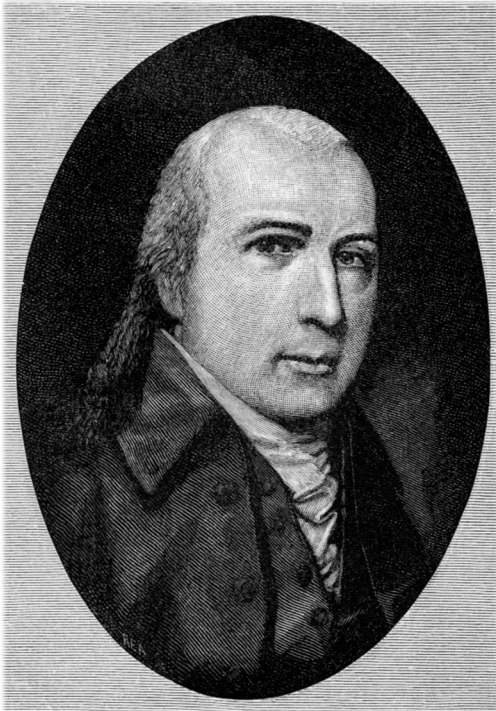


EBENEZER HAZARD

Postmaster General

January 28, 1782 to September 26, 1789



Ebenezer Hazard (1745 - 1817)
Postmaster of New York, Surveyor of Post Roads, Inspector of Dead Letters, and Postmaster General.

Ebenezer Hazard was a postal official during the War of Independence and held several important positions: postmaster of New York, surveyor of post roads, and inspector of dead letters. In 1782 he was appointed postmaster general and served in that position for eight years, covering most of the period that the United States were governed by the Articles of Confederation. Hazard's skill and diligence kept the postal service operating throughout the war and during the period of our nation's infancy.

Born in Philadelphia on January 15, 1745, Ebenezer was one of Samuel and Catharine Hazard's seven children.¹ When he was fourteen his father died; and Hazard attended the Nottingham Academy in Maryland. He continued his education at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). After graduation he went to work for another uncle, Nathaniel Hazard, a New York merchant.² In 1765 Hazard apprenticed for the New York bookseller Garrat Noel. He became a partner in the firm, Noel and Hazard Booksellers in 1769.³

In May 1775, during the early days of the war, the New York Committee appointed Hazard to receive and forward letters from the city. In July the Continental Congress named Benjamin Franklin postmaster general and the New York Provincial Congress recommended Hazard be appointed postmaster of New York City. Two months later, Franklin commissioned Hazard "Deputy Post-Master of the City of New York."⁴

When British and Hessian forces invaded New York in August 1776, the Committee of Safety advised Hazard to move the Post Office out of the city. Franklin directed Hazard to keep his office where he could serve the Headquarters of the army.⁵ Staying with the constantly moving army was vital to facilitate the dispatch and delivery of important letters and other communications.

Recognizing their importance, Congress excused postmasters and post riders from military service. Nonetheless, Hazard endured all the miseries of army life, including the threat of capture by the British.⁶ Hazard followed the army as it moved from camp to camp. He wrote to a friend, "So little attention has been paid to me as a gentleman, or respect shown to the Congress's commission which I am honoured, that I had been obligated to follow him [General Washington] on foot."⁷

Hazard did not blame Washington for his lack of a horse. He showed his readiness to serve when he wrote, "I submitted to this indignity and the fatigue consequent upon it, although it was not my business, as a Postmaster, to follow the Army like a sutler."⁸ Wartime inflation made it impossible for Hazard to meet his expenses.⁹ "Wherever an Army goes the demand for every article of life is greatly increased and the prices of them rise in proportion," he wrote.¹⁰

In the fall of 1776, Franklin sailed to France on a diplomatic mission. Second in command at the Post Office was Franklin's son-in-law, Richard Bache. On November 7, 1776, Congress promoted Bache to postmaster general.¹¹ Shortly thereafter, Hazard was promoted to surveyor of post roads.¹² Although he finally had a horse, the job of surveyor required constant travel.

The necessity of keeping the office near Head-Quarters arose from the importance of the General's despatches, and his being near the centre of the Army, who are almost the only persons for whom letters now come per post.

Letter from Ebenezer Hazard to Rev. John Witherspoon, Nov. 14, 1776

Despite the ongoing war, he inspected post roads, hired post riders, and audited postmasters from Maine to Georgia. Hazard kept a journal of his travels in which he not only noted postal business but vividly described the world around him.¹³ He transcribed documents at court houses and public record depositories that were later included in his archival work, *The American State Papers*.¹⁴

In October 1777, Congress authorized Bache to appoint two more surveyors and an "Inspector of Dead Letters." While the additional surveyors lessened Hazard's workload, the inspection of dead letters was added to his duties.¹⁵ The devaluation of Continental currency continued to be a problem. On December 2, 1779, Hazard wrote Congress that he was paying post riders out of his own pocket and feared "that the riders would resign and cause the total collapse of the department."¹⁶

The British surrender at Yorktown on October 19, 1781, all but ended the war. Bache returned to private life and on January 28, 1782, Congress appointed Hazard postmaster general.¹⁷ Hazard set about addressing the department's many troubles. Foremost were the numerous, sometimes conflicting ordinances Congress had passed regarding the Post Office. Hazard recommended that these be revised and codified into a single set of regulations. On October 18, 1782, a unified ordinance was passed giving Congress "the sole and exclusive right and power of establishing and regulating post offices throughout all these United States."¹⁸

To put the service on a solid financial footing, Hazard proposed placing limits on postal salaries, the franking privilege (sending letters for free), and the retention of dead letters. Under Hazard's leadership, the finances of the department improved. The Post Office began to show a small profit and paid off its debt to the Treasury.¹⁹ This enabled the Post Office to turn over any profit to Congress, which needed revenue as it had no taxation power.²⁰

Hazard also worked to improve the speed and reliability of postal routes between the states, especially along the Great Post Road from New Hampshire to Georgia. At the end of 1784, he reported that mail was being delivered once a week to each post office from Kennebec to Savannah. Mail between New York and Philadelphia traveled night and day and was delivered three times a week. By 1788, while there was still no service to the territories of Kentucky, Tennessee, or Vermont, the department had established over sixty Post Offices and nearly 2,000 miles of post roads.²¹

Hazard reestablished arrangements for handling mail going to or coming from France and Great Britain. He aggressively prosecuted those who undermined the Post Office by establishing private delivery operations.²² Despite some service setbacks and political squabbles in 1783 and again in 1788, congressional committees investigating postal operations gave Hazard's administration very high marks.²³

The end of Hazard's term as postmaster general coincided with the ratification of the Constitution and George Washington's election as president. Washington disagreed with some of Hazard's policies, in particular, the free carriage of newspapers and the use of stagecoaches on mail routes. To boost postal revenue and reduce the amount of unpaid mail, Hazard favored limiting the free carriage of newspapers. Hazard found post riders were often faster, more reliable, and less expensive than stagecoaches for transporting mail.

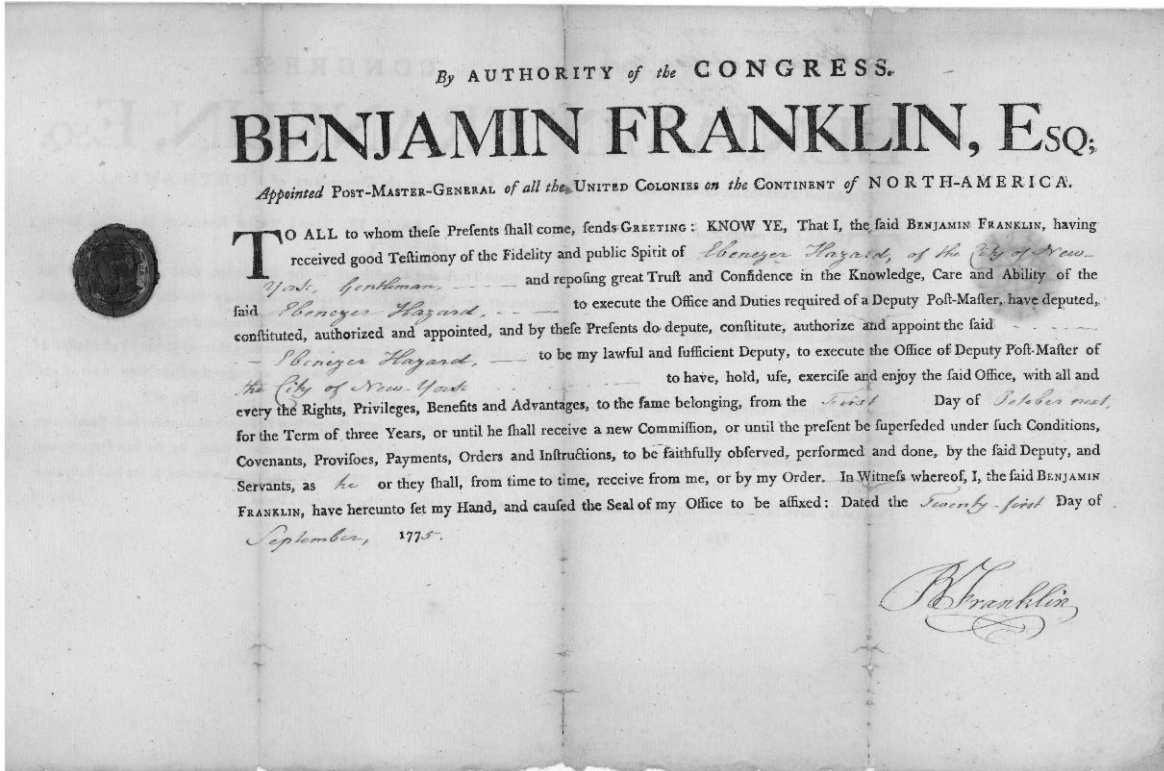
Washington opposed any suppression of the free exchange of newspapers. In a 1788 letter Washington wrote, "If the [exchange papers'] privilege was not from convention an original right, it had from prescription strong pretensions for continuance."²⁴ Under the Constitution, the President had the power to select the postmaster general. Washington retained nearly all existing government officials, except for Ebenezer Hazard.²⁵ In 1789 Washington appointed Samuel Osgood as the first Postmaster General under the United States Constitution.

Osgood had been a colonel in the Continental Army, and had served in the Massachusetts Senate and the Continental Congress.²⁶ Washington did not notify Hazard that he was appointing Osgood and he heard the news second hand.²⁷ Hazard told his friend Jeremy Belknap, "I have received neither letter nor message from the President; and after being kept in suspense till last Friday, was informed by a friend that Mr. Osgood was nominated for Postmaster General."²⁸

After fourteen years serving the new nation's Post Office, Hazard found himself, at age 44, out of a job. After failing to find a new position, Hazard moved his family to Philadelphia, where he lived for the remainder of his life.²⁹ In 1792 Hazard became involved in the operations of the Universal Tontine Association, a marine and fire insurance underwriting firm. In 1794 the business was incorporated as the Insurance Company of North America. Hazard

continued documentation of the records of the United States and undertook scholarly pursuits. His most notable work was two volumes of *Historical Collections; Consisting of State Papers, and Other Authentic Documents; Intended as Materials for an History of the United States of America* published in 1792 and 1794.

Hazard married Abigail Anthony of Nantucket on September 11, 1783, and they had four children³⁰ He died in Philadelphia on June 13, 1817, at the age of 73 following a visit to his son Samuel in Huntsville, Alabama.³¹ He was buried in Philadelphia's Arch Street burial ground, but his remains were later moved to Laurel Hill Cemetery.³²



Commission signed by Benjamin Franklin on September 21, 1775, appointing Ebenezer Hazard "Deputy Postmaster of the City of New York"

Courtesy of the American Philosophical Society

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- ¹ Ralph Edward Blodgett, "Ebenezer Hazard: The Post Office, the Insurance Company of North America, and the Editing of Historical Documents" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Colorado at Boulder, 1971), 13, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/302571332/citation/E23A1FF4DA6A4236PQ/1>.
- ² George Pilcher, "Ebenezer Hazard and the Promotion of Historical Scholarship in the Early Republic," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 56, no. 1 (1989): 3–14.
- ³ Fred Shelley, "Ebenezer Hazard: America's First Historical Editor," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1955): 44–73, 45, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1923095>.
- ⁴ Blodgett, "Ebenezer Hazard," 38-39.
- ⁵ Shelley, "Ebenezer Hazard: America's First Historical Editor," 52-53.
- ⁶ Stephen Allen Kochersperger, "Revolutionary Communications: The Patriot Post and Washington's Headquarters Post Office" (M.A. Thesis, Charles Town, WV, American Public University, 2021), 76.
- ⁷ Ebenezer Hazard to Rev. John Witherspoon, November 14, 1776, in *American Archives*, 3:681 (originally by Peter Force, Washington: 1853). <https://digital.lib.niu.edu/islandora/object/niu-amarch%3A92842>
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Shelley, "Ebenezer Hazard: America's First Historical Editor," 53.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ *American Archives*, 3:1563.
- ¹² Richard Bache, "Commission Appointing Ebenezer Hazard Surveyor of the Post Roads," January 6, 1777, American Philosophical Society, <https://diglib.amphilsoc.org/islandora/object/apsrevcity%3A1391>.
- ¹³ Ebenezer Hazard, "The Journal of Ebenezer Hazard in North Carolina 1777–1778," ed. Hugh Buckner Johnston, *The North Carolina Historical Review* 36, no. 3 (1959): 358–81.
- ¹⁴ Kochersperger, "Revolutionary Communications," 76.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Blodgett, "Ebenezer Hazard," 74.
- ¹⁷ *Dunlap and Claypoole's American Daily Advertiser*, February 5, 1782, 3.
- ¹⁸ Blodgett, "Ebenezer Hazard," 87.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 94.
- ²⁰ Robert G. Natelson, "Ebenezer Hazard: Forgotten Founder," Independence Institute.org, December 6, 2016, <https://i2i.org/ebenezer-hazard-forgotten-founder/>.
- ²¹ Ibid., 93.
- ²² Ibid., 97-100.
- ²³ Natelson, "Ebenezer Hazard: Forgotten Founder."
- ²⁴ Robert W. T. Martin, "How a Political Dispute Over the Early American Postal System Could Have Jeopardized the Whole U.S. Constitution," Time.com, August 24, 2020, <https://time.com/5883034/usps-politics-founding/>.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ University of Virginia, "Samuel Osgood (1789–1791)," UVA Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/president/washington/essays/osgood-1789-postmaster-general>.
- ²⁷ Shelley, "Ebenezer Hazard: America's First Historical Editor," 60.
- ²⁸ Letter from Ebenezer Hazard to Jeremy Belknap, Jeremy Belknap papers, Massachusetts Historical Society Vol. III---Fifth Series page 192-193.
- ²⁹ Shelley, "Ebenezer Hazard: America's First Historical Editor," 61.
- ³⁰ Thomas R. Hazard and Willis P. Hazard, *Recollections of Olden Times: Rowland Robinson of Narragansett and His Unfortunate Daughter: With Genealogies of the Robinson, Hazard, and Sweet Families of Rhode Island. Also, Genealogical Sketch of the Hazards of the Middle States* (Newport, RI: J.P. Sanborne, 1879), 241, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008731238>.
- ³¹ Pilcher, "Ebenezer Hazard and the Promotion of Historical Scholarship in the Early Republic," 12.
- ³² Hazard and Hazard, *Recollections of Olden Times*, 214.

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