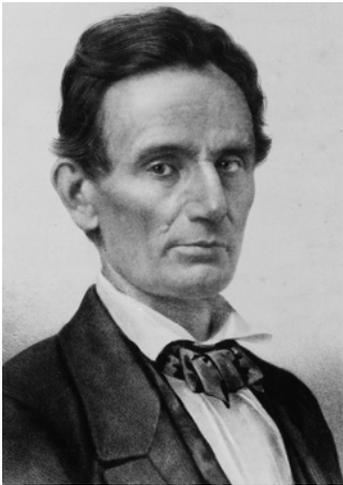


Postmasters Abraham Lincoln and Harry Truman



Abraham Lincoln, Postmaster
Library of Congress image

Two postmasters became U.S. Presidents later in their careers – Abraham Lincoln and Harry Truman. Truman held the title and signed papers but immediately turned the position and its pay over to an assistant. Lincoln was the only President who had served as a postmaster.

Abraham Lincoln

On May 7, 1833, 24-year-old Abraham Lincoln was appointed postmaster of New Salem, Illinois. Lincoln served until the office was closed May 30, 1836. The *United States Official Register*, published in odd-numbered years, dutifully records A. Lincoln as receiving compensation of \$55.70 in the 1835 volume and \$19.48 for one quarter's work in the 1837 volume. Besides his pay, Lincoln, as postmaster, could send and receive personal letters free and get one daily newspaper delivered free.

Mail arrived once a week, delivered on a route running from Springfield to Millers Ferry. If an addressee did not collect his or her mail at the Post Office, as was the custom, Lincoln delivered it personally – usually carrying the mail in his hat. Even then, Lincoln was "Honest Abe."

According to Lincoln's biographer, Benjamin P. Thomas:

Dr. A. G. Henry, one of Lincoln's closest friends, and himself postmaster for a time at Sangamontown, told Isaac N. Arnold that when the New Salem office was discontinued Lincoln had on hand a balance of some sixteen or eighteen dollars which he brought with him to Springfield. Perhaps the Post Office Department overlooked this small sum, for not until months later did an agent call on Lincoln to collect it. During the intervening time Lincoln had been financially hard-pressed, and Dr. Henry, who was present when the agent called, was afraid that Lincoln might not have the money. Henry told Arnold: "I was about to call him aside and loan him the money, when he asked the agent to be seated a moment, while he went over to his trunk at his boarding house, and returned with an old blue sock with a quantity of silver and copper coin tied up in it. Untying the sock, he poured the contents on the table and proceeded to count the coin, which consisted of such silver and copper pieces as the country-people were then in the habit of using in paying postage. On counting it up there was found the exact amount, to a cent, of the draft, and in the identical coin which had been received. He never used, under any circumstances, trust funds."¹

Harry Truman

Harry Truman was appointed postmaster of Grandview, Missouri, on December 2, 1914, according to postal records. While he held the position officially, he did not actually serve as postmaster according to several sources – the biggest one being Truman himself. Instead, he turned the position and its pay over to a widow, Ella Hall, who needed the money. This continued until Truman's successor, Cecil C. Hall, was appointed postmaster of Grandview on June 17, 1915.

Let Truman tell the rest in an excerpt from *The Autobiography of Harry S. Truman*, edited by Robert H. Ferrell and published in 1980 by the Colorado Associated University Press, Boulder, Colorado:

When my father passed away in 1914 I was appointed road overseer in his place and served until the presiding judge became dissatisfied because I gave the county too much

for the money. In the meantime Congressman Borland appointed me postmaster at Grandview. I let a widow woman who was helping to raise and educate her younger sisters and brothers run the office as assistant postmaster and take the pay which amounted to about fifty dollars a month -- a lot of money in those days. It would have paid two farmhands.

The Evening Star of Washington, D.C., ran a story on June 28, 1949, with the headline "Files Show Truman Waived Job to Let Civil War Widow Get Pay":

An accidental discovery of old records in the files of the Civil Service Commission has brought to light an almost forgotten interlude in the career of President Truman -- the days just before World War I when he was postmaster at Grandview, the little community near Kansas City where the Truman family farm is located. Actually, the then 28-year-old Missouri farmer never held the office, waiving his rights to the \$530 annual salary so that a Republican postmistress, widow of a Civil War veteran, could get the payoff. Mr. Truman, who won the post in a civil service examination, signed official papers, when necessary; the 'substitute' collected, and everybody was satisfied.

Grandview has many reasons to be proud of its association with Harry Truman, and the fact that he was generous with his position and salary as postmaster is one more.

¹ Benjamin P. Thomas, "Lincoln the Postmaster," *Bulletin of the Abraham Lincoln Association* (Springfield, IL), No. 31, June 1933, 7-8.