



BY: GORDON SMITH

Figure 1. John Morse¹, founder of Morse's Tea, Halifax, with his niece, Annie Prat. Date. ca. 1870.



In 1879, John E. Morse (see Figure 1) opened a small tea import business named after himself as J.E. Morse & Co. on the waterfront of Halifax, Nova Scotia. He saw tea drinking as an important part of English society and wanted to bring quality teas to Canada.

The Morse's Teas building, located at the apex of Hollis and Lower Water Streets (see Figure 2), was not the first building at that location.

In 1753, three years after Halifax was founded, British army agent, Thomas Saul, built a large stone house on the property. The house's next owner converted it to a coffee house called the Jerusalem Coffee Shop, which was a popular spot for merchants. In 1837, a fire engulfed the street and destroyed the building along with many others. In 1841, Edward Starr and Co. bought the property and erected a four-story ironstone warehouse using the surviving bricks from the original house (see Figure 3). The building was constructed in the Georgian style with a flat roof, pronounced corner quoins, and simple granite trim. The building became known as the Jerusalem Warehouse after the former coffee shop and was used by several Halifax businesses. In 1855, the warehouse was

purchased by J. S. McLean, who owned a grocery store that specialized in the sale of imported tea, which he distributed throughout the Maritimes. Figure 4 shows a postcard addressed to McLean at the Jerusalem Warehouse. The imprint of the stamp on the front of the card is not postmarked but the rear of the card has an oval May 10, 1872, cancel.

Figure 5 shows a cover from J.E. Morse & Co. to Ingonish, Victoria County, Nova Scotia. The cover contains a handstamp in the upper left that lists the company location as the "Head of Commercial Wharf". The one cent Large Queen on the front of the cover is obliterated with a quartered cork



Figure 2. Location of the Morse's Teas Building.



Figure 3. Original Morse's Teas Building³ in 1871.



Figure 5. Front and back of cover from "J.E. Morse & Co., Head of Commercial Wharf".

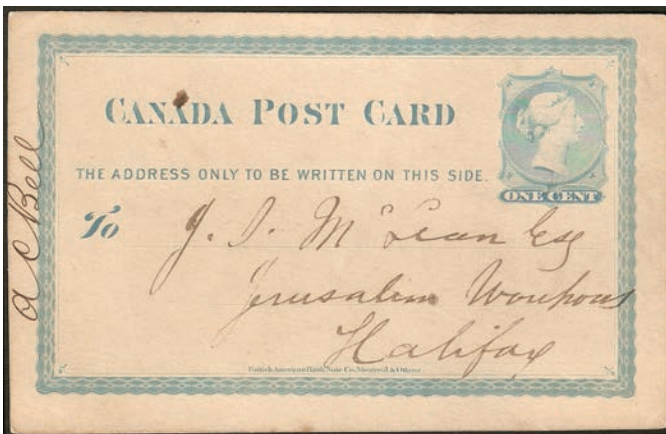
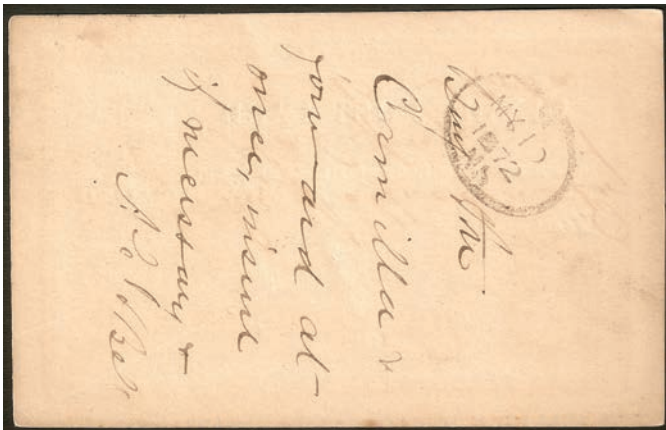


Figure 4. Front and back of postcard addressed to J.S. Mclean at the Jerusalem Warehouse.

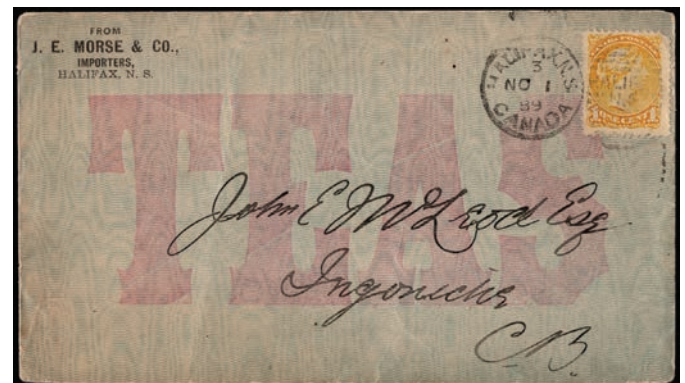


Figure 6. Moiré-patterned envelope.

cancel. While the cover is not registered, the rear contains a number of postmarks that show its journey to its destination in early February 1878.

Sometime in the late 1880's, Morse began having envelopes for the company professionally printed. Figure 6 shows a moiré-patterned cover dated November 1, 1889, with the word "TEAS" printed in light red behind. The upper left corner provides return address information for the company. The rear of the cover is plain.

Figure 7 shows the earliest known example of a cover with a belt logo for the company printed on the rear flap, postmarked Halifax, December 27, 1888, ten months before the cover shown in Figure 6. Various reprintings of this style of cover occurred after the moiré-patterned cover was produced. Figure 8 shows an example from October 21, 1896, with the logo having a break in the upper left portion of the belt outline. This appears to be a constant variety as I have seen multiple covers with logos containing this break. Figure 9 shows a later printing of this style of logo with an unbroken frame; however, the printing is fainter than the previous examples. This cover, from August 15, 1902, is the latest known example of this style of logo. Figure 10 shows some stationery from the company using a similar but not identical logo, dated March 3, 1903.

After 30 years in business, McLean sold the building to another local merchant, Cyril H. Gorham, and in 1910, Gorham

sold it to Obediah E. Smith, president of J.E. Morse & Co. O.E., as he was known, joined Morse's as a commercial traveller (salesperson) around 1890 and purchased the company some time before 1900.

Some time prior to March 1907, the company printed corner cards illustrating the packages of tea that were sold by the

company. Figure 11 shows this style of cover, dated July 13, 1908. The latest known date of this style of cover is December 11, 1913. There were various printings of these envelopes as earlier examples use a heavier paper stock. Figure 12 shows other company stationery that used similar imagery.

The company printed new corner cards using the image of its building sometime between December 11, 1913 (the latest known date of the previous style of cover), and October 3, 1914, the earliest known date of the new style of cover (see Figure 13). Again, there were multiple printings of these envelopes. The example shown has a misprint on the chimney, whereas later examples are fainter and do not have this misprint. The latest known example of this style of corner card is January 21, 1915.

Figure 14 shows a similar corner card, but the image is different. The shading on the foreground is smaller and the wind direction has changed. However, given that the horse carts



Figure 7. Belt logo on rear flap.



Figure 8. Belt logo with broken frame, Oct. 21, 1896.



Figure 9. Faint printing of belt logo, Aug. 15, 1902.

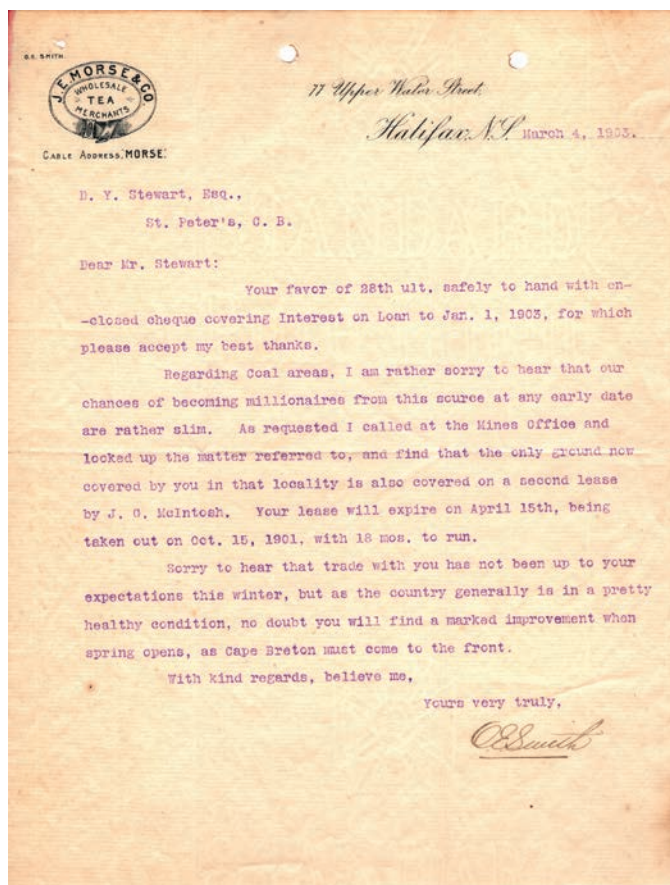


Figure 10. Company stationery with belt logo.

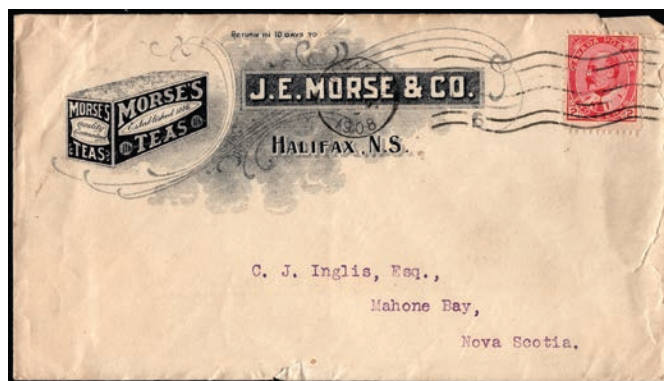


Figure 11. Corner card using image of tea box, Jul. 13, 1908.



Dear Robert!

We have heard nothing from Ottawa. Mr Leslie is waiting & will surely know some of us few days.

The Stratcliffe has been usual sickness & will on the usual this summer.

Our old friend from Vancouver called again the other day. I saw the time but he left word for his price in study work. May I make an offer of 26.4 for 200 LVS

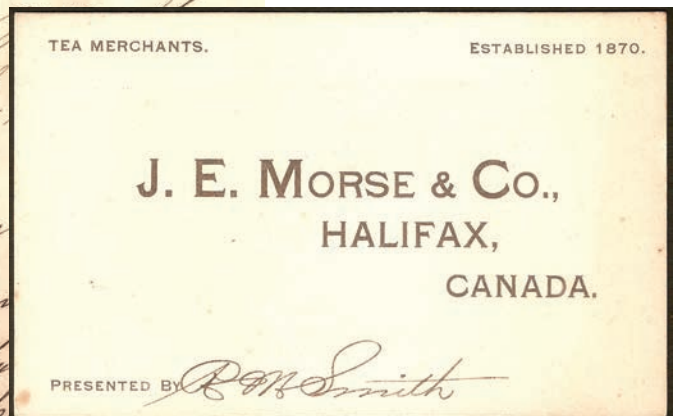
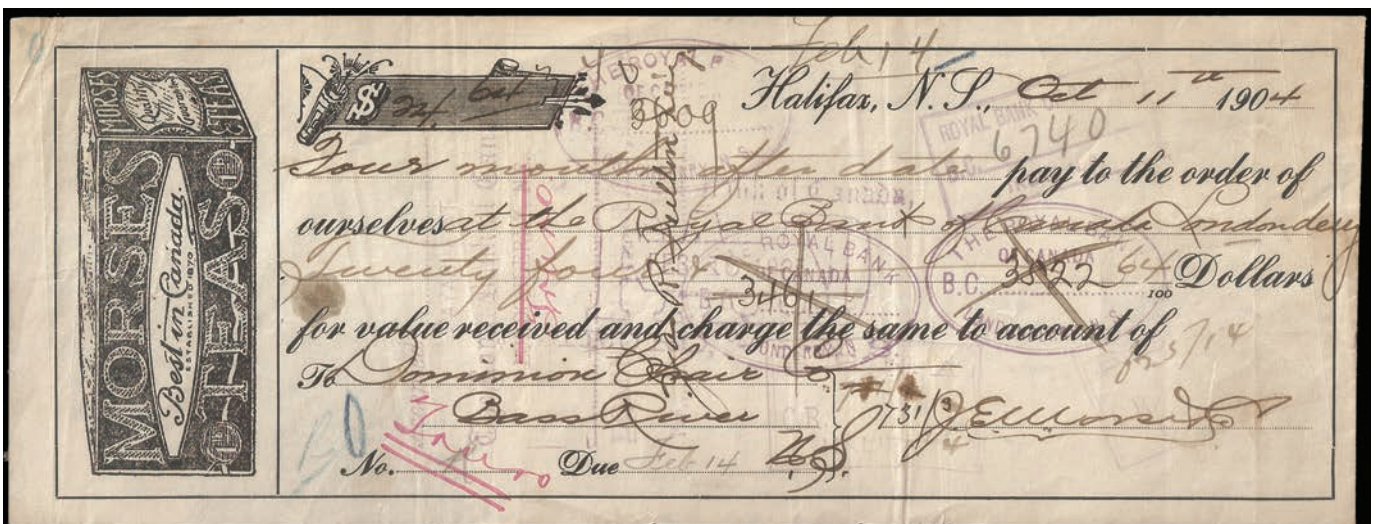


Figure 12. Various company stationery with tea box logo, letter dated Mar. 11, 1903, promissory note date Oct. 11, 1904 .



Figure 13. Corner card using image of the Morse's Teas building, Oct. 3, 1914.



Figure 14. Corner card using different image of the Morse's Teas building, Nov. 21, 1926.

close to the curb are similar in location and style, and the shape of the building and details on the façade are the same, it is likely that this illustration is closely based on the previous one.

On March 27, 1927, the Morse's Teas building experienced a devastating fire (see Figures 15 and 16) that led to major renovations when the building was rebuilt. Two additional storeys were added making the building six bays tall as well as wide, the loading doors were relocated from the north and east walls to the west side of the building, and the pitched roof was replaced with a flat roof (see Figure 17). Experts in 1964 said the building was architecturally and historically unique in North America.



Figure 16. Image showing damage to the building⁸.



Figure 15. Newspaper reporting fire in Morse's Teas Building.



Figure 17. Photograph showing the appearance of the Morse's Teas Building following the renovation⁹.



Figure 18. Corner card using image of renovated building, Apr. 3, 1943.

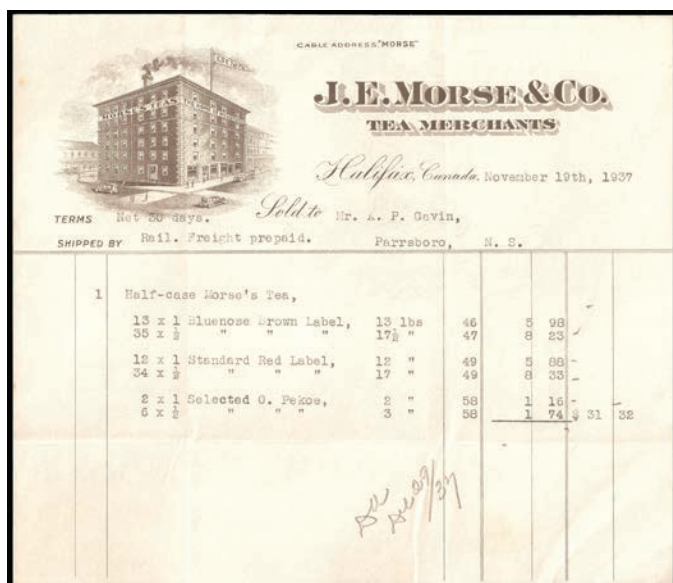


Figure 19. Bill from 1937, using same illustration of building as cover in Figure 17.

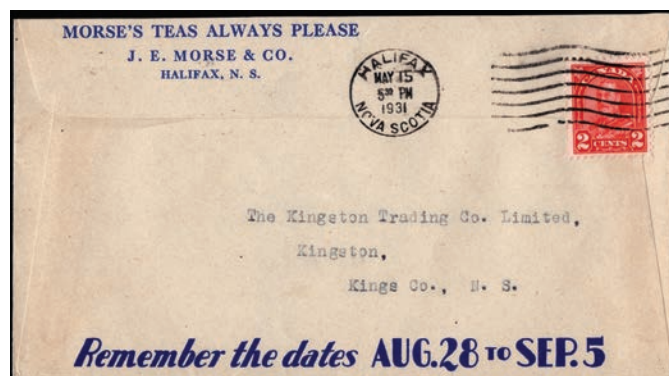


Figure 21. Specialty cover for 1931 Nova Scotia Exhibition.



Figure 20. Specialty cover for 1928 Nova Scotia Exhibition.

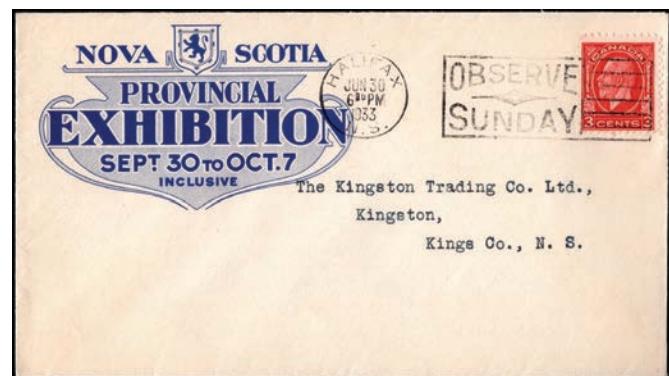
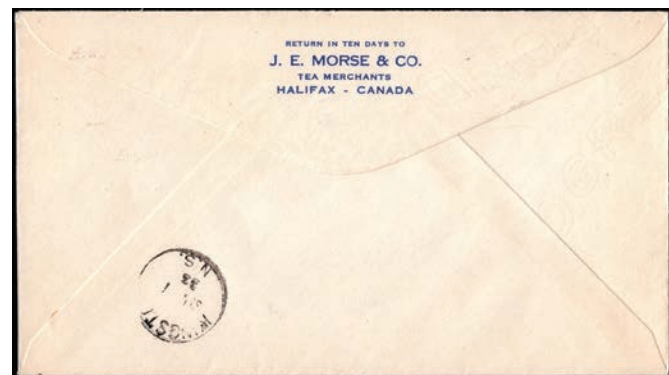


Figure 22. Specialty cover for 1933 Nova Scotia Exhibition.

The renovated building resulted in a new corner card that uses an image of the new building as the illustration (see Figure 18). The earliest known date of this envelope is March 4, 1930, so the building was rebuilt and a new corner card was printed relatively quickly after the fire. The latest known date for this style of corner card is April 30, 1945. The image was also used on company stationery (see Figure 19).

The building remains unchanged today with one exception. In 2013, new owners of the building said that they were unwilling to provide free advertising for Morse's Teas and painted over the advertising band around the top of the building.

J.E. Morse & Co. produced a number of specialty covers of which I am aware. These types of covers, with common images advertising exhibitions with different companies printing their return address information on them, were fairly common in the early 20th century. Figure 20 shows a cover advertising the 1928 Nova Scotia Provincial Exhibition with J.E. Morse &



Figure 23. 45 rpm record mailer with meter mark dated Feb. 3, 1958.

Co. information printed on the flap making what many people would typically consider the rear of the envelope the address side. The image was printed in grayscale. Figure 21 shows a cover advertising the 1931 Provincial Exhibition printed in colour with a similar configuration for the imagery and

addressing. Figure 22 shows a colour printed cover for the 1933 exhibition with a more typical configuration for the imagery and addressing.

J.E. Morse & Co. sponsored Don Messer's Jubilee, a musical group that was popular in the Maritimes from the 1940's to the 1970's. The company provided 45 and 33 1/3-rpm records from the group as promotional offers. Figure 23 shows a mailer for a 45-rpm phonograph record from J.E. Morse & Co. with a label containing the company's return address and using a meter mark to pay postage. I have also seen a similar mailer for a 33 1/3 record, also from 1958.

I am very interested in learning about additional covers and ephemera from J.E. Morse & Co. Please reach out to me at gs@postalhistory.ca. ☒

ENDNOTES

- 1 Morse's Teas, accessed from <https://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=7955g> on Dec. 31, 2025.
- 2 Morse's Teas, [historicplaces.ca](https://www.historicplaces.ca).
- 3 Munroe, Cora-Lynn. "Morse's Teas Building," Historic Nova Scotia. Accessed on Jan. 6, 2026, from <https://historiconvascotia.ca/items/show/108>.
- 4 Morse's Teas, [historicplaces.ca](https://www.historicplaces.ca).
- 5 The Mail-Star Newspaper, Aug. 15, 1964. - The Chronicle Herald Archive. Accessed on Jan. 4, 2026, from <https://www.saltwire.com/nova-scotia/a-look-back-to-when-halifax-very-nearly-lost-morses-tea-and-the-historic-properties-337970>.

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