State Heritage Areas
of South Australia

former Port Adelaide Customs House Complex
including Institute Building, Customs House & Telegraph Station

This complex of late-Victorian bluestone buildings forms a significant group of original Government buildings within the heart of the Port Adelaide State Heritage Area. Although the three buildings were constructed at different times, and originally for different purposes, their construction from similar materials and their eventual shared role as Port Adelaide's Customs Offices, has blended them over time.

At first glance the former Institute Building (1876) and Customs House (1879) appear to be one building, although closer inspection reveals the obvious differences in design and construction. The two buildings were once separated by a narrow lane, but by 1890 this had been built across to provide extra space for the Customs Service and, in 1959, the two buildings were physically linked by the creation of internal access ways.

Former Institute & Customs House, 1979

Since the Customs Department moved to more modern premises in 1986-87, the two larger buildings have more or less remained empty. The smaller Telegraph Office has been renovated and is used as an office.

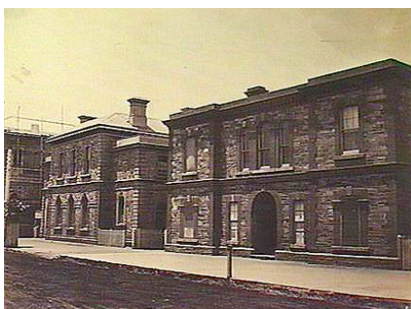## Telegraph Office
29 North Parade, Port Adelaide
SAHR 10927 – confirmed as a State Heritage Place 24 July 1980

Completed in 1868 for Port Adelaide's Telegraph Station, this two-storey Italianate building was later occupied by the offices of the Bureau of Customs and Quarantine.

It has a symmetrical design by Thomas English, architect for the Commissioner of Public Works, and was built by Thomas Tapson and Carl Neische for £2,500.

former Telegraph Office, 2005

Post and Telegraph Offices,
Port Adelaide 1879
Photo B 10738: State Library of SA

The Telegraph Office housed Port Adelaide's telephone exchange, which first opened in 1883. It then became the headquarters for the Lighthouse Service and, in turn, became part of the Customs Service complex.

The fabric of the bluestone building remains largely intact, although all rooms have been converted to offices and original chimneys have been removed. An early photograph, dated c1880, shows the building with original cement render dressings, which have since been stuccoed. The current front entrance was originally a window, mirroring the eastern wing.

Institute Building
30 Commercial Road (cnr Nile Street), Port Adelaide
SAHR 10949 – confirmed as a State Heritage Place 28 October 1982

The Port Adelaide Institute Building, which forms the southern section of the Customs House complex, was constructed between 1874-76 on the site of the old No.4 Bonded Store. It was conceived with local support, designed by the Colonial Architect, R.G. Thomas, and built by Cleave and Williams at a cost of £4,500.

The Port Adelaide Institute was formed in 1859 and was a centre for education and other cultural and social activities in Port Adelaide for over 100 years. It was one of a number of institutes that were established in South Australia in the second half of the nineteenth century to provide adult education for the working class, as well as libraries and other cultural activities.

Former Institute Building, 2005

This bluestone building contained a residence, a library, reading room, museum, lecture hall, classrooms and committee, lecturer's and curator's rooms. A lookout with balustraded parapet, provided by constructing a mansard roof, is visible on early photographs, but has since been demolished.

Port Adelaide Institute 1874
Photo B 10740: State Library of SA

Architecturally, the Institute Building is described as Victorian Italianate in style. It is constructed of stone from both Tea Tree Gully and Dry Creek, with Portland Cement dressings. Freestone fluted columns and bases decorate the main entrances, but original urns over the corner entrances have been removed.

Because the building is sited on reclaimed land, its footings comprise a red gum timber raft embedded in lime concrete.

In 1959 the Customs Department took over the Institute Building, and internally linked this building with the adjacent Customs House. The interior of the Institute was remodelled, but the layout of rooms is essentially intact, despite some reversible partitioning.

Customs House
56 Commercial Road, Port Adelaide
SAHR 10882 – confirmed as a State Heritage Place 27 November 1981

The Port Adelaide Customs House, constructed in 1878-79 to the design of the Colonial Architect, George Thomas Light, was built by Williams and Cleave at a cost of £11,102. It is one of the most dominant public buildings in Port Adelaide.

The scale and style of this substantial bluestone building reflect the role of the Government in the development and control of South Australia's chief port – the main entry point for goods and immigrants entering the colony.

At the time the Customs House was built, the South Australian Government collected customs duties on goods landed at Adelaide from the other Australian colonies and from

Former Customs House, 2005

overseas. This was an important source of revenue for the Government, prior to the introduction of direct taxation.

When Federation was achieved in 1901, intercolonial duties were abolished. The levying and collection of customs duties, on goods imported from foreign countries, became the responsibility of the Commonwealth Government. The Port Adelaide Customs House was one of several former colonial buildings around Australia that were taken over after Federation and used as Commonwealth Customs Houses.

This building was the fourth Customs House built at Port Adelaide, and originally housed the Marine Board, Surveyors and Harbor Master as well as the Customs Office. The first customs building had been completed in 1838, upstream at the old Port Misery landing, while the second, built in 1840, was located on this site. A third customs house (1860) was part of a police station, court house and customs house complex on the corner of St Vincent Street and Commercial Road (now the Port Adelaide Visitor Information Centre).

Initially the Customs Office was accommodated on the ground floor of this building, with the Marine Board on the first floor. A 'Long Room', an integral part of nineteenth century customs houses, was located at ground level and was used for conducting customs' business. The long room was a noisy, bustling place with numerous customs officers processing forms. All paperwork regarding duties payable on cargo was taken there and, after the dues were paid, the Long Room officials issued the receipts that allowed the goods to be unloaded, or collected from the Bond Stores.

Customs House, Port Adelaide 1910
Photo B 22777: State Library of SA

In 1885 the original Long Room was replaced by a new room on the side of the building, adjacent to the Institute Building. The Customs House and Institute Building were originally separated by a narrow lane, but c1890 a ground floor extension of the Customs House was built across it. A second storey was added at a later date. By 1901 the Customs Department occupied the whole of the 1879 building (and laneway extensions).

During the 1950s the Customs Service rented a number of rooms in the Institute Building, and in 1957 purchased this adjacent building to allow for further expansion. The interior was remodelled and internal access was created between the two buildings. The Customs Department vacated these nineteenth century buildings in 1987, when a modern office was constructed at the new Portland Canal development, near the Port Adelaide Railway Station.

Architecturally, the Customs House is described as an excellent example of a Victorian Italianate public building. When it was designed, the Architect-in-Chief's Office reported

"*This building will be somewhat pretentious, with cut stone dressings and cornices, etc and will form a prominent object on approaching the Port from the river. The building is constructed from Dry Creek stone, with dressings of Sydney white freestone and, because of its location on reclaimed land, sits on timber footings. A prominent tower, with mansard roof, lookout and flagpole, is located on the corner of the building, facing towards the Port River.*"

The building's exterior has changed little, but the interior has undergone significant alterations over time. The 'Long Room' has been partitioned into smaller offices, and some interior walls have been removed. Suspended ceilings and other timber partition walls have also been added, but most alterations are reversible.

Customs House tower, 2005