ANCIENT POSTS
BY “COSMOPOLITAN”

It is well known that the Asyrian (sic) and Persian Monarchs had posts ready at a moments notice, to carry abroad their despotic decrees. In the days of the Roman Empire, couriers were employed in passing from hand to hand, the imperial edicts. Private letters were entrusted to slaves on casual opportunities. It is said that Charlemayne (sic) established post stations with couriers, who delivered packets and letters. In 1464 “Louis the IX” of accursed memory, revived the system of mounted posts, which after the death of Charlemayne had been abandoned. Similar posts called, “Nuncio,” were established in England in the 13th century. These, however, were for Government business only. As late as the 15th century, butchers or drovers, who went about buying cattle, were the principal carriers of private letters.

The only exception to this general custom in regard to private correspondence was the establishment in the 11th century, by the University of Paris, of a body of pedestrian messengers, who bore letters from its thousands of students, to the various countries in Europe from which they came, and brought to them the money they needed for the prosecution of their studies. The great development of commerce following the crusades, and the geographical discoveries of the Italians, Portuguese and Spaniards, created a necessity for business correspondence about the beginning of the 16th century. The royal “Nuncio” or post-riders, had already found it for their advantage, to use their surplus horses for the conveyance of passengers and thus the system of posting, or traveling with post horses, came into vogue. These posts were now used for the carriage of private letters, at first irregularly, and without fixed compensation or regular periods of arrival or departure, but eventually for considerable order and system. The earliest of these posts for general accommodation in Europe was established in 1516 in the Tyrol, connecting Germany and Italy, by Roger, count of Thurn and Taxis. His successors received repeated contracts to carry the posts from the emperors of Germany, and they extended it over the greater part of Germany and Italy. Venice, Genoa, Leghorn, and Naples were thus connected with Hamburg, Bremen, Lubeck, and Frankfort-on-the-Main, and the active commerce which had sprung up between these cities was greatly facilitated. The counts of Thurn and Taxis retained this postal monopoly till the fall of the German empire, and until a year since the Thurn and Taxis post was maintained in 10 or 12 of the smaller German States, and supplies a district of 25,000 square miles, and nearly 4,000,000 inhabitants. In 1524 the French posts, which had hitherto only transmitted the letters and messages of the king and nobles, were permitted to carry other letters. In 1581, Thomas Randolph was appointed chief postmaster of England, but his functions seem to have pertained more to the establishment and supervision of post horses, and the regulation of the fees for posting, than to the transmission of letters. In Peru, in 1527, the Spanish invaders found a regular system of posts in operation along the great highway from Quito to Cuzco, and messages as to the progress of the invasion, as well as other subjects, were forwarded to the Inca by fleet-footed runners, who wound around their waists the “quipu,” a species of sign writing, by means of knotted cords.

The complete organization of a system of postal communication in England did not take place till the reign of James the 1st, who soon after his accession constituted the office of postmaster of England for foreign parts, and appointed Matthew Le Quester the first postmaster, with reversion to his son. Le
Quester appointed William Frizell and Thomas Withering his deputies. The latter eventually became postmaster-general, and, in 1635, was ordered to establish a running post between London and Edinburgh, to go night and day, and come back in six days. In 1644, Edmond Prideaux, then a member of the House of Commons, was appointed master of the posts, and first established a weekly conveyance of letters into all parts of the nation. In 1656, an act was passed to settle the postage of England, Scotland and Ireland, fixing the rates of letter postage, and the prices of post horses. The single rate of postage previous to the act were for a single piece of paper, under 80 miles, 2d.; between 80 and 140 miles, 4d.; above 140, 6d.; and on the borders and in Scotland, 8d. The act of 1656 (which were in all cases for a single letter) to 14d. for a distance of more than 300 miles, from which the sum they were dimished (sic) according to the distance down to 2d., for 7 miles and under. Between this period and 1838 more than 150 acts relative to postal affairs were passed. These rates operated as an almost prohibitory tariff on letters through the mails, and all manner of devices for avoiding the payment of postage were adopted.

The franking privilege, which at an early period had been granted to the members of parliament and officers of the government was much abused. Franks were sold openly. In 1838 the franked and privileged letters amounted to 30 per cent. of the whole number transmitted through the mails. In 1784 the net revenue of the post office did not exceed £150,00; but by the introduction of fast mail coaches soon after that date, it had risen in 1815 to about £1,600,000, at which point it remained standing for more than 20 years, in consequence of the abuse of the franking privilege, and the methods adopted to evade the payment of postage. In 1837 the number of letters annually sent through the mails was 82,000,00; in 1859 it had risen to 545,000,000. This extraordinary increase is the result of the entire change in the rates of postage, and the greatly improved facilities for the prompt transmission and delivery of letters, first proposed by Roland Hill in 1837. This brings us up to the time when Mr. Hill’s plan was adopted, and gives a very clear idea of the early establishments of posts.