

# The Acton Free Press

Ninety-Fifth Year. — No. 35

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SECOND SECTION

## Postal service gave Acton its name 126 years ago

Acton has had continuous postal service for 126 years, and 56 of those years are represented by the dusty rubble at the corner of Mill and Willow Sts. today.

It was the post office that gave Acton its name.

Our village, at first called Danville, was Adamsville by 1844 when its first post office was to be set up. The hard-working Adams — Zena, Rufus and Ezra — were the first settlers.

But Canada already had a registered post office by the name of Adamsville — miles away in Quebec. The name had to be changed.

The suggestion to call it Acton came from Robert Swan, son-in-law of first postmaster John Nicklin. It was the name that nostalgically recalled his native town in England. (Apparently Robert Swan worked with his father-in-law,

since other sources credit him as the first postmaster.)

The first post office was established, with the village's new name, in a frame building which stood for 65 years on Main St., the area which was then the centre of business.

Mr. Nicklin was succeeded by Lachlan McDonald who also had a general store and grain buying business across the street from the Dominion Hotel. Here in 1855 James Matthews first became connected with the post office. Mr. McDonald retired and the business and post office were moved to Charles Hill's store on Mill, and then soon after to another small store which was later A. T. Brown's old drug store.

Postmaster Matthews then built the post office adjoining his brick home on Mill St. (now Pete's Barber shop). The mails were handled here for 10 years and then Mr. Matthews built a

store at the corner of Mill and Willow (where the old post office was later built.) He had the post office in front and telegraph office in the rear.

Here the post office stayed until 1879 when Mr. Matthews disposed of his grocery and crockery business and another location had to be found. The Free Press then occupied the building belonging to Mr. Matthews next door which he decided to utilize, so the newspaper had to find premises of its own further down Mill St. (now the stationery store). This small frame building was Acton's first post office building.

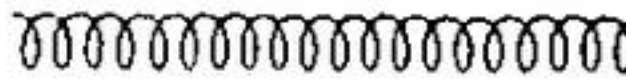
For the next 35 years the post office business was conducted in this building. The building was moved when the new post office was built. The post office was in limited quarters for a while before the fine new federal building was opened in 1914.

A 535,000 structure, the post

office and Customs Office was the town's pride.

Wrote the Free Press in November, 1914: "The post office is a splendid tribute to the loyalty of Mr. D. Henderson M.P., to the place which has been his home town for 40 years. Through his personal efforts this handsome and commodious building has been erected here. There is no lack of appreciation of this interest of Mr. Henderson in Acton's behalf on the part of our citizens. The new building was greatly needed and its comprehensive character and convenient appointments fulfil all the requirements of the community. It is a handsome structure occupying a commanding site in the centre of the town and will give to Acton a prestige not heretofore enjoyed. This is the first government building of any importance to be erected in the county of Halton."

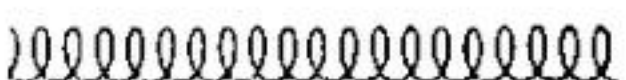
James Matthews was postmaster for 61 years and clerk two years before that — a record for Canada — and took charge of the staff in the new building. He saw a farming hamlet of 200 grow to the 2,000 serviced by the new building in 1914. When he came to Acton he helped his mother dip candles. He helped the Adams boys farm; brought the first coal oil lamp; saw electricity and the telephone come. He introduced the first sewing machines in his store. When the first post office was established no stamps were used and they weren't introduced until Mr. Matthews had been postmaster some years. It was necessary to stamp letters with a steel stamp "Paid Ad" or "Collect 3d." Letter postage rate was equivalent to six cents (actually the present rate!) The rate to Great Britain for letter "home" was 12½ cents. Before the Grand Trunk railway was constructed and traffic opened the mail went by horseback or stage. The stage roads to Guelph were fairly good, but the trip to Milton with the mail was through dense bush. The mail then came from the station in a pack, carried on the back of a contractor, but later a horse and wagon were required. Now trucks are taking over from trains. After John Nicklin, Robert Swan, Lachlan McDonald and John Matthews, post masters and their deputies were William Snyder, George Blackwell, John Secord, Thomas Kennedy, Robert Walters, W. Hawkins, A. E. Matthews, Robert Lyon, J. M. Fernley, L. G. Matthews, Miss Daisy Birch, Mrs. Richard Somerville, Mrs. Anna Maddock, Mrs. R. M. McDonald (just turned 90 and with clear recollections of learning the telegraph) Miss Annie Turton, Miss Clara Moore, Mrs. Pinke, Miss Ethel Near. Then in 1914 when the move was made into the new building, Mr. Matthews' assistants were J. C. Matthews, and Miss Mae Moore, and R. M. MacDonald was customs officer. The building that is toppling to the ground, brick by brick, held many happy memories for Actonians. After Mr. Matthews, postmistress was Miss Fern Brown. She was followed after World War II by Frank Terry and when he was transferred Gord McKeown became postmaster, the position he still holds in the new post office. Customs officer after Mr.



### THE OLD MAN OF THE BIG CLOCK TOWER



"The Old Man of the Big Clock Tower" was the name of a column of reminiscences in the Free Press for many years. The columns were reprinted in 1939 in book form as Acton's Early Days. Writers of the column were Free Press editors H. P. Moore and then G. A. Dills. A picture of the clock tower topped each column.



MacDonald was popular Billy Middleton, still a resident and held in affectionate esteem. After his retirement there were several customs officers before Murray Harrison.

Sandy Best was Halton's member of parliament when it was decided another federal building was needed. More room for staff, mail and truck turning was urgent.

The present site on Bower Ave. was decided upon, and the Storey Glove factory and old Knoxes home (then occupied by Knoxes and Spencer-Lees) was demolished.

Long-time residents of the old federal building, Mr. and Mrs. Cam Leishman overlooked the town's heart from their upstairs apartment for many years.

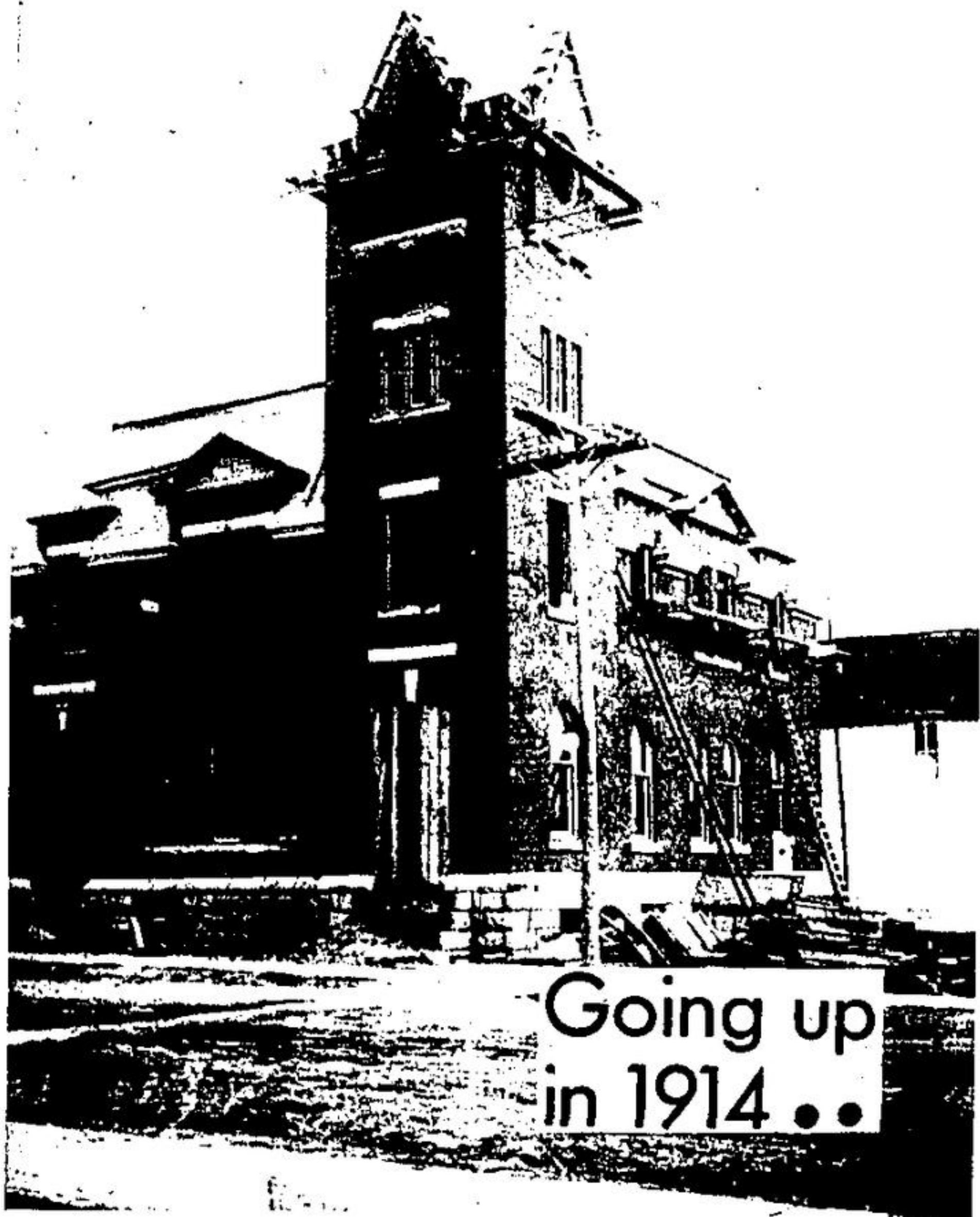
The bell tolled the hours faithfully for over 50 years; Cam Leishman looked after the clock with pride.

The new building opened with an official ribbon cutting ceremony in 1963.

The old building was bought by Ben Rachlin and George Robertson. It was vacant, then converted into apartments for a couple of years. The clock failed, the bell no longer tolled.

Recently the building was bought by Mrs. Pauline Ollen. Mr. and Mrs. Ollen, who live at Speyside, will build on the site for the Toronto-Dominion bank.

Just before the wreckers arrived, Ben Rachlin wound the clock for the last time. Soon the bell, weighing two tons, was hauled down, the clock knocked out, the tower smashed to the ground, and demolition was underway.



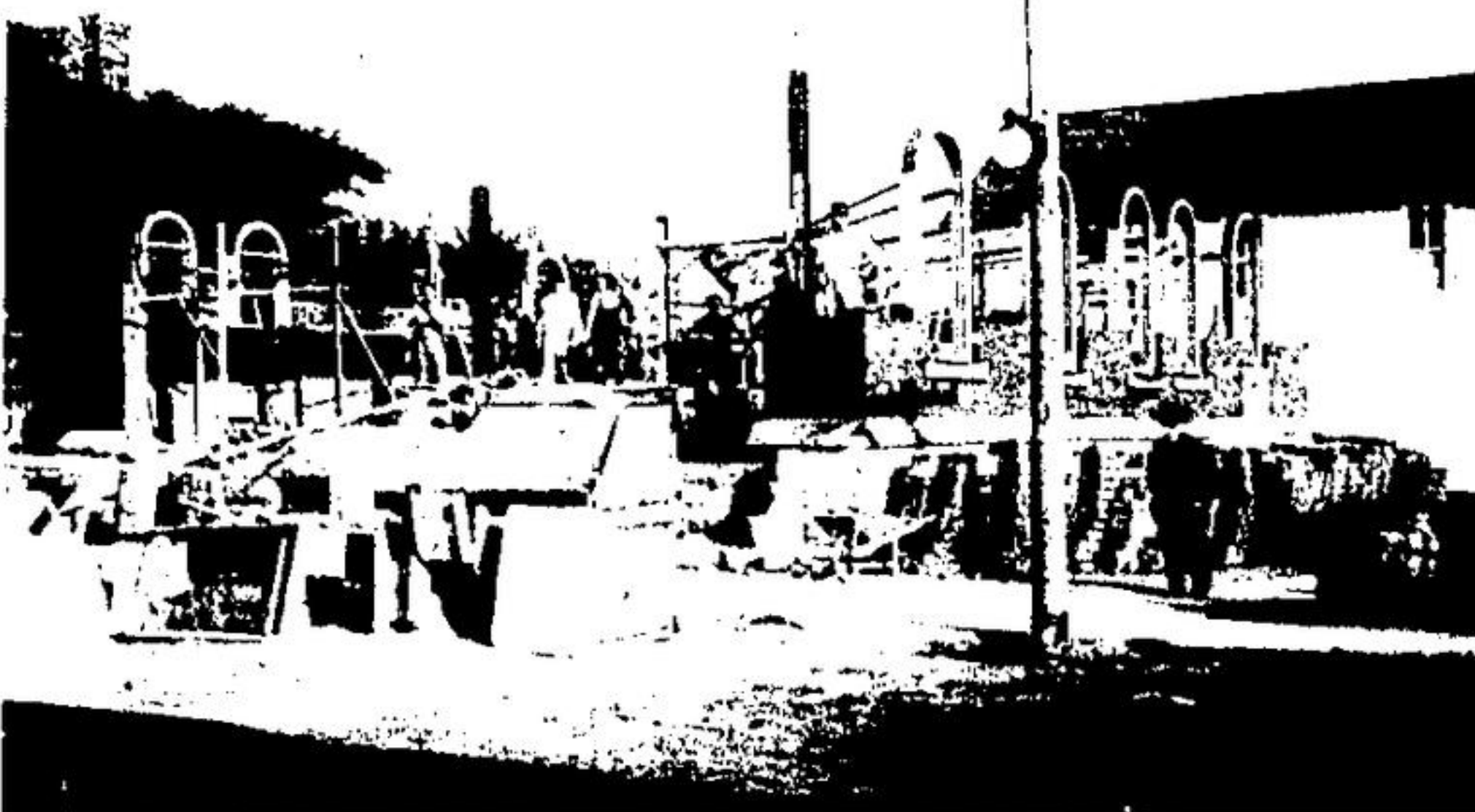
Going up in 1914...

BY 1914 WORK was progressing well on the building which was Acton's pride. Last week the old building looked much the same—coming down instead of going up. A. T. Brown, who was a druggist on Mill St., and early amateur photographer, took this photograph as townfolk watched construction with pride. The bell in the clock weighed two tons; it was taken out last week.



... Coming down 56 years later

NOT EVEN OLD enough to qualify for the old age pension, this landmark was knocked by wreckers into dusty rubble this week. Few watched and apparently few mourned; deprived of its usefulness when the new post office was built it had grown desolate and bleak. —(Staff Photo)



CONTRACT FOR Acton's federal building was let in 1913 and the work wasn't completed until 1914. This picture of the workmen, just beginning the construction of the brickwork, was taken by the late A. T. Brown and is now owned by Mrs. Gord McKeown, wife of the present postmaster. Building's cost was \$35,000 and the workmanship was excellent. Fine architectural details were included.



STORE & RESIDENCE OF J. MATTHEWS ESQ. ACTON WEST.



AFTER BEING located in James Matthews store, the post office moved into its first separate building in 1879. The Free Press moved out of the small frame building to permit the change. The post office was located there for 35 years, until 1914.

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