

# **Letters Home, Unraveling a Mystery about Postal Addresses in 1940s New Berlin**

**By  
Thomas Walker**

A quest often starts with a simple question: Why? So it began with my quest to find out why my father addressed his letters home in 1944 to “104 Market Street, New Berlin, Penna.” At that time, his family lived at 519 Market Street.

A bit of background: I am writing a book about my father’s time in the United States Army Air Corp in 1943, ’44 and ’45. His mother—my grandmother—saved her son’s letters, all 164 of them, in two scrapbooks. The scrapbooks survive and I have them.



Lt. Spencer William Walker, USAF 1945

Dad wrote about his daily activities in the letters from San Marcos, Texas, and March Field, Riverside, Calif., while he was in navigation school. He described training flights and his classroom work. He wrote about the movies and shows he

attended. On September 17, 1944, he wrote from California that he chatted with Abbott and Costello and Spencer Tracy in the Officers' Club following a show. When he was stationed in India, from November 1944 to July 1945, he wrote very little about his 25 missions, no doubt following orders to secure information lest the mail be intercepted by the enemy. A recurring theme from India was, "Please send me something to eat!" He requested candy most often. On November 27, 1944, he asked his mother to send him curtains for the barracks, providing precise measurements. He was also eager for news about his friends who were serving in the military and those who remained at home.

Some people say don't open doors to the past because you might not like what you find. Maybe. But in this instance, I was happy to throw open the door and rush in, not as a fool but as an explorer. And what did I find? Wonderful things! Solving the mystery became secondary. These little slices of family history and the people I met along the way turned out to be the gold in this quest.

Dad—Spencer William Walker—was born in his parents' New Berlin house at 644 Market Street on January 13, 1925. The family moved to 519 Market Street in 1930.

Dad died in August 2013. About 15 years prior, he and my mother wrote the story of his years in the service. My mother, Grace Wagner Walker, was from Mifflinburg. She died in 2007.

In November 2015, I read Dad's story for the first time in, well, about 15 years. He wrote about the letters in his story but that knowledge didn't stick in my memory. Turns out, my sister Nancy had the scrapbooks. I recognized the makings of a book and set out to complete Dad's story.

That's when I noticed that the mailing address he used to send letters to New Berlin didn't match the street address. I also found his pilot's rating book from 1943 on which he wrote his home address as 104 Market Street. Here are two envelopes from the tattered scrapbook:



In March 2013, my wife, Maureen, and I were with Dad in Union County for his sister June's funeral. We took a tour though New Berlin. We know this was his second-to-last visit home. His final trip home was in September 2013 for his burial.

We drove the streets slowly. He pointed out the two houses on Market Street where he lived, including the house where he was born, the house his grandparents lived in and houses where his friends lived. We visited the cemetery. That's where he is now with his grandparents, parents and his beloved Gracie. That day was fun and it was sad. I took pictures. We left New Berlin for a drive through Mifflinburg and then Lewisburg. We visited his sister Kate in Watsontown. Next day, I took Dad took for one last drive through New Berlin. This was the long way home to Bucks County.



Grace and Spence Walker with only remaining airworthy B24, Mercer County NJ Airport, 2003 (author photo)

Back to the mystery of 104. I searched online and found that today's 104 Market Street is at the opposite end of town from where Dad's family lived. It doesn't look like a former post office but who knows what was there in the 1940s. Thus began my quest to unlock the secret of 104 Market Street. Here is the chronology.

January 13 – Maureen and I visit my Aunt Kate (Dad's sister, Catherine Walker Stoudt Livingston, born in New Berlin, January 25, 1928). Aunt Kate has lived in Watsontown since the mid-1950s, first with her husband Bob Stoudt, who died in January 2000, and currently with her husband Bill Livingston. Aunt Kate remembers her New Berlin days fondly. She remembers walking to the post office for the mail but she does not recall the post office at the far end of town.

January 15 – I called the New Berlin post office and spoke with Pat Witmer. She said the post office has been at its current location since the 1980s. It was in an adjacent building prior to that, but Pat does not know for how long. She also told me that some New Berlin residents still do not have curbside delivery as they prefer to use a post office box for mail. Pat suggested I call Jim Lenge of the New Berlin Heritage Association.

January 16 – I received a reply to my email message to my cousin, Bob Stoudt, who is one of Aunt Kate's sons. Bob is a retired UCC minister who wrote a three-volume family history that he completed in 2011. Bob recently moved from Harrisburg to Milton. My message found Bob in Pelenque, Mexico, where he was photographing ruins. I assumed he meant old buildings. Bob had no explanation for 104 Market Street, but then that was not part of his research. He suggested I contact the Union County Historical Society.

January 17 – I had a pleasant conversation with Jim Lenge. He explained that he is a New Berlin newbie – only 11 years in town – but he would ask around.

January 18 – I visited the Union County Historical Society web site where I found the name Tom Greaves, editor of *ACCOUNTS of Union County History*. I sent email messages to Tom and the UCHS.

January 18 – Tom Greaves replies. The sources he checked indicate that the post office was in the center of town, but he found no street address. Apparently, houses were not numbered until only recently. Mail was delivered to the post office where the residents picked it up.

January 19 – I heard from the Union County Historical Society. They have nothing specific to the New Berlin post office.

January 19 – I received a reply to an inquiry I sent to my Aunt Suzanne (Dad's sister, Suzanne Walker Meachum, born in New Berlin, March 22, 1938). She has lived in Florida with her husband, Dave, since the early 1970s. She was but six years old when the family moved from New Berlin to RD#2 Mifflinburg, so her New Berlin memories are of later years when she visited her grandparents.

January 19 – I received an email message from John Showers. I didn't know it at the time, but John is a Union County commissioner. He told me that his parents owned a store in New Berlin that they purchased from the Seebold family in 1946.

My parents, Harlan and Jean Showers owned and operated Showers Store in New Berlin at the corner of Front and Vine...401 Front to be exact. They bought their residence and business in 1946 following the close of the war from Joseph and Nettie Seebold. The Seebolds had operated the store for many years and Joe was Postmaster running the Post Office out of the back of the store. When my parents took over the business in 1946, Joe was permitted under the terms of the contract to continue operating the Post Office from the rear of the store. It was isolated in a separate room that adjoined the store and that door was simply sealed. Joe Seebold bought the building in 1924 and I assume was appointed Postmaster prior to the Roosevelt election in 1933 as the Seebolds were staunch Republicans (Roosevelt would have never appointed Joe Seebold Postmaster). Therefore, I think it is safe to assume that New Berlin's Post Office from 1933 to 1960 was at 401 Front Street, with a side-door entrance from Vine Street.

I owned this building until 2006 and had later transformed it into part of The Inn at New Berlin. Today, it is a bed and breakfast (The Samuel Aurand) and The Emporium gift shop. I have many fond memories of the post office in the back of the store as a child. There are certain parts of that post office that remained, I believe, untouched from those days: oiled wooden floors, caramel brown woodwork, old wall paper, and an old summer kitchen fireplace.

[Note: The article "A Sense of Place" by Jeannette Lasansky, (ACCOUNTS, Issue 5-2, October 2015, page 70) includes a photo of Harlan, Jean, and John Showers standing in front of the New Berlin store.]

January 20 – Email message from Diane Lengle of the New Berlin Heritage Society, who writes, "This is what we learned.... before the 1950s there were no street numbers in New Berlin, so it [104] probably was the postal box."

Back to the Google. I unlocked the mystery with a page 1 article from the *Mifflinburg Telegraph*, January 24, 1946, headlined "Seebold Store at New Berlin Sold". Here's the article:

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### *Seebold Store at New Berlin Sold*

Joseph Seebold, who has conducted a general store at New Berlin for a period of 23 years, has sold the business, storeroom and dwelling to John Showers of Penns Creek who will be given possession of the store next week. Mr. Showers has operated a similar store in Penn's Creek for a number of years. The New Berlin store will be operated by his two sons, John and Harlan Showers.

In addition to operating the New Berlin store, Mr. Seebold served as postmaster at that place for the past 16½ years.

Mr. and Mrs. Seebold will remain in the dwelling, adjoining the storeroom for the present. They expect to construct a home, which they will occupy when finished, on their lot near New Berlin which is located across the Penn's Creek Bridge at that place.

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*Mifflinburg Telegraph*, Jan. 24, 1946, p. 1

Clearly, the post office was at this location in 1944. That's the "where," but what about the "why"? Why 104? The number 104 no doubt represented a post office box, not a street address (street addresses were not used in New Berlin in the 1940s), but how was it assigned? A map of New Berlin from 1868 shows the lot numbers for each property. Assigning a postal box number corresponding to the lot number makes sense. But that's not how it was done. Lot 104 is on Water Street, between Cherry and Hazel. My grandparent's house was on lot 169, which is now 513 Market Street. Perhaps the post office assigned box numbers first come, first served.

I consider the mystery solved and the case closed. But there's more to the story. There always is.

My Aunt Suzanne, the one in Florida, remembered that John Shower's wife, Nancy Ross at the time, was their babysitter in Lewisburg. I send this information to John in a how-about-that note. John wrote back thusly:

Oh my, it is a small world. I believe Dave Wagner would be your first cousin (son of June I believe?). Dave was a [Mifflinburg] high school classmate of mine.

Small world, indeed, and Dave Wagner, son of June, is my cousin.



These three individuals are standing in front of the door that Lt. Walker's mother would have used in 1944 to pick up her son's letters. The entrance to the New Berlin post office was on Vine Street in Seebold's Store, which became Showers' Store in 1946. In the photo, taken April 12, 2016, are Jim Lengle, New Berlin resident and member of the New Berlin Heritage Association (left), Maureen Walker, Reading PA., Lt. Walker's daughter-in-law, and John Smith, who purchased the building in 2013 and is innkeeper of The Samuel Aurand House and Proprietor of The Emporium craft and antiques shop.

My online search turned up a series of articles about the New Berlin post office from the *Sunbury Daily Item*. In 2008, the Postal Service wanted to begin curbside delivery in New Berlin. A large number of residents attended a public meeting to voice their opposition. Here are two comments from the article of December 10:

The post office is more than a just a place to collect our mail, it's a gathering place that strengthens New Berlin's sense of community," said Chris Wysocki, a councilman. "New Berliners have been gathering at a post office for more than 100 years."

Mayor Craig Egli said the post office serves as a hub for residents to learn of community events and borough notices, such as the leaf pickup schedule and when the water lines will be flushed.

"For a town our size, New Berlin is very active," Egli said. "Our community organizations host events throughout the year, from the Community Harvest Table in late summer -- just outside the post office - - to the New Berlin Talent Show in winter to the community egg hunt, and we learn about them during our regular visits to the post office."



I can imagine my grandmother trekking to the post office every day in anticipation of a letter from her son. I am sure she shared her joys and disappointments with her New Berlin friends who gathered in the back of Seebolds' Store. Did they share the letters from their loved ones? I'd like to think they did.



Spencer W. Walker was born in this house at 644 Market Street, New Berlin, in 1925 . Ninety years later, there is still no mail box. (Tom Walker photo, March 2013.)

That's a tradition worth keeping and one that lives on even in our wireless 21<sup>st</sup> century world. On November 9, 2012, the *Daily Item* reported that the postmaster from Selinsgrove assured New Berlin resident that their post office would remain open, albeit with reduced hours. Near as I can tell, there are no mailboxes on Market Street.

One final note on post offices. For me, the story of the New Berlin post office represents a fascinating look at not only the town's history and traditions, but of my family history as well. A post office connects people. My search for the 1940s New Berlin post office connected me with a previously unknown link to my family's past.

Along the way, I also met a number of friendly, helpful people in Union County who are now my friends.

Note: The author thanks John Helwig, publisher of the *Mifflinburg Telegraph*, for permission to reproduce the news article reporting the 1946 sale of the Seebold Store in New Berlin.

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