A SHORT HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES POST OFFICE (1)

With a description of its various issues of Stamps.

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To the casual observer, the title of this article might prove a sign-board of warning to enquire within; but we feel assured that notwithstanding the seeming dryness of the paper, the true philatelist, one who desires every information, will find in it pleasure and profit, and mayhap something new. The intention of the article is to give, first a short summary of the various workings of the department since its organization, some statistics, and a list of the gentlemen who have controlled and guided this vast machine. It is then proposed to give a correct account and history of every stamp and stamped envelope ever issued by the post office authorities, and we think we can describe a few varieties hitherto unknown to philatelists. Although not rightly belonging to a history of United States stamps, we shall next take up the United States locals and provisionals, the Confederate stamps and give a description of many U.S. essays. This latter branch of philately has been increasing in popularity the past year, and it is believed, new impetus will be given to the collection of these beautiful objects of the engraver’s art. Having unusual facilities for procuring essays, the list will be made as complete as possible.

In the English colonies, which subsequently became the United States, a postal system was inaugurated as early as 1692; but owing to the sparseness (sic) of the population, it was not fully organized till 1710. By an act of parliament of that year, the Postmaster General of the colonies was “to keep his chief letter office in New York, and other chief offices at some convenient place or places in other of Her Majesty’s provinces and colonies of America.” The revenues derived, were for some years very small, not paying a moiety of the expense. In 1753, Benjamin Franklin was appointed Postmaster General for the colonies, and was guaranteed (sic) the sum of £600 per annum as salary for himself and assistants. He brought his well-known executive ability to the work of remodelling and extending the operations of the office, and in a few years largely increased its revenues. He surprised the people of the colonies in 1760, by proposing to run a stage mail wagon, from Philadelphia to Boston twice a week, starting from each city on Monday morning, and reaching its destination by Saturday night. This scheme was looked upon as absurd, and much opposition was made to it; doubtless by the ancestors of those of the present generation, who opposed the lighting of streets by gas, steam transportation and the electric telegraph. In 1774, while in England, Franklin was removed from office by the British government, in consequence of his exposure of the double dealing of Governor Hutchinson of Massachusetts, and his adherence to the cause of the colonies. In 1789, the Unites States constitution conferred upon Congress the exclusive control of postal matters for all the states; and Congress proceeded immediately upon the adoption of the constitution, to organize the post office department, and to pass the necessary laws for the protection of the mails, etc. In 1790, there were but 75 post office in the country, and the whole amount of postage was $37,935, yielding a net revenue of $5,895 to the government. In 1800, the number of offices had increased to 103.

In 1816 the rates were modified as follows; a single letter carried not over 30 miles, 6¼ cents; over 30 and under 80, 10 cents; over 80 and under 150, 12½ cents; over 150 and under 400, 25 cents: and an additional rate for every additional piece of paper, and if the letter weighed an ounce, four times these rates. Newspapers under 100 miles, or within the state where published, 1 cent; over 100 and out of the state, 1½ cents; magazines and pamphlets, over 100, 2½ cents per sheet; if not periodicals, 4 and 6 cents.
As the facilities for transportation of the mails by steamboats, railroads, etc., increased, these high rates occasioned much dissatisfaction, and the law was being continually evaded in various ways, thus reducing the postal revenue. For several years large quantities of mail matter was carried between the different cities of the Union by express companies, at a much lower rate than the Post Office charges. The revenue reaches its highest point in 1840 and 1842, being, in the former year, $4,539,265; and in the latter, $4,546,246. From this point it receded. Even with this revenue the establishment did not pay expenses, there being a deficiency every year subsequent to 1837. The subject of a reduction of rates was continually broached in congress, and measures for that purpose were proposed by Mr. Edward Everett in 1836; but no well digested plan was brought forward. In 1843 the general discontent of the people on the subject was expressed in the form of resolutions by the legislature of several States, instructing their Senators and requesting their representatives in congress to take some measures for a reduction. Mr. C.A. Wickliffe, at that time Postmaster General, made some investigations in regard to the English system, and in an elaborate report advocated some reduction, but not a radical one, on the ground that the department would become a heavy charge upon the government if a large reduction was made. A bill was drafted reducing the rates to 5, 10, and 15 cents, for different distances; this bill passed the Senate, but was lost in the House; the next year it was again brought forward, but again failed. In the next congress a new bill was presented which became a law March 3d, 1845. Its rates were: - for a letter not exceeding ½ an ounce in weight, whether of one or more pieces of paper, under 300 miles, 5 cents; over 300, 10 cents; and additional rate for every additional ½ ounce or fraction of ½ ounce. Advertised letters 2 cents additional; drop letters, 2 cents; circulars unsealed, 2 cents; pamphlets, magazines, &c., per ounce, 2½ cents; and each additional ounce 1 cent. Newspapers, under 30 miles, free; over 30 and under 100, or any distance within the state where published, 1 cent; over 100 and out of the state, 1½ cents. Carriage by express was prohibited, unless the postage was previously paid. In the next congress an effort was made to raise these rates, as the postal revenue did not defray expenses; it was unsuccessful in regard to letter postage; but transient newspapers were charged 3 cents, and prepayment required; the postage on circulars was raised to 3 cents; newspaper postage to Oregon and California, was figured at 4½ cents, and letter postage to the Pacific territories, via Chagres and Panama, at 40 cents.

In 1849 the postage in transient newspapers was reduced to ordinary newspaper rates, but prepayment still required. In 1851 another effort was made to raise the postage, which proved unsuccessful; but a law was passed establishing the following rates: for a single letter, if ½ ounce weight, under 3000 miles, if prepaid, 3 cts.; or if not prepaid, 5 cts.; over 3000 miles or under 6000, 12 cts.; to foreign countries not over 2,500 miles, except where postal arrangements have been made, 10 cents; over 2,500, 20 cents; drop letters, 1 cent; ship letters, 2 cents; or if delivered where deposited, 6 cents; if sent through the mails the ordinary postage is added. Weekly newspapers to actual subscribers in the county where published, free; under 50 miles and out of the county 5 cents per quarter, over 50 and under 300, 10 cents; over 300 and under a thousand, 15 cents; over 1,000 and under 2,000, 20 cents; over 2,00 and under 4,000, 25 cents; over 4,000, 30 cents. Monthly papers, quarter, and semi-monthly half these rates; semi-weekly, double; tri-weekly, treble; and oftener than tri-weekly, five times these rates; newspapers under 300 square miles, quarter these rates, if paid quarterly in advance, a deduction of one half these rates to be made.