WHANGANUI DISTRICT HERITAGE INVENTORY

Register Item No: 375 **Type:** Building
Name: POST & TELEGRAPH OFFICE
Location: 51 Victoria Avenue, Whanganui
Legal Description: Sec ASO 32727
Current Details: Owner: [Contact Whanganui District Council for details]
Occupiers: Halo Hairdresser, Big Orange Coffee Bar (plus new restaurant under construction on ground floor)

Original Owner: NZ Government
Date: 1902
Architect/Designer: John Campbell, Government Architect
Builder: Nicholas Meuli; Government Overseer: W Annand

Status: Whanganui District Plan, Old Town Area, Class B, 2013
Thematic Context: Transport & Communication
Significance: Historic, Architectural, Technological, Context
Integrity: Altered sympathetically – clock tower removed after Napier earthquake

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Photo Reference:
WDC File Refs: Heritage/Inventory/B16 18m (1 below), B16 18n (2 below), B16 18o (3 below)
Date: Nov 2003
See p4 for additional photograph(s)



Post & Telegraph Office, Victoria Avenue façade – original entrance at left, now blocked off.

History:

Of the establishment of post & telegraph services in Wanganui:

The first overland mail reached Wanganui from Wellington on 20 Sept 1841 and later that year the first post office was set up in a raupo whare in Taupo Quay opposite Wilson Street, with Samuel King being the first postmaster, a position he held until 1849. The first post route of any importance in the colony was between Wellington and Wanganui (or Petre as it was known at that time) with the service extended to Auckland in 1843. The mail was carried by "native foot post" along the coast, the journey from Wellington to Auckland taking 3 weeks. Between 1847 and 1854, a fortnightly mail service was provided between Wellington and New Plymouth by Thos Scott, who later established Scott's Ferry on the Rangitikei River. Between 1843 and 1863, New Zealand's postal services were operated by the Customs Department, with the Wanganui customs house located in 1854 on the corner of Taupo Quay and Nixon Place. In the 1860s, the mail service between Wanganui and Patea either operated under military escort or was taken by coastal steamer between the two ports.

A post office savings bank was established in Wanganui in 1867. The first telegram to Wanganui was sent by Premier, William Fox, on 3 Nov 1869. In 1876, a submarine telegraph cable laid from Wakapuaka, Nelson to Wanganui made Wanganui the North Island link with the international cable network. In 1878, a daily mail service to Wellington was introduced by rail via Palmerston North to Foxton, thence by coach-and-horses down the coast. In 1886, the Wanganui Telephone Exchange was opened.

Of the site:

A store and school on the site was operated by a Mr & Mrs Davis by 1856, but in 1869 a one-storeyed wooden building was erected to house the Telegraph Department and post office. The architect was WH Clayton and the builder, Mr McKirdy. This building was added to over the years, first in 1875 and later in 1881 after a fire, when a second floor and bell tower with a 4-dial clock were added.

This building was demolished in 1901 to make way for the new Post Office. The builder, Nicholas Meuli, salvaged the kauri timber to build his own house on St John's Hill (which was burnt down in 1927). The post office moved to temporary accommodation in Victoria Avenue, occupying the two shops just down from the Bank of New South Wales which had housed HI Jones during their rebuilding (see B6.3).

Of the building:

Designed by John Campbell, the Government Architect, work on the new P&T building started on 1 April 1901 and it was completed 16 months later. Wanganui people were frustrated by the length of time involved in the building (see *The Yeoman*, 18 Oct 1902), which they considered was caused by "red-tapism permeating the departmental offices connected with the construction of public works". Meuli's tender was accepted as early as February 1901 (cost estimated at £5,144 10s 4d), and the site was cleared by early May but Meuli had to wait for the Government's surveyor to come up and put down the boundary pegs. The building permit was not issued until 28 June 1901. Later on, it took three months for the architects and engineers to decide on which side of a partition a door should hang.

Wanganui contractors involved:

Nicholas Meuli – the builder – was solely responsible for the interior furniture and fittings of the building, including the cedar-topped tables for the instruments in the telegraph operating room.

John Jones – masonry, stone and concrete work; R&E Tingey – painting and decorating; C Burrell – plumbing; RW Green – Venetian blinds.

The new Post & Telegraph building housed all postal and telegraph services as well as the telephone exchange and the PO savings bank. It was considered to be of such importance to Wanganui that Sir Joseph Ward (Postmaster General and Acting Premier) officiated at the official opening on 16 Oct 1902. About 1,000 attended the official ceremony, which took place following a civic luncheon at The Rutland Hotel (opposite) with the Mayor, Mr Alexander Hatrick, and the local MP, Mr AD Willis, taking a leading role in proceedings. Sir Joseph Ward noted in his speech that "the building was superior to any other Post Office in the colony". He also commented that, should the P&T business expand to require further premises, then they could always add another storey or erect a further building alongside. The Mayor presented Sir Joseph with a framed Denton photograph of the new building as a souvenir of the occasion.

The P&T building required alterations quite soon, in 1907 when Nicholas Meuli undertook further work. In 1911, the adjoining Bank of Australasia building in Ridgway Street was acquired to provide more room. The telephone exchange moved out in 1923 to a purpose-built building in St Hill Street. By 1929, a vacant section next to the old bank building had been purchased and announcements made that a new Post Office

would be erected on the Ridgway Street site (*Wanganui Chronicle*, 31 July 1929). In 1931, following the Napier earthquake, major alterations were made to the Post & Telegraph building: the tower was removed as were the high gables. The clock face was used for a town clock elsewhere in the Avenue and the chiming bells were taken to Cooks Gardens to the old Watch Tower which then became the clock tower. The building thus lost much of its imposing character, but as its life as a Post Office was shortly to come to an end, this was probably not considered to be a disaster by residents of Wanganui.

With the building of the Chief Post Office on Ridgway Street in 1940 [See B16-19], the old Post & Telegraph building became the home of various government departments. By 1955, the building housed the Marine Dept, Inspector of Machinery, Transport Dept, HM Customs, Dept of Agriculture and Child Welfare Dept. The government departments had moved out by 1990 and in 1992, a new use was found for part of the ground floor when Cables Restaurant was established.

Description:
A two-storey brick building with Oamaru stone pilasters and mouldings and a Mansard-style corrugated iron roof. Both facades are in classic Renaissance style, brick being exposed between the pilasters (Doric style on ground floor with Corinthian above). Dentils below remaining parapet. The imposing tower and gables removed in 1930s. Original main entrance at the corner of Victoria Avenue is now blocked up. The interior is currently a rabbit-warren, much of it blocked off. Stairs lead to a small third storey, but are also blocked off. Ground floor windows are arched; first floor windows full-height. All windows are double-hung and appear to be original.
(See *The Yeoman*, 18 Oct 1902 for a detailed architectural description of the building and its layout)

Condition:
Exterior good; interior in need of refurbishment and new uses/tenants on first floor.

Resources Consulted:
1990 Heritage Study #16/1 – (Sources quoted there not yet sighted in 2003).
Wanganui District Council Building file – papers from 1992 only, re Cables Restaurant.
Wanganui Borough Council Register of Building Permits, Archives Ref: AAF 174:1 – building permit issued 28 June 1901 for Post Office in brick and stone.
Wanganui Herald, 28 Feb 1901 – Mr N Meuli's tender accepted for Post Office. Est. cost: £5,144 10s 4d.
Wanganui Herald, 23 March 1901 – removal of old PO to make way for new building. Notes temporary premises for PO in Victoria Avenue. (Same article in *Yeoman*, 30 March 1901)
Yeoman, 4 May 1901 – notes site cleared. Meuli waiting for Govt surveyor to put down boundary pegs.
Wanganui Chronicle, 17 Oct 1902 – report on opening of building and history of PO in Wanganui.
The Yeoman, 18 Oct 1902 – report on opening and description of new PO.
Wanganui Chronicle, 14 Aug 1931 – notes that contractors are working on PO tower, removing concrete ornamentation prior to demolition.
Wanganui Post Office, Postal Services, RM Startup (unpublished history; copy from Randal Springer).
Wanganui Chronicle, 31 Jul 1929 – history of PO in Wanganui and use of the Old Post Office.
Wanganui Chronicle, 27 Oct 2001 – pre 1908 photograph (AP Bates collection) and historical caption.
Wise's Directory, 1955.

Comments on Significance:

Historic
This building is a reminder of Wanganui's importance in the Edwardian era, when it was the fifth largest town in New Zealand and an important regional centre. The fact that Joseph Ward opened the building, while Acting Premier as well as Postmaster General, indicates the importance the Government attached to Wanganui and its post and telegraph systems at the time.

Architectural
Although Wanganui still has a number of "Edwardian baroque" style buildings, the Post & Telegraph Office is one of the most substantial structures of its era. Joseph Ward noted in his speech when opening the P&T Office that "the building was superior to any other Post Office in the Colony".
Despite having lost its clock tower in 1931, the façade is remarkably intact with the stone window surrounds providing elegant street elevations to both Victoria Avenue and Ridgway Street.

Technological
Since 1876 Wanganui had been a critical link in the country's telegraph system and this building was purpose-built to house the telegraph systems as well as the manually-operated telephone exchange. Telephones were still rare in 1902 with new subscribers being listed in the newspapers at the time.

Context
This is an important corner building that is part of the classic townscape view of Whanganui, complementing the Watt Fountain and Rutland Hotel.

Recommendations:

Date: 24 February 2004 (revised 26 Jan 2005) **Research by:** Wendy Pettigrew



Post & Telegraph Office, Ridgway Street façade with original gateway.


At the Official Opening16 October 1902: *Back:* John McBeth, Wanganui Postmaster; AD Willis, MP. *Front:* Alexander Hatrick, Mayor; Sir Joseph Ward, Acting Premier & Postmaster General; Mr T Rose, Inspector to P&T Department. *Photograph courtesy of Lyn Shackleton.*