

The Postmaster's Son: John Wyllie: A man of great influence in the history of Ayr

By Rachel Morgan Redshaw, Historical Researcher
of the North Dumfries Municipal Heritage Committee



So there I was staring at an old tea bag stained coloured paper with various advertisements ranging from local shops to agricultural equipment produced at the Watson Factory. As I glanced at the dark swooping font heading the paper *The Ayr Recorder* along with the many advertisements I saw John Wyllie's name, the old ink pressed to the delicate aging paper. I had seen his name in several places while I was researching. An important man in Ayr's history I decided to find out more about him, what did he do? How was he remembered? I find that I have a fascination with history because it hopes to search for these answers.

Eventually I came upon what I was searching for. A paper recorded a roll of men of the First

Battalion of Waterloo Militia in 1857. As I scrolled through the names of men, I came upon John Wyllie. Underneath his name was a caption that casually read, "Genial John! A laugh and a joke with everyone". The stoic black and white photograph of John Wyllie in the fashionable profile positioning, his eyes staring blankly into the distance held in the records of the township did not suffice. To know that he was once a lively and humorous man made me even more inclined to find out how he fit into the puzzle of Ayr's historical events.

I continued to read on " - lending a helping hand first with pills and plasters, then with dollars and cents. 'Peace to his ashes". I had completed some research and was aware that John had not only been the postmaster of the local post office but he also was involved with the local bank. Before he became involved in the bank and post office he operated a drug store in the Wyllie Store Block and was also a clerk of the 4th division court. He had many talents also being a photographer and Ambrose artist.

John Wyllie was born in 1835 in Canada and married Margaret Pringle of Scotland. Together they had three children, Robert, Jane and John. They lived in a one storey house accompanied by a ¼ acre of land. It was

John's mother that was given credit for naming Ayr based upon the many immigrants from Ayrshire. Mentioning it to her husband Robert, who pronounced it as the name of his new established post office in 1840, she had founded the name that continues to exist today.

As I continued to investigate I came upon many mentions of John's father Robert Wyllie. Robert Wyllie was an early settler of Ayr and an emigrant from the west coast of Scotland. He became the second postmaster in Ayr after succeeding James Jackson. John, his son is recorded to have helped his father with the office; perhaps an instigator for his further endeavours.

On September 30th, 1875 John's father, Robert Wyllie, passed away at the age of 71 years old. In the same year, John Wyllie decided to purchase a vacant lot that would soon provide a two storey building for the post office and bank. It was constructed of brick with Angel Stone on the front of the building. The same building that is located at 40-44 Stanley today.

One of the newspapers I managed to have a peek at dated September 29, 1876 entails a section labelled, "Improvements in Ayr". Below the section were four words "Post Office and Bank" stating that Mr. John Wyllie, Postmaster, and manager of the Consolidated Bank, in Ayr, was "erecting a very commodious and handsome two story brick building". It continues in mentioning that it will be "fitted up with all the latest appliances, such as lock drawers, etc., and will be most convenient to the public, while the building, though plain will be quite an ornament to the village". As I read further down I saw a rather humorous caption from an optimistic journalist, "Who says Ayr is not improving!"

A year after the building was established John was postmaster and telegraph operator. Soon after the telephone was in operation a telephone was installed connecting Mr. Goldie's office and the Montreal Telegraph office in Mr Wyllie's post office building. As new changes were flourishing in the town, Ayr was beginning to become a well known and architecturally distinguished town. Letters written in neat calligraphy writing, now fading from the effects of time, discuss the visits of interested relatives and friends who mention the beauty of Ayr.

In 1878, the building housed the Consolidated Bank of Canada which at the time had a capital of 400,000. In the same year John Wyllie became the Ayr Branch Agent. The bank continued to be housed in the building until reportedly on August 8th, 1879 in the Galt Reporter it had closed its agency and the Merchant's bank had purchased the business.

Weeks after in the same newspaper it was stated that Mr. John Wyllie would eventually become the appointed agent of the new bank. At the time that John Wyllie was appointed agent of the new established bank, the Ayr division removed their lodge from the second floor of the post office. John Wyllie decided then to occupy the vacant section to make for him a 'dwelling house'. It was recorded in the Galt Reporter, "[Mr. John Wyllie] intends to occupy it himself as it is much more convenient to him in business".

In 1881, John Wyllie became the agent for the Canadian Bank of Commerce, an agency in Ayr and as an advertisement read "for the transaction of a general, banking business. Sterling and American Exchange bought and sold. Collections made on the most favourable terms. Savings Bank and other deposits received and Interests allowed: Office- Next door to the post office". The Bank of Commerce operated alongside the post office until

1905.

In 1886, the Bank of Commerce moved to Mr McGeorge's drugstore which was located at 16 Northumberland. In the same year on April 15th John Wyllie was appointed assistant in the Ayr Branch of the Bank of Commerce. On a frigid day on December 21st, 1901 John Wyllie passed away. The building came into the hands of Margaret Wyllie, his wife. Widowed and undergoing her recent loss she sold the building in 1902 to Emma Gillies.

It was later purchased by Alex. C. Gillies a druggist who ran A.C. Gillies Drug Store until 1949.

In the 1920's the Reliance Loan & Savings Co. of Ontario. It was rented for Bell Telephone and later purchased by Eric B. Toye in 1949 and run as a drug store. Purchased by Wally Yuzwa in 1967. By 1969 Wally had purchased the entire building and later in the year he became dealer-owner in the Home Hardware chain. He ran Wally's Sav-on and Wally's Home Hardware until 1991. At this point it became McEachern Home Hardware until 2001, when it changed into ElderBerry's and is now Ayr Space.

The building is rich in history; its central situation makes it an important piece in Ayr's history. It housed some of Ayr's finest members, active in the growth of the community important in matters of war, commerce and postal service which is sometimes difficult to understand how important such an enterprise was. It was here that letters would pass through to the hands of the villagers giving news to relatives and friends. If it was not for John Wyllie and his innovative mind and aspirations for the town this building and the many businesses it has served would have never existed. And although he may remain for us a man we will never know in an antique photograph, his building remains a landmark of his many efforts and plants in us a great reverence for such a man.



John Wyllie's Office Building