

## Airmail: A Brief History

*The air mail route is the first step toward the universal commercial use of the aeroplane.*

—Benjamin B. Lipsner, Superintendent of Aerial Mail Service, 1918<sup>1</sup>

When airmail began in 1918, airplanes were still a fairly new invention. Pilots flew in open cockpits in all kinds of weather, in planes later described as “a nervous collection of whistling wires, of linen stretched over wooden ribs, all attached to a wheezy, water-cooled engine.”<sup>2</sup> A 1918 article titled “Practical Hints on Flying” advised pilots “never forget that the engine may stop, and at all times keep this in mind.”<sup>3</sup> Pilots followed landmarks on the ground; in fog they flew blind. Unpredictable weather, unreliable equipment, and inexperience led to frequent crashes; 34 airmail pilots died from 1918 through 1927. Gradually, through trial and error and personal sacrifice, U.S. Air Mail Service employees developed reliable navigation aids and safety features for planes and pilots. They demonstrated that flight schedules could be safely maintained in all kinds of weather. Then they created lighted airways and proved that night flying was possible. Once the Post Office Department had proven the viability of commercial flight, airmail service was turned over to private carriers, flying under contract with the Department. In the days before passenger service, revenue from airmail contracts sustained commercial airlines.

### First U.S. Mail Flights, 1911

On June 14, 1910, Representative Morris Sheppard of Texas introduced a bill to authorize the Postmaster General to investigate the feasibility of “an aeroplane or airship mail route.”<sup>4</sup> The bill died in committee. The *New York Telegraph* deemed airmail service a fanciful dream, predicting that, when it was offered:

*Love letters will be carried in a rose-pink aeroplane, steered by Cupid's wings and operated by perfumed gasoline. ... [and] postmen will wear wired coat tails and on their feet will be wings.*<sup>5</sup>

Frank Hitchcock, Postmaster General from 1909 to 1913, was keenly interested in the development of airplanes. He was convinced they could be used for mail transportation. In November 1910, at an aviation meet in Baltimore attended by top government officials, thousands of spectators cheered when Hitchcock agreed to fly as a passenger in a Bleriot monoplane. In an article subtitled “Postmaster General Brave,” *The Baltimore Sun* reported:

*Mr. Hitchcock liked it. ... The wind grasped the machine ... and shook it, but Mr. Hitchcock sat tight. Three minutes after he started he had landed on the earth once more. 'It will not be long before we are carrying the mails this way, that is certain,' he said as he climbed out.*<sup>6</sup>

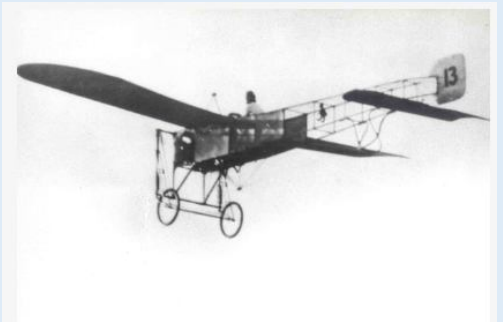
In September 1911, Hitchcock authorized mail flights at an aviation meet on Long Island, New York — the first authorized U.S. mail flights.<sup>7</sup> Eight pilots were sworn in as “aeroplane mail carriers” for the event, which ran from



**First authorized U.S. Mail flights, 1911**

*Courtesy Library of Congress*

Postmaster General Frank Hitchcock hands pilot Earle Ovington a mailbag at an aviation meet in Mineola, NY, on September 25, 1911, two days after Ovington's historic first flight.



**Earle Ovington, 1911**

On September 23, 1911, Earle Ovington piloted the first authorized U.S. Mail flight in his Bleriot monoplane.



**Katherine Stinson, the “Flying Schoolgirl”**

*Courtesy Library of Congress*

In 1913, 22-year-old Katherine Stinson became the first woman to fly the U.S. Mail when she dropped mailbags from her plane at the Montana State Fair. Stinson captivated audiences worldwide with her fearless feats of aerial derring-do. In 1918, she became the first woman to fly both an experimental mail route from Chicago to New York and the regular route from New York to Washington, D.C.

September 23 to October 1, 1911. Aviator Earle Ovington had the distinction of piloting the first history-making flight, on September 23. The pilots made daily flights from Garden City Estates to Mineola, New York, dropping mailbags from the plane to the ground where they were picked up by Mineola's Postmaster, William McCarthy.

In the next few years the Department authorized dozens more experimental flights at fairs, carnivals, and air meets in more than 20 states. These flights convinced Department officials that airplanes could carry mail. Beginning in 1912, postal officials urged Congress to appropriate money to launch airmail service.<sup>8</sup> In 1916, Congress finally authorized the use of \$50,000 from steamboat and powerboat service appropriations for airmail experiments. The Department advertised for bids for contract service in Massachusetts and Alaska, but received no acceptable responses.

In 1917, Congress appropriated \$100,000 to establish experimental airmail service the next fiscal year.<sup>9</sup> The Post Office Department advertised for bids for airplanes in February 1918, but cancelled the solicitation just weeks later after conferring with the Army Signal Corps. The Army wanted to operate the airmail service, to give its pilots more cross-country flying experience. The Postmaster General and the Secretary of War reached an agreement: the Army Signal Corps would lend its planes and pilots to the Department to start an airmail service.

## Start of Scheduled Airmail Service, 1918

The Post Office Department began scheduled airmail service between New York and Washington, D.C., on May 15, 1918 — an important date in commercial aviation. Simultaneous takeoffs were made from Washington's Polo Grounds and from Belmont Park, Long Island — both trips by way of Philadelphia.

During the first three months of operation, the Post Office Department used Army pilots and six Army Curtiss JN-4H "Jenny" training planes. On August 12, 1918, the Department took over all phases of airmail service, using newly hired civilian pilots and mechanics, and six specially built mail planes from the Standard Aircraft Corporation.

These early mail planes had no reliable instruments, radios, or other navigational aids. Pilots navigated using landmarks and dead reckoning. Forced landings occurred frequently due to bad weather, but fatalities in the early months were rare, largely because of the planes' small size, maneuverability, and slow landing speed.

Congress authorized airmail postage of 24 cents per ounce, including special delivery. The rate was lowered to 16 cents on July 15, 1918, and to 6 cents on December 15 (without special delivery).



**First day of scheduled airmail service, Belmont Park, New York, 1918**

*Courtesy Library of Congress*

Postmaster Thomas Patten of New York hands mail to Army Lieutenant Torrey Webb in his Curtiss JN-4H "Jenny" airplane on May 15, 1918.



**First day of scheduled airmail service, Bustleton Field, Pennsylvania, 1918**

*Courtesy National Archives*

Mail from Philadelphia is loaded onto a Curtiss JN-4H bound for New York on May 15, 1918.



**First civilian airmail flight, August 1918**

*Courtesy Library of Congress*

On August 12, 1918, Max Miller, one of the first civilian airmail pilots, took off for Philadelphia from the College Park, Maryland, airfield, which replaced Washington's tree-ringed Polo Grounds as the city's airfield. Miller flew one of the new Standard JR-1B mail planes purchased by the Department.

Still, the public was reluctant to use this more expensive service, which was just a few hours quicker than regular service by train. During the first year, airmail bags often contained as much regular mail as airmail.

## Transcontinental Route, 1920

To better its delivery time on long hauls and entice the public to use airmail, the Department's long-range plans called for a transcontinental air route from New York to San Francisco. The first legs of this transcontinental route — from New York to Cleveland with a stop at Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, then from Cleveland to Chicago, with a stop at Bryan, Ohio — opened in 1919. A third leg opened in 1920 from Chicago to Omaha, via Iowa City, and feeder lines were established from St. Louis and Minneapolis to Chicago. The last transcontinental segment — from Omaha to San Francisco, via North Platte, Nebraska; Cheyenne, Rawlins, and Rock Springs in Wyoming; Salt Lake City, Utah; and Elko and Reno in Nevada — opened on September 8, 1920. Initially, mail was carried on trains at night and flown by day. Still, the service was 22 hours faster than the cross-country all-rail time.

In August 1920, the Department began installing radio stations at each airfield to provide pilots with current weather information. By November, ten stations were operating, including two Navy stations. When airmail traffic permitted, other government departments used the radios for special messages, and the Department of Agriculture used the radios to transmit weather forecasts and stock market reports.

## Regular Night Flying, 1924

*Before the air mail service can offer ... its full measure of value it will be necessary to operate the planes at night as well as in the daytime.*

—Postmaster General Harry S. New, 1923<sup>10</sup>

To demonstrate the possible speed of airmail, the Department staged a through-flight from San Francisco to New York on February 22, 1921 — the first time mail was flown both day and night over the entire distance. Winter was not an ideal season for test flights, but the Department was pressed — Congress was deciding whether or not, and to what extent, to continue to fund airmail service. Despite bad weather, the flight was a success, largely through the heroic efforts of pilot Jack Knight (see at right). Congress was impressed. Instead of ending the service, Congress appropriated \$1,250,000 for its expansion, and later increased the amount.

To prepare for night flying, the Post Office Department equipped its planes with luminescent instruments, navigational lights, and parachute flares. In 1923, it began building a lighted airway along the transcontinental route, to guide pilots at night. The first section completed was Chicago to Cheyenne, 885 miles. Emergency



**Jack Knight, "The Hero Who Saved Airmail," 1921**  
*Courtesy Smithsonian's National Postal Museum*

On February 22, 1921, the first daring, round-the-clock, transcontinental airmail flight started out with four planes. Two westbound planes left New York's Hazelhurst Field while two eastbound planes left San Francisco. One of the westbound trips abruptly ended when icing forced the pilot down in a Pennsylvania field. The other was halted by a snowstorm in Chicago. One of the eastbound pilots fared even worse — William E. Lewis crashed and died near Elko, Nevada. The mail was salvaged and loaded onto another eastbound plane.

It was after dark when the airmail reached North Platte, Nebraska, and pilot Jack Knight was ready to fly the next leg of the relay, to Omaha. A former Army flight instructor, Knight looked bad and felt worse, suffering a broken nose and bruises from a crash landing the week before in Wyoming. He had flown to Omaha many times — but never at night.

Knight's first taste of night-flying was nerve-wracking. Residents of the towns below lit bonfires to help mark the route. As the weather worsened, Knight set down in Omaha, wind-chilled, famished and exhausted. Then he got more bad news: the pilot scheduled to fly the next leg, to Chicago, was a no-show. Though the route was unfamiliar, Knight volunteered to fly the mail to Chicago himself.

Between Omaha and Chicago lay a refueling stop in Iowa City, which Knight had never seen in the daytime, let alone at night in a snowstorm. There were no bonfires or beacons marking the airfield — the ground crew had gone home, assuming the flight had been canceled — but by some miracle Knight found it. He buzzed the field until the night watchman heard his airplane and lit a flare. After landing and refuelling he was back in the cockpit. He touched down at Maywood Field, outside Chicago, at 8:40 a.m. The mailbags were quickly loaded onto a plane bound for Cleveland and then the final stretch to New York.

The mail from San Francisco reached New York in record time — 33 hours and 20 minutes. Newspapers hailed Knight as the "hero who saved the airmail." Congress, which had debated eliminating funding for airmail, instead increased it.

landing fields were created every 25 miles, between the 5 regular landing fields in that section. All the fields were marked by fifty-foot towers with revolving beacon lights. At the regular fields, the beacons were visible for up to 150 miles; beacons at the emergency fields were visible for up to 80 miles. Small white lights outlined the fields' boundaries. Between landing fields, 289 flashing gas beacons —visible for up to 9 miles — were installed every 3 miles from Chicago to Cheyenne.<sup>11</sup>

In 1922 and 1923, the Department was awarded the Collier Trophy for important contributions to the development of aeronautics, especially in safety and for demonstrating the feasibility of night flights.

The Department extended the lighted airway eastward to Cleveland and westward to Rock Springs, Wyoming, in 1924. In 1925, the lighted airway stretched from New York to Salt Lake City.

Regular cross-country through service, with night flying, began on July 1, 1924. In 1926, the trip from New York to San Francisco included 15 stops for service and the exchange of mail. Pilots and planes changed six times en route, at Cleveland, Chicago, Omaha, Cheyenne, Salt Lake City, and Reno. The longest leg was between Omaha and Cheyenne, 476 miles; the shortest, 184 miles, was between Reno and San Francisco.

Charles I. Stanton, an early airmail pilot and airmail division superintendent who later headed the Civil Aeronautics Administration, said about the early days of scheduled airmail service:

*We planted four seeds. ... They were airways, communications, navigation aids, and multi-engined aircraft. Not all of these came full blown into the transportation scene; in fact, the last one withered and died, and had to be planted over again nearly a decade later. But they are the cornerstones on which our present world-wide transport structure is built, and they came, one by one, out of our experience in daily, uninterrupted flying of the mail.<sup>12</sup>*

## Service Contracted Out, 1926

*Our activities in the air have been directed toward the performance of an important public service in a manner to demonstrate to men of means that commercial aviation is a possibility.*

—Postmaster General Harry S. New, 1925<sup>13</sup>

On February 2, 1925, Congress authorized the Postmaster General to contract for airmail service. The Post Office Department immediately invited bids from commercial aviation companies. The first commercial airmail flight in the United States occurred February 15, 1926. By the end of 1926, 11 out of 12 contracted airmail routes were operating.



**Beacon on Rocky Mountains stamp, 1928**

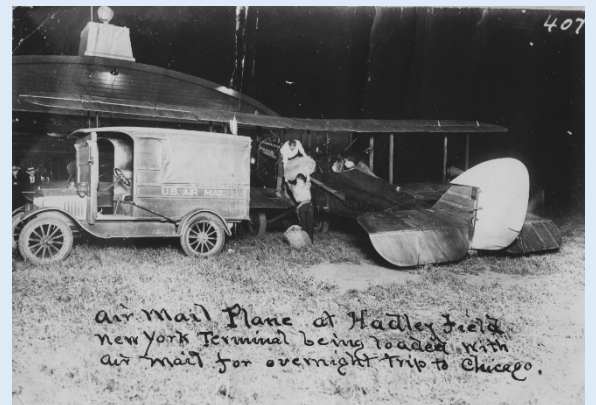
*Courtesy Smithsonian's National Postal Museum*

The 5-cent airmail stamp issued on July 25, 1928, depicted the beacon light tower at the emergency airmail landing field near Sherman, Wyoming.



**Starting the engine, 1920s**

In 1921 the Department adopted the DeHavilland DH-4 as its standard mail plane. Some of its DH-4s were surplus planes from World War I, modified to fly the mail. It took three men to crank the DH-4's 400-horsepower Liberty engine when it was cold.



**Preparing for overnight flight, circa 1925**

A DeHavilland DH-4 is loaded at Hadley Field, New Jersey (the New York terminal), for an overnight trip to Chicago. Overnight service between New York and Chicago began on July 1, 1925. The westbound trip took 9 hours and 15 minutes. Planes and pilots changed at Cleveland.

As commercial airlines took over, the Department transferred its lights, airways, and radio service to the Department of Commerce, including 17 fully equipped stations, 89 emergency landing fields, and 405 beacons. Terminal airports, except government properties in Chicago, Omaha, and San Francisco, were transferred to the municipalities in which they were located. Some planes were sold to airmail contractors, while others were transferred to interested government departments. By September 1, 1927, all airmail was carried under contract.

Although the first airmail contracts yielded little or no profit to the carriers, changes to federal law in 1928 granted carriers both increased compensation and the potential for 10-year exclusive rights to the routes they carried.<sup>14</sup>

The Airmail Act of 1930 provided for compensation to carriers based on carrying capacity, versus mail actually carried, and continued the Postmaster General's authority to grant 10-year exclusive rights to successful performers.<sup>15</sup> The act also gave Postmaster General Walter Brown (1929–1933) broad authority to re-shape airmail contracts and routes — authority he was later charged with exceeding.

Charges of fraud and collusion in the award and extension of airmail contracts at the so-called “spoils conferences” of 1930 caused Brown's successor, James Farley, to cancel all domestic airmail contracts on February 9, 1934. On the same day, President Franklin Roosevelt ordered the Army to provide airmail service. For several months, from February 19 to June 1, 1934, the Army flew the mail. Unfortunately, the Army had inadequate equipment and took over during a particularly severe winter, leading to dozens of crashes and 12 pilots killed.

Airmail routes were reorganized and new contracts were signed with domestic carriers beginning in April 1934. In 1941, the United States Court of Claims found that there had been no fraud in how airmail contracts were awarded in 1930. Because he structured contracts to encourage the production of larger aircraft capable of carrying more passengers, Brown is often credited with spurring the development of the modern airline industry.

## International Airmail

Airplanes were used to transport mail internationally with the establishment of routes from Seattle to Victoria, British Columbia, on October 15, 1920, and from Key West, Florida, to Havana, Cuba, beginning November 1, 1920. The Havana route was discontinued in 1923, but resumed on October 19, 1927, marking the beginning of regularly scheduled international airmail service.

Congress authorized the Postmaster General to enter into long-term contracts for flying the mail internationally on March 8, 1928. On October 1, 1928, Foreign Air Mail (FAM) Route 1 began regular service between New York and Montreal. In 1929, routes were



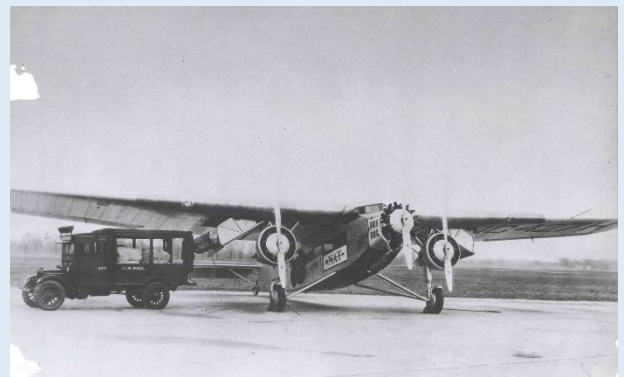
**Charles Lindbergh, 1926**

Before Charles Lindbergh made his record-breaking solo transatlantic flight in 1927, he flew the mail. Lindbergh was the chief pilot for the Robertson Aircraft Corporation, which held the contract to provide airmail service between Chicago and St. Louis beginning April 15, 1926.



**Weighing airmail in Los Angeles, 1926**

Los Angeles Postmaster Patrick O'Brien weighs mail for dispatch on April 17, 1926, the first day of service on the Los Angeles–Salt Lake City contract airmail route. From 1926 to 1930, airmail carriers were paid on a weight basis.



**Loading airmail, 1930**

Bags of mail are loaded into a Ford Tri-Motor Mail Passenger Plane. Ford hoped its all-metal “Tin Goose” would attract passengers — it could carry 15 people as well as the mail. Until passenger traffic picked up in the late 1930s, airlines depended on mail transportation contracts for survival.

established from Miami to Nassau, Bahamas, on January 2; to San Juan, Puerto Rico, on January 9; to San Cristobal, Canal Zone, on February 4; and from Brownsville, Texas, to Mexico City on March 10. By the end of 1930, the United States was linked by air with nearly all the countries in the Western Hemisphere.

Transpacific airmail routes began operating on November 22, 1935, with FAM Route 14, from San Francisco via Hawaii, Midway, Wake, and Guam to the Philippines. Airmail service was extended to Hong Kong on April 21, 1937; to New Zealand on July 12, 1940; to Singapore on May 3, 1941; to Australia on January 28, 1947; and to China on July 15, 1947.

Transatlantic airmail routes connected the United States with Europe beginning May 20, 1939, with the 29-hour flight of Pan American Airways' *Yankee Clipper* from New York to Marseilles, France, via Bermuda, the Azores, and Portugal. That same year, on June 24, a route was inaugurated between New York and Great Britain by way of Newfoundland, Greenland, and Iceland. On December 6, 1941, direct airmail service to Africa was made possible by the inauguration of a route from Miami via Rio de Janeiro to the Belgian Congo. Though interrupted during WWII, improvements in aviation fostered the rapid expansion of international airmail routes in the postwar years.

On October 4, 1958, a jet airliner was used to transport mail between London and New York for the first time, cutting the transatlantic trip from 14 hours to 8.

## End of an Era

Airmail as a separate class of domestic mail officially ended on May 1, 1977, although in practice it ended in October 1975, when the Postal Service announced that First-Class postage — which was three cents cheaper — would buy the same or better level of service. By then, transportation patterns had changed, and most First-Class letters were already zipping cross-country via airplane. Airmail as a separate class of international mail ended on May 14, 2007, when rates for the international transportation of mail by surface methods were eliminated.

HISTORIAN  
UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE  
MARCH 2018

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin B. Lipsner, *The Airmail: Jennies to Jets* (Chicago: Wilcox & Follett Company, 1951), 83–84.

<sup>2</sup> "Airmail's Odyssey: Inauguration to Golden Anniversary," *Postal Life*, May-June 1968, 10, in HathiTrust at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112106587246> (accessed February 9, 2018).

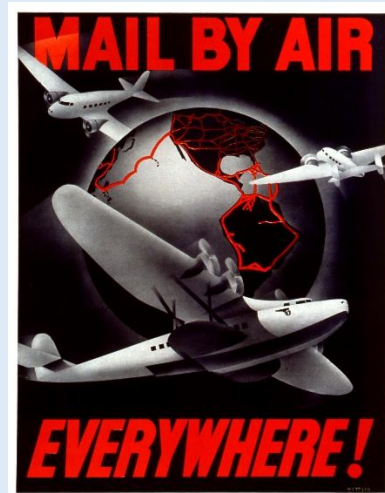
<sup>3</sup> "Practical Hints on Flying," *Air Service Journal*, January 10, 1918, 33, in HathiTrust at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101048919383> (accessed February 9, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *Congressional Record*, May 6, 1918, 6098.



**First International Mail Flight, 1919**

Eddie Hubbard (left) and William Boeing stand in front of a Boeing C-700 seaplane near Seattle after returning from a survey flight to Vancouver, British Columbia, on March 3, 1919. They brought with them a pouch with 60 letters, making this the first U.S. international mail flight. In 1920, Hubbard began flying the first international contract mail route, from Seattle to Victoria, British Columbia.



**Airmail poster, 1938**

In 1938, airmail routes sped up mail delivery to Canada, Central and South America, the Caribbean, and parts of Asia.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> *The Baltimore Sun*, November 10, 1910, 16.

<sup>7</sup> The first authorized U.S. Mail flights in 1911 were preceded by an unauthorized U.S. Mail flight in 1859, and a flight that was authorized in November 1910 but never took place.

On August 17, 1859, balloonist John Wise transported the first U.S. Mail by air, with the cooperation of local postal employees, but without authorization from the Postmaster General. Wise departed from Lafayette, Indiana, with more than 100 letters, hoping to reach Philadelphia or New York City, but a lack of wind ended the trip just 30 miles later. Upon landing, Wise transferred the mailbag to a railway postal agent, who put it aboard a train to New York.

Postmaster General Hitchcock authorized the carriage of mail by an airplane to New York City, from the deck of a steamship *Kaiserin Auguste Victoria* when it was 50 miles offshore. The flight, scheduled for November 5, 1910, was cancelled due to stormy weather. Had it occurred, it would have been not only the first authorized U.S. Mail flight, but also the first take-off from the deck of a ship.

<sup>8</sup> In his annual report to Postmaster General Hitchcock dated November 29, 1911, Second Assistant Postmaster General Joseph Stewart, who was in charge of mail transportation, recommended the appropriation of \$50,000 for "an experimental aerial mail service" in view of "the rapid development of the aeroplane" (*Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1911, 145). It's unclear if his request was passed on to Congress; it apparently wasn't considered until 1912.

<sup>9</sup> 39 Stat. 1064, March 3, 1917.

<sup>10</sup> *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1923, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Details of the lighting equipment are discussed in *Aircraft Year Book*, 1924 (New York, NY: Aeronautical Chamber of Commerce of America, Inc., 1924), 42–43.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in *The Roll Call: Air Mail Pioneers*, second edition (n.p.: Air Mail Pioneers, 1956), 43.

<sup>13</sup> Statement of Postmaster General Harry S. New, September 23, 1925, in *Aircraft: Hearings before the President's Aircraft Board*, volume 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1925), 265, in HathiTrust at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951d035053734> (accessed December 5, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> 45 Stat. 594, May 17, 1928. The Air Mail Act of February 2, 1925 (43 Stat. 805), had limited carriers' compensation to 80 percent of the revenue attributed to the airmail they carried. This was a money-losing formula; few bids were received. The act was amended on June 3, 1926 (44 Stat. 692), allowing carriers more compensation, figured on a weight basis. Even then, few contractors profited due to high operating costs.

<sup>15</sup> 46 Stat. 259, April 29, 1930. Among its other provisions, the Airmail Act of 1930 authorized the Postmaster General to require carriers to offer and/or increase passenger service, and allowed him to consolidate and extend airmail routes.