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# A Postmaster Should Be Apolitical

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During the course of my research it often happened that I would read on a postmastership card<sup>1</sup> that a postmaster had been dismissed for political partisanship. This information appeared on some of the cards beginning shortly after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cases are relatively rare in this period, but for the years between 1912 and 1940 the number is much higher. After that, this way of operating diminished considerably. It seems that this practice ended around the start of the 1960s.

It meant that postmasters should be politically neutral and not proclaim their partisan colours. For this reason, by remaining inactive in actual fact, they could not become involved in political debates, especially during electoral campaigns. They had no possibility of working in support of a candidate who opposed the party in power, because if the party lost the election the postmaster risked losing his position. In fact, he practically had to maintain absolute silence.

As far as the period of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is concerned, it seems that postmasters then also had to avoid getting mixed up in politics. It came down

to a matter of earning their living. There was no mention of dismissal for political partisanship noted on the cards covering this period, but on the other hand, it did happen. Information is almost impossible to find unless one has a document in hand which clearly shows it.

A concrete example is provided by the *Sessional Papers* dated May 10, 1862<sup>2</sup>. The Deputy Postmaster General, W. H. Griffin (1812-1900), clearly shows that four postmasters of Canada West were dismissed from their service because they had worked against the party in power during the 1861 election. They had operated the offices at Baltimore, Roseneath, Monaghan South, and Alderville. He states, "These Postmasters were informed by the Postmaster General that they were at liberty to remain inactive at the Election; that if they interfered against him it would be at their peril. In defiance of this information they became his most active and uncompromising opponents, and having voted against him, were dismissed from office." The postmastership card of the Baltimore office simply states "Removal" as the reason for Robert Harstone's departure (Fig. 1). This is rather vague as an explanation, but thanks to the previously-cited document, no doubt is possible ... they lost their employment because of their political involvement. This all happened in Canada West, but I am convinced that the same conditions applied in Canada East as well.

A short anecdote about this case: These four offices were located in the Electoral District of Northumberland. Since 1854 this county had been represented by Sydney Smith (1823-1889), who held the portfolio of Postmaster General from August 7, 1858. In the election of 1861 he was defeated, but nevertheless continued to occupy the position of Postmaster General until May 23, 1862<sup>4</sup>. He was therefore able to dismiss from their positions these postmasters who had dared to disobey his order and had worked against him. It was certainly a bit of personal revenge. ☒

**Name of Office:** Baltimore

**Dates:**

**Postmaster Information**

**Federal Electoral District**

**Establishment** 1851-11-06

Northumberland (Ontario)

**Reopenings/Closing**

## References

1. Library and Archives Canada: <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/post-offices/001001-100.01-e.php>
2. Sessional Papers, Vol. 1, for the year ended September 30, 1862, Postmasters section ; [http://books.google.ca/books?id=uekzAQAAAMAJ&pg=RA1-PA59&lpg=RA1-PA59&dq=Sessional+Papers+Canada+1862+postmaster&source=bl&ots=\\_Eco-E8XsN&sig=n-b9Sn3dko5LKMCY3334LE7NBMU&hl=en&sa=X&ei=PWZkUeSHLY2n0AGRqYHICw&sqi=2&ved=0CDcQ6AEwAg](http://books.google.ca/books?id=uekzAQAAAMAJ&pg=RA1-PA59&lpg=RA1-PA59&dq=Sessional+Papers+Canada+1862+postmaster&source=bl&ots=_Eco-E8XsN&sig=n-b9Sn3dko5LKMCY3334LE7NBMU&hl=en&sa=X&ei=PWZkUeSHLY2n0AGRqYHICw&sqi=2&ved=0CDcQ6AEwAg)
3. Library and Archives Canada: [http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/post-offices/001001-119.01-e.php?&isn\\_id\\_nbr=11448&interval=24&PHPSESSID=4focgj9992i49kl9c93tsh0k11](http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/post-offices/001001-119.01-e.php?&isn_id_nbr=11448&interval=24&PHPSESSID=4focgj9992i49kl9c93tsh0k11)
4. *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*: <http://www.biographi.ca/index-e.html>

Name of Postmaster	Military Status	Date of Birth	Date of Appointment	Date of Vacancy	Cause of Vacancy
Robert Harstone	—	—	1851-11-06	1861-07-11	Removal
John Gilbard	—	—	1861-09-01	1870-03	•
Thomas Mulligan	—	—	1870-04-01	1873-12-09	Resignation
Archibald Russell	—	—	1874-01-01	1876	•
Thomas J. Mulligan	—	—	1876-10-29	1878-08-24	Resignation
Thomas McCutcheon					
John A. Gordon	—	—	1885-07-01	1892-08-01	Death
George Mitchell	—	—	1892-11-01	1901-12-21	Resignation
Francis Wimbles	—	—	1902-01-22	1913-04-29	•
Arthur H. Noble	—	1884-12-04	1913-07-02	1960-01-15	•
Mrs. Flora Elizabeth Fraser	—	•	1960-06-01	1960-11-26	Resignation
Lorne Wesley Cane	OAS	•	1960-12-28	Acting	—
Lorne Wesley Cane	OAS	•	1961-03-21	1985-11-05	Resignation
B. Smith	—	•	1985-12-15	—	—

• In compliance with the Privacy Act (1083), certain personal information has been deleted from this file.

*Fig.1: Postmastership card for the post office at Baltimore, Ontario*