

Montgomery Blair: Lincoln's Postmaster General

by Don L. Evans

President Lincoln had great difficulty in finding a general who could lead his armies to victory. He appointed many who failed to meet expectations. However, when it came to selecting the right man to head his Post Office Department he made an outstanding choice by choosing Montgomery Blair (Figure 1.) as his Postmaster General.

On March 9, 1861, just five days after his inauguration, Abraham Lincoln appointed Blair to his Cabinet, and the new PMG immediately began to set in motion changes that would not only affect the U.S. Post Office Department, but also the way that the entire world handled international mail. His achievements are even more outstanding considering the fact that soon after he accepted office, the beginning of hostilities between the North and the South resulted in the daunting task of providing efficient postal service to and from the Union armies, and to a divided country in the midst of a terrible conflict.

He is considered to be the most innovative and effective head of the Post Office Department that the United States has ever had. In spite of his many accomplishments, and a stamp issued in 1963 in his honor, his name and what he did is not particularly wellknown, even in the philatelic world. It is hoped that this short article will help to remedy that deficiency.

Montgomery Blair was born in Kentucky on May 10, 1813, into a distinguished family. He was the eldest son of Francis Preston Blair, who would become an influential member of President Jackson's "Kitchen Cabinet," and publisher of the Democratic Party's official organ, the *Globe*. Montgomery's younger



Figure 1. Montgomery Blair: 1813-1873. Statesman and Postmaster General

brother, Francis Preston Blair, Jr. was also involved in the political scene. He, along with all of the family, was against slavery and his efforts were instrumental in keeping Missouri from joining the Confederacy. With his own funds, he also recruited seven regiments in Missouri and joined the Union Army as a brigadier general. He served competently and was promoted to the rank of major general.

Montgomery Blair further enhanced the family reputation by his own achievements. He graduated from West Point in 1835, and after a brief military career, including service in the Seminole War in Florida, returned to civilian life where he began the practice of law. He became a judge, was the mayor of Saint Louis in 1842, and represented Dred Scott before the United States Supreme Court in that

famous case.

In 1853, he moved to Silver Spring, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C., to join his father, and opened a new law practice. He took over "Blair House," the family home across the street from the White House in Washington, D.C., (Figure 2.) which is now used as a residence for visiting heads of state. Blair now began to take an active part in national politics. He joined the Republican Party and eventually supported Abraham Lincoln's bid for the Presidency.

As a reward for the efforts of the Blair family, and also to encourage support from the key border states of Maryland and Missouri where the Blairs were political leaders, Lincoln appointed Montgomery Blair to his cabinet as Postmaster General (Figure 3.).

Although political considerations played an important part in the appointment, Lincoln was also aware of Blair's capabilities. A con-

temporary described Blair as "the best-read man in the cabinet." He possessed a logical and well-ordered mind, and his



Blair House

USA 15

Figure 2. Blair House. From a 1988 government post card (Scott UX121). Town residence of Montgomery Blair (1854-1870). Occupied by President Harry Truman from 1948-51 while the White House was under reconstruction.



Figure 3. Lincoln's Cabinet, 1863. (left to right) Edwin Stanton, Secretary of War; Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of Treasury; President Lincoln; Gideon Wells, Secretary of Navy; (standing) Caleb B. Smith, Secretary of Interior; (seated) William Seward, Secretary of State; (standing) Montgomery Blair, Postmaster General; (seated) Edward Bates, Attorney General.

strongly held moderate views were of benefit to Lincoln in providing some balance in a Cabinet that contained many radical Republicans such as Edwin Stanton, the Secretary of War.

It was in this period of political unrest and imminent armed conflict that Blair began his stewardship of the postal service. One of his first activities was to forbid the use of the mails for the transmission of newspapers that supported the secession of the South, and which were considered treasonable. He received criticism from many individuals who claimed that this violated the First Amendment to the Constitution which protected free speech, but Blair's decision was supported by the Supreme Court.

The problem of getting mail to and from the ever increasing numbers of soldiers became an important concern. Although postal employees were not allowed within military units, provision had to be made to get the mail to the units, and finally to the soldiers. With the rapid deployment of troops, and the transfer of individuals between the units, forwarding became a big problem. Even keeping troops supplied with postage stamps was difficult.

Blair and his staff developed an efficient system for the military to use in handling their mail. Each regiment was to have a military postmaster, and specifics were provided on how the mail should be handled. The plan proved to be quite successful. Many civilian postmasters and

clerks enlisted in the military service to help provide experience in this area, among them, John W. Hill, the Waterbury, Connecticut postmaster who carved the Waterbury fancy cancels, including the famous "running chicken."

The problem of lack of stamps was solved by allowing soldiers to send mail as "soldier's letters." Letters so marked and endorsed by a military officer could be sent without prepayment, with the postage to be paid by the recipient.

Blair also acted quickly to prevent the South from using U.S. postage stamps in their possession for financial gain by changing designs and demonetizing all previous stamp issues. This action provided philatelists with one of the most interesting periods in postal history, and resulted in those avidly collected covers with inscriptions such as "OLD STAMPS NOT RECOGNIZED," and "ILLEGAL USE," an example of which is shown in Figure 4.

In the area of fiscal efficiency, he established an enviable record. When he took office, the budget deficit for the previous year was over \$5,000,000. By the time he left office, three and a half years later, he had reduced the deficit to an insignificant \$120,000. In the following year of 1865, mostly due to the reforms that he had put into place, the Post Office Department operated at a profit of \$161,000. This is an achievement rarely, if ever, matched by subsequent holders of the office, and a far cry from today's multi-billion dollar deficit.

Blair recognized the inefficiency of the "spoils system" whereby postmaster appointments were one of the rewards for political party service. Postmasters for the larger offices were appointed by the president, and the for the smaller offices by the Postmaster General. This system had three main disadvantages. First, it resulted in

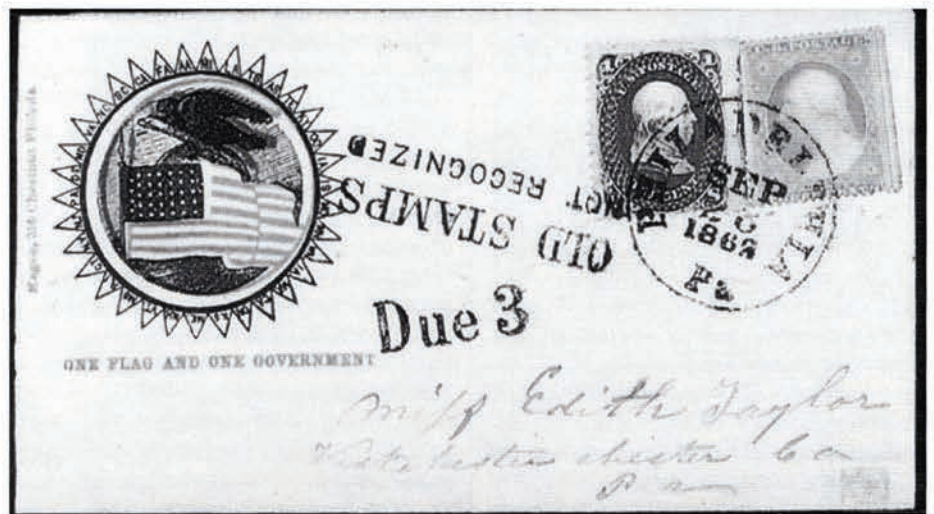


Figure 4. Scarce use of an 1857 three-cent demonetized stamp on a Philadelphia cover, dated, September 26, 1862. Marked with the rare "OLD STAMPS/NOT RECOGNIZED" handstamp, and rated Due 3 for collection. The 1861 one-cent stamp was a legal use and paid for a carrier to transport the letter to the post office. (Courtesy of R.A. Siegle Auction Galleries)

many appointments being made to fulfil political debts in spite of an individual's lack of competence for the office. Secondly, it promoted a rapid turnover in personnel. As soon as many postmasters learned their duties, a change in local or national government occurred and they were replaced by new and inexperienced applicants. Thirdly, it took an inordinate amount of both Lincoln's and Blair's time to deal with the thousands of office-seekers. It has been reported that as many as 600 appointments were made in a single day, with an average of about 9,000 per year. With this volume of personnel changes, it was impossible for the Postmaster General and his staff to investigate each applicant, and they were forced to rely on nominations from the field.

Although he recognized the popularity of the spoils system, and the political support that it engendered, Blair argued vehemently for postmaster appointments to be made with consideration of the capabilities of the applicant, and wherever possible to retain the appointees for as long as possible. He also strongly advocated the dismissal of postmasters who did not discharge their duties in an adequate fashion, and in the appointments where he had jurisdiction, he did just that.

Blair was constantly looking for ways to make the postal service more efficient, to serve the public better and to eliminate waste. He selected an outstanding staff of Assistant Postmasters General to support him, and thereby demonstrated one of the most important qualifications for leadership, the ability to put the right people in the right job.

He listened attentively to the suggestions of his staff, and to the requests of his postmasters, and acted decisively upon those of merit. While his list of accomplishments is long, it is only fair to state that many of these ideas were initiated by exceptionally capable members of his immediate staff. Blair, however, was the man with the responsibility, and it was his ability to recognize good ideas when he heard them, and to see that they were put into effect that transposed many ideas into accomplishments. He was also almost unique among government officials in that he publicly gave specific credit to his staff for their ideas and suggestions.

By today's standards, the United States in the 1860s was primitive. There was no transcontinental telegraph or railroad. Most roads were unpaved and many in poor condition. The Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., had yet to be completed, and



Figure 5. A typical foreign mail cover prior to the Universal Postal Union conventions. This 1867 letter to Genoa, Italy, was posted in New York and carried by the British steamship Scotia of the Cunard Line via Queenstown (as requested on the cover), and via French mail to Italy. The letter was prepaid by 21 cents in stamps, and the foreign exchange office at New York marked the letter with a red townmark showing credit to France of 18 cents. This was recorded for future payment to them. Three cents were retained by the United States as its share of the postage. Reimbursement to Great Britain for the sea and transit postage was taken care of by France. The boxed "PD" shows that the letter was prepaid to destination. (Courtesy of C.W. Christian)

the conveniences of electric lights and the gasoline automobile were many decades in the future. The task of providing postal service to a population dispersed across more than 3,000 miles of often inhospitable or impassable terrain was truly enormous.

The Post Office Department that Montgomery Blair inherited was not only deeply in debt, but was a collection of antiquated practices and cumbersome procedures. The domestic reforms that Blair instituted signalled a new era of postal services and efficiency.

To decrease the cost of running the Department, he discontinued the operation of unnecessary post offices, strongly enforced the pre-payment of postage, as required by law, and converted the pay of postmasters from a commission to a salary basis. He attacked the inefficient and sometimes fraudulent method of awarding contracts for mail transportation that was then in use, and fought successfully for much lower rates from the railroad companies.

To increase efficiency and service he proposed that letters be delivered free to the addressees by carriers. Prior to this time, mail had to be picked up at the post office, except for a few of the larger cities where carrier service was provided at an

additional fee. On July 1, 1863, free carrier delivery and collection of mail from post office boxes was instituted in 49 of the larger cities; and that beginning developed into the nationwide free delivery system that we enjoy today.

In those days postal service was real service. In 1863, New York City patrons received five deliveries each day and six collections from each mail box. Of course, it must be remembered at that time there was a greater necessity for rapid local mail. There were no telephones and if one wanted to invite a friend to dinner, an invitation could be sent and a response received the same day by mail.

Blair was concerned about the amount of money that was lost during transport in the mails. While the individual losses were usually small, the aggregate was substantial. Particularly during the war years, cash was frequently sent between soldiers' homes and the army encampments. His solution was to reduce the incentive for robbery and pilfering by instituting a money order system. He recommended this to Congress for action, and the authority to set up such a system was granted in May of 1864.

The routing of mail was done at distribution centers. These were usually large



Figure 6. 1963 issue (Scott C66), commemorating the 100th year anniversary of the International Postal Conference organized by Blair.

post offices where all of the mail was sorted and packaged or bagged for delivery to the destination town or another distribution center further along the way for additional sorting. The postmasters of these offices were paid a commission for each letter that they handled. There was no incentive to be efficient and many letters would pass through several distribution centers; sometimes more than once through the same center.

To alleviate this problem, Blair introduced the idea of railway post offices. The mail would be sorted and distributed by post office clerks aboard a railway car enroute to its destination. The idea was tried experimentally in 1862 on the Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad. It was successful, and in 1864 it was introduced on several major railroads. The following year, Congress authorized the traveling railroad post office, and it became the primary method of sorting and distributing mail until transportation by air replaced much of the railroad mail service.

In addition to the many changes that he instituted for the improvement of domestic mail delivery, Montgomery Blair was instrumental in initiating standardized and improved procedures for transporting and accounting for international mails. At the time that he assumed office, foreign mails were an almost impossible to understand quagmire of varying rates and routes. Each postal agreement with a different country required different procedures. Rates for mail between countries could vary depending on the route that was taken. Even the standard weight for a letter could vary. For instance a one-half ounce letter to Great Britain would go for a single rate. The same letter would require double postage to France since the standard weight for France was one quarter ounce.

Prior to 1863, bilateral postal conventions which established rates and procedures between the U.S. and European countries were in effect with only four Euro-

pean nations (Great Britain, Prussia, France, Belgium), and the city-states of Bremen and Hamburg. Mail to these constituted more than 90% of all foreign mail. Items to other European destinations generally had to be routed through them, and each postal convention had different rules and rates.

Blair was not satisfied with the complex and inefficient handling of foreign mail that resulted from these conventions. For instance, consider the letter in Figure 5. When a letter was addressed to a foreign destination, the sender was asked to write the name of the ship and desired routing on the envelope to help the clerk in the foreign mail exchange office assess the proper charge. The clerk would take the letter, which could be prepaid or sent collect, determine the proper rate, and mark on the letter how much was due to the United States if unpaid, or to the destination country if prepaid. This was arrived at by considering the charges for U.S. inland postage, the cost for sea passage, transit across foreign lands, and the postage in the destination country as established by the individual conventions. The letter was then placed in an outgoing mail bag for delivery to the proper ship. Accounts had to be kept, and at stated intervals the countries involved would remit to each other the balances due. The above is an overly simplified description of a very complex procedure, but it will give the reader some idea of the amount of attention that had to be given to each piece of foreign mail.

Blair had chosen for his First Assistant Postmaster General, John A. Kasoon, a man of great insight and diplomatic skill. He had the ability not only to perceive a solution but also to convince the representatives of other countries involved in international mails that the solution was to their advantage.

In 1862, Kasoon suggested to Blair that he propose a meeting to be held with the European and American nations with whom we exchanged mail and where we had diplomatic relations. The purpose for this meeting was to standardize and simplify the procedures for exchanging mail, and if possible, to reduce costs and improve service to the public.

In his December 1, 1862, Annual Report to Congress and the President, Blair officially proposed a meeting such as Kasoon had suggested. In proposing the International Postal Conference, Blair stated,

"Our international mail system is extremely loose and defective ... The whole

foreign system as now established is too complex to be readily understood by postmasters ...

"Accordingly, I opened a correspondence through the State Department ... Several replies have been received, all of which are favorable and consent to the project."

He also included as an annex to the report, a copy of the letter that he had sent on the previous August 4th to the Secretary of State, William H. Seward, asking him to initiate negotiations for such a conference. Blair made it clear that he wanted the attendees to be postal representatives, mentioning that he feared diplomatic personnel would pursue a more "dilatatory course," and would not have the specific knowledge of postal matters that would be required. Blair recommended that the conference be held in Europe, and included a list of 15 issues that he considered of great importance.

They stressed uniformity and standard procedures for all countries, and the initiation of international registry and money order systems. Included was a new concept that each country should retain all of the postage that it collected, either upon mailing or delivery, and that no accounts needed to be kept between countries, ex-



Figure 7. "International Air Letter Sheet," (Scott UC62), issued on November 20, 1989, to commemorate Montgomery Blair's tenure as Postmaster General. This letter sheet paid the first-class air postage in full to all foreign destinations.

cept for bulk transit charges through intermediate countries enroute.

This was based on the principal of reciprocity. Blair and Kasoon recognized that the amount of mail received from a specific country was approximately equal to the amount sent. This meant that the amounts of money paid to send mail and collected on due letters was essentially the same in each country, as was the cost of sea transportation either way. Consequently,

if each country retained all of the postage that it collected, and each sending country was responsible for the cost to deliver it to the receiving nation, the costs to each would just about balance, and the expensive and time consuming practice of rating and recording each letter would no longer be required. This was an idea ahead of its time, and it would be some years before its simplicity and merit was recognized by the postal administrations of the world.

The International Postal Conference was scheduled for the following year, however, in the latter part of 1862, John Kasoon resigned his position as First Assistant Postmaster General to successfully seek election to Congress. Blair did not lose his services entirely since soon after Kasoon was elected he was appointed by Lincoln to be the United States commissioner at the Conference.

On May 11, 1863, delegates from 16 postal entities met in Paris for the first multi-national mail conference. In addition to the United States, delegates attended from Austria, Belgium, Costa Rica, Denmark, France, Great Britain, the Hanseatic Cities (Bremen and Hamburg), Holland, Italy, Portugal, Prussia, the Sandwich Islands, Spain and Switzerland. It was estimated that the delegates represented over 400 million people who accounted for 95% of the world's correspondence.

Monsieur E. Vandal, The Director General of the French Posts, was elected as the President of the Conference, but there was little doubt but what the agenda of the United States and the technical and diplomatic skills of John Kasoon dominated the meetings. The Conference concluded on June 8, and published 31 agreed upon articles, including some reduction in rates, and increased standardization of procedures. Unfortunately, the idea of reciprocity was not among them. The most important result was that it planted the seed for major reform, and that seed continued to grow rapidly during the following decade.

Blair continued to push for postal reform, and many of his innovative ideas were incorporated into postal conventions that he arranged with Canada and Latin American and Pacific nations.

Blair asked Kasoon to remain in Europe, and to assist in the negotiations toward new bilateral postal treaties with many of the European countries. Every attempt was to be made to incorporate the advances agreed upon at the International Postal Conference. As a result, new and very much improved treaties were con-

cluded with Great Britain, the North German Confederation, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium and the Netherlands. The idea of reciprocity was included in some of these treaties.

In 1864, the Radical wing of the Republican party threatened to withdraw support for the nomination of Lincoln for a second term unless Blair was removed from the Cabinet. Lincoln was finally forced to ask Blair to step down. Blair did so within the week, and was replaced by William Dennison, the ex-Governor of Ohio.

Dennison, a good friend of Blair's, continued to support his postal policies. No matter how much the Radicals detested Blair's moderate philosophy, nothing but praise was ever mentioned in connection with his administration of the Post Office Department.

Although they were no longer active participants, the processes initiated by Blair and Kasoon eventually resulted in the 1874 Postal Congress which met in Berne, Switzerland. Agreement was reached on principles which revolutionized the world's mail system, and essentially produced the simple and effective rules of international mail that became the foundation of The General Postal Union. These principles were,

1. That a common postal territory, regulated by a single treaty, should be accepted internationally.
2. That every country should guarantee to every other country the right of transit of mail by land or sea.
3. That the burden of providing for the conveyance of mails should rest with the country of origin; that all intermediate services used by such country be paid for at fixed rates; and
4. That each country should keep all of its postage collections, on both prepaid and unpaid correspondence so as to sweep away the great mass of detailed international accounts.

The following year, the name was changed to the Universal Postal Union, and the organization still continues to meet every five years to review the convention and to make any necessary changes.



Figure 8. Universal Postal Union issue. (Scott 1530-37) Commemorating the 100th anniversary of the birth of this organization which provides world-wide standardization and procedures for the transmission of mails between countries.

Postal tributes have been accorded to Montgomery Blair in the form of a special airpost issue in 1963 (Figure 6.) commemorating the 100th anniversary of the First International Postal Conference, and on a very attractive 1989 international air letter sheet (Figure 7.), which shows both Lincoln and Blair, and a short summary of Blair's postal achievements.

The Universal Postal Union and the Postal Congresses have been the subject of several commemorative issues, the most spectacular of which is the multi-subject issue of 1874 (Figure 8.) which commemorated the centenary anniversary of the Universal Postal Union.

Due in a large part to the abilities and devotion to duty of Montgomery Blair and John Kasoon, we all now enjoy the benefits of easy and reliable correspondence. While Blair has been personally honored by postal issues, no similar acknowledgement has been given to Kasoon. There is little doubt but what his singular capabilities were instrumental in the concept and acceptance of a Universal Postal Union. It would be most appropriate to have this outstanding man also as the subject of a special commemorative stamp.

Recommended for additional reading:

1. *Reports of the Postmaster General for 1861, 1862, 1863 and 1864.*
2. *Montgomery Blair, Postmaster General.* U.S. Government Printing Office, 1936.
3. "John A. Kasoon," by William C. Norby. *The American Philatelist*. April 1992.