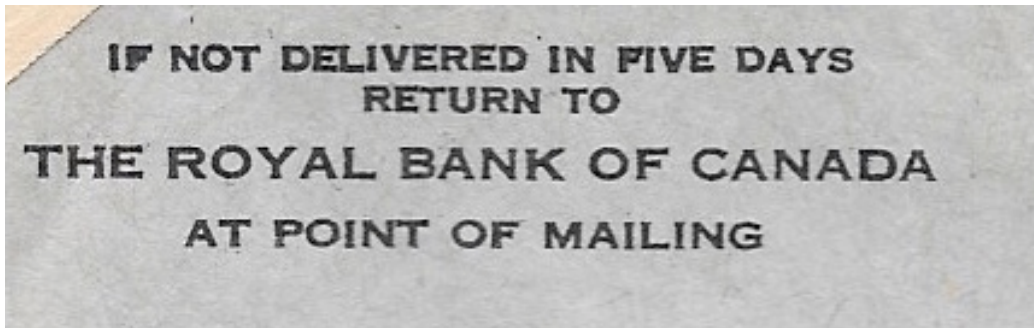


# The Royal Bank of Canada in Gander

(by Robert G Pelley 28 September 2016)

I recently acquired an empty envelope that really doesn't look like much. Even worse, it has a cellophane window that would have shown to whom it had been addressed – but there was no letter inside, so who knows who was supposed to receive it.

In the top left hand there was the usual return address, typical of business letters:



There was however in the other corner a Newfoundland Caribou stamp. On a closer look, it is possible to read the date stamp; Gander 23 December 1942. In others words it was sent by a Royal Bank employee in the middle of the war.

The bank of course had its rules, regulations and a work roster. It is not hard to imagine some person in a blustery day in December, two days before Christmas, in a cold, damp office working hard to get out a last bill - or check – before finally going home.

The people working at the bank were obviously optimists – getting things delivered in five days can be a miracle even today.

Before the opening of a “proper bank” in Gander, the Newfoundland Department of Posts and Telegraphs was assigned other duties in addition to telegrams and mail. Newfoundland Airport, as Gander was called early on, was one of some 100 sites where a Newfoundland

Government Savings Bank was integrated into Post Office operations.

The absence of a chartered bank meant that the men building the new airport had no means of cashing their checks. Well over ninety per cent of them were from “out around” and when they got a pay check, the first priority was to send money home.

The post office was originally set up as a small peacetime operation and was not equipped to cash the checks of well over 1000 men during the wartime construction period. The solution was to give only 2% of the check in cash and the other 98% as a money order. There was not much, except food and lodging, to spend money on in Gander anyway.

There were eventually four post offices in Gander able to assist in a quasi-bank function. One was situated on the “Canadian side”, north of the runways, near hangar 13 (It may have been on the Army side earlier on). Another was situated on the totally opposite side of the runways, in what was called the “South Camp”, which would have been, roughly speaking, about a kilometre east and south of the present RCAF base. There was another one in the RAF Ferry Command area, in present day hangar 22. The main post office was operated, on a 24 hours basis, in the Administration Building.

For those unfamiliar with old Gander, the photo below shows the Post and Telegraph office that existed in hangar 22 until the opening of the present day terminal. The other shows the Administration Building.





The Royal bank of Canada opened its doors for business on August 9, 1941 in a room built onto Eastbound Inn, named for aircraft crews stopping over in Gander en route to Europe. It was located immediately behind the two round-roof buildings shown in the photo above.

It can better be seen here. The building further to the right is the Gander Inn.

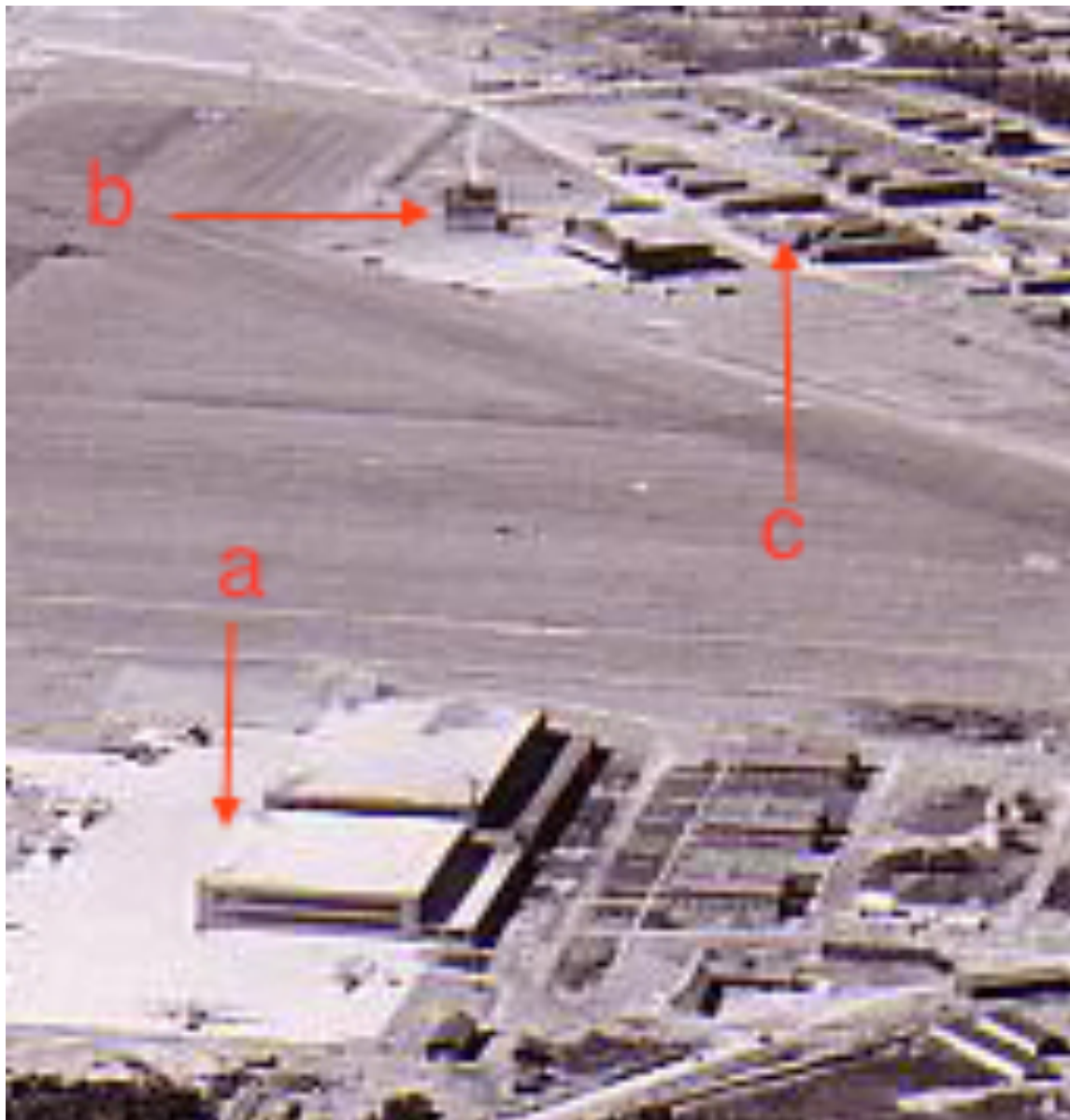


In the global overview below,

(a) refers to the present hangar 22

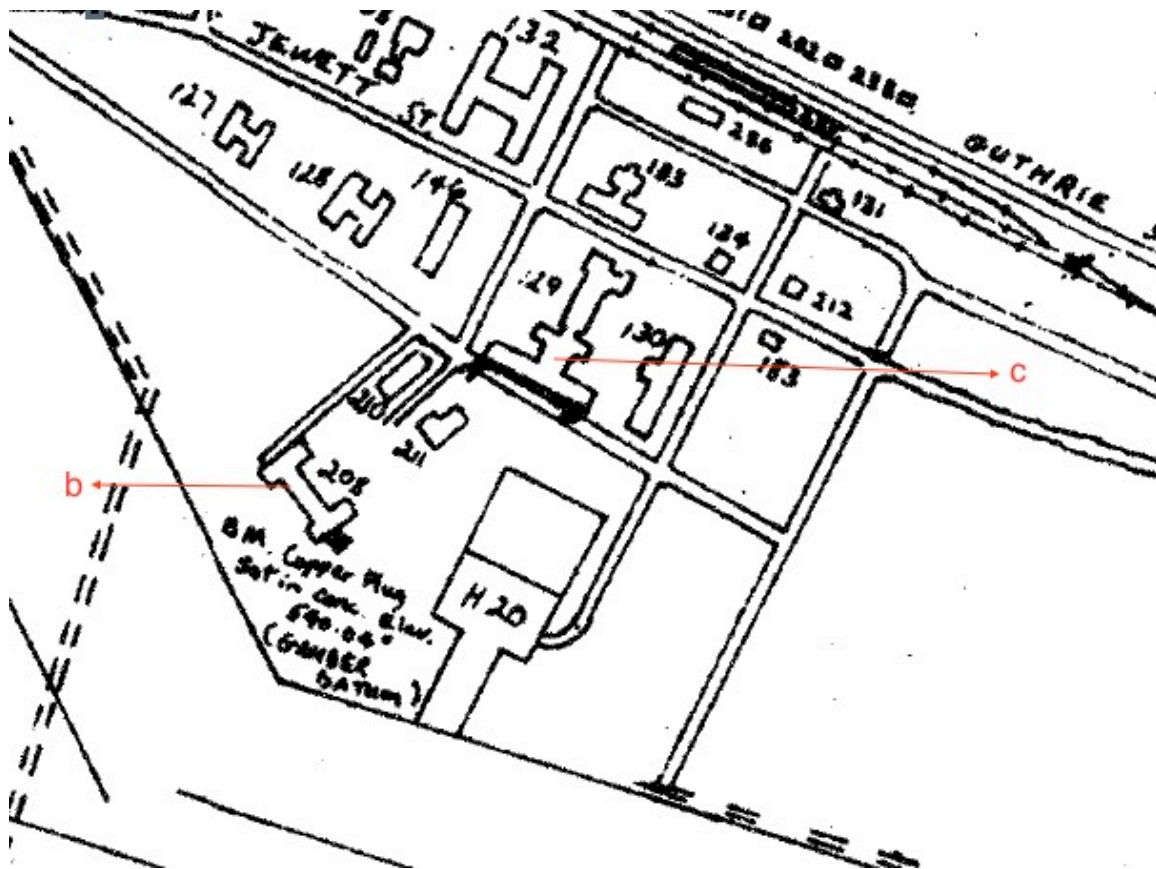
(b) was the old Administration Bldg

(c) shows the Eastbound Inn (Royal Bank)



The phone number in 1949 was simply "246". In 1954 the number was "646" and the address was shown as "Wood Avenue", which means that the entrance was on the side of the building, rather than via the main road.

The shape of the building can be seen here. The letters here are the same as in the above photo.



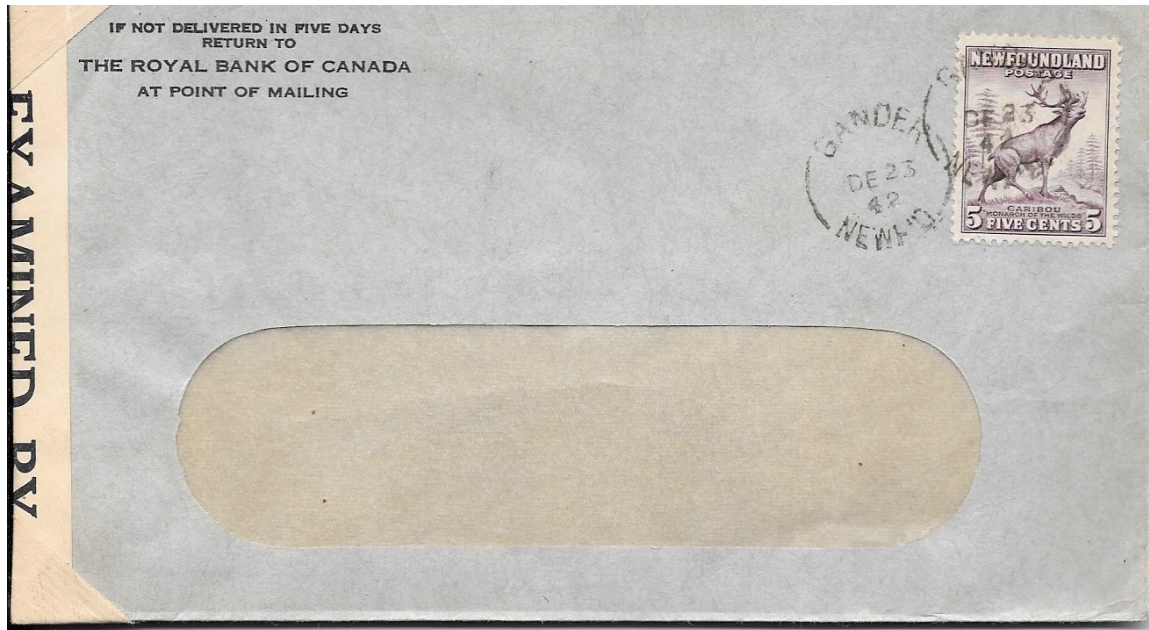
The first bank Manager was Mr. Gerald C. Smith from the Moncton RBC office. He got a room in Gander Inn and set up shop in the next building over.

The bank was very small. Both male and female employees shared one washroom. Money was stored in a safe in the corner and records were stored in boxes around the walls leading to and even in the washroom. A wicket was provided



with bars on the windows but the counter was in reality just a piece of stand-alone furniture. On paydays the Newfoundland Rangers, the civilian police at the time, let people in by groups of five at a time.

It was from this small office was sent the envelope below:



It would seem that not even bank employees were completely trusted in those wartime days. As can be seen from the left end of the envelope. censors checked even bank correspondence!

Near the end of the war Mr Smith was replaced by Mr Jack Austen. Eastbound Inn was also home to local businesses such as Simpson-Sears, Milley's Style Shop, Toytman's Store and several apartments. But around 10 years after the end of the war, a new town was being built and the venerable Eastbound Inn was living its last days. It would therefore be Mr Austen's job to lead the bank's move to the new town-site.

In 1955 the Eastern Woodworkers Construction Company completed a contract in amount of \$42,500 for the new premises of the Royal Bank, which it occupied the following year.

In 1956, there were around ten employees who worked in a non-automated world. Manual tools were the order of the day: proof machine, typewriters, adding machines, and basic dial telephones.

In those “manual” days - when the bosses were generally men and the clerical staff pretty much all women - good handwriting was quite likely highly important hiring criteria for female employees. Accounts, ledgers, teller logs, money orders, etc. were all done by hand. If a deposit was made to a savings account, it was hand-written first onto the savings card (the bank’s record), then to the individual’s bank book. As Gander had no law offices, mortgages were completed in St. John’s.

Today the bank is obviously computerized and while envelopes like the one from 1942 are still used, they being replaced by binary code. But the basic job stays the same.

This is what it looked like at the time of construction.



Today the outside is pretty much as it was back then. The faces of those working inside however have changed over time.

*(In writing this article I was inspired by a number of other documents. One was the very descriptive notes in "Faye's Pages" of the "Flight website" by Betty (Lush) Burt, who at one time worked for RBC. There was also excellent information in an article about Mr Smith in the Beacon Supplement 01 August 1988. The biography of Everett Milley, Gander's first postmaster, in The Beacon Supplement July 27, 1977 provided info on the post office's quasi-banking role. Audrey (Mingo) Grantham provided the info on the new bank building.)*