

Though most of the holiday mail going through Bethlehem comes from surrounding residents, the branch's second biggest customer is the Baltimore-Washington, D.C., crowd "from across the bridge," Mrs. Durham said.

Others come from Delaware and Virginia. And this year, Mrs. Durham said, residents from New Jersey and North Carolina came over Thanksgiving while visiting relatives.

Those from places too far away to visit — such as California, Texas and even Britain — send cards just to get the returned mail with the Bethlehem postmark.

Mrs. Durham said the post office has received four cards from Britain so far this year. However, she says the tradition is not quite as popular as in years past and that many of the cards are sent by stamp collectors.

She said about a hundred area families keep up the tradition, but there have been a lot of "first timers" this year.

"A dozen have already come in and told me they heard about it when they moved to the area," Mrs. Durham said.

In the past, most of the cards were cancelled by hand. But that tradition, like many others, has given way to automation.

"We start the machine when we get really busy," Mrs. Durham said. "There's no way to get all of them hand canceled unless there is extra help."

Sometimes, she calls on former Postmistress June Wagner to work in the lobby.

Mrs. Durham said each year the branch processes 50,000 cards, roughly a couple hundred a day.