

Free city delivery

The first post office letter carrier and the system he helped create



Joseph W. Briggs

A stamp was issued to commemorate 100 years of free city delivery in 1963.

Before the American Civil War, a postage stamp would take a letter only as far as the post office in the city or town to which it was being mailed. To actually get the letter, the intended recipient would have to go to the post office and see if he or she had any mail.

Much of a city's adult population would pass through the post office regularly, checking to see if they had received any mail. While there were private carriers who would deliver mail to the recipient for 2 cents a letter, that was considered a luxury and out of reach for many Americans.

One bitterly cold winter day in Cleveland, OH, in 1862, a long line of citizens was anxiously waiting at the lone post office in the city to see if there were any letters from husbands, relatives or friends fighting in the Civil War. The same people would come every day, making the lines much longer than before the war. The assistant postmaster and window clerk, Joseph W. Briggs, was appalled at this sight. He felt the government should treat its citizens better than he could on that cold day in Cleveland.

Briggs decided to experiment to see if mail delivery that didn't charge any extra fee could work, giving birth to the idea of free city delivery. Briggs canvassed neighborhood grocery shops to find out if mail could be brought to these stores, sorted by post office personnel and then delivered to the front doorsteps of patrons.

Before he could start the experiment, he had to ask the local postmaster, Edwin Cowles, for permission. Cowles, who also was the publisher of the *Cleveland Leader*, one of the city's newspapers, thought that his paper's circulation might

benefit from free delivery and gave Briggs the go-ahead.

Briggs mapped out a route for himself, satisfied that his plan was workable. Then, he loaded a basket with letters and headed out to personally deliver them. It was an instant—and popular—success. Not only did the recipients like it, they and others in the area wanted more of it.

And yet, Briggs quickly realized that for city delivery to continue, some changes were needed.

Back then, there were fewer rules for street names and planning. Many streets had no names, while other streets shared popular names. At the time, Cleveland had two streets named Lincoln, and the residents on neither street wanted to give up the name of the wartime president. After much arguing about which street's residents would have to surrender the name, Briggs solved the problem by renaming one of them Abraham.

Then he had to start numbering all of the houses in Cleveland.

There was pushback from the private letter carriers who delivered mail for 2 cents a letter to those who could afford it, such as wealthy merchants. They feared the loss of business if free city delivery continued. Briggs struck a deal to hire 10 of them as government letter carriers.

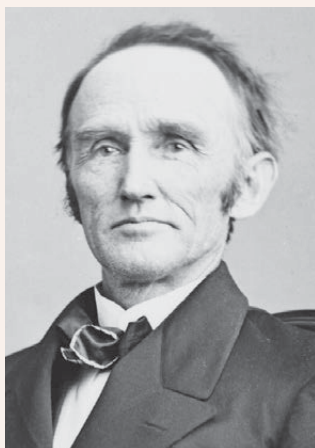
He mapped out the delivery district for the carriers. But people who lived just beyond the line were furious because they were barred from





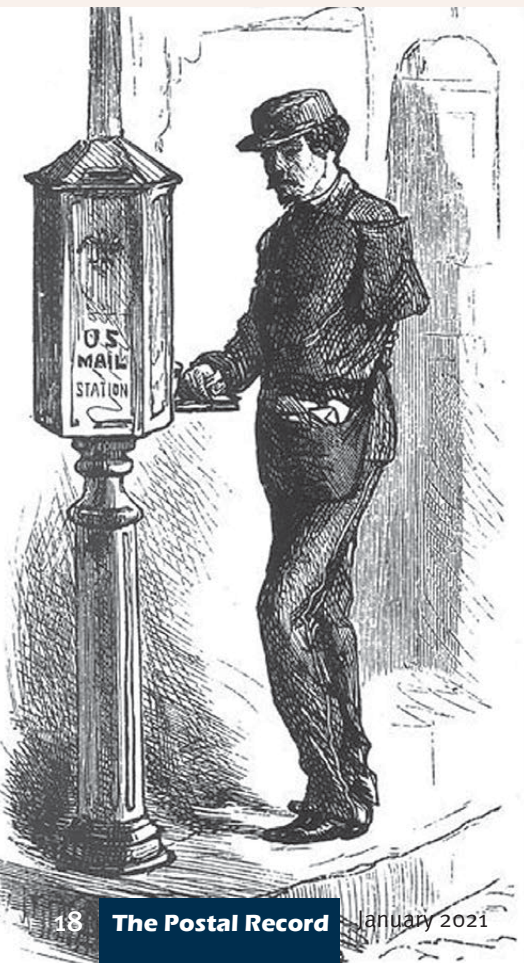
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Above: Postmaster General Montgomery Blair

Below: Civil War veterans were often hired as the first letter carriers.



delivery, and they accused him of discrimination.

Merchants wanted Briggs's men to bring enormous packages out with their mail. Housewives were upset because the carriers would not bring their groceries from the store, even though the carriers were coming their way with the mail they had picked up at the grocery stores.

Briggs and Cowles decided that it was time to take the idea to Washington, DC. Briggs wrote to Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, describing the idea of free city delivery and outlining the success of the Cleveland experiment. Knowing there might be concerns about costs, Briggs pointed out that it would be less expensive to hire mailmen than to require the entire adult population of a city to stand in line for hours at each post office throughout the land.

Briggs found a capable ally in Blair, the former mayor of St. Louis, MO. Blair thought that if the process of mailing and receiving letters was more convenient, people would use it more often, thereby increasing revenue. He pointed out that England already had adopted free city delivery and had experienced increased postal revenues as a result.

In his 1862 report to President Lincoln, Blair pushed for free delivery of mail by salaried letter carriers, which he felt would “greatly accelerate deliveries, and promote the public convenience.”

Members of Congress liked the idea of free city delivery and also liked the idea of getting credit for passing a bill that would deliver the mail right to the door of every voter in every big city in the United States. But Congress also feared the cost. With the Civil War

underway, some in Congress wondered whether this was the time to engage in expensive and radical experiments with the postal establishment.

On March 3, 1863, Congress passed a law that free city delivery be established starting on July 1 of that year at post offices where income from local postage was more than sufficient to pay all expenses of the service.

“For the first time, Americans had to put street addresses on their letters,” wrote the USPS historian in a 2007 report about free city delivery.

On July 1, 1863—the day the savage battle of Gettysburg began—449 modern letter carriers began walking the streets of 49 cities. More than one-quarter of them—137—delivered mail to the doors of patrons in New York City; on the other extreme, three letter carriers delivered mail in Louisville, KY, while one letter carrier walked his route for the first time in Nashua, NH.

In 1864, Briggs wrote to Postmaster General Blair, suggesting improvements to the system. Blair brought him to Washington and appointed him “special agent” in charge of the operation of the letter carrier system. He later was appointed to the job of national superintendent, responsible for organizing free mail delivery in 52 cities throughout the United States.

Postmasters, groups of citizens, or city authorities could petition the Post Office Department for free delivery service if their city met population or postal revenue requirements. The city had to provide sidewalks and crosswalks, ensure that streets were named and illuminated, and assign numbers to houses.

By 1869, revenues from free city delivery were more than 10 times the cost of delivery, and the new system



Some of the first letter carriers

provided employment for many Civil War veterans as letter carriers. By 1880, 104 cities were served by 2,628 letter carriers, and by 1900, 15,322 carriers provided service to 796 cities.

Initially, letter carriers hand-delivered mail to customers. If a customer did not answer the carrier's knock, ring or whistle, the mail remained in the carrier's satchel, to be redelivered when the customer was home.

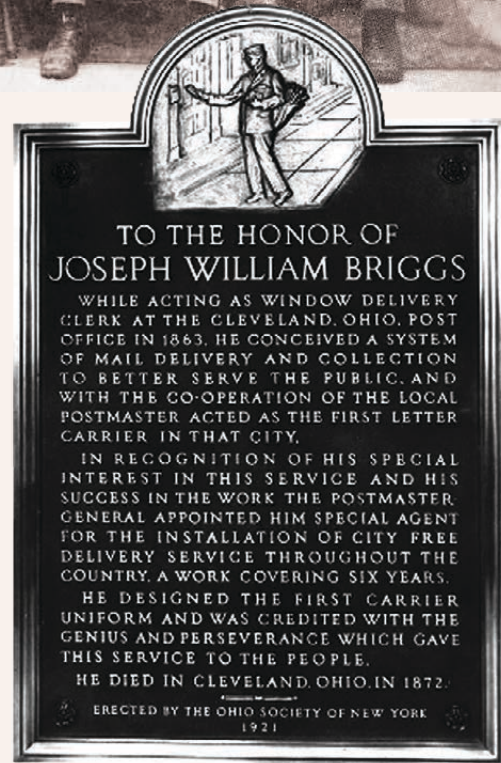
By 1912, new customers were required to provide mail slots or receptacles, and postmasters were urged to encourage existing customers to provide them as well. As late as 1914, First Assistant Postmaster General Daniel C. Roper estimated that on the average, letter carriers spent a daily total of 30 minutes to an hour waiting at doors where there was person-to-person delivery.

As of March 1, 1923, mail slots or receptacles were required for delivery service. By the 1930s, as a convenience to customers living on the margins of a city, letter carriers began delivering to customers with "suitable boxes at the curb line," according to the Post Office Department's *Supervision of City Delivery Service*.

Briggs remained with the Post Office Department, fine-tuning the system he had created, until his death in 1872. Before he died, Briggs helped design the first letter carrier uniform—it was gray cloth with black trimmings.

A postal committee formed in 1921 and was tasked with determining who should be credited with the establishment of free city delivery, after examining the available evidence reported to Postmaster General Will Hays that "no one individual can be considered the author or originator of this service ..." The committee said, "Mr. Briggs cannot be properly credited as the author of the City Free Delivery Service" because, with its introduction in England, many people were talking about free city delivery, and because Briggs would not have been able to introduce it without the help of Postmaster General Blair and many others.

However, it was his know-how and vision that propelled city delivery forward and developed it after the law passed. Despite the postal committee's ruling, a plaque in the Cleveland Federal Building commemorates Briggs's service and accomplishments, recognizing him as that city's first free city delivery letter carrier. **PR**



A plaque was installed in Cleveland to celebrate Briggs and his accomplishments.