighbourhood network with an anchor-point at which individuals fashioned linkages and

meaningful associative connections with one another, as in these spaces groups or individuals served as centres of network ties. Post offices were also central to the founding, maintenance, and definition of a given region because they contributed to and integrated three types of networks: distant, community, and neighbourhood. **Figure 1** conceptualizes the relationship between the three types of networks analysed in this paper. Distant networks, to which rural post offices contributed, involved non-local trade and correspondence between separate communities through letter writing, mail order commercial trade, and newspapers. This type of network was forged through trade between Middlesex citizens and people and businesses in other townships, cities, and even countries. It is similar to the type of network that has been described in other studies of 19th and 20th-century communication.¹ Communities petitioned to keep the locations of their postal services intact so that these distant networks could be maintained, with the coinciding benefit that the local, rural space was preserved and continued to anchor a locality.

In addition to housing broad-scale commercial networks, local post offices were also critical anchors of smaller scale community and neighbourhood networks throughout the rural regions of Middlesex County. These latter two networks types were of a different value because community and neighbourhood each had a different quality to them compared to distant networks. This is not to say that there was a hierarchy of relationships, where one type was more or less important than others, but that they can simply be understood to have served varied functions and uses. In order to facilitate this discussion of community and neighbourhood networks, definitions of the two systems must be offered.

Proximity is seen as an important element within the creation and maintenance of both types of local networks as it allows for the frequent/daily use of and participation in social spaces and landscapes. As Bulten (2002: 362, 374–375) describes, local space can be 'an actor or agent in the creation and transformation of daily life and social networks', insofar as propinquity is 'a tool' that can 'facilitate interaction'. Similarly, according to Mayol (1988: 8), local space is where the social contracts that make 'everyday life. . . possible' are forged. For rural historical geographers, such as John Clarke (1991), this idea of everyday, local interaction is the basis upon which relationships between settlers of Upper Canada (Ontario) were built. However, within such local networks there is also the important element of intimacy, which, as Wellman describes, is the foundation for social support mechanisms. This is because strong ties between very close kin, such as parents and children, allowed for the provision of aid, emotional and financial, as well as companionship and services (Wellman, 1979; Wellman and Wortley, 1990).

Thus, within 'the local' there are two types of networks—those that are built upon frequent interaction, and those that are built upon both frequent interaction *and* social support or bonding. This paper utilises the terms 'community networks' and 'neighbourhood networks' to delineate

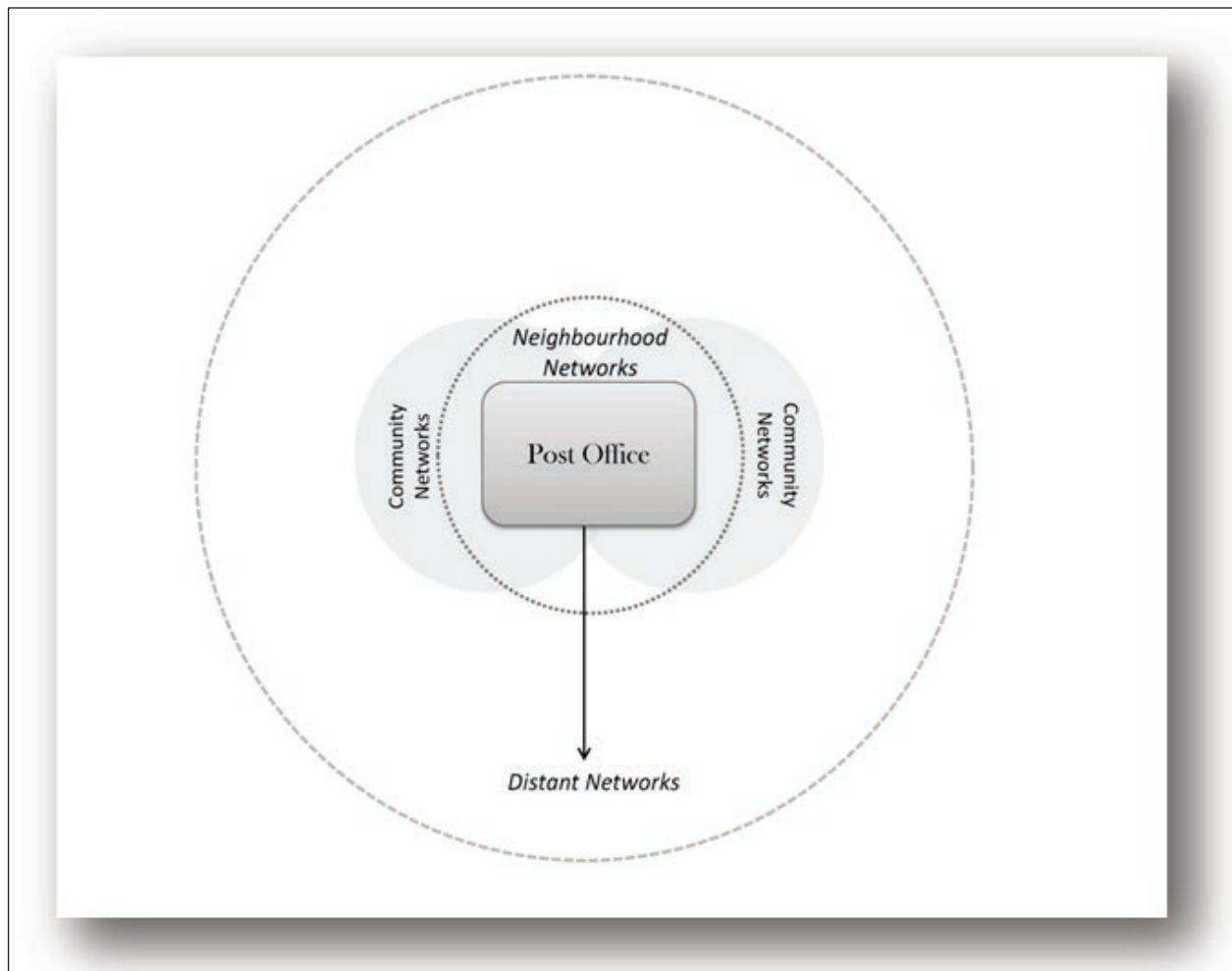


Figure 1: The Space of the Post Office and Neighbourhood and Community Networks.

the two types. In this sense, community networks are most similar to Richard Dennis' (1984: 270) interpretation of community, which he defines 'as people from the same area sharing the same attitudes, beliefs and interests, and expressing their commonality of interest through social interaction'. Community networks were therefore built upon frequent interaction and association, as fostered in the local space of the PO. Neighbourhood networks, however, were similarly localized and propinquitous, but they were more deeply intertwined with those systems of social support and bonding described by Wellman. We extend Wellman's interpretation of neighbourhood beyond the family to include those social interactions between proximal citizens who shared provision of aid and support, following the pattern described by Wilson (2001), Neth (1995), and Stansell (1986). As Walsh and High (2001) remind us, though, community (and we extend the argument to neighbourhood) must be seen as a process. In this sense, we remember that community and neighbourhood networks were fluid; members of one network might easily become members of another. Postmasters, for example, regularly moved from a community network to a neighbourhood network, as their families became interlaced with others' or as they became figures of trust. Post Offices and postmasters, then, were central to the building and maintenance of these two network types.

Rural Middlesex, Canadian Post Offices, and Petitions

Southwestern Ontario, though in geographic scale a small part of Canada, was for many years the heart of the country's farm production as it featured soil and climate perfectly fitted for the growth of wheat, drawing numerous settlers when the region opened up for large scale settlement in the 1830s and 1840s (Wood, 2000; McCalla, 1994). The 1850s and 60s brought a dramatic increase in the number of railways moving through Middlesex County, including the London and Lake Huron Railroad Company (1857), the Great Western (1853) and the Grand Trunk Railroads (1852), the London and Port Sarnia Railway (1853), and the Canada Southern Railway (1868).² Though these railways were primarily trunk rail linking southern Ontario to markets in Detroit, Buffalo, and Montreal, their junctions and stations helped bring the county's rural citizens and farmers further into international systems of trade and economy (Wood 2000). The success of farmers in the region and their large families fed population growth up to the end of the 19th century. In 1851 the population of the county was 32,863; by 1871 it had doubled to 66,769, by 1881 it was 73,335, and by 1891 the population peaked at 80,753 people (*Census of Canada, 1851 and 1891*). While not all farmers were successful, the innovative attitude of many rural dwellers led

to the region being filled with people diversifying their produce, investing in new technologies, and altogether seeking to improve their lot and forge productive neighbourhoods; in Middlesex and elsewhere, the development of post offices was a key part of these processes.

Postal services in Canada had been an important part of life in the early colonies, as communications from abroad formed an essential part of immigration and settlement. The letters and diaries of a number of Middlesex settlers indicate that the post was an important link to the outside world at a time when such contact was critical. Post offices in Delaware Township and in the city of London, for example, allowed Thomas Spencer Niblock, a pioneer who attempted to start a farm in the region in 1849, to contact his family in England repeatedly for much-needed financial assistance as his aptly named 'Wanderers' Home Farm' struggled over several years (Niblock, 1849–1852). In Adelaide Township, the farmer John Jamieson used the post to help him conduct important church-related business in 1852 (Jamieson, 1852–1860: Diary Entry, July 5, 1852). And the letters of the Carrothers family helped to maintain social ties from the 1840s to the 1870s, between a kinship network spreading from Ireland to Canada, and into Australia (Houston and Smyth, 1990: 249). These early beginnings marked the start of postal arrangements for the first two generations of southwestern Ontario settlement.

During the second half of the 19th century, however, Canadians took part in an 'early revolution in communications' through the development of a mass, publicly owned, postal service. This was a significant innovation in public infrastructure, and it was one that was started in 1851 when the British government handed to the Canadian colonies control over their domestic postal facilities (Osborne and Pike, 1984: 200–202). An increasingly literate Canadian public quickly sought the benefits of the postal services; in 1851 there were only 601 Post Offices in the Canadas, but by 1875 there were 3,054. Further, in Ontario alone, the number of Post Offices nearly doubled over the next forty years, going from 2,130 in 1876 to 3,888 in 1911, made possible by the development of the railways during the period (Osborne and Pike, 1984: 204; O'Reilly, 1992: 21). This increase in service meant that Ontarians, even those in areas that might be termed 'frontier,' were now able to access a whole host of postal products, from simple letter and post card delivery to money transfers and Post Office Savings banks (Osborne and Pike 1984: 203). Letter carrying served local post offices weekly, three times per week, daily, or even twice daily to some parts of the province.³

Rural peoples of Middlesex from the 1870s to the 1890s expected and required this postal system to service their commercial and communications needs. Like other Canadians, Middlesex rural folk knew how to access increased or altered postal services—through petitions addressed to the Postmaster General and submitted to local postal inspectors (an example is shown in **Figure 2**). Petitions had been an important part of

the development of political culture in Upper Canada so they were something with which rural dwellers were familiar (Wilton, 2000). And as Osborne and Pike (1984: 211–212) identified, the means through which a postal petition should be conducted were highly visible. Readers of the *Canadian Almanac* were advised in 1891, for example, that 'New Post Offices are established by the Department whenever it is ascertained that a sufficient number of inhabitants can be accommodated. . . . a petition should be addressed to the Postmaster-General at Ottawa, signed by as many of the inhabitants as can conveniently subscribe.' Petitioners were also guided to describe the 'lot and concession on which it is desired the office should be established; the distance from the neighbouring offices; whether there is a village at the site of the proposed Post Office; the number of mills, stores, taverns and houses thereat; the extent of the settlement' and other important facts justifying the proposed post office creations (*Canadian Almanac* 1891, cited in Osborne and Pike, 1984: 211–212). The standardized format of the petitions, including requests for new offices, changes to existing service, new postmasters, and other issues, relate that the people of Middlesex County had consulted these types of instructions and conducted their petitions in the format prescribed. Despite this formulaic nature to the petitions, their size and description ranged somewhat; some petitions had only a few signatures, while others had more than twenty or thirty. Once an office was established, the post office site became a regularly visited space in the lives of farmers and ruralites in many towns across the country, and Middlesex County (**Figures 3 and 4**) was no exception.

In Glanworth, Ontario, a small town in southern Middlesex, a post office was established in 1857 which became an excellent example of postal success and network facilitation over the next four decades. (Collections Canada, 2015; Unknown, 1889). The town's post was built shortly following the securing of a London and Port Stanley Railway depot, and while Glanworth was never a major settlement in Middlesex, its development of a diversified economy referenced the maturity of the region. By 1888, it had a population of 160 people and contained a harness-maker, a lumber dealer, a carriage-builder, a blacksmith, a small cheese factory, and two nearby churches, along with the town's postal facilities (Unknown, 1889: 580). In 1866 John Turnbull took over the role of postmaster in Glanworth, a position he would hold until his death in 1900. At the same time, Turnbull was the owner and operator of the Glanworth General Store and a hotel keeper (Unknown, 1874: 266). The tradition of the multi-functioning space of the post office/general store/hotel was established in the county since the 1820s, as noted above, since it located the post in an already-established system of shared social space. The combination of services also allowed farmers to make several uses of the same trip, as was common in rural Canada (Voisey, 1988: 53–76). By consequence, Turnbull himself became deeply involved in associated

To
 The Hon. L. J. Huntington
 Post Master General of the
 Dominion of Canada etc etc etc

The Petition of the undersigned ratepayers of North
 Dorchester

Humbly prayeth

That a Post Office may be established on the north
 side of the River Thames at Dorchester in the
 County of Middlesex

And your petitioners as on duty bound will ever pray etc

A. C. Shaw
 Egmont Shaw
 George Shaw
 Samuel Hillson
 Jas. Hillson
 Robert Sutherland
 Wm. McKay
 Newton Burdick
 Alex. Haight
 Robert Duffield
 Isaac Duffield
 John Sutherland
 S. Murray M.P.
 Thomas Fifield
 James Rogers
 G. J. G. G.
 Jas. H. Quintan
 J. S. Burdick
 Wm. Connor
 Wm. Edwards
 H. E. Nelson

Figure 2: Petition for Post Office in Dorchester, 1878.



Figure 3: Location of Middlesex County, Ontario, Canada.

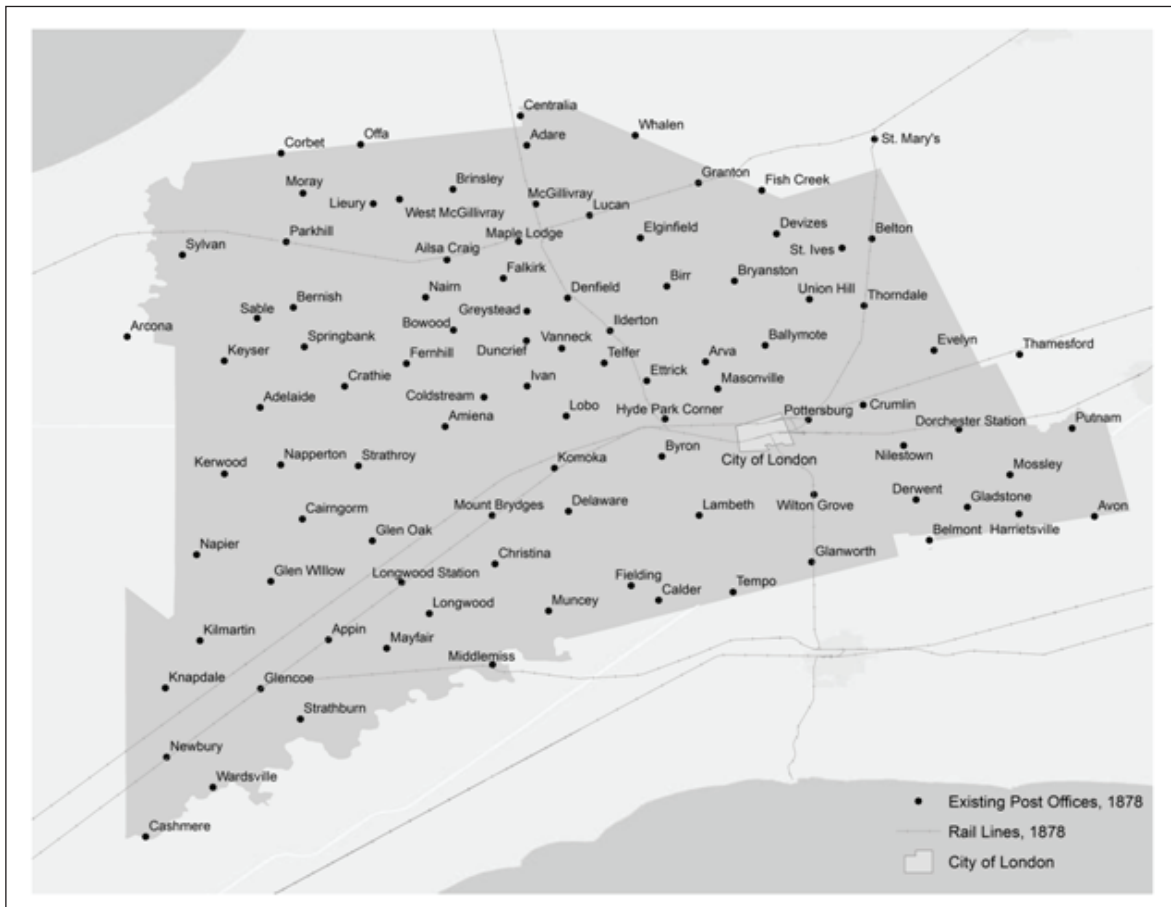


Figure 4: Post Offices in Middlesex County.

neighbourhood and community networks moving through the location and the local landscape.

Local farmers' diaries note the frequency with which they made contact with John Turnbull, referencing the importance of the postal services that he provided. James Glen, a farmer who kept a diary from 1866 to 1925, made a habit of visiting the post quite often, at an increasing rate by the end of the 19th century. His diary shows that he had three postal-related exchanges (these include paying for postage or stationary and the receipt of mail) in 1866; 16 in 1876; 18 in 1886; and 35 in 1896 (Glenn, 1866–1924). As James lived only a kilometre away from the Glanworth Post Office, the nearly weekly occurrence of the postal visit is understandable. This meant that James Glen and his family were a part of the communications revolution made possible through the use of the post. By the end of the century he and his family were visiting the post office often, sometimes to contact family members in other Ontario counties (Glenn, 1866–1924: Diary Entry, July 1, 1896) and to conduct the important financial business required by his farm, such as obtaining insurance and sending money (Glenn, 1866–1924: Diary Entries, May 14 and 28, 1886). Owing to the PO's central location, James was able to access the post when in town for other purposes. On June 18th, 1866, after drawing rails all morning on his farm, for example, James sent a letter to a relative when in town having his horse shod (Glenn, 1866–1924). In 1886 he dropped by the PO on January 4th, sent a book and posters to the East Middlesex Township Society, of which he was a member, and then stayed to have a whiskey with Turnbull (Glenn, 1866–1924). The proximity of the office and its centrality to other local businesses allowed James to maximize the trip off the farm and into town, and it also gave him a good excuse to have a drink out of the house, which was filled with four Glen girls, two boys, and several farm labourers throughout the year.

The Turnbull and Glen associations, however, did not stop at a simple exchange of mail delivery. As time passed, the Turnbull family attended James' farm bees and the church; John lent James credit on a number of purchases; James helped John with pig slaughtering; and James' daughter 'Nettie' married John Turnbull's son David in 1889 (Glenn, 1866–1924; Turnbull/Glen marriage certificate, 1889). As the Glen and Turnbull networks intertwined, they helped to forge those elements of rural neighbourhood that grew throughout the era. This level of familiarity was encouraged through the proximity and frequency of contact made possible via the post office and its services. John's 'fitness' as an ideal PM contributed to this development: he was not only a skilled money handler, given his General Store and Hotel-keeping acumen, he also was a respectable churchgoer, known resident of the community, and he held a store in a location where farmers regularly visited. So as post office petitioners across Middlesex demanded increased services, they also were enacting the organization of their own neighbourhood and community networks, of the type in existence in Glanworth around the anchorage point of Turnbull.

"We as a people": Building Communities and Neighbourhoods 1870s–90s: The Role of the New Post Office

Petitions were developed frequently in Middlesex County, between the 1870s and 1890s, as communities changed, were established, and local residents sought to have their postal situations updated. Within Middlesex there were 22 requests for such a remedy over the three decades, 11 of which left records of detailed petitions and signatures for nine communities. As seen in **Figure 5**, these places crossed the boundaries of other, existing post office sections. However, by writing the petitions, recorders identified that they were not well served by the existing postal arrangements, and they asked that they have a new central office placed nearby, through which to orient themselves locally. Not all of the petitions were successful; nonetheless they show that citizens of specific communities and neighbourhoods attempted to control their own localities by centralizing the post office space where they saw fit as the petitions allow us to view the spatial extent of the petitioners' addresses and give us a firm basis for reconstituting their postal communities and neighbourhoods. We obtained post office petitions from throughout the county, though there was a significant cluster of requests coming from the southwest portion of Middlesex, where, as will be seen, new developments had encouraged the formation of new communities.

When applicants petitioned for a Strathburn and Wardsville post office in Mosa Township, southwest Middlesex, in 1891, they identified themselves as a community and a neighbourhood. The petition that they circulated argued that theirs was a growing community, as it contained nearly eighty people desirous of a post office, a blacksmith shop, and also a grocery store in which the post office could be stationed. Though the postal inspector said that the area 'is not improving much. . . [and] is already well supplied with post-office accommodation' the petition nevertheless argued: '*We as a people* are asking for a post office.' (Strathburn & Wardsville, 230–1891). The people of Strathburn and Wardsville felt that they deserved a new postal arrangement since they had the features of a community, and were likely in contact with each other on a day-to-day basis. They asked for a reorientation of their neighbourhood and community networks, which could operate through the rural grocery store run by Edwin Weekes, where such interactions would have been common. Interestingly, the petition noted that the local blacksmith was George Weekes, a relative of the proposed PM, who also signed the document. Strathburn and Wardsville's commercial resources were likely run by the Weekes family, and the community's openness to have Edwin serve as the postmaster meant that they had achieved a sense of familiarity with the Weekes family. Had the request been granted, having this type of familiarity in a town created a sense of trust within the post office space and contributed to close, neighbourhood networks.

Often the existing postal arrangements seemed equitable, with most people being able to access a post office that was within 4 kilometres (see **Figure 6**). Based on

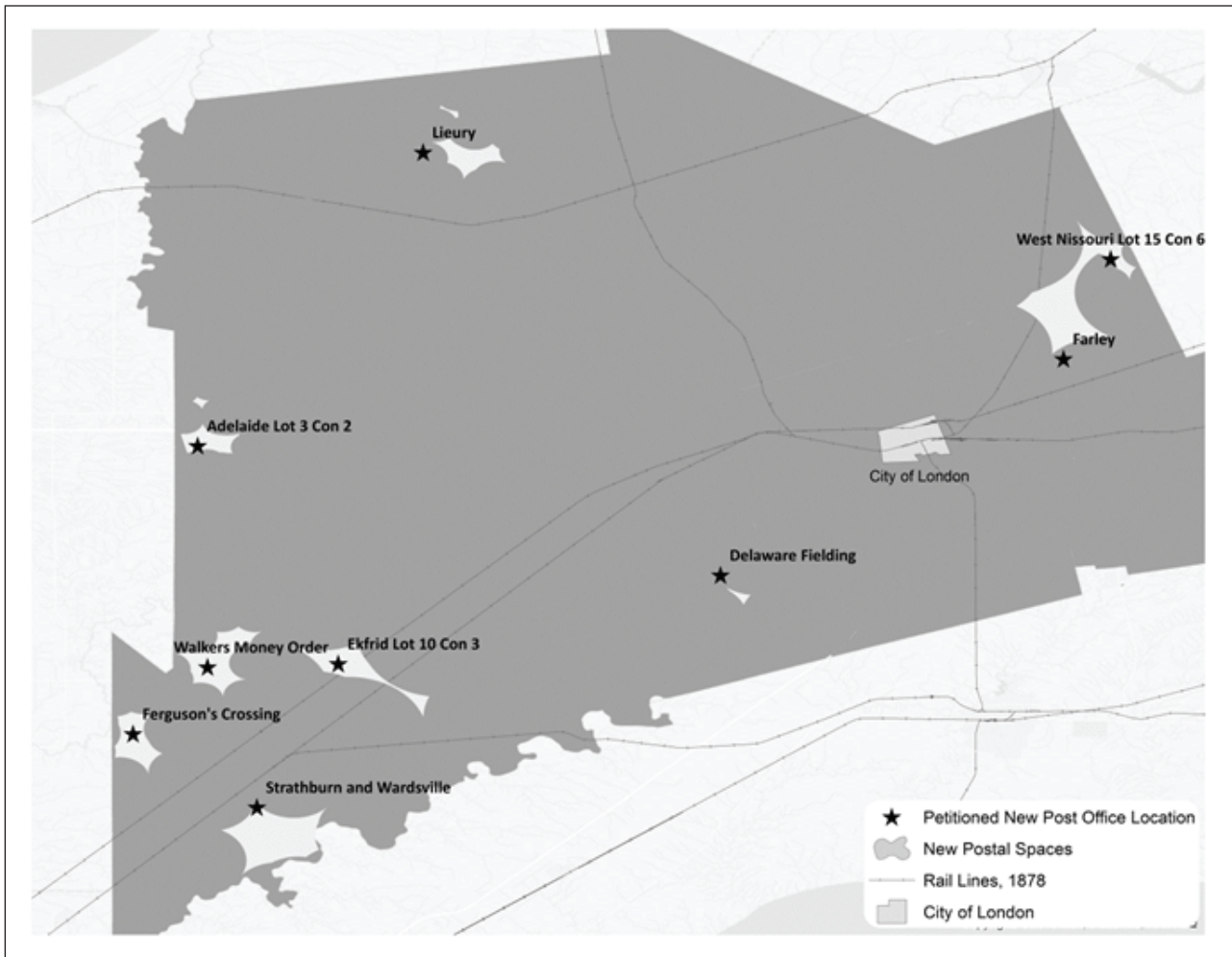


Figure 5: Petitioned New Post Office Locations and their corresponding postal spaces.

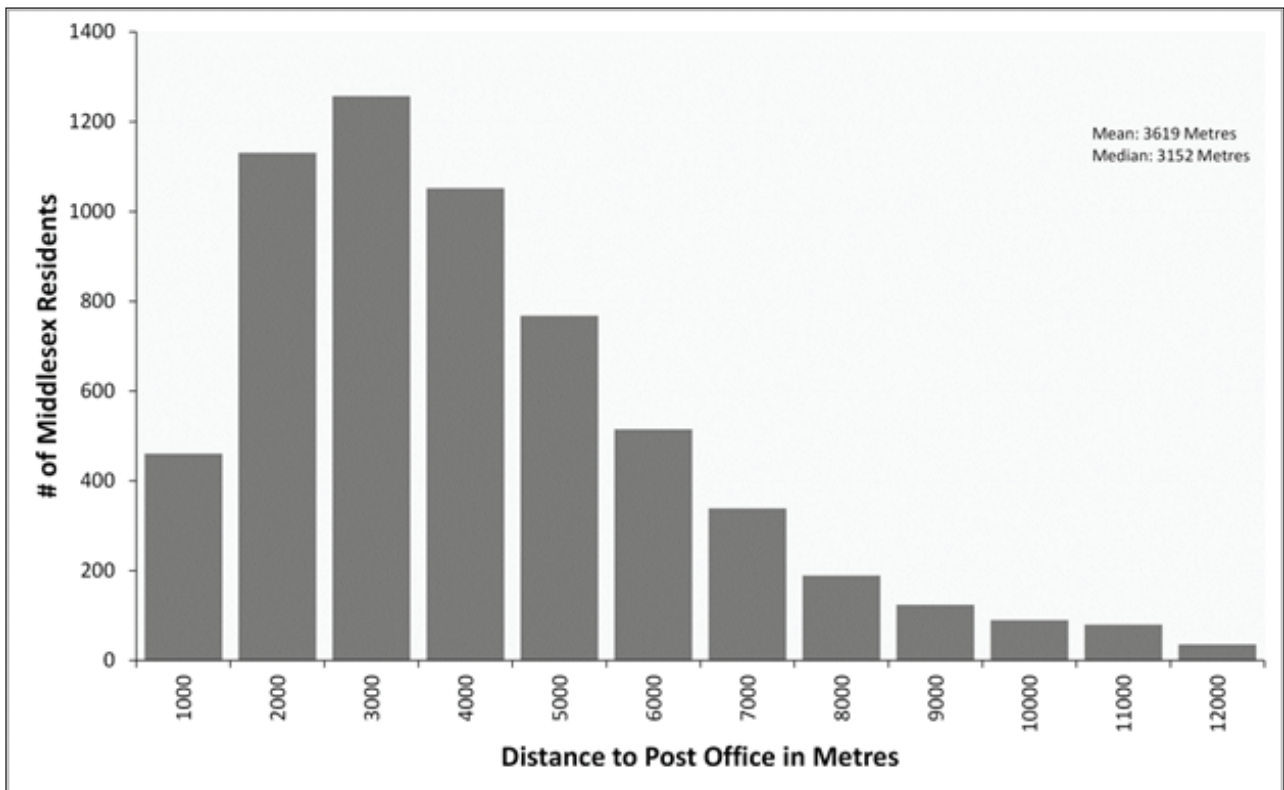


Figure 6: Distances travelled to existing post offices for the 7,100 households in Middlesex County.

the petitions and **Figure 6**, a distance of 4km or less was seen as the most convenient. Such proximity allowed for farmers to access the post frequently, whether by driving, walking or riding, in a reasonable amount of time. A contemporary estimate of a buggy ride said that farmers could travel at 20 kilometers per hour in 1881 (Derry, 2006: 81); this meant that most postal services could be accessed through a drive of 15 minutes or less. Since children were often sent to pick up the mail as well, the distance meant that they could walk to the post in the snow of winter or mud of spring if the roads were impassable by horse and buggy. Frederick Errington, for example, noted in March of 1896 that his son Fred had to walk in the deep snow in the afternoon of the 20th, since earlier that morning he could not make it on horseback (Errington, 1853–1903). Such closeness in service, however, was not always available because of the way local communities operated or had changed.

The people of a proposed site, 'Delaware Centre', in a part of Middlesex settled nearly fifty years prior, noted that they had a problem with the way they were served. They had for some time travelled to the post office at Calder but the main route between their location and the post office at Calder was discontinued (**Figure 7**). The people therefore found that their community needed a change in affairs, so they petitioned for a post of their own. They said, 'an office established on the 2nd concession, about midway between there would be of great convenience to your petitioners.' (Delaware Centre, 32–1879). The proposed location was to be 8.3 and 5.7 kilometres, respectively, from the POs in Calder and the town of Delaware. Residents would then have had a distance-to-post that

placed them within the two to five-kilometre range that most settlers had achieved in Middlesex. The citizens of Delaware centre had been able to manage the previously enlarged Postal trip because of the roadway 'shortcut', but once closed, petitioners knew that they were within their rights to request more convenient services. While their community, then, had for some time been oriented to Calder, their settled township had changed in its pattern of behavior because of the important loss of the roadway. This older rural community was seeking a new state of affairs and requesting that the federal government recognize the new spatial pattern of the settlement. The coinciding result was that the community in central Delaware who came together to record the petition gained a central meeting place via the new PO.

About ten years later, the citizens of Delaware Centre petitioned once again, in 1888, this time for a request of a savings bank system. By then, the community had not only achieved a post office but had benefited greatly since its establishment in 1879, showing the effect that the creation of the PO had on their local networks. The report of the inspector in 1888 stated 'Delaware is a prettily situated village, some 12 miles distant from London, containing one or two stores and some other small places of business.' (Delaware Centre, 298–1888). The people of the town asked for access to the savings bank system so that they could better take part in the national monetary system. The petition testified that the rural people of Delaware Centre could only otherwise conduct this business in the city of London, where the closest savings bank was located. The inspector declared that the Mr. Lawson who ran the post office was 'quite competent' and would

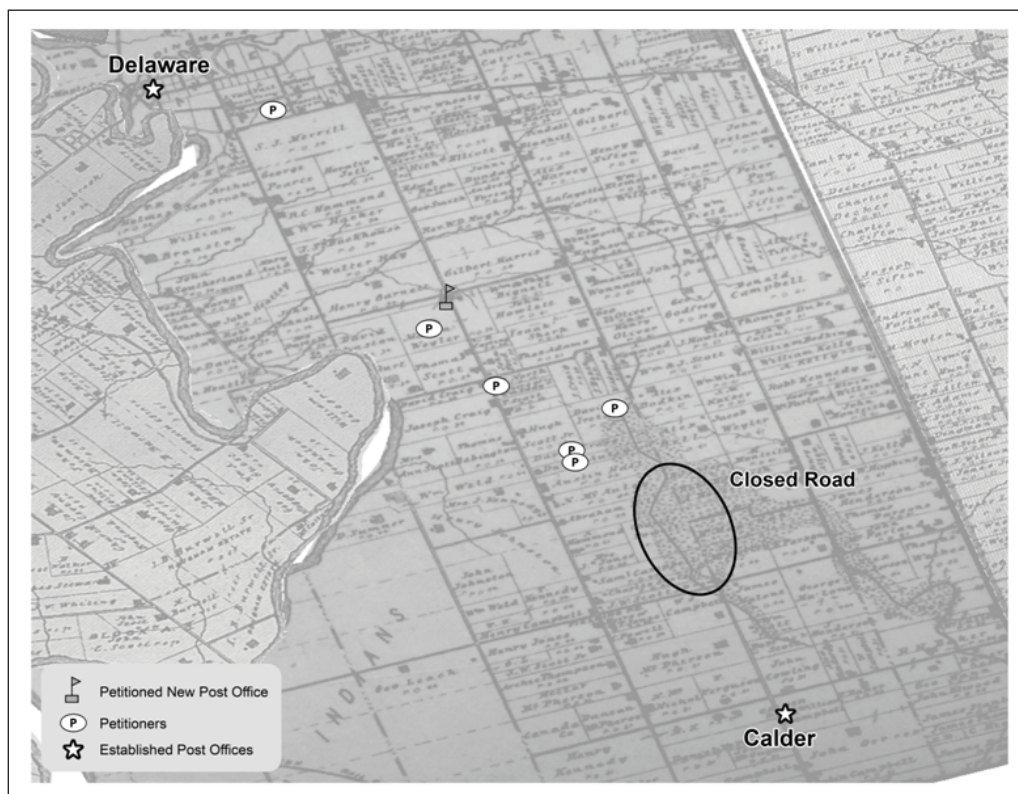


Figure 7: Forces that help create postal communities – Delaware Centre, 1879.

'do his best to make the Savings Bank system at his office a success.' (Delaware Centre, 298–1888).

As Osborne and Pike note, savings banks run by the Post Office were seen as a way to promote thrift among Canadian populations who might not otherwise have had access to such banking services and also to give remote communities more convenient access to the cash economy (1984: 203). The system had been originally established in Winnipeg, Toronto, Nanaimo, Victoria, and New Westminster in the 1870s, and in 1885 in the Maritimes. It was only in 1887 that Ontario and Quebec saw the transfer of government savings banks to the Postal Department by an Order-in-Council (Amyot and Willis, 2003: 140). The request of the people of Delaware Centre for a postal savings bank in July of 1888 illustrates that they were aware of national communications innovations and eager to take advantage of the new system. Complementary to this development is the highlighted role of Mr. Lawson, who, according to the inspector, was a 'well-to-do' official similar to those of his community (Delaware Centre, 298–1888). The post office in Delaware Centre, originally created after the 1879 petition, combined with this distant cash/exchange network, allowing them to see each other more often, not just to get their mail, but also to conduct cash-related exchanges. This resulted in a further developed sense of localism by

anchoring in the landscape more frequent activity in the person of Mr. Lawson and the PO space community and neighbourhood networks.

The late 1850s marked the arrival of rail in Middlesex County and rail development continued during the next five decades. A number of rail networks, mostly trunk rail, dissected the county as it stood centrally between the American Midwest and New England, and the consequence was that communities throughout the county popped up where rail was developed or intensified. In the 1890s, for example, southwest Middlesex saw the development of the Canadian Pacific Railway, heading from London to Windsor. The new rail created a junction in Ekfrid Township, and families began to station themselves in the locale (**Figure 8**). The corresponding 1890 postal petition stated that 'A new roadway is being opened from one concession to the other and a store and houses are about to be built. . . All. . . are desirous of having a P.O. established.' The people requested that the new town near Appin Junction be named 'McMaster', a family name which appears in the list of signatures. The inspector's report argued that the petition was somewhat premature, as the C.P.R. was not yet 'in full running order' and that McMaster should first become more 'built up' before a PO would be fitting (McMaster/Appin Junction,

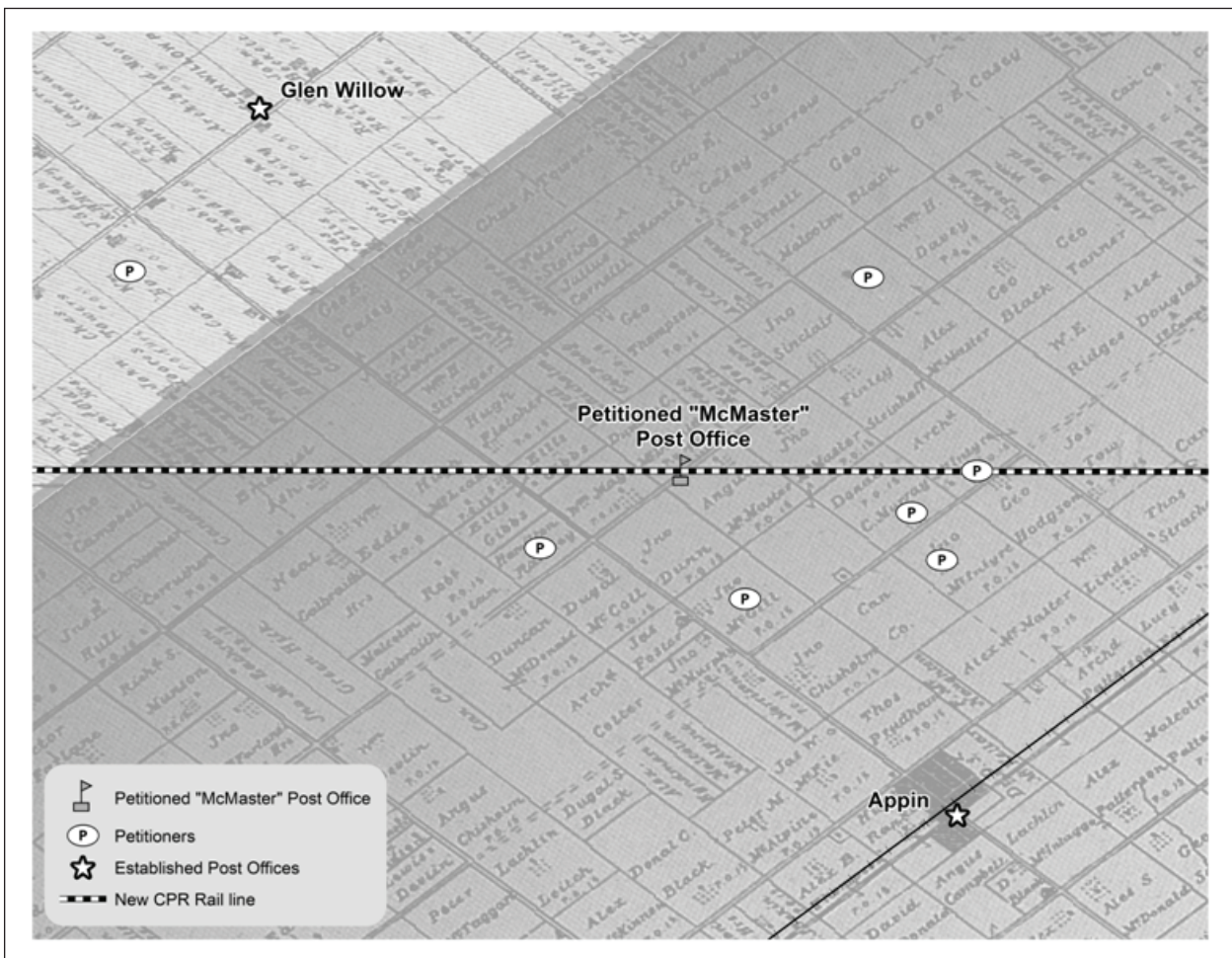


Figure 8: Influence of Railroad on creation of new postal spaces, the McMaster PO, 1890.

865–1890). Though the community was without a business other than the rail station, the petitioners who spoke on its behalf had already come to view the region as containing some of the elements that would be necessary for a post and a centralized spatial arrangement. Their signatures recognized the role that post offices could play in day-to-day business and the organization of a local space. ‘McMasterites’ recommended to the inspector that this sense of place and orientation be recognized by the federal postal system.

The new community of McMaster saw the postal system as so central to their development that they requested the founding of an office. This appeal is an interesting development since historians often think of rail towns as something that popped up largely during western development, and not in Old Ontario during the late-19th century. The post was important to the rural community’s sense of local space and orientation, as it was in Strathburn and Wardsville and Delaware Center. The positioning of McMaster in between the existing post offices in Appin and Glen Willow shows the pattern behind the request. With Appin being 3.9 kilometres from the proposed new PO site, and Glen Willow 4.6 kilometres, the people of McMaster wished to have services offered more within the vicinity of their residences, which they did not have due to their distance from other Ekfrid Township towns. Furthermore, the petitioners also sought to have their postal needs recognized by the federal system which did not yet see them as having formed a community of sufficient size. In a sense, the town’s dwellers recognized their own sense of community and the needs of their daily styles of life before the state could. In the development of a new community in Middlesex, the post office was indeed considered a central social space, fundamental to communities’ ability to be successful and spatially coherent.

Maintaining Community

The development of rail in Middlesex did not always help to create the foundation for communities. At times, such new infrastructure also reoriented patterns of trade and spatial behaviour, altering local networks and causing problems in some existing communities as their postal services changed as a result. Despite this structural shift, rural citizens of the county sought to control some of the extant community and neighbourhood relationships by preserving postal anchorages, post offices themselves, and local postmasters.

In late-19th century Middlesex, especially in rural areas, there was an outmigration of farmers to new farming territories in the American and Canadian West (Widdis, 1998). At the same time, families were becoming smaller throughout rural Ontario and populations in some centres were dropping (Gagan, 1981; Crerar, 1999). So while some communities in the county were growing, others were holding on. In Fielding, Delaware Township, and Devizes, London Township, the loss of a postmaster meant that the two communities had lost the anchorage of their networks. Fielding was a small settlement

in Delaware, and like Delaware Centre it was in an older part of the county. It had a post office, but by 1879 the citizens of the community found themselves without a postmaster who could run the local space. The inspector that year noted that ‘Mr John Scott Postmaster at Fielding Middlesex has left the country for good – for some months since.’ The inspector was right in saying that ‘The families are anxious that his successor may be named’ because they seemed to have to quickly scramble to try to have another reinstated (Fielding, 2002–1879). As illustrated on **Figure 9**, the loss of the Fielding PO meant that the networks in the town no longer were centralized, as they would have been reoriented to Calder, causing some residents to have more than four extra kilometres of travel to their post office. The community therefore gathered together and found a suitable candidate; the petition stated ‘We the undersigned humbly pray that the office as formerly known as the ‘Fielding’ Post Office in the Township of Delaware may be reopened as Tom Hall has offered to attend to the said office and will keep it at the old stand kept by John Scott.’ (Fielding, 2002–1879). **Figure 9** shows that Scott’s position in the settlement was just within the network space occupied by the Fielding folk, and so the transfer in location allowed for local patterns of behaviour to continue. The residents found a replacement and ensured that their community networks would be regrounded in the same space that it had been prior, in the ‘old stand’ of John Scott.

In Devizes the situation was similar, though it occurred 13 years later. In 1892, the London Township settlement found that the post office was closed because nobody was available to succeed the postmaster, Mr. C. Fitzgerald. This left the people of Devizes significantly isolated in terms of communication, because, as seen on **Figure 10**, they were located far from neighbouring centres. It took some time until Mr. Westman, a farmer on Lot I Concession 14, offered his services, solving the problem. The community took up the petition because Westman’s spatial offering was only 20 yards from the previous centre, which petitioners saw as ‘the most convenient locality’ at which to redevelop a post office space (Devizes, 626–1892). Like Fielding, this was a way of maintaining the internal network congruency within the Devizes settlement, by reinstating the postmaster who could re-anchor the community. They did not want to have to travel to Fish Creek, Union Hill or one of the other next nearest offices, all of which were over 3km further (**Figure 10**). Residents in Devizes therefore saw the importance of maintaining the existing community network and attempted to station the new postal space as close as possible to the previous location, thereby preserving the settlement’s spatial relationships and keeping potential community conflict to a minimum.

This same loss of a postmaster occurred in Plover Mills (Plover Mills, 68–1897) and Tempo (Tempo, 2–1890), showing that Fielding and Devizes were not alone in experiencing these community crises. While Hal S. Barron (1984) has argued that rural depopulation in some



Figure 9: Maintaining a Postal Community and Neighbourhood, the Fielding PO, 1879.



Figure 10: Maintaining a Postal Community and Neighbourhood, the Devizes PO, 1892.

settlements created an internal homogenization, part of this process of preservation and community crystallization was the maintenance of local social spaces so that community and neighbourhood networks did not fall apart. The re-establishment of post offices and new local postmasters appear to have been necessary to this practice in Middlesex County. In these centres, what is important is that citizens actively and regularly participated in the defining of their social landscapes and sought to have their own spatial interpretations realized 'on the ground'.

Where Business "Naturally Collects": Contested Postal Communities

While many settlements throughout Middlesex banded together to request new facilities or changes to existing post offices, others were divided. A number of communities remained split about how their postal services should function—most often opposing groups disagreed over the location of the post office building itself. In these 'contested' petitions, more colourful rhetoric was often employed, in attempt to convince postal inspectors of the necessity of one place over another, coincidentally describing the spatial relations of some settlements. In all three cases the petition documents relate the heightened levels of concern that people had over the placement of their postal facilities. They also show the visions that each group had for how their communities' social geographies should function and the ways that their networks would be oriented. As a result, they offer a detailed image of the relations in rural Middlesex and the function of local POs.

The town of Dorchester Station was a sizeable, older settlement in London Township, northwestern Middlesex. By the 1880s the town had over four hundred residents, including general merchants, harness-makers, hotel-keepers, important milling facilities, ironworks, and some small factories, each serving the needs of local agricultural production. The postal facilities in Dorchester Station had been in place since 1855 and were well established in the community.

At the time of the petition, 1878, the postmaster William Scott had been running the office since 1875 on the south side of the river (Collections Canada). The branch of the Thames that ran through Dorchester Station and powered its saw and grist mills proved to be one of the reasons for the opposing petitions. Petitioners in February 1878 put forth a request to have the office established on the North Side of the river, near the rail station and across the bridge, since business in the town 'naturally collects' at that spot (Dorchester Petition, 785–1878). Postmaster Scott, the note said, was 'ready at any time to move to the northern side of the River, and to keep the post office there as requested by the petitioners.' (Dorchester Petition, 785–1878).

By April of that year, an opposing petition was submitted for consideration. Petitioners, the comments read, 'have been informed that efforts are being made to remove the post office to the north side of the River'. The post office, they noted, 'has been established in its present position for about thirty years and property has been

purchased and buildings erected near it as a consequence thereof.' In addition, 'a majority of the people requiring a post office reside on the south side of the River', some nearly four miles away, down sandy and gravelled roads that were difficult to traverse in the spring and fall. These residents usually gathered their mail on their way to the London market and did not travel into town to the station. The petition also noted, as **Figure 11** illustrates, those opposed to the removal of the PO came from north side of the river as well. They also had various political leanings; neither petition, as was pointed out, was more in support of the governing party than the other. This petition opposed the establishment of a second office in the town, as this would, they said, be 'highly improper', likely because of the small population and the reorientation of the town's decades-old traffic flow (Dorchester Petition, 785–1878).

The debate was not just between residents north and residents south of the river, but was also about where postal networks should be anchored—near the historic business district south of the river, or north, near the rail station. The postal inspector noted the convenience of the southern PO to farmers travelling west to the London market and the hardship that crossing the river would cause them—especially since the banks of the river were quite steep. There was also, 'quite a village around the post office' where it stood (Dorchester Petition, 785–1878). This was a matter of balancing the social geography of a town which had developed two opposing centres of business—one utilising the new rail and another that serviced both local and distant needs. To balance both petitions, the inspector noted that on the north side of the river there were a number of inhabitants who lived near the station and that another village a quarter mile away would likely use its services. Notably, however, the inspector stated, there was 'no leading road running through' this village and the station. His recommendation was to establish a new northern PO, but keep the other southern one intact (Dorchester Petition, 785–1878). The property concerns of the opposing petition seem to have been of little consequence. Postal records indicate, however, that the single post office was kept—as William Scott remained the postmaster until 1888.⁴

The Muncey–Delaware set of petitions, from 1878–9, involved four groups' views on the orientation of their postal community. The groups requesting a change to the postal facilities consisted of: residents of the region surrounding the recently-developed Delaware C.S.R. station; a group of First Nations peoples living on the reserve; and staff at the Mount Elgin Industrial Institute, an agriculturally oriented residential school.⁵ These groups requested that the facilities be moved to a store, run by a Mr. McGregor, which was nearer to the rail station than the previous location. While only a few of the petitioners' homes could be located (most lived on the Reserve or at the Institute) **Figure 12** shows that those who requested a change were clearly those who lived just north of the Institute and the rail station, near the C.S.R. Station and the reserve itself.

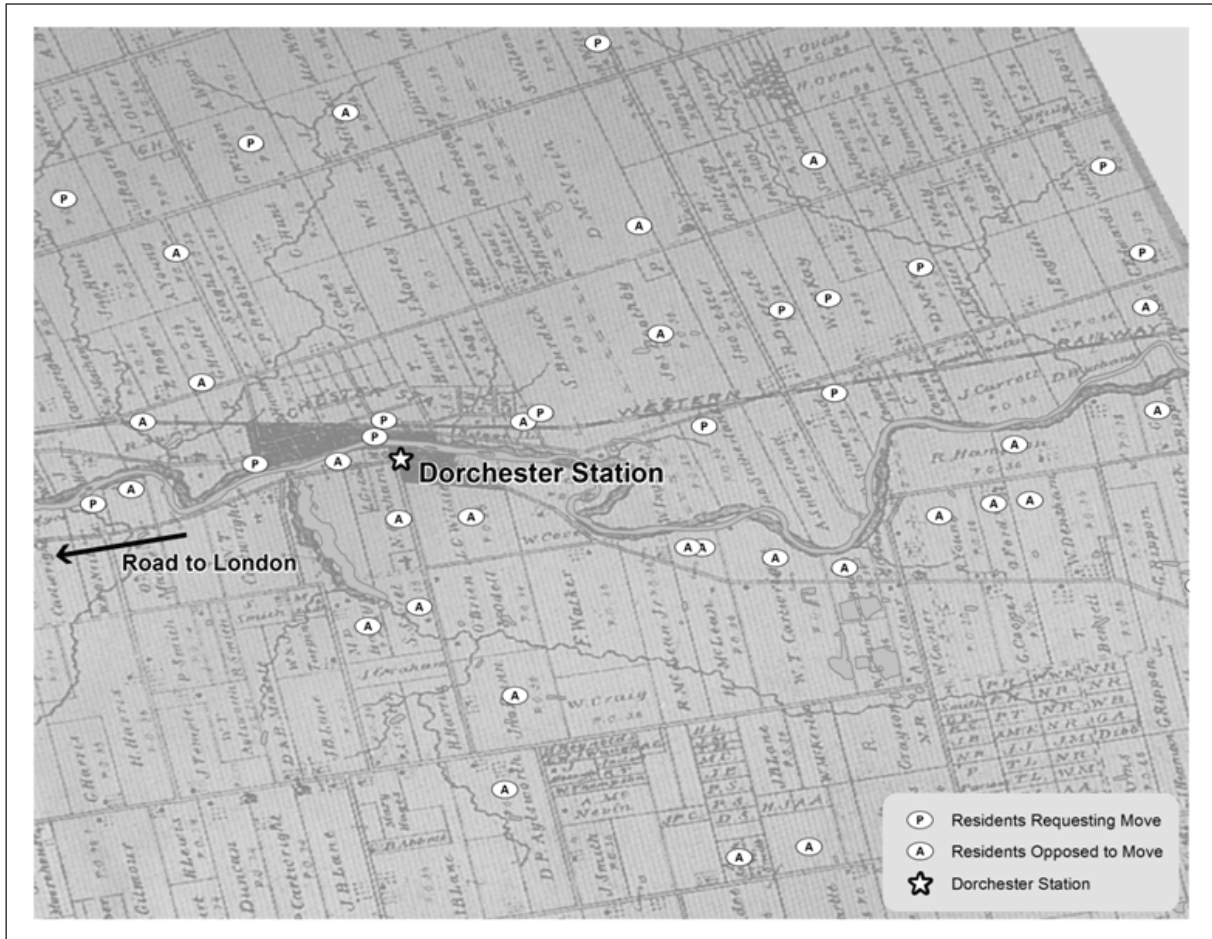


Figure 11: A Split Community, the Dorchester Station PO, 1878.

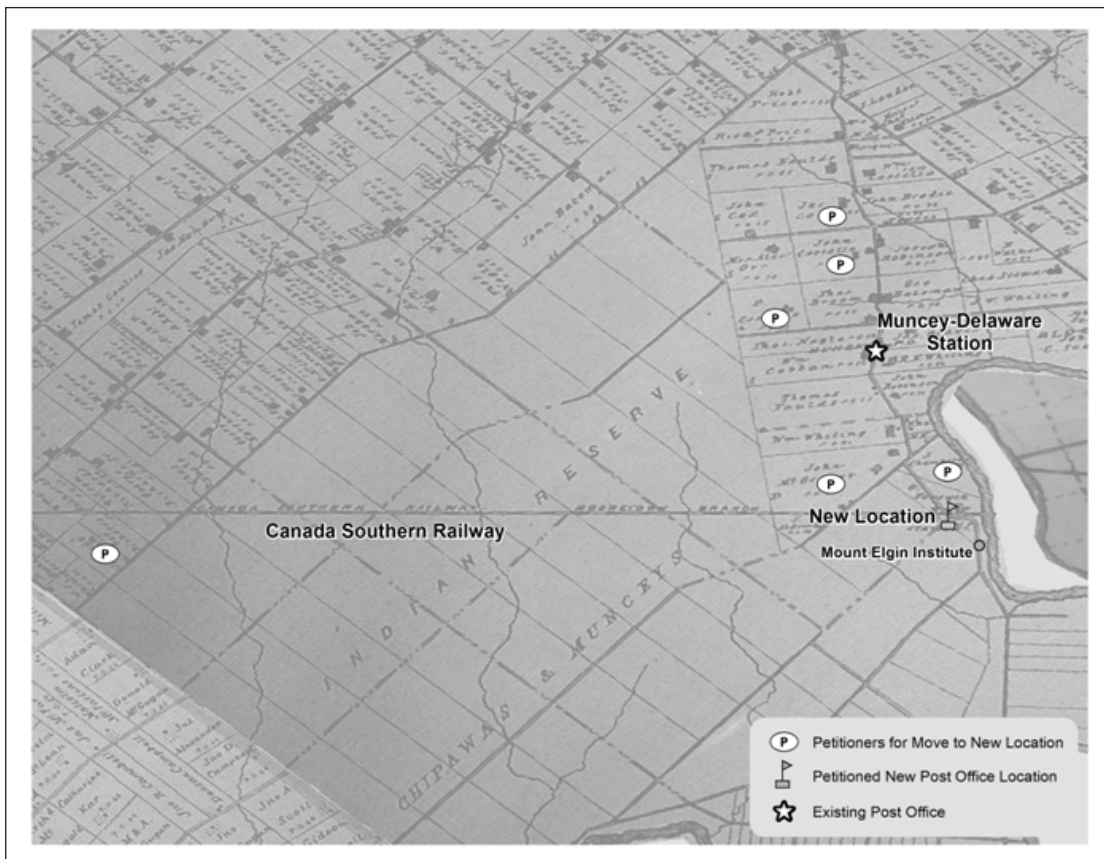


Figure 12: A Split Community, the Muncy-Delaware Station PO, 1878.

The petition noted that that the current location caused problems. It required users to walk nearly half a mile along the Thames River, cross at the railway bridge, and then travel another mile north to the home of Mr. Whiting, the current postmaster, where they had 'to hover about in the cold till they can get' their mail since Mr. Whiting's home could not accommodate them.⁶ When sending a registered letter, they also had to visit Mr. Whiting and then take the letters back to the station the next morning for shipping since he was unable to meet the morning visit of the Travelling Post Office (Muncey, 964–1879). Petitioners stated quite plainly that this arrangement was 'by no means satisfactory, and to which businessmen cannot long submit'; after all, work had to be done quickly, and the post was expected to keep up with such demand (Muncey, 964–1879). The geography of the C.S.R. Station clearly had augmented nearby residents' closeness as a community and drove them to request a change in the state of affairs.

Additional letters in the Muncey-Delaware postal collection offer a more intimate glimpse at local concerns. A letter from James Graves, a resident of the area in favour of the post office removal, hinted that there were local political issues afoot. He wrote to the postal inspector to make clear that there were so few people who desired to keep the post office where it currently was that Mr. Whiting had to start his own counter petition and took it throughout the township to peoples who were not directly involved. Graves was also concerned that if Mr. Whiting was 'capable of this smallness' he might have falsified other information. Particularly, Graves was afraid that Mr. Whiting may have 'represented himself as a conservative and the store-keeper (Alex. McGregor)', who would run the proposed office if its removal was successful, 'as a Reformer.' The postal inspector was advised that indeed, 'They are both reformers.' Graves then signed his letter, 'James Graves, Liberal Conservative' (Muncey, 964–1879). The letters make it clear that important fractures existed within the postal community which likely contributed to the disagreements over who should fill the important role of neighbourhood postmaster. Namely, Mr. Whiting's self-encouraged petition violated the desires of local residents for a new central place. In their eyes, he no longer could be the neighbourhood PM as he had lost this local respect. In some ways, Mr. Whiting had removed himself from the Muncey-Delaware neighbourhood network.

A letter from Thomas Cossford, Governor of the Mount Elgin Institute, was also included with the petition set and addressed to the Postmaster General which noted other spatial factors involved. He wrote that in his opinion six-eighths of the mail running through the local post office was on school business and four other 'Ministers of the Gospel' signed the petitions along with 'all of the businessmen in [the] section'. He argued that the original purpose of having the postal facilities in the area was to serve the school; the office was only at the home of Mr. Whiting because the school had been briefly closed and that deliveries had come via the road from Mount Brydges prior to the C.S.R. Station's development (Muncey, 964–1879). In

the opinion of Cossford, the Muncey post office should have been in a place central to the Institute's geography and network orientation.

The group in opposition included the current postmaster, Mr. Whiting, and some others. If James Graves was correct, the 'to stay' petition was taken up by Mr. Whiting himself and was taken throughout the township to whomever would listen. The Muncey-Delaware Postal map does not seem to accord with Graves' story—those voting for the petition to stay were actually clustered relatively closely around the current postal facilities and were neighbours of Mr. Whiting. Only one resident occupied land that could be considered 'far' away, standing at 8.2 kilometres, but it is reasonable that he may have had some interest in keeping the postal facilities where they stood. Proximity to the proposed site or the current site seems to have been the greatest factor involved in the postal communities' orientation. Nevertheless, that Graves saw those who signed the petition as 'outsiders' referenced a situation whereby those who lived near the post office may have been involved in Whiting's personal network, but were not truly representative of a holistic postal community based upon Whiting's Office. The two camps remained split either way, and they did not see themselves as part of the same community.

Whiting and his petitioners' reasons for keeping the post where it stood were fairly simple: they stated that he and the petitioners believed that Post Office in Muncey was 'as near central as possible for all parties interested.'⁷ Unfortunately for Whiting and friends, the postal inspector, Gilbert Griffin, wrote that those who had requested the office stay put may have had 'the largest correspondence' but 'they would not however be very much inconvenienced by the change' in location. Griffin felt that Whiting's postal network could have easily reoriented their trade toward the C.S.R. and its Traveling Post, and that, in comparison to the inconveniences of the Government Institute personnel, local residents, and Natives on the reserve, those requesting a stay had little to complain about (Muncey, 964–1879). Documents from later in 1879 show that the post was in fact moved to the C.S.R. station (Muncey, 964–1879), so it is likely that the region surrounding the Muncey post was home to some bitter feelings for quite some time afterward.

In the town of Evelyn in 1881, in Nissouri Township, Eastern Middlesex, community networks again dictated the origins of the requests for the post office to move or for it to stay. Postal Inspector Barker noted in his report that year that a Mr. Bray had become the postmaster in October of 1877, at which point he kept the office on the 5th concession. In 1879/80, Bray moved the office to a position midway between the 5th and the 6th concession, near a side road and near the neighbourhood schoolhouse, making it easy for children 'living about the corner [to] pass the Post Office when going to and from school.' Barker additionally noted that there was a blacksmith just a half mile east of the office, an important site for any farm activity, and that his wife would help out at the office as well (Evelyn, 420–1881). These comments

highlighted the features of the office at Evelyn and the ways in which rural people went about getting their mail. Bray's office clearly was a fairly heterogeneous space, as children could be present at certain points throughout the day, and it would appear that as farmers came to the blacksmith for repairs to ploughs, harrows, etc., they might stop by the Post to see Mr. or Mrs. Bray and gather their correspondence. In all, the post office seems to have fostered a family space for farmers and other ruralites.

The petition requested that the post office be returned to where it was located prior to Mr. Bray's relocation in 1879, as the post office had been there for nearly eleven years. This location, they said, 'gave great satisfaction to all the neighbourhood.' However, Henry Bray had moved the office to a place that was 'very inconvenient for the great majority of those who receive their mail through it' as it could then 'only be a benefit to comparatively few people'. The petition requested that the post office be put back at the 'junction of four cross roads where there is a store and blacksmith shop and the centre of considerable business'. Here, it also noted, 'there is a commodious store the proprietor of which is in every way qualified to act as Post Master.' (Evelyn, 420–1881). The opposing petitions were influenced by a preference for a particular blacksmith and the region's lacking of a single, central business district at the crossroads.

Those opposing the removal were caught off-guard by the other petitioners' request and wanted the post office

to stay in the hands of Mr. Bray. They argued that the relocation of the PO would cause inconvenience and would be short sighted, noting that the recommended new postmaster 'holds but a short lease for his store whereas Mr Bray is a freeholder.' Thus, they identified a debate in place between ownership/long-standing residency versus transience and tenancy, the former being a prescription for a neighbourhood postmaster (Evelyn, 420–1881).

These petitions suggest that within the Evelyn region two networks were anchored at different places: one older and linked by the junction, stores, and a blacksmith; and one newer, connected by the schoolhouse and the other local blacksmith. On the map for Evelyn it can be clearly seen that the two communities overlapped (**Figure 13**). Faced with the job of sorting out the community's needs, Postal Inspector Barker attempted to summarize his opinions. He noted that there was 'perhaps a slight advantage in favour of those protesting against removal' suggesting that Mr. Bray should stay on as postmaster. In addition, 'the office is as conveniently situated as it would be at the corner of the 5th concession, and that no change of site is desirable at present.' (Evelyn, 420–1881). The positioning of freeholder Mr. Bray, near the school and one of the blacksmiths, swayed Inspector Barker. The Evelyn post, despite some protestations of the western postal network, would remain where it stood for the time being.



Figure 13: A Split Community, the Evelyn PO, 1881.

Each of these contested petitions display the deep level of involvement of the petitioners in the management of their own local geographies. In Dorchester Station, Muncy-Delaware, and Evelyn, petitioners had clearly reflected upon the makeup of their own landscapes and the importance of the post office to their everyday lives. Furthermore, they had considered the relationships between community and neighbourhood networks and their postal spaces/local postmasters. By examining the petitions via the HGIS, and relating their oftentimes 'coloured' rhetoric, we gain a much better sense of the function of postal space within rural Middlesex.

Conclusion

Post Offices were at the centre of rural social landscapes throughout Ontario in the 19th century. Since the time of initial settlement, the communication tools offered through POs gave rural people contact with friends, relatives, and others in nearby and international geographies, helping them get through the colony's formative years. As previous studies have shown, this early postal formation was an intrinsic part of the building of the Canadas, and the Post Office as an institution was, after 1851, important to developing Canadian governmentality.

This paper has examined other factors at play in the social fabric of late-19th century Middlesex County, through the coupling of a traditional narrative and HGIS. First, we have shown that the founding of a new office could secure a central business location at a crossroads, their maintenance at existing centres allowed for the continuation of patterns of behaviour, their loss could reorient the daily activity for many families, and the placement of the PO location was key to ruralites' interpretation of local geographies. It is for this reason that POs served as central features in the social landscapes of Ontario hamlets, villages, and towns: in many cases, postmasters and post office spaces defined an important part of rural association and behaviour and, thereby, local landscapes.

Additionally, we have shown that the people of Middlesex engaged directly and actively in the process of defining their own communities and neighbourhoods. While the Post Office institution was a government-run body, the imposition of the government-run structure was limited. Local agents, here farmers and their neighbours, 'got up' these petitions themselves and saw to it that their own community and neighbourhood networks were governed in the manner that they saw fit. Rural citizens' attendance at the offices allowed them to take part in a shared space and, through this experience of rural proximity, families saw their lives become intertwined and enmeshed within the local landscape. This was the age of the rural post.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Notes

¹ For examples of such distant community networks and commercialism to which POs contributed, though they are not specifically analysed, see Korineck (2000),

Noel (2003), Crerar (1999), Santik (1990), and Borchert (1987).

² For a comprehensive history of railway development in not only Middlesex County but also all of Canada see Andreae (1996). For a local review see, *History of the County of Middlesex, Canada: From the Earliest Times to the Present* (Unknown, 1889). Dates for the creation of these railways are from their respective acts of incorporation. Physical construction of the railways would usually occur within a short time. The Grand Trunk, for example, incorporated in 1852, was cited as up and running by October of 1856, see letter, Joseph Carruthers to William Carrothers, in Houston and Smyth (1990: 276–277).

³ Postal Petitions referred to in this study, for example, often request changes in frequency in service to these levels; the demands show the high degree of frequency in postal services in some areas.

⁴ See 'Post Offices and Postmasters', using search term 'Dorchester Station' (Collections Canada, 2015).

⁵ The school was financed by the Wesleyan Methodist Society and the Indian Department.

⁶ Muncey, (964–1879).

⁷ Muncey, (964–1879).

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