

MAIL TO THE CHIEF

U.S. presidents and the mail

Theodore
Roosevelt



For as long as there has been a United States of America, and in fact a year longer, the Post Office has been a vital federal agency, starting with the naming by Congress of Benjamin Franklin as the first postmaster general in 1775 and being inscribed in the Constitution in 1787.

In 1792, President George Washington signed into law an act that reinforced the power of Congress to establish

official mail routes. It specified that newspapers should be included in mail deliveries and made it illegal for postal officials to open mail.

Since that action by our first president, many presidents have had interesting relationships with the mail.

Abraham Lincoln, postmaster and letter carrier (sort of)

In 1833, 24-year-old Abraham Lincoln was appointed the postmaster of New Salem, IL. As a perk of the position, he got to mail his letters for free and received one newspaper for free.

Because free city delivery didn't yet exist in the United States, residents in New Salem had to come into the Post Office to collect their mail. Mail arrived once a week, delivered on a route running from Springfield to Millers Ferry. If residents didn't collect their mail, Lincoln was known to deliver it personally, often carrying the mail in his hat.

The New Salem Post Office was closed in 1835, and the Post Office didn't send anyone to collect the roughly \$18 in office cash for several months. Meanwhile, Lincoln became a surveyor before deciding to become a lawyer and leaving New Salem for Springfield.

Months later, a Post Office agent trying to collect the missing office money located Lincoln. A friend of Lincoln's, Dr. A. G. Henry, was present when the agent arrived and, aware that Lincoln had recently gone through financially

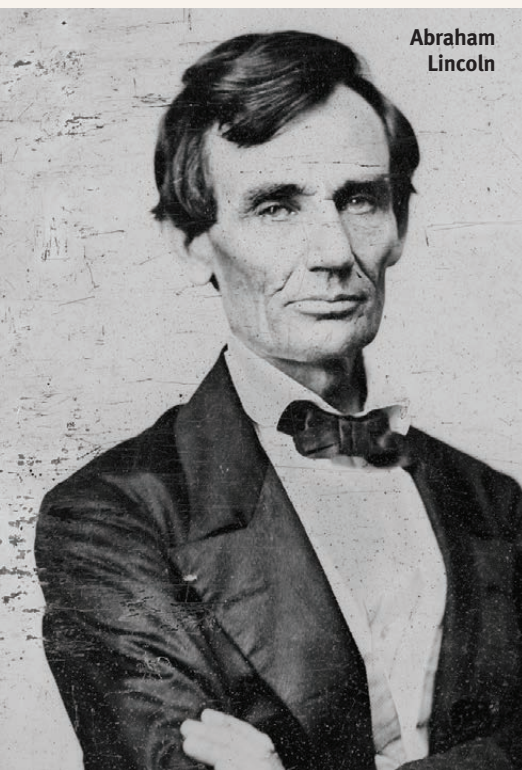
difficult times, Henry was about to offer him a loan. But before Henry could do so, Lincoln "asked the agent to be seated a moment, while he went over to his trunk at his boarding house, and returned with an old blue sock," Henry later recounted. "Untying the sock, he poured the contents on the table and proceeded to count the coin.... On counting it up there was found the exact amount, to a cent, of the draft, and in the identical coin which had been received."

Keeping every cent of the Post Office's money secure until it could be collected became another part of Lincoln's "Honest Abe" legend.

After becoming a lawyer and serving in both the Illinois and U.S. House of Representatives, Lincoln launched a bid for the U.S. Senate and engaged in the famed Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858. Those debates made him a national figure, and even though he lost his Senate race, two years later he was the Republican Party's 1860 presidential nominee and won the election—making him the first Republican president.

In 1863, President Lincoln signed into law a bill establishing free city delivery, starting on July 1 of that year, at certain post offices where it was financially prudent. (See the January 2021 *Postal Record* for more on the establishment of free city delivery.)

Lincoln wasn't the only postmaster to become president. Harry Truman, of



Abraham
Lincoln

neighboring Missouri, was appointed postmaster of Grandview in 1914 after taking the civil service examination, but he never actually performed the job of postmaster.

“I let a widow woman who was helping to raise and educate her younger sisters and brothers run the office as assistant postmaster and take the pay which amounted to about 50 dollars a month—a lot of money in those days. It would have paid two farmhands,” Truman wrote in his autobiography.

In 1949, a Washington, DC, newspaper dug up the story and reported that Truman “signed official papers, when necessary; the ‘substitute’ collected, and everybody was satisfied.”

Zachary Taylor, unaware presidential nominee

Zachary Taylor became nationally famous during the Mexican-American War. In 1846, he commanded American forces at the Battle of Palo Alto and the Battle of Resaca de la Palma, both in Texas. Though greatly outnumbered, he defeated the Mexican army and forced the troops back across the Rio Grande into Mexico. Winning praise for his humane treatment of the wounded Mexican soldiers and for performing the last rites for American and Mexican soldiers killed during the battle, he became a popular war hero.

Taylor was promoted to the rank of brigadier general, and the national press compared him to George Washington and Andrew Jackson—two generals who went on to become president—though Taylor denied any interest in running for office. “Such an idea never entered my head,” he remarked in a letter, “nor is it likely to enter the head of any sane person.”

In the run-up to the 1848 presidential election, he was courted by both major political parties, the Democrats and the Whigs. Taylor had never publicly expressed any political beliefs and, in fact, had never even voted. Eventually, he voiced his support for the views of some Whig leaders, and that was good enough for the party.

The Whigs were in rough shape. The party had won only one presidential election before, in 1840 with famed General William Henry Harrison, who subsequently served as president for just 30 days before dying of pneumonia. Hoping to repeat their victory, several Whig leaders aimed to put Taylor forward as their presidential candidate at the party convention in Philadelphia.

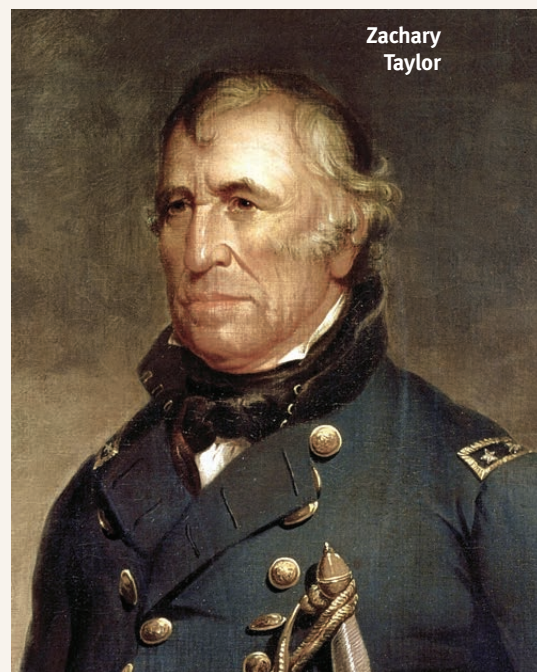
At the time, candidates traditionally didn’t attend the conventions, so Taylor was at his residence in Baton Rouge, LA. Unbeknownst to Taylor, he was nominated, and Whig Party Chairman John Moorehead sent Taylor a letter notifying him.

One week passed, and there was no response from Taylor. Two weeks passed and still no word. When the third week passed without a reply from Taylor, Moorehead began to worry.

The problem was that Taylor never received the letter.

At the time, letters were often sent with minimum postage and the recipient was expected to pay any remaining amount. Taylor, as a popular war hero, was receiving a large amount of mail from his admirers and, wanting to economize, had instructed the postmaster of Baton Rouge not to deliver any mail to him that had postage due. When Moorehead’s letter arrived, it went into the dead-letter file.

Moorehead’s letter spent weeks in the Baton Rouge mailroom until an



Zachary Taylor

embarrassed Taylor was informed what had happened and retrieved the correspondence, paying \$7.50 (roughly \$130 today) for postage due on a large amount of mail. He then accepted the nomination and went on to win the election of 1848.

William McKinley unofficially created the White House Office of Correspondence

Presidents have always received a lot of mail, and eventually they would need help going through it. Thomas Jefferson, elected in 1800, reportedly received 137 pieces of mail a month, on average. By the 1850s, Millard Fillmore said that he received 100 letters a day.

When William McKinley assumed the presidency in 1897, he appointed one of his 12 clerks, Ira R.T. Smith, to deal with his mail. Smith would go on to spend more than 50 years handling presiden-

For more than 50 years, Ira R.T. Smith was in charge of the presidents' mail and created the White House Office of Correspondence, which continues to this day.



tial mail, transforming the way successive White Houses dealt with it.

McKinley was president until 1901, when he was assassinated. He was succeeded by Vice President Theodore Roosevelt. When Roosevelt, a popular hero of the Spanish-American War, became president, the volume of mail grew “like an avalanche,” Smith wrote in his book, *Dear Mr. President: The Story of Fifty Years in the White House Mail Room*.

“Everything was turned upside down,” Smith wrote. “The mail poured in. We began taking on clerks. Before long we had fifty people handling mail. After the first week we were 450,000 letters behind—

almost half a million letters that hadn’t been touched. We had mail up and down the corridors and even over in the State Department. It took us six months to catch up.”

Ultimately, a special department was created at the central Washington, DC Post Office to handle Roosevelt’s mail. But the volume continued to grow after Roosevelt, with President Herbert Hoover receiving 800 letters a day and Franklin Delano Roosevelt receiving 10 times that many—8,000 pieces per day.

The staff expanded to meet the increased need and Smith was named the first “chief of mails,” which is now called the director of correspondence.

One of Smith’s duties was to make sure that there were no threats in the mail to the president or his family. Security is different today, in part because of the work of postal inspectors and the Secret Service, than it was in Smith’s day. “I listened for ticking, opening packages at the end of a pole and dunked others in oil,” he wrote. “Did it for years and never lost a president!”

During Smith’s tenure, he received a coyote sent to President Roosevelt that “terrorized the White House staff when it escaped;” two Nubian lions from Ethiopia; a large Alaskan eagle; numerous horned toads; a Puerto

Rican cow and calf for the “White House dairy;” and a grain of rice with selections from the Koran written on it, which was lost when the package was opened and was never recovered.

Smith ran the office until his retirement in 1948.

Each president has had his own approach to the mail. President Barack Obama requested that the office give him 10 letters from the public every day. Reportedly, the letters helped inform Obama’s perceptions of how his policies affected ordinary people.

President Donald Trump’s office focused on military veterans and their families, Gold Star families, law enforcement and first responders. In a letter, 11-year-old Frank Giaccio offered to mow the White House lawn free of charge and was invited to mow the Rose Garden lawn alongside President Trump.

The office has expanded since Smith’s days as chief of mails to include phone, email and, most recently, Twitter communications.

Mail is the only universal network for the country, connecting every citizen. As such, it will always be an important avenue for people to communicate with their elected officials, all the way up to the president of the United States. **PR**



William McKinley