

# The Delray Democrat

## The United States Post Office – The Early Years<sup>1</sup>

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The United States Post Office. We grew up in the years of daily mail delivery and it's always been an integral part of our lives. Despite online communications and transactions, there's still a bit of magic to the daily delivery of mail.

In earlier times correspondence was carried by traveling friends or acquaintances, and there were multiple attempts to establish a system of mail in the colonies. The first post office was chartered by the Massachusetts court and set up in 1639 at the Fairbanks Tavern in Boston. It was basically a place where locals could leave mail that was typically shipped to England.

Benjamin Franklin served as Postmaster General to the United Kingdom for the colonies from 1737 until 1774 and organized the early postal system. His allegiance to the independence of the colonies caused him to lose that position and return home. He was designated Postmaster General by the Continental Congress in 1775 when the U.S. Post Office was created.

Congress was granted the power to establish and regulate post offices by the Articles of Confederation in 1778, which granted the post offices the right to collect "postage." The Founders realized the critical role that mail played in communications, and Article 1, Section 8 of the United States Constitution granted Congress the sole and continuing power "To establish Post Offices and Post Roads" on September 22, 1789. Samuel Osgood was appointed the first Postmaster General that year by George Washington, and while Osgood served for only three years, he put the Post Office on a track to be self-sustaining.

After a few years of disagreement between the House and Senate on Post Office oversight and operation, Congress passed the Post Office Act of 1792 on February 20, 1792, declaring (Osgood's) self-sustenance model would continue. It was, however, the intent of the government to subsidize the delivery of news to the general population and through the Act helped to subsidize the distribution of newspapers by offering very low mailing rates. The Founders viewed it a critical public service to inform and educate the general population on all facts and issues, including and especially those governmental and political in nature. Prior to the Act the Post Office did not handle newspapers.

The Act also provided for the growth and expansion of the Post Office, and guaranteed the privacy of personal articles mailed. As the Post Office expanded buildings and routes, the country came together in knowledge and opportunity. The expansion and construction of buildings and roads became quite expensive over the years and there were numerous investigations that politicized cost overages and budget shortfalls. The need for mail delivery created the need for facilities and roads

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and those needs often eclipsed the efforts by Congress to curtail costs.

The nineteenth century gave rise to mail traveling by stagecoach over roads that were being constructed and better maintained to accommodate these stagecoaches carrying mail. In 1847 ships carried mail from New York to San Francisco via the Panama Canal. Steamboats and wagon trains were also employed in the delivery of the mail to the western and southwestern sections of the country by the mid 1800's.

The first postage stamps were issued on March 3, 1847 and bore the pictures of George Washington (\$0.10 cent stamp) and Benjamin Franklin (\$0.05 stamp), with the cost of mailing dependent on the weight and delivery distance of the item being mailed.

1860 brought us the Pony Express, created by the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express. The Pony Express ran from St. Joseph, Missouri to Sacramento, California, but lasted less than two years due to high costs that led to financial failure, and it was subsequently purchased by Wells Fargo. 1862 gave rise to the advent of home delivery, meaning people no longer had to stand in line to get their mail and resulting in the creation of many new jobs. The Post Office later became a major employer of Civil War veterans.

The transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869 and train cars in which mail was sorted were put into operation. 1870 introduced the early concept of air mail by using balloons, but the actual Postal Air Mail Service came about on May 15, 1918. The passage of the Comstock Laws in 1873 made it illegal to mail obscene and certain other materials, thereby regulating the content of mailed items.

Parcel Post began in 1887 with service between the U.S. and Canada and other countries but was not instituted within the continental United States until 1912. The United States Postal Saving System was created by Congress on June 25, 1910 and went into service on January 1, 1911. The system offered 2% interest per annum while the Post Office earned a small differential on the deposit of these monies and the saving system was operational until 1967.

All of the preceding activities and events contributed to the development of our current postal system.