

DID YOU KNOW . . .

THAT the Postal Service is older than the United States of America?

The Postal Service traces its origin to July 26, 1775, when the Second Continental Congress appointed [Benjamin Franklin](#) as Postmaster General of the United Colonies. Franklin was still in office when Congress declared the colonies to be “Free and Independent States” in July 1776.

THAT prior to 1775, Benjamin Franklin had a nearly 40-year postal career under the British?

[Benjamin Franklin](#) was appointed postmaster of Philadelphia by the British Crown Post in 1737, while he was the printer of the newspaper *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. Franklin held the job until 1753, when he was promoted to the position of joint Postmaster General under the British. In January 1774 he was dismissed as Postmaster General for the Crown because he was judged, essentially, to be too American.

THAT more than 100 U.S. Post Offices originally operated under the authority of another nation?

Before American independence, Post Offices operated under British rule in each of the 13 American colonies. [The first U.S. Post Offices](#) to operate in Vermont were established by the independent Republic of Vermont in the 1780s, prior to Vermont joining the union in 1791. Eighty Hawaiian Post Offices became U.S. Post Offices when Hawaii became a U.S. territory in 1900.

THAT women Postmasters were the first female managers in the federal government?

Mary Katherine Goddard was the first known [woman postmaster](#) in the United Colonies, the precursor of the United States. She served as postmaster of Baltimore, Maryland, from 1775 to 1789. She was also a printer. She was the first to print the Declaration of Independence with the names of all the signers.

THAT during the War of 1812, postal headquarters was located in one of the few government buildings spared when the nation’s capital was burned?

As British troops set fire to the public buildings of Washington, DC, on the morning of August 25, 1814, William Thornton, head of the Patent Office, persuaded British officers to spare the building that housed the Patent Office and [Post Office headquarters](#). Unfortunately, fire was a threat even in peacetime—the building was destroyed by a fire in 1836 that started in the basement, where firewood was stored. Many postal records were lost to the flames.

THAT the postmaster of the North Lansing, New York, served more than 74 years—the longest-known term of any postmaster?

[Roswell Beardsley](#) was appointed postmaster in June 1828, at the age of 18, and served until his death in November 1902, at the age of 93. He ran the Post Office in his small country store and was well-loved by his patrons, some of whose families he served for five generations. In total, he served under 35 Postmasters General and 20 U.S. Presidents, from John Quincy Adams to Theodore Roosevelt.

THAT some Post Offices once had areas reserved "exclusively for ladies?"

[Ladies delivery windows](#)—special counters reserved for women picking up their mail—were maintained in some Post Offices from at least the 1830s through the early 1900s, to protect the “gentler sex” from encountering “rudeness and a thousand vexations” when visiting the Post Office. Postmasters in some cities took care to staff the ladies window with female postal clerks. Some Post Offices even had separate entrances for men and women.

THAT until the 1840s, some states had two or more Post Offices with the same name?

In 1825, Ohio had three Bloomfields and Pennsylvania had three Washingtons. Customers were instructed to include the county name in the delivery address, but identical and too-similar [Post Office names](#) frequently delayed delivery. By the 1840s, the Post Office Department required prospective patrons to suggest unique names for Post Offices.

THAT the world's first public telegraph office was maintained and operated by the U.S. Post Office Department?

On April 1, 1845, service on the Washington–Baltimore telegraph line was opened to the public under the authority of the Post Office Department. This was nearly a year after the first telegraph message—“What hath God wrought”—was transmitted, in May 1844. Inventor Samuel Morse was sworn in as superintendent of the system; the postage rate for telegraphic messages was one-quarter of one cent for each character, to be prepaid by the sender. The system was turned over to private operators in December 1846, by which time privately-operated [telegraph lines](#) stretched as far north as Boston.

THAT although postage stamps were introduced in 1847, they were not required on letters until 1856?

Before [postage stamps](#) were used, postmasters or clerks marked “PAID” on letters. Until 1855—when prepayment was required—postage was often paid by the recipient.

THAT before 1863, postage rates for letters were distance-based?

[Postage rates](#) were based on the number of sheets in a letter and the distance a letter traveled. Families, friends, or businesses that were further away paid more to keep in touch. The Act of March 3, 1863, based postage for a letter on its weight and eliminated all differences based on distance.

THAT the legendary Pony Express carried U.S. Mail for only four months?

In 1860, a private company formed to carry mail between California and Missouri—the westernmost state reached by railroad—in just 10 days, using a relay system of mounted express riders. It was soon called the Pony Express. On July 1, 1861, the [Pony Express](#) began operating under contract as a U.S. Mail route. The service ended just four months later, as soon as the transcontinental telegraph line was completed.

THAT the first known African American civilian employee of the federal government was a postal clerk?

[William Cooper Nell](#)—abolitionist, journalist, historian, and equal rights champion—worked as a clerk at the Boston Post Office from 1863 until his death in 1874. In a letter of April 1873, he wrote that during the course of his postal career he “never lost a day from sickness or any cause.”

THAT the first African American to earn the Medal of Honor served as a city letter carrier?

[William H. Carney](#) was appointed as one of the first letter carriers in New Bedford, Massachusetts, on November 16, 1869, and served until he resigned in 1901. Carney was the first African American to earn the Medal of Honor, for his valor during the Civil War. The bravery displayed by Carney and the rest of Massachusetts' 54th Regiment in the assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina, inspired the acclaimed 1989 movie *Glory*.

THAT as late as 1872, a person convicted of robbing a mail carrier could be punished by death?

The death penalty for stealing mail was first imposed by an Act of Congress of February 20, 1792. In 1794, Congress amended this law to impose the death penalty only in cases where an individual had robbed a mail carrier. Beginning in 1799, the death penalty was reserved for second offenses or cases where the mail carrier had been harmed or put in jeopardy. In 1872, Congress lightened the punishment to life in prison at hard labor.

THAT reindeer once carried U.S. Mail in Alaska?

From 1899 to the early 1910s, [reindeer](#) helped transport mail to more than a dozen Post Offices in northwestern Alaska, including several located north of the Arctic Circle. During the winter of 1903–1904, reindeer were used to carry mail from Barrow to Kotzebue—reportedly the longest and most dangerous mail route in the world.

THAT dog sleds were used to carry mail in Alaska until 1963?

Dog sleds transported mail in some areas of the northern U.S. and Alaska during winter months. The last regularly scheduled dogsled route was discontinued in 1963, when Chester Noongwook of Savoonga, on St. Lawrence Island, retired his team. That route was thereafter served by an airplane.

THAT the Postal Service gave birth to the commercial aviation industry?

When [airmail service](#) began in 1918, there was no aviation industry, so the Post Office Department created one—building airfields, using its own pilots, planes, and mechanics, and fine-tuning flight instruments and navigational aids on the ground. By the end of 1920, airmail routes had been established from New York to San Francisco. 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.

THAT the Post Office Department employed some 200 airmail pilots?

When airmail service began in May 1918, the mail was flown by U.S. Army pilots. That ended three months later, in August 1918, when the Post Office Department employed [civilian pilots](#) to fly the mail. Unpredictable weather, unreliable equipment, and inexperience led to frequent crashes in the early years. Thirty-four airmail pilots died from 1918 through 1927. One veteran flyer recalled that the first airmail pilots called themselves “the suicide club.”

THAT two postmasters were later elected President of the United States?

Before they were Presidents, [Abraham Lincoln and Harry Truman](#) were both postmasters. Truman held the title and signed papers but immediately turned the position and its pay over to his assistant. Lincoln was the only President who actually served as a postmaster.

THAT although it was against postal regulations, several children were “mailed” in the early years of Parcel Post?

Just a few weeks after Parcel Post began in January 1913, Jesse and Mathilda Beagle “mailed” their 8-month-old son James to his grandmother, who lived a few miles away near Batavia, Ohio. Rural Carrier Vernon Lytle picked up the baby and carried him in his mail wagon to his destination. Although it was against postal regulations, several children traveled via U.S. Mail in the early years of Parcel Post. Initially, the only animals that were allowed in the mail were bees and other insects. In 1918, day-old chicks were allowed in the mail. In 1919, some additional “harmless live animals” were permitted, but children did not fall into this category.

THAT in 1916 more than 37 tons of bricks were mailed to Vernal, Utah, from Salt Lake City, to help build a bank?

Located in northeastern Utah in a high desert valley bordered by mountains and cliffs, Vernal was off the rail line and accessible only by rough roads. Shipping packages to Vernal by Parcel Post cost less than half the rates charged by private carriers. The [bricks for the bank](#) were individually wrapped in paper and packed ten to a wooden crate to meet the maximum allowable 50-pound limit for packages.

THAT Walt Disney, Rock Hudson, and John Prine all worked at the Post Office?

All three delivered mail in Illinois—Disney in 1918-19; Hudson in 1947; and Prine in 1964-69. Many other musicians, actors, artists and writers worked for the Post Office before they became famous. Some of these [famous postal workers](#) were later honored with their own stamp.

THAT during World War II military mail was miniaturized?

From 1942 to 1945 the Post Office Department developed and operated [V-Mail](#), or “Victory Mail,” in cooperation with the War and Navy Departments. V-Mail letters to and from troops were microfilmed before transporting, then printed out for delivery. Roughly 1,600 letters would fit on one roll of microfilm, saving valuable cargo space in support of the war effort.

THAT the Hope Diamond was mailed to the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History?

In 1958, when the New York jeweler Harry Winston donated the [Hope Diamond](#) to the Smithsonian, he used Registered Mail to send it to the museum in Washington, DC. “It’s the safest way to mail gems,” Winston said, “I’ve sent gems all over the world that way.”

THAT during the Cold War, about 1,500 Post Offices were designated as fallout shelters?

In the 1960s, [Post Offices in the nation’s largest cities were stocked with emergency rations](#), water, and other supplies, for use by both postal employees and the general public in the event of nuclear attack. Postal employees were trained to monitor radiation levels, and in a civil defense emergency, the postmaster was expected to take on the role of shelter manager.

THAT the Postal Service experimented with using a guided missile to transport mail?

In 1959, a [guided missile](#) containing 3,000 letters was launched from the submarine *USS Barbero* to Mayport, Florida. “Before man reaches the moon,” Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield declared, “mail will be delivered within hours from New York to California, to England, to India, or to Australia by guided missiles.” Although history proved otherwise, this experiment exemplifies the pioneering spirit of the Post Office Department.

THAT Christmas stamps were first issued in the U.S. in 1962?

While the decision to print [Christmas stamps](#) generated some controversy, especially from groups concerned about maintaining the separation of church and state, legal actions to bar the stamps failed. The first Christmas stamp was so popular it set sales records, with some Post Offices selling out within hours of placing it on sale.

THAT the Postal Service first tested electric vehicles in 1899?

The first known test of an [electric vehicle](#) for mail collection was in Buffalo, New York, on July 2, 1899, when Buffalo’s superintendent of city delivery collected mail from 40 boxes in a Columbia automobile, in less than half the time it took with a horse-drawn wagon. In December 1899, a Winton electric automobile was tested for mail collection in Cleveland, Ohio, during a snowstorm. The 22-mile route was completed in two hours and 26 minutes; with a horse and wagon, it usually took six hours.

THAT the Postal Service once used a network of pneumatic tubes to speed mail beneath congested city streets?

From the 1890s through the early 1900s, compressed air was used to send mail-filled canisters between postal facilities in six major cities. The canisters could hold 500 letters and travelled through the underground [pneumatic tubes](#) at 30 miles an hour.

THAT the number of Post Offices in the United States peaked in 1901?

There were 76,945 Post Offices that year. The growth of rural free delivery, which became a permanent service in 1902, contributed to the subsequent decline in the [number of Post Offices](#). In 2020, there were 26,362 U.S. Post Offices.

THAT more than 1,000 Post Offices nationwide feature works of art?

During the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal sponsored several art programs to help get people back to work and restore confidence in the nation. The New Deal [murals and sculptures](#) seen in Post Offices today were produced from 1934 to 1943 under the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture, later called the Section of Fine Arts.