Yesterday in Mekeel's:

The United States Post Office

by Sterling T. Dow

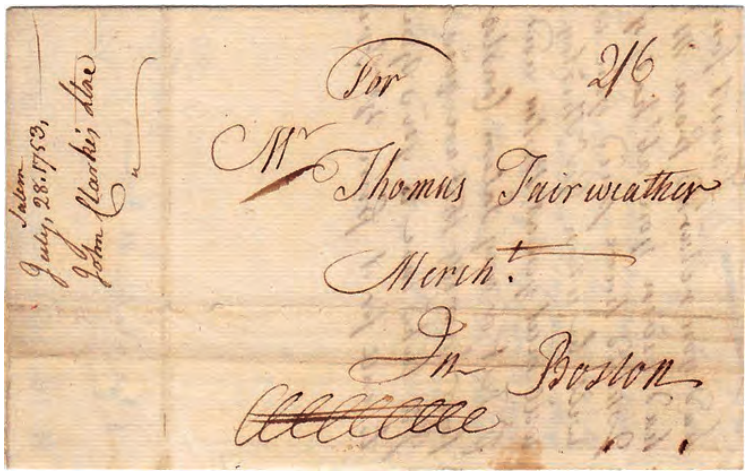
(From Mekeel's Weekly, January 26, 1942, with images added)

If you should visit the great New York City post office, you may read, over the entrance, *"Neither snow, nor rain, nor gloom of night stays these couriers from their appointed rounds"*. Written by Herodotus twenty-four hundred years ago in comment of a service of a king of Persia, far removed from the conditions of today, this inscription fairly indicates the spirit of the world's greatest enterprise—the United States Post Office.

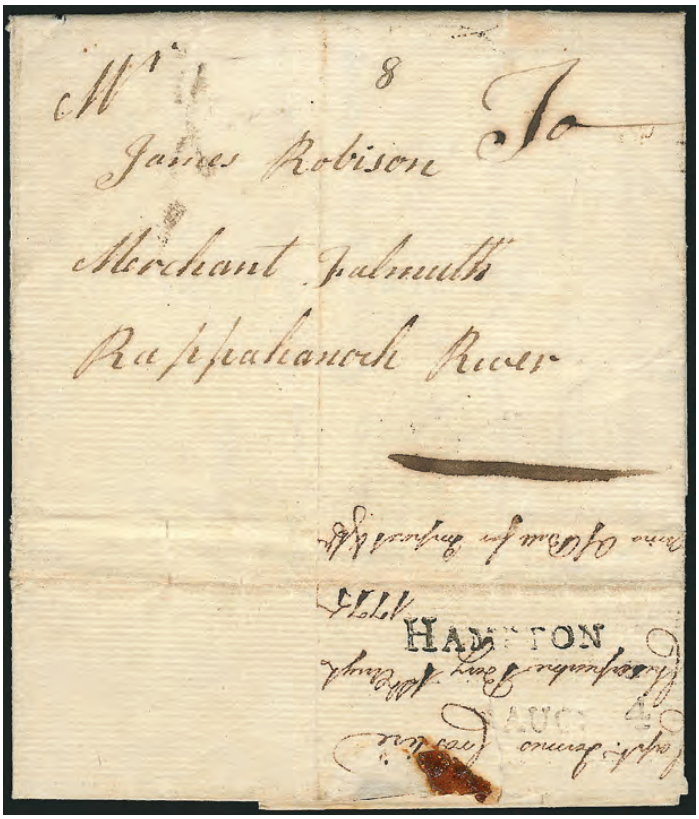
We are inclined to speak of business and commercial enterprises as though they were the same thing, and so they are ordinarily. However, in the United States Post Office we have a tremendous business, the primary object of which is not to make money but to serve the people of the Republic. This may be a matter of more or less surprise to some of us, and I can remember it being said many times, in speaking of the Government's ineptitude for business, that if the Post Office was privately administered, there would be no such thing as an annual deficit. That is probably very true, but if such an unheard of change should come about, the people would have to do without many of the conveniences which the Post Office affords.

Let me give a single example. The net cost of operating the rural free delivery, at 1930, was nearly $1,000,000 per week, but does anybody suggest doing away with a phase of Post Office activity which is such a necessity to millions of the rural population? It is self-evident that no private administration could stand any such expense.

The history of the Post Office falls naturally into three periods. The first is the British administration, from the beginning to 1775 (see page 2); second, the administration under the authority of the Continental Congress to 1789 (page 2); and third, the Federal administration to the present day (page 3).



A British Colonial period cover, this is the earliest cover known to have been rated at Salem, Mass. The rate of 4d sterling was for a single letter sent up to 60 miles, per the Act of Queen Anne effective July 1, 1711. (The rate of 2 shillings, 6d, upper right, was in local Massachusetts currency, which reflected a 7.5x inflation factor to 4d sterling.)



A folded letter from shortly after the establishment of the Continental Post Office under Benjamin Franklin. It bears a two line "HAMPTON, AUG. 4" datestamp (lower right) and is datelined "Chesapeake Bay the 1st of August 1775". It also bears a small manuscript "8" rate top center. (8p = 2.16 dwt, the rate of 2dwt for distances between 60 and 100 miles, plus a 16gr fee for the ship captain.)

The Congressional Post was formed by the Resolution of July 26, 1775. The rate reflects an effort to offer a better deal than the British Parliamentary Post; however it resulted in a deficit for the Post, so the old rates under the British were reestablished on September 30, 1775.

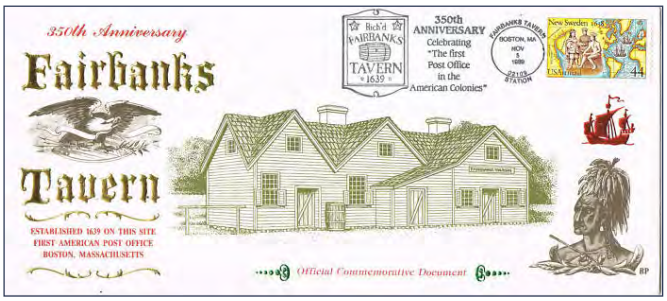
A folded letter to Boston with an "11/DE" Franklin mark and a faint "Salem" straight line in greenish black ink, upper left. It is rated 1(dwt), 8(gn), upper right, as a single letter sent up to 60 miles, per the Ordinance of the Confederation Congress of Oct. 18, 1782.

June 10, 1793, folded letter to Philadelphia with "SALEM" straight line handstamp, rated 22¢ (upper right) as a single letter sent 350-400 miles, per Act of Congress, February 20, 1792 (effective June 1).

A cover of historic interest, a 1754 folded letter from Benjamin Faneuil in Boston to Hugh Hall Wentworth Wentworth in Piscataqua, N.H. (now Portsmouth). The sender, Benjamin Faneuil, Jr., was the nephew of Peter Faneuil who built Faneuil Hall and was one of the consignees of the tea ships whose cargo was dumped into the harbor in 1773. He was banished from Masachusetts in 1778 as an enemy of the state. The addressee, Wentworth, was a shipping merchant, also friendly to the Crown, who was appointed Lieutenant Governor of the British Colony of Grenada in 1768.

The cover was rated at 3 shillings ("Bo 3/-") in the (9x) inflated local currency of account, equivalent to the official rate of 4d sterling, for a single letter sent up to 60 miles. (3 shillings x 12p per shilling = 36p ÷ 9= 4d sterling)

In the beginning, the different colonies had little in common with each other. What had the Puritans of New England to do with the Cavaliers of Maryland or the planters of Virginia? There were few, if any, roads and transportation was almost entirely by water. The colonists were European born and all their ties were in the old countries, consequently mail service was almost entirely with Europe. We read of shipmasters advertising their voyages to America and hanging letter bags in the coffee houses of London. On this side, expectant receivers of mail met the ships on arrival to receive their letters. Letters not called for were left at some convenient tavern to be called for. At Boston, it was found that this did not work out satisfactorily and the General Court, in 1639, only nineteen years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, designated the tavern of Richard Fairbanks as a place where letters might be called for or left for transmission. The order also provided that no man must use this facility unless he chose. Fairbanks' tavern was the first official post office in America.



A November 5, 1989 commemorative cover marking the 350th anniversary of the Fairbanks Tavern as "The first post office in the American Colonies"

As time went on and the colonies became more thickly settled, the need for intercommunication arose. Roads were constructed and the post rider came into being. Two factors determined the postage on letters. The first factor was distance and the second was whether the letters were single, double, triple or quadruple. A single letter consisted of but one sheet of paper. There were no envelopes in those days and letters were folded in such a way that two of the ends overlapped and a seal was applied to those ends to close the letters. A double letter consisted of two sheets of paper or one sheet with one enclosure, a triple letter had three sheets, and the quadruple, or ounce, letter had four.

The rates of postage were in the same ratio; a single letter took a single rate, a double letter a double rate, etc.

In 1691, William and Mary granted to Thomas Neale, Master of the Mint, described as a Court favorite, a patent to administer the American Post Office for his own profit, the annual rental to be a nominal six shillings eightpence, and the term of the patent twenty-one years. Neale was empowered to act by deputy and the patent was void if not acted upon within two years. The postage rates to be used were the same as used in the British Post Office or as agreed upon between the patentee and the several colonial legislatures.

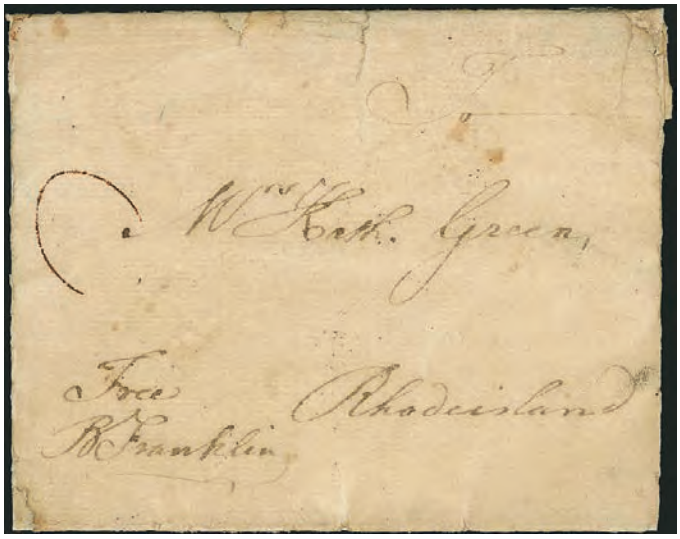
Neale chose as his deputy Andrew Hamilton, a Scot by birth, who had been a merchant in New Jersey for several years. The selection was a happy one because Hamilton was a good business man and was successful in his negotiations with the legislatures. Enabling acts passed by New York, New Hampshire and Pennsylvania were approved by the British Government. The acts established the monopoly and fixed the rates of postage. For various reasons the act passed by Massachusetts was not approved, but, in spite of this, the post office came into operation because its usefulness could not be denied.

It is to be kept in mind that Neale's patent was a commercial enterprise, which means that it must show a profit to be successful. No profit was earned and at the end of each year Neale sank further into debt. Hamilton had received no salary and finally Neale assigned the patent to Hamilton and another creditor, in 1706, for the unexpired term.

Believing that governmental administration would be more effective than private, the British Post Office took over the patent soon after. Andrew Hamilton has been called the Father of the American Post Office.

No other Deputy Postmaster General of any note administered the affairs of the Post Office until the appointment of Benjamin Franklin in 1753. Franklin had been postmaster in Philadelphia and from his knowledge of postal matters as well as his native ability and foresight

he was able to put the Post Office on a paying basis. No longer did post riders lay up for the night but kept on going day and night. Supervision over the system became more careful. It did not take the letter-writing public long to find out how much better the service had become and the deficit of the first few years of Franklin's operation turned to a profit. During his term of office of twenty-one years, Franklin spent fifteen years in England as agent for several of the colonies and he was dismissed from office in 1774 on account of his pro-American activities.



"B Free Franklin" Benjamin Franklin Free frank, as Deputy Postmaster General for the Colonies in America, on a November 25, 1762 folded cover.

The fact that he was able to make the operation of the Post Office show a profit had a very interesting result. The breach between the colonies and the mother country was steadily widening. The Stamp Act had been passed and repealed, but the British authorities had no intention of relinquishing the right to tax the colonies. The British contention was that the profit made by the Post Office was a tax, and if the colonies made no remonstrance to it, why should they object to any other tax? They furthermore named Franklin as the tax gatherer. At a meeting of a committee of Parliament, a tax hearing it might be called, this critical question was put to Franklin. His reply was that the Post Office was a facility which one might use, or not, as he chose, but if he did use it he was paying for a service rendered, but there was no avoiding a tax. He said

that one might send his letters by messenger. Perhaps, at first sight, this may seem to be reasonable, but the Post Office was a monopoly and any other agency for the transmission of letters was unlawful. I think the British were right in saying that any surplus over and above the actual cost of operation of the Post Office was a tax. While the colonies at first agreed with Franklin, public opinion soon changed. The British administration was regarded as unreliable and unsafe, and the way was opened for an American Post Office.

So far as I know, William Goddard was the prime mover for the establishment of an American Post Office. He had had post office experience at New London, Conn., and Providence, R. I., and had also had newspaper experience in Baltimore, Philadelphia and other places. He worked through the committees of correspondence in the different towns and submitted a plan for a post office establishment. His plan was that the post office should be established and maintained by subscription and that its control should lie in a committee to be appointed annually by the subscribers. The committee was to appoint postmasters and post riders and fix the rates of postage. The immediate management was to be with a postmaster general to be selected by ballot and to hold office for one year. While Goddard met with considerable success, there were circumstances which brought his endeavors to naught.

In September, 1774, the delegates of the colonies met at Philadelphia and gradually took upon themselves the government of the colonies. On the 29th of May, 1775, the question of a post office came up and a committee, which included Franklin, was appointed to report on it.

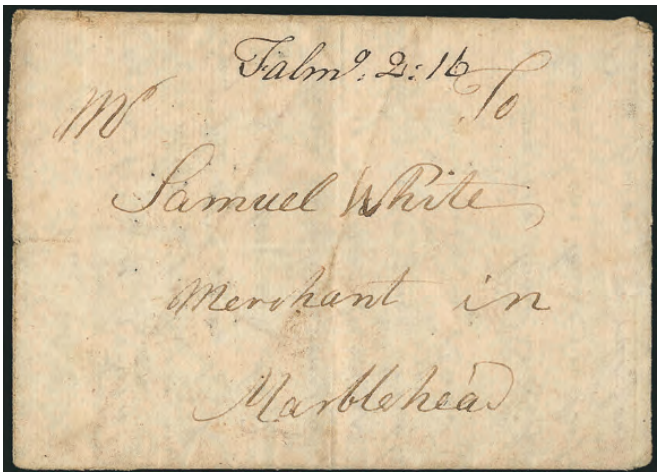
Left, Sc. 4024, Franklin as Postmaster

On July 26, 1775, the Continental Congress resolved to appoint a postmaster general, whose office would be at Philadelphia, and who was empowered to appoint a secretary and as many postmasters as he deemed necessary. A line of posts should be established from Falmouth (Port-

land) to Savannah. Franklin was chosen as Postmaster General, and he in turn appointed Richard Bache, his son-in-law, as Secretary and Goddard as Surveyor. From this time the British Post Office steadily dwindled, until its sole remaining office was conducted from a warship in New York harbor, and on Christmas day, 1775, it went out of existence.

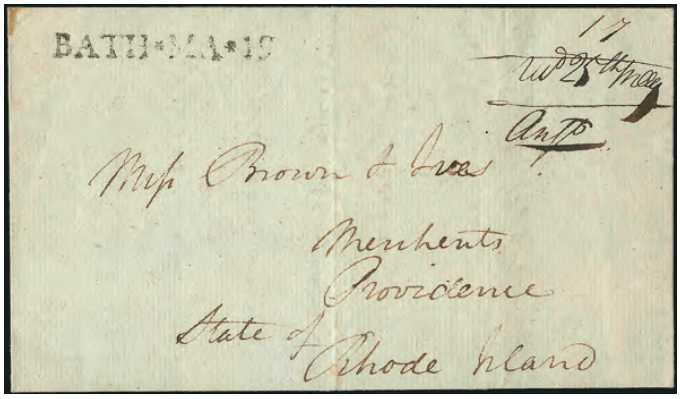
In my study of postal matters, particularly as they relate to the State of Maine, I have been unable to find that the history of the Post Office under the Continental Congress administration has ever been written. I have run upon several perplexing problems, the solution of which, I believe, depends upon finding the postal records of the period. The first Postmaster General was Franklin, but he served only a few months as his great ability as a diplomat was of greater service to the country, and he sailed to France. His successor was Richard Bache and he, in turn, was succeeded by Ebenezer Hazard. The records of the period are not in the Post Office Department. The papers of Bache and Hazard are in the Library of Congress, and to see them one must go to Washington. Such other records as exist are probably scattered through libraries, historical societies and private collections.

It would appear to be a logical deduction that post roads and post offices would be established at about the same time, or that the post road preceded the post office, depending upon the importance of the town. Of what avail would it be to establish an office unless there were means for the transportation of mail to and from the office? History tells that the original post road in Maine ran from Portsmouth, N.H., to Falmouth, in the District of Maine, and was established in 1760 (page 9) during the British regime, with weekly service. The road passed through York, Wells, Kennebunk (then a part of Wells), Biddeford, Scarboro to Falmouth (changed to Portland in 1786). Thomas Child, postmaster at Falmouth, made returns to the postmaster in New York in 1764 and this is the earliest date which can be assigned to Falmouth. The first historian of Kennebunk, Judge Edward E. Bourne,



The earliest known cover, and one of only two known in private hands with a postmark from what is now Maine. This folded letter to Marblehead, Mass., datelined "Falmouth Decembr. 22, 1769" bears a "Falmo. 2:16" manuscript postmark. At this time Maine was still attached to Massachusetts. The "2:16" indicates the 2dwt 16gr rate. The Falmouth postmark is the only postmark known from Maine during the British Colonial period.

states that Kennebunk had the first post office in Maine, in 1775. The Federal records say that there were two post offices in the state in 1790, Falmouth and Wiscasset. In 1791, Kennebunk, Biddeford and Bath were added. My



*1797 folded letter to Providence, R.I., with "BATH * MA * 19" straightline datestamp upper leftg and "17" rate upper right, also with receipt docketing at upper right.*

explanation for the apparent inconsistency is that the postmaster at Kennebunk was the first appointee in the state under the Continental Congress administration, or perhaps the appointment was made by Massachusetts, and that he was given a Federal commission in 1791. It may be presumed that the office was in continuous operation, but I have seen no record to confirm it. Why might we not expect that post offices were opened earlier than 1775 on this first post road? It is my belief that they were although I have seen no record, and to me, it is almost

beyond belief that the terminus of the route, Falmouth, did not have a post office earlier than 1764.

The second post road of which I have record went eastward from Portland, passing through North Yarmouth, Freeport, Brunswick, Bath, and to Wiscasset. The record shows that this route was probably established just prior to the adoption of the Constitution in 1789, and the postmasters at Portland and Wiscasset received Federal commissions in 1790. I have no earlier record of North Yarmouth than 1793, Freeport 1796, Brunswick 1793, and Bath 1791. There is some reason to believe that these dates, or the date of establishment of the post road, are not early enough. I have seen the petition of a committee at Georgetown (near Bath) in September, 1777, to the General court, asking for a post road from Falmouth to Thomaston, particularly on account of war conditions. The General Court replied in October, asking the committee to find a post rider, directing the postmaster at Falmouth to order the going and coming of the mails and appointing postmasters at Georgetown and Thomaston. Whether the route so ordered ever went into operation or not I do not know, but if further search reveals that it did, it is reasonable to suppose that the offices along the route, or some of them, were established earlier than we now know. It is interesting to note that this route was ordered by the State of Massachusetts (of which Maine was a district until March, 1820) and not by the Continental Postmaster General, although he was advised of the action of the state. The confederation of states formed under the Continental Congress was a loose one, the states assuming functions which we now recognize as belonging to the national government. Another instance of this was the restoration of the post road between Portsmouth and Falmouth, by the state, after Postmaster General Hazard abolished it in 1782.

Since the foregoing was written, further discoveries have been made about the post roads in Maine, in the early times, and this seems to be a good place to tell of them. In the *Smith and Dean Journal*, edited by Willis, appears the

following: “The post office (Falmouth) under the direction of Massachusetts was opened June 3, 1775, and so continued to October 4th of that year; after which it was taken into the charge of the United Colonies and instructions were given by Benjamin Franklin, Postmaster General, at Philadelphia”. It is one of the historical facts which I believe is not generally known, that during the wane of the British Post Office in America, Massachusetts took over the operation of the system in the state, which included the district of Maine.

1776 folded letter from Boston to Portsmouth, Mass., with “BOSTON” straightline handstamp in golden yellow and matching “16/MA” (May 16) Franklin mark on (unfolded) back of May 14, 1776, folded letter, also with manuscript “2 dwt” rate. A rare postal marking from Boston in 1776 and 1777, during the period after the British evacuated the city.

The dates given in *Smith and Dean’s Journal* are probably very near to the actual dates between which Massachusetts exercised control. The first date probably should be a little earlier but the last date is exact. It is known that Joseph Greenleaf, a member of the legislative committee having to do with the post office, made it known to postmasters and post riders that their connection with the state was severed as of October 5, 1775.

It has been found that a post road was in operation between Falmouth and Georgetown for six months in 1775 .

Benjamin Epes was the post rider and, as he was not paid until June 29, 1776, it may be assumed he rode post for the six months prior to October 5, 1775. It may be that this route was continued no longer as Epes was one of the riders dismissed from service on that date. It has also been found that the post road asked for by the committee at Georgetown in September, 1777, actually did go into operation. There is the record that Joseph Booker was paid eighty-five pounds, in accordance with a legislative order passed September 29, 1778, for riding post from Falmouth to Georgetown for one year, and an equal sum to Richard Harnden for riding from Georgetown to Thomaston for the same period. Under date of October 7, 1777, Major Wheaton was appointed postmaster at Thomaston and John Wood at Georgetown. It would appear to be correct to date the original establishment of a post office at Thomaston as 1777 and Georgetown as 1775. This latter date agrees with Judge Bourne's statement in his *History of Kennebunk* that post offices were established at Kennebunk, Georgetown and Falmouth in that year. How long these offices were open is not clear. As no other evidence of payment to the post riders has been found, it may be their tenure was for but the one year. We find General Peleg Wadsworth, writing from his headquarters at Thomaston, May 26, 1780: "and I would request that the Post might be continued from Falmouth & ride as far as this place". This shows that the route had been given up.

To Be Continued

Yesterday in Mekeel's:

The United States Post Office, Pt.2

by Sterling T. Dow

(From Mekeel's Weekly, January 26, 1942, with images added)

Picking up where we left off in Part 1, in our January 6, 2012 issue of SNO…

These resolutions of the Continental Congress express the United States postal policy during the Revolutionary Period and until the adoption of the Constitution:

"Communication of intelligence with frequency and dispatch from one part to another of this extensive continent is essentially requisite to its safety."

"The United States in Congress assembled shall have the sole and exclusive right and power to establish and regulate post offices, from one state to another, and exacting such postage as may be requisite to defray the expenses of such offices."

"All funds above costs shall be expended in establishing new offices and post routes so as to make the institution as useful as possible."

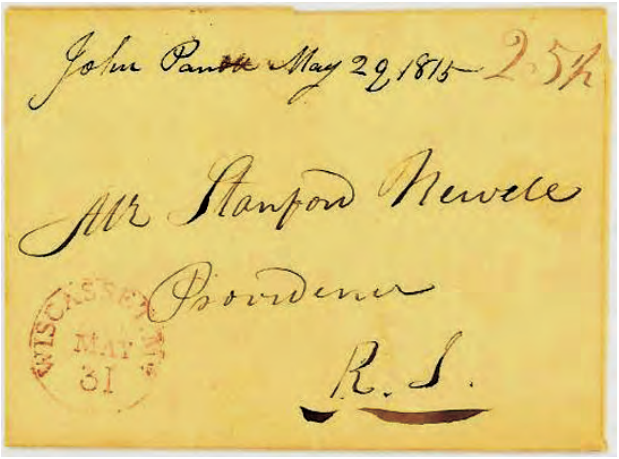
The change from profit seeking to service giving was one of those acts which made American independence more than a mere separation from England. It was a revolution in principle and purpose of government. The Post Office Establishment underwent a change, not of method but of fundamental purpose. The principle of the public good was substituted for that of Government gain. (Quotation from *Kelly's United States Postal Policy*.)

In the early days of the Republic postage rates were high and they were subject to the factors of distance and whether the letter was single, double, etc.

In the Act of Congress effective June 1, 1792, it was provided that a single letter going no further than 30 miles should be charged 6 cents. The rate increased with the distance so that a letter going further than 450 miles should be charged 25 cents. There was no compulsory prepayment.

1833 folded cover to Cambridge, Mass., with "Wiscasset, Maine Apr 9 1833" circular date stamp and attached "18 3/4" rate for a single sheet between 150-400 miles. (Use your pdf magnifier to see the 3 over 4 fraction.)

These rates, except for a 50% war tax increase for one year beginning March 31, 1815, were not changed substantially for over fifty years.

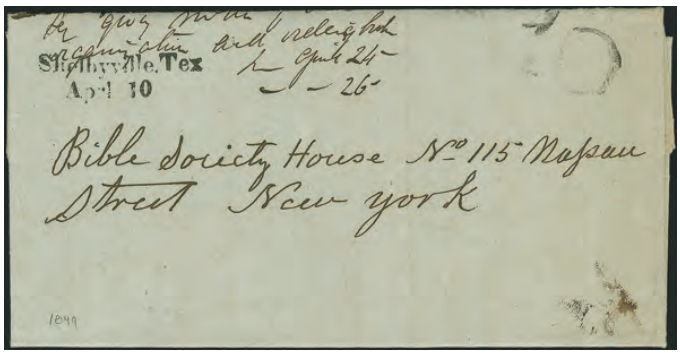


1815 folded letter from Wiscasset, Maine, to Providence, R.I., with red "Wiscasset Me May 31" postmark and manuscript 25-1/2 50% war surcharge rate during the period when Maine was a district of Massachusetts (before statehood in 1820).

1815 folded letter from Charleston S.C. to Newburyport Mass., with "New-York Nov. 17" red circular datestamp and matching "SHIP" straightline. The "27-1/2¢" marking represents the War of 1812 surcharge rate of 15¢ plus 50% plus the 2¢ ship captain's fee.

The Act of Congress effective July 1, 1845, provided a drastic reduction. The factor of single and double letters was abandoned for the present weight factor. A half-

ounce letter travelling no more than 300 miles required 5 cents postage, while over that distance the postage was 10 cents.



1849 stampless cover with "Shelbyville Tex./Aprl. 10" two-line datestamp upper left and "10" handstamp upper right paying the 300+ miles 10¢ rate to New York City.

The Act of Congress effective July 1, 1847, authorized the use of postage stamps, and stamps of 5 and 10 cent denominations went on sale.

1848 folded letter to Detroit with red "Ann Arbor Mic. Mar. 23" circular datestamp, repeated at left. While the the single rate to Detroit was 5¢, this 1847 5¢ pair, Sc. 1, paid the double rate.

1847 10¢, Sc. 2, tied by red manuscript cancel, also with red "Charleston S.C. 10 Jun. 7" circular datestamp on cover to Boston, paying the rate over 300 miles.

The Act effective June 30, 1851, lowered the rate still further. Prepaid letters could be sent 3,000 miles for 3 cents, but if unpaid, 5 cents. Over 3,000 miles the rate

1851 12¢ black diagonal half used as 6¢ (Sc. 17a) on cover to Boston, tied by light strike of "San Francisco Cal. 16 Aug." circular datestamp to pay the 6¢ rate.

was 6 cents if prepaid and 10 cents if collect.

The Act effective April 1, 1855, made prepayment by the use of stamps obligatory. The rates provided 3,000 miles at 3 cents, and 10 cents for more than that distance. The Act effective June 30, 1863, made the 3 cent rate good for any distance within the United States.

Under the stimulus of these reductions, the activities of the Post Office Department were greatly increased. The facilities of the Department were now within the reach of every person. Of course, another factor in the growth of the Post Office was the growth of the country in population.

The monopoly of the Post Office is not questioned today, but it has not always been so. From about 1840 to 1860 there was a strong rival in the various express companies.

1843 folded letter with Philadelphia Despatch Post (3¢) black on grayish paper with "R & Co." initials (Sc. 15L3). This is the earliest recorded use of the 1843 "Striding Messenger" issue. The world's first pictorial stamp, it depicts a giant letter carrier with a "City Despatch Post" bag slung over his shoulder, stepping over the Merchant's Exchange Building, which housed Philadelphia's post office, thus symbolizing the local post's superior speed and reliability—and the lower cost at a time when the single letter postal rate was 5¢.

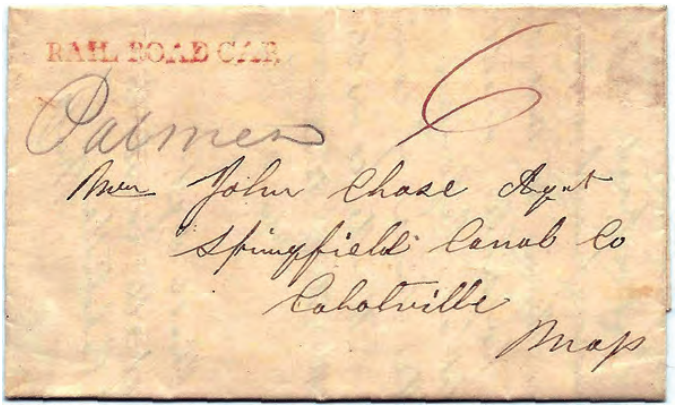
They gave better service, their rates were lower and they had the power of public opinion behind them. It was not until 1861 that the Supreme Court put the express companies out of the letter carrying business.

Transportation of mail was first performed by post riders, men on horseback. There are records here in Maine of the postman on foot and of one carrier who used a boat along the shore. Stagecoaches came into use in 1785, a little later in Maine. Steamboats (page 18) were used for the mail beginning in 1813 and in 1838 all railroads were made post routes (page 18).

Post rider, on 2¢ 1869 Pictorial, Sc. 113

An early stagecoach mail cover, with a "BORDENTON/ &/ NEW YORK STAGE" large rectangular framed handstamp on the (unfolded) back of an August 23, 1786 folded letter from Philadelphia to "Walnford" N.J., with the sender's directive "p Stage". This is the earliest recorded example of a private mail marking that is thought to be the first independent mail handstamp used by a private carrier.

May 1, 1822, cover from Balize, Louisiana, to Portsmouth, N.H. carried on the Robert Fulton, entering the mails with a red "New-York May 21" c.d.s.and matching "Ship" handstamp, also with manuscript "20-1/2" rate.



1841 folded letter to Cabotville, Mass. with "Rail Road Car" red straight line postmark of origin (applied at Springfield), also with "Palmer" notation of where the letter was picked up and manuscript "6" rate. Cover was carried on the Western Rail Road.

In May, 1918, Government mail service by airplane began between Washington, Philadelphia and New York, the rate being 24 cents per ounce or fraction.

First airmail stamp, the 1918 24¢ carmine rose and blue, (Sc. C3), tied by Air Mail Service Washington D.C. May 15, 1918 duplex cancel on First Day of Air Mail Service cover with W. B. Hibbs & Co. corner card

In February, 1925, an Act of Congress authorized the Postmaster General to contract with airplane companies for the carriage of mail.

A cover carried on the first Contract Air Mail flight, CAM No. 1, which was awarded to the Colonial Air Transport company. CAM 1 air service was inaugurated with both north and south flights on July 1, 1926 between New York and Boston with a stop in Hartford Connecticut.

The registering of letters began July 1, 1855 (see below for what may be an earlier example).

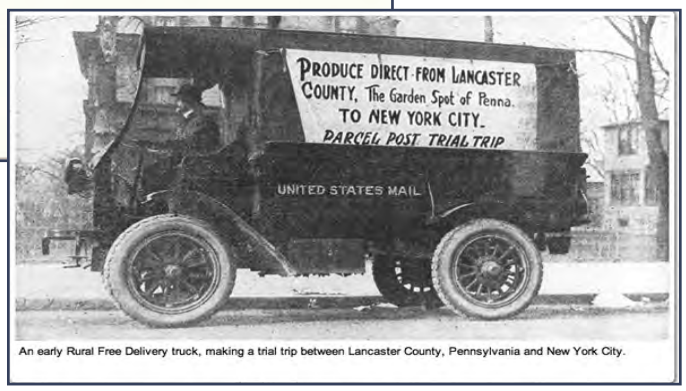
A folded letter from Newport, R.I. to Boston with the 1851 3¢ dull red Type II, Sc. 11A, with a red straightline "Registered", believed to possibly be a pre-1855 Registered usage.

The postal money order service was established May 17, 1864. The first railway post office was run June 9, 1864, on the Chicago and Northwestern Railway, and this present year has seen the experiment of its equivalent on the highway, the motor truck post office now being tried out (see page 20).

Free delivery, rural, was started Oct. 1, 1896, in West Virginia, and we know that three routes were started in Maine in the same year, one each from Gorham, Sebago Lake and Naples (page 20).

Above, a cover carried on Trip 2 of the first highway post office bus (right), which was used on a route between Washington, D.C., and Harrisonburg, Va.; the second route, between Jackson and Benton Harbor, Mich., which was not started until after World War II.

First Day Cover for the 1996 Rural Free Delivery Centennial issue, Sc. 3090



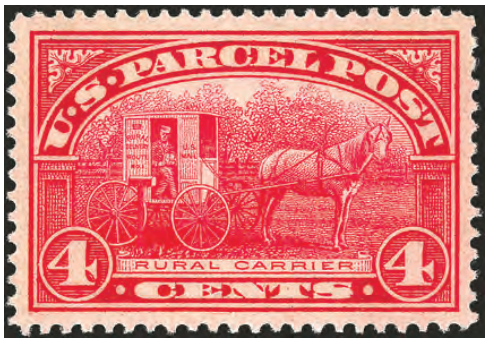
Left, an early Rural Free Delivery truck making a trial trib from Lancaster County, Pa., to New York City.

The parcels post, established in 1912, is the only postal service where distance is a factor in the rates (see page 21).

Such, very briefly, is the history of the United States Post Office. In 1790 there were 75 post offices and revenue were around $25,000. At 1901 the maximum number of post offices was just short of 77,000 and at 1930 revenues were over $705,000,000. The number of letters handled

A Parcel Post tag to a Seattle, Wash., fur dealer with 50¢ and 75¢ Parcel Post stamps, Q10 and Q11, used with 5¢ 1902 and 1¢ Washington heads, tied by "Bethel Alaska Jan. 11, 1916" duplex c.d.s.

reached the astronomical figure of 28,000,000,000. The rural free delivery, at 1930, employed 42,000 carriers and served 25,000,000 people. All of this is for the safety and well-being of the people of the United States and without too much regard for its cost.



A rural carrier in a "Rural Delivery Route 1" wagon, on Parcel Post Scott Q4.