

City Delivery

Before 1863, postage paid only for the delivery of mail from Post Office to Post Office. Citizens picked up their mail, although in some cities they could pay an extra two-cent fee for letter delivery or use private delivery firms. Among the postal reforms suggested by progressive Postmaster General Montgomery Blair in his 1862 report to the President was free delivery of mail by salaried letter carriers, which he felt would “greatly accelerate deliveries, and promote the public convenience.”¹ He reasoned that if the system of mailing and receiving letters was more convenient, people would use it more often, and pointed to increasing postal revenues in England, which already had adopted free city delivery.

Congress agreed. An Act of Congress of March 3, 1863, effective July 1, 1863, provided that free city delivery be established at Post Offices where income from local postage was more than sufficient to pay all expenses of the service. For the first time, Americans had to put street addresses on their letters.

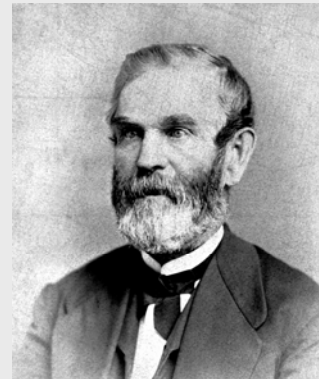
By June 30, 1864, free city delivery had been established in 65 cities nationwide, with 685 carriers delivering mail in cities such as Baltimore, Boston, Brooklyn, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C. By 1880, 104 cities were served by 2,628 letter carriers, and by 1900, 15,322 carriers provided service to 796 cities.

Postmasters, groups of citizens, or city authorities could petition the Post Office Department for free delivery service if their city met population or postal revenue requirements. The city had to provide sidewalks and crosswalks, ensure that streets were named and lit, and assign numbers to houses.

Initially, carriers hand-delivered mail to customers. If a customer did not answer the carrier’s knock, ring, or whistle, the mail remained in the carrier’s satchel to be redelivered when the customer was home. By 1912, new customers were required to provide mail slots or receptacles, and postmasters were urged to encourage existing customers to provide them as well. As late as 1914, First Assistant Postmaster General Daniel C. Roper estimated that a letter carrier spent 30 minutes to an hour each day waiting at doors where there was person-to-person delivery. As of March 1, 1923, mail slots or receptacles were required for delivery service.

By the 1930s, as a convenience to customers living on the margins of a city, letter carriers began delivering to customers with “suitable boxes at the curb line.”² In the ensuing decades American suburbanization, which exploded in the 1950s, brought an increase in curbside mailboxes. The Department introduced curbside cluster boxes in 1967. Their use has been increasingly encouraged in recent decades to promote efficiency and economy of service.

Originally, letter carriers worked 52 weeks a year, typically 9 to 11 hours a day from Monday through Saturday, and if necessary, part of Sunday. An Act of June 27, 1884, granted them 15 days of leave



**Joseph William Briggs,
City Delivery Pioneer**

Joseph William Briggs, a Cleveland, Ohio, postal clerk, often is credited with conceiving the idea of free city delivery while contemplating long lines of customers trying to keep warm as they inched toward his window in the winter of 1862. Many were women hoping for news of loved ones in the Civil War. Briggs enlisted local businesses to serve as staging areas for sorting customers’ mail, and he began delivering mail to his patrons free of cost.

In 1864, Briggs wrote Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, suggesting improvements to the free letter carrier system, launched in 1863. Blair liked Briggs’ ideas, brought him to Washington, and appointed him special agent in charge of superintending the operation of the letter carrier system, a role he performed until his death on February 23, 1872.

A 1921 postal committee charged with determining who should be credited with the establishment of free city delivery, after examining the available evidence, reported to Postmaster General Will Hays that “no one individual can be considered the author or originator of this service ...” The committee said, “Mr. Briggs cannot be properly credited as the author of the City Free Delivery Service, but the evidence seems sufficient to warrant the statement that he was the first letter carrier in the city of Cleveland, Ohio.”³

A plaque in the Cleveland Post Office commemorates Briggs’ service as that city’s first free letter carrier and his contributions to establishing the service nationwide.

per year. In 1888, Congress declared that 8 hours was a full day's work and that carriers would be paid for additional hours worked per day. The 40-hour work week began in 1935.

Carriers walked as many as 22 miles a day, carrying up to 50 pounds of mail at a time. They were instructed to deliver letters frequently and promptly — generally twice a day to homes and up to four times a day to businesses. The second residential delivery was discontinued on April 17, 1950, in most cities. Multiple deliveries to businesses were phased out over the next few decades as changing transportation patterns made most mail available for first-trip delivery. The weight limit of a carrier's load was reduced to 35 pounds by the mid-1950s and remains the same today.

In 2006, 224,400 letter carriers delivered mail in the nation's cities.



Endnotes:

1. *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1862, 32.
2. U.S. Post Office Department, *Supervision of City Delivery Service* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1930), 8.
3. Committee Chairman Edwin A. Neiss to Postmaster General Will H. Hays, Aug. 24, 1921, vertical files, USPS Corporate Library.