

The Royal Oak Post Office

A History

James Lockwood, the first postmaster, was appointed by John Quincy Adams on April 6, 1825. He lived in a log cabin on the site of the present Washington Square Plaza Building. On September 21 he sold out to Samuel Torbert, who was appointed by Andrew Jackson and who remained postmaster until January 20, 1830. There was not enough business at Washington Square Plaza, so the post office was moved to Chase's Corners at Thirteen Mile and Crooks. Chase's Corners was the center of community activities in the pioneer days of Royal Oak Township. Joseph Chase used his son David's store at that location as the post office. The Chases conducted this service from January 30, 1831 to October 27, 1841, when Moses Johnson became postmaster.

Because of the coming of the railroad in 1838 and the planning of the Village of Royal Oak, Chase's Corners was no longer the center of activity of the village, therefore, Johnson conducted the office from his store, at the northeast corner of Main Street and University. During the Civil War the post office was in the general store at Fifth and the railroad. This building was later moved to the corner of First and Main where William Hilsinger used it as a milk house.

A little later, stagecoaches carried mail and passengers three times a week over the plank road from Royal Oak to Rochester. After a time George Hickey began carrying mail three times a week on the Niles Road from Royal Oak to Troy Corners (Big Beaver and Rochester). Some people made hinged boxes for mail and nailed them to a fence, and hired Hickey to bring their mail. This antedated Rural Free Delivery by forty years or more.

The post office was usually the center of attraction and there the men gathered at dusk after a game of horseshoes to "tell tall tales" and talk over questions of local and national importance.

There have been forty-two postmasters in Royal Oak since 1826. Until recently they served just a few years. From 1849 to 1853, the town doctor, Flement Drake, took care of his practice and the problems of the post office at the same time.

The most interesting postmasters were Jacob Erb and Louis Storz. Jacob Erb's store was on the southeast corner of Main at Third, and Louis Storz's store was on the northeast corner of Main and Fifth. Jacob was an ardent Republican and Louis an ardent Democrat. This had always been a contentious political choice in Royal Oak, so, whenever the county was Democratic or Republican, the postmaster would change and the post office moved two blocks in either direction.

Jacob Erb	January 27, 1880
Louis Storz	August 26, 1885
Jacob Erb	June 12, 1889
Louis Storz	August 24, 1893
Jacob Erb	June 10, 1897 to August 25, 1914

The whole village enjoyed this political fun.

By 1914 the postal business had so increased that a separate building was rented next to Erb's store at 209 S Main with Charles A. Allen as postmaster. Allen had previously served as village president. In the next few years, streets were permanently named, and houses were requested to display numbers so that postmen could make house to house deliveries beginning on November 8, 1915. The post office had rural delivery by horse and buggy and motorcycle. The post office changed locations when the new three-story Royal Oak Savings Bank Building on the northwest corner of Main and Fourth was completed in 1916 and postal operations were moved there.

Carriers had to pass a civil service examination and wear a regular uniform. They received \$880.00 a year which was a raise of \$220.00 from their salary previous to 1915.

The Daily Tribune, May 17, 1918

"Royal Oak will have city mail delivery after July 1, and after that date the government employees who deliver your letters will come to your doors in dignified uniforms. All carriers will be under civil service and they will receive \$880 a year with gradual increases in salary. Their pay now is only \$55 a month and Postmaster Charles A. Allen has found it impossible to retain them on this pay. He now has a lady carrier, Mildred Parady, who began work Monday morning."

"A civil service examination was conducted last week to fill the places of these carriers."

"The business of our post office is increasing. In 1917 it was over \$10,000, and when the fiscal year closes July 1, 1918, it will reach considerably more than this."

The first female carrier was Mildred Parady; Cora Baker also served a little bit later. In 1920 Royal Oak became a branch of the Detroit Post Office, and carriers received \$1200.00 annually. Morning and afternoon deliveries were started.

The Daily Tribune, January 16, 1920

"The Royal Oak Post Office becomes a branch of the Detroit Post Office on April 3 (actual date was February 15, 1920)."

"This important announcement was made Wednesday by Postmaster William Nagel of Detroit, who received notice from department officials to take over the local office on that date. Postmaster Francis J. Heavener of Royal Oak had not received notice of the change Thursday afternoon."

"Six city carriers, making two deliveries a day, will take over the work being done by three carriers, making one delivery a day. The salaries will be \$1,200 a year to start. More carriers will be added if necessary."

"Pleasant Ridge and Ferndale will be covered by rural and foot carriers from the Royal Oak office."

"Two special post office examiners will canvass the Royal Oak situation in a few days in preparation for the change."

"Several weeks ago petitions containing 1,471 signatures requesting the change were forwarded to Washington. Postmaster Nagel also recommended that the Detroit office take over the local service."

"Improvement is therefore assured in the local mail service, which the post office has been unable to properly handle because of an inadequate number of employees. The rapid growth of the township of Royal Oak in the past several years has made entirely insufficient the force provided for a country village of one or two thousand inhabitants."

Grover Trombley was placed in charge of the office under Postmaster Nagel. On July 13, 1920, the office was moved into larger quarters on the southwest corner of Fourth and Williams streets.

A postal report of April 29, 1926, showed a thirty percent increase in revenue for the year ending March 1. At this time the branch served approximately 20,000 people in Royal Oak and Royal Oak Township; 9,000 of an estimated 13,000 population in Hazel Park; and 6,000 or 7,000 Berkley residents.

In 1926 two postal substations were in service, one at Ten Mile Road and Woodward, and one at Catalpa/Gardenia and Main. Both were located in drug stores.

The Daily Tribune, July 21, 1926

"The installation of another postal substation in Royal Oak has been announced by Supt. John V. Coffey of the Royal Oak branch of the Detroit Post Office. It is located in the Maxwell drug store at 941 N. Main Street near Gardenia Avenue. The station will be under the charge of W. E. Harris."

"The organizing of the new station, to be No. 65, will serve persons in the north end of Royal Oak who previously were compelled to make the trip to the main station in the center of the city to purchase money orders and stamps, and to register mail and parcel post. The south end of the city is served by station No. 114 in the Crane drug store at Ten Mile and Woodward Avenue."

Mail service under the Detroit system began to bog down, and in 1927 the City Commission asked that Royal Oak be allowed its own postal unit. Leo Campbell became postmaster on March 2, 1931, and the post office remained in its larger quarters at the southwest corner of Fourth and Williams. This site was occupied until the opening of the present building which was designed for postal work.

The Daily Tribune, October 9, 1945

"The City Commission took action on November 21, 1927, to study the question of re-establishing a separate postal unit in Royal Oak. The Detroit postmaster, in reply to their report, said the proposed local office lacked sufficient funds for satisfactory service."

"Early in 1930 petitions were circulated for an independent postal service. Signers numbered over 3,600, and the petitions were carried to Washington via local representatives. The office was restored to an independent status on March 2, 1931."

"Lee J. Campbell was appointed postmaster on March 2, 1931, to take charge of the office at Fourth and Williams streets, serving more than six times as many persons as were recorded in 1920."

"Contending that the quarters had been out-grown, and there were complaints about service, petitions were circulated in 1930 for a new Federal post office. In February 1931, \$190,000 in Federal funds were allocated for the project."

"It may be stated here that this grant was held up principally because the funds had been diverted to the Civilian Conservation Corps, and because some arguments in Royal Oak disclosed a possible split in the community as to where to build it."

"With these differences explained, the Public Works Administration was willing to release the necessary funds to build it, and the order went forth immediately, but the sum was reduced to \$171,000 in November 1933."

"Preparations got under way immediately for the new building on Second Street, between Washington Avenue and Center Street. Frederick D. Madison, a local architect, was contracted to design the building after competitive bids were reviewed."

"Gilbert Hitchcock Davis was appointed to succeed Leo J. Campbell as postmaster on June 13, 1934. The United States Senate confirmed the appointment on April 23, 1935. Despite the lack of funds, the Royal Oak post office was placed on the 'rush list' by the Federal government, and bids were taken for construction work."

"Henry Dattner of Detroit submitted the low bid of \$76,000, and construction was begun December 11, 1935. Local skilled and unskilled workers were employed, in accordance with a government provision."

"The nation's flag was raised over the finished building on August 29, 1936, during a brief dedication ceremony. Postmaster Davis presented the new post office to the people of the city. The first mail delivery from the new location was made September 14 of that year."

The building has since been enlarged and modified several times. The entire block between Second, Washington, First and Center now belongs to the Federal Government.

When Davis resigned as postmaster in October 1942, Bruce S. Trace was selected from civil service lists to fill the post. He became postmaster December 3, 1942, after competitive examinations determined the "experience, ability and character of the applicant".

For better utilization of its manpower at the beginning of the war era, the post office announced a new schedule of its service effective in April 1943.

The United States Congress passed wage increases for postal employees, which affected approximately 106 Royal Oak branch employees, early in 1945. The city commission lent their support to the bill during its hearing in Congress, when they passed a resolution favoring the proposed raises.

The increase in business in the Berkley area made it necessary to provide quarters there and accordingly a ten year lease was signed for the construction of a one-story 100 X 49 foot building to handle its own mail sorting, and Berkley carriers will work their delivery routes from it. Work was started August 16, 1948, at a cost of \$22,000. The work was completed and the new branch opened December 2, 1948, with Charles Glover in charge.

Postmaster Trace, in his letter of May 14, 1954, has furnished the following statistics of the office as of that date:

"Personnel at this post office include: Postmaster, Assistant Postmaster, Superintendent of Mails, Assistant Superintendent of Mails, Superintendent of Finance, Superintendent of Money Orders, Superintendent of Berkley branch office, two clerks-in-charge, 22 regular clerks, 37 substitute clerks, 49 regular carriers, 88 substitute carriers, 3 mailhandlers, two clerks-in-charge of contract stations, 3 rural carriers and 1 mail messenger."

Bruce Trace served as postmaster from 1942 to 1954. In 1954 Grant D. Maudlin was appointed postmaster of Royal Oak and he served until his retirement in 1969.

In 1967 Royal Oak became the Sectional Center for area mail processing. Royal Oak processed mail for a 2400 square mile area, serving the 60 offices beginning with the zip code prefix 480. This area runs from the Detroit city limit, 60 miles north beyond Port Huron, and from the Canadian border as far west as Milford, Michigan. The area serviced was 2400 square miles and mainly consisted of Oakland, Macomb and Saint Clair counties, with a population of over 1.8 million.

The mail processing function grew to 2.5 million pieces of mail daily, causing the need for a separate mail processing building and sophisticated electronic equipment to handle the mail. In 1974, Royal Oak leased 70,000 square feet of space on Nine Mile Road in the city of Warren and appointed James E. Miller, Director of Mail Processing.

Walter T. Ashton served as Officer in Charge from 1969 until his appointment as Sectional Center Manager/Postmaster on December 5, 1970. Mr. Ashton retired on December 31, 1974. William F. Kunst, Postmaster of St. Clair Shores, acted as the Officer in Charge until the appointment of James E. Miller as

Sectional Center Manager/Postmaster on September 27, 1975. James Miller was the first Royal Oak Postmaster to be appointed under the merit system of the U.S. Postal Service.

In October of 1981 a new building was built and owned by the Postal Service to house the Sectional Center/Processing and Distribution Center. This building was located at 2351 Bellingham in Troy and exceeded 140,000 square feet of space. Within several years, with the increasing mail volume and the deployment of new and improved machinery, this building became too small and other buildings were leased in the vicinity to accommodate the mail processing operations. This processing center handled 1.2 billion pieces of mail annually, with revenue of \$235 million. The service area had over 686,000 city deliveries and 108,000 rural delivery addresses. The Royal Oak Post Office (known as "the Main") now had two branch offices, Berkley and Madison Heights, and two contract stations at Huntington Woods and Meijer's. Many of the Royal Oak District's functions were housed at the Main, such as Human Resources, Employee Relations, Training and Address Information Services.

On November 14, 1991 tragedy struck the Royal Oak Post Office when a fired employee returned to the Post Office with firearms seeking revenge. Five people were killed and five were wounded by the shooter. Many at the time blamed the unfortunate incident on the management style in effect under then Postmaster Daniel Prescilla.

In 2008 a larger Processing and Distribution Center was constructed in Pontiac, Michigan. Named the "Michigan Metroplex", this processing center is the largest and most technologically advanced mail processing facility in the entire country, and processes the mail for virtually the entire southeast quadrant of the Lower Peninsula. Currently the Metroplex has almost 1400 employees, and despite its size and scope, those employees are all still tied to the Royal Oak Post Office, as they are part of the "Royal Oak Bid Cluster", along with the employees at Royal Oak, Berkley, and Madison Heights.

*Compiled by John A. Kuzemka, Royal Oak clerk
August 8, 2013*

POSTMASTERS OF ROYAL OAK

1. James Lockwood	1826
2. Samuel Torbert	1826 - 1830
3. Joseph Chase	1830 - 1841
4. Moses Johnson	1841 - 1842
5. Gage M. Cooper	1842 - 1844
6. David Chase	1844 - 1846
7. Levi C. Rose	1846
8. Augustus E. Brewster	1846 - 1849
9. Flemon Drake	1849 - 1853
10. Chester L. Stoddard	1853 - 1856

11. Jonathan Chase	1856 - 1857
12. Augustus E. Brewster	1857 - 1859
13. Corydon S. Fay	1859 - 1861
14. James B. Johnson	1861 - 1862
15. Manton H. Hammond	1862 - 1865
16. John Felker	1865 - 1867
17. John G. Hutchins	1867 - 1876
18. Edward Ferguson	1876
19. Joseph R. Wells	1876 - 1880
20. Jacob Erb	1880 - 1885
21. Louis Storz	1885 - 1889
22. Jacob Erb	1889 - 1893
23. Louis Storz	1893 - 1897
24. Jacob Erb	1897 - 1914
25. Charles A. Allen	1914 - 1918
26. Francis J. Heavener	1918 - 1931
27. Lee J. Campbell	1931 - 1934
28. Gilbert H. Davis	1934 - 1942
29. Bruce S. Trace	1942 - 1954
30. Grant D. Maudlin	1954 - 1969
31. Walter T. Ashton	1969 - 1974
32. James E. Miller	1975 - 1986
33. Waldo A. Kalsow	1986 - 1987
34. Thomas C. Johnson	1987 - 1990
35. Daniel Prescilla	1990 - 1991
36. Thomas B. Newman	1992 - 1993
37. Robert L. Dreith	1993 - 1994

38. Vanita Y. Wallace	1994 – 2001
39. David P. Bondy	2001 – 2004
40. Michael G. Bembas	2004 – 2005
41. Jeffrey P. Helmuth	2005 – 2013
42. Pamela D. Rambo	2013