

**NEITHER
SNOW
NOR RAIN**

A History of the

United States Postal Service



DEVIN LEONARD

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Grove Press
New York

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Published simultaneously in Canada

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0-8021-2458-6

eISBN 978-0-8021-8997-4

Grove Press

an imprint of Grove Atlantic

154 West 14th Street

New York, NY 10011

Distributed by Publishers Group West

grovetatlantic.com

To Eileen, Colin, and Faith

“The postal establishment of the United States is the greatest business concern in the world. It handles more pieces, employs more men, spends more money, brings more revenue, uses more agencies, reaches more homes, involves more details and touches more interests than any other human organization, public or private, governmental or corporate . . . There are other nations that number more people. But there is none whose intercommunications, in area of sweep and magnitude of proportions, approaches the United States.”

—Charles Emory Smith, U.S. Postmaster General, 1899

“No one really runs the Post Office.”

—Winton Blount, U.S. Postmaster General, 1968

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Prologue

Growing up in Queens, Evan Kalish didn't go to the post office very often. When he needed to send somebody something, he used his computer and later his iPhone. But everything changed after Kalish graduated from Brown University in 2008. He wanted to see the whole country and set off on a three-month road trip to Minnesota in his Toyota Camry. He took pictures of himself in front of post offices in every town he visited so he had proof that he had actually been to these out-of-the-way places, and he started sending letters to his friends while he was on the road. "I really got into it," he says.

The more post offices he visited, the more fascinated Kalish became. They were everywhere, and each one was different. When he returned to New York, Kalish was so inspired that he decided to visit every post office in America. It would take years, of course. There were 36,723 post offices in the United States. So what? Kalish would see the whole nation by the time he was through.

Kalish created a blog cheerfully entitled "Going Postal" and began to chronicle his travels on the Internet. He visited every post office in New York City and Long Island and most of the ones in northern New Jersey. He traveled I-95, snapping pictures of himself in front of post offices from Baltimore to Boston. Kalish swooned over the one in Nashville, the walls of which were decorated with hundreds of autographed photos of country music stars. He was charmed by a purple post office in Phillipsville, California, near the Oregon border. He cultivated a palate for the stylish post offices constructed during the New Deal era, which often had splendid murals, some of them painted by famous American artists like Ben Shahn and Milton Avery. The murals turned Kalish's journey into a treasure hunt. "It's almost like the institution is a giant museum," Kalish says. "It's fun to try to see if you can find all the galleries."

Sometimes postmasters tried to chase Kalish away, saying that he had no right to take pictures of their buildings. What if he was a terrorist? Kalish responded that they couldn't hassle him as long as he was outside on public property. Others recognized Kalish from his blog and gave him tours, pulling old photographs from their filing cabinets to show him. Kalish made a lot of friends this way, which was nice for someone who could be rather shy.

By the end of 2010, Kalish had visited 1,561 post offices and had made an unexpected discovery: he wasn't alone. He met a man who had been to 20,000 post offices over the course of 40 years. He befriended two others who had each been to more than 10,000. Kalish went on a summer excursion with his fellow enthusiasts to visit post offices on islands off the coast of Maine. They chartered a boat and went to MacMahan Island. There are no roads on MacMahan Island, just unmarked trails. But there was a post office waiting for them. They took a ferry to Bustins Island to visit another one in a small yellow building along with the public library. "The ferry we happened to take was also the mail ferry!" Kalish wrote on his blog.

Kalish announced on "Going Postal" that he had been to another 1,253 post offices in 2011. But the more Kalish immersed himself in the infrastructure of the U.S. Postal Service, the more there was to see. He now understood that behind all of those post

offices, there was a network of 461 processing plants, some with floors big enough to hold several football fields, through which millions of letters and packages flowed. He couldn't just walk into these places; they weren't public buildings. But with the help of his postal connections, he found people who let him in. Everywhere Kalish looked, he saw mail trucks and mailboxes. To think that he had spent most of his life oblivious of them all.

But Kalish needed to move quickly. The U.S. Postal Service was awash in red ink. In 2011, it revealed that it had lost \$8.5 billion the year before. As people abandoned the mail, it wanted to close post offices, shutter processing plants, and shed employees. Kalish was working on a graduate degree in geospatial analysis at the University of Pennsylvania. He hung a map on the wall of his apartment showing Pennsylvania's endangered post offices in concentric circles. He didn't have classes from Friday until Monday evening. "I would take my car every weekend and visit clusters of them," Kalish says. "It was a race against the clock."

The U.S. Postal Service is a wondrous American creation. Six days a week, its 300,000 letter carriers deliver 513 million pieces of mail, more than 40 percent of the world's total volume. In parts of America that it can't reach by truck, the USPS finds other means to get people their letters and packages. It transports them by mule train to the Havasupai Indian Reservation at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. Bush pilots fly letters to the edges of Alaska. In thinly populated parts of Montana and North Dakota, the postal service has what it refers to as "shirt pocket" routes, which means that postal workers literally carry all their letters for the day in their shirt pockets. At a time when the USPS is losing several billion letters a year to the Internet, it still has to do this six days a week because it is legally required to provide universal service to every American home and business. Is it any wonder the USPS struggles to make money, even now that it also delivers packages on Sundays for Amazon?

People often talk about how the postal service is lumbering and inefficient compared with private sector competitors such as UPS and FedEx. But the USPS delivers more items in nine days than UPS does in a year. It transports more in seven days than FedEx brings to its customers in a year. In 2011, Oxford Strategic Consulting, an English firm, studied the postal services in developed countries and found that the USPS was by far the most efficient at handling letters, delivering 268,894 per employee—twice as many as the UK's Royal Mail and five times that of Germany's Deutsche Post. The USPS refers to the study proudly, though being the world's most efficient letter handler doesn't have the same cachet that it did a generation ago.

The USPS seems archaic in the age of Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. But for much of its history, the American postal service has been at technology's sharpest edge. It developed a system of sorting mail on trains in the nineteenth century that was considered a wonder of the age. The U.S. Post Office Department, as it was once known, pioneered commercial aviation in the early twentieth century. In the 1950s, it created high-speed letter sorting machines with electric eyes that read zip codes and handwritten addresses. Postal services around the world use this technology now, but its slow deployment in America is a story that one long-serving deputy postmaster once confessed made him want to cry.

The USPS seems from the outside like a listless bureaucracy, full of people who have gravitated there for security, not because they are consumed with ambition. “Nobody aims to be a postal worker,” says Orlando Gonzalez, a letter carrier and union organizer in New York. “That’s not someone’s goal. But I know countless people that have come here and stayed.” It can be an insular place, suspicious of people and ideas from outside.

But fascinating people have passed through its ranks. Benjamin Franklin, America’s first postmaster general, was only one of them. Long before Abraham Lincoln was president of the United States, he was the postmaster of New Salem, Illinois. Harry Truman held the title of postmaster of Grandview, Missouri. Walt Disney was a substitute carrier in Chicago. Bing Crosby was a clerk in Spokane, Washington. Rock Hudson delivered mail in Winnetka, Illinois. The mercurial jazz bassist and composer Charles Mingus toiled anonymously in post offices in Los Angeles and San Francisco before becoming famous in the 1950s. Four decades later, the USPS honored Mingus with his own stamp, but neglected to mention that he was a former employee.

Some famous postal workers didn’t care for the job. The novelist William Faulkner, author of classics like *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, spent three years as postmaster at the University of Mississippi until he was forced to resign in 1924 for his obvious disinterest. A postal inspector furnished him with a long list of his transgressions, which included treating patrons rudely, failing to forward mail, and writing the greater part of one of his books while he was on duty. “I will be damned if I propose to be at the beck and call of every itinerant scoundrel who has two cents to invest in a postage stamp.” Faulkner wrote in his letter of resignation. The scabrous author Charles Bukowski worked for the postal service as a substitute carrier. In his 1971 novel *Post Office*, Bukowski depicted the job in nightmarish terms. “Every route had its traps and only the regular carriers knew of them,” he wrote. “Each day it was another god damned thing, and you were always ready for a rape, murder, dogs, or insanity of some sort. The regulars wouldn’t tell you their secrets.”

Like most large institutions, the USPS has a darker side. It has been plagued by racism and scandal. It has a shameful legacy of censorship, including banning material about birth control and novels like James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. In the 1980s and 1990s, postal workers went berserk on the job, murdering their coworkers. For much of its history, postmasters and rural letter carriers were hired primarily because of their political connections, not for their qualifications. It was a system that made many uncomfortable, but it persisted until 1970.

At the same time, however, the postal service has been a beacon for generations of working-class Americans, a place where they could earn a paycheck and rise into the middle class. It was not uncommon for brothers and sisters, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters to spend their entire careers at the USPS. This was especially true for African Americans and Hispanics. They couldn’t always find jobs in the private sector. But they knew there was always work for them at the post office. And Bukowski aside, a lot of people like working there. True, clerks who wait on us at the post office can seem perennially disaffected. “Why are they the way they are?” *Washington Post* columnist Mary McGrory asked in 1988. “Why are they so angry at us? Post offices have ropes to keep us in line. The clerks’ faces tell us they wish we hadn’t come. I wish they could realize that we have not come to cause them harm. All we want to do

is send packages and buy commemoratives, which I enjoy—apparently more than I am supposed to.”

Letter carriers, on the other hand, talk about how nice it is to leave the post office in the morning and be on their own for most of the day. Who hasn't secretly wanted to trade jobs on a warm spring day when we are stuck inside at our desks? Their mailbags may be much lighter these days, but they still have their junk mail or “job security,” as letter carriers call it.

Perhaps more than anything else, the USPS reflects the changing way that Americans see their government. The country's founding fathers, among them Franklin and Washington, envisioned the postal service as a force that would bind Americans together, bringing them not only letters from friends and family members, but newspapers and magazines that would foster a common culture. “We are so diverse that only extraordinary means could have held us together when so many forces seemed designed to tear us apart,” Lawrence O'Brien, Lyndon Johnson's postmaster general, said in an eloquent 1966 speech. “There are a number of reasons why the United States did not become the dis-United States and why we did not evolve into the North American Balkans. There are many factors that combined and unified America. The process was carried on silently, almost in secret, underneath the temporary upheavals in our history. It moved by a chain of paper that transported the elements of Americanism through thousands of miles, across mountains and desert, from city to frontier, a chain stretching into every clearing and valley. This link consisted of the postal service and the publications—magazines and newspapers—that provided a common store of images, of heroes, of folklore, of truth, and of inspiration and ideals.”

In the late 1970s, American attitudes toward government and toward the USPS began to change. Even before the election of Ronald Reagan and the triumph of a new conservatism, lawmakers and their cheerleaders in the business community began speaking of the postal service as a threat. If left unchecked, they argued, the USPS would extend its tentacles into new forms of communication better handled by the private sector. Therefore, the USPS had to be reined in; but the more the USPS's foes restricted its operations, the more they laid the groundwork for the postal service's current crisis.

Now the USPS is slowly vanishing. It has sold off its historic post offices. It has closed processing plants. A decade and a half ago, the USPS employed 905,766 people; in 2014, it had a workforce of 617,877. But even as the USPS shrinks, its losses continue to swell. By its own calculations, it owed nearly \$71 billion in mid-2015. The possibility of that money being repaid seems unlikely.

In other moments of crisis in the postal service's history, Congress has intervened to rescue it. Americans, after all, have depended on the postal service to bring them love letters, messages from family members in distant parts of the country, and newspapers that keep them connected to the rest of the world. Businesses have relied on the postal service to take bills to their customers and return with checks. Strange as this may sound, for most of its history, America could not have functioned without the USPS. “It is one of the biggest businesses in the country,” President Harry Truman said in 1951. “And without it, the rest of the country would not be able to do business at all. Without the postal service all our activities would come to a standstill—business,

national defense, family life, everything.”

Today, nobody in Washington seems to possess the politician’s will to save the U.S. Postal Service. Or perhaps the politicians simply don’t care because the issue is no longer as relevant to their constituents. Republicans want the USPS to cut mail service and close more postal facilities. Otherwise, they argue, the postal service will require a taxpayer bailout. Democrats and their allies in the postal workers’ unions accuse Republicans of exaggerating the agency’s financial troubles because they want to destroy the government mail system. People in the technology industry say that the Internet is killing the USPS and that this is how it was meant to be, but the Internet may be the postal service’s best hope.

1

The Founding Father

The placard above the door on Second Street in Philadelphia said “The Sign of the Bible.” That was how Benjamin Franklin knew he was in the right place on a cool Monday morning in October 1723. The 17-year-old Franklin was a newcomer to the city. He had arrived the previous day after fleeing Boston, where he had worked as an apprentice in a printing shop run by his older brother, James. Benjamin didn’t like taking orders from his sibling, nor did he appreciate it when James beat him for his insubordination. So Benjamin ran away, first to New York and then to Philadelphia, arriving by boat from Burlington, New Jersey. He had spent the night in a waterfront boardinghouse and had only a few coins left in his pocket. Now Benjamin Franklin needed a job.

This is what brought him to the doorstep of Andrew Bradford, Philadelphia’s most prominent printer. The Sign of the Bible was his shop. He published the *American Weekly Mercury*, Philadelphia’s first newspaper, and one that was circulated throughout the colonies. Bradford also operated a general store on the first floor of his Second Street house where customers could choose from whalebone, pickled sturgeon, silk clothing, and Spanish snuff, along with Bibles and other books that Bradford printed.

Bradford welcomed Franklin and offered him breakfast. He had no work for his visitor at the moment but said there might be an open apprenticeship at another printing shop. Franklin was grateful for the advice and the free meal, but he wasn’t impressed with his host. Franklin would later write that he found Bradford “very illiterate.” He was even more contemptuous of the *American Weekly Mercury*, which he described as “a paltry thing, wretchedly managed, no way entertaining, and yet was profitable to him.” At the time, Franklin was a penniless, teenage runaway, but he thought he could do much better.

After working as an apprentice for five years, Franklin opened his own printing shop in Philadelphia. He ran a general store on the premises that competed with Bradford’s, offering a more vast and eccentric selection, which, according to one of his biographers, included at various times soap, slates, pencils, ink, sealing wax, wafers, fountain pens, quills, inkhorns, chocolate, linseed oil, coffee, powdered mustard, compasses, scales, patent medicine, protractors, Rhode Island cheese and cod, white stockings, duck, barrels of mackerel, tea, saffron, spermaceti, and spectacles. In addition, Franklin acquired a paper called the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, which he transformed into a fierce competitor to the *American Weekly Mercury*.

Franklin may have been brighter than Bradford, but his rival was no fool. Bradford printed speeches and proclamations for the Pennsylvania and Maryland assemblies and paper money for New Jersey, and also used his government connections to secure an appointment as the postmaster of Philadelphia. The job didn’t pay much; postmasters worked on commission, keeping 10 percent of the postage they collected from their customers. But publishers in colonial America eagerly accepted the position because it

gave them a competitive advantage. As master of the local post, Bradford received a steady flow of free out-of-town newspapers, which provided him with material for the *Weekly Mercury*. It was common at the time for publishers to reprint entire articles from other papers without crediting them. The post office itself was a wellspring of news. People gathered there to gossip and trade information, furnishing more items for Bradford's paper. Best of all, postmasters controlled the circulation of newspapers in their regions. Bradford sent the *Weekly Mercury* through the mail at no cost and prohibited his riders from carrying the *Pennsylvania Gazette*.

How Franklin surmounted these obstacles and transformed the *Gazette* into the most widely read paper in the colonies is one of the most celebrated early American success stories. No one tells it with more wit and candor than Franklin himself in his autobiography. He put out a superior paper and ran his business more frugally than his competitor. He also understood that Bradford's postal riders were often in need of extra funds, so Franklin bribed them to carry his paper.

For Franklin, however, the final victory came when he pried the postmastership from his competitor's hands. In 1737, the British government removed Bradford because he had neglected to submit his financial reports for three years in a row, and it named Franklin as his successor. "I accepted it readily," Franklin wrote, "and found it of great advantage for, though the salary was small, it facilitated the correspondence that improved my newspaper, increased the number demanded, as well as the advertisements to be inserted, so that it came to afford me a considerable income. My old competitor's paper declined proportionately."

At first, Franklin allowed Bradford to send the *Weekly Mercury* through the mail, but he wasn't overly disappointed when the British told him to stop because Bradford hadn't paid his debts to the government from his time as postmaster. "He suffered greatly from his neglect in due accounting," Franklin wrote with evident satisfaction. "And I mention it as a lesson to those young men who may be employed in managing affairs for others, that they should always render accounts, and make remittances, with great clearness and punctuality." Franklin, on the other hand, was such a fastidious bookkeeper that in addition to his duties in Philadelphia, the British named him the comptroller of the entire colonial postal system, which meant that he kept track of the finances of 13 American post offices stretching for more than 1,500 miles of dirt roads from Portsmouth, New Hampshire; to Charleston, South Carolina.

In the years that followed, Franklin became famous for his experiments with electricity, his inventions, his political philosophizing, and his best-selling *Poor Richard's Almanack*. He did so well as a publisher that he was able to retire in 1748 from the day-to-day operation of his business and become a gentleman of leisure. But even then, Franklin kept his postal position. The job didn't require that much of his time, and it had its perks. As a postmaster, Franklin was entitled to "frank" letters, meaning he could send and receive them free—the term came from *francus*, the Latin word for free—enabling him to regularly exchange letters with intellectuals in Europe who publicized his achievements, thereby helping to make Franklin one of the world's most admired Americans. He inscribed his mail with his personal franking symbol: "Free. B. Franklin."

The job profoundly influenced Franklin's political thinking. He began to think of the colonies not as individual provinces but as parts of a potential nation bound

together by shared institutions like the post office. But for this vision to become a reality, the fledgling postal service needed to be improved. The mail arrived once a week in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston in the summer and every other week in the winter if the weather permitted. The roads were especially bad in the South, making delivery even less predictable there.

In 1751, Franklin learned that Elliott Benger, the crown's deputy postmaster and the official in charge of the colonies, was ill and might die. Franklin began surreptitiously campaigning for his job. He wrote to a friend in London, asking him to lobby British postal officials on his behalf and gave him permission to spend up to £300 on any necessary greasing of palms. Franklin asked him to be discreet: "I would only add that, as I have respect for Mr. Benger, I should be glad the application were so managed as to not give him any offense if he should recover."

Benger held on for two more years, but when he finally died, Franklin got his job. Much to his dismay, he had to share the appointment and its £600 annual salary with William Hunter, another printer-postmaster from Virginia. However, the amiable Hunter generally deferred to Franklin so the arrangement worked well. Now Franklin had his chance to reconceive the colonial post. In doing so, he would lay the foundation for a system that would become the largest hard-copy delivery service the world has ever known.

Almost as soon as the written word appeared, people began sending mail. Archaeologists have determined that by 1900 BC, the ancient Assyrians had established one of the first postal services. Merchants used it to exchange messages written in cuneiform on tablets sealed in clay envelopes, and they trusted it enough to send each other currency. "I provided your agents with three minas of silver for the purchase of lead," one businessman wrote to another. "Now, if you are still my brother, let me have my money by courier."

Typically, however, ancient rulers didn't allow commoners to use their postal services. They reserved the post for their own use as a tool for controlling their subjects and consolidating their power. Two centuries later, the Egyptian pharaohs created a network of postal routes traveled by horsemen who carried messages written in hieroglyphs on papyrus to their princes and military leaders. Only the most highly born Egyptians could send mail through the official post. Merchants had to use slaves to deliver their messages.

King Darius of Persia, who reigned from c. 521 to 486 BC, presided over perhaps the most celebrated ancient postal system and used it to extend his power throughout the Middle East and into Asia. The king copied his orders onto wax-covered tablets using a metal stylus and entrusted them to his postmen, who were legendary for their efficiency. "Nothing mortal travels so fast as these Persian messengers," marveled the Greek historian Herodotus. "These men will not be hindered from accomplishing at their best speed the distance which they have to do, either by snow, or rain, or heat, or by darkness of night. The first rider delivers his dispatch to the second, and the second passes it to the third; and so it is borne from hand to hand along the whole line, like the light of the torch-race."

Do these lines sound familiar? They are nearly identical to those carved in stone above the entrance of the monumental James A. Farley Post Office in New York City

designed by McKim, Mead & White and opened in 1914. William Mitchell Kendall, one of the firm's architects, read Greek for pleasure in his off-hours and selected a modified translation by Harvard professor George Herbert Palmer to adorn the building: "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds." Many have assumed that this is the motto of the U.S. Postal Service, but the USPS doesn't have one. It was just the world's largest postal service nodding respectfully to one of its most illustrious forbears.

The Romans improved on the Persian system after the founding of their empire in 27 BC, creating an imperial post that delivered letters written on papyrus and animal skins all the way from Britain to Constantinople on the empire's paved roads. The Roman couriers, easily identified by the emblems on their bronze shields, traveled in chariots, helping themselves to food and horses in the towns along the way. They also acted as the emperor's spies, fingering subversives and undesirables. Their targets, many of them early Christians, were sentenced to hard labor in post houses, cleaning the stables and performing other undesirable tasks. An early pope endured such punishment.

The demand for mail slackened in Europe after barbarians invaded Rome in AD 410. The Dark Ages, a time of almost universal illiteracy, engulfed the continent. Kings and queens couldn't read and bragged about it, but Catholic monks kept both the written word and mail delivery from vanishing entirely. They exchanged letters through foot posts, using messengers who strolled, or ran if necessary, from monastery to monastery with sacks of mail over their shoulders. And in the Middle East and China, where the written word flourished and paper was first used as a medium of correspondence, it was a golden age of mail delivery.

The Muslim caliphs established mail routes linking their cities, and in the ninth century, officials published the first written postal manual documenting how letters flowed through their system. "My throne rests on four pillars—a blameless judge, an energetic chief of police, an honest minister of finance, and a faithful postmaster who gives me reliable information on everything," said Caliph Abu Jafar Mansur, ruler of the Arabian Empire in the eighth century. And when Marco Polo visited China in the late thirteenth century, he was amazed by Emperor Kublai Khan's far-reaching postal service. The Chinese post riders carried Kublai Khan's proclamations and the state newspaper, the *Imperial Gazette*, on the nation's highways, stopping to rest and change horses at relay stations so elegantly furnished, it was said, that a prince would feel comfortable staying in one.

Once the Dark Ages ended, postal systems sprang up again in Europe. By 1297, the University of Paris had created one so that teachers and students could stay in touch with their families in distant parts of the continent. Knightly orders delivered letters to their armored members. Butchers who traveled throughout the northern part of the continent bore messages along with their meats. In London, foreign business owners, referred to as "strangers," transported mail over the oceans between London and seaports in other lands. This system was known appropriately as the Strangers' Post.

At the end of the fifteenth century, the Holy Roman Empire named Francis von Taxis of the Thurn and Taxis family as its first imperial postmaster. Francis and his relatives established a network of post houses from Vienna to the Netherlands. Their

horn-blowing riders wore a strip of badger skin to identify themselves. At first, the Thurn and Taxis post handled only imperial correspondence, but when the empire complained about the system's cost, Francis persuaded his overlords to let him open it up to the commoners so their fees would cover its costs.

Other European posts went through similar transformations. In 1516, King Henry VIII of England called for the creation of his country's first national mail delivery service with postal stations "in all places most expedient." It would be called "the King's Posts," and Henry and his successors treated it as such. No letters traveled on Britain's postal roads without their approval and they probably knew the contents of every message. In England, as in other European countries, it was customary for postal officials to unseal mail and have a look.

In 1635, King Charles I of England opened the Royal Mail to the public. It charged by the number of sheets used and the distance traveled. It cost twopence to send a single sheet of paper within an 80-mile radius. The price was twice that for a "double letter" and three times as much for a "triple letter," and the charge rose if a letter traveled out of the first postal zone into another. The senders rarely paid for postage; it was the recipients who had to reach for their purses when they collected their mail at the post office. The Royal Mail didn't use stamps; clerks just jotted the fee on the outside of the letter. It was an expensive and cumbersome system, but the Royal Mail generated a surplus for the British government, which it used to help finance its military adventures around the world. As English citizens began to colonize the New World, the British hoped to make more money by starting a postal service there.

It wouldn't happen right away. Only a few thousand settlers lived on the eastern shore of the Atlantic coast in the early seventeenth century, and they were primarily interested in hearing from their friends and relatives in Europe. They entrusted their letters to the ship captains who crossed the ocean and received a penny a letter. The captains left pouches in taverns and coffeehouses in which letters could be deposited. People riffled through the same bags to see if any messages had arrived for them. The British government formalized the system in 1639, designating a tavern owned by Richard Fairbanks as the first colonial post office.

As their numbers increased, colonists needed to communicate with each other and created posts inland. In 1673, New York's governor Francis Lovelace established a monthly post between New York and Boston on a trail known as "the King's Highway." Today, it is part of U.S. Route 1. The same year, William Penn, the governor of Pennsylvania, established a post in his region connecting Philadelphia with cities in Delaware and Maryland. In the south, plantation owners set up their own system, using slaves to relay letters from plantation to plantation. If one of these planters failed to keep the mail moving, he forfeited a hogshead of tobacco.

In 1692, King William III awarded Thomas Neale an exclusive contract to establish a privately operated postal system throughout the colonies. Neale was an odd choice for such a venture. He was a swindler and a carouser who ingratiated himself with the royal family by staging the nightly games of chance for the king and his courtiers. He never set foot in the colonies himself, letting New Jersey governor Andrew Hamilton run it for him.

Hamilton quickly discovered that it wouldn't be easy. In a dispute that foreshadowed future hostilities between the crown and its American subjects, Virginia

and Maryland refused to participate, saying it was unfair for the king to make his colonial subjects pay Neale for mail delivery when they could do it themselves. The Neale post ultimately failed, and its namesake died heavily in debt in 1699. After that, the crown assumed control of the system and forced the colonies to go along. In 1729, its users could expect weekly mail delivery at 13 American post offices, the largest of which could be found in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.

That was progress, but the colonial post was still primitive compared with those in Europe. Riders carried mail on dirt paths through wilderness where there were more wolves and bears than people. Ferrymen made them wait for hours while they filled their boats with other customers before taking the couriers across rivers. Mail carriers didn't make much money and supplemented their incomes by running errands for people. In one instance, a rider in New England brought a herd of oxen to a farmer, which must have meant some of his letters didn't arrive on time. Native Americans sometimes attacked colonial postmen; at other times, indigenous people competed with them. The "savages" knew the territory better than their white counterparts and provided faster service.

Early colonial postmasters endured their own hardships. They typically ran their post offices out of their homes and had to live with customers showing up at all hours seeking mail. Their patrons kept charge accounts, and it could take a while for them to pay up. One indignant New Jersey postmaster took out an advertisement in a local paper, demanding overdue postage from customers, some of whom hadn't paid him in nearly four years: "This is to give notice that all persons in town and country that are indebted to Andrew Hay, postmaster at Perth Amboy, for postage of letters, to pay the same or they may expect trouble."

Future postmaster generals would joke that that Franklin set a bad example for them by dispensing jobs within the colonial post office to many of his relatives. His illegitimate son, William, replaced him as Philadelphia's postmaster. A year later, Franklin promoted William to comptroller of the colonial post and gave the city postmastership to one of his wife Deborah's relatives. Franklin found jobs in other towns for two of his brothers, a nephew, and two more of Deborah's family members. Richard Bache, his daughter Sally's fiancé, pleaded for a postal position, but Franklin refused him at first, believing Bache to be a fortune hunter. Eventually even Bache was hired after marrying into the family.

Despite his weakness for hiring family members, Franklin vastly improved the system. He had little choice if he wanted to get paid. The crown promised Franklin and William Hunter, his fellow deputy, that they could split an annual salary of £600, the equivalent of \$182,000 today. But the money was not guaranteed; the two men would have to take it from the colonial post's profits, if there ever were any. It had lost money ever since the days of Thomas Neale.

So, even before their appointments officially went into effect in 1753, Franklin and Hunter embarked on an inspection tour, spending much of the next year visiting post offices and surveying postal routes from Maine to Virginia. They came up with better routes, avoiding river crossings where surly ferrymen impeded the progress of their riders. As a result, the system's users enjoyed faster delivery. They cut the time it took for a letter to travel from Philadelphia to New York to day and a half. Where once it

had taken six weeks for a Philadelphian to send a letter to a Bostonian and receive a response, now the circular exchange took only three weeks. Already, Franklin was drawing Americans more closely together through the post.

Franklin created the Dead Letter Office in Philadelphia, which became a repository for unclaimed messages. He started a penny post in Philadelphia, enabling residents to receive their mail at home for an extra penny if they didn't want to journey to the post office to pick it up themselves. Franklin encouraged his postmasters to circulate all sorts of newspapers. The European posts didn't do that, but Franklin was fashioning a distinctly American one,

Somebody had to pay for these improvements. Franklin and Hunter borrowed £900 to cover their costs, but their investment paid off. In 1760, the colonial post generated its first surplus, and the two deputy postmasters were able to collect their salaries. Franklin thought it would do even better if he lowered postage rates, which he believed would spur people to send more mail. The crown reduced the rates for longer distances but kept the local rates in place.

Franklin now spent most of his time in England, where he lobbied the British government on behalf of the Pennsylvania assembly, trying to win it more control over the state's affairs. He left the daily operations of the colonial postal service to a protégé, James Parker, another publisher turned postmaster. But Franklin stayed in close touch with Parker and kept track of the postal service's finances. The British government didn't seem to have a problem with the long-distance arrangement, reappointing Franklin and Hunter to their positions and praising their stewardship.

Hunter died in 1761 just months after receiving his salary. Franklin wrote fondly of his late partner, saying that they had worked in "perfect harmony," but he longed to run the colonial post by himself and pocket the full £600. Instead, the crown named John Foxcroft, another Virginian, to be his partner. The diplomatic Franklin made the best of it, returning to America and traveling with him from Maine to Virginia, looking for new ways to improve the system. They decided to have riders carry mail at night as well as by day, which meant that a Philadelphian could send a letter to Boston and receive a reply in six days. Philadelphians could send a letter to New York and get a response in 24 hours. When the British took control of Canada in 1763 at the end of French and Indian War, Franklin and Foxcroft supervised the creation of a postal road from Albany, New York, to Montreal.

Then Franklin returned to London, where he stayed for another ten years, representing a growing number of state assemblies in their increasingly tense dealings with Parliament. Even then, Franklin still audited the financial statements of the colonial post and handled complaints. American postmasters requested a shipment of bugles, certain that their riders would collect more letters if they could announce their arrival with the blast of a shiny horn. Franklin took up the matter with the British authorities, but the Royal Mail said the Americans should buy their own bugles.

As the relationship between England and the colonies deteriorated, Franklin feared he would lose his position. Lord Sandwich, the crown's postmaster general, disapproved of Franklin's pro-American sympathies and asked how Franklin could run the colonial post when he spent all his time in England. Franklin responded that there were plenty of Americans in London with similar appointments who rarely went home. "It is the practice in many other instances to allow the non-residence of

American officers who spend their salaries here, provided care is taken that the business be done by a deputy or otherwise,” Franklin wrote to his son William.

Franklin had given up his publishing business long ago and needed his postal income more than ever. “If I should lose the post office, which among the many changes here, is far from being unlikely, we should be reduced to our rents and interest of money for subsistence, which will by no means afford the chargeable housekeeping and entertainments we have been used to,” Franklin wrote to his wife. “For my own part, I live here as frugally as possible not to be destitute of the comforts of life, making no dinners for anybody, and contenting myself with a single dish when I dine at home and yet such is the dearness of living here in every article, that my expenses amaze me.”

Unflattering stories about Franklin appeared in the English press. He was sure that his enemies were planting them to force him to resign as deputy postmaster, but he refused to give them satisfaction. “In this they are not likely to succeed, I being deficient in that Christian Virtue of Resignation,” Franklin wrote to his sister, Jane. “If they would have my Office, they must take it. I have heard of some great Man whose Rule it was, with regard to Offices, *never to ask for them, and never to refuse them*; to which I have always added, in my own Practice, *never to resign them*.”

However, Franklin’s loyalty to his fellow Americans was too strong. He fought the Stamp Act, a tax on colonial newspapers and legal documents that had nothing to do with the colonial post. He sealed his fate in 1772 when he shared letters written by Thomas Hutchinson, the governor of Massachusetts, with a friend who leaked them to the *Boston Gazette*. In his private correspondence, Hutchinson mocked his subjects and called for the British to send more troops to Massachusetts to punish the more radical ones. The Massachusetts assembly called for Hutchinson’s resignation. Franklin confessed to his role in making the letters public, and he was removed from the colonial post.

Franklin was furious. As far as he was concerned, he had transformed the colonial post from a money-losing operation to a steady source of income for the crown, and this was the thanks he received? Now that he had been dismissed, Franklin warned that Americans could expect British postal officials to routinely open and read their letters just as they did with their subjects at home. “How safe the correspondence of your Assembly committees along the continent will be through the hands of such officers may be worth consideration,” he wrote, “especially as the post office act of Parliament allows a postmaster to open letters.”

Franklin’s removal reverberated in the colonies. The insurgent Sons of Liberty accosted postal riders and relieved them of their pouches. William Goddard, a virulently anti-British newspaper publisher, took the postal rebellion further. He had been forced to set up his own private delivery network to distribute his paper, the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, because it was too incendiary for the official mail. Now Goddard converted it into the Constitutional Post, a competing service that picked up and delivered mail at 30 of its own post offices between Virginia and New Hampshire. He persuaded state assemblies to adopt his operation, promoting it as “the New American Post Office.” Tired of the British-controlled colonial post, the states embraced the Constitutional Post. “The people never liked the institution,” wrote one of Goddard’s supporters, “and only acquiesced in it out of their unbounded affection