



1775-1862

THE EARLY DAYS OF THE REPUBLIC

*Let us bind these people together to us
with a chain that can never be broken.*

GEORGE WASHINGTON

When George Washington, our country's first president, spoke these words in 1782, he and other prominent figures of the time were seriously concerned about the fate of this fledgling nation. Many Americans worried that a democratic republic composed of thirteen states and a vast frontier covering over a million square miles would never survive: the United States was geographically too vast to govern; the customs, opinions and laws of each state were too different; and each state jealously guarded its rights and powers.

As Washington's remark suggests, he was acutely aware of America's precarious situation and saw the development of a national postal service as a way to bind Americans together into a unified nation. A nationwide postal system had existed since 1775—when the Second Continental Congress appointed Benjamin Franklin the first postmaster general—but by 1782, the operation of the post office provided little comfort to those Americans worried about their country's future. Stagecoaches and postriders were too unreliable, theft common, and postage rates too high. Postal legislation passed that year had given the central government control of both interstate and intrastate posts, but many citizens ignored the law. In fact, many Americans questioned the extent of the central government's postal power.



Benjamin Franklin immortalized in his role as the nation's first Postmaster General



Wilmington and New-Castle Mail.

THE SUBSCRIBERS respectfully inform the Public, and the Citizens of Wilmington and New-Castle in particular, that they have established a Stage for the purpose of carrying the Mail between the aforesaid places, and also for the conveyance of passengers and baggage....It will leave New-Castle for Wilmington, every morning between 6 and 7 o'clock, and arrive at D. BRINTON'S Tavern, in time for passengers to take the 8 o'clock Stage for Philadelphia.

THE Stage will occasionally return to New-Castle in the forenoon, when a sufficient number of passengers offer, and back to Wilmington, and leave there every day for New-Castle after the arrival of the Philadelphia Stages.

Passengers may rest assured, that this establishment will be much safer and more expeditious than any heretofore established between those two Towns; having the best horses, and a careful driver.

Wilmington,
Delaware.



JOSEPH BRINGHURST, p. m. Wilmington.
DAVID MORRISON, p. m. New-Castle.

But by 1794, Washington's wish was a reality. The Constitution of 1787 had granted Congress specific power "To establish Post Offices and Post Roads," and this authority was defined in 1792 when Congress approved comprehensive postal legislation. Two years later, in 1794, it officially established the Post Office as a permanent part of the federal government and authorized the appointment of this country's first letter carriers.

In these early days of the Republic, America's first letter carriers received no salaries but were permitted by Congress to collect a fee of two cents for every letter they delivered. Although two cents was a considerable amount of money in those days, this fee did not guarantee letter carriers a decent living wage. Since the recipients of letters had the option of accepting delivery service or calling at the post office to pick up their mail, most citizens chose the latter. Delivery of one's mail was a luxury few people could afford. Thus, the wages of these pioneer letter carriers were erratic at best.

THE SPOILS SYSTEM

To make matters worse, by the 1830s whatever job security letter carriers might have enjoyed was lost as favoritism and partisanship began to dominate their lives.

This started when Andrew Jackson succeeded John Quincy Adams as president after the bitter election campaign of 1828. Once in office, Jackson found himself surrounded by his enemies—men Adams appointed and who had actively and often viciously campaigned against him. Jackson's response to this situation was ruthless. He flagrantly replaced everybody—no matter how qualified—with loyal members of his own political party. "To the victor belong the spoils" became the rallying cry of his administration, and the spoils system—rewarding the party faithful with political appointments—quickly became entrenched in the federal government. In particular, it pervaded the Post Office Department,



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rippling downwards from the postmaster general to individual postmasters and then to postal clerks and letter carriers.

Local post offices intertwined with the local political machines of the national party in power. Letter carriers and post office clerks acquired their jobs through partisan ties and lost them whenever there was a local or national change in party or even in faction. So no matter how hard a letter carrier worked or how desperately a letter carrier needed the job, a change of administration meant he was out on the streets—not delivering the mail but looking for another way to make a living. In addition, for as long as the carrier held the job, he was expected to be a campaign worker first, a letter carrier second. If he failed to live up to this expectation, his work load might be increased, his pay reduced, or he would be fired.

The spoils system—capricious and arbitrary at best—fostered a kind of passivity among letter carriers. Hired only for political reasons and with the knowledge that the job was temporary, letter

carriers generally were inclined to accept inadequate wages and poor working conditions, both of which were determined by local postmasters. An individual letter carrier could improve his own situation by becoming friendly with the postmaster, but there was little hope of carriers as a whole wresting control over their work-lives. This situation, however, was to change within a short period of time.

Frederick W. Wolf was appointed a letter carrier in Troy, New York in 1854 and served for 54 years. At the time of his appointment, carriers collected two cents for each letter they delivered. Since it was not always convenient to collect on delivery, Wolf would often mark the amount due on the door or side of the house. A large number of these houses were destroyed in the fire of 1862 and since Wolf had no other record of the money owed him, he never recovered his money.

